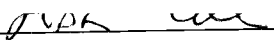


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michelle N. Abbott for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, Speech Communication and Human Performance, presented on April 16, 2001. Title: Aspiration.

Redacted for Privacy

Abstract approved:



Lisa Ede

This thesis consists of a collection of personal essays with interconnecting themes. The title, Aspiration, suggests a desire for high achievement and also reflects the metaphor of breathing, which serves to tie the collection together. Breathing is a physiological function that is subject to both voluntary and involuntary control, and the same mysterious interplay seems to shape our lives as we negotiate the choices we have and the circumstances that arise despite our will. Part I of the collection contains essays about my family and the loss of a loved one, while Part II explores the more purposeful aspects of aspiration, such as choices I make about independence and pursuing physical challenges. I've elected to write a creative nonfiction thesis because it serves to demonstrate my performance in the area of composition and also allows me to incorporate themes from the other areas of my MAIS degree: speech communication and exercise psychology.

Aspiration

by

Michelle N. Abbott

A THESIS

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Michelle N. Abbott, author

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Aspiration:

Expulsion of breath in speech;

To breathe, the act of breathing in, inhalation;

A strong desire for high achievement

For Missy

*"I heart you, Loof, but
I'm real sick of typing..."*
--Biddie

Aspiration

Introduction

I like to think I can breathe underwater. I guess technically I'm not really doing it, but sometimes when I'm swimming and my face goes back down in the water after a breath, I can draw the air a little deeper into my lungs. I pull the breath all the way down until even the tiniest alveolus is filled with air and busy exchanging gasses with my blood. I secretly think that if I were drowning, I could put this talent to use, gaining an extra few moments by recycling my last breath until I'd used up every last molecule of oxygen.

Truth is we can't live very long--more than a few minutes--without taking in a new breath. It's a powerful survival instinct, to keep breathing; even if we tried to stop, we couldn't. Eventually we'd open our mouths and gasp for air, the diaphragm would contract, the chest cavity would open up, and all the little air sacs of the lungs would be filled. Oxygen is so vital to our bodies that the whole volume of blood in our circulatory system passes through the lungs every couple of minutes. It makes its way into narrower and narrower passageways until it reaches the finest type of blood vessels, the capillaries, which drape the air sacs of the lungs like a web. Here, through single-celled walls, gasses are exchanged between our environment and our internal system. Oxygen from the lungs diffuses into the blood, cleaving to the hemoglobin like a scarlet life raft to be transported to the distal areas of the body. Carbon

dioxide also drifts across these walls, in the opposite direction. A waste product, it is expelled from the body through the lungs and exhaled into the environment.

Even before it was understood in physiological terms, breath has been recognized as a vital life force. In the Bible, it's regarded as the very genesis of life: "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." In seeking to unravel the mystery of respiration, Plato suggested that breath was essential because it served to cool the fires of the heart and blood: "...as the respiration goes in and out the inward fire attached thereto follows it." And in the 1400's, before the role of oxygen was understood, Leonardo Da Vinci observed that "neither flame nor animal" could survive without some life-giving substance found in the air.

Many Eastern philosophies revere the breath. The martial arts influenced by Chi Kung hold that disciplined breathing is a means for acquiring control over body and mind. In meditation, manipulation of the breath is seen as the key to self-control and the ascension into higher states of awareness. The Hindu tradition of Yoga suggests that strength and energy are derived from breath drawn to the core of the body, and that through the breath a center of balance is found--physical, mental, and emotional.

Perhaps the intrigue of respiration lies in this convergence of influence. It is subject to both voluntary and involuntary control. It is reflexive on the one hand--we could not purposely starve ourselves of

oxygen if we tried--and yet open to conscious influence on the other. Our breath is something of a liaison between our volition and our nature. It gives expression to our emotions (we take shallow breaths when we're nervous, gasp when we're shocked, sigh audibly when relieved), and carries messages the other way too. By consciously slowing our breathing rate, for instance, we can calm our nerves, slow our heart rate, even lower our blood pressure. A medical text from the 1930's describes the human body in terms of its balancing forces and suggests that the diaphragm, which controls respiration, is like the equator: "the dividing line of two great halves of being: the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary, the skeletal and the visceral."

In respiration, I see a metaphor for the mysterious interplay of forces which also seems to shape our lives--the choices we make consciously and the circumstances that arise despite our will. In my own life, I am strongly propelled by volition: determination comes naturally to me. I like to feel in control, to plan, organize, and manage my life purposefully. Out of this comes my ambition as an endurance athlete, my decision to pursue dual degrees as a graduate student, and my reluctance--so far--to give up the independence I enjoy as a single woman. But I'm also aware (thankfully, and sometimes painfully) that life is never as subject to my control as I tend to think it is. If it's a story I'm writing, much of its context and many of the plot points are not of my own creation. I find it interesting that respiration prevents us from becoming too self-contained-

-we cannot store up oxygen the way we can eat one good meal and have it nourish us for hours. Instead we are vulnerable, constantly tied to our environment, utterly dependent on the small thread of air that ebbs and flows from our lungs. We must live, quite literally, moment by moment.

The essays in this collection are about choices and non-choices. The first part, entitled "Breathing Out," contains essays about my family, the precarious privilege of happy times, and the unexpected loss of my younger sister in 1995. These are the "givens" in my life--the aspects over which I have no control. I am passive in these realms, just as expiration is often a passive act, a simple relaxation of the diaphragm muscle, the release of breath. Part I ends with the essay about my sister's death--the ultimate *non-choice* of my life--because the event itself seems to have forever separated my life into two parts: everything that came before, and everything after.

Part II, "Breathing In," explores the more purposeful aspect of aspiration, the choices I make and my awareness of the act of choosing. The essays in this section describe my life as if, like the tiny air sacs of the lungs, it is empty and waiting to be filled--by decisions, determination, my own will. Because choice, by definition, implies the existence of alternatives, I reflect on other possible realities in Part II. The first essay, "Walking Long Before Midnight," is a brief reflection on solitude in the context of community. "Switching Seats" describes my interactions with the

elderly people I drive at my volunteer job with Dial-a-Bus, people whose lives seem in many ways antithetical to mine. "Choices" picks up the issue of solitude introduced in the first essay of this section and further explores the decisions I've made--and continue to make--about living independently rather than choosing long-term partnership. The last essay, "Breathing Deep" describes a triathlon competition, and, with a shift in point of view, invites the reader into this world of willpower and physical exertion. The reflections interspersed in the narrative trace the element of choice through my life and show, finally, how determination culminates in a deep sense of satisfaction.

Reflections like these are well suited to the essay, because as a form, essays have traditionally been a place for asking questions. In her book Riverwalking, Kathleen Moore suggests that "...all essays walk in rivers. Essays ask the philosophical question that flows through time--How shall I live my life?" The essay is flexible enough, in structure, style, length, and tone, to accommodate all kinds of approaches to this philosophical examination, and to preserve the sense of human presence--the writer's personality--at the same time. In my collection, there is variation in page length as well as voice. Two essays are short and intended to serve as jumping off points for other, longer essays. "Breathing Deep" incorporates a shift in point of view, a more direct address to the reader--an *invitation*--into triathlon competition, unfamiliar territory to most

readers. These kinds of choices are the tools of the essayist; this is the freedom of the essay.

Essays are also humble in their approach; the word itself comes from the Old French *essayer*, meaning to *attempt*. Its definition today encompasses not only what the essay *is*, but also what it does: "a testing or trial of the value or nature of a thing." All the essay purports to do, then, is to attempt to tell a story, to make a connection, to offer its reader something of value or pleasure. Michel de Montaigne, who created and developed the form in the 1500's, wrote essays with the goal of self-knowledge and the hope of sharing. He explains, "What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but for me...[But] what is useful to me may also by accident be useful to another."

So, though flexible and humble, the essay is also quite ambitious. It aims to capture a grain of truth, through the telling of one's own story, and at the same time tries to do so in a way that invites others in. It tries to get to the broadly applicable through the specific and descriptive. Yet the essay offers no formula for this, presenting the writer with a challenge aptly described by Virginia Wolf: "A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life...?" The art is found through trial and error, hundreds of rhetorical choices the writer must make. No wonder E.B. White says that the essay, "although a relaxed form, imposes its own

disciplines, raises its own problems, and these disciplines and problems soon become apparent and (we all hope) act as a deterrent to anyone wielding a pen merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood."

I have become well acquainted with the challenges and rigors of the essay while writing this collection. I'd always considered myself a proficient writer, but have used the skill primarily in more functional contexts. I studied exercise science as an undergraduate, and have been working concurrently on a graduate degree in business while writing this thesis. I've written numerous papers in more traditional academic formats, as well as business reports and research reviews. The structure and function of these formats comes more naturally to me because I can approach them systematically: there's a clear objective and a process for getting there. Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, is less outcome-directed, more intuitive. You find out what you have to say in the saying of it--connections emerge, themes develop, ideas brew beneath the surface before they bubble up. This is the craft.

I present this collection of essays as the product of high aspiration and at the same time, with all the quiet humility characteristic of the essay as a form. In the words of Edward Hoagland, these essays are "a line between two sturdy poles: this is what I think, and this is what I am." In this collection, I'm reflecting on my situatedness--as a graduate student, a single woman, an endurance athlete, a *human being*--turning each thought

over and looking at it from different angles. Like the alveoli of the lungs, each essay is a place of permeability, where influence and exchange and reflection take place between myself and my environment. And from each encounter, story, and moment, I try to draw some meaning--in much the way that my blood, deep down in the remote cavities of my lungs, draws oxygen from my breath.

PART I

BREATHING OUT

*As the respiration goes in and out
the inward fire attached thereto follows it.*

--Plato

Snapshots

When I was a kid, I used to wonder what I would be like as a grown-up. I tried to picture myself standing in line at a bank with three children tugging at my sleeve, or lingering after dinner with coffee the way my parents did. I made resolutions: for one thing, I would never linger that long after dinner, boring my poor children to death. I also resolved positively that when I got old enough to buy a car, I would get a red VW Beetle and paint it like a ladybug, with a stripe down the middle, spots on top, and eyelashes around the headlights. I remember being extra firm about this--knowing there was a slight risk I'd outgrow the plan--so I mustered my strongest resolve to be sure my grown-up mind wouldn't override it.

It was so hard then to imagine that this adult would still be the same *me*. And it's equally difficult now, at age thirty-three, to look at old photographs and recognize myself in the towhead tomboy, the 4-H member, the camp counselor, the sunbather, the high school graduate. I crave a sense of affiliation, though, and perhaps that's why I keep my photo albums handy; I look through them on a regular basis. There's an oversized blue book called "This Is Your Life," which my father gave me on my twentieth birthday. It's a collection of pictures from our family albums, beginning with my birth in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1968 and chronicling my childhood in our family of six through high school. In high school, I started keeping my own photo albums, and I

have one for every year of my life since then--twenty-one, in total.

Sometimes I stare at a familiar picture for several minutes, focusing my attention beyond the smiling faces, and looking for clues to who I was when the camera clicked. Often it's a small detail I hadn't noticed before--the title of a book lying beside me or the words on a t-shirt I'm wearing--that trigger a specific memory. Or it's the larger memory that the photograph suggests, the story leading up to it or the happenings outside its borders. Pictures help me establish an important connection to all the old identities I once wore and wriggled out of like a snakeskin. People say that photographs are limited because they capture only a single moment in time. I disagree. I think *I* am caught in a single instant--the present--and these pictures trace a story.

In the picture I am wearing a red long-sleeved shirt, and I am sitting on the ground in a wooded area, legs outstretched in front of me, small hands tucked between my thighs, white-crowned head tilted upward toward my mother. She is sitting across from me. Our feet are almost touching. She leans against a tree, barefoot, bare legs bent, hands resting on her knees, a book resting in her lap. She is wearing a green dress and her long, straight blonde hair is pulled back in a barrette. She has been reading to me, but now our eyes hold each other's gaze, and she is smiling. My expression is quizzical and intensely attentive. Behind us: a blue camping cooler, and the corner of a picnic

table. The caption reads, "Chesapeake Ranch, Fall 1969."
I am two.

My mom always says she was best at mothering when her four daughters were young children. It's probably true, because by the time we reached high school, we had moved to California and all our efforts to fit in seemed to confound her maternal instincts. Suddenly we didn't want to take her homemade lunches to school, embarrassed by the recycled Safeway bags she packed them in, and we asked for money instead. We couldn't bear the thought of riding the school bus after the age of 16 and fought bitterly over the use of the silver Saab that usually sat idle in our driveway. My mother, true to her pragmatic Dutch nature, couldn't understand the need for a car when there was a bus that stopped on the corner and a garage full of bikes. We weren't going to become lazy Americans as long as she had a say in it. I suppose the clashes were inevitable: my mother, the ultimate individualist, and her four teenage daughters, trying eagerly to conform.

