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Echoes

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ECHOES

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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For my mother who taught me to love, my father who taught me to feel, and my brothers whom I will always follow into the dark.

ECHOES

By

SARAH ABIGAIL ADLEMAN

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

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Creative Writing

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Preface

*We are all haunted by our own history,
our unique problems, our personal demons
and that those experiences and fears
profoundly influence our actions.*

—Eric Kandel, IN SEARCH OF MEMORY

When I was twelve, I remember running my eyes across the books my parents kept in the living room and pulling Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* off of the wooden bookshelf. I think I chose the book mostly for the cover, a stitched linen hardcover with gold flaked font I could run my fingers over and hear the texture. Aside from the fairy tales and fables of my childhood, this book introduced me to the possibilities of literature—the art of creating emotion with words. I experienced the same sensation as a freshman in high school with Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Although the majority of the story's details have vanished, I distinctly remember reading the last page, sitting middle row two-thirds back in first period English, when Sydney Carton's revelation permeated into the silence of Mr. Hill's classroom. Two worlds brought together. I reread the first page and then the last, still years away from realizing the importance of writing for my own path, glimpsing the power of words.

Over the course of writing *Echoes*, the famous line from James Joyce's *Ulysses* has come to mind often—"Longest way home is the shortest way round." Although the writing of this piece began last August, the process to getting to the place where I could write it has been

nineteen years. When I was sixteen, my mother was killed one evening while running on the bayou behind our house in Houston. The man, who is now on Death Row in Texas, beat, raped, and then strangled her to death. This event defined my life in two ways. Both the occurrence of the event and the process of moving forward afterwards shaped who I am, how I think, and the process by which I live my life. Writer Mary Cappello says of creative nonfiction, “to compose discursively requires that we turn in the direction of the discourses that have made us who we are rather than start from a place of what we think *happened* to us in the course of our lives” (70). I choose to turn towards the event where my major discourses have stemmed from. The journey of creating a piece of art from that time began last August, but the path was found in the Summer of 2012.

After earning my Bachelors degree in 2002 in English where I dabbled with Creative Writing, the school’s literally journal, and a short stint in film school my path led me to join the Peace Corps in Bangladesh, teach English in China, discover Yoga in India and fall in love with a man from El Paso. And then in the summer of 2012, with a backpack and a girl whom I’d known for 5 months, I took off for SouthEast Asia. Externally, the intent was to further my study in meditation techniques for my profession as a yoga therapist. However, internally I was being called out to the world to discover the path that has led me to you.

In order to stay in touch with people stateside, I decided to keep an online travel journal while we traveled the coast South thru Vietnam and then cut over into the jungles and hills of Cambodia and Laos. I’d write on the trains, the long-haul buses and the overbooked non-air-conditioned vans. The writing, the editing, the sharing of experience with words was both creating and filling a space inside. I learned a tad about SouthEast Asian Buddhism and culture,

but the main awakening was realizing I could never stop writing again. And so, when I returned home to El Paso I wrote. In the early morning hours before the sun was up, I'd sit in the darkness of my living room and write. Largely influenced by both my mother and my mother-in-law who are both poets, I found the form of poetry to be what I knew, how my thoughts were processing into words on the page. By chance, or not, the following February I was emailed information about UTEP's impending centennial transformation from a fellow neighborhood association board member. As I was flipping through the renderings of the not-yet-planted grassy knolls and arroyo pathways there was a deep calling to be a part of the University. One click led to another, led to some conversations, and a couple of weeks later I found myself sitting in Lex Williford's office while he silently read the poems I'd written over the past Fall and Winter. He was gracious and kind and his words of encouragement led me to apply to the program. Leaving his office that Friday afternoon I will never forget how blue the sky was. How clean the air smelled. The freedom and elation I felt while riding my bicycle down the not yet remodeled University Avenue.

During the first year in the program I began to touch the discourses lurking underneath. The emotions and experiences began to find expression through the craft of words. My first semester, while sitting on the faded corduroy couch in Kinley's Coffee House I wrote the prose poem "Remember the Casseroles" in a matter of hours. The lines and ideas of which appear in the following pages. Blips of emotions associated with the loss of my mother emerged and took form as I began to internally excavate. Some of those forms have also found their way into the following pages including the poem, "On Getting Dressed for Her Funeral at 16" and another written about the obituary photograph. Both written under the direction of Sasha Pimentel. What

was fascinating for me is that although I'd processed my mother's death over the years through various therapies, both traditional and non, applying the craft of writing to those moments enabled different facets and lines to be drawn. New insights to be discovered. However, I still felt like a nomad wandering between poetry, which I loved for its white space and line, and fiction, for the lyrical sentence, but never really felt at home in either. Then, under the direction of Liz Scheid, I was introduced to creative nonfiction in the Fall semester 2014. My voice seemed to fill the form this genre encapsulated.

The introduction to this genre felt like an introduction to the place I'd been missing. A place I didn't know existed, but I somehow belonged, felt comfortable. In the introduction of *Bending Genre*, one of the books we read over the semester, the editors write that the genre of creative nonfiction is "a queer blend, a magnetic encounter where the positive charge of poetry met the narrative charge of fiction" (9). I was hooked. Over that semester and then in a creative nonfiction workshop held the following Spring, Liz introduced me to writers who have become my guides and teachers: Joan Didion, John D'Agata, Eula Biss, Lia Purpura, Maggie Nelson, Matthew Gavin Frank, Steven Church, Diane Ackerman, Claudia Rankine, and Dinty Moore. Another friend in the program shared with me Nick Flynn. These combined with the influences of C.D. Wright's *Deepstep Come Shining* and many works by Jorge Luis Borges, I began to understand and learn the craft of writing. I was awestruck with Joan Didion, absolutely compelled by the combination of documentary writing alongside personal emotions. As a writer, one of the goals I aim to achieve with my work is documenting the worlds I live in. Didion's work teaches us how to do this. Liz directed me to read John D'Agata's *About a Mountain* in the summer before Thesis I. Again, the weaving of factual information with his own personal

experiences was masterfully done. I couldn't put the book down. Eula Biss's, *The Balloonists*, and Claudia Rankine's, *Citizen*, were also influences in teaching me both the functions of the genre and also how to stretch the established boundaries—another attempt I strive towards. When reading Steven Church's book, *Ultrasonic*, I was struck by the essay "Curb." Church explores the loss of his brother in the essay while also showing the major events in our life will always be a part of our writing because they will always be a part of who we are. In many ways, I was scared to write about the events surrounding my mother's death. Reading the works of the above mentioned writers, and Liz's book *The Shape of Blue*, had the mentor effect: If we witness someone we identify with succeeding, then we begin to believe that we too can succeed.

For the past year I've been asked in a number of ways "what is your thesis about?" The answer has morphed and changed as the manuscript has morphed and changed, but when I first started writing there were just vague guideposts to form an answer: how trains shaped America, what moves us forward in life, what holds us back. Again, Mary Capello writes, "Creative nonfiction appreciates the power of prepositions. Instead of writing *about*, as in, "what is your book about?", it writes *from*. Or nearby, toward, under, around, through, and so on" (66). This major tenet made it difficult to answer what my thesis was about, as I often found myself describing the direction I was moving towards or the subjects I was writing around. Looking back, it now feels like I was taking the hand of the shy sixteen year old girl who lost her mother and with the tools I've learned in this program and the emotional clearing I've learned over the past 19 years, we started walking together. *Towards* the unknown finish.

One of Joan Didion's famous quotes first printed in *The New York Times* is "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I

want and what I fear.” My interest in writing lies in wanting to use the moments of humanhood truth to explore the pains and beauty of the human condition. Grounded in factual foundations I might leap, become weightless, or more often than not, dive deep into darkness, but always searching for the light. As Leonard Cohen says, “there is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Finding this light is of utmost importance to me and the work I produce. I want to challenge perspectives and thought patterns and explore what it is to be human. Armed with this intent, I sat in front of four 2x3 whiteboards and began to brainstorm, began to examine my thoughts, my feelings, and fears. At the top of the first board, I wrote *Forgiveness*. What I knew about forgiveness was from my mother. Under *Forgiveness* I wrote, *I forgive you and God does too*—the last words she is recorded to have spoken. On another board I wrote *Acceptance*. On another, *Grief. Perception. Cause & Effect. Choice*. Bullet points and quotes from texts I was consulting began to fill the white space of the board. Writer Kevin Haworth writes, “lists lead to narrative. Information leads to imagination” (92). And this is precisely what Liz and the genre of creative nonfiction has taught me. Trains seemed to be the perfect metaphor for the direction I was headed, so I began to research trains. I learned about the steam engine’s process of burning coal to heat the water to produce the steam that pumps the pistons that moves the axels to rotate the wheels. The whistle of steam expelled after build up. The soot that remains after coal is burned. These facts began to mirror my thoughts and feelings, they began to create the metaphor for the experiences being explored. They began to become the guideposts in the process of assaying.

Writer Ali Kazim refers to the words of text as the *body* “because it is made of the flesh and breath and blood of a writer” (28). All bodies take form, they take external expression. Form

is one of my favorite tools in Creative Nonfiction—quite similar to the line and white space in poetry. Margot Singer writes, “the truth lies in the form” (79). *Echoes* took on several forms, as any living thing does in its creation towards wholeness. The recognition was made early on that there would be a natural back and forth between subjects, a moving forward with one track of thought then a moving back to a different track then returning to another. Just as the bars that connect the wheels of a train move forward then back to move the whole body of the train forward. Just as we move forward then back when we’re working through loss.

Another early realization about form was the decision to justify and not use new paragraph indents so that the individual paragraphs would take on the form of train cars. Also, I wanted the words on the page to appear clean and in order because the subject matter being discussed is so messy. Grief is anything but neat. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, called me the night before my senior year in high school began, two days after the funeral and said “Tomorrow you are going to go to school and I am going to go to work because that’s what we have to do.” And so I went through the motions. I became captain of the soccer team and the cross-country team, I was accepted to a private liberal arts University in town, earned scholarships, made the Dean’s List. I went through the motions for three years and then the depression started to seep out. So I went to therapy and with my psychologist and the help of anti-depressants I checked off the goals we set. It wasn’t until transferring to a film school in another city did I spin into a severe depression and lost an entire semester of classes. The neat actions and motions from the outside led others to believe that everything was OK, but underneath it was anything but. I was even able to fool myself. I wanted the form of this piece to reflect the same.

Margot Singer writes, “The way we organize our material—the *structure* we are building as the words and ideas, images and facts spool out along the page—is an integral part of what a piece of writing is *about*” (77). The subject I’ve chosen to write about or rather the subject that chose me, is dense. It is intense and it carries with it the very real possibility of deterring readers because of its subject. The decision to include quotes along the way began from the whiteboards in trying to figure out what I thought, but as the piece emerged the quotes and outside advice began to mirror the process of grief as well. Grief is highly singular in that each individual is wholly responsible for what is happening inside of them and yet it’s almost impossible to live in the world, be a part of a family or a community and go through it alone. The quotes from others are meant to symbolize this turn to others when there is nothing inside. When there is too much inside.

