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Within a Farewell

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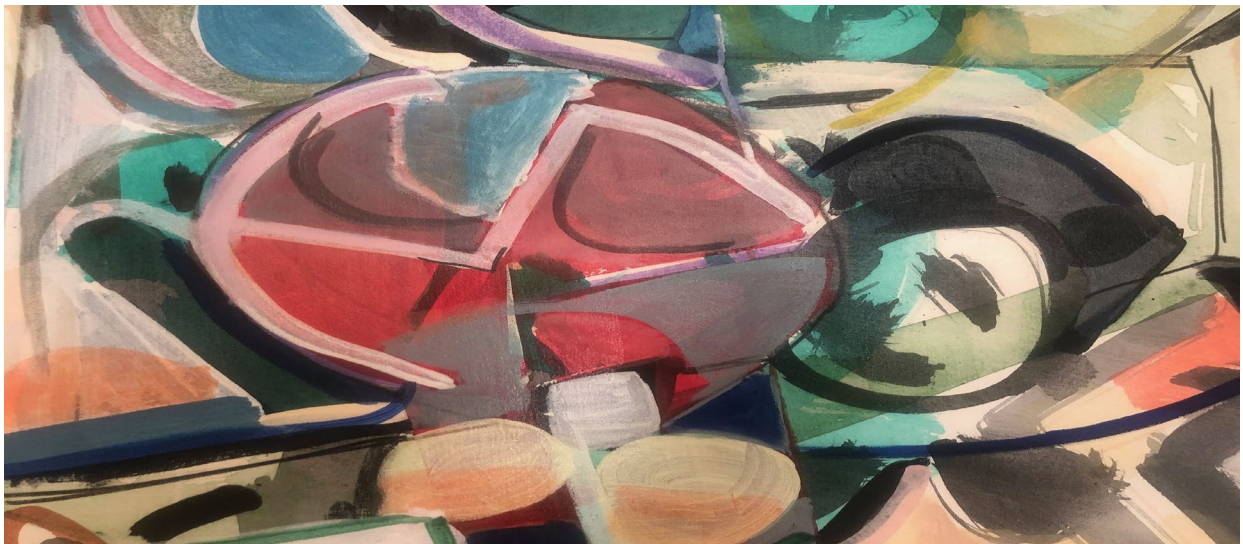
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Within a Farewell

Skidmore College Nonfiction Capstone '20

Elsa Schollmaier



*painting from Oma and Opa's collection

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Where Is the Center?

There is no one center. Scientists have attempted to pinpoint the true center, all coming to the conclusion that expansion is everywhere with no single origin.

What is the one thing I have to write before I can write anything else?

I want to write what I know. The only thing I know is myself, and even then I could be mistaking the truth for what I *want* to see. Ignore the ugly pain and focus on beauty. *Life isn't a story.*

If it is, you and I are equal characters measured on different scales. How is that a feasible tale to tell? Figure out where you fit; determine which story you want, knowing you will never know the end. I want to tell someone else's story, to fight the tempting urge to call something *mine.*

What is important?

I like to think I'm a good person. That's what I thought was most important. My favorite compliment has always been someone telling me they need me. I *need* you. I can't be ashamed of doing something if it's out of love, out of need. The problem with this life focus is there is so much need. And so, I find myself alone, often squeezing my own needs into tiny fragments of time. Sometimes, I forget my needs altogether. In those moments, I'll do everything I can to fulfill this facade of *goodness*, temporarily soothing my ego. It doesn't matter what I want as long as people want what I have. Keep *wanting*. Is that what's most important?

My dad told me: you have to find your mountain to die on, it's impossible to climb them all. One thing must rise above all else.

I told my grandpa once that we really can see in life only the things that affect us. I told him: *Think about your liver. In the last couple years, you've learned more about what you need to do for your liver than you ever did. Other people have been in your place before.* I was trying to show him that there are things happening in the world that we could know a lot about, because they're happening, but we don't because they don't apply to us. My grandfather never needed to learn about liver cancer until it was a part of him. One thing can bring to light your whole life's meaning. It's usually dying.

How can you fully convey that experience from one person to the next? Once we figure it out, we will finally be equipped to *really* educate.

We give to and take from a collective knowledge that's always growing, morphing into something new. Taking a very analytic, arguably pessimistic, view: we're all doomed to become another number, a data point.

Watching vs. doing. Thinking vs. feeling. Seeing vs. understanding. There are so many dichotomies.

I am lost.

What do I believe in?

Is belief insanity?

Some believe that we have past lives waiting to be reconciled. I wonder: can I tap into my past lives from the present to give them peace? Is that what they want? Is that recurring pain in my chest my soul remembering the shot to the heart that killed its body the last go around?* Can I somehow tap into these unconscious rememberings? Will they tell me where I went wrong? Would they know what I'm supposed to do now?

*I have never experienced any flashbacks to an unknown past while experiencing heartburn.

I heard another theory once that I quite liked. Imagine: everyone on the planet now, and in our known history, is living different versions of one life of a massive God. At some point, every possible life will be lived and the God will transcend (how could a god transcend? Where would they go?) with this database of knowledge. Is that what world peace looks like: everyone working under a single belief?

Couldn't the 'Great Plan' just be a book? Each of us are blots upon a blank page, nestled together, working to build ourselves into sentences or paragraphs or books of our own. To make a mark.

Most people, I would venture, believe in history, science and the things we can see.

Does every philosophy look at something bigger? Striving to discover exactly how we're supposed to connect it all. Is that what scholars are working towards? I wonder if it makes a difference what you and I think.

