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THE CULT OF TRUE MOTHERHOOD: A NARRATIVE

by

Jacoba L. Mendelkow

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

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

Approved:

Evelyn Funda Major Professor	Melody Graulich Committee Member
Christopher Cokinos Committee Member	Byron Burnham Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

The Cult of True Motherhood: A Narrative

by

Jacoba L. Mendelkow, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Evelyn Funda
Program: American Studies

This thesis consists of five chapters including a traditional introduction and four chapters, which investigate cultural interpretations of motherhood within the genre of memoir and personal essay. In the introduction, I discuss my research as it relates to the larger collection and detail how this work is different from other works within the "mother memoir" genre. Chapters II thru V, then, are all essays which begin to explore the major themes of cultural motherhood: ambivalence, loss, legitimacy, morality, and sin. These chapters, especially chapter II, identify and detail the traits of true motherhood as patience, compassion, sacrifice, and strength.

Chapter V, as the culminating chapter, places me, as writer, in a different position—as a reader—and I begin to understand my history as a parent and as a writer through these texts. Using literature as an area of personal research and recovery, I reconstruct my past as a child and a parent and begin to understand what it means to be a mother—or at least, to better understand the expectations of those who surround me.

(97 pages)

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I'd like to thank my wonderful and supportive professors: Evelyn Funda, Chris Cokinos, and Melody Graulich who bravely allowed me to write and learn what it was I wasn't sure I knew. I'd also like to thank the many professors at USU who did not sit on my committee but were in my corner and cheering me on each step of the way. Thank you all for your encouragement.

My daughter and husband have become my backbone and my cheerleaders. I am grateful for their strength and love. It is because of them that I had the courage to attend graduate school, and, it is because of them that I've been able to finish. Thank you for eating microwave dinners and frozen pizzas for the past three years. And thank you for only complaining when carrying all of my weight became too heavy to handle.

To my students who taught me so much and required of me so very little, thank you for changing my beliefs about the world. And to my friends who require of me very little and provide me with laughter and strength.

Finally, I thank my mother for teaching me the complexity of heart and humanity, and for showing me that we aren't so far away from the people we believed ourselves to be all along.

Jacoba Mendelkow

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CHAPTER I

PRELUDE

I categorize my life into three parts: before age 12 when my father moved out, until age 17 during the fallout, and age 17 when I gave birth a week after high school graduation. Everything else, as those “No Fear” t-shirts of the 1990s used to say, is just details.

I used to teach creative writing to pregnant teenagers. They attended a school designed specifically for their needs as young mothers. A nursery took care of the babies, two teachers worked with each student to help her graduate in the shortest amount of time. Twenty students attended a school that was set up in the 1950s; I attended this school in 1999. And so I returned ten years later to teach these students the things that I’ve learned in all my years as a writer and a person—after all, I come from their experience, I have survived, and I believed that I could teach them all of this in ten weeks.

These young women taught and influenced and humbled me—they asked me questions about being a mother, about raising a daughter on my own; they asked me about my relationship with my parents and about writing. They asked me about writing in my past—and I realized then that perhaps I dwell on yesterday’s experiences, perhaps I should write about the now.

The essays that follow do not exist in a chronological space: I rarely see my life and experiences as chronological. However, the essays fit into categories of time, and like my own memories, these essays exist in both present and past tense. “Pearl” tells of a conversation with my mother eight years before the end of the story is written in the

present day. “The Cult of True Motherhood” is perhaps the most “past-based” of the essays collected here—but as we are creatures of experience—the past cannot exist without memory in the present, and the past is perhaps my biggest influence. That said, however, “Sage” and “Scarred” in the “Selected Readings” section are the most present-date of this collection. I have attempted to move beyond yesterday, but it seems that in moving forward and writing things down, I may be forgetting myself. I must work harder than others to make beauty from pain and misery and to build up from this place takes me a lot of time.

Here are the things you need to know: when I am two years old, my family leaves Nebraska after losing our farm. This is 1983. My father had, by this point, already began and ended his first affair. When I am eight my father baptizes me as a member of the Mormon church—by this point he had begun sleeping with his secretary and had others have known this, he’d been unable to dunk me in the water to receive the gift of the holy ghost and all of God’s blessings. When I am eleven and ten months, my mother finds my father’s pick-up truck in his secretary’s garage—he moves out the next day. In June of that year, my parent’s divorce was final and my father married her. They’ve been married since.

When I am seventeen I meet a boy with a loud pickup truck and green eyes. A week after we begin dating, we have sex in the bed of that blue pickup truck. He was high. In six weeks I am pregnant and six weeks later, I am married in a church gymnasium in a homemade dress. Five days later, my husband leaves for California and Marine Corps bootcamp. We will not live together for nine months and I will live with my mother in the interim.

My daughter is two when I leave her father. We have both had enough—enough of each other and the toxicity that we created. It is November when I drive from California to Utah. I live with my mother for two months. During this time she calls my daughter Pearl.

I begin college in the spring of 2002. I graduate in 2006. I meet my new husband in December 2005; I marry him in September 2008. I do things right the second time around. I teach teenage mothers how to write in 2009; they teach me how to be a human being. They teach me to forget fear and exist. I teach them grammar.

CHAPTER II

PEARL

Pearl, age 2: My mother, the English teacher, tells me this baby is my "Pearl"—not a semi-precious stone, a symbol of virginity (my virginity), not an item of worth, not like the "Pearl of Great Price": a name for Jesus, a book of scripture. This baby *is* Pearl, the girl in *The Scarlet Letter*, the naughty child who doesn't fit, the daughter of the whore with the scarlet A on her breast. I remind myself to love this baby born in the month of pearls, this child born under another moon.

My mother calls my daughter Pearl and so, without saying the word, calls me Whore: bride in ivory, pearls around my neck, neck and chest exposed, translucent in florescent light, blue veins visible through thin skin.

Pearl, 7 months: A single stone in a clam in California—a Sea World shopping center: guaranteed a pearl in each one. My husband takes me there for a pearl, the birthstone of the baby growing inside me, under my sweatshirt, under my skin. The baby is growing bigger; my feet grow too wide for my heavy soled shoes.

He nudges me with his eyes: *You pick it, dear*—he sometimes called me *dear*—and I pick one closest to the top. A knife stuck through the center, the two ends pried apart, a single soft stone on the flesh of a mollusk now dead or dying. *What setting,* they ask, *which would the little mother like for her pearl?* What setting for this stone, what setting for this baby born without a home to a girl living with her parents a week after high school graduation? I chose one with a diamond—my stone, my husband's stone—

held with white gold, held like my wedding band and his. His hand wrapped around mine, too swollen for a ring.

Pearl, age 9: *Do you have any pearls*? I ask the man behind the counter as I rummage through the piles of antiques scattered in the dingy shop. Ten years ago I wore my first pearls, my daughter now the owner of that pearl set in gold, the one purchased on a day heavy with clouds, purchased by her father for his young bride. Today I look for something to replace it. Today I buy a ring because I will soon be married. I buy this for myself; I do not want the gift. Today in his shop, he's opened a case for me, several jeweled bands scattered willy-nilly on a dusty glass shelf. This jewelry wants to be touched, unlike the rings under glass in any chain store with florescent lights refracting from cut diamonds. The stones here look lonely in the light, sold under duress, somebody's grandmother's ring sold as genuine antique: rings one hundred years old sold for $75. Here there are diamonds, a man's elk ivory ring, a gold one with small opal. I had an opal once. Someone gave it to me before I knew how soon things fall apart. Within three months of wearing that stone, he'd moved away, and I learned that opals are cursed with bad luck. Perhaps a pearl is also bad luck—but I ask the man anyway.

The man leaves his post behind a stomach-high counter covered in old keys, books about dolls, a plunky cash register. Loud footstomps, loud breathing, loud is all around him as he makes his way over to the case he'd opened not long before. He looks at the ring I've slipped on my finger, something old, something precious, nothing like a pearl. He tells me that *pearls don't last, they aren't something you find in a store like this, they are too soft to last one hundred years*.

The man doesn't know what I know. He thinks they are too delicate to travel through time and space. He doesn't know that this stone, the round birthstone of my daughter, is sometimes called a "teardrop to the moon." He doesn't know that the heavens once cried tears that ended up in the belly of a mollusk, like how tears once landed in the belly of a girl who then gave life to her own pearl. I believe this man doesn't know these things. I believe his mind is set. There are things I could tell him, about my pearls, about my Pearl, the girl with another name, the story of my daughter, and the June birthstone she refuses to share with me. I don't tell him because it isn't for him to care, and he breathes through his mouth and stomps away.

Pearl, today: A June girl, my Pearl of Great Price, *my Pearl*: my daughter who plays dress-up and today wears her own pearls. Today she plays in jewelry hidden away in my sock drawer; today she wears the stone that once belonged to me. I've passed this gift on to her like I continue to pass on other things: my guilt and incompetence, the shape of my fingers and feet, the way a mouth droops downward when rested and relaxed. This girl dresses in the heavy stone of her mother, and I allow her to carry its weight.

CHAPTER III

THE CULT OF TRUE MOTHERHOOD

When a mother and child recollect their relationship, two separate narratives emerge. Sometimes it is hard to believe that this is the same relationship, the same circumstances and the same emotional events that are being described. But sometimes there are two stories that are completely linked and clearly connected.

Rozsika Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*.

Abstract: Power. I am bound—confined by rules of compassion, sacrifice, strength, patience—values of benevolence consume my psyche. I flail in the presence of women, of mothers, because I do not believe I fit within the group. It is a cult—a terrible, yet wonderful place, of Mothers. I am an outsider staring outward and inward. I look for my place and these mother-women do not embrace me.

My daughter's birth has changed me—down to my DNA—but not like actors say on late-night talk shows: *It's the most amazing thing, being a parent. It's changed my life*. Motherhood has changed me—damaged my body, moved parts, shifted sand. I am altered, I am scarred. And so is she. The day she came to me, her heart wasn't beating, and her skin was purple. The cord wrapped around her like a noose, choking her, choking me. Dead, purple, like a body pulled from a lake, like her body pulled from mine.

My daughter scares me. Sometimes when she grabs my hand, her strength invades mine, sucking away my energy, biting into my flesh, exposing my bones. But more than her physical presence, I'm afraid of her voice and her pick-picking constant need for my attention. When a sweaty hand grabs my sweaty arm, I sometimes prickle and fight the urge to jerk it away. I sometimes jerk away. Her skinny arms, brown and longer than those of other children her age, hold muscles underneath skin, and when she punches me, I ache and burn, inside and out, because I know how often she means them. *I'm sorry I strangled you today*, she told me once. I wonder if she knows, like my mother knew, and

I knew suddenly in the months before she was born, how incapable I am, what a mess I am making—like the muddy handprints, chocolate syrup-in-bed mess, she is making of me.

But she is small, still a child in grade school, and I am often reminded that this is more than I can handle. I am so young, or at least, I was so young once. Now I have aged, and I feel older than twenty-seven years. I see wrinkles on my face that weren't there when we smiled in a Christmas photo four years ago. Holding her in my arms for the first time was nothing like movie scenes of mother-child post-birth—neither of us cried. I wanted to give her away and let someone else hold her until I found my strength—her weight was oppressive. I still sometimes search for strength to hold her, to hold myself, vertical. And in that room, stark white with MASH playing on the overhead television screen, I gave her to my mother to hold and whisper my secrets. Her hair was black, and it was blackness that I felt that day—and sometimes still feel—when I am with her.

Motherhood is dangerous, and like it has aged me, quickly and too young, it takes other things too. It has taken all of my time: I bribe her to let me write, I beg for time alone, lying in my bed beneath polyester comforter, beneath false comfort. Delicious silence is rarely found anywhere where she is—and silence also frightens me. I no longer belong to myself, only to her. She is master of me, and she is sometimes good. I am grateful for her benevolence on those days. Her father takes her during the summer and some holidays. When she is gone, I cannot swallow; worry sits in my throat and blocks my esophagus. Each breath hurts, each breath is conscious, knots build in my stomach, even when I sleep. Like an alcoholic wants a drink, I wait for her calls—knowing that I need her, even though I feel that sometimes she destroys me. I imagine how she feels

when she is away, like she is free, away from the weight I place on her thin frame. I imagine she smiles more with them, her other family, than she does with me. I am sure she eats better, listens better, argues less. Her room is clean at her father's, I am sure of it. The hugs she gives to others are true and heartfelt, not limp-armed and forced like the ones I beg her to give.

I am hesitant to call myself a mother even as I write this. I am only a steward, raising a wild thing that I cannot control. Horses are broken, feral kittens are tamed but my daughter is unbroken, untamable. Mothers around me don't feel this way—they never say what I am saying or feel the self-hatred that comes with it. Motherhood is supposed to be different, pure and fulfilling. I wonder how different I am from other women; I sometimes think how much I am like my mother. Sometimes her voice comes from my throat as my daughter wanders, not listening. I stand like my mother, stiff and straight, arms always at my side, my hair is dark and I have her hands, veined and square. My daughter has them too. When I am angry my bottom lip sticks out and, when I am afraid, I sometimes run away. I cry alone and sometimes cry with her because we both know of my failure.

I sometimes see them, other mothers, the kind I envy, pushing their children in three-wheeled strollers down the uneven pavement in front of my home. Sometimes these women are smiling. I imagine they have babies because they want them, not because they didn't know what else to do. I imagine real mothers cry when they are pregnant, not with fear or hatred, not the frightened tears I cried at that clinic my senior year. As those mothers push their strollers away, climbing east, up the road, they never think of letting

go, leaving stroller and child and running away. Real mothers do not think this way. I imagine they are happy and I fight to bury my jealousy.

I suppose that the problem is inside of me, that I am somehow defective and unnatural. Perhaps she is under-qualified at being my child, as I am at being her mother. I haven't learned beyond the lessons of motherhood I have been shown, often resisting with all my muscles instinctive leaps toward violence. I often cannot control my words. But I find hope knowing that perhaps one day, when we have both learned, painfully, slowly, covered in blood, how to behave as parent and child, mother and daughter. Perhaps she will become known to me, and I will hear her heartbeat as she hears mine and listen, waiting, while we together, learn to breathe.

Literature: Barbara Welter says in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that "the daughter was … expected to be, above all else, obedient. Obedience and self-control were the two virtues on which society relied to protect young girls from those forces which it could not legislate, like falling in love" (4). Like girls of the nineteenth century followed rules of the strictest obedience, women too were charged with rules of womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood, according to Welter, is comprised of four pillars of womanhood: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. True Women hadn't any other choice.

Luckily for these nineteenth century women, motherhood and womanhood were neatly bundled and were inseparable from the other. True Women were then True Mothers: mothers taught their daughters, along with simple and strict obedience, how to be women. A young woman was "expected to help her mother in tasks recognized as

‘female,’ and mothers were advised to subtly direct their daughters toward those skills which would be most useful to them in maturity” (4). These skills all were linked to the upkeep of a successful family. Nineteenth century daughters became nineteenth century women who had always been exposed to societal expectations to become True Women.

It isn’t a frightening leap to see these values of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness replaced in the present by rules that advocate and dictate True Motherhood. Sacrifice replaces piety, compassion trumps domesticity, the cultural importance of strength replaces submissiveness, and patience outlives purity. Current notions of motherhood and True Mothers are essentially the same as one hundred or so years ago. It is for control of power that women are required to be and act this way: Mothers are mothers above all else, responsible for the welfare of children, responsible for their keeping and safety. It is a question of authority and power—piety is no longer in women’s guidebook to goodness and wholesome action. It needn’t be. Instead it is something lived without trying. Perhaps nineteenth century thinkers were correct when they said “women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men, and were happier doing tasks, learning lessons, and playing games that harmonized with their nature” (4). Modern women talk of *having it all* and perhaps this is what they mean: home and family, success and fulfillment. This is not my experience, and I believe it is not the experience of all women as it is filtered down upon those who will listen.

The Cult of True Motherhood has replaced the Cult of True Womanhood with its less “feminine” values—the values of Motherhood are those we hope to find in all human beings but the question is not whether they are expected, the question remains whether

they are *more* expected of one group than another. Are mothers expected to be more compassionate than fathers? Are mothers more self-sacrificing than their husbands, required to have instinctive patience and strength? I believe these are cultural beliefs and expectations of women and mothers. And yet it is a paradox: physical strength is not a feminine quality but mental and emotion strength and wellness is expected. Women with mental defects are often seen as "unfit" mothers, yet depression and mental disease does not exclude them as the caretakers and bearers of children.

