



THIS I CAN
TELL YOU

brandi
Spring

Praise for *This I Can Tell You*

“*This I Can Tell You* pieces together the complexity of a father-daughter relationship through family history, memory, self-doubt, and belief.”

— Alysia Sawchyn, author of *A Fish Growing Lungs*

“Riveting and haunting, *This I Can Tell You* chronicles an intimate recollection of familial history and a reconstruction of self in the aftermath of homicide. Part elegy, part memoir, part true crime story, this book surges from a house of mystery.” — Thea Matthews, poet, and author of *Unearth [The Flowers]*

“These poems ache and bend and yearn for a past where the truth came easier... Compassionate and unflinchingly authentic, this poetic memoir will devour you whole.” — Kailey Tedesco, author of *She Used to Be on a Milk Carton*, *Lizzie*, *Speak*, and *FOREVERHAUS*

“Brandi Sperring’s *This I Can Tell You* is a poetic exploration of memory and grief through the influence of time... A great read for fans of poetry and memoir.” — Alexa Josaphouitch, editor at *Painted Bride Quarterly*

“Skillfully mimetic of how trauma is retroactively recalled/ or not, narrated/ or not, this series of poetic meditations tells a story of everyday resilience through re-collection.” — Maria Damon, author of *Post-Literary America?: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries*

“*This I Can Tell You* is a book about the way memory works and doesn’t work, about the way it fragments and glints, about the way two people can dream of the dead simultaneously and how that might mean something, yet that something might be inscrutable.” — Nick Flynn, author of *This Is the Night Our House Will Catch Fire*



This I Can Tell You

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Content warning:

This book contains sensitive material related to death and violence

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PRESS**

*Whether this is a dream in which I'm captured
or I've been captured and made to think
I'm in a dream, I can't figure...*

*...I'm in
the same clothes and, except when dreaming,
in the same mood. To the first person who asks,
I willingly disclose my full name, my place of
birth, my age, and my sun sign. I have nothing
to hide...*

*To be clear, I'm not against the possibility
that I'm dreaming..*

—Renee Gladman
The Activist

*The following is based on perception and belief.
What I remember is occasionally wrong, or so I am told.*

1.

There are some scenes I have memorized: Grandpa by the grill in a straw hat and a cigarette in his mouth; Grandma waving the camera away; Mom's mullet; Dad's short shorts. Others include recitals and family reunions. The first, and one of the only videos I make a feature in, is from Easter, 1994. The third of April, six days after I was born.

Three large baskets are on our dark chestnut wood table. To the right, a washing machine and dryer. To the right of that, a sink, then a stove and cabinets—none of which are in the camera frame. It is hard to picture how the rest of the kitchen looks at this point without mashing the years together.

Each basket is full, wrapped in clear plastic, gathered and tied at the top with ribbons. One blue, two pink.

I am swaddled in a blanket in my grandmother's arms. She holds me over the cellophane wrapping, but my eyes are barely open.

My sister periodically fills the frame, disappearing between acts, somewhere below the hip of whoever's filming. I want to say it's my mother repeating, *Sanna, back up.*

There's a twitch in the image, some static, and now we are in the parlor on the sofa. My brother, Michael, ten, is unwrapping my basket and placing the items around me and Grandma. My sister, pushing four, tries to help. When Michael notices, he squeals. *San-nuhhh! Stop putting stuff on Bran-dee's head!*

Forgetting how time works.
Waking up at night. That sort of thing.

I replay the video in my mind. I've only seen it once or twice.
The VHS player was trashed after collecting several years
of dust in the basement.

We've been told a few times, our cousin Krista included, that we are *all tormentors, ball-breakers* that are always *rough-housing*, who *just need to leave* [insert sensitive family member] *alone*.

Often, I was placed within those brackets—I was a little *Brutus*, who was easy to provoke. Some read it as coddling. I felt dismissed; to not bother is to not interact.

The issue was that I was often alone, unsquared off. I was not able to do or discuss what the adults or my siblings could because I was too young.

It didn't help that my parents learned to expect the worst of anything that came after my brother and sister, but that was in terms of hijinks and hygiene.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't constantly reminded that I was just a child, not expected to understand even the simplest of things. It wasn't everyone, not always, but it was often those who mattered most. And it helped to train me in etiquette based on respect. But I'm still having to fight myself for my own respect.

There are two events that seemed to further the point, at least at the time.

I want to say each happened during a barbeque, when all adults would've been in the yard. In the first case, there was a gate that was used to stop me from wandering up the stairs. Michael placed it between us, trapping me in our grandmother's dark basement. He made a face to spite me, as if he thought he couldn't pull it off and was impressed. Then he left.

The second case is quite similar; Michael placed me on top of the ironing board before leaving the basement. I was too small to climb down, so I waited for what I'm told was only a few minutes. It felt longer.

Although I want to blame Michael again, it was more likely that an adult accidentally made an imprint in the carpet, long before my high-rise experience. The spot contained every detail of the iron, flattened as if coated in plastic. Smooth compared to the itchy, normal parts around it.

Soon after the incident, another imprint was made next to the original, facing the opposite direction. I feel responsible for it, but I know that no one, especially my brother, would've let me get close to anything that hot.

The younger I am in this situation, I guess, the worse it seems—or perhaps the more unlikely—but adding a few years would make my brother anywhere from thirteen to fourteen, which he most definitely was not. Not the boy on the stairs.

I tend to point my finger a lot in my stories, but I'm trying to stray away from that. I'm just introducing you all to each other.

2.

It didn't take long before I seemingly outweighed my sister. She was able to fit into my clothes even before we stopped counting my age by months.

I used to sit on the balcony of her dollhouse, stick my eye near the window, reach in to grab the sofa.

My nickname became what I thought was “Baby Ooey.” For years, I believed the reference to be of the mascot from the first *Baby Geniuses* movie. But I now know his name was “Baby Bunting.” The film came out in 1999, when I was long out of diapers.

Perhaps my parents were calling me “Baby Huey”: a 1950's duck cartoon, known to be sad and gullible. Or as either of my parents would say, *a big goof*.

In the images I could find, Huey is busting out of his diaper, his t-shirt snug, which I could relate to—my head was always bigger than the collar.

To my siblings, I was *fat-ass*

Waiting for my bath, staring down
I used to notice the way my stomach
protruded over my feet and my chest
caved inward like a hole. Michael has
always had it too, but deeper.

When I was born, my best friend
was already mine, thanks to our mothers.
She poked the sunken part until it reddened
but I didn't seem to mind.

To us, Michael was *pizza-face*

Due to his complexion, red pimples like pepperoni.
Greasy as any thirteen-year-old.

It disappeared when he started to become interested
in nutrition. Specifically after college, when he
transitioned between diets, from cheesesteaks to vegan
to only non-dairy.

To us, Sanna was *skank*

Although we didn't fully understand the ugliness of the word; she was considered messy, but having come right after Michael—the prince, who was brought a pool on the beach because he didn't like the waves; who needed his hands cleaned after every bite—anyone would seem a slob, which was what we meant.

When Sanna was a baby—and even more so as she learned to feed herself—spaghetti would reach the floor and walls, eventually landing on our mother's head in her bend to clean it. Sanna bathed in the gravy, the acidity creating an eruption of rashes across her face and body.

By two, she was peeling her own shrimp.

3.

There are six years between Michael and Sanna
three and half between she and I.

Michael was the first born; there were no complaints.

In utero, Sanna was doing flips and handstands flattening the protruding tummy, making it wider by pushing on the walls.

When she was born, the doctor needed a baseball mitt to catch her.

Freshly-brewed, a blastula
sucking on the straw of
A 1993 primitive placenta.

I swirl in her Atlantic,
Sonic howling: *Denise Denise Denise*.
I am pictured wrapped in blue.

I started off in a crib, as we tend to, in the back room of the basement where my parents slept. Michael and Sanna slept on the pull-out couch

at least

I think it pulled out.

Around the time of needing a new place to sleep, a space opened next to my mother, big enough for her two girls. Michael moved upstairs to one of the two unoccupied rooms.

When eventually, the oven in the kitchen upstairs stopped working and the shower on the second floor caused leaks through the thin wallpaper of the dining room, the basement became useful again;

by that point, we weren't living there anymore.

4.

The way lint collects, the mind does that.
An archive of fragments: the replacing
of a cap on a pen. The draw of the #8.
How to avoid the yeti own-age of *Skifree* '99.
The jamming and removal of pennies
from a CD drive.

Bottom of palm to lids, the viewing
of eye whites. The hologram projections
in the corner of contested inertia
assumed hallucinations.

