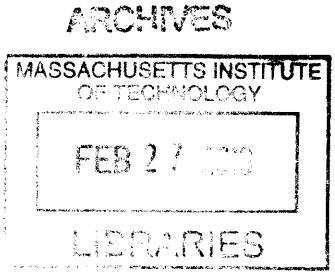
Catalogue of a Loss



By

Larisa Berger

Submitted to the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science in Humanities and Engineering
At the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

May 1, 2012
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Abstract

Catalogue of a Loss is a collection of sixty-two prose poems written within the past year and half. The work is printed on 4x6 cards. Each poem may be read individually from a single card or the poems can be read in sequences. Each poem maps to at least one prescribed sequence that is visually indicated on the card(s). In the case that the poem maps to multiple sequences that poem is reprinted so that each subset it belongs to may be individually represented. Within this document, I've provided re-printings of the cards along with four of the larger possible sequences I have framed for the reader (indicated by red/violet/cyan/gold). There are no duplicates within this set therefore the described cross-referencing in which a single poem maps to multiple sequences is not represented. The reader is encouraged to make what he will of the sequences: my intention is that the relationships suggested by the proposed reading-sequences do not establish a single structure designed to constrain the reader but offer, instead, multiple structures that will inspire new relationships of the reader's own making.

The work is a memoir-of-sorts. I began working on this piece in January 2011 knowing that I would write about my father who died in January 2007—ten years after he first began experiencing symptoms of dementia. In that time I took off the Fall semester and lived in San Francisco. Writing this work caused my own re-examination on life with my parents, life at MIT and life out in the world. The work examines my life at an intimate distance. Even the colors that I used to encode the poems are taken from our family portrait. The card-form emulates exactly how I was remembering my past: connections were formed and then blurred; random details were vivid and unforgettable while others completely disappeared.

The resulting work explores the lines between art and life, between art-making and life-making, between past and present, between solitude and loneliness, between intellectual exile and the comforts of home, between "family" self and "independent" self. In the sixty-seven cards represented within this document are the past five years of my life.

Thesis Supervisor: Erica Funkhouser
Title: Lecturer in the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies

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Introduction

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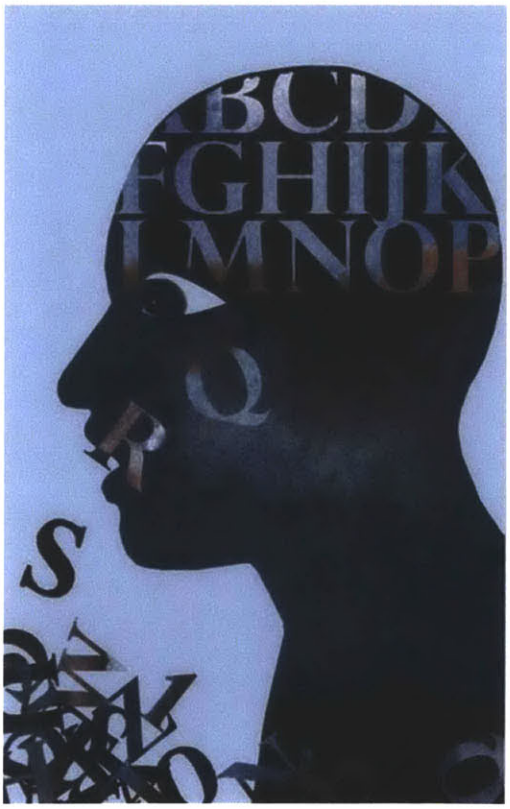
Exposition

"Catalogue of a Loss" began as a record of the words my father forgot. In the ten years before he died, my dad lost his vocabulary. He suffered from a condition called primary progressive aphasia. Last year, a New York Times article was written on this rare form of dementia. The article was accompanied by an illustration of capital letters pouring from a cartoon man's mouth[1].



The letters formed a messy pile while those in the cartoon man's head were alphabetized and neatly arranged in rows and columns. In the article, one sentence in particular struck me: the featured doctor was interested in a group of patients, "who seemed to know what they wanted to say but couldn't string words together in an intelligible sequence." This statement fills me with dread. As humans we fear dying alone, and as writers we fear

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[1] Brody, Jane E. "A Thief That Robs the Brain of Language." *New York Times*

obscurity. I try to imagine what it might feel like to be lost in one's own mind and I cannot. The closest I can get is imagining that the same song is on repeat, looping in my head; a song that I cannot sing or transcribe or Google the lyrics to find—a song that no one else hears but me.

In coping with his disease, my dad and I developed our own secret language. Even if I was not quite sure of exactly what he wanted to express, I knew how I could get there, how to bring the dinner conversation to him. I was in it, in his world and I felt great responsibility, I felt lucky to have been selected. If I were a linguist, I could codify our language, the gestures and re-mappings of words. I could trace the patterns of my father's transfigured vocabulary. But I am a writer, and so I began documenting the details that I remembered, beginning first with his words.

I thought if I laid out the process of his brain's decay in pieces, I could humanize biology. Show through an alternate lens that perhaps my father's dementia was not a decay but a sort of development disguised: development on a different axis. My attitude was scientific—I wanted to start from the specific and make my way to a more general, less-pathetic picture of the aging process, of death.

When I started writing, I began where I had left off and re-entered the world and psychology of my adolescent self. I remembered when my dad's closest friends and relatives dismissed him; spoke of him in the past tense even in his presence. They couldn't look beyond his loss of speech and began to speak about him as if his life were behind him: "Mark Berger was that", "Mark Berger used to be good at this." Their name-dropping and nostalgic talk felt so defeatist. I faulted them for not looking deeper, not trying harder to meet Dad halfway.

What they didn't know is that Dad worked every day of his life. He never retired. When he forgot how to speak, he worked even harder. Dad's practice

remained unchanged even though the domain of his activities shifted with his abilities. He applied the same discipline he had used to master his passions to the very basics of daily life.

This lesson from my adolescence is not general and is perhaps completely unrelated to my father's dementia. Our life together is my only experience of dementia. What I have written is neither science nor syllogism; it is just the story of my own experience.

Development

Six months into the writing process

Six months into the writing process and I had populated my bookshelf with memoirs and stories about death. I took a semester off from school in the fall, worked my first nine-to-five office job in San Francisco and read. Wallace Stevens. Annie Dillard. Dave Eggers. Joan Didion. Paul Auster. Susan Mitchell. I began keeping a pocket notebook of my favorite lines. Scrawled rhymes onto grocery lists. I listened to Bill Evans' Conversations With Myself on my commute and taught piano to programmers.

I marveled at Annie Dillard's cohesive prose. I tried to write essays that took the reader towards some abstract truth, that explored the senses, but I could not. So I began again. Of my own works, my favorite was a piece anchored by an Emily Dickinson poem written at the end of Erica Funkhouser's poetry seminar. I returned to that approach and

wrote paragraphs below the quotes collected in my pocket notebook. The focused

size of the small page enabled me to write each moment as it was imprinted on my memory, incomplete. Instead of being frustrated at the vacancies, I began to see them as opportunities. I began letting the themes that stuck out in my memory dictate the progression of my work and research. I reread books from my childhood, discovered books that were objects in my past but that I'd never read.

The shorter form that I had grown accustomed to related to a previous project I had worked on during the spring of 2011. I had begun printing my work on index cards then, inspired by card-style works and hypertexts that I was introduced to in Professor Nick Montfort's class, "Interactive and Nonlinear Narrative". We studied Heart Suit, Shufflebook, Robert Grenier's Sentences. These works used cards because they were meant to be shuffled; held.

