

# Back When We Used to Get Rain

by

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## Back When We Used to Get Rain

It rained every single day in March. It set a record for California, and cancelled my elementary school softball league. We drained our pool so it wouldn't overflow and every field at school, in parks, in yards, was swampy and thick. If it stopped raining, drops fell from trees and gutters, and the sidewalks never had time to dry. It made the concrete cool and the climbing ivy went wild.

The skies were overcast and a slow, cold breeze caught under our clothes as I tripped through the overgrown grass. I was little and we were at a park near our house that had a creek at the bottom of a hill.

Wind cupped my face as I trotted towards the mouth of the creek, a small pool of standing water no more than an inch deep. I'm sure now that my parents must have been watching on, but I didn't notice then as I walked into the creek.

Water flooded my small shoes and turned my socks icy. I looked up into the dark foliage that swept the skies, shaking and damp, and walked until I reached the edge of the pool, where the creek began to hold a current. Water pulled at the back of my knees and I stepped forward slowly so I wouldn't fall over. Low branches hung over the creek dangling webs of moss. Wild blackberries grew out of the cakey, earthen walls, no bigger than dimes, surrounded by wooly thorns.

The creek grew deeper, rising just below my waist. I couldn't see outside of the creek bed, only forward and back. The park was gone. I continued walking under trees with peeling bark and broken branches, my feet sliding over the gravel and smooth stones, until suddenly I felt my foot miss the ground.

The air in my lungs froze. I was chest deep in water and I could feel the

current pushing against my whole back. My wet hair swirled in front of me and I held up my elbows up by my face, keeping my arms out of the water as best I could.

I had stepped off of a ledge in the creek bed, a drop-off I hadn't found with my feet – a small submerged waterfall. Frightened, I scrambled back up the ledge and walked back to my mother as quickly as I could upstream, much wetter and colder than I had expected to be. She tsked, brushing away the wet leaves that stuck to my shirt, and made me take off my wet shoes and socks before I got in the car.

I went back to the park months later, during the dry season, when the creek bed was dusty and orange. Sun broke through the trees as I walked, tracing the empty, carved path. I was looking for the drop, for some physical evidence that would explain what had happened. I expected it to be obvious, like the edge of our porch, a small cliff.

Pruned trees revealed most of the wooded areas to be parts of back yards. Wide oak leaves caught the sun, and it didn't take me long to retrace my steps.

But as I looked around, kicking the gravel, I could find no evidence of the drop off. Sure, it grew steeper, a centimeter at a time, but everything was smooth and round. I could imagine so vividly the water around my chest. I knelt down and touched the dry dirt. Maybe the current had washed it away, eroded it out over time, I thought. Maybe it was farther up the creek, and I just haven't found it yet. Maybe I've grown and it just felt like a small step now and I hadn't even noticed it. Or maybe, a part of me though, a part of me wonders now, maybe I just imagined it.

Once, my mother likes to tell me, a plumber handed her a plastic Tigger figurine, three inches tall and dripping with water. It had clogged our entire drainage

system. My mother looked at me as I hid behind a wicker waste basket and sighed.

Tigger had been my favorite, so I decided to flush him down the toilet. *He's swimming*, I'd thought, as he swirled around the porcelain bowl.

He had come from a plastic play set – a treehouse that opened in half to reveal a dollhouse of different rooms and characters. I watched Winnie the Pooh VHS tapes, and my parents took turns reading me the stories from thick, glossy pages. In one story, Piglet ends up amid his misadventure floating down a river during a blustery storm, frightened, riding in an upside-down umbrella as if it were a small boat. He stutters and leans over the edge of his wobbling umbrella, spinning, spinning through the strong current. I remember giggling because Piglet was silly and the umbrella boat looked fun.

One afternoon when the sky was low and gray and the wind shook the trees like marionette puppets, I stood beside my family's swimming pool with my mother's umbrella in hand. The concrete was cold and I curled my feet inward because I had no shoes on. I opened the umbrella and it ballooned to full size. It was much larger than I was so I had to lean forward with my hips sticking out to set the umbrella, upside down, onto the glassy surface of the swimming pool.

I held onto the handle of the umbrella and carefully lifted one leg away from the concrete. I imagined sitting crouched in my boat, knees towards the center, drifting slowly from one edge of the pool to another, bouncing gently off the sides. I hesitated slightly, my leg hovering, deciding if I should step into the boat, or slide in with a knee already bent. I don't remember which I chose, because the next thing I can recall I am freezing and underwater, everything slow, bubbles and breathe floating upward.

The fabric of the umbrella collapsed around me instantly and I sank like a stone. A little stunned, I kick up to the surface and see my mother running out from the house with a dishtowel in one hand shouting something I couldn't understand. She would tell me later that she saw it all happen a moment too late from the kitchen window: the umbrella in the pool, my foot hovering. She started running before my skin touched the water.

We kept fighting over the rules, but eventually we decided no one was allowed to hide upstairs. There were only four of us, my brother, the two Gilliland brothers, and me, and we didn't want each round to drag. Most of this was decided by my brother, who wasn't the oldest or the biggest, but always ended up deciding these things.

I ran, feeling electricity in my feet, and sprang down the carpeted steps while someone counted down. I decided to hide in the coat closet, with its ceiling-high, mirror-covered doors. I slid the first door open quickly, crawled inside, and rolled it closed again along the wheeled-tracks. A pile of coats sagged in the corner, and I nestled into them. It was dark and I draped the coats over me like blankets, thinking it was an extra layer of camouflage. I waited, tense, for only a few moments before the air grew thick and heavy. I fell asleep quickly.

I woke to my mother prying the sliding door open, nearly knocking it off its tracks. I smiled, warm and sleepy, thinking that I had found the best hiding place in the entire house. They had given up and recruited our mother.

Apparently it had been a few hours, and I had been more than just hidden. I had been lost. My mother called the neighbors, my aunt, the police, looking for me. A

dozen people searched our house, every room, the roof, our back yard, calling my name. The game was long over. My mother says her eyes flickered to the pool and for a brief moment her entire body went cold.

“That was always my biggest fear with you guys,” she says now, “the pool. You can put a Band-Aid on a scrape. But when someone goes under...” she trails off.

When I had slid the door closed, I rolled the small wheels right over the edge of a coat cuff. The wheels locked up and the door was absolutely jammed. Everyone assumed that if they hadn’t been able to open the door, surely a child wouldn’t have been able to open it either.

I loved this, and asked her to tell and retell the story. Were you *scared* I would ask? Did you really call *everyone* you knew? My mother would answer “yes” with tight lips and kiss my forehead. It wasn’t until years later that she finally told me the story stressed her out more than she could stand and she would really rather talk about something else.

## Citrus and Other Fruit Trees

In fourth and fifth grade, most of the games we played after school were outside. Stephanie had a trampoline and would show us tumbling she learned from cheerleading. Sometimes she would spot us and teach us how to do flips or handsprings, but if anyone got too close to the edge of the trampoline, their toes got caught in the net. We played soccer at the elementary school field, and hid in-between classrooms outside. We rode metal scooters that made a terrible scraping sound when they hit the concrete lip of a driveway. But when it was a small group of us we always ended up in trees.

At the very back of our yard, where the fence is sagging, a large fig tree from the neighbor's yard reaches and hangs onto our property. When my mother wasn't around to watch, we could climb the tree from the branches on our side up the trunk and into larger branches on the neighbor's side. The thin metal roof of a gardening shed sat directly below most of the tree, and we knew intuitively that neither the fence nor the wavy roof could support our weight. So we leaned and climbed carefully between branches, knowing the only way in and the only way out.

The fig tree had thick, clustered branches that hid our small frames well enough from view that we could sit by the trunk confidently. We portioned out the tree – Stephanie and I took the higher branches because we were the best climbers, and claimed our own “rooms.” We came up with pretend names and relations, always orphans, always girls, though usually someone was the eldest sister who acted as a mother figure. I always picked a name like “Alex” or “Sam,” a girl's name shortened into a boy's name. Sometimes we would create our own local economies; I

sold perfumes I made from flower petals soaked in water that would start to stink if we kept them for more than a day. Erin collected rocks in pretty shapes, and Stephanie braided ivy leaves for our hair. We ate figs off of the tree if they were ripe, and threw them over the fence after a bitter, fuzzy bite if they weren't. The sap, a sour milk, stuck to our hands and we licked the juice that ran down to our elbows. On our way in, we knelt beside the pool and dunked our arms in up to our shoulder, wiping away bits of dirt and sap in the cold chlorine water before going inside.

We learned in school that orange poppies are the state flower of California. They grew like weeds out of the earth surrounding our mailbox in front of our house. Our teacher told us that it was technically illegal to pick them.

Sometimes we grabbed handfuls of gravel from our front yard and put it in other peoples' mailboxes. Once while we were doing this, we stopped and looked at the orange poppies, with small silk-screen petals bouncing in the breeze. We dropped the gravel, knelt beside the flowers, and picked them, gently, one flower each, clutching them to our chest. But we were fugitives now, so we took them with us as we began our new lives down the street.

In sixth grade I knew a boy from another school who went to cotillion. I didn't know what that was, but he went after school to learn about table manners and how to sit without making any noise. He told me that he got himself kicked out by wearing his tie on his head so he could play basketball afterschool instead. I laughed and laughed while he described how the old lady yelled at him and sent him away from the table. We were at his elementary school playing basketball.

I asked my mom if she had ever considered signing me up for cotillion. She smiled to herself for a moment and said she had brought it up with my father once, just as a musing. The idea hadn't gone over well.

"If I remember correctly" she said "the conversation ended with your father yelling 'I'll be damned if we send out daughter to cotillion,' so I suppose that was that."

"You have a very good father." She continued slowly. "I don't think it would have suited you. I never imagine him as being protective, but you were just so happy running around with skinned knees and muddy shoes..."

Erin had a large orange tree hanging over the uneven brick walkway in her backyard. The branches stretched taller than the roof of her house, and she, her dog and I could all sit under its shade at the same time. It blossomed during the winter, because they were navel oranges, my mother always told me, but it was never so cold that we couldn't play outside.

Erin would use a long stick to point to a ripe orange growing on a branch too high to reach. Then I would climb the trunk of the tree as she helped me navigate the foliage from below. I plucked the oranges and tossed them down to her. Together threw the oranges into the ground, splitting the fruit. We tore apart bits of the rind and passed the orange back and forth, eating the watery insides. Her mother yelled at us because the fruit left splat marks on the brick walkway.

Agapanthus line the front of our house like green leafy mops. Most of the year the big bushes look the same, except during the summer when they blossom.

Long stems with a dozen silky bulbs stick out of the leaves like baseballs glued to the ends of sticks, and then all at once they blossom like clockwork around the fourth of July. My mother says they're fireworks just for us. White and violet petals unravel and eventually dry into tattered, stringy messes. When the dried flowers fall off, they leave behind a narrow bulb, half an inch thick, hard and bright green, with a silk-thin, fibrous thread hanging off where the flower used to be. My brother and I would pick the green, rubbery stubs and throw them at each other, pretending they were grenades. We dodged imaginary ammo, and only collapsed into the grass if we knew we were both hit at the same time.

