Dust Bunnies in the Corner

An Honors Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This creative project is a collection of original personal essays, short stories and poems. The following works are new, created specifically for HONRS 499: “Fear of Flying,” “Plus Twenty,” “The Philosophy of Socrates,” “Untitled,” “Solace,” “Missing,” and “Remembrance.” In addition, Dust Bunnies in the Corner includes significant revisions of the following earlier written works: “Dust Bunnies in the Corner,” “In Defense of Divorce,” “On Generations,” “Last Days in the Cottage on Lake Bruce,” “Found Poem from History 445,” “Sharps Chapel Songs,” “Aqua Vitae,” and “Lucy.” The works included in this creative project are the polished results of months and years of revision and are therefore a “capstone” of the author’s creative writing coursework at Ball State University.

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Dust Bunnies in the Corner

Melody Cook
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Dust Bunnies in the Corner

There is, although you could not tell it by looking at the floor of my apartment, a vacuum cleaner in my closet. It came from an auction or a garage sale or one of my grandparents' neighbors. Like many lawnmowers, toasters and other vacuum cleaners before and since, it found its way to my grandparents' enclosed back porch, where, after a few of the hours of attention and “piddling” that make retirement bearable, my grandfather declared it “fixed.” It was then worthy of a spot in the extra room, next to two of its already repaired kin.

My grandmother gave me the vacuum when I moved into my apartment. She handled it rather well when I told her that Geoff and I were going to share an apartment. I told her over the phone. “We’d rather you live with a girl,” she replied a bit weakly, “but it’s okay.” I told her only because she and Grandpa were co-signing the lease. I like to think that I would have felt terrible if I had lied to them, that I would have told them anyway, but I really don’t think that’s true. When it comes to the generation gap, I am a coward.

Last year when I moved into the apartment, my grandmother gave me the vacuum cleaner. At the time my mind was focused on finding just the right furniture and decoration (posters and CD racks and, of course, the lava lamp), but Grandma was focused on my ability to be a good homemaker, not among the top twenty of my goals.

Anyway, I took the repaired toaster and blender (two more spaces in the extra room for other resurrected appliances), the mismatched silverware, the plastic bowls, the lace doilies (I ask you, what college student’s end table is covered with a lace doily?) the bundt cake pan, the orange and brown quilt, and the vacuum cleaner. Maybe she’s still waiting for me to drop out of college and get married so my husband can support me. After all, it’s all she’s ever done. She hasn’t had or doesn’t remember having the desires that I have, the desires to find personal success beyond my future positions as wife and mother. Don’t get me wrong. I admire women who make their husbands and their children their lives, who can sacrifice personal successes for familial ones. For my grandmother in the back hills of East Tennessee, there was only one option. Her fame, her glory would stem from how well she cleaned her house and how well she raised her children. Fifty years later she thinks her granddaughter can only do the same. I intend to get married eventually, but I’d like to accomplish a little more. I couldn’t be satisfied without other purposes in my life. When I die, I want my obituary to have lines beyond “loving wife and mother.” In my grandmother’s time, even my mother’s time, women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere where cooking, cleaning, and caring were enough to bring success. Those times are, obviously, gone.

Truly, I was and am grateful for all of my grandmother’s offerings, especially the vacuum cleaner, and I was planning to use it quite often. Most of the cooking and cleaning I do, however, is based on my mood at the time, and it was quite a few weeks (months?) and dropped crumbs and lost Froot Loops and one spilled plant before I got in the mood to vacuum. I had actually forgotten where, in my one-room apartment, the vacuum was hiding. After a few minutes of searching and the removal of the ironing board (also rarely used) and several pairs of shoes, disorganized dresses and fallen tee-shirts, I freed the Hoover from the closet and plugged it in.

At first I didn’t notice that it wasn’t really working. I try to make vacuuming and other household chores more interesting by doing other things at the same time. This time I was watching MTV. With the volume on the top notch I could almost hear the words of the songs. Eventually, though, the smell of hot rubber emanating from the machine turned my attention away from the television, and I realized that all of my crumbs and dust bunnies remained; they had just shifted their positions a bit. Obviously, this appliance had left Grandpa’s back porch shop a little too soon. It wasn’t quite cured. I wasn’t irritated by my discovery. Actually I was almost happy at the chance to put off vacuuming for many more weeks. I turned off the vacuum cleaner, rewrapped the cord, and fought through the tangled mess that is my closet to replace it.
I moved into my apartment in May. Since it is now November and the vacuum has not been fixed, about six months have passed without any dust or dirt or fuzz being removed from my floor. I know, it’s disgusting. But you’d be surprised what cheap brown carpet can hide. (Maybe even I would be surprised.) Every once in a while I pull the vacuum out, plug it in, and run it over the floor, hoping or at least imagining that some of the more visible pieces will be lifted. The motion relieves some of my guilt about not using the vacuum, about not telling my grandfather that it doesn’t work, and perhaps about my own feelings of incompetence. Where does the guilt come from? Grandma? Could her ideas have become some part of me? Do I have, somewhere hidden beneath my scholarly exterior, a homemaker? A housekeeper? A baker of bread or polisher of silver? Though at any other time I’d probably deny it, that homemaker, no matter how much I ignore her, despise her, hate what she stands for, is there inside me. Instinct or environment, I don’t know, but she seems to be surfacing more with age.

My grandmother has asked me more than once how the vacuum is running. I say “Fine” or “Good” or “I used it just the other day.” She’s satisfied with her gift, Grandpa’s satisfied with his handiwork, and I am somehow satisfied with the vacuum cleaner until a cleaning frenzy hits me again.

Sometimes I think about telling them that the vacuum cleaner doesn’t work, but I convince myself to wait. The longer I wait, I tell myself, the more successful Grandpa’s tinkering will seem and the more content they will both be, and the more I will be able to pretend that my failure as a floor cleaner doesn’t plague me. And it does plague me at times. I sit and stare at the carpet and I think how long it’s been and feel that I have somehow already failed in the domestic sphere. Perhaps I’ve overlooked the work it takes to be successful there. I just assumed that it would come easily and leave time for success in the other areas of my life. Now I’m beginning to see that being a good homemaker, mother, and wife is just as important as being successful in my career. They’re on different sides of the scale, though, and if I put too much of my time on one side, the other falls down. I’m still looking for the balance. Who knows? Maybe some day I’ll put all of my weight on one side and sacrifice the other, but I don’t want to do that. Maybe I’m naive, but I want both.

I see Grandpa doing less tinkering and more sitting, Grandma doing more resting and cooking smaller meals. If I gave them the vacuum cleaner, I wonder, gave them this problem to solve, would it bring a purpose to their lives for a few days? Would Grandpa break out the tools? Would Grandma watch him work, iron his coveralls, cook him a giant lunch?