The nonlinear sequencing that cards as a medium suggest emulates the process in which I was able to piece together memories of my father, my adolescence and present. Conceptualizing the collection in this way—in which each piece could also stand alone, energized my process. I took my longer, stumbling narratives and honed each piece into a *lapidary chunk.* Found that I was writing prose in poem form and adapted my thesis as a set of prose poems from then on.

January 2012-Present

In her work The Century of Artists' Books, Johanna Drucker defines the artist's book as "a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues"(). Artists' books are printed in beautiful ways, make meaning out of their binding and ink, the very paper they consist of. Similarly, in "Catalogue of a Loss" I wanted to create a relationship

between form and content[2]. Not only does the card form echo the fragmentation of my memories of my father, it plays an important role in the tactile experience of reading. I imagined the interaction between the card and its reader. The cards are printed with a smaller font so that they are held closely, privately. Part of the card is embossed to emphasize touch. The cards are made to be held.

I remember how my father held the cards and notes mom made to help him remember. The first were a pair of post-its she had quickly scribbled for him. She was frustrated and tired, could not be constantly interrupted from her work. The first said, "Dinner"; the second "6:00". It was not that he'd forgotten. He could not parse the meaning fast enough. I remember him sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the post-its together, side-by-side, with both hands. He kept looking at the alarm clock on the nightstand to match the clock's time with what was written. He read the post-it's over and over like he was learning to recite a poem.

Years after my dad lost his concept of time and numbers he asked me to sign my signature on an index card. Then he asked me to print my name underneath. I wrote my name in all capital letters and "I LOVE YOU" below in the same style. He kept the card next to his alarm clock. Then, one weekday morning when I was home from school, sick, I heard him repeating my name over and over. I traipsed over to his room to see if he needed something, stopped at the door when I heard him say "I love you." I peaked through the door's crack; saw him holding the index card, repeating my name over and over. Then he began reciting my mother's name.

Johanna Drucker writes that artist's books can facilitate a change of

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[2] The aesthetic difference to me is similar to that between prose and poem. A poem is more conscious of its form, allowing the poet to imbue meaning into the writing style along with the content.

consciousness. I hope to frame for the reader my father's practice by re-purposing his memory-cards.

I. Meditating on Loss

Genevieve Kaplan's collection of poems, The Ice House, meditates on the scenery of a past life: wild and domestic. She titles her poems with the names or features of each place, takes us into the eye of "The Ice Storm", into the "Kitchen", to "The Forest and the Trees". Pages later we are back to the same titles: a variation on a theme, this time more abstract or literally viewed from another angle.

> "The Ice Storm"
> Overlooks the mountains, overlooks the edges
> of the river that border the town.
>
> Silence is the only word that can replace loss

Kaplan never makes explicit what disaster has prompted her poetry, what loss. Her poems are sparse. She uses the space on the page with impact.

I identify with Kaplan's predicament. Writing about loss feels so often unapproachable. Fragmentation and discontinuity are the only ways of approximating it.

The poems of my thesis are separate not because they are designed to be shuffled or read at random. Not because they are whole unto themselves as is, but because I could not tease the memories apart and sequence them page by page.

Where Kaplan makes external all that she expresses, employs earth, wind and fire—the drama of the elements and nature in her own self-discovery, Maggie Nelson pulls the reader inward. She meditates on the color blue with every prose-poem in her book, Bluets. Blue is the blank canvas onto which she expresses

loss. She grieves a failed relationship, examines her life with all of its cracks and in so doing lets the light in:

> 240. All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was
> alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.

While many of her poems connect and reveal more of a somewhat cohesive narrative, each also stands alone and could be read separately. She collects quotes on blue by famous writers, passing comments on blueness from friends, blue art (the book is named after a Joan Mitchell painting). The domain of blue objects that Nelson covers in her two-hundred and forty prose-poems is all over the map. I wonder what a hypertext of her work would look like—how she would re-classify her poems for the reader.

II. Nonlinear Narrative

Hypertexts employ linking words and phrases to connect one screen to another. With this mechanic, a reader is given "parameters" in which to navigate through the work in a nonlinear fashion. Text that is also a link is underlined and/or represented using a different color.

As a reader of a hypertext, you have only the screen in front of you to navigate the sequence of screens that encompass the entire narrative. It is hard to keep track of where you are in a text. While you can return to a page to see where an alternate click would have gotten you, you have no idea whether the next thread you are in for is 3 screens or 10.

Part of the reason I favored physical cards over virtual ones represented in an app is because I wanted to set an expectation for what was ahead. I have color-tagged the cards on their top edges to "link" cards so to speak. The sequences

outlined are only suggestions, but if a reader seeks more structure they can choose a shorter sequence or a longer: all of the data is available on inspection.

In the style of hyper-text, there are two types of card-sequences specified. The first follows the poems as a stream-of-consciousness narrative like that of Maggie Nelson's Bluets. The second follows references and objects through the text so that they can be examined more closely side-by-side.

III. Variation on a Theme & Performance

The cards of my thesis are presented as cards because they are meant to be compared.

In Judy Malloy's hypertext, *Concerto for Narrative Data*, side-by-side narratives slowly populate the screen beginning first with a reference to Italo Calvino:

> *Remembering how Italo Calvino*
> *and his fellow soldiers in the Italian Resistance*
> *fought the Nazis in the Ligurian Mountains.*
> *And at night in camp they told stories.*

The piece unfolds like a contrapuntal score; quotes from the six characters appear on the screen in link-form. The reader can select any of the quotes to narrow in on a piece of a character's narrative simulating a solo. Each "solo" lets the reader navigate to the ensemble and read selected pieces in concert. Malloy characterizes her piece as "hyperpoetry or a score in the Fluxus tradition, such as a John Cage score, where, if it were performed, interpretation is partially determined by the performers"[3].

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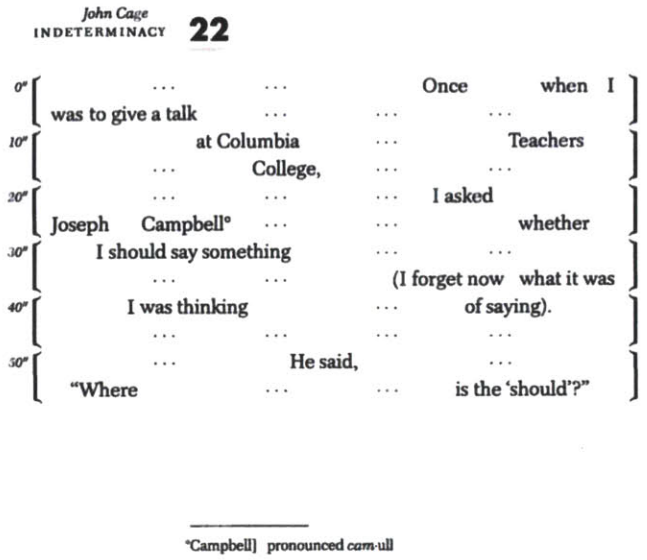
[3] Malloy, Judy. "Concerto for Narrative Data." *Drunkenboat.com*. Web. 01 May 2012. <http://drunkenboat.com/db10/09tri/malloy/notes.html>.



John Cage wrote and compiled his own stack of cards. Assembled together they make up the score to his Folkways recording. The collection has recently been re-cast as an artifact on its own called Indeterminacy. Each card is fashioned so that it takes exactly one minute to perform. Pauses are marked by space and lines are annotated every ten seconds. Cage recommends in the notes that the reader use a stopwatch to guide his performance so that he might keep to the card as accurately as possible. Additionally, he foot-notes unusual names with the correct pronunciation to further ensure that the reader will perform the card reliably. This attention to meter and articulation, distinguishes his piece as a musical score: his stories are written for the telling.