Ultimately, I am simply a collection of chosen perspectives. Or perhaps the perspectives are pre-imposed. Either way, someone out there will agree with me, at least partially. What I believe will no longer be attached to my body when I die, so what's the point in believing at all?

Where do I come from?

That would be an easy place to start, but I'm not sure what can be gained from answering.

I argue with my mother. I want so badly to prove *something*. I need to know where the argument is coming from. Whom should I listen to when there are too many versions of right and wrong?

She told me there's a history in the family. In a family cursed with a judgmental eye, how could there not be?

Driving home from middle school, my mother told me that people commit suicide because they believe they are not wanted, they think people would be better off without them. They *believe* this to be the truth, but it very rarely is. For some reason, out of hundreds of conversations during those drives, those are the words I remember.

Is that not saying you must live for others? What was she trying to tell me?

There is a difference between knowledge and experience and I want to know just how each perspective lies to the other. It seems we all have so many issues and far more solutions--you *must* choose at least one.

Our society loves medication. I know more about medications than I thought I ever would. I know how medications interact; I know how far I can push it--my body or my brain. Medications are how we know what we want, as they represent a means of getting to our imagined "elsewhere." You *know* when they're working, when they're worth it.

Your generation has no attention span.

I wonder if Opa put his arms around Oma as they lounged on a stained beige couch surrounded by their friends. I wonder if they forgot the pizza in the oven or forgot to lock the doors or let the sink pile up with dirty dishes. I wonder what they fought about. How they made up.

My great-grandmother was a drunk and a fan of pills. She was not too different from most other 40s housewives. In the images I've seen, she had a beautiful smile and a tiny waist.

We're the worst to the ones we're closest to for obvious reasons. They see more of us than we do of ourselves, so we resent them. We are always at least a step behind-- regret comes too late by nature-- especially when we hate ourselves. And we usually like to hate ourselves.

My mom told me she was relieved I didn't notice the cutting tone my grandpa took with me when we saw him last winter. She did warn us about his hair trigger. We were all a little drunk on scotch and talking politics. She said that she was trained to be afraid when that tone came out. That she's glad the automatic fear response wasn't passed down.

I am afraid of a lot of things. I used to fear someone coming into my room while I was sleeping. I worried they'd take me when my guard was down. I didn't know where but I knew it wouldn't be nice. I got over that fear by convincing myself the kidnapping wouldn't be the worst thing to happen. At least I'd have a memorable story.

My mom said she's felt a fear that resides in the chest. You feel like you can't breathe and your muscles tense. I guess that one was passed down. You can't pick and choose.

Where is the center?

My center is me. Faulty, balanced, seeing and speaking to be seen. Terrified of becoming stereotyped. More afraid of becoming jaded, mean.

Yeah, that guy climbed into bed with me that night, but luckily I was drunk enough to not remember exactly what else he did.

Remember the numerous times you vomited that night? That's way less embarrassing.
Remember the girl who gave you her shirt?

They came in on us changing, and when they left, she told me they weren't good guys. She'd been high for three days so I held her as she cried. Could've been worse.

I never pressed charges because I genuinely do not know what happened. I sleep-talk frequently. It's possible he was confused.

I'm not sure of the quality which makes someone good or bad. I am not sure of what love is and if it ever leaves. It can't leave every state of being--every path your feet have walked, every smiling face you've seen, the smells found only in memories and dreams-- no matter how the current circumstance has changed or how badly you *want* it to. Who can resist what once was? Butterflies remind you of butterflies felt before. Once you know love, you know love; once you know fear, you know fear--then you learn what lies between.

We all learn fear, Mom, nobody programmed me.

I write to the point of quaking. I want to write something that will haunt the remainder of someone's life. When it happens to you, you'll already know how to feel. My words imprinted on another. A love that can't help but last. If I just write enough, at some point, I must strike *truth*.

I hold onto bad memories because they reduce my own guilt. Is it so I can blame someone else whenever I need a place to put my pain? Is pain all there really is to put on a page?

I am starting to think that writing is the same process as looking in a mirror, the only differences being, on the page, you are frozen in time, and others will reliably see more clearly than you do. The center cannot be what *I* want it to be. I feel I'm slithering around some point. I

keep looking out and getting stuck within, neither focus showing me. The center is waiting to be seen.

What Happens to the Storyteller?

John Prine had been in the hospital for over ten days. He served during the Vietnam War, became a mailman upon his return, started performing in the 70s, was discovered by Kris Kristofferson, co-founded a record label, won a battle with cell cancer, and recorded eighteen studio albums. He was 73, lying in an ICU, hooked up to a ventilator while I sat at home, shedding tears over a man I'd never met. He was a true storyteller. Songs that when you sing them, you feel them, too. Real honesty--deep, unabashed, and sweet.

We—we and John together—are experiencing the duality of new life during the pandemic. Either safe boredom or the horrifying scene in underprepared hospitals that most will only read about. That we *hope* to only read about, knowing there really is no guarantee. Fiona Prine, the subject of many songs, was able to sit with him in his final hours.

“Hello in There,” which appeared on his first album in ‘71, was the first John Prine song I ever heard. He immediately touched me.

*Ya' know that old trees just grow stronger
And old rivers grow wilder ev'ry day
Old people just grow lonesome
Waiting for someone to say, "Hello in there, hello"*

I think of my Opa when I hear it now.

There is a special form of guilt reserved for the best people in our lives. It comes with the realization you can never do for them what they have done for you. Age adds weight to the burden. As their skin sags, you know there is less and less time to repay all their favors. They don't see it that way. They surprise you; they always seem to see more.

Why do we hide our old people away?

“Dad, do you know how to turn on Facetime? Want to see your granddaughter?” My dad, sitting across the table from me, coaxes, working to convince Opa the extra technological step would be worth it.