I continue to wonder. My grandparents continue to rest and to give. My floor continues its slow accumulation of dust and footprints. The vacuum continues to sit. I continue to wonder.
(As my mind wanders in and out and the ramblings begin to make sense.)

The war between science and religion. . .
Peking Man and Gregor Mendel
digging for fossil finds. . .
doesn't have to be T.H. Huxley
and Samuel Wilberforce

Biology is starting to talk now:
Commonalities that cross cultures,
innovative individuals,
groups.

A community of chimpanzees in Africa,
Big-shouldered men in tailored suits.
A dance between the two.

We dedicate more of our time to hierarchy
much like the zoo community at Arnhem
we puff up our shoulders.

What matters is who does the distributing:
Power.
None of the other apes
dared
go near the leaves.
Atticus

Forehead wrinkled in thought
he sits
loosened tie and lids droopy
as he pores through his millionth book of law.
So many pages he
has almost become them.

Married to Justice
a tiring wife
helps her raise the children
against persecution and ignorance
the people think, perhaps,
she is a bad mother
they ignore her righteousness
he fights for her virtues
with voice and heart
and cries salt tears
when she is lynched by the masses
her scales tipped by the ignorance of the many
while Atticus pulls on the opposite side with aging hands
and fingers slipping.

The battle is lost
the death of innocence
made a public display
and no one can deny it now
in “secret courts” the jury is in
they have done their duty,
but not in the name of God.

Justice bleeds now
and he nurses her wounds
and the children listen, watch and learn.
“Now, class,” says the teacher, “say it all together, ‘We are a democracy.”

Democracy
In Defense of Divorce

My early memories are organized in flashes. At age two, I fell off the living room chair and hit my head on the antique iron stove that served as an end table. Mom was washing dishes in the kitchen. Dad was watching television, three feet away. She covered the twenty feet from the kitchen before his eyes left the television. I was in her arms before he left the couch. Somehow I ended up on the kitchen floor. I remember a bloodless brown and orange dishtowel, a seven-year-old wedding gift, perhaps, soon saturated. I don’t recall what happened to that rag, if it accompanied me to the hospital or if it was quickly replaced by unfamiliar, sterile white gauze. And then I remember Mommy’s voice, hysterical, crying, begging Daddy to call the ambulance and dress Andrew, age 6. I don’t remember expecting my father to be the one who cradled my head in his lap.

When I was four, Mom threw her back out. She couldn’t get out of bed–had to crawl to the bathroom–but he wouldn’t cook her dinner. I brought her carrots and peanut butter and jellies on paper towels because my four-year-old arms couldn’t reach the plates, even when I stood on a chair. A neighbor took her to the hospital while my father watched TV.

I cannot remember them together. They existed, of course, in the same family, in the same house, but not in any sameness in my memory. At night, sometimes, I heard him yelling at her, though I don’t remember the words, only the anger. More than once I found her sobbing in the comfortable arms of the blue chair.

"Hush Little Baby" had always worked for me, so I sang it for her, but it took a long time before she stopped crying.

Forgive me if I provide too many examples here; it’s just that they’re all there, competing, stored in my head, each one reminding me, reassuring me that my feelings about my father are much more that generalizations based on a few foggy childhood memories. And there are many more stories than the ones I tell here. I have only two memories of our back porch at the house on Jay Street. In one, Mom and Andy and I, with red and blue Tupperware bowls, are digging a tunnel in the deep snow accumulated between the house and the fence. In the other, I see her through the kitchen window, standing outside the door crying and pounding and begging to be let in. When she’d left for the park to end an intense argument, he’d told us that she wasn’t coming back, that she’d run away for good. In truth, she had driven our red station wagon to the park down the street and cried.

When Mom returned to the chained doors a half an hour later, he stood inside the door and laughed. "So, you decided to come back, huh? I guess you’ll have to go back to wherever it is you went and stay there for the night." She was screaming and crying. Andrew, always the sensible one, ran to the back door and unchained it. When my dad found out and went to stop Andy, I unchained the front door and she came in. I can’t remember what happened after that, if she locked herself in the bedroom or slept on the couch. Actually, that’s the only time I remember him talking directly to me before the divorce–to tell us not to unlock the door. Other stories I learned later, when I was much older. When I asked my mom about the divorce, she told me openly of the topless dancers and the sixteen-year-old across the street, even of his refusal to have sex with her after my birth.

I cried only once because of the divorce. I was staying with my grandma, my father’s mother, and I cried, not because my parents were splitting up, but because I was afraid my Daddy wouldn’t love me any more. It never occurred to me not to love him. Six-year-olds are easy when it comes to loving. Often, a title like "Grandma" or "Daddy" is the only requirement. Sometimes I think part of me remains six years old, looking for love that may not be there, offering love based on a relationship that may be purely biological.

If you had asked me (and many people did) two years after the divorce, at age eight, how I felt about my parents being apart, I would have told you that life was much better after the divorce than it was before. Even though we’d given up living in the red brick home our grandfather built, my brother and I had also given up listening to the late night fights, watching Mom cry, and wondering when Dad would be home. I guess, in a way, we’re poster children for the benefits of divorce.
It seems that every politician has to preach the benefits of "American Values" and to discourage American couples' tendency toward divorce. Television shows are criticized for their abundance of single parent homes. Children of divorce are pitied. There is an assumption that we are intellectually, emotionally, and economically challenged because our lives differ from the "American Dream," because we don't live in a white house with a picket fence, two parents, and a dog named Rover. How many people do live in that world? How many want to? Much of this prejudice against non-nuclear families is ill-founded, little more than wishful thinking about cardboard box cutout families, round pegs for round holes.

My friend Katie's parents divorced when she was two, and her mother remarried a year later. Katie's stepfather was the only father she ever knew, yet her family seemed quite stable and well-balanced by today's standards. When she inadvertently mentioned to her high school guidance counselor that she had a stepfather, the counselor automatically pitied her and assumed that she was abused. A psychologist asked Katie prying questions. "How would you describe your home life? Has your stepfather ever made you feel uncomfortable through his actions? Has he ever hurt you?" She was mortified. She'd never seen such blatant prejudice against children of divorce.

Katie and I graduated in the top three percent of our high school class, and we didn't have to pay for our college educations because we were leaders, achievers. We learned independence and responsibility from our strong mothers, who had been independent and responsible enough to leave the men who made their lives hell.

Certainly, divorce is devastating for many children. It's a big adjustment to recognize that Mommy and Daddy don't love each other any more; however, divorce can and often does lead to positive changes. People like my mother are given the chance to repair their unhappy lives, and their children are given the chance to enjoy the benefits that a loving parental relationship can bring. Thoughtful, understanding parents who approach their children openly and honestly about divorce can prevent most of the emotional problems associated with parental separation.