I see us in the basement, two pillows for three heads, mine
falling in between. Parents, then parent and sister.
Staring straight at drop ceilings, sneaking up dark flights alone
to the head honchos.

The grands.

Then a move.

Dad moved into his own apartment sometime before the rest of us left the basement.

Around then, Mom walked into the house to find me sitting too close to the TV. I suppose Michael was watching me and Sanna, and I suppose Dad was with Mom, her siblings, and Grandma.

But I don't know. Because I thought it was around this time that I didn't see my father. That the curtains were drawn whenever he visited.

This is where it gets messy.

I remember him riding his bike with a bucket of LEGOs hanging off the handlebars. A kiss on the cheek through the fence of the yard before being called inside. Which was common while living a few blocks away from the refinery; sometimes the air turned a thick yellow.

It must've been later, maybe a single event not circumstance. But I remember him explaining that he did come, that he walked from 16th to 21st Street on crutches and with casts, to be told we weren't home.

I remember being told to hide.

I cannot be positive of the timeline, but I know Dad was there for Mom when she lost her father; when we lost Grandpa. We lost him on Thanksgiving, 1996. Christmas was spent at Dad's apartment, since it isn't proper to hang decorations after a death. It isn't a time to celebrate. It wouldn't have been fair for Grandma, but it wasn't clear enough for a kid to understand.

I thought passing away was synonymous with going away; with a rest assured attitude, I told them, *he'll be back*.

It took years for Grandma to move from her side of the mattress to the middle, using both pillows piled up. A few months after Grandpa passed, she was lying on her back when she felt something press against her lips. In a state of sleep paralysis, she was unable to move. When the power in her lids was restored, she could see her husband leaving the room in the suit he was buried in. She tried to speak, to call out *Tommy*, but the sound wouldn't come and her body could not move.

In the morning, before Grandma spoke of it, my mother told her I dreamt of him. That I woke her in the night to tell her how Grandpa threw me in the air and caught me a few times.

5.

There were nights when it was just us kids sharing a bed in Dad's apartment, which for the most part I can only picture overhead, as a blueprint. My siblings would instruct me to run down the hall to the living room, where Dad was falling asleep on the recliner. I was to tell him I fell out of bed—we thought it would earn us, somehow, a stick of gum from his fridge. We were prepared to slice it in three.

Did I know, at this point

Dad tied his cash and cards
in rubber bands, electrical
wires in twist ties
hung clothes on makeshift
rods of pipe

he had a blue... *blue* bathroom
and cereal he swore
to never sog

When we moved from Grandma's, I was in kindergarten. Or entering. For Sanna, it was fourth grade. At the end of the year, we opened our graduation presents from Mom at our new kitchen table. Each was a mug wrapped in white tissue paper. They read:

I Graduated!

Then, in large font covering the majority of the mug:

In 2000!

Although in reality, Sanna was taken out of school once Mom found out she didn't have a teacher the entire year. Not even a substitute, just kids in a room.

Mom took me out of the school too, on principle, and because my teacher often reminded us that the strings hanging from the ceiling were there *to hang the bad kids*.

Sanna and I were treated the same, in a lot of ways. Dressed alike until she could resist her way out of it. We shared a bedroom in the new house. Michael's was at the end of the hallway, Mom's at the front.

The floors were garnished with a shaggy pink rug—the tackiness a five-year-old's dream. Mom did not hesitate to rip it up.

She hired workers through a family friend. When they were finished, she painted most of the woodwork, the trimmings, the extra and the re-do. She critiqued it all, the most valid being the new floor of her smoke den, which she called the powder room.

Because of the tile, the door was cut in attempts to make it close properly creating a gap tall enough to fit a fist through.

We still stick steel wool in the holes.

6.

We can't begin with a hole.
This is what happened.

I began with a missing piece
perhaps not initially and not
for the time it seemed to take.

But it began with a missing piece.

I began as a witness
of a faulty structure
embedded in the basement
of a safe place.

This is what we crave
a secure home we build ourselves.
Even with dilemma.

Because running around the block
is better than Europe

if it's all you can do.

An absence took place.

What I believe was a few years, could've been a few months.

Early on, when I started to learn about the man in the sky, I swore I was up there too, belly on the cloud, staring down at my sister and mother crossing the street. It is the only memory I will admit is completely fragmented.

I was imaginative, so there is the possibility that certain details of a memory could be an afterthought, created either in an initial misunderstanding, or in the retelling of what seemed to make sense.

With practicality of character, time, setting, and its place in a series of events, I know to preserve a memory regardless if others have argued it false.

But the blurriness remains.

Here is where I cement that; where I sew myself together.

7.

Sometime in the summer of 2013, while sitting with my best friend, Alexa, in her yard, she reminds me that I used to say I hated my father, convinced he chose to keep a distance.

My mind always wandered, but not too far from what was said around and to me.

I was under the impression he had another family. With a woman named Terri.

8.

Let's back up.

Before there was a family, there were two houses, separated equal distance from Broad Street, a division in one general sense, a relation to parishes.

I can't tell you the difference in Philly's Irish Catholics vs. Romans despite having parents of each. The distinctions I see in each of their upbringings tend to rely more on stability in the household.

They married fresh into their twenties. I always pictured Mom hiding in her bedroom for four years, avoiding college. How else would she have gotten away with not going? She slipped it in my cards so young that I never considered another route. Like starting a family.

Dad finished trade school instead of high school.

By the time I came around, he was an all-around handyman.
Specialty as plumber.

He boxed when he was young. Perhaps a product of the time
a group of boys tried to jump him. I don't know
whether he knew them or not, but they chased him home.
When his father came outside, my dad—a child—expected salvation.

Instead his father made him fight each boy one at a time
his ass was handed to him.

I heard he was once stabbed around the eye with half of a glass bottle.

I always wondered where he got the scar.

One of Mom's various jobs was at the Häagen-Dazs up South Street. She'd bring my brother, no younger than two at the time, to taste-test ice cream. One day, she made a bet that she could lure a cop's horse into the store. She won.

I never knew, but somewhere nearby
Dad was working at a 7-11.

By the time I came around, Mom worked for a politician, was a receptionist a few times, and some time before me, a dog groomer. I spent night shifts with her at Ralph & Mickey's and Mama Yolanda's, getting Shirley Temples.

I remember mostly: visiting Mom at family court—another job—and attempting visual art with the copier, practicing impressions with her co-worker.

When I was in second grade, Mom went to what I knew as construction school. I remember when, only because of the car she drove: a station wagon and playing in it: the faceless doll she bought me on a field trip to Bartram's Garden.

.

The car, a gift from Dad, was given to her by us kids one Christmas. It was his—or maybe Michael's—idea for me to stuff her stocking with car fresheners. It was Dad's signature smell of Fresh Springs. I'll never forget the look on my mother's face when she thought she had to remind me that she didn't own a car. It wasn't a sad, pity-me look but an *Oh you're a fucking idiot* type of look—priceless.

It wasn't long before it was broken into; there was a dropped cigarette and a fire. Or at least that was the story.

9.

There was a reintroduction.
Weekend visits, some no-shows.
Technicalities.

I didn't know at the time
but there was an accident.

Dad, a passenger, went half-way through the windshield.

The car he was in was hit. The driver of the other car was ejected.
She was lying on the hood next to Dad.

There is a metal rod from hip to ankle, there are screws.

There is a bad back.
There is a lack of knowledge:

rehabilitating in what seemed secret

It took two years after writing the previous page
to find out Dad didn't go through the windshield.
That the driver of the other car, a drunk teenage girl
wasn't on the hood of a car, either.

She was fine.

It started as a casual conversation. When Mom turned from the passenger's seat of her friend's car to correct me, I knew to drop it for the sake of our company.

Her face grew soft, softer than it would appear even when talking to a child.

They had to use the jaws of life, she said, to get him out.

Not that the previous assumed situation was better, but the car was hit on the passenger's side, where Dad was. If he had worn a seatbelt, it would have crushed him completely, beyond revival.

10.

[March 28th, 2000]

Dad had his staples removed. I know so by his plain brown spiral notebook that has “Pizza Place” scrolled across the front with a phone number. I discovered it on top of a box in Mom’s basement, sophomore year of college.

Inside, it read:

University of [redacted] (215) [redacted] NOA: 3/10/00
Hospitalized 3/11 → 3/17 adm - thru Trauma
Surgeries: (R) hip femur/knee 3/11 AM
done by Dr [redacted] (R) ankle 3/14 AM

X-rays: - to be picked up at HUP
(copies of (R) hip/femur/knee films from
3/11 Also CT Head along with
OR films + all reports)
Also (R) ankle films pre/post op
along w reports.