But in this early picture of our family camping trip, my mother is all I need. She is beautiful and elegant and has the power to tell me a story from the words in our book. I am captivated. Outside the borders of the photograph, there is all the motion and commotion of a family camping trip--one blurry hand appears on the very edge of the picture--but the moment between my mother and me is still and timeless.

In May of 1975 we are on a walk in the Vienna woods. My father takes a black and white picture of my mother and the four girls. Caroline is in the front and center, sitting on a stump, looking directly into the camera, giggling. Her knees are together, hands between, heart-patch on the knee of her faded jeans. Mom sits to the right of her on another stump with her legs crossed. Her ankle is in a cast from a skiing accident. There is a basket between them, mostly unpacked, and a thermos with the top unscrewed. Jessie sits on the ground on the other side of Caroline. Her face is scrunched up as she opens her mouth wide to bite into an apple. Her hair is stringy, long, and straight, hanging in her face. I stand directly behind Caroline, drinking out of a white cup, sandwich in my other hand. I am wearing a black straw cowboy hat. Missy, the youngest, is next to me, wearing a leather Indian vest and a matching headband. She is holding a chocolate chip cookie and is looking at the camera with a comical expression. In the picture next to this one, I am chasing her through the woods with a gun drawn from my holster.

I've never had an easy answer to the question, "Where are you from?" because we never lived in the same place for longer than five years. My dad worked on international agribusiness and development projects, so we moved around to different parts of the world. My notion of "home" doesn't come in a physical form, like a particular house I grew up in, but instead it packs up and moves with me from place to place--Thailand to Virginia, Virginia to Austria, Austria to California.

This is a picture of me at home in the Vienna woods--with my dad, mom, and three sisters. *Familie Abbott*.

My sisters and I didn't always seem like allies--there were vicious fights in the back seat of our red Volvo station wagon, like the time I told Jessie I loved the worms in the garden more than her and made her cry. But when it counted they never let me down, like the day I peed my pants in 2nd grade. I was afraid to ask where the bathrooms were at our new school in Vienna, and by story time at the end of the day, I just couldn't hold it any longer. I had to change into my gym shorts, and this made me late for the bus. When I got to the parking lot, the buses were starting up their engines and honking their horns (we had big, scary, touring buses, not friendly yellow ones like in the States) and students were running every which way to hop on. I was too young to know which bus to take, and the vice-principal found me wandering around the bustling parking lot in tears, wearing shorts in the rain. "Don't your older sisters usually meet you at the bottom of the stairs?" Mr. Glass asked. But I didn't believe they'd still be standing there--I was late, the buses were leaving, and it was pouring rain--until he took my hand and we ran to the stairs, and of course, they were.

I look at pictures of my sisters and me, each developing our own character and yet growing up intertwined, like trees planted too closely together, so that even when one is plucked from the stand, its imprint remains. I always took comfort in the longevity and permanence of having our roots grounded in the same soil.

But permanence is an artificial notion, suggested in pictures but hard to come by in real life.

I am standing in the Aptos High School gymnasium in front of the whole school, wearing a shimmery gray pantsuit. It is 1985. The picture is a long shot in black and white, taken by the school photographer. I am bow-legged, high-heeled, and hair-brushed, with anxiety and self-consciousness registering on my face. I am nervously biting my lower lip. My father stands poised and proud beside me. He is wearing a dark suit, a white carnation pinned to the lapel. Our arms are interlocked. In the slightly darkened background a sign hangs over the crowd, "Like For Sure! Beat the Valley!" Both of our faces are turned just to the left of the camera, where a woman in a long, blue, velvet robe is about to place the homecoming crown on my head.

My dad loves to see his daughters dressed up, and we tease him about this pointy-lipped, proud expression he gets on his face, like he could be smiling twice as big but is trying to practice a little modesty. If I ever get married, this is exactly the expression he'll have at my wedding. To this day, when he sees me dressed up he says the same thing: "We didn't know if we'd ever see this feminine side of you."

I was at a swim meet the day they voted on homecoming, so I didn't even know I'd been nominated until I got back and found out I'd already made it on the "court." I liked the special attention--getting called out of classes with pink slips for practice and photo

shoots--but I also liked that I could make it sound incidental, having missed the whole voting process because of swimming. This way I could play both cards: get dressed up and participate in the whole silly ritual but act like I didn't care too much about it at the same time.

In grammar school, all I had to do to be popular was beat the boys in dodgeball. I was a tomboy, and though it mystifies me still, my parents deemed it necessary to institute a policy to force me to wear skirts to school twice a week. I set my incorrigible mind against it, and on those days I'd cry and fuss and pretend I was sick until my mom would say, "All right, then! Wear your pants!" and I'd go happily off to school in Toughskins.

In 7th grade I found out the rules were changing and that boys liked girls now, not tomboys. I had a crush on Brent Garvey, and my neighbor Lisa Baird--who was 13 like me, but looked 16--told me that he said I was cute, but that I dressed like a boy. Lisa gave me some hand-me-down skirts, and I still remember getting my first pair of shoes with hard soles that went clickitty-click on the sidewalk. It made me feel very lady-like. I didn't abandon my tomboy tendencies to be girlish, though--I could still beat the boys in dodgeball when I changed into my gym clothes--but I learned the joy of getting to be *both*.

I am eating cold pasta out of a Ziploc bag labeled "Parm. Cheese," holding it just under my chin. My eyes are turned up toward the camera, but my face stays tilted down, my lips closed around the strands of spaghetti

which run over the plastic fork, and into the Ziploc bag. Two silver rings are glistening on my brown hands. I am wearing a gray fleece jacket with red trim around the wrists and snap-up collar. The picture is dark just above my eyebrows, where a black baseball cap covers my forehead and fades into the dark green forest behind me. Most of the light is caught on the bag, my hands, and my face--not pretty, but alive--the kind of vitality that comes from living out of doors for a while.

It's Alaska in the summer of '95, and my two friends and I came equipped for this long, wet week on the Prince William Sound. We had polypropylene long underwear and Helly Hanson rain gear--right up to the silly hats, which we wore every day. Our gear had to be double packed in garbage bags and dry bags, rolled down tightly and clipped shut. Every time we pulled our kayaks to the shore, we'd scan the area for bears and suitable tie-off points for our overhead tarps, the only shelter from the incessant rainfall.

Before I left on the trip, a coworker asked me why I was going. "It's supposed to be vacation!" he said, "It sounds like work. A vacation should be relaxing, like lying on the beach in Hawaii." Of course it's the effort we put into the trip that made it so rewarding--you'd have to paddle for eight hours to know how good spaghetti out of a Ziploc bag can taste. There's always payoff for the hardships, like when you have to pee in the middle of the night and it feels so miserable to leave your warm, cozy sleeping bag, but then there's a piece of the night you get to experience. And the rewards can be

spectacular. The morning after this picture was taken, there were eight-foot high, ice blue chunks of glacier on the shore outside our tents, a gift from the high tide.

My sisters would laugh to hear me say this, because I sound exactly like my mother. She is famous in our family for her philosophy of delayed gratification (the Dutch are notoriously hardy people). "A little misery--" she'd be saying as she set out on her bike in the rain, even though there were two cars in the driveway, "--and those dry clothes will feel so good when I come home." My sisters never bought into the idea the way I did. Missy claimed the whole philosophy was as psychologically unsound as banging your head against the wall so that it would feel good when you stopped. She went to the opposite extreme, relishing a hassle-free life as soon as she got out on her own and categorically rejecting the notion of delayed gratification. She couldn't even endure the wait for a surprise. She'd buy me a birthday present and then call me up with: "Ask me what I got you for your birthday! ASK me!"

I am in the center of the photograph, wearing a red bathing suit and yellow swim cap, a light blue towel around my shoulders. I have a stiff grin on my face--not plastered on for the camera, but frozen there because my lips are numb. I have just swum 1.5 miles in 52-degree water as part of the 1995 "Sharkfest" crossing from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco's Waterfront Park. My chin is slightly grayish from the algae that has collected there after 45 minutes in the bay. On either side of my

small, weary figure are two of my sisters. Caroline's arm is over my shoulder; Missy's is around my waist. Both of them are smiling broadly--almost laughing--with round, rosy cheeks, their expressions revealing a hybrid of pride and amusement over my crazy endeavor.

If the photograph of this moment had been a moving picture, it would have begun early in the morning. I would have been boarding the ferry to Alcatraz with a hundred other swimmers, smearing Vaseline around my neck and zipping up my wetsuit. Missy and Caroline, now living together in Napa, would have been sleepily pouring coffee into travel mugs, piling into Caroline's Pathfinder early in the morning to get to San Francisco before I emerged from the water. I didn't know they were coming. They were not early risers. I was shivering and stumbling down the finish chute on the beach when I heard them call out to me, one on each side of the taped-off area for competitors. They hugged me and helped me numbly remove my wetsuit, supervised my consumption of hot chocolate (refilling my Styrofoam cup each time I emptied it), and asked a friend to take this picture. I spent the morning forging my way through the chilly surf, but here I am buoyed by their love.

I find a sense of continuity in these pictures, a common thread of character that ties me to who I was and who I'll probably always be. I wonder where it comes from? Is it inherited--was I born with my mother's tenacity, for instance? Or is it cultivated by a

lifetime of choices and experiences, the way a long wet week of kayaking builds character? I'd be curious to deconstruct my personality, to identify all the components and try to trace their origins. But wherever the thread comes from, it weaves through the pictures in these albums, connecting my life like a giant game of dot-to-dot. Of course, like the game, the pictures still miss all the in-between parts, the color and texture of real life.

Rooftops and Riverbeds

*Every sweet has its sour; every evil its good.
For everything you gain, you lose something.
Nature hates a monopoly.
--Ralph Waldo Emerson*

I used to have recurring dreams about falling from high places. Sometimes it was an airplane, sometimes a cliff, or the roof of a tall building. It's a precarious place to be, up high...so far down, so much to lose.

Last fall I read Kathleen Moore's Riverwalking for a class I was taking. In the essay "The John Day River," I recognized a certain apprehensiveness about privilege and happiness which I have always felt in my own life, but never quite identified. Throughout her essay about a jubilant family rafting trip, Moore juxtaposes images of pleasure and pain as though she suspects shadows lurking around the edges of her joy. The tension culminates when her gleeful family reaches a set of rapids on the river where the water level is unexpectedly high, threatening their safety.

Suddenly Moore finds herself reflecting on Ralph Waldo Emerson's suggestion that "nature hates a monopoly" and wonders nervously if "everyone's life finds its own equilibrium, a natural balance of joy and pain." Like a child on the high end of a seesaw, she suddenly realizes the precarious privilege of all the joy in her life:

But if happiness has to come out even with sorrow in the end, then I am in big trouble. I try to take my joy in tiny sips, hoping my sorrow will be equally shallow. But usually I end up swallowing happiness in gluttonous gulps, believing all the while in

justice, and so rejoicing at little setbacks and petty unpleasantness, courting small disasters, hoping to eat away at the deficit. I know that if the universe is as reciprocal as Emerson says, I have already had more than my fair share of happiness, and in the end I will have a tremendous, bone-crushing debt to pay.

I, too, have had the distinct feeling that I'm taking in happiness in dangerously gluttonous gulps, too much for the natural balance of life. Call it youthfulness or naiveté, but for years I thought that my life was perfect. In the early '90's I was living in a sunny apartment in the San Francisco Bay area, with lots of friends and my three sisters living close by for the first time in years. Our family had always been close, but at that time I wrote in my journal that we four girls were "closer than we've ever been--in the sense that we're really living out what, to me, is the ideal sister relationship." I felt as though I was insulated from all the pain and loneliness in the world, surrounded by these relationships that had a depth and constancy some people never know. I wondered at times what special responsibility or risk I might be incurring by living such a thoroughly contented life.

In any case, I was gulping it down. One such occasion was the 4th of July 1995. I was (ironically) on the rooftop of my sister Jessie's apartment building in the densely populated neighborhood of North Beach in San Francisco. My other two sisters, Caroline and Missy, had come down from Napa for the day, and the four of us gathered on top of the building, on top of the world. We

had a picnic dinner and an expansive view of the city skyline.

Caroline had parked her Pathfinder illegally on the sidewalk, so we were on the lookout for legitimate parking places (always in desperately short supply in North Beach). From the roof, we had the advantage of perspective, but not access. Each time we heard an engine start up, we'd peer over the edge of the building to scope out the potential parking place and cheer Caroline on as she leapt down five stories of fire escape, clutching her car keys. We laughed hysterically each time she emerged, breathless, out the front of the building just as another eager motorist pulled into the empty space. Eventually we cajoled a friendly man approaching his vehicle to delay his departure until Caroline had safely descended the fire escape and strategically positioned her car. After our picnic dinner, the four of us walked up to the lookout point beside Coit Tower and watched the fireworks over the city. Then we piled on Jessie's futon, under so many afghans, and watched *Little Women* on the VCR. I wrote in my journal the next day that when we were all together, it seemed almost too good to be true.

