

**LOCUST SKIN: A THESIS IN CREATIVE NONFICTION**

A Thesis

by

TERRI LYNN POFF

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2007

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

Locust Skin: A Thesis in Creative Nonfiction. (May 2007)

Terri Lynn Poff, B.A., University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Jimmie Killingsworth

This creative thesis includes a critical introduction that discusses a brief history and definition of the creative nonfiction genre, the ethical dilemmas faced by the writer when telling a true story, and contextualizes my work within contemporary creative nonfiction. *Locust Skin* contains twenty-eight original pieces describing my experience adjusting to life as a single mother. Narrative segments alternate with short prose poems that add depth of feeling and a sense of wonder and beauty to contrast with the struggles voiced in the narrative.

Through research and the study of works by authors such as Mary Karr, Terry Tempest Williams and Norma Cantú, I was able to establish a framework for the creative portion of the thesis. In writing the stories, I discovered the difficulty in negotiating an effective balance between telling a true story while maintaining privacy for the real people included in the narrative. Objectivity, avoiding sentimentality, and writing about myself without producing an overly self-absorbed collection was also a struggle. Overall, the collection contains short prose pieces that strive to reflect the precise poetic prose of Karr's *The Liar's Club*, while combining human suffering with detailed descriptions of nature illustrated by Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family*

*and Place* in an unconventional form reminiscent of Norma Cantú's *Canícula*:  
*Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*.

## DEDICATION

To my Father, Charles Richard Poff, Jr., who taught me the importance of perseverance and the need to approach life as a Pygmy eats an elephant—one bite at a time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge Larry Heinemann's invaluable assistance and support. Not only was he the first to graciously agree to serve on my committee, but the honor of working with a prize-winning author such as himself is a privilege I will always treasure. His expertise and constant encouragement provided me with new determination and fresh perspectives.

The chair of my committee, Dr. Jimmie Killingsworth, made the opportunity to write the thesis a possibility for me when he chose to head my committee in spite of his involvement with many of his own rhetoric and composition students. His belief in me and in my style of writing was both inspiring and motivating. In my role as a teacher in some future English program, my hope is that I exude the same kind of concern for students and professional expertise as Dr. Killingsworth.

Many others spent a significant portion of their time to help with the editing and perfecting of my essays. Although Dr. Janet McCann is a poet, she graciously read my work and gave wise criticism to help me polish and organize the body of essays. Fellow students, Jennifer Haley, Sara Day, Jessica Neely and Beverly Van Note gave feedback and suggestions for improvement. Without all of their time and effort, my work would be considerably less polished.

The faithful listening ears and free babysitting from my two best friends, Rob Westphal and Jessica Neely, infused me with the time and personal encouragement necessary for me to complete my coursework while adding desperately needed balance

to my life. I am not sure I would have made it through my first semester without them. Their love for my children and willingness to work for nothing more than food, friendship and gratefulness has been a gift of immeasurable worth.

I would like to thank my two boys, whose patience with me throughout our two years of graduate school has humbled me. Our love for each other and the Lord has gotten me out of bed more days than I can count, and their smiles and infectious laughs have brought joy into the darkest places.

Lastly, I humbly acknowledge the truth that without the hope I find in Jesus Christ and without Him holding me together, I can accomplish nothing of worth. Not only has He given me the opportunity to study at Texas A&M University, but He has also provided the financial, emotional, and practical support necessary while faithfully healing many broken places.

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## INTRODUCTION

Having been coined in the early 1970s, the term *creative nonfiction* is relatively new, but many scholars point out that one has only to read Thoreau's *Walden*, or essays by E.B. White and George Orwell to find the genre's American roots. According to Bronwyn Williams,

We tell stories to one another, to understand one another, in part because they are true. That is, after all, why creative nonfiction appeals to us. The nonfiction writer says to the reader, "Such things can happen, have happened, and as human beings we must struggle to make meaning from them." (296)

Recent reality television shows and the boom of memoirs both in print and on the movie screen have brought more attention to the genre. While publishers of fiction are more difficult to find for the aspiring writer, nonfiction markets are increasing. One only has to refer to Frances Mays's *Under the Tuscan Sun*, Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*, John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, or Tobias Wolfe's *This Boy's Life* to recognize the public's fascination with this genre—all were present on the *New York Times* bestseller list and were subsequently made into movies (Root 245).

Perhaps the popularity of the genre is also found within the overall goal of well-written creative nonfiction, which tells a true story in a creative and engaging way in order to produce a greater meaning from the life experiences of the author that the reader

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This thesis follows the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

may find applicable or inspirational in his or her own life. At the core of the genre lies an intimate personal truth that the reader is asked vicariously to share. In a postmodern world where the philosophy of absolute truth is considered a fallacy, the implied existence of inherent truth becomes problematized. Lynn Bloom eloquently explains one aspect of this truth issue:

What truth to tell, however, is more problematic. For the writer's vision varies over time and intervening circumstances, shaped by the protean personalities of his or her subjects. What is true for writers is true for readers as well; as we experience more of life and learn more ourselves, and as the world itself changes, we come to understand events and people differently. Thus although the facts of the story, any story, remain the same, its truth—like the impressions in time-lapse photography—can change. And does. (286)

With truth being variable over time and affected by the writer's unique point of view, the ethics and responsibilities of the author immediately need to be explored and defined.

Successful authors and scholars in the genre have many different viewpoints as to the ethical responsibilities of the author while presenting their story. On one end of the truth spectrum is the belief that the “creative” part of the genre does not refer to the information, but to the craft used to tell the story (B. Williams 297). Lee Gutkind, a proponent for the genre since the early 1970s and the editor and founder of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, says that the genre involves “writing nonfiction using literary techniques like scene, dialogue, description, while allowing the personal point of view and voice rather than maintaining the sham of objectivity” (Postel 2). Names are not

changed to protect identities and no one other than the author has the authority to shape the characters in the story or choose which parts are told. Characters are not composites and one scene cannot be created by integrating several events (Bloom 278). On the other end of the truth spectrum is the knowledge that in telling their story the writer is telling the story of other people as well. Therefore, writers of creative nonfiction must take into account the lives of the innocent and guilty who have not asked for or approved of the writer's rendering of their life and actions. Annie Dillard is perhaps one of the most well known writers holding this view. According to Bloom, "in writing her autobiography, *An American Childhood*, she [Dillard] explains in 'To Fashion a Text,' 'I tried to leave out anything that might trouble my family,' and 'gave them the right of censorship'" (279).

In this creative thesis, I explore both the variety of writing within this genre and the ethical issues in writing one's view of events. Issues involving how much truth to reveal where others in the story would certainly be rendered in negative ways affected which portions of the story I chose to write and how I chose to write them. If a creative nonfiction writer's goal is to render the truth in such a way as to inspire or enlighten, should specific parts that I deem meaningful be omitted to protect another involved in the story? Annie Dillard would say "Yes" while Lee Gutkind would say "No." As a writer, am I allowed to tell what I remember of my ex-husband in my own view when I think that he would object? Norma Cantú would say "Yes." At a reading of her work *Canícula* at Texas A&M University in the spring of 2006, she stated that her family told

her after her book was published that certain parts of it were not true. Her response was to say that *Canícula* was her story and was written as she remembered it.

After weighing the promise to readers to write the truth against my responsibility to the people involved in my story, I chose to abandon specific details about my ex-husband and myself in order to shield my children from things I feel that they do not need to know or be involved in, regardless of their age. I wrote with care, wanting to protect not only the children involved, but also the other innocents whose permission was not sought before I penned my tale. I have accomplished this goal not only by omitting details, but also by leaving out some names. Details concerning the reasons leading up to my divorce might add a sense of excitement for the reader at the invitation to participate in the intimate substance of my life, but I chose to create a similar experience by enabling readers to view candidly my emotions and perspectives instead of details about my ex-husband, our marriage, or friends. While the writings of *Locust Skin* are as true as I remember, I did create some composite characters and compress some scenes.

In spite of Annie Dillard's precedence to allow the writer's family and friends to censor their work, I chose to write the sections of my thesis that may be objectionable to my ex-husband, friends, or family. However, I made this decision not out of revenge or bitterness, but out of a need to tell the important parts of my story and personal growth the way I remember them. Negotiating this fine line between what details were essential to the story and what could and should be omitted was sometimes difficult. I opted to take Annie Dillard's advice: "While literature is an art, it's not a martial art" (*To*

*Fashion a Text* 69). Checking my motives and seeking to stay focused on the main idea I wished to convey kept the essays faithful to the truth while avoiding the creation of a narrative that was overly angry, sensationalized, or whiny.

Regardless of how objective I may seek to be, I confess that my work is not without its biases. In *The Liar's Club*, Mary Karr takes a few moments at key sections to remind the reader that her sister has a different opinion of the events and would tell that particular portion differently. Although the form and structure of my thesis does not lend itself easily to these clues about my authorial viewpoint being subjective, it certainly is.

Therefore, I wrote my truth my way with the understanding that I must hold my story loosely—I must allow the interpretation of my truth and myself the chance to grow and change over time. I wrote what I remembered and what I felt from my view at specific points in time, while knowing that another set of eyes and another soul would render a far different story. Also, I wrote knowing that I may assign the same truth a vastly different interpretation in the future, just as the truth of who my parents are is currently different than the truth I believed about them when I was a teenager.

Research has illuminated the ethical difficulties with which writers of creative nonfiction must wrestle. Choosing which stories to tell and which details to omit must constantly be weighed against the promise to tell a true story. Weighing the omission of details for ethical reasons against the equally important responsibility to tell a true story produced many revisions in *Locust Skin*. Surprisingly, these ethical dilemmas and

responsibilities made the writing more challenging than the creation of scenes, effective dialogue, or memorable moments for the reader.

After reading memoirs, essays, and other books from various well-known creative nonfiction authors, it became clear that there is a broad range of styles within the genre. Styles ranged from journalistic writings by Tom Wolfe such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* to nature writings similar to Annie Dillard's *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, to memoirs such as Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*. The most easily recognizable form is the memoir written in a linear narrative that begins at one point in the narrator's life, moves through time while lingering over significant events, and ends when the narrator has made sense of the events that have shaped their identity. Most of these books reveal childhood secrets, sexual addiction, rape, abuse, drug addictions, racial struggles, mental illness, or even "the flickering, newsreel ghosts of a far-off genocide" (Selinger 6). It seems as though the more tragic one's life has been, the more appealing their story becomes.

