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LESSONS IN HUMANITY

A MEMOIR

by

Chelsi Sutton-Linderman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

Dr. Jennifer Sinor Major Professor	Professor Chris Cokinos Committee Member
Dr. Michael Sowder Committee Member	Dr. Byron Burnahm Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2008

ABSTRACT

Lessons in Humanity
A Memoir

by

Chelsi Sutton-Linderman, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2008

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

In the opening pages of his work, *Dog Years; A Memoir*, Mark Doty explains:

> Love for a wordless creature, once it takes hold, is an enchantment, and the enchanted speak, famously, in private mutterings, cryptic riddles, or gibberish. This is why I shouldn't be writing anything about the two dogs that have been such presences for sixteen years of my life. How on earth could I stand at the requisite distance to say anything that might matter? (1)

In this thesis I argue that Doty, among other respected contemporary writers, is saying something that matters when he writes of his relationship with his dogs. Such words and ideas matter much in the genre of creative nonfiction and particularly memoir, they matter as models of narrative craft, and they matter as works that examine the nature of personal trauma in narrative and the importance of connections to the natural world in the healing process.

"Lessons in Humanity: A Memoir" appears as a creative work examining the nature of trauma and healing in memoir. The narrative addresses childhood trauma and the effects it has on our adult lives, the recovery from marital abuse between a husband and wife, the impact of a severe health crisis, and the importance of connections to the natural world, particularly dogs, in the healing process.

(111 pages)

For Trevor, who always helps me to hang on,
and for Lexi and Ripsi, the two dogs
who taught us both how to let go.

Here, Gentlemen, a dog teaches us a lesson in humanity.

Napoleon Bonaparte, after being
saved by a Newfoundland after
slipping on his ship and falling
overboard. He did not know how to
swim, and was kept above water by
the dog until he could be rescued.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I want to thank my friends Cami Pack, Nicole Butler and Kati Lewis for their support. I might not have made it through the program or finished this project without you.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their loving support; my sweet husband who helps me remember what is important, my parents for inspiring me to keep going, my grandparents who made my college education possible, and Trevor's family for all their kindness and support.

Chelsi Sutton-Linderman

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……...…….ii
DEDICATION……iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS……...……....v
LESSONS IN HUMANITY……...…….....1
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION……...……...90
BIBLIOGRAPHY……..……..105

LESSONS IN HUMANITY

A MEMOIR

You see, the mother explained to her daughter, *mistakes can be swept up.* She was, at that moment, sweeping up a mistake. A china plate, no longer whole, but scattered across the floor in uncountable pieces, sharp shards of glass catching the sunlight and dotting the floor like tiny tear drops.

The girl's own cheeks were wet; she had been frightened and scared about dropping her grandmother's china plate. And her mother's voice did little to soothe the cracked pride and embarrassment that burned her skin.

They can be swept up, her mother was saying, *but things can never be the same again either. You can't entirely get rid of the consequences of a mistake, just like we won't ever have this plate again. Sometimes mistakes mean you lose something*, she paused, *even worse, sometimes mistakes mean that you gain something you will have to deal with for the rest of your life.*

Perhaps that is the way the mother felt about her second husband, the girl's stepfather.

More than nine years pass….The mother grows older, cuts her hair, starts drinking 1% milk, and decides she would like to try an aerobics class. The husband grows older, his hair turns gray, so he starts drinking 60 proof alcohol before coming home from work. He decides to have an affair with the woman two houses over. The girl grows older, wears her hair long, drinks only water, and decides to sleep with her first high school boyfriend (the plot line becomes weak here, but that can be fixed later).

There are, of course, defining moments in these people's lives, and certainly continuous narrative lines run through the years, each individual progressing or digressing as they get up each morning and go to school, go to work, or go down the block to see the neighbor they are cheating with. It is the same routine – they scream, they fight, they cry, and at times they laugh and pretend to be a family, but there are ~~important~~ crucial moments, like this one:

I don't know what it was about that plate the girl dropped. I can't even remember what it looked like. I imagine it had a delicate scalloped cut and small blue flowers painted along its silver edging. In my most elaborate imaginings the flowers are Blue Phaceleia's, Wild Heliotropes, or Spanish Needles. On days I am not so creative, they are blue bells.

It sounded like the clang of a cheap bell when it hit the floor and scattered across the sea foam tile. And because a poet once said that remembered time is instantaneous, I can hear that sound now, can hear the comet Shoemaker-Levy slam into Jupiter, can hear the earth slowly grind its axis, can hear children crying in Rwanda, can hear planes overhead, can hear the sprinkler system turn tirelessly in the yard, can hear hummingbirds at the feeder outside the kitchen window, can hear the mother's gasp, can hear the half-formed apology rushing up the girl's throat, can hear the clang and the shatter, and the silence of disbelief. And in that silence the girl grew older.

Though we are always taught not to make mistakes, it was when the girl, let's say her name was Chelsi (which happens to be my name), was in fourth grade that she

learned the importance of writing without mistakes. It was called a rough draft, and she wrote three of them about elk in the wild, carefully numbering and titling each one:

Rough draft #1: Elk.

Rough Draft #2: Elk in the Wild.

Rough Draft #3: Wild Elk.

At last she turned in the final draft to Mrs. Connie Cox at Ririe Elementary School, "Wonderful Wild Elk." The final seemed perfect, clean, scrubbed and polished – she even carefully colored a picture of two elegant elk climbing a gentle slope for the cover page. And when she was finished she felt proud. It was beutiful (ever since I was a little girl I have always spelled it wrong – the spell-check will catch it). Years later, buried beneath forgotten dolls, cards, sweaters, and dust, I found that old elk report – each draft dutifully stapled behind the final copy, so that upon flipping through the pages of the packet one might see the essay in its entire lifespan, from the first attempt to the final, like one of those cheap flip-animation cartoon books, the red marks grow less and less as one thumbs the pages until they finally disappear. Rereading the essay I had to laugh. In an attempt to make the report perfect, Chelsi had deleted anything that may have even looked like a mistake, erasing comma splices for fear of run on sentences and placing periods in their stead.

Elk are mammals. Mammals feed their young milk. Elk have hooves. They also have antlers.

I later thought it odd to have such short sentences.

I.am.surprised.at.times.there.wasn't.a.period.seperating.every.word. The writing

was terrible. But there were no grammar mistakes. That was my goal in fourth grade. It was simple. It was straight. It was to the point. It was the final draft.

It is not that run on sentences are good by any means, it is just that sometimes, when pressed down on by reality, there is no time to pause for a comma, and often, no matter how old a memory may be, or how long ago an event may have occurred it still feels like there is no period at the end of it, that instead the memory simply runs into another moment that is ~~held submerged suspended~~ frozen in time, and the two merge into one, the way that you can never truly draw a line between the ocean and the shore ~~between the past and the present, between love and hate, between wakefulness and dreams~~. In these places there are no transitions, no topic sentences, and no periods.

She hadn't meant to let go of the plate it just slipped from her fingers, her mother's beutiful plate – silver and porcelain and blue bells (Blue Phaceleia's, Wild Heliotropes, Spanish Needles) all came crashing to the floor the same way that her mother had crashed against the window upstairs in the maroon floral bathroom of the master suite when the girl's stepfather had thrown her against it, yelling out loud to the children downstairs that their mother was trying to commit suicide again and screaming at the mother herself calling her names no child would dare to repeat at the time, nor even now, years later sitting upstairs in a rundown-for-rent house five years after the mother had finally left that angry ~~son-of-a-bitch~~ ~~bastard~~ man, six years after the man held the girl up against the garage door by her throat, her feet off of the ground dangling, and eleven years after she first ever made the mistake of dropping that china plate.

There has been a “dropping point” in each place I have lived. I buy plates, bowls, and glasses from the local Dessert Industries Store for ten cents apiece and keep them in a box in my trunk, the way some people carry around cigarettes or tranquilizers. In high school, it was the spillway below the dam at Ririe Reservoir. I came to this place one night ~~after my mother called my cell phone, whispering hurriedly that my stepfather was drunk and it would be better if I did not come home. Through the static of rural cell phone reception and behind her hushed voice, I could hear him raging about *inconsiderate children, the little shits*. In heavy darkness I sat on the hood of my car above the spillway and listened to the night.~~ The wind rattled the sage brush skeletons beneath their downy leaves and the water behind the dam licked the rocky bank. There was the quiet whir of August gnats, the sigh of day’s heat, and the shatter of the plate that had only moments ago left my hand and crashed against the pavement down the hill.

The conclusion to the girl’s paper reads something like this: “In conclusion, Elk are mammals. Elk live in the wild. Elk are wonderful, interesting animals.”

Perhaps a period is the written form of psychological closure. Closure is a dynamic of grief; it is the letting go of a haunting or traumatic experience. “Closure” is a 1997 Nine Inch Nails album, “Closure” is an art gallery in downtown Chicago, “Closure” is a final draft.

And yet there are things that the girl cannot throw away. She holds onto old toys, in college still sleeping with a worn, stuffed dog, now a sullied white color and missing one eye. She keeps past Christmas cards of friends, like the one from Randy Munns, that

was left inside of her second-grade desk between her spelling and math folders, with the words “I lov you” scrawled in childish writing. She still has the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt her cousin gave her for Christmas in 1997 folded in the bottom drawer of her dresser, and she wears it when no one is home. She ~~has~~ ~~retains~~ ~~cannot be rid of~~ saves the sound of the china plate breaking, and the expression on her mother’s face as she swept the kitchen floor and said, “You can never entirely get rid of the consequences of a mistake.”

I hoard past utilities bills (in case the Power Company overcharges me), dried roses from boys (I like to think this is because they look pretty, and not that they are some type of trophy), and rough drafts (because sometimes mistakes are beutiful).

Beutiful like the thousand pieces of china on the kitchen floor that morning, cast carelessly across the clean tile like a handful of comma’s, periods, and semi-colons. There had been no seamless transition to announce their presence there–only a shatter. And in that shatter the girl (me?) grows older.

*

July 2007 in Idaho is hot and dry and leaves me feeling limp and deflated, a half-empty balloon, my skin scaly and puckered like latex left out in the sun, like one of those weary balloons left over from some anonymous birthday party or county-fair stand that have lost enough helium they float no higher than a few feet from the sidewalk, but retain enough of the #2 noble gas to keep from resting entirely on the ground. We bob along the city sidewalks of Boise, Idaho, just outside St. Luke’s hospital, my husband and I clasping hands, afraid to let go, as if we don’t realize that neither of us is capable of floating away. I know little about the life of Saint Luke at this time—I learn only a little

more some sleepless night weeks later when I google him. Saint Luke: The Evangelist, a native of Antioch, writer of the third and fifth books of the New Testament, the first iconographer, unmarried, childless, dead at 84, the patron saint of physicians and surgeons.

But I am not thinking about the gospels or life of Luke. I am not thinking of my own history—my southeastern Idaho childhood four hours away from Boise, the decades of Julys between my girlhood and the now, my year-old marriage, my graduate studies in Logan, Utah, the two big dogs in the backyard of my small red brick home, the mistakes, the successes, the failures, the dreams and hopes that might have brought me to this moment walking beneath the staggering burgundy brick buildings. I am not thinking of the pigeons perched above my head in the windowsills of patients I do not know, feathered gargoyles guarding the hospital, until an old women on the corner spills out a bag of week-old bread crusts and they all come swooping down in a flurry of steel-blue-gray with a dash of dusty plum-wine plumage here and there. If they squawk and scrabble over the crumbs I do not notice—the way I don't notice the 160 blossoms in the Remembrance Rose Garden planted by volunteers on the south side of St. Luke's, or the policeman who has pulled over a Toyota four-runner at the corner, or the way my high-heeled sandal is pinching a toe on my right foot. I am not thinking about any of it because the oncologists at St. Luke's Hospital have found a brain tumor in my husband's head and its presence weighs down any free-floating thought.

On this particular July day, we will sit in a surgeon's office at St. Luke's, one with the blinds closed to the pigeons perched outside and the lights turned low. We will stare at MRI scans of my husband's brain on a computer screen and watch Dr. Bruce

Cherny circle a grayish haze hovering over the sulci and gyri of the left hemisphere with the tip of a pencil again and again. On screen the haze does not look like much, a charcoal smudge, a long lead streak, a section of blotched shadowing off a street-painter's canvas. I will blink my eyes rapidly, as if clearing my vision will somehow make the mark disappear. But it won't, and I will have to resist the urge to pluck the pencil from Dr. Cherny's hand and furiously scrub the pink eraser across the computer screen trying to rub the whole thing away. I'll stare at the tassels on his leather loafers instead.

We will learn that the charcoal smudge is actually swollen brain tissue; the tumor is lodged beneath it irritating and causing it to inflate like a balloon. The tumor is likely not entirely encapsulated by a strong cellular wall, but probably has roots and fingers of cancerous cells spreading out around it, exploring and probing my husband's brain, as if trying to decide whether to reach into the wrinkle of his fourth grade year first or to invade the algebraic formulas, Christmas memories, the now-mechanical motions of the way to hold a spoon, a fork, or a knife stored in other folds and neurons of the cerebral cortex. We only have a few months, six at the most, to decide what treatments to take, though Dr. Cherny will explain he believes surgery, then radiation, and then chemotherapy are inevitable. We will ask some questions, but not many, still unable to wrap our minds around the tumor that has wrapped itself in my husband's mind, pulling the thick, gray folds of brain matter around it like a blanket.

Only days after leaving Dr. Cherny and his slides, after leaving St. Luke's and Boise, will I be able to verbalize the question that has been boiling in my brain. It is a question that I haven't asked myself for many months, since before discovering the tumor

in Trevor's head. It is a question I tried to tuck away on a shelf before, one that clattered down and scattered across the floor as I listened to Dr. Cherny outline Trevor's options for treatment. It is one I can only verbalize to my little sister, Lacy, on my cell phone as I walk up the long hill that stretches toward Utah State University where I am working to finish a master's degree and am late for class on a windy Wednesday afternoon.

Do you think my marrying Trevor was a mistake?

For a moment there is nothing but static and cackle on the line over my own heavy bursts of breath from lungs exhausted by the uphill climb. Secretly I hope the question was lost in the capricious annals of cell service.

But she answers, *I thought you guys were doing better?*

We are. My words sound even more anxious when I am out of breath, and I feel the necessity to explain that I am winded from walking, that the rasp in my voice isn't there because she is asking about the stability of my marriage and I've been caught like a teenager sneaking in late. *We are.* I clear my throat. *I just mean—my life would be completely different if I hadn't married him you know…* I don't add the silent thought that it would certainly be easier. *Everything we've been through, and now this.*

Maybe, is all she says, *I don't know*.

I don't know either. What I do know, or at least what I believe, is that this is not a normal reaction for a wife who has just discovered her spouse suffers from a cancerous brain tumor. I am supposed to be stalwartly devastated—like those proud, tall women dressed all in black I see walking behind caskets at graveside ceremonies. I am supposed to seek out religious strength for myself and my family; pray morning, noon, and night, light candles, fast and hold vigils. Maybe I am supposed to be shocked beyond belief,

too fragile for such news and fall fainting to the floor each time someone whispers the words *cancer* or *tumor* or *catheter*. I am supposed to hold a bake sale to raise funds for the surgery. I am supposed to change into the appropriate frock for each doctor visit. At the very least, I am supposed to be supportive, cook a meal packed with cancer-fighting nutrition: flaxseeds, kale and tuna mixed with spicy-peanut-ginger sauce and udon noodles. I should be open and loving, maybe even angry and loving, or scared and loving, or lugubrious and loving, or panic-stricken and loving. Loving and any other adjective so long as it does not have to do with questioning whether or not I should have ever married my husband in the first place

*

Still there is a part of my own brain, coiled in my own sulci and gyri like a pile of puffy pink and puce worms on the sidewalk after a heavy rain, that knows my reaction to the news of Trevor's brain tumor must not be uncommon. Certainly, I tell myself, certainly there are other women out there who question their marriages, women whose acute stress response systems lean more towards flight rather than fight. I know about husbands and wives disappearing from lives they created together. The roots of infidelity, abuse, and divorce run deep in my family, back at least three generations to my grandmother's first marriage.

Kaye Johnson married James Fetterly in a garden ceremony. Two times in my life I have seen her bridal pictures, her gown a cream-colored silk with puffed sleeves and a gathered waist. I do not know what James Fetterly wore—I do not know if any pictures of the groom exist. I know I have never seen them. In mind-wandering moments over my life I have sometimes imagined the scene, on a long drive late at night, waiting in line for a bank teller, or sweeping the kitchen floor. I picture my grandmother in her silk and

satin gown; she is beautiful, vibrant, hopeful. I wonder how her family felt about her marriage to the passionate, Italian man who always seemed just on the cusp of success, but never quite tipped over the edge into actual achievement. Had they frowned when she married him in a garden instead of within the sacred buildings and ceremonies of their religion? More likely, my great-grandmother had rolled and curled her daughter's hair around hot irons and secured it with bobby pins. My grandmother's sisters strode down the aisle to Richard Wagner Lohengrin's "Bridal Chorus" clutching bouquets, and their father kissed his daughter's cheek and gave her away. I do not know if any of them could foresee James Fetterly's many indiscretions, his cruelty or the way he would leave Kaye two years later shortly after their anniversary, scared and alone, her belly bulging. Maybe, like me, all they saw was a beautiful young girl in a silk dress with Cinderella sleeves and a pleated waist.

I did not know James Fetterly existed until a strange man began calling my home when I was seven or eight-years-old. Never asking to speak with my mother, he only wanted to talk to me when I answered the phone. He asked what my favorite colors and foods were. He asked me what I liked best about school. He asked me to sing him songs. Telling my mother later that a man called and that I sang to him made deep worry line her face for reasons a child cannot understand. She was home the next time he called and snatched the telephone from my hands just as I began to sing, *Skinna-ma-rink-a-dink-a-dink, skinna-ma-rink-a-doo, I love you. I love you in the morning and in the afternoon. I love you in evening, and underneath the moon! Oh, skinna-ma-rink-a-dink-a-dink, skinna-ma-rink-a-doo, I love you.*

Who is this? she demanded.

I remember the way she sat slowly on the edge of her bed, the telephone cord snaking across the room. I can still see her pale face, the quick sweeping motion of her hand that brushed me away from the room and the phone call. I left quietly, closing the door.

They arranged to meet late one night in the lobby of The Bank of Commerce where my grandmother worked. James brought my sister and me each tiny golden rings, one with a pearl in the center, the other with jade. The memory of him is foggy, edges of scene curling in, tinted orange. Though I do remember he looks strikingly like my mother, the same waving hair and full cheeks. The grown-ups talk and I rock my sister in her baby carrier. We leave when my mother claims she does not feel well. She will tell me, many, many nights after, that it was the moment her father took her hands in his and said, *Why Jackie Lynne, you are such a beautiful woman, what do you think about incest*? that made her stomach turn.

