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Can We Just Give Her A Dime Bag?

December 2, 2011

Thesis Committee:
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Can We Just Give Her A Dime Bag?
Relating Translation, Memoir, and Feminism

The story of this thesis project begins in my undergraduate years. As an undergraduate, I became interested in the process of translation and what that process does to a text. I could see that, at the very least, translating ran the risk of changing the original text’s meaning, through the necessity to find words in a new language that might not have exactly the same meaning. Wanting to know more about the act of translation, and believing my thesis would be on the subject, I enrolled as a graduate student in a course on Literature in Translation. I quickly found out that I neither wanted to enter the academic translation conversation, nor was I qualified to do so.

I found the texts about translation, and the academic voice in general, to be dry, boring, and alienating. The translation texts I read for the class consisted almost entirely of the usual dead white guys, with the exception of a few Latin men. While I admire these men and their work, I found the very idea of entering a discussion that involves Friedrich Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Jacques Derrida, and Vladimir Nabokov, to name just a few, to be more than a little daunting. Add to this list the fact that I don’t speak another language fluently, and I felt thoroughly uninspired and unqualified. I brought this frustration to discuss with a professor, and she asked me to consider the idea of the translation of memory into memoir. I had taken some memoir classes with this professor, and was familiar with the decisions involved in the retelling of memories, so the idea interested me, a lot.

When I met with the graduate coordinator to discuss the beginnings of this idea for my thesis, he responded, “So you want to do a creative thesis. A memoir that explores the relationship between memoir and translation.”
“Ummm, yes,” I said. “That’s brilliant! That is exactly what I want to do!” And so my creative thesis was born from an academic accident.

But the next week, yet another professor complicated my seemingly finalized idea for a thesis. When the resident feminist professor gave a presentation on her subject, she hit a nerve. I am a feminist. I couldn’t ignore it. I knew something as important to my career and sense of self as my thesis would have to include feminism in some manner. But I wondered: is there a relationship between these three intriguing elements? Is there a relationship between translation, memoir, and feminism?

Over the course of my research and writing, I have not only found a relationship between the three, but I now see myself and my work within that relationship. I have observed in myself and in my writing, an unconscious attempt to reject the voice of academia. I recognized an also unconscious attempt to write academically in my more comfortably fitting personal voice. As a result, I now recognize that I have begun to use my own personal-academic hybrid voice. I have discovered that the translation of texts, or the translation of memories and stories, often continue the hegemonic dominance of the white patriarchy, and yet translation can be the very device that frees the oppressed.

It was in a class about pedagogy that I found the missing link between my three intriguing elements. During an in-class, free-write assignment, the director of our General Education Writing program posed a question meant to inspire our class full of brand new teachers to think about the differences between academic prose and independent voice. Did we think there was a place in academia for both? My first reaction was “Independent voice? Absolutely not!” (This gut reaction of mine is ironic, given that I later uncovered my own attempts to incorporate personal voice and narrative into every paper I wrote.) In discussing this
question with other student instructors, I recalled and shared an essay I had come across in my preliminary research for my thesis project. The first time I read Jane Tompkins’s essay, “Me and My Shadow,” it provided interesting food for thought, but nothing in particular stood out. I liked the way she wrote, but I did not stop to think about why I liked it. In summarizing the essay for my fellow instructors, I realized it was key to my research on the relationship between translation, memoir, and feminism.

In the essay, Tompkins grapples with the dichotomy of her two voices, the academic and the personal. She calls this duality “the public-private hierarchy,” and posits that it is “a founding condition of female oppression” (169). Says Tompkins, it is the women in our society who are socialized, conditioned and required to validate their emotions, and the men who are required to suppress them. Academic prose, which has no room for emotion, privileges the male voice over the female. Tompkins admits that when she begins to speak in her academic voice, she feels as if she is “being squeezed into a straightjacket [and]...will not go in” (175). I have felt the squeezing of this proverbial straightjacket for years, but have been unable to name it anything other than a disdain for academia. Until now. Yet I knew academia was where I would find self-validation. No wonder I felt like a charlatan who would be exposed at any moment and asked to leave the program. And no wonder I felt uninspired and unqualified to enter into the translation discussion.

When William Zinsser or Stephen King advise against using adverbs in writing either fiction or non-fiction, but Mary Hiatt’s study of the differences between male and female writers finds that “women writers use the word [really] two and a half times more often than men writers in non-fiction,” we see one example of the differences between men’s and women’s writing (322). Hiatt suggests that her findings “probably reflects women’s feelings that they will not be believed, that they are not being taken seriously...” (323). Women, it seems, feel the need to
justify their arguments with adverbs like “really.” With these pieces of information, I began to look at other texts, and academia in general, in a new light.

As a woman who grew up in the seventies, I have always been aware of the male-female dichotomy in America. Although I would not have been able to name any wave of feminism, even as a young girl I was aware of the changes taking effect in American society. While my mother, a mere eighteen years my senior, had once been asked to leave her junior high school for wearing pants, and felt that she could be nothing more than a wife and mother, I knew differently about myself from a very young age. Thanks to Marlo Thomas, Harry Belafonte, and Free to be You and Me, I believed I could be whatever I wanted to be when I grew up. However, as I got older, I learned that, despite my abilities, I would need to depend on a man to validate me, to deem me good enough to work alongside him. And my over-confidence and confrontational nature tended to get more doors slammed in my face than opened for me. I was also somewhat aware of what Karen Powers-Stubbs describes as “women in patriarchal social institutions [being] customarily relegated to powerless positions” (Powers-Stubbs et al, 377). While I would have been unable to verbalize this dismissal, I could see examples of it every day in the media and in life. But when it came to my own academic silence and powerlessness, I looked at myself, my acquisition of identity, rather than at the institution. I have been aware of my own powerlessness for the duration of my life; however, I attributed this lack of power less to a patriarchal society and more to my relationships with my three fathers, or shall I say, father figures, and their lasting effects on my sense of self.

One father, the one who got my mother pregnant while he was married to another woman, walked out on me before I was born. The next, my mother’s first husband, was over-bearing and abusive, eventually rejecting me as his daughter because of my incredible likeness to
my mother. The third father placed more importance on the female body--of which mine fell sadly short--than on any qualities I did possess that might have rendered me significant. All of these men and their actions were the result of situations I had neither participated in nor could ever change. I could no more change my resemblance to my mother than I could change my body type. I was rendered completely powerless when it came to acceptance, which I equated directly to love, by these father figures.

I concealed the effects of these men, my feelings of powerlessness in every situation, under the veil of over-confidence and confrontation, but that sense of powerlessness informed and shaped my every move. And I believed that education was key to negating my feeling of being silenced. Never had the idea occurred to me that the institution of academia was, in its epistemology, a different source of the powerless feeling I had felt for so long. With the question posed in pedagogy class, and with Jane Tompkins’s essay, I began to ponder the details of my own rocky relationship with academic prose. Had I, in my quest to earn acceptance, recognition, and a sense of power on my own terms, been unconsciously rejecting the straightjacket for the duration of my education?

bell hooks gave me perhaps the largest cluster of the puzzle that was/is my thesis. Her essay, “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words,” engages Adrienne Rich’s poem, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” Specifically, hooks analyzes Rich’s statement, “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you” in the context of African-American oppression and slave narrative. She demonstrates how slaves used the language of their oppressors “as a space of resistance” (169). By using English in broken and grammatically incorrect ways, oppressing whites had to rethink their own language, giving slaves a resistant space within the oppressors own language. I wondered, is it then possible that women resist the
oppressive, emotionless male academic voice when we write in the personal voice? If so, memoir
then becomes its own space of resistance, rejecting and subverting female powerlessness.

hooks further suggests that this space of resistance, this shared new language, gave slaves
the power to bring about a new meaning of the oppressor’s language, to subvert the meaning of
the original: “They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the
meaning of the English language. . .[and] made English into more than the oppressor’s language”
(170). Personal narrative, memoir, has similar potential to bring about a rethinking, a kind of
translation of the academic language. The language of academia tends to remove the subject
through its use of the passive voice. When the subject is missing, the language takes on a
detached, unemotional quality. Alternatively, memoir is constructed around the subject. The
subject of the memoir usually takes a journey into emotion, looking deeply into life experiences
in an attempt to find meaning. In the reflective nature of memoir, there is resistance to the
calculated, objective, detached academic voice. And in this space of resistance, in this space of
shared language, there is new meaning which validates both the private and the public.

But hooks admits that there is a risk in this translation of standard English. She argues
that the oppressor(s) may come to view the resistant voice as trivial, or as mere entertainment.
Using rap music as an example, hooks shows how “when young white kids imitate this [black
vernacular] speech in ways that suggest it is the speech of those who are stupid or who are only
interested in entertaining or being funny, then the subversive power of this speech is
undermined” (171). Memoir, as an example of the personal voice, also runs that risk of being
viewed as trivial. Because of its tendency to take up the place of entertainment, memoir in the
academy is still in the exception rather than the rule.
Perhaps academia is not as inclined to offer memoir courses because memoir is often
viewed as a genre for women--women writers, women readers. It is also something that every
Tom, Dick, and Palin thinks he/she can/should write. When politicians, movie stars, and
corporate bigwigs outsource their life story, memoir becomes something less than subversive or
resistant. These icons of pop culture, these politicians of yesteryear whose memoirs are on the
shelf moments after they leave office, are often not the authors of their own memoirs. Their use
of well-paid ghost writers takes the personal out of the so-called personal voice. Their memoirs,
for lack of a better term, are pumped out so fast, that there is not enough time for reflection. And
it is the act of reflection that sets a memoir apart from mere autobiography.

The format of memoir is something else that sets memoir apart from autobiography.
Memoir, in its non-linear structure, is more effective in “captur[ing] the experience of people
struggling to stay afloat...” (Maynes 105). It is the reflective aspect of memoir that captures the
personal story and subverts the hegemony. By bringing the personal stories into the political
institutions, memoir resists the hegemonic representations of the norm. If there is no personal
(ghost writer), and no reflection (no times passes before publication), hooks’s “subversive power
of [memoir] is undermined” (171). Memoir thus becomes simply a means of creating a profit. It
becomes mere entertainment. And it endorses and reinforces the patriarchal oppression.

hooks brings the idea of translation into her exploration of the resistant language of the
oppressed. “Using the vernacular,” she says, “means that translation into standard English may
be needed if one wishes to reach a more inclusive audience” (172). This need for translation
applies to memoir as well, as much as an act of translation as an act of validation. Those who fit
comfortably in the straightjacket of academia may feel that the reflective personal voice of
memoir is an invalid means of argumentation. The academic reader of memoir may need to say
to himself, “what this writer means is ___.” Essentially, the academic reader of memoir may need to validate the value of the non-academic text for him or herself. Just like Tompkins feels the need to validate her personal voice with permission from her academic voice, and just like a white male had to validate and proclaim to be true autobiographies written by Frederick Douglass or Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a text that is in its nature reflective and not emotionless, may need validation from academia before it will be taken seriously.

But what happens when that personal voice is translated into the academic? Does memoir lose some of its subversive power through translation or validation the same way its power is undermined through trivialization? The answer, for me, is yes. Translating or validating personal voice as academic jargon furthers the oppression of the feminine voice. Tejaswini Niranjana argues, in her book, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, that translation is merely another form of colonization. Since “translation [into standard English] depends on the Western philosophical notions of reality, representation, and knowledge,” then translation of personal voice into academic voice depends on those same notions (3). Niranjana describes these Western notions as a representation of an “unproblematic” reality which “provides direct, unmediated access to a transparent reality” (3). However, in their personal and reflective language, by offering individual stories within an oppressive institution, or by illustrating hybrid identities that do not fit with in the hegemonic definition of “normal,” these memoirs or texts of personal voice change the hegemonic base of an “unproblematic” knowledge of reality. But if entry into the base of knowledge requires an invitation or permission from a member of the hegemonic elite, in this case academic language, then all hope of change is lost.

Rich’s words echo in a different tone: “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.”
In her essay entitled, “Personal Voice/Feminist Voice,” Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz seems to refer to the academic voice as a facade for women. “[T]here is an aspect of the personal,” says Rabinowitz, “that is political; personal voice scholarship is related to feminism at least two ways. First the professional voice is associated with masculinity, if not necessarily and essentially, then in the ways it has been performed and by whom. Thus it seems like a costume for women” (192). Yes. The academic voice has indeed been a costume for me. And I have actively tried--and failed--to step out of the costume in my academic writings. My attempts to insert my own brand of ironic and sarcastic humor into my academic writings have not gone unnoticed. But they have gone unrewarded. In other words, my grades have been less than what I consider success to be. Although, I will admit, the poor grades may very well have been a reflection of poorly written papers.

However, a person can begin to be comfortable in a language that is not his or her original. George Steiner, who speaks three languages fluently and cannot remember which one he learned first admits, “I dream with equal verbal density and linguistic-symbolic provocation in all three” (120). Like Steiner and despite myself, I have begun to think, or dream, as the case may be, in the oppressive language of academia. From this hybrid thinking emerges my hybrid voice. I see in my writing moments of the academic, juxtaposed with my tendency to use the voice of the personal narrative. Over the course of my educational journey, my two voices have grown stronger and more separately distinct. And yet my voices merge together, especially in some sections of the memoir part of this thesis project. With the recognition of the merging of my own two voices, I see a place for the hybrid voice in the literary canon.

Rabinowitz and Tompkins write in hybrid voices, as do hooks and Hiatt. And although in each of these women’s essays there is a sense of academia giving permission to the personal
voice and allowing it to speak, the hybridity is there. And it is here, in this space of academic-
personal hybridity, that academia has begun to accept and incorporate the personal voice.

Resistance has not been futile.

Ruth Behar believes that personal narrative--or what she calls “testimony”--has already
begun to reshape the canon, and she offers an opinion as to what makes testimony worthy of the
canon: “I can assert, with confidence, that the best autobiographical scholarly writing sets off on
a personal quest and ultimately produces a redrawn map of social terrain” (Behar, B2). It is
Behar’s definition that I set off to accomplish in my thesis project.