The most important decision about form and structure though, came towards the end of writing the final rough draft. I was graciously awarded the Dodson Research Grant to ride trains back and forth across America in order to gain more insight for the setting and feel of the train. I boarded the train in February for 8 days of travel from Denver to Chicago to Seattle to Sacramento to Denver. The exact form of how the metaphor of train would weave itself in became clear during the many hours of watching the frozen, snow covered land of middle and northern America. The decision to use the white space in sections where the setting of the train is present is meant to mirror the emptiness of the landscape in a quintessential winter. As well as the personal landscape inside during times of grief. We feel compressed. Also, it was during this time that the decision to play with tense within paragraphs came into fruition. Liz first mentioned playing with tense in the sections of childhood to create a sense of presence for the past. I loved

the idea of using tense as a tool within this piece. The sections around childhood background kept changing and while it no longer made sense to keep those parts in complete present tense, beginning there did work. And it mimics how our memories are recalled. From the present moment we remember the past, and if we allow that past becomes the present moment. Our bodies respond by mimicking the brain's response. So within paragraphs it is intentional to move from the present tense into past tense and back again.

The largest piece of influence in finding the facts to leap from came from Eric Kandel's book, *In Search of Memory*. Eric Kandel won the Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology for his work with memory and how learning works. While reading I was immediately struck by Kandel's description of how neurons fire—as one person speaking into the ear of another in three parts: the lips that speak, the space between, and the ears that hear. The process of my mother speaking the words that would be documented during her killer's confession was mirrored exactly as a neuron fires. Writer T Clutch Fleischmann writes, “the role of knowledge is not so much to inform, but to *encourage exploration*” (48). And so with the knowledge of this very basic step of memory physiology I began to explore deeper the memory. I had no idea how intense or important this exploration would be.

It began with reading articles from the newspapers and routers about the story and the trial. It began with realizing I wasn't certain if he was still alive and if an execution date had been set. I found myself reliving moments of those first few days, moments I hadn't recalled since they happened. And when this happened I wrote. Some of the moments, like seeing her for the last time or the incident with the cardboard box on the bayou, I'd visited in poems written for previous classes. The distillation of emotion from those moments was helpful in writing for this

project. And when it became too much, I would stop and pick up Kandel's book or Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* or any of the other resources I was consulting and switch tracks.

I remember googling his name for the first time, shielding my eyes from the screen in case photographs were to appear of him. Afraid to look. Again Joan Didion: "You have to pick the places you don't walk away from" (256). There was something that wouldn't let me walk away. His personhood was being realized and the more I wrote about the event, the more questions I began to have for him. I'd never really thought about him or his situation. I realized he had been serving time for the past 18 years and one day he'd be gone. I thought I might want to visit him. I spoke with John Veldt, another student in the program who is part of my self-created cohort, and he directed me to Ann McKnight, a psychologist who works in the area of forgiveness, particularly with prisoners and their victims and/or families. It was in this conversation she said, "The reality of the other human being hasn't yet been realized." And this was exactly what I'd been experiencing. A sudden awareness that he existed. I continued to write and continued to work through this bizarre desire to connect to the man who killed my mother. I ultimately decided to write him a letter.

One of the concepts *Echoes* explores is the death penalty. As a seventeen year old who'd lost her mother to murder, the opinion was particularly easy since life without parole wasn't an option in Texas at the time. However, I'd never really thought about the death penalty as a whole or explored what the different sentences entailed. Again, T Clutch Fleischmann writes, "The traditional essay...is interested in convincing us of the truth (the biography, the research, the reality of a place where the writer does not live) rather than in exploring some truths

together” (45). It is my hope that while reading the following pages the reader embarks on a journey of discovery as well.

After I wrote the letter, I sent a copy to Ann McKnight, the psychologist I’d spoken to and to Jennifer Cohen, my husband’s cousin’s wife who’d worked on the Innocence Project as a law student. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t overlooking some detail that could be harmful either to myself or him. I also sent a copy to Liz whose experience with both the writing and the grief has mentored this project into being. And then I hung onto it. After living in El Paso for almost 10 years to the day, my husband and I moved to Denver mid-December 2015. My family visited for the holidays and when the dust settled, I opened a PO Box and mailed the letter the last week of December. I discussed the possibility of opening the door to communication with a few close friends, but not with my brothers or father. As a family, we’d never really discussed where each of us were within the grieving process. I did know that my place was different than theirs and my decision to make contact was solely based on my path as I moved through the remnants of grief being uncovered while writing.

When I received a return letter from him I called my brother Geoff, closest to me in age, immediately. What had been an act that was strictly a part of my own journey had suddenly moved into concerning my brothers and father. Geoff and I have spoken, face timed, or emailed one another almost every day since I was in college and he was in the Navy. We were the rocks for one another when my father was grieving beyond comprehension and our youngest brother, 10 years younger, was still a child. Although I’ve explained my actions and thoughts clearly, Geoff has refused all communication since I called him about receiving the letter. Both my father

and youngest brother responded differently. Most importantly though, a discourse has been started. A possible discourse towards healing together.

One of the last decisions I made was to include some of my mother's poems within *Echoes*. Throughout the work the idea of speaking and being heard is explored. The last words she spoke are what began my process of healing years ago and what began the process of writing *Echoes*. She began writing poetry when she was eleven years old and I have the majority of her poems today. I wanted the resonance of her presence in *Echoes* to be made with her actual words. The memories fade and alter, but the printed word never does. On the page in black and white it waits for the reader to breathe into it, to fill the body with life. And in this sense, the memory moves beyond the mind and into the space of eternal.

In her latest book, C.D. Wright writes, "The goal is to make not sense but art of this story" (7). And that is my hope with *Echoes*. I hope to meet you halfway. I move forward continuing to want to document the world around me, to share in the human experience, to glean the good in each of us and not to make sense of it all, but rather to find a place where I could share this experience with you. I still don't know how I feel exactly about forgiveness or the death penalty, but I also know that's OK as long as I continue to explore. Continue to assay.

One of my role models for her ability to stay true to her craft and her path in life is Maggie Harrison, a winemaker in Oregon. Every Spring she sends out a letter speaking to the last season, how the grapes grew, what the weather was like when they called to be picked in the early morning hours of darkness and frost, the process of creation, how many buckets of coffee were consumed during the process. It seems winemaking and writing aren't that different. I've kept the letter from last season on my desk, next to the blue glass lamp I bought at a thrift store

in Cloudcroft, NM and an assortment of collected shells and rocks from around the country. It is folded to show an excerpt she included from T.S. Eliot's *East Coker*. I recently found *Four Quartets* in its entirety at my local bookstore, took a seat in one of the leather chairs that sits just a little too close to the ground, and read it in its entirety. The resonance struck me immediately. My eyes wanted to dart ahead. My mind wanted to soak the words, feel the rhythm. I feel it is only appropriate to leave you with the words that met me at the beginning of this journey. The words that watch over as I type away, pause, look out the window into that place we share by writing, by reading, by being. The page that sits on my desk begins halfway through the fifth line. I've included the five lines before because they are where I find myself now. Where we meet. The past influence, the venture that began and is now coming to an end, being led, always being led by the desire to create, to try.

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of impression of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

I offer this piece of me to you. This small slice of the human condition.

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Echoes

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

~Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi

The black soot that remains after burning coal is known as lampblack or channel black and is used to make ink, paint, or products like the soles of shoes or rubber tires. Although lampblack is one of the first pigments known to man, found in ancient cave art, today it's found in factories, fueled into production. Past ash creations become carbon copies of what was into what is, returning the cycle back once more.

Eric Kandel, Nobel Prize Laureate in medicine for his work on how learning and memory work, correlates the communication of neurons to that of one person whispering into the ear of another.

In three parts:

the lips that speak

the space between

the ears that hear.

I've written the letter. It took four months, though I suppose really it took 18 years. A letter that began slow, as most letters written towards ourselves do. The letter, sealed inside of an envelope and addressed to a place I gathered was real, though I found it on the internet, was handed over to the young girl working behind the counter, metered, and sent to a man whose reality I'd just begun to realize.

It would have been enough to simply write the words I dredged into existence. The words gathered out of the sludge in the black bottom of me, long hidden beneath rocks unturned, crevices forgotten, echoes lost. It would have been enough to haul the words out, lay them to dry, clues of crumpled salt and grit—a map to the place I didn't know I was looking for. It would have been enough. But after I pieced them together, wrote them into existence, the process was only sublimated to the surface, lacking in some-not-yet-known way.

I mailed the letter mid-morning on Tuesday, December 29th. It takes 2-7 days for delivery from here to there, minus the postal holiday of January 1st, setting the arrival time sometime between Thursday, December 31st and Friday, January 8th. Once delivered, all mail is opened and searched for contraband like razor blades, string, or prohibited written or visual material. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice correspondence rules state all mail must be processed within 2 business days. It is possible, if the letter arrived the morning of Thursday, December 31st that it was vetted, approved, and delivered that afternoon, before the mailroom employees turned off the lights and left for the long holiday weekend ahead. It is more likely the letter was delivered the first week of January.

I don't actually think he will respond. And it's not his response I want. I simply want to know the cycle was completed. My words were heard. But I don't realize this just yet. I still think I'm looking for answers. I still feel like answers might bring sense.

The girl behind the counter can't meter something that doesn't exist yet, so I affix a stamp from home to a return envelope and stuff it inside. Stamps are considered contraband and my return envelope will be tossed when opened by the prison mailroom staff. If inmates don't have funds in their accounts to purchase stamps and envelopes the state will provide up to five of each per month. More if the letters are of legal matters. I don't know this and I also don't want to take anything from him.

I don't check the PO Box until Monday, January 25th. When I do there are three pieces of mail for the woman who had the address before me and a letter postmarked January 8th. It's not my handwriting, but his. It's not the stamp I sent, a black and gold headshot of Johnny Cash, but rather a Forever stamp with fireworks bursting in red glare across an American Flag. I close the small metal box and turn the key. My legs are shaking. I can't get my eyes to focus. I can barely get my hands to clasp the thin white envelope, size 4 1/8 x 9 1/2, an approved size inmates of the TDCJ are allowed to mail.

On the street I am acutely aware of the freedom I have. Of the freedom everyone around me has, the couples sharing coffee, the woman behind me who says she likes the wine colored gloves in

the window, the group of baggy panted teenagers who've gathered with a boombox on the corner. The distance between everyone on the inside and everyone on the outside, between him and the rest of humanity has never felt greater, nor more imagined. My breath has become metered. Controlled. This is when it begins to snow. Light at first, hardly noticeable. But soon, gradually, the sky and the ground will turn white, covering everything, covering all that I have ever known, in silence.

There are only two choices in a neuron: to fire or not to fire. This firing or not firing results in our actions: to speak or to remain silent, to move or to stay still. Each of our actions, the movement of one foot in front of the other or the muscles of the mouth opening, the tongue touching the teeth to form sound, each decision distills back to the neuron.