It is this paradox that interests me: who can we consider a legitimate mother especially when all mothers are humanly imperfect? Why do our expectations of mothers taint our ability to look rationally at our lives as women and say that we have done our best? Why do I wake each day heavy with guilt that has been placed upon my shoulders without my permission? Why do I envy other mothers and despise them? Why do I feel ambivalent?

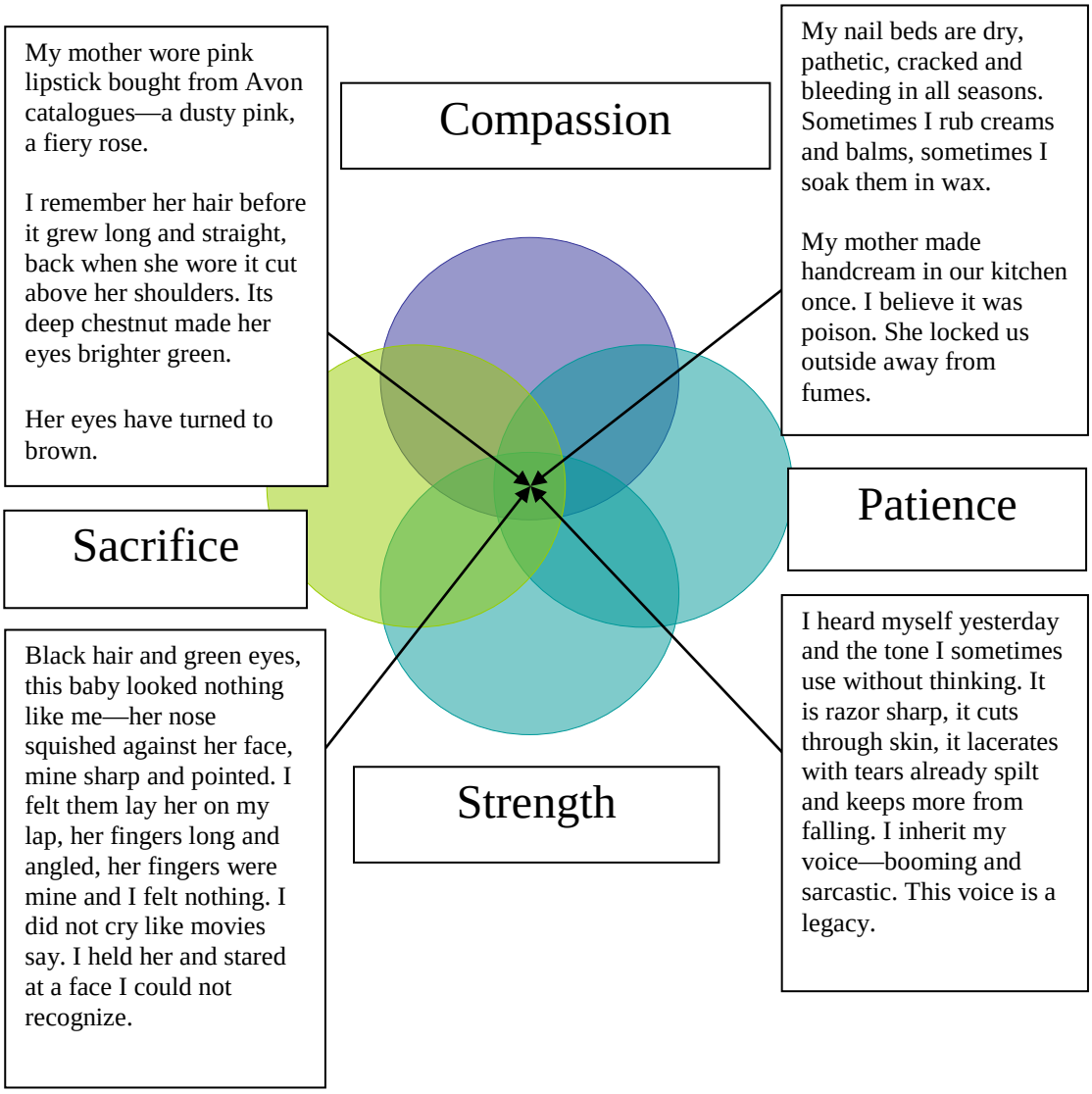
Methodology: I observe the Cult of True Motherhood from the periphery. I see Mothers as my enemies—judging me from their higher place, laughing at my stories, they ask my questions of my desires to *have another*. Strangers evaluate my womb. Strangers speak in tongues of happiness, gratefulness, *God-willing our children outlive us.* And I sometimes feel this way. My child has changed my life, and sometimes I am grateful for that.

I watch them: the women at the park, the wives around me, homemakers and mommies, and I do not understand them. Sometimes I spit distain; sometimes I believe in their truth. Often I believe they are liars. Loving a child sometimes hurts. For me it does not come naturally. I've watched for years. I pretended to be paralyzed when I was a

young girl. I'd lie in bed and try to not move my body. I'd imagine a nurse, a caring someone, who'd bring me food and extra blankets as my legs grew cold. I am the nurse now—a strange place for a woman like me—uncaring, unwilling to sacrifice. I wrap myself in wings of mothers around me. I search for a safe place to hide them.

I believe in two kinds of mothers. I am spiked, elbowed, chewed-up fingernails and rough skin. I am not those who I admire as much as hate. They wrap children in their softness. I push children away and recoil from their touch. I study mothers and the things that are passed between them: a way to hold a jaw when angry, square-palmed hands and heavy eyebrows.

The Cult of True Motherhood



Background: Growing up as a member of the Mormon Church, I believed its doctrine and its teachings regarding motherhood: good mothers stay home with their children, baking cookies from scratch, raising daughters to have children. Good begets good. Good mothers did not choose this life (like they do not choose to inherit squared palms, determined jaws and unpredictable eyebrows). This was God's will. Mormon mothers believe that "Nurturing mothers are knowledgeable but all the education women attain will avail them nothing if they do not have the skill to make a home which creates a climate for spiritual growth. … Nurturing requires organization, patience, love and work" (*Church News*). God's will was to promote a church built on the religious backbone of nurturing mothers—these mothers would provide an army of soldiers to keep the religious doctrines alive in a dangerous world.

My childhood religion, the one I left as a teenager after my "sinful" and unplanned pregnancy (note: if I hadn't have left on my own, those in power could have done it for me—it was better to leave with dignity intact, not stripped of the goodness I believed I retained in leaving), did not allow women to question their roles as bearers of God's religious army. It was unforgivable to question God's intentions for sending children (often in rapid and unplanned succession) to this Earth, to a preordained family.

Good mothers do not feel like I do: they do not feel ambivalent about their children. Roziska Parker, psychologist, says, "ambivalence is the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side. … Much of the guilt with which mothers are familiar stems from difficulties in weathering ambivalence" (1). I sometimes feel ambivalent. I usually feel guilty.

My experience is consumed with guilt and unworthiness: At seventeen I told of my moral failings and married my child's father—my mother swore at me then and left me crying on her flowered comforter. At twenty I acknowledged my loneliness and left that man to drag through drifts of falling snow. My daughter tells me the things she's learned in school: parents spend 15 minutes daily talking with their children—I sometimes do not speak for days—my words stuck in my throat to exit in shrieks and screams. A cat with claws exposed, I sometimes resent her touch and reach out only to cause pain. I am her illegitimate mother—as I have created her as illegitimate. It is no wonder she and I have become confused. Yet, with illegitimacy comes a shirking off of expectations, and with this shirking I begin to negotiate my power.

I teach writing to high school students who already have children of their own. I teach these young women in the same school I attended a decade before. These women tell me the way others who live otherwise, as students and not mothers, treat them. They tell me of lowered expectations, of being called "stupid," of cafeteria workers whispering and calling names. Perhaps these women know what it is they have done in stripping other women of their cultural power. These young mothers are capable: equally compassionate and strong, equally patient, more sacrificing than others. But they continue not to fit within the parameters of the Cult of Motherhood—they are young, too young. Their youth and children's illegitimacy prevents them from mothering as True Mothers do. They will also watch from the periphery. I wonder if this is something they have already begun to feel.

My guilt, the guilt of offspring bearers, those who aren't Mothers—the group, the mother-being, the ultimate—is consequence for shirking ordained True Motherhood. But

True Motherhood, as anything other than a cultural thermometer, cannot exist. Parker says: “There is no single answer to questions of mothering … because there is no one experience of mothering. … We mother in very different social, economic and ethnic contexts. … [and] reproduce and resist the assumptions of what it means to mother—but those assumptions cannot be escaped” (2). I cannot escape my guilt because True Motherhood, like Welter’s True Womanhood, is something I cannot embrace. In both categories I am too angular for the round hole, and I simply do not fit.

Case Study: Sacrifice

Keep your lips from dull complaining,
Lest the baby think ’tis raining.
—Mary C. Bartlett

In my early teens I worried that my mother would die. It wasn’t unfathomable—she sometimes told me how she’d soon *slit her wrists*—why wouldn’t she feel this way? She’d been faithful, full of hope for their marriage, and my father’d slept with his secretary. I’d hear her cry at night, sobbing in her pillow after the doorknob broke on her bedroom door, and we’d replaced it with a man’s sock tied in a knot; I wonder now if the sock was my father’s. I’d find myself dragged from my sleep to hear her screams on the balcony, howling in pain like an injured coyote. I remember coyotes answering her tears with their own pitched howls: her sadness fed theirs. Sometimes she’d tell me that she wanted to die, and I always believed her.

I was afraid of her then, full of anger toward my father who had just left, resentful of the five children she’d now raise. My father hadn’t tried to win custody—he hadn’t even fought. Instead he was happy with every-other-weekend visitations and home on Saturday nights for church the next morning. She wasn’t simply angry or depressed. It

was more than that, a shattering of bone into her spirit, her neck broken under the weight of her head. I believed, and still believe, that sometimes remaining alive is the greatest of all sacrifices. Death would have been easy for her—a simple cut down her wrist. Breathing air, in and out of her lungs, inhaling and exhaling despite the pain—I believe in that.

My mother demanded silence. Food prepared itself or was of the cheap microwave variety consumed by largely ravenous children. Brothers jumped into kitchen cupboards, off the trampoline into the patio built by my father. Requests to visit friends were acknowledged with only a nod or an um-hum as her eyes remained on the pages of history books she studied. Notes left on kitchen countertops scribbled with At *Rachel's,* or *With Buzz* were sometimes seen, sometimes not, more than once lost, thrown into the trash as I wiped the counters, preparing for her return from a day exhausting and troubled. But sometimes there was time for us, a drive to a movie on a Monday evening, she would sit in the car and study in silence for two hours. A trip to our grandmother's farm in Nebraska; she'd leave us to spend three weeks with her former-mother-in-law. These were when we most saw our mother, driving, taking the time to move us from place to place.

I think of sacrifice, giving in and pushing through as necessary to survive. My religion told me stories of pioneer women who buried children on the trail between their homes. I've heard of losing everything: family, home, children. I've never been tempted to live this life. But this sacrifice—of sanity, of self—is the highest of virtues. *Giving the clothes off your back*, giving yourself to another person; that is what I'm told I'm supposed to be willing to do. I sacrifice little for others. But I'd like to remember myself

as otherwise: generous, giving, a person willing to share all. I imagine I'll grow to someday be this way. I imagine the harm is not already done as I keep myself buttoned up and locked away from those who chip off piece-after-blood-covered piece of me. I believe my mother felt this way, armored against children's tap-tapping of finger to metal breastplate. The noise it makes is sometimes enough to hurt and distract.

I found myself distracted, and my therapist asked me about suicide only a month before I left my husband—my memories then are foggy and smell of alcohol. I tell him about a bathtub and water, pills to thin my blood, a razor. He recommends drugs to balance this liability, large pink pills in a plastic pharmacy tube. Paxil. He asks about my daughter because he worries about her safety. She did not fit into my plan. She prevented self-sacrifice, or, perhaps, she was the *true* sacrifice. It felt that way sometimes to continue to breathe—sharp and angry—breaths cutting deeper than healing. I'd never known anyone who'd committed suicide, but within a year of medicated health a junior high friend and a cousin both dead—a gunshot, a razor pushed too deep in a cutter's arm (is that suicide or accident?). I'm grateful that leaving was healing enough and that sometimes my daughter curled to sleep on my lap.

I think about depression—the chemical and physical sadness down to our bones. I think about chemicals that skip around in my brain and they synapses that miss in the bouncing. Later, I'll read that "it is hard to avoid the fact that there is something really depressing about motherhood" and wonder if I make this worse (Mullan 111).

Sometimes my mother calls and tells me I'll receive 10 acres of her 2200 acre farm. This is something she can give, a sacrifice of place, a gift of land, but only after she

has left it; only after it has been used by her can it be given away. She'd always give things away: pieces of antique furniture, sweaters she'd outgrown, a wicker bird, and say that she'd want them back someday. Everything is on loan—use it and return it once you tired of it. This is how she gives: pieces one at a time, guarded, handed out only to be returned. And this sort of giving is comforting to me; I only give away the pieces of myself that I've already used up.

I tell my mother I do not want a part of that desolate place she wants to give away, and I worry about her there, surrounded by the howling of coyotes and loneliness of rippling wind. I see her when the wind whips through her bottle-black hair, and she looks more wild than good, her shoulders robust from work, her legs thick and healthy. I worry about what is underneath in her brain, in her blood and see that underneath, she is frail. I wonder if she cries at night.

Case Study: Compassion

Lay here your pretty head.
One touch will heal its worst,
—Grace Denie Litchfield

A cord around her neck twice and her body twice, my daughter is born without a heartbeat. Purple. They rip her from my body with forceps placed on her skull—her cheeks marked with bruises long after her heart finally begins to beat on its own.

I try to breastfeed, asking for help from a nurse and a counselor. I've heard of its benefits. My own mother held me to her breasts long after I'd learned to talk. She tells me that it is the reason I am smarter than my older brother. She blames herself for his disability, his ADD, his extra chromosome. I've read in a book about the things I should

expect and the bonding that would come as I hold my daughter tight to my body. I haven't read that she'll reject me.

At home, after I'm given blood enough to allow me to stand without falling into a black fog, I'll hold my child to my breasts and listen to her animal screams. My breasts full and stretched, I try to hold her like the nurse showed me—I cradle her, I hold her like a backwards football, I switch sides and cry with her when my milk curdles inside my breasts. For five weeks we dance, she and I; I encourage and beg and begin to hate the black-haired head of the child who I believe does not love me. She does not want me. Her survival is in my body, and yet she rejects the milk I have made for her.

I stop my arms from holding this child who does not want to be touched: her legs kick me, her mouth open, shrieking, in our pain. I'll place her face between my knees and face her away from my heart. She'll eat like this from a bottle of latex, held by the muscles of my legs, and I'll bounce her into sleep.

Later I'll notice the knots in her neck, jutting from her transparent skin like tumors. I'll see her head begin to shift shape as she refuses to roll her neck like other babies. I'll hear about children who wear helmets of plastic to form their heads back into balls, and I'll realize what I forgot to remember in those hours of midnight rejections: My child survived birth to be crushed by metal. At night I rub her neck and the bumps of muscle between my fingers. I work her muscles underneath my own, releasing her poisons into my fingertips. I massage pain because it is all I can do, and I pray that she knows I do not mean to cause her this pain; I hope she understands that I am sorry.

I'll teach myself to dance with her, feeding her once again in my arms and returning her head to face the floor as I force hot air from her swollen belly. My fist

thumps her back, high between her shoulders, then lower down her spine. At parties people will ask what I am doing, hitting my baby in this way, my fist loud and solid on her back, and I will tell them this is how she has learned to sleep, and we will be a novelty.

Case Study: Patience

How many stockings to darn, do you know?
How many muddy shoes all in a row?
Nobody knows but mother.
—Anonymous

My daughter is six when she begins to see a therapist. I carry with me a sack of guilt and write answers on a clipboard to tell this stranger of our lives so far. I tell of my daughter's birth. I tell of my ex-husband and my boyfriends and apartments. I talk of my hours away—first because of sadness and later because I work at night as a waitress and take classes during the day. The therapist asks about alcohol, drug use, child care. She establishes my credentials, and I mostly tell the truth.

In a building with other therapists and other misbehaving children, we take the elevator to the basement. I encourage Dallas to push the elevator buttons; the therapist demands that the children ask first. Those were her rules: ask to touch a toy, ask for something to eat, ask for permission to touch a button. I tried to believe her—rules about parenting were not something I'd tried to follow as an adult or a child, but perhaps that was why we were here. Dallas struggles in school; her teacher, blonde in a sleeveless dress, older than my mother, recommends that I *love her more, provide a stable home environment, give her medication* once she's diagnosed as hyperactive. Her teacher says these words as I sit straight-backed in a hard plastic chair. Dallas sits to my side. She is upset by my tears. I wonder if these faults are as her teacher believes; perhaps she was right.