*The Liar's Club* contains some of these aforementioned events. Karr writes about life with an unstable mother who struggles with drug and alcohol addiction. Portions of her book reveal appalling events such as her mother taking all of her and her sister's belongings from their room into the yard to create a bonfire, her rape by a male babysitter, and the terror of awakening to a drunken mother hovering over her with a butcher knife. While these types of tragedies are common to modern memoirs, what sets *The Liar's Club* apart is Karr's mastery of language and use of imagery. In his article about memoirs written by poets, Selinger states that what first struck him about Karr's

book was “the plot, characters, and harrowing, snappy prose” (7). Karr has the ability to create such a masterful text because, before she wrote her memoir, she was recognized as a poet. According to Molly Ivin’s review of *The Liar’s Club* in *The Nation*, “To have a poet’s precision of language and a poet’s gift for understanding emotion and a poet’s insight into people...is an astounding event” (Selinger 7). In addition to Karr’s ability to write vivid, truthful prose, she writes the book matter-of-factly and without a hint of sentimentality.

In my own work, I strove to produce a similar tone while writing my life-story. Unlike her, I chose to omit some of the more dramatic portions, but I sought to maintain the same kind of distance from the personal narrative. Karr succeeded in telling a dramatic story without stylistically manufacturing the drama or sensationalizing events. Her objectivity allows the reader to authentically identify with her without being manipulated by her rhetoric into doing so. This was a goal I was unable to successfully accomplish in all of the twenty-eight essays, but one toward which I strived.

In addition to *The Liar’s Club*, Terry Tempest Williams’ book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Space* is an equally inspirational and beautifully written book. In this book, Williams details the process of her mother’s battle with cancer as well as the way she and her family adapt to the inevitable changes by weaving them into “the story of the dramatic rise of The Great Salt Lake, and the threat which that natural phenomenon posed to the community in which Williams lived” (Mitchell 168). While *Refuge* is clearly a memoir, it also is considered nature writing because it follows “the nature writing path in many ways, including close observation and detailed



description of the birds and their habitat, scientific explanations of avian ecology, and the presentation of quantitative data like rainfall and lake level, all enclosed in a first-person, non-fictional form” (Glotfelty 158). As a result, Williams creates engaging prose that blurs the boundaries of traditional nature writing with that of memoir.

The compelling questions that the reader finds both inspiring and unsettling revolve around one’s ability to find stability in the midst of change and devastation. Each chapter wrestles with the desire and necessity to learn to adapt and live with events that irrevocably change one’s inner and outer landscapes. “Each [chapter] searches for a metaphor that will allow one to remain rooted without being buried, broken, or swept away: How can we feel at home on a landscape that is always in flux? How do we belong to something—a family, a place—that refuses to stay put?” (Mitchell 169). Williams’s answer to these questions is found in the solace and support she finds in watching the changes in natural life around the flooded Great Salt Lake. Through this solution, Williams moves nature writing from simply writing about observable nature to “situating and knowing the self” within the natural world, which “simultaneously provides an individual with support in the face of great change and loss” (Riley 588).

The changes that Williams chronicles in *Refuge* are quite different than the ones faced by a single mother, and yet I found myself experiencing some of the same emotions. While many readers can identify with walking alongside a loved one through the death process, the scope of her writing allows others to see their own traumatic losses as well. Although the processes of healing, adaptation to life changes, and learning to function in the midst of personal tragedy are also reflected in *Locust Skin*, I

do not link them to a specific geographic area as Williams does, but to the natural processes involved in re-establishing oneself after a significant life change. My essays do not weave these issues into changes in nature, but to things such as making friends, taking care of children, dating, and adjusting to custody arrangements. In my own work, the influence of Williams can also be seen in some of my own moments in nature where I sensed a connection to and experienced healing from inspiration found the natural world. Like her, I similarly draw inspiration from the life around me and am willing to learn from it. While my work cannot be classified as nature writing, my admiration for *Refuge* compelled me to include a touch of Williams's creative nonfiction memoir.

While not fully belonging to the creative nonfiction genre, Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* proved to be a valuable source in my research and enriched my understanding of both creative nonfiction and the boundaries of truth. Her book consists of many separate, small stories that balance and work together to produce a moving and vivid picture of growing up as a Mexican-American on a border town. She states that family photos inspired each section. Through the use of these photographs, her book "charts the lives of her extended family as they live in this border space" (Penaz 152). In the introduction Cantú states:

[T]he story is told through the photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage; and in

all cases, the result is entirely of my own doing. So although it may appear that these stories are my family's they are not precisely, and yet they are. (xi)

Originally, she describes her work as "fictional memoir." Because she readily admits to blurring the lines of truth and fiction, *Canícula* clearly does not fit in the creative nonfiction genre. She realizes that her work can easily be placed into the categories of Chicana literature and ethnographic work, so she has altered her original assessment and now classifies *Canícula* as an "autobioethnography."

Cantú's purpose was to create a book that gave the reader a powerful rendering of a Chicana childhood. However, she struggles with the same truth issue as creative nonfiction writers. She "wants to have it both ways, wants her book to be taken as an authentic representation of her Chicana childhood, and yet wants to protect herself from family members and others who might argue that she has made things up" (Adams 66). What makes her book different from the creative nonfiction genre is the fact that many details have been blurred to fit her narrative and an actual, specific truth is not as important as the overall ideas she wishes to convey.

While *Canícula's* struggle with the boundaries of truth reflects the struggle of the narrator to locate herself in her own borderland, this was not an idea that I wished to reflect in my own writing. What did impact my style and organization was her play with time and her use of photographs. Several of my pieces were also inspired by family photos. In addition to the physical photos used, I chose to write my work in verbal snapshots and place them in a non-chronological order in the finished piece. The result

is a collection that forms a collage with varying moods, subjects, and styles. It moves in a similar nonlinear time and avoids conventional development of characters and plot.

*Locust Skin* contains a collection of nonfiction essays meant to connect into a narrative rich in imagery. While the story I tell is true, it is true from my own perspective. It is self-censored and compressed in places but does not work too hard at being completely inoffensive to everyone involved. There are portions that are similar to traditional nature writing while trying to portray my personal sense of awe, beauty, and inspiration I find in the natural world. My desire is to tell the reader a true, vivid, poetic, and non-sensationalized story that will inspire and challenge while pointing to a larger truth with which he or she can identify.

## LOCUST SKIN

### **And She Lived Happily Ever After**

Women are wonderful and complete and the source of beauty and creativity and love. But they are brought up to believe that they are inadequate and insufficient and that to be complete and fulfilled they need a man. This erroneous notion leads them to seek fulfillment outside themselves, which in turn reinforces their belief in their inadequacy and keeps them in a vicious circle of continually seeking answers outside themselves rather than in discovering at their core that they are already fine and magnificent and complete and that if they lived from their centers all would work out and they could again become the source of creation in the world.

Ari Kiev

I think it was my attorney Sandra's invisible fog of perfume that made my stomach hurt, but it could have been my nerves. The room was too cold from too many grim-faced strangers stacked in neat rows like iced catch-of-the-day in the fishmonger's case. Joe sat across the room in his power suit and silk tie I had purchased for him, his demeanor more stoic than the statue at the front of the room.

That sound fell flat on the cheap tile floor, never even made it to the faux tin ceiling. Ten and a half years, just like that, were over when the judge banged his gavel. He was no longer my husband nor I his wife. What began in white lace with promises, kisses, swirls of candlelight tinged with friends' laughter and the flash of photos ended in a courtroom with bulging blank eyes from strangers.

Oddly enough, outside the courtroom, my attorney gave me a gift. Forgotten, it huddled in the corner of my purse for days until I pulled at the silk ribbon and

discovered a silver cuff bracelet. Simple, with three little silver daisies on the top.

When placing in on my wrist, I noticed the inside had a message...AND SHE LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

I didn't believe it. Not one little bit.

### **Man vs. Dog**

A few months after Joe moved out, it was Aaron's birthday. He had been begging for a puppy. I had always wanted one too, but Joe would not allow it. My in-laws were allergic to dogs, and if we had one, then they would never come to visit. Since he moved out and I no longer had to compromise, I bought Aaron a Bichon Frise for his third birthday. I quickly learned that the small, fuzzy dog was fabulous to cuddle. The softness was soothing and his newborn-baby size smelled of better days.

Joe had taken the kids for the weekend, and the house, which should have been silent, was noisy with aching memories. Unable to stand it, I left to wander around town and take in the longest movie showing in theaters. I was able to forget for a while, but dread was in the passenger seat on the way home.

As I walked in the door, a bouncy, overjoyed, cotton ball puppy greeted me enthusiastically, longing to spend some time with me. Joe had seldom bothered to pretend to be happy to see me. At that moment, I decided that dogs are better than husbands.

After two years, I stand behind my original assessment. To this day, my dog has not tired of greeting me when I return, no matter how long I have been gone or how often I leave. Dogs are also significantly easier to train. I don't have to pick up the dog's laundry off the floor, bring his dishes from the family room, or fold his underwear in neat little squares per his request. He does not bark at me if I don't pour the soda "just so" to avoid making it "go flat." The dog says thank you to me every day with a kiss to my hand. I was lucky to get a thank you from Joe a couple times a year. When I talk, the dog actually looks at me, right in the face instead of thumbing through work files and continuing to watch *Jeopardy*. Not only does he look at me, but he also seems interested and hangs on my every little word with tilted head, big brown eyes, and ears perked. My dog knows when I am having a bad day and when I need a little affection. During these times, he actually gives it to me without me having to ask and well before I begin to cry. He understands that I love him, and he willingly shows me how much he appreciates it by loving me back.

I had the dog neutered. I grew up hearing Bob Barker end each *The Price is Right* with his bleached smile and "Have your pet spayed or neutered." It would be un-American not to. Besides, the dog began to remind me too much of Joe when he started humping the furniture or anything else that looked good at the moment.

Although I felt a twinge of guilt for having the dog neutered, I found it oddly satisfying. If I had known then what I know now, I would have traded alimony for neutering.

## **Locust Skin**

The past thirty-something years have changed the black and white photograph of my mother into a yellow and brown and sepia work of art. She sits in the black vinyl chair in front of a backdrop of dark wood paneling, her hair a perfect bee-hive mounded on top of her head, dwarfing her thin neck and rounded shoulders. Behind the black-rimmed glasses that we called “cat glasses” as children, green eyes the same as my own stare but focus on nothing. She holds my older sister, all smiles and gums and healthy baby chub. And in her holding of her first-born, she shows no joy or disdain and her eyes are neither sad nor helpless. It strikes me that in page after page of yellowed black and whites of Christmas mornings and Disney vacations and birthday parties that the camera never steals one smile from the beautiful face with the trendy hair and glasses. I wonder if her mental illness was there all the way back then, stealing smiles and even sadness, leaving only this shell shed by the being that was meant to be, like the skin of a locust left on a tree in the yard. I wonder if she never learned to laugh and run and fly from the hollowness that encases us all. Perhaps she feared the locust within. And now all that remains is locust skin on a tree in some small yard with children laughing and summer sky and winter winds and flower scent all around, and she, in the midst of all the bubbles of life, unable to feel anything at all.



