ACTS OF SYMBIOSIS

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FREEDOM WITH FORM: INSPIRING AUTHENTICITY IN MEMOIR WRITING

Memoir writing is an act of personal exploration, a journey a writer takes to deepen her understanding of herself. As such, the achievement of self-awareness through writing is a measure of the memoirist's success. Another measure of her success is the connection she establishes with her reader. Good memoir writing is achieved when an author's quest for truth inspires her reader's self-reflection. Driven by her goals, the memoirist's key to achieving them lies in *how* she presents her journey.

The focus of this dissertation is on style and how a writer can establish her most authentic style in the construction of her memoir. It is also about genre and form, and more specifically, how an author's freedom with form can enable her truth and her ability to create an intentional experience for her reader. Finally, this paper seeks to defend the multi-genre memoir.

This defense begins with an explanation of memoir and some clarification between it and autobiography. Autobiography is not a focus of this defense, however, as memoir and autobiography are often confused, clarifying the differences between the two genres is important to this defense. In *The Art of Time in Memoir,* Sven Birkerts writes: "Auto," or self; "bio," or life; "graphy," or line. The line of one's life. No mystery there. The autobiographer undertakes to set down the line of his or her life." Birkerts continues:

> Memoirs, by contrast, are neither open ended nor provisional. For as the root of the word attests, they present not the line of life, but the life remembered. They are pledged not to an ostensibly detached account of events but to the presentation of a life as it is narratively reconstituted by memory (50-52).

One of the great distinctions between the two genres to which Birkerts points is time. Whereas the autobiography generally begins with the onset of an author's life and tells the story of a full life, memoir typically begins with a compelling memory that has occurred at some time in the author's life and concludes when she has completed her exploration of it. *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela is an example of autobiography, as it is an account of Mandela's life. It spans his childhood, life in Johannesburg, path to freedom fighting, arrest for treason, imprisonment at Robben Island, freedom from incarceration, and rise to the presidency of South Africa. Conversely, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed is a memoir, as it is a collection of memories presenting Strayed's three-month journey on a perilous thousand-mile hike, while also dealing with the fallout of her divorce, a drug addiction, and her mother's death.

In addition to time, another significant difference between autobiography and memoir lies in the author's approach to relaying content. The autobiographer *tells* his life story and his thoughts about it. By contrast, the memoirist *explores* her memories from a specific time in her life and asks herself the question "What do these memories say about who I am?" The passages below exemplify the differences in Mandela's and Strayed's approaches to content sharing. Writing about his path to politics, Mandela recounts:

> In 1946, there were a number of critical events that shaped my political development and the direction of the struggle. The mineworkers strike of 1946, in which 70,000 African miners along with Reef went on strike, affected me greatly…I had a number of relations who were mineworkers, and during the week of the strike, I visited them, discussed the issues, and expressed my support (101-102).

Strayed's approach is quite different. She reflects: "I didn't need to see Oregon, I could feel it, huge before me. I would walk its entire length if I made it all the way to the Bridge of the Gods. Who would I be if I did? Who would I be if I didn't?" (237). Mandela presents his account as "this is what happened to me," whereas Strayed recalls her memory to achieve an understanding of how her experiences are impacting the woman she is becoming.

Moving beyond the differences between the two genres, and focusing solely on memoir, structure is important. It refers to the framework that the writer uses to order her memories or the way she moves her narrative from start to finish. How a memoirist utilizes structure can vary from memoir to memoir. There are memoirs that have chronological constructions. Barbara Wuest's *Drive Gently* is an example. In Wuest's memoir, she mostly follows a structure that author and memoirist Mary Karr calls "dopily episodic" because the structure reflects a predictable chain of events (Karr, xii). The narrator, Barbara, meets and falls in love with her true love, Glenn. Glenn's job gets transferred. Then Glenn moves away to be closer to his job. Then Barbara misses Glenn. Then Barbara leaves her job to take another one so she can be closer to Glenn. Then Barbara moves in with Glenn, etc.

Whereas some memoirists opt for this linear construction, others do not. A memoirist might structure her journey by tracing a theme that relates to her life like Mary Karr does with *The Liar's Club* in which she focuses on her turbulent childhood in East Texas in the 1960s. Her book is chronological, but it is divided into three sections, each corresponding to a different time in the author's life that connects to her theme. Another memoirist might choose a less orderly structure. In *The Glass Castle,* for example, Jeannette Walls begins her reflections about her difficult childhood with her adult future self, after which she infrequently deviates from chronology as she explores her main themes.

Be the construction of a memoir chronological or otherwise, the memoirist's journey on the page is not typically about the events themselves. Rather, it is about what the events means to the writer. As Birkert's asserts:

> The memoirist is generally not after the sequential account of his life so much as the story or stories that have given that life its internal shape. These are necessarily filtered by the memory and recounted in ways that reflect understanding and interpretation—in some cases to the point where the process of coming to understanding is the main part of the story (51-52).

However the author structures her memoir, she does it with purpose, giving the substance of her experiences a shape that reflects her process of self-discovery. Birkert's asserts that the memoirist can do this because she enacts a unique "vantage point," a juxtaposition of the past and the present (17). He writes:

> Now, then. Present past. The sine qua nom of memoir—with the past deepening and giving authority to the present, and the present (just by virtue of being invoked) creating the necessary depth of field for the persuasive idea of the past (6).

As Birkert's suggests, the memoirist's vantage point is critical to her work because it leads her to a better understanding of herself and helps her create a meaningful experience for her reader. Remembering a life on the page while simultaneously pursuing the meaning of her memories, she demonstrates how balancing the past and present encourages awareness. Joan Didion has many poignant moments like this in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking.* Writing about the sudden loss of her husband, John, in the year following his death, Didion wrestles with her grief trying to communicate what it is and simultaneously make sense of how it is impacting her. In this excerpt, she confesses her awareness of her struggle:

> That I was only beginning the process of mourning did not occur to me. Until now, I had only been able to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention (143).

Reflecting on her past and considering her present simultaneously and on the page, Didion recognizes her state of mind, acknowledges that she has not yet dealt with her grief, and admits to herself, and in turn, to her reader, that doing so must happen so that she can progress on her journey. Here Didion does something important for her reader, and ultimately, her memoir. She makes the conversion of "private to public" by way of narrative. In other words, she takes her own personal challenge and universalizes it, allowing any reader who has suffered a loss and subsequent grief to relate to her experience. Furthermore, and as seen in the passage below, Didion effectively chooses words—she adopts the pronouns "we" and "us" instead of using "I" and "me"—to include the reader in the loss experience. She writes:

> Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. We anticipate (we know) that someone close to us could die, but we do not look beyond the few days or weeks that immediately follow such an imagined death. We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks. We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind. We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe their husband is about to return and need his shoes (188).

Examples of Didion's ability to build a bridge between herself as narrator and her reader are many in her memoir and they are significant to the success of her work. With them, she

achieves what every good memoirist must do—establish relevancy with and "coax sympathetic resonance" from her reader (Birkerts, 23).

Didion's memoir, as well as others, are among the many successful memoirs that have been written. No doubt, there are also plenty of memoirs that have failed miserably due to poor writing, bad storytelling, author's motivation, etc. They have no place in this paper. Whereas one might suppose that anyone who has lived a life and has memories upon which to reflect could write a memoir, the truth is that not everyone should. Mary Karr identifies many reasons why a person shouldn't write a memoir, which include but certainly aren't limited to: being too close to your subject matter; seeking revenge on a person(s); looking for personal therapy, or simply having a bad memory. Karr believes that those who *should* write a memoir are people who: are passionate about their subject; "who have felt a living emotional connection to the past that struck [them] as real, those who have been somewhere, who brim with feeling and may even be crying, but are not devastated"; who will write the truth; and who have the ability to make their book as much about the reader's experience of self-exploration as it is about the narrator's (33).

While Karr's characterization of a memoirist is a bit commercial compared to Birkett's philosophy on the genre itself, the two authors essentially say the same thing about good memoir writing: it is about actively exploring memory for the purpose of inspiring self-reflection for both writer and reader. And again, while they say it in different terms, they both point to *the way* or the *how* a journey is told as being essential to the genre's success. *The way* or *the how* refers to style.

A conversation about "style" requires the inclusion of "voice" and "tone", as well as acknowledging that these terms are often used in close connection and to a confusing degree in discussions about narrative writing. Style, voice, and tone can be defined individually as literary

devices that distinguish an author and contribute to a reader's experience with a piece. It is also true that "style" can be utilized more generally to encompass all three of these terms, a notion that this paper adopts (Bishop and Starkey, 152-155). Taken collectively, "style" is essentially the "personality" of the narrator. Furthermore, this paper assumes the understanding that when it comes to memoir, the author and the narrator are one in the same, as by the definition of memoir, the author is exploring her *own* memories with a commitment to her *own* self-discovery.

Brian A. Klems of *Readers Digest* speaks of style when he shares that every memoir has its own "personality" and that how a memoir reads "quirky, funny, semi-tragic or ultimately inspiring" ultimately depends upon a writer's own personality. Klems points to the memoirs *Angela's Ashes* and *A Girl Named Zippy* to assert his point about the power of style. He says: "Frank McCourt's childhood in *Angela's Ashes* and Haven Kimmel's childhood in *A Girl Named Zippy* each have a completely different feel… This is because these authors have distinct voices, and they use them to relate their stories in different manners."

A close review of both memoirs reveals that there is no doubting Klems' assertion. Looking first at *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt's style is that of a self-effacing, matter-of-fact Irish American who is bent on escaping the misery and squalor of 1930s and 1940s Ireland to make a better life for himself in America. The narrator is young McCourt, who tells the story of his miserable Irish Catholic childhood with chronological episodes of the hardships he has endured. Even the few potentially happy times in the memoir turn into violence or distress: a day at the playground with his little brother, Malachy, that results in a bloody scene when Malachy falls from a seesaw; the narrator's first Communion Day celebration that results in him throwing up his host and being punished for getting sick; a sexual relationship he has with a young woman named Theresa, who ultimately dies of consumption not long after the two give up their virginity

to each other; and more generally, the many hopeful but failed attempts on the part of his alcoholic father and desperate mother to make a good life for their family.

McCourt makes good use of tools—a chronological structure, the child's perspective, and simple syntax—to relate his memories. The chronological structure is important to McCourt's memoir because it lends itself to the introduction of the child's point of view at the onset of the piece and serves McCourt well in developing his point of view as the narrator ages. In addition to structure, the child's point of view and syntax are critical to McCourt's memoir. Utilizing them, he succeeds at relating his dreadful experiences to the reader in a way that is engaging. Structure, point of view, and syntax enable McCourt to wield his matter of fact and self-effacing style and infuse a balance of both humor and pity into the piece.

An example of McCourt's style is evident in an early scene through which he depicts his little brother's accident on the seasaw. McCourt writes:

> I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two. I'm three. We're on the seasaw. Up, down, up down. Malachy goes up. I get off. Malachy goes down. Seesaw hits the ground. He screams. His hand is on his mouth and there's blood. Oh. God. Blood is bad. My mother will kill me. And here she is trying to run across the playground. Her big belly slows her. She says, "What did you do? What did you do to the child? I don't know what to say. I don't know what I did. She pulls my ear. Go home. Go to bed. Bed? In the middle of the day? She pushes me toward the playground gate. Go. She picks up Malachy and waddles off (19).

Writing in the present tense, "I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue" McCourt effectively places the reader directly beside him, allowing the reader to experience the action of the scene with him. McCourt intentionally uses short sentences, ones that reflect the storytelling

capacity of a little boy, to share the action and keep it moving, and in doing so, he sustains the reader's engagement in it: "up, down…he screams…there's blood…here she (Mom) is…she pulls my ear…she pushes me toward the playground gate". In addition, McCourt uses simple and unfiltered language to both share the scene and his reaction to Malachy's injury. "Blood is bad…her big belly"…she picks up Malachy and waddles off…I don't know what I did…" (19).

In this passage, McCourt's vernacular couldn't be truer to that of a little boy. It is blatantly honest and a reflection of his own childhood naivete, what he knows and doesn't know. Young McCourt's naivete inspires consideration for what's missing from the narrator's account of this scene that is also important to the development of McCourt's style. Young McCourt makes no dramatization of Malachy's injury because that's not how the young narrator saw the accident unfold. In addition, he does not share his opinion about the injury because at three years old he doesn't yet have the capacity to form an opinion about the occurrence. Rather, there is quite a bit of confusion on the part of the narrator about the injury because there is also no understanding on his part about how it happened, how he is responsible for it, and why he now is being punished, sent to bed at midday, because of it.

Relating the scene of this accident as a little boy who is experiencing it for the first time, and as a little boy would see it and speak of it, McCourt engages his reader in the action and encourages both humor and pity for the narrator from his reader.

As the memoir evolves and the young narrator ages, McCourt's style evolves in step with the narrator. He remains matter of fact and self-effacing, *and* he gains a deeper and more adult perspective on the events that happen to him. An example of this can be seen here:

> St. Francis is no help, he won't stop the tears bursting out of my two eyes, the sniffling and choking and the God oh Gods that have me on my knees with my head on the back of the pew before me and I'm so weak with the hunger and the crying I could fall on the floor and would you please help me God or St. Francis because I'm sixteen today and I hit my mother and sent Theresa to hell and wanked all over Limerick and the county beyond and I dread the millstone around my neck (342).

Here McCourt delivers that blend and balance of humor and pity yet again, engaging the reader in his memory. And again, structure, point of view, and syntax are the tools of his artful delivery. McCourt delivers this emotionally charged scene in which the now sixteen-year-old narrator is prostrate in a church pew, weak from hunger, ridden with guilt for the sins he has committed, and both begrudging St. Francis and begging him for forgiveness. He looks and sounds both sad and silly to the reader, who has been drawn into the moment via McCourt's continued use of a first-person present narration. Here McCourt also purposefully utilizes an unpunctuated stream of consciousness to carry the reader swiftly and smoothly through the piece. This quick, paced forward press through an emotional memory becomes characteristic of McCourt's style as the narrator ages. It reflects the way he has learned to process his memories. He wants the reader to see and feel what he saw and felt in the actual moment. However, he's not a dweller or a "woe is me-er" and so he presents his memory without pause. Accelerating the movement through the piece with the absence of punctuation, McCourt gives rise to the intensity of the moment for both himself and his reader. In addition to omitting punctuation, he utilizes descriptive language such as the words "sobbing" and "choking" and well as phrases such "tears bursting out of my eyes" to create vivid images that evoke the emotion he felt and wants the reader to feel. He balances those pathetic images of himself with overstatements of his actions

that lend themselves to the self-effacing nature McCourt maintains. These statements such as "sending Theresa to hell" simply because he had sex with her and "wanking all over Limerick and the county beyond" are both ridiculous and humorous (342).

The narrator's style at age sixteen reflects greater depth than his style at age three. Now a young man, he is more serious and sophisticated in his thoughts because of his lived experiences. It is no longer naivete that determines his style. Now, it is about how he has learned to process his experiences, and this allows him to be more himself on the page. From the troubled boy on the playground to the troubled young man in the church pew, the narrator's style remains matter-of fact and self-effacing.

Moving on from *Angela's Ashes* to *A Girl Named Zippy*, the narrator presents a very different style than McCourt does in relating her childhood. Kimmel's style is that of a sharp-witted, whimsical girl, growing up in midwestern, smalltown, America in an innocent post-war era. The narrator, Zippy Jarvis, depicts Kimmel, who was born Elizabeth Jarvis and nicknamed "Zippy" by her father for the way she sped around the house when she was little. Critical to her and the narrator's style are Zippy's imaginative and spirited reflections of the town of Mooreland, IN itself—landscape, traditions, and most importantly, the people who inhabit it. Zippy's adventures and interactions within her hometown reveal the magical youth Kimmel experienced growing up there, as well as the deep personal connections and profound life lessons she gleaned from her environment.

Kimmel's memoir reflects her time, place, and age, and she brilliantly shares Zippy's escapades in a way that is engaging to her reader. Kimmel begins in her adult voice with an explanatory Prologue and then proceeds into random memories told from the point of view and

using vernacular that is true to the child, Zippy. With Zippy as her narrator, she infuses her memoir with an interplay of humor and poignancy.