Beginning in the space of our mind, the neuron electrifies the message of intended action down the length of its axon to the synaptic terminal. Here, there is space. The synaptic cleft, like the space between one star and another or the space between your face and the face of another, is where the message changes from electrical to chemical. Where the message, like words being spoken, changes from the thoughts in our heads to the sounds that transverse across space and enter the ears listening. If the ears hear the words they are computed back into thought. Or in the case of a neuron, back into electrical code and the process repeats. One neuron whispering into the ear of another. This pathway establishes our habits and thoughts, our perception and memory. The brain from where we live.

Sometimes we are aware of the words we will speak before they leave our mouths. Consciously thinking about what and how we will voice the thoughts inside our head. Which course of action we will pursue. Often, though, the words are of impulse—an instantaneous reaction to other words spoken around us, or to us. The mind cycling through the rolodex of memories and experiences, choosing a lightening quick path to proceed. The past, present in each moment creates the space for how we move forward.

Remember when you straddled your bicycle at the top of the driveway? Your feet barely touched the concrete below. Your father, holding the seat behind you, tells you not to look back and not to stop pedaling. You can feel him steadying the sway as he pushes you down the long drive. *Don't stop*, he says, *Keep going*. And you do, down the drive, past the mailbox, and into the cul-de-sac ahead. This is when you realize he is no longer behind you. You don't look back. You watch the road slip beneath the tires and begin to balance into what feels like an act you've always known.

Your neurons connect as you pedal. This is where learning and memory reside. Not within the neuron, but rather *in the connections it receives and makes with other cells in the neuronal circuit to which it belongs*. We stop in front of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis and I'm reminded of crossing the New Bridge into Baton Rouge on visits to my mother's hometown. Those times we would pack into the Beretta or later, the Crown Victoria. My brothers and I vying for space the entire drive from the bayous of Houston to the swamps of Louisiana. Smells of grape bubble-yum, the plastic drum of generic cheese-puffs, the way the green *500 Jokes & Riddles* book we kept on the back of our toilet at home always made its way into the car. It's not about nostalgia. The importance of those details comes from their foundational basis of memory, of the beginning. When our neurons are first laying down the tracks of our whys and hows.

When brothers Augustus and John Allen arrived at the headwaters of the Buffalo Bayou in the summer of 1836, shortly after Texas won independence from Mexico, they identified the land wild with Sicklepod flowers and Sweetgum trees to be the future city of Houston. They bought

the 6,642 acres that had been previously granted to John Austin by Mexico and began the process of connecting the booming city of Galveston to the new town. Gail Borden Jr., who'd made the first topographical map of Texas and who would later invent condensed milk, was hired to survey and lay out the streets that now comprise downtown. The Chamber of Commerce was established in 1840 and by 1853 the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos & Colorado Railroad connected Houston to the rest of the country that was being fueled by development. Christian Wolmar, one of the world's principal railroad experts, writes *without the railroads, the United States would not have become the United States*. Trains were born out of the idea that steel wheels on steel rails would produce more power and less friction than wooden wheels over dirt. And in the 1820's, horse drawn carts built to pull materials and goods over quarries and coal mines proved the theory efficient. At the time, a series of canals were being slowly built across the East coast to connect cities and provide a more efficient way to transfer goods than the standard horse drawn trailer. However, a stretch of rail could go in overnight and the speed at which a train could travel far usurped the system of canals. By the 1850's the spirit of the railroad was establishing the framework for America. From the industrial tycoons who funded the endeavors to the laborers who laid and pounded rail after rail, the East connected to the West, the West to the East, and all of the places in between. As a brain functions in innovation and production when connected, this same framework propelled America forward.

The first locomotives were steam powered. Fueled by coal—carbon linked to hydrogen and oxygen, once living cells of plants and organic matter, pressurized. Hidden under rocks inside the earth's body and cooked by her internal heat over thousands of years. Coal created. Black lumps

of energy to be burned. To heat the water and produce steam. To pump the pistons and create movement. To move the wheels forward.

The Allen brothers saw the economic importance of Houston's location on the Southern coast. Through establishing the shipping channel and then connecting into the rail lines Houston joined the economic bustle of the 19th century. The city began to expand across and along the naturally occurring pathways of the bayous. Today there are over 2,500 miles of these waterways connecting through the city centers of Downtown, the Medical Center, the Museum District, and the Galleria. They pulse out into the suburbs and surrounding areas with banks of concrete and Sicklepod, along dirt paths flanked by tall grass where on any given day thousands are found walking or running, riding their bicycles, together or alone.

In 1977 both my mother and father join the 1 million others who move to Houston during the decade. My father, after attending The University of Texas at Austin and then serving as an officer in the Navy for four years. My mother, after living at home while attending LSU and then completing her MFA in theatre arts at The University of Minnesota. He moves into a garage apartment in the Heights. She pulls *Houston* out of a hat of possible places to move and buys a small 2 bed/1 bath on a street that dead ends into the White Oak bayou. In the summer of 1978 they meet at a party my father throws.

He was making fresh strawberry daiquiris. She was on a blind date. Her date asks for his daiquiri to be seedless. My father acquiesces without debate, without criticism, with just kindness he

strains the fresh red juice from the pulp and makes his guest a drink unaware that the path his life would take pivoted on this decision. My parents marry less than a year later and move into the house off of the White Oak.

My memories from this house are two-dimensional, latent images printed between sheets of mylar plastic and sticky glue. The second bedroom turned nursery decorated with the half-domes of rainbows. Asleep, next to my father on the orange and green patchwork quilt that covers their bed. My mother holding a platter of boiled crabs, my father shirtless holding a basket of fresh picked cucumbers from the garden. Easter morning, in a cotton white dress, in the backyard next to a red radio flyer holding lilies taller than I. Another morning, drinking from the hose beneath the concrete birdbath.

The snow grows thicker outside. At night I turn off all the lights inside and press my face against the cold glass. The train windows cast just enough light to see the snow banks pile by, blackness just beyond, maybe a forest of trees or an open plain, or perhaps nothing. Just us, the tracks the only indicator of where we've been, that we were once here. For a moment, another set of rails run beside us, two lines the exact distance necessary to carry the weight of this train—The snow is too thick to see the ties underneath. Laid on crushed stone and coal ash, connected by the rails running above, the rails running outside my window, two lines reflect the light back to my eyes, two lines run together until we turn one way and the other tracks another. They disappear into the blackness I can't see into, the blackness beyond the snow, beyond the snow covered ground.

Geoff was born in 1983 and the four of us move into a two-story house on Bayou Vista in the back of a neighborhood on a cul-de-sac. There is a gate in the backyard that opens to the path of the bayou and it's on this bayou, on a Sunday afternoon, at age seven, I learn to cartwheel.

*She asked me
to teach her how
a cartwheel is thrown.
I knew such things
have to be lived into.
“You’ll find out how,”
I said, “on your own.”*

*(It’s turning your world
upside down:
hand over hand
and heel over heel—
and staying balance.)*

I set the worthy number of 500 and spend the afternoon cartwheeling up and down the bayou counting each time a revolution was completed, knowing each time it was one more than ever before. Like most things, the process is slow at first, standing with arms overhead, pausing for a moment, looking at the ground ahead, thinking about the action, initiating the movement. It becomes easier with each rotation. The body and brain began to find rhythm, become familiar with the movement. When the sun started to set, she called from the gate at the bayou and I cartwheeled off of the dirt path, through the backyard, and onto the street out front, around and around the cul-de-sac, the pavement pressing loose gravel and the unevenness of terrain into my hands, each rotation rubbing deeper into callous.

When learning is taking place, our neurons pulse serotonin at the synaptic terminal which releases glutamate and strengthens the synapse communicated. When a memory is stored long-term the intensity of the serotonin increases. This causes not only increased amounts of glutamate, but also growth of new synaptic connections. In order for this new growth to occur, the nucleus of the neuron becomes involved. It activates a protein that binds to our genes—the building code for our existence—two perfectly spaced lines spun into a double helix. This protein regulates which memories are stored by creating a threshold of sorts *to ensure only important, life-serving experiences are learned*. The more one activity is repeated, like tying a shoe or learning a language, the more protein is released and the stronger the synaptic connections become. The repetition necessary for long-term memory storage is bypassed during heightened emotion or life altering moments. In these cases, the protein is released so rapidly the memory is automatically stored into long-term.

Do not go into the water, she said and handed me the cardboard box. I held it tight with all the expectation of adventure ahead and turned towards the bayou. Again and again, down the grassy slope bumping over rocks, gripping the sides all the way down to the water. Each time, moving further down the bayou as if I were in an ocean tide. With the box under my arm I'd make the trek back up to the top, brush the hair that had escaped from my ponytail out of my face and begin again. Each time, the crowd cheering in my head grew louder and when the cardboard box slipped out from underneath me and into the current of the bayou, I had no choice but to go in and rescue the now invaluable item. I removed my shoes and stepped onto the muddy banks. But

the water was clear. I could see the bottom. I could see where my feet were stepping, until I couldn't.

I don't know what she saw first—her child soaked and frightened or the blood tracks from my feet. I do know she wrapped me in a towel and put a mixing bowl of warm water at my feet. Her jaw clenched, didn't say a word. The dirt and blood dissolved, turned the water the color of rust, iron ocher. She lifted my feet out of the water and held my legs steady. When she poured hydrogen peroxide over the gashes and they fizzed white I wanted to yell, I wanted to squirm away. Instead, I gripped the wooden chair tighter, both of our faces clenched tight.

Sensory stimulus leads to two types of changes in the nervous system. Excitability and Plasticity. Excitability generates one or more action potentials in a neuronal pathway. This causes a refractory period where the firing of the action potentials briefly raises the threshold for generating additional action potentials in those neurons. These are the moments we remember. When the pathways in our brains are heightened, altering themselves from outside stimuli, coding for future survival. However, learning and memory storage are not dependent on external stimuli. Rather, whenever two stimuli inside interact then learning results. Plasticity is a functional transformation resulting in changed patterns, behaviors, and thought.

In the spring of 1989 my parents file for bankruptcy. The four of us move again, further out of the city into Northwest Houston where the floor plan is repeated every fourth house and the bayou wraps around the neighborhood on three sides like a moat. The fourth side is a giant

concrete sound wall that buffers the endless whooshing of cars on Beltway 8. A dead-end. One way in and one way out—except for the bayou. Zach is born a year after we moved and my parents don't stop singing Doug Stone's *Little Houses*. The next seven years are filled with school talent shows and Boy Scout dinners, summers in daycare, summers in camps, summers in school. First crushes, first kisses, sneaking out of bedroom windows, learning to drive, testing limits, passing from children into the questioning, challenging years of adolescence. Over these years our parents spend most evenings in the backyard watching the sunset. After work, after running together on the bayou, they sat while the day faded into night. It didn't matter that the neighbor's house and fence blocked any real view of the actual sunset—you could feel it, the time of day when transition is palpable in light and color and air. This is when they stopped. Perhaps often just to touch the base of the other in the moments between full time jobs and three children.