My heart stopped. I wasn't ready for this. I'd already been feeling guilty enough about pushing this phone call off. I'd had “call opa” scrawled on every single one of my lists the past week, but it never seemed to be the right time and I couldn't find the words I felt I needed to say. I always love talking to Opa, but I hadn't yet come up with what he now needed to hear from me. I still haven't.

I think so... I just see myself. Oh! I have to accept...Aha!

His face popped up on the screen. The new phone my dad had gotten him highlighted every smile line on his face, each one crinkling as soon as he saw me. His hair is so white, it's always been so white. I never expected him to age before my eyes. I'm blessed he did. His smile is the exact same, timeless.

“How are you doing, Opa?” I asked with an attempt at cheerful ignorance.

I'm doing surprisingly well! They have us on lockdown over here. Carol's been beating me at gin rummy, 25 out of the 36 games. I'm surprised she's letting me win at all. Ha! We took a walk yesterday and we're going to try going out again once it cools off.

I'd known he was on lockdown. The entire world is on lockdown. That's why it's so important we called. I had tried to see him on my drive back home from my spring break in New Orleans, but the very day we reached Fort Worth was the day his retirement home closed to all visitors.

BEEP: Elsa, sweetheart, this is Opa. I'm really sorry, but I'm not going to be able to see you this evening. I'd absolutely love to, but the Stayton has been shut down because of this corneo... uh, cron...uh, this virus, and there are no visitors permitted. So I'm gunna have to say

I'll look forward to seeing you some other time, sometime soon. I'm very sorry. When you get my message, give me a call. I love you and I'll talk to you soon.

Thank God, I thought later. I couldn't have lived with myself if there was even the slightest possibility I could have given him the virus that would almost certainly kill an eighty-seven year old with long-term diabetes. I was disappointed that day I wouldn't be able to talk to him over dinner at Lucille's, the place he'd been taking me since before I could walk and long before I could finish a Texas-sized portion of chicken fried steak, but at least I knew that once I graduated in a couple months, and the pandemic settled down, I could see him whenever I pleased. So, I took the following phone calls for granted, only briefly checking in to tell him I loved him, before returning to my studies or whatever other pressing matters were occupying my day.

That was only a few weeks ago.

This call was different.

We asked him what else he'd been doing to keep busy. He'd been frustrated with the cancellation of sports, saying he had resorted to watching the rodeo and reruns of his favorite crime TV show.

You know, the great thing about being old is I don't know if I've watched the episode before, he said with a contented chuckle.

We have to watch out for him, I said solicitously. Old people living alone are at high risk for depression, and that is the last thing he needs right now.

Do you want to hear a profane joke?

My dad and I looked to each other. Sure...

A new nurse has been assigned to tend to her very first patient. She walks in on an elderly man, quite similar to me, and wakes him up. Excitedly, she tells him that it's her first day on the job. She asks him if there's anything at all she can do for him. He mumbles: "Are my testicles black?" "What?" the nurse says. "Are my testicles black?" the man repeats. "Well, I don't know... what should I do about that? Do you want me to... check them?" "Yes," the man replies. So the nurse pulls back his sheet and then unbuttons his hospital gown. She looks to one side, rolls him over, and looks at the other one. "No, sir, your testicles are not black. Can I do anything else for you?" she asks. "That was very nice," the man starts, "but I was wondering if my test results are back," the man says, enunciating every last syllable.

Ha, ha, ha! Isn't that a good one? That joke is the best thing I've heard during this whole pandemic thing. I've been telling it around the Stayton and everyone's been enjoying it. I told Dave down the hall and I've never seen him laugh so hard.

"That's great, Dad. Anything else you've been up to? How was your doctor's appointment?" Seems like we don't have to worry about depression, I thought to myself, bemused.

Well, I've been making it a point to donate every day. People need the money now, so I've been looking into new causes that are really taking care of this new...uh...virus.

"Where have you donated?" I asked.

Oh, I've done it the past few days. I also talked to the lady at the bank. I told her I was closing the account and she started tearing up--I could tell through the phone. She said: "Over the years, we've managed the accounts, but after we're done we always just talk for a bit. Well, I want you to know those talks have meant a lot to me. I've taken your philosophies and applied them to life and work. You'd never know, but you've really helped me. Thank you." I've only met

with her about 10 times but that was nice. She could've been just saying it, but it's still nice to hear what people really think about you.

How could he be unsure of the way people view him? When we go out to dinner, we can hardly get through a meal. Usually, before we even reach our seats, someone will stop him with a twangy: "How you doing, Ed?" He is so connected to life and the people in his. He gets thank-you letters almost every time I help him go through his mail. He'd gotten some lifetime award from the city of Fort Worth. He'd shaken hands with a president. He could warm anyone from the inside out with his signature belly laugh and a wink. Not one person who met him didn't like him.

*Memories they can't be boughten
They can't be won at carnivals for free
Well, it took me years
To get those souvenirs
And I don't know how they slipped away from me*

I'd wanted to write something about him after my last visit a couple weeks before Christmas. My dad left the room to grab the mail, leaving Opa and me alone in his two-bedroom apartment on the eighth floor overlooking the train tracks. I'd wanted to write about that conversation because he'd treated it like it could be the last time we'd see each other and that had surprised me.

His apartment--like the home he'd had on the hill where my father grew up and where my brother and I had mashed acorns into mush to feed the squirrels, or been bitten by spiders in the treehouse Opa had built for my dad and never touched since--was white, clean, minimalist, and tastefully beautiful. He can fit any space perfectly, comfortably.