My mother explained that trees could die the same way people could, from disease and old age. Our lemon tree had root rot, so we tore it out before the withering branches broke off. We've tried planting other things there, a tangerine tree and a pear tree, but nothing's been able to stick.

Sometimes when my parents drove north, I would look out at the tall concrete freeway walls, yards from the edge of our lane, and wonder if they were the edge of civilization. Dense green treetops extended beyond the walls in all directions, rolling upwards into hills and peaks without any roads or houses or traffic lights. If I could just climb over the edge, I thought, that would be it. An entire world would be waiting on the other side, wilderness.

## A Few Notes about My Brother

Sun turned the palm fronds into parasols as I plunged deeper into our backyard. I pushed through the low-hanging foliage, deep and green and waxy, looking for you. Dirt caught on the Velcro of my shoes as I stumbled over roots and lumpy grass, sprinkler water cool and damp against my bare ankles. I smiled toothy and bright until my mouth went dry.

I had followed you, out of the kitchen and down the wooden steps, into our backyard. “Tag!” With one hand you had pushed me onto the couch and run away. As a boy, and three years older, you were faster, but I followed, with dangerous conviction, even after you had disappeared. It was impossible for me to imagine that you could have snuck back into the house, leaving me alone to wobble through our overgrown backyard; my blind faith wouldn’t allow it.

So I kept pushing, one arm full of green after another, sure I would find you just after this, just after this.

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We stood, one at each knee, in front of our sitting mother. Her eyes danced as she tried to hold back laughter, her lips pressing, but I could see her shoulders shake. She dodged and swatted our small hands as we tried to grab her fingers.

You’d asked her, with a very serious face, which of us she loved more. Surprised, but ever-eager, I joined in, demanding that she choose.

“I can’t answer that!” she’d said, “I’m your mother and asking me to choose between you two would be like asking me to cut off one of my hands.” We asked which one of us was her writing hand, but she insisted she needed both.

And so we stood, lunging at her strong wrists, smiles wide with our new game. Her practiced hands caught us each time, and eventually I forgot how troubled you'd looked when you'd asked.

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The highlights in your sandy hair caught what little light glowed from the living room. We crouched on the hardwood floor peering in at the tree. It stood wrapped in colored lights beside a dark window, waiting for morning.

With one arm around my shoulder, your fingers pressing into the fleece sleeve of my pajama top, you bowed your head towards me and spoke with all the importance a nine-year-old could summon.

“Do you see those presents? They weren't there before.” I nodded, my mouth open slightly, my breath caught in my chest.

“Mom and Dad put them there, not Santa. I saw them do it.”

I stared at the glossy wrapping paper and imagined our mother bending over the dining room table with scotch tape.

“Trust me, I'm doing you a favor. There are things you need to learn, things nobody told me. Well I'm going to tell you. All of them.” You looked up towards the tree with hard determination in your face, and I looked at you with reverence. I didn't understand, but I knew I wanted to be by your side.

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Back when the lemon tree was still alive. Our kitchen was bright with afternoon, and my friend who grew up down the street was over, her brown hair dangling to her waist.

She and I were making lemonade, giggling as we pushed the bumpy yellow rinds against the juicer and felt the plastic mold rotate under our palms. I licked the juice dripping down my forearm and squinted at the sun. I'd picked the lemons; they still had dirt on them and were almost sweet enough to eat.

She helped me fill a giant glass pitcher, the heavy one our mother used for ice tea, until it was perfect: water, lemon juice, and sugar a spoonful at a time.

I'd mostly ignored you when you came into the room, but made space on the counter for you to pour your glass of milk. You poured from the gallon jug into your cup, and then looked at our pitcher. My friend and I stopped talking, and looked at you.

You chuckled once to yourself and then poured an extra splash of milk into our lemonade. The white cloud spread quickly, billowing and opaque, through the rest of the pitcher, blocking the sun that had been streaming through the glass.

You put the milk back into the fridge just as I began to protest. You were already walking away when you turned slightly to cut me off:

"Hey – don't cry over spilled milk." I stared at your back, flooded with a rage and indignation that was new to me but maybe not to you.

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I knelt hidden behind my door listening intently as you two spoke. Your voice was low and brusque.

"What do you want me to do. I don't know it."

"You're too old not to know this, it's every-day stuff!" Our father raised his voice in desperation. "The months of the year? I mean, for heaven's sake..."

“Sorry, I guess you’re stuck with a stupid son.” You stood right outside my doorway. You must have been twelve, which would’ve made me nine.

“Just... just go to your room and try to figure it out, okay? Write it out on a piece of paper or something.” I heard our flustered father walk down the hall to the left and I heard your door slam to the right. I sat still for a moment, my skin buzzing.

I stood from my crouch and found a faded piece of binder paper. Then I grabbed a pencil and began, *January, February*, in my best handwriting. Tenderly I folded the piece of paper in half, and on the top wrote, *To: Aaron. From: Sarah.*

I opened my door, wincing as it creaked. I got onto my hands and knees and slid the folded piece of paper between the golden carpet and the underside of your door. Then I returned to my room, leaving my door open a crack so that I could sit and stare.

Almost immediately, I saw the piece of paper slide back under your door into the hallway. My eyes wide, I got up to take back my cheat-sheet, hoping it had helped.

You had scribbled out every word that I had written on the piece of paper and stabbed holes in it with a pen. “Go away,” you wrote. My cheeks flushed. I took the piece of paper in both hands and returned to my room.

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I held my blankets under my chin and breathed, slow and deep. I looked out my bedroom window and watched the warmth of the purple sky darken, replaced by a vastness that made me feel small.

I imagined the roof outside my second-story window, a low overhang covered with peppered sand-paper shingles, and wondered what they would feel like under my

feet. I imagined how I would escape my bedroom in case of a fire; I'd pop out the screen of my window and climb into the cool evening air.

I would crouch, barefoot on the rough shingles, and move carefully, one foot over the other, around the chimney, over the top of our house, until I reached the overhand above our front yard where your room's window met the roof.

I imagined us standing on the edge with our toes in the metal rain gutter, holding hands, and I wondered, lying in my bed, wondered and wondered, would you have jumped with me?

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The trampoline wobbled beneath our feet as we rocked our weight, and cold wind blew strands of hair across my face.

"Do you think the whole house will burn down?" A wild excitement hid in your eyes. Your energy was contagious, but, fraught with genuine concern, I just smiled and shrugged.

Our mother waited in the kitchen for firemen to arrive. She had sent us into the backyard after realizing a small fire was spreading across our stovetop.

"Do you think you're in shock? I think you're in shock." You bounced lightly from one foot to another.

"I don't know, what does shock feel like?" I asked.

"Do you feel kind of numb and like nothing is real?"

I scanned my body and noticed a slight tinging in my forearms. "Maybe a little..." But before I could finish the thought you reached out and slapped my cheek.

"Aaron, what the heck!"

You laughed easily and looked at me without apology.

“I guess not then. If you were in shock you wouldn’t have felt that.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” I mumbled. I sat down on the plastic tarp covering the metal of the trampoline and let my legs dangle off the edge. My fingertips traced where you had slapped me and I wondered if I could go back inside yet.

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We were alone for dinner, both parents at work, but our mother had left a twenty-dollar bill on the kitchen counter and a note that said, “Order pizza – Aaron knows how.”

You sat at your computer, occupied by an online game, rocking back and forth and shaking your free hand. I waited for you to notice my presence. Finally you pulled off your headset and, without looking away from the screen, asked,

“What do you want.”

“Mom said we should order a pizza.” I tried to sound official and to-the-point.

“Okay, so order a pizza.”

“I don’t know how.” We were getting used to being home alone without a babysitter. The first time, we had gotten under the sheets of our parents’ bed and watched a History Channel documentary that convinced us both UFO’s had visited Earth. But now the novelty had worn off and I wished we had a babysitter again to play hide-and-go-seek with me.

You slid your headphones back into place, and I stomped my foot.

“Aaron, seriously! I don’t know how to do it!”

“Fine! Jesus, you’re such a fucking baby sometimes. Here.” You opened up a new tab on the computer and went to a pizza company’s website.

“Do you see this number? Write it down and call it.”

I scrawled the number onto the note our mother had left, and found the home phone. The numbers glowed in the dark living room. I dialed the numbers slowly. It rang once and I was startled when a man began to speak. I didn't know what a cross-street was, but I ran, breathing hard, down the street to check a sign.

I sat by the door until the delivery man came, and gave him the entire twenty-dollar bill. I turned on the lights downstairs, and locked the front door: the things I saw our mother do in the evenings.

I served you before I served myself; I put two large pieces onto a ceramic plate and brought it to your computer. You didn't look up, but grumbled a thank you. I made a point not to look at you as I walked upstairs as cold and dignified as I could pretend to be.

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Waves of hushed voices floated upstairs as I lay in my bed. I dug myself deeper into the covers and pulled my knees up toward my torso, the way I slept when I was cold.

I wasn't supposed to know, but you were being spoken to by the police downstairs at our kitchen table. You were still in middle school and were always getting spoken to about something: accused of putting gum in someone's bike helmet, talking back to a teacher during class. But this felt heavier.

I tried to ignore the light that slid under the crack below my door, but there was no way to ignore what I imagined going on downstairs. I strained my ears and wondered if you were going to be arrested. I grabbed at my nest of untucked blankets and bit the inside of my cheeks, but it didn't help and I cried anyway. I kept repeating to myself, *Why can't I just have a normal brother. Why can't I just have a normal brother.*

You were being spoken to about a minor case of arson. It hadn't been committed by you, but rather your friend Kevin. Still, you had been the one to go back to Kevin's ex-girlfriend's house, where he had lit her family's wreath on fire, to make sure everyone was okay. You told the police everything, perhaps admitting to more than your actual involvement. Or maybe that's just how our mother likes to remember it. Either way, you remained calmer than our parents could, and I remember our mother crying and our father threatening to send you to military school, and I dug my nails into the stuffed kitten you had gotten me for my seventh birthday, the nicest thing you ever gave me, before throwing it weakly to the foot of my bed.

You were quiet and I heard the stairs creak as you walked to your room with slow, heavy steps. I wanted to reach out to you from my bed, but I stayed hidden in the darkness of my room and rolled over to face my wall.

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I couldn't move my arm above my shoulder, and I knew from the way my coach's eyebrows pulled together that it must be serious. I cradled my arm across my body. We stood in the hot parking lot, dust swirling as everyone else got off the bus. He asked if anyone could pick me up and I pursed my lips awkwardly; both of our parents were at work, and I was still a year away from getting my license.

"Don't you have a brother? Why don't you give him a call."

"Yeah, I'll do that...." But I winced at the thought. Even if I did know where you were, there was no guarantee I could reach you. You were always more risk than reliable, fun yet fleeting. When my eighth-grade trip returned from D.C., our mother had made you promise to pick me up because it would be late at night. But I sat next

to my suitcase until Joy Montgomery's mom circled back to make sure everyone had gone home and gave me a ride back. Our mother was so embarrassed and angry that she took away your car for a while.