## **Holding Hands**

I remember when we were first dating. There was something about his thick fingers, the wideness of his hand that accentuated the smallness of mine, the slimness of my own fingers.

While walking across the small campus of my Baptist university, Joe really stood out. In the middle of the Texas spring, a stereotypical Italian New Englander in a tank top while we Texans were still wearing sweatshirts drew significant attention. Walking around campus hand in hand was my favorite thing to do. I liked the attention and letting other people know that we were a couple. People identified me as an honor student, the president of this, the leader of that, the youth pastor, the homecoming queen. But now I belonged with someone. Someone had chosen me, and my outer shell of strength, autonomy and resilience was able to melt into the fear and deeply intense self-consciousness I carried hidden under talents and work and successes. He saw past most of the surface. With him, with my hand wrapped in his, I was safe enough to be authentic. There was no more need to hide. He could see behind what I presented, what everyone else saw, and touch the vulnerability, the fear. And he loved being my cliché knight in shining armor.

There came a time over the years when I ceased being frail and afraid. The resilient warrior-woman was a real part of me. I healed. I was scarred and imperfect, but I had healed. It was then that he stopped holding my hand.

## **Onion Love**

He thinks that I am not affected and that something inside me is so steeled like the foundation of a skyscraper that I do not know how to be soft and to let it all out with a whine and some dramatic sobbing.

He does not remember, as I do, that moment when the world ceased to spin and his actions revealed that I had looked at him all those years as a mother gazes at her sleeping child. In that stark, white-walled office on sturdy red sofas, with our child out in the toy-strewn waiting room, the veil tore from my lids when he choose himself over the innocents and me.

Now he doesn't understand that I figured out how to be like him, how to reduce all those onion layers that gave iodine tears. That in the process, the man I adored morphed into just a person in my house who never goes to bed with me, who leaves before I wake up in the morning. He does not understand that I simply will no longer afford myself the luxury of allowing a staple like an onion to make me cry.

## **Thank You for Visiting Connecticut**

The room was still dark through my eyelids. No sandman had visited. I was sick to my stomach all night long and lay on the floor in the room with boxes making mini skyscrapers around me. The alarm went off. I did not cry until I was in the shower.

The car had been packed the night before. I finished a few things and tried not to wake the children as I put them in their car seats, fumbled with all the belts and buckles and locks. I pulled out of my driveway for the last time. I did not look back. I planned to die in that house. Part of me had.

An hour and a half later, it was still dark when I passed the “Thank You for Visiting Connecticut” sign. I pulled over on 84 and threw up in the thigh-tall weeds on the side of the road. After returning to the car, I found the kids still sleeping, so I had the luxury of continuing to cry silently to myself.

My thoughts were a scratched vinyl album that kept repeating “*Thank You for Visiting Connecticut—Thank You for Visiting Connecticut—Thank You for Visiting Connecticut.*” I couldn’t bump the needle or force my mind to lurch ahead.

Eleven-year “visits” are hard to let go.

Eleven years was the longest I had lived in any single state. He had been the longest relationship I had ever had. But that was over. All the friendships I had made, the family I had created, my role as a youth director at church, my home, my ability to be a full-time mother were gone. Unwillingly, I pictured him among some of my friends

standing at the sign throwing flowers and kisses and waving the Miss America wave as we drove down the highway. *Thank You for Visiting Connecticut.*

They had meant well, but their words had cruelly burned. “How can you go to school and take care of the children? No one can do both well, not even you, Terri.” “You shouldn’t have agreed to the divorce. What about the children?” “Texas? You don’t know anyone there anymore and you will *have* to have help.” “You should just get some kind of job and stay here. It would be better for the children.” “You have too many responsibilities now to chase after dreams!” *Thank You for Visiting Connecticut.*

### **My Children’s Laughter**

When all is full and bright it seems impossible that the sun could ever set again. The rolling hills with their fragrance and the wind with its bones and fingers make winter a forgotten fantasy. What is more sublime than knee-high grass and laughter that rides the breeze on wishes blown into a dandelion’s parachute seeds? But the darkness seeps in and consumes, seasons change too abruptly.

He is somewhere while I am alone in his dark. I asked him to stay. Should I have begged and cried with the anguish of a thousand lost souls, on my knees? I fumble weary in the black for so long. Too long. It is somewhere I travel, alone. From the outside in, it is so easy; others know what I should feel and do, walk away clucking

tongues and wagging bowed heads. I made mistakes, I know. I wear them publicly, embracing authenticity, wanting redemption not given. Their gaze doesn't adjust to his hidden darkness, which is not for me to reveal. Black is all I can see, no matter how hard I try. I have lived with his dark for too long. Will my eyes ever know light?

All I want is the ability to hear my children's laughter again.

### **Wild Woman**

I was afraid, overwhelmed, regretful. Everyone had said that I needed help with the kids, with school, with work, with adjusting. I believed that I could not do it by myself. It seemed so perfect to move in with her warm smile that I remembered from being in her church class so many years before. She was divorced before I had met her, had recently retired. It was a God-send. Perfect for us both. Excellent for the children after moving so far from their father to have a "grandmother" in the home with them. There was calm, relief in my spirit. I was leaving the controversy, his girlfriend, the assumptions, the sharing of mutual friends. I would have a new place all mine. I would have a chance to heal, to grow, to pursue the education I set aside eleven years earlier when I married him.

She kicked my bedroom door in. All five foot three inches of her sixty-something self kicked my door in. As she flew through the breach, I was given my first

vivid picture of a real-life “wild woman.” I picked up the screw that had flown from somewhere off the door, hit my cheek, and landed in my lap. Our conversation escapes me. I only remember that in spite of the screw I held *and* the eight inch or so crack in the wood door *and* the fact that it took more than three tries for her to force her way in, she insisted—no, demanded—that she merely bumped the door gently with her hip. Sometimes, no matter how right you are, there is no point in arguing.

I moved out two weeks later in the middle of my first semester of graduate school. The last time I had been in school, George Bush—the dad—had been president. All my work at switching my mind from *Sesame Street*, *Dora the Explorer*, and *Rescue Heroes* to post-colonial theories, MLA standards, and humanities research in the digital age came to a violent halt. I was focused on physically protecting my children and myself.

I had moved to Texas with color-coded, fully labeled boxes. After a house was secured for the three of us, the two friends I had made swept in with 45-gallon outdoor trash bags when the wild woman was not home. We filled the bags, threw them in a truck and dumped them in the rental. It was a mess. I was completely overwhelmed.

When we went back to get the beds and dressers, she was there. She attacked me. My friend had to pull her off. She said I hit her with the door and she was defending herself. I never touched her. I left with bruises, a ripped-out earring, and broken glasses. Things were thrown at me while we finished—both objects and epithets. According to her, it was, of course, my fault.

Doing it alone was no longer something I feared, but an opportunity I relished.

## **Ex-Shadow**

Aaron's preschool falsetto, 2000 miles away and yet so close, kisses my ear and tells me that he wants to come back to my house and why does he have to stay so long with Daddy when he doesn't like it there. And a deeper voice in the background: *Tell your Mommy what we did today*. Four-year-old honesty is nakedly appalling. He tells me that they went to the Dutch Wonderland with Daddy's girlfriend and her daughter and that the rides were big and scary but he wasn't as scared as his older brother and his favorite was the thing with all the swings that flew him round and round like a spinner and up and up with the wind tickling his hair and the cotton candy was blue but made his tongue look grape-y. He asked if I had ever been there. I answered honestly. He said, "You went there with Daddy when Wesley was still in your tummy?!?!?" I heard his father laugh in the background.

Being naïve isn't so bad as long as you never find out that you are and as long as no one ever rubs your nose in the ignorance you once wore as easily as jeans and your favorite t-shirt. Although we had not ventured into the amusement park designed for small children, we had stayed in the hotel adjacent to it for a week while I was pregnant with our oldest son. And now, he took our children, and the woman he suddenly fell in love with one month after our divorce, there as a family, laughing and happy in the northeastern summer with the sun shining just enough. There they were spending the day and, he with the daughter he always longed for that I did not give him, riding amusements and eating concessions and getting sunburned enough to fade into a perfect

tan overnight. There they were re-living a vacation that I had already had with him, but as a big family. *I don't have the time to fix our marriage*, he had told me.

Times like these are the only moments that I am almost saddened by the truth that I was not made to be his shadow.

### **The First Miracle**

The Graham's home was an emotionally warm and bright space. With their children grown and their eagerness for grandchildren, they loved having us over for dinner. M'Liss had been in a similar situation as I, had remarried, and raised three children with her new husband. They had adopted us, and their attention and acceptance was a welcomed balm. M'Liss watched the boys for me at her home on Tuesday nights for a few hours so that I could attend choir practice at church. The boys loved playing on their cul-de-sac where they could run outside with other children from the neighborhood. M'Liss even patiently accepted Aaron's habit of using the dog door to access the yard.

The first time we were invited over for dinner, I had a twitching yet muscle stiffening anxiety over the event. Getting food on the table after a long day was a victory for me while adjusting to the constant physical and emotional exhaustion of



single parenting. Table manners, especially for Aaron, were inconsequential. As long as there was no complaining and more food went into bodies than on the floor, I was thrilled. This worked for me on a daily basis, but visits outside the home led directly to a desire to hide under the table at the ghastly sight of my three year old eating with his hands or his inability to sit in his chair through an entire meal. I wished that my boys were perfect gentlemen at the table, but sometimes, there is only enough energy to focus on the necessities.

The Grahams could tell that I was uptight that first visit. When I told Aaron not to use his hands to eat and he immediately stuck his face in his plate and began to chew, M'Liss did not even have to look at me. She knew I needed assurance and calmly patted my leg while reassuringly whispering to me, "It's OK, we've raised three of our own, and the neighborhood kids come over a lot."

The rest of the meal went by without much excitement. I was relieved that my children had not revealed my parental shortcoming in the meal area. As M'Liss and I were clearing the table, I instructed the boys to finish their milk before we served dessert.

The Amish blue kitchen was partially separated from the dining area by a breakfast bar built for three. M'Liss and I could have easily seen the boys from the sink where we were chatting and cleaning, but we were so busy talking that we were not paying attention to them. I was banking on the fact that they wanted some of the chocolate covered strawberries we had made. That was an unwise decision.

