This collection of poems and essays is about the folklore of family and the shadowy imprint family myth can leave on its members. At the center of the argument is a struggle about coming to terms with these shadows from a speaker trying to find a sense of a self under the heavy weight of mistakes and uncertainty. What is being challenged here is the art of acceptance, how freedom is available not to those who fight, but to those who choose to see that the self they are seeking lies within the very thing they had always fought against. Elements play a heavy role throughout, sometimes creating a sense of earthy gravity in an otherwise fickle and airy universe. The organization of the elements also incorporates a sense of denial or an inability to connect with the qualities symbolized within the elements. The themes of free will and fate are brought forward and questioned; what the speaker chooses to do with these possibilities is left out in the open, as something that can be read in the traces of one’s breath as it crystallizes in the air.
The Folklore of Daughters

by

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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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Heather Bremicker, Author
Grateful acknowledgement is given to Dr. Karen Holmberg for her commitment and inspiration in shaping these poems and stories. I would also like to thank Ted Leeson for his guidance in helping me find not only the words, but the story underneath the belly of the essay. I am also grateful to Dr. Wayne C. Anderson for his free-writing prompts and advice on my poetry.
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The Folklore of Daughters

Heather Bremicker
At the Base of the Mountains

As we drive through Thompson Pass, a 2,805-foot-high gap in the Chugach Mountains and the snowiest place in Alaska, recording 45 feet of snow per year, we pass Worthington Glacier pouring into a small lake near the highway. My eyes wander to whitewater rapids cascading down narrow, rocky canyons far below the highway bridges and then look up toward Bridal Veil Falls and Horse Tail Falls. The gravitational pull and residual spray from these cataracts is so immense they create a shower of mist that coats the highway. My mother’s gray Jeep begins the descent into town as the windy, sharp curves and quick rush of tires lull me quiet. I try hard to stay aware of my surroundings but soon surrender into the thick bank of fog hovering over the town of Valdez.

Like an Antarctic outpost surrounded by Alp-like mountains, Valdez has drawn people to its rugged ledges on the edge of a fjord for thousands of years, from the Chugach natives for whom the mountain range was named, to the Spanish explorers who gave the town of Valdez its name, to the miners who sought out claims during the gold rush. Valdez is made up of grey and beige-toned buildings, lining mud-encrusted paved streets that seem to speak without apology, saying “Nothing fancy, just real.” In its current location, the town of Valdez was set up in the late sixties after the Army Corps of Engineers relocated it from the original site, which was destroyed by a tidal wave in 1964, when one of the greatest earthquakes to hit North America occurred within 40 miles of Valdez. Registering 9.2 on the Richter scale, the quake lasted five minutes, sending a huge chunk of mountain sliding off the Chugach Range above the fjord and plummeting into the water. The impact produced a tsunami that wiped out the town and thirty residents. Later, when the Corps of Engineers determined the ground underneath the original town site to be unstable, it moved everyone and everything to its current location. The town migrated, and the new Valdez is tucked farther up the fjord, hidden behind a few scattered islands and nestled into the base of the Chugach range where small waterfalls of snow-melt can be seen cascading toward the ocean.
It was a strange sort of frenetic pull that tugged at my mother and me when we decided to leave Fairbanks and go to Valdez with my two daughters for the weekend. In our attempts to get out of town and down the road, we ended up making a mad dash for my mother’s car, the kind that comes when you’re blindly running toward something but don’t know exactly why. We were determined to see my mother’s favorite fishing hole; she wanted to show me what some call “The Switzerland of Alaska.”

But when my mother urged this fishing trip, the Solomon Gulch fish hatchery in Valdez was not exactly what I had in mind. When we arrive, the hatchery is packed to the gills with people, seagulls, and shiny, green, spotted fish stacked side-by-side near the shore. The spawning pink salmon, also known as humpies, are so thick en route to procreate near the source of the hatchery that people snag them by the fins. Some walk away with ten pinks tied together on a rope, while others come equipped with their own coolers in order to catch, slice, gut, and ice their fish right there on the black rocky beach, leaving discarded skins and egg sacs scattered on shore. Some families are full-on fly-fishing teams decked out in matching gear. I watch as they slowly wade up to their shins into the sea of gyrating pinks, in hip waders and vests, struggling to get a toe-hold on the slippery streambed, as if the fish were whitewater beating against their thighs, ready to take them under any minute.