You answered the second time I called, and I relaxed.

"Aaron, can you come pick me up? I'm at the high school."

"No." And you hung up. I called back, and spoke with more urgency.

"Aaron, I think I broke my collar bone, can you come pick me up?" You were quiet for a few moments before sighing deeply.

"Goddamn it, Sarah, yeah, alright I'll be there in twenty." I told my coach he could go, but he insisted he needed to wait for school insurance purposes. I sat on the concrete curb next to my backpack and tried not to move. What had started as a dull ache began to sharpen unpleasantly and I closed my eyes, trying to take deep breathes.

You didn't get out of the car, and my coach gave you directions to the hospital through the passenger window. You nodded without saying much. I squirmed and wondered if he could smell the weed and wished he had just left.

It was late spring and we drove with the windows down, flashes of tall pine trees and pink blossoms passing us by. We took an expressway, and halfway there you began to laugh.

"Sarah, you're such a dumb ass."

"Why do you say that?" I smiled and glanced at you sideways.

"Because you broke your fucking collar bone. I don't even have to see the x-rays, that shit's broken. I mean Jesus, look at it. And it wasn't even snowboarding or jumping off a building or anything cool. You straight up fell, and now you're probably

going to have to have surgery.” I laughed, despite my fear of surgery, and turned up the radio, my good arm hanging out the window. I counted the yellow strips painted in the road.

The hospital staff seemed confused that you would check me in, only to leave me in the waiting room, but it made perfect sense to me. By your standards, you had already exceeded expectations. You drove off in our father’s old dented Honda (it wasn’t dented until you backed it into a pole behind Burger King) while a kind, young-looking nurse took my blood pressure. I felt out of place, my track shorts creased with mud and sweat, the youngest one in the room by at least a decade. But I also felt giddy in an odd way and giggled as I watched your tail-lights turn out of the parking lot. Who knows, maybe I was in shock.

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I packed my bag carefully, quietly, leaning over my bed. I tried not to sacrifice thoroughness for speed, but I grew more anxious as your laughter bounced off of the walls.

You and James were drinking downstairs, and had taken something else out of a prescription bottle. An anti-anxiety med, I speculated. Your laughter was coarse and boastful, nothing I could remember from childhood, nothing like the self-conscious jingle of your genuine laugh.

I crept down the stairs one at a time, avoiding the places where I knew they creaked. Just as I reached the bottom landing, I heard your voice and you stepped out to cut me off.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” You smiled broadly, and James smiled behind you. You both stared at me as if I were the solution to a problem you had.

“Yeah, you weren’t just gonna leave us here? With nothing to do?” James said.

“Come on, Sarah, we get so bored,” and it was true. The moment you got like this you needed something to do, somewhere to turn your energy. I had been trying to escape.

“I...I need to go to a friend’s house for a biology project.” I looked past your face, into the ground.

“You’re lying.” You smiled wider and I could smell alcohol. I hated you for being right, but I refused to acknowledge it. I also refused to stay. To get thrown in the pool, to watch you burn my homework, to get locked out of the house without my shoes or phone or backpack.

“I have to go,” I said coldly, still looking at the rug. I tried to keep my breathing calm, but I heard my pulse in my ears. If I could just sink into the night, under a dark sky with pencil-point stars.

I pivoted on one foot ready to hurry out the front door when I felt your warm, strong hand wrap around my forearm. I shook your grip free and bounded towards the door, propelled by something in my blood. I threw open the front door and heard our dogs barking. I ran into our front yard, through the wet grass, but you were right behind me and so was James.

You cornered me up against your car. I leaned backwards against the hood and crawled on top, pushing myself backwards with my palms. Loose pollen from the car stuck to my hands and jeans. I crawled higher and higher up the car, my back

pressing against the windshield, as you and James reached for my ankles, James with his lanky arms, you with your broad shoulders. I kicked at your grasps and panted unevenly. Your face was that of a stranger's.

“Just stop it!” I finally screeched, my elbows shaking against the windshield wipers. You stood up straight, your hands by your shoulders.

“Jesus, we were just playing around. Calm the fuck down.”

“Yeah, seriously, go wherever you want.” You two walked back inside together as if you were coming home from school, but your laugh sounded stifled and pinched, now, and you dragged your feet.

I slid off the car into our gravel driveway and adjusted my bag. I took a deep breath and did not look towards the house before walking down our street. I snuck back into the house before our parents returned home, and never told them that I had left.

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You were on-time picking me up, and I raised my eyebrows in surprise. I waved goodbye to my coach and teammates, one strap of my soccer bag flung across my back.

“God this place is in the middle of fucking nowhere,” you hit the steering wheel. I smirked. You were back from college and mom was making you pick me up.

“Well yeah, it's South San Jose. South of South San Jose. Soccer tournaments have to be in the middle of nowhere – they just need a bunch of fields... by the way, how long has your gas light been on?”

You laughed and mumbled, “A while. Definitely look around for a station.”

“Aaron, seriously, how long has it been on?” You didn’t say anything but turned up the radio. The AC in your car was broken and all four windows were down. You turned up the radio every time I tried to talk and drove in circles looking for a gas station while I looked up the number for AAA.

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My wet hair rested over the top of your computer chair as I lounge post-shower in sweatpants. Sun poured through the front door as I heard it squeak open.

“Hello!” I heard our mother call from the kitchen.

“Hi, Mom,” you called. I heard other voices and realized you were with friends. I was in the middle of reading the second *Lord of the Rings* book, and, embarrassed by the prospect of company, I rolled out of the chair and scurried towards the kitchen.

But before I was out of the room, I heard your voice behind me.

“This is my sister, Sarah. Sarah, this is…” I turned and three boys I had never met before shook my hand and I smiled, a little bit flushed. I hurried to the kitchen, but paused, as I often did, on tiptoe outside of the doorway to listen to your conversation. I wondered if they had noticed my book.

“Dude, that was your sister? She’s in my Calc class, I totally thought she was Asian.”

“Nah, that’s my sister.” I could hear the smile in your voice. “She’s like hella smart. She has a 4.2 GPA or something like that. She’s gonna go to some crazy good college” You paused for a moment, and I could imagine you nodding. I was listening so hard I barely breathed.

“Yeah, she’s gonna make it man.”

My heart pinched. Because in the same breath that you said I was going to make it, you implied that you were not.

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“Sarah, can you come pick me up?”

“Why do you need a ride? I thought you were at the dentist’s”

“I am... I was... mom dropped me off and told me she couldn’t come pick me up ‘till one. Sarah... Sarah I’m so hung over. Please come get me. I’m literally stranded. My phone’s about to die... Sarah please.” It reminded me of what our mother said, that you were like a Sourpatch Kid: sour, sweet, gone.

“You’re so fucking spoiled. I’ll be there in five,” and I hung up and smiled to myself.

I found you walking down Grant Road about a quarter of a mile from the dentist’s’ office. I thought of all the times you refused to stop the car all the way when you picked me from high school and I had to run alongside the car and throw my backpack in first before hopping in.

But I pulled into the bike lane and stopped. You asked if we were early enough get McDonald’s breakfast and you were so pathetic it reminded me of when you had mono. I drove us to the drive-through window and you rested your head on my shoulder before leaning up and saying,

“By the way I lost my wallet.”

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Your layered jackets hung to your waist, always slightly too long in the arms. You stood at the top of the steps beside your duffle bag and our parents were saying goodbye. It was evening because you preferred to drive in the evening, and it was time

for you to go back to college. You looked happy and sturdy. The past few weeks had been genuinely pleasant, the best holiday we as a family had experienced in years. You may have admitted to our mother, when it was just the two of you, late one night, that you didn't want to go back to school. But that got sorted out by morning.

I was beginning to resolve some of the doubts I had about us being able to have a normal adult relationship. I could be alone with you in a room without feeling the need to sit by an exit, even if I did make sure to note where they were. I asked you about college and you asked if I was excited to leave high school. We felt closer in age and you got me a Christmas present from a mall kiosk.

I waited to hug you last. I can only count a few times in my memory where we've really hugged. Most are beside airports or in our driveway.

You put one wide hand on my shoulder, and looked hard into my face. A little startled, I looked back. Our eyes were about level, and you spoke with a kind of authority I had never heard you use.

"You be good, okay?" You looked at me seriously, and with so much feeling I was relieved to hug you so that I could bury my face in your shoulder. I had to push down tears that I could feel in my throat because crying would make it weird.

You were trying, really trying, to do the classic older brother thing. I could feel it in the way you hugged me and patted my arm. To be protective and concerned, to have your own life in order enough to care about someone else's. As if you could suddenly adopt that role now.

Our parents walked you to the door downstairs, but I sat in your bedroom upstairs. I knelt by your window, opening the plantation shutters, and watched you throw your bag into the trunk. I heard your door slam and your car start and I

touched the glass, tears finally coming, as I watched your taillights pull away. I can't help but wonder if some part of me knew.

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It's been four years now since Mom started calling your bedroom the "front room," since I became an only child. Maybe it's because my birthday is coming up, but I've been remembering you a lot lately.

I still remember everything I used to, but when I think about you now, the time-line gets all jumbled up. I look at a picture of you as a Boy Scout and I imagine syringes. I see your graduation cap and I can picture us playing with wooden blocks. It's hard to imagine our life together and not feel like I should've known. To look at memories without them feeling like foreshadowing.

I try and touch an old life, one that ended the day you died. It's as if a line were drawn that day separating my life into a before and an after. You are a part of the before that I can never go back to, that I can never really touch again. Just like you can never know about the after - what college I went to or that I broke up with my high school boyfriend or that I understand you better as I get older because sometimes I feel what I think you used to feel.

I wonder now how well I ever knew you at all. I see a picture of you from your first day of kindergarten; you're tugging on the ends of your cotton shirt and your face is puckered. Mom says you cried because you had to go and I cried because I didn't get to. I worry now that I'm too harsh on you, that I misunderstood. Every tantrum you threw over a bad hair-cut, because maybe your day-to-day existence was already painful enough. I wonder if the world did something to you or if you were just born

uncomfortable and agitated. I wonder if you would've been fine if you'd had another five years.

I remember the way you asked our mother, quiet, sincere, defeated, if she would make you sugar cookies. You sat alone in your room and ate them, on your quilt that was covered with dog hair because they slept in your bed. You did this when you were seven, you did this when you were seventeen.

The farther forward my after life goes, the harder it is to cross back over to the before life, to access those memories without the after knowledge getting in the way. It's like my new world is taking over my old one, and I worry someday I'll lose my connection altogether. Even now I have to close my eyes and force myself to think, to really imagine what it was like to be by your side.