Before Kimmel embraces the child's point of view in her piece, she gifts the reader with the Prologue. The inclusion of the Prologue is a stylistic choice and it serves Kimmel well in establishing an early connection with her reader. In the Prologue, Kimmel shares her goal, which is "a way to return" to the memories of her childhood experience for which she seeks to express a "sigh of gratitude" (4). In addition, she uses the Prologue to share her overview on the community about which she writes, admitting that she "cannot speak for the town or the people who live there now" (4). The Prologue provides the reader with a sense of who is narrating and why, as well as the specific time and place that her work encompasses. The Prologue is a welcoming entrée into her journey, a friendly pad from which the reader can launch into Kimmel's memories.

Beyond the Prologue, the narrator quickly embraces the child's point of view. The thirty chapters that comprise *A Girl Named Zippy* are told from the point of view of little Zippy, whose age in the memoir ranges from three to nine. Each chapter is intentionally brief, and it relates a memory—an adventure or a mishap—at home, school, in her immediate neighborhood, or in the wider community of Mooreland—that holds a lesson for the young narrator. In addition, the order in which Kimmel presents the chapters is purposely random. This randomness is significant because it supports the child-size point of view. The concision of each chapter reflects the attention span of a child, which is brief. In addition, the random placement of memories in the piece reflects a child's approach to recall, which is more instinctive than systematic.

Adding to structure, Kimmel's placement of photographs at the onset of every chapter supports the young narrator's point of view. For example, a photo of Zippy and her father at a

local pool hall prefaces the chapter entitled *The Lion*, in which Zippy and her father talk about what she wants to be when she grows up, which she asserts is to "belong to the Mafia" because she likes the movies (15). Another chapter entitled *Daniel* begins with a headshot of her brother Daniel, in which Zippy relates her admiration for her brother and shares a memory of how he slapped their sister in the face for pretending to be busy in the bathroom when he needed to use it. These photos are simple in nature, and they depict simple living. They are included by the narrator to introduce the reader to the subject of her memories, quite like the way a child would conduct a show-and-tell presentation to her classmates. With the photos, Zippy is saying "This is my father, about whom I'm now going to tell you" and "This is my brother, about whom I'm now going to tell you." In addition, and more obviously, the photos support the child's point of view because they showcase the everyday life of the young narrator.

With her photos and her memories, Zippy reveals her family: her gun-toting but sensitive, atheist father; her bookish, lay about, Quaker mother; her "so handsome" and "silent and furious" (57) older brother, and her moody older sister, whose infrequent acts of kindness toward Zippy make Zippy suspicious (12). She celebrates her dogs, cats, pig, chicken, pony, and hamster, and admonishes "Edythe, the evil old woman who had lived across the street" and whom her sister says, "eats a stew made out of puppies" (92). She depicts herself exchanging punches with her neighbor Dana, whose parents don't pay much attention to their daughter, and who regularly wants to fight Zippy. She talks about moments when she speaks up for her friends, Julie and Rose, who can't speak up for themselves. She laments times when "adults (Mrs. O'Dell, Edythe, Doc Holiday, Rose's parents, to name a few) were harder on me than anybody else" because they didn't appreciate her quirkiness (231). Collectively, the individual memories Zippy shares and the accompanying lessons she learns reflect a young girl's childhood and reveal

a narrator who is unafraid to be herself, no matter how bold or unconventional she is perceived to be by others.

Beyond the structure, the narrator's syntax also supports the child's point of view, reveals the smart-witted and whimsical style of little Zippy. One specific memory in which the narrator's style is strongly present is her reflection about the family's one and only bathroom, notably the bathroom door, which despite its faulty knob, Zippy still prefers to lock even though she fears getting stuck in the room. She says:

> My parents never locked the bathroom door, but Melinda and I did, even if we were only going in to brush our teeth or look for a towel. I personally believe that the bathroom door should be kept shut at all times, ever since my hamster Skippy had escaped from his cage and mysteriously drowned in my potty chair. My sister could do a dreadfully inaccurate imitation of the look on Skippy's face when we found him, and preferred to perform it at odd times, just so I would never forget that I was implicated in the death of a rodent (42).

In sharing the difference between how her parents treated the door and how she and her sister treated the door, the narrator differentiates between the viewpoint of an adult and a child. In addition, and with word choice, the narrator presents herself as both child-like and aware and articulate for her age. The way she speaks of her bathroom activity and the incident involving Skippy depicts youth attempting maturity. She speaks about her bathroom activity with a degree of exaggerated privacy, even when it comes to performing not so private tasks such teeth brushing and "looking for a towel." She uses the words "personally believe" to assert her own learned position or individual wisdom gleaned from what turned out to be a tragic incident that transpired when the door went unlocked. She uses words such as "escaped" and "mysteriously

drowned" to suggest her continued skepticism about how Skippy died and to distance herself from responsibility for the incident. She calls her sister's impression of Skippy's death face "dreadfully inaccurate" to discredit her sister's performance of it. Finally, she asserts that her sister's reenactments of the performance "and at odd times" is deliberate and intended to implicate Zippy in the hamster's death (42).

Zippy's many episodes are like this one: simple yet implying complexity, and at the same time, serious and funny. They are this way because of who Zippy is, a whimsical and witty young girl, who lives boldly and learns hard lessons as she lives and matures. True to herself and the memoirist at work, she is living her life and simultaneously questioning what her living means in a manner that is endearing to her reader.

In support of Klem's assertion about *Angela's Ashes* and *A Girl Named Zippy,* both memoirs are about childhood and reflect a path toward understanding the impact of childhood on the adult narrator. What's also true is that these memoirs have completely different voices, each one unique, and reflecting a personality that has been shaped by specific life experiences. In short, the works of McCourt and Kimmel reflect their journeys, in both what they depict and how.

Knowing that a memoirist's style is key to the communication of her journey and, in turn, the reader's experience with her journey, it is critical that a memoirist have the freedom to curate her memories in a way that reflects her style. Said another way, establishing style is dependent on the memoirist's ability to choose or create an organic form. Different than structure, which again, relates to how a work is organized, form refers to the kind or type of text. Whereas literary forms have set structures, some writers blur the lines on form to achieve a purpose. *In Literary Styles and the Lessons of Memoir,* literary critic, poet and professor Stephanie Burt

highlights some examples of more recent experiments with memoir's form including Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric,* which "take cues from prose poetry and lyrical essays" to convey style and assert meaning. In *Citizen,* Rankine combines poetry, essays, and images to expose pervasive systemic racism in what is supposed to be a post-racial era in America. A black American herself, Rankine portrays the experience of what it is like to be black in America, and illustrates, with particular attention to the use of language, how both seemingly innocent offenses and intentional transgressions against African Americans can limit them from leading lives that are whole and meaningful. With *Citizen,* Rankine is essentially asking her reader to think critically about racism in America, drawing attention to the reality that racism exists everywhere—playing fields, offices, schools, stores, in media, etc.—and to reflect upon the consequences of it.

Rankine calls *Citizen* an American lyric and the language she uses in the piece is lyrical in that it is evocative. However, she challenges the traditional definitions of lyric poetry and prose most notably by utilizing a second person "you" narrative voice rather than a single, first person point of view. Rankine does this deliberately. Placing the reader in the position of protagonist, she primes the reader to see, feel, and think more intimately than a first- or third-person narrator might, and imposes her sights, feelings, and thoughts upon the reader to inspire the reader to embrace them as the reader's own.

In a 2015 interview with a National Public Radio (NPR) staffer, Rankine shared that the way in which she relates experiences with racism in *Citizen* was meant to bring the reader as close as possible to each chronicled moment. She acknowledges "That was part of my intention. I wanted to create the field of the encounter…what happens when one body comes up against another and race enters into the moments of intimacy between two people." By "the field of

encounter" Rankine is referring to the position of one experiencing or bearing witness to racism, which is where the reader is and persists as the protagonist of her piece (Fahle, 2015).

Rankine's approach to form in *Citizen* is highly inventive and she uses it to shape the reader's experience with her memoir. The piece is comprised of seven chapters. Each chapter maintains a different form and includes images and artwork. Each form has a purpose, and collectively, the forms create a single experience for the reader. Rankine uses prose to exemplify powerful examples of racism in her piece. For example, she comments on the unfair treatment of tennis icon Serena Williams by match officials and the press. Rankine writes: "Neither her father nor her mother nor her sister nor Jehovah her God nor NIKE camp could shield her ultimately from people who felt her black body didn't belong on their court, in their world" (26). Rankine uses poetry for a different purpose, which is to invoke the reader's reflection upon the impact of racism on black Americans. Here she places the protagonist into "the field of encounter" and expresses empathy for the protagonist's condition. She writes:

> To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about (59).

Regarding visual displays, Rankine makes use of both images and white space to contribute to the conversation about racism and enhance the reader's experience with the subject matter. One of these images is the names of black people who have been killed by police. From the top of the page to the bottom of it, Rankine depicts the names in bold text, then in plain text, and then in faint text until the names eventually fade into the page (134). Rankine uses this image: 1) to make the comment that there are too many black people who have lost their lives to

police violence, and 2) to suggest that what has happened to these black people has been diminished. When asked about the visual displays in *Citizen,* Rankine talked about the value she sees in engaging the senses to bring a reader "into the text full-body." She shared: "I love the freedom that is created when the text and the image are in juxtaposition—that it creates a kind of associative field that I can't control" (Craig, 2020).

Rankine's deviation from traditional form is deliberate. She constructs *Citizen* to create a specific experience for her reader. She uses multiple genres to disorient her protagonist reader, to place her reader in a space of confusion about how to navigate her piece. Again, Rankine does this to bring the reader as close as possible to the condition of racism. In addition, she does this to make a larger comment about the bewildering and frustrating predicament of a black person living in American society, which is to endure racism in a culture that asserts racism doesn't exist. When questioned about the untraditional form of her piece, Rankine shared:

> I think people get into these boxes in terms of what the form should be, and I really believe that form and content should always be in dialogue. When I work on something I think 'what are the tools I need to make this be the best it can be?'… It's not that I have anything against traditional form, it's just that in thinking about race, you're thinking about people's lives (Chingonyi, 2018).

What Rankine is saying is that achieving the purpose of a piece to the best of her ability takes precedence over maintaining its traditional literary construction. Her words support a key assertion of this paper, which is that a writer's ability to exercise freedom with form ("what are the tools I need?") enables her to establish her truest self or style on the page and create a well-defined experience for her reader. With her authentic construction, Rankine is also saying that there are some topics, such as pervasive systemic racism, that may require tools of the writer's

trade or ways of approaching the reader that are different than the ones or ways that have been well-practiced and sanctioned.

Citizen is a work of pure authenticity. With it, Rankine depicts her own unique style and exemplifies as well how different genres can be used together in the same piece to help the author achieve the desired impact. *Citizen* is the perfect example of the literary construction that this paper defends: an artfully crafted memoir that utilizes multiple genres to reveal an author's truth and her commitment to connect with her reader. It is a multi-genre memoir. Rankine utilizes poetry, prose and images to construct her memoir. This defense looks at poetry, personal essays, and letters, to highlight and exemplify the value that each of these genres can bring to a memoirist's project.

First, poetry. In his book *Poetry as Survival*, author Gregory Orr both says and asks: "In poetry, the terms of our lives are transferred into language. But what kind of language and for what purpose?" (22). Orr's words point to poetry as an effective genre for the memoirist, whose subject is the terms of her life, whose "what kind of language" is to be determined by her style, and whose "purpose" is self-reflection for her and her reader. In other words, poetry is a good fit for the memoirist because the potential of the genre aligns with the memoirist's quest. Poetry provides the memoirist with a unique opportunity for communication with her reader. That opportunity is to shape sounds, images, and thoughts to share her personality on the page and create an experience for a reader that might be too complex to describe with language that is direct. Looking back at *Citizen*, Rankine's style, which is both provocative and evocative, is alive in her poetry. Her use of it to place the reader "in the field of encounter" is an example of this opportunity, as well as an example of poetry's contribution to a memoir. Rankine's piece also exemplifies how poetry as a genre can serve a writer well in the curation of her piece

relative to how she utilizes other genres in her piece. As noted above, Rankine uses poetry as the vehicle for encouraging her reader's reflection about experiences she delivers more directly with prose.

Other examples of poetry that encourage reflection occur in Kwame Alexander's *Why Fathers Cry at Night.* Alexander's journey on the page is an exploration of his own personal relationships with his parents, former spouse, and daughters. It is essentially a memoir about learning how to love. His memories entail witnessing love, questioning love, enjoying love, and losing it. Like Rankine does in *Citizen,* Alexander uses poetry to draw his reader into his memories. The images he creates in his poetry, particularly the ones of his parents, evoke the complexities of a parent-child relationship. In his poem "The Heavyweight of Father," for example, Alexander depicts his father as someone who "loved us like a boxer" and "wouldn't stop until he knocked us down" just to ultimately "massage our wounds/with a softening tongue" in such a way that "left each of us smiling" (17-18). Mindful word portraits like this one reflect Alexander's reminiscent and passionate style and are a hallmark of his poetry. They enable him to express the experiences he has with love as outgrowths of deep personal reflection, and they beg the reader to think profoundly about how both difficult and gratifying loving a person can be.

In a 2023 interview with NPR, Alexander shared how he curated his memoir. In doing so, he revealed how poetry serves his piece with respect to the other genres in it. Alexander notes that initially his book was meant to be a collection of love poems. However, "it took on a life of its own and evolved into something far more expansive" to include letters, as well as recipes from his mother and grandmother. Alexander's powerful poetry provides the reflective tissue for

his memoir. The letters and recipes, which he found himself writing later to give greater context to the memories, are tools of support for them (Fresh Air, Terry Gross, June 2023).

With its interplay between words and rhythm, poetry has the potential to deliver a reader to the essence or living truth of a work. The personal essay has this transportive quality as well, and therefore, it is another excellent choice of genre for the memoirist. A personal essay is a type of non-fiction through which the fruits of a personal experience are relayed. According to author of the *Art of the Personal Essay,* Phillip Lopate, what makes this genre unique is "the supposition that there is a certain unity to the human experience." As such, Lopate adds that the goal, and therefore, the success of the personal essay is dependent on the author's ability to share "thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies" so that he "sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue, a friendship if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship" (xxiii). How the personal essayist achieves this relationship, Lopate says, has much to do with language, the conversational nature—"casual, everyday, demotic, and direct"—as well as his commitment to "show: don't tell" his story (xxiv, xxxviii).

The personal essayist engages his reader with devices that are akin to most narratives. They include character description, place, dialogue, conflict, etc. The approach he takes to engagement, however, is less about recounting the actual event with the utmost accuracy and more about encircling it to engulf the reader in his storytelling. Lopate says: "The essayist attempts to surround a something—a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation—by coming at it from all angles, wheeling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral taking up closer to the heart of the matter" (xxxviii). This approach facilitates the connection between the writer and his reader as well as the reader's journey to the recognition of the writer's goal for his

piece. The writer's intention is identifying "the heart of the matter" or that example of the human condition—love, suffering, mortality, etc.—that unites him and his reader.

The potential of the personal essay to connect and relate makes the genre a good fit for the memoirist. Utilizing personal essay, a memoirist can share a memory that reveals a truth about who she is, as well as that which is meaningful to her. James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* is a personal essay that reveals person and purpose. In his essay, Baldwin reflects on the fragile relationship he had with his father, the anger in the black communities in Harlem in the 1940s, and his own rage toward both situations. He shares the following, revealing the complexity of his feelings about his father as well as his own life's truth.

> I had told my mother that I did not want to see him because I hated him. But this was not true. It was only that I had hated him, and I wanted to hold on to this hatred. I did not want to look on him as a ruin; it was not a ruin I had hated. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain (Lopate, 596-597).

Baldwin's honest admission reveals his experience with suffering, which while different from person to person or reader to reader, is a shared human experience. His essay is rich with well realized and well described personal disclosures such as this one about both his own plight with racism and the larger plight of injustice experienced by black Americans nationwide.