I loved to sit in his lap in the worn blue leather couch in the living room of the home on the hill. I'd hop on his knee and he'd give me a smack on the back: *Hey, ya Bub!* he'd boom from his chest. When we'd watch TV or a movie, I'd play with the cigar cutter always on the table. *Don't cut off a finger!* In his office, I'd look at the pictures on the wall. I'd ask him about the ones taken before I was born and he would tell me. At one point, I could picture that wall in my head and I knew every story. The details are foggy now.

He always had a new photo of me somewhere on his desk. It got so cluttered that, at some point, my dad bought him a digital photo display. It remained in the box for a year before my dad set it up for him, and even then, Opa would still print the new photos of my brother and me. He mails us articles and pictures he's cut out of the newspaper when they make him think of us. Often, clippings are lying around on any open surface, waiting for Opa's big, loopy scrawl before they're mailed off. The only messes in his space were those made by memories and love.

He had a piggy bank shaped like a football that he saved for me, stored on the left corner of his desk. He said that every time he got change, he put it in that piggy bank for me. When I visited, he'd give me the coins to count, sort, and wrap into their proper, color-coded packages. He'd put the rolls of coins in a wooden box stored in a drawer under his desk. When I asked him what he did with them, he just gave me a teasing shrug and a wink. Every time I crack a tightly bound roll open, spilling loose coins into a register, I think of him. I didn't know until very recently that you could just dump loose change into a contraption at the bank and a machine would sort it all for you.

He clings to his dated ways, but he loves modern art. He's been collecting beautiful pieces since before my dad was born. From jewelry and clothes for my Oma, to the bronze sculpture of a melting face that sits on the shelf outside his door, contrasting the other old folks' kitschy wreaths and stuffed animals, to splatter paintings so large and mesmerizing a child could

spend days sitting on the white oak floor trying to make out familiar images. Some are still with him, some are in my parents' house now, and some will one day be mine.

During our conversation the last time I'd visited, he told me of a past life. Of adventures in Europe right after college, when he was about my age. Somehow, he'd gotten stranded alone for a night in Italy, was attacked by thugs, escaped, sought refuge at a cafe with prostitutes, was beaten by pimps because he didn't want to purchase their "product," and was rescued by off-duty Italian army men who became his friends, even though they shared no common language.

I certainly do not have any stories like that.

He'd once hung out in Willie Nelson's hotel room in Chicago after meeting him in the elevator. *I'm not a country fan, but it was still cool.* Some of the paintings we have are unsigned gifts from well-known artists he'd befriended in San Francisco. I'm told those would be worth a lot now. He once ran for mayor of Fort Worth and could possibly have won if not for his inability to fight dirty.

Then he told me about myself, innately knowing everything I felt about who I was, who I wanted to be, telling me numerous stories I hadn't remembered until he brought them back to life. He told me of my first outing into the world without my parents. He and I collected flat stones from the riverbed and brought them home to paint. I still have a red and blue one on top of my bookshelf with my name signed in his handwriting on its underbelly. *You never cried. You were always full of smiles. Even then, you wanted to make sure you weren't a burden, always aware of your effect on us. Your Oma and I loved every minute with you.* How could I be anything but all smiles when I was with the man who loved me most? The man who finished every art project we started, saying the "painting fairy" had come in the night. The man who gave the best hugs. The man who made sure I knew that he was proud of me. I'm pretty sure all

of Fort Worth is waiting to see me become a Broadway actress or Olympic athlete from the way he talked me up. The man who, whenever we had to catch a flight home, asked if, next time, we could stay *just a bit longer*.

I've learned that there really was no way to fully know this man, probably because he's even better at listening than he is sharing the fascinating snippets of past lives fully lived. He will always surprise me.

I asked him how my father was as a kid as a way to take the focus off myself. His face instantly changed: the glimmer in his eye threatened to become a tear. *Your dad was the best kid there ever was. We felt so lucky.*

"Have you been social distancing?" my dad asked in his caretaker tone.

Oh yes, six feet apart. It was too lonely when we were all in our rooms so they told us we can walk around. It's so good to see people.

"Dad, how did the doctor's appointment go?" my dad said, very careful not to come off too sternly.

Uh, well, he told me, like all the others, that he's just surprised I'm not in a lot of pain. The cancer has spread to the bones in my back which would usually be painful. I'm glad I'm not feeling it! He told me I should probably call and get hospice care figured out, but our experience with hospice was pretty unimpressive with your Oma. She didn't want to talk with someone new about all of this. I guess they have some little kit with morphine and stuff that gets you ready. Speaking of, where did you put your mother's ashes?

He said it all so matter-of-factly. Is that really how it feels to face death? Like just another appointment.

“Uh, they’re in the closet, Dad. The top shelf in her closet.”

Oh, good. I was thinking that we could bury them at this plot in Cincinnati where my mom and dad are buried. We have four plots bought there. I’m thinking we can bury her there and then, when it’s my time, me too. I just need to get in contact with a stone mason who can copy the font on the other two headstones. I want to be cremated, too.

He’d been in pain. The cancer started a couple years ago, but, at that point, the doctors all said it was no cause for concern. They found it when doing scans of his back after he’d become paralyzed during my high school graduation. That was the last time he’d come to us for a visit. Traveling up to the Colorado altitude had always taken it out of him. He’d gone through back surgery about three years ago. There were minor complications and the healing process proved to be difficult for him, but he had regained his mobility. My dad flew down to take care of him and keep him company every couple weeks. He’d go into a depression every time he did the isolated chemo injections straight into his liver, where the cancer had started. They’d said that the cancer was responding really well to the injections. But now, it’s travelling through his bones. He had the choice to start full chemo or to live out the rest of his time, comfortably. The decision kept him up for nights. I knew which option he would take. He knows exactly how much time he has left. He is going to help us as much as he can now: close all the accounts, say his goodbyes, and make it as easy for us as possible. He exemplifies selfless grace.