My mother met Max one year after the divorce was finalized, and Max quickly embraced my brother and me as our father never did—as he's just learning to do now, fifteen years later. Don't get me wrong—my father has remained a part of our lives, but Max's influence as a father figure has been much greater. When I married last year, both my fathers walked me down the aisle. Both fathers hugged me just before I walked to my fiance. Max's hug was the one that made tears well up in my eyes.

Have we, as politicians keep telling us, lost respect for the institution of marriage? As the divorce rate rises, does the morality rate decline? There are, of course, those who divorce and remarry countless times. My Uncle Tim, for example, is just beginning his seventh desperate try at wedded bliss. Obviously, his respect for the commitment that marriage involves is nearly nonexistent. Would he have been better off, though, if he had continued the first marriage? He cheated on his first wife more than once, and she divorced him because of his abusive, alcoholic behavior and inability to remain faithful. I picture Tim as the primary target of the "family values" advocates. To me, however, Tim's problem lies not in an overall decline in the America's view of the sanctity of marriage, but in his own lack of responsibility and values. This irresponsibility is the reason his children have emotional problems. The divorces are not the problem; they're the symptom, the symptom of problems rooted much deeper in American culture than the tendency for divorce.

I know so many women who remain in failed marriages "for the sake of the children" or because "divorce is a sin" unhappy men have, I know, done the same. But how can living in the presence of the tension and disruption of an unhappy marriage be helpful for children? I don't know why any kind god would want someone to submit to the emotional and physical bruises of a dysfunctional family.
Maybe the issue here is one of responsibility. Marriage does not make an irresponsible person become responsible. My father was forty before he even began to fit my conception of a true father, and I still don't think he's responsible enough for marriage. We need to teach people the value of faithfulness and respect instead of degrading the single-parent home. The divorce rate is a reflection of society; society is not a reflection of the divorce rate.

Marriage and divorce should, of course, be taken very seriously. Divorce should not be too easy or too casually decided upon, and I hope that I will never divorce the man I chose to marry; however, I respect myself too much to let a bad marriage ruin my life.
Untitled

Waves of water lapping toes
Sucking them like baby pigs
and leaving them wet.
Jealous sand sticks to ruin the goodness of water.
Sunshine dries the sand,
making a brown crust of my feet
and the kisses of water seem long ago.
Arms of Appalachia

She never knew it was called Appalachia, never knew that Big Ridge had a place somewhere on a scholar’s map, maybe with a different name. They came in their Hondas and Caprices, drove around it, on top of it, flew over it. They drew their maps, but they didn’t stop to see it, to look inside, to climb up and into the culture.

If they had stopped, she surely would have offered them a meal or, at the very least, a lazy conversation in her kitchen. Lucy Keck’s kitchen in her outside gray, faded, sagging, inside bright, yellow, still sagging, house. If they came on Sunday, they’d be offered scratch biscuits, brown and warm, fried green tomatoes, mashed potatoes, okra fried with cornmeal, white pan cornbread, cube steak, sop beans, fat green beans with whole beans inside, fresh red tomatoes and fried corn. And Krispy Kremes in a box. And three kinds of pie. Then the next day they would remember lard on the stove, spit cans, and a woman growing the things that grew on the mountain while they drew on the map.

In 1992, after the maps had been perfected, more men came to name the streets. They asked the locals about the roads. They figured that after paving them last year, the next logical step was naming them. But they already had names. Lucy lived on Keck Road just down the way from all the other Kecks who lived on Keck road. That road had been Keck Road for as long as anyone could remember, for as long as any Keck had lived on Keck Road. When Lucy’s brother Charles heard from Pic Weaver, a county official, that the street-namers from Knoxville had sent him a street map with Back Road in place of Keck Road, Charles drove to Maynardville to complain. Too much money had been spent, though, and the road that had been home to generations of Kecks before Charles became “Back Rd.” Lucy wondered if her grandchildren and great grandchildren would know that this was Keck Road or if they would find their truth on the way from the city in the workmen’s signs and the cartographers’ maps.

Lucy’s momma, Avie, had died in 1972 at the age of 88, and Lucy’s husband, Aubry, had followed her to heaven ten years later. Her children had their own children and moved closer to the towns, closer to the factories, closer to Knoxville. Her brothers had moved north for factory work fifty years ago, retired and come home to Keck Road in the red clay hills of Tennessee.

A year ago Lucy’s son had connected his old trailer to the side of her house so she could have an indoor toilet, so she wouldn’t have to walk behind the coal pile to the outhouse. The television, made in 1979 but acquired by Lucy in the mid-80s, was constantly running and turned low, set on the one station it got. She liked to watch reruns of The Waltons. “Them’s good people,” she’d tell her grandson Jeremy. “You don’t never see people like them on television no more.”

On Sundays, her eighty years of cooking started at dawn. Portions would be dished out and heated on the stove several times throughout the day as relatives and family members stopped by, the older ones on the way from church and the younger ones on their weekly visits to the country. This particular Sunday was a pleasant one. Lon, the only brother who had stayed in Indiana after retirement, and his wife Jay were down and had brought their grandchildren. The boy was chasing a blue racer up the hill and being chased by it all the way back down. The girl stood, safely distanced from the snake, on the edge of the porch with a thoughtful, adult look of concern on her fair face. Lucy’s son Clive had brought plenty of coal into the house last night, so the coal bin flowed over onto the living room floor. Lucy bent over to put more coal in the stove, and Lon stood, “No, Luce, let me.”

Suddenly she felt like Grandma from the Waltons. “I can bywell do it myself, Lon. You’re not so much younger than me!” Lon frowned and sunk back into his seat. Lucy shoveled coal into the fire and closed the door. Jay observed to herself that Lucy looked smaller and smaller each time they came home. The three of them settled
back into their chairs and talked about Edna’s hip replacement and Jack’s new beagles. Lon nodded off as the women exchanged drawls. Jay woke Lon to see if he wanted to walk down to the Jim Walker spring. Lucy declined; she was comfortable in her old, duct-taped chair.

Lucy felt something strangely calm in her chest. It had been there for days. The quiet had continued to grow while Lucy’s awareness of it became more and more acute. It was like the call of the bob white in the evenings as it moved closer and closer across the mountain. The closer it came, the more powerful it was, until it sang the southerners to sleep in the shadow of Big Ridge. Now Lucy’s lullaby was encompassing her and she did not resist it, just as she did not resist the call of the bob white.

Lucy could hear the children’s feet on the rocks outside. Pound, pound, pound, skid. The girl had gotten up enough courage to race the snake now, too. Lucy had known the girl was strong. She had seen something of Avie in her. That one was going to be the center of a family, the unexpected glue that held things together. Pound, pound, pound, slide. Of course the children didn’t hear the call at all yet. They never stopped long enough to listen, and if they had, they would have only heard the faintest slice of the song.