The image of these artificially propagated fish returning to their manmade spawning grounds makes me feel guilty, as though I’d brought my four-year-old to a Disneyland version of Alaska, where she is given a plastic pole with a magnet on the line to capture pink salmon with magnetized mouths. The frenzy makes me wonder what brought these people to Valdez, and why to a hatchery? Were they visitors or were they local? And if they were local, why on earth were they fishing for pinks, outside of a hatchery?

It troubles me to think about what humans have become over time. I am sure that the native tribes who existed here thousands of years ago didn’t fish when the runs were weak, yet we have arranged nature now so that we don’t necessarily have to come on the salmon’s schedule. Instead we can come when the hatchery calls them home, just in time to catch our limit before jumping on the nearest plane back to Florida. Someone once told me that fishing anywhere near spawning grounds was illegal in all states, yet here are hundreds of people led by some ancient instinct to hunt and stock up, throwing their hooks into the (section continued)
next spongy fish too old and decomposed to taste good, having essentially destroyed itself in order to come home and spawn.

As I look out over the overwhelmingly beautiful snow-capped Chugach mountain range with the eerie hue of Alaska’s summer daylight reflecting off the salt water, I catch a glimpse of myself in this madding bunch of fish hoarders, seeing the raw instinctual pull that drew all of us here. It seems as if we are a part of some irrational and unspoken ritual, as if having my daughter catch a salmon off the shores of Alaska is a sort of rite of passage in becoming a true Alaskan. As if being born here isn’t good enough.

My mother begins the task of setting up my daughter’s equipment, and we joke about putting a worm on the hook. Spawning salmon don’t eat, let alone eat worms. But I agree to go along with the joke and the challenge. I know that she is curious to see if my daughter reacts to worms the same way I do, and I want to prove to her that my oldest won’t. As a child I had an unnatural aversion to worms, and to a mother who loves to fish, this is one of the worst traits her offspring could exhibit. I grab the white Styrofoam tub and open it as both my daughters step forward and dig in, pulling out handfuls of earthworms.

As a small child, I couldn’t stand the feeling that came over me whenever I held a worm; an electric shock racked my body, inevitably sending the worm flying through the air and me into a fit of shivers. I consciously tried to get over my phobia flying through the air and me into a fit of shivers. I consciously tried to get over my phobia when I was in the third grade by sitting down in the backyard for hours, attempting to hold onto a worm for more than a few seconds. But the electric shock never failed to come through. What truly sealed the deal for me occurred in the fourth grade when I took down a jar of peanut butter from the pantry shelf. I noticed that there was a thick white spider web underneath one side of the lid and asked my mother what I should do about it. She instructed me to simply wipe it away, so I took a paper towel and began wiping the web away when a pile of little white maggots started pouring out and onto the countertop. At that point I threw the jar into the garbage and gave up on the idea that I would ever get over my phobia of worms. Luckily my daughters have not inherited my problem. The toughest part now is to act normally whenever they bring a worm to me. A few times I have slipped up when caught off guard, sending a night crawler into the air with a howl, as my daughters’ eyes look up trying to pinpoint the destination of their friend’s free-falling body. My mother never knew what to
do with me when it came to worms and fishing; she finally gave up, and bought me a special container full of hot-pink salmon eggs.

When my daughter hooks her first fin, connected to six pounds of pink salmon, the worm’s body is limp and hanging intact above the dorsal fin. I help keep my daughter’s rod tipped toward the sky because the reel can’t hold the weight of the fish, and my mother wraps the line a few times around her cracked and swollen hands, pulling the fish to shore. Her forearms, hands, fingertips and nails are cracked from a severe case of psoriasis she has had her whole life. The skin is bright red and scaly, like a fish’s, and swells up throughout the nine months of winter in Fairbanks. She has tried everything, from sticking her arms up to her elbows into a vat of melted wax, to smearing cans and cans of Bag Balm up and down her arms and then covering them with hot towels. Nothing seems to help, except the three months of summer when her condition quiets down. But her nails still split in two, protruding away from her skin like fins. She said it has to do with a lack of circulation and I imagine her blood unable to leave her heart. Weakened from a severe Jeep wreck she was in during the early seventies in Fairbanks, my mother’s heart is unable to pump out enough blood to prevent her own fingernails from falling off.