The basement holds rooms of toys—each selected to tell of trauma. Dolls represent mothers, or sexual assault; plastic stoves for homemaking or abuse; snakes and dragons and feather boas for princess dress-up. Stuffy, the room smells of dirt and the skin of sweating children. Dizzy from the colors and lights and smells and sounds, I take troubled breaths. *Play with her*, the therapist says to me, *you do not know how to play.* An assignment: we are to play together an hour each day. The therapist does not show me how; I am to learn on my own.

My mother did not play. Instead, when her time was free, she'd sit in the shade and read aloud the books she'd hoard on untouchable shelves in her bedroom. The trailer house gave enough coverage in the afternoon to sit on sleeping bags and listen to her read, her voice lilting up and down, happy in her story and happy to read tales of *Narnia* and *Stuart Little*. I listened to stories of giant insects in *James in the Giant Peach* and imagined myself thumping around, rolling down hills, crushing his terrible aunts. My mother wasn't terrible then, just tired because she had too many children and worked a night-shift in a cookie factory. Neighbor children came to our house, and we picked raspberries to eat, handfuls of unwashed fruit in plastic bowls, while my mother read us stories. She led us somewhere else, her voice strong and sure as she said each word, she'd led us away into fantasy. I think she liked to run away with us. My mother was so young then. But she did not play with us—no monster trucks or dolls, no dress-up games or hide-and-seek. There wasn't time.

For a week I play with Barbies, and Dallas and I dress up in silly clothes. We play house and school. We dance to Elvis songs in our dull kitchen. Dallas teaches me to behave; as her pupil I ask to touch her toys, ask to read her books. But soon I grow

frustrated. I do not see a change in us—my daughter, the teacher of things I should already know, and me, her pupil, floundering in my inexperience. I do not want to waste my time. Deadlines for classes pile high; graduation looms, I cannot dance for hours in the kitchen, I have given up on playing with dolls. The practicality of dirty dishes and unwashed laundry replaced our play: term papers and final exams, a job as a waitress in a restaurant where people sometimes did not tip, schedules and weekends, and we slip backward. There is more to worry about.

When I tell her therapist all of this, she leads us to another basement room. Long tables surrounded by chairs hold low tubs of colored sand—red, white, gold, black. *Do not mix the batches of sand*. *The colors remain separate*. On the walls are shelves of toys—kitschy lunch box giveaways, shells, plastic jewels, glass figurines, rocks, bowls, superheros, women, babies. Like the room of toys, each figure holds a psychological story. And here, her therapist instructs us to play.

Make a story, she says, *take the toys and make a story to tell each other*. I pick black sand, Dallas chooses gold, and we begin to construct our narrative. I choose a castle, some plastic jewels, a woman, a child, rocks. Dallas touches her fingers to sand, and I want to play. She chooses toys without sequence—as I suppose all children do—and fidgets long after the therapist tells her to stop. I watch Dallas dig holes and bury treasure. I see the doll she chooses for its long silky hair. She constructs her story in sand.

I tell my story. I do not remember it completely; I remember it like this: *There once was a woman who lived in a castle with a beautiful little girl. They had to move far away because the woman decided it was best. The little girl came with her. Together they made a new house.* Dallas is excited; she approves of my story and begins to think of her

own. *There once was a mommy with blonde hair and a little girl. And they had this treasure. And there was a monster. And they had some jewelry*—her story drifts, she is telling the story of the plastic toys in her hands, a story she constructs because her mind is full, and there is sand beneath her fingernails. She is absorbed. *And they had a car. And they had some food.* Soon a superman joins the woman and her child. Then a witch. There are pearls and bowls to hold them, and the therapist loses patience. She has been writing notes—furious lists of what is happening in the room. *A mother?* I imagine she writes, *like her own mother? Symbolic? Who is the witch? Perhaps the child is talking about her relationship with the mother. Perhaps the child is*—I imagine she writes this on the yellow legal pad. Time is up, and we shuffle through the sand to put our toys away—orderly because we are told and walk down the hall to the elevator.

Now, years later, I wonder about this day. I place my daughter's hand in mine as we leave the office. We'll go back a few more weeks—the therapist says we have work to do but I've given up or, perhaps, finally given in. Like the dolls in the sand, we'll tell our stories that sometimes don't fit. On a notepad I want it to read this: *The mother clearly loves her daughter. The daughter is precocious. The mother is sometimes nasty. The two are evenly matched.* This is something her therapist does not write, and so, now, I write it myself.

Case Study: Strength

Such a weak, little, tiny body,
To shelter so brave a heart,
—Anonymous

The February before my twelfth birthday my father leaves my mother for his secretary and takes his contributions to their marriage—an Indian breastplate, a velvet painting, a

oyster-shell suitcase of clothes and cowboy boots—with him in a small pickup truck. In a door-slam instant, my brothers and I were alone: almost-orphans; our father gone, our mother changed. We'd suffocate in sadness.

My mother made holograms in a factory on the highway in the years before I started elementary school. I remember the holograms brought home filling our pockets—skeletons, shifting heads, an eyeball—glass cut in a circle, sharp on the edges, the ghostly images appearing in just the right light, on just the right angle. In her bedroom the holograms piled on each other, skeletons lying on eyeballs, eyeballs next to a pyramid. I played with them when she allowed it; I'd hold the glass between my finger and thumb and pinch my eye closed for the best view. If I looked just right, and just hard and long enough, sometimes an image appeared. It pleased me to see ghosts that only I could see.

My mother worked in factories along the busy highway 89 corridor of northern Utah and into southern Idaho—hologram, Del Monte, and soon Pepperidge Farms wearing white polyester-blend and separating whole from broken cookies, dividing them into cups made of paper that cut the tips of her brittle fingers—Chessmen with their corners crumbling, Milanos with splotchy bits of chocolate, gingerbread men missing legs and arms. On Line 4 at Pepperidge Farm, my mother worked a graveyard shift; this is the schedule of my memories—asleep during the day while other mothers who visit my class at school help us plant grass seeds in paper cups as homemade gifts.

My mother tells me that my father blames this schedule for his finding another woman to love. She didn't say love; she never did say that word about my father and his *whore*. She said other things instead: that my father was jealous of her, that jealousy is a sign of infidelity.

My father took the old Jeep in the divorce, something about the equal division of property, each parent receiving a less-than-reliable vehicle because the state law declared that it was fair. For many years before it didn't run, or almost didn't run, and sat in the field next to our home, mostly hidden by a large blue tarp-covered hay stack—our meeting place in case of a fire.

But it wasn't a fire; we called it a flood instead, the day my father moved out. My mother told us, over spaghetti and bread, that he wouldn't be home, or coming home, ever again. My neighbor told me why—that there was a woman with a cheerful voice who sometimes answered his work phone when we called. She loved him, my father told us, and she had his baby—a little girl, only two years old. That girl was the one person I couldn't hate because she looked too much like me. My mother was shocked, taken completely off-guard by my father's affair. She believed him when he told her he worked late; a load of animal feed was needed by a farmer in the middle of the night. She later told me she should have seen all the signs. They were there, she said, he was a bastard all along and we children just got in the way. Sometimes she blamed us because she wanted to die, threatened suicide when she was most depressed, when we were too much for her to handle. But she couldn't do it because then her children would go live with the whore. An English major in college, she'd tell us that love is an action word. It's a verb and you can't just say it to make it true.

On Sunday, like every Sunday before, we awoke and went to church—suddenly different from our neighbors who had shared our pew for nine years. And the mothers of our friends whispered: *Did you hear? He left her. Finally, at least that is what I heard. She was blindsided. He had another family. Adultery. Did you know there is a baby? That*

poor woman. What is she going to do? I don't know but you can't help but wonder if she deserved it—she was gone a lot. A man shouldn't be alone.

I prayed to God and Jesus for things to come together, for my mother to breathe again, to exhale, pull us close to her body and whisper that this was a trick gone wrong; I wanted a promise never to trick us again. Instead, we sat on the pew surrounded by the kind of family we once were. In a single day, exactly how long it took for our secret to be spread like a virus, we became orphaned misfits—a charity case.

These are the things I remember: my mother wore a navy sweater dress that fit snuggly. Soon she will shed pounds from her arms, chin, waist. Soon women will stop whispering about the things that were *her fault* and begin to chew on words like *eating disorder* and *anorexia*. On that bench in that rose-colored chapel with empty choir seats behind the pulpit where ordained men preached of things like *eternal families*, my mother sat next to me, blue dress heaving in silent sobs over her expanding and contracting chest, my three-year-old brother in her arms, her beautiful hand cupping his shoulder, another brother on her side, her blue-veined palm on his leg. She's seen the looks from the women whose husbands never left, heard them lean in and whisper to each other, watched notes passed back and forth. She sits and guards us from assault while looking straight ahead, her chin jutting forward, her shoulders squared and high.

Conclusion:

I've read that "we live in a society that idealizes and romanticizes motherhood and the relationship between parents and child." And I've read that "'no child is wholly loved'—and that is true of a relationship between parent and child as it is of a relationship between two adults" (Mullan 141).

Tonight I visit my daughter's room. I've yelled, begged for her silence, closed the door with a slam as she wandered off to find comfort elsewhere. Her television blares the Disney Channel and tells of families different from ours—patient mothers, husbands who have always been around, fathers who don't leave. I turn off the television, and the blue light goes out with the tube.

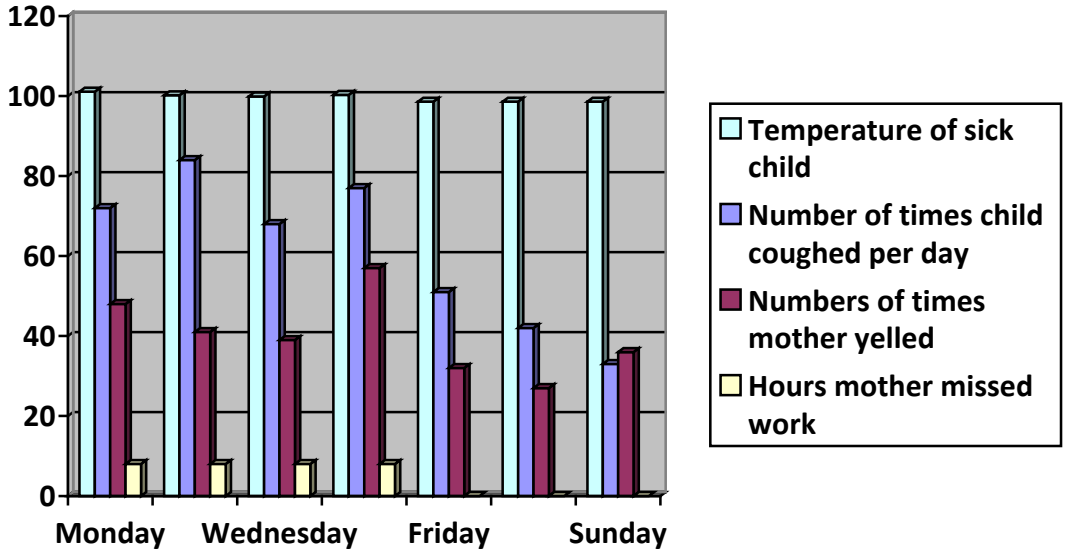
Her hands are cold under her single blanket, and her mouth is open because she is sick and cannot breathe through a stuffed nose, heavy with croupy breaths, wet and strained. Her fever gone now, tomorrow she'll be well enough to return to school. I touch her face, whisper in her ear, hoping she'll remember whispers, not pitched shrieks when she wakes, and I wrap a second blanket around her sleeping body. I am tempted to climb into her bed and take her in my arms and feel her breath on my skin. Instead, I stumble to the door and shut out the light from the hallway to allow her peace and sleep.

Alone in my office I will read: "Love for mother is universal. Except for a mother's love for her children, it is the one love, growing through the years, which remains a guide and comfort even to the end of life itself" (Notkin ix). I wonder about this: loving another human universally—completely, without exception. I do not believe I am built this way, perhaps my DNA is different. Perhaps I have not learned this like I have not learned to play. I find hope in what I know about myself: I love this person, the one brought to life in our flaws, gratefully conflicted in my devotion.

Appendix A

Sample of data collected during final week. Child sick with fever and croup. Child sounds like a barking dog. Child taken to clinic on Thursday of sampled week for antibiotics and steroid medication. Child's welfare immediately improved as did mother's attitude toward sick child.

Mother and child return to normal day-to-day the following Monday. Mother is ill within two weeks. It appears that mother and child share the same germs. They also share similar jaws, hand shape and eyebrows.



Appendix B

Sample questionnaire for admittance into the Cult of True Motherhood.

1. Having a child is:
    A. Your heart walking around outside your body
    B. God's greatest blessing
    C. True happiness
    D. All of the above
    E. None of the above

2. I wanted a baby of my own since I
    A. Was a baby myself playing with dolls
    B. Helped my own mommy take care of my younger baby siblings
    C. Saw a kitten as a child and really wanted someone to depend on me
    D. All of the above
    E. None of the above

3. I always wanted
    A. A boy or girl
    B. Two boys or girls
    C. As many as God would give me
    D. All of the above
    E. None of the above

4. When my children say my name I
    A. Welcome them to me with a great big hug
    B. Use my smiling face to show them how much I love them
    C. Worry that they may disturb the sleeping baby but am happy they need me
    D. All of the above
    E. None of the above

5. Children are to be
    A. Loved all the time
    B. Covered in kisses
    C. Fed homemade snacks like cookies and cakes made with love and wheat I ground myself
    D. All of the above
    E. None of the above

CHAPTER IV

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS

In this essay, the speaker wrestles with, and attempts to tackle, her feelings toward motherhood and family. Here the speaker writes of the birth of her fourth brother and the monetary strain it placed on her working-class family. Note that the speaker's mother is still in a cookie factory putting cookies into paper cups; her father is still works in a mill lifting large bags of horse and cattle feed onto his farmer's back.

Note that the events in this example take place before the speaker's father has left and nearly three years before the speaker claims to notice a significant difference in her family dynamic and mother's personality.

Questions for discussion may include the following:

1. *What is the significance of the cookie factory references in this essay?*
2. *How does the speaker feel toward the members of her family? (Pay specific attention to those who are named).*
3. *What does the naming of a character in a story tell the readers?*
4. *How does "naming" function in this essay and in the essay to follow "Ambivalence"?*
5. *Discuss the author's identification as "trailer house poor, raise your own cows for meat poor, parents remind you every day that other kids somewhere else are hungrier poor." How does this identification become complicated later on once her father leaves and her mother returns to, and graduates, college?*

GOAT'S MILK

On February 12, 1989, my mother called from the hospital to tell me there was another brother just born, and at age eight, this was the most devastating news I'd heard so far. Four brothers now. I sat on the floor of our trailer and cried: another brother to share my room, another boy in diapers, another mouth eating my food. We were poor: trailer-house poor, raise-your-own-cows-for-meat poor, parents remind you every day that other kids somewhere else are hungrier poor. Despite my parents both working, there never was enough of anything—food or otherwise.

When this youngest brother was born, it snowed outside. It was cold inside on the linoleum floor that hadn't been replaced since the trailer was manufactured in the early 1970s. We were lucky to have it: a secure roof over our head, a place we tried to call home. When Levi Phillip (*a good Mormon name*, my Presbyterian grandmother said) was brought home, I held him in my arms and tried to understand, in my eight-year-old brain and body, what it was I was worrying about. It couldn't have been that I was worried about taking care of him. That wouldn't be my job until ten years later when I had a child of my own. What now makes the most sense is that I worried about sharing more of my little dugout space with somebody else—a single top bunk in a room with two sets of bunkbeds, cardboard boxes labeled "Play Clothes" and "Church Clothes" under the bottom bunk. I wanted a sister, someone to share my girlhood with, instead of someone who would draw with ink on the faces of my dolls. Maybe that, too, is why I cried.

We bought a goat to feed this baby. On a farm in Lewiston, Utah, my parents purchased an old beige nannie that had recently given birth and was still full of milk. My mother was unable to feed—first she got a fever and then mastitis and then she returned to her graveyard shift job baking cookies. She said they treated her like a number; she said they didn't care about her baby at home; she wasn't allowed to pump her breastmilk, and soon it dried up. Not that any of this information was ever discussed—we were children after all, and our delicate ears needn't listen to any discussion involving the milk- producing capabilities of our mother. There were other things we did not know like how much it cost to keep the trailer heated or where all the wood for the stove came from. But formula was expensive, like disposable diapers were expensive, so my parents

drove over the hill and through the fields of farms to secure a foodsource in the goat Wilma.