She saw Jay and Lon outside the window, looking at her Missouri Wonders on the way down the hill. Mostly, Lucy had figured that before people died they got tired, making their Sunday dinners smaller and smaller. Lucy wasn’t that tired, really, and the aching never bothered her much. Sitting next to Pa’s old coal stove, Lucy felt mostly warm and satisfied that her stay here had been a long one. Satisfied that there were flowers and vegetables growing in the garden, fresh biscuits on the table and children in the driveway, still, chasing the blue racer up and then being chased back down. Satisfied that there was still someone walking down the hill with the hollowed gourd to drink the mountain’s cool, clean blood. She hadn’t thought it would be like this; no, she had never reckoned it would go this way.

Sunday dinner still sat on the table. Flowers and vegetables still grew in the garden. The coal stove in the living room still warmed clear into the kitchen. The children’s feet still kicked up the gravel: pound, pound, pound, skid. The next day the workmen drove through the hills to plant the shiny green street sign, marking for civilized posterity the road called Back.
In the past
women were defined
as imperfect males.
Our penises had fallen off,
chests (I suppose) had sagged,
and sides slid down to form our hips.

We sought our lost thoughts
and ribs
and appendages
in lumps of dough,
in our daughters' dreams.
In hysteria,
we sought ourselves
in shop windows,
in magazine ads
and wallpaper.

The remote stops on censored porn
jammed so scrambled sometimes
it's hard to tell to whom the curves belong
a man or a woman.
It takes us more than years to see
the figure within
that is a woman
aching for release.

The oppression is in the patterns we keep
Forgive us if we don't understand
why the perfect is so intrigued by the imperfect
Why we are still the ones
missing the parts.
The Philosophy of Socrates

When I met him he was thin, and he always wore black. His skin was pale, though not nearly as white as it was last night on my television screen.

I thought about changing the names for this as, let's be honest, it's place in my honors thesis will no doubt make it a public record, accessible to everyone, including his father, who works in the library. But I figure if 48 Hours can use first names, if What's-her-name with her false inflections can say them, then a girl who knows them, who from a short distance watched and heard this unfold across residence hall lounges and phone lines, should be able to use those names, too, so I shall.

I will use a name, though, that What's-her-name doesn't know, or at least one that she doesn't attach to her boy in the bathroom: Socrates. Long "a". Sewkraytz. That's how I knew him when I met him, years before he went into the bathroom.

My first impressions of Socrates were based primarily upon information I obtained from others who shared our residence hall. He was incredibly intelligent, a genius. He studied philosophy and he'd been at the university a long time. Both his parents worked for the university, so his schooling was practically free. It was not until later, after I'd gotten to know him, that I found out about his battle with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

I met Socrates through a mutual friend, and we bonded, a bit, over our obsessions with fat free food. Like me, he had battled with his weight throughout childhood. Unlike me, he had decidedly won that battle by, in his words, becoming bulemic until he lost the weight, and then eating only low fat foods after that. Evidently, it worked. He was rail thin; I never saw him eat anything but pretzels and low fat saltines.

A few months after Socrates and I met, the school year came to a close. On the last day of regular classes, I got what I considered to be a strange email from him. He said that he found conversation with me interesting and that he'd like to be my friend. He feared that his move off campus in the fall would sever our ties, and he wanted to make sure that we'd still talk. Although, as I said, I found the email odd. I didn't see that strangeness as a reason not to be Socrates' friend, so I accepted his proposal, though it did seem a bit like answering a note from a classmate in first grade.

For the next two years, I didn't see Socrates. I talked to him, though, as he called quite frequently. Usually we talked about movies or philosophy, and there were few hints that anything in his life had changed. Until one day he told me that he'd been living on low fat saltines and salsa. Since they were a cheap and fit his diet, he had gone to the grocery store and bought several boxes of saltines and salsa, and that was all he ate, every day, for months.

I didn't hear from Socrates in the fall semester of 1998, but he started calling again that Spring, and something had changed drastically. He was somewhere that he couldn't leave, he said. I offered to mail him books, but he said he'd have to destroy them when he was done reading them and that he didn't like to destroy nice books. He told me he had no television, and he asked me about TV programs and movies. A few times, Socrates offered to tell me where he was, but he seemed uncomfortable, so I told him that he needn't tell me anything that he didn't feel comfortable talking about.

His calls became increasingly frequent and long-lasting. He always said that he realized that he sometimes talked too long because he had nothing else to do, and he gave me a code word to use when I was ready to get off the phone. I was never willing to use the code word; instead I hinted very obviously when I was busy or ready to end the conversation. He never noticed. His calls would last hours, and I would be left feeling
uncomfortable about hanging up with someone whose only contact with the outside world was telephone conversation.

I began avoiding his calls. I screened when I was doing homework or watching TV, and I didn't return his calls when he left messages. Some days he would call and leave a few messages and then keep calling and hanging up when the answering machine picked up. I guess I should have set limits, but I struggled with my feelings about the situation. Part of me said that I was being selfish, but another part maintained that Socrates and I were never good friends, were really just acquaintances, and that I shouldn't feel responsible for being incredibly supportive. I would certainly never turn my back on a friend in a time like this. Some days I hated myself for dodging those calls. Other days I hated him for making them.

One night he called and asked me to watch 48 Hours. I turned on my television, not knowing what to expect. Turns out he was the focus of the program. I thought he was in a hospital, but in truth he had locked himself in the bathroom. The reporter stood outside the bathroom and slid a tiny camera underneath. Inside, we caught a glimpse of a man who had not left his bathroom, not even opened the door, in well over a year. Piled against the mirror were books that his mother had slid under the door to him. I scanned the titles on my TV screen. We had discussed many of them in our conversations.

That program aired a year ago. Since then, Socrates has slowly taken steps toward recovery. He emails me from his den. I don't answer all the time. I must admit that I'm afraid he'll start calling again, afraid that I'll be asked to fulfill some obligation for a friendship that never really was.

Last week I was home on vacation, and I saw an ad during daytime TV for an all new episode of 48 Hours. Their subject? The "boy in the bathroom," and his struggle with obsessive compulsive disorder. I watched the show, and it made me angry. The reporters tried, in their own ways, to be objective and non-condescending, but Dan Rather's stunted intros made me want to throw things at him. The look of fear on What's-her-name's face as Socrates stepped outside the bathroom to meet her made me want to scream. Here they were telling a story about someone who was a human being, someone who was a victim of this terrible disorder, and they couldn't convince me that they believed that Socrates wasn't a freak. What I realized, though, was something good: I do believe it.