* Spoke to ⁽²¹⁵⁾ [redacted] file room - will call
Terry's cell when Ok to p/u.

Medications.

percocet 5 - 60 filled 3/17 (as needed)
Cephalexin 500mg 56 " 3/17 (4x day)
Lovenox injection 28 syringes
2x day (10am/10pm)
33000 9:30am Penn Care will be delivering more
Lovenox at about 1:00 today

VISITING NURSE Tues/Thurs

L [REDACTED] 3/18 - checked vitals/temp
changed dressings
ved incisions/staples

M [REDACTED] tried to call 3/20
(spoke to representative, said that
M [REDACTED] is visiting 3/21.

3/21 - L [REDACTED] came ~ 1:30pm
checked vitals/temp
changed dressings on hip

in a lot of pain today, explained that
nubs are wearing off more quickly than
usual - L [REDACTED] said to take 2 percocets
along w/ 1 tylenol every 3 hrs instead of
every 4. and to inform Dr [REDACTED]
also

3/24 - nurse didn't come call →

R [redacted] from [redacted] called
~3pm - thought there would not
be another visit from nurse
waiting for call back.

~4pm R [redacted] called back stated
that there would be one more
nurse visit. - will come Tues 3/28

OXD last appt. 3/28 due to
Dr [redacted] took out staples - said
to call office if any problems.

When my kindergarten class was told to relay a question
to our moms and dads

I asked Ms. Johnson, *What if you don't have a dad?*

To which she replied, *Everyone has a dad.*

I didn't know he was healing

I knew of his existence. I could picture his face.

My question was born out of bitterness and I believe I was baiting.

To confirm: *yes I do have one.*

I wanted to bring what I interpreted as his truancy
to another's attention.

In this retrospect, a memory has unlocked itself as they tend to
when one stirs up bits of another in flashes of tunnel vision.

Standing in a doorway, two hospital beds. Dad's at the far end.
I hide my face behind the woodwork of the door frame.

I have closed my eyes for quite some time.

I don't know at what point in his long recovery
this visit, or my questioning in school, took place.

I am known to let my imagination run rampant.

Make nice with glue in my blind spots.

Sometimes it is hard to tell
what is too soon or too much with children.

Crumbs are always a given, despite attempts
at a clean sweep.

I'm sure I was given a watered down explanation.
I'm sure it was muddled with my own workings as well.

Michael would be the only one old enough to remember more vividly—as he was a teenager—but the only thing he knows is that he never went. Sanna vaguely remembers, but is as uncertain as I am that we entered the hospital room or even the building.

Looking in through the doorway, nothing else.

We cannot recall how we got there.

In our flashes, we only picture ourselves and not the other.

Normally, a sensorial memory could anchor a day to solidity, but there are none. There are no everlasting scents or stenches, and we were taught to not touch anything. With this tidbit, I know that my cheek would have never reached a public door frame, much less one of a hospital. If I started leaning toward it, my mother would have anticipated my actions.

P.T. J [redacted] (voice mail (215 [redacted])

Starts: 3/21

arriving ~ 11:15 AM

made me walk \bar{c} walker to
kitchen until tired - said I did
~ 80 ~~ft~~ feet. - made me walk \bar{c}

Crutches - (I'm really not
comfortable \bar{c} them due to modifications)
(pain #7)

gave me home exercises to do

next visit Thurs, 3/23 between 10:30 # 11:30 AM

3/23 ~ 11:30 AM J [redacted] - made me do

exercises - standing

out to side 10x

legs to back 5x

& went up 3 steps

coming again 3/24 between 11:00 AM + 12 AM

3/24

J [redacted] visited 11:30 AM
we walked outside About
100 feet. Inside we
did both standing Exercise
& Laying (leg L.F.B.)
Next Appointment Tues.
3/29 11:30

3/28 - (CXS) APPT @ J [redacted] - too much
pain - waiting for New Jersey home

3/28 - Dr. [redacted] - [redacted]
Haddonfield office. took out
all staples - new prescription
of percocets (40) - new PT script
Flu appt. 4/28 10 AM (Haddonfield)

By first grade, he was picking me up from school with a cane.

11.

So which birthday was it, that I hung my head through the window like a decoration? I don't think it was on a whim; I think I was expecting him.

Dad double-parked across the street. I'm picturing his limp, but I don't know if I remember him enough from before the accident. He crossed the street and slid a card through the mailbox of our door.

I watched him come and go, popping my head in and out of the curtains.

Despite knowing what my father risked by walking up the front steps, it felt as though he was hiding. Essentially, he was forced to.

Sometime before that birthday, and therefore the reintroduction, we heard loud bangs on the front door, rhythmmed with hollering. We hid on the powder room floor until blue lights came in through the front windows. Mom went outside to meet them.

My siblings and I were aware of the situation, or a version of it. We thought he was breaking in, and although I doubt any of us—including Mom—thought he would harm us, I don't think she exactly felt safe.

I'm assuming she didn't know how to handle the confrontation, especially with three witnesses.

But he was tired of not being able to see us
which I *thought* was his choice.

I don't think either of them knew what to do besides express the anger they both felt. Maybe they knew someone would need to step in as a mediator but were too prideful to willingly seek it.

They went to court to distinguish set times for him to see Sanna and I. Michael was a teenager and capable of making his own decisions.

The first three “visits” were no-shows.
Dressing by 10 a.m. on Saturdays, just to wait.

I don't know if there was a lack of communication about the dates and times, but Dad had already proven by that point that he would go to great lengths to see us. We were told a different reason, but from what followed years after, I figure he was in too much pain to get out of bed or even call.

I started to get to know Dad at these visits. I learned he tied shoes tighter than anyone else, which impressed me. He explained how one acquired major air on the swings, demonstrating the back and forth motion of legs.

Whether he knew it or not, he introduced me to gel pens and black paper, glitter nail polish and Hello Kitty. But on most occasions, we window shopped. I found it a cruel joke despite realizing it was a poor man's sport, the only thing we could afford to do most days of the month.

12.

When Dad wasn't around, wasn't living at Mom's, I spent nights mourning our relationship and the gap I felt within myself. But when given a chance those Saturdays with him, I felt incredibly disconnected, as though we were cheating on Mom.

I remember eating French fries with enough ketchup to fill a bowl. It was hard to imagine Dad existing in the space when we weren't there. It was where he made his eggs in the morning—assuming he cooked for himself. It was a strange living arrangement never properly explained by either parent. We're supposed to skirt over the details. We are a wholesome family.

Dad was renting a room in his friend's mother's house. It could've been Terri's, who—to my knowledge—was his coworker, the person driving him home the night of the car accident.

At one point, I swore my brother said they were only friends; that Terri had a girlfriend. As of late, Michael says he never knew anything about her.

We called the old woman on the recliner by the TV ‘Old Pretzel Breath’ which might’ve been Michael’s to coin, after staying there a short time.

Old Pretzel Breath was sweet. One spring, she crocheted pink slippers for my sister and I.

On the way to Dad’s car, when his back was turned, Sanna threw both pairs in a neighbor’s trash can. She loathed the color, but more importantly she worried how Mom would feel to see them.

13.

Back at our rowhome, where my mother still lives...
If you turn the spigot for hot, cold comes out and vice versa.

Getting older, we became stronger against one another:

Sanna was getting too old to like sharing a space with her little sister. When you're young, three and a half years can be four different stages.

But we were on the same side.
Shared bedroom meant shared solitude.
Shared hide-outs and door-locks.

It became tricky with punishment:
dealing with it yourself
or bringing the other along.

14.

Maybe it was the aroma of sandalwood incense my mother used to burn or her fresh coat of white on the walls, but at first, the house smelled new.

There was a lightness to it, perhaps due to a minimal amount of furniture.

She had never been a fan of clutter or *gatzidayzees*, so there was plenty of floor space for a glide in socks. It was a fresh start for us all carried by her renowned strength as a single parent.

When my mother was doing her own renovations, she enjoyed them with a glass of red wine, a lit candle, and a plethora of Rod Stewart CDs. One night, she woke on her air mattress to find Rod muted and the CD flipped to the wrong side. The candle was also blown out.

She felt something gentle in the air, comforting and protective.

Some mornings, she would let us ride the mattress down the steps like a sled.

The gentle hum shifted.

Right before we moved in, Mom made Michael run to the house for something she needed. He was about to leave when he heard the toilet flush. Normally, that wouldn't have caused him to run out of the house, but he knew Mom had just changed the locks and they were the only two with a copy.

After about a year of being there, we heard the utensil drawer slam shut while we were all in the living room.