When she pulls the crook-mouthed salmon onto shore, its shiny body writhes in pain. The fish fights against the air at my daughter’s feet, and I wonder whether my mother or I will do the honors of beating it over the head with a rock or a pair of needle nose pliers. Instead we decide to pull it far enough up shore, to build a large and heavy cairn on top of its body so that the fish can slowly suffocate behind us.

I see my mother wishing to reproduce herself in my oldest daughter. I see her need to create some sort of allegiance with my oldest child that divides my mother and me yet still keeps us co-dependently bound at the same time. My mother comments on how my oldest shares her independence and stubborn will; how, whenever my daughter acts out at school she does it only because she is just like her grandmother. I can see how she hungers to put those pieces of herself into my oldest that never completely fit into me. I feel an urge at times to pounce and claim my own territory, afraid that my mother will project into my

(section continued)
daughter all the pieces of herself that never found a home. Instead I want my daughter to gravitate toward her own convictions, to believe in her right to be the person she wants to be. I once told my oldest to hug herself. In response, she slowly wrapped her arms around her torso and nervously laughed out loud. Even at a very young age we are self-conscious about loving ourselves in front of others, even the people we love the most.

A born tomboy, my mother could tickle trout in the creek beds of North Dakota and Idaho. She always likes to talk about the favorite pair of coveralls she wore as a child. She tried to raise me to love the things she loves: board games, skiing, fishing, playing cards, camping, sharking pool, softball. I think that she was driven by an unspoken need to replicate in me, her only child, what she considered her best qualities. Instead, her fierce drive to make me into a version of herself only resulted in a backlash of rebellious teenage angst and a daughter who left home at fourteen. But sometimes I think that my mother’s best qualities could never come through because of her own self-destruction and my duty to cover it up and hide it. Growing up, whenever I had friends over, I was instructed to tell them that my mother’s girlfriend was actually her “roommate” and would be moving out soon. My friends and I both knew the truth, but pretended otherwise. I was in the eighth grade the day my aunt came to me and told me that my mother was gay. It sent a shock through my body, a 9.2 on my private Richter scale, sending me and the trust I had in my own perceptions sliding down a mountain-side. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know. I knew, but what shook me was the idea that my mother was living a lie, and that I played a huge role in making it a reality. By agreeing to adhere to the narrow channels of conventionality, bounded by the concrete walls and fences of other people’s expectations, I was a part of the façade my mother chose to live behind.

My mother’s shame is my shame. The house of cards we chose to call reality swiftly came tumbling down when I realized that we had both caved in to what others wanted us to be. I would like to believe that my mother has had moments where she was able to thrive in her own natural state, to love what her body naturally wants to love, without feeling guilty about it. But a part of me doubts this when I think about the mother I knew as a child. Growing up, I was a witness to my mother falling apart. I watched as she exchanged one form of self-destruction for another, unrelentingly damaging herself by trying to fit between

(section continued)
the narrow confines of other people’s ideas of right and wrong. I can’t help but think that if she could have accepted her own sexuality in a world that refused her that right, maybe I would never have resisted that person she wanted me to be. But we are still hung up on this artificial world we created a long time ago; we still never say the word “lesbian” until my mother has had a few drinks, and even then she only refers to her past lovers, one of whom was a part of my life for ten years, as “the ones who really had problems.”

I think about our lack of honesty with one another, about how life is always at odds with itself, as my mother ties the hook and sinker onto my daughter’s line. Watching quietly, I take note as her cracked fingers push the end of the line through the eye of the hook in a way that creates a loop, and then proceeds to wrap the tag of the line around the standing line and then back through the loop, pulling it taut. I envy how effortlessly her cracked and swollen hands are able to know, without thinking, how to maneuver through something so delicate and essential.

The hatchery building looks like a small armory for service ants in comparison to the mountains surrounding it. Hatched here, the salmon travel all over the world to come back to the very place they were born, to reproduce and die. In order to harvest the salmon roe and propagate more salmon, The Department of Fish and Game built a large concrete “stage” called a fish-counting weir. The weir creates a barrier in the freshwater channel, directing the spawning fish through a single opening where they can be separated and counted. A channel of fresh water on the weir splits forward in two directions: one out toward the fjord, and another pouring into a chute called a “livebox.” On one side of the cement weir, the force of gravity and the rush of the stream pull the spawning fish into the cement box where they are counted. Some make it past the livebox and are home free to procreate, to build redds among the rocks and lay their eggs.