We were interrupted by a voice, small but firmly loud: "I-I-I am Jesus!"

Standing directly in the middle of the wooden country table, hands to sky, face upturned to his recently declared Father on high, was Aaron. All thirty inches and twenty-eight pounds of his little self.

He had successfully rendered me speechless. My mind dug around to discover the perfect way to handle this unique predicament. Which infraction do you address first in a situation like that? Before M'Liss or I could figure out how to react to his seemingly random performance, he dropped his little chin while lowering his right arm in one grand motion. He turned his head to follow the direct path his arm was now in, and nodded toward my glass on the table.

“Behold!” He paused. “I turned Mommy’s water into *milk!*” He punctuated “milk” with his arms, now both outstretched, parallel to the tabletop.

Just like a cartoon, my mouth dropped to the floor. I really didn’t know what to say. I was embarrassed by the fact that I, who already knew the Mother of the Year Award would never be mine, had a child impersonating a deity. On a table. *What to Expect the Toddler Years* didn’t cover this. Thankfully, Aaron obeyed immediately when asked to get down. M'Liss began walking past the dining area into her adjacent Master bedroom. Looking over her shoulder, she motioned for me to follow. Her face was red.

I dutifully went and, looking at the kids, imparted the spine-chilling look only moms have because the knowledge of how to execute such a threatening glare gets absorbed from the placenta of the first child. Closing the door after me, M'Liss let her laughter go and my own quickly joined.

## **How to Sleep Alone**

It is remarkable how something hollow can be so heavy, how it can pull at your brain by reaching up through your toes; how this invisible intruder can pull you down so far, wave after wave, with all the force of its hollow heaviness.

I wonder why it does not suck out the smiles from the people around me too. I see students who came from other countries, other cultures, other languages, to America with no friends, no family, living in the tiniest of apartments sunset after sunset after sunset. When their day in academia is over, do they read their assignments aloud, listening to their voice bounce off the sparsely furnished space? Talk to plants? Leave the TV or radio on? What is their weapon?

After the colors have faded from the sky and all is deep within and around me, I climb into the king-sized bed and sleep right in the middle, slanted somewhat sideways. Claiming as much of the bed for myself as possible is my method for growing accustomed to the vastness next to me at night. I remind myself that being alone by myself hurts less than being alone with Joe five feet away. I let it all pull me to sleep, and right before I drift into blessed nothingness, I tell myself that tomorrow I will remember how blessed I am to be free, and promise myself that I will talk to my peers, make a phone call to an old friend. Maybe then the hollow will move on to another.

## Marriage Wasn't a Mistake

On the way to school, Aaron asks me to buy a box of orange popsicles—just orange. He wants orange hair and decides that if he eats an entire box of orange popsicles, his hair will become his new favorite color. He asks me why there is a meatball moon in the sky when the sun is already so high up, and tells me he loves me all the way up to God and back again. *That's a lot of luvin'*, he laughs. His words glide like falling snow, covering the deadness, reminding me of the first tree lit in Rockefeller Center after the terrorist attack. It imparts the sheer possibility of *being*.

Even though he has consumed more bugs, worms and used band aids than I care to count, even though “his bellybutton” took a permanent black marker and made cave paintings all over the walls of his room, even though he sticks his face in the toilet and yells, “Echoooooooo!”; his heart kindles mine.

He climbs from the car, his hand a comforting gift. My hand, the wrapping paper. *Do your best to stay clean and dry!* he calls after me from the playground across the vast parking lot. Then, *Wait! Momma **wait!** Catch my kiss! You forgot to catch my kiss!* He kisses his palm, winds up better than Andy Petite, and pitches to me. I catch his kiss, put it in my pocket, my heart embered for one more day.

## Visiting My Father

I remember that day in the park, sitting on the plastic alligator behind my father with his soft tinsel curls and his Hollywood smile for my sister Deanna's camera—brighter than any he had ever given me.

I had taken the boys and driven to Florida to visit Dad. But the hurricane shot us like unsuspecting human cannonballs to Deanna in Mississippi where we could watch the storm on the news and see the trees muted and dreamy, kneeling to the earth.

I remember swinging on the blue plastic seat after the picture was taken and lighting up like a firecracker when Dad pushed me hard from behind, jolting me from my nostalgia with the rush of movement higher into the sky and the feeling of the seat being forced from underneath me. Shock and fear from not knowing he was there, from nearly falling, quickly changed to anger.

I would have touched the clouds with my feet, leaned my head back and back so the sun stroked under my chin. I would have laughed loud like the clitter-chit of the squirrels—if I had known the secret cancer was already twice the size of his kidney, that four months after its exhumation three more would be found in his brain—and I would have said, leaning back and back with my toes laced through clouds and jazz-laughter: “Push me again, Daddy! Please?”

## Moving Christmas

### 5. Parental Access to the Children:

5.1 The Husband shall have parental access including but not limited to: December 20<sup>th</sup> through January 1, 2006 and every odd year thereafter; December 26<sup>th</sup> through January 1, 2007 and every even year thereafter; every summer from the end of school until one week prior to school commencing; Spring Break from School.

—Excerpt from the Divorce Decree

The humidity had left the Texas air, but it still didn't feel like it was getting anywhere close to Christmas. Thinking about the holiday gave me a headache. It wasn't about the shopping or activities; giving up my children for two weeks around the holidays irrevocably altered my holiday spirit. What was I going to do? What would it be like to awaken on Christmas morning in a house with no excited children, no family near, no partner, and no one to give gifts to? I didn't know if I could hold all that emptiness.

For ten years, Christmas was woven from the same traditions. We always went in the snow to our favorite New England tree farm to choose a tree. The cold air was comforting as it chilled our noses and made our cheeks into pink airbrushed perfection. At some point, snow would stick to hair, jeans, jackets and sometimes even eyelashes from the snow fight we would have around our chosen tree. Joe would saw down our Christmas guest, pull it to the parking lot in a special red tree sled, and we would tramp through the snow behind him, playing hide and seek among the trees. The workers would tie the tree to the top of the car, fresh evergreen scent warming our spirits, while

the complimentary hot cocoa warmed our bodies near the nostalgic weathered barn. We were a Norman Rockwell painting.

Christmas Eve was always spent at a candlelight church service. Afterwards, we would have finger foods by the light of our tree and choose one gift to open. Joe and I would tuck the kids in bed, and then we would watch a holiday movie and wear the tranquility of the season. On Christmas day, a trip was made to New Jersey to celebrate with our extended family. We went every year during blizzards, stomach viruses, and with newborn babies.

What was I going to do? My children would be with their father and *her*. *She* would get to make Christmas breakfast, hear the tickle of children's joy, sneakily place the gifts under the tree, and snuggle with him under the calm halo of Christmas Eve. *They* would go to New Jersey and have the traditional Christmas dinner with his extended family. And *he* would be happy I wasn't there. And me? I would be alone. *Rat-bastards!*

I purchased an artificial tree from Wal-mart. It was 70 degrees. I could not figure out whether it was the weather, the lack of a familiar piney smell in the house, or the papers I desperately needed to finish for school that sucked the joy from the season. The celebrated and caroled Christmas spirit more than escaped me—thinking about it nearly sickened me.

The kids and I set aside a special time to decorate the tree anyway, pulling the boxes in from the garage that had been packed since the previous Christmas. I didn't feel like it, but I was, after all, not the only person involved. I had to do it for the kids. I

didn't know exactly what I had in those boxes because Joe and I simply split them without looking inside. The boys were so excited that they immediately began digging through them, grabbing ornaments, and hanging them on the tree.

They didn't understand why I took some from them and eventually stopped their chubby fingers plunging into boxes to pull out ornaments. That pewter wreath we purchased on our honeymoon? Throw it out. The miniature clay house with our four names on it we bought the year we purchased the home I was going to die in? Back in the box. This one from vacation in Virginia, the day before we found out our second child was on the way? I can't deal with this! My brilliant idea of collecting ornaments from our yearly vacations and celebrated milestones made decorating the tree an intimate time for us while we were married. Obviously, I lack the ability to see the future. I took the ornaments off the tree and fussed at little faces with wide eyes to get out of the boxes. They didn't understand and I did not want to explain the truth. I made the excuse to the children that we had to put special ones on the tree so our puppy wouldn't break them. I thought I was doing a fairly good job at masking the tears when Aaron asked, "Why are you crying, Mom? What's the matter?"

"You're so little, you don't understand. It's just dusty in that box. You know, she has allergies." I had been saved by Wesley's six year old brilliance.

At two in the morning a few days later, I was awakened abruptly with only one thought on my mind: moving Christmas. I realized that traditions link us to a sense of past, our heritage, and our future through what we leave behind. We all wish for such transcendence. And in a society where personal success and independence are



worshipped, the holidays are rare times when we are forced to remember that life is not a one-man show, that there is a beauty in being connected and linked to the dead, the living, the lost, and the future. We all touch, intermingle through the celebrations and traditions we embrace. The meaning is found in more than just a day with a specific number. So why did the three of us have to celebrate on the 25<sup>th</sup> or after? We would celebrate it before; I wanted to have my own Christmas with the kids, and not have the left-overs. I began to focus on some new possibilities. When I was married, we had never done the Santa thing with the kids because Joe found it anti-Christian, for lack of a better word. Why couldn't I?

The boys and I wrote Santa a letter, explaining the situation to him. I assured the kids that he would get it and understand the fact that they would be celebrating Christmas early. Sweet faces and happy feet rushed to the mailbox and painstakingly worked the key to place their hope inside. Their excitement was so tangible that my Christmas spirit was finally resurrected. Santa would be coming the night of their last day of school, and then we would have our Christmas day. The trip to Connecticut to spend two weeks with Dad would take place the following day.

We obviously couldn't go to church for a Christmas Eve service, so I made other plans. We all put on our special Christmas pajamas, brought Christmas cookies in the car, blasted the air conditioner to make it as cold as possible, and listened to Christmas carols while driving through town to look at the decorated houses. We sang to test out whether we could see our breath. We wove our family in and out of the lives of others as we stopped to look at lighted homes. We parked outside a few to see if the Santa on

the roof would move, thereby informing us that it was *the* Santa. The kids would occasionally explode with, “Look at that one!” or “That’s my favorite!” When we got home, we cuddled up with some big mugs of cocoa under a blanket together and watched *The Polar Express*.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, I woke up to an empty house. No children tugging on my covers, making promises they couldn’t keep if only I’d get up so the presents could be opened. No wrapping paper flying. No children’s toys to put together. No laughter. No faces for me to eagerly watch, no reactions to memorialize on film. No children jumping up and down, begging to go outside in their footed pajamas to ride new bikes. No one to say thank you. No Mom and Dad cuddling on the sofa, enjoying the family they had created. No hugs.