*When I get to heaven, I'm gonna shake God's hand
Thank him for more blessings than one man can stand
Then I'm gonna get a guitar and start a rock-n-roll band
Check into a swell hotel; ain't the afterlife grand?
And then I'm gonna get a cocktail: vodka and ginger ale*

*Yeah, I'm gonna smoke a cigarette that's nine miles long
I'm gonna kiss that pretty girl on the tilt-a-whirl
'Cause this old man is goin' to town.*

I'm so lucky to have him. I'm so lucky to have him. I kept repeating these words over and over after my parents called with the news. I sat there, repeating that phrase and picking at the lacing on my steering wheel, paralyzed. For the man who always knew exactly the right thing to say, I was at a loss for words. I wanted to call him right there and tell him he couldn't leave me. But I didn't.

*Then God as my witness, I'm gettin' back into showbusiness
I'm gonna open up a nightclub called "The Tree of Forgiveness"
And forgive everybody ever done me any harm
Well, I might even invite a few choice critics, those syph'litic parasitics
Buy 'em a pint and smother 'em with my charm*

I got to see John Prine at Red Rocks as my last birthday's present. The Colorado Symphony played behind him. It was the "Tree of Forgiveness" tour. That will have been his last.

The day before my parents told me about the spreading cancer, I'd written a few lines about Opa for a poem I'd intended to write for the ill John Prine:

*My father's father loves me without reason,
has a hundred stories that could please you,
but he's unsteady on his feet,
and says he'll greet death with a smile so sweet.*

*Come on home,
Come on home,
You don't have to
Be alone
Come on home.*

You know, sweetheart, I never thought I was going to die. I knew it happened to other people, but I'd never thought about it. So, this is all a bit of a shock. But I'm grateful, I've had a good, long life.

The Ranch Off Carson River Road

My mother picked up the lower half of a jawbone—most of the teeth still set in their grooves—and traced what would have been the chin with her thin fingers. She tenderly picked blades of grass from the pores in the bone and gaps in the gum-line before handing it to me. Her find was better than mine. I set down my cracked femur, and took her jaw in my hands. I wiggled a large, square molar, the same one that was loose in my own mouth, until it popped out. I shoved my tongue towards the back of my mouth, causing a squelching half-release that allowed me to feel the underbelly of what was once attached. The jagged, paper-thin edge gave way to emptiness.

That was my first time in the cow-graveyard, marked by the jawbone. For years, the bone would sit atop the largest rock beside my grandparents' porch like a crown. It's probably still there. I would show it off proudly whenever there was company or a family gathering.

Mom and I found this! There's a tree that is right by the ditch in the back left—no, back right if you're looking at it from our direction—side of the pasture.

Bones make up a skirt around the lone tree in a field of purple sage brush. I invented elaborate backstories for them, just like the tales I imposed on my collection of Bryer's horses. Each bone fragment belonged to a family of cows. I tried to organize the bones as if the pasture were a real graveyard, weaving intricate narratives, and always keeping "loved ones" together. The stories I read in school about the pioneers and miners and Native Americans that had passed through the Sierra Nevadas came to life. I thought that every bone left in the earth had a story worth telling.

Papa-Moo, my grandfather, and Gammie-Moo, my grandmother, bought the ranch in the 70s. They built the house, started a Christmas tree farm, and began raising cattle. It was their first foray into ranching, but all five of them, save Gammie, adjusted immediately. My grandfather turned the swamp by the house into a pond, routing water from the river up through hidden PVC pipes. In the mornings, they would watch the fresh sun gleam on the still water while drinking their coffee. Every once in a while, Papa would see movement in the cattails around the pond, leap up from the kitchen table, grab his shotgun, and sprint to shoot at the muskrats destroying his piping or a bear that had ventured too close for comfort. Gammie missed her city friends across the border in California and hated how quickly the house became filthy. By the time I was born, disposing of dead bats and mice became second nature to her. Their two boys loved the open space, roaring around on four-wheelers whenever they could, often getting themselves into trouble, but rarely getting caught. My mother would find baby heifers that had lost their mothers and nurse them back to health. She herded with the cowboys and did her schoolwork lying on the back of her pony. I did the same. I would read books as an excuse to lie there, for hours on end, with my head resting on my pony's butt. I wasn't any help at all rounding up the cattle, but I loved the chase. The cowboys would all chew tobacco just like they'd done back when my mom was growing up. She hated the smell. We spent our most formative years here.

There is stillness on that land. Cows spread out, abstracting into brown and white blobs, blending into the bushes. After our stop at the cow graveyard, Mom and I rode our horses up to the top of the highest hill on the ranch. She pointed out bear scat and a rattler as we wound upwards on the thin trail. She told me stories about the bear that broke into their house when she was a kid, the time she galloped through that same field under the belly of her horse because she'd forgotten to tighten the girth, the time her brothers threw her in the back of the pickup

truck and drove over potholes, and the time she got too close to the river and was shot at. I waited for something to happen on our way up to the top, but, sadly, I had no such story to bring back.

My parents were married in a clearing across from the pond, surrounded by towering pines. The wooden skeleton of a wagon was left at the edge, the only reminder of the festivities. They had met at my uncle's graduation party years before over a plate of my dad's famous boxed brownies. They lived in the Pacific Northwest at the time, but my mother insisted she needed to be married there, at the ranch. After bouncing around the U.S. with two small children, they decided to settle down near Gammie and Papa into the first home I remember: a single-story farmhouse set on five acres. When my mother moved back almost twenty years later with us in tow, the land remained unchanged.