No one really knows how salmon find their way back to the places where they are born. Some say that they follow their noses or the moon. All I see is a blind urge, a primordial calling that reaches beyond words, beyond conscious and logical thought. It is a form of gravity, a sense of something that pulls, bringing them back to their source where they fight upstream in order to recreate the self that is slipping away.

(section continued)
On the lower side of the fish-counting weir, facing out toward the fjord, is a section where a chain link fence and the cement stair merge, at a concrete wall. Below this, the salmon pack into a pool of shallow water, sandwiched between cement and rock. In desperation to reproduce, some of the salmon try to spawn in the only fresh water source they can get to, a thin stream of water rushing out through a small crack between the bottom of the fence and the weir, barely large enough for a clump of algae to slide through. Drawn to this trickle, the salmon don’t realize that they are entering dangerous territory in their biological drive to spawn, and the bottom half of the fence has become a sacrificial killing ground, where pink salmon of all sizes impale themselves on jagged triangular tips at the bottom of the fence.

I imagine that those beautiful salmon hung on the fence are my mother, scales, and fins and torn flesh. I want to step into the crazed horde and unhook her body, to set it free and tell her to swim away from this counterfeit home. I want to pick her up and point her in her own authentic direction, where there is no chain link fence. Grabbing hold, I point her nose in the direction she wants to go, releasing her body toward its natural state where she can let go and be free at the base of the mountains.
I

Earth
Under the light
of the microscope
I see hatchlings
pirouette through water
gelatinous, revealing

the rotating stages
of life. I see everyone
I know inside these motions,
in a deep green
twilight. The movement

around me falls
into staccato rhythms,
like the beat of many
metal-plated shoes.
Still in the womb

I am, in the shape
of a three-dimensional
triangle, where larval
snails are my mother,
underwater, and sand-
dollar bulbs swirl,
glide on the sharp
force of currents.
Without sound.
Without source. I fall

up under myself, a spinning
tutu. Over and over
I wonder if it hurts
to grow,
forming bones

from the larval
into the skeletal.
To bloom
into a diatom,
a baby on a swing.
The Heavy Weight of Separation

We always want to believe our mothers. Mine says she flew
down to Anchorage from Fairbanks every
day to touch my 3 pound 14 ounce frame through the rubbery
gloves attached to the holes in an incubator. I can see her
muddled, fogged up in bars and strip-clubs
during the pipeline in the 70s. The air pulses through the plastic
coffin. Tubes and wires are the only things that touch my wrinkly
infant skin, surrounded by the muffled sounds of machines beeping. Female
voices reach over her shoulders, blanket my body in a distant metallic hum.

In the heavy weight of separation my mother tried to cradle what she could not,
then sent me to a foster home, returning three months later.

But there is still no replacement for her mother skin, her leaky breast she tried so hard to hide.
When

When you’re fifteen and hairless in Juvi-hall without any protection.

When the rain and the snow mix.

When you have no hair because you want to crawl out of your own skin.

When you shaved it all off. Every single hair on your body, shivering.

When you’re surrounded by adults who lock you up behind Plexi-glass doors.

When they peer in at you, put you in metal shackles and call you ugly.

When you sit there bleeding because it’s that time and they give you nothing.

When the cops found you next to that schizophrenic man you should never have listened to.

He only brainwashed you to rape you later.

When they ask you why you ran away and you tell them that she beats you.