The next time I would see my maternal grandfather would be at his funeral sometime during my high school years. There my mother and I were introduced to a dozen of her half- siblings and their children. The legacies of other women James Fetterly loved and left. We visit his grave in the Provo, Utah, cemetery every year with my grandmother who leaves white mums in purple foil staked below the headstone with lengths of an old wire hanger, snipped and straightened to secure the flowers to a man my grandmother could not hold onto.

I have heard my mother admit that she can’t help but believe that her mother’s divorce influenced her own divorce from my father. Perhaps a result from the cold and demanding woman my grandmother became after James Fetterly left, perhaps because

my mother carried half of his genes and couldn't control all the wild pulsing through her veins on a small Idaho farm. Though this first divorce certainly was heartbreaking to a child, as it is anytime parents split up, it was my mother's second divorce that I would later claim influenced the troubles in my own marriage.

My mother married my step-father in a grove of trees in late July. The ten years he spent as her husband and as my stepfather are pockmarked with bruises that have turned even deeper shades of cobalt and charcoal after marinating in my memory all these years. It is a painful part of my past I profess to have resolved, another story I have already penned out on other pages. I have turned the events over in my mouth like hunks of thick sour-dough rye or pumpernickel, gnawing at images and scenes until they grew soft with alliteration and metaphor, until they began to carry their heavy weight in similes instead of in the heavy blows I remember pounding against my mother's skin. Even then though, the taste of such memories is biting and bitter, crushed orange peel in a glass of hot lemonade. Something I would rather swallow and forget.

*

I have forgotten much about a cold night in October when I was in the fifth or sixth grade. In middle school my friends tried smoking for the first time in the school bathroom, we cut band because it was only for geeks, we were cool enough to hide in the locker-room, and some of the girls started wearing sports bras that had to be lifted up when we were checked for scoliosis in a back room by the school nurse. The boys worked every curse and innuendo into each sentence they could and scrawled them across the desks without really understanding what they meant. We scrambled to find our identities hanging on those cinder-block school walls among posters with captions

like TEAMWORK and PERSISTENCE, and later at home as we tried to put on eye-liner or discovered the pot and porn stashes of older siblings. More concerned with whether or not it was still cool to play tag at recess with a certain group of girls or if it was better for my image to lounge in the breeze-way with others during break, twirling a lock of hair in my fingers, pinching my lips into a pout and rolling my eyes, I didn't have time to be concerned about my family.

So I do not remember where we were going for the fall break vacation or why the family motor home was parked on the curb. I do not remember how the argument between my mother and stepfather began, or the exact moment it exploded from the front door and out onto the lawn. Across wet, sticking grass I see my stepfather drag my mother who is screaming, or maybe I am making it all up. I cannot be sure, but in my mind's eye they stay that way, growling and cursing in the dark night air until the neighbors begin to turn on their living room lamps, light spilling out into the night. And just like that he's let her go and my sister and I are loaded into a car, driven to a motel where we watch *I Love Lucy* reruns and my mother cries into a pillow until the next morning.

There are other nights I cannot, or will not, remember. The fights between my mother and step-father I have seemingly blacked out. What I do remember is the different places we would stay after the arguments were over. We spent a weekend at one of my mother's old friends in Ririe, Idaho, where I slept on a brown floral sofa that smelled like stale beer and cats. We stayed often with our dear friends, the Landons, where we could play pool with their children and watch MTV. Shelley Landon tells me that we sometimes came after my stepfather had beaten my mother, or strangled her with

a phone cord. Kevin Landon would sleep on our couch for three nights with a gun after my stepfather finally left for the last time.

But even after my stepfather was gone and even after Kevin Landon returned home with his rifle, I was afraid. Afraid my stepfather might return to our house—so I stayed awake the night he left with my stepsiblings and packed all of their belongings into boxes and garbage bags piled into the garage. And when they didn't return the next day to pick up their belongings, I combed the house for pictures. I cut out any image of the three of them from the photos. Fragments of legs, the backs of heads, faces far away and blurred – I did not want even a hint of them to remain. I triumphantly set the Ziploc bag of massacred picnics, Christmas celebrations, family vacations, and birthday parties on top of the other boxes in the garage waiting for them. Fragmented Kodak moments.

I was afraid the careful lies and excuses we'd handed to our family and friends to hide the abuse and hell my mother, sister, and I had been living in for years would come crashing down around us. So when my girlfriends asked at first why my stepsiblings were no longer in school, I said they'd left on a vacation.

I was afraid every time I spotted my stepfather's truck parked two houses down, in the driveway of the neighbor he had been having an affair with, well within the 150 yards the Jefferson County restraining order allowed him to be. I was afraid when someone left threatening letters in our mailbox, broke into the workshop we owned, and lit our home on fire in the middle of the night.

I am still afraid to really remember any of it, to admit the effects it had on me, the effects it had on my marriage. I am still afraid to write it all down, the way I am afraid to write about the reasons I have thought I made a mistake ever marrying my husband in the

first place—afraid to admit the possibility that like my mother and her mother before her that perhaps I simply chose the wrong man. I would rather forget it all.

*

In sixth grade I make my father take me to the potato warehouse because I had to show him the letters. In 1997, in rural, southeastern Idaho the internet had not hit it big with small-time farmers, and the nearest connection to the virtual world spun through a grub-gray telephone wire twenty minutes away in the dingy office of the potato warehouse my father owned. I made him take me because earlier that day my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Hunter, in her solid-black, square-heeled, silver-buckled shoes had shown us the letters in class. Her nasal voice droned on and on about World War II – the Nazi's, the Jews, the Allied Forces, The Axis, the Blitz, the bombs, the camps, the boats, the cities, the countries. In wide generalities with sweeping arm motions she showed the wake of war to twelve-year-olds in slick, yellow desks, fissures beneath their varnished surfaces, where we were not allowed to pass notes or fall asleep, but had to sit and bear witness to all of it from forty years before we were born. She brought in pictures, posters, old magazines, newspaper clippings, ChurchillFDR(GodforbidevenStalin) speech excerpts. And she showed us the letters. I remember the letters.

So I make my father drive me to the warehouse on a dry October night, when he should be irrigating instead, and we log on to the old PC, typing "potato" for the administrator password. We wait for the internet connection to hum – a series of high squeaks and shrill notes, not unlike the sound fax machines still make today. It takes a while to connect. Dialing attempt one…dialing attempt two…and finally, on the fourth, the browser opens and we find the Yahoo search page. A few minutes more, and there

they are—fuzzy, faded, poorly pixilated scans of images, letters from Liverpool, Normandy, and Miline Bay all in the misspelled writing of uneducated young men, far from home, alone. They read like this:

> Dear Mother,
> It is cold here[redacted]. And I miss the wuther back home. We will be moving soon though, at least that's what the rumors say. Not sur where we are headed. Hope it [redacted] or [redacted] But I expct it will be the same there. How is little Anna doing? I think about her sometimes out here, guss she'l be all growed up when I come home. Some folks, even Capt. [redacted] are saying that could be real soon. God Willing. Please right soon, don't know how much longer I'll be stationed here.
>
> Love,
> Your Son

See? I point at the screen, not certain if my voice is filled with anger or awe. *See Dad, they just blacked it out. They just blacked out his words.* I show him another one, written by a Robert Sandall on September 1st in 1944.

> Encl. find $70.00. Use as per need. Wthr clr & snny. Temp in 80's. Rn stopped. Wnd blwing. That's the way a letter would be written if one were to follow the army rules of message writing. The last letter I sent was "confiscated" because I revealed more than a "civilian" should know. When I asked what else to write, I was told "the weather".
>
> Heard that Elmer is likely to be inducted this month. Hope he gets the Navy or the Merchant Marine, anything 'cept for the Army. Oh well, chances are he'll not get such a bad deal. After all, this war is definitely on its way OUT! Plenty of rumors, but I long ago ceased to put any stock into rumors. And even if we did go over, [redacted] was before [redacted] The areas & men involved in the actual shooting war is daily shrinking. It might possibly be that we may have to be an army of occupation, in which case I'd perhaps have to be in a little longer, but for me the main thing is that this shooting insanity gets over.
>
> Are you folks at Ellen & Gordon's or still at 707 Russel? It's queer not knowing where "home" is.
>
> Just heard from Lieut[redacted] that the Americans are on the border of Germany. Looks like this insane war is beginning to come to an end, finally. Now I hope those bastardly Japanese folk see the handwriting on the wall & quit their insane suicide mission.

> Had a "big" inspection today. Worked well into the nite last nite to get ready. Brass was due to come & did come, but it so happened that my junk was inspected by a corporal. [redacted] we never know who's going to inspect. It's likely as not to be a cranky old colonel. The best ones to have inspect are captains and majors. Lieutenants & colonels are bad. The Looie because he's cocky & the colonel because he's cranky & finicky. Once in a while a "star-boy" comes around (general).

It was to keep them safe sweetie. Heavy hands pat my head as we stare at the computer screen, *It was to keep them safe.*

And I suppose I understood this then, understand this now, the concept of censorship and safety. Just the same though, it didn't (doesn't) seem fair.

My father knew about things that were unfair. It had only been two years since my mother left him for another man—whisking my sister and me away with her and then dropping us back at his door every other weekend. Of course, I didn't entirely understand all of this then. Years and years later I would piece it together, the many nights she was gone from home on "business trips." The mysterious "friend" she sometimes took us to see who bought our silence with pizza and cheap porcelain dolls in blue pinstriped dresses from the Kings store in town. She would disappear with that man for hours, tell us they were drinking "apple juice" from tall dark bottles, but that it was "only for grown-ups." Examples of a few of her censored details, the words she shared that drew dark lines across the choices and actions she worked tirelessly to hide. In sixth grade though I only know that my parents have split up, that they hate each other, that my mother's moved in with her friend, and that I am told it is not the fault of my sister or me. In addition, I know that the weekends with my father are precious. We rent movies and cook popcorn the old fashioned way—in an air popper with a third cup of melted, oily butter drizzled over it. He takes us to the small gas station down the street and lets us pick out treats from behind the glass counter of Lloyds General Store. Sometimes we go

swimming or to the theater. Sometimes we just drive around the farm and he ties our hair up in his old bandanas because he does not know how to braid it without pulling so hard we scream. But mostly we talk. He asks us grown-up questions about what we are doing in school and what we are reading. I won't notice until years later how hard he tries to stay involved in our lives, the way he volunteers to coach all our school sports teams, the way he buys the same novels we read in English so we can talk about the story when the weekend comes. The way he drives me to the warehouse late that night so he can look at the letters I am so concerned about, and later, when we return home gives me a copy of *1984* by George Orwell to read.

It wasn't the last time I'd see pages of documents with words blacked out by dark ink. Blotted bars of black stretched over letters, covering up whatever they may have spelled, whatever their author meant to say. There were countless censored documents: the books from my high school library, the ones donated to the school by a strong Christian group, with every curse word and sexual reference crossed out by salvation-seeking volunteers. The city sign posted at the entrance of our small town which originally read" Welcome to Ririe" and then had "Ririe" blacked out by some screw-ball kids who painted Hell in its place. Hell was later covered over so that the sign eventually simply said, "Welcome to [redacted]." Nobody repainted it until years after I left the sleepy community and went on to find more writings shadowed by dark lines. The transcripts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that I studied for a college class, pages of testimonies so diligently recorded only to be deemed "unsuitable" for the final, printed product of truth; slashed and struck out, left as dark lines marching across the page. The documents from my own country. The declassified–still

classified—reports of army missions, presidential meetings, corporate agendas that comply with The Freedom of Information Act until material is so sensitive it must be covered up, wiped away, blacked out. And there are more…more onyx and ebon lines across thousands and thousands of words like dark prison bars. But still, years later I come back again and again to sixth grade and those letters and my father's voice, warped by days of southeastern Idaho wind, saying *it was to keep them safe, it was to keep them safe.*

I study writing in college—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, journalism, literary criticism. Ironically, I choose English as my major after writing an essay for a generals course that reveals some of my family's most carefully guarded secrets and receives praise from my professor. In writing, it seems, there can be a grant of relief, a receptacle for a freeing confession, a rebellion against the censorship of our own lives. In graduate school, I settle on memoir and begin to focus my work—critically, creative pieces with focal points on my marriage, my childhood, and my deepest, darkest, rawest, secrets. I carefully construct and place sentences, decorating with punctuation and italics. In classrooms and hallways and books, I hear again and again that we writers must tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There is no one there to censor us. No one there to stop what dangerous words we may write. No one there to keep us safe.

When I tell Trevor I want to write about the first six months of our marriage, I feel him cringe. Sometimes I cringe too when I think about it. The six months when the insecurities and fears we couldn't escape slowly took over our lives and our home, creeping in and pushing us out to the edges until we were two strangers who merely lived in the same space. Our conversations then were plagued by anger, accusations, and

threats; our actions, by violence, fierceness, and force. We have since tried to forget the arguments, forget the mutual abuse, forget the fights. So when I tell Trevor I want to write about what happened to us I feel him cringe. My back is towards him, we are both busy, and yet I can still feel him, hear him, picture him, cringe. There is a pause, a weighted silence, the kind that hangs heavily in the air above listeners, the kind that causes uncomfortable shifts, the kind that makes someone eventually speak. *You want to write about all of it?* he asks. I tell him I do. *Why do you want to dredge all that up?* I tell him it's not dredging, even though I too have doubts about such intentions. I tell him it is a process I am going through, trying to sort out everything that happened, compartmentalize it, label it and tuck it neatly on a shelf. Crossing the room I lay my head in his lap and whisper, *Don't you ever think about the way we were? The way things got so bad? Don't you ever think about it and become angry all over again?* I stare at the seam on his pants.

No.

No?

I just don't think about it—I just black it out.

I start to ask how and how and how, but he licks his finger and sticks it in my ear, and I squirm and squeal and drop the conversation because maybe it does not matter, maybe it is not a part of who we are any more, maybe it should be blacked out. Maybe not talking about it keeps us safe.

That was one of the concepts the first marriage counselor we saw most strongly believed in, that not talking about things out loud would keep us safe. Before a quibbling argument could descend into screaming and slamming doors, into any physical or

emotional abuse, he suggested we simply not discuss the matter. Instead we were to get a book of some sort, any sort, to write in. We were to keep this book near our bed, in one common place, and instead of speaking to each other we would write down our thoughts and feelings. The counselor was clearly excited about this idea; perhaps he was planning to publish a paper about its effectiveness. I can still see him teeter on the edge of his blue-bound chair as he eagerly explained, the reflection of Trevor and me glinting back from the lens of his owl-eyed glasses, two people I no longer knew. I know he went on and on, about how this new practice would eliminate many problems, how often we could completely resolve disagreements entirely within the pages of the book without ever having to speak to one another. I stopped listening somewhere among the more detailed explanations of the theory's philosophy. I'd already resigned myself to trying it. Besides, I didn't really want to speak to Trevor anyway.

We drove home, found a book, and placed it beside our bed. Our book was a marbled cream with the word "Journal" embossed in glittering gold on the front. It was the sort of book that should contain memories of beautiful moments, graduations, births of babies, simple spring days when the rain smells just right. It was not the sort of book that should contain clerkish descriptions of arguments and emotions, the bookkeeping of a failing marriage. Ironically, it had come to us packaged in silver-wedding-bell paper, a reception gift from an elderly family friend when we were first married. It came accompanied with a note telling us we should carefully record the early years of our marriage, so that we could still remember them on our sixtieth wedding anniversary. But Trevor and I had our first bad fight before I even sent a Thank You note out to Mrs. Witbeck, and the journal was tucked in the back corner of an old bookshelf. Even then, it

seemed, I would pick and choose the moments from my marriage that would be recorded forever.

It is the very first journal entries that capture our enthusiasm for the idea our therapist had for the notebook, written on the first page.

Trevor: This book thing is bullshit.

Me: Our whole marriage is bullshit.

I am not sure this is the type of writing either our counselor or Mrs. Witbeck had in mind, more likely it is the type of writing that should be blacked out.

Maybe black outs are designed to keep us safe. Most psychologists agree that people can "black out" or suppress the memory of traumatic events. We physically "black out," or faint, or syncope because of a lack of oxygen and blood in our brains – if we didn't "black out" and fall to a nearly horizontal position we would die. When information risks too much troop safety, public violence, national security, it is "blacked out." The power "blacks out" to protect us from electrical surges that could potentially destroy us. Lights are "blacked out" during wartime to protect homes and cities from air raids. Television channels are "blacked out" from certain live events to protect ticket sales and the economy of the venue.

Yet, humanity never seems entirely satisfied with any black out either. Therapists, hypnotists, psychologists, psychiatrists charge hourly rates to recover blacked out memories. Doctors prescribe blood thinners and recommend not standing up too quickly to avoid the possibility of blacking out. We rail against government censorship, wait for post-live television shows, call the power company the minute our electricity

fizzles, and even behind black shutters and curtains, perhaps with enemy planes overhead, we revel in light.

And if we can't get past the black outs, we return to them over and over again, pull at the memories we know we have but cannot remember. We examine and investigate documents, laugh about the power outage three years ago when we tried to find flashlights but pinched our fingers in drawers, slammed our knees against tables, or frightened each other by our mere presence because we could not see who was who or where things were. Years and years later, I come back to the sixth grade and those letters and my father's voice saying, *it was to keep them safe, it was to keep them safe.* And I think about the small mercies that some black outs provide. The way you would lose consciousness before dying many unspeakable deaths, starvation, freezing or immolation, expiration from any number of the diseases that cause severe pain. Many hospitals and doctors even purposefully create and maintain this lack of consciousness in terminally ill patients. In less severe circumstances, black outs still offer us an out—when we have had more alcohol than our body can stand and any more would likely kill us we black out, effectively stopping our intake. Researchers at Harvard and McGill University in Montreal are even currently working on a new drug that is designed to pick and choose memories to black out. A *60 Minutes* episode and countless journal articles from this fall claim that the name of the drug is Propranolol or UO126 and that it can disrupt the biochemical pathways in our brains that allow recall of memory. Tested on rats trained to recognize and then forced to forget different musical tones, it is now administered and marketed to those who suffer from post-traumatic-stress disorder, victims of violence and

rape, witnesses to horrific events. It is the stuff of science fiction and Star Trek, the business of George Orwell, or perhaps it is a small mercy.