Every family member had their spot on the property, and the cow graveyard was mine. I braved snow and barbed wire and even almost drowned in manure water to get there. Most of the time, I wouldn't take anything back. The bones were too shattered. They were light and soft. Bleached by the sun. Weakened. Their timelessness became my canvas.

At the top of a waterfall, beside the river, was the collective family gathering spot. Just for us. Over the years, Papa fashioned makeshift bridges out of dead trees to fill in the swampy areas of the path. A grill, tipi, and picnic table were always waiting for us when we got there. They're probably still there. As kids, my cousins, my brother and I were never allowed to even wade into the water. We would throw sticks and flowers into the furious river and watch the rolling white froth sweep them away. I always got nervous when one of the dogs waded too far in, but they always made their way back out, shaking mud all over us in relief. *Never jump in*

after a dog, the dog always makes it out, but that's how people drown. We went here when the whole family was together. We called it our secret spot.

My uncle asked for his ashes to be scattered in the river. The last time I'd seen him had been at the secret spot the previous summer. There were parts of him I hadn't seen then. The way his hands shook, the missed steps and near falls, his yellow eyes. Someone found him on the sidewalk near his house in Seattle, and the ambulance took him to the hospital where he stayed for almost a month. I never got to see him there, I was too young. My mom told me I wouldn't recognize him, I would be afraid. I was told machines surrounded him and small tubes kept him alive. Slowly, the yellow spread from his eyes.

Mom wore a bracelet then that read: *Expect a Miracle.*

We cleaned up his house. To me, it felt more like an archeological dig. Like the class trips to the ghost town nearby. Not one of the towns refurbished since the miners left: no shiny main street, no "genuine" saltwater taffy shoppes, but one where you could still find a cowboy hat hanging on the back of a door, left behind. Every trip, each of us would bring home rusty, twisted metal bits that had come from the silver rush miners. Railway spikes were ranked the best find. Rumor had it that people without homes lived in the mines, but we never got to go down there. Too dangerous. Maybe they think they can still strike silver.

In my uncle's house, all we found was a lot of wine.

There was a Native American man who was found face down dead in the riverbed at the front of the property. He was from the reservation of sorts--by all recognition but the law's, as the real reservations are surrounding the Casinos--over a mile away, among our closest neighbors. I never got to see the place, but I was taught to be afraid. *They live in tents*

surrounded by garbage, my grandmother told me. They drank and gambled. They were the people who'd shot at my mother from across the river. They had broken into the house a number of times, usually taking nothing of significance-- just bottles of liquor and small, sellable items, I imagine. One time, they found my grandfather's guns. A rifle of his was found with the dead man by the river, but the other ones were never returned. Nobody ever learned how the man had ended up face down and bloated on our riverbank. They said his blood was filled with alcohol. His name was never printed in the local obituaries. My grandfather was happy to be reunited with his gun.

I took my elementary school best friend to the cow graveyard. Her dad was a rancher, too. We got to the base of the tree and she asked me if I knew why all the bones landed here. I did not. She told me that the cows got sick sometimes or sometimes they were attacked by wolves or coyotes. A special attachment drags behind the tractor like a silver cape with curved spikes, sweeping the bodies here so they're out of the way. She always knew more than I did about the things that mattered. I couldn't think of who drove the tractor or why nobody had told me before. My friend's mom took her away after second grade, right after I'd shared the graveyard with her. My parents told me they'd had to go because her dad was a bad man. I never saw her again.

In middle school, I started telling my friends a suspicion of mine: my Gammie had an affair with a Native American across the river. That is why Mom and I didn't look like the rest of the blond-haired, blue-eyed family. I imagined that this was why my family had such a fear of the Native Americans; this was why the Natives hated us. Nobody believed me and they were probably right not to. When I said that we weren't that different from the Natives, it was seen as

naiveté. I dressed as Sacajawea two Halloweens in a row and read every book I could about Native American traditions. I am sure the idea was just wishful thinking, something to make me feel like I was more interesting. To make me feel like I had a community. Right around that time, my friends noticed my family didn't attend the local church. I was told countless times I would be going to Hell.

We scattered the ashes of my uncle from the wooden bridge into the river. The water was lower than I'd ever seen before. The rock we used as a marker was fully exposed. We all told stories about my uncle, and I strained to remember him the best I could. As if on a silent pilgrimage, we brought a white flag up to the top of the highest hill and planted it there, past the cow graveyard. We told no more stories of him. Nothing else happened. The full stories were never told back then, the truth would have to come out later, in pieces. Whenever we drove by, I tried to spot the flag. It's probably still there. At the funeral, my mother said the ranch was the only place my uncle was truly happy in his life.

I'm sure you can still see the Christmas trees on your left when you drive down Carson River Road. If you look up the hill as you round the first bend, you might see a small white flag flicking the wind. You can take a turn into the drive and cross the bridge. Our water rock has remained exposed for quite some time now and the river doesn't roar quite like it used to. If you look behind you, the hill will still be scarred from the fire that ate up the sagebrush the year before we left. Maybe it has all grown back. The fire, miraculously, didn't jump the road; that time, the ranch was preserved. Cows haven't been grazing in those fields for some time now. Desert grass grows thick. The picnic table, the tipi, and the grill must have started sinking into the earth, shifting a couple inches deeper every year. The code on the gate would be new, so you

can't go any further. A price tag was placed on our memories, and they were passed along to someone new. I do not know who lives there now. I have not been back in quite some time.