Mary McCarthy's *My Confession* is another example of a personal essay that inspires the reader's connection through an honest revelation of person and purpose. McCarthy writes to share the truth behind her views and her involvement with the Communist party in the mid-1930s. She explains her participation as a superficial engagement that emerged from the desire to make the rounds at parties, advance her literary career, and meet and engage in sexual activity

with men. Once connected to the Communist party, she discovered that she was in a precarious social position, as her connection to it brought her greater scrutiny than success. Her essay shares how she abandoned her association with the party and that she maintains some shame and regret over her association with it, but not so much, as she was an observer of and not a believer in Communist philosophy. McCarthy shares:

> Most ex-Communists nowadays, when they write their autobiographies or testify before Congressional committees, are at pains to point out that their actions are very, very bad, and their motives very, very good. I would say the reverse of myself, though without the intensives. I see no reason to disavow my actions, which were perfectly all right, but my motives give me a little embarrassment… (Lopate, 560-561).

While her personal story is controversial, her style lends itself to connection with her reader. She presents her truth as a mistake, which is something to which any human reader can relate. Furthermore, she shares her truth with a motivation to disclose all she has gleaned from her experiences with the Communist party. Her commitment to detail and candor through her act of sharing adds to her credibility and encourages her readers to trust her.

Both Baldwin and McCarthy's pieces exemplify characteristics that overlap with memoirs. On their own or utilized in conjunction with other genres, these personal essays provide the writer with the opportunity for sharing by showing who they are and what matters to them, as well as lens through which the reader can connect and relate to their experiences.

Personal letters are an effective tool for the memoirist in that they too are a vehicle for communicating a writer's truth and establishing connection. Like memoirs, letters reflect elements of personal style such as syntax, voice, and tone, and in turn, reveal the personality of

the writer who pens them. In a piece encouraging the study of letters, educator Amy Maupin asserts that letters reveal the individual behind the letter writing. She says "When one studies a letter, one sees inside the life of and the mind of a specific person…a letter writer reveals his or her own identity…"

The letter writer embraces the "I" of the genre. Like the memoirist, his goals are to share, to connect, and learn something about himself through his writing. The content of his letter reveals the purpose(s) for his connection—to thank, to honor, to inquire, to celebrate, to bemoan, to name a few of the many reasons for correspondence. The reader of his letter, often the "you" addressed, is the recipient of his words. Again, like the memoirist, the letter writer considers the role of his audience as he writes. Who the audience is to him and the purpose of his letters impacts the depth of personality he reveals in his writing. Maupin talks about the possibilities of the letter as a genre. One of great possibilities, she asserts, is the potential of the letter to go a layer deeper than most genres can in revealing life's purpose and meaning "in the raw." She quotes Grunwald and Adler relating:

> Dreams are confided in letters—both the nightmares and the hopes. Love is confided in letters—without fear of hearing laughter. Sex and jealousy—money and drugs: all of these are subjects that the intimacy of letters allow. A young man dying of AIDS describes to his parents how he wants to be buried. A woman tells her mother about having an abortion…A lot of the joy of reading letters comes from hearing the ring of unaffected truth (63).

The potential of creating "unaffected truth" certainly has to do with the relationship between letter writer and recipient. It also has to do with language. In his article *The Personal Touch in Writing*, Allan Dittmer talks about the language of letters. He says: "…the language of

letters is perhaps the closest thing to natural speech and reflects that casual spontaneity we associate with conversation…" (24).

Highlighting the honest and organic qualities of language in letters, Dittmer makes the connection between language and truth. Speaking through the pen as he would in person to someone whom he expects will consider thoughtfully what he shares, the letter writer is encouraged to be himself on the page. He is free to say what he truly feels. Furthermore, his awareness of space for the reader's leisurely consideration of his words (versus an expectation to respond in the moment), gives him the confidence to express himself with even greater feeling than he might in a face-to-face conversation. Sharing freely and confidently, the letter writer's action on the page becomes about more than just communicating with his recipient. Writing his letter is also a journey of self-discovery.

In his *Letters to Milena*, Franz Kafka exemplifies love "in the raw." Through these letters Kafka corresponds with Czech translator, Milena Jesenska. Their writing begins as business correspondence in April of 1920 and evolves into a pen-and-ink love affair between the two, which lasts almost a year. Kafka's letters to Jesenska, whom he called "a living fire" are intensely emotional love letters (14). True to Kafka's writing style, they are highly introspective, deeply philosophical, and beautifully crafted, revealing not only his love for Milena but his prowess as a thinker and writer. In this quote captured from one of his letters, Kafka uses the metaphor of love as a knife to artfully communicate the sentiment that love has the power to cut through the surface of the human persona and reveal true emotions. He writes: "You are the knife I turn into myself, that is love. That, my dear, is love" (201).

Kafka's words to Milena reveal the personality of a man, his earnest expressions of love, and longing he feels for her. Kafka both revels in the love he feels for Milena and feels immense

pain for not being able to be with her. While Kafka's use of language may be interpreted as surreal to a reader for whom these letters were not intended, they reveal the seemingly honest expressions of a man who loves and simultaneously feels unearthed and tortured by love. Writing letters to Milena is an outlet of profound self-exploration for Kafka. Kafka admits this to Milena in one of his letters in which he shares: 'Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost" (230). Kafka's communication with Milena reflects a personal journey for him, one through which he explores his feelings, how he feels for Milena, and what he thinks about his feelings.

The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor is another compilation of personal letters that reflects an author and her unaffected truth. O'Connor's unaffected truth is the outgrowth of her southern born and educated youth, her life as the only child of two Irish Catholic parents, her deep commitment to her faith, and the twelve years she suffered debilitation before succumbing to Lupus at age thirty-nine. *The Habit of Being* collects O'Connor's correspondence with writers, friends and others spanning the years 1948-1964. Her letters are many in number. They reflect ordinary occurrences of her daily life like feeding chickens and visiting friends. In addition, they reveal her most "formative beliefs" about writing, religion, and the human condition, as well as and her staunch commitment to living out those beliefs. In an introduction to the collection, O'Connor's friend, writer Sally Fitzgerald, highlights the connection between the author and her letters. She says: "Reading through her letters, I felt a living presence in them. Their tone, their content, and even the number and range of those she corresponded with, revealed the vivid life in her, and much of a personality…" (xi). Fitzerald goes on to further describe O'Connor on the page: She says:

> There she stands, to me, a phoenix risen from her own words: calm, slow, funny, courteous, both modest and very sure of herself, intense, sharply penetrating, devout but never pietistic, downright, occasionally fierce, and honest in a way that restores honor to the word (xiii).

O'Connor's letters are a vehicle for her to talk about matters that are of importance to her. In addition, they exemplify a strong personality embracing a genre that encourages her to be her most candid self on the page. O'Connor's rawest letters powerfully exemplify the genre's potential for relating unaffected truth.

In a letter to author William Sessions, for example, O'Connor boldly challenges Sessions' critique of her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. When she realizes that Sessions has reviewed her book through a phallic lens, seeing "everything in terms of sex symbols," she objects that his Freudian approach is "too far from the spirit of the book." First quipping "Your criticism sounds to me like you have read too many critical books, and are too smart in an artificial, destructive and very limited way," she ultimately ends her letter to Sessions encouraging "My Lord, Billy, recover your simplicity!" (407).

In another letter to one of her more frequent correspondents, identified as "A", O'Connor vehemently disregards the concept of "modern Catholicism" as some new iteration of the Catholic faith "which doesn't make sense" (103). She accounts for history and the world's current historical position but reaffirms that Catholicism is not subject to their whims. She concludes her letter by passionately expressing her personal loyalty to the teachings of her faith: "If you're a Catholic you believe what the Church teaches, and the climate makes no difference" (103).

O’Connor’s letters depict sharing and connecting. They also reveal an author fulfilling her need to explore on the page. No doubt, O’Connor has a need to communicate the contents of her life and mind with others and letters are one of her trusted ways of doing so. In the *Habit of Being* she admits that “I have always been afflicted with a love for letters…” and that letter writing is more than just an act of communication for her. It is also an act of self-discovery. She shares: “I have to write to discover what I am doing. Like the old lady, I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it again (5).

Both O’Connor’s and Kafka’s collections exemplify the fit with and value that letters bring to memoir. The fit is in the objective of the genre: to share that which is personal, to seek a connection that is meaningful, and to discover a greater understanding of self. The value is in the genre’s ability to capture the most instinctive or impulsive nature of the author.

The memoirist is the who: a thirty-six year old white woman who fondly recalls growing up in smalltown, midwestern America in the 1960s; a sixty-six year old Irish-American who begrudges the childhood he experienced between New York City and Dublin, Ireland in the 1930s-40s; a fifty-one year old African American woman who exposes pervasive systemic racism in a society that professes racism doesn’t exist; a fifty-five year African American man who shares a journey about learning how love. Their style is their how: whimsical and witty; matter of fact and self-effacing; proactive and evocative; reminiscent and passionate, respectively. When it comes to memoir, the who determines their how, and their how ultimately reveals the who. Memoir writing is deeply personal work. Rooted in a quest for truth and understanding, it requires serious reflection, as well as freedom and invention.

Reenter the multigenre memoir, an unbridled path to authenticity. The multigenre memoir is a choice literary venue for a writer to explore her truth and then share it in whatever

shape her journey takes her. Narrative genres—poetry, personal essay, letters, etc.—that align with her goals and can help her execute her purpose, are reliable tools for her craftsmanship. Unbound by the constraints of traditional genre, the author of the multigenre memoir embraces freedom of form and fashions her truest journey, one that reflects her style, her sense of self, and her thoughtful intentions for her reader.

EXPOSITION

What comes next is the creative body of work that I have lived, written and retooled to this end. It is a multigenre memoir of my own design, a collection of poems, personal essays, and letters. There is more than one genre of writing here within because I have learned to rely on more than one form of writing for self-expression. In thinking about form choice, I'd say that it is the subject matter, and how I want my reader to experience my work that determines it for me.

Letter writing gives me the opportunity to say most plainly what I am thinking and feeling. Personal essays allow me to capture and share moments that have stirred my senses and moved me. Writing poetry is far more complex. I write poetry when I want or need to say something that requires more than the language I speak. All three forms require thoughtful consideration of the how, as the work is mine, and therefore, it must reflect me.

I do not want to say any more about form choice except this: Sometimes I decide. Other times, there is no decision. A piece of writing evolves from a thought, or a sentiment, and then it takes shape becoming something more.

Acts of Symbiosis

It is not my nature
to be a grizzly to a wolf
sparring for survival—no.
I'd find another place to hunt.

Sadly, I have been
a fluffy dog to a deer tick
unknowing happy host
of some selfish, noxious feed.

I truly hope I've been
a barnacle's life whale
an anchor, or a transport
for another's needs

And how I long to love
like a flower with a bee
in an essential, benefic
reciprocity.

BODY/CONTENTS

ACT I

Looking Back

When I look back now
I think to myself that we didn't have much.
The house we lived in wasn't ours
and the car we drove belonged to Uncle Ed.
My world was a small backyard yard fenced in by rotting wood,
a metal swing that burned from June through August,
and a red-headed girl who lived four houses down.
No laptop.
No iPad.
No smart phone.
I did have my own library card.
I kept it a green shoebox in my closet
along with some coins that Poppy gave me
a gold button I found in the parking lot at school
and what was left of my yellow baby blanket.
When I look back now
I think to myself that we didn't have much.
Never once,
did I think that then.

For Melanie: MADAKAM Pond

When summer set we'd perch ourselves
on terra cotta castaways
and dip homemade fishing rods
into the shallow water.
We swore we spotted trout and bass
wiggling among the rocks,
yet celebrated all the same
a catch of matted leaves.

Some days we took to gathering
beach pails full of science,
plastic handles cracking
as we lifted our samples.
Then nose to nose we'd huddle
over thick, cloudy specimens
thoughtfully determining the
age of our playground.

One time we snuck some leaves
from your mother's Hosta plant
not enough that she would notice
but enough to give us pause.
Turns out, we were right,
they were the perfect raft
and so we bravely sailed our Smurfs
as far as we could blow.

But mostly, I remember
our endless tinkering
with all the odds and ends
that we found buried in the brush--
a stomped out cardboard box,
a weathered piece of canvas,
a tire, broken ladder,
metal folding chair.

We tested and tried
growing wet but never hopeless
pushing off the water's edge
to cross, just because.

Holy Intrusion

Peaking up through prayer hands
I catch my mother's eyes
spell-cast on the altar.
She is staring.

I bend deep into the kneeler
stretch my back up tall and curious
to search for what she sees—
there is nothing.

I really want to ask her
"Mom, what are you looking at?"
but we're not allowed to talk in church.
so I must find another way.

I press my face into my holy fist
and watch her through the cracks
between the laces of my hands
where fingers do not meet.

Her gaze is fixed with finding.
I feel frozen in intrusion.
And I wonder, with anticipation,
how long, until she breaks?

When she finally lets go
she is quick to catch her vision
one cuff and then the other,
she dabs and dabs away.

I decide she must be sad
for someone or herself
but I do not really know
so I just get back to praying.

Pledging

Clutching my hand and leading me through the green, iron gates of Brookdale Cemetery, my great aunt Cioci (Chuch e) would remind me that were entering a "resting place. " I had learned through six years of visiting this "resting place" every day after school, to be quiet until Cioci and I had made our way back to the other side of the gates. Then and there, I could return to my anecdotes about Vinnie Matullo, my childhood sweetheart, and she could return to playfully teasing me about him.

Once inside the cemetery, my great aunt and I would take the familiar right at Niedzinski 's stone and walk three places up to my grandmother's grave. There, we visited with Aunt Cioci's sister, my grandmother, and then moved on through the cemetery passing in between rows of irregular headstones and the arrow-headed, maroon fence, until we came to the site of the small American flag. Fixed to a black metal staff, the flag hung over a small, square stone with craggy edges that seemed to flatten into the sunken ground.

The wide edge of the flag, which ran the width of my great aunt's fingers—index to pinky was a frayed mess of weather-bleached threads. Quietly, I would watch my aunt as she knelt upon the stone, almost fully covering Frank Katla 1925-1949 with her knees. As she knelt, Aunt Cioci would extend her arm to the flag, holding her hand in mid-air against its back. Looking on, I sensed that both she and I were waiting for the small flag to take her hand. Of course it never did.

As a little child, I didn't think much to question the meaning of this flag or of my great aunt's devotion to it. I had pledged allegiance to the flag every day at Our Lady of the Lake School. I had known that Mom, as an elementary school teacher, did the same at School # 5. I just assumed that Aunt Cioci chose Brookdale Cemetery as her regular pledge site. However, as I neared the third grade, I did begin to wonder about the significance of the flag on Frank Katla's grave. Still, I didn't ask Cioci about it. I always seemed to think about the flag when Cioci and I were already inside the cemetery gates. And I knew, it wasn't appropriate to ask her about it there. By the time we'd made our way back outside the gates, my mind had wandered onto something else. I never did ask Aunt Cioci about the flag.

My great aunt Cioci died of emphysema in November of my junior year in high school. Her health had been failing since the previous Christmas. Mom had been called away unexpectedly by her cousins that Christmas night to meet them at Mountainside Hospital. I asked Mom just before she left home that night why she was going to the hospital on Christmas. She told me she was going because Cioci couldn't breathe. Mom's words put me in mind of a small, white and yellow box that I had seen too often as a child at my great aunt's house. The box was wrapped in a thin, plastic film. It read Benson and Hedges. The image of the box reminded me of being just tall enough to see out of Cioci's kitchen window and into her backyard. At least twice an afternoon, the child of me had watched her from that window, Aunt Cioci sat low to the ground on an old tree stump, blowing smoke up to the sky from lips I couldn't see.

From Christmas the year before to the day she passed away, I didn't see Cioci.

And although I didn't see her, I knew she wasn't well because Mom would come home from having visited her in the hospital with swollen eyes and tissues in her sleeve. I knew because I'd pressed my ear up against the closed door of Mom's bedroom, and listened as she comforted her cousins on the phone, "God rest her soul, when she goes, at least then she'll be in peace."

Looking back on my great aunt's wake, I have mixed feelings about not having seen her in her illness, I was happy not to have seen her suffer. And yet, I wished I might've been better prepared to have seen the woman of her I saw at her wake. This woman was not the one who had marveled wide-eyed with me through the oven door window at the sight of browning sugar cookies, or who had danced with me in her backyard at spring's first show of daffodils. She was without her red cardigan, her black, wide-legged trousers, and her large, plastic glasses that mostly hung around her neck on a thin-linked chain.