I can remember the phone call perfectly, when our father told me I needed to come home from school. I can remember your coroner's report. I remember over a hundred cards for you on our dining room table. I can remember a weight tied to my sternum and people telling me on my eighteenth birthday that I had so much to look forward to. I can remember thinking we never really knew how much our mother loved us. I can remember the loneliness, being the only one who lost a brother; both of our parents, at least, had lost a son. All of your friends had just lost a friend. I can remember now, so clearly, the quietness of losing a sibling, like a disappearing shadow.

But I'm worried I'll forget, or learn to forget, things about you that I never used to question knowing. Things from my before life. Like the way your jackets smelled or the callouses on your hands or the gentle veins beneath the surface of your neck. I dreamt of you, the night before your memorial service, and I saw you and felt

your hand on my shoulder so vividly that I cried when I woke up because my dream included details I had already forgotten.

I'm only going to forget more, I know that. Do you remember, when I was very little and you were mean to me, I used to say "I can't wait until I'm older than you." I had every intention of giving you hell the moment I turned six. Alas, you were always three years ahead. Until, that is, I turned twenty, and began leaving you behind.

Sometimes, in the years after, I thought I was still seventeen. Like the years in-between hadn't happened. Like nothing since your death had really counted because it had been in a world where you didn't exist.

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I held the single-subject notebook in my hand, its edges curled and stained. I had found it in the bottom drawer of your desk while looking for a paperclip and froze, my skin going numb.

Most of the pages were empty, never used or scribbled on in the corners. A grocery list or a telephone number. A smiley face and a zig-zag. But near the back, I found two pages of your hand-writing. I pored over the pages - your distinct scrawl that never changed after third grade. I imagined you had written them the last time you were home.

The first page was a journal entry of sorts. It began "As I sit writing this I can't help but think that..." and finished with "...I don't know what I'm even doing, this is so stupid, why am I writing this." It made my heart hurt to read it.

The second page was a list, evidently a to-do list, with dashes all down the side:

“-Lift more

-Get to 160 lbs

-Get with more girls (Lianna? Maybe better as friend)

-Find better hiding places in house

-Fix relationship with Ken”

The lifting didn't surprise me, neither did the goal weight; you had always been skinny. I had no idea who Lianna was. Hiding places could only be referring to better places to keep your drugs. And Ken had been your roommate, the one who would find your body in the morning, call an ambulance, explain to our parents. Apparently you two had been having disagreements about drug use; you wanted to do heroin again, he did not. He woke up the next morning, you did not.

But the last dash on the list hit me across the face, and I re-read the simple words again and again.

“-Get closer with parents (sister too)”

Even if it was as an afterthought, you had been reaching, you had been reaching too.

## Gardening in California

I have two competing images of my mother stuck in my head. One of her burying his ashes, hunched over, struggling to use the shovel, tears dripping from the end of her nose. I had to turn away suddenly because I thought I was going to throw up.

The other, years before, is of us squatting in the garden. I'm little and we're tearing up tiny roots, digging into dark soil with our hands. She's laughing and we both have dirt under our finger nails.

Blossoms bloom early in California - by February it's spring. Colored petals line the streets for months before everything's killed by summer heat. It's always seemed like an odd reversal, that he was born in August and died in February.

A new memory of us gardening: my mother has forgotten to take off her good clogs and the sun makes her hair look blonder than it actually is. We've covered the yard in forget-me-nots, short white flowers with petals the size of pencil points. She bought them despite the fact, or maybe because, they make her cry.

## Backyard

Sometimes, when I came home from school, I would strip off my jeans and pull on loose, mesh basketball shorts that used to be for my P.E. class. I would walk straight into my backyard, barefoot, until the concrete ended and the lawn began and lay down on my back under the oak tree around the curled, sharp, shrunken leaves. The cool, damp grass pressed upward against my naked arms and ankles and for the first time all day, under the shifting clouds and swaying trees, I felt like I could really breathe.

## Summer

I mounted my bicycle in track shorts and leather flip flops and chose a direction to go, anywhere, everywhere, with the knowledge that classes were over and it smelled like pollen. Waxy leaves hung lazily from sagging trees, and I took wide, slow turns around the streets because cars rarely came by that way. Blossoms are most fragrant in their final few weeks of life, before they are overtaken by heat. I stole an orange from a heavy branch and dug my nails into the citrus. I squinted into the sun and moved my long hair to cover a scar on my shoulder so it wouldn't get too much sun, but the breeze pushed it back behind my face a moment later. I smiled into the bleached concrete roads.

I picked up a pool noodle, saturated with water, and a few loose flippers. Kids were cleared from the pool deck, and somewhere Zack yelled at the ones who were still in the water.

Sam and I pinned up the diving boards with thick pieces of plywood. He stole the towel from around my waist to dry his hair and I kicked him half-heartedly.

I threw off my straw hat and cheap, smudged sunglasses. I waited until it was only staff before I jumped into the pool. I skimmed along the bottom, running my hands over the smooth, bright plaster, and felt the drag in my hair. I picked up goggles, more flippers, a lost hair tie, and returned them to the surface.

Our boss waved to us, wishing us a happy weekend, and I waved back yelling something like "drive safe." While I stayed in the water, other lifeguards dragged the large blue pool covers towards the edge of the deck. I grabbed the corner and began dragging it across the pool while Ya'el released more and more slack. When the whole

pool was covered with the blue plastic, I hopped out and we all began placing bets.

Only Zack could really make it all the way across. Sam got close, and Max could when he was younger, before he'd put on weight for football. We all took turns trying to run across the top of the pool cover, quick feet, high knees, without sinking. We all laughed and tried not to get stuck under the pool covers. Eventually we remembered we were tired and went home, and I left my hat in the office over the weekend.

The leather couch sagged in the middle, but it was smooth and cool. The dog barked at the crickets in the backyard, and our neighbor's dog barked at our dog, the sounds meeting in the night sky. My parents made air-pop popcorn, and I could hear my mother opening the pull tab of a diet-ginger ale.

I called to my parents, saying the movie was starting, and they scurried in, my mother sitting next to me so close our thighs squish together and her satin robe hung onto my lap. My dad sat in the chair beside us with the heavy green bowl of popcorn and cheddar cheese cubes. I pull the tattered woolen blanket over our laps, turn the brightness down on my phone so I can text my boyfriend without annoying my dad, and wonder how this will end, the movie. We took turns yelling at the dog.

I woke up slow and groggy to NPR playing on my dad's radio. I looked out the window and wondered why I was in my parent's bed, what time it was, and remember my parents are out of town and I had been watching TV the night before. It was Sunday, so I didn't have work, and I walked downstairs in sweatpants to feed the dogs.

My mom left a small hand-written note next to the coffee cake on the counter. I took a slice of the cake and poured a cup of yesterday's cold coffee and walked into the backyard. I sat with my feet in the pool and ate breakfast there.

The dog licked the floor between my toes as we set up the blender. My friend asked where the glasses were and I oriented her towards a wooden cabinet over the counter. I pulled out the ten-pound bag of frozen berries and hit it against the counter a few times to break up the frozen block. With bare and rolled up sleeves, I grabbed a few handfuls and dropped them into the bottom of the blender.

Dust particles floated through the window, exposed by the light. I made sure the door was open so the dog could enter and exit. We tossed in the melting, oozing peaches, and they folded around the berries. We added apple juice, tried blending, apple sauce, yogurt, tried blending, more apple juice. It was still too thick, so we added orange juice and when we realized it was working quickly lunged to find the blender lid.

I sat in the passenger seat of my best friend's Subaru with both arms out the window so one didn't tan more than the other. She's my only friend that listens to country music. We parked at a local grocery store, a little bit crooked. We grabbed cheese and crackers, a watermelon, glazed cream puffs, and two coffees. Our cart scraped against the linoleum as we checked out. We got back to her house and brought everything to the plastic lawn chairs in her backyard. A hummingbird hovered near her porch, and her lawn smelled like cut grass. We rolled up our shorts and wondered if we were crazy to want to leave all this.

I'm conscious, now, of the way my hips must have been swinging as I skipped ahead of my mother. She would've been smiling behind me. I pulled down the hem of my cotton dress and combed through the ends of my wet hair with my fingers, trying to help it dry faster.

The produce men hand out samples, strawberries and plumbs. They smiled and nodded, corn, sunflowers, fresh bread, blueberries in cardboard boxes. I sampled as I went and my mother bought a few pomegranates. She sends me ahead to buy parsley.

The streets closed every Thursday for the market, and most families were there to grab things for dinner: fresh vegetables, rotisserie chicken, or something from the street vendors like gyros or kettle corn. It was nearly seven and the sun was only beginning to set, bathing the streets. I leaned my head against the car seat and laugh as my mother teases me.

At home the kitchen is dark and cool. We prepare dinner with the television on. I chop garlic for the salad, and toast slices of frozen cake for desert.

I put a book and water bottle into a draw-string backpack. The gears on my bike were stained with years of pollen. I pulled my hair back with an elastic, and chose a direction, a straight line, to bike as far as I could go before I ran into something, sometimes coffee, sometimes a park, sometimes an old school.

The dogs pulled, each leash in one hand. My sweatshirt was pretty dirty, but so were my dogs so I didn't worry about it. I let the dogs set the pace, they were old,

and I didn't have anywhere to be. They dragged me around the streets, slowly, like a Zamboni, the same route we always took. I looked at the houses and lawns and fruit trees. We passed the empty lot with prairie grass and a small barn in the corner. Sprinkler water trickled down the street gutter and I avoided the little streams. We passed the old Mormon Church where we used to play cops and robbers. My dad taught me to drive in the parking lot and someone asked me to Homecoming there once. I've never been inside, but they hold services every Sunday. I looked for our yard, the tall trees that sway and the roses that line our fence. I couldn't help but wonder when these places would stop feeling like home and start feeling like childhood.

## Language of Flowers

“Violets wither in heat.” My mother and my aunt stand with their hands on their hips staring downward at the planter box. Red satin petals the size of quarters lean against their limp stems. My mother tsks and they both shake their heads, cursing an early summer. I try to take mental notes: *Plant bulbs before the rain. Climbing roses are happier facing the sun. Crop fruit trees to their trunks in the offseason.* We continue our loop around the back yard and the sisters talk about things I worry I’ll never know.

Wet grass clung to my ankles. I’d followed my mother barefoot into the backyard. She was clipping an apricot tree, near the fence, but I stayed on one of the stepping stones, an island in the muddy yard. Rain slid off of waxy leaves and palm fronds slapped each other from the weight of the water.

The tanuki hid, tucked away under a bush, no bigger than a hunched black cat. My mother got the statue at a garage sale. It was the first one she’d seen outside of Japan and she had always regretted not getting one there.

The first time I asked, my mother said simply that a tanuki was like a Japanese garden gnome; mischievous and mythical, a watcher of the plants. He carries religious scripture in one hand and sake in the other. My mother jokes sometimes that the tanuki is her alter ego, but I can’t convince myself it’s really a joke. It has to do with the spirit of the thing. She doesn’t drink and she’s hardly religious, but she collects acorn caps in her pockets and can always make people laugh. Sometimes I feel she’d rather stand in her garden while it’s raining than anywhere else.