I sat in a rocking chair with a cup of coffee, looking at the blinking tree lights and the ornaments we had made to fill out the tree, remembering our visit from Santa in comfortable silence.

### **Throwing Away Sensible Shoes**

There is something about you, the way that you say my name and laugh so easy and touch me that dissolves even my strongest conviction and suddenly I am who I am not, or perhaps I am the real me that I hide and don't want to acknowledge under the prim and tailored Sunday dress. And tomorrow I will have a ragged tear inside somewhere I can't touch and I know it. Tomorrow I will remember that I am not whom you want but whom you want to play with. I will cry and hate myself and vow never to entwine with you or live for that moment when nothing exists outside of you and me and tongues and fingers and flying past dreams into sheer flesh and wind. I know I will fall apart for a few days or maybe longer, but in those moments when I am your world, I forget that I am nothing. I will not sleep and I will shrink with the knowledge that you will one day be with someone else. But still, I walk taller, and talk to strangers, and trade my sensible shoes for heels, and wear shirts cut low and laugh more, even though today, I know I may never see you again.

### **Sometimes Understaffed**

The kids had been quiet for a while. I put down my book and went to make sure that they were not coloring the white dog with permanent markers again. They weren't in the family room, so I went back down the hall to their bedroom. Empty. Smiling, I decided it was a one of our hide-and-seek games and said, "Ready or not, here I come!"

I looked behind the sofa, in the closets, under my bed, in the pull-out storage bin under their bunk beds. Nothing. The front door and the door to the garage were both still dead bolted. Now I was nervous.

"Ok boys, come on out!"

Waiting, I began to pray. They did not come. I called again, more insistent this time, hoping that not masking my panic would make them come out of hiding. Still nothing.

Frantically, I flung back the curtains, checked behind the recliners and the television. While I was double-checking all the places I had previously examined, there was a knock on the back door. I ran to get it. I unbolted it, and looked down into Wesley's face, brown puppy dog eyes pleading with me to stay my anger.

I sank to my knees and hugged him.

"WherewereyouWhathappenedIwasworriedWhere'syourbrother?"

Aaron walked around the corner. "Hi Mom! Wanna play fire drill with us?"

They had pretended that there was a fire, and without raising the blinds they had opened their window, popped out the screen and climbed out. The idea was Wesley's,

who had insisted that I check the smoke alarms the first day in our rental home and periodically thereafter. He had an obsessive respect for fire. During a fire drill at school, sweet Wesley was the only child to carry the contents of his desk out into the schoolyard. During his self-imposed home fire drill, he left everything in the house, but were unable to climb back in the way they had escaped. Since the doors were locked too, they began to play outside.

The previous semester, I had read an article for a class about single parenting. In the middle of the right column was a black rectangle filled with larger white text that stated, “To be a single parent is to head a family that is sometimes understaffed.” Yes, *sometimes*. I had often wondered who had come up with such a brilliant idea. I’m outnumbered, too often outwitted by brains that think radically different than mine. I’ve been locked out of the house with a guy in a pink dress shirt selling pizza coupons door to door. I could be buried in the mound of laundry that two growing boys and a working mother generate. The boys play video games for too long everyday and I let them watch *Spongebob* far too often. I have no idea what the sticky stuff is on the bottom of my sock that I acquired from somewhere in the kitchen, and if the kids were allergic to dust, I would be arrested. Our family is understaffed, but only *sometimes*.

The article also mentioned the number of single parents living in poverty. Granted, going from a shared six-figure income to realizing that my child qualifies for free school lunches could be considered poverty. However, I find the money to make his lunch every day. We rent a nice house and ride around town in a car that is reliable. As far as dinner is concerned, they like having macaroni and cheese or pasta two or three

times a week. I buy the expensive Kraft with the powdered cheese—not the store brand that is thirteen cents cheaper. For pasta, I buy the whole wheat, which is at least an entire dollar more than the white. They might not get all the fresh fruits and vegetables, the home cooked fish and lean meats that the pediatrician may like for them to, but what kid does? That is why vitamins were created. So what if two meals a week (ok, maybe more) cost less than a dollar! That doesn't mean we are living in poverty.

When mowing the grass for the first time as a single parent, it took me four hours, and it had nothing to do with my ability to work the mower or the size of the yard. It took four hours because operating lawn equipment efficiently and watching two boys is a painfully acquired art. I had to stop the mower several times: when Aaron came out in his underwear; when the kids let the dog out; when a wrestling match broke out between the kids; when Aaron stopped a group of beautiful co-eds, dropped his *Nemo* underpants, and volunteered to demonstrate his ability to urinate over the six-foot cedar fence; and when Wesley kept riding his bike into the street. After I was finished with the microscopic lawn, Aaron needed a bath because he chose to coat his entire body with layers of crayola colored sidewalk chalk. He also found the car a suitable canvas for his budding artistic expression. After taking care of him, the car, and the messes inside the house from the kids running in and out, four hours had passed.

I consoled myself with the knowledge that all these events and losing my children in a locked house did not mean that I was a negligent mother. It merely meant that sometimes, I was understaffed.

## **The Scarlet Letter**

People crowded in the entryway, all smiles. I headed to the welcome desk, weaving through the crowd with Wesley and Aaron. Her eyes were startlingly bright and seemed misplaced on her worn face shellacked with too-beige foundation. She wore a “Hello, My Name Is” sticker under her left shoulder. After handing me a map and suggesting that I attend the new parent session, I headed to the children’s wing to check the boys into their Sunday school classes.

In the new parent’s class, I sat at a round table alone while other couples mingled and laughed. Overhearing conversations about children, schools, and soccer teams, I tried not to squirm in my chair. I had gone through this before at another church significantly smaller. Thinking that I would be less conspicuous in a larger church was a bold yet hopeful error. As the room continued to fill, a couple finally sat next to me and began the same conversation I always seem to have with new people. We covered first base—names and ages of children. Rounded to second—where we are from and where we live. Sprinted toward third—what we do for a living. Headed for home—where is your husband?

I honestly considered telling them that he was buried in the backyard. It would be more interesting, at least for me. I contemplated a different response than the truth because, from my experience, telling the truth about being divorced in a church setting is a full-blown, show-stopping, bug-your-eyes-out, drop-your-jaw, fumble-for-words revelation. But since I happened to be in church, I chose the truth. Just as I expected,

my scarlet “D” immediately halted the conversation. We sat awkwardly fumbling with our fingers. A table of people had never rejoiced so whole-heartedly for a Sunday school lesson to begin.

Moving to a new state offered me the opportunity to start brand-spanking fresh, pink-baby-skin new. No more conversations about the ex or awkward birthday parties for the kids or friends feeling as though they needed to pick a side. It was foolish to think that I would be able to start completely fresh or that I would not be judged simply because my scenery had changed. Apparently, a scarlet “D” is non-refundable while remaining completely transferable to each new location.

### **Ripley’s Woman**

As I have adjusted to this world of singleness, there is one thing that I find more offensive than those who judge me negatively for being divorced—the people who think I am amazing. This may sound odd and somewhat stupid for me to say, so please allow me to explain. I understand that what I am doing is not easy. I am the first to admit that there are many hurdles—the financial pressures, the isolation, school, juggling tasks—it is all difficult. The man who met me for coffee today and then casually extended it to dinner ended the coffee-turned-into-full-date with a statement that it was “intimidating to be with an amazing single mother” like me.



I asked my babysitter when I got home if I was intimidating. “Well, yes, if I was a guy I would find you very intimidating. You’re a great mom, getting your master’s degree, holding it all together after moving halfway across the country. Yes, you are so amazing that you’re intimidating!”

Let’s put this down for the record right here and now—I’m not any more incredible *after* he divorced me than I was *before* he divorced me. Being divorced has challenged me, but I have done what all people do—survive the best I can no matter what, especially because my children are directly affected by my attitude and outlook. Perhaps some of my rough edges have worn off through the process of learning to live on my own after ten and a half years of marriage. Perhaps my inner strength has been tested and found true. Perhaps I am more self-confident since I am no longer in a relationship where I tried to submit myself to a husband’s career and dreams. Perhaps all this personal amazingness converges around my ability to perfectly balance my checkbook after not being allowed to merely enter anything in one for a decade.

Regardless of the source, I believe that if I can be accused of being amazing, then I have *always* been amazing; this state did not magically descend upon me from the Fairy Godmother of Divorcées. Single moms do what they have to do, and yes, it is a lot. Yes, it is challenging and scary. But, if in the off chance I marry again, do I suddenly cease being so amazing that I am intimidating to people?

The average non-divorced person has to realize that to say that the survival of a divorced person is amazing belittles us, casts us into a group of Ripley’s-Believe-It-Or-Not leper people who still have their phalanges after a long battle with their illness.

Now, *that* would be amazing. It is as if the world expects me, the rejected, scorned woman, to crawl into a fetal position and wait for another man to have pity on me, rescue me from my singleness.

I am who I am, married or single. I spent too many years wrapped around the life of another who did not value me, care to understand my heart, or let me look at his. I am honestly *enjoying* my freedom, my individuality, and my ability to make my own decisions and choices without having to consult or confer with another. This makes the occasional lonely night worth it. I am whole, complete, and even more alive without my previous partner. What would be amazing is to find a man who actually feels the same way about *himself*, and who is not intimidated by a woman who doesn't *need* him, but wants to walk beside him. It cost me far too much for far too long to live the way I did before. I don't *need* someone to share my life with me, but to have a best friend, a lover, someone to touch in the middle of a restless night, to curl up with when I'm overwhelmed, to hold hands with in church would be the proverbial icing on the cake.

I *am* an amazing mother. I do not know how long I have been this way, but the date certainly did not coincide with any judge signing any papers and restoring my maiden name. I *am* an incredible woman, but it has nothing to do with the fact that I am a single mother of two fabulous boys. I am incredible because I care enough about myself and my children to secure the education I need to get the kind of job that will bring me joy. I am dedicated because I deserve to have the best I can achieve and because my children need to see that their mom loves them enough not to give up, no matter how hard a task might be. They need to see and I need to know that no matter

what life may hand us unexpectedly, hope still breathes and belly laughter is merely a heartbeat away. These are not qualities that I awoke with on the first day of singleness—I always had those characteristics. I am living my life one moment at a time, making the best choices that I can, savoring each taste as it floats in my general direction, and taking one more step when everything within me screams that I cannot go any farther. Since when did a human being letting go of the past in order to live fully in the given day become intimidating?