I realized that I handled my relationship with Socrates poorly in many ways. I should have set boundaries. I should have been honest. I enjoyed our conversations, but I was disturbed by his persistence. I should not have dodged his calls. When I finish this paragraph, I'm going online, and I'm going to email Socrates for the first time in a few months. I'm going to stop fearing the consequences, stop fearing that becoming his friend means that I'll have to come through on some implied promise in the future. I don't know if I'll put this essay in my thesis, if I'll allow it to become part of some public record, but I do know that I've learned from this, and I do hope that others who read it can learn from it, too. And Socrates, if you ever read this, if you ever wonder why I didn't answer your calls, know that I am sorry and that I remain deeply ashamed of my own fear and failure to be honest.
Solace

I'm going walking tonight.
I seek the place where no light
shines from an artificial God.
I seek warmth of snowless fields
Callous cold of winter yields
to sweetest scent of summer skin.
I cannot feel the warmth within
my slowly thawing heart of stone.
Fear of Flying

Until I was nine, the pictures I drew on my own, without the prompting of my parents or my teachers, were always of one of two things. Mostly they were of houses with trees and doghouses and barns with rabbits hopping in green grass beneath the trees. But sometimes, sometimes they were of airplanes, in sky blue skies with white jet wash trailing behind, with puffy white cumulus clouds. And you could never see the ground. And there were never, ever any people. Not peering out the the airplane windows, not standing beside my square brick houses.

My brother was always fascinated with airplanes, and accordingly he always knew what he wanted to be: a pilot, of course. Before he was old enough for lessons, he taught himself by playing a pirated copy of Flight Simulator on our Commodore 64. He'd spend hours glued to the screen, the blue light reflecting off his serious face. He'd press the keys quickly and precisely. When he wasn't home, I'd sneak into his room and slide the floppy into the computer. I'd punch every key on the board, just trying to make the plane go forward, just hoping to get off the ground, but I never could. And I never asked Andrew how. I eventually just resigned myself: I wasn't meant to fly.

But I think, now that I look back, I think maybe I was wrong. I gave up too soon. I was afraid that I couldn't do it, afraid that the complicated cockpit controls on the screen were something only boys could understand, afraid that if I asked Andrew to show me how, I wouldn't be able to learn. So I never asked. And he never offered. And he never knew how many times I sneaked in and tried to fly before I gave up.

That game, that story has followed me all my life. I put off decisions until the last minute, hoping that someone else or some ambiguous fate will decide for me. I refuse to plan. I wait until the night before to write twenty page research papers. I get A's on them. I brag to my friends that I wrote them the night before, that the prof guaranteed us that this was something we should be working on all semester, that he would see right through us if we put it off until the last minute. And only one has. Hell, even this thesis has taken me years to write because I had no deadline. There seemed to be no point after which I could no longer put it off. So I made one. I walked through graduation so I'd have to finish my thesis.

All right, you say, so she's a classic, lazy procrastinator. She puts things off because she's lazy or because she'd rather be having fun. But I tell you it's not that at all. Really, it's not. It has taken me a long time to figure it out, but I finally did. It all comes down to my fear of flying. Let me explain: I put things off because I'm afraid of giving them my all. If I put a paper off until the last minute and the prof gives me a B or sees right through me (I'm not being vain when I say this rarely happens), I can blame it on the procrastination. It's not me. It's that I did it so quickly, that I didn't give it my all. But what if I give it my all, if I plan ahead, if I do real research with notecards and sources from interlibrary loan, if I do all of these things, and the result is no better than a late-night concentrated effort? What if I apply to the Ivy League schools and get rejected? Wouldn't it be better to put off the GRE, the entrance essays, all the other requirements, to the last minute and to apply to IUPUI? I mean, for God's sake, I chose Ball State as my undergraduate college because the application deadline was later than the others and by the time I looked at the information it was the only one left.

My grandpa will never set foot in an airplane. He spent World War II vomiting off the side of a ship because he refused to fly. If you ask him if he's afraid of flying, he'll respond, "No, I'm just afraid of crashing." I'm with you, Grandpa. I, too, am afraid of crashing. Maybe I need therapy. Maybe in ten years I'll soar. But right now my feet are planted firmly on the ground. So if you read this and you think, "It's not so good, not so easy to follow," don't blame me. I just wrote it tonight.
Elegy to a Musician Lost

Justice is a confusing companion.
Exacting looks and random touch
Feed her selection.
Feeling finds no solace with her.

Bring us back that voice, that heart
Under and over undulating
Cutting, conniving, soaring voice you
Kick your boots, step into the muddy Mississippi
Let the undertow pull, drag you into those southern drawls
Ever strengthening, sweeping your body until unconscious...
Your blue world turns upside down.
Is that how the song went?

Gracefully, my love? Sweet and heady like lilac wine?
Roaring Mississippi swallows the Music
And now you don’t drink, don’t dance, don’t dream you are
Compressed into one last MTV news flash, a tiny article in Rolling Stone
Eternal life was on your trail, like your father you’re gone so soon
and the lyrics are all too telling

I lost myself on a cool damp night.
I gave myself in that misty light.
I was hypnotized by a strange delight
Under the lilac tree.
J.B.
Water of Life

The bath water is hot in the filling tub, still empty of human life. The woman sheds her regulation white tennis shoes and blue scrubs with a low, deep sigh then pulls a tired turquoise towel from beneath the sink and drops it carelessly next to the tub. She lifts one leg, pale with red speckles of sensitive skin, over the side and lowers it through the steam into the cloudy clear. She hesitates briefly at the heat, but Annie knows her foot, her leg, and then the rest of her body will become used to the hot and the shock will turn to relaxation.

A dog barks outside, and children jump on the trampoline. She reaches above the tub to open the window just enough to let in the cool, crisp air and the ever-present essence of fall’s brittle death. She lowers her body into the water, noting the contrast of the too hot water and the too cool air as they combine to create more steam. She hears the front door open and the heavy clod of footsteps—her husband’s work boots or her daughter’s Doc Martens?—across the kitchen linoleum, then the silence as the feet, she assumes, cross the living room plush.

Please don’t turn on the television. Just a few more minutes here in living sound. Leave me here without that cacophony. She hears no artificial newscast voices or sitcom laugh tracks. She sinks deeper into the water, allowing only her head to remain above the soapy meniscus. She remembers the Sixties, her family silently circled around Leave it to Beaver and The Donna Reed Show. ‘When did we stop talking?’ she wonders. ‘Or did we never start?’

The bedroom door opens, and her daughter’s familiar voice asks “Mom?” as her hand grabs the bathroom doorknob. Annie imagines Lanie’s surprise and concern at the doorknob’s lack of response. The knob does not turn. Lanie’s daily tubside chat is prevented by a wooden door and by her mother’s decision to push the tiny mechanism that locks the bolt. “Mom, are you in there?”

“Yeah, Lane, I’m in here. I’m just relaxing. I’ll talk to you when I’m out of the tub.”

“You OK, Mom?”

Annie chokes back unexplainable, unexpected tears. Maybe she shouldn’t have locked the door. She never meant for Lanie to feel left out. “Yeah, Honey. I’m just fine. Just enjoying the quiet. Just need some time to myself, ’K?”