We've felt weights on our chests while sleeping, unable to move or open our eyes, but knowing a presence was near.

We suspected a toxic leak, an old soul, and other ghosts.

There are forms
that stand in
 absence
trying to write of a hole
what hides in it
what dances along the brim
stands over
 watching it.

We are not meant
to understand
everything.

The forms
that stand in
 absence
are the forms
hidden
by the shadow
of a hole.

Honing in on what should be lingering
the obsessive throb of thought
what should be memorialized.

In the yard, our stone walls are falling apart at a visible seam: a
break in stone I press with palm whenever close.
The seam lines up again as if only a fracture.

The door that leads to the alleyway is made of green, now broken
splinter-ready wood. It's missing panels, has cinder blocks
in the way of the push, for comfort and security.

I used to climb over the trash cans in that alley, to sneak out.

Denting the slightest, we all did.

15.

There became a need for self-soothing
Or was there always that need: rubbing thumb over cheek for the
heightened sensory that is left on a moving fingertip, baby hairs
and peach fuzz.

Constraints I assigned myself to avoid regressing
Sneaking out to prove to myself:
one day I could leave for good.

But at a standstill, you bear the heaving alone.
You stick to your corners until a force

pulls you out
for a moment.

In my case, that force was my mother's fist pulling me out of the corner of my closet by my hair.

It led up with the official re-introduction:
When we were all under one roof, again.

Walking in to see Dad on the couch, his cane beside him.
Mom on his other side.

It was as if we were being introduced for the first time.

16.

My parents were always better off as friends. Probably not always
but the parts I was there for. I wanted them on good terms
I wanted him in my life. And that's what they did; they compromised.

Very much still love. Just trying to make it.
Trying not to argue.

Dad lived with us for the better parts of that decade until there was
another move. We thought it a cleanse, a clean break, healthy for
them both.

It was always a separation, never a divorce
never conditioning
each end.

But still, never a splitting of ties.
They were both always all in.
At least for us.

It wasn't a break.

I went over to Dad's new place a few times. After a short while it wasn't allowed.

He was renting a room in a friend's house, said it *[was] not [his] call.*

The more my father knew his roommate, the less he wanted to be around him.

He returned dishes to the cabinets dirty, left clothes to mold in the washer.

I thought these were the issues.

17.

For a while, I only knew my dad to have one friend—outside of many acquaintances and *old buddies*, whom I only saw in passing when they called him *Father Mike*.

This friend had a cousin, who he introduced to Dad. Suddenly, I heard less of Dad's first—and to my knowledge, *best* friend—and more of his soon-to-be roommate.

After Dad started renting a room in his new friend's house, I didn't hear much about either of the men.

When we made plans to go to Long Beach Island, Mom worried it was for the wrong reasons. Dad spoke of it as a father-daughter clambake trip, at the fishing club he had been trying to become a member of, for two years or so, at that point. But when he disclosed we were going with his roommate and his daughter, who was younger than I was, Mom was convinced I was there to babysit.

I don't think she was implying much; Dad's goal was the fishing club, and bringing me was a plus. I guess she wished his main goal was to bring me, not to go to the clambake with people she did not know. At the time, I gathered that she believed it was his friend's idea to bring his daughter and an afterthought for Dad. My father wouldn't have indulged in a vacation without one of his kids and I, the youngest, didn't have the same freedom as my siblings had, given their age. Therefore, I was the chosen one. I think he wanted to create a happy memory, just the two of us.

However, I knew my father would've felt odd and self-conscious sharing a motel room with this other man, mostly because this man was more of a can of beans than a cup of tea—meaning he was an annoying pain in the ass—and we, the daughters, were buffers.

Maybe those aspects were the main cause of unease I felt around them. I hurried showers so as not to leave Dad alone with them—particularly *him*. I did not feel unsafe around my father's new friend, but I did feel as though my father was, in some way.

But we, the girls, could walk to the bay. Which pleased me.

It wasn't until three or four years after the clambake that Dad made it into the fishing club.

Had poles inscribed with his name:

Michael J. Spring

18.

After he moved out, most time with Dad was spent in his car on the drives to and from high school. At first, we tried to find things to do together, like go to the movies, but we would leave at the first sex joke and call it quits. It wasn't exactly bonding, either. He would leave a seat empty between us. There was a slight clashing because he was definitely the opposite of my mother in a lot of ways, and I was used to her.

In the morning, he'd bring me Pinwheels, a Cosmic Brownie, and coffee from the corner store. We spoke and shared silence. Didn't really adjust the radio. I felt the constant desire to hug him, which is hard when all you can do is twist your torso in your seat.

He would make sure to ask me—often more than once
within a drive: *Guess what?* *I love ya*
And I said it right back.

But I didn't know everything a child should know about their father.

His mother's maiden name. Or first.

His number of siblings, only one of which I met at the time.

I knew he was in pain, especially when the air was damp: his bones ached. Depending on if he took his medicine, he was either awake or asleep for a week straight.

Before he moved out of Mom's, he spent nights reorganizing all of the cabinets and the cellar way. Made cornbread. He'd wake us up, calling that it was *Time to make the donuts!* But when Sanna and I would finally come downstairs, we'd find him tucked behind a door, sometimes of the fridge, snoring lightly.

He had even fallen asleep at the wheel before, after taking the wrong pill by mistake. It was a quick doze that thankfully harmed no one. He immediately pulled over and called for help.

After that, he stopped taking the heavy prescriptions.

19.

In August of 2012, my parents and brother moved me to my dorm in Brooklyn.

Hugging my father, before Mom snuck in another, I started to well up realizing I had wanted so badly a life on my own, away from the structure of someone else's rule. It was bittersweet, a big moment for me to say the least, but it was a wake-up call; I relied on them, immensely, and I wasn't as ready to say goodbye as I had thought.

It was my first year on my own, so naturally I missed them both. But I felt the distance between Dad and me more than ever. I was coming into myself, becoming aware enough to consider pursuing a better relationship.

I realized I had made everything about me. I started to see my parents for more than just their household roles and more as people who barely had time to live themselves.

As soon as they were old enough, they were parents.

20.

In college, I flatlined.

Like weeds between cracks

under a heel.

Like a fountain with too little pressure.

Not knowing what to do

keep busy and drain

keep it slow and clogged.

At the end of my first winter break, after my visit home, my brother came to spend two nights in New York before returning to Boston, where he was attending graduate school.

The night before, I was crossing Myrtle Avenue, a long strip of stores by my school, which has long been gentrified. In the 70's it had the nickname Murder Avenue for its reputation of being a constant crime scene. Walking along a strip of cafes and gourmet groceries, you can feel the forced change.

As I crossed, Dad called. He had been sick with the flu for two weeks. He sounded morose.

I was going to the movies to see the new version of *Les Misérables* with Anne Hathaway. He hadn't heard of it, so I explained the plot before he told me he'd *let [me] go*.

Love ya. Buh-bye.

My dorm was small. Michael, rightfully so, did not want to sleep on the floor in the few steps of space between my roommate's bed and mine. We opted to spend the night at our cousin Krista's apartment.

21.

[January 18, 2013]

Sometime around four or five in the afternoon, Michael and I crossed the Brooklyn Bridge on foot. In Manhattan, on one of those big streets, a man was being covered by a sheet. He was hit by a car, and now for traffic to continue, the scene had to be concealed.

It was being dealt with.

When you witness
or hear
of another's loss
you count
by dialing
who you have.

The person
who is most
like who
was lost.

For once, I didn't follow that instinct. I saved it for later, planning to call Dad once Michael left. We went to the movies—my second night in a row. Coming out, a call came from my best friend Alexa, who usually only texts, unless inebriated or waiting somewhere for me to meet her. Even then, it's rare.

Shakily, she asked where I was, said she *just wanted to say hi*.

We took a cab back over the bridge to Krista's.

I called her to let her know we were outside, but for some reason when I reached her voicemail, an automated voice came on similar to the one on my father's, saying to *leave a message for Mike*.

I mentioned it when we got upstairs, assuming some wires got crossed. Or maybe I dialed the wrong number and hadn't noticed. Krista's boyfriend—now, husband—looked pale at his feet. Michael joked, *you look like you're about to tell me my dog died*—or maybe he thought it and told me later.

Krista told us to sit, and I expected her to tell us what restaurants we could go to.

Instead, she slowly dropped to crouching position, her body curling into itself. Having yet to process what she was told over the phone, a minute sooner, she shared the news with us. Michael did not let himself feel. He instinctively turned to comfort me.

22.