My personal quest, to tell the story of growing up in abusive households in which females
held no power and had little value, will, hopefully, shine a sliver of new light on one effect of a
male-dominated society. I tell these stories of mine with the desire to show the lasting effects of
misogyny and the devaluing of women. Self-loathing and self-abuse is often passed along from
generation to generation, just as a genetic trait is passed. It takes self-awareness and knowledge
of the problem to break the chains of abuse. My intention with this thesis project is to show that
breaking of familial patterns of abuse through my mom’s actions, as well as through my own
actions and thought processes.

The methods of creative writing I use throughout this memoir differ from story to story.
When I began the writing of this memoir, I thought I was merely experimenting with different
points of view, different tenses. But as I write more and more pieces of my life, I realize that
each piece requires a different style of narration. I have attempted to tell each story the way it
needs to be told. Some stories require me to revert to the moment and tell the story from my
point of view as a child. Some stories require me to look back as an adult. Some require both. It
is my intention that, in telling these stories from discontinuous and differing points of view, my
sense of a split sense of self will emerge. And from that representation of a split self, I hope a representation of my process of reflection and subsequent healing has emerged.

I have made a special attempt to pay attention to the moments of my memories that are not clear. I have analyzed these unclear spaces for what it is that makes them unclear. It is in these opaque moments that I question memory in general, mine in particular. I have attempted to convey my confusion and/or lack of clarity by delving into the questionable places. And yet, as I say in the beginnings of my memoir, I am conscious of my reluctance to do so. It is my intention to uncover these questionable memories and, at the same time, shed light on how those pieces of memories have also contributed to my construction, and often deconstruction, of self.

My memoir is not arranged in a standard chronology. I have arranged the following bits and pieces of memory only according to what makes them readable. Some pieces must come before others for clarification purposes, and others make more sense when paired together. I have, however, included interim chapters that are mostly in chronological order. The interim pieces are very specific moments of memory that do not revolve around reflection. They are only remembered moments. My intention with these small pieces of story is to portray only the memory, and nothing else, with an underlying purpose of guiding the story forward.

My overall desire with this memoir is to present a discontinuous story that mirrors the nonlinear aspect of memory, reflection, and the construction and translation of self. Through different narration styles--fragments of memory, linear narration, flashbacks, and questionable moments--I hope to present a non-linear story to which the reader is free to assign meaning.

The form and content of this memoir are a culmination of the effects many other memoirs have had on me and my writing. It was reading Jeanette Walls’s memoir, *The Glass Castle*, that convinced me I had a story worth telling. But it took many years before I would find the courage
to do so. Many times throughout the writing of this thesis, I drew from Wells’s example. She tells her story of being the child of mentally-unstable, addicted parents from a place of personal distance. Her story presents itself, simply. Hers is a model I strived to exemplify.

Another memoirist whose approach to writing memory I have attempted to emulate is Joan Didion. Her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is one that stands out for its ability to question memory as much as its ability to tell the painful stories without too much sentimentality. Didion’s story begins in a traumatic moment in time--her husband’s massive heart attack and death. Her writing about that time period is a compilation of facts pulled from documents and interviews, combined with questions about her own memories of her actions and processes. With Didion’s memoir, I found authorization to not know if I remembered what I thought I knew I remembered. It is this questioning of my own memories that I have been aware of most in the writing of this thesis project.

Lydia Yuknavitch’s memoir, *The Chronology of Water*, gave me perhaps the biggest part of this memoir’s form, structure, and content. Her chapter “A Happy Childhood,” consists only of fragmented memories. In writing in only fragments, Yuknavitch portrays a very vivid fracture of memory, which is often the form memory takes. Since so many of the stories I wanted to tell are incomplete in my own memory, yet these fractured memories of mine have so much meaning in the larger picture of my life, I knew I would use Yuknavitch’s format for telling parts of my story. The result of my attempts to write fragmented memories are the interim chapters that I use to guide this non-linear story.

Yuknavitch’s story affected the content of my memoir as well. Her horrific story of self-abuse, with underpinnings of sexual abuse at the hands of her father, gave me permission to tell some of my own stories. Without Yuknavitch’s model, I would not have included many
moments of self reflection in this story. But with her example, I knew I could. Knowing that she
could successfully pen moments in her life like waking up under a freeway overpass with her
pants around her ankles and no memory of how she got there, or being so intoxicated she hits a
car being driven by a pregnant woman head on, possibly causing a miscarriage, gave me the
freedom to write my own very small instances of slight discomfort and reflections of my own
ugly moments. If she could say such things about herself and her life, I could too.

There are, of course, other pieces of memoir, poetry, and fiction that inspired me to write
certain pieces. Two poems, "Towards a Definition" and "The Person That You Were Will Be
Replaced," by Alice Notley, made me think about grief and its process. In the moments after I
read her poems, I began to reflect on the beginnings of my process of grieving over my parents,
and how unfinished that process was. And so I wrote the chapter of my memoir entitled “Grief
and Gratitude” in the wake of Notley’s poem.

I Go To Some Hollow, by Amina Cain, inspired me to write a very succinct memory in
her style of shortened sentences that portray uncomfortable moments in people’s lives. At the
time I read her collection of short stories, I had only a few pieces left to add to this memoir. But I
did not know how to tell them. With my attempt to emulate Cain’s style of fiction writing,
especially her story entitled “Two Dimensional War,” my chapter “A Safe Secret” emerged.

Nick Flynn’s Another Bullshit Night in Suck City uses different points of view, and
unusual pieces of narrative, to tell yet another story of addiction and parenting. I thought of his
memoir while writing “Hiding in the High,” a story that I have heard about my mother, but do
not know the details of. Stepping back into a somewhat omniscient narrator role allowed me to
use my own memory of my mom in that time period to paint her as a character in a somewhat
fictionalized story. Fictionalized only because I have never become privy to her version of it.
And something interesting to note here: as I sit here, writing about my intentions of modeling my memoir like Flynn’s, flipping through the pages of his memoir, I come across the handwritten version of “A Memory? A Dream?” Scrawled on the last page of his book, in red ink, is a very messy first draft of what I would eventually put in my memoir. I do not remember writing it. I do not remember what it was about Flynn’s story that inspired me to write it. But the scratches and scribbles demonstrate a sense of urgency in getting the story down on paper. I must attribute my inspiration to Flynn.

Occasionally, in my memoir, I use Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, as a device by which I measure my mother’s--and my own--place within the abject. In these pieces about the abject, I often speak directly to my mother. I ask her questions about her actions and experiences as a way of exploring Kristeva’s abject and our, mine and my mother’s, location within the margins that are the abject. I also use these discussions with my mother to demonstrate the breaking of the familial chains of abuse, both hers and mine.

As I arrive at the end of the process of this thesis project, I find that I am more comfortable in the academic language than I thought I was. I find less alienating and more enjoyable to read what I once considered dry and boring, although I believe that is to be expected at this point in my academic career. However, I have also noticed that I tend to write in the academic voice with more ease, despite my attempts to reject it. Like Steiner’s dreams, I have taken on the foreign voice at an unconscious level. My relationship with feminism, memoir, and translation theory is not over. I have opened the doors to an intriguing connection, and I find myself continuing to read on the subjects, hoping to uncover more secrets. Finally, I no longer feel silenced, either by my fathers or by academia. With this thesis, and this memoir, *my voice*
emerges. In telling the story that follows, my resistance is apparent. I feel the subversion taking place.
Works Cited

Behar, Ruth. “Dare We Say ‘I’? Bringing the Personal into Scholarship.” Chronicle of Higher Education 29 June 1994: B1+


*A note about dads:

As you maneuver this text, you may become confused as to whom the narrator is calling dad. Which dad does she mean? And just how many dads are there anyway?

The answer is, it depends. And three.

Up until age nine, I called one man “Daddy.” That was Scott. I knew I had another dad, Charlie King but he was just a fantasy at that point. He was the king who was my *real* dad.

When my mom moved my sisters and me into Robert’s house, I struggled with him becoming my new dad, or my step-dad.

When I was about twelve, and in a few moments at younger ages, I began referring to Scott as his first name.

Robert has always insisted I call him by his first name.

Charlie King is Charlie King for clarification purposes in this thesis. In life, I refer to him in many different ways, which would become confusing in these pages.

Here is a chronology that may help:
1969: I am born.

My mother, Patricia Lou Goodwin, is 18. My father, Charles Earnest King, is 26.

1971, age eighteen months:

My mother marries Scott Cadwallader. I will call him Daddy for the next decade.

1978, age eight:

My mother and Scott divorce.

1979, age nine:

My mother moves us into Robert Brown’s home. I want to call him Daddy, but he resists. However, I will always refer to him as “my dad.”

1982, age 12:

Scott no longer wants to be my dad. From this age on, I refer to him as “Scott.”

1986, age 16:

I meet my birth father, Charlie King. He steps into and out of my life for a few years.
Talk Stories of the Abject

I explore part of my story through my mother's existence. My life began in the moments the second wave of feminism was washing ashore. My mother’s life experience was part of the momentum that created the wave. I do think my mother has had regrets about the opportunities she gave up for her men. For the needle. I think feminism did influence my mother, but I don’t think she had the tools or the courage to resist. She didn’t know how to be who she wanted to be. She didn’t even know who or if she wanted to be. The ability for women to achieve their goals and live their lives as they so desired grew with my mother, or perhaps next to her. She believed that she should be able to be anything she wanted. She said she should be able to do whatever made her happy. But what her actions showed, what she eventually did, was exactly what her husband(s) wanted her to do.
“Between Two Powers”¹

In your day, Mom, your choices were few. Poor, white trash girls from Descanso didn’t go to college. Poor, white trash, pregnant girls from Descanso were not even allowed to finish high school. But you went to night school, Mom. And you got your high school diploma with the rest of your class. But in 1969 you weren’t allowed to attend graduation ceremonies with proof of me protruding from the front of your gown. This moment of objectification and abjectification is where my story begins.

    Mom, your story is my story.

¹ Kristeva, page 70.
Memories

I am exploring the shadows of my memories. The corners where just enough darkness remains, and something goes unseen. The dimly lit rooms where it becomes difficult to make out particular faces, and it becomes necessary to listen to voices or notice the way a person moves in order to know who is in the room. Sometimes I get scared when I delve into a memory. Like if I reach my hand into that darkened corner, something will grab my arm and pull me in. Or if I focus in on the face of the person who is in the dim room, I will recognize the face, remember why my subconscious has blurred it, and I will have no way out of that room.
I am aware.

I am in a tube. Where is Mommy? I am alone, afraid. Someone is down there, at the end of the tube, looking at me from the light. When the someone looks at me, I know I am safe. I go back to the black.
Snapshot

Her beautiful smile. Wind in my face. Exhilaration. Elation. I squeeze the chains that are too big for my hands. Hot chains, safe chains, too big for my hands. Her arm is around me. Holding me close, safe. Mom. Exhilaration, elation, safe. I am laughing. She is laughing. We are laughing, our hair in the wind, her arms holding me safe, the chains in my hands. She is beautiful. Young, beautiful, untainted.

It was you, Mom. You are my first memory. We are swinging, and I feel safer in your arms than anywhere else. This memory is more a snapshot than a movie. A Polaroid picture of you and me on the upswing. When I see the photograph in my mind, I feel that funny swing tummy feeling. I imagine my eyes were closed, head thrown back, mouth open with joy and excitement, and your arms were around me. You were so young, Mom. I see now how young and beautiful and innocent you were then. You were a good mom, in those days. You protected me with your arms and with your choices. But then you stopped. Why did you stop protecting me, Mom? Did you think I was old enough to take care of myself? I wasn’t. I wasn’t old enough, or mature enough, but I did it anyway. Still, when I see the picture of you and me on the swing, I am happy. I am happy and I am safe, Mom.

When I think of the swing, I can feel the wind on my face. I can hear your laughter next to and around me. How old was I, Mom? We called us “spider,” because together we had eight legs. You were the only place I felt safe, I remember that too. And I knew that feeling would not last. I knew we would have to go home soon. Did I know even then that he was hurting you?
"The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego"\textsuperscript{2}

I know the story: you wore little pillows in your shirt and pretended to be sick to your stomach. You wanted to get back at your first boyfriend for accepting but not treasuring the gift of your virginity. You made up a way to lose the baby just as easily as you made up its existence.

Did you ever tell him the truth, Mom?

A baseball game in the field caused your first abortion, a fake abortion. You didn’t know then that the "father" of this faked baby, this faked spontaneous abortion, would come back in your life after you had a real baby. You didn’t know that the “father” of your pretend baby would be the man I, your real baby, first called "daddy." For a little while.

But he left too, just like the real daddy. Just like all the daddies.

\textsuperscript{2} Kristeva, page 15.
**Found in my Baby Book**

“A little girl likes new shoes, party dresses, small animals, first grade, noise makers, the girl next door, dolls, make-believe, dancing lessons, ice cream, kitchens, coloring books, make-up, cans of water, going visiting, tea parties, and one boy. She doesn’t care so much for visitors, boys in general, large dogs, hand-me-downs, straight chairs, vegetables, snow suits, or staying in the front yard. She is loudest when you are thinking, the prettiest when she has provoked you, the busiest at bedtime, the quietest when you want her to show off, and the most flirtatious when she absolutely must not get the best of you again.”

Taken from “What Is A Girl?” by Alan Beck.

Mom still has the pen from my baby book. Its blue ink fills the first few pages with her loopy, teenage writing. But the loops become fewer and fewer as the pages progress. I learn from this unfinished text that my name would’ve been Shawn Richard, if I had been a boy. What would have happened to Shawn Richard if it had been he, rather than Syndee Marie, who had breathed his first breath in 1969? Who would he be in 2011?