Our job, my older brother's and mine, was to milk Wilma, spraying streams of milk into an old whipped-topping container. The ounces she supplied were be poured through a coffee filter into a glass jar in the fridge. Levi's milk was transparent, an off-white color, and sat segregated by glass from the raw cow's milk my parents purchased from a dairy nearby for the rest of us to drink. Sometimes we snuck a taste, stuck our fingers in the hot strange milk after we'd strained it into the jar. The goat's milk tasted like chewed-on paper, and the heaviness of the liquid sat on my tongue long after I swallowed.

Levi always smelled: his hair and skin covered in film from the milk that seeped through his baby-pores. Such a beautiful little boy but the lovely thick sprouts of deep brown hair on his head smelled of rotting cheese. No one held him close and drank in his smell unlike baby powders and pink lotions. His hair, his clothes, his diapers all smelled heavily of rotting cheese. Almost twenty years later I still remember this smell, how much he cried, as unhappy with us as I was with him in the beginning. And this is what I remembered years later when my own brown-haired daughter came to my life. I cried then in an empty hospital room, sterile linoleum on the floor, and thought of my fear of having this baby, not so unlike the fears of getting another brother. I'd resented and feared him and instantly knew that I'd resent and fear my child as well. Things were different this time around—this girl was mine solely mine to care for; that boy'd belonged to adults. I wasn't adult either time. I remember knowing instinctively what to do with that little boy. I knew ways to stop his cries but that girl, my own child, was

different. I knew nothing about her when she was born. At eight I was more capable of mothering than I was at eighteen.

And when there wasn't any milk left to feed her, only five weeks after she came home, I did what I knew I could do for us and bought a can of infant formula at Walmart with my last twelve dollars.

The speaker in this essay attempts to understand her father's motivation for leaving her family. Here the speaker writes a letter, an exercise suggested by her therapist, to her father. It is interesting and important to note that this essay functions as both a looking backward—the speaker reminds her father of the years in her childhood—and an internal wandering as the speaker attempts to better understand if his leaving is a familial and "genetic" defect.

Questions for discussion may include:

1. *Compare the concept of "passing down" traits and "genes" in this essay and in "The Cult of True Motherhood." What does the speaker believe about behaviors and defects passed between mother and daughter and father and daughter? Does she learn to reconcile these feelings?*
2. *Does the speaker's mention of grandparents change the reader's understanding of "the things that are passed on?" The grandparents in this story remain "a family" even after the grandfather's death.*
3. *The speaker seems most interested in understanding the complex relationships that create "family"—list those relationships (in this essay and others) and how they support or oppose the author's assertions.*

FOR MY FATHER

Dear Dad,

Remember when I was small? I have a picture of us in our Nebraska house, the one you called *The Wild Blue Yonder*. It was before we moved to Utah, before I was two, before we left the farm, before the IRS got what they wanted and took our land and our home. I don't remember the farm sale when neighbors and strangers pried through our

stuff. Did they sift through old work clothes? Did they take my mother's pans? Or was it only equipment they wanted—swathers and swather parts, tractor wheels and rusted horse troughs? Did they tell you "thank you" when they walked away holding the keys to your work truck, did they smile sympathetic smiles seeing you there with wife and three children, did they know that you would never come back to stay after you were gone? I don't remember because it was too long ago, my memories don't travel that way, moving from the now into the past, pushing through puddles of Nebraska clay and sand. I need you to remind me what things were like then, when we were a family. Remind me that you loved us.

I don't remember you holding me, at least not very often. You worked turning dirt into corn, harvesting wheat drowned in rain and soy beans beaten into earth by hail. I try to remember your hands then but only remember them now—large and strong, powerful, fix-it hands, tile-cutting hands, bag-of-feed-lifting hands, grandchild-cradling hands. You were a mountain then, and you are a mountain now. I stand next to you and become smaller, unimportant. But how was anyone ever to be heard over you anyway, your voice a snarl, your size and strength always in the way? At six, I saw you cry when your father died. I don't think you knew I watched you. Your head was bowed, lowered but not in prayer, as if it was too heavy to hold above your neck. Tears traveled over hilly cheekbone, down softer flesh, stopping next to your mouth. You wiped them as they fell, eyes of strangers and former neighbors following you, witnessing a mountain crumble. Wishing I could help, maybe I rubbed your chapped, calloused hands. Maybe I crawled on your lap and slid my fingers through your hair. I remember the church, the one we still call *Grandpa's church*. Red, scratchy pews, like a hangnail to a sweater, they pulled

through pantyhose. The stained glass and the large crucifix reminded me then that I was an outsider even in the house of God, a Mormon, like you, like my mother. I was like both of you then, my mother's religion in my grandfather's church. I remember feeling cold, and it must have been cold, as they lowered your father into the ground early that Nebraska winter.

Before I was born, in that church you married my mother. I have that picture, rescued from a pile of garbage thirteen years later after you left us. It hangs in my home, oval framed, gilt-edged. You hold my mother, your arm around her back; you smile in the photo and wear a blue suit. You looked happy then. My mother did too.

But the funeral was later, eight years after you married my mother in that church, four years after we moved, six before you moved away. Your father died slowly as I remember, oxygen first, a man of sixty, then unsalted cereal and un-sugared *mush-melon* and tomatoes. But the mush and the oxygen and unsalted cereal didn't help him, he died. My mother says when you left her, she buried you. *Death is easier than divorce,* she told us. For her, *no one has to pick up the shit after you die.* I wonder if she knew that you were leaving, her, me, us, a little more each day, each year, and four-and-a-half years later when she found your truck in the garage of your lover's home, didn't you realize it would have been easier if you were dead, not tromping around, calling my mother names. I heard from your lover that you said making love to my mother was like fucking a telephone pole, that there was nothing there to grab. I remember that day, the day she told me what you thought of my mother, nausea moved up my legs and into my fingers before it stopped and stayed in the bottom of my stomach. But now, fourteen years later, I hope you found softness.

In my picture, the one from when I was small, I sit on your lap. You were handsome then, handsome now—ladies always loved you, didn't they, Dad? In the picture of us, you have a mustache, smaller than the one you wear now, uncurled at the ends. I sit on your lap, chubby face, rounded fingers, pockets of baby fat on my arms. Were you watching television? Were you watching my mother? You were smiling at something, as if you were happy with me in your arms, as if you knew this was where I should be, that perhaps we might always be together, and our family would stick it through. We sang songs together when I was a child: *Families can be together forever, through Heavenly Father's plan*. But we weren't together forever, and I wonder now if we ever had a chance.

My mother couldn't stick it through and I don't know if I blame her or you. You could have been faithful, said no to the woman in Nebraska, the one I blame for everything. It is harder to blame the second, the woman you married, the mother of my sister. Hate is poisonous, and I see how it has made you different, wrinkled your face, darkened your teeth. Sometimes in the light, when the sun is shining and hitting the hair on your low-positioned brow, I see flecks of grey, markers of what this deceit has cost you. The price was high for everyone, for my mother, for myself. I lost my own marriage, failed because I could not stick it through, finding his need for other women a punch too heavy to handle. I knew that men sometimes leave more often than they stay. But when I was seventeen and engaged, you told me marriage was good, sometimes, that I could probably make it with Matthew. But when I couldn't make it after all, when I finally left, I waited to tell you—knowing I had failed. Knowing I was like you.

I'm grown now, not the child I was when you moved away in the night. I think about it all the time, the dinner my mother made to tell us over, the way I choked, the heaviness of the bread, the dry spaghetti noodles, the way you snuck in and out, taking things that belonged to you that she might not give back. I remember hearing about your girlfriend, your child, your motel room where you stayed for the month you were homeless. You asked if it was okay to marry her. We were swimming, mineral springs in Idaho. I told you I didn't mind, but I did and cried at home that night. I told my mother what you had said, how you asked for my permission. I didn't tell her how happy you looked. I learned from you how important happiness is, but how sometimes the happiness of others takes second string, or third, moving further and further from your consciousness.

Walking on an afternoon after you left, I found out about your infidelity from a neighbor. She had heard it from her husband, who'd heard it from a friend, traveling through our town like lightning traveled over prairies, like screams exploded through walls. She told me of your child, a two-year-old girl, blonde, like me. She told me about your new family, that there were brothers and sisters for me. I had always wanted a sister. Walking and sobbing, climbing the hill to the house you built, the one you were so quick to leave, I wondered what had broken—in you, in me, in us. The sun was setting, sitting on the mountains in the west, light touching houses, fields, snow. The house was cold as I entered, smelling stale and iced, you gone, even the walls knew.

Have I told you my mother screamed at night on the balcony? Her screams woke me, jarring me from my dreams and pulled me to her. I watched her through the window in the door, listened to wailing, to her pain. Her shoulders caved into her chest, power

leaving her thin frame, frustration, devastation, fear. The coyotes must have heard her, sometimes joining in her sorrow, answering her horror with their own. It must have been solace for her, not being alone, knowing the coyotes could hear her. Alone in my room I cried for her, she must have been so afraid. No one blamed her—everyone blamed you. My mother's heart broke, I heard it. She let you go in a scream.

But Daddy, how did you leave us? Even now I don't know who to blame. My mother despises you, I am sure you know. Your abandonment was her badge, something she earned that day in February, a scar that never really healed, raised above the skin, bursting with pus and memories of you. But for you, I imagine it was easier than it was for us. New home, new life, new children. Perhaps you didn't ache and scream—perhaps you weren't crushed by your decision to go in the way we were suddenly crushed by yours.

And so I write, as a therapist told me to do years ago after you were gone. *Write your father*, he said, *and say the things you want to say but never could. The letter is for you*, he told me, *you don't need to send it.* I am grown with a daughter of my own, but I am still that girl, twelve and broken, bewildered and ashamed. I wander waiting for you, a touch, a phone call. I see the way you hold my child, rocking her in your man-sized recliner, a beer and a remote in your hands, the Denver Broncos on the big screen. She watches with you, afraid to wiggle as I was, listening to you talk about the game, the plays, the players. I am jealous of her in those moments, remembering only in photos the times when I sat on your lap and you held me. I am sure I didn't make them up, that my jealousy is not unfounded; I know they happened, and I have a photo to prove it.

This essay begins a series of essays where the author is no longer a juvenile character in the story, but is instead represented in the present as mother and adult. The speaker moves beyond a distant past and into a more recent history and memory and appears to be less interested in this essay with how genetics and personality traits are passed on. The central idea explored in this essay is the concept of "ambivalence:" the ability to love and hate something or someone simultaneously.

Note that this essay was inspired by a painting in the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art on the Utah State University campus in Logan, Utah. The painting is central to the essay, like the question of ambivalence is central to the essay.

Questions for discussion may include the following:

1. *Discuss how ambivalence, the concept, moves between characters of this and other essays. How is the speaker ambivalent? Who is she ambivalent towards? List other characters who exhibit this emotion throughout the other essays in this collection. List also the target of their ambivalence.*
2. *Divorce is nearly as present as a theme as any other in this collection of essays. What do you believe divorce means to the speaker, knowing what you know about her beliefs on family and motherhood? What does divorce represent for the other characters in the collection? How is the speaker's mother's beliefs of divorce different than her daughters and how is that complicated by the speaker's mother's feelings about her own daughter's first marriage?*

AMBIVALENCE

I have created time to be here in silence. At home, my daughter wants to see me. She chatters as I prepare our dinner, discusses school, choir practice, a boy with long hair and skateboard, bullies on the playground. Clothes washed for the morning, notes from her teacher, homework, reading, *brush your teeth, set the table, clean up your room, push in your chair when you're finished, I'm not your slave*. Words clump in my throat. I sometimes pretend to not hear her. Sometimes I do not have to pretend. I am selfish and have always been; it is my nature.

Before and After Frankenstein: The Woman who Knew too Much: The Power of Naming stands nearly floor to ceiling in my university's art museum. Dwarfed, I stand beneath it.

Today I do not know this painting; I know nothing of its origins: based on the B-film *Frankenhooker* of 1990. Carole Caroompas paints the story of mad-scientist/medical school-dropout's fiancé killed by lawnmower. An accident, according to an on-site reporter, that ended i*n a blaze of blood, bones, and body parts. The vivacious young girl was instantly reduced to a tossed human salad … a salad that police are still trying to gather up … a salad that was once named Elizabeth*.

At twenty years old after three years of marriage, I load my car with whatever fits. I am leaving my husband. Boxes piled seat to ceiling leave only room for my two-year-old daughter's car seat. Her vision blocked by walls of cardboard, she climbs through the driver's side and back and fastens her seat. Toys, a container of milk, one or two of her favorite books and a fleece blanket are within her reach. I will drive through the night. I pray for safety.

November roads in Utah are sometimes treacherous, and 350 miles from my mother's home, it begins to snow. The snow falls slowly at first; tiny frozen droplets melt on my windshield. Within an hour, my window-washer fluid is frozen in its tubes. My tires pull from lane to lane as the wind and snowdrifts yank us from our path. I am reminded of my mother, driving to Nebraska through a storm of tornados while we beg her to pull over to safety. She did not stop despite our tears. And I do not stop now. I am grateful for my child's silence in her backseat cocoon, grateful her chattering has stopped.

I am full of guilt on that stretch of highway. I am leaving the father of my child, pulling up our roots on this winter day to hang from the window like a cigarette and freeze in the snow. I leave because it is what I know.

Large trailer trucks with heavy loads pass at terrific speeds, headlights barely visible through fogged windows, their sludge hits with icy force. Later I will cry without restraint and suffer an aching for years to follow. Like my mother I will blame a man for my pain. I spit his name and hang up the line when he calls to talk to our child. I torment him with reminders of infidelity and abuse. I will poison myself with anger, and my veins will grow darker.

The Power of Naming is a mixture of the gruesome and the comic. Open gaping mouths modeled after those in an anatomy book line the bottom of the painting. Their lips are pink and open, uneasiness palpable. Each silently screams, each lip tethered to a yellow rope connects to a frame of bones. Eerie and shocking, the bones lead to a “POW” comic book explosion at the center-top of the painting. Stars, those of cartoon pain, complete the troubled border.

In the center of the painting a woman holds the head of a child. Her arms folded over his head, her elbows rest on his shoulders with fingers woven together. She rests her chin on her hands which sit upon his head. This woman stares ahead into distance. I know this position of hands crossed on head. I have held my child like this, my leather skin barely feeling her soft brown hair. In a clear vat below a brain soaks; tubes, like spider legs, crawl from the liquid inside. She steadies him in her hands and holds the brainless head.

Staring at the painting makes me think about what I already know about mothers, and although the imagery of this painting is shocking, it seems appropriate somehow. *Ambivalence* is what psychologists call the simultaneous feelings of mother-love and -hate. *Ambivalence* is something I know.

My daughter is two when she finds my brother's depression medication and swallows two of the sugar-coated purple pills from the easy-open pill box on his dresser. I see her climbing up the stairs, blue flip-top box in hand, the lids on Tuesday and Wednesday gaping like an open mouth. I call poison control: *My daughter just swallowed two Wellbutrin*. I am not panicked. I am angry at her: the basement is off limits because it holds her uncles' dangerous things. I worry about knives or loaded guns. I forget to worry about pills.

W*ellbutrin can cause seizures in children. We will send an ambulance.* The operator's voice is calm; her words do not carry their own weight. I tell her I will drive the eleven miles to town. *I think my daughter swallowed some pills* I tell the receptionist at the desk. A buzzer rings, a man in hospital scrubs rushes out, demanding that I follow him. No time for paperwork and suddenly I realize the danger. A doctor joins the man in scrubs, explaining to me the procedure of removing the pills from my child's stomach. *We will secure her head and hands and body to a board. She will be awake so we can monitor her for signs of overdose. We will insert a tube up her nose that will go into her throat and stop in her stomach. We will pump out the contents. When we are sure that all fragments of the pills are out, we will pump charcoal into her stomach to neutralize the contents. We hope there is time.*

I sit in a chair next to her head and stroke her cheek. My child could die. I cannot process words and see only a flutter of action around her. With arms strapped to her sides, her body secured around the waist, she cannot move as a nurse inserts a tube into her small nostril. I rub her cheeks to stop her screams and play with the space of skin between eyebrow and hairline. I rub her tiny earlobes beneath my fingers. I am no longer angry. My child could die.

An IV inserted. Tube in her nose secured with tape. I speak softly to calm her; I am doing my best. Soon liquid comes from her nose following her tube, landing in a pink bucket. A nurse watches it, watches my daughter, watches the bucket. The bile is without fragments; no trace of anti-depressants. Liquid charcoal pumps through the tube to coat her stomach. She will be fine. She will be fine.