[January 18, 2016]

I'm sitting in the kitchen of my Brooklyn apartment, contemplating how I will transport this thirty-year-old wooden table my mother lent me to my new place. It's one of the finer things we've owned—she's owned—and for longer than she's had me. I am determined to not ruin its stride or the condition my mother has kept it in, despite the paint chips from school projects and the wear on the legs from being carried to each new home. It has spent the last fifteen years on a cement floor in my mother's basement. Now, it is here and in use. The table isn't as long as I remember, not as oval.

There are sesame seeds spread across it: two here, three there.

On the ceiling above me are three holes that appear as black dots if you look quickly. For the past two weeks, my roommates and I have feared ceiling collapse as walls are being demolished above. The exposed pipes running through this kitchen are clanging as if to say, *why can't you do something* as workers hit them in the process. It has been raining drywall and wood, screws and nails. Some in trash bags, some loose, hitting the fire escape before the yard.

Because the floor is on a slant, the fridge doors pop themselves open. Our milk spoils fast. We had, and might still have, some unwelcome pets. But it seems to be improving. I spend some nights here and most days when I don't have class. Empty pizza boxes keep finding their way to the floor.

I want stability.

The bridge itself we crossed over, leading us from

with

to

without

and the more we knew, the less comforted we felt.

23.

Our suffering a tie, looped
and in place, day and a day
and another repeated day.

It seems like I don't allow myself to be open to it anymore.
Stability in the sense of state, a consistent balance
of mood and energy.

I feel as though I carry the weight of the sadness, without really mulling it over, piece by piece. It's a lot for each day, for one day even, and maybe I've done it for many.

So have I dealt with it for now or am I just numb

Let it loop until loose

try to take it off

and it won't budge

I'm watching bread rise and pull apart, and I'm thinking of the skin
on my knee, pink and scabbed over. How I didn't see the pavement
give me the middle finger.

How I never notice until after.

A red face, mirror and pink:
I keep myself company
to witness my own despair
protecting hurt self with rough self
becoming dough with the measure
of blue in my cry

24.

[February 11, 2016]

I tend to stifle sobs. A love song can bring it on, even if it reminds me of my partner. Any rush of feeling allows the gateway to plunge open.

I cannot pinpoint each source.

I have a feeling today is
someone's birthday

I once had
memorized.

There are certain words I can't say. Forbidding myself
from language too harsh for you to read.

Because writing it out

My father is dead

reminds me of what I try to not think of.

His story on the news.
Thinking it would be possible to cope
if it was natural, a cease of pain.

Learning it wasn't natural.
Not an ordinary passing.

25.

He did not catch a shot. They took through him.
Four out of six, he dodged and missed
by an inch.

But it depends on who you ask:

The consensus of the news:
it was his head
another says torso
another says

Mike Sterling

They didn't say: A bullet grazed each cheek

One entered his neck

And left the opposite shoulder blade

That he was found
hands folded between knees.
That the detectives were afraid
to touch him
fearing a gun
was in his palms.

It's becoming real again through narration, in fear of trapping it.
If I don't vocalize my memories, I'm afraid I'll lose them
But the recalling of an event is the making of a memory; I question
my attempts at honing in. Are my anecdotes smoothing out fine
detail like a pumice stone on a foot?

Pretending an event didn't happen will manifest into reliving the problems
that Freud thinks we develop in infancy.

But sometimes we aren't pretending, sometimes we don't remember

For the first few days after Dad's death
and months later (maybe even a year)
I repeated in the mirror
what happened
to remind myself.

He wasn't coming back.

26.

The night he died, Dad was supposed to pick Sanna up from work. When my best friend's father showed up instead, she questioned him, piecing it together before she was in the house. She pushed past Dad's siblings, since they were strangers in a living room. She found my mother smoking a cigarette in the powder room, out of sight from the people in her house, all of whom she hadn't seen in twenty-something years.

Soon they had all left and *close* family arrived. My friend's father returned with his wife—Mom's best friend. From there, an argument erupted about who should be present. Who should have been called first. All had good intentions, but too, a lot of nervous energy. Insignificant, but worth mentioning since Sanna had to retreat from a rare embrace with our mother to tell them *shut the fuck up*.

Plucking up the pieces, as she tends to. The calm, resourceful one.

My father, having lost his mother to cancer at six, always looked to Grandma—
Mom’s mom—as his mother. He often said he could always go for her gravy,
even if it was poured on top of dog shit.

No one wanted to stir Grandma, but she had to know. She would've been angry to be out of the loop, and rightfully so.

She was most likely spending the night filling boxes and cleaning since it was right before she moved. If it was years earlier, I would've guessed she was sitting with one leg up on the couch, reading from her book of prayers. But that was something until it wasn't. I wouldn't be surprised if she picked it up again, after that night.

When she opened her door, my uncle repeated *Mike. Mike. Mike.* Without the addition of *Little* or *Big*, Grandma assumed it was my brother.

After Krista told Michael and I, she rented a car to drive us all to Philly. When they stopped to get coffee before the ride, I stood outside and dry-heaved, again, after spending at least twenty minutes rocking myself on her bathroom floor, shoving my head in the toilet. I suppose I thought it would help. She drove me back to my campus to grab some things, where I shakily told my roommate *No, things are not alright.*

27.

It is savored. The taste bitter
like broccoli rabe, softened by dough.

At first, I couldn't fathom why I could taste when he could no longer. How not even the end was fair. I thought about the heat, how his bones felt better in the summer than winter, now hating the warm days without him. Wondering how the sun could shine.

Not being able to find the importance in anything.

The physical pain of changing an expression.

I was ambivalent then, avoidant now.

Dad's siblings were gone before I got there, and the next time they came, I hid upstairs in my mother's bed. They were too late.

I know that it was mutual; that Dad was part of the distance between them. He might've been the main source, for all I know. And for good reason, I'm sure.

They let decades pass without him. Not knowing us.

And yet, still, they came. Which is to be acknowledged.

But I was jealous and resentful towards anyone who had the choice to see him, since I often did not.

When we got there that night, I overheard people—whoever was still there—discussing what happened. This is how I learned some of the details. Which ones, I do not know.

Mom was lying in bed, watching the news. She flipped the channel as soon as I walked in, saving me from reading the tagline at the bottom of the screen or hearing the wrong details from a jittery news anchor.

When I started to ask her questions, she turned the TV off.

She told me he and his roommate were shot.
It was being investigated as a murder-suicide—*but they don't know yet.*

I told her it was impossible. That a father—his roommate—would never leave his daughter behind. That a father would never take another father from his children's lives.

Neighbors came forward, claiming they saw men with brass knuckles and a bat knock on Dad's door the day before.

When I brought this to my mother's attention, since we had our theories, she turned it down. Said it didn't lead to anything. *Besides, it wasn't a bat. Just the handle of a hammer.*

Having witnessed a murder via hammer-to-the-head when I was playing outside at age seven, this didn't make me feel better.

It took what felt like weeks for the guy next door to return from vacation. He didn't want to get involved, but the investigators needed the surveillance tapes from the cameras at the front and back entrances of his house.

When the tapes were retrieved, there was no mention of the men the day before. My father left, apparently went to Dunkin' Donuts—his last meal—and returned. Detectives claimed no one else, besides his roommate, was said to have entered.

But if someone had, we wouldn't have been told. According to the detective, my mother *[didn't] deserve to know jack-shit* since she and my father were separated in marriage and house.

At first, it made sense that there was no one else.

Why else would a dog sit peacefully next to their dead owner?
There wasn't a mention of barking.

No one reported hearing the sound of a bullet leaving its chamber, either.
Whether a silencer was involved, or a pillow, is unknown to me.
At first, police said there was, then they said there wasn't.

Did twenty rowhomes ignore the noise?

And where was this dog when her owner was thought to be hunting?

Did she use her nose, did she sniff the blood?

28.

They were found by his roommate's mother.

There's no way to know for sure, but she apparently yelled

Oh my God, he finally did it

when she saw her son in the hallway.

I think she knew of another *He*.
That she, like the cops, knew a threat was made
a few days prior.

29.

In the days following my dad's murder, Alexa took me on walks to the store to get me out of the house. Plus, we were always out of tissues and sleep aid. The bottle we passed around like cheap wine each night. For me, it did nothing.

These walks gave me time and place to air my theories, worrying I'd depress my siblings and mother even further. I asked Alexa what she knew, what was said on the news.

His head, she said, not before her voice cracked in a failed attempt to speak.

I thought, *Good, it was quick*, before learning the rest—which you already know: this wasn't the case. Six bullets flew at my father. The news confused the two—his roommate was the one who went quick.

If the murderer, whoever it was, preferred the strength of hands or a knife instead of hiding behind a gun, my father—flu, bad back, rod in leg and all—would've, no doubt, won.