I remember the look of my great aunt's hair as she lay there in her coffin. It was combed back, out of her face. I remember standing there beside her and imagining myself as a little child, how I would crawl into her lap and tousle her short cut into a shaggy mess. I especially remember the way her lips had been made up. They were caked in a wild, rosebud pink, a poor replacement for the fine, wine shade she always wore and allowed me to show to the mirror at times. The woman whose lips I saw that night were tied in a grave expression. To me, they looked solemn, more solemn than silent, pledging lips.

Aunt Cioci's hands were draped in rosary beads. The small, pink, crystal beads accentuated the only recognizable of the woman whom I had known and loved. The fingers of this woman invited me. I remember touching them right then and there in the funeral parlor. It was my attempt, I guess, to hold the hands that once held me from traffic, strangers, and an unfriendly, neighborhood dog. Touching Aunt Cioci then and there was the first time I had ever touched a dead person. Touching her then and there did not bring me back to where I wanted us to be.

On the night of the wake, I remember looking on as men and women I knew and didn't know knelt before my Aunt Cioci with their sad eyes, I was thankful for their quiet offerings. Our family—my mother and father, Cioci's husband, Eddie, and their middle-aged daughters, Deb and Kris—made their offerings as well. In her coffin, they placed two pictures. One was a black and white photo of Cioci sitting outdoors somewhere with her parents and my grandmother under a gigantic tree, The other was a picture of my great aunt standing with my great uncle Eddie, their daughters, and my family in front of a Christmas tree. In both pictures, Cioci looked much like I'd remembered her. In addition to the pictures, they gave Cioci her favorite red cardigan and her prayer book. I gave her a small, American flag.

The day after the wake, my mother asked me about the flag. She told me that she thought the flag was a wonderful gift but admitted to me that she thought I would’ve instead given Cioci something from my childhood or a picture of my great aunt and me. Confused by Mom's confession, I told her that I had given Cioci something from my childhood. Mom was equally as confused by my confession as I was by hers. I quickly explained to her about the American flag at Brookdale Cemetery, information I'd just assumed she had already known. Mom's response to

my explanation confirmed that she had known about the flag. What Mom hadn't known was that I had visited the site of it with my great aunt every day after school for most of my childhood.

The day of Aunt Cioci's funeral and following her burial, Mom and I walked the short distance through Brookdale Cemetery to visit the site of the American flag. Mom knew the route but admitted on the way that she hadn't taken it since she and Cioci had the day they'd buried my grandmother. When we arrived at the flag, I demonstrated to my mother how my great aunt had gone about her pledge, I knelt upon the stone, almost fully covering Frank Katla 1925-1949 with my knees. I extended my arm to the flag and held my hand against its back. Just as I did this, a wind picked up and the frayed edge of the flag tickled my fingers. I pulled my hand away from it quickly and laughed at how nervous the sudden gust had made me. Mom looked at me with high eyebrows and I stood up. Then she bent down and carefully examined the stone upon which I'd knelt, running her fingers across its inscription.

"Oh, Ellie," she sighed my great aunt's name aloud.

"Who is Frank, Mom?" I asked.

Mom answered, "He was her first love, Kerri."

Mom explained that Frank Katla and Cioci had met and married when they were in their late teens. The same year in which they were married, Frank was called off to the Second World War. After the war, Frank had come home. He'd had been home for only a few years when he passed away. Mom said it was cancer that took him from our Cioci. Mom's words left me with a feeling of regret. They made me wish I could have told my great aunt that I was sorry for her loss.

Standing with Mom in the place I had stood with Aunt Cioci as a child, I closed my eyes and prayed silently to Frank, an image of a young man in an Army uniform. In this moment, I asked Frank if he would take care of my great aunt. He nodded his head, smiled wide, and then saluted me. When I opened my eyes, he was gone. All I saw was the flag.

"He was handsome," I said aloud to my mom about Frank.

Mom answered, "I'm sure he was, Kerri."

"Not Vinnie Matullo handsome," I said to Mom remembering my childhood sweetie,

"but he was handsome."

Mom looked at me strangely and asked, "What in the world made you think of Vinnie?"

I answered, "Cioci."

Again, Mom looked at me as if to say "I don't get it." I laughed out loud at her look, and she asked what else she didn't know about my relationship with my great aunt.

"I don't know" I answered, honestly.

At that, Mom took my hand and led me back through Brookdale Cemetery.

She didn't let go of it until we had passed through the green, iron gates.

Paying Homage

My mother taught me how
to care for our dead
with a small garden rake
and a pair of kitchen gloves.
She'd kneel down in the dirt
and gently comb away
the fallen leaves,
craggy weeds,
and past blessings
that cluttered the plot.
I loved to sit beside her
run my fingers through the soft grass
and listen as she talked
through her purposeful restoration.
My mother,
with her dutiful hands
clearing a mess she didn't make
with her heart hung over her work
wondering out loud
to me, but not just me,
about time,
and how she wished
she had more of it.

Portrait of a Life

A small boy in pants just short
standing on a platform
too young to ride alone
raised on subway fare
and food he put on his own table
waiting, serving, cleaning
after hours of belaboring propagating Jesuits
for whom the man now has the most bewildering respect
the hours he once kept in a small newspaper office
over the river in New Jersey
where he began to talk in keystrokes
unveiling stories
about Black Panthers
and civil rights
until a colleague delivered him
to the front steps of a local mobster's home
and he was done
with a marriage
that lasted 22 years
and produced three children
to whom he can hardly talk about anything
but his affinity for Lionel trains
toy soldiers
and playing handball in the Stuyvesant of old
pen man now working PR
for the Miss America Pageant
on the Avenue of Americas
singing the lullabies of Broadway
and eating the best damn chocolate chip cookies
he's ever had at his desk

On My Way

I stood directly in front of the one and only mirror in the girl's locker room, searching my purse for bob-pins. Erin stood up on a bench behind me and bent over my left shoulder trying to mold the flat, square cap to her thicket of flaming red hair. "There" she said after about three seconds at work. "See, I don't need bob-pins" she said. I looked at her and giggled. The cap was lifting off about three inches from her forehead and a clumpy lock shot over each of her ears like red tidal waves. "Come here" I said, leaving my reflection in the mirror and turning around to face her. I gave her my purse to hold, took her head in my hands, and then fastened down her head wings and the cap with bob-pins. She took another look at herself and smiled into the mirror. "Oh yeah" that's definitely better, she said gratefully patting her cap and then hopping down from the bench.

I turned back to the mirror and stared at me. My cap was perfect. I was thinking about my speech. I had written it and rewritten it. "Um… I think you're going to need these" Erin said smartly, producing my eyeglasses from my purse and holding them out to me. "Oh my gosh, yes!" I said to her, taking the glasses from her and putting them on my face. Satisfied with herself for helping, she grinned widely at me and insisted that I would never, in a million years, be able to survive without her. She seemed to be reminding me of this more than usual lately. Or maybe I had just been *hearing* it and thinking about it lately. I giggled at her playful egotistical air, then silently turned the question back to reality. Would I make it on my own without her and our little crew of girls, beyond the conventional life I knew so well in small-town Verona? These were the things I wasn't supposed to be thinking about until after graduation. At least that's what we had agreed upon, the girls and me, that we wouldn't talk about leaving home and

each other until we'd graduated. In all my seriousness, I reminded Erin of our little pact. "We're not talking about that right now, Erin" I said. "Right, right, Pres," she said. "Actually, Pres, we're never talking about that" she added.
"Okay" I laughed.

Erin threw her arms around me gave me a quick squeeze. Then she started toward the locker room door. I sat down on the bench she had been standing on. "Well, come on," she said.
"I'll be right out, Erin. I said back to her. She wrinkled her nose at me as if to question the delay. I waved my hand at her to go. "I just want to go over my speech one more time," I said to her. "O-kay," she said and left.

Alone in the locker room, I whispered a prayer for confidence. It was quiet except for the voices of my classmates in the gym that tunneled out into a distant hallway. I heard the clock on the wall pass another minute, and I instinctively looked up to where I knew it was. It was almost time. I stood up, went back to the mirror, and took another good long look. "I want it all to be okay." I said earnestly to the woman in the mirror. She looked back at me with truth in her gaze and I committed myself to the blacks of her eyes. In them, I saw my tired father in a wrinkled business suit standing in front of his former home, looking unhappy to be there. I saw my mother at my bedside, at the stove, in carline, at our ballgames, in church. I saw my two brothers and me riding Big Wheels, chasing grounders, hiding out with flashlights under covers saying to each what we knew was wrong between our parents. I saw five inseparable girlfriends in the hallway of this high school huddling happily around my Happy 17th Birthday locker. I saw familiar faces

of friends and neighbors who were always there because they could be to lend a hand, a cup of sugar, anything. In all those visions, I saw what I needed most to see.

Then there she was again. “Hey, Pres, we gotta go.” We’re lining up. Okay?”

“Oh yeah…yes…okay…” I stammered out of the mirror. “Are you okay?” she asked. I smiled at her warmly and nodded “Yes, Erin, everything is going to be okay, I answered confidently.

“OK then, Miss President, let’s go then. You belong out there not in here. Besides, we can’t process without you.”

Erin was right. I did belong out there. I belonged in many places out there. Verona would always be one of them. I picked myself up from the place in the mirror and followed Erin out of the locker room. I found the rest of the Class of 1995 waiting in the long band hallway. I took my place at the head of the line and turned around to face them. Erin popped out of the line and stuck her tongue out at me. I laughed and turned back around. Bagpipes blared, I took my first step, then another.

Redecorating

When my Dad left,
color moved in.
Mom took the neutral rugs
out to the curb
and went and fetched
her radiance.
I didn't have to ask her
where she'd put it
all those years.

In the vacuum
frying pans
shopping carts
and lunchbags
in diapers
fevers
little bruises and bumps
in carline
on sidelines
and bleachers
in stadiums.
in birthdays
and holidays
her classroom
at work.

When Dad came back
he seemed surprised
by Mom's newfound brilliance.
Naturally, he didn't stay long.
I didn't have to ask him why.
It was obvious to all of us
Mom didn't need him.

Short of Breath

The air was heavy, and breath was short that summer night in Waterloo. The intense sun had kindly retired early, but the brutal humidity was inexorable throughout the night. It was nearly midnight when the eight-hour concert concluded and some 8,000 Phish fans, scorched, sweltering, and sluggish searched desperately for the quickest route to air conditioning and rest. Among this anxious mob, my two girlfriends and I stuck together.

For a long while, I stood staring down at my feet and at the feet of those around me in anticipation of their march forward. Not one sole moved in the ensuing forty-five minutes. As the crowd began to express disgust, I too, became impatient and began to search for a way out of the mob. But I couldn't. My vision was obstructed by giant men whose sweaty backs clung to my face. I couldn't see a clear foot ahead of me, let alone an open path to an exit. Firmly clutching familiar hands, I balanced on tiptoes and peered over the shoulder of the goliath directly in front of me. I spotted an exit—a break in the fence that encircled the field and confined us—about a hundred yards from where we were packed.

With little room to move and little room to breathe, I remained silent for the next thirty minutes. Closing my eyes, I imagined that I was home and lying down in my own bed, sprawled out comfortably beneath my ceiling fan. That reverie was working for me, keeping my calm, until it was disturbed by a voice ahead. It was goliath, complaining to his concert companion. "We've been here forever. This is ridiculous," he said. He continued on babbling about the obvious. I tried to ignore him, but he had settled on my last nerve and was really pricking it. At this point, I

thought I might lose it myself. I was sure I was being punished by God for this situation in which I found myself. I quietly contemplated what I had done to offend Him. I decided that whatever I had done, it must have been awful. This was no ordinary punishment. It was torture. Silently, I prayed to God for his forgiveness, promising I would never sin again if he would save me and my girlfriends from this predicament.

Half-way through my vow, goliath shut his mouth. Instantaneously, the girls and I exchanged glances. A "Thank God" look was all I could offer. I held my tongue, but others didn't. The crowd brewed with fussing and complaining "This is insane. What the hell is going on here? Why aren't we moving?" The girl behind me was snapping her gum violently. Someone said that he might pass out. A bead of sweat dripped off my forehead and onto my nose. I closed my eyes and took in one deep breath, and then another, in out, in out. Then it happened. We moved.

Police officers were on the scene, and they began practicing "crowd control." Waving their arms frantically, they weren't having much luck directing the crowd away from the exit and toward the left side of the field. The hot, tired, wasted mob shouted and cursed belligerently at the officers. My head roared. We had waited over an hour. Yes, we wanted to move, but we didn't want to go anywhere but forward.

The front of the mob and only several feet from the exit, a hysterical young man attacked one of the officers in attempt to free himself from his confines. Consequently, several officers seized the assailant and led him to a patrol car just outside the fence. For a second, I thought, "At least he got out." Then I caught a glimpse of an ambulance nearing the exit about to make its way onto

the field. Startled by the sirens and approaching vehicle, the throng of people around me lunged in a wave to the left. My friends and I went with it. With virtually no room to move, the mob pushed and shoved and clung to stay on its feet. Arms waved, fists were clenched, bodies stumbled. Having been knocked off tiptoes, I lost my balance and fell taking one of my friends down with me. We scrambled quickly to our feet just in time to avoid being crushed by a leaning tower of a couple. A young man with a woman on his shoulders tripped in the struggle and the two plummeted down toppling four others in their fall. It was dominoes. Angry and restless, the mob continued to shout profanities at the officers and paramedics who were fighting their way through the crowd with a stretcher and first aid provisions.

Ignoring the belligerence, the help pushed through to the rear end where the mob was still. Less than five minutes later, dead silence had fallen over all of us. Standing at attention, we watched as the bruised and broken body of a teenage girl was carried through the crowded field. We found room, and instantaneously, squashed together to let her pass.

Dandelion

I remember you, soft lioness,
with your light
and spokey mane.
You always liked the yard next door
more than you liked ours.

Tall and strong
your head, hung up
like a question mark
over healthy green blades.

You were, to my child,
a perk of outdoor play
an invitation to wish for something.
And how she reveled in
dreaming with you!

From the ground to her lips
to the whole wide world,
she'd send your feathers in flight
breathing out her most hopeful secret
believing you carried its promise.

ACT II

Intuition

Look! The cardinal comes.
Lightly she touches down
on the gate you hold wide open.
See how her tiny eyes search mine,
how she arches her tail in pride
and bows her head to me.
She does not question where I've been
she is nothing but hospitable.
I think she waits
I'm sure she knows
that at last I have begun to contemplate
the situation of my overnight bag.

Back to Me

I give up busying my mind and find the photo of my love, the one I have placed more than my own arm's length away on the sill of my office window. There, from within an oval frame, my love sits straight-backed in his uniform, wielding a smile he has vowed over and over in his letters to show me, in person, again.

I get up from my desk and go to the window. I pick up the photo and hold it against my chest. I do not look at him again. Instead, I perch myself on the sill of the window and search the Forest, as if out there, I expect to find him.

Staring out into the Forest, I interrupt a moment between two trees. Boughs arch from distant trunks, brushing over and against one another. I watch their tender conversation—a kind of body language—quiet and nurturing. Their fluid exchange reminds me of conversations I have witnessed among small ocean waves, lipping lightly over and against one another before dissolving into the shore. Such waves, these trees—they speak a language with which I am familiar, one that I have longed for ever since my love was called away.

A light breeze blows and lifts up the boughs of the two trees, floating them high and away from one other. Their boughs sway toward my window and I look away, embarrassed by having been caught spying on trees. When I find them again, they are back together, back to brushing. I smile longingly at what I see. I cannot give up watching them.

The sight of these trees—the way they move—is the sound of them too. Softly pushing through

boughs and branches, the forest tongue voices a quiet rustling that entrances me to close my eyes. I have heard fully the delicate rifling of wind through tree leaves when all the muscles in my face have relaxed and I have just about forgotten where I am. With my eyes closed, boughs rise and fall, and I can both see and hear cadence in the play of the wind. It is the music of bodies brushing softly, again and again.

Under my nose, the air smells ripe like earth newly tilled. I pull my shoulders into my chest and dip down my chin to draw this air. From my chest, powder laces the earthy scent and I quickly catch a hint of my love. Me and the forest, we are him.