I watch the tube fill with black and travel slowly like leaded ink past her nose. She is asleep now. I watch her breathe.

The woman in the painting is contemplative, perhaps she is ambivalent, maybe she believes danger has passed. She holds his head, her agency revoked by the actions of others, she holds him because it is instinctive—something mothers do. I imagine she speaks to him softly, whispering that she is sorry while she strokes the skin behind his ears with her fingertips, touches the space between eyebrow and hairline, comforts his pain. She calmly holds his head and keeps the brainless child steady.

At five, my daughter’s fingers were crushed under the wheel of her red wagon. Hers was a tactile world, fingers constantly grabbing and pulling, picking up pieces of rock. When

she is seven she will swallow a marble and turn blue. I will squeeze her middle, forgetting everything I know about choking and the marble will spring from her colorless lips.

After her fingers have touched the cool gravel of the road, after they are pulled under the wagon and scraped by tires and the weight of her body, a frantic man carries her to me. Her scream is sincere, her eyes those of an animal caged. They dart from him, the man who'd pulled the wagon over her fingers, the perpetrator of this pain, to me. I take her hands in mine, her right one in my left flipping it from top to bottom while she trembles and examine her injury. Her skin is pulled back from four knuckles, white with pink watery globules. I take her to the sink, tiny body trembling in my hands, to remove gravel and dirt. I scrub her fingers with dish soap to kill the germs and spread cream on her wounds. I wrap bandages around her knuckles. I whisper and coo my words.

And after I have finished, I take her in my arms, my body pressed against hers and rock her, speaking softly, telling her I am sorry and try to begin to explain that her fingers would heal, that the man said it was an accident, that my fingers ached because hers did. Her head rests near my collarbone, my arms support her weight.

I think of the woman in the painting, her arms posed almost in prayer, giving to the child all she has to give making me think of what I know about mothers. I stare at the mouths and think of screams coming from my own mother late at night after my father abandoned us. I remember the pain on my daughter's face as I bandaged her hands, and I think of myself bloody and scarred after a bicycle accident. I am dwarfed by the size of this painting as I am dwarfed by my own expectations and memories of motherhood. I

see bone connecting: my bones and the bones of my daughter. Silently, like the women in *Naming*, we repair our bones. Silently, we sometimes heal wounds.

This essay appears to be the author's most introspective essay, and while this essay is not about the author's mothering, it is an investigation into what safety and home actually are. Additionally, the author brings into play here one of the major themes of the collection thus far: the idea of sin and sexuality. The author blames herself for the pre-cancer which, according to the author, is a direct result of a virus contracted during unprotected sex. This recurrence of sex and sexual sin is central to the author's ideas on morality and family—it remains a complicated idea that the author struggles to understand, and so attempts to do so in this essay.

Note that unlike the first essay in the Supplemental Readings section, "Goat's Milk," this essay takes place entirely after the author's father has moved away. It is interesting to compare the two voices in both essays—a child and an adult, an innocent and a sinner, a daughter and a mother.

Discussion questions for this essay may include the following:

1. *The author writes about her skin condition and her pre-cancer, and in this essay blames both of these "natural" illnesses on herself. She also blames other things on herself throughout the essay collection: what are they?*
2. *Scars in this essay are both internal and external—they are both literal and metaphorical. How does the author represent her childhood bicycle accident as a both a literal and metaphorical experience?*
3. *The author has used several "S" words to represent herself in this collection: sinner, sexual, scarred, selfish. How does this tie back to the author's use of Nathaniel Hawthorne's* The Scarlet Letter *in chapter 1's "Pearl"? How does the author begin to construct herself throughout the collection as the wearer of the Scarlet S?*

SCARRED

1.

On my face there are scars: one on my left eyebrow, a chickenpox crater on my forehead. On the bone that connects arm to hand there is a scar, perfectly round from layers of peeled skin rubbed raw by concrete. The inside of my right ankle is demarcated with a

scar within itself, a three inch line inside a larger, jagged one raised above the surface. My stomach is stretched from pregnancy and scarred from a botched gall-bladder surgery that couldn't quite be completed laparoscopically. My breasts and hips, thighs and ass are lumped and shiny, rivers of connected marks, from pounds added and lost too quickly in my teens and early twenties. A turkey scratched my wrist when I picked him up as a child from the coop where he lived, where we were raising him for meat. The scar isn't deep but pronounced and obvious on the pale transparent skin that covers a blue artery.

2.

The campus doctor asks why I have come in today, and I tell him it is my hands, they are red and cracked, the skin is bubbled up at the base of my palms and the lesions there are green and full of pus. He looks at them, touches them, flips them over and examines the skin on the tops and clicks his tongue. The skin on the top is normal, a little red from all the scratching but there are not bumps, no pus, no cracks layers deep. He flips them over again and removes his glasses. *Are you exposed to chemicals? Have you used a new soap lately? Do you wash your hands a lot? Do you use a moisturizer?* I answer his questions, the same questions he asked me four months ago when I was in his office, after my skin had gotten especially bad. No, I tell him. It is always the same: I use unscented soaps, I don't wash my hands compulsively, I wear gloves to do dishes and to hand-wash my laundry. I sleep with lotion or bag balm and socks on my hands. I am not exposed to chemicals.

I tell him that it is worse at certain times of the year when I am especially stressed: weeks at the beginnings and ends of the school semester. I tell him that this time the itching and the broken skin is keeping me from sleeping, that the scratching wakes me

up at night. He tells me that I have dermatitis; stress has nothing to do with it. I need to keep my hands away from chemicals. I must be doing something wrong.

He decides to drain the boils on the base of my hand. They are large and painful, the raised, green infection surrounded by circles of red. I've marked my arm with the ink from a black permanent marker because a red line has traveled toward my elbow and I'm worried about blood poisoning. I'm worried about the infection that causes my hands to swell to almost double their size; I'm worried that it will never go away. The doctor takes a large needle with an open tip and pushes it through a bubble on my left hand. I wince because it isn't numb and the doctor isn't gentle and when he squeezes it to push out the infection, nothing comes from the hole he has made.

He wraps my hands in gauze and then in an ace bandage and writes me a prescription I've used before. The redness never went away but the doctor doesn't listen and sends me to wait in the lobby for the pharmacist.

Four months later I will return. The weather has changed and is warming and the doctor asks me questions: *Have you changed soaps? Are you exposed to chemicals?* And when I tell him that we've done this before, he removes the glasses from his face, picks up my hands, looks at the tops and then at the palms and clicks his tongue. I have dermatitis. I must be doing something wrong.

3.

I wrecked my bike the summer before first grade. Some friends called and asked if I could play. Their house was bigger, they lived with fewer brothers and their treats weren't stale and broken Pepperidge Farm cookies that my mother bought at a discount in a clear plastic bag and brought home after working the graveyard shift. Their mother

sometimes babysat me and my brothers when our mother was away and our father was at work lifting fifty-pound bags of cow feed onto his shoulders and piling them into the backs of pick-up trucks for $6 an hour.

My clothes that day were used and ripped playthings given to me in black garbage bags from the neighbors next door or down the street. I wore my play hand-me-downs more than the nice ones I kept in a cardboard box under my bed that my father made from two-by-fours and a crib mattress that just barely fit in the washer-dryer closet in the long hall of our trailer. The shirt was one from at a family reunion, a cousin-something of my grandfather's, in Colorado. It was navy with white letters that proclaimed my lineage as a Lyness-Bower and V-necked with three white bands on each sleeve. My skirt was ruffled denim, a favorite of mine that I wasn't allowed to wear in public and especially forbidden from wearing to church because of the rips and stains covering the front. My mother asked me to change my clothes when my richer, cleaner friends called. She demanded, but soon she gave up after I wouldn't budge. Perhaps she was exhausted that day, arguing uses so much energy.

My brother and I rode our bikes to meet our friends. Neither of us wore a helmet. Regular kids didn't wear helmets then, only kids with overbearing worry-wart mothers and strange fathers who jogged daily in banana-yellow sweat suits. Kids who wore helmets were targets and sissies. They didn't have freedom or dignity and so we teased them and made them cry. We wore stained and dirty clothes and rode our bikes down the block-long driveway and into the road, past two houses, a crick, past the mud-hole full of spring runoff that hadn't dried in the summer sun, putrid and thick. The road twisted beneath us, curved three times and then a sharp turn led us down a long hill.

Residents of Richmond, Utah, call the hill “Forsgren’s Hill” because for as long as many can remember, the Forsgrens have always lived there farming and raising cows for milk that they sold to my parents in plastic jugs when it was raw, untreated and tested, full of cream floating at the top. Recently, the older Forsgren died and the farm was sold but the name remains the same to those who have history there, like I do. This hill is also called “Kid Killer Hill”—a somewhat obnoxious name well earned by the hill for nearly killing and sometimes disfiguring many of us who were lucky enough to live above it. Even Kevin Forsgren, the son of the older Forsgren who recently died, found himself maimed and bruised after a serious accident when he descended too quickly down the hill on a bike or a skateboard.

Midway down the hill ran an irrigation canal, full of parasites and Giardia, rusted barbed wire and penny-skipper bugs. When I am older, I will float down the canal on a truck tire inner tube and swim in the pond at the very end, ignoring the bugs and filth that skip about on the surface of the water. I will board up the concrete waterfall at the end and swim naked in the mud and filth. In my underwear, when I am thirteen, I will kiss my best friend’s cousin next to the pond, on the top of a small cement reservoir. He will tell me that I am beautiful, that he loves me, that I am the girl he wants, and I will see him grow hard inside his boxer shorts. Later, I will cut my ankle on a rusted piece of barbed wire and let the skin scab together. I will pick the scab, piece by deep ripping piece, and watch the blood bubble and then run down my ankle onto my heel. I will pick and pick despite the warnings I hear about infection and the ugliness of scars, and the scab will not grow back after being picked and picked, and the skin will heal raised and scarred.

On this day, my brother and I ride: him on a second-hand bike from the town thrift store, and me on my purple Huffy with a banana seat and a unicorn and a name stenciled on the curved bar that was something like “Fantasia.” Our friends are at the base and because the hill is steep we can see them from the top. I remember seeing them. I think I remember that I waved, and they waved back though this would have been impossible because the distance was too far. Probably a mile away, they must have been small and unrecognizable. I remember my brother riding in front of me. I remember wanting to catch him, peddling faster because I didn’t want him to beat me to the bottom. Then, I remember my wheels feeling loose; I remember a tightness in my chest—the way I felt when strangers stopped on the road and asked to take my picture; the way I felt when the police man asked me questions about the car they were driving, the things that they said to me, if they made me do anything that made me feel strange or weird in my tummy; the way I felt when I walked home from the neighbor’s after dark and knew that somebody followed me through the field of tall grass that separated our houses. I remember feeling afraid and moving my feet and legs backward, pushing hard on the pedals to move brake pad onto tire to slow the Huffy and me from moving this fast. I slammed on my brakes. I pushed too hard. That is all I remember.

The rest is a compilation of stories I’ve been told by others. My brother rode faster and had reached our friends at the bottom and together they watched me crash. They say that my bike began to S down the hill, swooping from side to side, side to side. Then the bike stopped, and I toppled over curved, purple handlebars and slid, face first, down rocky, oiled pavement. My mother tells me that Mr. Mitchell was working at the house at the base of the hill, and they ran to him, who, my mother tells me, *saved my life*.

Perhaps he pulled me from the road—enough of something that my mother always sent me to him whenever our paths would cross to thank him for what he did to help me. Meanwhile, my neighbor through the tall grass, a mother of eight, who drove a yellow Subaru, was flagged down as she drove upwards toward home, and my six-year-old crushed and crumpled body was put somewhere on her back seat. She drove me to my mother.

The rest of the story is this: my mother didn't recognize me. She tells me that with my bruised and swollen lips, my blue and black cheeks, my closed-up purple eye, the large split on my left eyebrow, the pink-red and worn off spots on my arms, forehead and knees, she didn't know who I was. I wasn't her child. I wasn't her only daughter. Later she will tell people, neighbors who attend our church, my grandparents in Nebraska who send get well cards with teddy bears holding balloons on the outside and dollar bills straight and ironed on the inside, that I looked like the "elephant man"—a movie I remember watching and crying for the ugly man who dies because he refuses to sleep with stacks of pillows.

And after that, after my mother is given a child she does not recognize because she is no longer her daughter, I remember again. I wake up in a bed in the emergency room. The gauzy curtains hang to the floor, bright florescent lights shine into my eyes, my t-shirt and denim skirt torn and covered in my own blood. My mouth tastes like metal, my four permanent front teeth loose and aching. In that room, surrounded by flimsy curtains and bright lights, nurses come and check my pulse and good eye; a doctor stitches shut the gash in my left eyebrow. They bring me popsicles to suck on, grape flavored or cherry, cold and wet on my aching teeth and my swollen lips. I want to

remember my mother next to me in that hospital room. But twenty years later I don't remember where she was.

I do remember that through the curtain a woman was sobbing because her daughter was dead. I would hear later about a girl from my town only a few years older than me, shot by a boy from my town in the head with a .22—on accident—who died in the hospital in the room made of curtains next to mine. Something sticks with me that makes me think of this girl, the way she died playing with her friend, the way I became unrecognizable the day I went to play with mine. I'm sure her mother thought she was safe when she sent her off that day to play with that boy—I'm sure her father told her about guns and perhaps threatened to *kick her ass* if she ever touched one of many leaning up against the wall behind the laundry room door. But in that curtained off room next to mine that girl a few years older than me died, and everyone blamed her friend, whispering under their breaths at church about the tragedy of it all, a poor little girl, a bullet in her head.

That night, home from the hospital, my mother dresses the beige floral velvet couch in a My Little Pony sheet and stands me next to it in my bloodied clothes to take a picture. I don't remember feeling that this was strange, so much of what I remember is changed and shifted from what it was or is and my mother taking a picture of me that day covered in my own blood wasn't anything to fight her over. But it is something because on a day when so much of what I remember is what people tell me to believe, I remember my mother, young and so pretty, holding whatever cheap plastic camera we happened to have for the year and telling me to stand still. In the picture I am not smiling because my mouth can't move and my lips are pulled too tight from the swelling to curl them up or

down. My eye is swollen shut and purple, a ball of skin and flesh protruding from my face, circular bruises, like those from fingers poked into my flesh, dot the skin of my neck. After the photo in my denim skirt and my navy Lyness-Bower V-necked t-shirt torn on my shoulders, my mother tells me about the girl who died so close to me on a day my mother didn't know me. She tells me this story about the little girl with the bullet in her brain, my mother's mouth moving slow, tears in the corners of her eyes ,and she cuts my clothes from my broken body, tucking me into bed on the couch where no one was allowed to sleep.

4.

The skin on my palms is thick from years of scratching through rough and raised pink skin. My fingers are habitually curled inward, making the resting position of my hands nearly that of a closed fist. If I stretch my hands past the comfortable fist where my fingers rest, the skin on my palms, where the elasticity is gone, cracks in the corners, and in the joint where pinky meets palm. My hands bleed when I have scratched off layers and layers of skin. Itching and cracking, I sometimes cannot resist the driving, almost unconscious desire to pull skin from muscle, muscle from bone, to dig into the soft flesh in the center of my hands and rip from that gaping, pink hole whatever has entered my body and made the itching. In high school I used a hair brush to scratch my arms because my nails pink and sharp, bitten down to the quick could not. My arms itched in my sleep then and sometimes my legs too, but I displayed no other symptoms—no scales, redness, or strange blotches that looked like the ringworm on my arms I got from playing in the dirt every summer when I was small—small, red discolorations raised above the skin like cigarette burns.

I worry about my hands only because people ask questions. My mother has scars on her arms that she tells people are from being abused as a child, burned with cigarettes, flesh smoking and melting. She wasn't this girl; the scars are because she picks raised and rough, pink, swollen shafts of hair. She picks them and picks them: a nervous habit, a way to calm herself. I understand the need to pick, digging through flesh, peeling off scales of hardened double-layer skin. I like touching new skin when the leather has been picked away: skin barely exposed, red and clammy before the scales begin to grow and my palms no longer feel like they belong to my body. I call the redness, the raised and raw skin my stigmata, a leprosy.

I take steroids to stop the itching and slow the skin that grows five times too fast. The steroids make me sweat, make me shiver and ache, my legs sore and twitching when I lie down at night, my heart racing and thumping. The steroids make me anxious, angry, short. They alter my hours of sleep, my mood, and my ability to taste. I wash my face and body in tar shampoo—recently removed from the shelves in California because of its connections to cancer. Twice a week I lie in a plastic coffin under UV lights and don't wear goggles to protect my eyes because it started growing there too—on my lids, under my right eye—swelling them until my eyes could not open. The treatment is sometimes worse than the scratching, though the scratching is habit, the picking is something I do to pass minutes into hours and into days. The picking is something I do to myself.