That isn't to say that my father would have killed a man with his bare hands.

But it would not have been the first time he fought for his life, metaphorically or physically.

I always wondered where he got his scars.

We knew he got into the occasional fight, if pressed. It became rarer as he got older. He only shared details if it was obvious in the state of his clothes; there was never a bruise or a mark.

Michael once knew a younger, more nimble version of Dad. They worked security together at Spectrum Stadium. Michael inside, Dad outside.

One night, Michael got cut early
ran into Dad *beating the shit out of three guys*

he was trying to help them get into their locked car
under the promise that one of their licenses matched
the registration.

They started giving Dad a hard time.

I was standing right there.

And with that, he meant I know *this* happened.

Mom always accused Dad of being too trusting. She wasn't wrong.

When a woman we had seen around the neighborhood asked to wash our windows, he paid her a year's worth in advance expecting a visit once a month. When she disappeared forever, Mom *told [him] so*. Loudly.

He wasn't phased; the money had come and gone as it does so he shrugged.

My father had two sides. He was gentle and kind but had a limit, as we all do. With us his patience was high.

We knew when to not *push his buttons*, but it wasn't in fear. Knowing he was waiting in the car, Mom would take the longest time, then add *Come on, he's probably blowing bubbles out there* or *he's probably huffing and puffing*

Sanna, more recently than Michael, witnessed my father consider an altercation. In her reenactment, her hand raised in a fist before flattening into a high-five, as it lowered into a swing. *He provoked Dad. He stood directly behind the car while Dad tried to pull out of a spot. Then he said something cocky.*

Dad landed a slap on the guy's face, out of pity and perhaps growth. He had simmered down throughout the years, but he also knew his place. He was not going to cause a scene outside Sanna's work, or have her catch him in the act.

In terms of his death, we wouldn't know who exactly to blame—besides Dad's roommate for being either the murderer or the man who made my father a witness, then a shut mouth.

30.

If there was any bit of Dad's energy left in that house
it belonged with us.

Before the crime scene tape was torn down by someone warranted to do it, Mom did it herself. She wanted to bring Dad's things home.

Even a used disposable razor—which was immediately thrown out in case it wasn't Dad's, and I guess even if it was. She wasn't looking at what she was grabbing; there was a shock swirling through her system like an electrical current through a socket.

We begged her to not go, although part of me wanted to as well. She refused, saying she owed it to Dad. She felt as though his soul was trapped with his things, within the lime green walls of what used to be his roommate's daughter's room.

Because of this, even pastel-colored sidewalk chalk was taken to Mom's in a trash bag and later, officially tossed in one.

Michael would not let Mom go alone. When they came home, after loading all the bags into the parlor and dining room, he sat knees to chest at my feet, on the tile floor of our kitchen.

He told me only a sliver of what he saw:

the red parts.

Another cousin—Dad’s niece, who lived across the street from him—was bent down trying to clean what hit the walls and floors so that my brother and mother wouldn’t have to see.

In addition,

someone threw my father’s belongings around the room

in a raid

31.

I originally wrote:

*The last thing Dad heard was the shutting
of his bedroom door and the bullet that took
his murderer from responsibility.*

*I wanted there to be a third person, I think we all did.
Dad's brother, I met for the first time in the days
following—who looks almost twin-like to him—promised
out of anger, that he and [his] guys would get the prick.*

I was hopeful

*Mentally prepared myself. Fantasized about beating
a bat—or the handle of a hammer—against middle aged
knee caps.*

I wonder if she still doesn't know what her daddy did.

How he took mine with him.

It was from that estranged uncle that I learned the truth.

There was a trial—not for my father’s death, or his roommate’s, whose name I try not to think of. Now their last names are paired together as exhibits.

They are just one fact of many, paired again with other names of other apparent murder-suicides and missing persons, the faces of a couple I saw on the flyer of every storefront growing up.

I learned that some of us no longer hoped for a third person. That they made their peace and couldn't go backwards. Couldn't retraumatize themselves, certain that they couldn't be mended like broken bones.

When my mother ignored several calls from my dad's brother, I knew she was avoiding something. When he reached out to me, I called him back.

I learned the truth a day after I originally finished this manuscript. After I already decided on the villain and blamed him in print.

It was three years after I lost my dad, and it was Father's Day.

32.

Taking down one
impacts a herd.

When we were younger, when we didn't see Dad every day, Michael acted as guardian; he essentially was co-parenting with Mom. He surprised me with clothes, took it upon himself to steal sneakers from his job—one shoe at a time. He'd take me to get water-ice and in return for all of this, I pretended I was his daughter. Somehow, a seventeen-year-old with a seven-year-old kid worked as a pick-up.

Sanna was also generous, despite being no older than twelve and without an allowance. Sometimes the bills she pulled out were littered with my name, being birthday money that never reached the bank. In her defense, I was the one who wanted the cheese fries.

We tried to rotate duties amongst the three of us, so no one took the full brace. And so Mom wouldn't have to deal with the burial alone.

We couldn't handle it, though; luckily Krista assumed as much and stepped in for us without even being asked.

Our loss made us notice what we had previously gained in life and hadn't appreciated in full effect. How many people were willing to do whatever we needed.

33.

*When a person has died, the order of their things is weighed down
by the fact that they will not be returning to move them.*

*So the order of their things becomes a shrine; the order is preserved for as
long as possible.*

Until it is clear that the person has actually left the room.

—Kristin Prevallet
I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time

We “legally” were not allowed to open Dad’s storage unit since he did not have a will. The company refused to open the gate which meant we couldn’t drive the car to the door of the unit. It would have taken multiple trips for the amount of fishing gear at hand, passing the main entrance each time.

Our second attempt was guessing the code to the gate, knowing very well they were watching us on camera.

The last four of his social didn’t work, neither did anyone’s birth date. We did find keys amongst Dad’s things. One was a bent key to Mom’s house and the other was to the unit. Unless we wanted to toss it all over the fence, it wasn’t getting out.

Moving mechanically, we piled everything we could outside of the unit. Tools mostly, some coats, shoes, and gear. Sanna’s husband—boyfriend at the time—approached the only other car in the lot. He softly explained our situation, prompting them to eye my brother and me, as we stared at our shoes.

We had under 10 minutes, if that, until they drove away, shutting the gate behind them. In that time, we managed to save Dad's portable camping toilet, which had an attachable shower curtain for privacy.

He was a rustic sort of man who appreciated amenities.

Between siblings, nieces and nephew
T-shirts and hoodies—we divided
the creamed crops of Mike.

Like artifacts, I looked for connections.
Wept at my ceiling.

Felt a piece of him each time I caught the clock
at 1:11, his birthday. It happened more and more
at low times.

34.

In the days following, police made a commotion over something found in the basement of the house where Dad was living. But I'm told that pipe bombs are a common household item for South Philly residents.

I was more concerned with the fact that the detectives did not care to hear the last voicemail we had from Dad, who always made note of the time.

First he'd say, *Hey it's Daddy*, then
it's _____ o'clock.

He even added the day of the week.

It contradicted the time of death given to him on official documents.

The state trying to compensate the victims of victims. Sharing that any money in my father's bank account legally had to go toward his funeral.

He probably would've found defeated humor in it. He loved life, would vocalize it quite literally, but he wasn't ignorant to the fact that it could and would bite him in the ass.

It's not like he could've used the money at that point, but it's the principle that he helped fund his own wake.

It bothered me that it wasn't too surprising.

35.

Losing my face in the mirror to find it again, my face scaring my face.

His ethics are in me, not by conscious choice but welcomed.

I feel like it must mean something, if each of us had our own version of the truth

of what happened before and during his death.

36.

One is embraced by a view.

It can be profitable with wisdom or lived out with contradiction.

I started to pray again. It had been seven years, but this time I spoke only to my father and anyone I imagined to be meeting him at the gates. Told them to be ready, as if they didn't already know.

I used to believe that those up there knew what was going to happen before we did, but not that it was necessarily predetermined. It was as though there wasn't an interlude or rerouting in my understanding of Catholicism in that aspect. Believing again in the afterlife.

But before and occasionally after, I still thought:

*What salvation is promised, to stop aging to sit on a cloud
Haunt my lovers until I can leave for good?*

My faith in karma also dismantled.

Dad lived by it in most ways, but his absence momentarily proved to me that I should not. The crux of karma is a healthy route to follow and I believe we shouldn't expect anything out of good deeds.

It should all be selfless, which he was.

But I was still hurt that it did not make a difference.

Dad was hopeful. Was a present tense. Was holy in the face of Catholicism, but his denim cut-offs didn't make it through that vestibule too often. He *praised-be-to-God* in his own way and time.