In Japan the tanuki were seen as governing all things in nature. In some stories they were ghosts. In others they were shapeshifters, foxlike and clever. They

brought neither good nor ill tidings – they just were, a spirit of nature.

My mother surveys the garden, her arms by her side, with her fingers spread out like webs to keep the dirt on her hands from touching her pants. Once I could've sworn I saw her look down at the little statue and wave.

The heels of my sandals dragged across the asphalt as I walked, but I didn't mind; I was looking up. Cherry blossoms line the sidewalk down my street.

A strong wind shook the angled branches and a flurry of pink thumb-print petals swirled off of the trees and fell like weightless hail around me.

“There's a word for that in Japanese. A snow storm of cherry blossom petals. It happens a few weeks out of the season, and then it's gone. It's considered good luck, one of the world's greatest gifts.” I blushed a little and shook a few petals out of my hair.

“I know ‘hana’ is flower,” she continued. “Oh, well I've lost most of my Japanese anyways.” I asked her if she missed it, knowing Japanese, and she shrugged saying these things come and go. She looked at the ground, though, and I wished I could give her the language back.

I found it later: “hanabubuki.” Apparently it's particularly good luck if a petal falls into your tea.

My mother tends to love flowers and plants that explode; plants like agapanthus and cherry blossoms and apple trees that don't exist and then are suddenly too full. She particularly likes weeds, too, or at least flowers that grow like weeds. After a single rain storm morning glories and climbing ivy and forget-me-nots have doubled in presence. We have succulents on our porch the size of small cars.

The exception, maybe, are her roses. They are her second children, and she tends to them daily, quietly, when no one else is home.

For all this, she never admits to being a gardener.

“Gardeners are good patient people. I’m not that patient.” I point to the garden in our backyard and ask her what she is if she’s not a gardener and she says, “Oh I don’t know, care taker? I just like what I like. I do what I can do.”

Hanakotoba is the Japanese language of flowers. It’s the idea that plants can communicate directly, without the use of words, by evoking feeling. The nature of the plant or flower, its height, the presence of thorns, its color, directs this communication, determines the physiological effect that plant will have on a person.

For example, a red rose may “mean” love, or in love. But a gardenia may communicate secret love. A pink rose, truth, happiness and confidence. Morning glories communicate a willful promise. Peonies, bravery. The list is extensive, communicating wealth, hatred, modesty, sincerity, shyness. But each translation is proximate; we’ll never have the words to pin down exactly how a lily makes us feel. Still, though, it gives new weight the art of flower arranging, like trying to compose an orchestra of feeling.

I read an article that says Hanakotoba, like other forms of floral symbolism, may no longer be commonly understood by “populations that are increasingly divorced from their old rural traditions.” I’m not sure how a language is lost, or how quickly, but the idea makes my chest hurt.

My mother still finds crayon scribbles on some of her old sheet music, mostly on pieces she hasn't played in years. She'll hold it up to me and laugh, asking "now who do you think could've done that?" The first time she did this I sincerely had no idea. She smiles and kisses my forehead, seeing something I know I don't remember.

Apparently I used to sit on the carpeted floor while she marked up her music, watching as she added bowings for the section. I tried to mimic her, drawing big loopy scribbles over the bars. One of her operas has a pink smiley face in the corner of the page and she says it made her stand partner laugh.

She's the assistant principal of the second violins. I always tease her for having so many concessions in her title, and she reminds me that it's a title chair, not an easy audition to win. She was also six months pregnant with me when she took the audition. My brother wasn't yet three at home. I tell her I was her lucky charm and she says the truth is she was so exhausted she didn't have the energy to be nervous. "I played the best that day. That's all an audition ever is."

Down the street with the cherry blossom trees, there's a little blue house on the corner that often has gardening materials left out with a "free" sign: large decorative stones, open bags of peppered soil, a planter pot, half a case of fresh tulips. The woman who lives there is a landscape designer and is constantly giving away spare garden supplies.

My mother and I walk past her house often and see her gardeners working with thick gloves, their knees in the dirt. Occasionally she'll be there, watching or giving instruction. Flowers are torn up at the change of each season, and a new batch of something is planted in their stead. I always wonder if it makes the gardeners sad to

throw the uprooted flowers into orange plastic buckets. My mother admires them – their commitment to the land, servants of a kind.

The woman is ruthless, but ruthless in a way we also have to admire. Her yard always looks like it slipped off the cover of a glossy magazine. Always in color, always seasonal, groomed into perfect shapes and rows. We've yet to see a single weed in her yard.

My mother could never do it. Not only does she support weeds and wildflowers, she grows sentimentally attached to “rescued” plants. The palm tree in our back yard was an accident. It had been living in a pot in a corner of my grandmother's house, no bigger than any other house plant, for years, deprived of direct sunlight and space for growing roots. My mother decided to “give it a new home” in our yard, and before we noticed it was as tall as we were and wider than we were and suddenly we were stuck with a fully-grown palm tree in the corner of the garden.

She will always grab the tulips with the “free” sign. She doesn't read gardening magazines, and she's terrible at following advice. But she talks to them, her plants, her flowers.

“There” she'll say, “that's better. They'll be happy here at least for a little while.”

For my birthday one year she sent me a watercolor of a dogwood blossom and used a stamp with a white Sarah Van-Fleet rose – she planted one in our front yard when I left for school. She calls it my rose, “your rose is beautiful right about now.” The card said something about the kitchen being clean and that she never knows what to get me for a present; she sent me pressed lavender and a hundred-dollar bill.

She claims to be a terrible writer – I’m the writer of the family she says. She insists when I begin to protest. “That’s just how you communicate. Your dad and me, we use music.” But I’d argue she’s multi-lingual.

Whenever I sit during one of my parents’ concerts I listen to see if I can pick out their individual instruments. I close my eyes and find them, piecing apart the symphony, sorting out an oboe, the cellos. I hear a clear note, my father playing the clarinet. I listen for the violins. Not the melody, the accompaniment. That’s where she is, somewhere in there.

Camellias are thought to be bad luck. Though their “meaning” varies depending on their color, their entire form is perceived as ominous. It’s the way the flower dies. Rather than falling petal by petal, camellias fall off their stems whole. Their colors, yellow, white, and red, connote “longing,” “waiting,” and “in love, perishing with grace” respectively.

I can’t help but compare camellias with cherry blossoms. Cherry blossoms are good luck, camellias bad. Cherry blossoms bloom in April, Camellias last through winter. A flurry of petals, a single falling. I don’t think opposite are supposed to exist in this language – what’s the inverse of a daffodil – but I wonder if camellias and cherry blossoms are just showing us two different ways to deteriorate.

The plastic-sheeted pages creaked as we turned them. We sat on her bed, elbows on our knees, bent over the album. She had never been very organized, but made the album herself and she was proud of that, even if it wasn’t decorated and

some of the photos were falling out. It was hers and she was showing her daughter.

I asked about unfamiliar faces and about years, if she had met my dad yet, if she was still in Illinois, if she was getting her music degree from Northwestern, if it was before she'd lived in Japan with her sister. Most of the photos were polaroids, poorly lit, goofy smiles, shiny faces. One picture showed my mother sitting on her knees in a white belted robe with loose black pants beside a young man wearing the same.

It was one of many from her Aikido dojo. She trained all throughout college, plus a few years before and after. I knew she had her black belt, and my brother and I have memories of her strong hands grabbing our wrists when we asked her for a demonstration. It scared us a little, if we were being honest, and she always emphasized that it was strictly defensive, and that you can seriously hurt people – and yourself – if you don't know what you're doing.

“That's Frank. He lived at the dojo with my boyfriend at the time, they were good friends actually. Frank was a good man. We never had anything like that, we were two ends of the same battery, but we were buds.” She pointed to the man sitting beside her in the picture. He was thin with curly hair and glasses.

“This is of his wedding,” she pointed to the next page. “He married a Japanese woman. They had two services, one traditional, one American. This was her wedding kimono, it was so beautiful.” She looked at the photo of Frank's wife laughing, the silk around her waist catching the light.

I asked my mother if she kept in touch with Frank, or his wife, or any of the others from the album. She sighed and said no. I know her sensei died a few years back, she had flown out for the memorial service. She didn't say much about it, but she looked tired. She shrugged and closed the book.

“No... I mean, it was a lifetime ago. I moved out to California, I met your dad, I got my job in the orchestra here. We fell out of touch.” When we got off the bed I couldn’t get the picture of Frank and his kimono-clad bride cutting cake out of my head. I didn’t want to let go of the book, but more than that, I didn’t want her to.

Little thing, honey, sweetheart, bunny. My mother has been generous with pet-names, ever since I was a baby. But she always returns to sweet pea. She looks at me and I can tell she sees something that isn’t there, a memory of me from before I had memories, and the sincerity of her gaze makes me squirm.

“Oh sweet pea,” she says, and whatever words I had get caught in my throat. She tries to cradle my head to her shoulder as if I were small enough to sit in her lap.

I try so hard to ignore it, that sweet pea means Goodbye. I re-imagine every coo. A morbid preparation for someday, a precaution, just so I’m ready. I don’t imagine she knows the symbolism, it’s something I found while reading. I don’t think she’d give it credence, either, if I told her about it. But now I can’t get it out of my head, and I worry that deliberate or not, she may be communicating in the way she knows best.

## House

After falling upon some financial troubles, the Clemens family moved out of their home in Hartford, Connecticut while the father, Mark Twain, worked on various speaking tours to make back the money he had lost in a series of bad investments—the house he once said "was of us, and we were in its confidence and lived in its grace and in the peace of its benediction." You can still visit the house and listen as a tour guide points out where the family read stories after supper, how Mrs. Clemens was particular about her drapery, and how the house, where Twain wrote his most famous works, was as much alive as the family. Yet little time is devoted to Susy, one of Twain's two daughters, who stayed behind in the U.S. while Twain and the other Clemens continued his speaking tour in Europe. While they were gone, Susy died of spinal meningitis at the age of 24, in the home alone but with her sister Jean. Upon hearing the news, the family decided that they would no longer try to move back into the home. Her mother never set foot inside the house again.

It is, I think, the closest thing to a haunted house that I have ever heard. While the family lived there, they described the walls as living and breathing, a company in the parlor, a sigh of welcoming upon returning home. But many people, women, children, families feel a connection to a physical home. No, what I find eerie is not that Susy died in the home; tragedy is hardly unusual, then or now, and most people wish to die in their beloved homes. It is that the family was gone. That she died alone. That the large house was nearly empty. The haunting isn't what was there. It was what wasn't there.

My parents bought our house when my mother was pregnant with me and my brother was about to start pre-school. They have a polaroid, somewhere, of what the

house looked like when they bought it. The walls were stained with cigarette smoke and the backyard was all tall, unkempt grass. They remodeled the house once, before they moved in, and again when I was in second grade. My mother planted roses and built her own picket fence. I sat beside her in the yard, handing her each post as she needed it. My father watched on, horrified by the price of everything, as my mother hammered and dug and tiled. When he saw the color of the kitchen he went ballistic. “It looks like we’re inside a God damn Creamsicle!” but my mother saw what it would look like with furniture and light coming in through the windows. The backsplash, the hardwood flooring, the wilting arbor – all of it, every inch, it’s hers.