I read about my diagnosis, a disease I have had for years that only now makes sense. Doctors tell me now what I've known for years: it is worse when I am stressed, when my stomach pits and sinks to the floor, when depression consumes my limbs and

my brain, when I have injured my skin. There are lists of possible triggers: injury, alcohol, sunburn, stress.

5.

I worry about the stress you are under. Stress creates toxins and toxins can poison you. I am afraid you could get cancer. Cancer from stress, not from smoking, not from too much sun, not from artificial UV lights in a plastic tanning bed twice a week. Cancer.

When I was twenty-three she drove me to the hospital when I had a real cancer removed. The procedure was simple: an electrically charged loop would remove the front part of my cervix, scrape along edges, and remove the stage-four cancerous cells before they became full-blown making a hysterectomy my only option. A loop electrosurgical excision procedure: a LEEP. A procedure this new gynecologist performed everyday. My mother sat in the waiting area full of pink and blue and green geometric fabrics on a padded rigid chair. *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping*, maybe a *Parenting*, sat on the table in front of her. I'm sure she picked up the book she brought with her, probably the latest biography of Abraham Lincoln or a new literature anthology to teach her high school kids when they returned in the fall. She'd never read a silly magazine like those spread before her. I believe she sat there reading, her pencil perched in her hand, marking in the margins, she could do it anywhere, even in a waiting room of a gynecologist attached to the raucous waiting room of a pediatrician.

In the sterile tiled room the doctor removed more than he originally thought he would have to. A nice man, cuteish, apologized when I winced as he cut off parts of me that weren't quite numb. His eyes above his mask looked kind, and I remember furrowed, concerned eyebrows. After the pre-cancer was removed, he left the room so I could dress

and entered again when I cracked the door, showing my willingness to discuss what had just happened between us. He told me he had to cut more than originally planned, the biopsy hadn't been taken from the edges and the sickened cells went up into my uterus but he didn't know how deeply. He assured me that I would probably recover but I may need a second procedure, something more extreme because the cancerous cells could return. Prevention: I needed pap smears every four months for two years, I may need a hysterectomy. Hopefully we caught it in time. I could be one of the lucky ones.

Dazed, I left the room, walking slowly because pain was shooting between my legs and down to my flip-flopped feet. My mother looked up as I entered the room through the glass and wooden door that separated us and, stumbling, carrying my self and my corduroy purse, told her we could go now. I wore a pad, an after-baby-having, large, almost-diaper to prevent any of the un-cauterized fluid from leaking out and ruining my denim skirt. I wanted to go home, lie on my couch and rub my cramping stomach. I had put myself here: years of unprotected sex with multiple partners had given me a virus that evolves and morphs, twisting and attacking healthy cells before it becomes cancer. I didn't tell my mother that this was my fault. I didn't cry; I wanted to feel remorse but instead only felt twinges when I moved too quickly.

I assured my mother that I was okay, my wincing and carefully thought out moves only a side-effect for what I really felt. I felt fine, I told her. Happy now that this thing was behind me, one less thing to worry about. I told her to tell myself: I was going to be okay. I was going to be fine. My best friend had this cancer years ago, right before she was pregnant with her second baby. They couldn't get rid of hers, fearing that she would lose the baby, and so for nine months she waited and the cancer grew. When she went to

a doctor to have her cervix cut apart and the cancerous cells vaporized, they told her it was severe. They told her she may be one of the lucky ones; they may have caught it in time.

I fainted in the shower after giving birth to my daughter. And years later on my way home that day from the hospital, I felt the same swirling blackness I knew from before. My mother was there both times and both times she helped me stand, bracing me after I fell.

6.

There are scars on my palms the color and shape of burns that heal and flare up every day. The psoriasis sleeps and then returns when I've had too much wine or too little water. The scratching keeps me up at night, Velcro scratching Velcro palms, flakes of skin falling onto black shirts, falling onto the floor. On my insides I am damaged and I've done it to myself. But on the outside, where skin is stapled to skin and new layers grow five times too fast, rising to the surface and forming scales and plaques of leather, it helps to imagine that I am healing, that perhaps I am getting better.

Tonight I will rub a salve on my skin and cover my hands in soft, cotton gloves. I sometimes sleep at night, but often lie restless in my bed and listen to hours click by, because I am too afraid to dream and remember the stories I've been told by others after it fades to black and I wake up, broken and sore. Sometimes I wonder about peeling back layers and layers of skin. I wonder what I would find. Underneath my layers of skin and scars some things are broken that have never healed. Like a bone not properly set, joints rub together, the bone shifted and crooked—always slightly off-center, always almost out of place. In these places, the ones that are under my skin, where my history is lodged,

new skin begins to grow, moving toward the surface, moving up layer by layer and forming a scale when escaping to the surface.

A sliver from a haystack trampled through in bare feet always works a way out; through scars, through skin. Some things aren't forgotten.

In this final essay of the Supplemental Readings section, the author uses place to begin understanding loss. Here the author begins to tie together feelings of ambivalence as a mother and as a daughter. This ambivalence is also something she expects to find, and believes she sees, in her mother and in her child. This essay is in the author's most immediate past—the loss of this child is very much unlike the author's reaction to the loss of her grandfather in the essay "For my Father."

Note that the author discusses in this essay, as she discusses in "The Cult of True Motherhood," "For my Father," and "(Re)reading Legitimacy," her views on religion, morality and sin. Here the author begins to unearth the religion of her youth as she digs to understand its significance on this place and this experience.

Questions for discussion may include the following:

1. *Contrast the author's reaction to loss in "For my Father" with her reactions in "Sage." Is there a difference? How does age and time change the author's view of death?*
2. *How does the landscape convey the emotions of the story? What is the significance of place in this essay?*
3. *How does the author's use of religion in this and some of the other essays in this collection begin to add layers to the author's argument of a "cult of true motherhood"? How does this essay prove, or disprove, her feelings of inadequacy throughout the collection?*

SAGE

My nephew is buried two hours away from my home. In April 2008, he just died. *Stenosis of the Colon*, the doctors said after months of saying it was nothing: that *it is acid reflux,* that *the vomiting was normal*. And when he told his mommy that his belly

hurt, she laid down to comfort him and he died. Just like that. He was twenty-months old.

Hung-over and sleepy-eyed, I was surprised to hear my phone ringing next to me on my make-shift bedside table, 6:32 a.m. *Honey*, my mother said, *it's Weston. He died*. And I gasped loudly enough to wake the man, who will soon be my husband, sleeping next to me. I'd been prepared for such a phone call in early hours to tell of death two years ago when my brother was fighting a losing war in Iraq. I'd begun to prepare myself for my own parents' passing—my father already outlived his own father. I know I will lose him to a heart-attack. My youngest brother was serving a Mormon mission in Miami—he sometimes wrote of gunshots and murders—it could have been him. Instead, Weston just died before the sun decided to rise.

I wait by the phone, hoping to be called again to meet my family and grieve. I want to feel arms around my waist as I shudder through my sobs. I keep my daughter home from school; I wake her to tell her in the same way my own mother told me. *Honey*, I say, *it's Weston. He died*, and she cries like I did—shocked at first and lonely next, and we cry together. I spend the day in bed, though I am dressed. I am prepared to meet and discuss arrangements, prepared to juggle the tears of his parents. My mother calls in the afternoon. *You may want to come up. We're all here*. And I leave the isolation of my home, drive to the other side of town and park my Oldsmobile on the curb. My mother walks in a hunch. My stepfather has blood on his shirt. He begins to weep when I ask without thinking what he has spilled there.

When they buried Weston they chose the cemetery in the valley where he'd spent most of his small life and today I drive to see him.

In April, when he died, I didn't follow the lines of cars through the lush green hills to place his body into the already fertile earth. I'd been teaching poetry to third graders (my own daughter's age), his funeral and interment the day of our final parent performance. There simply wasn't enough time. I chose them, and my commitment to their art and voice, instead of my commitment to my family—the children would miss me if I wasn't there. I needed to be with them—I needed their hope, I needed to see their eyes glisten. I needed to feel their spirits and not think of the child we'd lost. Standing before me with shaking notebook in hand, reciting for proud mothers and fathers the poetry I had helped them write, they justified my decision.

In April, in Arbon Valley, the earth begins to thaw after months of hard winter snow and drifts sometimes 10 feet tall. The men talk of moisture and hope for the months that will come, the crops they will plant, the price of seed and fuel. I imagine the line of cars, and my weeping family within them, climbing Highway 38 through hills surrounded by plowed fields and natural meadows, Bureau of Land Management lands used for grazing livestock. I imagine the sniffling as the drive continues, conversation moving from the death of a boy to the life that surrounds them, the earth becoming ready as they drive onward.

I drive today, nearly six months later, with my daughter and husband to plant flowers around his grave bringing life to this lonely place. A cemetery as old as the homesteaders' farms, many of the graves are unmarked and collapsed over the returning-to-dust remains of settlers. Surrounded by farmland, fences prevent unnecessary disturbance by tractors turning earth. Raw wooden fence-posts lean from rotten bottoms

and ceaseless wind. It's been a hot summer; stalks of green winter wheat pop out of thick soil in straight rows. This is the only green I see.

I am here to plant flowers, purple and white crocus plants to bloom in early spring. I want to remember him. I want others to remember him. My intentions are also wicked: I use this excuse to visit my mother. As we drive I prepare myself for the things she will say about my child, my job, my degree, my new husband, my failure. I warn and remind my daughter of the words she should not say, the jokes her grandmother will not understand. I remind her of rules: don't open the refrigerator without asking; the computer is not a child's toy; Sundays are days of rest; television is full of evil and worldly pressures for sex and money. I prepare us all for her sharp words during the two hour drive. I plan to plant these flowers without my mother: I am prepared with shovel and water to say *hello*, and *goodbye* to this boy.

But instead, we pass the cemetery and continue to my family's farm. I am worried about being late for lunch, arriving too late to help with its preparations and feeling the weight of my imposition on their Sunday. I have brought a salad, some rolls. I will feed them and visit my nephew on my trip home. Perhaps on this day I have prepared myself for failure. I am convinced that a fight will erupt soon after my arrival. I often find myself slipping into defense. Around my mother I become reactionary, impulsive. This irritates her. It infuriates me. Thus, I am prepared to tip-toe and am armed with homemade pesto dressing to grease her gears of happiness.

I've wondered for years about the true relationship I have with my mother, about the way I feel about her and the way she feels about me. And despite all my wondering and thinking and trying to understand the relationship we have, I never feel any more

secure than I did so many years ago. I'm grown, I've not lived at home in a decade, I am respected in my job. My teenage mother students look up to me, my teaching evaluations are respectable, I buy organic milk, I donate money to charity. I do these things because they make me feel like a better person. I search for this acceptance in her—to be acknowledged as smart or kind, to have her ignore the tone of my voice and instead see me in the way I've tried to see myself. But this isn't to be and I wonder if she feels the same way about herself that she feels about me. Perhaps this is why I feel rejected, perhaps she feels ambivalent toward herself like she feels ambivalent toward her children. It isn't a stretch to think so, I feel it too: toward my child, toward myself, toward her. But it isn't as simple as this: yes, perhaps we both feel this way. There is more to it than that, she must feel something for me more than ambivalence. But I'm not sure that she does, and perhaps this is sometimes how my own daughter feels. How can so much resentment be born from love?

Today she is different from what I expect: happy to see me, hugs all the way around. I begin to prepare a supper and she is in the kitchen, telling me stories and jokes. Her voice is cheerful, lilting up and down—the way I sometimes remember it long ago. *I think you've lost weight*, she says to my husband and balls her fist and taps his stomach lightly. *You always make a nice salad* she says to me *I just don't ever think about eating the way you do*. I am uncomfortable in the kitchen next to the stove she's installed herself, she tells me of the hole she cut in the wall to make it fit and points to exposed floorboards from the carpet she'd ripped out while my stepfather plowed his 2200 acres. *Be a dentist, not a dental assistant*, she'd always said to me as a child—she'd taught me to be better than those women happy to clean teeth and be less than men, she'd not

understood limits, she knew how to help herself. She'd not had a choice after my father left her to care for all those children. A roof leaked? You caulk it yourself. Trees difficult to mow around? She'd cut them down with a chainsaw.

I worry that I may ruin this visit, and so I smile too much and say too little. She asks me to cut potatoes and heat roast beef for sandwiches, and she does not offer to help. Her arms folded across her chest, she stands in a corner. My hair in my face, I bend over the marbled linoleum counter. She watches me use the knife she has suggested I use. I feel that perhaps I am doing this wrong and grow anxious. My daughter is outside swinging in the trees, and I see her through the kitchen window facing east. My mother asks me about school. She'd gone to the same college years ago, her GPA better than mine, she asks me because she is smarter than me and wants to remind me. She tells me that writing is a simple thing though her own manuscripts pile high in her office—stories rejected once and twice, she never sends them out anymore. *It is simple*, she says.

They are getting divorced, she tells me. The judge has ordered therapy for my brother and his wife. *They've gone through a lot this year*, said the judge. *They need help*. My stepfather nods; he went to counseling when he divorced his wife. My mother took pills when my father left her. I had a prescription for Paxil the year of my divorce. When I left, I took my daughter with me. My brother cannot do the same—his son is buried in the dry Arbon soil.

And it is dry today. No rain in the valley for some weeks, and my stepfather talks about the wind and the danger of fires. Everyone here is afraid of fires. Last year a family lost 90% of their crop right before harvest. Today, with dryness all around us, we climb into my air conditioned car and drive through dirt and wind to Church Road, and up, east,

to the cemetery. My mother has come along to plant crocus bulbs in the earth and I am glad. We will do this together in a moment of silence. I want to reach her, place my hand on her hand, wrap my arm around my daughter. I want to feel her veins rippled through the skin of her hands and touch the softness of her arms. I want to comfort her and allow her to comfort me. Yet I do nothing and watch my stepfather bow his head as we drive through the wooden gates: "Arbon Valley Cemetery" barely legible on the carved wooden sign.

Many of the graves in this place hold the remains of children. One family, friends of my mother, have buried three here in the past year: one gone to cancer, one lost in a car accident, another, they say, *died from stress*—I'm unsure what this means but cannot ask the question. I do not want the answer; I'm uncomfortable in the place. Weston is buried in a plot purchased by my parents and they show me where they will rest someday to the north of the smallest one. My roots are somewhere else and Weston rests alone. But he is buried near others in this newest part of the cemetery and this comforts my parents—the oldest graves follow the crooked fence—Weston rests in the center. *He is with other children*. This isn't what they really mean: as Mormons, my parents believe in eternal life and eternal families. They believe Weston will live eternally with Christ forever in Paradise. To be taken so young is sometimes a blessing. Weston isn't here, in this cemetery, but in Heaven where he waits for his parents.

I used to believe in eternal families until my father left. Imagining my mother alone in heaven, without a husband there as she was here, surrounded by five children who tortured her, was unfair and unthinkable. He left her, he left for someone else, he took her eternal future and walked out—and he didn't care. That is what I believed then:

if he would have loved us, and loved us forever, then he would have stayed and not gone to live with his secretary. Sunday school teachers would tell me that it wasn't for me to understand, that it was all part of God's plan, and that he knew what would happen before we did. His puppets (they did not say this word. I say it now). But I believe in fairness and getting what you deserve; I believe that if this were true then God would have worked it out for my mother before my father took off, and she'd not have been punished eternally for his sin.

My stepfather walks the dirt paths with me, nearly too small for a car to pass. These were the roads of wagons and buggies. These paths are history. Lives and deaths are imprinted into the soil, marking time in packed earth. He is this kind of man, good and hard working, of the soil and the earth. He believes in God and, I believe, he has given my mother hope again. *Here*, he says, *this is Bitter Brush*. And he points to a yellow flower on a green-brown leafless stalk. Its roots dig deep, and it survives here in this cemetery. These are the plants that can live in a place like this, roots pushing through soil, digging deep and surviving long, windy winters. It is the determination of the plant that allows it to continue to grow (even inches a decade) in this sort of place. My mother is like that: digging in, picking up, moving on. She's always been like that, and I think of her here, and I'm glad she's come with me to plant these flowers for the baby Weston.

Wild plants are everywhere. Even the domestic, an evergreen shrub, a lilac tree, are overgrown and sprawl wildly outward reaching out of this place. *Giant Sagebrush*, he says. *Its roots are twenty feet deep.* He points to a bare patch on the mountain. *You see that*, my stepfather says, *that dirt patch. It'll be planted to wheat soon; it's new land*—my brother has pulled the roots of sagebrush from the earth. *I told him to work hard*, he says.