I hang my mouth open in invitation to forest air and a natural cleansing. Dewey and green, I can almost taste how clean the air is. I can also taste the rain. A perfect blend of salt and sweet, it is mild perspiration on human skin.

On the pane of my window, rain drops splash and dance, but mostly the rain is just a spray. I watch the rain mist the brushing boughs in front of me. Beyond the tree boughs, I just watch the mist. In the wind, it has a body. With the wind, bodies sway.

It has been months that my love has been away. But I have not forgotten how to move with him. Boughs arch from distant trunks.

Ode to Raspberry Sneakers

You are my childhood:
sour-sweet treats
and summertime, poolside attire.
To-the-fingertips passion,
you're the give-it-all kind,
passion that has its own mind.
You are the sky
just before dusk.
You are a thank you smile.
You are an awkward surprise
and a hurtful surmise.
(I'm not good at hiding either.)
Ella Fitgerald?
A grand symphony?
No, you are the lift
both give to my chest.
You're the skin of a radish
petals of affection—
You are my tongue and my lips.
You are warm-me-up stamina
(and I swear, I can see it!)
inspiring lift in my legs.
You are temptation
late at night, side by side
or anytime, anyhow, recklessness.

(A letter to my daughter, on getting pregnant, being pregnant, and the day she was born.)

Dear Annabelle,

I knew I was going to get pregnant after that night. I can't tell you how I knew, I just did. Maybe it was the little prayer I breathed while still lying in bed. "Please God, I really want a baby." When my period was late and three pregnancy tests came back negative, I didn't stop taking them. I was sure that a second blue line would show up. It was just a matter of time, days.
I did not expect a girl.

Your Dad and I went for the ultrasound to find out your gender and I was certain the test would confirm I was having a boy. I'd convinced myself you were a boy because having a boy felt right to me. I had brothers growing up and had even helped raise my younger brother, Chris. So, with a boy, I knew what to do. Then, when your dad pointed at the sonogram screen, asked the technician if what he was seeing was a little vagina, and she said "yes," I was flabbergasted. And terrified. What would I do with a girl?

At first, I was sick at night. I kept saltines and ginger ale on my bedside table. The nausea would wake me in the middle of the night like a bad dream. I'd pull myself into a little ball and wait for it to subside.

When the nauseous phase passed, I got fat quickly. I gained 14 pounds in the first trimester. My obstetrician told me to not to eat so much. I felt I was eating nothing. For months thereafter, I lived on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, turkey, and cheese subs with LTMOV, and

Chunky's Beef Stew Soup. I continued to gain weight, but I was happy. In my third trimester, I ate almost nothing. You sat right under my breast line and on top of my abdomen. Handfuls of cereal and McDonald's vanilla milk shakes kept us going.

I didn't run for the entire length of my pregnancy which was a big deal for me, especially since that wasn't the plan. I tried. Once. I didn't get tired. I got scared. I imagined you in my womb getting knocked around like a little pinball in an arcade game. The doctors said that wouldn't happen to you, but I wasn't risking anything. And so, I walked. A lot. I walked every single day I could from late fall until August 8, the day before you were born. During winter, I wore a black down jacket that looked like it came from the Men's Big and Tall Store. In summer, I wore cotton t-shirt dresses that resembled tents. I went through three pairs of Saucony sneakers in those nine months.

When I walked, I thought about you and what you'd be like when you got here. Would you look like me with blonde hair and green eyes? Would you look like your dad with brown hair and brown eyes. Would you love baseball? Or swimming? Would you love being my daughter?

I went to baby classes with your dad, and when he was travelling for work, I went alone. He was away for the last class, the one that was meant to "prepare" us for the delivery. I asked Gaga to come with me because I didn't want to be alone. I figured, who'd better than my own mom to be my wing woman for the trial run? After that class, I knew I wanted Gaga to be with us in the room when it was time for your delivery. Someone needed to remember what we had to do.

The night before you were born was memorable! It was the opening ceremony for the summer Olympics in Beijing. Me being me, I was in bed by 9 pm. Your dad being an Olympics aficionado, he stayed up until 4 am to watch the entire program. Needless to say, he was a little groggy when I woke him at 7 am to tell him that I was having contractions. He hesitated at first. We'd been to the hospital once before when I mistook contractions for gas. This was different, I told him.

We were at the hospital within an hour. When the doctor came to see me, your dad was asleep in the hospital bed, and I was on my feet gripping a countertop as if doing so would ease the pressure of the contractions. "Who is the patient here?" the doctor asked us with a laugh. "Over here," I said, waving to her from the far corner of the room.

The doctor examined me, made me walk the hallways to encourage your arrival, and then gave me poticin to induce labor. You held out until about 10 pm. I remember the last thing the doctor said to me before you came out into the world. "Kerri, she's ready. I feel her lips." Gaga said "Oh my God! Oh my God." Dad was quiet but smiling. I pushed five times, and you were here. I heard you. I saw you. The nurse put you on my chest. And Annabelle, I knew exactly what to do. I insisted that a nurse clean you up immediately. You looked like you'd been smeared with Philadelphia cream cheese. When you'd been cleaned, we took a nap. Daddy too. Here I thought the adventure had already begun, but really, it was just beginning!

Love you,

Mama

(A letter to my daughter on feeding, a journey for her and me.)

Dear Annabelle,

I failed at breastfeeding.

I didn't want to do it, but I was open to succeeding at it if that were to have happened too.

It was almost time to bring you home from the hospital. An hour prior to my discharge, a lactation specialist showed up in my room with a warm smile and a pile of pamphlets about breastfeeding. She was a hearty, full-figured woman. Upon meeting her, my first thought was she'd likely nursed a brood of children herself and hadn't needed any help doing it. She asked if I'd like to "try nursing you" before I went home. For the record, I did not want to try. I had spent the last two nights in the hospital. I was tired from your delivery. I had just showered and dressed. I wanted to go home. But I told her "yes" because saying no felt a crime against motherhood.

I tried. We tried. Then it was just she who tried because I was so done with her giant hand nudging your head into my little boob. Finally, I thanked her and told her I'd had enough. She looked a little surprised, which I interpreted as "she thinks I am a quitter." She encouraged me to try a few more tries. "No thanks" I told her firmly. She wished me luck, let me know that "a lot of women with smaller breasts have a hard time breastfeeding at first," and then left the room. I felt like throwing the brochures at the door she'd just closed behind her, but I didn't. Instead, I packed up my belongings and went home with you and daddy feeling like I'd failed at my first mommy assignment.

I didn't give up right away. I tried at home several times over the next couple of days, but I just couldn't get you to latch on. It was so frustrating. Your Dad made me feel better about it. "Ker, no use crying over no-spilt milk." It was a ridiculous thing to say, but it made me laugh. More than anything, I needed to laugh, because all I could think about since we'd brought you home was how responsible I had suddenly become.

Thereafter, I pumped for three weeks supplementing formula with breast milk, so you'd have enough to eat. Pumping had me dropping weight quicker than any diet I'd ever tried, but unfortunately, it wasn't helping you gain weight. And you needed to gain weight. Our first visit to the pediatrician taught me that I wasn't making enough milk for you. And so, I quit milking myself and went strictly with the formula. Result? You gained weight. I calmed down a bit. Your Dad got more feeding time with you. I got over not being able to breastfeed.

You were a colicky baby. I can still picture you lying on the changing table in your room stretching out long and stiff like a plank and wriggling to get comfortable in your own little body. Over the course of eight long months, Dad and I went through three types of formula, more Mylicon drops than I feel comfortable admitting, and countless diapers. I'll let you know that I have seen shades of brown that even Crayola doesn't know about. Thank goodness for solid food. When you graduated to it, our lives changed for the better.

At first, you ate everything. And when you'd hesitate, a little distraction got you to eat even the stuff that was gross, like strained peas. I credit the show "Little Einsteins" for your two years of life with a diverse palette. After two years, something changed in you—your tastebuds or your

attitude—and we went backwards. I'd put the spoon in your mouth, and you'd spit the food right back out, repeatedly, sometimes spraying me in hair, face, neck, or chest with the contents of your mouth. It was infuriating and messy.

All through your toddler and elementary school years, you were such a picky eater. I can still remember the food chart we had on the kitchen wall over the table. It listed what days you had to have a vegetable with dinner and what days you could have fruit instead. I dreaded the veggie days, as they always brought a standoff between you and your Dad. He wouldn't let you leave the table until you ate an arbitrary number of something—10 peas, 5 carrots, etc. You always refused to eat however many he insisted, usually drawing the line at half of what he'd presented. Those were some lengthy dinners for the two of you.

At some point, you became curious, and therefore more adventurous, trying new foods—broccoli, red peppers, kale. And at some point, I eased up sneaking cauliflower puree in your grilled cheese just to be sure you got your vegetable intake.

Touche, my dear. How far we both have come.

Love you,

Mama

Sharing with Grandpa

I find a place against the wall,
and lean in
to make no shadow.

My little girl,
with her sunshine curls
and her watermelon smile,
she climbs you
like a tree branch
and dangles glitter toes
from your wooden perch.

You don’t break against her weight
Your shoulders open
And your lap holds.

From my corner
We watch her turn
a monochromatic-sided cube
into to a rainbow.

She proudly presents
You smile and nod
the wall disappears
and we’re all dancing.

Annabelle's Gift

We build in the cold
your little nose, pink
and soft
as the warm
of new life.

I scoop and
You pat
I pile
You smooth
until it's more fun
to go kicking
through snow.

With boots
then wings
mine large
and yours small
we embroider the lawn
with our child's play.

Crystals and wonder
This is your winter
that bellies with laughter
and sillies
the senses.

This is your winter
You're sharing,
I'm taking
should I forget once again
how to feel through
the cold.

Claire

When my mother told me you had died, I knew I had to come. I didn't think about it. I just knew. Even after I had been away, had not seen you for so long, had tried so hard to "unconnect" myself from the place I knew you were, I had to come.

My husband didn't understand it. I don't talk much about my past. It's complicated, more than you would have ever expected of my family, and I don't always have the courage or the words to place my feelings. "It's just something I know I need to do," I said. He didn't press me for more. I'm not sure why. I think you'd like him. Or would you? My husband, the atheist.

The day of your wake, I thought of everything but you and returning home. I thought so much I couldn't think clearly. I was overanxious, hyper busy.

That afternoon, I drove the 30 miles back to my hometown with purpose. No music. Just me and my head. When I arrived, I looked for the old place, which both was and wasn't the way I had remembered it to be. The IHOP was gone. A nail salon and spa was where the bowling alley had been. The fire house had been expanded, so large it made me question if fire had become a greater threat to the town since I'd left. Street signs were larger and a lighter green.

I passed our school, the church, the convent, the rectory, the Virgin Mother on the hill where I observed May crowning every spring for nine years. As I passed the park, I looked for

someone—walking, running, cycling. A face, a frame that I might recognize from a distant day. But no one resonated.

I passed our street.

I spotted Town Liquors just beyond the funeral home. I pulled behind the store and looked for my mother's car. I found it. I looked for more cars I might know. In the lot next door, I looked for your car—the giant gray Impala with the dark maroon roof and your husband's blue Cutlass Sierra—both I used to wave to when they'd pass me on our street. There was no sight of either.

I parked and got out of my car. There was so much wind I thought I'd be taken by it. Some part of me wanted to be. I fought it and walked. I crossed the lot to the guard rail that separates the town's libations from its losses, hiked up my pencil skirt and hopped the divider. I pushed against the funeral parlor door and went in. It smelled like a library and *Jean Nate*. Instantly, I remembered the smell, remembered being Catholic, remembered how to do this thing.

My mother was already there, a ball of cotton mourning in her fist. "I'm so glad you're here, honey" she said. "Thanks Mom," I said and asked if she was okay. "I'm fine," she stated with assurance, blowing her nose loudly, "just fine." I knew that she was fine. Mom is always fine. Not too happy; not too sad. It seems I'm always trying to be fine but always coming up short on either side of it.

"Let's get in line" Mom said and I let her lead me through the parlor and up to the short cue. She went first, embracing your husband, your two sons and then your daughter. I admired Mom's poise, her grace, her ease, how good she was at this. I followed. Heart open, chest tight…

"You remember, Kerri" my mother said to them with her hand out at me. She followed her reintroduction with a well-intentioned 30 second overview of the highpoints of my last 20 years—college, grad school, a job in a "private" school, and a daughter, smart and pretty.
"Mom," I said aloud with a twinge of reproach. I was so embarrassed that she had made this about me and equally so grateful to have been saved from saying something awkwardly conventional. I never know what to say to someone who has just lost family.

I pushed through kind words of acknowledgment from your husband and children, who knew me well enough without mom's presentation, all the while feeling sorry that they had to stand there to hug and shake those of us who needed hugs and shaking. They looked so tired as if they should have been done with this already. I wanted them to be done with this already.
I wanted to see *you.*

I was almost there when your daughter Aileen, took my elbow and gently pulled me back. She found my eyes with hers, and with more warmth than I deserved, she shared:

"Kerri, my Mom talked about you at our dinner table often. We knew you were something. She *loved* you.

"And I, her," I responded, almost automatically. In that moment, I'm sure I didn't feel the weight of Aileen's words. I meant what I said back to her, but I didn't feel that either. She had stunned me. I couldn't get past her eyes, her face. Up close and in earnest, she looked more unquestionably like *your* daughter than I had ever seen.

I hugged Aileen until she let go of me. She felt good. I felt like a leaf. Mom had said her prayer and moved across the room to talk with someone she knew. I fell hard to the kneeler before you. With a dizzy heat in my chest, I searched your face for the woman I knew. I wished you would open your eyes. Then, beneath a heavy veil of powder and rouge and in the far-reaching corners of a mouth—that even in death, seemed to draw wide and high—I found you and I held you in my gaze. I saw your pink carnation smile radiating from morning announcements to afternoon prayer. I saw the wide folds of your floor-length skirt breathing like an accordion as you swept the room with your daily instruction. I saw your strong arms long and open, bridging knowledge and novice, hard board to pliable minds. I saw your lovely, chalky, unmanicured hands.

In that moment, I wanted to be young again…young with objects and prepositions, haikus and limericks, Scout and Atticus, Silas Marner and Eppie—with your perpetual attention and your perpetual encouragement, you and me. More curiously, I wanted to be Catholic…so Catholic…to believe in prayer and penitence, to blindly follow rites and rituals, to do what kept the old days in motion and once made me feel safe.

I did not want to be fine.

Tears, warm and full came unthinkingly…the kind one needs to spill…the kind that soaks your face, your neck, your collar bone, and anything else in their lines of stream…the kind that hollows the mind, exhausting a mess of wrecked-up uneasy.

I cried like that when my father finally left home, when I knew that it was over and that I too, could leave.

When I was done and ready, I stood and placed my damp hands on the cuff of your gray dress.

“Thank you,” I said before I left you.

I think you always knew that I was grateful. I’m just not sure you ever knew how much you meant to me.

(A letter of support that I wrote for my former student, Garrett Hill.)

GARRETT HILL

Without fail, there is one student who gets under my skin and goes right to my heart each year. I know that such a thing is not supposed to happen to college counselors. We're supposed to be unbiased, equal in our thoughts about all the young people we represent. However, we're also human. This year, that one student is Garrett Hill.

I met Garrett for the first time the day after our College Night for Juniors. It is at this winter program that our office designates a college counselor per each junior. I became Garrett's counselor that evening and he came by my office the very next morning to introduce himself. I was impressed and surprised. You see, I had always thought Garrett to be a quieter, more fade-into-the-shadows type of kid.

Garrett and I didn't talk much that day. We spoke briefly about his interest in big schools, traditional college experience, photography and the visual arts. It wasn't until about two weeks later that I really got to know him and his story.

Two weeks after Garrett and I met, his parents came to school with him for a family meeting. During that meeting, Mom explained that while Garrett is her biological son, he is the adopted son of her current husband, Tom, with whom she has other children. "Garrett's biological father has never been a part of Garrett's life," she shared. To me, that wasn't "a thing" I hadn't heard before. Modern times = modern families. It is what mom shared with me thereafter that gave me pause.