After a while, the cow graveyard ran out of bones. I like to think there was someone else who found the tree, but more likely the earth ate up all the bones without ceremony.

Without You, There Is No Story

It's all temporary. We're told to live in the moment, do what makes us happy. But momentary dreams aren't enough, I ache to give them the weight of the future.

Memories stick to my pores, becoming detached as I move through the world. I'll release one here, drop one over there. They itch; they burrow. *Listen to me: you've seen this before. You've done this before. You can escape the cycle.* I sing one into a friend's ear. I've never been able to let my thoughts be only mine. Every once in a while, a new one will provoke a chain to form around my body, locking me in until each moment has been fully processed, broken down, and passed along. Love is sticky. It holds me in the confines of its twisted web.

Remember the first touch to carry with it a jolt of sexually charged magnetism? Try to hold on to it forever; it forces you to let go. What once breeds excitement becomes a comfortable habit—when fingertips graze in the cold and you no longer have to wonder why they didn't immediately put their hands in their pockets when you walked outside.

Oh, how you want to sip on that danger until, inevitably, excitement becomes tears. Why do we accept that this feeling is out of our control? Why is "easy" considered an insult to love?

I start to wonder how deep I want to get. What if to actually understand yourself—to fully understand someone else, too—is to ruin the love that is there?

I can't let my brain place you in the midst of a darkened chain of bitter loves. I will wrestle my memories until I have found out how to preserve love.

1) Fantasy

I just want to go back in time with you. With you by my side, everything makes sense. I don't need to do anything I don't want to do when I'm with you. We can be silent, talking through looks and movements.

I look up at you in disbelief that someone so beautiful can be touched.

I want to make the bed while you play guitar on the couch. I want to write about our collective experience in such different ways it seems like we are telling different stories about different people, but, still, it is always you by my side.

*I set out to disappear
And out there I found a new home*

I hear you as soon as a song comes on. A blues guitar plucks my heart as the distorted voice sings the words I want to hear.

*Into my arms, oh Lord
Into my arms*

I remember the way this song felt live. The music changed the beat of my heart as you stood behind me—arms resting around my hips, head, resting, with your cheek pressed to my tangled hair.

It was a cold night and you kept rubbing the arms of my jacket as I shook by your side. You tried to shelter me on our way back to the car; we underestimate the cold every time.

You find songs for each person in your life.

*Well, you asked me if I'll forget my baby
I guess I will, someday
I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way*

We slid the first CD you'd ever bought me, a Johnny Cash compilation, into the mouth of my car's player. Windows down, our friends piled in the back, the sun reflecting off my dirty windshield, as we drove aimlessly through the late summer day. We stayed parallel to the mountains so we knew we could always find our way home.

*We make a little history baby
Every time you come around*

Those were my favorite times. When the distance took over, I saw you through my mind. Half the country lay between our feet. For a while, I had a picture of you tightly grasped in my mind, but, with time, it grew fuzzy. I had to relearn you time and time again. I overthink and overstress, so worried to lose you, even then. I tried to picture your day in my head before I fell asleep, imagining it as if I were there with you. I miss figuring out your thoughts before you speak them. Experiencing life together. United in a story.

*Even if we were both well meant and
High born in another time*

We felt out of place in the world. You smoke old cigarettes, we wear old clothes, we talk of people who are long dead. You bought me a typewriter at a flea market in Wyoming and we joked I could be Joan Didion one day and you could be Bob Dylan.

A filter over our lives highlights the way the dust reflects in the sun, how the clouds turn brown in the afternoon, and the way our fluffy hair meets in the grass.

2) Reality

It is difficult to think about current happiness, current love, because the ending is but a faint, murky projection. The threat is always there in some way. Whenever you try to wipe off the fog or focus in on one point, any outcome you choose can be seen. Just because you see something in that crystal ball, doesn't mean that's the way it will be. When I see you talking to, smiling with, another girl, I imagine you will grow tired of me. That my sadness will take over and push you away. Or you will see only the boxes of leftovers I leave for months in the fridge and will be unable to look past the dirty clothes I leave on the floor.

There are unspoken rules that have been established in our relationship:

- 1) We don't act too much like a couple when around friends.
- 2) It's necessary to be pissed at the world sometimes, but we can't take it out on each other.
- 3) Always remove your hair from the shower drain (that's a spoken one).
- 4) Elaborate gifts on birthdays and holidays are more stressful than they're worth.
- 5) Having our own lives is the only thing that really matters.
- 7) We don't call one another babe.

My friends and I changed after we felt love for the first time, we changed when we gave our bodies willingly to someone else, we changed when our bodies were taken from us. We changed. I know where the deepest scars lie on so many who are now long removed from my life. We still share a bond, a love. And I hold hatred, still, in my heart for those who caused the initial cuts. One friend lost her job after a coworker assaulted her; one was abandoned with a newborn; one was raped twice by a man whose father owns an airline company; one couldn't take the physical and emotional bullying any longer; I was raped one fourth of July as I lay passed out in a friend's childhood bed.

Good people can do bad things. When did that line between good and bad start to get blurry?

Charlie was my second or third "boyfriend" in sixth grade. He was the coolest boy in the grade and I was more confused than anything as to why we were dating. I was even more confused when he started calling me pig nose after we broke up. It was not long before the whole grade was in on the fun.