It will help him heal. My stepfather believes this. He's had to heal before when his wife up and left him. He understands the way someone else can rip your heart from your chest; he understands my mother, and the way she gets when the winter has been too long.

Rabbit Brush, my stepfather says, pointing to heavy stems coming from the dirt. And because this is only my second time in this place, I ask why the cemetery is wild. *Why is there no grass?* There is cultivated, planted, planned order all around in the fields of wheat keeping order away from wild and chaos. And he answers, *Up here, there isn't any water*. The dead don't need to drink, the desert a suitable enough burial. My mother joins us, pointing upward, east, into a field now plowed under. *There is a body out there, a man who killed a woman. She was homesteading. They wouldn't let him in here—it's consecrated ground*. I imagine the loneliness of living in this place, wildness and brush and murder. A baby, a woman, a family of three, dead.

My mother holds large kitchen spoons in her back pocket of her dark blue jeans. These serving spoons, the kind I used to plant flowers around our home as a child, are to dig holes two or four inches deep to plant each bulb, pointed side up around the grave that holds my nephew's body. I have a shovel. My mother holds her spoons in folded hands and rests them on her chest useless because the ground is hardened from the dry summer. My husband shovels, cutting into the edges of a tomb. I kneel next to the grave and drop the small bulb into place, pushing then patting dirt over the small hole. My stepfather waters the bulb; my daughter wanders through the graves looking at names and dates. My mother watches us and stands back away from our group. Many of the headstones have a single date that serves purposes of birth and death—here, Weston is surrounded by children.

Doctors sometimes cannot diagnose colonic stenosis—often it isn't detected until a child begins to eat solid foods. Then the child's belly grows painfully full of waste. In the meantime, it looks like other things, perhaps like acid reflux. Weston's belly consumed him, his midsection full of poison. Doctors sometimes label these children: *failing to thrive*—arms and legs gangly and thin. My mother complained of his smell as a newborn covered in spit-up of nearly all the food he'd swallowed, rancid splayed on bib, on blanket, on her t-shirt. Even milk caused pain. In one of every 20,000 children born with a severe case of stenosis, the colon is nearly completely blocked. Weston is one of 20,000. Colonic stenosis was first diagnosed in 1673. These children always died. Now children like Weston who undergo surgery have a 90% survival rate. Weston may have survived if we'd have known. But the doctor said it was acid reflux, and his young mother believed the doctor; perhaps she did not know about seeking another opinion. I imagine her crushing guilt. It is sometimes hard to believe that life could have been otherwise. I am afraid to wonder of such things myself. My guilt dwarfed as I think of Weston's mother—my child is alive and in the cemetery with me, while hers remains alone and buried in this dusty ground.

Mormon Crickets eat this land, laying their eggs in sagebrush, hibernating in brush, sleeping through the heat within its shade—they consume loneliness. They eat each other and themselves.

One year my mother sent a cricket home with my daughter who'd been to stay with her during the summer. A jelly jar and a Mormon Cricket, this insect of folklore and

destruction with robotic face, alien legs and body. Both prehistoric and futuristic grasshopper, it gave me the willies. I remember a story about pioneers who moved from the East to the Midwest, and after banishment and terror, moved finally to Utah. They planted grain in the desert, they irrigated the land, they cleared sagebrush and jack rabbits. One day the crickets appeared and turned the sky black. The crickets consumed work and hope of homesteaders in Utah's Salt Lake Valley, and the people prayed with arms folded across their chests and bowed heads begging God to remove this plague. *Please, Heavenly Father, save us* and He did. This is what they say: the sky grew black again and the gulls came, swarms and swarms and dropped down to eat the crickets. The people were saved.

This story isn't true. Mormon Crickets do not fly. They could not have turned the sky black because they move on the ground. They hop, like grasshoppers, and they crawl. They can move 50 miles a day and consume everything within their paths, but they do not fly. Perhaps this is the story that should be told: when it is warm enough, 80 degrees or so like the crickets prefer, and they awake from hibernation in the belly of a sagebrush to scuttle out and feast on growing grain. And every year, the story should be told, they do this again. According to the "Mormon Cricket Fact Sheet" published by the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center, these crickets (that aren't crickets at all) can completely destroy cultivated fields and consume hundreds of thousands of dollars of crops each year. States like Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah have suppression plans in place to eliminate the crickets by using pesticides and insecticides. These poisons are sprayed on the plants the crickets consume, saving the consumption for humans, poison and all.

Poison and wheat, crickets and sagebrush, a little boy buried in a box with a toy John Deere tractor near his tombstone. The loneliness is in my mouth, in my hands. The dust turns my stomach, and I am suddenly exhausted. I call my daughter to me; she is entranced by the finality of bodies placed in earth, and together we walk toward my car passing sagebrush, bitter brush, rabbit brush, rotting fence posts, a dwarfed lilac. My husband carries the shovel, my stepfather his now empty jug of water. My mother carries her spoons.

We drive home through the dust.

The crickets are gone now, passing through this place two months before; their bodies making roadways slick as oil as car tires crush and expose insect organs. Their eggs laid in the branches of the sage have already begun to hatch. Winter they hibernate, spring they grow, and summer comes and the crickets move—out of the sage and over Weston's grave, perhaps snacking on the remains of the crocus flowers, moving outward to the fields of wheat and alfalfa. The people begin to pray and soon the crickets disappear. And like the flowers planted around this baby's grave, they hibernate through the winter and find light again in the spring.

CHAPTER V

(RE)READING LEGITIMACY

The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne

I read *The Scarlet Letter* my junior year in high school—a year before I switched schools as a pregnant teenager, the year I'd met my boyfriend and father of my child, a year before I married in December in a church gymnasium decorated with on-sale Christmas lights, three years before I loaded my car with my clothes, my child, a television, my dog, and drove back to Utah through icy November storms.

My mother, teacher at a local school, brought the film home to watch —not the one featuring Demi Moore, the other one, a woman with icy blue eyes, a believable Hester. My mother watched for video clips and telling bits to show when her struggling students needed visuals to hold in their memories the story of Hester and her scarlet A. She'd show the film in her high school class to the jocks and the geeks. This was her reward—five minutes of video exchanged for hours of reading. My mother and I watched this film together: my mother preparing her lesson on Puritan restraint and punishment, me preparing my thoughts to share with uninterested peers. I wanted to tell them about the unfairness of Hester's punishment, I wanted them to understand how I saw this woman. I was sure that my feelings about her, a victim of circumstance, a reasonable human being, a woman who must have been swept away by a powerful something to have made this sort of decision to sleep with a man who was not her husband. She was like the rest of us; she made choices without thinking—she was like me. She must have

believed she was in love. I recognized this even before my own life turned topsy-turvy and my own scarlet A became visible in my eyes.

I believe, although I cannot prove it, that the day I announced my early pregnancy to my mother and stepfather something visibly changed in my appearance. I wasn't showing a swollen belly yet and wouldn't for a few months. First pregnancies are like that: you can hide them for a little while so you have time to catch your breath. It wasn't my growing belly that told of my choices, it was the weight of this decision, my spontaneous choice to sleep with a boy without any protection, that altered my looks. I look back and remember baggy t-shirts and my boyfriend's sweater, I remember bags under my eyes, I remember jeans that grew tight on my stomach. I remember dropping my eyes and feeling ashamed and can only think of the ways I was like Hester Prynne and I wonder how she'd tried to hide her swelling belly.

It must have been easier for her than it was for me. She lived alone on the edge of Massachusetts forest; I lived with my parents in a country town in Mormon Utah. I imagine that she stayed hidden until someone discovered her swollen stomach under bolts of subdued fabric. And even then there was no one to see her and call her names until she was released from the dinginess of that country jailhouse. It was only after her child was born that the others called her *hussy*. I could not stay hidden—I had classes to attend and a high school full of people who could judge me and call me names: *slut*, *easy*, *that poor girl*. Someone said that I'd *jumped the gun*. My mother called my boyfriend a *chicken-shit* when he didn't come around for a few days after I told her. I don't remember if she called me names then, I don't remember her calling my daughter *Pearl* until Dallas was two or three. But I saw it in the eyes of those who I loved and I heard them whisper and

say things about *never going to college*; I heard them talk about my future like I'd already lived enough of it and there wasn't a way to turn back and fix anything from that point on. I didn't want to believe them but I was young and they knew so much about the way the world sometimes worked—about girls who live on welfare and work at nights in factories, girls who give birth sometimes yearly to the children of different men. I knew their expectations and they saw my own in my eyes.

It is years later, three or four, when I drive home through the icy winter night to sleep on the couch of the mother-in-law I am soon divorcing. The decision to sleep on her couch seemed reasonable then: family remains family after a divorce, or at least this is what I thought. My own mother remained the closest friends with my father's mother and would drive us to visit her Nebraska farm as children. I must have believed this would be the case with my young family—I see now how frightfully inappropriate this was, but I am older and have had time to sort through some of the drawers of memories and confusion. I wonder why she offered me a couch to sleep on after those hours of driving and if she thought I'd resist and drive on through. I don't know these answers but I know I slept on a couch that night and not in the bedroom I'd shared with my husband on Christmas-time visits.

Wind pushed my car into banks and off the road, ice and sleet hit my windows as eighteen-wheelers flew by, unconcerned for my two-wheel drive. Eighteen wheels, eighteen years, a tiny daughter in the back seat of a domestic car. Domestic, not a trait I've inherited, and there were others I missed out on as well: patience, kindness, sympathy. Selfishness and high-octane gasoline push me through the snow glazed mountains.

And in my cassette player, I hear clicking and a woman's voice from the book on tape: *"God gave me the child!" cried she. "He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!—she is my torture none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?"* (Hawthorne 77). My mother gave me the box of cassettes to listen to on the drive because she knew it wouldn't be long before I'd leave my husband. She drove at night so many times with us children between our home and that Nebraska farm that she knew music eventually became a background noise that couldn't help her stay awake. She'd lived this memory of driving between fear and safety with a car loaded to its ceiling and listened to hours of books to keep her eyes on the pavement of Wyoming freeway. She'd given me these tapes because she knew I'd leave eventually, she told me that the summer before and said that when I did I could live with her for a little while. She saw it coming; she knew things would fall apart. Before I left her house that summer to drive home with a man who made me cry in a family picture, my mother gave me these cassettes for the drive back alone—whenever it was.

I think about my mother calling my daughter *Pearl* and I'm conflicted, like I'm conflicted about so many things. Perhaps she meant this hateful name-calling. Yet, I want to believe the opposite; I want to believe that in my child, the girl my mother wanted to call *Joy*, was a child who would save her mother. Perhaps my mother recognized Pearl's qualities in my daughter: impulsive and distrusting, fiery, a girl who is not a symbol as much as she is a icon—a savior. Perhaps my mother knew that my daughter would save

me like Pearl saved Hester. My daughter lives in life as Pearl does on the page and she remains both my torture and my happiness.

"God gave her into my keeping," repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. "I will not give her up!" (Hawthorne 77). As I write this now, I think of the girl I knew in school who'd given her son to a family in Idaho—a mother, father and a child sort of family—and I wondered of her strength. She gave up one son and later another and held the babies of her friends like a new mother: stiff-armed, cold plastic without warmth. I think of this now, unsure myself how to hold an infant years after giving birth to that girl who rode with me in the backseat of that crimson-colored car. I think of this now as I write of my own family's willingness to be rid of a child they had not met. My mother suggested moving away for a while. She'd sometimes come to my bedroom in the earliest hours of the morning to tell me about her dreams; she'd come to my room, flip on a light, and accuse me of moral failings. It was in this way, a blinding light at four in the morning, that she suggested I *go away and live with Aunt Cheryl*, my unmarried aunt in North Platte, Nebraska. It would have made things easier for her, I think, sending me off to make it on my own so that she'd remain a respectable sort and clean up the pieces I'd be leaving behind. Future in-laws and aunts line up to give advice for the life of this child. They suggest adoption.

At seventeen I stand on a ladder in a florist's shop in Idaho where I work after school. I wear my husband's sweaters to hide my growing belly. My boss is a wide woman, unable to climb ladders. She is full of Filet o' Fish sandwiches and advice. *It was the '60s*, she tells me. *Nice girls didn't get pregnant. Nice girls didn't have sex. I was a nice girl but it just happened in that bathroom on the way home from the lake*. And then

she tells me about her three children, the one who died when he was run into the soil by a tractor driven by his father, and she tells me about adoption, about how she wanted to give her daughter away but ended up keeping her, about her son who couldn't have children, about the black-haired pixie he finally adopted. I climb down from the ladder and walk out the door, to my car and drive home.

Three years later, over iced concrete, I drive home again.

My Ántonia, Willa Cather

My daughter is nearly ten years old and for nearly ten years I've considered myself a single mother. I was married to her father during the earliest years of her life, leaving him while he sat on a boat in a harbor in Japan, or maybe Australia. I moved home to Utah where I'd lived since my parents lost our farm in 1983 and moved from the Nebraska panhandle. Federal laws prohibit divorce during deployment for its Marines. Separations are fine, divorces unlawful, affairs and infidelity unethical. None of this mattered.

I'd given birth without a husband and perhaps this is why I've always considered my daughter father-less. I watched the doctor grow panicked. I lay alone on a birthing chair and wanted so much to hold my husband's hand through each contraction. I wanted him present and participating, telling me things about *what is normal* and spitting facts about labor from the books he'd read. But he wasn't there and even if he had been, the reassurances would have been forced because he hadn't opened a single book I'd bought him about *What to Expect*. I'd cried alone in that hospital bed, the recliner next to me telling in its vacancy. I lost blood, I received more, I signed for her body to be tested and

vaccinated: hearing, heart, hepatitis. The evening of her birth I'd taken a shower, washed my hair with baby shampoo and tried to cleanse myself and my skin with hotel-size bars of hospital soap. I fell into a fog when I left the shower stall as I bent over to dry my shaking legs. I remember feeling dizzy. I remember calling for my mother. I woke up in my hospital bed, draped in a gown and covered with a sheet. I wished it was my husband who'd picked me up from the floor to carry back to my bed.

Perhaps possession is the law in the ownership of children. We'd lived like a family when she was three months, and I'd played the games they required that I play with them. I mothered and dressed her. I bathed and fed. I woke in the night to coo her to sleep. I held her in my arms or on my legs when she demanded. I heard her wild animal cries. I warmed up bottles of formula and budgeted and *went without* when the money wasn't there to buy a replacement for the one we'd already consumed. I was wife and mother and housekeeper and nanny. In my hours with her, she became only mine while her father prepared for urban combat and wars of the future. In two years buildings in New York would fall, and he would call from a boat in a harbor of Japan, or maybe Australia, and tell me about the war that would soon come.

Before he left me to sit on a boat and wait for a war to start, we'd been fighting a war for two years, him and me, in that boxy apartment in California where cockroaches scurried out from under the fridge, the cupboards, the toaster. Money in and money out: formula, diapers, car insurance, cable, telephone, alcohol. Prisoners in our deprivation we do not band together; instead, violence wins. So does fear. And as the nation declares war on terrorism, I move back to Utah.

My daughter is mine then, sole physical custody, and I wear this like a badge. I have given her a new mountain home, the home where I spent my teen years, the home on a hill where I played next to creeks and thorn patches, a home with a dried pond that once held rainbow trout. I give her an acre to wander on, fields of alfalfa, a corral to hold horses, the remaining raspberry bushes that still produce—if only a few berries a year so many years later. She is a member of my self-important team. Mother, daughter, tragic life. My sadness is armor.

These are the things I know about how to be happy: Mormon children who grow up and "fall away" from the church—meaning: rejecting any part of the doctrines delivered by God as he speaks to modern prophets—may return to happiness and eternal safety by requesting forgiveness by local church leaders (always male) as they stand in proxy for God. And in the weeks following my move back to Utah and to the home of my devout mother, I request the forgiveness of God by asking His proxy. I know that to be truly happy, women in the Mormon church marry for eternity, and in this life and the next—on heaven and earth—women bear children because it is God's will and important for the life of the religion. How better to make believers than to create them yourself?

The thing about legitimacy is that it is a construct. Two parents make a legitimate child; following the laws of the land as they are proscribed make for a legitimate life. Legitimacy is in the documentation—it is all paperwork. And despite my daughter having a legitimate father on her birth certificate, and despite our legal marriage before she was born, I have never considered my role as mother a legitimate one. Perhaps this is why I am badger-hole protective of this person.