Garrett has a younger half-brother, Brendt, who has struggled with a malignant brain tumor for several years. Since 2010, much of Garrett's family life has involved stress over his brother's cancer, doctor visits and hospitals stays, and community fundraising events for his brother's cause. The years have been riddled with ups and downs—near-death experiences coupled with moments of inexplicable joy when a scan has come back clean. Garrett has experienced these moments and has strongly and quietly supported his family the best any young man possibly could.

Truth be told, it has never been Garrett's life that has been held in balance. That being said, his brother's illness has led to consequences for him. I can't speak to them personally, as I am not Garrett. He speaks for himself in his essay. I can only tell you what I know about Garrett today. He is a soft but well spoken, mild-mannered and gentle young man; he doesn't seek the limelight; he is composed and mature; he embraces all that is artistic and expresses himself beautifully through photography and art.

I'll add that the ups and downs of Brendt's health have affected Garrett's academic performance at GSB. His tenth-grade year was toughest for him, as this was the year that Brendt was diagnosed. Eleventh grade proved to be better for Garrett. I expect that twelfth grade will be even better for him. In short, I think Garrett is a good student, someone who can do the work and do it well when he is focused and interested in the topic at hand. I don't think he is destined for straight A's in every subject, or that he has a future as a Spanish teacher. Garrett epitomizes the

visual leaner. He excels best in disciplines where information comes from seeing and doing. For example, he is brilliant in the lab, be it a biology or a photo lab.

Much of Garrett's extracurricular life in high school has been tied to his family situation. I mentioned fundraisers for Brendt. As I understand it, there have been numerous efforts over the years to support the cost of his brother's multiple surgeries, chemotherapy, and stem cell transplant.

Beyond the family service, Garrett is involved in several charitable organizations including a group called Kaboom, which builds homes in Appalachia, as well as Spirit Builders, which constructs playgrounds in inner city regions. He has coached CYO basketball at his church and participated in service programs here at our school as well.

Add to service, the young man has serious hobbies that he enjoys, especially photography. Garrett just about always has his camera with him both at home and in school. He's done great work for us here at school with his visual talent. Garrett photographs school events for our newspaper and yearbook and has displayed his work in our art shows. When he isn't with a camera, you'd find him with golf clubs, skis or his surfboard. Garrett is one for outdoor sports.

On the whole, Garrett Hill is terrific young man who has had a fairly unusual high school experience. Over the years, he has worked hard to balance a difficult family situation with a typical high school life. I, for one, believe he has done very well for himself. At the lunch table

and around the coffee pot, my colleagues and I celebrate Garret's unflagging spirit and academic progress. We admire his gentle nature, his thoughtful way and his beautiful photographs.

Please give Garrett Hill the closest look you can. Once you do, you might find him under your skin too. Hold onto your heart! Know that I give him my highest and most heartfelt recommendation.

Best,

Kerri Small, Director of College Guidance

"Nietzsche was the one who did the job for me. At a certain moment in his life, the idea came to him of what he called 'the love of your fate.' Whatever your fate is, whatever the hell happens, you say, 'This is what I need.' It may look like a wreck, but go at it as though it were an opportunity, a challenge. If you bring love to that moment--not discouragement--you will find the strength is there. Any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life. What a privilege! This is when the spontaneity of your own nature will have a chance to flow.

Then, when looking back at your life, you will see that the moments which seemed to be great failures followed by wreckage were the incidents that shaped the life you have now. You'll see that this is really true. Nothing can happen to you that is not positive. Even though it looks and feels at the moment like a negative crisis, it is not. The crisis throws you back, and when you are required to exhibit strength, it comes."

— *Joseph Campbell, A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*

When it happened, I was sleeping. I had put my seven-year-old daughter to bed that evening and fell asleep with her, as I often did. My husband woke me at 11:30 pm. My younger brother, Chris, had called him after having tried to reach me several times, unsuccessfully.

"Ker, wake up. Wake up," my husband whispered seriously.

Instinctively, I knew that something was wrong. I got up out of bed and followed my husband into our bedroom. "Ker, I don't know how to tell you this…Chris just called me…your father died today," he said. For a few seconds, I said nothing, waiting for wakefulness and understanding. "What?" I responded finally.

Once my husband's words resonated, I got up and left our bedroom. I found my phone and dialed Chris. He was emotional, as well as frustrated. Mari, our stepmother had called him an hour prior to tell him the news about our father and he hadn't been to reach our older brother David. I understood why Mari had reached out to Chris. Of the three of us, Chris had the best relationship with my father and so Mari knew him best. I was also annoyed instinctively

annoyed with Mari for having laid the burden of my father's death on my little brother, who lived alone, and therefore was alone to receive her call that evening.

I apologized to Chris for not hearing my phone and then asked about David. As coincidence had it, David, who lives in California, was visiting the east coast for a couple of days. Chris and I knew that he was in New York City but we did not know where or with whom he was staying. Chris explained to me that he'd tried to call David several times; every time, his call went directly to David's voicemail. I listened to Chris and then asked him to talk me through the specifics of what my stepmother had shared with him about our father's passing. He managed to do so. We wrapped up shortly thereafter, agreeing to get some sleep and reconnect first thing the next morning.

After I hung up with Chris, I went back to bed. When I woke up the next morning, I remembered the events of the evening prior, but did not *feel* much of anything. I got up, got dressed and went to work. Following a brief meeting with colleagues, I spoke to my boss and co-workers, sharing that my father had died the previous evening. All were sympathetic; questioned why I had come to work; told me I ought to go home. Instead, I stayed at the office for a while and called Chris.

When I got him on the line, he shared that he had connected with David in the early hours of the morning. "Ker, that call was rough…" and then I could hear David in the background asking Chris if that was me on the other end. Chris said "Yes", and then David's voice took over.

"Hey." His voice was groggy. "Are you all right?" he asked me.

"I am," I said. "I am. Dave, are you?"

"Yeah, I am," he answered. "I was not all right earlier this morning, but I am all right now."

We talked for a while, going over the events of the past evening and the early morning and then revisiting what Chris had learned from Mari about our father's passing. After that, we made plans to reconnect the next day in person.

"Go and be with Chris," I told him. "I'll call Mari tonight and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay," he said, and we both hung up.

Shortly afterwards, I left work and went home. My head was spinning, and I had to sort out my thoughts. After talking with David, I knew I had to set some things right, first with my stepmother and then with my brothers. My father would be last.

Later that evening, after I put my daughter to bed, I decided to call Mari. It required some preparation. I went to the cabinet in my dining room that holds the wine and whiskey and took two shots of Maker's Mark, one immediately after the other. I waited about 20 minutes and then found the phone and dialed my stepmother. Within the first few seconds of our conversation, I could tell that she was angry, which was a first for her with me. Her voice was cool, and her speech was curt. She talked me through both what happened to my father the day before, and how we would honor his memory over the next couple of days. Then, when she'd worked herself up to it, she blurted out a version of what I'd been expecting:

“I don’t understand why you and David couldn’t act like his children,” she said reproachfully.

I had been sitting alone in the driveway of my home listening to Mari’s story and her plans for the upcoming days. It was a beautiful night, cool but not down-coat weather. The air was calm and still. Up until that point, I had been calm as well. Thereafter, I wished I had a third shot or waited longer for the first two to numb me completely. Mari’s words found the nerve I’d tried hard to dull and they pricked it. My body began to burn from the inside out and I felt myself becoming mean. My pride lodged itself into my windpipe, and I swallowed hard. Not to hide it. Rather, so I could speak.

“Well, you don’t know a lot Mari. Whatever you know about our relationship with my Dad was filtered by him. You weren’t there all those years. You don’t know what an incorrigible bastard he was to my mother and how brutal he could be to his children. Perhaps we should have shared more examples of that man with you when he was still alive.”

When I had finished speaking, both of my arms were shaking. I grabbed my elbows, hugged them into my stomach and waited. At first, she said nothing. While I waited, I searched the night and my neighbor’s roof for something, anything, upon which I could fix my mind to regain composure. The night was dark. There was no moon; just a shadow around where a sliver of the moon would be the next day. I found my neighbor’s chimney and watched smoke escape from it. The smoke blew out and up. I watched it cloud against the black and then gradually disintegrate into the night.

Then I heard her again. She was rallying.

"Kerri…Oh Kerri…she choked. He never told me…"

Thereafter, I spent some time on the phone with Mari trying to be kind and to rationalize my father's reasoning for not sharing the truth with her. Mostly, I made excuses for my father, so that she would not take his shortcomings personally. Mari half believed what I had to say, but I knew she felt disappointed. She knew why he didn't tell her anything about his first marriage and family. I knew she felt betrayed.

When I hung up with Mari that night, I called my own mother. I told her about the conversation I'd had with my stepmother and I cried. I really cried. Not heaving uncontrollable sobs; more so, an evacuation of guilt, which gave way to relief. I felt terrible for having exposed the awful truth about a man who had suffered so much; I felt tremendous for having finally told the awful truth about a man who'd made others suffer unnecessarily.

The days that followed that night felt easy. To clarify, they felt easy for me compared to how I think most children feel when they lose their father. Five days after my father had died, there was a viewing and a small service. Both were well attended by people who remembered my father from his years with my mother, as well as those who knew him in his current life with my step-mother. Prior to those events, I wondered and even worried how the two families—my mother's and Mari's—might manage them. I worried for nothing. While no one worked too hard to be sure that every one of us knew every person who came to pay tribute to my father, we were kind to each other. Looking back on that evening, I managed well. I stood up for the duration of the

events, embraced people graciously all night, and unexpectedly conducted a Bible reading successfully. Admittedly, there were a handful of people—a few from my childhood and a couple from my adult life—whose presence that night moved me deeply. Those feelings, I know, were about how those folks had touched my life and how their presence at the viewing made me feel their touch again.

The feelings I experienced in those encounters don't reflect the sentiment I felt for my brothers that night and in all the days we spent together during the week of my father's passing. Those feelings are the stuff for which there aren't words, more so, the stuff of shared experience, unspoken understanding.

When the time came for me to say my final goodbye to my father, I did my very best. I looked at him wholly and despondently, wishing that some things had been different but also fully accepting the reality of how they'd been. I thought about his brilliant blue eyes, his operatic voice, a stuffed dog I once loved that only he could make talk, and the shows we saw together—Les Miserables, Phantom, Merlin, Stomp, Beauty and the Beast. I thought about how he always called me "Peanut," "Kiddo," and my least favorite expression of endearment "Kerriynsky."

That last one made me laugh out and smile. When it was really time to go, I brought my hands together in a prayer and blew a kiss in his direction saying out loud "Goodbye Daddy."

Grieving Without a Grave

Dear Dad,
Saying what
I have always had to say to you
is even more difficult for me now
than it was when you were here.

You said “no cemeteries”
and I respected your will.
And so,
I will have to find another way.

Until I do,
Please know,
that I long to kneel
in a place where you are
turning rock over root
kneading hard soil soft
to some better beginning

For you, for me,
a violet,
hyacinth,
or lily.

Holy Sharing

“It looks so sad” you say with some distress in your little face.

“It’s prayer” I correct, wiping a tear from my eye and pushing myself back into the pew to talk to you.

I am missing my father today.

“What’s prayer?” you question me, and immediately, I’m disappointed. Not in you. In myself, for having waited this long to teach you.

I look around before I speak, conscious of where we are, others, and their offerings.

“What’s prayer?” I whisper back at you, taking time to think through an honest explanation.

“Well, for me, it is remembering.”

“What are you remembering, Mama?”

“Oh, mostly grandpa, great grandma, Aunt Cioci…” I confess.

“So, your tears are happy then,” you say positively.

I smile warmly at you, and nod.

“Yes, they are good tears” I say.

Welling

I dip my little pail low
because I can
because I want to
because I believe
that the draw from this well
will be better than anything
I have tasted—
Sweet spring air
tickling my lips.

I do not know
how far it will go
how little or how much
there will be
but I dip
I bend
I lean
for more than I have.

See now that I am here
Who would I be
If I didn't
send that pail down
but a perpetually curious woman
frozen in my own wonder
inert
a coward
and thirsty.

Go, little pail, go
Down down
Far beyond where I can see
I will reach
I will lift
I will hold
your brim
to my lips
for chance.

Marriage Requiem

On week seven
we lingered
in the dingy lobby of
the therapist's office
where the elevator sometimes worked
and sometimes didn't
squinting at each other
through a haze of orange halogen.
I felt how your eyes looked--
bruised, raw and swollen.

"This is making me not like you" I said.

And for the record, I liked you
enough,
even then,
when I was sure
our marriage
was going to end
not for anything you or I had done
but more for who we are.
I wanted you to care less about
what you could provide
and more about
what I needed.
You always said you did
I'm sure that
you believed it
but I didn't feel it.
And on, and on,
that way,
we went.

You stood and stared
at me
for a long time,
long enough for me to examine
all ten of my
blue chipped and jagged nails
and count 13 petals
on the fake fiddle leaf plant
slouching sadly by the door.

"Ok" you said with a familiar tone

of disappointment.
Then you turned toward the door
lifted shiny keys from a deep pocket
and stepped your Gucci loafers
among the other muddy soles
that came and went that day.

We'll be married 14 years in August
separated now for four
most of what we owned has been
easily divided.
For the record I still like you,
enough.

On Starting Over

Lovely little scarlet hearts
with long and slender necks
perking tall
like question marks
looking for affection.

I pick them up and raise them
tuck them behind my ear
braid them into yellow strands
that dangle at my chin
red wonder nasturtium
moulin rouge geranium
petunia “cha ching” cherry

They don’t keep long,
nor can I keep them.
Pretty shoots of sunny days
turn into something else
when the wind breathes
for chrysanthemums
and fireflies flicker
blink out.

New ones take their place.
I take someone’s place.
You take someone’s place.
Looking, finding
holding dear
to let go
and begin again.

ACT III

Recycling

Insoluble vessels
hollowed of flesh
by current or hunger
now dressing the shore.
Here the gulf broke
positing treasure
slippers and whelks
catching eyes, calling hands
for some new purpose
a magnet, an ornament,
reefs.

Codependency

Sometimes
we go back
to it

to the thing that
stuck us
where we were.

The mud.
The muck.
The ugh.

We go back to it
naturally, instinctively
or maybe, purposely

so far or so long
just to see,
but it’s still

mud
muck
ugh

and we
are
still us.

Little Engine

Fire up.
Pump steam.
Heave and pull away.
Do not look back
down the track.
Hills?
Accelerate.

My Arse is on the Couch

The room is small.
The room is blue.
She sits in a chair.
I sit on a couch.
The couch is firm.

She looks at me.
I look at her.
I look at a bowl of mints
resting on a table.

I look away from the mints.
I look down at my hands.
I look back at the mints.
I want a mint.
I take a mint and hold it in my hand.

“How do you feel today?” she asks.
I look at her and then down at the mint.
I open the mint, put the mint in my mouth.
I taste the mint and it tastes good.
And now I want to be somewhere else where
there are only mints and no chair
and no couch and no table and no her.

But I’m here.
Here is where I am.
I came here.
I came here
because I know I must do this
and so much then
for making any more
of the good-tasting mints.

“I feel tired” I say, answering her question.
“Go on” she says.
“I don’t know” I say.
“Yes, you do” she says.
“Okay, I do” I admit.
“Go on” she says.

“I’m tired because:
the washing machine
is leaking
every fourth cycle
and I don’t have the money to fix it
because despite the Nextguard and the Capstar
and the endless washing and
the constant vacuuming
my dog still has fleas
and even though my daughter has recovered
from conjunctivitis
I woke up this morning with what felt like Frosted Flakes
crusted to my right eye.
My mother is text-guilting me on a daily basis
for not having visited her in two weeks
and last night my boyfriend’s daughter greeted me at the door with
“You know my mother hates you, don’t you?”
My older brother still won’t talk to me for reasons
I do not understand,
and my ex won’t stop talking to me for any reason he can conjure up.

I stop
and get up
a pretty nice sigh.

“Is that all?” she asks.
“I think so,” I say.
“Ok, she says, nodding and nodding
and then:
“So what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do?”

Shit.

There it is.

I hear her words.
I feel her words.
Then suddenly I see them
in bold, italics,
underlined,
now blinking incessantly
red, neon red, hard red
drum, drum, drumming
on my washing machine
on my vacuum

on my dog's back
while fleas dance
and -*itis* flakes fly
and my mom, ex, and boyfriend's daughter chant
"What are you going to do? "What are you going to do?"