At the end of Kathleen Moore's essay, her family is safely reunited below the rapids, drinking beer together and laughing about the episode on the rapids. But she's left wondering about the cost of happiness, and the possibility that there is a "sum total" of pleasure and pain in the world--perhaps a cosmic cause-and-effect between their celebration on the John Day River and her

father's suffering in a hospital in Ohio? "Maybe one person's happiness is balanced with another person's pain," she muses, or even "suffering in one time causes joy in another." Perhaps she feels that life eventually evened the score, when she later had to witness her father crying in pain and struggle with the heart-wrenching decision about ending his life.

If there is a grand equation of pleasure and pain in my own life, the weighty debit came in December of 1995, when a congenital defect in my younger sister's brain took her life at the age of 25. The depth of sorrow is unquantifiable; it cannot be measured against the happiness I've known. Perhaps my life is safer now that it has been toppled from its lofty state, up there on the rooftop, with no where to go but down.

Perhaps now it rests in equilibrium.

On Henry Road

I

She always addressed her letters upside down, so you had to flip the envelope lengthwise to pull the contents out the top. She wrote in big, block letters, or in the script she acquired when she got older, the letters with sweeping lead-ins and sharp points at the top of the M's and A's. There was usually an additional post-script on the back of the envelope, something she'd forgotten to mention, or an update since the letter was sealed and before she finally mailed it (*"Caroline just 'shhh-ed' me--pretty rude, don't you think??"*). Often she'd sketch a cartoon of Mickey Mouse on the envelope; she'd assigned me this mascot because of my nickname. We were Michelle and Melissa, but everyone called us Miki and Missy. We had our own nicknames for each other--Biddie and Loofa--the origin of which now eludes me. We were the younger half of the four girls in our family, all evenly spaced by two years, and we grew up sharing bedrooms, the kid's table at Thanksgiving, and eventually rides to high school.

When I went away to college, Missy wrote me funny letters full of anecdotes about being a self-proclaimed "confused little teenager." She seemed to have a harder time getting through adolescence than my older sisters and me, maybe because she spent more of those years in Aptos, California, where we moved after leaving Vienna. Aptos was a small coastal town with a small-town mentality, and our high school had a social structure as rigid as the caste system--surfers, stoners, jocks.

Missy was also struggling to break free of her role as the adored, doted-on baby of our family and rebelled against my parents in various ways until it seemed that all they talked about was "what to do about Missy." When she dropped out of high school they launched a variety of initiatives to set her back on track, and eventually sent her to a Christian boarding school, which she referred to in her letters as Monte Vista Prison.

Still somehow she seemed to assume her role as the family underachiever without resistance or resentment, and made light of it with her characteristically wry sense of humor:

So Biddie failed an exam! It's a miracle--I think I should announce it on the radio or something. Don't feel too bad; according to Mom and Dad, I am presently failing life so I guess you'll have to get pregnant or go to jail to top my act (sorry).

Her letters were sometimes punctuated by a touch of sentimentality, which--coming from a stoic, sarcastic 16-year old--went straight to my heart. There is a letter she wrote from boarding school; it's postmarked 20 Mar 1986, though the date she has written is just "Tuesday." It has a heading at the top--a disclaimer--that says: "Factual letter (sorry)." But buried in the news she writes:

In the mean time I'm going to this counselor every Friday. She's this British lady; she's pretty cool I guess. It's kind of nice to have an objective person to talk to, but I don't think it's necessary. Obviously Mom and Dad do! She talked to Mom and Dad once too. Mom told her I was unkind to my sisters. That hurt. I hope you don't think so 'cause I love

all you guys a bunch even if I don't show it. I just hope you know that.

And at the end of the letter she adds:

p.s. My friend Shar calls me Meliss, and it totally reminds me of you! Plus all they play over the intercoms in the dorm is Amy Grant which reminds me of our trips to school when we lived in the condo! 'Member the little bump? And those beautiful sunrises on the ocean by New Brighton? Hee! I miss the real world!

p.s.s. I have you under B for Biddie in my address book.

My parents finally let her leave the boarding school after she found her roommate on the brink of a drug-induced suicide. Missy didn't like to be dramatic; she usually just claimed it was the Christian music they piped through the intercoms that drove her away. She got a job at a pizza parlor, moved in with friends, and established a life in Aptos even though the rest of us had moved away.

Her independence was short-lived, though, and a new shadow loomed over her life. She began having seizures, and they came with increasing frequency. At first she didn't tell anyone, but eventually they embarrassed and debilitated her until she was staying in her apartment most of the day. She lost her job, her boyfriend, and most of her friends. Like waves taking back the sand around her feet, soon there wasn't much left for her to stand on, except her family. The day her roommate finally called my parents to say something was very wrong with Missy, they drove down from Davis and picked her up.

She was diagnosed with a congenital, arterial malformation in her brain and underwent surgery in San Francisco. It was 1988, and I was studying abroad in Africa. She kept me close through her letters.

My scalp feels weird, Bid, my hair's about a centimeter now--it makes me feel like Mr. Fuzzywuzzyhead when I rub it. And it's black as anything. I hope it stays like that and doesn't turn some halfass color again from the sun.

These letters arrived in my Zimbabwe post box like a weekly dose of vital medicine, essential *Missy-ness*--potent, distilled, and spilled out on the unceremonious pages of her white, lined binder paper. I needed to feel this connection to her, not out of guilt for being absent during the ordeal, nor out of big-sister concern even, but because there was a magnetic, alluring quality to her personality. She was warm and loving and funny, and yet cool, detached, and ultimately self-contained. She was a character so defined--by her quirks, her wit, her role in the family--and yet so opaque, so frustratingly hard to contain. I was always wanting more of her.

She stayed with my parents in Davis during her recovery. Black stubble began to grow back on her scalp, and she gained weight from the medicine she was taking. In high school she had been hyper-selfconscious, going to great lengths to keep her body slender and her hair blonde. But now she abandoned the struggle wholeheartedly, and the surrender seemed to bring relief.

She was almost cavalier in the face of misfortune, her bravado at once endearing and a little heartbreaking.

Mik, Tony dumped me and that's quite obvious at this point; he hasn't called me in about a week so I think I had better get the message through my bald head. Funny thing, 'cause he told me he was falling in love with me when I had hair...Don't ever let anyone tell you that looks don't matter, 'cause once you're ugly things change in a big way!

I was never without some degree of worry about Missy. She was stoic and sarcastic on the exterior, but on the interior--what? I was never sure what she had inside her. My own life was defined by discipline and determination--essential tools, as far as I could tell. But Missy just seemed swept along by fate, helpless in the face of it. I never heard her ask "Why me?" or wrestle with existential questions about the rotten hand she'd been dealt. She just acquiesced, as though she half expected it or didn't have the energy to resist it.

I think, no, I'd have to say that I know, that a combination of the heat, excessive boredom, and your and my Mother, have definitely gotten in and twisted and tortured my already malfunctioning brain!

I suppose I always suspected that where strength should have been, deep down in the core of Missy, there was an acute absence of it--a hollow cavity, a reservoir of un-strength. She was wise, perceptive, alarmingly honest, and placidly resigned to life. But to me, she never seemed *strong*. Perhaps my worry somehow registered on my subconscious as foreshadowing, because I treasured my relationship with Missy as something precious and ephemeral.

How areeee youeee doineeee?, she writes in one letter, dated "Augustsomething, 1988."

It's typed on an electric typewriter, apparently with a sticky "e." The words are artfully typed around a Mickey Mouse cutout which is taped to the first page. The letter is decorated with hand-corrected typos, and rambles on like the type of conversation you have when you're bored, which she usually was.

I meant, How are you doing? Its rediculously (I know I didn't spell that right) (sound it out, your in college) hot here--not even fit for humans if you're asken' me sonny!

She had a quirky propensity for using old-fashioned words like "tomfoolery" and "satchel," which peppered her letters and made me laugh. In many ways, she seemed like an old soul, so perceptive about people and intolerant of pretense. But at the same time, she seemed underdeveloped or slightly stunted in her maturation--with her small, sweet voice and girlish giggle--like a tree that grows around the obstacles in its path, and ends up having spaces where branches should be. Together, she exuded an amusing combination of agelessness and silliness.

She ends her letter:

*I heart you Mik, but I'm real sick of typing,
Loofabaduffa*

II

I can see Missy's clear blue eyes as I'd walk up the path to the house that she shared with Caroline in Napa in the years after her surgery. She'd appear in the doorway, shoulders raised and head ducked in a girlish

gesture of excitement, holding out her arms to hug me. She was big now, just an inch or two taller than me, but substantially larger. Her body language was shy, but it had always been--she was more comfortable now, in a physique that took form without effort. And of course, she remained sarcastic about it, as with everything else. ("What does your new dress look like, Miss?" I once asked. "Well, a small tent when I'm wearing it!" she quipped, the statement trailing off in a giggle.) Most often she'd be wearing loose-fitting clothes, like a long-sleeved cotton J.Crew shirt in a pretty plum color with little buttons down the front, faded black leggings, and Teva sandals.

Her round cheeks would rise in a broad smile that revealed a row of small, almost child-like teeth. She had a pug nose that she was never happy about, probably because when we were young we convinced her it was abnormal. We'd flatten it against her face and tease, "Look! You have *no* nose-bone!" Her hair was long now, down to the middle of her back, and it was thick, brown, shiny, and straight. She always wore it down.

She had the sweetest, softest hands. They were pudgy; the knuckles at the base of her fingers were little indentations, like a baby's hands. She had finally kicked a persistent nail-biting habit and would call my attention to her long fingernails, sometimes painted with clear nail polish. She liked to "give things a pat"--like the couch seat next to her, where she wanted you to sit. She wore silver rings, the same kind I liked to wear, so sometimes I would take them off her fingers and try them on. On occasion, I'd forget to give

them back when I went home to Berkeley, and then she'd say over the phone in mock irritation, through clenched teeth, "*I'm going to have to PINCH you!*"

Missy was great with children; she worked part-time for Head Start and as a nanny. She drove a '69 VW Bug, eggshell color, with no headrests and poorly functioning seatbelts. This was cause for concern in our family, but the character of the car suited her well. She adopted a Rottweiler mixed-breed from the pound, which she named Indica, and the dog rode around with her in the backseat. As it turned out, Indica was pregnant when Missy got her and had a litter of eight puppies while Missy was home for Christmas. She found a charitable woman who promised to find homes for the puppies, but it was heartbreaking to take them all away from their mother at once. For days after Missy drove away with her VW full of puppies, Indica wandered around the house and yard looking for them.

Missy was perpetually short on resources and a little impaired in the pragmatic aspects of life. She once slept on the couch in the living room for several months when her room got too messy to inhabit. She'd occasionally launch sweeping initiatives to get organized, making a huge effort that she hoped would help her stay on top of things for a while, like trying to get up a hill on momentum. She bought a desk that had dozens of little drawers where she could neatly stash her scotch tape, receipts, pens, and paperclips. She got a little black book and wrote in her work hours and errands in neat block letters. Her bills at the house were heavily subsidized by Caroline.

But what she lacked in aspiration, she made up for in contentment. Missy demanded little of life--just a quiet place and no one bothering her. She was happiest walking her dog on Henry Road outside of Napa or sitting on the back patio of Caroline's house with her best friend Jeanette, smoking a cigarette. As sisters, we were close then, living within an hour of each other. She loved getting together but was always the first to declare "a little too much family," and suddenly she'd be gone--outside for a cigarette or in another room reading Stephen King.

Sometimes Caroline and Missy would venture down to San Francisco to see Jessie and me, but more often we would head up to their quiet home in Napa. I remember one excursion we took to Bodega Bay in Caroline's Pathfinder. We got Starbucks lattes-to-go on the way out of town and had a picnic on the rocky cliffs of the Northern California coast. We took pictures of each other against the scenic backdrop, laughing, doing handstands, lying in the grass, putting our arms around each other. On the way back, we turned the stereo up loud and sang with the Counting Crows at the top of our lungs:

*Asleep in perfect blue buildings
Beside the green apple sea
Gonna get me a little oblivion, baby
Try to keep myself away from me*

III

I wish I had the comfort of believing that a person who is meant to die young is endowed with an uncommon

sense of courage and tranquility. But something tells me that Missy was scared. At first she didn't tell anyone when she started getting headaches and then blacked out one day in December. Everything seemed normal the evening Caroline went across the street to her boyfriend Derek's house, and Missy stayed home to watch *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Then in the very early hours of the morning--December 16th, 1995--Missy had a seizure that took her life.