I'd been ashamed of this baby and this life while we lived together in Utah in the months before we tried to look like a family. I believed then that looking like a family—mother, father, baby—would eventually make it so. I could not justify living apart; my mother sometimes said things about *taking responsibility* and *stepping up* when she'd say my husband's name. She believed as I did: in order to be a family you first had to look like one. So I moved to California with that tiny baby to make amends for the wrongs I'd committed in my mother's home. I discovered that in California I could smoke cigarettes without lecture and drink alcohol until I was sick. I learned that religion and church attendance on Sundays takes up too much time. I learned that I didn't have to hide from my pregnancy and my past because I knew other women who had done the same thing.

It was almost like a club of women who'd started motherhood too early who lived next-door in on-base housing. We were the same: seventeen or eighteen or nineteen, we had children to care for, we sent our husbands away for weeks at a time while we stayed home to make do and live on rice and beans. We were legitimate mothers of these children because no one said otherwise. No one questioned our ownership; there wasn't anything to be ashamed of here.

I think about pride and shame and hiding and being respectable. It makes me think of my mother's suggestion to move away and have a baby somewhere else. I think it must have been a comfort to her when I was gone, there must have been a weight lifted from her shoulders. She didn't need to hide me or defend me or make excuses for me anymore. I think about pride and I think of the way Ántonia Shimerda in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* wasn't ashamed of having a child out of wedlock and how the people in the town talked about her. I think of the things I'm sure those women in my Mormon town

said about me and I wonder if Ántonia knew what they were saying and I wonder if I've become too absorbed with establishing myself as a legitimate caretaker for the child I hadn't meant to want in the first place.

Like the townsfolk said about Ántonia: *"That's Tony Shimerda's baby. You remember her; she used to be the Harling's Tony. Too bad! She seems so proud of the baby, though; wouldn't hear to a cheap frame for the picture,"* I feel that some still say these sort of things about me. But that was ten years ago, and I wonder if I'm making it up, perhaps they've forgotten me and the way they looked at me in church. Perhaps there is another girl and another who have had such early babies that they needn't think about me anymore. I'd like to think that they've moved on but still wonder if this is true. I still feel their eyes searching my face when we sometimes meet in the grocery store. They ask me questions and whether I have *just the one*, and where her father is now. They are establishing my legitimacy in aisles of boxed food, and I allow them to ask because I sometimes wonder about it myself.

I read the story of Ántonia Shimerda as if it is my own—failure, illegitimacy, blatantly unremorseful. Except, I am not unremorseful. I am sorry that my child was different from the two-parent children in her daycares and schools. I apologize for the sadness I may have caused in my inability to love the way others do. I inherit quills and spikes and I pass them on to her—I assume she too will pass these on. Perhaps she will not have children of her own. Perhaps that is this legacy I have given her in my illegitimacy.

For the Strength of Youth, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1990.

There is a text given to all Mormon teenagers that tells of the evils of the world. *For the Strength of Youth*, which tells of the powers of Satan and Christ and the infinite forgiveness of a Heavenly Father, is a pink and grey booklet small enough to tuck into your pocket. The slick-papered book is small enough to carry around and pass to a floundering and suffering friend (as a fellowshipping tool), to keep in your scriptures for study (because it is inspired by God and it is accepted as doctrine to believers), to call upon when urging for repentance of sinners (because God loves us all and wants us to be happy). Published in 1990 by the "Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" it begins with a preface that reads: "This pamphlet summarizes standards from the writings and teachings of Church leaders and from the scriptures" and has been "reviewed, accepted, and endorsed" by the same. Followers of these teaching and admonitions will receive blessings. Those who do not listen will be punished.

And there lies the problem—sex simply isn't discussed by way of education, only, simply, as the most terrible kind of sin. *Certain sins are of such gravity that they can put your membership in the Church and your eternal life at risk. Sexual sins are among those of such seriousness.*

Eventually, I just gave up. It is a slippery slope, which I suppose is the threat I've heard my whole life. Everything is part of the gateway to evil: first you kiss a boy (his name was Davey, cousin to my best friend, lips as big as anyone I'd ever seen. His kisses made me sick to my stomach at first. Soon they were all I could think about and I didn't care that sometimes he kissed other girls—prettier girls—instead of, and in front of, me), and holding a boy's hand isn't enough (and all you think about is what his hands would

feel like all over you. I'm still talking about Davey here, but soon there were others, boys I let feel under my clothes as they drove me home from dances where we'd just met, boys whose names I wish I could remember and just don't). I got drunk the first time when I was twelve; the year Mormon children receive the pamphlet inspired by God for leading a morally pure life. I drank the vodka mixed with orange juice or Pepsi and said slutty things to a seventeen-year-old boy. I lost my virginity at fourteen to a boy I'd dated briefly the year before and when it was over, me in his bed, my head spinning and and my muscles shaking, he got up to leave and said *I don't love you and I never could and this didn't happen*. I think for me the slippery slope may have started for me then.

Or perhaps *it* started for me before that. Perhaps the boys and the parties and the dances where I let strangers feel under my clothes were symptoms of whatever else I couldn't or didn't want to feel. Regardless, on Sundays I dressed in modest dresses and attended church where I recited scriptures with the best of them, participated in lessons and gave talks in a chapel full of people. I lied, and I lied well. It is easier to lie than to admit that you haven't got ground under your feet anymore. It is easier to ignore that you hate everything about yourself than to admit the reasons why.

The father of my child was a bad sort of boy. He'd been to detention and had been kicked out of his aunt's house (where he'd gone to live after detention) for having beer in the toolbox of his GMC pickup. I'd hear him coming up a hill a mile away, broken glass-packs on his muffler rumbled his coming minutes before he torn up my driveway. He called me from payphones, he smoked Malboro Red cigarettes, he always had a bowl of weed hidden away somewhere, he bought acid to sell to our friends, he went camping by my house so I could sneak away and see him, he encouraged me to lie and by then I'd

gotten good at it. I lied about everything. And soon when I missed my period, and he drove me to the clinic, smoking his cigarettes one after the other and ashing out the window, stereo on, music loud to cover the thumping in my chest, the heartbeat in my stomach, I would have to admit all of my lying. In church where I'd held an office as a leader to all the teenage girls, the highest calling for a girl my age, age seventeen, I had to admit to God's proxies—men placed in his stead to lead and direct the congregation—my sins: drugs, alcohol, sex, sex, unprotected sex.

I suppose it isn't enough to hate yourself, or to hide, or to try and forget what you've been taught since the day of your birth. Excommunication, the punishment for sexual sins, isn't scary when you've got people who've done it before. I used to worry about the eternalness of my father's life—he'd been excommunicated after he left my mother, after he'd been labeled as an adulterer, a sin equal to murder, the murder of an eternal family. Eternal is a Mormon word. Eternal means you have your family forever. I didn't have my family together in front of me in a real sort of way—eternalness didn't frighten me anymore. You can't take away what doesn't exist. And perhaps, that is where *it* actually started, long before I started lying someone else already was.

Deenie, Judy Blume

I spent summers in my grandmother's Nebraska home. For three weeks of summer break my brothers and I were released to my paternal grandmother and her Nebraska farm. My family is in Nebraska—maternal and paternal grandparents both and visits to my maternal grandparents were squeezed in during one of those three weeks. My brothers and I would visit them in Lincoln (though we hated to leave the farm and the

dust. There were kittens to play with and fields to investigate. It was in the country where we were allowed to roam.) In Lincoln our days were packed full of trips to the zoo in Omaha and the natural history museum on the University of Nebraska campus where my grandmother had gotten her PhD. These grandparents had raised five children but were never comfortable in our presence. I think they probably kept us busy and moving from place to place because they did not know what else to do. We were, perhaps, too destructive: we played pool without sticks, we used the paddles from the ping-pong table as weapons, we wrestled and screamed—we were abandoned by our father, and my grandfather blamed him for our bad behavior. On evenings after the zoo or museum we'd eat macaroni and cheese from scratch and Spanish rice that Grandma would make in a pressure cooker. Elbows on the table and spilled milk were the obvious signs that we did not belong in a house like this.

My grandmother never seemed comfortable in our presence. Even now, as I've made something of myself that I'm proud of, conversations still suffer during the obligatory holiday telephone call. I am careful to speak in a more refined sort of way as I'm sure they expect it of me—more now than before. It isn't that they are unkind; they are simply a different sort of people than I'm used to, even now. They are three-square-meals-a-day sort of people, they are early-risers, they are refined. I have never seen my grandmother's feet—she always wears socks and securely tied white walking shoes. I wonder about my mother and her relationship to her parents. I believe she feels as I do. I'm sure they do not do this to her, or to me, on purpose. This is their nature; this is who they are. I wonder if they consider themselves different from the rest of my family but

doubt that they see any disparity. And perhaps I'm making it up but I know I've seen my mother act they same way I do.

I think about her relationship with her parents and I think about my mother's relationship with me. I wonder if she sees or acknowledges the ambivalence and confusion that is on both sides and I worry that this is something I am passing on to my own child. I am afraid of their judgments: mother, daughter, grandparents. They all make me feel as if I have to compensate for what I lack. Last night I tucked my daughter into bed and as I closed the door and said *I love you*, she did not say it back. I said it again, twice, and left feeling dejected: she makes me needy, she makes me search for affection. And how can I blame her as I sometimes do not show it myself. It is no wonder, then, that I have passed this on. Is it genetic? Nature versus nurture? Nurture is something I lack.

In my grandparents' Lincoln home, after baths and appropriate television viewing, we'd go away to separate corners of the dark house—boys were sent to bunkbeds in my grandmother's sewing room, my grandparents would retire at the end of the hall (I have only a single memory of their bedroom—I'd showered in the bathroom once), and I'd sleep on a cot in my grandmother's office.

I loved her office, cherry wood desk and displays of apples—her profession had always been as a teacher. In the living room she had her fancy apples of crystal and glass. But in the office she had wooden apples in bowls, apples on plaques, apples everywhere. They were symbols of her success, and they were also kitschy—she collected them but only in moderation. These apples were placed deliberately; they were arranged. My cot lay between her L-shaped desk and a small bookshelf. I don't remember the titles of the books but remember yellow stickers that said *used*. The books reminded me of my

mother who had, or would soon be finishing college, and teaching high school English. On her vacations during the summers when her five children were away, she'd go on pack trips alone in the mountains with her chestnut mare, Brandy, and a few cans of Dinty Moore stew. I always thought these trips were very brave. My mother was remarkably brave.

In my grandmother's office I would read books to fall asleep. Now, as I write this, I try and put myself back in that room, snuggled up on that military-style cot, facing the bookshelf to the cot's left and reading a book about the girl whose mother wanted her to model; instead the girl is caged in a scoliosis brace for years, and her mother's dreams are shattered for her daughter.

"You can't make us be what you want!" This is what Deenie's sister tells her mother when neither daughter lives up to her expectations: the smart one chases a boy who isn't intelligent or driven (at least according to the mother); beautiful Deenie cannot model because of her scoliosis and unsightly back-brace. I think about expectations and being who it is we are intended to be. I think about what my mother thought I'd become after my young pregnancy. I think about her parents at my teenage wedding. They didn't say anything hurtful, they were appropriate and civil, but their silence was loaded with judgment—of me, of my husband, of this new life. In that book I read in my grandmother's office, a girl disappoints her mother and ruins her mother's dreams for her future because she is physically malformed, she cannot help it, and yet her mother's heart is crushed because her daughter cannot be what her mother expects. I wonder if this is what my own mother felt that day when I told her I would soon have a baby. I wonder if this is why she said *Shit. Fuck. Goddamnit. What do you want me to do? What the hell*

are you going to do? I believe her expectations were wrapped up in me and that my choices had ripped apart her dreams for me. I believe mothers often plan the future of their children; I believe they are sometimes jealous; I believe they are often disappointed. I see this now. She did not leave that night to abandon me; she left because she was crushed. And even though I understand this, I still resent her for leaving.

But even then I wanted to be like my mother—so brave and strong; she was beautiful and tall and men loved her because of the way she made them feel. These men who followed her around were the subjects of her jokes: she'd laugh at their bellies and bald spots, she's say things about their children and ex-wives, she'd laugh at the way they talked. And even though her words to them were full of bite, they continued to come around to fix broken doors or build her a fence for her horses. They'd come to our house late at night and throw pebbles at her windows, and I because I was a teenager, I thought these men were romantic; my mother thought their actions were pathetic and effeminate. These men gave her gifts and took her dancing because they knew how much she loved to dance. My mother was so beautiful then.

I sometimes hear that we are very much alike, and I have trouble with these words because I am conflicted in my feelings about her and about me and about how it all fits together anyway. I want so much to understand why she refuses to admit that we sound the same and that sometimes, in the right light, I might look a little bit like her. I want to make her understand that I am worthy of her pride; despite all of this, I am not shameful.

The Awakening, Kate Chopin

In an English course as an undergraduate, I was the only person who had read *The*

Awakening more than once. I'd read it seven times between high school and college. Something new shook me each time I picked it up: sexual awakenings, feminism, motherhood, romantic love, self-love—each reading awakened new ideas and self-identities I hadn't known existed before.

Edna Pontellier, the story's main character, is a mother of two sons and married to a rich Creole man. Edna's feelings toward her children are not like those she sees in her friends and associates. She was "*not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels"* (Chopin 9). Edna's reserve toward her children was something I identified in high school and something I identify in myself now.

I too believe in mother-women and believe in the Cult of True Motherhood. Edna Pontellier does not exhibit the qualities that make a woman an ideal mother: patience, compassion, sacrifice. I could argue that she is strong, but in doing so, I'd have to give examples: Edna leaves her husband (this is true), Edna drowns herself in the ocean (this is also true—a quality of strength, I suppose, that depends on the audience). I believe that I am the same as Edna Pontellier because I am disconnected, or am sometimes disconnected, or perhaps, a better term is that I am often distracted: distracted by work and school, distracted by the acquisition of knowledge and self-identity. I believe this contributes to my ability to mother. But it is something greater than that. I am selfish—I

believe my own needs exceed those of others. Perhaps this is why I consider Edna Pontellier a friend.

But although we are friends, Edna and I, her feelings of motherhood are not technically the same as my own, though I am also not a mother-woman. Edna does not suffer guilt because she feels that she is inadequate as a mother. She does not feel like I do—her children belong to her like she belongs to her husband; they are a possession like she is a possession. And as a possession and a "thing" they are in her charge. She is interested in their well-being but remains, throughout the novel, more interested in her own well-being and discovery than she is in being their mother. She is without guilt, and the author allows it to be so by classifying her early as "not a mother-woman"—distinctly different than the women around her.

My best friend is a mother-woman. Last week I walked away while my daughter held her stubbed toe and cried. I'd tried to comfort her, wrapped my arms around her, tucked her head into my shoulder. But her screams and her shaking sobs were more than I could handle—the noise coming from her mouth made me tense, my shoulders and my jaw clenched up, and I had to leave the room. I walked away. I closed the door.

Other women would do something else; I've seen it done many times, the things that mother-women do. They sit down. They hold the child on their lab. They speak softly. Sometimes they rock back and forth. Always they are compassionate. Always there is patience.

This isn't the first time I have walked away. I am sure this isn't the last.

I think of Edna and a conversation she has with a mother-woman friend when Edna says: *"I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life*

for my children, but I wouldn't give myself" (46). I believe this also but do not say it out loud. In acknowledging my feelings of self-preservation I am guilty of sacrificing my child and I wonder what people would say—I always wonder what people will say because I'm afraid of them and afraid of myself. But Edna sends her children away and drowns herself in the Gulf of Mexico—a testament to what she'd not do after all—and I think of myself and all I've said and done and the guilt I carry with me in plastic bags on my back. I would give up the unessential; I've already given it up once before and I'm not sure I wouldn't do it again. But I've sacrificed her family when I picked up her roots and drove from California to Utah on roads covered in sheets of ice, and I'm not sure I wouldn't do that sort of thing again—I'm selfish and worry about saving myself; I think of this always before the other.

I recently remarried; my new husband is good and kind. People ask about babies and say things about *having another*, and this terrifies me. I am paralyzed in my fear of another, paralyzed that I cannot do for another child in the same way I couldn't do for the first. And I suppose this is normal, a sort of post-traumatic stress or something, a child doesn't touch a hot stove twice mentality. But this mentality is also worrisome—in my failures, or pseudo-failures, I am almost content, or, proud. We've done a lot together, she and I, and we've made it this far.

I remember going-to-school stories of *uphill both ways* that I've heard about this older person or that and I think that my story may be like that—overused, perhaps clichéd, always true in the eyes of the teller and always heard before by the listener. Regardless, it is the story I tell now and the story I tell to the students I teach—other high school mothers; others who will travel the road that goes *uphill both ways*. I write this for

them; I write this for me; I write for my child and hope that someday she understands why I sometimes walk away.

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