Yet, it isn't as easy as that. What if our lives are only as big as our memories? Do black outs shrink our reality? Do they warp the meaning of past events and their context? I have read that it is a surplus of adrenaline that makes us remember, that galvanizes incidents in our minds. I've been told this is a socio-biological, evolutionary advantage: if early man became terrified by a lion attack, adrenaline and biochemical hardwiring would sear the memory in his brain and teach him to stay out of lion territory. Modern man may worry less about lions but instead learns what to say and when, who can be trusted and who cannot, which places are safe, and where our own, individual dangerous territory lies. Everything we know, everything we do comes from our capability to remember, recall, and revisit our pasts. And if we are simply aggregates from our memories do black outs literally make us forget who we are? Perhaps then, it is remembering that keeps us safe and proves the philosopher George Santayana right: "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it."

I fill pages in notebooks, scribble on dining tickets, type snatches of scenes on my computer trying to unpack the blacked out months of my marriage. The times I have chosen to forget, the events I've picked to suppress. And I am torn because I want desperately to know what was behind those barred lines in old letters, the details of the nights and fights I've blacked out, I'm torn because I want so desperately to know, and still so desperately to stay safe—or perhaps only comfortable—and not remember.

Trevor will ask how my writing is going over bowls of granola in the mornings or at night while we brush our teeth. I tell him it is good, I tell him it is hard, I tell him it is

still something I have to do , something I have to uncover. I tell him how I remember as much as I want to remember, how I sketch out dark details and how the pages come back with critics' comments saying *I want to know more, we want to know more*.

I will ask him about some of the fights and nights that were particularly bad. I will ask him about the weeks that he slept on his brother's couch and didn't come home. And he will tell me that he does not remember it much. I will ask if he remembers that first marriage counselor who recommended we use the book. He will get a funny look across his face, roll his eyes, and make a sound that is half sigh and half laugh. He will wrap his arms around me, kiss my left ear and say that he still thinks that was a nutty idea. If he asks where the book is now, I won't tell him it is in my office at work. I won't tell him that I sometimes flip through the pages trying to shed light on the times that are blacked out. I won't tell him that, on days when I am horrified and terrified by what I read I pick up a fine point black Sharpie marker and draw dark lines through our words. I won't tell him because I want to keep him safe. I won't tell him that our forgotten memories still have an impact on other people. I won't tell him that I must remember because he will not, and one of us must safeguard the past from repeating.

*

I have denied many things in my life. In third grade I denied spilling orange juice onto the counter and neglecting to wipe it up, leaving a sticking, crusting pool of pulp as if some giant hand had squeezed the color out of the sun and onto the granite slab in our kitchen. I was grounded for a week. At fifteen, I denied caring about my close friend, Kali, because the other girls in our group had turned on her—deciding she was so tall and lean that she must be bulimic, so good at math she must be cheating, and so popular with

the boys in the grade above us that she must be easy. Midway through our freshman year of high school, Kali slit her wrists and spent two weeks in the behavioral unit at the Eastern Idaho Medical Center. For years I denied the abuse of my stepfather until all the lies I'd told family and friends and teachers about my life came crashing down like a house of cards when he left. For years after he left, and still even perhaps today, I deny my own culpability in my relationship with him, in his relationship with my mother.

The day after discovering Trevor's tumor in Dr. Cherny's office, I opened my eyes wondering if perhaps the entire afternoon before had been a dream. I studied the wood paneling of the Boise Best Western Inn walls and thought that maybe it was today we were supposed to go and see the doctor, that maybe today was the scheduled meeting to discuss a concern about Trevor's MRI image, and that today would be the day the radiologists would find nothing wrong, but decide that perhaps Trevor had just shifted slightly during the MRI making the image fuzzy and explaining that troubling haze in the left hemisphere. It is interesting the lies we tell ourselves, sometimes so fantastical and illogical that we must believe them because it is the only way we can make sense of the situation. Suppressing the actual reality of our experience offers comfort and safety, a way to handle circumstances that seem so much bigger than us, too big to face. De Nile isn't a river in Egypt. It is an entire ocean. But if we throw ourselves to the waters again and again, what is there to keep us from drowning, buoyancy leaving our bodies, expelled with the last breath of air until our lungs are empty and we sink, skin slick and translucent underwater, the limbs and lines of our body broken and fragmented with refraction and less light, our eyes glazing over like pearls, hair waving like thick strands of kelp, our lips parted like the cracked shell of a clam, as if we had been about to speak and then

suddenly forgot what it is we had to say. It is an image not unlike the one that haunts my favorite poem by Sharon Olds, a bit of poetry that hits too close to home on nights when I don't sleep and sit up reading with bloodshot eyes in the strained light of warming yellow bulbs.

The Victims

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and
took it, in silence, all those years and then
kicked you out, suddenly, and her
kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we
grinned inside, the way people grinned when
Nixon's helicopter lifted off the South
Lawn for the last time. We were tickled
to think of your office taken away,
your secretaries taken away,
your lunches with three double bourbons,
your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your
suits back, too, those dark
carcasses hung in your closet, and the black
noses of your shoes with the large pores?
She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it
until we pricked at your
annihilation, Father. Now I
pass bums in doorways, the white
slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their
suits of compressed silt, the stained
flippers of their hands, the underwater
fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the
lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and
took it from them in silence until they had
given it all away and had nothing
left but this.

I know what the victims of my denial were left with: a sticky kitchen counter, a betrayal of best friends, a restraining order banning my stepfather from within 150 yards

of my home or my high school, a husband who loves a wife who thinks she made a mistake marrying him.

But certainly, I too, to some extent am a victim as well. My mother's denial about her marriages cost me how many years of truth? Of memory? How many years of lies and anger and ache did we take and take? A debt to denial paid by lying to my friends about the rings of bruises around my neck after my stepfather lifted me from the ground against the garage door. By spending nights alone at the top of Ririe Reservoir hurling dishes down the dam's spill-a-way, creamers and sugar-bowls tumbling end over end through the air above bare sage brush bones like miniature porcelain meteorites, their crash against the dry earth signaling a larger destruction than the shockwaves of dust puffing up from their jagged pieces. The same debt my mother must have paid to the denial of James Fetterly—the man whose spitting image she was, according to the insults and names hurled at her by her mother, the reason my grandmother sometimes claimed to hate her daughter, because there are some things that nurture cannot beat out of nature. Lies and half-truths and broken dishes repeated again and again until we all believed them ourselves, a cost of denial too great to bear. Perhaps the burden I struggle with the most is knowing the trauma of my childhood that blossomed into the trauma of my marriage like a cactus flower, is not all blacked out, but instead is there, hovering in my consciousness, suspended in the sound of two lives shattering, a husband and wife breaking like the generations before them and the generations before that. The shatter of choices we cannot change and moments we cannot undo, and must, if we are to survive such breaking, at some point remember.

*

I turn, then, and face the hard, angry line of my husband's mouth, his wild eyes—features I remember more clearly than I care to admit, the same features I saw in all of our fights. Like the time on any one of a hundred winter nights, when I was angry over something (who can ever really remember?) and I tell him to just go, to get out. Rolling his eyes he turns away as I scream at him to leave, calling him names I heard once as a child, names I believed I would never repeat. The stream of insecurity and fear masked too heavily by anger to be distinguished, emerging only as torrents and torrents of horrid things I can't really believe I am saying now and know I don't really mean. Following him through our apartment my voice grows louder and my body pulls closer to his, intending to make him see me, make him listen to me, make him feel whatever emotion I want him to feel, make him reach out and save me from whatever it is that makes me scream. If I could have been open, or soft, or vulnerable he might have.

But instead he does what I have demanded and leaves. When he is gone, I slump down against the door, fresh sobs racking my body, and press my head to my knees, thinking perhaps that if I can just make myself small enough, roll myself into a ball the way I did as a child then everything will disappear, and, when I open my eyes, Trevor will be back and it will all be ok. I stayed curled long enough to see if this would really happen, springing instead to my feet and following him outside where I now start to beg him not to go, to stay, to just hold me. I pull at his arm, his jacket, pleading and promising we won't fight anymore if he'll just come home. He shakes me off, brushes away my hands with a force that makes them hurt and makes me only more desperate. I have followed him for blocks on January and February nights, in bare feet, begging over and over again for him to just come back now to the place I ordered him to vacate.

And there were other nights too. Nights when he would intentionally say something cruel—

You're as crazy as your mother.

Maybe I don't really love you, why should I? You don't even love yourself.

I can't stand you.

I hate being married and I hate you.

I don't know which was worse—when he watched his words wound me or when he wielded silence as his weapon of choice, sitting behind his computer desk in the back corner of the living room determined to look at anything but me, aimlessly tapping his index finger against the mouse searching through on-line articles and news archives, Expedia travel deals, and web computer parts stores. I watched him stare at page after page, as if he wasn't even reading or thinking about them, as if he were practically staring through them while he scrolled along. I yelled, I cried, I slammed my hand against the desktop—but his eyes stayed focused, his mouth an angry line and he did not speak.

I wore long sleeved shirts to cover bruises that I'd press my fingers against just to feel tingle. And sometimes at night from the narrow white hallway, just out of his sight I'd watch him in the bathroom mirror as he lifted his shirt to run his hands across the deep fingernail marks on his chest.

It doesn't really matter who was the victim one night and who was the aggressor. The roles shifted and fluctuated and we reeled each other in only to throw each other back. We were both gone—hook, line, and sinker—stuck to a string of destruction threaded through a pole neither of us held alone.

*

Trevor was the first to realize that we could no longer exist together—could no longer co-exist as the people we were when we entered this marriage. We were becoming monsters, beings that neither of us any longer recognized. We'd started fighting late one night when he came home from his brother's house. I'd already gone to bed, though I hadn't fallen asleep as I waited beneath our thick down comforter, anger seeping from my skin, floating into the air, dripping onto the sheets. He must have felt it when he opened the bedroom door at one-thirty in the morning. It must have been the reason for the hesitation of his silhouette against the hall light that framed his wide shoulders, the reason he hung back like the kids I used to watch on the high dive at the local pool in Ririe, the ones who hadn't really wanted to jump from so high in the first place but were pushed and prodded by their friends. He stood in the light for a moment, and it seemed as if the air and bedroom furniture around us leaned in listening, waiting for the sound of a splash, waiting for a shockwave. I didn't say anything at first, and he flipped off the hallway light, plunging into the darkness where I waited in bed, curled like a rattlesnake. Stripping to his underwear Trevor climbed in beside me. And then came the splash.

Where have you been?

You know where I was.

Well what the hell were you doing 'til one-thirty in the morning?

It's really none of your business. Roll over and go to sleep.

What do you mean it is none of my business?

Go to sleep.

Can't you just answer my questions?

No. You won't interrogate me.

Well if it is so awful to come home and talk to me maybe you should have just stayed there.

Maybe I should have.

The argument ran the route of most of our other fights. Yell. Push. Shove. Blame. Hit. Slap. Insult. Cry. Leave. Only this time Trevor never came back. I didn't sleep for the rest of night. I paced our apartment, turning pictures of the two of us face down in their frames. I called the cell phone he wouldn't pick up. And then I called it again, and again, and again. Curled in a tight, tense, ball on the couch watching reruns of Law & Order on TNT, I jumped when my phone finally rang the next morning.

Where are you? When are you coming back?

He didn't say anything for a minute, just sighed static into the phone. And then the man who never had any answers gave me one I did not want to hear.

I'm not coming home Chels, not 'til things can change, it's not safe for either of us.

*

I remember a story someone once told me about two prisoners in jail. I can't remember who it was, maybe a friend, my mother, one of those insightful fellows you end up sitting next to on planes. I possibly even read it somewhere, in some Please-Forward-To-All-You-Know e-mail, a Reader's Digest, or a book I received as a random gift and didn't pick out for myself. I don't know why I know this story, but I know it goes like this:

There are two prisoners in jail. They don't know each other, but, longing for human contact, they bang on their adjoining wall. They knock back and forth and in this way feel connected. The wall is the thing that separates them, but it is also the thing that provides them with a means for communication.

It's the same concept as God and prayer, postcards from countries across oceans, the reason we wave or nod at strangers on the other side of the street. Every separation is still somehow a link, something we hold onto, something we somehow find security in. Each broken, blacked out, fragmented moment of our lives tells us there was something before that shard of memory, and promises us that moment will impact all the others to come. We hold onto the moments someone leaves us, we cling to arguments and harsh words, we cherish the breaking of a china plate because somehow, somewhere, at some level we understand that if we can only embrace our brokenness, hold the bits of our fragmented life narrative in our palm like crumbling shards of porcelain then maybe we can see how we are still connected to ourselves, connected to each other, connected to the world. Maybe we can come to understand that it is what we do with our fragments and connections that makes it all so beautiful, sun glinting off a thousand pieces of shattered glass, a diamond decked kitchen floor sparkling as specular and diffuse reflections waver and glimmer, offering us new angles of perception.

*

By August 2006 we can no longer deny the presence of Trevor's brain tumor. Nor can we deny that, in order to save his life, serious treatments must be undertaken. We have walked beneath more brick-walled hospitals named for saints I do not know: Saint Alphonsus and Saint Mary. We have frequented other hospitals touting another

religion: LDS Regional Medical Center, LDS Hospital, Primary Children's Hospital. We see the same tassel-loafers and pink pencil erasers, the same MRI scans glowing blue on computer screens, we hear the same prognosis: brain surgery, radiation, chemotherapy. We finally decide these treatments will be performed at the Huntsman Cancer Institute in Salt Lake City, Utah. The hospital name is not any reference to Hubert, the patron saint of hunters, but instead carries the surname of Utah's governor, John Huntsman Jr., whose family donated 100 million dollars to build the institute and raised 150 million more to fund it. Though I don't say anything aloud to Trevor, or his parents who have come with us for this final consultation, I find some strange comfort in the large framed photograph of John Huntsman Senior, who in a black suit with his broad shoulders hunched resembles something of a grinning black bear, his paw-like hand draped over the arm of the petite woman at his side. Instead of the stained glass collages of saints with golden halos and white robes, I feel like I could reach out and touch these people, like I could send them an invitation to a Christmas party, where we would lean against the mantle in tacky sweaters, swirling our glasses of cider, discussing the current economic trends.

Unlike any hospital we have visited previously, the scent of latex and cleaning chemicals is undetectable, marble columns line the foyer, and marble slabs make up the floor. A plush library is located in the basement beneath rows of glittering windows, the cafeteria menu boasts "freshly steamed asparagus" and "blackened salmon with lemon-herb sauce." As we follow a "hospital hostess" to the office for our appointment, Trevor leans over to whisper, *This is more like the Hilton than a hospital*.

We meet Dr. Randy Jensen in a consultation office buried below ground in the limestone hills that back the hospital. He explains the thick layers of rock and earth

block the radiation waves that require most other facilities to line their walls with lead. Dr. Jensen is a short, round, red man with startling blue eyes that pop from his pinkish skin below the blue bandana he wears over his balding head. He does not wear loafers or a suit, but scrubs and Nike top tennis shoes. He is the anti-neurosurgeon and I like him immediately. Today he leans back against his swiveling chair, arms crossed across his chest as he tries to describe the possible side effects of the neurosurgery we have scheduled for September 29th .

Trevor will remain *awake* during the seven hour surgery. Though Dr. Jensen is quick to explain that "awake" simply means he will be breathing on his own and responsive. Before cutting out the actual tumor the surgical team will *map* Trevor's brain, poking and prodding his sulci and gyri to see what areas of his brain control hand movement, speech patterns, reflexes. For a moment I find myself imagining a blue smocked surgeon hovering above my husband, Trevor's skull open like a melon beneath the low overhanging light. I see the doctor's gloved hands pull back the thin layers of dermis, the eggshell fragment of skull, revealing the pulpy pink and gray tissue. Trevor's eyelids flutter as I watch— and I see the sharp blue of each cornea, swirled lightly with green like the marbles I used to collect as a child. His lips move the way they did when I first met him in a high school debate class, carefully enunciating each word, the speed of speech increasing as he moved toward the crucial point of an argument or the punch line of a joke. Dr. Jensen explains the nerves in the brain do not register pain, and, in my own numbed mind there he is, oblivious to the surgeon with his scalpel, talking away about AIDs intervention in Africa, oil regulations and CAFÉ standards, our country's immigration policy with Cuba until suddenly that surgeon pokes some wet wrinkle with

the knife's tip and his body jumps, like his limbs are hooked to strings suddenly taken up by a puppeteer. I see Trevor's fists open and close rapidly as the doctor works that sharp surgical tool, Trevor's blue eyes staring in amazement at his hand that for the first time in his life is entirely under someone else's control.

My stomach churns and I shake my head to rid the image of my husband awake and helpless on an operating table, debating idly while the left hemisphere of his brain is mapped. Where, I wonder, is the memory of our first kiss? How does a doctor measure the axons of the neurons that hold the scent of my shampoo after I have just showered, a smell Trevor claims is all my own and one of his favorite? How do you locate the nights we spent together and the nights we spent apart? How do you decide which ones to cut?

I have shaken my head while Dr. Jensen is in mid sentence, and he stops to ask if I have any questions. I do, but don't know where to begin, so I say no and try to listen as he describes possible side effects of the surgery. *There may be some memory damage from the surgery, but there will be more from the radiation treatments. It will mostly be short-term memory damage, but may affect the long term as well.*

There are others of course, the possibility of temporary paralysis, the indefinite headaches, bone tenderness, weight loss, nausea, vomiting, and a host of others, but today I have faced enough and stop listening, thinking instead about brain mapping and the tender and terrible moments that lie among the ridges and valley's of the topography of our experience.

*

Nights later, back in Logan, I ask Trevor about the possibility of memory loss as we drive down 400 North, on our way home from dinner with friends.

If I lost my memory, I say, *I would be scared of not remembering who I was. If I couldn't access my past how could I know what I liked and didn't like, how would I know who I am?* I am fiddling with the seat belt stretched across my chest. Trevor and I talk about many things. We met in a high school debate class and started dating as we debated for Utah State University in college. On long drives or during late night conversations one of us often throws out a controversial topic and we choose a side and argue it up and down. We entertain each other for hours with stories about our childhoods, the summer camps we loved or hated, the pets we had, the defining moments in our lives. We talk about family and friends, school and work. We speak often about the two big dogs we have waiting at home, wriggling and pawing in the back yard eager to go for a bike ride or too simply be let in the house where they can sleep on blue floral pillows beneath our feet while we lean back into the couch and talk some more. We do not talk about the bad months of our marriage. We do not talk about Trevor's tumor. We do not talk about the way our lives are changing.

I think I would be more scared about the not knowing who I would become. Trevor stares straight ahead at the road. *If you don't know where you have been how can you decide where to go next?*

*

This is my earliest memory: it is hot, the kind of heat that presses against you and repels you at the same time, the same sensation of reaching a finger toward a light bulb, until it gets too close and you have to pull it away. As kids we melted through the yard, chasing a game of tag, running at first, then walking with only bursts of quick steps when we came close enough to touch someone else, and finally simply falling to the ground to

lie beneath a shade tree, breathing hard and heavy and hot. My cousin's house was our favorite place to be in the summer. It promised games and popsicles, romps across the yard with the neighbor's dog, or a box beneath the two-by-four porch that always seemed full of a new litter of kittens. Our young mothers with nowhere else to go in a small farming town framed by fields and fields of blossoming potato plants got together to turn us kids loose in the sun-scorched yards while they visited in air-conditioned trailers and cinderblock houses.