When Maya Lin designed the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington, D.C., she described wanting her art to be “like a wound in the ground.” Viewers must descend downward to view the memorial. There is nothing protruding above sea level. The sunken walls are dark, polished stone. The reflective surface allows viewers to see their own faces over the names of the fallen. She wanted there to be respect and solemnity, but also shame and discomfort. To project the responsibility of remembering onto the viewer. Lin’s design created a precedent of absences and abysses being used to commemorate losses, notably the National 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City, and many of the Holocaust memorials across Europe. As a way to formalize loss without repairing it. To remember, but never console. Some things cannot be rebuilt.

My mother says that she brought my brother and me to the house once, during the big remodel. I was seven and Aaron was ten. She says I saw the exposed piping, the men on our roof, and thought it was like a wonderful playground; I ran around the yard looking at the gaps in the walls. My brother, though, never let go of

her hand. He wouldn't look at the house any more than he had to, and, as we turned to leave, murmured "never take me here again." It surprised her, and she immediately felt guilty. "Something about seeing the house like that, torn apart" she told me, "I think it was upsetting for him."

He did not die in our house, and I wonder if that means it is more or less haunted. Sometimes I sit in his bedroom and think about how much more sunlight his room gets than mine. I look at the new bedspread my mother bought, and her sewing machine that she moved in, and I search through his old drawers and scour over notebooks, collecting evidence that he was real. The last moment I saw him exist I was kneeling in his bedroom while he began his drive south. I remember the red taillights, the sickening crunch of gravel.

My mother tries to spend time in his bedroom. I can hear her practicing violin there sometimes. She sews when she has something she needs to sew. She worries it will become a mausoleum if nobody uses it. When I am home for the summer I read on his bed and use it to fold laundry. Often I just sit in there, looking out the plantation shutters.

I walk through my house when my parents are at work and I am alone, slowly, barefoot, touching the walls. I wonder if he is here, or not here. If I am so aware of his absence that he begins to hold form. Or if he is so absent that I create a form that was never his. I try to remember the concrete, running down the stairs, playing with blocks in his room. I worry, as always, that I am beginning to remember the summary of him better than I remember him.

I have friends who tell me I am lucky that he did not die in the house. Friends who lost parents on hospice, deteriorated slowly. They remember it with crystal

clarity and they can never see their homes the same way again. But I had the opposite problem. He left, and simply never came back. I could sit, like a dog at his window, forever, and never see his car come home. There was no body to waste away. It was suddenly gone, into thin air. It was silent and it took me a long time to believe and some mornings, when I wake up, I have to remember all over again, but that happens less now.

## Doom in California

When I've spent a lot of time in California, I develop a vague awareness of earthquakes. A reminder, in my sternum, that at any moment the earth could begin trembling beneath me. Technically we are overdue – it's been over a hundred years since the last big one. I think about this when I'm stuck in traffic or driving across a bridge. It's a slow panic tethered to the flawed logic that the longer I remain there, the more likely it is to happen.

It's similar to the feeling I have when we drive past a reservoir and I can see the rings left by different water levels descending downward. Small puddles and dry, cracking earth. The hills turn yellow and then a pale grey, perfect fire kindling.

When I'm on an airplane flying out of San Francisco, I look out the window and imagine the buildings wobbling like jelly, collapsing into piles of dust, and for a wild moment the thought flies through my head, I've escaped.

## Diagnosis

My dad tells me that he used to get tired when he read to my brother and I before bed, that his voice would grow hoarse and he would have to stop.

“But not your mother.” He says. “She would read to you guys for hours. She used to read you everything.” Whatever she was reading, she read out loud – cookbooks, magazines, novels from the library. I followed her around the house, no taller than her knees, and listened to her voice. I have no memory of this and I wonder now how much I understood, but I smile when I try to picture it.

My mom was vague about it at first, even as I began to press.

“So the lung thing... it cleared up, right? You got a chest scan? What did it end up being? I remember you saying the pollen was weird this year, it was just so dry...” she had an insistent cough, and found a few specks of blood in her napkin.

“Well” she paused. “They’ve been looking at it more and doing some extra tests. They think it’s some kind of growth.”

“What kind of a growth. Like a bacteria thing? Bronchitis?” I pushed.

“More like an odd collection of cells...” she trailed off like she was thinking of a way to describe it.

“Mom... mom that sounds an awful lot like cancer.” I began to feel my heart below my collar bone.

“Well, I suppose technically it is. It’s... well, it’s lung cancer.” We were both quiet for a few moments.

She had been worried about distracting me in the middle of the week, in case I had homework, she said. She didn’t want me to worry. I explained to her, as calmly as I could, that she had to keep me in the loop about these things, that school came

easily to me, or at least, I had a lot of practice. She promised she'd be better, and call more soon.

The evening after her diagnosis, I couldn't sleep. More accurately, I couldn't close my eyes without writing her eulogy in my head. The words tumbled and I felt my throat tightening. I had written my brother's, and my brain made the jump like a trip wire.

I got out of bed and grabbed a book off of a friend's shelf, a spine that looked familiar, a read that had been recommended to me years ago. I read a few chapters, enough to re-set the spring, and faded into sleep. It was the beginning of a long-abandoned habit, one that hasn't stopped again since.

I read frantically, between classes, before bed, when I was supposed to be showering or eating. Her diagnosis got more complicated. What had looked like an isolated area in her lung proved to have companions in her brain. They canceled her original surgery and opted for radiation and chemotherapy. Autumn slipped by and, useless, helpless, I went to classes and didn't talk to many people.

My dad sat with his book across his lap, squinting at me through the sun. Our iced teas sat beside us on a wire metal table.

"You know, I've given it some thought..." he said. "I read to learn things. I like to know the details of just how this piece affected that one, histories, biographies. Your mother, well, she reads to escape."

"How generous..." I started but he continued.

"No, no, no, I just mean she reads when she needs a break. She reads to take her out of this world and into another one. But you, I don't know why you read yet."

I looked down at my feet, feeling self-conscious, and shrugged.

“I don’t know, I just kind of like it,” I said.

I started reading *Gone with the Wind* during my mother’s surgery. They scheduled it as soon as they were able to localize the cancer to her lungs. It would be an eight hour procedure, but it was a thick book. I took the book back to school with me, leaving my mother the day after she came home from the hospital. I worried she would try to do too much; she wasn’t supposed to lift more than ten pounds, and the doctor told us she should remain upright in a chair for at least a week. We all smiled dryly and said we were sure that wouldn’t be a problem.

I read *Gone with the Wind* well into winter, until the seasons began to change again. The panic of the diagnosis, the liminal stages where she took tests and they examined her scans and met to discuss options, our crash course into oncology, was largely over. My father was no longer breaking out into rashes and I cried a lot less. But a new period of waiting began, only marginally less precarious. The will to reach remission, to get far enough away from the gravitational pull that we could be free, forever, like a slingshot, into outer space.

My mother and I discussed the books we were reading over the phone. She read quickly, and had long finished the books I’d sent her in a care package. She went to the library every week and got a murder mystery or a top-seller. She would read sci-fi if I gave her specific recommendations. But she loved to hear what I was reading for school or where I was in *Gone with the Wind*. It became an interactive reading.

She didn’t warn me, though. Nobody warned me. But perhaps nobody knew how badly I needed a win. I remember finishing the book in a panic, with too few pages in one hand and too many in the other, thinking this can’t be it, this can’t be it. I called my mother sobbing and said something along the lines of “it wasn’t supposed

to end that way,” and she cooed “oh I know sweetie... but I mean, it’s in the title...”

## Four Years and Counting

He is always more vivid around the anniversary; his face sharpens and I can hear his low chuckle. It doesn't sneak up on me now the way it did the first few times, but on the dot of midnight I began to cry and forced myself to write his name in pencil on the back of a piece of paper. It's a reminder that we shared a name, that there used to be another.

I have flashes of memory from the immediately after that, I've realized, upset me almost as much as the actual loss. Though I'm never going to be okay with the fact that he died, I have accepted it as fact. I think of our shared memories now in a way that brings me comfort. They've turned around in my head and the thorns have just about all been removed. There are a few surprises, prompted perhaps by relics, a Boy Scout badge, a middle school science project – “Land mines” my mother and I call them. But we are running out of things to find, and soon we will have all the information we ever will. I will stop being prompted to remember things I have forgotten. He will solidify in my mind as the combination of the memories I have and the pieces I have found. And then that will be it, like a concrete statue drying in its mold. But for the most part I can think of him and smile, with the semblance of understanding I have put together.

But how I imagine the months immediately following his death still make me grit my teeth. Like how I waited in my high school office for our principal to be out of a meeting so that I could ask about the school death policy. Or how one of my teachers gave me her cell phone number because she said I should have adults in my life who weren't grieving. Walking through the hallways of my school, wondering if

everyone knew. These memories feel crude, and writing, talking, thinking about them feels like smearing something on a wall. They make me angry and hateful, most similar perhaps to how I feel when I imagine the last moments of his life and how his death could have been avoided. Like I want to throw porcelain against a wall. All the same.

I wonder now what my face must have looked like. If my eyes were wide and unblinking. If I stared at the ground for too long. If my teachers talked about me during the lunch hour and put their hands on their hearts while I walked through the hallways. Or maybe they really didn't notice and were behind on grading. I can't tell now where my perception started and my paranoia ended.

My brother died on a Wednesday, or I should say was found dead on a Wednesday morning, and my father called me home from school during lunch. I remember checking my phone and seeing that I had nine missed calls. My heart stopped, and I imagined the worst. Even still, I couldn't have imagined.

But I was back in school on Monday. The days in between were frozen, a world without time or gravity, but I returned to school eager for familiarity and routine. My high school had a death policy that allowed for a two-week excused absence for "funeral leave," so my teachers were surprised to see me sitting in class when the attendance system already had me marked as absent. But they didn't ask and smiled like they were trying to say something.

My AP lit class had a practice exam that day, and my teacher Ms. Oliver told me I didn't have to take it. I told her I might as well, if I was going to be sitting there for an hour.

The exam asked us to read a poem about the ocean and describe how the author used literary techniques. I watched my classmates, bowed over their desks, scribbling fiercely. I outlined my own essay, lacking the urgency of my peers, and thought it was kind of a fun exercise. But when I began to write my introduction, I struggled to put together complete sentences. Words simply didn't come. The fluidity I'd built from years of in-class essays and writing last-minute articles for the school paper had dissipated. I would realize other cognitive impairments over the next few weeks – a shaky memory, an inability to think quickly, exhaustion. But at the time this discovery was new and frustrating.

I gave up on the essay, instead copying down my outline, and spent the rest of the hour drawing sail boats crashing into an ocean storm.