“Um, yeah. OK.” Lanie sounds hurt. Annie watches the thin crack beneath the bathroom door. After ten or fifteen seconds Lanie steps away, and the light flows uninterrupted once again.

Annie soaps her legs mechanically, trying not to think about anything but the hot water and the sharp, accurate air. Air tastes and smells so clean in autumn, so much clearer than in July or May. The autumn death is a cleansing, really. Nature renews itself by sloughing off its old skin. She glides the razor up and up across the familiar hills and tilts of her left leg. Her attempts to overcome her negative thoughts begin to fail. She thinks of her mother, her mother in a red apron on a Sunday with a hollow smile. Her mother’s hands, just like Annie’s and Lanie’s, wrapped around the hook of an umbrella. She always held umbrellas with both hands. Annie tries to remember love, tries to recall the time before her own turbulent teenage years, tries to forge the dispute they had the night Mariel died and left Annie motherless. It has been twenty-five years today.

Annie had nearly forgotten this morbid anniversary until Mrs. Johnson had coded at the hospital and Dr. O’Neill had asked Annie to accompany him to speak with the family. Mrs. Johnson’s daughter, near Annie’s own age, had silently let round tears roll down her cheeks as the doctor comforted her aging father. Some
similarity of feeling or expression had sparked the memory of Annie's own mother's death, and Annie had felt the recollection like a hollow pressure in her stomach.

Now, away from the hospital and the beeping heart monitors, Annie finds more time for analysis. She thinks about the years between her own mother's death and Mrs. Johnson's. How much healing and growing and understanding has she missed in those twenty-five years? What would her reaction be if she faced her mother's death now, at the age of 41, instead of then, at the age of fourteen? Would she find more comfort in the memories, or is the recollection of death always discomforting?

She had tried to get through her own daughter's turbulent years with more understanding than Mariel had offered, but it was tougher than she'd imagined. Annie and Lane had come out just fine on the other side of the teens and were now trudging into the years of marriage and new generations. The years, Annie thinks, have gone too quickly. The twelve-hour shifts at the hospital, the graduations and the measuring marks on the kids' growth wall have piled up, one on top of the other, to form one dense line. She wonders if she should quit the job and let the house go, if John should quit his job, too, so they can spend more time with the kids.

Time is her enemy. The escape from time does not come from thought, from sleep, from death. The escape does not come when the children get on the bus and the doors close. It doesn't come with the locked bathroom door or with the steam as it combines with the autumn air.

The time it takes to pack a sack lunch, to start an IV, to perfect an unassuming grin, it's all lost time. She has stared at the reflection of time in bubbles of Ivory liquid, in the fuzzy mirror of a kitchen floor, in the stainless steel of a surgery cart. Time fills her pockets, fills her evenings, both sides of her brain, her thighs, her kidneys, her breasts, even her stomach. It invades her pen, reshaping letters to lost friends into the figures on the Citibank bill, reshaping genuine embraces into handshakes at a dinner party.

Annie hears her daughter's stereo upstairs. Another screaming garage band. "Have you ever felt so used up as this?" Annie closes her eyes and drops her head below the layers of steam into the cooling water. Here it is silent but full. Here it is warm. Warm silence.

She opens her eyes and peers up through the soap to the dim light of the ceiling. The world kept out by the bathroom door seeps in. Where is Lanie? Why aren't we talking? Why am I wasting this time? She lifts her head, sits up, and pulls the plug to let the warm water flow back into the ground.
Last Days in the Cottage on Lake Bruce

Dark and gold, with fog so crisp
Rippling waves contort the light
Buglights make it hard to hear
the frogs, the shore, the jumping fish.

The green black lake, an August night,
I throw my line and let it fall.
Close my eyes to kill the light
The pier sways slow here in the dark.

I picture sun and afternoons
spent catching frogs from lily pads
When evening came, we'd watch the moon
and listen for the train to pass.

We sold the house before the snow
Dull and dim, midafternoon
Our last steps north were backward, slow.
We left the pier and took the boats.
Sharps Chapel Songs

I

Days

Sweet summer sun rolling down mountains
Melting dew on wet, bare feet.
Southern draws
Old men in overalls whittling in the lawn chairs under the coffee tree
Kids with cedar sticks who adore them
Lazy dog on the front porch
Men with no jobs fishing at Norris Lake
Grandma cooking cornbread in the kitchen and talking about someone's new aluminum hip.
No phone.
Catching june bugs and tying strings to their feet so they can be airplanes for a while until their legs fall off
Sneaking up to the pond to try and see a bullfrog before it plop plop plops into the muddy water.
Rain on the tin roof of an old house and people who say Howdy and wave when they drive by

Lightning bugs in jars at night and tree frogs
Dusty roads with no names
People unashamed at rummage sales
Ladies with blue hair and permanents
Four course meals every day and you're always welcome to dinner
Names like Ed and Charlie and Mannie and Doc
Helen and Mary and Polly and Dot

A place where you can do nothing all day and not feel guilty
because the truth is there's nothing to do
but sit and watch the sun rise and eat breakfast
and wait until you can go to bed and wake up to do nothing all over again.

II

Dogdays

Milk jugs cut off at the shoulders
overflowing with sweet, tart blackberries.
More eaten than kept and more to be eaten still
before they find themselves in the warm arms of dough.

Blackberries and june bugs
Water fresh from the mountain's mouth
Beheaded jugs, the insides of their shoulders scraping
As out fall the bleeding blue.
On days dogdays hot june bugs are airplanes
and copperheads bathe in slithering waves of sun
reflected from gravel, from trees, from sky.
Solitude at the salt lick
the cattle have gone far into the back pasture.
For food for sex for darkness sleep.

III
The Holler

On days dogdays hot Grandpa warned of copperheads
bathing in the light by the Jim Walker spring.
We watched ever more closely as August approached
and June lagged farther behind.
We did not fear that cold mountain blood
no thoughts of contamination or impurity
as it ran through our throats.
When we left we gathered it in jugs for the long ride home.
It never tasted the same contaminated by the plastic.
Whoever had left the gourd had known
had known and left it there so others would know:
you could not bottle the South.

IV
Rain Days

Tiny
perfect
falling from the sky
toads
scaled down
with rain are falling
hopping.

I put one down Grandma's shirt
she screams, untucks it
to let the tiny toad fall
and it does
hopping
across Charlie's deck
to join its brothers
under the trees Tracy and Kristy set fire to
with bottle rockets in the drought of '89
and boy was Charlie mad
us kids had to shoot them over the lake from then on

The toad doesn't remember the bottle rocket fire
he's new and small
and I'm not sure if he came from the tree
so I ask Grandma where he came from—
if he came from the tree
she tells me he came from the sky
and I don't know if it's true
if she even really knows
I think it must have been the tree
I think about cats and dogs and wonder
if it can rain toads here
then maybe somewhere it does rain kittens and puppies.
Grandpa says no,
only toads,
only here in East Tennessee,
and only in the summertime.
Come winter nothing falls.