"I don't…" I say.
"I can't…" I say
"You can and are" she says.
"I'm what?" I ask.
"You're here" she says.
"I am" I say.
"You are" she says."
"I am" I say.
"I am
most definitely here."

Dad

Dad was a complex man. He was affable and gregarious on the surface and a ticking timebomb underneath. One day, a milk spill at the dinner table was “just an accident”; on another day, it resulted in him shaming the offender for being an idiot. I recognized this about him when I was little, learned to look and listen for signs of him having a bad day, and either poised myself with good behavior for the duration of the evening, or burrowed away in my room.

I don’t know who or what it was that made Dad this way, but his fuse seemed to shorten at the peak of his children’s adolescence, and then grow longer again in the years thereafter. At 45, he was as volatile as a petrol-chemical blaze. By 65, he was simply flammable. It is true that in his later life, my brothers and me were no longer in his immediate space where we might do something to incite him. However, it wasn’t just our absence that leveled him. It was also cancer.

My father “got prostate cancer” at age 55, never quite got rid of it. It surfaced three times in 15 years. He had multiple procedures to eliminate it, including radiation, which led to life-long complications for him. Ironically, it wasn’t the cancer that killed my father. “It was a blood clot” his doctor said.

I miss my dad mostly in the summer when the ballfields in my neighborhood are alive with little leaguers and their parents. Brightly colored jerseys sporting the names of local businesses dot the infield. More dance around the outfield spinning around in circles, tossing mitts up to the sky, picking dandelions out of the grass, doing anything but playing baseball. Parent volunteers hustle about attempting to manage the chaos and make the most of teachable moments— “Drop the bat

before you run to first base!" "Tell me that you are going to throw the ball before you throw it to me." "Run!"

My Dad was one of those volunteers. My brothers and I were those little leaguers. He taught all three of us how to play ball. He understood the game, gave good instruction, and raised us to be better athletes than we were ever going to be on our own. Sure, he yelled too much, calling us out in the moment from the dugout or baseline on our every bobble, failed steal, and strike out. And yet, when all was said and the game was over, he always took the time to show us how to do better.

Many summer nights, Dad would have my brothers and me out in front of our family home tossing a ball or taking grounders in the street. He'd throw or hit balls at each of us, one at a time, sometimes for hours or until my mother insisted it was too dark for us to keep on playing. "Richard, enough. It's dark. Kids, come inside now." Other nights he'd drive us out to the local elementary school field where my mom couldn't interfere with his coaching. We'd take the infield, and he'd hit balls to us from the cage. He had a good bat and good aim. He'd make us work the field, creating both unpredictable scenarios as well as awkward line drives and bad hops, testing our skills. If you missed one, he'd offer up some measure of disappointment coupled with instruction and then hit the ball to you again, and again, until you got it right.

I was a much better fielder than I was a hitter, especially in the later part of my softball career. At the varsity level, the ball came across the plate a lot faster than I could anticipate at first. I'm pretty sure I struck out every time I got to bat in the early part of my junior year season. Dad had a lot to say about what I wasn't doing right. However, he never gave up on me. "Come on, Kerri. Try it again" he encouraged. He kept me hitting, taking me to the batting cages several times a

week for weeks until I finally adjusted my reaction time and found my confidence in hitting once again.

No doubt, I love baseball because of my father.

The guy who taught me to love America's favorite pastime also taught me to love music and theatre. Dad was a singer and a performer. Our next-door neighbors used to tease him and say they always knew when he was home because they could hear him singing through the open window in our upstairs bathroom. His voice was loud, and it had vibrato. "The party's over. It's time to call it a day…la da dee da dee da dee…the party's over."

Dad performed in musicals in high school and in college, and he dabbled in community theatre with my mom before my brothers and me were born. I caught the musical bug from Dad. When I was in my teens and too old to have birthday parties, he would take me to New York City every year to see a show of my choosing. One year, we saw the Phantom of the Opera. Another year, Les Miserables. Another year, Stomp. I'd save up my babysitting money and then go to Sam Goody's to buy the soundtrack of each several weeks before we went so that I could learn the music. Then, when we saw the show, I'd watch the actors sing the story to life, hanging on every word, feeling what they portrayed to feel.

I know Dad enjoyed the shows too because we kept on going, every year for 10 consecutive years. Most of the shows we saw were on Broadway, but we saw concerts too. The last show we went to together was on my 28th birthday. It was a concert starring Dione Warwick. To this day, I know all the words to her comeback hit "Heartbreaker".

The final performance at which Dad and I were both present was one in which he performed. In his early sixties, just a few years before he passed away, he played in an outdoor production of Damn Yankees for a local theatre. I remember sitting by myself in a lawn chair and watching him parade his charisma around the makeshift stage. I didn't know if I should be embarrassed or proud, but I could tell he was having the time of his life.

I got to know who Dad was through the time I spent with him in and around our family home, on baseball fields, and in New York City. His work was always a bit of a mystery to me, only because it wasn't simple to process like auto mechanic, postman, doctor, or teacher. I knew that he "did public relations" and that he was a writer. I went to work with him a few times to an office in Manhattan. I remember playing with the xerox machine with my brothers, making copies of our hands. Eventually, Dad left that office and the city and opened up his own public relations practice near our home in New Jersey. He said he left New York because he wanted to be his own boss. My Mom said he left because he was the only boss for whom he could work for an extended period. I believe it. My Dad was always switching jobs. Had it not been for my mom, who taught at the same elementary school for 38 years, we wouldn't have had much of anything.

Strong-willed in an almost immature way, Dad had opinions about most things. And while he was usually right about how best to hold a bat and swing, he wasn't open-minded. Dad wasn't one who talked openly about religion or politics. He was, however, quite open about how he felt about those who disagreed with views. He was brutal in his judgement of others, and often, it was downright embarrassing to be around him when he was ornery. He was the type of guy whose satisfaction lasted only as long as the moment that gave him content.

What's true is that my mother and my older brother, David, bore the brunt of his criticism more than my younger brother, Chris and I did. I don't know why that was the case. Perhaps it had to do with Dad's age and stage. Perhaps Chris and I were better at pleasing and hiding. After my parents divorced in their fifties, we all saw less of Dad. He disappeared into his work, called every now and then to ask if we could go to dinner, only then to share over dinner how his lack of work made it difficult for him to "support" my mom and contribute to my college tuition. He seemed lonely and unhappy. Then he got sick.

I don't remember when Dad told me he had cancer. I do remember going to Mountainside hospital alone to visit him. The nurses were prepping him for a procedure when I walked in. I had to excuse myself from his room to a hallway, where a nurse caught me by the elbows before I passed out. Seeing Dad in a bed with skinny tubes running in and out of him was too overwhelming for me. We never talked about that moment, but I'm certain that my inability to manage my emotions embarrassed him.

Dad's battle with cancer lasted 15 years. In a weak moment, he once told me that it might not have come back had he pursued a different course of treatment or been more vigilant about seeing his doctor after his first remission period. That made me angry. I didn't indulge him with a conversation about it then, and I can't think about it too much now. When I do think about it, it feels like I'm losing him again to his own damn will.

While Dad wasn't lucky in health, he was lucky in love. After my mom, whom he was certainly lucky to have, and then a series of failed relationships, all of which my brothers and I were asked acknowledge in some deliberate way, Dad met and married, Mari. Mari loved my dad completely, and so it seems, she could express her love for him in just the way he needed. She

took charge of his health, supported his up and down career, gave him a home to live in, encouraged her children to fully embrace him, managed their financials, cooked, and cleaned for him. He let her do all those things.

Dad died on October 14, 2015. Early that day, he had an invasive procedure that was intended to reduce scar tissue in his urethra. Thereafter, he went home. Mari went to a yoga class. While she was gone, Dad had a pulmonary embolism. Mari came back from her class and found him at the bottom of their first-floor stairs. The paramedics said he died instantly… "He felt no pain."

After Dad died, Mari invited me to go through his things. There wasn't much—some photos, school records, medical documents, professional writing. I kept the photos, his writings, and a legal pad on which he'd scribbled some notes about a roofing company he was promoting. On a page of that pad, in caps at the bottom left, and next to a phone number, he'd written the words "Try again."

Was it a note to himself or was it for someone else? I didn't know and I've never called the number. I just had to have that page. "Try again" said everything to me about the man I knew, a man I loved so much, who was so hard to love, and for whom I will always have the greatest empathy.

(A letter of support that I wrote for my former student, Trevor Migliaccio.)

TREVOR MIGLIACCIO

Trevor is making strides as a student. As his transcript suggests, he has been challenged by our rigorous academic program. What I need you to know is that he is working hard. Currently, he has nothing less than a B- in all his classes.

Trevor hasn't yet found the subject area that lights him up and drives him. He has enjoyed classes in both biology and history. At the suggestion of our Latin teacher, Jared Ciocco, who taught Trevor in History of Ancient Greece and Classical Mythology last year, Trevor is taking Debating Social Issues this year. Mr. Ciocco's experiences with Trevor last year showed him that Trevor has a natural aptitude for debate. I mean that with sincerity and not with sarcasm. Trevor is good on his feet in conversation and presentation. Debating Social Issues is proving to be a great class for him. Currently, he has an A in this class.

It's true that Trevor had a rocky transition academically from his local public middle school to GSB. It took him some time to really understand what was expected of him here at GSB and how to balance his academics with his involvement in Varsity lacrosse. I do believe that he now understands and works hard to sustain his commitments. But there is more to Trevor's story than a boy growing into himself and maturing. When Trevor was in elementary school, he lost of one his brothers to cancer. To say this was a awful time in his life and in the life of his family is an understatement. I was working with Trevor's oldest brother Garrett at the time. To this day, I can remember Mom and Dad sitting in my office in the fall of Garrett's senior year and telling me

that Brendt only had a couple of months to live. In that meeting, they asked me if I could "run point" on all things college for Garrett from start to finish, as they had to focus on the child they were losing. Of course, I agreed. A few months later, I went to Brendt's wake and funeral. The outpouring of support for him and this beloved family was like nothing I have ever seen.

I tell you all of this because Brendt and Trevor were very close. For a good while after Brendt's passing, Trevor was not okay. Who would be? He struggled with not being able to understand how and why his brother was taken from him. He wrestled with guilt for being among the living. He got the help he needed to move forward, and he is in such a better place these days. Trevor decided to write about Brendt's passing in his college essay. When he'd finished writing the essay, he came to my office to tell me that it was done. And in that moment, Trevor, the giant of a boy broke down in front of me. "I hated writing it, but I'm so glad I did it" he said. "I think I needed to tell the story, and I don't think Brendt would mind that I did" he added. I was floored by his emotion, his trust in me in that moment, and the loyalty he expressed toward his brother.

Outside of the classroom, you would find Trevor in one of two places: the lax field or the gym. Trevor has played Varsity lacrosse for us since his freshman year. This year, he is the captain of the team. His talent and leadership on the turf have earned him the respect of his teammates. He is someone whom younger members of the team look up to and seek to emulate. The gym is where he goes to train for his sport and decompress. At one point, Trevor considered playing college level lacrosse but then decided it might be best for him to go the intramural or club route instead. My sense is that while he loves his sport, he does want to do other things in college that interest him. In short, he doesn't want lacrosse his run his college life.

Lastly, I'll share that Trevor is a sociable and well-liked member of our community. He has a great attitude about life; he is a fan favorite of younger classmen; he is adaptable and easy going; teachers enjoy having him in their classes. In short, Trevor is a good kid.

Here's the thing: I know that Trevor Migliaccio won't present the strongest GPA or test scores in your pool. And yet, I need you to know that Trevor has so much to offer—the desire and understanding as to how to succeed, good character and a sense of altruism, and excellent communication and social skills. He is the student holistic application reviews were created to benefit. Please give him a careful and thoughtful read because you want a person like Trevor at your school.

Know that I give Trevor my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,

Kerri Small, Director of College Guidance

For Mike: I promise to pay it forward.

You left me your cactus plant
even though I told you not to
I said: “It doesn’t look much like a cactus”
You said: “Well, not at all cacti look like cacti”
I laughed, “That’s probably the truth.”

If the chia pet had a hippie mama
that would be this cactus
with its long, green, dread-lock leaves
spilling out wildly over little knotted roots
onto my desk
where it unknowingly crowds my things
the ones I put there:
a vase of homemade paper flowers,
a brown and yellow bendy giraffe,
and a puppy post it note dispenser.

It won’t die.
The cactus, I mean.
Why
It won’t die because people like you
who care
make it their business
to keep it alive.

They pick it free of fallen leaves
bring it coffee mugs of water
Meredith even talks to it every now and then
apologizing to it on my behalf
for the neglect it has been shown
She shames me playfully with her eyes
and I remind her “Mere, it is not mine.”

You left me with this cactus
that I didn’t want,
can’t forsake
surely wouldn’t miss if it were gone.
I would miss my puppy post it note dispenser
if it were to die
not that it could
I’m just saying.
I would miss it.

Look, I don’t hate the cactus.
I can’t.
The people here, love it.
And when it blooms
it’s actually quite lovely
with its bright and eager flowers
reaching out, fingers wide,
like a good friend
politely trying
to help another find her way
in a place
he knows so well.

Nopal

Suddenly a beauty
orange as the dawn
rooted in a crag
between two shifting plates.

Her velvet palms are small
She lifts them high to reach the light
she wants to be seen
and to welcome me.

Oh how she surprises!
Proud flower of the mountain
She brings sweetness to my eyes
They smile her lovely in.

Fruit of Otera Mesa
the massif's native gift
she brings lift to my journey
and new life to my climb.

Blue

I had never seen blue
like you before

a bruised bruise
a Prussian night
the ink of a stingray.

You came out
and I protected you.
That's what I do.

I, like field grass,
green and tall
living off
the morning sun.

You, a southern black racer,
just sliding through
soon to slink underground.

I should have seen
What I'm sure I knew
That blue cannot be kept.

Bearing Homage to Enchantment

The peaks
of my knuckles
have been blanched
a sandy yellow
and the canyons
that run between them
a terracotta rose.

The rise of the
short horned
eastern fence
and collared
has burned me
different
than my home.

I give my wrist
to native fingers
and watch as copper tips
slide a liquid ring
around it.
“It’s made for you”
he smiles,
sterling in his eye.

I flip over my palm
then again
admiring the handiwork
of place and man
as it winks back
at me, at him.

I pay him for the bracelet
which I like more than love
but have decided that I need
to remember a vision I can’t bring home:
red rock turning purple
when day light dips out.

Too Much Work

June came
brought heat,
longer days
and a stalemate.

So we sat down
with ice cream
to some end
Vanilla.

Your mom's in town
you need a couch
should sell your house
Drive to Montana.

I'll paint my porch.
Duckdive.
Barbeque.
Run.

It was our sense
It was nonsense
We stayed a bit
prolonging it.

When it was done
you blinked out sun
to find my eyes
to shake my poise?

Your forehead sweat
Our cups went empty
My mouth felt sticky
And then, the bees

I got up first
You hugged me tightly
It felt like "sorry"
I'll never know.

I took the long road
windows open
warm wind blowing
hot air out.

Ouch

Little white scars
on the face of my knee
say
willfully eager,
aware of,
but nothwithstanding
take your time.
I cut myself
more than once,
more than twice
in the shower,
in the bedroom
in a marriage
overtrying
bleeding
youthful determination
for which my only
real regret is
hurt.

ACT IV

Having Faith

So you sit,
contemplating that one person
who will forever satisfy you
the one for whom you drop the anchor
on a lifelong quest.

In the shadows you catch a girl on the wall,
and you remember where she has been.
you consider the view from a warm embrace
and the one from her pillow case.
Then you see her name.

And it comes to you, almost suddenly
That is it! And you stand up on your feet
aware of what is it to have loved
and you trust old bliss and past despair
knowing they will guide you.

(A letter of support that I wrote for my former student, Corbin Migliaccio.)

CORBIN MIGLIACCIO

Full disclosure: this young man and his family mean a great deal to me. I have known the Migliaccio family for 14 years and have been in and out of their lives as their boys have made their way through the college process at GSB. Corbin is the third of the Migliaccio boys with whom I have worked. Had we not lost Brendt to cancer, Corbin would be the fourth.