For the reader, Cage carefully sequences the text, draws out each line so that the spaces on the card marking each pause make of the existing line a jagged sequence of words. Visually, this draws attention to the words on adjacent lines since the words are often otherwise isolated from those neighboring them in the spoken sequence. This alternate reading of a card is private to the performer, for only his eyes to hear. While the reader is publicly exhibiting the work for others, precisely performing the work to Cage's specification, he is in turn engaged in a

private experience of the work on his own.

My work is not literally a musical score, nor is it intended to be read aloud. Often, I repeated the headings and entire paragraphs in order to explore variations on a theme. This practice I picked up from piano improvisation: two people play the same "question" and trade-off creating the "answer" or variation. I can imagine a similar dialog evolving between readers: one rearranging the cards into a sequence that pleases him and replacing them in that order in the box for the next reader to find.

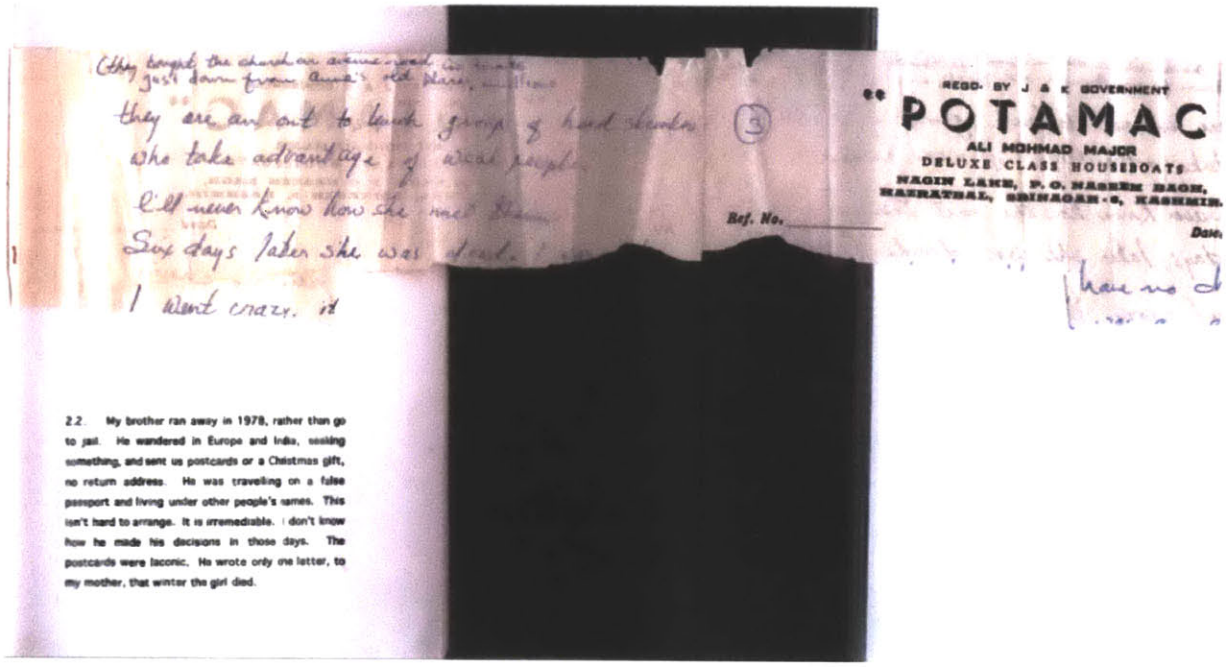
Recapitulation

In 2000, Anne Carson published Nox. She tracked her brother's existence after he died and documented the process. She chronicled his life through scanned artifacts: received letters, old photographs, Greek texts, works of art, a bit of paint. She carefully scanned these objects of significance and embedded them with her poems and thoughts on death onto a single 80-foot scroll of paper. The scroll is folded accordion style and fits into a book-like box.

Carson created the only monument for her brother that would endure. Her brother's ashes were scattered into the sea by his wife. She dropped sunflowers in after his ashes because they turn upside-down once they hit the water. My mother and I cast half of Dad's ashes out over the terrace towards the Hudson River. A year later we walked halfway across the Harvard Bridge, released the rest into the wind from a Ziploc bag.

Anne Carson's art leaves a trace of her brother in this world. Carson is a

Greek scholar; she translates ancient texts for a living and applies her practice to her poetry. She decrypted her brother's handwriting and the intermittent messages he sent to her and her mother after he ran away in 1978.



Five years after my father's death I look for traces of him in my very being. Proof that he was here. I had envisioned that the *Loss* of my thesis' title referred to my dad's shrinking vocabulary, to the words and meanings he literally lost over time. I wanted to document the process of his decay. I had thought that what I sought was to derive some meaning—to reveal hidden patterns.

The loss I catalogued is not my father's but my own. I documented the process of his decay and death because I don't want to forget that he existed. I have documented my experience of my father. He was persistent, adaptable, frustrated, intense, focused and above all—completely devoted.

Coda

I don't know exactly when I knew I would write about my father. Paul Auster writes in The Invention of Solitude, that he knew he would have to write about his father immediately following his father's death. Immediately following my father's death, I could not form the words with my mouth. Could not explain that he was gone. I was eighteen and had not yet written a poem I was proud of. My dad's decay paralleled my growth for most of my life. If his death marked the beginning of adulthood, I was not ready. Writing about him helped me find my own voice as a writer. Thinking about him helps me to become the adult I want to be. I don't know exactly when I knew that I would write about my father, but it was well before I started.

The hall is a place to wait in,

Two rooms painted.
Three sets of kitchen odds-and-ends, bought and sold:
Frying pans,
spatulas,
toaster ovens and two-slice toasters (that have since become my preference).
I have moved six times since my father's death.
I am spending my fifth fall without him in San Francisco.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

The hall is a place to wait in,

Caught in my first California downpour, I take refuge in Oakland's Chapel of Chimes. The pillared entrance opens onto a marble hallway. Palm trees and glass walls. Pieces of a greenhouse scattered. Exotic plants everywhere: bougainvillea and vertical boxes filled with succulents.

The main hallway opens onto more narrow paths sequentially. These too branch off with increasing disorder through the building's labyrinthine structure. The further along an artery you travel, the more intimate the space becomes—the more private. Following my feet through the infinite and unforeseen I have found it. This quiet corner, this moment, completely mine.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

*** The hall is a place to wait in,**

Surrounded by the encased ashes of strangers, I feel for the first time on this coast, something familiar. After slipping off my soaked summer flats, I walk up the marble steps; feel the cool marble on my bare feet.

At home we had two sets of marble steps.

The first led from the front door to the living room.

The rest to the hallway that funneled into our bedrooms. Here the books are not books but bronze book-like containers. Filled with people.

The hallway that led to our bedrooms was once filled with people too. Family photographs that contained our history. I would search my dead grandfather's portrait and look for my mother's face. Looked at my parents posing in front of my father's plane. My mom had long hair, perm-ed and dyed red. Dad wore a double-breasted jacket.

* *by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity*

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The first led from the front door to the living room.

The rest to the hallway that funneled into our bedrooms. Here the books are not books but book-like. Filled with people. Cast in bronze and precious metals, their spines are engraved with last-names: Smith, Jones, Lymon, Burns.

I imagine I am the grief-stricken relative of Mr. Smith. Searching for a place to rest his soul. Why not a place such as this? That hidden vacancy next to the fountain perhaps, around the corner. No—let him face West. So that he might see the sunset.