Chelsi, come in! my mother called from the door, my baby sister balanced on one hip. When she had promised me earlier an hour to play outside, I had muttered an emphatic *Yes!* while my cousin Rachel, older and just beginning to grasp that elusive concept of time, pouted, *Aw, an hour is not that long.* Rachel was right and I dragged my feet towards the door with the neighbor's dog, Sammy, trailing behind. We stopped on the front stoop. Inside I heard Rachel complaining about being too old to take a nap, my sister beginning to fuss, and my mother hunting for a pacifier. The big German Sheperd stood in front of me on the plank porch, sunlight beating down on both of us, the black and bronze of the big dog's coat melting together in a hazy coffee cream blend. I don't know anymore what I thought just then, as I stared at the dog staring off into the yard, as I tried to separate the various patterns of onyx and ochroid in his coat, as I reached out to rest my hand on his back. I do know that he turned; I now imagine he spun with a growl climbing through his throat. I don't know if I remember or imagine watching his mouth open, catching a glint of that burning sun against his upper canine tooth. And then, I can no longer remember anything but blackness.

Though there must have been more in that blackness. The scars across my face tell the story, the way the big German Sheperd spun around, dark eyes startled and then retreating deep into his head, an animal instinct not completely tempered by generations of domestication. The soft half moon of permanently ruptured skin cells beneath my left eye marks the place his lower jaw clamped down. His upper jaw stretching and tearing into the flesh across my nose, my right jaw, as he dragged me from the porch and into the yard. What the scars do not physically record are the sounds of a little girl crying, a mother screaming, other adults cursing the dog as they chase it through the yard to pry open its mouth. The scars don't record the way they pointed at the girl's face, covered their eyes, and cried. I imagine it all now and know it is me…but I can't really see what happened because I cannot remember actually being bitten.

Nor do I remember the doctor's office, the surgeries, the stitches. My mother kept a scrapbook of sorts, weekly photos to monitor the scarring. In the pictures, I am a beaming red-headed girl, with thick stitches lined up in rows beneath my left eye. Stitches across the bridge of my nose, through my right eye brow and curling down along my right cheek like a ribbon. The long line of marching black thread only ends at the very bottom of my jaw. I can't fathom my mother's horror as she diligently applied emu oil and crushed calendula in lotion to my face each morning and night, hoping to prevent scarring, her mouth set in a thin red line of determination and maybe even anger, lips pursed until they were even more pink then the lipstick she wore then.

It was a frightening way for a child's life to begin, or at least the conscious realization of that life. After Sammy bit me I should have been afraid of dogs, like my mother. I certainly seemed to understand what happened, smiling when a shocked

passerby in the grocery store or at church asked about my face and merely answering, *Sammy tried to eat me*. But my father loved animals, and had never spent more than a few days of his entire life without canine companionship. Being afraid may have been an option for my mother; it was not for me.

*

A father cannot let his daughter be afraid. He prays over her, begs God to erase the memory, pleads that she will not fear one of the things he loves most in this world. Maybe he prays for himself too, turning to faith to soothe the deep hurt he feels, the betrayal of an animal he admires so much that hurt a daughter he loves even more. Tucking her beneath bedcovers, his body feels heavy. Unable to make it all go away, he does the only thing he can do: carries in the old black Lab mix, the dog that has shared his daughter's entire life to lay beside her as she sleeps. His wife never cared for animals much, and he'd promised never to bring them inside her house. But she only watches quietly from the bedroom doorway as he and The Runt lie down beside his daughter. His wife even comes slowly to the bed to sit beside them to smooth her daughter's hair and listen as he begins to tell the little girl stories about all the dogs he's loved and lived with and lost. Rocky, Ringo, Scout, the old Boxer with one eye, the Spaniel he found chained in an old potato cellar. He tells stories about how he picked out The Runt from a neighbor's litter four years ago. He takes time on the description of how the other puppies, full of new life, butted the smallest around, how the little dog's eyes had seemed to promise, "I'll be the best dog in the world if you'll just take me home." Searching for words, he tries to tell her that dogs are not terrifying beasts with snap-lock jaws but instead gentle creatures to run with, rest with, play with, pretend with. He tells her they

are guardians and protectors, creatures that will love and trust if you can love and trust them. And, when he finally runs out of words, he starts to sing songs about dogs, worried that if he stops reassuring her for even one moment the nightmare might come back. There is a slight sense of relief, a sharing in his burden as his wife's soft voice melds with his own, as The Runt nuzzles his chest.

I stayed curled up beside them all, my mother, father, The Runt, all the stories of dogs past, soaking in the strength of their presence. We stroked the ears of the old Lab mix and each time my dad said her name, The Runt, she looked up eagerly, her heavy tail thumping against my legs, never understanding that her name really wasn't a name at all.

*

After Trevor moved out of our apartment he was no longer physically there, but his presence was all over the place. The furniture we'd picked out, dark dress socks in the hamper, the tuna fish I can't stand but that he loves to eat with pineapple still in the cupboard. I've often wondered, though I've never asked him, if the absence of my things at his brother's house had the same stabbing confirmations of loneliness for him—the quilt I'd made that he loved to sleep under, the intricate wooden carvings I'd brought from a trip to Russia, the chess board we'd played our first game on together when we began dating.

During the separation we hardly spoke to each other. We never saw each other. While I sat in class one day at school, he came and gathered more of his things. Returning home, I was so angry and hurt I bagged the rest of his belongings and left them on the front porch. Only the boxes stuffed with shoes and the garbage sacks bulging with binders and books did not leave me with the same defiant strength I'd found by packing

away my stepfather and stepsiblings as a teenager. Rather the heavy-set, square boxes were duct-taped exhibits of evidence that I missed my husband, that I had never been so lonely in my life. I printed off the on-line version of divorce papers from Utahcourts.org several times. I'd fill them out and throw them away. Friends came over to sleep on my couch; they took me to lunch, to the gym, to the mall. They gave me the phone numbers of the divorce lawyers their husbands had used during previous marriages. And finally one friend gave me the number of her mother, a marriage counselor.

Do you want to go?

I think it's a good idea, we know we can't do it alone. We've been trying that.

Well, why don't you move back in then and we'll go?

Let's go first before we do anything else.

Please just come home.

I can't. Not yet. Please don't ask anymore.

Dr. Jorgonsen's office was sparsely decorated, two big, brown, suede leather swiveling chairs facing a single hard, wooden seat. I guess a woman who listened to uncomfortable stories from clients thought she may as well be physically uncomfortable too. We began meeting regularly, but Trevor still did not come back to the apartment.

*

We were still living apart as Spring Break approached and Trevor began to mention that he might go camping with his brother and friends. I decided I'd go home to my family. I was already at my mother's house the weekend before the actual break began. I don't remember where I was or what I was doing when Trevor called. I remember what he said.

Do you want to spend the break together? I tried to control my breathing. Until this moment all I wanted was for Trevor to come home. Now faced with reality of the past that haunted our conversations at our counseling appointments I was not sure.

Where?

I'm figuring that out. I want to surprise you. Do you want to go?

Scenes of slamming doors and flailing fists swirled in my mind, eating at the edges of my consciousness. Pushing them aside, I took a deep breath and tried to let go. I did want to try. We met the next morning back in Logan at the Petsmart between our apartment and his brother's house, only choosing the location because it fell in a central, neutral place. I arrived first and sat behind the wheel of my car arms folded tightly across my chest, not because the air-conditioning was on too high, but because I was embarrassed and angry. I defaulted to these emotions; it was easier to be mad at Trevor for our current living situation than to be sad and lonely about it.

Trevor pulled into the space beside me. Defensive and unsure, I could feel tenseness pulsing through my body until he folded his arms around me in the parking lot whispering, *You look pretty.* We hadn't seen each other in over a week and I began to cry. *Come on Chels, things are getting better. Let's be happy.*

He was right, things were getting better. I still felt the same shocked sensation from his phone call the night before, only dampened by a night's sleep and a habitual wariness that he might pull his promise of spending the break together away at any moment. We couldn't say anything else to each other, and we had nowhere to go together, but neither of us wanted to leave the other person alone in that parking lot. I don't remember who suggested walking through Petsmart to look at the fish and birds

and the cats, but we made our way through the parking lot holding hands for the first time in a month.

Four Paws Adoption, a local dog shelter, sets up a display at Petsmart on Saturdays. They panel off the middle section of the store and fill it with hopeful adoptees. The warehouse-like building echoes with barks and laughter as children gather around the panels and reach between to rub a puppy's back. The dogs themselves seem to either be in seventh heaven or frightened to death (perhaps at the prospect of being adopted? Or at the prospect of having yet again to return to the shelter?) They grab each other with their jaws in a wrestling tug-of-war, relenting only when one or the other goes too far and actually draws a yelp from their playmate. They loll on their backs as customers scratch their bellies. They cower in corners or cling to the legs of the shelter volunteers. Outside the panels, people considering adoption might hold a puppy in their arms, or try out a leash on an older dog. Children beg their parents for a puppy and Petsmart employees hand out milk-bone treats to the crowd, encouraging them to make a friend, establish a connection, save a life.

Trevor and I made our way to the arena, still holding hands and staring at the dogs. We sidled in next to another young couple. The girl cradled a small black and tan puppy in her arms.

You guys looking for a dog? the boy gave Trevor a sidelong look.

We are really just looking, Trevor explained, *What do you have there?*

A puppy we are giving up for adoption.

Oh, really?

The boy nodded, *She's purebred and everything, a Doberman from a breeder in Syracuse. We even paid five hundred bucks for her. We've had her for a week, but she's just too much work, we don't have enough time for her*.

That's too bad. Trevor reached over to scratch the puppy's ears. She licked his hand and squirmed in the girl's arms.

Trevor had wanted a dog ever since we'd gotten married. I'd always refused citing that the acquisition of a pet seriously limited our renting options. Plus we were in school and didn't really have time for dog. The conversation had even been the igniting point for some of our infamous fights. I'm not sure what changed when I was again sitting in my car in the parking lot watching my husband drive back to his separate residence, maybe I'd already begun to change without realizing it. Maybe for a moment I remembered the soft, warm tongue of The Runt as she lay beside me licking my elbow after I'd been attacked by the German Sheppard. Maybe I remembered those liquid eyes, maybe I remembered the soft look of Trevor's own blue eyes. I am not sure, but dialing his number I could feel excitement pulsing through my body

Trevor where are we going for Spring break?

I told you I want it to be a surprise.

Just tell me if it's somewhere with a hotel or if we are camping.

He sighed into the phone, *Camping. That's all I'll tell you.*

Ok, great. Let's get a dog before we go.

What?

Let's get a dog.

*

It was an impulsive decision, one not weighed by reasonable thinking or consideration of consequences. We were two people who couldn't even commit to living in the same home, why did I ever think that we could commit to owning a dog? Hadn't we just heard another couple say that a dog was too taxing on their lives? A dog that was living with people who were still living with each other? Even now, I know I am only considering these questions in retrospect; they didn't cross my mind at the time. We were seeing a marriage counselor, we'd gone out in public together, we were slowly wading back into our lives and, ever eager, I must have figured why not dive in. We were getting a dog. Had I discussed this with anyone else they would have said I was crazy. It wasn't a sane choice, it was one that reminded me again of the Four Paws dogs—a decision to put my heart out there, to hope.

*

An hour after our meeting at Petsmart, Trevor called me from the driveway to our apartment. *Can you come out?* he sounded happier than he had in a long time. Walking outside, I found him grinning from ear to ear beside the passenger door of the car.

What are you doing? I laughed.

He opened the door. Curled in an awkward ball, its legs too long for its body and its head strangely out of proportion with rest of itself lay the black and tan puppy.

If you don't like her we can take her back, can get a different dog… Trevor's smile had turned nervous, as if he suddenly remembered the people we'd become lately. I bent down over the dog, her liquid black eyes seemed unsure and scared, yet full of eagerness. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was a little girl all over again listening

to my father describe the way our first family dog had eyes that promised to be the best little dog in the world if he'd just take her home.

I lifted the puppy into my arms. She licked my nose. I was sold.

*

We spent the rest of the afternoon shopping, buying groceries for our camping trip, stocking the trunk of our car with firewood, and finally picking out dog accessories. We purchased a bag of Purina Puppy Chow, a feeding bowl, and two chew toys. We spent $8.00 to engrave the name Lexi on a pink metal heart with our phone number beneath it, then hooked the heart to the pink and black polka dot collar Trevor let me pick out. He added two small bells to the ring with the heart, so we could be sure and hear Lexi wherever she went. We laughed and talked and planned, and didn't argue.

We left the next morning for Escalante, Utah, that wide expanse of national wilderness less traveled by the weekenders and day hikers. Strange, looking back, that we would adopt a dog and head off into the wilderness alone together in the midst of a failing marriage. Friends and family later asked what would have happened if things had gone bad out there? They tell me it wasn't smart to go with a man you hardly trusted in one car to an area with no cell phone service or police dispatch. I'm sure Trevor heard the same things. In the back of our minds as we loaded bags into the little Ford we may have even thought these same things…but stronger were thoughts that perhaps this marriage wasn't failing after all, maybe it was beginning to revive.

Our car merged into South bound traffic on I-15 and we settled in to drive for nine hours, a time span ripe with potential for rehashing many arguments. We held each other

as captive audiences for our own individual grievances. But neither of us mentioned a word. Instead we talked about the little black ball curled in my lap.

Do you think she knows her name yet?

Not yet.

Do you think she knows us? I mean knows that we are her people now? She's been shuffled around a lot. First the breeder, then the couple who bought her, then the day at the pet store, now us. Do you think she knows us? Knows she belongs here?

I think she's starting to.

And when we grew tired of talking and Lexi grew tired of my lap, she stretched out on the floor between my feet and we listened to Meat Loaf and Pink Floyd.

*

I never wanted a Doberman for a pet. The dogs have a demonic image, black and white prints of the German breed with their Nazi handlers, fierce junk yard guardians with spiked collars. Every drug dealer I've ever seen portrayed in any movie has at least a couple of the beasts lounging at his feet. The large paws and sleek, muscular build, give the dogs an immeasurable amount of strength and agility, rendering them perfect for attack animals. Utah even has breed-bans against them, along with Rottweiler's, Pit Bulls, and German Sheperd's, requiring residents to declare these breeds on their home owners insurance. I've heard Dobermans are known to turn on their owners at a moment's notice, even though the AKC website Trevor and I looked through the night we brought Lexi home assured us the number one contemporary use of the breed was for service or therapy dogs. The AKC description of a Doberman's temperament reads, "Energetic, watchful, determined, alert, fearless, loyal and obedient." *It all depends on*

how you raise the dog, Trevor concluded. *It's about love and respect. If you are mean to the dog and teach it to be mean you'll have a mean dog*.

*

I should have been afraid of dogs after being bit as a child. I was expected not to be afraid, and so I wasn't. Expectations don't make the scars go away. There are still traces of the day Sammy tried to eat me engraved beneath my left eye and along my right jaw line, tiny fractured skin cells that are usually forgotten when I look in the mirror or that go nearly unnoticed by strangers. But they are still there, bits of a personal history I carry around and wear, ever so slightly, on my face.

And like the scars, there is the memory that cannot go away. The clear, hot blue sky, the dog's gleaming coat, my small hand reaching toward his ridged back, then jerking away again as I watch the dog spin and hear, though years later, the growl in his throat.

I should have been afraid to disappear into Utah's Southern wilderness with Trevor for one week. I should not have stayed married to him after our six months of physical and emotional abuse, plenty of people expected me not too. But sometimes, I suppose, you have to search out all the possibilities before letting go. You have to see something more than the dangling modifiers and misplaced grammar clauses in the school reports and stories you write. You have to see something more than the fragments of Blue Phaceleias, Spanish Needles, and Wild Heliotropes. You have to refuse to let fear and the difficult moments of your past define you. You have to see that there are different kinds of dogs out there than the one that bit you, that there are different men than your stepfather, that there are different women than all who came before you. You have to

expect more. You have to consider all the bits and pieces together in order to come away whole.

*

I haven't forgotten the angry words Trevor and I have exchanged. I haven't forgotten sleepless nights or slamming doors. There are emotional scars that run deep, like their counterpart memories, a secret history I carry in my heart and mind. A dog and a camping trip can't suddenly save a marriage. But the three of us seemed to share the same hope for a home and for love and respect as we set up our tent in Escalante. We were all there together, trying to establish where and how we belonged, finally crawling beneath the heavy flannel sleeping bag when the sun tipped over behind the rock cliffs rushing the sky. Lexi snuggled in between us, in that deep puppy sleep that is marked by contented sighs and groans. We held hands above her head and stroked her sleeping back as if this were simply the way our life was, the way it had always been.

*

One of the most admirable qualities of a dog is that they live in a perpetual present state. For dogs there is no past memory of anger or hurt. Nor is there any future notion of anxiety or fear. There is only the now. The scent, the scene, the people entering the front door, the car zipping by on the highway, the pool of sunshine from the window that is spilling forth right now. For Lexi our trip to Escalante was not a week that would hopefully heal our marriage, it was simply the way life was in whatever moment it found us in. The second day of our stay we set out from our camp ground to hike lower Calf-Creek Falls, an easy six mile round-trip through a narrow valley. Utah Junipers and Pinyon pines mark the beginning of the trail. The trees are a life force in this

red rock desert locals call the spine of Hell. Producing small seeds and dark nuts, the Juniper and Pinyon feed nearly ever wild animal that inhabitants the dry terrain. Nearly a thousand years ago the Pueblo people and Freemont Indians trusted the Pinyon nuts to feed them through the winters. They made beads from dried Juniper berries and sealed baskets with the resin from both trees. Trevor and I pulled the hard blue balls from the branches to launch at the backs of one another as we made our way along the thick trail of sandstone sediment. When the Junipers and Pinyons give way to the Navajo sandstone walls, pictographs and stone granaries from the ancient native peoples can be spotted from the canyon floor, etched into the streaked layers of minerals. We hiked silently at first, squinting against the sun. Lexi plunked along between us as we walked, her puppy feet leaving light imprints in the sandy path. Hoping to reach the falls before noon, Trevor carried sandwiches and carrot sticks in his day bag. My husband has always been a fan of schedules and plans when it comes to camping. We intended to tromp along steadily, stopping only for three minute water breaks every half hour. The puppy at our sides, however, shared no concept of a pending lunch schedule and after walking for twenty minutes or so Lexi would simply fall over in a sound sleep. The first few times she collapsed in exhaustion we could still rouse her, wiggle our hands along her back, curl our fingers beneath her ears until her nub tail waggled and she popped to her feet again, rejuvenated by a bit of affection. Or we could simply walk a few paces ahead, turn and call back to her, coaxing her to come again and again until she realized we might leave and would come streaking down the path, clouds of cinnamon dust kicking up from her paws. Eventually though, we would waggle and pat, call and command, and she would only open her dark liquid eyes to our silhouettes in the sun then curl up and go

back to sleep. Soon it became evident she would no longer move. Scooping the eight-pound puppy into our arms we took turns carrying her along the trail, the way small children carry ragdolls. Her four paws turned up into the air, our arms beneath her back, she could not have been more content to sleep in the sun against our skin.