The book tells me my father was twenty six when I was born. Mom was eighteen. And again I compose a picture of what I might have seen if I had been at the party in 1968 when seventeen year-old Patee Goodwin met twenty five year-old Charlie King. Mom has always told me “he looked a little like Neil Diamond. When he was young.” My composed picture of him at that age inevitably has him on a boat belting out a song about coming to America. But Charlie King was a drummer, not a singer. According the my baby book, his band was called The Mota-Vation. A play on the Spanish word for marijuana.
I ask Mom why the book says she didn’t begin seeing a doctor until she was six months pregnant with me. Aside from the inability to pay, Mom reminds me that “Nanny didn't know.” Shortly after Mom did tell her own mother though, welfare payments began to arrive, and she could afford medical care for her baby.

Mom documented my very slow growth pattern in this book: I weighed a scant thirty four pounds at age six. I wore a children’s size seven dress at my sixth grade graduation ceremony.

I am one quarter Mexican, one quarter Irish, one quarter German, one eighth English, and one eighth French. Until I read this book, at age forty two, I didn’t know I was French.
What did you want to be when you grew up, Mom? I don’t know that I have ever heard you say. Did you know you would be a mom, my mom, at eighteen? Did you know you would be pregnant five times, or was it six? Your choices were few. The babies you had were chosen. The ones you didn't weren’t. You had no choices, Mom. You thought you couldn’t go to college. You kept getting pregnant. The pill wasn’t legal until after at least two of your abortions. Abortion wasn’t legal until a year after that.

Were any of your abortions legal, Mom?

Did you know, Mom, when you faked that pregnancy, when you were sixteen, that you would really be pregnant, not faking, just a year later? And that you would be pregnant continuously until you were twenty three, when you got your tubes tied? Did you want to be a mom, Mom?

In those days, your choices were few.

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3 Kristeva, page 7
I am four.

After Sunday School, Nanny and Grampa Bill come to get me and take me home. I am not big enough to go to their church, but sometimes they let me come with them anyway. We always walk to the car together holding hands. I like it when they make me fly. Nanny wears her church gloves; sometimes Grampa does too. They hold my hands tight and swing me up high into the sky. We laugh and feel happy when we leave church.
Not My Memory

I had an owie. The skin on my thumb was ripped and it hurt. Mommy could make it better.

“Mommy, I got a owie,” I said, showing her the pulsing, torn, redness of my thumb.

“Oh sweetie, it’s just a hangnail.” 19-year-old Mommy was washing dishes, Dittos swinging to the beat of Chicago, Kansas, Boston or whichever geographical location was playing on the radio at that moment. “I’ll fix it in a minute, okay, Baby?”

I gave Mommy my sweetest, two-year-old, freckle-faced smile and left the room. Mommy presumed that her good little girl went to find something to do until the dishes were done. Mommy was wrong.

Mom could have been distracted by memories like passing out on the floor in the middle of the Janis Joplin concert. She could have been reminiscing about how she and Gloria had tricked that one guy, whatever his name was, into thinking he’d gotten my mom pregnant, only for her to “lose” the baby in a high-speed baseball accident. Or maybe she was just daydreaming about that drummer she would soon realize she had to marry.

A short time later, when the dishes were done, Mom, who had forgotten about the urgency of the hangnail, picked up another task. And another task after that. When I came into the kitchen, Mom remembered the owie and told me she could fix it now.

“It’s okay, Mommy,” sweet little Syndee said. “I fixed it all by myself.”

Mom, nervous at the thought of her toddler cutting the skin off her own thumb, asked to see what I had done. Upon inspection, however, Mom found the flap of skin still attached and became more than a little nervous. “How did you fix it, baby? Show Mommy.”
I took her hand into mine, and led her to the opened hall closet, where we kept the medication.

There, in front of the closet, I showed my mother the chair. It was teetering with enough phone books, dictionaries and encyclopedias to help a very small two-year-old grow tall enough to reach the top shelf, and the delicious, dissolving delights called baby aspirin. Panicked, my mother searched through the bottles on the shelf looking for the one that, hopefully, contained remnants of what I had taken. She found only an empty bottle and didn’t need a calculator to know that the dosage I had ingested could be lethal. She knew she needed to get help, but we didn’t have a phone. Nor did we have a car.

My mother has never been accused of being calm; she gets hysterical under the most mundane of circumstances. But she was alone that day, and she managed to keep her head well enough and long enough to remember she needed help. Somehow this very young mother had to find a way to get her very poisoned baby to the hospital before it was too late.

I’m not sure how we made it; I’m not even sure if my mom knows. Maybe a neighbor drove us, or maybe it was some good samaritan who saw a frantic young girl running along the side of Market Street, carrying her beginning-to-doze daughter. We did get to the hospital that day though. The E.R. staff pumped the entire bottle of St. Joseph’s orange-flavored, baby aspirin out of my tiny stomach, and I lived to scare, again, the bejesus out of my poor hysterical mother.

This is not my earliest memory. In fact, it isn’t my memory at all. It is my mother’s memory, and I have just heard it so many times I can retell it without thinking. Honestly though, I’m not sure if I got the story right. I should ask my mother to tell the story – again – so that I can write it down and get it straight. Or maybe not. I kind of like my version.
That day, when I took the aspirin, was when my mother was first dropped into the whole parenting gig. After that, she knew that she wasn’t playing house any more. My sister, who my mom was probably pregnant with on that day, really scared the shit out of my mom. My sister Krista loved to eat, and managed to get a few different items lodged in her throat. Peanuts, rocks, you name it, my sister tried to eat it. Fortunately for my sister, Mom had experience running kids to the hospital. Krista managed to make it out alive, like I did.

It is quite possibly the work of God that the five of us kids did make it to adulthood. In those days, seat belts and tailgates were optional; we never wore the seat belts and we often rode in beds of trucks that did not have tailgates. My parents always drove faster than the posted speed limit, and they usually had a beer in hand.

We used to take monthly trips to the desert; my step-dad, Robert, was a motorcycle rider and we went out for his enduros. The trips out to the desert were, basically, a race between Robert and his best friend. They both had a truck with a camper shell, an ole lady in the front seat, and kids in the back. In our camper, the beer was in the camper with us kids. We were required to open the bottles, as needed, and pass them through the window from the camper to Mom and Robert, in the cab of the truck.

Once the two truck drivers made it to the desert, usually well after midnight, they were free. There were no roads, or law enforcement agents, to tie them down to the ground. Having each had several Miller High Lifes, they pushed the gas pedals to the floor and proceeded to race through the desert at speeds often exceeding 100 mph. Did I mention they liked to turn off their headlights?
I am seven.

I am wearing blue leotards and tights. Mommy did my hair in my favorite hair style--circle braids with blue ribbons. My new black gymnastics shoes are on my feet. I am on my daddy’s shoulders. I feel happy, but I am crying. Mommy is crying too. In my first gymnastics meet, I won two ribbons. Two third places. Mommy and Daddy are proud of me.
**Not Like Every Other Christmas**

I was seventeen. It was Christmas Eve, 1986, and I was working at HoneyBaked Hams, just a few miles from my house. Working there was my first experience with hard work, and I liked it. At that point in the work day, I was stocking hams ranging in size from six pounds to twenty two pounds. For a seventeen year old girl weighing in at just over ninety pounds, it was a difficult job, but I felt strong and practically normal sized.

It was loud inside the refrigerator, but I was grateful to not be taking phone orders, so I basked in the cold and the solitude and the sound of the thirty four degree breeze that kept the hams cold. The insulated HoneyBaked coat I wore was as long as a dress. The sleeves hung to my knees, and the HoneyBaked gloves were twice the size of my hands. Somewhere around age six, I had stopped letting my size be an excuse, so I scrunched everything up small enough to fit me, took foil-wrapped hams from the back wall of the cooler and slammed them into the glass display case. From behind the glass doors, I could see the backs of the employees at their registers, and, as they opened and closed the doors, I could hear the impatient customers, anxious to get their holiday started. The Christmas Eve bustle meant the hams left the case faster than I could fill it, so, every once in a while, an employee would open a door, drop the corporate façade, and yell for a specific sized ham. I felt at ease in the chaos. It was just like home.

Home. Chaos. Two words that described the seven person family I was part of. Even so, Christmas Eve of 1986 was unlike the others we had had together. Robert’s sons, Charlie and Chris, had gone to live with their mother some time during the year. At the time, I thought that Charlie and Chris had left because the fighting between them and our parents had gotten to be too much to handle.
Although only twenty four hours remained until Christmas, we, those of us who remained, had no tree. No stockings. No lights. No promise of any of the traditional festivities. I don’t remember feeling anything about this fact at the time, and, as I reflect, it seemed like the usual for our non-traditional family. At our age, we kids had long since stopped believing in Santa. Together, the five of us had decorated the tree on many a Christmas Eve while our parents shopped until well past midnight. Then they would lock themselves in their bedroom and wrap while we slept, and we would inevitably wake up to a living room full of presents. Every one of them labelled “From Santa.”

As I sang Christmas songs to myself in the cooler, someone opened the back door and yelled to me that I had a phone call. I removed my too-big coat and gloves and mentally prepared myself for what I thought would be a frustrated customer. Instead it was my sister Tawnya. She and Krista were alone at home, but they knew I was coming home soon. Now I was the frustrated one; she was calling me even though she knew I was busy.

“I just thought I’d let you know that we’re leaving,” she said. “We just found out that Mom and Robert are doing heroin.”

What? I didn’t understand what she was saying. Heroin?

She continued. “That’s why we don’t have a tree. And we aren’t getting one either. We’re going to Dad’s. Do you want to come?”

Heroin? What?

The next few moments are gone from my memory. I remember only how my stomach felt: like a wave machine pushing, pushing, pushing my lunch around inside of me. And how my throat felt: like I had swallowed a hot rock.
I must’ve told my sister that I was going to finish my shift. Of course I wouldn’t have gone to Scott’s house. He had made that clear. I do remember telling my boss that something had happened in my family, and I needed a break. I walked to the area behind the store; the trees behind me seemed like a place I wanted to disappear into. Instead, I sat in view of the store but as far away from people as I could, and I began to cry. It all made sense now. No tree, no stockings, no brothers, no Christmas. But more pieces began to fit into the puzzle, like the occasional day without electricity, without cable, without food. How could I not have known? Our stuff had begun to disappear. Our vacations to the desert had stopped sometime back, and now our motorcycles were gone, our camper, even our television. They said it had been stolen while we slept; I believed them. I remembered the day we got the television, a surprise from Mom and Robert. It even had a wireless remote, and, that night, we had all gathered around it to watch some show like “The Dukes of Hazzard.” I sobbed harder, choking on my tears as I realized how long before that Christmas Eve our family had died, and finally understanding the reason.
I am seven.

I ride my new bike and show Daddy my new trick. I can already ride with just one hand. After just a few days, I can already do a trick. You’ll crash, he says. You will fall and crash. My hands return to the bars. He will be mad if I fall. Two hands is better.
The Beginning. The End.

I remember my mom in the kitchen. Cooking. Sometimes she was watering the plants, or lounging in the sun, but usually she was in the impeccable kitchen. I’d come home from school to the scent of something delicious on the stove and Shotgun Tom on the radio. She’d be standing at the sink—barefoot, tanned, shapely legs, short shorts, hips swinging to the beat of Chubby Checker or The Teenagers, tanned back exposed through the long, curly hair that covered the back of her triangular, crocheted halter top—washing the dishes or preparing dinner for our family.

I remember my mom sifting through the trash. Sometimes she was in the dumpster, but usually she was sifting through the heaps of trash. I’d come home from school to the metallic stench of discardings and the rustle of plastic bags. She’d be sitting on the hard wood living room floor—dirty feet, fresh track marks on her pasty legs, scabbed arms hidden under long sleeves, scabbed and scarred face exposed under her dirty, unbrushed hair—as she urgently categorized the neighbors’ garbage into piles according to resale worth.

I’ve spent my life wondering what made my parents so susceptible to addiction. What makes two people give up their belongings, vacations, home, family, and children? My parents spent years smuggling illegal aliens across the Mexican border and into Los Angeles, until finally Mom got busted and spent months in federal prison. What made these two people so desperate for drugs that they became coyotes?

They’re clean now. But they didn’t go through a traditional rehabilitation program. There were not twelve specific steps for them to take. There was only one step: get clean. Methadone became the new addiction. After several years of increasing their daily doses, my parents weaned
themselves off the Methadone too. But because there was no program, there was no taking responsibility, no making amends, no fearless moral inventory. In fact, their addiction remains a joke to them. Haha we sure did screw up, didn’t we? Any discussion that hints at what might have been so burdensome and painful as to need anesthesia is promptly redirected to a safer zone. I watch Mom for clues. I have been watching and listening for twenty years.

In not understanding why Mom turned to drugs, I have become afraid of some of my own memories. I cannot talk to her about all of what I remember, only the most innocuous memories. Even those have a sense of fear boiling beneath them. If I ask a question that to me seems innocent and safe, will I uncover something at the root of her need to numb herself with heroin? I ask about a friend of Scott’s, I remember a round belly and curly black hair, and I think there is no danger in the answer. But why does it feel like I am taking a risk just by asking? I tiptoe through my memories, afraid of what they might reveal. Did Mom turn to substances because of me?

I am lucky. I know that if I had learned of their addiction just a few years earlier, I might not have known that it wasn’t me that drove them to it. A fourteen year old me might have processed their choice as a result of my behavior, and I might have turned on myself, spending my life punishing myself for the demon I thought I was. But I am lucky. Rather than a life of self-infliction, I have lived a quest for love, clinging to the hope that someone, anyone would give me the love my parents should have.

My mom’s dad died a painful, lingering death—cancer of the voice box—when I was two. I am told becoming my Papa made him nice. But I did not know him long enough to
remember him. I must rely on the remnants of stories and hints from Mom to cast light into the shadows of her life.