I look up at the skylights that even with the rain light the space. Rain droplets bead their curved surfaces.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

The hall is a place to wait in,

The first long summer that I spent away from home after my first year of college, I remember calling my mom in tears. A job had not panned out as I had thought it would and I suddenly felt aimless, without purpose. What would I do in Boston all alone for the summer?

My mom echoed my grandma's refrain, Things Take Time.

T T T!

LvM

She'd text me, throughout the day.

She told me that if I could find comfort in this uncomfortable moment—find some kind of equilibrium amid the constantly and too quickly changing universe—I could hone a skill. One that would always serve me, for all the future transitions that would enfold in my life.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

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The first long summer that I spent away from home after my first year of college, I remember calling my mom in tears. A job had not panned out as I had thought it would and I suddenly felt aimless, without purpose. What would I do in Boston all alone for the summer?

That summer I read C.S. Lewis' On Mere Christianity. He writes:

> *God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. When you do get into your room you will find that the long wait has done you some kind of good which you would not have had otherwise.*

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

The hall is a place to wait in,

Some weekends during college I'd shuttle down from Boston to my childhood home. On one such occasion, I searched through my mother's collection for something to take along on the long ride. C.S Lewis' On Mere Christianity jumped out at me. There hidden in the coat closet I remembered my childhood adventures: The secret wardrobe that led to Narnia where I periled against the White Witch with Susan, Edmund, Peter and Lucy (my favorite).

What I found in this new volume was affirmation. Getting lost meant that I was actually searching. Three years later, I find that the waiting has gotten easier. But still, I cannot help that with each transition I feel a pang in my heart. Ripped apart, just a little. Somehow the timing always feels too soon. Leaving is never easy but it's all I manage to keep doing lately.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.*

My mom met my dad six months after she moved to New York. Then she lived with five flight attendants; the six of them crammed into a one-bedroom apartment. After giving him her number, my mom had assumed that my dad would just date one of her roommates since the probability that she'd pick up the phone when he called was so unlikely given her packed schedule. But dad was persistent and a year later, after my mom had moved another three times, she finally moved in with him to the other side of the George Washington Bridge.

* *by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity*

The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.*

My father's apartment was my mother's blank canvas and she began with the floor. Dad had recently upgraded from his studio to a two-bedroom just before meeting my mother. The building had gone coop and so he was in a position to buy. He had only a grand piano for furniture.

Mom matched the floor's marble to the Lincoln Center's travertine: ivory with dark flecks like dirt.
(See Marble Stone)

* *by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity*

Marble Stone

My mother chose the travertine. Covered the upstairs of our apartment with it. Years later she began on the downstairs with a different marble—palissandro blue.
I participated in the Great Search for the perfect tiles. Watched as the tile-man laid tens and tens of them, looking for aesthetic patterns that would dictate their arrangement on our bathroom floor. He sat Indian style in his careful work.
Marble derives from mármaron—Greek for crystalline rock, shining stone. White marble connects me to home.

I imagine my mother choosing it. Making my father's apartment her home. Living the metamorphoses of the apartment as her own.

Marble Stone

David Hare calls the Jerusalem stone subtly pink rock.
The Dome of the Rock—saffron-yellow golden.
I wonder at the pink. The Jerusalem stone.
I think of the marble in the apartment of my childhood.
More white than pink. Matched to the Lincoln Center's travertine:
ivory with dark flecks like dirt.
Travertine is a corrupted form of lapis tiburtinus—
Tibur Stone.
Tibur was a town outside of ancient Rome,
older than Rome herself by four centuries.
Tibur, like Jerusalem, is a place of vistas.
From outside my room window a summer ago
I could look out upon the Palestinian villages below Mount Scopus.
Donkeys tied to posts. Satellite dishes perched
next to black water tanks on the roofs of people's homes.

Travertine is white in its purest form and
browns or yellows with impurities.
Travertine forms from alkaline waters.
The water dissolves the limestone. Resurfaces.
The calcium carbonate recrystallizes. Leaving the rock porous with
cavities. Leaving the travertine black with sediment in segments.

* *in reference to David Hare's book, Via Dolorosa*

The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

My mom began what would become an entire career of demolition, beginning first with the wall that divided the living room from the kitchen. Nearly twenty years later, she took care of the wall covered in photographs in the downstairs hallway. The pictures escaped to the pages of large albums that were stored with the books, tucked in the coat closet.

With all this destruction came the realization of my mom's ideal—horizontal space. She aspired to Mies van der Rohe's straight lines, a reference to the open space of her childhood.

a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be), is, I think, preferable.

My mom grew up on a cattle ranch in Western Nebraska. Nebraska is flat and all that you see is grass and sky. But when she moved to New York, the horizon was obstructed.

She lived vertically first: looked out onto garbage dumpsters and into neighbors' windows. The street lamps' amber light traced the difference in heights of adjacent buildings. Striped shadows covered her bedroom walls at night. Shadows that moved when cars passed by. The building shook at the resonant frequency of a truck bumping down the road. Rattled and bent with strong winds, and her ceiling leaked to let the rain in.

In the morning, the sun just appeared in the sky. Rose out of nowhere. The horizon was always hidden, blockaded and interrupted. The choppy concrete structures conquered.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be), is, I think, preferable.

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When I practiced for what my own life would be like in San Francisco, I moved into an apartment next to a bridge because that is what I knew. The apartment was on the second floor and so it was more under than over the bridge. I found modern furniture on the Internet. Filled the place with it.

Even though the sun poured into the rooms in the morning. Beamed onto the black lacquer of the piano that I had rented for the eight months, there was something missing. I lived in the shell of my previous life, with nothing but the most superficial aspects of it imposed on the space. I had spent nearly a year trying to make it just right, so that I would not feel miles and miles and years and years away from my home. Your home is so long ago and so far away. Your home is so long ago and so far away.

It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at.

The rain had stopped.

The light was almost gone and so I decided to start making my way to my car while I still could.

In my walking I arrived at the largest room I had seen yet. The corridor, with its column of rooms, opened onto the trickling of fountains.

Stone angels poured endless pitchers of water and nested pedestals overflowed into each other with no relief.

There was such loneliness in this loveliness.

I returned to an empty apartment. The moon's light reflected off the metallic bowl next to the door—my father's bridge trophy.

I hung my wet clothes on the curtain rod above the tub and boiled water to make tea.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

You must keep on praying for light.*

My mom's text begins the day:

`How goes it my little chickadee?`

The apartment is covered in sunlight— in excess.

My summer flats are almost dry. They sit leaned against the corner window when a hummingbird flies by, confused at the curvature of the invisible pane.

I listen to the traffic that passes on the enclosed overpass above; the building bends with the wind, with each passing bus or larger truck.

I make my way over to the piano. Dust in Sunlight and Memory in Corners. Harmony in quartals. Tonal sounds dis-ordered. Poems for Piano is a series of pieces assembled from Persichetti's favorite poems. My favorite piece is this one.

There is a sadness in Persichetti's interpretation of TS Eliot— a lingering dissonance of tenths and minor sevenths.

The minor seventh has since become my favorite interval because there is such a longing in it; an expectation set, it is pregnant with it, hopeful.

* *by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity*

You must keep on praying for light.*

My friend once told me that all you need to go anywhere is a credit card and a passport. I hold onto both and bring dad everywhere. Assemble his features into anecdotes. Each one a fracture of his personality. Some stories I know and some I've been told so many times it feels like they are mine. They're not but still they bring back time.

Maggie Nelson wrote two hundred and forty poems on the color blue.

She writes: I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning.

She admits to not being bothered even though so many before her have written about blue: every dozen years or so someone feels compelled to write a book about it.

I feel confident
enough of the specificity
and strength
of my relation to it to share.