Four days later, we began the drive back to Logan. As soon as the tiny digitalized bars appeared in the corners of our respective cell phones, indicating near-by towers providing airwaves, we called friends and family members to tell them we were headed back, to let them know we had not pushed each other over the edge of any cliffs, or held one another's heads down in any streams. As a matter of fact, we explained, it was a wonderful trip.

These were the only words we had for Dr. Jorgensen as well. Meeting with her shortly after our Spring Break vacation, we recounted the weather, the scenery, the hikes, the campfire conversations. *It was wonderful*, we repeated again and again, *it was wonderful*.

*

Oligoastrocytoma is a beautiful word. The long, moaning o's, the nearly iambic rhythm, the way breath rushes out of your mouth in a soft sigh at the sixth syllable, a feeling that corresponds so well with the pronunciation of *cy*. It is melodic, the type of word your tongue loves to taste, rolling the light L against the back of your teeth, kissing the M at the end. It is a crème brulee of language, a vanilla liquor base lined with caramel in a silver scalloped dish. Such a spectacular word, and such a hateful thing.

I whisper the word again and again as I read it in the stack of computer print-outs and fliers Trevor's mother has brought for me to look at, an offering of information.

Though I wish I could pretend I don't care, that I have no interest in oligoastrocytomas, I know I can't, so I flip through the papers in the corner of my living room couch and mouth the word *oligoastrocytoma* again and again.

On a print out from the National Cancer Institute I read that an oligoastrocytoma is "a brain tumor that forms from both oligodendrocytes and astrocytes, which are types of glial cells (cells that cover and protect nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord and help them work the way they should). An oligoastrocytoma is a type of mixed glioma."

Medscape Today offers a little more, "Oligoastrocytomas contain distinct regions of oligodendroglial and astrocytic differentiation and account for 5% to 10% of infiltrative gliomas. They may be biphasic, with the 2 components separate, or intermingled, with the 2 neoplastic cell types in proximity."

The only text that leaves me without wishing for a medical dictionary composed especially for English majors, is from Wikipedia: "Oligoastrocytomas are a subset of brain tumor that present with an appearance of mixed glial cell origin, astrocytoma and oligodendroglioma. Often called a 'mixed glioma', about 2.3% of all reported brain tumors are diagnosed as oligoastrocytoma. The median age of diagnosis is 42 years of age. Oligoastrocytomas, like astrocytomas and oligodendrogliomas, can have malignant histology. However, lower grades can have less aggressive biology. If resected, the surgeon will remove as much of this tumor as possible, without disturbing eloquent regions of the brain (speech/motor cortex) and other critical brain structure. Thereafter, treatment may include chemotherapy and radiation therapy of doses and types ranging based upon the patient's needs. Even after surgery, an oligoastrocytoma will often recur. The treatment for a recurring brain tumor may include surgical resection, chemo and

radiation therapy. Survival time of this brain tumor varies—younger age and low-grade initial diagnosis are factors in improved survival time."

My first impulse, because I can't entirely wrap my mind around the articles from the Cancer Institute and *Medscape Today*, is to hope that whoever entered the information into Wikipedia about oligoastrocytomas is wrong, that some sick person somewhere thought it would be funny joke to post false information about brain tumors on the web. I leave the printouts in piles on the living room floor and stumble to my own laptop, just to check and see if anyone else engaging in the democracy of information has changed the webpage. But it is still there in blue and gray font complete with hypertext, hyperlinks and several drop down menu options. I want it to be wrong. What I want the entry to say is "oligoastrocytoma is nothing more than a pretty word, with eight syllables, four hard and four soft. If it were a thing it might look like an exotic sunset, taste like a fancy desert, or be the name of some long-forgotten mythology figure. It is certainly not a brain tumor in the left hemisphere of your husband's head. It certainly does not threaten the future."

*

Our four days in Escalante had been incredible, had made us feel close to each other again. But back in Logan I was not sure where they left us. After returning home we didn't have to look far in our apartment to find old arguments and hurts swept under the corners of rugs or stacked in closets where we had left them. On the scale of experience, four days of sun, tinfoil dinners, and peace does not begin to outweigh months of meanness, but we did have an eight-pound Doberman to add to our side and

Lexi was growing every day. Her lengthening leg bones and the rest of her daily progress still offered a 'home-base' for any conversation that began to hover on the border of argument.

I really can't stand when you speak to me in that tone of voice.

Look, watch Lexi chase that spider, she can't decide what she thinks about it. And just like that the tone of voice, the argument, the temptation to slip back into our cycle of argument and abuse disappeared among the sixteen legs huddled around on the kitchen floor as Trevor and I laughed at our four-legged pooch sniff a frantic eight-legged black and orange spider scrabbling over the tiles—her deep snorting inhale would suck the spider back towards her big, wet nose until the following snarfel of exhaled breath would send it tumbling end over end again.

*

Like any pet, Lexi required certain equipment. We purchased jars and bags of turkey liver dog treats, rawhide chews, stainless steel feeding bowls, zoom brushes for her coat, bottles of WoolLite carpet cleaner, a fluffy bed I embroidered her name on, a bright red tennis ball, and a multitude of squeaking, stuffed toys. In a funny little bookshop on Main Street, I found a book on Doberman Pinscher's and bought it along with, *What is my Dog Really Thinking* and *The Dog Whisperer: A Compassionate, Nonviolent Approach to Dog Training*. The Doberman Pinscher book was one of those slick, perfectly square manuals produced en masse with other titles like *Cocker Spaniels*, *Pugs*, and *Italian Greyhounds*. Printed on the front cover was the long sleek head of a Doberman Pinscher, its black ears pitched forward, its eyes focused intently on something in the distance. Lexi fit the image of Dobermans that most are familiar with.

Her black coat stretched over her muscular little body, rust colored markings stood out on her legs, chest, rump, muzzle, and in two little smudges above her eyes. Though a lolling little puppy at the time I purchased the book, she would grow into one of the world's most recognizable breeds. However, the nature of that recognition is not particularly positive. The conversation I had with my father on the phone after returning from Escalante and explaining that Trevor and I adopted a dog, and not just any dog, but a Doberman, captured the stereotypes we would be up against.

A Doberman? he asked.

A Doberman. I replied, *But she's really sweet.*

Sure, all killer-dogs are really sweet.

I was surprised at his tone, the man who had taught me to love and treasure dogs was not as ecstatic as I about my new pet. I told him so. I told him about Trevor's theory that it all depends on *how* a dog is raised, not what shape or shade or genetic line the dog holds in the first place.

Chelsi, he sighed into the phone, *I'm not saying all Dobermans are bad, but as soon as you say the words Doberman Pinscher the image of a mad, snarling guardian of the junkyard immediately pops into mind. Or the mad, snarling dog next to a sneering Nazi in World War II. Or the mad, snarling attack animal patrolling the billionaire's estate. Are you seeing the pattern here?*

My father spoke about patterns to me before, months earlier after learning about the trouble and violence in my marriage—before counseling, before the dogs. He'd warned me to get out while I still could. On the phone late one night he shared stories of women and girls he'd known with abusive spouses—invariably they all ended up in the

hospital or bruised and battered with a gun to their heads. *It won't change* he'd said. It was only one conversation. And after I told him that I would be staying and that Trevor and I had begun to see a marriage counselor he never spoke of it again. Indeed, he became a pillar of support when Trevor's tumor was discovered, driving down to the hospital to sit outside the surgery room with me, offering to pay for our fuel as we drove to and from doctors' offices, calling nightly during the weeks of radiation and chemo just to check in and see how Trevor felt. For my part, I often found myself, still sometimes find myself, trying to prove to everyone around me that Trevor and I are well and happy—that, in fact, I am the most content I have ever been in my life. During telephone conversations when I sit in the beat-up recliner in my front room, I tell family and friends about the walks we take with our dogs, the dinners we cook, the movies we see, we, we, we. I am a broken record of bliss, desperate to show them all that things are not getting worse, that there is no gun to my head but that I've chosen to stay with a man I love, a man who loves me and a growing Doberman Pinscher who had the run of our entire household.

I hoped that Raymond Dudas and Betsy Sikora Siino's guide to Doberman Pinschers and "everything about purchase, care, nutrition, training, and behavior—with full-color photographs and illustrations by Michele Earle-Bridges" might give me the insight to turn the stereotypical image of that snarling attack animal into the picture of the clumsy charcoal and chestnut ball nuzzled against my stomach snoozing on the couch as I leafed through the book at home. It was Michele Earle-Bridges who got me in trouble.

Each page of the Doberman guide book had some sort of picture on it – photos of a pile of newborn puppies, groomers illustrating how to brush out a dog's coat, and show

dogs prancing proudly around competition rings. The images that caught my eye presented the same strong Doberman body, but instead of being covered in the sleek black coat these dogs wore a stunning russet-red jacket around their rust markings. The hue not unlike my own auburn hair. "Dobermans are available in several coat colors," I read, "black, red, blue, and fawn." Michele Earle-Bridges apparently had an affinity for photographing black and red Dobermans side by side, their coats complimenting each other in a stately way, their thick necks and wet noses held high.

It began with innocent conversation, Trevor and I speculating about what it would be like to own two Dobermans. *They look so good together, a red and black one I mean,* I would say casually over salads at dinner, *like a complete set.*

They're not like dishes, dear. Trevor would say between bites of romaine lettuce. *You don't buy them in sets.*

I've never seen a red one before.

Me either.

*

After scheduling Trevor's "awake craniotomy" with Dr. Jensen for September 29th, 2007 Trevor and I returned to Logan to wait. Caught between what was not a particularly pleasant past and what looked to be a painful future, we sheltered in the present. Fall in the Northern Utah mountains comes in a flash of crimson and saffron leaves. Overnight the canyons surrounding Logan suddenly seem ablaze in color, reds and yellow and oranges so vibrant, that if you were to lift a handful of leaves from a branch and squeeze, it would seem as though you could wring the color right out of them. Leaves line the Logan River Trail where Trevor and I ride our bikes with the dogs, we

have two by this time. Seven months old now, our puppies have grown into sixty-five pounds of long legs and lungs bursting to pant and froth with running. We bike three miles on city streets to reach the mile and a half green belt that winds along between the Logan river and the local golf course. High willows and oaks hang overhead, shading the asphalt walkway. Cattails and reeds rise from the swampy ground and hide the ducks that float lazily on the water among them. If the sound of the nearby traffic whirring down the highway can be ignored, it is easy to feel like you are in the middle of the woods, instead of the city, until the autumn leaves begin to drift down and line the path like terra cotta tiles, leaving windows between the bare branches where walkers and bikers can glimpse the office buildings and fast food chains in the distance. We spin down the trail, knees and heart's pumping rapidly, breathing in the cool fall air, a dog at the side of each bike, their ears peeled back, tongues lolling from the corners of their mouths, as we follow each curve of the river, the breeze pulling at our jackets. Sometimes I wonder if we could just pump the pedals harder, propel the tires faster, if we didn't turn around at the end of the trail but kept going up and up into the hills and the burning colors of the scrub oaks, if we could form enough friction against the fibers of the universe pulsing around us and in our ears that we might just disappear in a wisp of smoke and ride into a place where there was no messy, denial-packed past, no present brain-tumors or stereotypes about bad marriages and bad dogs, and no future surgeries, but just two dogs, two bikes, a man and a woman pedaling and breathing in the deep autumn air.

*

In the first few months after adopting Lexi, Trevor located the breeder who originally sold her in Syracuse, Utah. A bubbly woman named Samantha, she sent

several e-mails asking questions about us and our intentions for the dog, trying to ensure that Lexi would now have a stable and secure home. "I have an open-door policy," she wrote, "if it doesn't work out for you two please don't try to resell the puppy again, just bring her back to me. I like to screen the homes they go to." Samantha, it seemed, also believed the stereotypes of mad, snarling Dobermans could be reversed. Her solution was to breed well-tempered even-mannered dogs with wide skull bases. She explained in one correspondence that there was a theory that certain genetic lines of Dobermans had been inbred continuously in an attempt to achieve small, solid skulls. "The problem with this," she wrote, "is there is not enough room in the small skull for the dog's brains. Their brains press against the bone. It is like having a constant headache. All that pressure can make them unpredictable, sometimes they just snap." She wanted to send her puppies to homes that would also work against the negative image of junk-yard guard dogs by raising submissive, obedient animals.

We wrote telling her how pleased we were with Lexi, how much we enjoyed her soft puppy breath and clumsy paws. We wrote about her success of learning to sit and the funny way that she cocked her head to the left side when we spoke to her. Samantha wrote back delighted, explaining how pleased she'd been with the puppies from Lexi's litter. "I have one of her littermates left. A little red girl whose home fell through at the last minute. She is a little shy, but will grow to be a good, calm dog. If you know anyone who is looking…"

We were not looking for two killer dogs. However, often it seems that the best things happen to us when we are not expecting them too, the job offer that comes casually at a neighborhood social mixer, the spectacular friend you meet because you

both end up in the same college biology class, the way Trevor and I had begun to sleep wrapped up in each other's arms again beneath our thick comforter at night, a puppy nestled on top of our chests, the three of us breathing slow, steady breaths, lost in dreams that were our own and each other's all at once.

*

Ripsi appeared as a drowsy, brown butterball in the doorway of Samantha's kitchen when we went to pick her up from the suburban home in Syracuse. Living the entire eight weeks of her life on kitchen linoleum, Ripsi was terrified of carpet and refused to come out across the fibrous expanse of plush sea-foam-green to the living room where we were seated. Samantha snuggled Lexi, complimenting us on the condition of her coat and her lively personality. Trevor and I had grown accustomed to the hum of Lexi's elated energy that only stopped when she tipped over in one of her deep sleeps and exploded again upon waking. We were dubious about the pot-bellied puppy that seemed more afraid of us than the carpet, but Trevor slipped a stack of bills into Samantha's palm. She handed him the AKC registration papers and we were the proud owners of two Doberman Pinschers.

*

The differences between Lexi and Ripsi's personalities immediately became apparent. Lexi was content to stay up all night, chasing after balls and gnawing on squeaking toys. She slept fitfully through the night and snoozed through the morning. Ripsi zonked out at eight-o-clock every night, sometimes emitting soft puppy snores, her mouth still wrapped around a piece of rawhide. As Lexi just began to settle down in the wee hours of the morning, Ripsi was awake and ready for the day at five-thirty. Lexi

quickly learned new trained behaviors and tricks but chose to think of them as suggestions rather commands. Though it took Ripsi longer to master “sit,” “stay,” and “come,” once she figured it out she was as reliable as the rising sun she woke with. Lexi was the first into everything, Ripsi always hanging back behind her sister reluctantly; a redeemable trait when Lexi learned to knock over the garbage can, an annoying one when at three-months-old and twenty-five pounds Ripsi still was afraid to walk up and down the stairs. Lexi lived to play fetch; Ripsi would rather stay curled in our laps and have her belly rubbed.

Though opposites in many ways, Lexi and Ripsi were frustratingly similar in others. Before bringing Ripsi home, Trevor and I speculated that raising two puppies surely wouldn’t be different than raising one puppy. However, it soon became clear to us that raising two puppies was more akin to raising ten. Both Lexi and Ripsi shared the impish inquisitiveness that led to chewed up socks, sticky spider-traps stuck to their paws, and trips to the vet after they lapped up toilet bowl cleaner. My father warned me that *two dogs will do things one dog will never think of doing*. A prophecy that proved true when I would return home from work to find all the fibers pulled out of my favorite kitchen rug or a bag of potato chips somehow pulled from the cupboard and shredded all over the living room floor.

House-training became an especially grueling time. Our strategy to teaching the puppies to take care of any natural needs outside on the lawn was to simply scoop them up and run them outside whenever we spotted one with a suspicious look of concentration on their face. This act was rendered all the more difficult because we lived in a basement apartment with one door and fifteen steps between us and the backyard. What’s more,

Lexi and Ripsi who never wanted to sleep at the same time, play at the same time, or go for a walk at the same time, always had to pee at the same time. Just as I bent to pick up one puppy, I would see the other begin to squat on the other side of the room and scream for Trevor. If he was not home, I would lift one dog, scramble to grab the other one, and try to make out the back door and up the stairs before their little bladders burst into yellow blossoms on my shirt or jeans.

Our conversations with Dr. Jorgenson became less and less about our marital troubles and more and more about our frustrations with dog training or about the puppies' latest escapade. As our dogs began to bond more and more deeply with us as their owners, we began to bond with each other again as a husband and wife, sometimes collapsing in laughter against the back of our leather-bound chairs in Dr. Jorgensen's office before we could finish describing the expression that came across Trevor's face when he discovered Lexi and Ripsi chewing his boxer-briefs in our bedroom one day or found them covered in soot after they rolled in the fireplace. Focusing on our new life with the dogs we began to forget to focus on the hurt in our past. We stopped concentrating on who was right and who was wrong, we stopped fighting. We even stopped thinking about Trevor's brain tumor and the approaching surgery deadline. We were just two people and two dogs, and most of the time, that was all that mattered.

Though we certainly deeply loved Lexi and Ripsi, Trevor and I are not the sort of people who confuse animals with children. We never referred to each other as Lexi and Ripsi's "mommy" or "daddy," and we didn't think of them as our "kids." We had not adopted two puppies in the hopes that they would somehow bring us back together and save our marriage, the way some couples sometimes try to have a child. Months and

months later when trying to figure out exactly what impact the dogs had on the transformation of our relationship I would ask Trevor what he thought while we were driving in the car on our way back from visiting friends in our hometown, the dogs sleeping in the backseat.