Retrospect

I never knew it was Appalachia,
that the mountain we call Big Ridge had a place somewhere on a scholar’s map,
that the mountain looming over our heads
maybe had a different name.

They came in their cars
drove around it
on top of it
flew over it
to draw their map,
but they didn’t stop to see it
to look inside
or climb into the culture.

If they had stopped surely they would have been offered a meal,
at the very least a lazy conversation in Lucy’s
outside gray faded sagging
inside bright yellow
house.

Tomorrow they would remember
lard on the stove
Krispy Kremes in a box
An old woman with a garden
growing four o’clocks and Missouri Wonders
on that mountain
they drew
on the map
Remembrance

Warm sunny days remind me of you
days of bright
seen through sun-burned eyes and smiling teeth
when Irish grass kissed golden toes
and sky-dried locks hung limp and bleached
in August air
and after dark ate the sunset
we were all there, together
sucking cold from concrete
and holding each other with our voices
our eyes now obsessed by darkness and stars
that shot to where we had sent our hearts
that we caught and held for a moment
lost as they slipped through our fingers
and slid to the ground
Plus Twenty

We arrive in summer, eat tomato and mozzarella sandwiches in a tiny little shop around some forgotten corner. We walk down to the open market for Ben’s Cookies. They’re warm, and the whole place smells of sweetness and wool sweaters. Quietly, with determination, we walk back down the Broad Street to Manchester College. It’s Friday and someone’s left the side gate open. The grass is as short and green as it was twenty years ago, and the same bench holds a lone occupant beneath the quadrangle’s only source of shade, a towering, gnarled oak tree. We stand there, silently, still, just inside the gate, as students continue their paths into and out of the gate, sending swift gusts of air across our bare arms. A bell chimes, and I consider the stained glass windows of the chapel. It still, unsurprisingly, seems too small for its extravagance, not spacious enough for its solidity, its permanence. I consider suggesting that we should go in, but then I remember that we never went into the chapel back then, that we thought about it, we meant to, but that it seemed so proper, so imposing, and we chose to visit the more accessible sites instead. And besides, I don’t want to be the first one to break the silence.

I like to think that we’re less conspicuous now than we were back then, in our t-shirts and jean shorts. That no porter will scold us if we dare to step towards Balliol’s ornamental Mercury. That somehow twenty years have made us worthy of something, at least of looking at the fish, of seeing, this time without breaking any rules, the fountain that soaked Anthony Blanche’s pajamas. But after I stop looking at the chapel, the quadrangle, the beginning of the worn stone path that leads to our old room, I notice the people passing by, their eyes on us as they pass, and I know that we have failed to overcome our alienness, that our remembrance of this place as somehow ours will hold no weight with these young students. Do we dare to climb the stairs to our old room? To knock on the door and ask the occupants if we may come sit in their window seat and watch the passersby, or do we just venture to the bottom of the steps and let the scent of centuries of learning and dust drift to us and knock us down, filling us with more memory than we knew we possessed?

I look to my friend, who has come back here with me to relive, recall those days, and I know that she’s thinking the very same. Will the peanuts and beer in the JCR be quite as we remembered? Will the porter have stocked the bar with a case of New Castle? I continue to wonder if we should move forward, if we should risk further destruction of this vision we’ve formed, of the stories we’ve refined and revised and re-edited as the years have passed. We realize that some time during the several minutes we’ve stood here, the bench’s occupant has left, and we step together to it, sitting in unison on its worn wood. Suddenly, mirrored in my friend’s face, I find that we have become weary. That walking to the tuck shop for bagels, ordering those terrible spicy chili peanuts from the Turf, smoking cigarettes in the dark passages, punting on the river, none of it can bring back what we seek.

Maybe the best thing would be, I think, to go to Balliol, to put on our T-shirts and boldly walk past the no trespassing signs to the center of the quad, to look at the ornamental goldfish, to speak to them and to tell Anthony Blanche, “Hey, we know what you mean. We know why you let them throw you in.” And to scowl at the porter when his bowler hat bobs across the quad to remind us that tourists are not allowed access to the fountain.

Suddenly I’m taken by the urge to run, to run to Balliol and proclaim my Americanness. To proclaim to anyone who’ll listen my sympathy for Malvolio. To shout to the passersby my proclamation “These worn paths and corridors, this river, this Cotswold stone, these souvenir shops and tourist-lined streets are mine. Do you hear me? They’re mine just as much as they’re yours!” For a moment, I think I’ll do it, and I look to my friend to make the suggestion. I plant my feet and reach for her hand, but then I think twice. And I remember that we’re all aliens here, that Anthony Blanche and Sebastian, Ved Mehta, and Rosa Ehrenreich, they were aliens, too. So instead I hook my arm through my friend’s, and we turn our feet toward the river. We’ll pick up strawberries
and cheese and biscuits on the way, and we'll pay our seven pounds to punt down this river of memory, to search for our youth, for our happiness, in the heart of Oxford.
On Generations

I spent yesterday teetering on the edge of conscious discomfort, caught somewhere between playing the part and not playing the part, between being Daddy’s little girl and being a stranger. After twenty-one years of breathing, I still haven’t gotten to know my father well. We haven’t lived in the same house since I was six, but he has been in my world, at least physically, ever since. Each year when Christmas approaches he asks me for a list of things I’d like to have, and he picks things off the list for my presents. It bothers me that there’s never even one surprise, that he has no idea what my interests are. Why does he require a Christmas list? Why don’t we know one another better? Why haven’t we introduced ourselves? Why haven’t I stepped forward and said, “Hello, my name’s Melody and I’m your daughter. My favorite flavor of ice cream is strawberry. I like ‘arty’ movies and Sting. My favorite color is green”? Is it because we don’t want to know each other? Because we’re comfortable with the distance and uncomfortable with the possibility of losing it? Maybe I’ve failed; maybe he’s failed.

Every time I go home I decide that I’m going to spend time with him, and every time I do I am left with the same feelings of emptiness, the same regret. This weekend it was the flea market. I knew he was going, and I knew that he would appreciate taking me along, so I got up early Sunday morning. He’s a critical man, my father. He asked me to drive his truck and criticized me “politely” the whole twenty minutes to the North Drive-in: “Push the RPMs up higher before you shift. You could have gone into first for that turn.” It was as if he had asked me to drive only to show his mechanical superiority, to prove to his only daughter that he was a real man. I suppose he doesn’t know me well enough to know that, for me, working on cars and driving fast do not a real man make.