If she can share about blue I can share too. I'll keep writing.

* *by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity*

You must keep on praying for light.

I touched down twenty minutes earlier than my flight was scheduled to land in New York City. The westerly winds were exceptionally strong. An hour and a half later, after sitting in traffic and listening to the familiar accent of my complaining cab driver, I had finally arrived.

My eyes were swollen from crying. Here I was again with my possessions en route, broken down into numbered boxes. Starting over again. I looked out at the horizon, from the top landing that led into my childhood apartment. The sun was just beginning to rise above the silhouetted buildings. The light peaked through the skyline that is burned in my memory. I looked left at the bridge that was faintly reflected in the water's smooth surface.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

And above all you must be asking which door is the true one.

Alone in the apartment, I un-layered. Walked barefoot down the marble steps. Put on Blue in Green and listened to Miles Davis and Bill Evans fill in the silence. Their sound was so pure and honest. Pulled me right back, out of space, out of time, to a place completely mine.

by CS Lewis from his book, On Mere Christianity

Second Cigarette

While smoking my second cigarette, I imagined my
perfect pink lungs slowly turning black.
Exhaled, then coughed; I was still growing
accustomed to the smoke moving through my throat.
I felt it wind its way down my wind-pipe.
Wondered if I had hatched a habit
and examined my soft palate.
Touched the tip of my tongue to the
soft flesh, imagined my tonsils were
softly burning, glowing red, growing red-
der with each puff

First Cigarette

I smoked my first cigarette just ten minutes before my last.
My neighbor had been smoking in the hall.
The red cellophane wrapper crinkled in his hand
when he gestured at the pack, raising his eyebrows
slightly as if to ask a question. Until then we had only exchanged
pleasantries.

I smiled while shaking my head and admitted
that I had never had a cigarette.
That my dad had quit.
That he was an evangelical non-smoker and
always told me that if I tried even one cigarette
the nicotine would have me addicted forever.
My half-Bolivian neighbor straight out laughed at me.
Touched one glowing tip to spark the other and
held out the second cigarette toward me, with two fingers.
many happy returns of yesterday.

many happy returns of yesterday.

With two fingers my half-Bolivian neighbor
handed me my first cigarette casually
like this was something he did all the time,
sharing cigarettes with strangers.
I took it between my thumb and index fingers
then tried to shape my hand as I had seen in Dad's old black-and-white movies: Gracefully, with a relaxed wrist
and curved fingers, as if the cigarette was hardly there.
I nearly dropped it. Brought it to my lips and formed a seal.
Touched my teeth to the filter.
Minutes later, my half-Bolivian neighbor
unraveled right in front of me.
Told me his life's history.
Started with the big questions like
what-is-love and
is-it-just-about-the-one-person-you're-fucking.
I was nineteen. In love. Confused. Heart-set on a boy.
At home, Norman, my mom's companion—
as we had decided to call him—had moved in.
Dad had been dead nearly two years.

Dad had been dead nearly two years.

Dad had been dead nearly two years.
I held in my heart the breakfast scene of my childhood.
Orange juice in octagon glasses.
Dad peeling away the Sports Page. If I closed my eyes
I was at our dining room table, facing the Hudson.
There were cereal boxes and cut-up cantaloupe.
Our bird hopped between the glints of sunlight
that reflected off the marble floor.

I described the scene to my half-Bolivian neighbor
the night I smoked my first cigarette. We sat in the hall
with our backs against the front door and I watched
the smoke curl up around the corners of the glowing exit sign.

I held in my heart the breakfast scene of my childhood

I held in my heart the breakfast scene of my childhood;
my neighbor would hear none of it. Said:
Whatever picture you have in your head of how things
used to be, you need to forget it because
things are never going to be that way again.

He recounted being nostalgic for a house with both parents
after his mom took him and his sister and left:
She was from Connecticut. Yuppie parents, a goodie goodie.
She met my dad and was fascinated.
He was from a war-torn tiny country people only read about.
But eventually I guess she had had it. Then it was just over.
Pancakes, my sister's high-chair. My parents' conversation. Done.
I am the artifact.

I am the artifact,

I am the artifact, he said.
My half-Bolivian neighbor.
We smoked cigarettes outside in the hall.
I felt in my body an unknown hollow-ness. Smoke-filled. Remembered the wholeness I used to feel.

The artifacts of my childhood had emptied slowly.
My things. My father's things. Our family's shared history.
See: Things My Mother Threw Away.
The things my mother made us give away,
to keep the chaos within our apartment controlled.
The apartment dismantled slowly,
its meaning constantly turning over. Re-configured
furniture and displaced meanings.
A dismantling.

A Dismantling:

Things are inert: they have meaning only in function of the life that makes use of them. When that life ends, the things change, even though they remain the same. They are there and yet not there: tangible ghosts, condemned to survive in a world they no longer belong to.

* *Paul Auster's account of attending to the objects left in his father's house after his death.*

Things are inert: they have meaning only in the function of the life that makes use of them.

My father died in January. Hours after, my mother poured
the morphine down the bathroom sink.
Flushed his pills down the toilet. The hospice staff came later to
remove the hospital air mattress.
Re-claimed various other equipment:
unused tubes and the electric box that had
vacuumed the fluid out of his lungs over the last few days.

They would not take the cans of food
that we had poured into his stomach for the last year and a half.
To keep him alive, they had wanted to re-operate.
Push the tube further into his intestines.
We had come this far but my mother knew that it was time.
A month and a half later he died.

Things are inert: they have meaning only in the function of the life that makes use of them.

My father was a man of systems. Systems built on patterns. Designed out of necessity, practicality. He created a master-list of his nearly three hundred video tapes. Added each one to the queue, photocopied the list as the paper degraded over time and continued.

As his mind decayed he could not make out the patterns, they vanished. All that was left was the faint outline of an idea as to how the stuff related. Fast-forward, rewind, he could not keep straight the order. Time. Trapped.

My mom purged the multitude to get him out. Repeated the process on different sets of things. Iterated until our house was almost empty of him.

[See: Things My Mother Threw Away]

Things My Mother Threw Away

Clara, my patchwork doll
Dad's moccasin slippers.
ankle bells (for Chinese New Year)
The Bath Tub
300 video tapes.
Math Blasters.
Dad's handkerchiefs.
Bedroom Doors
CRT monitors.
Collared White Shirts.
Cufflinks
Grandma Pearl's lipstick cases.
Discount Suits (tailored).
White tennis shorts and his racket.
White Volvo (1989).
Sunglasses.
Dinner Jackets.
Dress shoes, sneakers.
Morphine (as instructed).
Bridge Trophies.
Dad's ashes (in the Hudson and Charles rivers)
Wilted orchids.
liquid food (3 cases).

[See: Things My Mother Threw Away]

[See: Things My Mother Kept]
Among the things my mother kept is my
father's red white and blue jacket.
The jacket he wore with his tennis whites on Saturdays. The jacket he wore on our trip to DC with my best-friend in eighth grade. The jacket for weekends when he took me to basketball practice. When we shuttled friends home in his White Volvo. I navigated; we worked as a team. I prepared my friends beforehand, explained that they had to be completely silent.