### **The Long Way Home**

Standing in my driveway, I waved at the kids buckled into Joe's rental car. He stood awkwardly at the hood, leaning hesitantly onto it. He never looks at me directly anymore, and today is no different.

“I wanted to tell you before I told the kids or anyone else. Barbara and I are getting married this summer.” He said it in one unrushed breath.

It wasn't a total shock to me, since he admitted to ceasing our marriage counseling because he had “met someone.” Although he made it clear that they had not been “involved” at that time, they had discovered through many phone conversations a mutual interest and decided not to talk about their attraction further until we were divorced. At the time, all that had been news to me; for some strange reason, I had believed marriage counseling was as sign of commitment. I had seen the change in him, and knew when he

had quit trying. The day I asked him if he had met someone, he looked shocked at first, and then a half-smile appeared. I don't know how, but I knew it was Barbara. That really surprised him.

And now, with this news months after the divorce, oddly enough, I managed a smile, touched his shoulder, congratulated him, wished him a happy life with her. I admit that I wasn't enthusiastic about it. It was strangely disconcerting not to feel jealous, angry, or bitter—I should have felt *something* other than transient ambivalence.

“Thanks. We've been engaged for a few weeks, but we haven't told anyone yet because I thought it was right to tell you first. I decided that in-person was best. I am planning on telling the kids this weekend.”

“OK. Have a good weekend with them. If you need anything, I'll be around, just let me know.”

I waved at the kids again and went inside.

I wondered if he would enjoy coming home for dinner with his new family. He had told me during those last months that for years he hated coming home to me at night. That sometimes, he was so anxious that he thought he might have a heart attack. That our family dinner with the kids, the meal prepared as a welcome home, as a relaxing time for us to laugh and talk and spend some time together, caused him so much stress that he hated coming home. If he had spoken the words in bland whispers, it would not have lessened the sting.

My gift, my picture of family life was his cross to bear. I admit that it bothered me when he was more than 20 minutes late and did not call me on his cell phone. I

worried about him, especially in the icy winter weather, and I would get angry. I didn't realize that wanting my husband with me, that valuing time together over a prepared meal was such a problem. Would he hate coming home to her? Was it just *me* that he, the one whom I had trusted to love and cherish me forever, hated? I began to ponder all the atrocities of my personality, all the flaws, all the serious issues I had, all the warped things camouflaged to the acquaintance. I had known for years that I was not perfect. But he *hated* coming home *to me*. Night after night after night for years, and he never said a word.

Knowing that my mere presence resulted in a long drive home—for an undetermined amount of time—digested me. I had tried to show love and service through my actions and, had it crossed my mind for one second that it was causing anxiety, I would have gladly changed, sought a compromise. He never gave me the chance to understand, to see into his heart, to envision his oasis of family life, to communicate to me what he was feeling or why. Did he not know that I would have changed things? What do you say when you have injured someone you love, when those wounds have turned to scars and you never even witnessed the blood? It's far too late for, "Honey, I didn't mean it."

He waited until it was too late, until in a moment of intense emotional regurgitation, he spilled it before me to savor. He hated coming home to me. I was not bestowed with the gift of clairvoyance. I cannot be held responsible for what I did not know. I ache for things to have been different, to take away those nights on 84 from Glastonbury to Southington from him, to replace the dread with joy at a house full of

people wanting to see him, needing his presence, hoping for his smile, longing for an embrace, for meaningful conversation. But silence ate him and, ultimately, it was his choice to take the long way home.

### **The Last Firework**

You sit near me, not touching, your legs stretched and your hands silent. I focus on memorizing your face, wanting to melt into you and stay there until the world is innocuous. Crack-boom of the fireworks reverberates the air, interrupting makeshift Eden. You say if we hurry, we can make it to the arena to see them. You don't understand why I want to linger in this remote garden, at the end of smooth blue sky, embraced by the trees and flowers. I can't find the words or the courage to express the solace I find here with you, alone in this moment, or why seeing part of the fireworks imposed behind the arms, hands, fingers, of the seeking trees births in me things both new and forgotten. Aching, I plead inwardly for each glorious burst to not be the last. And when those final pieces of fairy sparks fizz and dissolve, you say it is dark and we should go. Reluctantly, I relinquish what I need to follow your long strides down the path, your lighter in my pocket, bargaining with the mute universe for one more firework with you at the end of another dream.

## Broken Family

I stood alone clapping in the elementary school gymnasium, surrounded by the folding chairs filled with extended families and friends. None of the scowling eyes or surprised faces turned in my direction bothered me. Neither did my obvious tears or my father intently pulling on my elbow in a vain attempt to persuade me to sit. I did not care that the principal, in an effort to allow the program to progress smoothly, had politely requested that the assembly refrain from clapping for individual students. My exuberance was, in fact, too much for a kindergarten graduation, but I wasn't celebrating only Wesley's accomplishment.

As we had entered the gym, I immediately noticed the familiar feeling among the quickly filling rows of Sunday-dressed families and friends—we were different, out of place among the nuclear families. The children filed in from a door in the front left. Each bright little face scanned the crowd for a familiar face, and people popcorned up to wave at their child. We quickly spotted our graduate, one of the few boys wearing a tie. He looked handsome in it, and had insisted that I purchase one because now he was a “kid” instead of a “little boy” like his younger brother, Aaron. Even though his face was shadowed by his lop-sided poster board graduation cap, I could still see his dimple when he smiled.

After the principal's welcome, my mind began to wander as the first six classes walked up to receive their diplomas. *His Dad should be here; I wonder if he is sad that his Dad isn't here.* Even with my father and a friend accompanying me, I felt as out of

place as I had all year when at church or at school. At the university, six or more young women were pregnant. The thoughts of my own first pregnancy, the shining hope of a family, still stung like a lash on bare legs from a fresh tree switch. I didn't fit neatly anywhere.

I reflected back onto the series of debates assigned in the education class I took. In one particular debate, I listened to twenty-two-year-olds discuss why it was important to have religious education in schools. There were many broken families, and because single parents are not dedicated enough to stay married, there are millions of children without the proper role models. These parents are selfish, economically disadvantaged with a single income, work several jobs and do not have or take the time to teach their children any morals. The flames of anger still brush my cheeks when I think of that young woman's blatant, ignorant judgment. In one twisted way, I respected her: at least she was bold enough to say what I suspect so many others only think.

I remembered all the places I had walked into that year without a husband or boyfriend. I needed more time to grow accustomed to being the only single person in a room of couples. I remembered the other places I had gone as the only person with children. It was an odd existence, being single-mom-older-student in a Bible-belt college town. So often, I had felt that searing burn of the scarlet "D" and struggled to escape it. Even well meaning friends inadvertently re-opened those wounds with simple words meant to encourage such as: "Don't worry that your children are misbehaving. We understand that you're a single mom." Signals everywhere told me repeatedly that



we were broken. It had all been so final, something that the three of us would be forced to deal with at every turn. Those who did not judge us pitied us instead.

As I watched my son move slowly with his class toward the stage to get his diploma, I realized how much he had grown. He had not merely passed kindergarten, but he had rocketed through. I had watched him learn to read, author his own book, build his confidence, and let go of much of his shyness, with far more on his shoulders than most boys his age. I was so proud of who he was.

In those slow-motion moments before his name was called to shake the principal's hand, I decided that everything I had been told, read, and accepted about our family was *wrong*. He was not struggling. He was smart. Happy. Adjusted. Resilient. Aaron watched in his wiggly way on the chair next to me, taking pictures with his pretend camera. He was fine, too. I was healing slowly but surely. I had finished two semesters of graduate school with a 3.9 GPA; I would be able to keep my assistantship and health insurance for the three of us.

The world had called us a fatherless family, a broken family. But we were succeeding wildly in spite of what people in Connecticut had predicted, what I had hoped. In that moment, watching my son in his dress shirt and tie paired with khaki dress pants walk toward his diploma, I found the courage to shuck the labels and my scarlet letter. *We are not a statistic. We are a family.* I stood and cheered and clapped, thankful tears streaming down my face, not caring that we did not fill an entire row. I cheered for him, but also for our collective success. We were making it together. I finally let us belong.

## **Dragonfly Picnic**

The sky was heavy with blue. The tips of the maple, birch, oak, and pine trees seemed to keep it from tumbling into the lake I was fishing. Standing knee deep in water muddied momentarily by the disturbance of my bare feet, I practiced my cast while my friend slept on the bank against a fallen log decorated with various colors and textures of mosses. The delicious sensation of cool water releasing the discomfort of the mosquito bites on my lower legs made me grossly aware of the sun's warmth. It was one of those rare dazzling moments when all else disappears and you feel truly alive in only that one moment—nothing else matters.

I had flown with my children to Connecticut so that they could spend their entire summer vacation with Joe. I was not sure how I was going to handle a ten week separation from them, having spent no more than the two excruciatingly long weeks apart the previous Christmas. My friend owned a cabin in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, so after an evening in a hotel in Connecticut, I flew to a tiny airport over an hour away from his piece of wilderness on Eel Lake in Presque Isle. We had rented a campsite in the Ottawa National forest in a portion called the Sylvania Track. The only way in was to paddle a canoe with all your camping gear. No motors were permitted. We had set up camp the day before and headed under the new morning sun onto the lake to fish and explore. After portaging the canoe off a main lake and onto this smaller one, he was resting with his sleek black lab on the shore, protected from the sun by the trees,

drooping their arms comfortably around them both while I, the far less experienced fisherman, attempted to perfect my cast into the cover along the shore.

It was then that the dragonfly, having captured an engorged horsefly in its mouth, landed on my shoulder to enjoy its meal. When I turned toward the buzzing sound, I was looking squarely into its face. It captured me; I could not stop watching this naked display of life and death, joy and pain, unfurling inches from my face. Perhaps a better person would have brushed the pair away, but I was transfixed by the rawness of their moment.

The dragonfly was methodical in a gourmet fashion, savoring slowly each portion of his hard-won lunch. I could see it chew. First the back of the fly, then with slender hands, it pushed in a leg. When blood began to ooze from the horsefly, my guest politely and elegantly took care of the situation before any stained my shoulder. In a neat manner exuding an odd appreciation for the personal sacrifice made by its meal, the dragonfly finished his picnic, rested a few seconds more, and left me with one lone fly leg on my shoulder.

The sky was easy with blue. A deer came to the edge of the water to drink across the lake, unaware of my presence. Small fish and minnows tantalized my legs as they swam in a chaotic whirlwind. Having caught nothing, I put my pole back in the canoe, waded farther out into the lake and climbed upon a large rock to watch life. It was one of those rare dazzling moments when all else disappeared and I was alive in only that one moment—nothing else mattered.