Brendt Migliaccio, one of Corbin's older brothers, passed away when Corbin was in elementary school. I was working with Corbin's oldest brother Garrett at the time. To this day, I can remember Meg (Mom) and Tom (Dad) sitting in my office in the fall of Garrett's senior year and telling me that Brendt had only a couple of months to live. In that meeting, Mom and Dad shared with me that they were not going to be in any place to manage Garrett's college process and asked me if I would "run point" for Garrett from start to finish. Of course, I agreed. Months later, I went to Brendt's wake and funeral. I have never been to more crowded services. The outpouring of support for this beloved family from their hometown community, the GSB community, the local lacrosse community, their church community, was remarkable.

In talking to Meg and Tom about that time in their lives, they have always spoken of Corbin as their "little light" and the one who kept them all going. Indeed, Corbin is a light, a ray of sunshine, someone who can turn a bad day into a better day for anyone with his genuine, inclusive, upbeat, look-on-the-brightside nature.

Corbin is a 6-foot-tall smile. “Eternally positive” are the words that come to mind when I think of him. When he began here as a ninth grader, he quickly became known as “the mayor” of the freshman class. That wasn’t because he ran for student delegate or worked hard in any way to make himself known. He was just being himself, saying “hello” all over the place to students and teachers, smiling and laughing, introducing kids he’d already known to those who didn’t know each other, holding open doors for people passing through them, saying “thank you” to those who held doors for him. As a rising twelfth grader, he is still the mayor. He is him, just taller, more mature, and wittier. He’s still not interested in running for student government, but he is, most definitely, a leader.

Corbin is the captain of our Varsity lacrosse team. He is a leader on our Blue Crew Spirit Team, a group that actively promotes and supports all athletic teams at our school from soccer to swimming and baseball to fencing by attending games/events (sometimes in a creative costume connected to a pre-determined theme!) and cheering wildly for GSB. He is a peer leader who works closely with ninth grade students RE: their transition to GSB. He reads with the lower school students via our Reading Buddies literacy program. In addition, he volunteers to teach elementary-age students how to play lacrosse and is committed to annual service for cancer research, a family activity. In the summer, he spends his time at the Jersey shore working and fishing.

As a student, Corbin has made great strides. No doubt, ninth grade was a transition year for him, and it was marred by COVID. COVID meant a combination of in person learning and virtual learning, of which the latter was NOT a fit for Corbin. As is true for many young people,

learning is a social experience for Corbin. He thrives in interactive, discussion-based classes. He is adept at analysis and reflective work; however, he shines as an active participant and a doer. His tenth grade and eleventh grade years in an in-person class environment more accurately reflect Corbin as a student. In short, Corbin is a solid B+ student in a demanding college preparatory program. He has worked hard here and done extremely well. No doubt about it, he has the skills he needs to thrive in a college classroom. His eyes are on a future in business. He has both the hard and soft skills he'll need to succeed in the workplace.

In all Corbin does, he is genuine. He is someone who embraces every day of his life with the goal of making the most of his time and yours. He is bright, genuine, positive, athletic, hardworking, funny, fun, incredibly gracious, and resilient. Corbin is the kid you want in your class, on your team, to be your son or daughter’s roommate and/or friend.

I could go on and on, but I think you get it. I think the world of Corbin Migliaccio. I stand behind him and support him unwaveringly.

Sincerely,

Kerri Small, Assistant Director of the Upper School and Director of College Guidance

For A.M.

I'm not sure
if it's disgust or sorrow
I feel for you
alone in your tiny apartment
with your Maine coon cat
and all the stuff you have collected
to bolster your esteem
since you left your husband and children
for the guy who decided not to leave his wife for you
but had a makeup baby with her instead.

I found the man whom you discarded
and your children
held them, chose them, choose them
for which you
call me ugly
question my sincerity
shame your girls
for feeling love for me.

I don't deny
you are their "one and only mother"
but you aren't the only one
I'm a mother too.
and someone's ex-wife.
a woman who's made difficult decisions
with which she's had to live.
I hurt for what I've lost
I feel guilt for what I've sought
wanting to be happy
speaking up about it
turning upside down
a life that wasn't only mine.

That's my cross.
I own it.
Own yours.

Come out of that hollow you keep
so large, so steeped
that you can't see yourself
under all the shit
you're holding onto,
see that you brought this on yourself.

(A letter to my mother months after her release from Holly Manor Rehabilitation Center.)

Dear Mom,

By day three of your stay at Holly Manor Rehabilitation Center, the receptionist didn't need to take my name, ask whom I was there to see and if I knew where to find you—"Small, Augusta, #206" she said knowingly.

I hated room #206 because it wasn't clean enough or bright enough for you. I did what I could to fix that with Clorox wipes, Windex, greeting cards and colorful flowers. I liked room #206 because it had a large window with a deep ledge that I could tuck myself into when the doctor or nurse was tending to you, close my eyes and just listen to my breath.

You had cancer. They took it out. You couldn't take care of yourself. What did I think I was doing?

I found a rehab facility five minutes from my work. I moved you in and went to see you every day at lunch. When I left work to go, I didn't tell anyone where I was going. If anyone missed me while I was gone, they never said so, or if they did, I wasn't paying attention.

I bought clean towels, new sheets, and a soft blanket for your bed. I took your dirty clothes home, washed them, and brought them back to you daily just so you would have them. I discovered shampoo caps, adult bath clothes, swabs and rinses, creams, and ointments I never knew existed. I found myself sitting on the floor in CVS surrounded by Ensure bottles and

wondering which type get. Would Original suffice or did you need Max Protein? I found other things for you to eat—soup, yogurt, pudding, and ice cream—you needed more than chicken broth, applesauce and tea.

I learned who among the nursing staff was helpful and who couldn't be bothered. I opened doors outside of yours that I wasn't meant to open, found tissues, toilet paper, bandages, and gowns behind them, and then stocked your bedside bureau with whatever you needed that you couldn't get yourself.

You cried every day for two months, said you couldn't "do this" and that you didn't want to die. For the first time in my life, I questioned if you had enough strength. I was scared.

I held your hand and listened. I cleaned #206 compulsively, talked to you more than we have ever spoken, brought tulips, daisies, and other varietals, more greeting cards and two St. Patrick's Day plush gnomes that we named Seamus and Kelly. I showed you videos of your grandkids being silly and smart, called doctors whose specializations I had to google, argued with insurance agents over their definition of "incapacitated", brought more clean clothes and Haagen Daas, and sat on that window ledge and breathed.

Then, even though I disagreed and so did your doctors, Aetna decided that you were well enough to go home. And so, you left that place that did the things for you I couldn't. You went back to your home an hour away, in a wheelchair, with a walker, and to a regiment of medical professionals who retaught you how to do things you used to do before cancer.

I felt better and worse. Relieved and helpless. I called you every day at lunch. You cried less than you did at Holly Manor. I cried more than I did when you were at Holly Manor, but not to you. I visited you on weekends. You began to talk more about the things you wanted to do in the months ahead, poke some fun at your predicament, eat solid foods, walk on your own, drive.

I slept better at night, went back to lunch at work and made small talk with my colleagues, got my nails done for the first time in months. Now we talk at night, sometimes text if that's all we have the time for. We are back to being mothers, sisters, wives, and all the rest.

Mom, you had cancer. They took it out. You couldn't take care of yourself. I didn't know what I was doing, but we did it.

Love,

Kerri

For MS and Mothers Who Always Had It

Your desk is decorated
with two rhinestone tiaras
a mug that says “Girl’s Rule”
and a photo of your children and their father
sitting high up on a lifeguard stand
somewhere at the beach.

You slouch behind all of this
pressing two skinny wrists
into each side of your head
squeezing out the angst
of the night before he found your journal
in the top drawer of your bedside table
and read enough of it to ask
why after twenty of marriage,
you don’t think he is the man
for you.

I hear you.
Yes, he read your journal.
No, it was no accident.
You know better hiding places
for the thoughts you want to keep close.
I stare into your face
which looks more distressed than angry
and I’m trying hard
not to remember what
this was like for me.

It has become your fault.
It’s been your choice to work
commuting hours every day
cooking every dinner,
caring for the kids, the dog,
waiting for repairmen,
tending lawn and garden,
doing all the laundry.

I have it, you told him
not to worry
so he didn’t
now you’re tired
of doing everything.

It is his fault, you know
he should have made you
let him help you
in a way that made you feel
okay with being helped.

I'm looking at your desk
thinking of my mother
and all the working mothers
I have known who came and went
we added one shift to another
never letting go
of anything
keeping and keeping and keeping.

I'm looking at your desk.
You are everything I see.
And there's no fault in your becoming
more than someone
thought you should become.

But it's time to hand a few things over
Give that man the camera
Let him take the picture
of you up on that lifeguard stand
watching the tide turn.

How I Knew

I knew you loved me
that first Christmas when you
nervously studied my reaction
to your overly generous
but much appreciated gift.
I knew you loved me
when you hired a sitter for an hour on an evening
so that you could drive down to my house,
apologize and make things right.
I knew you loved me
when you brought me to your hometown,
not knowing what I'd think
of that town,
them folk,
somewheres in the country.
I knew you loved me
when you drove
three hours, four times in one week
to manage your product launch
and some days at the Jersey shore
with me and my family.
I knew you loved me
when you called me out
for regularly texting a man
who isn't you.
I knew you loved me
when you forgave me
for texting that man
regularly.
I knew you loved me
when you gathered those I love
to give me a surprise
and celebrate my turning forty.
I knew you loved me
when you took on
my expenses as your own
just to give me peace
because you could.
I knew you loved me
when you volunteered to watch
my ten-year-old daughter
so that I could
go to class, work late, meet a girlfriend for a drink.

I knew you loved me
when you said “I love you”
and I didn’t question it
because everything you’d done for me
had convinced me that you do.
Know that I love you
for making me feel
your love.

(A letter I wrote to my husband the night before we married—June, 2022.)

Dear Steve,

We decided we would not write our own vows. And here I go! Breaking a promise to my soon-to-be husband. Not to worry. I won't show up tomorrow, leaving you unprepared to reciprocate. I just need to write. While "I do" is the summary, the details of our relationship are what got us to this day and will keep us together.

I never thought I'd find my husband on the Internet. I was skeptical at best of using Match.com to meet anyone. You messaged me and I was intrigued. It was that picture of you in the Disney Princess section of Party City that gave me a good pause. "A girl Dad" I thought. "And a very cute one."

As you know, my prerequisites for a partner were "educated, employed, divorced, has young children, and is 5.10 or taller. Thanks for pushing back a bit on my height parameter. "Would you consider a guy who is 5.7?" you'd asked. I'll be honest, I didn't want to. I like tall men. And yet, I'd hate to think I'd have passed on a heart that's a mile wide for a mere 3 inches of bone matter.

you for being patient with me. When we met, I was newly separated and not ready for what we have become. I was overly conscious of my ex, trying hard to preserve an amicable situation between him and me. I was overly conscious of my daughter and introducing her to anyone whom I didn't yet know well enough. I was uneasy about your ex and her efforts to derail our

relationship. It was a lot for me. You understood, and allowed me to find my way, all the while reminding me that you were mine and would give yourself fully to me and my daughter when I was ready to give myself fully to you and your girls. Honestly, I couldn't believe someone would be that patient with me. And yet, it was what I needed to learn to trust myself again.

Fast forward to today and our life is full of dynamics. There is you and me. There is you and your girls. There is Annabelle and me. There is the three girls together. And then, there is the five of us. Who was that woman from your old neighborhood who asked us what our secret is? Michelle. "You two make a blended family look easy," she said. I think I laughed out loud at her when she said that. However we make it look, you and I both know that it hasn't been easy. And yet, I wouldn't have done this any other way. We are a family, growing together, leading with love, and finding our way.

What is our secret? Ha! Real stuff. We talk a lot about how we feel and what we need from one another. We say "I'm sorry" a lot for falling short when we fall short. We treat the kids like they are all our own kids. We laugh a lot at ourselves, our kids, our dogs, and the world around us.

Somehow, our three girls are not little girls anymore! Eight years have passed quickly since we first met and now, they are teenagers! I remember when Gabrielle was "reading" to me on the leather chair in your living room. "Kerri don't tell Dad that I'm not reading. I just memorized what he said is on each page." I remember when we found the journal Riley had written in which she hauled off on you for making her believe there was a tooth fairy. "HE LIED TO ME! What else is he lying about?!" I can still see Annabelle snuggled up to you on the brown couch in my old living room drawing sea creatures on the large pad of paper that my stepfather brought

home from his print shop. “Mom, Steve and I are busy.” They were so little, so squeaky. Suddenly, they have boobs and are talking about college! It won’t be long before they are out in the world, making lives for themselves.

Steve, I’m so excited about tomorrow. I am also thinking about our girls, specifically, how cool and weird it will be for them to be at their parents’ wedding. No doubt, it was both cool and weird for me to be a part of both my parents’ weddings. I imagine that they will never forget our wedding day.

Okay, I want to keep writing but I really do have to get some rest, or I will need more makeup tomorrow than I want to wear! Time has flown, Steve, and beyond tomorrow, it will continue to fly. Know that I’m grateful for each day we’ve shared and that I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you.

All my love,

Kerri

It’s About the Foot

I worry
we women
will lose our ground
hyping the gender of the foot
that has been stepping on our necks.
The soles of oppression
can and are both he and she
I have felt them both
planting on the buzz of
my throaty bee.
I’m not suggesting we just lie there
our human collars breathless
blocked by a heel of pinning ignorance.
We have come so far
by all means
grab the damned foot
or the hindfoot at its bend
and twist it good and hard
until it lifts.
What I’m saying is
who cares for the biology
of its owner?
It is a foot
pressing hard
where it does not belong.

(A letter I wrote to my daughter on her fifteenth birthday, August 9, 2023.)

Dear Annabelle,

I am writing this letter to you on your fifteenth birthday. Currently, you are with your Dad visiting Mami in La Tranche Sur Mer. I miss you and want you to know that I am thinking of you today. Know that I am also so happy for you that are celebrating your birthday in a beautiful place. I hope your day is everything you want it to be!

I love you, Annabelle, and I am so proud of the woman you have become. When your father and I separated in 2016, I worried about how your life would be impacted by that change. I acknowledge that the change was huge for you and could not have come without feelings of confusion, anxiety, and pain. You went from living in the house you knew so well with both of your parents to living between two homes, one with each of us. I want you to know that it was difficult for me too, and while I can't speak for your dad, I think he'd say the same was true for him. Seven years later, your life is so different than it once was. Your life is fuller than you probably ever thought it could be with a mom, a dad, a stepmom, a stepdad, and 5 siblings between your dad's home and mine. And I think you know that while your father and I are no longer married, we care a great deal for each other and are happy for each other's newfound happiness, knowing that the happier we each are in our own lives, the better parents we can be for you.

As I have watched you grow up over the years, I have been so proud to be your mom. You adjusted to your new life between two homes and families, and you have embraced the people your father and I have brought into your life. I have often heard you speak about your stepsiblings as your “brothers” and “sisters”—you don’t hesitate to attach them to you or express your love for them.

How you speak of them and to them says so much about you, Annabelle. It tells me you that you have allowed them into your life fully, trusting in the new relationships, and making them a matter of priority for you. With your friends and classmates, I have seen you display the same degree of openness—you give everyone a chance—you are among the most open-hearted people I know. It is why your peers in school are drawn to you, why you were nominated by your classmates for class president multiple years in a row, why they chose you to be the recipient of the Jefferson citizenship award, why they want you to be our school mascot, why your teachers selected you to attend the Hugh O’Brien Youth Leadership Summit, why you are captain of your volleyball team, why you are the center of the energy in almost every group with which you engage…

Annabelle, I am so proud of the person you’ve become. That isn’t to say that I expect you to always be a winner at everything you do or that the challenges you encounter in life will in any way reduce you in my eyes. It is to say that I admire you for trying to be the best person you can be each and every day. In truth, what I want most for you is for you to be proud of who you are. While not immune to the twists and turns of adolescence, you are growing up so strong, standing

more solidly on the ground at 15 than I ever did, and still dreaming big dreams about who you might become.

Blow out those candles today and make a big wish for yourself and your future.

And eat cake. Eat lots of cake.

I love you, honey.

Love,

Mama

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