Dad dressed in the style of a different era. Exchanged his shoes for slippers, just like Mr. Rogers. Wore dinner-jackets to dinner. Three piece suits to concerts. Dad didn't wear cufflinks. Used cardboard collar stays and cleaned beneath his nails daily. Dad wore sweaters at home. Packed a shaving kit for vacations along with his red white and blue jacket.

red white and blue jacket

Greeted by Norman's mammoth leather chairs
and his wooden easel (setup like a prop on stage)
it was clear that the occupation was in full effect.
Mom and I peeled grapefruits at the table.
Norman sat on the sofa telling jokes.
Then went downstairs and returned wearing my father's red white and blue jacket.
As he walked up the stairs I felt as if
the floor fell out of the room.
Felt as if I had seen my father's ghost
in a lifeless artifact of the recent past.

a lifeless artifact of the recent past

Paul Auster's account of his father's passing is dark.
I imagine the dumping of his father's things resembled
the cleanup of a breakup:
Tossing a past lover's things into a box
and sending it away. The memory of his father
is tainted by his adult realization that
his father did not return his love with the same intensity.
The things that had imprinted on Auster's memory—
his father's ties—he grew to completely despise.
Despised himself for despising them:

> *the patterns, the colors, the shapes that had been embedded in my earliest consciousness, as clearly as my father's face had been. To see myself throwing them away like so much junk was intolerable to me, and it was then, at the precise instant I tossed them into the truck, that I came closest to tears."*

I came closest to tears

I came closest to tears,
in yoga class, the day after I smoked my first cigarette.
My body felt like garbage.

Realize that skin is really skin.
I did not feel the outside of my foot as if it was all skin.
Did not feel my legs stemming into the earth.
Felt as if the cigarette stink had filled every pore,
had rendered my skin sickly, my breath toxic.

Beside me sat a girl from Beijing.
She put paper towels beneath every part
of her body that came into contact with the mat:
hands, knees, forehead, feet.
She was protected. Had taken with her
this artifact of her home.

I turned my internal gaze towards the space
between my eyebrows, towards my third eye.
Felt my eyelids well up with tears. Closed
my eyes tighter, and sat in the dark for awhile,
well after everyone else had gone.

Well after everyone else had gone

Well after everyone else had gone
to sleep, my half-Bolivian neighbor and I were
wide-awake. He argued that: one's
willingness to be monogamous was largely a product
of one's experience of one's parents' behavior.
Three years later and I cannot remember the
conversation's conclusion, but I remember
the fire; a kitchen accident.
We walked outside and watched five fire-trucks arrive.
Realized that this was not a drill and parted ways.
He turned to leave as I watched the firemen assemble hoses.
He exited the courtyard as they twisted metal couplings together.
Couplings larger than I had ever held in my own hands.

Students huddled en masse in down coats and fleece blankets.
An hour later and it was all over. The trucks retreated
one-by-one. All the fire people returned to their homes
and their kids and their dogs and all the rest.
And I returned to mine, alone.

Loneliness is solitude with a problem

Dad was in his puppy-dog phase. Would
shuffle up the steps and sit on the sofa,
go right to his seat for thirty minutes
or thirty seconds. It was as if he was
sleep walking even though he was completely
conscious. Kept me company while I was
writing, silently. Perhaps if he could have
spoken he would have told me to go to
bed. But he couldn't; didn't. We stayed up
together, the night sky reflected back
our portrait in the double-paned window
frame. Me, writing; he sitting. Then at dawn,
months later, he died.

by Maggie Nelson from her book, Bluets

Loneliness is solitude with a problem.
or
The Blue in
***Blue in Green*

My friend Lauren says her favorite time of day
is twilight. For its quiet-
ness and the sky's lightness—
a blue not quite black, a gradient leading to darkness
with shades to contrast against the city lights.
Lately I've tried to re-conceptualize my loneliness
this way. It begins with the sky.
Just as there is a sadness in twilight—
because it marks the day's ending—
there is a sadness in my alone-ness.
Only once I have completely
given over to my loneliness
(a necessary condition for solitude and jazz)
can I hope to see the city lights
shining brightly, awaiting
discovery.

*by Maggie Nelson from her book, Bluets **the third track of Miles Davis' Kind of Blue

Loneliness is solitude with a problem *or* The Blue in **Blue in Green*

When I studied jazz improvisation with Don Byron,
he revealed to us his shifted point-of-view (musically).
A student of George Russell, Don demonstrated that
shifting the theoretical frame of reference
for a jazz standard's harmonic structure was enabling.
You could play any note in the mode, paint with every color,
if you shifted the intervals correctly. *INTERVALS,*

NOT INSPIRATION—
Don declared.
Let us in on his discipline.
We practiced with him.
Traversed our instruments in new ways,
tripped over our fingers as our brains tried to catch up,
enlightened by the theory of Lydian Chromaticism.

Don scowled at the idea that *jazz* was a way of letting go,
that it was somehow less rigorous than Stravinsky.
Being in it, he believed depended almost exclusively on one's preparation.
Was not a matter of *swinging-it.*

Sometimes before rehearsal, I'd find him
practicing in the closet. I'd sit in the hall, listening
carefully in the silence for his muffled sound.

*by Maggie Nelson from her book, Bluets **the third track of Miles Davis' Kind of Blue

Loneliness is solitude with a problem*

In high school I read that Wittgenstein always sat in the front row when he went to the movies. He wanted to be completely taken in; to let the light wash over him.

I started going to movies alone in college. Movie-going was an obsession of my mom's and mine. My father's too I'm told, before my time.

When I went to the movies alone I'd often go with the best of intentions and often times hardly watch the movie at all. Used the darkness and private anonymity to cry, silently.

I found in the darkened theatre, a sanctuary. Have reached epiphany even with mixed company. Sometimes it can feel imprisoning, suffocating even. Stiff.

The trick of it, is to let it happen.

If your mind wanders, let it.

If your attention drifts, drift with it.

The darkened theatre is a vehicle for marking time's passing—in the changing patterns projected on screen.

Try as you might, you cannot hold onto all of it, this fleeting time. All that you can do is sit with your own thoughts. You never know what might happen...

* *by Maggie Nelson from her book, Bluets*

On Solitude & Sound *and* Darkness and Space: Infinity

If I studied psychology I might self-analyze my vampirish ways—this preference for darkness—as a reference to the darkness of a mother's womb. Comfort. Softness. But I am a student of sound and therefore of silence. Silence is a vehicle for marking what sounds are important, what must be most-listened-to. Silence is a lack of sound, a sonic darkness; endless.

Alan Lamb finds music in silence. As a child, his babysitter demonstrated: put her ear to a telephone pole to *hear the sound the world made*, but all that he heard was a quiet hum.

He dreamed of sound. Dreamed that a major sixth was emanating from a train that descended distant hills and then ran through the air above where he was standing.

Decades later, he found the sustained sixth from his dream, emanating from telephone wires, amplified by the wind. This time he listened to their harmonies; later recorded the wires for hours until he memorized their patterns.

Alan Lamb's instruments consist of wind and wires that stretch across Western Australia. I imagine that Western Australia is like Western Nebraska. Plains. Wind. Sky. Limitless Space. An Expanse. Infinity.

Dark Space

When we went to the symphony
we sat in the mezzanine—

Lifted above the heads of strangers, we sat
behind the parents of the first french horn player.
Dad sat in the aisle.

I remember miming for the binoculars. Dad was
caught up in his own world. His feet would get going,
sometimes he'd start tapping the rhythm on his knee,
let out a *La dee da dahh*—
Mom touched his elbow when he got out of hand.
Looked at him with eyes she so often gave me back then.
Dad turned to her and chuckled.
Held her hand for a while in the dark
as I fell asleep on her soft shoulder.

Then suddenly, one evening as if in a dream,
the violins began singing to me.
Enunciated solfège syllables so distinctly.
The timpani propelled my legs, I felt as if I were swinging.

It's been years since I've felt connected to infinity.
Sometimes I catch a glimpse while singing.

Learning how to sing (from the stomach) *and* Learning how to speak (without words)

At first I sang from the throat
as if a bird stirred—
spent her life hidden—behind my tonsils.