I had dreams that someone was at our front door looking for him. I ran all around our house, up and down the stairs, checking different rooms, and couldn't find him anywhere. My father sat at his computer and wouldn't turn around or help me. Eventually I forgot what I was looking for and that scared me the most.

I remember sitting perched on the steps one evening while my father read in his leather chair. I drew circles in the golden, two-toned carpet.

His book lay open in his lap, neglected. I remember thinking he looked older than I had ever seen him. His tattered bathrobe, the one he wore on Christmas, hung loosely around his slumped shoulders, and occasionally he would start again, a soft whimper. I wondered if he was okay and reminded myself that of course he wasn't, he

had just lost his only son. His full head of hair looked ashen as it pulled closer towards his chest. If he knew I was there, he didn't show it.

I thought about crying too but wasn't really in the mood. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered where my mother was, upstairs maybe. I wanted to ask him what his book was about. I can't help you, I thought. You lost a son, but I am only a daughter.

My mother made vague comments about feeling genetically responsible; she had stopped drinking in 2002, and had always made the pairing of my brother being more similar to her and my being more similar to my father.

"Your brother and I are more prone to sinus issues, but you and your dad get stomach bugs. We never get stomach bugs." She said my father and I loved school. She and my brother struggled with structure. She had originally started playing violin in fifth grade because it would get her out of class. I made homework for myself over the summer. She had been making the comparison for years, and when I was younger it had upset me; I was a girl and I was supposed to be like my mom. That was our family: two boys, two girls.

But now it looped back to addiction, and the combination of watching her blame herself while also excluding me was more than I could stand and one day I finally told her how much it upset me and she never brought it up again.

I had no idea when the first orchid arrived how strange the mail situation was going to be that spring. It started with a card from my boyfriend's mother, the same day we found out. Condolences, blessings, prayers, I don't know what to say, I'm so sorry, there aren't words, there aren't words, please tell me if there's anything I can

do, God takes the good ones first, I'm so sorry for your loss. Card after card arrived, at least one a day, from teachers at my school, work colleagues of my parents, old friends of the family who had fallen out of contact. Every envelope skipped a beat – Mike, Betty, Aaron, Sarah became Mike, Berry, Sarah.

Eventually my parents stopped checking the mail – it's too early for that, they would say. So I checked the mail on my way to school, or on my way back from school, opened the cards, and stood them up on our dining room table. By April, the dark, glossy wooden surface of the table was invisible under cards. I counted once, somewhere around one hundred and fifteen.

I didn't opt out the way my parents did, partly because I felt hardened towards letters from people I had never met, but largely because I was waiting for college acceptance letters. I rifled through the mail, sorting bills from junk mail, another card. I received a few birthday cards, even some combined condolence-birthday card hybrids; happy eighteenth birthday, you are so strong, you have so much to look forward to.

I went to buy a birthday card for my best friend in May and, upon reaching the card section, stopped walking. The sympathy section had caught my eye and I realized that I recognized every single card, all three rows, from our dining room table.

Devan, a boy in my calculus class, gave me a hand-made card and a box of Nerds on Valentine's Day. I'd had a crush on him in middle school and he had told me then that his brother overdosed on heroin and was recovering in the hospital. He had made me promise not to tell anyone and I never did. My brother didn't dodge

the bullet though, and I wonder what Devan saw when he looked at me over his shoulder in class.

Derek Abraham had been in the grade above my brother, a graduating senior when I was in middle school. He died in a terrible accident at the beach, hang gliding I think, crashed against the rocks. It was the week before graduation and every family in our town said his name in hushed voices and I remember my mother saying “if that had been you? Or Aaron? I can’t even imagine... I can’t even imagine.” Everyone brought food to the Abrahams. When we started getting food I wondered if there were families talking about the Corners.

And so it continued, for a while. But eventually the memories become less angry and vulnerable and more amusing. Like when I had to scan his death certificate in my college computer lab to send to Facebook as evidence of his death so that they would take down his hacked profile. Or when I made a joke about being rich because my inheritance had doubled and an entire room fell silent. I met students at a grief support group who roared with laughter when I told them and I realized everyone had similar stories. Telling someone mid hook-up about a dead family member because it suddenly seemed important; holding a grudge against a friend who didn’t show up to the memorial service. How creepy an autopsy report is. That ashes don’t mix well with water so scattering ashes over rivers and lakes only works well when there’s a current.

Once, when I was feeling defeated, like no time at all had passed between his death and the present, I was struck by the face of someone new coming to group. And I thought to myself, no, *that* is what it looks like. A blank face, shock, before the

feelings have met the facts. When you vibrate but are also freezing and you are exhausted but sleeping ten hours a night. Time moves too fast but also too slow. It reminded me in an instant.

I've learned over the years to say, when I'm not at grief group, that I "grew up with an older brother." This isn't a lie and it doesn't beg further question. I tried, for a while, to answer honestly and say that he passed away, but whenever I do this I can feel people pulling away, as if my reality could be caught like a disease. They have the luxury of leaving.

Some people look at me and suddenly stop seeing me. They pull back, mouths agape, and stare wide-eyed and teary. Oh my dear. I stand like a marble pillar. I feel like a roman statue, frozen, elegant, brave; a representation of a person, all the more tragic for having an arm broken off or a chipped head, a reminder of what was. That part feels fair, though. For a while it felt like missing a limb.

So on the day of the anniversary I put on a somber outfit and a queen's face. I accept condolences and walk slowly. Be visible and suffer, endure with grace.

## Ravine

I sit by my window and imagined someone walking past. I look down my street, past the end of the houses. I imagine disappearing, melting into the ravine at the end of the lane. Slow, fading, sinking, quiet into the mist and damp soil. I imagine, indulgently, like Tom Sawyer watching his own funeral, my house mates, my friends, my boyfriend putting their heads together and looking for me. But the illusion catches when I get to my parents, the image of the phone call that their only living child has gone missing. Chilled, the illusion crashes to the ground and I move to my bed, thinking I'll have to disappear another way.

## Rocket Science

My friend, recently accepted to a PhD program in astrophysics, texted me to explain the significance of the seven planets orbiting a red dwarf that had recently been discovered by NASA.

“They are close to us? They are possibly life-supporting?” I stammered, repeating what I had heard on the news.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “There’s the possibility of liquid water. The press and optimists call this habitable zone.” He explained that it provided a great opportunity to observe planetary formation and atmospheres, and stability and long-term survival of planetary systems, but it would still be a lifetime before we had any way of knowing about liquid water or life existing in the system.

“What I find coolest is this:” he continued. “The planets are very closely spaced in orbit, so many chances to see each other. Close enough to see terrain and clouds of other planets like we see features on the moon. Imagine civilizations on 2 planet neighbors. Growing up as a society knowing you are not alone. Able to communicate as soon as you develop radio with only minutes of communication lag.”

For a moment I imagined it, the beginning of a sci-fi trilogy, living with another world in the corner of my sky, red and rocky and close, a reminder that there was difference, that there was an observer, elsewhere in the universe. Equal and yet opposite, companions without ever coming into contact.

He concluded by saying he was skeptical we would ever release telescopes developed enough to answer these questions. But still, the image lingers in my head, two worlds, far off..

The most difficult part of my mother's brain surgery was getting over the idea of brain surgery. "It's not rocket science. It's not brain... oh. Indeed it is," I caught myself thinking. She called me and asked if I had any friends with an undercut, where a section of their hair was buzzed short under longer pieces. She was afraid of ending up with a mullet, but I told her a reverse mullet was much more likely; that she would have short hair in the back and long hair in the front, like an extreme bob. We decided an undercut might indeed be our best bet, because at least that way she could wear her hair down to the super market and to work without looking like, well, whatever a brain surgery patient looks like.

And so this is how we talked about it. In hypotheticals and pragmatic details. She told me how she was certain she had found a raccoon footprint on the new sofa, so she would start closing the sliding door more often. She did six loads of laundry the weekend before, washing every article of clothing and bed sheet she owned.

"I just want to get everything ready for after." It was like the first surgery, except that this time we knew more of what to expect with pre-op appointments and the possible recovery time.

"I like surgeons." She paused for a moment and I held the phone up to my ear, waiting. "They're arrogant. You should've met my neurosurgeon. Honest to god she's like a ... like a cowboy or something." She paused again.

"I still can't believe I'm doing this," she said quietly.

I looked down into my lap and tried not to imagine her first surgery, the images of herself that she'd never seen. In the recovery room, with tubes in her lungs and an IV attached to her wrist "in case an emergency transfusion is needed." The

strange pink goo that stuck to the sides of the tubes. The way she slept with her mouth slightly open, her hair stuck to the Vaseline around face.

“You know, it’s right around the area of my brain that controls balance – I think it’s been pushing into it a little bit. Whenever I’m in yoga, I only fall to the left.”

My father and I whispered to each other over the phone, *technically it’s lower risk than her last surgery. It’s statistically safer than driving a car. It’s not brain cancer, so the tumor isn’t actually embedded in the tissue.* Incantations, over and over. She entered surgery an hour ago, and he just walked the dog.

But the moment we hung up, my heart felt like a smooth stone, sinking, reaching for my sternum. I went to the gym, nagged by a sadistic voice saying *and then there were two, and then there were two*, sneering in the back of my mind.

I stared out the large window that made up one of the walls, into a field, open and gray, and watched as the tall grass and far away trees caught the breeze. It was cold, and looking like it was going to rain. I had a sudden urge to be in the middle of it, lying flat on my back, without any shoes, arms spread wide under the rolling sky. It seemed as good a place as any.

I woke up from a nap to a text from my father saying that everything had gone well. She was awake, “making jokes already.” She could move all ten fingers and all ten toes, find her face with her eyes closed. She had even taken a lap around the hospital, tubes out, catheter out, without any problems. She might come home from the hospital the following day.

I was shocked by this; an overnight stay for brain surgery. They hadn't shaved more than an inch of her head. For a moment I blessed the world of oncology, medical researchers, neurosurgeons, anesthesiologists, the engineers that made MRI's, radiologists. My mom told me, when she was first diagnosed, that ten years ago she wouldn't have had the options she has now. Even ten months ago, she worries, the guidelines wouldn't have allowed her to qualify for her first surgery. I try not to think about the timing of it all because I have a friend whose mom died from cancer in 2008 and the whole idea is so stressful that it makes me feel like I have to throw up.

The next day my father texted me with updated information. When my mother was more lucid, the surgeon explained that she hadn't been able to get the entire tumor out. She hadn't wanted to risk any damage; specifically she was nearing an area that could impair my mother's hearing. Knowing the consequences of what this would mean for a musician, she pulled away and was "perhaps a little too careful." My heart fluttered and I texted my dad that I would always encourage neurosurgeons to err on the side of caution. Because of this, though, there wasn't a large enough sample to biopsy: "It had been so small to begin with..." but it looked more like scar tissue than anything else. So while she didn't have to go back into surgery, we were back to the "wait-and-see" model of testing, measuring growth. But no radiation, no chemo, nothing for now.