I was on my way to visit Caroline and Missy the same morning, to introduce them to my new boyfriend. I called from the Sonoma bed-and-breakfast where we were staying to say we'd be there in half an hour. But I got a strange outgoing message on their answering machine, and I called Derek's house across the street. I was still smiling when Caroline picked up the phone, but then it was suddenly clear that something was wrong. "Miki," she said. And then again "Miki."--just like that, a statement in itself, like she wished it was all she had to say.

The words *Missy died* didn't register. My brain automatically diluted the message: she means Missy's sick, or something has happened. The finality of death is incomprehensible in a single moment, and it's probably a good thing. Shock insulates you like armor. Every devastating detail that followed ricocheted off me with no more penetration than a pinprick. I didn't cry as Steve drove me to Napa that morning, making the trip in about 15 minutes by taking the corners too fast. I may have even laughed a little. I have no idea what we talked about.

By the evening, my parents arrived from Washington D.C. where they were living. Caroline, Jessie, and I picked them up at the airport. For about two weeks--starting with those teary embraces at the United Airlines gate--the five of us stuck closely together, moving around in a pack. The first night we all slept in my small studio apartment in Berkeley--two on the futon, two on the Murphy bed, and one on an air mattress in between, so that there was no floor space left unoccupied. It felt good to be close, to not let anyone out of our sight.

Somehow, in our collective shock, we managed to make good decisions. This still amazes me. We held a memorial service at a small chapel in Napa and tried to make it as personal as possible by arranging most of it ourselves, even though we didn't know the first thing about how funerals were supposed to go (how would we?). The programs were hand-designed, and we bought big, beautiful flowers at the flower market in San Francisco to avoid the blue carnations offered by the funeral home. Before the service started, we had Missy in an open casket. At the time it was just the family in the chapel--just the five of us, the survivors. We sat in the pews, each planning to go up and say goodbye. Mom went first and stood beside her, holding her hand. But when she came back to the pews, she told us not to go. "It's not Missy anymore." So we said goodbye from where we were sitting.

Just before the other guests arrived, we decided to close the casket, and that was the right thing to do. She would have hated having everyone looking at her, even

in the pretty blue dress she had bought recently, with make-up on and her hair done by some funeral director who never even knew what she looked like alive. After the service, we had her body cremated, which felt spooky to me but much less so than having her whole body lying underground. We purchased a gravesite to bury her ashes, though, so that we'd have somewhere to go visit her. She's at Tulocay Cemetery in Napa, overlooking a beautiful green hillside speckled with boulders and Live Oak trees.

At a historic quarry nearby, we ordered her headstone, and it's perfect, too. It's a simple, classic, gray marble headstone, rectangular and slightly rounded on top. We didn't want images of angels or butterflies on it, or a pithy phrase that attempted to sum up her life or what she meant to us. Instead it just says in beautiful engraved letters:

Melissa Abbott
February 12th, 1970-
December 16th, 1995

IV

At our house in Vienna we had a maple tree in the front yard that dropped seeds that fell like helicopters, a single wing fluttering around and around the heavy pod as it falls to the ground. When we were bored, Missy and I used to collect them, splitting open the pod so that the sticky goo would adhere to the bridge of our nose with the wing sticking straight up like a rhinoceros, or on our forehead like a unicorn. Sometimes we sat on top of the high cement pillars that framed our front gate and

threw the seed pods at the old ladies walking their Dachshunds up and down our street. They'd be confused and annoyed until they'd look up and discover us, and then they seemed to relish the scolding, "*DAS geht aber nicht!*"

But there were a few Viennese women who wore wide black bands around their arm, and I knew that this meant that someone close to them had died, most likely their husbands. We never threw things at the ladies with the black armbands. I remember thinking, "Be nice to that lady. Someone she knows died."

I wish I'd had a black armband to wear when my sister died many years later, a sign to indicate to the world that I needed a little extra understanding. I hated feeling like I had to explain my change in demeanor when I went back to work--I just couldn't smile as much, couldn't care about people's petty problems like I used to. But in the absence of external cues, people reacted in ways that made me feel worse, getting snippy or demanding even more of me. Those who did ask for an explanation with a casual remark wouldn't have been prepared for the answer. The armband would have spoken for me: *Be nice to her. Someone she knows died.*

I've heard of mourning rituals in other cultures, like the tearing of clothes at traditional Jewish funerals, meant to symbolize the gash that has occurred in the lives of the survivors. In Zimbabwe, I remember seeing throngs of friends and relatives camping out in the front yards of families who had lost a loved one. They stayed weeks and months sometimes; life didn't return to normal very quickly. But for me there were no

mourning rituals to turn to for solace. I think our culture is too uncomfortable with the notion of death to sanction any reminders of it; we'd rather deny its inevitability and maintain a collective illusion of control. After a certain ambiguous amount of time, people get anxious for you to get "better," and any residual grief goes underground, to a therapist's office or a support group that meets in the basement of a hospital.

The memorial service we held in Napa three days after Missy's death was the extent of our official mourning. It lasted roughly an hour. I hadn't even begun to grieve yet. It took years for the numbness to wear off; I couldn't have realized the enormity of my loss in one sitting anyway. I would have frozen in despair. Instead, the painful reality of Missy's death seeped in in carefully metered amounts. Each dose was a different sort of anguish.

Sometimes it was just sadness--profound sadness. I never knew there was such sorrow, and now I was keenly aware of it--not just my own, but all the communal sadness in the world: an old man looking lonely in the window of a rest home, a woman raising her children on a dirty city sidewalk. It was as though I was participating for the first time in the darkest sacrament, some bleak membership ritual into a cult of people for whom life is misery. I wondered if I would ever be truly happy again.

But in a way, feeling sad was the easy part--it wasn't complicated or scary. It sometimes felt good to bravely delve into my grief, when I could do so in a

controlled environment, or at least in the daylight. I moved to Amsterdam a year after Missy's death, and there I'd walk through the cemetery along the Amstel River; when the dates on the headstones subtracted to 30 years or less, it made me cry. These bouts of sadness were cathartic, like the minor 3.0 earthquakes that lessen the danger of the Big One.

But when my grief didn't wait to be invited--when it came upon me suddenly as I lay awake at night, transported by some detail too close to Missy's death and transfixing my mind despite my desperate efforts to evict it--this is when it scared me. It was like getting sucked down a drain, pulled into an irresistible, downward spiral toward a frightening abyss. I didn't know how deep it would go; it seemed bottomless.

And grief got complicated. Its effects weren't limited to a pocket of sadness around Missy's death, but splintered into other, seemingly unrelated areas. I became fearful--the sound of sirens made me shudder and feel like the world was a scary, dangerous place. Messages on my answering machine--even from well-meaning friends--felt like threatening intrusions on my space. And I felt devastated by small disappointments, like little hints that my boyfriend wasn't turning out to be perfect. These feelings confused and frustrated me because they seemed--at the time at least--to be without explanation, to be part of a general deterioration of my life as I'd known it.

I missed Missy. I couldn't quite get my mind around the finality of her absence. I felt I could bear the heartache, if only there were an end in sight, a return

date on her ticket. But instead it felt like I was treading water in a vast pool, groping for an edge but not finding one, finding only water, water, and more water. A hint of panic loomed when I'd try to imagine the rest of my life stretched out before me, with no Missy in it. Like an addict, I had to take one day at a time. And my most pressing question--then and now--is *where did she go?* I know what became of her body: ashes buried on that beautiful, peaceful, hillside in Napa. But where did *SHE* go? Where did *she* go with her little "pats" and her old-fashioned words and her wry sense of humor?

V

Several months after Missy's death, I dreamt I was on the phone with Caroline. In the dream, Missy was apparently coming to visit her, so Caroline sets the phone down on the counter to answer the door. Yet somehow I know Missy won't be able to come to the phone, so I cup the receiver with my hand and shout, hoping she'll hear: HI MISSY! HI MISSY! HI MISSY!

But I can't connect with her anymore. The line's been severed and it just hangs there, dangling, leading nowhere.

I continue to have dreams about her still--they usually come in batches. In most of them, I am feeling concerned and trying to help her, the same persistent urge I had throughout her life. I'm helping her push her stalled car off a bridge, or making a bed for her in my house, or encouraging her to start swimming again.

Or I'm clinging to the vain hope that I can still change the course of things. In one dream we are climbing up a cliff, and I think how awful it would be if she fell. So I grasp her hand, and implore, *Take your time and be safe.* In another dream, we're sleeping in the same bed. When she gets up to go home, I resist: *I don't want to see you go, because what if you die again?* These dreams are also thinly disguised efforts for my own psyche to adjust to her abrupt departure. In one, Missy and a friend are house hunting, and I say to her--or to myself?--*Missy, it takes a long time to find a new home...*

In all my dreams about Missy, my attention is focused intensely upon her. I conjure up her presence like a nerve impulse from an amputated limb I still desperately want to feel.

Missy's here, at the oceanfront. Her old self...feels GREAT to have her. At one point I stop just to watch her, and I think "my life is complete now that she's back." I'm watching her and thinking how much I love her.

Missy and I are on a bridge--she is chatting away, just as normal as could be, herself, alive, and I am just soaking her in, taking her in--not consciously thinking that she is dead now but knowing I had to cherish her alive--that it was special...I was just looking into her face.

I suppose in a sense the dreams come as Missy's letters used to, little hits of Missy-ness, potent doses of a presence still vital to my existence. It can't be summed up on a gravestone or contained in a vial, but what I miss is holding her soft hands, slipping the

silver rings off her fingers and putting them on my own. What I wouldn't give for one of her funny, quirky letters to make me laugh out loud and want to write right back. But the letters I get now have no return address, and they're gone by the morning.

I don't regret not saying goodbye to her when she was lying in the casket the day we held the funeral service, now more than five years ago. I could see the profile of her face from where I sat, elevated slightly above the side of the casket. I needed that--I had to see her face, the profile of her little pug nose, to know she was really lying there. But it wasn't all that convincing, really. Because she wasn't *there* anymore, and I still can't imagine where she went. I might insist she's just stepped out to smoke a cigarette. Maybe she's out walking Indica on Henry Road.

PART II
BREATHING IN

*This Being of mine,
Whatever it really is,
Consists of a little flesh,
A little breath,
And the part which governs.*

--Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Walking Long Before Midnight

Now and then there's a moment that seems inexplicably sad to me, that goes straight to my heart with its poignancy, the way a certain note of music can. Usually there's no apparent reason why it should seem sad--what is it about the way the Korean guy is holding his jelly, his sole purchase, in the grocery line?--but it passes over me like a dark cloud and I have to make up a cheerful story about the circumstances to feel better.

I almost had one of those moments on my walk tonight. I like to go for walks in the evenings around my neighborhood. Someday I'll have a dog, but for now I don't mind not having a reason. My family has always been big on walks after dinner; I guess I just never got used to sitting around with a full stomach. I especially loved taking evening walks when I lived in Amsterdam, because in Dutch culture people tend to leave their curtains open, allowing passers-by to peek in on what's happening inside their home. It's not just voyeurism that makes this fun; it's the aesthetic of the warm, yellow lighting, the bookcases, the piano near the window, and--if you're lucky--someone playing it. Dutch people seem to have universally good taste in interiors.

In Corvallis, where I live now, you're more likely to see the aesthetic transgressions of student housing, like empty liquor bottles lined up on a windowsill, too-bright lights, or dilapidated blinds hanging unevenly. But there are also neighborhoods, like mine, where a lot of families live, and where there are homes with interesting additions built onto them--second stories

made of wood with hexagonal windows, and there might be a man upstairs with graying hair and glasses working at a computer. I like seeing multiple layers of activity.

Anyway, tonight the sky was a deep, exquisite, dusk-blue. On earth it was dark. From across the street, I saw an old man standing in his carport, fumbling around in the dark, trying to stack his recycling containers. For a moment I felt so sad for him; it stopped me. But then he picked his way through the carport and carefully up the three steps to the back door. And when he opened it, light and voices fell out into the evening, and there were people in there--a wife, maybe, and a few others, bumping into each other in the kitchen. Suddenly the sad was gone, dissipated completely by the time he closed the door behind him.

I think what made me feel better was this: he had *people*. I don't trust other people's aloneness.

I live alone and I go on my evening walks alone, and sometimes it makes me feel lonely to look into other people's homes, their private little communities like microcosms. People seem so fortified in their homes, among their pianos and their bookcases and--especially--their people. And I'm on the outside, looking in. Of course I have my moments of companionship, when I'm out with friends or visiting my family. But companionship is not the same thing as cohabitation. There's an acute absence of company at my house. It doesn't gnaw at me, though, because solitude is a friend and loneliness only comes occasionally, and usually gently. That's why I like to take these evening walks, even when I anticipate

some loneliness--to indulge it now and then is to disarm it. It seems wise to get acquainted, on your own terms. Because solitude--even when you choose it--is challenging, like a persistent rival you face at every competition who makes life a little harder and winning a little sweeter and ultimately you wouldn't want it any other way.