I think we'd forgotten how to love each other, he began, *and somehow watching how you loved the dogs and took such good care of the dogs made me remember the things that I love about you. It helped me see the sweet, kind girl I fell in love with. It helped me forget the mean, distrustful people we'd become. We aren't perfect, but I think we are learning how to be perfectly flawed, how to let go of things we can't control or fix.*

*

Just because Trevor and I were learning to let go of the memory of our past hurt and anger did not mean the friends and family members who witnessed it were ready to. Over lunch with my girlfriends, I would be reminded of all the times Trevor had hurt me, of the times that I swore I would never go back to him. Colleagues left the business cards of good divorce lawyers on my desk at work. Trevor's brother still refused to talk to me, refused to come to our house telling Trevor that he couldn't stand to be pulled into our problems anymore. Mutual friends who had chosen one side or the other during our separation stopped answering phone calls and invitations to dinner now that we were back together, worried about any lingering awkwardness their various loyalties might have left. Our parents tip-toed around loaded questions like *how are you doing?* when the two of us were together, but during private phone conversations or when one of us left the room they would lean forward with concerned eyes, *No really, how are you doing?* Unable to believe the ugly months of our marriage could be erased by the

adoption of a couple of dogs and a few visits to an aging therapist, they raised their eyebrows at our answers and said *Well, we hope it stays good* in tight voices. In quiet private moments that neither of us would admit to, perhaps we had our own doubts about the strength and fragility of it all as well. Though we seldom slipped back into any of the old arguments, the weeks and months leading up to, and then during, our separation still somehow defined our relationship. I do not know if Trevor wondered if he made a mistake. I had almost entirely quit wondering myself. We didn't talk about the months of our marriage we wished we could black out. But if we closed our eyes we could still hear the shatter of our lives crashing against one another—a sound that haunts and saves us. Haunts, in all its fuzzy, gray memories of pounding fists and slamming doors, and saves because we cannot deny it, cannot black it out, cannot live in the empty spaces erasing history would leave. Instead we have to stretch out our arms and fingers, reach across and find each other again on the other side of all the bad feelings.

The moments I questioned my marriage grew farther and farther in between moments where I simply thought of other things. There was much to think of. We had discovered the tumor in Trevor's brain and were preparing for surgery, then six weeks of radiation and a year of chemotherapy to follow. Our time before the doomsday of September 29th 2006, couldn't be filled with misgivings and questions, there was not enough of it. Instead we filled it with our dogs, biking, hitting tennis balls across open fields for them to chase, walking the streets of downtown Logan, trying to teach them to "spin," "beg," "shake," delighting when each of their triumphs over a new command became our own.

Working to divorce the stereotypes of aggressive attack dogs we decided not to crop Lexi and Ripsi's ears into the demonic, pointed, devil-dog ears of recognizable Dobermans, allowing their long, natural, floppy ears to add an aura of over-grown puppy to their ferocious features. We taught them to sit at the approach of strangers, corrected every growl or snarl we heard, and encouraged passer-bys to pet them on the street before answering questions about what breed they were. After learning they were Doberman's, some of the joggers and walkers we met on our paths would jerk their hands away in fear. Some of the other beret-bearing men who walked the parks and the river trail to work off bellies from years of dinners and desserts or the sweat-suit bound women carrying power-weights who took a break to scratch Lexi and Ripsi behind their ears would gasp a surprised, *really?* Some still seemed unconvinced, and commented that they looked more like hunting dogs. A young Hispanic boy down the block is convinced to this day that our dogs are just *skinny Rottweilers*. Other's confronted us about the Doberman's reputation more directly. In late August we stopped to speak to one old woman resting on a bench. She squinted up at us against the sun as she loved the long triangle head that Ripsi lay in her lap against her thigh, *Doberman? Aren't those the kind that ate that boy down in Texas?* In actuality, the news story she referred to concerned a family Pit Bull who killed a child a week earlier. But since we believe that you cannot judge a dog merely because of its shape, we didn't correct the woman, instead telling her simply that our dogs only ate dog food, and the occasional graham cracker at night. *You are a good doggie*, she patted Ripsi's head and leaned down to give her a kiss between the eyes before we went on our way. People we never would have spoken to offered conversation over the dogs outside of grocery stores and gas stations, at outdoor music concerts, on the walkways of

the park and River Trail. Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows the interesting connections the animals allow you to make with others: the seven-year old down the street who comes to feed Lexi and Ripsi gummy worms through our chain-link fence, the man who breeds Boxer's in the new sub-division across from the park who called us over when his new litter was born, the gas-station attendant at the Tesoro who comes out to see the dogs when we are traveling somewhere with them in the back seat and who assures us he believes that *Hell has a special place for those folks who don't like dogs*. We have met the many dogs along our own street and neighborhood: Miles, Sunny, Luna, Ayla, Roxy, Bert, Boston, Jezzabelle, Hoss, Rocky, Junior, Ralph, Barkie, and Snowball. There is a Chihuhuhua named Kong, a beagle called Caper, and a long little blonde mix that answers to Foxy. Walking Lexi and Ripsi in the late afternoons we wave to them all as they sit on the porch with their owners or walk at the end of their own leashes. There are others we have yet to meet: the Brittany spaniel who howls when we pass her lot, the ancient Great Pyrenees who spends the hot afternoon under a crooked apple tree, the one I don't recognize as any formal breed with a swishing, plumy, black tail who scrabbles at the inside of her living room window each time we walk by.

*

Two nights before the surgery we are on one of our favorite haunts – The Logan River Trail. Yellow burnished leaves litter the path the evening we walk, glittering with drops from a light shower earlier in the day. The water on the small willow and cottonwood leaves shines in the falling sunlight and I tell Trevor it looks like it has rained goldfish. The dogs walk along happily, noses to the fresh ground, pulling at their leashes only when they spot a swank German Shepherd up ahead or when we pass a dark-haired

woman with three bandana bearing Yorkies. We are quiet as we walk; only disturbing the silence to tell one of the dogs to heel or scold when they lunge after birds that are too fast for them to catch anyway. We have so much to say to one another that we cannot say anything. A block from our house I finally ask Trevor if he is worried about the surgery. He shrugs and says *you can do anything for a day*. I probe more, what about the risk of complications, the memory loss, the possibility he could spend months in the hospital? *You can do anything for months.* It is an answer that infuriates and inspires at the same time. I stop asking and we walk the rest of the way holding hands, letting the dogs wander and sniff the six feet their leashes allow.

I pack our bags for the hospital stay, folding in sweat pants and baggy shirts, loose skirts and flat shoes, tucking in Tylenol, toothpaste, and plush towels. In a separate tote I load books, DVD's, I-pods and finally Patch and B. Trevor and I both still sleep with comfort items from when we were children. When we were dating as undergraduates in college I remember being delighted to find the green silk baby blanket beneath his pillow once while I sat on his bed listening to him play the guitar with his roommates. The blanket is frayed at the edges and worn in some places so heavily that the material seems nearly transparent.

I have slept with my stuffed dog, Patch, from the time I was a child, and my family always teased that I would only ever get rid of him when I married and my husband threw him out of bed. I would laugh and plan to still store Patch in my closet, and then I met Trevor and his baby blanket, "B." He never said a word about Patch, and after we were married we simply tucked the objects beneath our pillows as we made our bed every morning. Both are scraggy and torn, each their own shade of a dingy gray that

comes with age, and use, and love. Trevor's blanket is missing one corner, and Patch is missing the hard plastic triangle he used to sport for a nose, both victims to the early chewing stage of our dogs. I finger the old items, wonder briefly about what the nurses and residents might think and then stuff them in the bag anyway.

My little sister gave me Patch when I was seven-years-old, after Disney's animated film *101 Dalmatians* had just been released. He came zip tied to a red cardboard box and wore a red collar with PATCH printed in black lettering. I hauled the toy to bed with me that first night, and have slept with him under my left arm, tight against my side, ever since.

Trevor's loved his baby blanket much longer. It was given to his mother at his birth by his paternal grandmother. She'd carefully hand-quilted the fabric into a scene of a lamb bounding over a fence, the sun rising behind it. Green silk on one side, soft white flannel on the other, the material must have been expensive. He was her first grandson though and certainly afforded the best she could offer. Trevor towed his treasured blanket everywhere, calling it "B." because he couldn't entirely pronounce the name of this thing he loved the most.

I load our luggage in the car, walk the dog-sitter around the house, rub both dogs' bellies, convince my husband that we really must go now, and we drive to Salt Lake. We meet Trevor's parents at the hospital for pre-operative procedures. Dr. Jensen and his surgical team have ordered a CAT scan of Trevor's brain. After studying the images, they paste small circular sponge leads to his head in the areas where the bolts and machine lines will be attached at six-o-clock the next morning to provide geographic locations for the surgery. A nurse traces the outline of each sponge in a dotted purple permanent

marker line, in case the sponges slip during the night. With six sponges all around his head Trevor looks something like a gangly teenager with swollen purple and gray pimples, and when the nurse is finished and suggests we go out to dinner he points at the dots covering his forehead and says, *Are you serious*?

She is. And, in an effort to make him feel a little better, she gives him a pad of extra stickers which he happily presses into the foreheads of his parents and me as we drive through down-town Salt Lake City looking for a restaurant. Over steaming steaks and Brazilian salads at the Rodizeo Grill, we discuss all of the items Trevor might want when he wakes up from surgery. His mother is jotting down the names and brands of our favorite snack foods when Trevor suddenly turns to me, eyes wide, *Did you get B?* Turning a piece of chicken over on my tongue, I nod.

When was the last time that blanket was washed? Trevor's mother demands, looking up.

Trevor looks at me. And I think briefly about lying, claiming it was washed 'just the other day,' or about admitting that I hate doing laundry more than anything, or confessing that I would rather curl up with a good book and a bowl of microwaveable popcorn than prowl my house for items that deserve washing. Instead I chew chicken and think for a moment back to a time we were dating on a vacation in California when soda got spilled on B.

Two years ago.

My mother-in-law has the grace to only blink twice, purse her lips slightly, and say, *Why don't I take that and wash it tonight.*

I shrug and nod, but Trevor is unsure, *Mom, B is old, it's really fragile.*

I'll hand wash it and just use some WoolLite. She assures him.

He relents and we finish dinner. At the car I fish out Trevor's blanket from the trunk and hand it to his mother. We hug, pat each other on the back, then part to drive to our separate hotels. When Trevor's mother wraps her arms around me I feel my body stiffen. I am not entirely sure why I am so defensive around his parents. It has been nearly eight months since our separation, and, like my own parents, I don't believe Trevor's family holds many grudges against me. I know they want us to do well and be happy. I know these things and yet their constant presence at every doctor's appointment and never-ending phone-calls about what medical procedures and precautions they believe we should take has made me feel like a child they do not trust. In the rational region of my mind I know that Trevor has been their son for twenty-three years and my husband for only a little over a year—half of which was spent yelling, screaming and fighting and then attending counseling sessions. What I won't realize until months later is that much of the hostility is born out of my self-consciousness about the bad months of my marriage, my own self-judgment and condemnation for the mistakes I have made. Like the child who still sleeps with her stuffed dog and like the little girl in third grade writing about "Wonderful Wild Elk" sometimes I still cannot let go of the longing to be perfect, to have a simple and straight story with a happy ending and no dangling modifiers, to have a marriage with no blacked out moments, to freely remember all of my life, recount each moment of my narrative and have it be happy and whole and perfect, like a plate high on a hutch shelf.

*

I do not like hospital rooms. They feel expensive, starched, bleached, and bland. Nor do I like the scrubs all hospital staff must wear. In the darkness of dawn the next morning, it feels like we have woken up at some giant slumber party and people are wandering the halls in their pajamas. Instead of the sensible white sneakers the nurses and doctor's wear, I half expect everyone to have slippers and spend a few moments imagining what selection of sleep footwear each individual who walks through the small door to our room would display. The anesthesiologist is young, with thick black hair pulled into a loose braid. I imagine her in pink slippers, maybe even those rabbit kind. She is the one who has finally come to take Trevor back to the operating room. *Tell me about yourself,* she chirps, as she prepares sedatives and desensitizers to shoot into his veins. She is pretty, the sort of girl I would have been jealous of my husband looking at in another time and in another life. Trevor's eyes lock with mine and he begins talking. It is the first time I have seen him look afraid for what is about to happen to him, but his voice is calm. *This is my wife. We've been married just over a year. We live in Logan, Chelsi is finishing her Master's degree there. We have two big dogs.* The needles are slipped into his arm, but he does not flinch. *They are Dobermans, but really, really sweet. We take them on lots of walks and bike rides.* He begins to close his eyes and the anesthesiologist is unlocking the brakes on his hospital bed. *We just went for a walk the other day after it rained and the dogs were acting so silly. Had to smell everything.* I kiss his forehead as he is wheeled out of the room. He is still talking about Lexi and Ripsi and walking as he disappears down the hall. I think I hear him say something about raining goldfish.

Trevor's family is in the waiting area of the surgical center. When I emerge from the heavy cedar double doors from the patient admittance area, his mother approaches and hugs me tight against her chest. Tears stream down her face and she has a million questions. I do not want to be touched and her tears make me feel awkward, like some sort of imposter. I still have never cried about any of it. She wipes her eyes and begins to dig through her shoulder bag. She produces Trevor's baby blanket. *Look how clean it came!* she exclaims. She's right, the silk shines more like the way that silk should, and the once-white flannel looks quite a lot less gray. She folds the blanket into my hands and then pulls me along over to the rows of chairs where the rest of Trevor's family sits flipping through *Newsweeks, Reader's Digests,* searching the play-lists of their I-pods, or text messaging. I take a chair on the outer edge of the circle they have created, lean my head against the wall behind me, close my eyes, and roll the edge of Trevor's blanket between my fingers.

Time is a strange thing. The weeks before Trevor's surgery it seemed to bear down on us, to push against our backs rushing and rushing towards surgery, and hospitals, and this interruption to our lives. In the waiting room of the Huntsman Cancer Institute, time becomes a different sort of enemy. After weeks of hurried moments, practically stolen away before I could even taste them, this morning it is as if time has nearly stopped. It drags its feet, minutes feeling like hours, bitter and sour, not sweet or golden or the way that poets I've ever read claim them to be. I close my eyes, open them, glance at the clock, surprised to see that only a few moments have passed, sometimes only a few seconds. After ten minutes, I realize this will be a maddening way to spend the seven hours the surgical procedure requires. Somewhere in the back of my mind I

understand that time is neutral, that it only feels there's been a change because my own situation has changed. Time is the constant, I am the variable. It is my grasp of time that is fallible, not Time's grasp on me. Paul Bowles, the expatriate writer, had the right idea when he remarked, "We get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless."

I long to hit the seven hour limit of waiting time in the lobby, and as the clock marks off the meters of this intangible aspect of our lives I can't help but think about the mistakes we have made, the time we have wasted. I wonder about the first six months of my marriage. Would it have been different if we knew there was somehow a deadline looming? Maybe we would have argued less, taken more walks. Maybe.

At 1:30 Dr. Jensen's senior resident assistant escorts us to a private conference room, walling us away from the other families in the general waiting area still pacing and anticipating the outcomes of other surgeries, still checking the hands of the clock that suddenly seem to be moving again for me. He says the doctor will be in shortly to report on the outcome of the surgery. After only a few moments Dr. Jensen bursts into the room, a smile creasing the pale skin on his face.

Trevor did amazingly well. There's no paralysis. He seems to be doing great. He is headed up to recovery, you can see him in half an hour. I have been steeling myself for so long to receive bad news that I almost don't process this good news. For the next

few minutes, Dr. Jensen answers questions and describes the surgery in detail. He tells us that based on the way the tumor *behaved* during extraction he isn't even sure if Trevor will need any follow-up care, no chemotherapy, no radiation to the brain that threatens to erase his short-term memory. The terminology seems strange, as if certain tumors are grown and raised with better manners than others. Perhaps some are nearly regretful for their unwelcome presence, slipping out easily under the surgeon's scalpel, their smooth excisions serving as apologies for the inconvenience they caused us. They call this sort benign, a word first used by Robert Manning of Brunne, a Gilbertine monk and an English poet, who according to the Oxford English Dictionary, penned the adjective in 1320 CE, in reference to his son. Altruistic, goodhearted, characterized by kindness and concern for others. And because all things must have their opposite, they call the other kind, the badly behaving sort, malignant. Even the low, guttural hiss in the word sounds ominous. Hateful, poisonous, vicious, characterized by intense ill will or spite.

Dr. Jensen warns us that he cannot say this for sure if Trevor's tumor is benign or malignant until next Wednesday, after he and other practitioners look at its pathology. But for today the good news is enough. After Dr. Jensen leaves we all pull out cell phones and begin to call and text message the many people waiting in other places to hear about the outcome of the surgery. I hand a list of phone numbers and names to my mother. I don't have the energy to call friends and go over each detail. Instead I call the dog sitter—Lexi and Ripsi are doing fine. They have been walked, watered and fed. I leave the waiting area holding onto Trevor's baby blanket and hope.

*

Because we own dogs, I wage a continual war against the hair they leave everywhere in my house. I've always known that dogs, like many other animals, shed to some degree or another. This inevitable loss of hair was the reason my mother cited throughout my childhood as evidence that all the dogs and cats we owned must stay outside. *You want to go to school with hair all over your clothes?* she'd ask when I tried to smuggle a kitten past the customs clear point of our front door. *You want people to think that you were born in a barn?* I tried to reason with her. Christ had been born in a barn too and certainly he had loved kittens as well. *You won't have any friends,* she'd replied, *They'll whisper about you behind your back. Besides, Christ also said to do everything your mother tells you, and I say the cats stay out.* The kittens were left outside to battle squirrels, get flattened on the road, or grow up and become the half-wild tabbies we could glimpse from far off weaving through the stalks of green grain in the fields behind our house.

Like her mother before her, my mother was a fastidiously clean woman. They each retained their own individual quirks. At Grandmother's house we did not walk through the formal living room. Ever. We did not walk there because the long white carpet was always carefully vacuumed at alternate angles in a precise diagonal pattern. The perfectly manicured floor sparkled like snakeskin in the sunlight pouring through two rounded windows at the end of the room, inviting my sister and I to romp and roll across its glistening surface. We were always stopped by my mother's firm hands and redirected along the plastic walkways that cork-screwed through the rest of the house, protecting carpet that was equally valued as untouchable, but was less easily all together avoided.

My mother's eccentricity was the kitchen floor. For my entire life, up until I was about ten-years-old, I believed that the only purpose a mop served was to poke down the mud nests barn swallows made in the eves of our house. That a floor should be mopped on hands and knees with a rag and a bucket of hot soapy water is one of my mother's core beliefs. It is the only way to get a floor spanking clean, and any other way was *lazy* and left particles of dirt and crushed potato chips on the floor that were *disgusting*. On days when she would mop the kitchen floor she would holler up and down the stairs to my siblings and me, *Come and get a glass if you want anything to drink.* We filed into the kitchen to dutifully select the mug that we would later fill with soft-water from the bathroom sink when we grew thirsty throughout the day. I remember watching her, my toes against the line our living room carpet drew across the entry way to the kitchen tile. On hands and knees she scoured our floor with a slow back and forth rocking motion, humming old Kenny Chesney songs.