Will was my long-distance best friend from the summer camp my parents sent me to the year they were packing all our belongings up and moving halfway across the country. I had never been friends with a boy before, but Will took care of me in a way I didn't know was possible. He would worry when I didn't answer his calls and let me into his most personal world. We were "dating" each other's best friends from that summer, but we would say what we had was more special. A true friendship will never end. He told me about the abuse he'd endured from his father. Trauma he had to come to terms with as a thirteen year old in oversized gym shorts and a backwards cap. And I'd thought I had problems. I never knew what to say, but I was proud that he trusted me. He ended up cheating on my best friend. We talked on rare occasions after that. I heard from his last high school girlfriend that he had pushed her to an eating disorder and was an angry drunk. I didn't know what to tell her, but that didn't sound like my Will. He and I talked once during our first semester of college; it felt so good to see his face. He told me that I hadn't changed at all and I wished I could have said the same.

My first love and I dated his senior year and broke up the night before he left for California. He, overall, treated me well. He listened when I spoke to him, he made his life revolve around me, he made me pancakes and milkshakes, and his two dogs always wagged at our feet. As far as first relationships go, it wasn't the worst. At least, I didn't think so at the time. He molded me into exactly what he wanted from me and I was as obedient as I could possibly be. I developed an unhealthy dependency on sex—I thought it could make any problems go away. I decided to think him bending me over his parents' couch without even asking me about my day first was just an expression of his deep, passionate desire for me.

I wasn't upset with his cheating, that was something that I had grown up to expect. I was upset he hadn't told me. I was also upset that he had raped someone when I lived only ten minutes down the street. I blamed myself while he evaded blame. He had tried to strangle her,

but she'd fought him off. He held a knife to his throat and then to her own. Evoking pity, then fear, then guilt. He had somehow convinced her not to call the cops. She told me that she didn't think I would have believed her, that I was too in love with him. The number of times I questioned her is fucked up. Part of me, still, doesn't want to believe it's all true. We talked most of the way through his freshman fall of college until I found out about the rape, months after the fact, from a friend who had initially told me to stay away from him. When I confronted him with the fact he was going to lose me forever, his obsession began. He twisted the words I'd once said, sent three-hour-long voicemails begging me to take his pain away, drove by my house whenever he was back for breaks, and bombarded my email, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook until I was forced to slowly erase his face from every memory.

In time, I began to see clearly all that I had ignored for so long. Every rumor was true. I live with the knowledge that there are likely more girls out there.

I never managed to block his number and I miss him to this day. That kind of love made me numb, not afraid. I still have dreams where I am trapped in his clear blue eyes.

3) Spiral

I'm afraid of loving like the first horse to break out of the gate. That is always the one whose legs give out first.

In any moment of shift there is the choice to crumble or seek support.

Nothing that was can continue. Things must get worse before they get better.

We mask fucked-up things in the name of love. We regret the people that we turned away. We fixate on the word, on the meaning, thinking if we can control that, we can control experience. People fall out of our lives, people hide who they really are, people hurt you. Why fall—is it worth it?

I don't know how you could share the same bed with me, the same breath, the same food, the same touch, the same conversations.

Maybe all this jealousy is just a classic case of projection.

I'm starting to think lies are the secret tie that keeps people together.

I'll never be able to think of you as a bad person--I know you too well.

What do *I* want?

You've left me no choice but to start again. I think you may have had to. At this point, there is no continuing for me. The tinted glasses toppled off when you slapped me in the face. I keep trying to replace them, but they never will fit the same.

There are certain clichés I am now finding much truth in, regardless of how much I dismissed them in the past: you must love yourself first; never go to sleep angry; being completely alone is a necessary act; always meet in the middle.

If I make the choice to continue along the path built with stones already starting to crumble, what will I find at the end? Endings, in my experience, reflect beginnings.

Perhaps this is just the pattern love will always follow. Heartbreak is here, it always will be, and it always was. I thought you were showing me something I had never seen before. I thought you were different from anyone else. As soon as I see those words on the page, I know where I went wrong. I'd gotten comfortable. Too comfortable with no foreseeable end in sight.

But I can't imagine a day without your name on my heart. I can't imagine not knowing what you have to say. I can't imagine you holding someone else the way you hold me. The problem might just be: what if you can? Is there anything *wrong* in whispering the three most abused words to a new face before bed? Would they mean the same?

I can't think of a single word to say. Instead, I intentionally have isolated myself in the depths of my mind. It is silent there for the first time in so long. I feel the need to cry come from a place too low in my chest where the tears can't reach my eyes.

Love can be a disguise, a weight, a tool for manipulation, or a security blanket. It depends completely on the lover. Love, like most things, can become just a matter of convenience, easily morphing into something flimsy or dangerous. I could front an attack on love, but, try as I might, I still cannot conceive of anything better.

I know love can make you stronger.

4) The End

It's not about you.

*I could stay awhile
But sooner or later I'd break your smile*

Songs, or a soundtrack? For every moment—every heartbreak, each kiss, each unison breath. So afraid to hurt, we stay in this limbo, grasping at what we feel is there, hoping that it stays. Pretending we have any form of control.

*Oh the jealousy
The greed is the unraveling it's the unraveling
And it undoes all the joy that could be*

Your voice through the phone breathes through and we hang in a vacuum—no longer in each of our worlds—suspended with only each other. You pace.

*Drivin' on 9
I'll sure look pretty
Carson City
Walking down the aisle
Driving on 9
Looking out my windowsill
Wondering if I want you still
Wondering what is right*

I'm afraid of the silence.

List of Mentioned Songs

John Prine

-Hello in There

-Souvenirs

-When I Get To Heaven

-Summer's End

Deer Tick- Baltimore Blues No. 1

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds

-Into my Arms

-The Ship Song

Johnny Cash- Guess Things Happen That Way

Elyse Weinberg- Houses

The White Stripes- A Martyr For My Love For You

Joni Mitchell- All I Want

The Breeders- Drivin' On 9