You have to be up for it, though. I usually am. I like having everything my own way, having my bed all to myself, even if it is every single night. When people come to visit, I look forward to their company, but I still find myself counting down the days I have left to be alone. I don't mind making half-batches of brownies or going to the trouble of freezing pesto to cook later, just for myself.

But now I think I know what those poignant moments all have in common: an element of vulnerability, made especially potent by a person's being alone. When you see exactly which item a Korean guy is missing from his kitchen, or you watch someone eating alone, like a businessman across the aisle on the airplane, fumbling with the plastic wrap on his silverware, or when there's someone running across Kings Boulevard with an awkward gait, trying to beat the stream of oncoming traffic--it makes you feel tender and nervous for them at the same time. It's almost as though it violates a basic law of nature for a person to seem so alone, exposed, susceptible. And so that's it, more specifically: it's vulnerability exposed.

I suppose someone might find my solitude on these evening walks to be a bit sad, but I don't. My own

aloneness is innocuous. But maybe we just never seem vulnerable to ourselves--perhaps because we know exactly how much strength we have.

Switching Seats

I'm dropping the old man off at Grace Center, where the sign reads "Adult Day Services." I come around the back of the van, pull the sliding door open and lower the wheelchair ramp. I climb inside and bend over to undo the restraints and then the seatbelt, which is half-choking the poor fellow, but he hasn't complained. I can't remember if he can actually talk, though, so maybe he couldn't have complained if he'd wanted to. I haven't tried to make small talk with him, or even asked him for the \$1 fare I'm supposed to collect when I drive for Dial-a-Bus, because I'm not sure he's coherent. I wheel him up the building ramp and into the gymnasium, where five or six old people, mostly in wheelchairs, are sitting around a table playing cards. "Hi George," some of them say. It's the middle of the day on a weekday. George has been sent to day care for the elderly, so that his wife or whoever takes care of him at home can have a few hours to get other things done.

There's a lovely couple from New York that I pick up next. Well, *she's* lovely anyway; he sits in a wheelchair and doesn't talk, but he does like to have his feet dangling on the ground because he can pull that wheelchair along pretty well with them. He can almost pull himself right up the ramp into the back of the van when I give them a ride to St. Mary's Stone Soup. They do volunteer work there. I enjoy this woman with her Brooklyn accent. She remembers my name when I come to the door: *Michelle* she says. *Yes! Good memory.* I reply.

She explains: *I have another young friend who's equally lovely, so I made the association...*

I like her face. She wears nice lipstick and has wonderful skin--it has wrinkles, sure, but it's soft and smooth and milky-looking. When I compliment her, she blushes and says *it's Ponds. Ponds! That's what I use!* I tell her. This cold cream has been my skin-care staple ever since my sister's movie-star friend told her it was the \$7 solution to a perfect complexion. Now I'm even more convinced and perhaps I'll use it the rest of my life. *I thought only older people used that,* she laughs.

When I take the couple home later in the day, she offers me a bag of bagels, left over from the lunch they attended. Her husband has them tucked between his lower back and the wheelchair, leaning against them like a backrest. She wants to give them to me as I say goodbye at the front door, but he is pulling, pulling himself toward the living room with those dangling legs and she has trouble getting him to stop long enough to get them out. Earlier she told me about a dog they used to have, and how, even after five years, she still misses that Irish Setter. I wonder if she misses her husband, too.

I pick up a nice lady and her elderly aunt at the Conifer House. I forget her name, but I think it is Helen. Many of the ladies are Helen. Strangely, the first thing we talk about is Ponds. I say, *Someone smells nice and minty,* because the elderly aunt, whose wheelchair I am securing in the back seat, reeks of Bengay. They both laugh, and the aunt explains that they've rubbed it all over her legs. We talk about how nice Bengay feels and I say *it really works, too--*

athletes use it all the time for sore muscles, but I don't tell her I'm an athlete. I'm wondering what it's like to have Bengay rubbed on legs that don't move. Helen says, at least it doesn't smell like...like that... and she can't think of what, but by the time I get back around to the driver's side, she says Ponds. I tell her Ponds doesn't smell bad (although this time I downplay how much I use it), and she says maybe they've changed it; it's been over ten years.

I drop them off at the eye doctor in the Aumann Building by Good Samaritan Hospital. *It's so nice to have someone that talks, they say as I wheel the elderly aunt down the ramp. And so young!* Most of the other drivers at Dial-a-Bus are older and retired like their passengers, so riders are usually surprised when I pick them up for the first time. *You can't be from Dial-a-Bus!* they laugh, *You're too young!* Then they'll ask me why I volunteer, as though they're somewhat suspicious. It makes me feel like I've crossed a boundary and am spying on the other side--on lives that have drifted out of the mainstream and into an eddy, people who move back and forth from doctor's appointments and hair dressers while the rest of us aren't paying much attention. This morning when I was unloading George from the van, there were two girls across the street, eating yogurt on the shady balcony of a sorority. The whole time we were there they never took notice--of George in his wheelchair or of me behind it, an accoutrement to his peripheral life.

So I guess it is a bit of reconnaissance that I'm up to when I drive for Dial-a-Bus. Because I want to know

what it *feels* like. How do you manage to not get indignant when somebody tells you when you can go grocery shopping--today at 2:30 or not until tomorrow? How do you maintain your dignity when someone has to move your legs for you? How do you keep your spirits up when you spend the whole morning in a gymnasium with no particular purpose but to pass the time?

Herbert rides in my van every week and I think he gives me straight answers. I pick him up at the posh retirement community where he lives and take him to a nearby health care facility where he visits his wife. Herbert rides a motorized scooter instead of a regular wheelchair. He can drive himself right up the ramp of the van; the American flag that sticks up from his handle bars bends below the roof of the door and then snaps back into place when he gets inside. He's not very adept at fine-tuning the controls, so he usually drives right into the wall on the other side of the van with a thump, and he'll smile and say *Bumpy ride*. When I asked Herbert if he feels like he can still communicate with his wife, even though she's slipping away with Alzheimer's, he answers straight up: *No, not really*. He's honest, and not overly dramatic, so I ask him what it's like to live in a retirement home (Is it really as depressing as it seems, I'm wondering?). But all he says is *The weekends are a bit slow*.

At the end of my shift I pick up two women at WinCo. They don't know each other, but they have both called Dial-a-Bus for a ride home, so they are waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of the store with their grocery carts. The smaller one has had a stroke recently

and moves very slowly. *I don't move very well anymore.* She was going to sit in the front seat, but even with a hand on my arm she can't make it in, can't muster the *umph* for that one step up. So we rearrange. The woman from the back seat climbs to the front, while I walk the smaller one slowly up the ramp. Once I have her belted into the backseat, she looks like a little child, because her legs don't reach the floor.

I feel sorry for her, then guilty about feeling pity. Am I focusing too much on her physical decline? Does my reaction suggest that I believe in some inherent hierarchy based on physical ability--one that we inevitably slip down as we grow older and less able? We're parked here at the foot of the Timberhill trails and my legs are just begging to run up the mountain, and this woman can't even climb into the back seat of the van. She doesn't move a limb without moaning helplessly, *Oh sweet Jesus.* But I try to erase any notion of superiority as I load their grocery bags into the van and climb into the driver's seat. I try to banish my sympathy...or is it fear?

With awkward hand gestures and garbled verbal commands, the woman in the back seat directs me to her unit in the corner of the mobile home park, number eighty-five. A lot of the elderly people I drive live in beautiful settings on the edge of town, like this one off of Highway 99, but these are residential developments I oppose, on land I vote to keep as open space when bond measures come up in November. The second lady is talkative and easygoing, and doesn't mind that we went all the way to NE Conifer before we get to her place on

SW "C" Street. *As long as I get home sometime!* She lives in a nice complex of shady two-story apartments down by the train tracks, in a kind of hidden and unlikely part of town, near an antique store. Not in a mobile home park that encroaches on open space.

We talk the whole way, and she's lively and funny--I laugh, not just out of courtesy. It starts when she says she likes my name, Michelle. (The grouchy lady who I drove first thing this morning also liked it: *You'll do well with that name*, she had said. She also told me I had bad garlic breath--I think she used the word *terrible*--but all I've had today are Frosted Mini-Wheats and coffee.) The lively lady says she had wanted to name her son "Michael" but people told her she'd be sorry if she did, because they'd call him Mike or Mickey, so she didn't. Instead she named him "Norman." *When they asked me what his name was, I just said Norman! Out of the blue!* She still sounds surprised.

When we get to her apartment I help her carry the groceries to a covered entranceway just outside her kitchen door, setting them down beside an old pair of shoes. A knee-high black dog with a wide body and short legs bounds out of the house, tail wagging. She has already told me the dog's name--Trixie--and I like Trixie and pet her enthusiastically. As I'm leaving, I raise my sunglasses to my forehead and say goodbye. *Oh, you're pretty*, she says outrightly, *I couldn't see your whole face before.*

Choices

I

Phil left on Monday night; he'd been visiting me in Corvallis since Thursday. I've known him over 15 years, since we were together in college, so his visits are like having a boyfriend for five days at a time, every now and then. This suits me well. I was happy to have my quiet apartment back to myself, to wash all my rugs and put them down on cleanly vacuumed floors again, and not have anyone tromp on them with outside shoes.

But the morning after he left I wanted to tell him about the frost outside--on the cars, the grass, and the trees. I wanted to tell him about the squash I roasted that night, with brown sugar and cinnamon and nutmeg. I wanted to ask his advice about which volunteer job I should quit to make more time for my writing, or at least to have him help me feel better about the decision I would make anyway. In the end, there will be people who respond to whatever I decide--my friend Susan will say she understands why I had to quit SMART, my advisor Lisa will tell me that I did the right thing. But these people will be reacting to the *outcome* of my decision; they weren't there to help me make it. They're still on the outside. How nice it would be to have someone on the *inside*, inside my home, inside my head almost, listening to me, helping me make those little decisions, and actually *caring* about them.

That's the amazing thing--almost miraculous--that when you have a partner, there's someone to whom these kinds of things actually *matter*, besides yourself. When

you're alone, only significant things and outcomes matter to anyone else, but when you have a partner, even the mundane, routine things have more meaning--like doing laundry, because you're doing it for someone else, too. It matters to someone that you're doing the laundry. Maybe that's why they call them *significant* others: they lend significance to inconsequential, daily things...and maybe that makes it a more satisfying life all around? Not any easier, mind you--it's still twice as much laundry--but possibly more satisfying.

II

Phil and I met at college, a small private school in the hills of Santa Barbara that we called "Camp Westmont," in the fall of 1985. I was a freshman, and he and my sister were seniors; they were good friends. Jessie had called me on the hall phone of my dorm one afternoon and asked, "Miki, do you like Dire Straits?" "Umm..." I hesitated. "Never mind--you'll love this concert. Joe and Phil are coming over right now to ask you if you want to go. It'll be a double date."

Phil and I looked like blonde-haired, blue-eyed siblings and got along like best friends. We'd stay up all night in the Student Center writing funny, coded messages to put in the school newspaper for our friends, and then early in the morning we'd walk up the hill to New Dorm to wake Jessie up and take her out to breakfast with us. We'd head to one of our favorite beachside cafés in Phil's black '68 Camaro with a horn that went "Aooga!" and sometimes we didn't get back to campus until the afternoon. He loved to make the most of the moment

by choosing the perfect venue for every occasion, like the patio of La Suprica on Milpas Street for soft tacos and Coronas on a warm, sunny afternoon, or the cliffs above Butterfly Beach to catch the sunset. On weekends he'd whisk me off to Lake Cachuma to go camping or down to his grandparent's dairy farm if a cow was due to give birth.

It was New Year's Eve, 1988, when he called me at my parent's house in Washington, D.C. We were no longer dating--I'd broken up with him the summer after my freshman year with a great deal of deliberation and earnestness for a 19-year old--but we'd stayed friends. I was just back from a year in Africa where I'd been studying abroad and was planning to start at the University of Maryland as a transfer student after spending the holidays with my family. We were all in the living room playing Scrabble and chilling Champaign in the refrigerator when he called. He said he was in the hospital, staying overnight for tests. He'd been feeling sleepy and lethargic for weeks. At this point there were still several possible explanations, but one of them--the worst-case scenario--was leukemia. He just wanted me to know.

Within days of his diagnosis, I found myself packing again, taking things back out of the drawers I'd just put them in and stuffing them into suitcases, trying to get zippers around them. It didn't seem to matter that he wasn't technically my boyfriend anymore or that I had other plans. Friendship is so abiding; in the face of uncertain circumstances, togetherness seems the obvious course of action, regardless of the details. When I

arrived in Los Angeles, Phil's parents picked me up and took me straight to his room at the UCLA Medical Center.