I opened my mouth to let her out and
her sound echoed in the concavities of my jaw.

Then, I didn't know how to saturate my voice with sound.
The sound was not my own. Did not feel like I had caused it
directly. Even though its distinct ringing
was an expression of my very being.

Church has idealized the sound of children singing.
Has appropriated the role of the Junior Choir to that of
God's angels singing.

At Church, we sang from the diaphragm.
Did not know exactly what it meant but
convinced ourselves it felt differently from
playground swinging and shouting from
the monkey bars.

Every Palm Sunday the Junior Choir sang from the balcony
in call-and-response with the grown-ups

My father came to the performance every year. His presence
was conditioned on my singing. I listened for his arrival.

His voice was all sound, full of intention. *Was the rehearsal finished?*
and *Will the service begin on time?* Most distinctive

were his U's. Byo͞otiful is the closest
I can get to writing how he sounded.

They sing U's like those in Brooklyn I'm told. But since
dad died I lost the sound of it. Until my first year of college:

My Multivariable Calculus Professor spelled out
an equation in different colors and when his
U rang out in the lecture hall I forgot to breathe.

Beautiful became a compartment
for different meanings when dad began
learning to speak with fewer words.

Red (his favorite color). Especially when worn (well).
Blue Skies. Because with blue skies there is good weather (for flying).
Sunsets—

A happy accident. I don't remember
much of how he sounded
before he began
forgetting his words. But I am told that

before his disease, words for my father would
just spill out.
That he was one of those people who
always knew what to say
and how to say it.

When my body grew my voice did not grow with it.

I reached for familiar heights and slipped, as if my
tongue
had merely caught the wrong syllable.

I could not remember the sequence of steps,
had to suddenly start conceptualizing
the movement and
gestures. Reached for clumsy metaphors:

Your voice is a Ping-Pong ball in a fountain of water.

Chutes and Ladders

Slips and (memory) Lapses.

Singing, with the voice is a perpetual falling.

Beautiful was: Purple. For the azalea flowers that appeared
on neighbors' lawns in Spring. *Beautiful* was for: my singing.

For a voice that I had lost. That I counted and re-counted
my steps to find. Dad counted his socks in the months

before he died. Counted one and one. The sequence together
meaning two. Was understood when we

looked at each other. Traded secrets with glances.
Because we have the same eyes. I tried for months

to make a sound. To achieve that crystalline purity.
Because I am not a child anymore, I have learned instead

to sing from the stomach. To release my abdomen
and fill it with air. Then to use this breath to support my sound,
however it comes. In whatever form it takes,

because this sound is mine for the taking.

The web is woven

My mom collected books.
Real literature. Stacks of New Yorker magazines.
Scripts. Books on Art. Her favorite plays.
Books by Finance Gurus. Big Books with titles
in all capital letters or volumes whose covers
were re-printings of famous paintings. Pollock.
Joan Mitchell. A box of Rothko postcards propped-up
her bedside lamp for reading.

There were books whose pages were delicately bound,
pulled together one-by-one. I imagined
the threaded needle piercing the page,
navigating its margins, forcing the thread
through. Imagined under
my pink crocheted blanket that I was assembling
a master-piece with my bobby-pin.
Pulled the pin through the pink
yarn, interleaved the blanket's threads and stacked the pin—
on both its sides—with bunches of fuzz,
then tugged at the woven fabric.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

Now it is September and the web is woven. The web is woven and you have to wear it.*

In school we took long bus rides to makeshift planetariums
enclosed in dark fabric that blocked the outside light.
We lay on our backs and looked up
at projections of the night sky. The guide
traced figures with a laser, globular clusters and constellations.
Outlined the big-dipper. Orion and Andromeda.

I followed instead the tessellation of the fabric-canvas.
Thought about its history. Pictured the thralls of children
assembling in this same suspended-parachute-structure.
Children who ate lunch on fold-up tables that disappeared
into the gymnasium's wall. Who drank chocolate milk
with two straws.
I found in the makeshift planetarium the *dark space
within an embrace*** . Found the space within my own mind
and claimed it. Discovered I could trace my thoughts backwards
as if reaching for a rope with one hand over the other to slowly
make my way back up to the first that had caused the cascade.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Mark Doty from his book, Still Life with Oysters and a Lemon*

The winter is made and you have to bear it,

In the winter months when it was really cold, I walked
from the bus stop, entered the apartment and headed
straight for the radiator to read.
I had begun growing my own book collection. It began
with Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth. Before dinner my dad
always took a short nap with my old radio in the center
of his bed. The quiet classical music divided his space from mine.
Sometimes I snuggled into a ball on the other side of him.
He lay with his stomach puffed out
and his fingers interwoven.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

***The winter web,
the winter woven, wind
and wind,**

I used to have nightmares of my father's passing.
Strangers dressed in black. A heart pumping in a
bowl of punch. Dad lay with his hands
on top of his stomach, over a black suit jacket
covering its buttons. Dreams that would end in falling.
Strapped to a grand piano that was pushed off
the roof of a house that I'd never lived in, I listened
to the wind whip through its strings as its motion
accelerated until I crashed into concrete pavement.
I woke up in a sweat, my ears still ringing.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

**For all the thoughts
of summer
that go with it,
In the mind**

My mother spent her youth behind a book, I'm told.
She worked summers in the hayfield, pulling gears
with one hand while reading with the other. She and her
sisters wore their bathing suits to tan, atop the
caterpillar tractors.

My mother saves the top shelf in the coat closet for
Willa Cather.

My mother, unlike most book enthusiasts,

doesn't believe in bookshelves—
thinks it too exhibitionist to put on display
the bounty of her obsession
for any visitor to see. Instead, she hides her mind's treasures
in closets and under coffee tables. Stows books in benches
with flip lids and under beds.

I was not born a reader like my mother.
Hardly read at all until middle school when I found
The Good Earth while unpacking winter sweaters
(exchanging them for summer shorts and sleeveless-shirts).

That summer I was thankful for water.
Enjoyed the nearly endless supply that I did not have to fetch like O-Lan.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

In the mind,
pupa of straw,
moppet of rags.

Willa Cather's Antonia is the epitome of every true Nebraskan Woman, according to my mother.
My mother holds onto her Nebraskan roots with her capacity to store things. She doesn't hoard, nor is her habit an effort to prepare for disaster. My mother buys in quantity, as if the grocery store were hours away.
For this our two-bedroom apartment has two freezers, even though we are minutes from Manhattan.
For this, the coat closet holds canned goods, nuts, nutritional yeast, and a good portion of my mom's book collection.

Below Willa Cather is a sampling of poetry bought from the tents of the last few biennial festivals.
These are unsorted and mostly unread
save for Billy Collins' latest. On the dining room table for quick reference, mom keeps his *Directions*.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

***It is the mind
that was woven,
the mind
that was jerked**

Dad's funeral was nothing like what I had dreamed.
Dad's suit was grey. He wore his red tie.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

It is the mind
that was woven,
the mind
that was jerked

I remember Dad's first forgotten word.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

***the mind**
that was jerked

Dad's last word, before he died, was *No*.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

Dad's funeral was nothing like what I had dreamed.

I read an excerpt from Ali Smith's Being Quick:
"I was on my way across King's Cross station concourse dodging the crowds and talking to you on my mobile when Death nearly walked into me.

I'm sorry, I said.

Sorry for what? you said in my ear. He smiled and stepped back and stood to one side as if waiting.

I can't stop now, I said, I'm on the phone.

Who are you talking to, you said.