I see him taunting her. His face construed in anger as he belittles her, using her small size to physically control her, the stench of whiskey invading her as he breathes his venom into her face. Today, when Robert plays drunk games of hand-shaking strength with equally drunk male family members, Mom shrinks from the room, whispers to me, “My dad used to do that.”

Maybe her dad liked torturing animals, forcing her to watch until they were dead. Today, when the grandkids go fishing, she is reduced to tears at the sight of a fish gasping for breath in a bucket. She can admit only that her dad used to fish, and it always upset her to see the fish suffering.

I know her dad abused them. Mom tells me of the time she heard her own mother call from the kitchen. “And when I came in, he had a hold of her hair. She was sitting in a chair and he was pulling her hair so that she was leaning backwards on only two legs of the chair. He had a knife to her throat. She said to me, ‘It’s time to say goodbye. This time he is really gonna do it. He has had enough and this will be the last time he has to put up with it. But he has let me say goodbye to you.’” Mom stops here. Doesn’t finish the story. Just looks off into her memory and leaves me to fill in the gaps. I know he didn’t do it, because Mom’s mom was my Nanny until she was eighty eight years old. But I wonder to myself, if he had done it, if he had killed Nanny that day, maybe Mom would have gone into the state’s custody, and maybe she would have gotten the help she needed. Maybe then she would never have turned to heroin and methamphetamine. Maybe.

Instead, she married Scott. He was a bigger, angrier, Marine-version of my grandfather, and I am very familiar with the abuse he heaped on her. For seven years he slapped, kicked,
twisted, and burned self-loathing deeper into my mom. Scott’s abuse toward us kids fell into the emotional and verbal categories.

Mom tells me stories. Stories about his need for control of a little girl. About how, when I was two years old, he would not let me go to sleep until I had learned something. Anything he deemed important. No matter how tired I got, Mom tells me, he refused to let me sleep until he had taught me something.

Mom also tells me stories about my fear of him. About how, when I was three or four, using the toilet while Scott was shaving in front of the mirror, I fell into the toilet water. She found me with my bottom in the bowl, unable to pull myself out. And I had said nothing to Scott, even though he was standing right next to me, because I was so afraid of him. I don’t remember stories like this one. But today I am the mommy, and today I am sad for that scared little girl who needed a daddy.

I do remember some of it. His stinging words are etched in my mind, as if no time has passed at all. I remember that, when I was a little girl, I had long, thick, brown hair. Mom put it in a ponytail every day, and my hair drew compliments everywhere we went. One of the compliments I heard most often was, “Your hair is so thick it looks like a horse’s tail!” Even at that young age, I didn’t like being compared to an animal, and when I reported this one day to Scott, his response was, “You know what that makes your face, don’t you?” Seven year old Syndee understood immediately that she looked like the ugly, black, wrinkled place just under the horse’s tail. In a sentence, Scott shaped a child’s identity for life. I believed in my own ugliness from that day forward.

But I am lucky. He only hurt me with words.
I remember the joy I felt the day I found out that Scott and my mom were getting a divorce. I do not remember being conscious of why I was so elated at the news, but I do remember I was joyous. I was eight.

One Mother’s Day, Mom went on a date with Robert, a friend from high school, and within a week our families merged into one cramped but happy home in Encinitas. I gained two brothers who protected me like I never knew I always wanted. Robert became my dad, although I never call him “Dad.” I refer to him as “my dad” to others, but when we speak to each other, he is and always will be, “Robert.”

We moved from Mira Mesa to Hermes Avenue, Encinitas. We might as well have moved to the moon. Encinitas was a laid back surf town, full of laid back surfers and their laid back children. Our new brothers rode motorcycles in the desert, camped on the beach, and stayed up as late as they wanted. At first all us kids slept in one room. There was a second kids bedroom, but Robert had been renting it to a migrant worker. After a month he moved out and, in the space of a weekend, our new family collectively painted and carpeted our new bedroom.

My sisters and I still saw Scott, mostly on the holidays, until he got engaged again. Then only my sisters saw him.
**Woman or Abjection Reconciled**

Mom, you were seventeen in 1968. You wore your hair the right way, you had the right friends, you were a good girl. But you got pregnant anyway. Some of your family disowned you when they found out I was growing within you. Your father bought you a tiny gold ring for your tiny finger so people would think you were married. You always considered this to be a kind gesture; I was always bothered by it. Was your father always ashamed of you, Mom?

Mom, you have lived through the feminist journey. You were sixteen in 1967. Did you know about Friedan and her mystique? Or Firestone and her dialectic? Did you know you were part of the beginning of change?

Mom, did you know your daughters would live in an America when wearing pants to school would not result in suspension? Did you know your granddaughters would have goals like becoming an attorney? A judge? A photojournalist? Did you know, Mom?

You were fourteen in 1965. You watched the civil rights riots unfold in your living room. Would you have guessed at how many races your grandchildren would envelope? What would you have said if you had glimpsed into your future and saw what Christmas Day looked like in 2010? Would you have believed it?

Could you have guessed, Mom?

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What's In A Name?

I was born on August 28, 1969—ten days after Woodstock. This is pertinent information because the era I was born in, paired with the unique spelling of my name, has created me. As much as living with addicts has. Because of my name, I teach. My name has made me witty. And my name has given me attitude.

Mom was eighteen when I was born. Charlie King was married to someone else, had another family, other children, no time for a teenage fan he happened to knock up. So it was Mom and me. Being only eighteen in the latter part of The Sixties, Mom chose to tweak her baby’s name. I was christened Syndee Marie King by a mother who may or may not have been under the influence of a mind-altering drug throughout her pregnancy. I took up residence in an era when young parents rebelled with the names of their children as much as they did with closed fists and burned bras.

A girl in my ninth grade Algebra class was named Sundae. As in ice cream with whipped cream, nuts, and a cherry on top. Mystikle Rayne was in my graduating class. The newly-launched pop culture craze, MTV, featured v-jay Dweezil Zappa. Videos by his sister Moon Unit ranked high in popularity. Of course, rock stars took the child-naming craze to new levels. The one that disturbed me to the core was the infamous urban legend about Grace Slick and her son named god. As if the small g made it okay. Poor kid grew up, as the legend goes, and changed his name to John.

I was lucky. My name was only spelled wrong.

When Mom married Scott, he changed my last name to Cadwallader. Well, not legally. He had no intention of adopting me. Scott simply told Mom to start using his name on forms
since he was my dad now, and Mom did as she was told. So I entered the public school system armed with my wit, my intelligence, and my names.

I was always surprised when teachers couldn’t pronounce Syndee or Cadwallader. As a seven-year-old, I was perplexed that college graduates with twenty years of experience teaching kids how to read couldn’t seem to string together the four syllables that made up my last name.

“Cad wall a der,” I would say to myself. “It’s not that difficult!”

If the last name was tough, the first name was impossible. These professionals who intended to teach me that “y” is often used as a vowel in the English language could not figure out how to place the vowel between two consonants in a proper manner. Syndee became Sydnee, Synder, Sign-dee, and my favorite, Snydee. Parents named their children crazy things in the 60s, this was true, but Snydee?

As a result of this confusion over my names, I grew up with a belief and attitude that I was smarter than the teachers, and that I could do their job better. By fourth grade, I knew I was going to teach someday. And I knew what to expect on the first day of school. When the teacher got to the Cs, I’d give him or her a chance to get it right, marvel at the level of idiocy possessed when he or she couldn’t get it right, and I’d eventually butt in with a haughty but correct pronunciation.

“That’s SIN-dee Cad-WALL-a-der.”

It wasn’t until college that any teacher ever got it right. Apparently, the echo of seven-year-old Syndee observed, they don’t teach proper use and pronunciation of the English language until graduate school.

In addition to the desire to teach--so that at least somebody would be teaching the next generation how to speak our language--I developed a need to respond quickly to inquiries about
my name, or face a lifetime of giving the same boring answers to the same ridiculous questions. Since I’ve worked retail most of my life, wearing a name tag has helped inspire both queries and quips.

Some of my favorites are:

Customer says, “Is your name Cindy? Wow, what a weird way to spell it.” I say, with a shit-eating grin and a sarcastic tone, “Well, thank you!”

Customer says, “What nationality were your parents? “ I say, “American hippie.”

Customer says, “Well that sure is an interesting way to spell Cindy.” I say, “Well I’m an interesting kind of Syndee.” This response wins as this customer was so impressed he later came back and asked me out.

I have often wondered if the fact that my name houses the word “syn,” albeit misspelled, has influenced my take on God and religion, or if my distrust of religion and questions about God are innate characteristics of me. Perhaps by the end of this life, I will have the answer to that lingering question. Either way, I am constantly aware of the influence my name continues to have on my personality and existence.
I am eight.

My bed rests against the wall. On the other side of the wall is the drum room that Daddy and his friends built in our garage. They stacked walls over walls so nobody can hear the drums, but I can still hear them. Every night, when I go to bed, I hear the drums on the other side of my wall. When Daddy is playing his drums, I am safe. I feel their music as I fall asleep. Their rhythmic beat meets me in the land of my dreams.
Mom’s Nine Lives

Mom shies away from stories of her own childhood, except to tell me stories of the many times she cheated Death. There was the time teenage Mom was riding the roller coaster at Belmont Park, on the shore of Mission Beach in San Diego. She was so skinny, the seat bar didn’t hold her in. She almost flew out as her car rolled over a high loop. A friend, maybe a stranger, reached out and grabbed ahold of Mom’s pants as she rose above and out of the coaster car, pulled her back in, holding on to her until the ride came to a full and complete stop. No wonder Mom is afraid of heights now.

There was the time teenaged Mom was playing in the waves at a San Diego beach and found herself in a riptide. Her friend managed to get out of the strong current, but Mom was too short, too weightless, and too afraid of water to keep her head together and get out. Did I mention Mom couldn’t swim? At least she couldn’t in those days. And she still can’t do much more than a back float. She and I had lessons when I was twelve or so, and we learned together how to swim. Clarification: I learned, and she back floated through the tests. That day, Mom could barely tread water, and she found herself drowning in a riptide. Just as she had resolved herself to the fact that she would be dead soon, Mom says she felt a hand grab her and pull her out of the water. She had been saved by a very tall man, so tall that the riptide did not affect him, as he was taller than the breaking waves. He carried her in to shore, and she never saw him again.

Mom almost drowned another time too. After Robert paid for Mom’s swimming lessons, after he convinced her she could get her scuba diving license, after she passed her swim test with ten laps of the back float/stroke, they went diving together and with friends often. Despite the
fact that Mom did not like to eat crab or lobster, many of them spent the last few moments of their lives on our barbecue.

At the end of one night dive at San Onofre beach, Mom and Robert became separated from each other, and from the group, when they resurfaced near the shore. As Mom came into shore, the waves at her position on the beach were too strong for her small body. She tumbled onto the beach, finding herself on her back, in the sand, mask and snorkel lost in the waves, the tide coming in rapidly. She could see Robert searching the beach, but her scuba tanks were buried in the sand underneath her. The regulator was under the tanks. Mom yelled for help, but she knew Robert probably couldn’t hear her over the crash of the waves, which were rolling over her in shorter and shorter intervals. The two other divers in the group watched the scene unfold from the cliffs. They yelled for Robert, pointing down the beach to where my mom was. Just as she did during the riptide, Mom resolved herself to her demise. And then she felt someone lifting her out of the sand.

Today Mom tells me, again, of The Time The Car Crashed Through Our House. This is the name of the story we tell and retell often. This is a story which, when I try to tell it, tends to be less about meaning and more about shock: “Did a car really crash through your house?” “Yes, it really did. It was pretty crazy. My mom was steps away from being shoved into the 375-degree oven by a refrigerator that was being pushed by a falling car. The guy had a seizure or something.”
But this is as far as I can go in retelling this particular family story. I have heard it innumerable times, yet I cannot fully and correctly retell it without Mom being there to fill in the blanks. If someone were to ask me tomorrow what happened, I would have to call Mom. As I write, my memory of her storytelling is recent enough for me to recall.

In 1975, we lived in a duplex with four units. Is that a quadra-plex? A small apartment building? However our tiny home was classified, we lived in a bottom unit, just under the 94 freeway in San Diego. Five of us: Mom, Scott, me, Krista, and Tawnya. If I was six, my sisters were four and three. In the back of my mind, I can picture what our living room and couch might have looked like in 1975. I do not think pictures of this house exist, but my glimpses of memories show me dark rooms with low-ceilings. I think this is the house we lived in when I saved my little sister’s life. She had swallowed a rock. Today I envision what I might have been wearing when I ran to Mommy, told her Krista couldn’t breathe, that she had eaten a rock. But the outfit from my glimpse of a memory looks remarkably like one I was wearing in the picture of skinny Syndee doing a handstand. Are these memories? Or are these imagined possibilities of memories? The kitchen sat behind the wall the living room couch was on. That night, we were all walking into the kitchen to eat dinner, meatloaf, which was just about ready to be pulled from the oven. I imagine I would’ve put ketchup on mine, just like Scott always did.

Mom tells me that was when we heard/felt an earthquake, just like the one we had had earlier that same day. We all stopped when the earth moved and remarked on how much bigger that one was than the morning quake. Within seconds the neighbors were running down the stairs screaming. Are you all okay? Are you all okay?

Of course we are, Mom responded. It was just another earthquake. Although much bigger than the last one.
No, my neighbors gently assure her, it was not an earthquake. There is a car in your kitchen.

A walk around the living room wall shows that the neighbors are correct. There is, in fact, a car in our kitchen. The car has moved the refrigerator, which has moved the cast-iron stove into the wall, which is now resting six inches north of its original position. I believe the meatloaf was ruined. And had the car hit five seconds later, when Mom would have been bent over the 375 degree oven, she would have been pushed into the oven by the fridge, which was being pushed by the car.