There are really only two ways any child raised in such a manner can turn out. When my mother would keep my sister and I home from school simply to clean the house from top to bottom, we would swear to each other over bleach-soaked sponges that we would never do *this* to our children. We dreamed of overflowing garbage cans, piles of crumpled papers, dirty dishes, pizza crusts, dust bunnies, and molding dirty socks littering the landscape of our adult lives. I defiantly told my mother that I would *never* clean my house before she came to visit and the only thing I would cook for her would be macaroni and cheese. *We'll pick up an ice-cream cake from the Dairy Queen for dessert, if you're lucky*, I said. She rolled her eyes and handed me a rag and a bucket of hot, soapy water, *Mop the bathroom floor first*. Lacy was the lucky one. She held true to our

declaration of dross and debris, driving home from her own college town in a car so full of fast-food take out containers, half-spent tubes of mascara, broken CDs, and dirty clothes that my mother asked her to park it anywhere but in front of her house. I could not fight nature and nurture though and spent my college years sorting the clothes in my closet by sleeve-length and color, vacuuming my carpet into various patterns, and mopping tiled floors on my hands and knees.

So I found myself incredibly disturbed when I began to notice short, slim black hairs along the baseboards of the living room. I became even more disgruntled when I saw it clinging to the grout between my kitchen tiles. And I nearly choked in disgust and despair when I spied a short, black bristle spinning down the Chicken noodle soup whirlpool in the pan I stirred on my stove-top. Trevor first realized that something must be done when he found me lying on my back on the bathroom floor.

What are you doing?

Shhh. I snapped.

What?

There. I smashed my lips together hard, pointing up. *How the hell does dog hair get on the ceiling?*

Upon bringing Lexi and Ripsi into our lives, Trevor assured me that Doberman's *hardly shed at all*. His family always kept dogs in the house. *Have you ever felt like there was ton's of dog hair in my parent's place?* he asked. Admittedly, the answer was no. And since we were not allowed to have dogs in the first apartment where we lived when we adopted Lexi and Ripsi, we couldn't have them running around outside where they might be spotted by the neighborhood watch our landlords created to monitor our

every visible move. So to shield them from anyone spying out their front windows, we threw blankets over the puppies and carried them inside where they began their lives as indoor dogs.

We only lived in the basement apartment that banned dogs for the first two months of our canine-owning career. If Lexi and Ripsi shed much during the first three months of their lives, I certainly didn't notice it. For the most part they were just two big tootsie-rolls walking through our home on stick-like legs inappropriately proportioned to their rolling round bodies. They lapped treats from our hands, peed occasionally on the carpet, and slept every two or three hours.

At the beginning of the summer we moved to a new rental home across town—one that welcomed dogs and provided a huge fenced backyard where they could run during the day before being allowed indoors at dark. If they hadn't shed much before, they began shedding shortly after our arrival.

Where? Trevor lowered himself to the floor beside me.

There. I jabbed at the air with my index finger again. *There.*

Studying the slender dark comma above our heads, he shrugged his shoulders against the cool tile, *It's just one hair*.

It's everywhere.

You know there's tons more on the floor we are lying on.

I preferred to think about the one hair on the ceiling. It seemed more manageable. All one had to do was simply balance carefully on the rim of the porcelain tub, right foot in front of the left, reach up, pluck it from the plaster and flush it down the toilet. Who knew where to begin to extract it from the carpet, brush it from the walls, lift it from the

cracks, unload it from the upholstery, clear it from cupboards, and purge it from every last inch of the house? It isn't that I haven't tried. I have swept and scrubbed, waxed and polished until I've emptied entire bottles of Comet and Pledge. I have attacked the root of the problem—bathing the dogs once a week, brushing out their coats on the porch each night, wiping them down with a wet towel before allowing them entry. I used a lint roller on them each night for a full week, running the sticking cylinder of tape along their forelegs and over the nubs of their waggling tails. I surfed blog sites, perusing information like "pour a tablespoon of olive oil on their food" and "buy a 'Doggy-T-Shirt' for your dog to wear indoors, it keeps all their hair on the garment and off your floor" posted by contributors with names like LaBlOvEr and schnauzerpower. Like a shopping list, I checked off remedy after remedy and still shuddered that floating across my floors was enough dog hair to weave a small blanket.

When Trevor discovered me vacuuming, then lint-rollering, then swabbing the living room with a damp towel three days in a row instead of grading my English 1010 students' papers, he calmly sat down and explained that we could not continue to live like this.

The dogs will be just fine sleeping outside, he assured me, *and you won't be distracted from your work by the dog hair on the drapes. As long as they come into this house though you will never get rid of the shedding.*

That night after cleaning the house one final time, I settled into bed with a cup of hot water and honey, a good book in hand. Trevor lugged the dogs' blue and gold tapestry pillows from the foot of our bed outside to the backyard beneath our bedroom

window. He promised again that Lexi and Ripsi would be fine, and after reading for awhile we switched off our lamps and pulled the comforter up below our chins.

I held out until nearly two-o-clock in the morning, the time when one of puppies would have normally woke me to be let out. Instead of waking up to a couple of heavy paws plopped down beside my head and a Doberman balancing on her back legs towering over me, the manner Lexi and Ripsi had taken to announce their natural needs in the middle of the night, I woke only to the quiet, heavy breathing of my husband. The digital numbers of our alarm clock glowed in broken bars of candy-cane crimson, radiating in the blackness of the night. The blades of our ceiling fan beat into slow arcs of dry autumn heat. A few minutes of flipping the comforter off only to pull it back up again found me sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Wearing only a sheer white night gown, I padded through the hallway, unlocked our front door and crept down the porch, forgetting about neighbors who might be up late with open windows or the kids dressed in black that periodically wander our neighborhood streets at night stumbling their way through adolescent anguish. The cement of the driveway pad stung with coolness against my bare feet as I made my way to the back gate. With their typical eagerness, the dogs greeted me at the gate, wiggling and shaking in the dark as soon as I jangled the handle. Gathering their pillows in my arms, our small company made its way back along the drive, around the corner and to the porch, tripping over paws and feet still numbed from sleep.

In the bedroom I laid down the pillows, and the dogs pawed and circled three or four times before collapsing onto in heap. Kneeling beside them I ruffled ears and buried my nose into the base of Lexi's neck—not caring about the sharp black bristles working

their way into the fibers of my nightgown. Her coat smelled with the sweet scent of the softening apples beneath the trees outside, the breeze that blows up from the creek, dirt, garden, and hair. I stayed that way for a while before climbing back into bed and nestling into Trevor's right shoulder. Maybe I could sweep a couple more times each week, maybe after the dogs quit growing so quickly the shedding will taper off a bit, maybe I am just still learning to let some things go.

*

On the sixth floor of The Huntsmen Cancer Institute, behind the doors marked ICU, across from the "Special Care" nurse's station a group of people huddle in room 615. I am surrounded by Trevor's brother and his parents, my mother and her boyfriend, my father and stepmother and my three half-siblings. We squish onto the muted olive couch, perch on metal chairs with mauve padding and shift uncomfortably from foot to foot in the corners where we stand. We have nothing to do but wait. It has been nearly two hours since we met with Dr. Jensen and were told that Trevor's surgery was a success. Nearly an hour and a half since he was scheduled to appear in his recovery room. And though I still know that the steady ticking of seconds and minutes is constant, I find myself wondering if that kindly gray-bearded man, Father Time, who grew out of the ancient Greek god, Chronos, hasn't left his post at the Zodiac wheel, if it isn't true that time sometimes can stand still. Mostly, I worry that something has gone wrong.

In fact, the entire recovery process has not gone exactly the way I planned. The night before while Trevor was deep in the bowls of MRI and Cat Scan machines, I left the waiting room to find the nurses who would be helping us today. The lead nurse wore a name tag that read, Nancy, and her lean face was framed by wispy blonde curls.

Looking uncomfortably at my hands, I tried to explain about the tense relationship with Trevor's parents, about the way I felt more like a child than a wife, about the sting of betrayal and distrust. Months later, looking back on the moment, I know my voice shook as I spoke because I was ashamed of what I asked for, sensing at some instinctive level just how wrong and self-serving my request was. But pushing aside such feelings, I held instead to anger and irritation. *The bottom line,* I begin, *is this: When Trevor comes out of surgery I want to be the only one in his recovery room, I just want a few moments alone with my husband.*

Nancy explained there was not really much she could do. Her soft eyes, surrounded by fine wrinkles offered comfort and understanding, *I can try to tell them that it is best Trevor is not crowded during recovery,* she said softly, *but you might just have to tell them how you feel*.

I left her office feeling validated, a victim of over-bearing in-laws. Nancy's advice and encouragement coupled with the present circumstance of being at the hospital provided the perfect opportunity to declare my independence. And didn't I have every right to? Regardless of what anyone else around us thought, Trevor and I had a good marriage now. I was a good wife. We were happy, and the months of hard work we had done in counseling and the work we had done to reconnect with each other surely gave me all the justification in the world to say, *he is my husband and I love him and I deserve some time alone with him, just the two of us because isn't that all that really matters here? Isn't that all a marriage really is, just two people who love each other and need each other and trust each other?*

But looking around at the faces in the recovery room with me, I knew the answer to each of those questions was no, the same way that I knew the answer to my countless inquiries about mistakes and my marriage was no. Somehow, in that scrubbed-sterile room, waiting anxiously for the ding of the nearby elevator and the squeal of the wheels on the mobile hospital bed, I began to see that we are more than the china plates we dropped as children, more than the chess games we played in college, more than the arguments and fights we have had, more than the bike trails and hiking paths we walk our dogs on, more than mistakes we make and regret and learn from, more than the fragmented moments that define us, more than the memories we wish to erase and the ones we treasure, more than the number of times we watch a full moon rise. Across the dark green walls and the slick marble floor of room 615, I begin to see that we are more than perfect or imperfect creatures, that our stories, no matter how polished or how rough the writing, are never only our stories alone. I am just beginning to see all of it when the elevator bell chimes and a nurse wheels my husband into a room full of his family and friends and their stories that hang and pulse in the air, narrative strands pivoting on this one moment. It is just becoming clear when Trevor sits up, leans away from his pillows and lifts both arms high into the air.

*

Three days after Trevor's brain surgery we are sent home from the hospital. There is no paralysis and Trevor can walk himself to the car. He will begin radiation treatments and chemotherapy in three weeks. The coming months will offer their own unique challenges. The memory loss that accompanies radiation treatments will cause us to invest in post-it notes that we leave around the house to remind Trevor when he is

supposed to go to work, what my school schedule is, what leftovers are in the fridge for dinner. The nausea from chemo will determine a diet of soft jellos and mashed potatoes for one week of every month. There will be blood transfusions and bone marrow infusions and more MRI's and cat scans. There will be prescriptions and bills and vomit and constipation. There will be dizziness and headaches. There will be nights we cry and nights we are too exhausted to cry.

But there will be other things too. There will be offers of support from everyone we know, family will come to stay during hard weeks and sit with Trevor while I go to school or to work. The owner of our neighboring dogs, Sunny and Luna, will bring us Greek Vegetable soup, leaks, chickpeas, and pearled potatoes suspend in thick, steaming tomato broth. We cradle each act of kindness, and as Trevor points out we begin to *really see the good in humanity*. We will watch countless movies snuggled up together on the couch with banana popsicles and the dogs curled at our feet. We will tell each other we love each other more often. We will find ourselves saying *thank you* when one of us brings the other a glass of juice or passes the salt at dinner. We will spend nights in each other's warmth, and once in a while we will even let Ripsi and Lexi, who will grow to weigh nearly eighty pounds, climb up into the big bed and sleep with us like when they were puppies. We will begin to really see the good in ourselves.

*

On a cold Sunday night in March we have gone out with friends to celebrate the end of Trevor's latest chemotherapy cycle. The treatment schedule the doctors in Salt Lake City have him on allow us about two weeks of a normal life, and we take advantage of the time filling it with friends and movies and long walks with the dogs. This

particular Sunday is no exception. After spending the day with dear friends who came visiting from out of town, we ate dinner with a group of my colleagues from the university and then wandered over to the apartment of some other close friends for junk food and a movie. We visit and laugh, finally wrapping up the evening at 12:30 AM. Across town we park our car and Trevor goes to open the gate to the backyard where the dogs are. The wind is biting tonight and I pull my collar tight against my neck waiting for him to return with the keys to the front door. When he rounds the corner toward the porch his face is ashen, and for a moment I think perhaps he is feeling nauseous and we have been out to celebrate too early.

Did you latch the gate when you put the dogs out this afternoon?

I think hard. I always latch the gate, seldom making the mistake of leaving it open because I know that when the sun tips over the horizon and night falls across the valley that Lexi and Ripsi get impatient to come in, and if the gate is not tightly latched they can push and paw until its hinges spring open.

Whether it was my mistake or not does not matter. What matters is that the dogs are gone. We walk through the backyard, whistling and calling, the cool night air lifting our voices high on the breeze and then dropping them flat against the roof top of the garage. We climb back in the car and begin to slowly drive down the streets. We stare out the windows, neither of us speaking. In my mind I believe there can only be three possible outcomes to the night, the dogs may have been hit by a car, they may have been picked up by animal control, or they may have been found by someone else who has decided to keep them. Chest tight and breathing constricted, I roll down my window and slowly whistle into the darkness. There is no answer, only an almost unbelievable

quietness, a tangible stillness that hangs in the air and seeps in through my open window. I squint my eyes into the blackness first willing something, anything, to move, and then willing that something to be my dogs. My thoughts race. The glowing green screen of the car's clock reads 2:23 in broken numbers. My fingers grow warm as Trevor's hand tightens around them.

I know he must be feeling all the things I am feeling: worry, fear, disappointment, regret. In some strange way though, this is our most triumphant moment. We have lost something more dear to both of us than my mother's china plate or Trevor's baby blanket. One of us did not latch the gate and our dogs are gone. It is a situation ripe with opportunity for blame and anger and rage—the emotions fueling the angry words we once exchanged in a golden embossed book, words I have since literally blacked out and then forced myself to remember. It is a situation resulting directly from an obvious and evident mistake. But we do not yell, scream, or cry. There is no hot flash, no boiling blood. Instead we hold hands as the car rounds the last corner toward our little brick home in Logan, Utah. Neither of us says anything, and in that silence I know we have grown together enough that if our dogs are gone we are strong enough to let them go.

In the night's shadow I study my husband's face. Oscar Wilde once said that a man's face is his autobiography. Sometimes I think the scars and wrinkles around our eyes are more easily read then the lines in memoirs, sometimes more cryptic. If I imagine Trevor's face the image pops immediately to mind, as if I molded his features in thick, red clay. I know each pocket and groove, the broad, square jaw, the knot on the bridge of his nose, the thick lashes around startlingly blue eyes. I see so easily his wide forehead, the stretched skin appearing even more bronze beneath the wild shock of long,

blonde, surfer-style curls that were the first to go during the radiation treatments, pulling out in soft handfuls of gold.

He looks so different tonight. His hair is slowly beginning to grow back, sticking up in short, stiff patches, dark like the dog hair that clings to the baseboards in our living room. His face is more hollow than a year ago, eye sockets sunken, skin and bone ravaged by chemotherapy and high dose radiation beams. Even so sick, he is beutiful. I am still staring when he pulls into our driveway, wondering if it is possible for our whole lives to show in our faces, and if it isn't the scars, moles, and tiny imperfections that make them all our own and all beautiful. Lost in thought I hardly notice when Trevor takes his hand from mine to point past the windshield and into the night that has coiled itself around our car. Curled up on the front porch, washed in the yellow light hanging above them are two lanky Doberman dogs, one black and one red. At the sound of our engine they lift their heads, then scramble to their feet where they wriggle and paw at the welcome mat. They are a perfect set. They are trembling excitement. They are waiting impatiently for us to get out of the car, unlock the door and let them inside.

We don't say anything for a moment. Finally when my husband speaks his voice is soft, reflective. If there was ever a day when the wind rushing out of Logan canyon brushed the leaves along the Logan River Trail just right so they rustled against one another making the smallest sonance, his voice might have sounded like that. The strands of air escaping from his lips so thin and breathless that I am unsure if he is speaking to himself or me. *See, they knew where they belonged the whole time.*

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I love writing best at 5:30 in the morning at my kitchen table in a thick, full-length polyester robe that is the color of the sky outside the two big windows in front of me. I often sit there, staring past the blinking cursor of my laptop, past the double-pane windows, past the winding ribbon of road at the end of the front lawn my husband just mowed the previous day, past the darkened windows of my neighbor's house, past the birch and ash trees that bud in late April, past the tentative glow of gold that is just beginning to climb above the Northern mountain peaks. I stare out into the world and type, stop to stare and then type some more. Steadily, words emerge on the page in front of me, and by the time dawn's pastels begin to shade the birch buds in honey-toned pink, I have a story staring back, and I grow almost giddy. But then the teapot shrills, my husband stumbles from the back bedroom towards the shower, the dogs begin snuffling the kitchen floor for crumbs, and as I sip peppermint tea and skim over my morning's work, I begin to realize that staring back at me is a story I am only barely beginning to understand.

In this way, over the past few months, this project, my graduate thesis, has emerged. The finished text is far different from the one I envisioned, the focus has shifted, the form transformed, and the message, in whole, morphed. I am left with what I believe is a more insightful, more complex, more aware narrative. And perhaps, most importantly, I am left with an even deeper awareness of my own complexity as a storyteller. This journey has allowed me to trace out the multifaceted speaker in this story, to study and identify paradoxical and often contradictory versions of myself, and to

discover the continuous core beneath the fragmented surface of my experience. It has been a surprising journey.

Early on I envisioned this text as largely an experiment in fragmentary form. At the time, I believed fragmented narratives offered the perfect venue for recovering and understanding traumatic experience in memoir writing for both the author and reader alike. Such an approach to writing and reading fits with the work emerging from the tenets and concepts of post-modernism and feels natural to writers of my time period. So I began. In the summer of 2007 I began to write shorter segments of my story with an essay-like approach. I wrote ten or twelve pages about my childhood, ten or twelve pages about my dogs, and ten or twelve pages about my marriage. I wrote personal essays, lyric essays, and braided essays. Then I simply piled one on top of the other and stapled them together. This, I was certain, would be my masterpiece.

As a child, when visiting my paternal grandmother, my cousins and I were always encouraged to create "masterpieces." Grandma Gwen, as we called her, would pull out a big cardboard box from somewhere that was overflowing with glorious odds and ends. There were feathers, packets of glitter, and tins of buttons. We found carpet swatches and paint color wheels, scraps of upholstery fabric and half-spent spools of thread. There were old dime-store strands of pearls, milk jug caps, rick-rack, raffia, popsicle sticks and toothpicks, balloons, silk flowers, balls of fraying yarn, plastic medallions from Cracker-Jack boxes, bent-up Kerr's canning lids, marbles, single mittens and mate-less socks, plastic beads, glass beads, wooden beads, and any number of a hundred more unclassified knick-knacks. The box was our Mecca. Grandma Gwen encouraged us to tape, staple, or paste any number of these things to pieces of paper, bits of wood or to each other. We

could color or paint on them. The only rule was that we must do *something* with them, and that something was our "masterpiece." We made sock puppets, decorated tin boxes, and created uncountable collages; always, we were adding the bits and pieces to some solid base, using glue to hold them in place.