The middle of America is sparse in the winter. Bare trees reveal undergrowth and the fallen dead. Broken branches tangle into what could be kindling. But there is too much snow. The woods give way to expanses of open white. Fields now barren. The rivers too are thick and slow—the atoms heavier: weighted by the new density. I am endlessly tired. Often I close my eyes and what feels like days pass. Often I close my eyes for days and when I open them again, the white sky still touches the earth, the empty trees still pass by, no leaves, just the base of form.

The earliest recorded death penalty laws date back to around 1760 B.C. written by King Hammurabi of Babylon. On concrete tablets he wrote his code. The death sentence was prescribed for a number of crimes, joining other texts of the relative time like the Jewish Torah, the Christian Old Testament and ancient Athenian law. When someone was put to death during these times it was a public spectacle and meant to be painful and slow. Ways included stoning, being burned at the stake, and even being trampled by a heard of elephants.

In Britain, under Henry VIII's thirty-seven year rule, it's estimated that 72,000 people were executed. In addition to the standards of being burned, hung, or beheaded, being boiled or drawn and quartered were also common practices. The nineteenth century Italian Minister Pelegrino Rossi wrote these punishments were *the poetry of Dante put into laws*. The first recorded capital punishment in America took place in the Virginia Colony of Jamestown in 1608 for treason. Four years later the Governor of Virginia implemented the *Divine, Moral, and Martial Laws* for his constituents. Crimes punishable by death included killing chickens and stealing grapes. And in the colony of New York offenses such as denying the true God warranted death. By the 1700's works from different writers like Voltaire and Cesare Beccaria began to question the standard practice of Capital Punishment and even began to theorize against it. Thomas Jefferson, William Bradford, Benjamin Rush, and Benjamin Franklin all worked to rein in the scope of crimes punishable by death arguing degrees of culpability. Over time, the general masses began to also see the gruesome forms of death as cruel towards their fellow man, even if that fellow man had

broken a commitment to society. Death as punishment began to move towards being fast and as painless as possible. Thus, hanging and the guillotine took stage, still as public spectacle. And although the severing of someone's head from their body is gruesome it was fast and therefore seen as more compassionate. Plus, it was thought if society witnessed the act of someone being killed for a known crime it would reinforce law abiding tendencies. Foucault writes of these times the system sought *not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body.*

The first state to move executions out of a public venue and into a correctional facility behind walls was Pennsylvania in 1834. And in 1846, Michigan was the first state to abolish the death penalty completely. Other states followed and by the end of the 19th century, countries around the world were all coming to the same conclusion. However, this was simply a fractal effect and many other states in America and other countries around the world continued to vary their views on capital punishment.

Hanging was the main means of execution in America through the 19th century. The first electric chair was built in New York in 1888 and executed the first prisoner in 1890. The state of Texas authorized the use of the electric chair in 1923 and on February 8, 1924 executed the first Texas inmate. Four more were executed by electrocution that same day. The same year, after a failed attempt to pump cyanide gas into an inmate's cell while he slept, the State of Nevada built the first gas chamber.

The peak of incarcerations and executions in America was between 1920-1940. During the 1930's, an average of 167 people a year were put to death. Compare this to the statistics of the second highest year: ninety-eight people in 1999. The 1930's were also arguably one of the worst economic periods of our country. On January 29, 1919, Congress signed into law the 18th Amendment banning the production, transportation, and sale of alcohol which went into effect a year later. The law caused thousands of Americans to lose their jobs when breweries, distilleries, saloons and restaurants were forced to shut down. And it's estimated that during the twelve year ban America governed the 18th Amendment, \$11 billion in tax revenue was lost and about \$300 million was spent trying to enforce the law. Then, on October 29, 1929 the stock market crashed and further west, in the American Plains, the worst drought in recorded history made it impossible for seeds to take root and crops to grow. The Great Depression had begun. In a presidential radio address given on October 18, 1931, President Herbert Hoover argued that what was facing America was the question of *human relations, which reaches to the very depths of organized society and to the very depths of human conscience*. He argued that American life was built on the responsibility each of us has to our fellow man and the plight America was facing was from *failure to observe these primary yet inexorable laws of human relationship*. President Hoover was unseated by the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 who ran on the platform to end prohibition. It's said he celebrated his win with a dirty martini and over the course of the next eight years more people were put to death than any other time in American history.

However, post-World War II between 1950-1970, support of the Death Penalty in America and other countries came to an all time low. Perhaps the world had witnessed enough killing. Appeals reached an all time high and the average length of stay for someone on Death Row increased from 6 months to 2 years.

In 1958, the Supreme Court interpreted what the forefathers meant by *cruel and unusual punishment* in the trial of Trop v. Dulles, a citizenship case. Chief Justice Warren concluded *the basic concept underlying the Eighth Amendment is nothing less than the dignity of man. While the state has the power to punish, the Amendment stands to assure that this power be exercised within the limits of civilized standards.* He goes on to speak the words that are often quoted in opposition to the Death Penalty, *The Amendment must draw its meaning from the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society.* Fourteen years later, in 1972, the court is presented with the decision of if the death penalty violates the Eighth Amendment. In a five-four vote and over 200 pages of dissents and concurrences the court rules the current application of the Death Penalty to be in violation of the Eighth Amendment. In his concurring statements, Mr. Justice Brennan writes, *Death is truly an awesome punishment. The calculated killing of a human being by the State involves, by its very nature, a denial of the executed person's humanity.*

He concludes further, *In the United States, as in other nations of the western world, "the struggle about this punishment has been one between ancient and deeply rooted beliefs in retribution, atonement or vengeance on the one hand, and, on the other, beliefs in the personal value and*

dignity of the common man that were born of the democratic movement of the eighteenth century, as well as beliefs in the scientific approach to an understanding of the motive forces of human conduct, which are the result of the growth of the sciences of behavior during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mr. Justice Blackmun dissented with his opinion that the Death Penalty *violates childhood's training and life's experiences, and is not compatible with the philosophical convictions I have been able to develop. It is antagonistic to any sense of "reverence for life." ... I fear the Court has overstepped. It has sought and has achieved an end.* It is this moral conflict and question of degrees of culpability that lead to the nine year moratorium on all executions. Over 600 sentences were moved from Death to Life. Then, in 1976, the Supreme Court rules that State assigned capital punishments may continue and a man in Utah is executed by firing squad. The corneas from his eyes are saved and donated for a transplant giving the gift of sight to another.

Today, there are five legal methods of execution in the United States. Lethal Injection. Electrocutation. Gas Chamber. Hanging. Firing Squad.

The state you're prosecuted in determines the eventual method in which you will die. Although lethal injection is the primary method for the thirty-three states in which the Death Penalty is a path, Tennessee would impose the electric chair if the lethal drugs were unattainable. Oklahoma, the gas chamber. Utah, the firing squad.

But most likely it will be lethal injection—bound to a gurney. Imagine: someone attaches heart monitors to your chest and you (and everyone else in the room) can hear the beep, beep, beep of the beat inside. Another someone (maybe the same someone) will then insert two needles into your veins. This person is not medically trained. So, be wary if they miss the vein and the drug goes into the muscle. There will be intense pain. They may have trouble finding a good vein. You will lie on the gurney, strapped down, while you are pricked again and again, your loved ones (maybe others you don't recognize) wait behind a concrete wall, thick glass window, curtain drawn, until the needle connects to the flow of your blood. The saline solution is started. The warden signals for the curtain to rise. Do you look? Do you look over to your children, your wife, to the faces you don't immediately recognize? They are looking at you. It's your last chance to look. Sodium thiopental will start to flow through your veins and this is the last memory you will have before falling asleep. Pavulon or pancuronium bromide will be injected next. Your muscles will become paralyzed and then you will stop breathing. And finally, potassium chloride will stop the beating of your heart. Death by overdose. Death by respiratory and cardiac arrest. But you'll be unconscious. You won't feel a thing.

My mother kept a prayer garden in the backyard. Each morning before dawn, before the light ushered in the demands of day, she woke and sat next to the concrete birdbath carried from house to house to house, and the flowers planted and pruned each season. Peonies, roses, butterfly weed. She didn't wear slippers or shoes, just barefoot, skin to concrete, cool and damp in the early Houston hours. The morning after she didn't come home I found a baby sparrow in the garden next to the birdbath, under the Ash tree. I thought if I could nurse the bird back to health my mother would be OK. I made a home for the bird in a shoebox, cut grapes for it to eat, and kept it on my bedside table for two nights.

Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize winner in Economics for his work with Amos Tversky on decision making, discusses the natural human tendency to find causality in the world around: *a large event is suppose to have consequences, and consequences need causes to explain them.* Somehow causes bring meaning. If we can find causes or intentions then it helps to understand the place from where the effect was born.

In 1839, the anatomist Mattias Jakob Schleiden and Theodor Schwann formulated the now ubiquitously accepted fact of cell theory. The theory is composed of three basic precepts: First, all living organisms are made of cells (I am you and you are me). Second, the cell is the basic unit of life (Distilled to form, we are the same). Third, all cells are generated by other pre-existing living cells (Those before to those after).

Just a year earlier the first telegram in the United States was sent across two miles of wire in New Jersey. Congress sees the potential for this new form of communication and allocates \$30,000 to Samuel Morse. A line is laid from the Capitol in D.C. to the Mt. Clare Train Depot in Baltimore. On May 24, 1844, while Congress watches, Morse uses his code of dashes and dots to send a message to Alfred Vail in Baltimore. Vail receives the message, decodes it, and sends it back to the Capitol chamber waiting in silence. Morse reads aloud, *What hath God wrought?* The message is taken from Exodus 23:23 and the International Standard Version is the only translation that poses *What hath God wrought* as a question. The King James uses an exclamation mark and the Douay-Rheims a period. The Holman Christian Standard reads *What great things God has done!* and the International Standard translates the verse as, *What has God accomplished?*

The telegraph lines were installed across the country next to the rails. And 150 years later fiber optic cables for high speed internet are laid along the same routes. America is connected by lines—rail lines, telegraph lines, telephone lines, internet lines—all drawn across for communication. Railroad historian and photographer, Lucius Beebe is quoted as saying, *It is no accident of circumstance that the most beautiful devisings and artifacts of American record have all been associated with motion and movement, the transport of people and things going somewhere else.* The transport of ideas and thoughts sent from one location to another.

I smell her in random places. It happens more in the first years after, in gas stations or on the streets of foreign cities. But mostly in grocery stores. It's her perfume. I follow the unsuspecting

women up and down the aisles, stopping when they stop, moving when they move. Following like I also needed apples and milk. Silently inhaling as if I might be able to breathe her into existence from the place she disappeared. Once, I asked a woman inline in front of me what perfume she was wearing. She looked up, continued to unload her basket and answered like I knew she would, *Elixer*.

That's what my mom wore, I said.