But today, when Mom tells me this story, there is a new piece that I have not heard before. Maybe because I asked, or maybe because she has allowed herself to remember, or maybe because we are alone in her living room, Mom shares a rare moment of emotion involving Scott. Today, in 2011, she remembers that, after all the chaos had died down, after the driver had been taken to the hospital, after she had arranged for the family to stay in a hotel room, Scott took all of us girls to the curb outside of our destroyed home, pulled us into his arms, and sobbed with the realization of just how close he had come to losing all of us. Mom remembers today and cries, she says, “because it was one of the few times he ever showed vulnerability and love.” But I can only recall a photograph of Scott at this age, hair in his young face, fat, white, dimpled belly hanging over his jeans. It wasn’t long after this incident that Scott told me my face looked like a horse’s ass. I wonder to myself if six year old Syndee was sympathetic to his emotions. Forty two year old Syndee is not.

Today’s Syndee cares more about the driver of the car than Scott’s temporary emotions. How or why did he--the driver--crash? What happened? Did he live? Mom remembers that, in 1975, it took three weeks for the test results to come back. They revealed that the driver, an
attorney, had had his first hypo-glycemic attack that day. Seems he had taken an early flight to L.A, a short flight so no food served, fought his case all day in court, no time for lunch, another short flight home with still no food, and then drove from the airport to his home, not knowing he was hypo-glycemic. He passed out just before our home, rolled down the embankment, which has railings today but did not in 1975, and hit our house moving somewhere around the then speed limit of 55 mph. He suffered only a dislocated shoulder.

As an adult, on the rare occasion I find myself driving the 94 freeway, I have an uncanny desire to drive in the furthest left lane. And, as an adult, I feel a little bit sad for a daddy who has come seconds away from losing his entire family.

Once, when I was ten or so, Mom fell from the roof of our camper truck. When we were in the desert, she and Robert slept on the roof. She narrowly missed the motorcycle trailer that was still attached to the truck’s rear bumper, hitting the hard desert ground with her head. I was sleeping when it happened, sometime in the middle of the night, but I have an almost memory of a noisy frantic commotion. I almost remember waking up the next morning to find Mom laughing as Robert and the rest of the desert crew attempted to sort through her immense curls and wash the crack in her head. There is something about how washing it with beer or tequila might be appropriate since beer and tequila had contributed so significantly to the fall, but I can’t quite reach it.

Thirty years later, after another should-be-dead desert experience that has resulted in several fractured vertebrae and some herniated discs and the discovery of a fracture that has been healing for several years, Mom’s chiropractor tells her an old neck injury has been the cause of
her lifetime of allergies, sinus pain, headaches, and insomnia. Mom remembers that these symptoms began about the same time as the now infamous Mom Fell From the Camper night.

Then there were the times that Mom almost died from overdoses. She doesn’t tell me those stories. Other people do. Friends of hers, or friends of mine. People I run in to here or there will nonchalantly drop a piece of a story of one of Mom’s near-death experiences. As if I had been there and we were reminiscing about the good ole days. No details, just the light handed mention of how blue she was that one time, or the casual “we thought for sure she was a goner that time.” Hahaa, yeah that was a good one.
I am eight.

It is Christmas Eve. Mommy is baking presents, I am riding my bike. My best friend rides in front of me, tells me to follow her. She stops but I am watching my feet on my pedals. When my tire hits hers, I fly over my handlebars and hers. My head hits the street. I see a rock on the street, then I see nothing. When my eyes open, I am moving. I am in the backseat of the car, wearing my Christmas clothes, sitting between my sisters. It is dark. My head feels funny. Mommy and Daddy are in the front seat, somebody is talking. I am scared, Mommy. Will you please stop saying that now, Mommy says, you are scaring me too. I am more scared now, but I don’t say it. Where did the day go? My head hurts.
Dreams

Mom’s head is floating in my closet. The door is open and Mom’s head, red bandana wrapped around her hair, is floating just far enough above the floor that, were I to climb out of bed and walk to the closet, I would look her in the eye. When I grow up and go to Disneyland, I will be reminded of this nightmare every time I go through The Haunted Mansion. The crystal ball has a head floating in it. A head that has long curly brown hair, just like Mom’s. This first nightmare of mine will exist in my memory as long as my memories of Disneyland do. But today, age three or four, I only know that my mommy’s head is floating in the closet. I do not know that this is a dream. Mommy needs me, but I cannot help her. I am too little, and I can’t leave my bed. I can only scream. I scream until I wake up and Daddy is there trying to calm me. When I grow up and recollect this moment, I wonder if four year old Syndee felt any sense of calm at Daddy’s presence. Grown up me wonders if the dream wasn’t a projection of the very real possibility that he might someday take Mom’s head off and I would be too little to help her.
The House With The Bugs

This first nightmare of mine reminds me of The House With The Bugs. We lived in this house in Golden Hills, San Diego, when I was three, or four, or five. Most of my first memories are here in The House With The Bugs. It must’ve had a lot of bugs, because that is what we call the place, although what I remember more is playing in the backyard that seemed to be as big as the world. A sidewalk separated two pieces of grass. A chain link fence seemed miles in the distance, sanctioning our play area from the narrow alleyway that our car was parked in. I feel unsure of the other people who walk through our backyard. I can see only legs, pants, walking past me and down the path to the alleyway. Do these legs belong to neighbors? Is this house with bugs less of a house than a duplex? Toys litter the grassy areas. A lot of broken toys that my sisters and I make use of anyway, since we won’t be getting any new toys to replace them. As I write, my memory suggests flashes of scoldings from Scott about those broken toys. “We aren’t made out of money, you know.”

But we used those broken toys, my sisters and I. We made use of the broom stick when the broom part fell off. The stick became our crutch when we imagined ourselves soldiers with broken legs. There was always something to be made from pieces of toys, since we weren’t made of money.
I am nine.

For one weekend, I get to go visit Daddy at his girlfriend’s house without my sisters. I pack my clothes for the weekend and put them in my new bright pink/red/yellow suitcase. On Sunday, when it is time to take me home, Daddy says I’m staying one more night. It’s exciting, he says, because I get to go to junior high school tomorrow with his girlfriend’s daughter. But when we go to school, the teacher is confused, and I go to the principal’s office. Even though I know I didn’t do anything wrong. The principal asks me for my telephone number and I tell him (her?). My address too. She (he?) calls Mommy and explains that it is very unusual to send a nine year old to junior high for the day. But Mommy tells him (her?) I was supposed to be home yesterday. That my daddy said he was keeping me and wouldn’t she like to know where I was. When Mommy comes to pick me up, I tell her my suitcase is at Daddy’s girlfriend’s. Can we go get it? But she doesn’t know where they live. Neither do I.

I am forty two.

While writing stories for my thesis, I send Mom a text asking her to verify my age at the time Scott took me for the weekend and didn’t bring me home. She responds that it was May 4, 1979. She remembers the date, she says, because that was the day I told her I’d go play if she called the man I knew only as Robert Brown. “I was frazzled,” she explains, “and you had heard a friend and I talking about him, so that was your nine year old solution to make me happy again.”

So this whole thing is my fault?
Mom was cooking tacos. She tells me she knows it was tacos because she can’t forget the greasy, chili powder dyed meat splatters throughout the kitchen.

We lived in the first house in Mira Mesa. On Circo Drive. I remember we had a pool. I might have been four or five. In my photo album, there is a picture of me in this house. I am holding a swaddled baby doll, my best friend, Monica, sitting next to me. Mira Mesa was new in those days, and our street ended at a dirt lot. Monica and I would walk our babies from the dirt lot to my house, just like our mommies walked our baby brothers and sisters.

On this night, when Mom was cooking tacos, Scott was mad. Mom doesn’t remember why, but he was.

He grabbed the handle and threw the pan full of taco meat against the wall, hot hamburger grease splashing the walls, counters, and floors. “I will take my daughters to Jack in the Box for dinner. You and your daughter can eat whatever you can find.” And he left with my sisters.

As Mom cleaned the smears and chunks of red fat, I asked, “What did he mean your daughter?” And that is how I found out Scott was not my father.

I almost remember this moment. Maybe I remember, or maybe I want to remember. But there is a distinct feeling of relief when I view this movie memory. I am small, the kitchen is white, and a smile is forming in my chest.

*He isn’t my dad.*

*I am not part of him.*

What I do remember is that after this moment, after this night, I am freed just a little from him. When he is horrible, I feel distanced from his wrath. I am still afraid of him when he is
angry, but there is safety in not being his. When he is kind, I feel chosen and the acceptance feels better.

He doesn’t know I know. This is my secret. Mine and Mom’s.
“Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night.”\textsuperscript{5}

The ghosts continued to haunt you, Mom. You were used to hurting, being hurt. It was a comfortable place to live, safety in misery. So the few years of happiness evolved back into pain, comfort. But with nobody causing you pain, you brought the pain to yourself. You pushed the needle into your flesh, into your veins.

"The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (Kristeva, 15).

When you were stealing our stuff, Mom, did you know you were hurting us? Or did you feel only your own hurt? When you removed pictures from the walls at night, stole encyclopedia sets from bookcases while we slept, removed your daughter’s flute while she was out of her room, when you sold them all, traded them, for heroin, were you feeling only something that had resurfaced and needed to be pushed down again? Mom, maybe stealing from us was what you had to do so you didn’t hurt us like your dad, and your husband hurt you. Maybe taking our belongings and selling them, trading them, for heroin was the best you could do for us.

\textsuperscript{5} Kristeva, page 58.
They’re Gonna Do It Anyways

Being the children of hippies turned addicts had its perks. Before it got really bad, it was really fun. Once Mom moved us in with Robert and the boys, she aligned her parenting style with his. Which meant we could pretty much do whatever we wanted. When it came to us kids, Mom and Robert’s motto was: they’re gonna do it anyways. They expected us to cuss, drink, smoke, and have sex. We were encouraged to behave badly, and we became the butt of family jokes if we didn’t.

Our parents provided our birthday parties with alcohol. When we got to the age when we started smoking pot, they wanted us to come to them, so they could make sure we got the good stuff. My dad even went to my first boyfriend and asked him if I should go on the pill. He neglected to ask me if I was ready to have sex. Of course she’s ready, I imagine Mom and Robert saying. She’s sixteen. With all that encouragement and without fail, my brothers, sisters, and I made the decisions we were expected to make.

It was during the summer of seventh grade that I first tried pot. I was eleven. Dawna Hollingsworth was my best friend, mentor, and idol. From Dawna I learned about music, marijuana and metaphors. We’d hide in her bedroom, smoking stems of trash weed that we called pot, listening to AC/DC, and practicing the fine art of insults. “You’re such a Nigel,” Dawna said one humid afternoon. A what? I had always thought Nigel was a name, like in that song by XTC. But to Dawna, the name was a rock that she wielded with power-hungry eyes before hurling it at my head. I ducked. “I am NOT!” I may not have known what a Nigel was, but I most certainly did not want to be one.
Dawna’s mother had once been Robert’s girlfriend. We figured this out the first time Dawna met my parents. Hollingsworth is not a common name, so my dad mentioned his former girlfriend Bobbi (Or Billi, or something with a B). “Yeah, that’s my mom,” Dawna said. Oh God. The image of my dad doing it with Dawna’s mother dissipated from my mind eventually. After I met Dawna’s mother, it seemed to me that parents the age of my parents were all kind of alike. They were less like the parents in a Judy Blume novel, and more like the leather clad Harley Davidson riders on the pages of Easy Rider magazine. And they had a tendency to spell their kids’ names wrong. Like Dawna and Syndee.

The Hollingsworth household had people coming in and out as if the place was a restaurant with a front door that said “In,” and a back door that said “Out.” The constant coming and going of people in her house meant that Dawna and I could get away with more than even my parents would let us do. Since the role models on either side of us were all smokers, in one way or another, we felt encouraged to smoke too. I remember sitting in a nook of her roof, trying to roll a joint with a dried stick that may or may not have been the stem of a marijuana plant. I think she had found her mom’s discardings, and we, not knowing the difference, thought we were stealing and smoking some good shit. Once, she convinced me to inhale smoke from her fireplace through a rolled up piece of newspaper. I did, because I thought she had too. That was also the summer I learned not to be a follower.

After that summer, when I’d sometimes babysit for friends of my parents, they knew they didn’t have to pay me in cash. They’d get home from a night of drinking, or swinging, or whatever it was they did when they went out, and I’d pretend like I wasn’t reading the Penthouse
Forum magazines on their coffee table. They’d stumble through their wallets or purses and find they didn’t have enough cash to pay me, so they’d pick up the phone and call my parents.

“Hi Patee,” the wife would say to my mom. “It’s Michelle. Listen, we don’t have enough cash to pay Syndee. Can we just give her a dime bag?”
I am ten

My new daddy is building a fence. He is strong. He talks to me while he works, asks me to help, get him things like water or a tool. He is nice to me even when something goes wrong. My new daddy doesn’t want me call him my new daddy. He wants me to call him Robert. He says I already have a daddy. But I like this new daddy better. Even if I already have one.
“Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories”\textsuperscript{6}

The stench of sauerkraut reminds me of Scott. I wretched the first time I smelled sauerkraut. The two, Scott, and retching from the stench, have become one and the same to me. The memory of sauerkraut is a memory of Scott, is a physical response.

I was playing with my friends, outside. I went back in the house, but I do not remember why. When I opened the door, my nose and ears were assaulted at the same time. He was yelling at her, screaming. I could sense his size as he towered over her, could sense her size as she cowered beneath him.

And I could smell something putrid. I wretched, gagged on the stench. Ran outside again.

When I smell sauerkraut now, hear or read the word “sauerkraut,” I am there again. Seven years old, afraid for you, Mom, and unable to do anything but wretch.

\textsuperscript{6} Kristeva, page 75.
Driving Lesson

Now here is a story. I’m fifteen and a half.

I have my driver’s permit, and I have my car—a 1969 Volkswagen Bug. Today some debate remains between Mom and Robert as to where the car came from, and how much it really cost since neither one actually remembers the interaction, and what other products might have been traded for the car. But fifteen year old me does not care. I just need to learn how to drive it, get my license, then it’s mine.