He was sitting up in bed, wearing khaki shorts and a red Montecito Sports t-shirt, his blonde hair cut in a flat-top. He looked handsome and tan and healthy, the same way he always looked in college. But here he was completely out of context, propped up in a mechanical bed in the oncology ward, with metal railings and sterile white sheets, machines and monitors surrounding him. Under his red shirt, a tube called a Hickman went straight into his chest above his heart, dripping blood transfusions and medication from the blue machine beside his bed directly into his veins. There was the distinct antiseptic smell of hospital in the room, masked ineffectually by a room deodorizer that sat on a wide windowsill among hundreds of cards and several bouquets of flowers. The window looked out on another wing of the hospital--gray cement--and a sliver of the Los Angeles hills, which sparkled at night with the city lights. The window didn't open of course; a huge ventilation system below it gently blew air into the room 24 hours a day, recirculated and perfectly conditioned, in a temperature you couldn't feel.

"Is what we're doing dangerous?" Phil asked one night after I'd been there two months. I had my own cot in his hospital room by then, but I was lying beside him on his bed. By then, I knew all the nurses, knew how to read his medical charts, knew what it meant when doctors came in to say things like, "Your counts are down today, Phil." I had become the hostess of his room: screening

phone calls, greeting visitors, hanging the dozens of get-well cards that arrived every day. When the first round of chemotherapy started, I'd helped him shave the thick, blonde hair from his head. He wasn't vain, but I knew it was a grim landmark. Less than a year before, my little sister had gone through the same thing in preparation for brain surgery--she told me in her letters it was the hardest part. Phil wore a yellow bandana. He looked good bald, but people cast sidelong glances when we went into Westwood for dinner, as though they knew we belonged to the hospital, that we'd just escaped for a few hours. A bald head identifies a cancer patient as surely as the bright orange jumpsuit of a prisoner.

"What if I don't make it?" He had tears in his eyes.

He looked like an ordinary leukemia patient by then--sick, sedated, yellowish, and very bald. He slept a lot. The cancer cells had grown back after the first round of chemo, and they'd started a new treatment; so far, no remission. His hospital roommate Mike--another young, unlikely leukemia patient--had recently died, having made it into remission only to relapse several weeks later with a bad case of pneumonia. A new patient named Hamid took Mike's place, but his prognosis wasn't good either.

Other friends and family came to visit Phil, but I never left. I was functioning just like the spouses of other patients--my life on hold, my whole reality the hospital. I spent my days making tea and coffee in the ward kitchen, getting to know the other patients, taking walks around the hospital corridors. It began to feel

like a perfectly normal existence, plenty to fill the days with. I had become an integral part of Phil's battle with leukemia, and in a way, it had taken us both by surprise. I remember being very sure, though--even then--that I wouldn't regret going to California to be with him, regardless of how things turned out. I didn't think much about the possibility of his dying, and he was always worried that I was in denial about his chances. What I actually did worry about, though, was what if he *did* make it? I was still planning to go back to Maryland when this was all over, when he got better. But after going through all of this together, how could I just walk away?

III

I was only twenty-one years old then, and conscious of feeling too young to be facing such serious decisions--about togetherness and sacrifice and long-term partnership. In other times or for other people, twenty-one might be a reasonable age to consider these things, but I had expectations...expectations of a whole period of independent living still to do, of exploring options for myself, of having years before making any permanent decisions. I was afraid of going too far down the road in partnership with Phil, finding myself in a commitment I didn't mean to make. In the end, I left Los Angeles while his prognosis was good; he was in remission and waiting for a bone marrow transplant, and I went back to the East Coast.

More than a decade later, I still find myself postponing those permanent decisions, like who to spend

my life with and when to close the door on other options. I think the expectations I had when I was younger have evolved now, into something related but slightly different: a general reluctance to give up control in my life, a comfort and ease with living alone, an addiction to open possibilities, and an unwillingness to make the sacrifices that come with commitment. I'm not alone in this; I read that there are more women now than ever who are over the age of 30 and single by choice. Perhaps it's the fact that there are more choices now--we can find meaningful vocations outside of family, we can get married later or not at all, have non-traditional partnerships, have either children or a husband, and not necessarily both. It's exciting to have so many options, a whole palette of lives from which to choose.

I've always been inclined toward having my own agenda. Even when I was four, I could play alone for hours, building farms out of plastic animals and running train tracks through them. In those days, before my younger sister and I started kindergarten, my mom would make brownies and we'd all take a "coffee break" together mid-morning. Missy would be in the kitchen hours before the brownies were done, hovering around mom's knees, but I'd be so deeply involved in my farm-world that I'd often ask her to just bring me the brownie so I wouldn't have to come upstairs. I had friends in the neighborhood, boys that I raced Big Wheels with in our cul-de-sac, like my best friend Malcolm, a scrawny, redheaded kid. But I would get positively annoyed if Malcolm knocked on our front door too often--I wasn't even old enough to go to

school, but I'd yell angrily from the basement, "Mom! Tell him I'm busy!"

I suppose it's possible that I'm not cut out for full-time partnership; maybe instead I'm destined for a life like one of the strong female characters in Barbara Kingsolver's early novels. I'd have a house with a sprawling verandah in the Southwest somewhere, with lots of dogs adopted from the Humane Society, and maybe even a foster child. I'd have a diverse and interesting group of friends, as close as friends can be, and sometimes they'd be sitting on my front porch having iced tea even before I got home. In this ideal single life, I'd have as much solitude as I desired, but never more, and I wouldn't be lonely. (Because solitude and loneliness are not the same thing, as the thesaurus implies.)

But if pressed, I'd have to admit that this is only the life I would choose *if* I never marry. My first choice, all things considered, is still to find someone with whom to share my life, all the mundane moments and the consequential ones, too. I'm just not willing to pursue partnership at any cost; it would have to be better than what I have now. Because marriage itself wouldn't make my life more satisfying--only a really great marriage would. (I know there are plenty of people with partners who are painfully lonely, all those people doing double-loads of laundry and still not having anyone who cares.) So maybe that becomes my double-bind: I want to share my life with someone but only under exceptional circumstances, and consequently, I may just end up with my second choice. Friends--and old boyfriends in particular--accuse me of waiting for an impossible ideal,

suggesting that I'm expecting too much of marriage. But I think it's the opposite: I think I'm expecting too little.

IV

I've had long-term relationships over the years, some which seem deeply meaningful--even in hindsight--despite their impermanence. But there's always a point when I find myself examining the scales, when the balance seems to be tipping, when a decision has to be made. And it's always an agonizing one, with weighty pros and cons. I seem to remember all those decisions with uncanny clarity, distilled down to the very moment of choice--like the rainy afternoon in Amsterdam three years ago. My friend Monica and I were drinking tea out of glass mugs in her living room. Her boyfriend Gideon was sitting at the dining room table, working on his laptop. From the art deco couch where I sat, I could see the planes taking off at Schiphol airport. I had just dropped Steve off at the departure gate.

For a year Steve and I had been living on a houseboat in the Prinsengracht canal, in the heart of Amsterdam. It was a converted barge with original porthole windows and a propane-burning stove for heat. The boat was moored beneath the landmark tower of the West Church, the *Westertoren*. This had been a dream of mine and when the time was right, Steve was a willing companion. His commitment had surprised me; we'd sold our cars, quit our jobs, and given up our apartments in San Francisco to move there. The houseboat used to rock gently when the tour boats cruised by in the evenings,

but sometimes late at night, motor boats sped through the city's waterways and made it jerk violently against the brick wall of the canal, jarring us awake.

Steve and I had been together almost three years by the time he left Holland to return to the States. We had seamless rapport with moods that seemed conveniently synchronized and thoughts that occurred to both of us at the same time--we'd often speak up simultaneously. But for reasons that were hard to articulate without sounding petty, I had doubts about our future and feared that as our adventure in Amsterdam was drawing to a close, our relationship was too. It's a sinking feeling.

"He's the perfect guy for you--don't think so much about it," was Gideon's input from the dining room. He seemed to think his proclamation would suddenly bring clarity and closure to the conversation I was having with Monica on the couch. You'd think after all this time I *would* have some closure to this conversation--some clear guideline for answering the question, *Is this it?*

Monica walked me to the tram station when it was time for me to go home. She wore her wooden clogs, which made me laugh, even through my tears. It felt good to laugh. As we were leaving the apartment, Gideon stood in the doorway, and said, "*'t komt well goed.*" It'll all work out.

V

Three years later, Steve still thinks it was a mistake to break up, still wants to shake me and say, "Wake up! This is it!" So who's to say whether it's worked out for the best? How do you know until the end

of the story? I don't believe there's only one true Mr. Right out there, and it's a good thing--I'd hate to think there was so little room for error. I may have thwarted my destiny more than once already. Instead I expect that at some point the decision to marry will be a more or less deliberate one, a choice for partnership when the scales seem to tip in that direction. I guess it's just easier for some people to make that assessment, like my friend Kelly in Missouri who is confounded by all my agonizing. She's been married over 12 years now, with two sons, and says simply, "I loved Rob, so I married him. I don't know why you make this so complicated."

Maybe it's not *having* the decision made that's so addicting. It adds an air of suspense to my life. There could be someone right around the corner--I never know--and in the mean time I don't have to let go of any dreams. Possibility is so much more enticing than reality. It gives me a sense of power to have the decision up in the air--full of potential energy like a coiled spring or a raised weight--all that power gained from not having come down yet.

Meanwhile, the further I get into my thirties (the age at which women used to be defined as "spinsters") the more I sense I'm walking a tightrope of perception. I hardly notice I've made a radical lifestyle choice by delaying marriage, but I have many friends who are already well into family life and by contrast, my life seems so different. People speculate about my status. Some assume I'm a commitment-phobe (which, incidentally, I mind the least, probably because it defies the more common stereotype about single women); others jump to the

conclusion that I'm desperate to meet a man (which of course I mind the most). There's no escaping the characterization of the neurotic female approaching 30 and fretting over a lack of husband--in the book Brigid Jones's Diary, the fictional character likens it to a big game of musical chairs: a frantic contest to grab a husband before the age of 30--when the music stops.

It's a pervasive bias; I encounter it in subtle ways. The other day a friend gushed, "You have so much going for you--I can't *believe* you don't have a boyfriend!" Of course she meant it as a compliment, but the underlying assumption is that a lack of partner is somehow indicative of a lack of desirability. Surely, the logic goes, if I were desirable enough, someone would have *plucked* me up by now. Why not the opposite reaction--that with so much going for me, it's *easy* to see why I haven't found a compatible partner? I'd venture to guess that single men don't encounter this bias--this assumption that they're just waiting around, hoping to be chosen.

It seems like reactions come in two forms: admiration and pity. And the fine line between them? I think it's the element of choice. As long as it's readily apparent that I've had the *option* to take a more traditional route, and that I'm quite happy in my situation, then it seems fully accepted--people are almost enamored by it. But any hint that I just ended up here despite my best efforts to get married, and the whole picture looks different. All of a sudden instead of a statement of defiance, my single status is deviant, and probably embarrassing, and hopefully temporary. This

is a troubling distinction. Does it mean that my social status, my cultural power, is all wrapped up in my ability to attract a man? What does that mean for women if (or rather, *when*) that desirability slips away, as we get older or less attractive, more invisible in the eyes of men?

I'm not sure what, if anything, will change the status quo of my life, whether it will be a deliberate, pragmatic decision (will I be able to make it?), or an act of providence (will I recognize it?). I'm not sure what ultimately tips the scales and makes partnership better than being alone--is it when you've been through a lot together? When you have the same eyes, or think of things at exactly the same time? From where I am now, I can't tell; it's still the middle of the story. I'm not sure if I'm waiting, or choosing, or if I've already chosen--or even if it makes any difference.

And all my musings over ideal lives aside, who's to say it's one or the other anyway? If partnership and solitude are on opposite ends of a continuum, I don't think it's linear or unidirectional. It's a matter of degree; we constantly make decisions about how much to share and how much to keep for ourselves. And sometimes external circumstances come along and decide for us, taking away a beloved partner or plunking one down when we least expect it. Togetherness is not a singular decision.

VI

Phil's lying on his back on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. He's healthy now, more than ten years after his bone marrow transplant, except that his eyes don't produce tears anymore. He has to use eye drops all the time. I'm sitting up beside him, flipping through a magazine for an article I want to show him. It's reminded us of a day when he was still in the hospital. He'd had a lumbar puncture--chemotherapy shot straight into his spine to eradicate any leukemia cells that might be hiding there. For several hours afterwards, he had to lie perfectly still to avoid leaking spinal fluid, which would have given him a horrible headache. So he lay there motionless, staring straight up at the ceiling, telling me what to read to him. It was one of his low points, he's told me since then, one of the times my companionship meant the most to him.

"I had no idea how much it was going to mean to have you there, until you came," he says now, as we reminisce.