Memories are stored in the cerebral cortex—the outer layer of the brain, composed of gray matter, crumpled in on itself like a newspaper—where they are originally recorded. The memory of the last time I saw my mother is stored in the occipital lobe of my brain. She is standing in the living room, just home from work. I'm standing by the front door in running clothes on my way to the first cross-country practice of the season. It's a week before my senior year in high school. I'm frustrated at the perceived constraints of my life. I want to pierce a second hole in my ears and need parental approval. I'd watched my friend's brother numb his ear with ice and press a sewing needle through the lobe. Watched the fresh red blood ooze down his neck. I wanted it to be fast—relatively painless. *Not today* she says. It was a Tuesday. Deciding my silence would serve as communication for my frustration, I turn to leave. *Sarah*, she calls to me from the doorway. I remember her saying *I love you*. But it could've been, *I'll see you later*. I do remember looking back. Her smile. I want to remember I said *I love you too*, but in reality I think I just nodded. I do know I didn't walk across the living room. I didn't touch her, feel her arms or touch her face. I will replay this moment in my mind forever. We are not quite frozen, we are breathing. Our eyes are blinking. One terminal emanating towards the other.

I've often wondered what his intention was the evening he threw his leg over the bicycle and started pedaling. What caused him to leave his house? Where was he headed? To the store to buy cigarettes (did he smoke?) or milk (for his children)? Or was it an unmeditated impulsive action. A part of me wants him to have set out with the intention of: knowing she (women) ran on the bayou in the evening (sometimes alone). This, of course, leaves space for intervention—as thoughts exist in our mind, so does the potential to change them. To roll them over in consciousness, bathe them in perspective, before the action potential is fired.

Retroactively eternal—cause & effect. The snake eating its tail. David Hume argues there are only three principles of connection between different ideas: *resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause or effect*. Out of connection, our brains birth meaning. It feels wrong to find meaning in death. But it feels hopeless to find none.

The sun set while I ran the streets around my high school during practice. While she ran on the bayou behind our house. While my father watched the sky from the backyard—vivid orange and lavender lighting into formations. He was waiting for her to return when I got home, the sky turned dark, the cicadas moved to silence.

Every time we recall an event we bring it back into consciousness. Restoring. But each time we recall, we resave with input from the current moment. If the memory is recalled enough the event will become distorted, magnified, polished. Our memories fall into two different categories:

implicit and explicit. Implicit memory is not recalled consciously, rather it is responsible for those motor and perceptual skills that become second nature. Like running or riding a bicycle. Explicit memory is what makes it possible to simultaneously be in the present and the past and the future. Our memory stores the nouns of our existence from which our thoughts are drawn, to be inside of once again, to relive. The physical body responds with the heart beating faster, our breath catching, the stomach clenching into a sharp pit. Or a deep breath, a smile, a release. With PTSD, the pathway of a memory in heightened emotional stress becomes hardwired into survival. Soldiers who have returned from combat with crippling PTSD have done the work of rewiring these pathways. With the work of re-remembering the event or revisiting the memory, armed with the tools of conscious knowledge, I've watched several re-circuit the traumatic pathway away from fear and anger and into a place of stillness. They had to do the work themselves, with the intent of moving through the space they found themselves stuck in, reliving. No pill or external physical manipulation. The work of the mind is ultimately internal. We are each the conductors of our existence.

I remember the helicopters and the reporters. The police. I remember the doorbell on the third day. I remember my friend's father standing at the threshold of the neighbor's house. Telling me to come home. I remember asking him while we walked if everything was ok. I remember him looking down at the ground and saying *not exactly, no*. I remember walking into the living room filled with friends all silent. Being escorted into my bedroom. My brothers and father waiting. The thin quilted bed. I remember sitting between my brothers. My father kneeling on the ground in front of us. And here is where time freezes. Where we become stone statues replicated by

preserved circumstance, like a display in the museum of mind. I lift the velvet rope and walk over to my father, his head lowered about to speak the words that will forever change our lives. I stand in front of him and touch his head. Cup his ears from the scream that will leave us deaf for years.

If this train were to flip, would I survive? If say we derailed, slid down the bank and tumbled across the plains, would I ricochet inside my tiny compartment, against the glass and blue carpet walls and plastic bedside table. Would I be able to grip the seatbelt harness above me or maybe wrap an arm into one of the thick ribbed curtains while the metal train car crashes and sparks across the earth? I don't think I sleep, but when I wake the carpet burns across my face and forearms scathe. Was it not a dream? I lay in bed, still, watch the blue curtains sway and rattle from the tracks underneath.

I insisted on burying the bird in the garden. I wrap her body in a paper towel, folding the wings across her body and bury her without the shoebox beneath the ash tree. Beside the concrete birdbath. It's Jewish tradition to place stones on graves, though this isn't why at sixteen I placed stones on the bird's grave. It's an act of acknowledgement that under the earth lies a once living being. Nobody quite knows where the Jewish tradition stems from, but it became a mitzvah, a commandment. If you are walking from one town to another and pass by a cairn of stones, the mitzvah commands you stop. Pay homage, stack more stones. Rabbi Goldie Milgram makes an argument for the stones to be a metaphor for God. The Ten Commandments were carved from stone. Moses beat the stone he was sitting on when his sister Miriam dies. Stoning was a form of capital punishment and stones were used to cover dead bodies as they lay on the earth. Returned to the cells of before.

In 2008, two art kits thought to be around 100,000 years old were discovered by a team of researchers in a South African cave. The kits included natural pigments like ochre and charcoal as well as grindstones, abalone shells, and bone. The researchers deduced that the pigment was ground into a fine powder and then mixed and heated with other crushed stones or bone in the abalone shells along with liquid of some sort, perhaps blood or urine or animal fat. Artificial holes in the cave walls indicate temporary scaffolding was used for high, hard to reach corners, deep inside, void of light. Torches are necessary to illuminate the expressions. Sometimes a natural protrusion inside a cave wall indicates the location of the drawings. The earth's natural formations. And sometimes it's sound. Sometimes, its the places in the cave where the echo changes. A call, a vibration out, ricocheting the passageways, the crevices, an echo back—listen.

Find the place where the change happens and like memories in a mind, pictographs mark the cave walls.

The German chemist, August Wilhelm Hofmann, began his research career by studying the chemical constituents of coal tar, or lampblack. His work spurred hundreds of experiments and discoveries in chemistry. One of his students, William Henry Perkin, discovered the synthetic composition for the color mauve in 1856 in a London laboratory. The dye industry exploded. The once expensive and hard to cultivate natural colors such as indigo and sienna became affordable and available as synthetic pigments. It was because of these discoveries in the world of chemistry, Santiago Ramón y Cajal was able to use a combination of soaking preserved blocks of brain tissue in a silver nitrate solution and dyes which darkened the nerve cells—from the dendrites to the axons. The technique, developed by Camillo Golgi the Italian physician who would later share the Nobel Prize with Cajal, was labeled *the black reaction*. It was these inventions that led to Cajal's established Neuron Doctrine: the nervous system is made of individual cells that form connections between one another. This doctrine falls under the broader cell theory.

Political parties have long since staked territory in issues concerning life and death, the beginnings and ends to our time as citizens. Although politics in Texas are starting to change, the reputation for electing officials staunchly in pro-life and pro-death penalty legislation remains our foundation and reached a tipping point in the eighties and early nineties. When running for reelection, Mark White's campaign aired a commercial of the former Governor walking through

a display of large photos of people executed during his term to show his toughness against crime. And the oil and gas tycoon, Clayton Williams, who unsuccessfully ran as the republican gubernatorial candidate and may be more infamously remembered for saying of rape “if it’s inevitable, relax and enjoy it,” claimed his proposed laws to expand the death penalty were "the way to make Texas great again." However, since 2000, the number of people incarcerated on Death Row across America has been declining. In 2000, 3,593 people. In 2009, 3,173 people. On April 1, 2015, 3,002. On October 1, 2015, 2,959.

The decline in numbers is the result of several factors. The main reason is six states have since abolished the death penalty. Four of the states transferred all of their death row inmates to life in prison and two of the states chose to abolish the law but did not make it retroactive. Thus, there are still twelve inmates in Connecticut and two in New Mexico waiting. Six additional states choose not to abolish the death penalty, but to add Life without Parole as an option for the juries.

There were 299 people between 2000-2013 who died on death row because of natural causes, suicide, or murder by another inmate. Compared to the 761 people who were executed. Exonerations due to innocence account for the release of 156 people since 1973. The occurrence of people being wrongfully committed has significantly decreased due in part to DNA testing.

~~There are 271 death row inmates in Texas.~~

There are 263 death row inmates in Texas. Of these, ten are women. The peak of those sentenced, following the national trend, was in 1999, 460 persons nationally, forty-eight people in Texas.

The phone is ringing when we walk into the house. They made an arrest. Found him in a convenient store buying (what?) four days after. He'd shaved his head somewhere in the in between. He was still on the bicycle. He gave a full confession. I hold the wooden bench during the trial—worn, polished wood curving under my thighs. I wanted to look at him. I didn't want to look at him. I wanted to see the last person my mother saw, the last person she spoke to. He was closest to her in this way. If I looked at him, maybe I could see her. The last of her physical existence still linked to him. But I also didn't want to see what she saw.

He brags about it to another inmate. I don't remember if I hear prosecution relay this to the jury or if someone tells me about it afterwards. It comes up in the trial as a matter of culpability. Perhaps he was scared. Trying to build a reputation in the first days of incarceration. I was sixteen. He was twenty-six. Life without parole wasn't an option in Texas at the time.

Today I am thirty-five. He is forty-five. When I was five, he was fifteen. When I was nine, he was nineteen. I know nothing else. I want to know what he recalls from that day. What are the memories he replays in his mind? I wonder if he is angry or if he's found some sort of peace. I wonder into the space of my mind creating, where time tries to stop, where anything and nothing is possible simultaneously. He's been on death row for eighteen years. The average length of

time in Texas is twelve years. I know one day the space of wonder will never have a stopping point, only added questions that can never be answered.

By the mid 1930's, after bolstering towns into cities and transforming cities into beating synapses, trains in America started to lose their momentum. Looking to keep up with the growing country, the rails underwent major changes, like adding air-conditioning and increasing the speed of travel—switching from steam to diesel. Don Ball, Jr., railroad historian, writes of the time, *great changes were in store for the railroads, and a new spirit of adaptability to change—both physical and psychological—was very much needed.*

My father tells me one morning while driving to church that a counselor told him to expect a year of grieving for every year they were married. He says, *So I guess I have eighteen more years.* He says it like he has no other choice. He has been committed and must serve out the allotted time. The first year gapes the holes left by her. Emptiness highlighted by the details we are afraid of forgetting, but too painful to consistently remember. All time becomes slotted into before and after. One day, not long ago, I realized I've lived longer without her than with her. This time before and time after has become balanced by the outstretch of time that lies ahead: a curve up to the peak, a general tumbling fall to the point of equal after.

The Hebrew word for Lord is *adonai*, which has one of its roots in *ehden*, or threshold. Threshold as in: *edge, brink, beginning.* As in: *We begin after we cross the threshold.* Threshold as in: *limit, verge, inception.* As in: *I'm on the verge.* In physiology or psychology, a threshold is

the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an effect. As in: *pain*.
Another word for threshold is *limen*. Not to be confused with *liman*, a geological term to describe a muddy marsh near the mouth of a river.