Robert’s giving me my first driving lesson in my car. It’s a stick. The last time Robert gave me a driving lesson was on a Kawasaki KX80, at Superstition Mountain. That day, he sat on the back, gunned the throttle, and jumped off the back of the bike while I careened toward the sand dune. I was ten. Today, I am wiser to his ways, so I’m prepared when he tells me from the passenger seat, “Okay, drive.”

We drive to 7-11, me rolling through the right turn on a red light because I can’t work the clutch and the brake at the same time. I am reminded of that motorcycle lesson when I shift gears, and I wonder to myself if I should’ve been using the clutch on the motorcycle when I shifted from first to second. No matter, we’re at 7-11 now, and he is buying me Snickers, Chick-O-Sticks and Abba Zabbas, rewarding me for putting him in a potentially deadly situation. He suggests we stop at his friend’s house, just around the corner from 7-11. Everyone thinks Al is nice, but I don’t like him. Something about him. More destinations mean more driving though, which I am all for.

Al’s house feels weird when I walk through it, but I don’t yet know to leave when something feels weird. There is a garage in the back that seems to be Robert and Al’s destination, so I follow, bag of candy in hand. Two pit bulls come toward me. I smile at them
and say hello. I pay no attention to Robert as he jokingly tells the dogs to “sic em.” He does this with our dogs all the time and thinks he’s hilarious, but I’m over it.

In a blur, I am face down on the ground. Something stabs me in the back. Where is my candy? Pain shoots through my leg, much sharper and deeper this time. I scream out “Fuck!” and immediately worry that I’m going to get in trouble. I can’t get up; something is on me. Now somebody’s hands are lifting me and throwing me against a stucco wall. Robert is standing in front of me, facing the other way, crouched down in an umpire position. He growls, “Come on! Come the fuck on!” I hear one of the dogs whimper. From the safe spot behind Robert’s legs, I can see eight dog legs, but now they seem too scared to lunge at me. I am crying. My back hurts, my leg hurts, my heart feels loud in my ears, I can’t hold my own weight.

I see Al, dog collars in his fists, as he leads them to the garage. Robert turns to me and asks if I am okay. But I don’t know. We see that I have a bite on my back and a deeper bite on my butt. I am crying again, still. My favorite pants ripped, bloody, ruined. And what about gymnastics tryouts tomorrow?

Robert takes me out to my car. This time he gets in the driver’s seat. We laugh about me having to sit sideways, and he jokingly reminds me I will have to clean up any blood I get in his car. I know I am safe now. He tells me that my mom will only freak out if she hears about this, so we should just go straight to the hospital. No no, I tell him, she would never forgive us if we told her after the fact, and besides, she will worry if we stay gone for three more hours without explanation. But he was right. She freaks out. I turn the hysterics over to her. It’s her job. I let her be in charge of the question of how this happened and what needs to be done. Mom will take care of it all, so I can relax, process what has just happened to me.
At the emergency room, two other patients have arrived before me, a third comes in later. Mom and Robert become mad when the person who came after me gets to see the doctor first, but I don’t mind. It’s not hard to see that she is having trouble breathing, while I am just bleeding from a hole in my butt. She can go first.

Now I lie face down on a hospital bed. How embarrassing. These people are standing around looking at my butt. Thank God they place a sheet over me when they stitch me up, but how the hell am I going to tell everyone at school that I got stitches in my ass? And what about gymnastics tryouts tomorrow?

The doctor gives me some white pills; they will take care of the pain, he tells me. During my suture removal, I will find out they are antibiotics, not the codeine I assumed they were. I find out they are not codeine after I pass them around to my friends—who now call me Dimples—one Friday night. No wonder we didn’t feel the high.

In the years since this happened, I have learned that Al was a fairly notorious drug dealer in our town. The pit bulls that attacked me were mother and son, the younger one doing the most damage to my body. That same dog was put to sleep after he attacked another girl, who was eerily like me—my size, my build, my freckles, drove a VW bug, was a gymnast. The attack put her into an emergency surgery that included melting her skin together in an attempt to stop the bleeding. She ended up with hundreds of stitches and more than a year on crutches. Her gymnastics career ended that day. I was lucky.
I am ten. Maybe twelve. Maybe thirteen.

I still go to church with Nanny and Grampa Bill during the summer, when I stay with them. Their new church is small and hot. The neighborhood it is in is a little bit scary too. But I feel safe in a church, even if I don’t really believe all of what the pastor is saying. When Nanny sings, I can’t keep the tears away. Her voice fills me with longing. I want to be the kind of person she sings about.

The pastor asks my grandparents if he can speak to me, privately, in his office. The pastor’s son sits at his desk, awaiting me--a young, red-faced, fat, sweaty man. The pastor stays in the room, and his son begins to speak. He noticed I was crying during the service. Do I have something I need to talk about? Jesus is always there if I need Him. I feel afraid. If I need to confess some sin, he says, Jesus is listening and ready to forgive me. The room feels smaller and smaller with every word. Tears begin to fall onto my cheeks again. The men are too close. Their faces show me the person they think I am. The son reminds me that sinners go to hell, and that Jesus is always watching and listening. I can’t talk. My throat has closed and I think I might throw up. I gulp for air as the sobs escape. I just want to go home, please. Nanny’s arms bring me in close. Grampa Bill leads us to the car. They hold me near and tell me it is okay. What happened to get me so upset, they ask. But I don’t know. I can only cry.
Charlie King : A Very Short Relationship

Mom made me meet my father when I was sixteen. I hated her, as many sixteen year olds hate their mothers. When I remember my hatred of her then, I must wonder if I was reacting to what I knew under the surface--that Mom was an addict. But, when I was sixteen, the addiction was still manageable for Mom and Robert. There were periods of time when our family went without electricity, or when our refrigerator went empty, and our motorcycles were suddenly gone, but I remember believing my parents’ explanation that times were just hard. They always got the electricity turned back on. The fridge always refilled. And I was tired of going to the desert anyway. So I thought I just hated my mother because she was my mother.

And I hated her more for making me meet the man who walked out on us--on me--so long ago.

We met at a Mexican restaurant in San Diego. What I remember is telling Mom later that I didn’t like him. I remember being unimpressed with the man my mom held in the highest regard. And I remember hating her a little more for thinking the man who had left us was so great.

But as I grew older, I began to romanticize the idea of my father. While making preparations to move to Hawaii, I felt the need to call him and tell him I was leaving. His voice on the other end of the phone sounded unsurprised that his adult daughter was calling him for the first time in her life. He gave me the phone number of a person he knew in Hawaii, just in case I might need a friend. When I came back from Hawaii one short month later, I was embarrassed to call attention to my failure to this dad who had such an untarnished impression of me, so I waited a few months to contact him again. When I finally did call him, he told me he was eager to get to know me.
I have a picture of me from that night: long hair, signature flirtatious head tilt and attempted-innocent smile, hands stuffed into the pockets of an oversized orange jacket, leaning against the tailgate of his truck. Maybe we went to dinner somewhere first. The part I remember is that we walked on Oceanside pier together, smoking, for hours. He told me his story, I told him mine. He shared his interest in astrology, I shared my interest in whatever it was that interested me in those days. He told me how uncanny my similarity to my mother was. He told me my mother had been sleeping with a few other guys, and he would need me to take a blood test to make sure I was his.

I do not remember my reaction to his request. I do not remember why I agreed to the test. My mother was seventeen when she got pregnant with me. She still loved him, despite what he had done to us. I knew there was no way she had been sleeping with anyone but him. I had a fear of needles. And yet, I agreed to the blood test. The need for approval from this man was seeded deeply.

A few days after the test, he called to tell me the results. “They said it is highly likely that I am your father, and that is good enough for me.” Today, as I write this story, I am sad for that young woman. She should have told him to go fuck himself. She should have seen her value without any man’s approval, and she should have told him to go fuck himself.

Years later, when Mom and Robert had resurfaced and sobered up, I told her about the blood test. She laughed. “I was seventeen!” she said. “How many guys was I sleeping with at that age?”

After the test results, Charlie King and I forged our new relationship. He bought me an Amtrak ticket and twice a week I took the train down to San Diego. He picked me up and made me a part of his life for a few months. I met his family, my new family. I practiced my Spanish
with my new hispanic family. I met his friends. I went to his classes with him, which were more like book clubs. I felt accepted in his community, even when I was aware of the dumb things coming out of my mouth.

Charlie King, during our short relationship, did my astrological chart. With the chart showed me where in the stars my personality perks originated. He was a believer in the supernatural too. He talked openly about the ghosts in his home. The signs he had seen that his friends and family who had passed on were making their presence known to me. “Laura says hi,” he said to me one day. Laura, as I had learned that first night on the pier, was his lifelong friend who had recently passed away from cancer. He said he saw her presence in the tarot card reading he was doing for me. His mother said hi once too, but I don’t remember how. There was a picture of a house hanging on his wall, which he said was the house he lived in during one of his previous lives. According to my father, I had been somebody important in one of my previous lives.

At one of the classes we attended, I had an animal card reading. I was a hawk. Charlie King was an owl. He told me that he would think of me whenever he saw a hawk, which was Laura’s animal too, and I should think of him whenever I saw an owl. Any owl I saw, Charlie King explained, would be a sign of him watching over me. The day I got married, many years after my short relationship with Charlie King ended, there was an owl sitting in a tree outside my window, watching me, as I got ready.

I started dating Jimmy Ortega during my short relationship with Charlie King. And by dating, I mean sleeping with. I don’t remember Jimmy ever speaking a word to me, but I reveled in the instant approval from one of the most popular guys at my high school. My father, however, disapproved of Jimmy. Not because of the purely sexual nature of our relationship, but
because Jimmy was Mexican. Really Jimmy was a surfer from Encinitas with bronze skin and a hispanic surname, but Charlie King saw only Ortega.

“Why would you want to date a Mexican?” he asked. “They’re no good.”

I was stunned at the irony. Here was my father, who was of Mexican descent, who had walked out on my pregnant teenaged mother, judging a man by his name.

“I don’t want you dating him,” he told me.

After being missing from my life for nineteen years, he felt he could tell me what he wanted me to do, or not to do, with men? I refused to validate his desire, and I kept dating/sleeping with Jimmy. But the nature of that relationship failed to propel it forward. I wasn’t the kind of girl Jimmy wanted to take places, except into a bedroom. And that part wasn’t so great that I felt compelled to invite him back much more than a couple of times.

I caught a cold about two months into my short relationship with my father. I had a fever, chills, muscle aches, but went for a visit to his house anyway. He gave me a dose of NyQuil and offered to rub Vicks on my chest and back. I lay on his waterbed bed. The menthol relieved my stuffy nose as he rubbed it onto my chest. His fingers, it seemed, were rubbing further down under my top than they should. I rolled over so he could rub my back. The warmth of the ointment and the effects of the NyQuil loosened my muscles and my mind. His hands rubbed Vicks into the the ribs just under my arms, and just behind my breasts. I brought my arms down to my sides, told him it tickled. He began rubbing the backs of my legs--was I wearing shorts? One of his t-shirts and underwear? His motioned slowed as he rubbed into my calves, my thighs, the bottom of my buttocks. I told him I had to go to the bathroom. I told him I was feeling too sick to stay any longer, could he please take me home now.
I don’t remember if I went to see him after that. I know I talked to him on the phone. I told him I was dating Enrique, who was from Mexico City. He reminded me he didn’t want me dating Mexicans. I told him I could date who I wanted to date.

In my mind, the relationship lasted a few weeks after that, albeit strained and only via phone calls. I remember asking him a few times if he wanted to hang out or something. He always had plans. The mom that writes this story feels a need to hug that nineteen year old girl and tell her not to call him. He didn’t deserve her. He had never deserved her.

I called him six months later for his birthday. Like my first phone call to him the year before, he seem unsurprised to be hearing from his estranged daughter.

“Happy birthday! Do you miss me?” I said, in my usual jokingly narcissistic manner.

“Well, I think about you,” he replied monotonously. And he said nothing else. I knew then that he was done with me.

I hung up the phone and cried for another father lost.

Ten years after this relationship ended, my mother awoke from a nightmare about my father. He had died in her dream, and she was worried it was an omen. She called him, having never forgotten his phone number from 1969 and was surprised to find he had the same number. They had lunch together, during which my mother said he talked about himself the entire time.

“What did I ever see in him?” she asked me.

Then she told me his version of the end of our very short relationship.

He told Mom that I had called him one Friday night, wanting to know if he could come pick me up and take me to dinner. Since he “had plans with a lady friend,” he told my mom, he couldn’t. The next morning, his car had been vandalized. His window smashed, his camera--the
camera I had expressed interest in, as he pointed out to my mother--gone. The following Friday, according to my father, I did the same thing: I called him and asked him to hang out with me, which he again said he could not do. Again his car was vandalized. This time, in addition to a broken window, his stereo was gone. The stereo, he added, that I had expressed interest in.

Charlie King told my mother that day that all of his friends and family knew I was the culprit. None of them had ever liked me, he said, and had only been nice to me for his sake. So Charlie King decided to do my astrological chart again. He called it taking me to “astrological court.” Through my chart, the stars revealed to him that I could commit these crimes, so he knew I had committed these crimes. He told Mom that he and his friends had enjoyed placing me in the butt of their jokes ever since.
I am eleven.

Scott tells me I am his favorite. Of the three girls, I am his favorite. Because I am smart, he says, smarter than them. I think to myself, but I don’t want to be your favorite. And if you like me more because I am smart, that doesn’t say very much about you does it? They’re your daughters and I am not. I don’t want to be your favorite. I just want you to love us all.
“Abjection is therefore a kind of narcissistic crisis”

When you destroyed your beautiful face, Mom, did you look more like you felt? Was your reflection more truthful after you scraped and dug? Maybe the hours you spent in front of the mirror digging at the imagined blemishes were your attempt to dig out the past. Maybe you were trying to find the face that didn’t remind you of you.