## Uncaged

After breaking camp in the easy morning glow, we loaded our gear into the canoe and began our several mile paddle back through and across two lakes to the truck.

Humanity has done a fine job of destroying peace, but here in the forest, it is breath.

Where man is not, there exists stillness so true that it unwinds the burial cloths with which we inadvertently bind ourselves. The National Forest Service maintained the area effectively, and all the other campsites on the lake were placed as far back as ours had been, giving the lake an Eden-on-the-first-day appearance. It was creation and us. It was growth and death. It was healing. Nothing more, nothing less. Everything man used to fill the void within, all the noise and chatter, all the eternally meaningless endeavors, all the conflicts from clashing wills, all the pursuits of man-made pleasure were gone. After it is all peeled, what is left is more than enough for me. The simple truth that there is more than us resurrects.

The water was as flat as the Midwestern plains and as smooth as a woman's inner thigh. The birds had long awakened and had begun their morning conversations along with their breakfasts, but in the middle of the lake, we remained untouched by their songs. The wind had yet to rise. Several loons, red glass eyes honed in on us, swam around their tiny island nests without sloshing the indigo waters or voicing their eerie calls. They found us unthreatening. Our paddles quietly mingled with the water and slid in smooth motions even though our shoulders were sore from the unaccustomed activity. I was in the bow of a wooden canoe with a fast entry, so there was less than two feet of

the canoe in front of me as I knelt less than six inches above the surface of the deep. It felt as though it was just me and the lake, the gold turned azure sky, the majestic tree line.

One dead tree, taller than the others, whose exposed, knotted roots lay several feet above the water line, stood alone and unashamed at the lake's edge as we navigated a peninsula of the shoreline. I stopped paddling when a young bald eagle with undeveloped feathers trimming his wingspan located its breakfast. Easily dropping from the perch at the top of the tree in a smooth arch to the water only a few yards in front of me, he leaned his body back, extended yellow-orange legs and extracted from the indigo a fish nothing else could have possibly seen. Majesty. Grandeur. Splendor. Fleshed and boned before my eyes.

I had become transparent, a part of the elusive thing we lose as we grow up, the thing we vainly try to replicate with our created noise. As a teenager, I had read an essay about parrots and eagles; about how, like parrots, we spend our lives in cages we create, repeating what we have been told, picking over the same seed our whole lives; about how we are meant to use more of ourselves than a parrot. The author discussed how we are designed to be eagles, soaring on updrafts, like the one a few feet from me, perched at the edge of Eden, at the top of a dead tree, fresh fish in its grasp. Real. Vibrant. Unashamed. *Free.*

I had been a parrot. I had gone from being locked in a cage by abuse to placing myself in one without ever testing my wings. Now, I had been set free. Fending for myself and my children in such wide open spaces was frightening. It was tempting to

rush into another relationship, prove that the problem was him, not me. It would be easy to slip back into the familiar, into a new cage, instead of making broken wings work and discovering their potential. But at what cost? If I wanted to feel freedom's strength, the power of the wind, the taste of sun, I realized that I needed to not grow weary or settle for what was easy, what was comfortable, what was familiar. No more picking at emotional scabs or sipping regret.

The eagle, his white head accentuating the sharp yellow beak in the morning glow, opened his wings, fell into nothing, and drifted down the shoreline in the direction we were navigating until it found a new perch.

Changing from a parrot to an eagle isn't easy. Learning to fly with wings that have never been fully opened hurts. Feeling comfortable in the wide open space, in the peace, takes practice and perseverance; learning to see the world without bars, living without the reassuring hug of their confinement, requires working through and past freezing fear. Thinking on your own, forging your path, providing for yourself, forces the sleeping parts to pin-prick with tingling agony. It isn't easy, but living free seldom is.

**Salt**

And I, standing with arms outstretched and face to the moon, basking in what warmth, thankful for the man so far up there and the tiny holes in the blackness leaking in hope with their flicker-light. (At least something shines beyond what can be touched with fingers).

You came to me, like the salty earth-sigh from the old ocean, carrying with you all the untraveled places.

I had been content in shadows, running with frozen moon as companion, and sand between my toes to keep me grounded while throwing back starfish that belonged in the water womb and, like me, needed help being free.

I had not fully breathed until your salty sigh opened up parts of me that had never been born.

You see me (I didn't have to try).

My soul crescendos as fine as the first morning, with all its hues bleeding, airbrushing into wholeness. It swells with your sigh, and I taste your salt, mingled with mine on my lips.

## **Victim**

His words were smooth and easily slid into my heart. Everything I had ever wanted to hear. It was all so easy and far too fast. I knew it by that twitter that lies halfway between your gut and heart, but I had found releasing hope difficult. Maybe someday? Maybe just one more chance? The dance was dangerous and part of me liked it. Can his good intentions become reality? Most people want to be wanted. I went a step further and wanted lies to be true.

The worst lie ever told is the one to self. The one you believe. The one that becomes so mixed up with reality that the two are no longer distinguishable in your mind. The last time we spoke, I knew he was that kind of liar. His lies no longer tasted bitter to him.

They say that I am a victim. That I should not feel bad for trusting or giving love a chance in my life again. They say that he is a con artist, preying on women like me. I say that I made my own choices that I chose to believe in someone, in something. I say that, yes, he is a con artist. I figured this out and left when the price was too high. I say I am not prey, a weak herd animal that stays on the outside, easily picked off for the hungry carnivore.

I am a single mother. I am a graduate student who reads several novels and scholarly articles weekly, a math and reading tutor for Wesley; an instructor of college English; a charm school principle for two little boys; a daughter; a bookkeeper; a budgeter; an architect of living room tents and of Lego spaceships; a friend; a counselor



to my children who don't understand divorce; a housekeeper; a chef of meals fit for a mom, a budding astronaut and a future train engineer; a bargain shopper; a closet-monster slayer; an organizer; a magician who can multiply time and pair up tiny socks; a cheerleader for Aaron's soccer team; a healer of all boo-boos; a story teller and a referee of the most dangerous ultimate fighters—two brothers.

I am not a victim.

### **Sky Kisses**

The sky bends down so deeply that I can reach out and touch the pool of dark, run my fingers around and trace the burning stars into whatever pattern I dream. A sky like this reduces us with its majesty, expands our souls with its vastness. I whisper my secrets to its ear, knowing that everyone's secrets are the same; it is hearing nothing new. I spend time under the leaves laced above my head, hearing the voiceless cry of the loon skitter across the lake, over the beaver dam, and through the trees, to me, sitting quietly on the deck in the darkness under the hummingbird feeder, too weary to slap at mosquitoes. I had planned for the big moments in life, weaving my todays into hopes for the tomorrows I dreamed. I realize, not too late, that life is lived in the moments that sneak up on us like tonight, in the dark when the sky stoops down to kiss our cheeks. In this moment, as the voice of the loon courts me, I permit my own dry sorrow to join with his. Inside the cabin, I wrap myself in down blankets and sleep free.

## **Breathing Out, Breathing In**

I got an email from a student at 3:14 am. Chris will not be in class for a while. As I was driving home at 9 pm last night from my German class, I saw from a distance the stopped traffic, the psychedelic swirling of emergency lights a few blocks down before I made my left turn. I heart-spoke a prayer into darkness.

There was Chris, kneeling on the street, intermittently illuminated red or blue, holding his best friend covered in blood, the motorcycle maybe half buried by the concave SUV, his own motorcycle propped up by the curb. He probably didn't notice the nineteen year old driver who pulled out in front of them standing outside the SUV trying not to horror-shiver from the realization that their inability to wait, or look twice, resulted in glass and blood and fear and guilt and someone else's unconsciousness.

Somewhere in that night, on that street, while I drove home singing with a Nora Jones CD, Chris held his friend while he died.

I wonder about the parents awakened to an officer telling them that their hopes of a college graduation, a wedding rehearsal dinner, a first job and the elation of first time parenthood for their only child needed to be replaced with plans for a closed casket. And about Chris, wondering if he was revisiting why he had not insisted that his friend wear his helmet, why they had chosen to race at 75 mph down a local 40 mph street, if he was asking why it wasn't him instead. Is Chris feeling guilty, lucky, or both?

And me, with my worry and weary, stop complaining, thankful that I have breath for today.

### **After the Sacred Is Torn**

While standing on a corner of University Drive waiting for the light to change, somewhere in my brightly striped tote bag my phone began to ring. Fumbling past my lesson plan for the day and my textbooks, I grabbed the phone and flipped it open while apologizing to the guy next to me for jostling him during the ungraceful process. The January wind always seemed stronger on that street corner, and it pushed at me insistently, firmly.

“May I speak to Terri?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Kathy from Scott and White. I am calling to schedule additional imaging for you. Can you come in this Wednesday morning at 8:00?”

The walking signal changed and the others around me began to cross. My mind was racing, but my feet managed to follow the crowd.

“No, I can’t come in that time on Wednesday. I teach. Why do I need additional imaging?”

“The radiologist looked at the films and found something that needs to be looked at more closely.”

“What kind of something?”

“I don’t know. I just schedule the appointments. You’ll have to call your doctor’s office for more information about that. What about next Tuesday at 11:00?”

I was across the street now and students brisked past me, perhaps more eager to get out of the cold than to attend their classes.

“That’s fine.”

“Ok, Terri. I have you down for Tuesday, January 23<sup>rd</sup> at 11:00.” We hung up.

It was supposed to only have been a baseline test. I had not given it a second thought. My doctor had ordered the mammogram because of my family’s strong history of breast cancer. It was merely a precaution because the insurance would not pay for genetic testing or the preventative medication that can be given to women who carry the gene. It would be a baseline. Just a precaution. There had been no reason to worry about it.

Out of cowardice, I waited a few days to call my doctor and waited again for a return call. A nurse whose name was inconsequential spoke to me about my “abnormality” that was “probably nothing.” She explained that another mammogram was needed to look at the area and gain more information. Seven more days until the test.

I shoved the thoughts and fears from my mind so that I could focus on teaching rhetoric and composition to twenty-five students who looked like they would rather have a root canal than be in the desks bolted to the linoleum floor. I wrestled with thoughts of cancer, of poisoning myself with treatments to kill it. Six more days until the test. Would I be able to finish my degree? What if I was too sick to complete the semester? Would they allow me to finish in a year or so, when I was better? If I got better? Five more days. What would it be like to lose my hair? Maybe I’ll grow it out again. I

cancelled my appointment with the stylist. Four more days. What if I had to have a mastectomy as a single thirty-five year old? Would another man ever find me, a one breasted woman, attractive again? Three days. Would I be able to humble myself enough to ask people who were practically strangers to help me? Two days. How would I pay the bills, the health insurance, if I did not have a job because I was too sick to work? One day. What if I didn't get better? Could I die peacefully, knowing that *she* would be raising my children? All these thoughts peck, peck, peck, pecked at the back of my brain with sharp, insistent beaks. I shooed them away, determined not to yield, to take everything one step at a time.