It's quiet in my apartment aside from the tink-tink of baseboard heating vents, warming up.

"...And when I left?"

"It was the right thing. At some point, I had to face my demons."

And it dawns on me that solitude may have very little to do with decisions, and choices, and degrees, and dispositions. It's an existential reality. On a very basic level, we're all alone. And maybe once we recognize that and come to terms with it, we realize what extraordinary joy there is in the moments when we aren't--when someone's there to help us bear our losses, even

just for a little while; when someone cares about the morning frost or the decision at hand. Maybe these moments of connection--in whatever form or frequency they come--are the real gift.

Breathing Deep

PACKING LIST

<u>Wear</u>	<u>Pack</u>	<u>T1</u>	<u>T2</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Triathlon suit	<input type="checkbox"/> Wetsuit	<input type="checkbox"/> Bike, stocked with food & fluid	<input type="checkbox"/> Running shoes
<input type="checkbox"/> Sweat pants	<input type="checkbox"/> Goggles	<input type="checkbox"/> Helmet	<input type="checkbox"/> Number belt w/ number
<input type="checkbox"/> T-shirt	<input type="checkbox"/> Swim cap	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunglasses	<input type="checkbox"/> Cap
<input type="checkbox"/> Fleece top	<input type="checkbox"/> Water/Gatorade	<input type="checkbox"/> Socks	<input type="checkbox"/> Hair rubber band
<input type="checkbox"/> Sandals	<input type="checkbox"/> Powerbars/Gels	<input type="checkbox"/> Bike shoes	
<input type="checkbox"/> Watch	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 towels	<input type="checkbox"/> Camelback (off-road only)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Timing chip	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunscreen		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Vaseline & Body Glide		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Cooking spray		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Bike pump		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Wallet		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Driving directions & reg info		
	<input type="checkbox"/> B-fast food		

The race site will be bustling even though the sun is barely up. A small crowd will be gathered at the registration table, where you'll head first, to check in and pick up your racer bag. Then you'll take your bike to the transition area, where each of the long metal racks will be designated with a range of race numbers--there's supposed to be enough room, but if you're a little late, you may have to edge some of the other bikes over to make room for yours. People will get very testy about this because they already have their stuff laid out *just so*. Keep in mind, most triathletes are this sort of person: super-organized, driven, a little rigid, and on the anal-retentive side--the type that gets testy when their stuff gets moved.

The next step is getting body-marked. This involves pulling your sweat pants down to your ankles and standing

in the cold morning air in a bathing suit while someone with a big, fat, permanent black marker writes on your goose-bumpy skin: "**F 30-35**" (your age group) on the left calf, and "**847**" (your race number) on both upper arms. The "8" will start right on top of the deltoid muscle, the "4" below it, and the "7" on the outside of the bicep. Then you'll wait in line at the port-a-potties. You'll do this at least three more times before the race starts, and after that you can just pee in your wetsuit, or in your biking shorts during the ride. (It'll drip down your leg but dries pretty quickly.)

You'll be so nervous and excited for the race to start that you'll check your watch every three minutes to see exactly when that will be. You'll envy the people walking around looking relaxed, wearing regular street clothes and warm jackets, sipping coffee, because they're just here to cheer someone on and they don't have to do the race. And then you'll remember that you don't have to do the race either, and you'll ask yourself for the hundredth time why you choose to.

A few years ago, I was doing my cold-water swim in the bay after work to get ready for the Alcatraz race. My friends were up the hill in Nicole's apartment, opening a bottle of wine, and I was down at Aquatic Park, putting on my wetsuit, a thermal cap, and getting an ice-cream headache from just putting my toes in the water. I was having mixed feelings. On one hand, it felt so miserable and I dreaded the feeling I had when I first got in: *I can't do this!* But the swim got better and eventually I had the good feeling that I *could* do it and

I *would* do it. But I remember wondering the whole time: *Why* do I choose to do this? Why do I always have to do the *hard* thing?

I had the same feeling when my friend Celeste and I decided to spend a year studying at the University of Zimbabwe. It was so hard sometimes, living in a third-world city, and often it seemed just foolish to have left our idyllic lives in Santa Barbara--why purposely choose to be so uncomfortable? When our college in the States asked us to write something for the school newsletter about the experience, we joked about writing, "STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" But of course it all seemed worth it in the end, leaving our comfort zone and rising to the challenge. If I never did things like this, I would feel like I was just hydroplaning over the surface of life, rather than digging in and *extracting* something from it. And I find that the deeper I dig in, the more I get out of it: effort level and satisfaction are positively correlated. Everyone probably realizes this and responds according to their own level of ambition--this is what gives each of our lives a unique topography. Some people are happy to dig small troughs and stand on little mounds, while others wouldn't be satisfied until they'd dug the Grand Canyon. Aspiration is a matter of degree. The funny thing is we don't seem to have much choice in the matter; it's as though we all just start out with different sized shovel.

With a half hour left before the race starts, it's important to get the transition area set up and ultra-organized: a towel laid out beside your bike, running

shoes and race number toward the back, and biking shoes--one sock lying neatly on each one--near the front. Bike helmet goes right on top of the handlebars, with the straps lying to the outside so you won't have to fumble. To get yourself ready, rub Vaseline on your nipples and around the seams of your bathing suit to avoid chafing. Body Glide, which comes in a solid stick that looks like deodorant, will help protect your neck against a wetsuit rash that stings when you sweat and looks like a bad hickey the week after the race. To help the wetsuit slide off quicker in the transition, apply cooking spray all around your ankles and calves before pulling it on. By now the race announcer will be calling a pre-race meeting for all competitors, so you'll grab your color-coded swim cap, goggles, and, after one last scrutinizing look at the transition area, head down to the water.

I took up swimming in the 7th grade, for muscles. I was always a skinny kid. I swam year-round for the Cabrillo Threshers, a club team, and when I got to high school, we practiced before and after school. I always loved how the fog hung just above the pool at early morning workouts, mixing with the steam rising up from the water. From underwater, the overhead lights refracted in weird ways like a kaleidoscope, and all the sounds were muted. Looking up toward the surface, the world appeared surreal and glassy, as though I were looking from inside of a globe.

I still train and compete in triathlons, and I still do it for the muscles--partly. I love feeling the strong, efficient contractions of my heart pumping blood

urgently to my muscles while I'm exercising. I love the warm flush of my face, the blood vessels just below the surface of my skin dilated, dissipating heat. And I like how it feels to take huge breaths, all that air passing in and out of my lungs, loading my blood up with oxygen and delivering it throughout my system. Even a fish tank gets green and murky without air; oxygenation must be a good, clarifying thing.

The part I love most about endurance training is lung capacity. My lungs are conditioned to meet the soaring demand for oxygen in my muscles when I'm climbing a long, steep pitch on my mountain bike or doing butterfly strokes across the pool. But the capacity is there even when the demand subsides, and I'm just cooking dinner or walking to class. And what I love is that I can take an extra-deep breath. I sigh a lot.

I've heard it said that a lot of graduate students live "from the neck up," becoming so consumed with intellectual pursuits that they lose touch with their bodies. I can't fathom such a disconnect. All my aspirations originate in the same place, and it's a physical place--located in my physical being. I live a thoroughly embodied life, from the moment I set out for a trailhead in the morning--when the deep rumbling sound of tires on a gravel road rises up in my car and triggers a release of adrenaline, like salivation--to late at night when I wake up from hunger because my metabolism is on overdrive, and I find myself standing on the cold linoleum floor in the blinding refrigerator light, eating vanilla yogurt.

Even if the race start is split up into heats, there will be about 50 people starting at once. Whether the official start line is on the beach or in the water, everyone will be crowding toward it, nervous and excited, one finger on their sports-watches, ready to push "start." The announcer will count down over a bullhorn, and usually everyone is jovial and counts along, like a group chant: "8!...7!...6!...", and a big cheer goes up when the horn goes off. Then the thrashing begins. It's not uncommon to be kicked in the face, have your goggles knocked askew, or to have to swim right over people to find open water.

Eventually you'll want to find someone to draft off--someone who's swimming as fast or a little faster than you are--and then get right up where the bubbles come up from their kick, and swim in their wake so that your fingers almost touch their toes with each stroke. This way, the water is broken and it takes less effort to move through it. Big orange buoys will mark the course and landmarks on the shore will serve as reference points, so every other breath or so, look up and direct yourself. Don't rely on anyone else for this. And keep swimming, even as you approach the shore and start to see the ground again. Pop up and start running only when your hands start to scrape the bottom.

On the run to the transition area, you'll want to unzip your wetsuit and pull your arms out--it won't be so much of a *run* as a *trot*, really, because you'll be out of breath and running on bare feet, which hurts. The transition area will be frantic and funny. Everything is supposed to be completely organized and efficient, and

people will be freaking out if something is going wrong, like they can't pull their wetsuit off because their hands are too numb, or they've grabbed their bike but can't find the exit to get out on the course. You may even have to giggle a little--something about the way you try to pull your shoes on so fast, like you're a little kid again and someone's out there on a Big Wheel, and you want to hurry up and go join them. No one wants to be left behind.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a boy. My hair was white and always cut short like a boy's, and I dressed like a boy and played with boys. I remember that I loved it when people couldn't tell what I was and had to ask my mother. I even beat someone up once when I was about 10 years old--he had stolen the soccer ball that my friend Mariette Offerhaus and I were playing with on a blacktop near her house. At first it was all in fun, but I wanted to show him how tough I could be, even though I was a girl. I had him up against the chain link fence and I hit him, as hard as I've ever hit anyone, and he suddenly looked very scared, and hurt. I remember feeling bad that I had taken things too far, but also slightly exhilarated by the power of pure physical aggression. It seemed like that's what it would feel like to be a boy.

I'm still a tomboy, part-time. I like getting soaked and muddy on my mountain bike, until my face is completely spattered brown except around my eyes, where my protective glasses have been. Sometimes I get a double take in the parking lot at the trailhead, when someone notices my ponytail and realize it's a girl

lifting that muddy mountain bike overhead, onto the roof racks of the car. I like their surprise, and this is why I'm glad I'm not a boy after all: I'd rather defy expectations than conform to them. I resist being typecast--jock, academic, tomboy, feminine--because I want to be all of those things at different times. I like a range of options. I never could settle on just one thing.

And there's something more to it, too--this impulse to dodge whenever someone comes at me with a label. It's my own small part in a much larger campaign, one I support wholeheartedly: surprising people in ways that make them reconsider their assumptions. Every time someone acts outside of the box they've been put into or doesn't fit neatly into a category, it blurs the lines for good, and I think that's progress. It gives everyone a greater range of choices, more possibilities, fewer limitations. It's more accurate too. This way, when a little boy on a blacktop steals a soccer ball from a girl, he won't be surprised when she puts up a fight.

Spectators will surround the transition area, cheering, and a few focused volunteers will be diligently recording race numbers into a computer as competitors come and go from the transitions, once between the swim and the bike ("T1") and once between the bike and the run ("T2"). Later, all the results will be posted on a website and you'll pour over them until you know all the statistics by heart. It won't be enough to know you were 3rd in your age group and 57th overall--you'll want to know your average miles-per-hour on the bike, minutes-per-mile

on the run, time spent in the transitions. You'll compare this information to your performance at other races, and, depending on how competitive you are, you'll compare it against other people in your age group, to figure out what you would need to do to beat them next time, like go to 20 mph on the bike rather than 18.5 to make up the 6 minutes that cost you second place.

But you can't think of any of that yet. During the race, there will be moments where you have to dig deep just to keep going, and never mind what your splits are or who's beating you. There will be points of exertion--like on the bike--where Gatorade is spilling down your chin, and your spit doesn't clear your shoulder and it's just hanging there, and you really, truly, don't care about it at all. There just isn't the slightest amount of extra energy for that. Every ounce of resolve has to be going forward, onward, toward the finish. And that finish line will never seem close enough, not even in the finish chute with a few yards to go.

When you start the run after getting off your bike, your legs will feel like the legs of a couch. They don't move very well and your body weighs a ton. So you just stay inside your zone until you loosen up, and run your own race. This is critical--don't get lured out of your pace by another runner, even if you can tell they're in your age group by the writing on their calf as they go by. You can always chase them down at the end if you still have it in you. But when you're tired, you'll resent any extra energy you expended not being true to yourself.

Pretty much what I think about the whole entire race is the finish line...how far it is, how long it will take me to get there, how good it will feel. I guess that is the essence, the *definition*, of delayed gratification: to go for hours and hours--about 2½ for Olympic distance, 4 hours for an off-road race, and 6+ for a half-Ironman--to go that long thinking about the finish line. It's sheer determination in the mean time, helped along by a strong sense of efficacy. I know I could be stopped by a flat tire or an injury, but when it comes to willpower--I absolutely *know* I have the willpower to get to the finish line.