When you were destroying your face, Mom, were you remembering the opportunities squandered? The life that could have been? The someone-other-than-Mom who would never be? Were you hurting yourself because it was easier than looking in the mirror and seeing the object you had allowed yourself to be?

Today, Mom, you wear the scars like badges. (The scars we see are prettier than the ones we don’t.) You used to cover your arms and legs, so nobody would see what you had done to yourself. But today you are proud. The lines around your main veins, the white, circular cut outs on the backs of your arms, the unusual looking scars behind your knees are badges of the courage it took to stop on your own.

I am proud of you, Mom. Did I tell you that? I am proud of you.

7 Kristeva, page 14.
I am twelve.

I am staying the weekend with my aunt and uncle. When the phone rings, my aunt tells me it’s for me. It’s him. Scott. He says he has to tell me something. He says he can’t be my dad anymore. He says his new fiancee is jealous because I look too much like my mom. He says it’s okay because he isn’t really my dad anyway, so it’s okay. But it isn’t okay. I hang up the phone and see my face in the crackled mirror behind the phone. I hate the way I look.
The Abject Shatters the Wall of Repression and its Judgments

How old were you, Mom, when you got suspended from school for wearing pants? You were so little, so poor, you had to make your own clothes. The long, billowy pants you made for yourself looked like a dress. They looked like a long dress with a seam in the middle. But they called your mom anyway, Mom. Told her to bring you a change of clothes. Something decent. They weren’t prepared when your mom scolded them and took you home. Did either of you know you were effecting change? If you had known, would you still have done it? Was this the last time you rebelled, Mom?

I am five when I fall in the puddle. I am wearing my navy blue, polyester, matching skirt and top. Why do I have to wear a slip too, Mom? Slips are so nobody can see through, but this skirt is dark and thick and nobody can see through it and I can’t make it right after I go to the bathroom. The bigger kids laugh at the bunches of white around my waist. I wish I could throw the slip away and just wear my pretty new skirt, but I know Daddy would be mad. Daddy would be mad if I threw his money away and he might ask me if I took off the slip because I just want the boys to see my panties. I try to tuck it in the right way again.

I like to play on the bars during recess, even when the rain puddle is under the bars. I am good at the bars, I won’t fall. I am better than any of the other girls my age. But my hands slip and I fall into the puddle. I think they can see my panties so I stand up quickly. My pretty new skirt is wet, the bottom part of the thick fabric is a darker, wetter blue. The bunches of white slip at my waist have splotches of brown mud now. Everyone laughs, points.

Daddy will be mad.

\footnote{Kristeva, pg 15.}
I know why Mommy wanted to wear pants when she was little. It will be a long time before I wear a skirt to school again. I am happy Mommy and Nanny got in trouble so I don’t have to wear a slip anymore if I don’t want to and nobody will see my panties if I fall off the bars again.
Denny’s

I am seventeen.

I am at a Denny’s near Oceanside Harbor. Someone is with me, although in a few years I will not remember who. I brought this person--Jody? Stacey? No, Stacey had Curtis at this time, so it must’ve been Jody--because I am afraid of meeting him alone. Him. Scott.

How he managed to convince me to meet him, to see him for the first time since he removed me from his life, as well as what we talked about, will also become blurred bits of this memory. Maybe Aunt Sherry and Uncle Brett are there too? I will remember that I cannot eat. I am nervous. Someday I will admit it is probably fear that I am feeling rather than what I believe is nervousness about seeing this dad for the first time in five years. But since I haven’t experienced this particular kind of fear in so many years, the fear that comes with Scott, I do not recognize it.

Whether I am nervous or afraid, I cannot eat, so I order a salad. And coffee. I have never before tasted coffee, but my desire to appear grown up becomes apparent to Jody/whoever is with me the moment I order the coffee.

The salad arrives. Maybe he eats a sloppy bacon cheeseburger, or maybe he just has coffee. This detail becomes lost. He comments on the fact that I must be so skinny since I eat so little. My response is blurred too. I would like to remember that I respond with some smart, pain-inflicting quip about having my mother’s genes, that I am skinny despite the amount of food I eat, but I probably respond that I already ate and am full. He has been out of my life for so long he doesn’t know, nor do I, that me not eating is a sign of my fight or flight response.

Small units of time and conversation will remain in my memory of this evening. We talk about family, school (have I graduated by this time? I think yes), my security guard/nameless
friend, my future plans. And I am sure we discuss some other subjects, but I will not remember when it comes time to write this story down. I will remember though that my stomach hurt for the rest of the night and into the next day. I will come to understand that tonight I feel judgment in his eyes. You are the failure I expected, they say. I will remember that the one-half cup of Denny’s coffee I drink with Scott will keep me up for the rest of the night and into the next day. And, finally, I will remember that I leave Denny’s with no desire to see Scott again.

Despite my desire not to, my need for his approval wins out, and I will see him again. Just before my wedding, six years from now, I invite him back into my life to meet my daughter and fiance. Maybe I want to show him that I can make beautiful babies. Or that I am lovable. He will drunkenly cut in on my father-daughter dance at my wedding, the dance I have reserved for Robert, the man most resembling my father, and I will again cut off the communication for some years.

But then, in thirteen years, after my twins are born, my need for his approval will resurface, and I will send him and his wife a Christmas picture of me and my family. The card might as well have read, “Look at how wonderful my life is without you, Scott.” This time, he will write back. He will tell me I “have grown into a foxy lady,” and that he would like to get to know my children. An exchange of a few letters will re-injure what I thought had healed, and the letter-writing will end in an ugly letter from me completely severing all communication.

The me that writes this story sees clearly my fear of him hurting my children like he hurt me. This me also waits for news of his death, and wonders if she will attend his funeral.
I am thirteen.

I am with a friend of Mom and Robert’s. We are in a car, sitting outside a giant chain liquor store. She tells me Mom and Robert do drugs. They do cocaine, she says. They turn it into liquid and they use a needle to inject it into their veins. But they are going to stop, she tells me. That’s why she is babysitting us for the weekend, so they can dry out. My sisters are asleep in the back of the car, but I think they heard.
Teasing Girls Without Boobs

One day Mom asks me if I'm afraid of boys. "Has Robert made you afraid of boys?" I wonder to myself if I should be afraid of boys. Did something happen to me that should have made me afraid of boys? She reminds me of the time two boys asked my friend Kim and me to the seventh grade dance. She reminds me that I said no. She reminds me of when Scott wanted to talk about why that boy in fifth grade touched my boob, but that I didn't want to hear it and ran away. I tell Mom that no, I am not afraid of boys. What I do not tell Mom is that all of those boys were making fun of me, the way I looked, my lack of boobs. The two boys who asked me and Kim out didn't really mean it. They were cool. We were not. Teasing dorky girls is a fun sport when you are in seventh grade. The boy who wanted to touch my boob was really trying to prod to see if anything was growing yet. It was not.

Thirty years later, a birthday party at my house, my boys are eleven. Robert asks my also eleven year old niece when she is going to start growing boobs. In that moment, I am the dorky seventh grade girl again. The party goes downhill from there and, by the end of the day, my kids, my boyfriend and my family wonder why I am such a bitch all the time. Don’t I know that Robert was just joking.
“She is isolated with her children for most of her workday”\textsuperscript{9}

You did go to college, Mom. When we were older. I remember how proud you were. You wanted to be an accountant. You studied hard, for a few semesters. You told me you felt smart. I wanted to feel smart.

You had some jobs too, sometimes. Your own money.

Why did you stop, Mom? It was hard to run the house and do homework, I remember. It was hard to keep a job when we called you at work so many times a day. Our home was happier when your only job was being our mom. We liked coming home from school to find you dancing with the broom. We liked coming home to the scent of warm sugar cookies and a freshly cleaned home. We liked being taken care of. We liked knowing you lived to take care of us.

Did we ask you to stop going to school, Mom? Did we make you feel like you had to quit? I am sorry, Mom. You liked feeling smart and we made you stop.

\textsuperscript{9} Kristeva, page 54.
**Hiding in the High**

She is an addict. Uneducated, dirty, hiding in the high. She scavenges through trash bins at night, when no one can see her. The water company turned off the water again; she has not bathed in weeks. Her legs, arms, face are dirty, scabbed, scarred. She is always busy, never productive.

Tonight she is walking. Her boyfriend/husband/co-dependent has been arrested, and she is walking home. How many miles is it from Denny’s Del Mar to Hermes Avenue? She will be there before sun up, if she follows the tracks.

Follow the tracks.

The tracks are comforting. They lead somewhere. Away from the feeling of worthlessness and despair, to somewhere else.

The carnies are in the Denny’s parking lot after the fair closes, after the rides have been shut down and the families have gone home. The faces change every year. Yet nothing changes at all. The sit in the dark on the greasy floor of the orange step-van, passing needles, sharing the escape.

In the bathroom at Denny’s she washes the dirt from her face. The blood from between her toes. Her face in the mirror distracts her. Something on her face that she cannot wash off. She squeezes. She scratches, scrapes a new bloody spot. It blurs her view even more, and now she cannot see the something that she cannot wash off.

Flashing lights from the parking lot.
She hides in the bathroom for what seems like a long enough time. When she comes out the carnies are gone, her boyfriend/husband/co-dependent is gone. A tow truck driver is attaching chains to the step-van. No matter, he had the keys anyway.

She is addicted and now she is alone.

Follow the tracks.

There are few trains in the middle of the night. She contemplates walking down the middle, hoping to end the addiction, the despair. But she knows the train can’t stop it anymore than she can find self worth in the needle.

She sees The Belly Up. The place where the addiction began. The kids were still young then, and there were still five of them. Hand the kids a twenty to spend at the roller rink. Then go across the street to The Belly Up. Drink, get lost in the music, lost in the high, until the two oldest kids come asking for more money. Hand over another twenty, continue until the rink closes. Pile the kids in the bed of the truck, drive home. But that was a long time ago. The kids are older now, the two oldest are almost ready to be on their own. Only one still lives on Hermes Avenue though. The others have gone to other parents. Other families.

She sees old Encinitas. The places they used to frequent are now gone. Too many deals at Cooter Brown’s. Too many fights, too many Harleys muddying the Encinitas Streets. Too many people like her muddying the otherwise beautiful streets.

Crashing waves echo under the bridge.

Home. The kids are sleeping. The kid. There is only one now. The one who has no other options. Piles of trash call out for organization, but tonight she is alone.
I am seventeen.

Home from a date at two a.m. Dark house. Who is home? Walk through the trash bag maze, into the bedroom. “Who’s here?” A scuffle, a beam of light flashes across somebody’s legs. Straddling the toilet. Something in his hand, something in his mouth, handkerchief around his arm, flashlight falls to the floor.

My eyes adjust. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know if anyone was here. You scared me too. Goodnight.”

Lock my bedroom door. The waves in the distance. The waves on the rocks in the distance. In the morning, I tell my date I am ready to move away with him. I am ready to leave now.
“Feminine Personality Comes to Define Itself in Relation and Connection to Other People”

I wanted out. My sisters were gone, my step-brothers were gone. Mom, you and Robert were gone from Hermes Avenue most of the time too. When you were home, I saw things kids, even eighteen year old kids, should not see. Any guy who could take me away from the home I didn’t know how to leave would have been fine.

Tony’s lies did not matter to me. He was a way out and I took him. When we drove away, on our way to the airport, he did not understand why I was sad, why you were sad. I should have gotten out of his car then, but he was a way out.

I should have come home when we arrived at the party only for me to look like the fool in the outfit he had insisted I wear. The rich family he had played up was dressed in comfortable shorts and flip flops--so was he, surf trunks actually. He said he would change when he got there. I, however, was dressed for a New York evening. Tight black dress, black stockings, heels, hair, make-up, everything he told me I should wear to meet his family.

I should have left then, but I discreetly changed into something more appropriate. He was my way out.

Why, Tony? Why did you want to make me look like a fool? You told me later that you had never wanted to take me. Was this my first clue?

His sister drove us to the airport. I should have left then. Our flight--Flight 911, another clue--was delayed. Five times it was delayed. For a total of thirty hours. I should have left the first time we boarded then un-boarded. Or the second time. I should have left when his sister informed me, during one of the delays, that Tony was not twenty one like he had originally told

10 Chodorow, page 2.
me, not was he twenty three like he later confessed. He was not any of the ages he had told me
he was. Tony Marachel was thirty years old. I was eighteen. His sister told me the truth. As I was
waiting for my plane, Flight 911, during one of many delays. I should have left at any of these
clues. But he was my way out. What did I have at home but a couple of junkies who had sold
everything we had? No, I was going to Hawaii, with Tony, because I had no idea how to take
care of myself.

In Hawaii, life was not much easier. I could not find a job. Tony could not find a job.
Housing was expensive. Food was expensive. And I knew a grand total of one person: Tony, the
liar.

I eventually found a job. As a cocktail waitress. My first night I almost dumped a cast-
iron pot of clams on someone’s head. Tips were not forthcoming. But what I did make, I had to
turn over to Tony. He was quickly becoming unhappier and unhappier with my mere presence.
Looking back, I can understand why. He was a thirty year old man shackled up with an eighteen
year old child. I knew nothing about living in the real world. But he had asked me to move with
him. He wanted to take care of me, he said. And I needed a way out.

One night, the night I decided to leave Hawaii, we had a fight.

I do not remember what started the fight. It was probably me, since the mere sight of me
made him violently angry.

We screamed at each other.

He chased me into the bathroom.

He grabbed my neck.

He picked me up and held me against the wall. By my neck.
I screamed more.

“Let me go, you fucking asshole!”

He held me there.

I do not remember this from my body. I remember this fight from the point of view of a person watching a movie. When I watch this movie, I am not scared, I am not hurting, I am not upset. I have seen this movie many times, on many screens. She should have left at the airport.