While waiting in line to check in for my second mammogram, I tried to suppress a yawn built up from seven nights of restless slumber. I had been highly alert and somewhat anxious the past week, probably as a result of the vigilance required to suppress obsessive thoughts of cancer from my mind. The thoughts had their own undercurrent that I could not see, touch or control, but it pulsed through me, wave upon wave of throbbing possibilities not yet shaped into a complete verbal narrative.

The woman ahead of me turned and met my gaze over her shoulder. Smiling, she said, "Looks like this is your first one. Boy, are you in for a special treat!" and then proceeded to punctuate her epiphany with a pencil legged bird twitter-laugh and a ferociously white smile.

After changing, I walked down the hall in my spa blue institutional robe to the familiar waiting room. I chose the same seat in the corner near a microscopic TV tuned to a cooking show. An elderly woman, arms crossed over her chest with knuckled hands

grasping her withering biceps, stared intently at the show as though cooking that meal would save her life. A younger woman, expensive purse perched on her lap, read a magazine.

She calls my name. Again. Partially remove the gown in the cold room. Stand facing the equipment that can see inside. Allow a stranger to touch my breast. Act like it doesn't hurt to have a machine compress what a lover should touch tenderly. Hold my breath. Pretend to relax while waiting for the technician to set up for the next image that could save my life. Remind myself that prevention, early detection, is worth it all. I picture Wesley's dimple. Hear Aaron, my little nugget, laugh. Then I see my previous films on the backlit board on the wall.

I can see it there on the wall. I can't feel it inside. My doctor couldn't feel it. But I see it there. Two baby peas in a pod, forming the shape of a disfigured number eight, huddling together somewhere inside my left breast. I ignore the technician and walk toward the films. An odd curiosity overtakes me, and I touch the spot on the wall. My fingertip consumes them. She tells me things I can't remember. I nod, never looking at her, unable to stop looking at the films. It is done now. I leave, get dressed, and begin the waiting.

School days came and went. Playtimes, a first grade spelling test, dinners when we take turns saying what we are thankful for, story times, bedtimes—they all went by in a slow motion, punch drunk reality.

On Monday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, the nurse who schedules appointments called again, this time for an ultrasound. I didn't bother to ask her why. I knew what her answer

would be, so, defeated, I simply made the appointment. This time, there was no wait; I had to be seen immediately.

The next morning I went in for the ultrasound. It wasn't nearly as fun as the pregnancy ultrasounds I remember. Then, I was able to see the hands and face of a being I was creating, a person who would change my life, bring me joy, make me grow. A tiny, perfect person, wrinkled pink. This wasn't a being. It was a thief. An abomination. A traitor. I lay on the paper-covered vinyl table in the dimly lit room, watching the screen reveal the inside of my body as the slender brunette worked. She paused in a few places, stopping the three inch wide wand that she glided across the warm gel on my skin to take a picture. I saw the pictures that she took, but could not decipher what she was seeing in the shades of blacks and grays mottled on the little monitor.

She couldn't answer my questions. She was just "a technician" and "unqualified" to do so. The radiologist would review them, write up a report, send it to my Doctor, and then I would get a letter in the mail. It would take at least a week. I had not asked her any conclusive questions; I just wanted her to point out what the different colored blobs were in the pictures. I left the office frustrated and angry. Concentrating on driving so my thoughts would not burst into some form of road rage, I breathed deeply, slowly. I wanted to hate the brunette, be angry with her for her sideways two-step. I swatted at the tears. She knew enough, she just didn't want to tell me. It was much easier to express the rage at an innocent by-stander than something my own body had created, something without a face. I was angry, frightened, but I wasn't about to let

emotions control me, to dictate my moments. I had work to do, so many things to finish. Somehow, I would find the ability to focus. And to wait a week or more for the report.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait that long for the results. The next day as I was driving to pick up the kids from school, Kathy, the setter of appointments who knew nothing else, called. They wanted me to come in on Friday morning at 9 am to see my Doctor. *Oh no, this can't be good!* I had to teach, and the earliest I could get in would be the next Tuesday.

I filled my days with re-energized mundane. Cooking with the boys was suddenly more fun than cumbersome; I didn't mind that it took twice as long. When Aaron wiggled and hummed during Wesley's nightly book reading, I just kissed his little forehead and held him tightly instead of fussing or sending him to his room for distracting his brother. I didn't realize that I had allowed myself to be a captive of my own life. Freedom after being locked up for so long makes the air taste different, the Texas sun feel less harsh, and the rain become liquid joy. After walking into the kid's bedroom one evening long after they had fallen asleep and absorbing their peace, I knew that there was only one thing I was truly troubled about, and someone I needed to talk to.

His phone rang.

"Hi Joe, it's Terri."

"Hey. Are the kids okay?"

"Yes, they're doing fine. I just needed to talk to you for a few minutes about something."

"Okay, I have a few."



“I know you are getting married in August and that it is going to be a big adjustment for the three of you, but I need you to talk with Barbara about something.”

He skeptically responded, “Okay...”

“I don’t know how to say this but to just say it. I am having a medical issue and I don’t know what is going to happen.” It was the first time I had said it out loud, and the words sounded odd to my ears, pierced my tongue. I didn’t anticipate that my voice would crack and tumble over the words, or that the tears had been so close all these days. “I just need to know that if, on the off-chance that I should need help, that you two are prepared to take care of them a semester or more.”

His response was surprisingly gentle. “I’m sorry, Terri—for whatever it is that you are facing. Of course we would take care of them. If you are worried that we won’t give them back to you when you are better, I will have my attorney draw up any papers you want to ensure that it isn’t a permanent situation. You shouldn’t have to worry about that.”

“Alright, thank you.”

“Hey, I appreciate you being willing to ask me instead of just trying to deal with it on your own. Do you want to talk about what’s wrong?”

“No. I don’t know anything for certain yet. I just know that my major fear is how to take care of them if I’m sick. I can deal with what I need to deal with, but I can’t deal with the possibilities of what it might mean to them. I just needed to know that they would be taken care of, that if I choose, they don’t have to see me struggle with my health.”

He laughed when I asked him if he was still the best worker's compensation attorney in the state. I knew he was. He adored his job and it fit him like a finely tailored suit. I had always respected him for his dedication to and talent for his career. After we said goodnight, I snuck back into the boys' room and sat with my back against the wall, listening to the lullaby of their breathing, their lamp with the blue bulb giving the dog's coat a soft baby shade as he curled up on my lap.

Dr. Bertsch informed me that I didn't definitely have cancer. But abnormalities like mine could quickly turn into it. It seemed to be benign, but a transformation may have already begun. The only way to tell for certain was through a biopsy. A needle would be guided with the help of an ultrasound and fluid would be removed and sent to a lab somewhere. If it came back positive, she knew of several good oncologists to whom she could refer me.

I married promising and meaning forever. We just can't see that far. I had moved 2000 miles away from the life I had spent eleven years building in order to start a graduate degree in English and creative writing. I had waited too long to pursue my dream, and although it wasn't under the circumstances that I had originally hoped, I was still enjoying it. I had worked diligently toward my final semester with the treasure of writing my thesis to spur me to continue past the sleepless nights, the mound of work I was never able to finish, the frustration of knowing that "my best" as a single mom was far different than my best alone. Learning to live with the frustration of knowing that I was neither the best mother I could be nor the best student I could be while doing them at the same time was a constant challenge. I wouldn't trade my children or the

opportunity to study for anything. Writing my thesis was a prize I could try on over those tedious eighteen months of reading, writing, working and mothering with no time to build any friendships outside of school, no time to even watch television. I had earned the right to savor my last semester, just like the dragonfly eating his lunch on my shoulder.

I decided to wait for the biopsy until my thesis was completed. Perhaps I should be afraid, as I was when my marriage ended and the unknown was spread before me. I am a little frightened, but I don't want to live my life waiting for the big moments, letting the real ones, the ones I have, wash away unnoticed, unappreciated.

Sometimes the sacred is torn; maybe the only thing to do is quietly learn what it feels like to be held by a God I cannot see. As a 20 year old, I had shaken my fist at Heaven in anger after realizing that a miraculous healing of my mother's personality disorder and paranoia would not happen. It left me with a pebbled heart and a sore arm. I had shrouded years of abuse from her with academic success and false self-confidence. The mask left me empty, unknown, aching. I have learned to thrive as a single mother while methodically meeting each new challenge with a fear and trembling that, with each step, gave way to calm determination. After the sacred is torn, the only thing to do is to accept that I am being held by a God I cannot see, to realize there is something beyond my myopic vision and understanding.

I don't have today. I have this moment, and it holds enough.

## CONCLUSION

The art of creative nonfiction writing is a skill that, like all arts, needs practice and patience to develop. Negotiating the borders between a true story and the author's desire to insulate both him or herself and others involved, complicates the inclusion of some life events essential to the story. Aside from avoiding legal liability issues, understanding the ethical decisions an author must consider when telling a true story directed my narrative and choice in what stories to tell as well as which details to include. While I have told a true story by lacing together many smaller ones, the goal was to inspire the reader through the overall narrative while being honest with the spectrum of emotions and situations surrounding life as a single mother. After considering my research on the ethics of creative nonfiction, I decided that I was comfortable with my work dwelling somewhere in the middle of the truth spectrum. The feelings of my friends, family, and even ex-husband are important considerations to me, but I did not allow this to interfere with the narrative other than finding creative ways to re-word or re-write specific parts.

Finding a place to fit my own work within the creative nonfiction genre was an arduous task, but through my readings, I was able to identify authors whose work inspired me and whose style I found worthy of influencing my own. My writing does not model any one specific author but adapts personally appealing characteristics from Mary Karr, Terry Tempest Williams, and Norma Cantú. While some sections of *Locust Skin* could be considered prose poems, they were designed to fit nicely into this body of work thematically while offering a different pace of reading to sustain the interest of the

reader. I avoided the traditional and expected conventions of plot and character development by abandoning a linear narrative in order to create my own artistic space. The result is a series of “verbal snapshots” that give the reader enough information to watch my struggles, adaptation, and healing while facing great change and loss. The result is a story that is true, vivid, poetic, non-sensationalized, intended to both challenge and inspire while pointing to a larger truth.

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