Resolve like this is woven into my personality. When I was a kid we lived in Virginia, and I had a gerbil. My mom, who wasn't big on pets, was helping me clean its cage one day, and I had to hold it while she ran upstairs to rinse out the cage. I was standing in the hallway of the basement, outside the playroom, at the bottom of the stairs. And the gerbil started biting me, biting my hands until they were bleeding. But I knew I had to hold on to him, because once when he got away, he hid places where it was difficult to catch him, like under the refrigerator, and my mom had gotten frustrated. So I just held on and screamed up to her, and finally she rushed down the stairs, put the cage down, and took the gerbil out of my bloody hands. I remember that I would never have let go, just because it was hurting me.

In triathlons, you endure so much pain and then feel absolutely wonderful when the whole thing is finally over, and you're walking around the race area stiffly

with the sweat drying on your face, eating orange slices and pretzels and cheering on the people who are still coming across the finish line. Later you'll drive home with racing bikes on top of your car, going over every detail of the course with your buddies, and you'll stop at Denny's for a big, greasy breakfast and the waitress will look at you oddly when you order two, finding it strange for a girl to be pigging out like this, and it's because you've already burned 3,000 calories today and it's only 11 o'clock.

When you get home, you'll take the most euphoric shower, standing in the warm stream of water like you're in a trance, letting it pool in your hands and spill down your chest while you just stand there, thinking. You can stand there as long as you want, because the work is over now and you deserve it, no matter what your splits were or how you did at the race.

And it makes me wonder, over and over, what kind of strange alchemy takes place on a day like this, that transforms all the nervousness and dread of the morning into unwavering resolve and--finally--into this extraordinary sense of satisfaction.

*"All good writing is swimming underwater
and holding your breath."*

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

Why Words?

Why words? Why this crazy, endless trail of words, like the longest course I ever raced, with the most distant finish line? If I stretched them out, line after line, all the words I've strung together, they would stretch the length of my life, I think, would probably keep up with every mile I've ever walked or run.

Words run through my head in an incessant narration, so habitual it's barely conscious. *She walked behind a man who moved with anguished steps--his left knee caved inward, his hip dropped, his shoulder jerked forward--his shoulder lurched-- (lurched? can a shoulder lurch?)...* I ransack my vocabulary for the right word. I don't know why or when I started narrating my life in third person, but I remember the first time I realized I was doing it (and that it wasn't normal). I was about 10 years old, standing in the crowded kitchen of our house in Vienna while my mom cooked a Sunday morning pancake breakfast. I leaned over the stove. "I'll have that one, she said," I said. It just slipped out. My sisters laughed.

Letters feed this compulsion with words--letters on license plates, for example. I think this began as an innocent car game we used to play on family road trips in our red Volvo station wagon, but now I can't stop making words out of the three letters on car license plates. And if the first word I come up with is too easy, like making "reclaim" out of a license plate that reads *RCL 728*, then I have to keep thinking until I come up with

harder, less obvious words like "trickle" or "recalcitrant."

The soft, delicate wooden letters of a Scrabble game offer endless word-making opportunities; my sister Jessie and I played twice a day when we were on vacation in Amsterdam last winter. We'd play first thing in the morning over muesli, and then take the game to a canal-front café to play in the afternoon, while drinking *koffie verkeert*. Someone once taught me an even more lively game called "Steal-a-Word" that's played with the same letters, but allows you to take other people's words by rearranging or adding letters to make new ones. You have to be quick to spot the possibilities, though; only the first person gets to take the word. My license plate obsession comes in handy; I almost always win.

Letters are the steps that add up to the miles I've covered with words. I document everything. I have a notebook to catalogue my daily workouts...*3/10/01: Rode Belfountain-Llewellen-Fern, 21.65 mi, average 15.7 mph Ⓢ, 1:22min. Was going to do Decker but got discouraged with the headwinds.* I have personal journals that go back as far as when I first learned how to write. My closet shelves sag under the weight of them. And I keep adding to the collection--every three months or so, another spiral-bound 7" x 9½" three-subject notebook is filled with words and wedged between the others on the shelf. I like reading these old journals now and then, but I'm pretty sure no one else ever will. They'd probably be deathly boring to anyone but me, even though they seem pithy and juicy and enticingly secret when I write them.

I can't even imagine a good use for them after I die, so what will become of them? Why write them in first place?

I've added a few miles of words in the last several months, while writing this thesis. Not just the words in the essays themselves--that's less than half of them actually--but in the writing journal I've kept alongside this project as well. There are seventy-five single-spaced pages of process notes so far...*"How can I tell the story without making it too story-ish; how can I interrupt the chronological pull of this essay?...I wish there were instructions for this!..."* None of these pages will ever make it to my computer printer, of course; they're just more words for storage.

Why the urge to write, I wonder? I don't think it means that I was *born* to be a writer or anything romantic like that (and remind me--if I ever do become a *real* writer--not to claim that it does). I did write stories prolifically when I was a kid, mostly about animals. There's one about breeding our Golden Retriever, in which I was trying to incorporate new vocabulary words (*"The bitch produced a litter of six while I was sleeping"*) and another written from the perspective of an insect, on which my teacher wrote, *"Very good, Micky--you've really helped me see what it's like to be a potato bug!"* But I'm skeptical of predestination, and I could just as easily make the case that I was destined to become a scientist. My dad gave me a microscope when I was nine, which I loved. It came in a light blue oval case with a zipper and had a set of prepared slides along with it, with labels like "cheek cell" and "plant cell." I made

my own slides, too, by pricking my friends' fingers and squeezing their blood out onto the glass for closer examination.

So if it's not a matter of foreordained vocation, why do I write so much? What do the words tell me when I get them down on a page like blood on a slide?

I think I put my thoughts into words for the same reason I used to use my microscope--for examination. I'm hopelessly analytical. I have to get the thoughts outside of me to get a good look at them; it's an effort to organize, a method of inventory. Who can figure anything out when it's tumbling around and around in your head like clothes in a drier? When I write, things begin to line up nicely, and my thoughts eventually lead somewhere--vacillations zigzag into informed conclusions, visceral reactions evolve into rational responses. I write my way to equanimity.

This is how I justify all the time and ink I spend in writing: by believing that it *gets* me somewhere. I always like to feel like I'm making progress. Often writing does lead me to action, but I wonder if it's more often a matter of *adaptation*? Am I really directing the circumstances of my life or just feeling my way around them--using words the way a blind person uses his hands? I think I pepper my life with words in an effort to make it *show up*, like the detective's black powder that makes a fingerprint appear or the sprinkling of glitter that sticks to an invisible patch glue. Does that make living a process of discovery or of creation? Can it be both at the same time, even though discovery works backwards and living happens forwards?

Postscript

At the suggestion of my committee, I am including this postscript, which is a revised version of the introductory remarks I made at my oral defense. This postscript discusses the reasons why I chose to write a creative nonfiction thesis, its potential advantages and disadvantages, the ways in which a creative nonfiction thesis does (and does not) differ from a more traditional academic argument, standards for evaluation, and the personal benefits I gained from writing the thesis. My hope is that this postscript will be useful to future graduate students facing similar decisions.

The Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies at Oregon State appealed to me initially because--as you know by now from reading this thesis--I can never settle on just one thing. My work experience in fitness management, sports marketing, and freelance writing led me to be interested in various aspects of influence and human behavior such as rhetoric, motivation, and management. Eventually, I decided to pursue my business studies as a separate degree, and chose as the three areas of my interdisciplinary degree rhetoric and composition, speech communication, and exercise psychology. Coming back to graduate school and even doing two concurrent degrees was the right decision--I've really enjoyed being at the university. And even after 126 credits of coursework, there are still classes I wish I could take!

Over a year ago, Dr. Ede and I started brainstorming topics for my thesis. I think I originally expected to do more traditional academic work, perhaps some type of research in electronic communication, which eventually became the topic of my MBA portfolio. Dr. Ede suggested that I consider writing a collection of nonfiction essays as a thesis. It seemed a novel idea at first--certainly a more substantial creative writing project than I had ever undertaken.

My first concern was that it might be considered less rigorous than a traditional thesis, perhaps because I would have more autonomy in the process of writing it. My friends in other graduate degree programs were often complaining about problems like research subjects not showing up for data collection or computer models not running correctly. A creative writing project like Dr. Ede was suggesting, on the other hand, would be completely up to me. But that was also the scariest part about it: on uninspired days, there'd be no structure to resort to, no numbers to crunch or articles to reread. In fact, there'd be nothing at all on my desk--it would all have to come from inside. The open-endedness was unnerving. What if I just ran out of things to write? Some topics I knew I wanted to write about, but I wasn't at all sure they'd amount to a thesis. I remember asking Dr. Ede if she would give me assignments if I ran out of things to write. In my mind, it seemed as though a traditional research project would be like an organized running race--I might not know how it's going to go, but at least I would know the course. A creative thesis, on the other hand, seemed more like a treasure hunt--I'd get

one clue at a time, each leading to the next, and the course would have to evolve.

Ultimately I chose to do a creative nonfiction thesis because one of my main reasons for coming back to graduate school was to develop my writing skills. And I know that the only way to become a better writer is to write. This is something I tell my Writing 121 students on the first day of class every term. I liken the class to a running class I taught my first year at OSU. I explain that my running students didn't expect to come to class to hear lectures about running--instead, they improved their skills by going out and doing the workouts I prescribed. Similarly, I knew from my own advice that the best way to stretch my writing skills would be to undertake an extensive writing project like this--to dive in, even if I literally wasn't sure I could do it.

This thesis differs from a traditional academic thesis in that it is not an attempt to demonstrate knowledge in a particular theoretical or practical area; it does not advance an argument. Instead, it can be considered a performance, much like a student of music might perform their work as a final exam. This is a performance of composition.

But the more clearly I draw that distinction--of this thesis as a performance rather than an original contribution to a body of knowledge--the more I begin to question it. I started thinking back over conversations I've had in each of my disciplines over the last few years, and I remember that I was often struck by how similar those conversations were; the issues were often the same, just situated in different disciplines. One of

those issues was that of epistemology--how do we come to know? In all my fields of study, there seemed to be a shift away from the notion that we can arrive at universal truths by becoming objective and unbiased enough in the scientific process. Instead, there seems to be an increased emphasis on understanding social and cultural contexts, whether it is language or motivation or the writing process that is being investigated. In other words, we seem to be learning that recognizing our own situatedness as seekers of knowledge does not cloud the issues we study but sheds necessary light on them.

As I reflected on this, I realized that what I have done in writing personal essays is not so different from what people are doing all across the university: seeking knowledge. In this thesis, I seek to understand through the medium of personal narrative. I'm exploring interpersonal issues like solitude versus community and motivational issues in physical activity--and I'm exploring them by telling my own story, by sharing my perspective.

Although the essential activity is the same--seeking knowledge--my methods are different from other types of study, and the purpose of my project is different. I have had to learn the rigors and challenges unique to this approach, to the writing of nonfiction essays. I did this by reading writers I admire, like Annie Dillard, Marjorie Sandor, and Kathy Moore, by meeting with Dr. Ede who has been a great mentor, and by meeting weekly with my writing group--getting their responses to my work and responding, in turn, to theirs. This is how I learned, and how I continue to learn.

Some of the methods I've been learning, for instance, are describing specific details and moments, so that the writing serves as a lens through which the reader can see things along with me. I've been learning to try to evoke truths with a delicate touch. The writers I admire seem to (metaphorically) turn the light on just as they're leaving the room, illuminating truths without overexposing them. Professor Chris Anderson, who I was fortunate to have in my writing group, taught me the value of raw and unpolished material and encouraged me to resist the urge to "over-process" my writing on a sentence level. I have also been learning to trust my "felt sense," as well as the process of trial and error, to find the right tact to take among almost limitless options for approaching my topics.

In learning these things, I have been attempting to achieve two goals in my writing: to say what I want to say, and to do so in a way that accomplishes the purpose of the essay. And what is that purpose? This brings me to the final question I'd like to address. In my initial meeting with the committee, several members expressed concern about establishing appropriate standards for evaluating my thesis. So I turned the question around and asked it of myself--by what standard would *I* like the thesis to be judged? What would I consider a success? And I found myself returning to the same two-part goal. First, have I said the things I want to say? I feel that I have. But perhaps more importantly, in light of the purpose of evaluation, is the second part, which I think boils down to one question to you as my readers: Did you care?

I would consider these essays successful if they do what essays are supposed to do: offer an enjoyable reading experience, so that the reader cares about the subject and wants to know what happens next. To me the greatest challenge in writing personal essays has been believing that someone might be interested--interested in reading about my sister whom they've never met, for instance, or about my thoughts on living alone, or about the fact that I like to take extra deep breaths. I was constantly asking myself: what makes me think the reader will care? And what I kept learning, over and over, is that when the essay is done right, readers do care.

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