Walking back to my room after dinner one of the exit doors between cars is open. The night air rushes past in pure black. It would be easy to lose one's balance—stumble, trip, fall thru an unexpected open door. How long, I wonder, would I tumble before I stopped? My hands instinctually grip the rail wrapped in red and white tape. I close my eyes. The metal floor sends the jolts of the tracks up my legs, my knees and hips, my spine cushions into sway. I loosen my grip and begin to feel the vibrations sound through the body, pulse sensation into my ears. The cold wind pricks my cheeks, finds its way through the fibers of my clothes. When I open my eyes again we're slowing into a station. The outskirts of an unfamiliar town, street lamps glow yellow chipped curbs, old snow piles the roads edges.

Growing-up our family made biannual pilgrimages to South Padre Island off the coast of Texas. I think one of the major reasons my parents packed three kids, luggage, and coolers into the Grand Marquis on three day weekends was for the sunsets at the dunes. Each night we'd pilgrimage to where the road on the island stopped and hike into the white sand. The island is skinny enough that from the top of the dunes you can look west across the bay towards the mainland and then turn your head east and look across the Gulf.

While my parents sat in stillness at the top of a dune and watched the sun draw out departure across open sky like a well-orchestrated concerto, my brothers and I would chase each other in high intensity games of hide-and-go-seek. We became particularly attuned to sliding from the top of a dune like snowboarders without the board.

*Swells of sand are held whole
by the undulating circuitry
of sea vines. Their green
life force networks from dune to dune
and harbors lizards with crusty brown skin.*

*Until the sun goes our children
play maneuvers in their vastness,
losing and seeking each other.
They roll with my lost abandon
down slopes silvering in fading light.*

*My blood pulses a prayer
for my abandon lost
sometime ago between tides.
My vision transfixed on a setting sun,
I ceased to be partnered with the landscape*

*and grew into spectator.
My visits now are brief.*

Right before the sun would set, my father would call us to join them. *Look close and you'll see the green flash*, he'd say. We'd all sit staring at the sun, trying not to blink as it fractured the horizon. *Don't blink. Don't blink or you'll miss it.*

The first years after, we continued to make the trip South. My brothers and I would bring friends, each of us trying to avoid existing in a place with four, where the fifth was so honestly missing. I started walking down the dunes to the ocean during these years. I remember walking back and looking up towards the dunes, silhouettes lit by the setting sun. I watched my brothers, ages fifteen and seven, and their friends jump to surf down the dune, one by one. Alone at the top of the dune, my father walked away from the edge as far as he could get then started running, his arms pumped, his tan stout body moved along the top of the dune and he leapt, flung his body head first off the side of the dune.

And this is how I remember him. Suspended in air, arms open wide, daring the ground to break his fall, daring the ground to hurt him more than he was hurting. He hit headfirst and tumbled, without control, without trying to stop himself he tumbled as fast as gravity would allow to the ground below.

Because sensory, motor and cognitive functions are served by multiple pathways the same information is processed simultaneously in different regions of the brains. Because of this, if one path is damaged, other paths may compensate, *at least partially, for the loss.*

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone who has died. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response, grief also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, and philosophical dimensions. Our brains will often ignite physical responses when faced with psychological issues. We change the paradigms from where we view the world. How we interact with others. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, first discusses the five stages of grief. Denial/Isolation. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance.

Before he killed her, she said, *I forgive you and God does too.* I've often wondered when—exactly—did she speak these words. I imagine it was after the initial shock of being attacked. After the hypothalamus sent a message to the adrenal glands to produce adrenaline. After the initial increase in heart rate and respiration. After the muscles in her legs felt heavy and light at the same time. I don't imagine it was her initial response. And I don't imagine she screamed the words. I wonder how close he was. If his ear was near her lips when the words left her mouth. Or was he leaving. Was he walking away, his back turned to her and from the ground, hidden by the tall grass, did she say, *I forgive you. And God does too?*

For a long time I said to myself, *how could I not?* But he never factored into the equation. It wasn't a person that needed forgiving, it was the entire situation. All of the circumstances that led to the consequence at hand. Too many *what ifs* to counter the one big cleft we found ourselves standing on. Life needed forgiving, not him. He became insignificant in the process as soon as punishment was set. What she did do with her words was open the door to acceptance. Acceptance that life, no matter how hard we try or how hard we fight it, will ever be as it was. Forgiveness comes after. After the necessary stops, cycling through, denial into anger into depression back to isolation back to depression, they catch us thick and flatten into our road ahead. Returning, each time a new experience, each time familiar from before, remembering. Sometimes they catch us whole and their richness provides movement. Sometimes they catch us stuck. Without feeling. Just a body in motion. Time dictates we are always moving forward, even when grief dictates we stop.

The night before my senior year in high school my mother's mother called me from Baton Rouge. She said, *Tomorrow you are going to wake-up and go to school and I will go to work because that's what we have to do.* I don't remember much from these first few months. I do remember family friends sleeping on the couch at first. I do remember the casseroles stacked high in our freezer. Each evening after school, after cross-country practice, I'd remove one of the perfectly portioned meals wrapped in foil and preheat the oven to 425. Repeat the following evening. Through the motions. Hugged father when he couldn't stop crying. Listened when youngest brother questions if there is a God. Run more, try to stay awake in class, run harder, have asthma attacks, run. Graduate. Drink too much. Use pot as an anti-depressant. Graduate

college. Wear her jewelry. Through the motions. Become the parent of your brothers because your father can't. Become the parent of your father. Do not stare at mothers having coffee with their daughters. Travel. Do the things she would have done. Do the things she never would have. I can't call her when I'm pregnant. I can't call her when I miscarry. Dip your hands into the bloody water and scoop the fetus out of the toilet. Wrap it in toilet paper. Bury in the garden by your front door.

In order for the transcontinental railroad to connect from Sacramento to the existing rails of the East, 1,776 miles of track would need to be laid through the mountain ranges of the Sierras and the Rockies. This required tunnels to be blasted and hand-carved out of the granite and stone of the mountains. The longest was Tunnel No. 6 measuring 1,659 feet in length. Two feet of progression a day was considered good progress. In addition, bridges over rivers and retaining walls to bolster the sides of mountains and reinforce for the weight of the trains was all completed over the course of six years. On May 10, 1869 the two teams of workers met at Promontory, Utah with a golden spike, cars filled with reporters, politicians, and cases of champagne. And in June 1876, the Transcontinental Express set the record of eighty-three hours and thirty-nine minutes to make the trip between New York City and San Francisco.

Thunder is the sound of pressure around the lightening bolt. The air rapidly expanding. Lightening always creates two channels: from the clouds to the ground—from the ground to the clouds. The second path creates so much electricity in such a short amount of time the air has no

time to expand. Compressed. Particles explode outward, a shock wave in every direction, an explosion. A loud, resounding rupture.

The hardest part was knowing he went back. The biggest *what if* came from her movement. He was leaving. The report reads he heard her moving and saw a witness approaching. So he returns. To her beaten, bloody body. *Mother, don't move. Be still.*

In the photograph she is smiling, her chin turned towards the light, her forty-seven year old hair died dirty blonde, big green eyes my youngest brother inherited. Her smile is not closed mouth, made only with her eyes, her smile shows teeth, spreads her lips wide, raises her cheekbones. The photograph was taken in our backyard. After an afternoon summer storm, the butterfly weed and roses glisten in the background along a wooden fence. The concrete birdbath sits beneath the Ash tree, rain water collected to fill the belly of a sparrow. It hung in the hallway between bedrooms, next to school photos with books and fake apples and the rodeo photo of us years younger. My brothers and I sit with our mother on a bucking stuffed bull, my father hangs from the horns, we are all open mouthed, frozen in joyful chaos, staring into the camera.

I don't know who took her photo off of the wall and out of the frame to make a copy for the newspaper. To accompany the final words summarizing her life. I wonder if they cleaned the glass in the process. Wiped the dust collected before once again hanging the frame back on the wall. It's the first image I see when I think of her, a headshot saved photo to my memory. I've

recalled the memory so often I don't know which details are real and which ones I've created to fill the blank spaces.

The black lamé fabric rips at the seam when I pull
the zipper up the length of my torso

Barefoot, stockingless : I stand alone in front of the mirror

Mother, this is the only black dress I own

The contract between citizens is if you break the code of humanity and commit the crime of murder, you secede your right of freedom. Depending on where you live, death will end your life sooner rather than later. Michael Selsor served thirty-six years on death row, the longest amount of time to be served between conviction and execution. Nationally, the average amount of time between sentencing and execution has increased from six years in 1984 to sixteen years in 2012. Many who oppose the Death Penalty advocate for Life Without Parole. Selsor is quoted as saying, *the only difference between death and life without parole is one you kill me now, the other one you kill me later. There's not even a shred of hope. There's no need to even try to muster up a seed of hope because you're just gonna die of old age in here...*

Death Row Phenomenon refers to the harmful effects on inmates. It includes such conditions as extended exposure in solitary confinement and the mental anxiety of an impending death. Death Row Syndrome on the other hand refers to the psychological illness that results from Death Row Phenomenon. *When the doors finally close and one finds oneself facing banishment to the carceral state—the years, the walls, the rules, the guards, the inmates—reactions vary. Some experience an intense sickening feeling. Others, a strong desire to sleep. Visions of suicide. A deep shame. A rage directed toward guards and other inmates. Utter disbelief.* This is of course a matter of perspective. Everyone has an impending death—with walls or without. Some of us are simply more aware of this one certainty—with walls or without.

The arguing points on both sides seem to stem from fear. The kind of fear that comes from the same place hope hides. In the case of Life Without Parole the fear that one day the convicted

might earn parole or a governor might reduce the sentence. Or hope they are afforded days to perhaps, find redemption. And in the case of Death, the fear they might be exonerated or experience anything but punishment before they die. Hope, perhaps, they will die before finding peace or hope they have found peace before they die.

In his famous treaty *Of Crimes and Punishment*, Cesare Beccaria writes, *Let us consult the human heart, and there we shall find the foundation of the sovereign's right to punish; for no advantage in moral policy can be lasting which is not founded on the indelible sentiments of the heart of man. Whatever law deviates from this principle will always meet with a resistance which will destroy it in the end; for the smallest force continually applied will overcome the most violent motion communicated to bodies.*

The verb *to serve* stems from the Latin word *servire*, to be a slave or the noun *servus*, slave. The definition today has broadened in its action to include: *to be of use, to be worthy of trust, to prove adequate*, and *to work through*. Serving time, the base remedy for a shattered psyche.

We both have been serving time. My prison made of hours and days, graduations and finish lines, weddings and births. Each joyous moment simultaneously a prison. I was a freshman in college when I realized my mother would never witness any of the marked events of my life. It struck me quite suddenly while filing papers in the financial aid office where I worked. It seemed her loss would give forever, a life sentence.