This is what the earliest draft of my thesis was missing: a substantial core. Early readers of the text realized it before I did, sending back pages of comments with a troubling refrain, "this is just not holding together yet." The glitter and rick-rack of my experiences had been laid neatly on the page, but once picked up to read they went sliding off onto the floor.

Still, I was resistant. After all, I thought, isn't this the goal of fragmented form? Isn't this the objective of the postmodern memoir trend? And moreover, isn't fragmentary writing the best way to communicate traumatic experience with our readers? In researching my subject matter I pondered extensively Marian MacCurdy's work regarding the neuroscience of storing and then writing traumatic experience. In her essay, "From Trauma to Writing," MacCurdy explains, "*Trauma* to many connotates mental unhealth, if not outright illness. Yet, trauma does not only refer to catastrophic moments. Dictionaries define trauma as a bodily injury produced by some act of violence or some agency outside the body; the condition resulting from the injury; or a startling experience that has a lasting effect on mental life….However, we cannot judge how *traumatic* any particular experience may be for a given individual. What to one could easily be assimilated into life can for another become a defining life experience" (161). Indeed, trauma and pain seem unavoidable conditions of our humanity—the physical sensation of pressing our fingertips against a hot iron, the loss of a family member or

friend, the divorce of parents, the failure of our own relationships. On the continuum of human emotion, loss and trauma make their marks across race, culture, and gender lines, measuring high and low points in each life like a cardiogram. MacCurdy argues that these traumatic memories are stored in the human brain in a purely imagistic sense and do not register in the linguistic narrative of the rest of our memories. Trauma theorists, such as Judith Herman, suggest this phenomenon occurs as individuals dissociate from the traumatic moments they suffer. In a situation "when a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from their situation not in the real world, but by altering her state of consciousness" (qtd. in Linette 439). Often, during traumatic experience we remove our minds from the present and leave our bodies to suffer and witness what is happening. Because we disengage from actively trying to assimilate trauma as it occurs, we are left with haunting images afterward. "Although the trauma is forced from consciousness, it often returns in the form of physical symptoms….We re-experience or reenact the traumatic event in dreams or in compulsive, repetitive actions" (Berger 72-73). We are troubled by arguments with parents, siblings, friends or lovers, though we may not be able to recall the exact words or context of the heated conversation. We can recall snippets of scenes from abuse or intense moments of loss, but struggle to understand the entirety of the circumstance. We may remember some events leading up to and directly after an accident that caused severe physical pain, but cannot recall the moment our bones broke or skin bruised. Dr. Dominick LaCapra, a Cornell professor concerned with psychoanalysis and post-structuralist literature, explains the consequence of this mental function: "Trauma creates

a break between lived experience and cognition, so that one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel. A catastrophic event may so shatter a person's psychic equilibrium that he cannot represent the event to himself--cannot assimilate the event into any stories of the world or self he knows. Instead, the event actually disintegrates the stories that connect the self to the world. Without such stories, a person truly is bereft and broken" (qtd. in Berger 73).

Herman, LaCapra and MacCurdy argue that one of the most effective ways to recover from trauma and restore a sense of self is to write about traumatic experience. "Immersion in or haunting by a traumatic event can be countered by narrative. Instead of allowing the trauma to return on its own terms, we recall the trauma in a narrative of our own framing. Because trauma shatters the narratives that structure our lives, we can only be healed by telling our stories again, by representing in words the trauma that now controls our mental images, thoughts, actions, even our bodily functions beyond the reach of language. Language, and especially narrative, allows us to work through trauma rather than acting out the trauma symptomatically" (qtd. in Berger 73).

If our initial experience of trauma is blurry and fragmented because of mental dissociation, the inability to recall the entire context of events and understand them fully is frightening, at times demanding self-revelation that is difficult to engage in. It is painful to think about those past arguments, those physical sensations of pain, the moments of abuse. It stands to reason, then, that we represent the trauma in words in a similar way, through fragmented narrative. Judith Herman offers more insight: "The conflict to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their

stories in a highly emotional, contradictory and fragmented manner, which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth telling and secrecy" (qtd. in Linette 440).

Following this vein, it seems natural then that all of the trauma and healing memoirs I read in preparation for my own work were composed of individual images and scenes that were not necessarily linear. When I first began my project, I believed strongly that fragmented narrative is popular in contemporary memoir work because it simply mirrors how humanity processes traumatic circumstance and illustrates that we are fragmented, narrative beings. However, such a deduction simplifies too narrowly exactly how fragmented narrative functions for an author and reader. "Fragmentation is often essentialized, universalized, and celebrated in a way that seems not to acknowledge what it feels like to *experience* fragmentation. Fragments are not seen as arising from specific relational interactions, or historical circumstances, but rather are seen as the condition of selfhood. While such texts demean any notion of a unified self, any wish for an integration of unified fragments, they paradoxically leave the reader with the sense that their protagonists are in total control of their fragments" (Layton, qtd. in Linette 440).

Peggy Shumaker's memoir *Just Breathe Normally* offers a striking example of a fragmented text that operates in this fashion. Shumaker relates her difficult recovery from a senseless accident that left her body broken and mangled after a teenager on a four-wheeler stuck her bicycle. She struggles to heal emotionally from the trauma as well, therapeutically attempting to recover memories of the accident on the page, metaphorically trying to regain control of her life. Working to recreate her experience of breaking and healing for readers, Shumaker turns to a fragmentary form of writing,

leaving gaps and holes in her story. As she cycles through these fragmented narratives, some no more than a paragraph or two long, she tries to recreate her own experience of feeling fragmented for the reader:

> I wake to Joe's voice, "Here she is!"
> Where is he? He comes around the end of the bed, into my chopped field of vision.
> "What happened to us?"
> I cannot hold on to any answer.
> Joe tells me he's been by my side ever since we made it to the hospital except when they wheeled me into surgery.
> "How are *you*?" I ask.
> "Got some bruises I'm going to enter in the fair," Joe says.
> "What happened to us?"
> Joe asks what I remember.
> Not much. We were coasting downhill, warm from pedaling, cool from the wind. I almost remember someone touching my head.
> Joe says, "You never saw the kid?"
> "What kid?"

Shumaker then changes gears and enters into an entirely different subject and scene. In this way, readers begin to experience the fragmentation Schumaker experienced during her trauma. Because Shumaker does not remember seeing a kid, readers do not see the kid, nor do they listen to Joe describe the accident until nearly 100 pages later, waiting while the story wanders in and out of other fragmented scenes.

Deborah Tall also seeks to create the sensation of fragmentation for her readers in her memoir, *A Family of Strangers*. Offering bits of narrative in only two or three lines at a time in what appears to be a random cycle of theme and subject, Tall's work is carefully crafted so that readers understand the fragmentation of her journey to uncover her family history. On page 80, below a heading that reads "Anatomy of Secrecy," Tall writes, "When familial denial of the past intersects with communal denial of recent history it may leave one feeling as if a part of the mind has been sheared off…*the past is*

dangerous territory." The "Anatomy of Secrecy" then ends and on the next page readers face a new heading, "The Anatomy of the Past," below which is:

> Earliest memory: being lied to, age three, about my missing orange juice, the glass drained while I was in the bathroom.
> "The gremlins got it," my mother winked. "It didn't look like you were going to finish it anyway."
> "There are no such thing as gremlins—you drank it!"
> "I was only teasing," She rebuked. "You have no sense of humor."
>
> Random moments like these, that we later think of as defining, are seldom the ones parents would deem memorable. It would have mystified my parents that I recall my seemingly happy childhood as webbed by secrecy, silence, and lies.
>
> Some say we remember mostly trivia from our childhoods, that the selectivity of memory is not that meaningful.
>
> But is doesn't feel that way. What we remember is all we have to go on.

Tall then moves on to "The Anatomy of Memory" and "The Anatomy of Story" and other headings. Because Tall was not given much genealogical information from her parents, a silence that left gaps in her childhood consciousness, she does not give readers much information either, suggesting the selected bits she offers are extremely meaningful metaphorically and because of this they must suffice for readers to go on.

If Tall's memoir leaves little for readers to go on, Lauren Slater's *Lying* leaves even less. One of the most controversial works in memoir, Slater claims, "There is only one kind of memoir I can see to write and that's a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark" (221). Slater admits she is an unreliable narrator relaying events of her lifetime that may or may not have actually happened, but that speak to the metaphorical truth of her experience. Slater's form, use of metaphor,

and genre-blurring work to create a sense of confusion, loss and discovery of self for readers, so that they may *experience* Slater's journey of coming to terms with her own narrative life. Slater explains her artistic decision in this regard when she writes,

> I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother's heart.…when I opened my mouth after all that, all my words seems colored, and I don't know where this is my mother, or where this is my illness, or whether, like her, I am just confusing fact with fiction, and there is no epilepsy, just a clenched metaphor, a way of telling you what I have to tell you: my tale (5-6).

Though certainly broken and fragmented, like Herman mentions, each of these authors are in total control of their fragments, and are manipulating form primarily to create a certain sensation for readers.

I considered again Schumaker's, Tall's, and Slater's memoirs. I began to see the paper and poster boards that were holding their stories together, the way in which they each controlled their fragments. Running through each fragmented narrative was a solid, traceable core. Schumaker is telling the story of her physical and emotional recovery and pondering the way her past will affect her future. The final, concluding fragmentary paragraphs of her memoir read:

> To celebrate that we are not among them, we choose Day of the Dead for our first post-wreck ride….I force out of my mind visions of falling, visions of me and the bike tangled in blackberry brambles, visions of cars swerving but not missing. Every muscle is on alert. It's as if I have to give orders for each motion. The focus this morning reminds me of the day I got glasses, after a childhood of seeing blurry….I look both ways, outside, inside. We push off, wobbly into the rest of our lives.

This is the moment all Schumaker's fragments have been leading up to, the point where her story comes together. In similar ways, Tall recounts her genealogical work, and Slater is considering the nature of creative nonfiction and fragmented form. While each writer employs breaks and pauses in their narratives and eagerly explores narrative

tangents that may seem unrelated, each fragment adds up to the larger journey, so that in stepping back to look at the text, readers can see the whole picture, the entire collage, the masterpiece. But in each text there is still an honoring of the broken because the surface story of fragmentation creates an authentic experience for the reader.

While Tall, Shumaker, and Slater's approaches are certainly effective and artistic, I slowly came to realize that unlike these authors, I am not primarily interested in recreating the experience of fragmentation for my readers. The energy of my writing picks up where theirs leaves off. I am concerned with what happens to the rest of our lives after we wobble our way into them. I am really more concerned about the core subject that lies beneath fragmented experience, I am more intrigued by the glue.

This being settled, a question immediately presented itself. What was my glue? What was I really writing about? Setting out to compose my graduate thesis several months ago, I knew only that I wanted to talk about my dogs. Of course, I had many ideas about the various themes that might be pulled through metaphorically on the leash of the world's most popular domesticated animal. They were simple truisms and observations, the sort that inspire cliché catch-phrases that ring against our ears: *You can't teach an old dog new tricks; chasing your tail gets you nowhere except back to where you started; life is just one table scrap after another*… . None offered much in the way of substantial glue.

Perhaps Anna Quindlen had a similar experience when she began to write what she calls the "obituary" of her four-legged companion of fifteen years, her dog Beau. Within the first pages of her best-seller, *Good Dog, Stay,* Quindlen suddenly comes to a startling realization, "Beau, of course, will have no idea what I say about him…Besides,

when I talk about him I'm really talking about me, about us, about our family, about our life together" (8). Quindlen's introduction to her story reads as a soft undercurrent to the conclusion of my own narrative. I considered my words and what was thrumming beneath them. I remembered the old dogs I grew up with and studied the two new dogs chasing each other through my backyard. What linked the large paws and snuffling noses I remember from childhood to the drooling pups I brought into my house every night? The dogs in my life that stood out the most, the ones whose obituaries I would write, were four-fold: Sammy, a neighbor's German Sheperd who attacked me when I was a child; The Runt, the family dog who taught me that all dogs were not dangerous; and Lexi and Ripsi, the two big Dobermans my husband and I adopted while we were in marriage counseling. After days of doodling their names in notebooks and sketching pictures of each dog in the margins of my writing, the answer began to form itself among the swishing tails and floppy ears. These four dogs marked some of the most traumatic times in my life, and each, in their own way, helped me to cope with that trauma.

The recent boom of dog memoirs on the creative nonfiction scene is full of authors examining similar phenomena. Dogs carry so many of our years and experiences with their lives that it seems natural to turn to these silent, loyal companions for reflection.

> Dogs provide many services in the lives of human beings, even human beings who don't need a dog to lead them through their daily routines or to keep predators away from their sheep. In dog shows, the class of dogs who do those kind of jobs are still called working dogs, but most of them don't work anymore in those particular ways, nor do many hunting dogs hunt…The job so many dogs really perform is to allow us to project our feelings upon them, to assume they are excited or downhearted or lonely when we are…dogs do not talk, or talk back, which is part of their charm in a hyperverbal age, and so they lend themselves effortlessly and endlessly to this sort of projection. (Quindlen 8-14)

This understanding allowed me to begin to view the dogs as more than a literal vehicle for my own personal healing from trauma, but rather a metaphorical avenue for reflection on my experience.

Still, I found myself struggling to detail exactly what experience I was writing about and what questions I hoped to suggest. The trauma memoirs I studied detailed childhood trauma, abuse trauma, or illness trauma—certainly important categories to the work, but my own story did not fall neatly into any of them. Unlike Shumaker and Slater, I do not suffer from any physical or mental illness; rather it is the health crisis of my husband I am writing about, a circumstance I only know by second-hand knowledge. And while I identify with some of the gaps Deborah Tall finds haunting her family history, genealogy is not what drives my narrative. Though my writing contains elements of childhood abuse, these are neither unique nor isolated, and not representative of where my authorial interest lies. Moreover, I meant to write the story of my marital trauma and healing. Such stories are absent in memoir. Narratives about spousal abuse seem to end after the abused party finds the strength to leave the relationship. I am searching for the strength to stay. And on top of all that, I still believe that somehow my experience and connection with dogs lies in the heart of the story—even if only metaphorically—an element certainly entirely absent from Shumaker, Slater, Tall, and even MacCurdy's work.

As I continued to search for examples and insights to effectively navigate these differences in my own writings, I was happy to find several relationship narratives among the texts of dog memoirs. Mark Doty's *Dog Years: a Memoir*, was the first to capture my interest. Through the lives of his two Labrador Retrievers, Doty recounts his own loss of

his partner, Wally, and his process of recovering from his grief. Abigail Thomas in *A Three Dog Life* also details the tragic loss of her husband and her ability to cope through scenes with her canine companions. Composing in fragmentary form, Doty and Thomas both turn to their relationship with the natural world and its most noble inhabitants, dogs, to recreate their reality and understand their journeys of trauma and healing. Yet, these texts too fall short of encapsulating my own experience. I am not writing about the loss of a partner as much as I am writing about the retrieval of a relationship. Nor am I considering only how interaction with dogs can help to facilitate the recovery of one individual, but instead the relationship of two separate people.

What I am left with, then, is a desire to fill these gaps in memoir work with my own story—a narrative that addresses childhood trauma and the effects it has on our adult lives, the recovery from marital abuse between a husband and wife, the impact of a severe health crisis, and the importance of the connections to the natural world, particularly dogs, in the healing process.

Such an endeavor is not without professional risk regarding subject matter and craft. Doty and Thomas are conscious that sentimental writing about pets can alienate readers. In the very first pages of his work Doty explains:

> Of course, listening to stories about other people's pets is perilous, like listening to the recitation of dreams. Such reports may be full of charm for the dreamer, but for the poor listener they're usually fatally dull… Love for a wordless creature, once it takes hold, is an enchantment, and the enchanted speak, famously, in private mutterings, cryptic riddles, or gibberish. This is why I shouldn't be writing anything to do with the two dogs that have been such presences for sixteen years of my life. How on earth could I stand at the requisite distance to say anything that might matter? (1)

Thomas too explains her hesitation about basing her narrative on her relationships with her dogs. She writes:

> These days all I talk about is dogs…I get nervous when I find myself answering the question 'what's new?' by eagerly detailing the sleeping arrangement of [the dogs] the previous night…Sometimes I detect the tiniest pause before whoever it is murmurs a change of subject, then remembers an errand. But my dogs make me laugh, and they comfort me (73-74)

Though Doty and Thomas speak of a concern that should be duly considered, I believe their experience of deeply relating to an animal and then relating to readers who identify with such experience is what renders the explosion of dog memoirs so successful and popular. Though my text can certainly be considered a dog memoir, my writing further complicates this subset of the genre by viewing the dogs more as a metaphorical tool. Doty and Thomas are primarily concerned with the literal relationship they have with their dogs. I am interested in the way my relationship with my dogs has metaphorically impacted my relationship with my husband. I believe this move will resonate deeply with readers, especially those who believe the animals in their own lives have taught them invaluable lessons and taught them to trust and connect to others around them. Author Ken Foster shares a moment that proves this true in *Dogs I Have Met and the People They Found* when he recounts a conversation about his dog, Brando:

> Last spring, Terry Gross asked me to describe my relationship with Brando when I was a guest on her NPR show, *Fresh Air*. 'He's my soul mate,' I said without thinking. I say some of my best things without thinking, but in this case I really hoped that it might be edited out. I wanted to appear at least somewhat rational on the subject of dogs. No such luck. And while I did get a few e-mails from people who accused me of being sick, irresponsible, and wrong, I found far more people who felt the need to write to say, 'When you described your dog as your soul mate, I was relieved to know I'm not the only crazy one.' (2)

This, I knew, was the story I wanted to write each morning at my kitchen table. After all, it was my dogs that had me writing in the beginning. I will risk the few readers who may be turned off by fawning over a waggling tail, a cold wet nose, and deep liquid eyes for the many more who will read and know they are not the only crazy ones. As Anna Quindlen says, when I am talking about my dogs I am really only talking about myself. Dogs carry with them so many years of our own lives that it seems only natural to consider them as a lens on our human experience. And though my dogs are not my whole life, they have helped to make my life whole. I hope that telling their story—which is, of course, my story—will allow readers a glimpse into an experience, criss-crossed with fissures of loss and pain, held, indeed glued, together by hope and healing.

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