Death was unexpected. He was handsome, balding, a middle-aged man in a suit so light-colored it seemed contrite, and he was vaguely recognizable…

He smiled and my phone went dead. I looked at it; its little screen was dark. A moment ago you had been telling me about your day at work and about how you were home now, waiting for me to come home."

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Anne Carson from her book, Nox*

***the mind**
that was jerked
And tufted in
straggling thunder
and shattered sun.

Dad was standing in the kitchen while Mom was making dinner.
She was putting together the salad, had asked him what he wanted
in it when he began enumerating the list:
Tomatoes
Onion
Bell Peppers
Olives
and the rest, You know
It's Green.
He shook his hands as if he could touch it;
couldn't say it or smell it—
could only reach for it. The Green, he said,
The details of it, swallowing him up:
it's green, it's small, it goes in that bowl, you can eat it hot or cold
Until finally we decided that enough was enough.
Green: n. Lettuce, Romaine.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

***the mind**
that was jerked
And tufted in
straggling thunder
and shattered sun.

Before *green* took on its new meaning, Dad used to tell the story of when he first noticed he had lost his sense of smell.

It happened years before I was born,
when my parents were visiting grandma in Florida.
They walked across a baseball field
after a high school game had just finished.
Mom remarked on the freshly cut grass—
breathed in its overwhelming scent.
Dad remembered the smell, felt the grass crush
beneath his sneakers, pushed the green blade
behind his moon-shaped nail but smelled nothing.

After the telling, Dad always let out a chuckle, as if to say
isn't it the damnedest thing. That you could forget how to smell.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

***the mind**
that was jerked
And tufted in
straggling thunder
and shattered sun.

It is my belief that funerals in the western world are a distraction

a way of keeping busy, attending to others,
making arrangements.

Our world had shattered in ways that we could not articulate,
but the hastiness of making public all that we had kept in private
translated to delaying the truth of what had happened.

What of his body.
Where did it go.
The moment he died,
the smell of his decay
had suddenly lifted;
took with it
his living-ness.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

***the mind**
that was jerked
And tufted in
straggling thunder
and shattered sun.

What of his body.
Where did it go.
The moment he died,
the smell of his decay
had suddenly lifted;
took with it
his living-ness.

Left behind flesh and whiskers, translucent
skin. skeletal bone. I remember his nose.
The hair appeared darker on his face. His nostrils
were more pronounced. Was it that the hair
was the same and his face was cast white, became
whiter still in the hours after he stopped breathing?
The blood pooled from his head, sank with his weight
into the bed. His body looked heavy from life, tired.
That was when it occurred to me that my dad was old
and had lived a long time, longer than I may ever know
(or at least remember).

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

the mind
that was jerked
And tufted in
straggling thunder
and shattered sun.

Left behind flesh and whiskers, translucent
skin. skeletal bone. I remember his nose.
The hair appeared darker on his face. His nostrils
were more pronounced. Was it that the hair
was the same and his face was cast white, became
whiter still in the hours after he stopped breathing?
The blood pooled from his head, sank with his weight
into the bed. His body looked heavy from life, tired.
That was when it occurred to me that my dad was old
and had lived a long time, longer than I may ever know
(or at least remember).

I don't remember when they took his body out of the apartment.
The next time I saw it, it was covered in make-up.
I knelt before it, looking for my father but I couldn't find him.
Realized he had left while we were sleeping.
Like a storm in the night. I could not recall the thunder.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

It is all that you are,
the final dwarf of you,
That is woven
and woven
and waiting to be
worn,

My best friend's grandfather died the summer that I was away,
in France playing in an orchestra. Before I had left my father had
stopped eating. Had forgotten how.
After weeks of coaxing, we realized all at once, together
at a Chinese restaurant that this was something
we could not adapt to.
Not just yet. Dad had ordered his favorite dish
and looked with despair at his plate filled with vegetables
and shrimp, scallops covered in brown sauce.
How could it have come to this? Useless body and useless brain.
We held on two years longer.

My best friend's mother went back to Taiwan that summer,
to help her sister care for her father's body. Cooked ambrosial meals
until
his soul sought out another vessel. Months later, monks returned
to her house holding a newborn baby, saying *This is your father.*

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

Neither as mask nor as garment but as being, Torn from insipid summer, for the mirror of cold,

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

When I returned from France, dad was in a nursing home.
They had placed a feeding tube in his stomach.
We visited him daily until school started. At which point we
decided it was more hectic to commute to see him and that we
missed his presence at home. It had been too long without him.

We were brought cases of food in cans
that we poured down a funnel into dad's stomach.
My best-friend's grandfather was being kept
in a refrigerator in Taiwan.
That summer I wondered what animal mirrored dad's disposition
(if he were to be reincarnated).

Mom and I had nicknamed Dad the heron
years earlier after watching one tactfully steal
from a seal at sea world, then glide past as if
nothing had happened, with poise and dignity.

Sitting beside your lamp,
for the citron to nibble
And coffee dribble. . .
Frost is in the stubble.

I don't remember when we started shaving dad's face for him.
I remember his furrowed brow and clenched jaw;
his pursed lips. I held an orange bowl of water
for my mom as she cleared away his whiskers.
Then took a wet washcloth to this face afterwards.
Cleared the crud from the corners of his eyes
with the sleeve of my red sweatshirt.
He relaxed; smiled.
Beautiful he said, tugged at my sleeve.
Dad's favorite color was red. Then,
his tense expression lessened
and he lifted his hands to his face
to feel his smooth skin. Dad smelled like a baby then
and I napped with my head on his full stomach.
Ran my palm across his soft scalp when his eyes
met mine. Brown and deeply set by time.

This was before his face augmented into unknown contortions.
Before he looked right past me, alone in his own head.
Before his lungs filled with mucus, left him struggling for every breath.

The last week of his life, I wrote:
This is not my dad. This is some drugged decaying flesh, some odor,
some hum of machines, a crackle, an echo. He does not eat,
he does not rest, he only waits.

My memory is selective, and I don't remember the smells or sounds with
the fidelity that I remember his smooth face, his closed eyes smiling,
his clean t-shirt against my face.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

***The web is woven**
*****If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush.***

Words cannot describe how beautifully my dad pronounced *beautiful*. He enunciated every syllable carefully, as if forming—with his mouth—each pearl of a necklace.
Rounded and strung together one after the other. Pearl-shaped like Mozart's phrases, requiring a supple wrist.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Anne Carson from her book, Nox*

The web is woven
If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush.

For their twenty-fifth anniversary, Dad gave Mom a pearl necklace.
She connected together her new gift with a strand of pearls given to her by her father, decades earlier. I remember
the long strand of pearls that adorned her beautiful dresses.
Dressing up to go out on the town always took longer than Dad expected.
He'd approve our sartorial choices, help settle indecision, always picking red.

by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf

by Anne Carson from her book, Nox

***The web is woven**
****Why do we blush before death?**

Dad's face flushed red when he looked west. Towards the sunset. Softly saying, under his breath: *Beautiful, beautiful.*

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Anne Carson from her book, Nox*

The web is woven
Why do we blush before death?

Fuchsia azaleas were his favorite. We'd tour the neighborhood's lawns, searching out the flowers. Purple-red or pink-burgundy. The bushes were manicured with so much precision it was almost funny.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Anne Carson from her book, Nox*

The web is woven
Why do we blush before death?

Our last Christmas photo was taken after one of my performances. I wore a red-silk top to match with the other singer, matched my father's favorite tie coincidentally. In the photo I am blushing, overheated from the stage-lights. Finally old enough to borrow my mother's pearl earrings.

* *by Wallace Stevens from his poem, The Dwarf*

** *by Anne Carson from her book, Nox*

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