Early in the work of memory Freud postulated that there are different neurons for different purposes. In the case of perception, the way we perceive the physical world around us, the synaptic connections of the neuron are fixed. And in neurons concerned with memory, the connections change in their strength depending on the amount of time given to that particular circuit. It seems reasonable to think that if we recall a memory often enough it will become a fixed perception, a cairn for our thoughts. Awareness is a synonym for perception: *a feeling of being grateful or an ability to understand the worth, quality, or importance of something*. When we have perception, we have awareness.

The more we perceive from the world around us, the larger and more intricate the map for these perceptions becomes inside our brains. We literally can learn so much detail about the world around us that the hippocampus, where memory is saved, becomes larger. When we travel certain roads often and get to know the intricacies—where the sidewalk cracks, the dent of a mailbox, a scar on the body of a loved one—they become landmarks. These places we know become the shelf from which we draw details when our brain doesn't have time to fully perceive. Light on the retina, the vibration of the fibers in the ear drum, the sinus cavities of the nose, are all but a piece that contribute to the brain's map. When something doesn't make sense, when there is a rift in our perception, we will draw from what we know and try to give it sense. It's how we find our reality, *holding tight to some anchor back there*.

In physics, movement is described as any change in the position of an object with respect to time as a reference point. Time is just space between one moment and another. Between ourselves then and ourselves now. Between me and you. Time is the movement we cannot control. We are simply along for the ride, existing only in this moment. Sometimes standing still. Sometimes frozen. Sometimes leaping. Sometimes falling. But always here. Right here, from one cleft to another.

I will forever be homesick for a place that no longer exists. A place that stopped existing years ago, reachable only in my mind. But this place that no longer exists, the home lost, has less to do with losing another and more with the idea that no matter what has happened in life, if we have lost or not, we can never return to before. It's all memory. In his play, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, Tennessee Williams writes, *Has it ever occurred to you that it's all memory, except for the present moment you can hardly catch it going*. I'm reminded of a line in Zach Braff's first movie, *Garden State: Family is missing the same imaginary place*. Missing the same moments which ultimately is missing the same emotions. The same place inside.

The word *volve* comes from the latin word *volvere* meaning to roll or turn over, especially in the mind. It's where *evolve* and *revolve* stem from. In the case of *evolve* the "e" stems from Latin to mean *out* or *away*. As in, *eclipse*, *eliminate*, *eternal*. The *re* of *revolve* also stems from Latin meaning *again* or *backwards*. As in, *record*, *remain*, *refuse*. Respond. Our brains are constantly changing and connecting. Regions of the Prefrontal Cortex are updated every five-eight seconds. This means from the first breath we take to the last we expel, our brain is changing itself.

Recalculating. Forming new memories, filling in the pieces that are missing. Building new pathways, or reinforcing old ones. Existence as revolution. Evolution a reduction into existence.

Texas was the last state to sign into legislation the option of life without parole for those facing the Death Penalty. The law is not retroactive. A violent motion communicated to bodies.

The Jewish prayer verse said at the time of death is called the *Shema* which translates as LISTEN. The *Shema* is also spoken upon waking in the morning and falling asleep at night—creating a line of intention. An intent to listen. Among ash and concrete angels, listen. The definition of *hear* takes up a page and a half in the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Entry number twelve of the definition reads, *to have heard of or to be aware*. We cannot be aware if we do not hear. We cannot hear if we do not listen.

Theodosius Dobzhansky, one of the founders of the modern synthesis of evolutionary theory, writes, *Nothing in biology makes sense except in light of evolution...without that light it becomes a pile of sundry facts some of them interesting or curious but making no meaningful picture as a whole*. If we were to stretch out the veins and arteries and capillaries in our body, the pathways that carry our blood would cover over 60,000 miles. The earth's circumference at the equator is 24,901 miles which means we could each circle our blood 2.4 times around the thickest part of earth. Our nervous system is over forty-five miles long. The pathways created from one neuron to another, the length of feeling in your big toe to your brain, the pit in your stomach to the breath in your lungs. The distance between the bayou where she was found and the Polunsky Unit is ninety miles. Two bodies worth of nerves.

Sometimes it all stops. On the tracks, pitch black every direction, just the memory of starlight. A freight train needs to pass. We wait. For what seems like years. The tracks our only indicator we once were—Sometimes the darkness is sudden, a tunnel. Into a mountain. Granite exploded, chiseled, seasoned by time and train exhaust and water that seeps from inside the earth, from somewhere deeper still. I press my forehead to the glass my eyes reflected back to me, cheekbones inherited. I see nothing when we're in the middle. It's only when approaching the other side, where light's reach brims, can the frozen columns of ice dripping from the ceiling be seen. Temporary stalagmites formed out of situation.

Sufism is a branch of Islam and follows the teachings of the Qur'an. The religion of the Sufi, like the root of all religions, is Love. The path to reach Truth, or God, stems out of this Love. Love is the path, often loss is the way. Retuning to Love is how we find home when we're in the tracks of loss. Rumi, one of the Sufi's major teachers writes, *Sorrow...violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow.*

In writing about why America latched on to trains early in the 20th century Don Ball, Jr. observes that humans *instinctually find that most things which move are inherently more interesting than most things which are fixed.* We are meant to move. Our bodies, our minds, our emotions. It's against our nature to be fixed, to be stuck. Sometimes necessary, but not our nature. The cells of our bodies regenerate at different rates. Skin renews at a different rate than the fibers of our muscles. The oldest part of our physical existence is the cortical neuron held within the cortex. Abstract concepts like Justice and voluntary movements like dancing live here. This is also where the pathways to all of the senses converge. The hippocampus held within the cortex generates about 1,400 new neurons a day. Our brain constantly is supplied with the opportunity to create, to connect memories to the senses. When we store memories long-term it's the hippocampus that files the memories away to the appropriate area of the brain for later retrieval.

One of the expressions of the Sufi is the practice of revolving—like confessing in Catholicism or sitting shiva in Judaism—the Sufi spins. Often accompanied by music, the breath of a reed flute and the beat of a floor drum, the ritual of *Sema*. The *Sema* is not a singular event of one person spinning, but communal, each person spinning individually together. In flowing white garments representing the ego's shroud, soft slippers on the feet and a hat made of camel hair representing the ego's tombstone, the Sufi tilts their head twenty-three and a half degrees, just as the earth is tilted in space, and begins to spin their body. Beginning with the arms folded in across the chest, across the heart, they begin to spin, as the earth spins, and together they spin in a circle as the moon revolves around the earth, as the earth revolves around the sun, the arms open, the right reaches towards the heavens, the left reaches towards the earth, they spin, as the electrons, neutrons, and protons spin inside our atoms, as the blood circulates through our bodies, the Sufi honors the inevitable revolution.

I Google *How to contact someone on death row*. There are several organizations committed to connecting Death Row inmates with pen pals. The first result is from brethren.org, an organization who claims they are *continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together.* Human Writes, an organization based out of the UK, is *a non-profit humanitarian organization which befriends people on death row in the USA*. He's not listed on any of the websites requesting contact. In fact only thirty-eight of the male prisoners on Death Row in Texas are. There are introductions from those listed. I read through a few. Several proclaim they are the victims of bad attorneys. Mostly though, they are looking for people to connect with. He's not

listed. I want him to be. I don't want him to be. I realize I'm looking for effects. I'm trying to find threads of meaning from the crossroad where we met.

I read that death row inmates recreate individually, often spend 23hrs alone and have individual 60 square feet cells. That's about half the size of a parking space. Everything, apart from a metal sanitation unit, is grey concrete; including the bed, stool and walls. There is one slim window but this provides so little natural light that the cell is illuminated by strip lighting. Although the prisoner spoke about conditions being sometimes eerily silent, he also described how it could also be unbearably noisy; the sound of keys rattling, toilets flushing, pipes gargling and prisoner's voices echoing through the labyrinth of cells. Other prisoners complained that the sudden clashes and bangs that penetrated their walls caused them to feel constantly unnerved; their unease owing partly to the fact that they did not know where the noises were originating from. There is a list of upcoming executions in Texas. Eight names in the next five months. He's not listed.

I have questions I want to ask him. My husband says don't underestimate the magnitude of what's lurking underneath. But, there are things I want to know. I wonder if he has found a place of peace or a place of despair, a sense of hope or existence in denial. I want him to have suffered, but I also want him to have found grace. Somehow, if he has then two lives were not wasted. Ultimately, it doesn't change anything. I know the meaningless of the act remains without reason and applying reason simply changes the lens from where I'm viewing. But I want him to have found meaning. It somehow gives purpose to the prisons we've been living in. I speak to a

woman who has experience connecting prisoners to the family members of their victims. She asks me what I want to say to him. She asks if I need to express forgiveness. I don't. She says, *What hasn't been realized is the reality of the other human being.* And this is true. He is but a small piece fractured. A kaleidoscope form that has recently come to focus. Another friend tells me, forgiveness is a selfish act. That it's not about the one doing the forgiving, it's always about the one being forgiven.

There are three pieces to the language instinct: to speak, to understand, and to repeat. As children we repeat words spoken to us, we listen, we imitate in sound and intonation. We speak and eventually begin to understand. The lack of this language instinct is called aphasia. Wernicke's aphasia is a disorder of the brain causing the affected individual an inability to comprehend language—both words they hear and words they speak. While the intonation and rhythm of the sentences is correct, the words are random and mixed with made-up words. Blaf gets tomorrow, thunder pane, merkle ocean because. Wernicke's is unlike Broca's where the affected person is able to process the words, but unable to produce responding communication.

In the letter, I ask him to respond. It would have been enough to have just sent the letter, but I needed to know he'd heard my words.

A dear friend often says, *you cannot use logic to get out of a situation where there was none used to get into.* There is not logic in senseless death. Kevin Young writes, *To lose someone close to you is to enter an experience no amount of forethought or hindsight can free you from. You must*

live through grief. You cannot outsmart it, nor think through the fact of someone's being gone, and forever. You must survive the sorrow. You must survive the sorrow. The illogical sense filled death. Improbable to escape. Even in my denial filled delusions, I know there is no getting out of death. It is complete in its rift. For those of us left, there is only the climbing deeper inside, beyond logic into the movement of grief in hopes we may emerge once more.

After the second punishment trial he asked to address the family. The *Houston Chronicle* reported, after the jury was excused he *tearfully apologized to Adleman's family*. "I'm sorry," [he] said, sobbing, "...for causing y'all so much pain that day. ...I think about what she said to me, that she forgave me and did I know God. I couldn't understand why she did that but I didn't know God then. I looked for answers but I can tell you now I know God now, and I know I took a special person away from you, and I'm sorry for that." A family member replied... I can only imagine this was my father. My brothers and I did not attend the second trial, nor would we have been the impromptu spokesperson. I imagine my father stood from the wooden bench where he had been sitting during the trial and looked at the man in front of him. I imagine my father's lips twitched before he spoke, as they do, piercing into thought before he says something poignant or heartfelt. The paper reports the family member said, *We thank you for your apology. Thank you.*

He will spend the next twelve years appealing until the U.S. Supreme Court denies his appeal. This was in 2014. A sentence is defined by a group of words that expresses, questions, commands or wishes a statement. They begin with a capital letter and end with a period, a

question mark, or an exclamation point. Sentence is also the punishment given by law. It too can end with a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point.