My instinct wasn't to make the sign of the cross as he would. It used to be, but when I was instructed to do so only because he would have, I felt the need to rebel.

I became critical of the way others were trying to heal while my processes weren't any healthier. When Mom told me to pass a finger from forehead to heart, I grew resentful.

I knew who my father was. I didn't need to be reminded. I was on the same page as his morals and ethics before and after his death. I also know he approved and trusted our choices—was proud of his children. He never let us forget it. With that, we were rich.

I couldn't pretend the performance of a ritual would be a cleanse.

That it would help, even though it was really just a disbursement of positive energy. So when Mom started to reconnect her own routes with religion, it struck me sorely. When she began to adopt his morals not far from the way I had, I found fault. I'm sure any child could grow sour toward a parent when being told how to live. Especially when you do as they say and then the script is flipped. When they no longer can recall what they used to say about a topic.

But to remain sour is to be a child. Is to be unsympathetic.

This is what happens. We reenact. We picture the gun in hand.

37.

I thought:

*What is the general basis of Christian ethics, loving as the dead did
calling heathen on all that frown upon it? I think some think: God to person
as father to child, well I was a child*

and if now a heathen, so be it.

I wrote:

*But if it's all you say and none of which you do
you are hitting the fan at rock bottom.*

Being a hopeful for the sake of it.

But I wanted to know:

*How do we recall what's real
without destroying the realities of others*

Plenty could have been done differently. We can all say that at some point in our lives. I would hope we're evolving.

Just as I didn't need to be reminded of who he was, others did not have to be reminded of the weight of the past.

Especially all at once. Not while they were already mourning.

That weight, they were already carrying.

Look at our durations. What do they look like

Cross the luminous gate from heaven

and come back

down

You are the gate in that body

the surge

that sometimes comes in side

of that pattern

through the front door of the house

let it in

Afterword

I flicked crumbs off the bare mattress and lay my head on my half of the pillow. Hair pushed upwards, out of my partner's face, my legs bent. I closed my eyes then felt the need to look. There were green specs—an outline—but it was dark and there was a woman. She reminded me of the witch from Hansel and Gretel: long dark hair, a boiled nose, a handkerchief over her head. The woman made the same face I used to make in the mirror, which always made me move quicker out of the room: her nose and brows squished up, her mouth in a tight circle like gathered elastic. She was saying *boo* without making a sound. I childishly covered my eyes with my hands as if I just caught my father on the toilet. Turning over, my back curled, I wondered if it would make her go away. The green dots appeared again, this time a thought, an image of a knife going through my back. At that moment I felt a poke that straightened my body with a jump.

It could've been psychosomatic, but it wasn't the first time I lied awake at night with the suspicion of being watched. Occasionally, it was a pressure on my chest prohibiting me from moving. When I was young, spiritual experiences were more vivid and welcomed. No matter the spirit, they always

seemed to prefer meeting one-on-one, and I didn't mind. This solitary act with them led me to believe I could see what others could not; I thought of it as a supernatural power. In reality, I was hypervigilant, always observing and scanning my setting.

When we moved from my grandmother's house into a new one, my "power" seemed to morph into a haunting. I was always an insomniac and probably always a *nervine*, so I can't blame either on the transition, but perhaps on my hypervigilance. The occurrences seemed to happen at night when I was alone. I was open to sharing space at Grandma's because I knew who the spirits would be. For a decade straight, my grandmother lost sibling by sibling—there were eight of them at one point—and in-law by in-law. I welcomed them, and because of these stacked losses, I was surrounded by praying, as well as frequent mentions of God and heaven. It was normalized. When Grandma said she could see Grandpa looking over her, we spent stretches of time staring at the ceiling. No matter how hard I tried, I could never make him appear.

I knew it would be different when we moved; that the spirits did not pack their bags with us. I became afraid of the new spirits I expected to meet within the initial nights spent there. The first thing I learned about the new house was that there was a blackboard in the basement. The second was that the previous owner had passed away. The fear was born and loomed immediately. We started to blame the late owner for the constant aroma of tomato soup, but we quickly became immune. Still, years later, in high school, when I would sneak friends over, they would question the smell, convinced that my mother was home and cooking, somehow invisible. Having others notice it as well worked as confirmation that someone was there.

After moving out of my mother's house in 2012, I didn't seem to have company. The following year, I moved to a different dorm with two roommates. It was in the old Willoughby building that I watched my scarf lift one side of itself (which was draped over a chair) into the air, holding the position for a few seconds like an ice skater. Then it fell. No one was home when my scarf put on a show, but one night a roommate said she saw our fathers—mine and our other roommate's— both of whom recently passed, hovering above us as we slept.

Although I felt it was possible my father could have been visiting through the scarf, I was hesitant to embrace what was happening. I didn't feel a sense of comfort in the moment, whereas I have since, when experiencing another energy in an empty room. It felt invasive. There were rumors of the dorm buildings being

haunted—of textbooks throwing themselves across the room—so again it could've been someone I didn't know. Plus, the scarf had no connection to my father.

The old woman I saw in bed more recently was definitely not my father, but if it were his face I saw, I'd like to believe I would have welcomed him. It was confusing to deal with my contradictions. I wanted another moment with him, to say the least, but I had to consider the frightening part. We lost him eight years ago, and for the first three, I was too fragile to be able to bear the thought of having him visit. I worried he would be in the same physical state he was in when he died, not as the youthful man with maximum mobility that used to come to me in my dreams.

This concern manifested quite easily, starting the night he was killed. I pictured my father with grazes on his cheeks and bullet holes in his neck and shoulder. In the moment of learning we lost him and every day following it, I verbally reminded myself of his absence. Most of the time I stood in front of the mirror, Bloody Mary style repeating the details. I kept picturing over and over what must've happened to him, what caused it. At first, I did this simply because I could not believe it. I thought it was the best way to come to terms with what happened, to start healing, but also the opposite—to not heal too soon; it didn't feel proper or respectful. I needed to be aware of the situation of not just my loss, but also my father's loss, to properly honor his life. To do this was to picture him dodging four bullets. Which one got him to the ground? Did the murderer stand over my father, make him kneel on his bad knees?

These images are contingent on the little facts we know. He shut the door with my father inside on the floor, balled up with his hands between his knees. Did his roommate shoot himself out of guilt, or was that premeditated—was any of it? And as time went on, I considered the possibility that it was another person entirely. That there were more people involved. These scenarios are another haunting. As soon as I started to reintegrate living with mourning, they flooded back to me as though they were memories, and it felt like I was actually a witness.

At times, I remind myself that I've come a long way, especially in healing; that I am solid like a paperweight but as fragile as what's being held down. And I've been holding my foot over it for a while because I have enough strength to do that. At the same time, I keep finding the need to answer the question: have I really come a long way or am I pretending? Am I really confident in what I perceive or see, in any aspect? I want to say yes, but I have the same

doubts, the same realizations I repeat to myself—like the ones when my father died. *Everyone is better at what I do, at anything I try.* As Anne Lamott writes in *Bird by Bird*, “Jealousy is a secondary emotion, that is born out of feeling excluded and deprived.” But I have “worked on those age old feelings.” I have progressed, or so I hope, as my embedded fears lessen and I start to trust myself, believe I can handle it. *It being anything.* I’ve handled worse. After losing my father, there’s no way I want to make anyone feel unwelcome, especially if that one is him. I wonder if he ever catches me on the toilet. I hope he has better timing.

The forming of my poetics is aligned with my maturing and understanding of myself. Everything is process-oriented. Such is life. Before reaching this place, comfortable with myself and having company, there was uncertainty that I carried, bitterness as well, which showed through my writing. I was angry, and I wallowed in self-pity. When in such a low, it is easy to become deeply absorbed in oneself. As the cliché goes, only time can tell, and it knows better than I do. This growth was (and is) gradual. Poetry is a mode of transportation, a tool for development, where I can recollect and reconstruct myself.

When writing first called me, and especially again when writing *This I Can Tell You*, I needed to recollect and reconstruct because it was difficult to know myself. There are holes in my memory. I do not always trust what memories I do have, and that battles with outside opinions that try to keep some family matters secret. By reading books of poetry that dealt with these themes—memory, trust, and hidden histories, to name the least—I was given a guide, as well as immense hope that what I was trying to do could be done.