In my heart I know that my mother is treatable. I know that her condition is largely solved, and what we are dealing with now are the odd remnants of her treatment. Nothing has come back. There has been no cause for alarm from physicians. Yet I can't help but think this is the thing that will get her. Maybe she'll be

80, maybe it'll be three surgeries later, she'll travel in the meantime, but the PET scans and MRI's will never really stop, and we'll get used to the new normal and deal with this too, and this too, until finally something stops working or something starts growing back or she becomes too old for surgery. But that is far from now, and now she is healthy and her hair is growing back in and she wants me to pick out a dress for graduation.

## Watercolors and E-mails

My mother tells me that she started to pay a lot more attention to the cards she gave people after she had cleared out her own mother's house.

“She'd saved every Mother's Day card we'd ever given her. And not just the ones we made. The crappy ones from the store. She had a whole drawer full. I felt terrible, I never thought much about them. I'd just pick one out and sign it. I think I might've even missed a few years.”

But she's careful now, and every time I get a card from her, I read it as a cypher. A hand-painted card. In a recycled envelope. With a flower stamp. Cursive and smiley faces. A reference to an old joke. A reference to my future. They're sticky with meaning and I keep them in a sleeve of my backpack.

For Christmas, I asked my mom to paint me a watercolor. She's always painted and drawn, here and there, and she even took a class at the community center while she was recovering from her first surgery. Last year my aunt got her a nice set of watercolor paints and a few new brushes. My father and I gave her a gift card to her favorite art supply store.

She told me to pick out a photo, a landscape or something online, but I pointed at an oil painting on our wall instead. My aunt had painted it, copied a postcard of a woman sitting on a beach that looked so much like my grandmother it was uncanny.

My mom copied the painting, but softer, with more stillness and a lower horizon. I look at it now when I'm trying to fall asleep, even in the dark when I know

I can't really see. I imagine the beach, the pale clouds, a watercolor brush, the women in my family.

My father says that it can be difficult to follow a conversation between my mother and me when we are in the same room.

“Well your mother thinks the first half of something in her head and says the second half out loud... most people just ask her to start from the beginning. But you have so much practice with it, you can find where she's coming from and run with it.”

I still e-mail papers that I write for class to my parents. I send it after I've turned it in, as a kind of academic newsletter; *this is what I'm reading about and studying in class*. After sending my parents a paper about Spanish colonialism, my mother replied:

I liked your essay,  
I know little about that time. I like how you are able to look completely at a sentence and examine all it had to offer. It seems really the issue is that, regardless of the nationality, slavers are terrible people. It is true today, in war or factories.

We are looking at flights. They are expensive...always are. we'll get a good one

I am ready to be done with the show. I feel like I am being left like a one night stand by the touring people. They stop talking to us. I also have to deal with one of my "crazy" friends in the pit. there is little room to avoid them. I will try harder tonight. Was too tired for yoga today. Was up with Milo 2x but no carpet poos! Went for a walk with dad and dog. Beautiful day warm but pretty. We need rain.

I am so confused about who I am...So much has happened these past few years. I feel like I need a retreat. I know  
I am pretty healthy right now. I don't have time to give Lung Foundation...will work on money.

You and Dad are healthy too. I am so grateful for that.

Dad and I are better than ever. Grateful for that too. I think time off will give him a chance to do more AA??

Yoga makes me better at many levels. AA too. running too

My violin is doing OK, but I want to watch my schedule so I am not stressed out. Practice and prep make me happy.

Money is fine, I want to start thinking about retirement money management...Your Dad does fine this way.

Miss painting. Don't have time for Nature Journaling right now.

I will make a list like this every day and see where I am in a week. It is grounding.  
I have a little time off after the show and will feel better then.  
Will put cream on and practice soon. Library too.

Glad you are better and all is well.  
I love you  
Mom

I read her sentences quickly. She started going to yoga when she was first diagnosed as a way to deal with stress. She goes as many days as she can with her given schedule. Touring shows are demanding, with little rehearsal time and an unfamiliar conductor. My father stopped drinking after my mother's first surgery but before her second. Milo is our eight-month old puppy. She writes gratitude lists and grocery lists, and sometimes sends them to me. I never mind; sometimes I actively ask what she's buying from the grocery store. I can picture everything.

But "I am so confused about who I am... So much has happened these past few years" and "we need rain" haunt me all week.

It was almost too cold to go for a walk, but the sun was clear and it felt nice to stretch my legs. I called the home landline, when I was far enough along, and she picked up right away.

"Oh hi! Hi, it's you. We keep getting calls from telemarketers... I was on the phone with Camilla earlier, and your Dad's worried he won't be able to pick up his dress clothes from the dry cleaners before his concert tonight. But we don't want to talk about that. I want to hear about you! How are you!" I smiled and swallowed, a little embarrassed though no one was around.

"I'm good mom. Things have been good here. Has there been any more rain?" I had talked to my dad, during a different phone call, and he said they were

doing better. He had broken out into hives once during her early treatment. But now they focused on the puppy and made plans to travel to Europe.

“Oh, well the other day, yeah. We must’ve gotten half an inch overnight. We sure need it though. My poor roses... Don’t worry, your rose is doing wonderfully.” It took me a moment to realize what she meant.

She told me about the roast she made and about my dad’s concert, the one she took off. I let my eyes wander towards the trees and listened. Tall, spindle branches webbed together across the sky, thin and crooked and foreign. The horizon stretched wide, wider than it ever could in California with the mountains. It made me wonder how anyone could’ve ever believed the world was flat.

I looked down again. “It’s been clear skies here. Cold, though. I’m getting there. Little things, you know.” I imagined my mother nodding.

“Little things are important. That reminds me, do you need new boots? I saw boots that reminded me of you at the thrift store...” I admitted that boots weren’t a bad idea. I was stuck between snow boots and sneakers. She told me to look for them in the mail.

My mother texts me a photo of the new arbor we built the last time I was home. She insisted that it get done, and threatened to do it by herself if I wasn’t going to help. It was a week after her brain surgery and she promised not to stand under anything that could fall.

Constructing the arbor was easy enough, but replacing the old, broken arbor proved a tricky task. We kicked the old arbor down and I held up the climbing branches while my mother hoisted the new arbor underneath. Everything was caught

and tangled and scraping our wrists and we were bickering about where to move which hand or which way to lean when a man in a pick-up truck drove by slowly, his shoulders shaking. I wasn't sure if I wanted to smile or hiss.

But the arbor was up, and the mixture of rain and sun meant she had a wild garden and thriving roses.

“I must've had a thousand rosebuds.” She told me over the phone. “It's a floral season. It all feeling very auspicious.”

My parents are planning a trip to Croatia for July. My father checked out a few guide books from the library, and e-mails me about the different historical cities. I send him pictures of the Dalmatian Coast and tell him not to forget about day trips along the coast.

I send them updates regularly – about graduation, a friend's birthday, something that reminds me of home. My house-mate told me about an art history class that talked about puttos, chubby cherub-like babies in classical art. My mother did a water color once of a statue that had a putto and I tell her about it. I check my e-mail and I have four e-mails; one from my father replying to “apartment thoughts,” something I sent him about possible places for me to live in New York. The other three are from my mother. They include a link to a pair of shoes, a discussion of puttos vs tanukis, and an article about safe neighborhoods in New York. She also apologizes for sending me “such chaotic messes” when I always write such nice, coherent things. All together they are less than a third the length of my father's e-mails. In her last e-mail she tells me to respond to my father's e-mail because he put in so much effort to make it nice.

At the height of the chaos before my mother's second surgery, most of the calls and e-mails and text messages from home were about work and medical updates: blood tests this day, pre-op meeting on Friday, Dad is stressed about this concert. I realized that my phone acted as a portal into their world in California. I could see their daily lives, feel their stress, know their schedule to the hour.

I also realized, with a wave of guilt and abandonment, that I had the luxury of closing my phone, leave that world, and thinking about something else for a while.

My mother sends me a box every year around my birthday. The boxes are small but surprisingly heavy, stuffed until they are nearly ripping open. "They're more festive that way," my mother says.

I have learned to wait until I get home to open the box, partially because I can never re-close it once it's open, but largely because there's a good chance that whatever is inside the box will make me cry. She has shipped saran-wrapped cakes, birthday candles, ribbon, a packet of water-balloons, chocolates, flowers from the garden, books of poems. Her own small bombs of meaning. I have tried to keep up, sending her things that I think she will cherish, but she is truly fluent. One year she sent me a small children's book titled *I Like You* and I can still hardly read it without weeping.

My mother texts me a photo of a maple tree, no fewer than five feet tall, in a pot on our front porch with the caption "I did it!" I'm not sure where it came from or how she got it there. I asked her where it was going and she said,

“Who knows, in this pot? In the backyard? It could go anywhere.”

My school gives me free graduation announcements, and though they already have their calendars marked, I send my parents a paper invitation. I know they’ll put it on the mantle.

I was checking out at the post-office, paying for my American flag stamp, when I noticed a packet of colorful stamps in the back of the cashier drawer. I asked if I could see them. They were “botanical art” forever stamps. Flower stamps. I bought all of them and put them in my backpack.

## Hammock

When I was in elementary school I convinced my mother and brother that we should get my father a hammock for Father's Day. They were skeptical, worried no one would use it, but they eventually agreed. My dad loved it, or liked it well enough, and uses it here and there to nap in the afternoon, though he still prefers to read sitting upright.

The hammock is stung taught between two olive green poles that connect at the ground so that it's moveable. We tend to keep it under the shade of the oak tree in the damp grass of our backyard.

I lay in the hammock often, feeling my hips sag in the middle, and fold my arms behind my head. I look up into drying oak leaves that cover most of the sky, though whenever they shake bits of sun poke through the layers of leaves.

The tall swaying trees that line our house. My dog is trying to catch a butterfly with his mouth and my parents are either inside or at work. I've done this at every age, and I do this when I come home.

It's where we held my brother's memorial service. It's where my mother and I have coffee and toast in the morning. It's where we raised our puppy and where we used to have a tire swing. It's the most familiar thing in the world, and whenever I'm there, for a moment, time stops, or rather collapses, and I can see everything that's ever happened there all at once, stillness.

There's an effect in human memory cognition that I like to call the highlighter effect. That is, if you highlight a sentence on a page, you indeed will remember that sentence better. But, you will remember everything around that sentence, the non-highlighted text, worse. It's a sacrifice.

I am painfully cognizant that, as I write and remember these things, I am losing the in-between memories. I'm hand-selecting the "important ones" to become narrative milestones. I don't think hindsight is 20/20. I think that hindsight is the completed stories we've strung together.

My memory has decided how they're going to look and make sense. I can feel things calcifying. My portrait of my child brother. California in the early 2000's.

The less certain things become, the more I hope my parents never sell the property. I come back less and less frequently, and things are steeped in change; I used to call it "surprise construction" when my mother would hire someone to move a doorway in our house or re-cement our walkway without telling anyone. Cover the backyard in bark chips or throw away the trampoline. But still, it's something to picture while I talk to my parents. A place to disappear. It's proof of a world that exists in my mind.

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