Concentration camp survivor and philosopher, Viktor Frankl asked himself while in the concentration camp, *Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning? For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance—as whether one escapes or not—ultimately would not be worth living at all.* After the death of his son, Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to it as courting suffering. He writes, *there are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth.* By feeling we find truth. By feeling we know in this moment we exist. To be alive and to not feel is contradictory to the very essence of living. The preposition of *a*, as in *alive*, is a reduced form of the Old English preposition *on*, meaning *in*, *into*, or *toward*. In life. Into life. Toward life. To be alive doesn't require constantly being on, but rather moving towards an existence. It's messy. Feeling truth—feeling emotions we don't want to feel. That's vulnerability. Feeling unsafe inside ourselves, moving into what we don't know, places we haven't been. Guided only by the simple desire to be clean.

Outside the frozen stream passes by under the window—blown glass, a green hewn murk frosted and still. Even the grass, burnt sienna, emerges from the bank leaning slightly in one direction. As if a frigid wind has gusted everything into silence. It's hard to imagine this land at a different time when the days are long and the water, warm, sways the tall grass from underneath. The sun is low in the sky, beginning its descent. It seems the day ends, just when it's beginning. But from where the sun is now a shimmer is being cast over the frozen water—a luster of reflection. At one point the stream becomes a river, still frozen over, but occasionally a break in the surface where the ice has started to melt, and I can see ripples of movement underneath. The small white peaks of ebb and flow.

The Neuron Doctrine, inferred by Santiago Ramón y Cajal, states the electrical web formed between the axon terminals of neurons are not random. Discriminately neurons form connections with certain nerve cells and not others. There is a constant choice. After a while these choices become habits recognized as patterns that create the framework of who we are. The more the framework is utilized and the pathways are ignited, the stronger they become. Without connections between cells there is no memory.

Joan Didion writes, *The willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life is the source from which self-respect springs.* My mother taped sheets of paper that read *Choose Joy* all over the house—on bathroom mirrors, closet doors, inside kitchen cabinets—we grew up with a constant reminder to choose. Nobody took them down after she was gone. The adhesive on the tape slowly dried and the papers fell—behind the toilet, to the ground, on dinner plates.

I wonder if he has any whys. If he has whys to bear the hows. Nietzsche writes, *he who has a why to live can bear almost any how.* This is what I want to know. It seems a given that freedom is easier to grasp and experience if you have full use of your life. But I think it's the opposite. We realize what we miss once it's gone. *I never saw the morning till I stayed up all night.* Viktor Frankl proposes, *freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility.* The law is set to give guidelines to the citizens who live in the land. And of course, there are the basic human laws. We are responsible for following, but more importantly, we are responsible for our perceptions. And when basic choices like sleeping, food, fresh air are removed—what happens to

perception? Is it not our responsibility to find the why within the how? *Mostly what travels is our perspectives.*

I've had the dream before. My mother is alive and returns home. She's been on an adventure, visiting far-off lands, living with other families. She returns and it's always disorienting. I have a need to take care of her. In the first years after, seeing her was like welcoming your favorite, eccentric Aunt to Thanksgiving dinner. She was carefree, hair grown long, her clothes flowed over her body, wanderer's eyes, and my father earthbound, distant, a sadness connected to this earthbound life. They aren't together. She doesn't move back in. Even in my dreams we don't return to before. She no longer belongs here. I used to wish I could dream her. I would think about her before bed in hopes my brain would return to her—anything. Her voice, her smile, her touch. She recently visited and I woke angry. Unreasonably at her control to appear and disappear when she chooses.

Below the small window and the plate that says *Watch Your Step*, there is a rectangle pad where a handle would usually be. It reads *Press to Open* and the metal door slides to one side. I step into the space between cars. The joints of movement that absorb the jolts and bumps of the track. The door slides shut behind me. I can feel the outside air seeping in from between the metal plates, the smell of diesel exhaust. I stand between the two cars, teetering between thresholds. Between where I came from and where I'm headed. Frozen. If the train were to disconnect, would it be here? This space between space, this cocoon of metal latches and plates holding one car to the next.

There is a concept in yoga and meditation called *tapas*. It translates into English as *the fire from within*. As the *light* or *luster* inside. Luster, a soft glow—especially off of a reflective surface. It's where our intuition stems from, it's where awareness lives. The fire inside that can burn uncontrollably in rage decimating everything into ash. Or the fire that can be controlled—by mind, by breath, consciously allowing whatever is holding us back to burn. To create space inside for other emotions, other experiences. To create a beauty of emptiness. To burn into the luster of reflection.

The pigment of grief is often so blue its black. Like a storm sky reflected by the the deep ocean. Like the muddy, bottom of a bayou. Pigments are defined in their essence by choosing which colors of the light spectrum will be absorbed, thus changing the reflection. The earliest known pigments are dated to 2.6 million years ago. Red ochre and carbon black both are linked to this time. Pigments are classified by their permanence and their stability. When a pigment is not permanent it is called fugitive. Fugitive colors fade over time or when exposed to light. Sometimes they turn to black. They become void of any color. Pigments can only ever subtract wavelengths from the source light. They can never add new ones.

My mother was working on a new play about Miriam in the last months of her life. Miriam, sister of Moses, who hid her brother in the tall grass by the river in order to save him from the Pharaoh's order to kill all newborn boys. Miriam who danced and sang and played her timbrel after they crossed the Red Sea. Miriam whose name means *bitter*, but bitter as in *strong*, like

grief makes us strong. Miriam whose name stems from the verb *to change*, as bitterness is a cause to the effect of change. Miriam who roots out of the noun *sea* or *hot springs*, as in *Bitter Waters* or *Waters of Strength*. She told my father she'd run by herself that evening to mull over some lines in her head.

Do you need to express forgiveness? I don't. And I also don't know that I do. Or that I ever will. But this has nothing to do with the other. My decision to move forward is no less dependent on him than I am on his. Occasionally, I still feel the remnants of anger, brief like lightening, gone before I fully turn my focus, charred grass smoked. And loneliness. Loneliness of the empty space left by another when they're gone. We never really talk about it as a family. Early on we filled the space with alcohol and tears—pickled the anger and sadness into the isolated dark, dank cellars of us.

Around me here in the coming dawn—layers of sound; a layer of traffic, deep and constant, overlaid by two layers of bird song—one tree bound, one on the wing—and punctuated now and again by the call of a crow. Woven into the lower layers are crickets and frogs and once and again the thrilling rise and fall of cicadas. Layers...The sun rising beyond is heralded by a silent fanfare of precious pink clouds. It rises without a sound, a still resolute ascension into the height of sky. 'Be still and know that I am God.'

I don't tell my father or brothers I wrote the letter, until he writes back. What was a wholly singular act for my path suddenly involved us all when communication was made. We've never

talked about him, about his personhood. About the very real facts and emotions of his existence or the very real facts and emotions of our individual existences with grief. When I tell my father he listens and without hesitation he speaks the words that will change our relationship forever. He becomes the parent once more, holds the hand I didn't know needed holding, and says, "I'd like to read the letter. If it's OK with you. If you want to share it with me. I'd like to see what he has to say, if he's changed. I hope he has. You know, you hope everyone changes for the better." I want to be where he is. I want to catch the next plane and fly home to him. Viktor Frankl writes, *We must not forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed.* Meaning, he proposes, comes out of experiencing. Experiencing something like Truth. Beauty. Nature. *Or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him.* By sharing the human experience.

The letter is still unopened. A confirmation that he heard my words. I thought I wanted answers. I thought knowledge of facts, information like how he spends his time behind bars and where he came from might bring sense, might illuminate meaning to the whole meaningless act. But facts bring no more logic into an emotionally charged existence than speculation does with love. For the moment, I know the words I spoke were heard, the synapse fired complete. I am not yet ready to hear. And I'm acutely aware of the imbalance of this decision. But, for the moment, it's where I am.

We started dancing after, not in the very first of after when silence filled our mouths, but later when we couldn't hear each other over our thoughts. When there was too much to say and nothing left to say. We turned the music loud and moved. The four of us so different in our beings, forged out of circumstance and bayou waste, tumbled stones in the night sky. Geoff likes to spin his body and occupy the entire space of the room. I too fall in this category and when we dance together a 600 SqFt area is sometimes not enough. Zach sways through the shoulders, drops his head, keeps his arms in close. Often his eyes are closed, his feet glued to the ground. Our father dances with his whole body, though it's more of an arm pumping, knee bending bop. The four of us refuse to let go of the other. Especially when one of us descends into darkness. We wait. Sometimes we follow, armed with an extra light. Even if when we find the other, we simply lie down next to them, turn off the light and listen to the space filled silence.

I've been walking the cars for months now. Back and forth, from one car into the next and then back again. The train always moving. Always moving forward even when I was moving backwards. Even when I stopped. I head to the very back of the train. I walk through the dining car, the booths are empty and waiting, baskets of butter on each table. Initially, the cars are filled with people, each seat taken, but as I continue to walk back, the people become less. They spread themselves out across entire rows. I see a man who reminds me of my father. He's wearing a Led Zeppelin baseball hat and nods as I walk by. The woman I've seen since I boarded the train, her three young children always on her heels, steps out of the aisle so I may pass. Each door slides open when I press the button and I cross into that space between. One swoosh into the next, from threshold to threshold, from car to car. The noise from outside seems to lessen as I move back, the wind outside, the general hum of the engine becomes further away. One car is completely empty except for a young girl staring out the window, her ponytail disheveled. Approaching the last car, I press the button to enter. There are no seats, just the same blue carpet and windows as the others. There's a basket of cucumbers on the floor and some lilies leaning against the wall. I walk to the back of the car, the very back of the train, and press my face against the

glass. The tracks roll out from underneath us, one wooden tie after another, two silver lines precisely measured carrying the weight across. And next to the door, propped up in the corner, as if this is where it belongs, the concrete birdbath. As if there were no other space for it to exist except for here, in the back of my mind, as the cornerstone for all that I know.

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Curriculum Vita

Sarah Abigail Adleman graduated as a member of Sigma Tau Delta and Cum Laude with a Bachelor's of Arts from The University of St. Thomas in 2002. After graduation she worked in special projects for a photographer, sales/writing for a magazine, a bartender and a cocktail waitress in an Irish Pub. She joined the Peace Corps in 2004 and served as a Community Development and English Teacher in Bangladesh before being medically discharged due to melanoma. Not ready to be back in the states, she accepted a position teaching English in a government high school in Weihai, China where she also found the path of yoga. Adleman earned her Registered Yoga Teacher certificate through Integral Yoga under Swami Ramananda in 2006 and her 500hr designation as a Professional Yoga Therapist with Integrative Yoga Therapy in 2015. She is one of the only RYTs to also become a Certified Brain Injury Specialist for her work with the population since 2007. She was awarded the Dodson Research Grant in 2015.

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