Reading Maggie Nelson’s *Jane, A Murder*, helped me as an investigative text, as it tries to piece together the murder of her aunt, Jane, whom she has never met. She begins by trying to understand who Jane was, using Jane’s diary and the memories others have of her—in and outside of the family. Through reading, I learned how to follow my instincts of what feels best to investigate, since that is exactly what *This* is and what Nelson does throughout her book. For example, in the original version of my text, I did not include an important asset: my father’s voice. It wasn’t entirely possible to create, since not even his journals detail exactly what

was going on, or how he felt. I assume Nelson did the same in writing *Jane*, but she found a way through the journals. At first, including my father's journal entries seemed like a nice notion, to have a concrete voice of his in there somewhere, like a ghost. They became more necessary when I learned how to read them—and by that I don't mean to read his handwriting, although that was an initial issue as well. Nelson taught me how to find clues in my father's journal, how to generate questions to ask, what to look for and where/in what direction. Once I became confident with my approaches, I became less doubtful of what I remembered.

Another writer, Lyn Hejinian, leaves space within the text for the reader to be a part of the investigation; the right and wrong turn; narrating the process of the process. In my first read of *My Life*, I did just as Hejinian planned for: I rushed into it, expecting a concise narrative based on the long paragraphs which one usually only experiences—or expects to experience—with what seems to be prose. It is an “autobiographical” poem that consists of forty-five stanzas and forty-five lines, which is reflective of the process of writing the book and her need to return to see what couldn't be said initially, what physically couldn't be said all at once. The number of lines and stanzas are aligned with her age, which is why before the re-print, there are only thirty-eight stanzas and thirty-eight lines. It is archival of itself.

Originally, I wrote with a thought: *what I know is what I know and I cannot make these memories come to mind*. It was a defensive strategy; my memories did not feel complete, linear, chronological, or verifiably accurate. *My Life* shows the selectivity of memory and finds beauty within what we have at our disposal. Hejinian doesn't follow standard conventions; she explores identity by moving through history, linking each sentence to its neighbor by sensorial experience. It was after reading her work that I swayed more toward poetry because it felt the most natural in presenting what I knew. It also allowed me to admit where there was flaw, to weigh in on the story.

I wrote what felt like draft after draft of *This I Can Tell You* my senior year of college. Everything before that led up to it. Sophomore year, I practiced intertextuality using Jenna's Osman's *Public Figures*, which observes statues of military figures in Philadelphia, focusing on where the statues are facing in discussion with history and our own places within it. My mission was to ask the essential

question, as Osman did: *are our gazes complicit with the gun sights of war?* At that point, a year had barely passed since my father died. I didn't realize it at the time, but my eyes were fixed on the haunting mental images of my father's murder.

Despite not actually being there when it happened, I became unable to differentiate between a car backfiring and a gun going off, jumping at anything loud. My attitude about war in the poetics I weaved through Osman's was seeping with a raw mourn. In other words, I was writing too soon. I was pointing my finger towards what others have done or how specifically I have suffered. Writing *This I Can Tell You* has taught and allowed me to ignore what used to be the need to point my version of a gun. It made me realize that I am not the only one who has felt a metaphorical gun placed in front of them. But for a while, it was difficult for me to be able to sympathize with others and their problems, because I didn't think they were as severe as my own. It wasn't until the sixth round of editing—which in retrospect was still the very beginning—that I realized I was writing not only my own, but also my family's story. I chose to cater my language around what was being said, using "our" instead of "my." It was slow, but eventually I was able to take my shit-stained glasses off. I lost the victim complex and started being able to see others as well.

Other writing, independent from the intertext project, was sloppy, making little sense—I don't think I knew the point of anything I was writing. In 2014, I wrote: *What does it mean to dream of a door/what does it mean/why not study a Faberge egg/there people that do strive/for connection/communication with self/that's part of it/it does make you wonder.* Two years later, I was still writing of doors, not with judgment but with what they hold, what fills the space, what they separate—what or who is excluded, what is in the framework, how was the door constructed? What has the door endured? At one point, I wrote: *As a child, I thought of the floors, the walls, the doors, as reincarnated souls. The unlucky ones. Walked over, held onto, slammed, banged, beaten. They were all breathing.* This quote shows the innocence I used to have, although I've since been reunited with this idea when I started considering spirits again.

Perhaps I still have some hypervigilant tendencies, but it will always be my goal to be aware of all that surrounds me, even if some are no longer breathing. A tree would look at my table as an old friend. In an early draft of *This*, I wrote: *even the structure of the house operates the way we feel. The front door of the house has always been in ill shape, from the time the screen door was snapped off in a fit. First was the screen itself and then the rest. It's always the rests; the breaks we take from speaking. In the morning it isn't remembered, or*

so it seems it is pretend. This speaks to the structure of the house and how we, the people inside (my family), structure ourselves and our relationships with one another.

When you think about your relationships with various people, you think about the experience, the place, the conversation. Sometimes it feels as though I am someone different when I'm with different people. I am the same person, but my company might bring out different aspects of myself, or rather, I feel comfortable to bring out certain parts or sides of myself, depending on relevancy. I assume space or spirit can have the same effect. Considering the intentions of spirits, their place, etc. might shape or change the experience, as it would for any other being.

My perception of my hypervigilance shifted from a power to a haunting. It's a lemon life gave me, I won't whine about the reason. Now, it is somewhere between the two realms. It has made me observant—to listen to all that surrounds me—of the living, the spirits of space. I'm constantly working on this because if I pay close attention to my surroundings, I can see what is needed of me. It teaches me how to become a better person—a better daughter, sister, and friend.

Although I'm not sure how much truth there is to what I perceive, to what I see, to what I've witnessed, it's necessary to document and acknowledge the energy, the spirits, and all else that creeps—what could be said, what can't because it isn't remembered. *This I Can Tell You* is a statement on accepting what has been dealt, to growing into my own. Come in through the front door and listen; come into the living room.

Glossary

A big goof: synonymous with “a big chooch.” Neither were coined specifically for me but resembled the nickname my mother affectionately gave me, which was “Looch,” and eventually “Scootch Looch.” But also, I did try to take her seat on the couch a lot.

Chooch: someone with no common sense. It is based on Southern Italian slang, derived from the word “ciuccio” meaning pacifier. It is reduced to “ciucc” and used to describe an ass or a fool.

Grazy: A lot of people use this word to explain tomato sauce that has been cooked with meat. In my family, any homemade (tomato) red sauce is considered gravy.

Gatzidayzees [Got-ZEE-day-ZEES] (correct spelling unknown): Meaning junk or kitschy knick knacks / unnecessary things that take up space. Recently, I heard my mother pronounce it “Gatzidaylees,” crediting my grandmother’s sister, my great Aunt Connie. Derived from the phrase “capo di cazzo,” roughly pronounced in Italian-American slang as “Gabadeegats.” The phrase means “dickhead” but can often be exchanged for “ballface.” Aunt Connie has gotten quite a few generations to use this word to refer to things that hang around.

Father Mike: I always thought my father was given this nickname due to the amount of free plumbing jobs he would do, but Michael first remembers hearing it at his little league games; all the coaches were dads/referred to this way. The nickname apparently continued years later, when he worked at the with one of those fellow coaches.

Nervine: word commonly used in South Philadelphia to describe someone with constant nervous energy and anxiety. According to Merriam Webster, it is the name of a type of medication used “to calm the nerves.”

Notes

Renee Gladman's *The Activist* is used as the epigraph for the overlapping themes of perception, doubt, and dream-state foggiess. However, as the use of ellipsis and blank space suggest, there is an omission of part of the quote as it was extracted from a larger context.

I always thought "Time to Make the Donuts" was my father's slogan, but he lifted it from a 1981 Dunkin Donuts commercial.

In Chapter 30, "the red parts" is reference/ode to Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*. (Graywolf, 2016.)

Reading Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* helped me understand why I felt like a witness to my father's murder, despite not being there; it helped me understand re-traumatization, and how we all have different triggers and boundaries.

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Brandi Spering resides in South Philadelphia where she writes, sews, and paints. Favoring non-fiction and poetry above else, her writing tends to sway between both, carrying a little over each time. Spering received her BFA in Creative Writing from Pratt Institute. Her work can be found in *super / natural: art and fiction for the future*, *Forum Magazine*, *Under the Wires Magazine* and *ArtBlog*.

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This I Can Tell You walks in through the front door and looks under the sofa. It measures the length of the wall, taps to find the beams. It removes the hammer and the nails from the toolbox, places them in a line to find the difference. *This* is a poetic narrative that examines structures within a home. It navigates Sperring's muffled timeline due to the fragility of memory as a result of trauma and the secrecy maintained within a family, like a well-groomed dog.

“Skillfully mimetic of how trauma is retroactively recalled/ or not, narrated/ or not, this series of poetic meditations tells a story of everyday resilience through re-collection.”

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