There’s a gap there, cultural or generational or both, between us and our parents who were alive in the sixties and seventies. So much was hidden, so much was programmed. There were (and still are, though I hope to a lesser extent) molds that people were made to fit. If a woman had business ambitions, for example, and didn’t want to have children, that part of her was ground away, bit by bit, until she fit the mold. It didn’t matter how much of her was lost along the way. My father still subscribes to this theory. He is a mechanic, a factory-working exuder of Grade A Southern testosterone, a womanizer, a faggot-hater, a Confederate in the North 150 years later, and he expects every other real man to be the same.

It’s no surprise, then, that he was at home as we walked among those flea market vendors, with their car parts and c-clamps and cast-off Cabbage Patch dolls. I got the chance I both dreaded and was drawn to—to see my father in his home court, dribbling “hellos” to his teammates and passing the ball of sexism and racism, flashing money he’d earned, trying to buy my love, or at least my admiration, at a flea market.

“Do you see anything you want?”

‘I want you to be kind.’

“Anything you can’t live without?”

“Nothing I can’t live without.”

Nothing I can’t live without.

He wanted to buy me something—so he could say that he bought me something—so I picked out some green army pants. Every time I wear them I think of him, standing in the middle of the North Drive-in barn, smiling because he has shown me his wealth.
Outside the barn we ran into some woman he knew; he called her Seymour, but I don't think that was her real
name. She stood surrounded by four tables with boxes of junk marked “All boxes $1.00.” She was moving to
Michigan, she said, and my father told her to come over and give him a back scratch before she left.

“I've got a boyfriend, Cookie.”

“Get rid of him. I need a housekeeper.” That's my father's euphemism for a prostitute who cleans his house.

“You know I can't.”

“You don't know what you're missing.”

I suppose everyone flirts at least now and then, but my father wasn't kidding. Maybe it was just another feeble
and misguided attempt to impress me. If it was, it didn't work. Then, later, at Pizza Hut, he told me how hot
the girl sitting behind us was. I turned around to see her. She might have been fifteen.

I don't know what love is when it comes to my father. I thank God so often for the divorce and for my being
young when it came. I can't imagine having grown up under the influence of his racism, his sexism, his coarse
and stupid treatment of my mother. I don't remember exactly when my mother told me about Rita the
barmaid and Dad's affair with sixteen-year-old Janet across the street. How many others? How many women?
How many diseases did he expose my mother to? How many nights did she spend alone, crying, afraid that she
couldn't support two small children on a bus driver's salary if she left him? It's amazing what fear and guilt can
do. The fear he put in her kept her for eleven years in a disastrous marriage. The guilt that he twisted into me
has kept me for twenty years in a disastrous father-daughter relationship. Sometimes when we visit and hug our
fathers, mothers, siblings, grandparents, the only thing that brings us there is a feeling of obligation, of guilt,
that tells us we have to love them because they are a part of our past, because they are family. I am not
immune, I know. I still hug him, uncomfortably, and visit and try to see something where there probably is
nothing. No matter how far I go back in my memory, I cannot find a reason, beyond the biological ones, that I
should love him.

When you're a child you see so little of the big picture, but children grasp feelings intuitively. They feel tension
and discomfort between their parents. I think about all the things my five-year-old heart knew. I knew when
he yelled, when she cried, when he locked her out of the house, that they did not belong together, that Daddy
was not a kind man when it came to Mommy. How much more was there that I didn't see? Children grasp
only small, concrete images of what goes on. Much is deliberately hidden from them. I can only imagine the
way my mother felt fifteen years ago trapped in a relationship with the man I have trouble tolerating for an
hour.

For a year after the divorce he lived in our brick house, the house that had belonged to my mother's father, the
house where she had spent most of her early years. The pine tree she had planted when she was little now
towered twice the height of the house. The bed where she had spent many nights alone or with me, her six­
year-old daughter, wondering when my father was coming home was his alone now. Was she happier when he
actually came home, the fragrance of perfume and cigar smoke clinging to him, or when he didn't?

I visited him twice, I think, in the year he lived there. That house was empty. The hardwood floor of my old
room was naked without its braided rug. It held not nearly so much love as my new, smaller room in the trailer
court. My mother must have been the one who gave that house warmth, because without her the bedroom
they had shared was cold and uninviting. She brought her warmth to the trailer court and to the fold-out couch
she slept on. She must have felt better there, with a key to a door that he couldn't unlock. She must have been
filled with hope, with knowing that she had been strong, knowing that his threats to take us away and leave her helpless were idle bluster, knowing that after eleven years she had called his bluff. Looking back, she knows that he never would have taken us because he couldn’t handle the responsibility we carried with us. When there were kids around there could be no topless bar dancers, no “housekeepers.” Too many fathers, too many parents, in fact, see their children as toys they can take from the shelf to occupy their time or boost their pride. They show off the kids to their friends, their lovers, and then forget them after the novelty has worn off. My father is no exception.

Truly, he’s not a terrible man. He never punished us, never hit us, never called us names. He also never hugged us, never encouraged us, never held our hands. He paid his child support, at least—something that many divorced fathers don’t do. I used to say that he handed out his money as love and then accused us of coming only for the money. Now I think, perhaps, the money is less than that. It’s guilt money. He’s guilty because he does or cannot love us as a father should, guilty because our stepfather can and does. Maybe he thinks this money, this surrogate love, will buy him a place in my wedding to give me away—as if I have ever been his to give or to keep. I’m afraid that he’ll get that place, not because of the money but because of the familial guilt to which few are immune.

Lately, I’ve noticed that he tries to take on a fatherly role in my life, but only when he disagrees with what I’m doing. For example, last year I decided to move in with my boyfriend. I spoke with Mom and made the decision with her approval. My father found out through my grandparents, as I suspected he would, and a few days later he tossed it out on the Easter table among the yams and potato salad. I was adamant, informed. He was, well, my father.

“It’s a bad idea. I’m worried you’ll get pregnant or get hurt or get AIDS.”

“If I’m sleeping with him, any number of those things could happen. Moving in with him is not going to change that. I’m a responsible person. I’ve made my decision. I respect your opinion, but I disagree.”

“So what you’re pretty much saying is ‘Kiss off, Dad’?”

“No, that’s not what I’m trying to say, but if that’s the way you take it then that’s the way you take it.”

How could he think that I needed his blessing to go on with my life? You cannot ignore your child’s needs for twenty years and then expect that child to listen to your advice. To be respected, you must deserve respect. My father does not. I waited until I was nineteen to have sex; my father had cheated on my mother before he was that age. He has no right to tell me about AIDS, pregnancy, respect. I am more mature and informed than he has ever been.

I realize, though, that it must be hard for him. Like me, he doesn’t know how or when to take steps forward, so he stays at his comfortable distance, and I stay at mine.

We live in a world of broken relationships and broken promises, deadbeat dads and unruly children. Why do we focus on these troubled, damaged relationships? Why do we foster them and try to salvage any small piece of hope? I don’t know the answers. I’m fostering one myself. I’m feeding the guilt and searching for the tools to repair something that was never whole enough, never real enough to be broken.