There is a knock at the door, a woman’s voice yelling for Tony to put me down. I am relieved, both in the bathroom and in the movie theatre. He puts me down and we walk to the door.

She tells me to get my stuff and come stay with her.

I am leaving now. She is my way out from my way out.

I call a friend in California. He buys me a plane ticket and I go home. The me in the movie theatre always cries at this part of the movie. Because home is where the junkies are.

You showed me, Mom, what a relationship looks like. But I will show my sons and daughters something else.
My third grade teacher had her students write two things at the top of every page of schoolwork or homework: “CAN” and “IALAC.”

The “CAN” was simply for each of us to remember that “I can.” Fill in the blank. I can be a good student. I can get an A on this test. I can play kickball and not get pegged in the face by the ball. I can believe in myself.

The IALAC was an acronym for I Am Lovable And Capable. Another reminder that each of us was cared for and loved by someone, somewhere.

I remember that there were moments in her class when I was unsure of what the correct answer on a worksheet was. But then I would see CAN at the top of my page, or IALAC. It gave me confidence in myself, confidence in my work, confidence in me.

That Christmas, Scott had matching t-shirts made for my sisters and I. Each shirt had been printed with the acronym, “ILAC.” I wore mine anyway.
Girls Don’t Ride Skateboards

She wants a skateboard for Christmas.

When Santa peeks through the curtains of the living room window one night, Daddy invites him in. This Santa reminds her of Daddy’s friend, and she feels safe sharing her secret with him. “I want a skateboard,” she whispers into his ear.

Even at age seven I knew I was wrong. I knew I was not like the girls on TV. The girls in books who like dolls and cooking and cleaning and doing hair. The books Mommy and Daddy bought me showed pretty, ruffled, pink girl bedrooms, dolls whose eyes open and close, two story doll houses. But those same books also showed messy boy bedrooms with dirty shoes and baseball hats and skateboards. Those were the bedrooms I wanted to play in. I had liked dolls when I was a baby, but not anymore. The globes and books about the world in boy picture bedrooms were far more interesting to me than the dollhouses and books about horses and hair in the girl picture bedrooms.

But Mommy and Daddy will not like it. They will not like watching her ride a skateboard any more than they like watching her try new tricks on her banana-seat bike. Or on her skates. So she isn’t surprised later when Santa and Daddy whisper together and glance at her with that look. She knows she isn’t supposed to want a skateboard, but she hopes anyway. She hopes, even though she is a girl, that she can have one anyway.

I didn’t get the skateboard that Christmas. And when I asked Scott why the one thing I asked Santa for was not under the tree, he was angered by my selfishness and lack of gratitude. I knew then that the Santa who had come to our house was Scott’s friend. And they knew my secret. The real Santa, if there was a real Santa, would never have told my secret. I knew I would never get a skateboard. Girls do not ride skateboards.
She is seventeen now. Some guy friend is always willing to let her use an extra board; she rides with confidence. Most guys confess they have never even seen a girl try to ride before, let alone attempt tricks. They are impressed. But she wants more. She wants to be one of the guys. She wants to be as good as they are--360s and jumps in half-pipes and empty swimming pools. If she had just started at a younger age, they tell her, she would be able to do all of those things.
A Memory? A Dream?

She is alone. Watching from the darkened room. The people in the light are loud. She wants to go to sleep. Maybe she is drunk. Still high from the party. Maybe she is dreaming. Maybe she is sober and has been awakened by this party. Her parents’ party. Her mind will never let her access this part of the memory. What she does remember happened later. The house is dark. Quiet now. Something hurts. Something heavy is holding her down in the dream and pulling her out of it too. The party is over but someone’s breathing is close. Inside her, something hurts. From the dream she emerges and is in the darkened room again. Someone is on top of her. Someone is having sex with her. She can’t see his face. She can only feel him pushing into her. She can only hear him grunt. Something wet hits her cheek. He pushes harder. The dream returns and she is spared the rest of the memory. The drunken-drug-trauma induced darkness takes her back to the place where mommies protect their babies and bad things don’t happen.

This incident is not my memory. Not my first hand memory. It is my recollection of a phone conversation in which my sister confessed this had happened to her as a young girl. She might have been twelve, thirteen, fourteen. I am not confident I remember her words accurately. Except: “Someone was having sex with me.” In writing this piece of her story, I am reminded that I am lucky. I do not have stories like these in my memory bank. However, in writing this partial memory of a partial memory, I am aware that these stories might exist for me. Putting this horrific story on paper gives me an understanding about why I am so afraid of remembering too well.
I am three weeks from my eighteenth birthday.

Mom and Robert are in the driveway, busy with pieces of cars and organization of items deemed worthy enough to sell. I see a woman dressed in a pressed skirt and blouse who looks very much out of place on Hermes Avenue. Instinctively, I ask if she needs help. Out of my parents view, she hands me a card proclaiming her position at Child Protective Services. I don’t know what that is, but I know we children need protecting. So I invite her in. Mom sees the interaction, and she and Robert drive away in the step van.

I show the woman around our once proud home. I point out the bags of trash spaced throughout the living room, the empty cupboards, the sometimes electricity. She sees that my bedroom is the only clean room in the house. And she sees my fourteen and fifteen year old sisters who sometimes get dinner. When Mom and Robert remember.

Since I am almost eighteen, and since Scott isn’t my father anyway, I will stay at Hermes Avenue. If I want to stay. Tawnya and Krista are going to live with their dad. They pack their belongings, and leave with this stranger who is here to protect us. Before they go, I hug them and promise it will be better if they’re away from this house. But after they leave, I wonder how Scott’s emotional abuse is any better than Mom and Robert’s neglect.
Grief and Gratitude

Mom and Robert are dead. They have been found somewhere, overdosed. They are gone.

I awake from this nightmare, face wet, chest constricted, throat chokingly tight. I am in my new apartment, and I roll over to grab my phone. Robert’s best friend appears at the other end and I tearfully explain why I am calling. If anyone has heard from Mom and Robert, it will be Robert’s best friend, Greg. He will also have heard if anything bad has happened, like in my dream. He reassures me that, although he has not heard directly from my parents, he has heard nothing bad either, and so I can be assured that they are not dead.

Not dead yet.

In the two years Mom and Robert were missing, since they had left our home and not returned, this scene was a reoccurring one. My dreams and thoughts of their death were so common, I began to accept that it was an inevitable fact. And I began the process of grief.

Today I feel fortunate that I have been given a bonus twenty years as their daughter. I made peace with their inevitable death two decades ago. I prepared myself for that phone call so long ago that, if it were to arrive today, I imagine I would feel a mixed sense of grief and gratitude. I wonder to myself, if that phone call were to arrive today, where in the grief process would I be.

And I feel lucky that I was able to begin the grieving process so very long ago.
I am eighteen.

My parents are gone. My family is gone. I hear voices. As I emerge from the darkness of sleep, I hear voices. Someone is in my house. They are trying to get into my bedroom, but I locked my bedroom door before I went to sleep. “We’re gonna steal!” I hear their words echoing in the empty living room. When I hear them leave, I look out my window. I recognize a neighbor, but he is with someone I don’t know. I open my window and scream at them. What were they doing in my house? They leave quickly, apologizing. They say they thought the house was empty. I run to another neighbor’s house and call the police. When I get back to my house, there is an officer waiting for me. He tells me he recognized the address when they had announced it over the radio. He says he knows my parents are gone and that I am living here alone. He rushed to make sure I was okay.
What Is This Strange Feeling?

I wake up one morning with a feeling of loss. Like something is gone. But I do not know what is missing. I call around and make sure all the important people are okay. They are. I do not worry too much about the people I love because this is not the kind of loss that brings tears or sadness. I can simply feel that something, somewhere, is gone.

I walk to pick up my sons from third grade. My skin warms under the sun, and I marvel at the peace I feel today, despite the unexplainable. Above me, a hawk comes in from the sky and lands on the streetlight above me. It looks down on me; I feel sought after, as if it is me this hawk is looking for. I immediately think of Charlie King.

My boys and I begin back up the hill toward home and I notice the hawk is still there. Now he (she?) is sitting about three feet to my left, on a chain link fence, watching me, not flying away. A sharp intake of breath and a realization that Charlie King is dead. That sense of losing something, but not sadness or grief, makes sense now. He must be dead. Will I ever know for sure?
I am twenty two. My baby, Alexa, is almost one.

I find a card in the mailbox. Child Protective Services and, in blue handwritten letters, “Please Call Me.” I identify myself when she answers her phone, explain that she must have left her card in the wrong mailbox. When she verifies there is concern about a baby’s safety in my house and that she needs to come visit us, I see them taking my Alexa away and cry out a little. She arrives at our scheduled time and looks around my house. Opens the refrigerator, looks at the baby crib, looks in the closets. Steps over the baby gate, notices the childproofing efforts, watches me interact with my Alexa. Tells me there has obviously been some sort of mistake. This baby seems to live in a home with a mother who cares very much for her well-being and makes the effort to keep her home safe. When I ask who was it that was concerned, she tells me only that it will remain confidential.
“Processes of separation and individuation are made more difficult for girls”\textsuperscript{11}

You learned how to be female by your mother’s example. She cooked and cleaned and worked while you slept. She suffered the abuse from her husband and showed you what a marriage was supposed to be. She showed you that daddies hurt mommies and make little girls feel afraid and unwanted. She showed you that daddies decided whether mommies, and animals, lived or died.

She showed you, Mom. And you showed us.

You grew up and became the female your mother showed you how to be. You cooked and cleaned and worked while we slept. You suffered the abuse and showed us what a marriage was supposed to be.

But how did I know different? Did you also show me what a family might be? Did you show me and I don’t remember, Mom? How did I know at such a young age that mommies aren’t supposed to have bruises? That daddies aren’t supposed to hurt mommies with fists and feet, backhands and bruises? How did I know that daddies tell their little girls things that make them feel pretty and smart and loved? Not ugly and dumb and unwanted? How did I know, Mom?

Maybe he taught me. Maybe I was too young and don’t remember, but maybe it happened when Daddy got mad and threw dinner away and took my sisters and told you that he and his kids were going to eat out and you and your kid could eat whatever was in the house. Maybe I learned before my memory began that little girls’ real daddies love them enough to care if they eat or not.

If he was my real dad I might be worried that his psychosis might become my psychosis. Like my sister, I might be afraid of waking up in some psychiatric ward of some hospital like he

\textsuperscript{11} Chodorow, page 48.
did. I might be afraid that my daddy ghost would always be present. But my daddy ghost loved me, wanted me, just couldn’t find me. My daddy wasn’t crazy.

My daddy wouldn’t have taken so long to drive the babysitter home. My daddy wouldn’t have gotten a cheap motel room while Mommy slept. Real daddies love mommies.

Are these stories real, Mom? Do I remember them right, or have I remembered myself into them?

Do I remember, Mom? Do I remember when he kicked you in the face with his work boots with the steel toes? Or do I know the story so well I think I remember? Do I remember the threat of hot coffee against your beautiful face? I must remember because sometimes, sometimes the scent of hot coffee brewing in my kitchen produces the picture in my mind. Produces the tight feeling in my chest and the chunk of fear in my throat. Did I see it, Mom? Or do I remember only with my desire to break the chains?

You learned how to be female by your mother’s example, Mom. I learned by yours.

When you found your strength, Mom, you taught me, and eventually your granddaughters, what it means to be female. You taught us, and showed us, and I was proud of you, Mom. Did I tell you? I was proud.
I am twenty.

At Grama’s house for Thanksgiving with the boyfriend who will eventually become the father of my first child. Mom and Robert have been gone, missing, for two years. I have stopped having dreams about overdoses and violent earth departures, but being at Robert’s mom’s house brings a sprinkling of sadness to my eyes. I walk into the house to the news of their return. My parents. They are back. In the barn. As I walk numbly toward the barn, I see a man walking toward me. Dirty. Hairy. Scary. He says hi to me, it is Robert. I walk past him with only a hello because I am scared of this Robert. Your mom is in the barn he says. She’d like to see you. The room is dark. Mom is on a mat on the floor. My memory will prevent my mind from seeing her face. I won’t remember after today if she is dirty or scarred or bloody or bruised. I won’t remember what she said to me, or anything else about that Thanksgiving Day. But how she feels in my arms will always be with me after this moment. My chest tight, my face wet, my arms holding her close to me, her sobs in my ear, my own throat so constricted only gasps can escape. Mom and Robert are home. But the path of their addiction does not stop here.
The End. The Beginning.

I end this part of my story here, at the time and place my parents came home. I do not know what finally brought them home, but it must have been something horrible if the other experiences hadn’t. Mom and Robert did get clean, eventually. They went through a methadone addiction first, which they also tackled in their own way, on their own terms. Just like they tackled the other addictions. Today they are aware of their tendencies toward addiction and are their own self help program.

That Thanksgiving Day, in 1989, marked the day I began to process myself within my parents’ addiction differently. Slowly, I began to see that I had nothing to do with their pain. They had their own stories. And I was aware that day that Mom and Robert had made a conscious decision to stop their self-abuse and come back to their family. I felt then as I do now, that they were probably terrified to face the issues that had brought them to drug addiction, but that they had arrived at the point of no other choice.

The year after that Thanksgiving Day, I became a mother, and I began to experience my memories differently. As my children grew and I watched them at the ages of my bits and pieces of memories, I saw those moments of my childhood from a different perspective. I saw them as a mother. There was healing. I became a mother to the little girl of my memories.

Today, as I tell these stories, I am sad for that little girl. I am sad for her the way I am sad for the children in stories on the news about abuse or neglect. But when I flashback to memories of Scott’s emotional abuse, the mommy in me becomes a safe haven for the scared little girl in me. And I am aware that the act of raising my children has brought me to a point of some kind of understanding. I have arrived at a place where I no longer need to understand why my parents turned to drugs; that fact is no longer the sole definition of me.