When they send you home in shackles anyway.
Trolling

My husband’s body hunches over a PVC pipe jammed onto the tiller of a Honda outboard motor. He loosely clamps it between his torso and upper thighs while trying to bait a hook. We are idling in the middle of a cove aboard his father’s 16-foot homemade wooden boat called Driftwood, which on a rocky day feels as brittle as an old man’s shoe. As the motor starts to gurgle we are shadowed by a large and jagged rock, Gull Island, a nesting place for puffins and gulls. Whitecaps smash against the side of the boat, drenching the floorboards, creating a knot in the back of my throat, tightening my chest, as the engine choking to stay alive under heaving waves. I watch the deep foamy blue as the boat swells on the crests of the waves; crying seagulls harmonize with the drone of the motor. We moved into this turbulent part of the bay to catch some herring for bait, such small fish for so much trouble. My husband screams over the noise of the seabirds and pistons, telling me to come to the stern and grab hold of the engine, but I’m paralyzed by the dizzying sway of the ocean and my utter uselessness. When I try to step to the stern of the boat, terror grips me by the knees. All I can do is sit back down. Shaking my head, I stare into the cloudy yellow underbelly of a wave as the swift, terrifying movement of the day breeze picks up. My eyes veer back to Gull Island, with its flashes of bright orange, white, and black. I want to go over to that jagged rock, to wait with the birds until the sea moves away, to forever refuse the fear my husband drags up from below.
I gave birth to eight children under the gaze of Dinale’s great peaks. Hunched and peering over my swollen, achy belly, my full breasts, I pushed for hours until my eighth son came down with his body red and slippery, eyes blinking, chin reaching out for air. I remember his spasms for life. Placing my mouth over his, I sucked the fluid from his lungs, spitting it into the dirt near my feet. Then I lay down as my body lost its strength, the red stream beading into pools beneath me. No one could help me down from the summit of childbirth. I fell in and out of sleep trying to hold on as my son snuggled into my breast and belly. That was when they came through the smoke, bearing the herbs and song to stop the bleeding. Clutching my son I shook and begged for herbs to stop my breathing, but then the bleeding stopped and they were gone.

~

I was fourteen when the thirty-nine-year-old trapper named Arthur Harper came to my village in the Yukon. It was 1874 and everyone was dying from sickness and lack of food. I watched my grandmother slowly starve to death. For two weeks she moaned. I can still see her cracked, bleeding lips smack for fat, for water, for low-bush cranberries. When the trader showed up and took me away, they said that I was the lucky one.

~

He took me by dogsled to his prospecting cabin on the Tanana; my people call it Tth’tú. There he began to sow his seed over and over, pressing against my unending summit of babies. I could smell his rough and sour sweat; his breath like rotting meat; his skin, hot sweat-lodge rocks scouring my swollen belly. When my children were older, he sent seven of them, one by one, to America, to be educated, civilized. My people would never send a child away; to do so would kill it. But they were scattered like fireweed capsules telling when winter is on its way.
My last child was Walter. I knew that he would be a strong man. I could tell by the shape of his legs, the look in his eyes. My peoples’ strong-man ceremony requires that a boy withstand pain without showing fear. This rite prepares him for the world. The ceremony starts when an elder places a thick stick, greased down with fat, between the hands of two boys. They sit down and tug, until their muscles cramp, lose strength trying to hold onto the slick wood. Sometimes there is a torn muscle in the arm or shoulder. The stick-pulling game trains their hands to catch a fish, to overcome the slippery skin and grab hold of the meat. I saw this when I was a little girl. In the background I also saw the women quietly smirking, telling jokes about how it would be if they pulled back the skins of the birthing huts to hear the guttural howls and see the gnashing teeth of the women giving birth. “Then the men would see,” I can still hear the women say, “then they would know that a small tear in the muscle of an arm is nothing compared to the tear that a baby can make.”

In the legend of my people there is a story called “The Sun and the Moon.” It tells of a girl who does not want to marry. The legend goes, “outside she walks although they notice her not at all.” I have been walking outside of this heart-hut of mine where my people once lived, and I am trying to figure out how to get back in.
II

Air
Sterile

I kept my shirt down
as the one next to me

pulled hers up, revealing
taut, luminous skin.

Making a joke with his
large white hands, he placed

one on each belly in mock
jubilation. We were caught

without breath in that jack light.
Two heavy doe aware of the one

who stood behind him: a broom in his wife’s
right hand, an empty dustpan in her other.
Water Birth

I remember David after my daughter was born, our fleeting flirtation that came to the surface.

I remember when he took off his clothes, his half-Yupik body breaking open

the glossy calm of the reservoir. I stood on shore, a shivering witness, imagining the sound

water makes when it hits your ears, the sudden slap, the trapped sizzle

of bubbles, leaving a trail back to the surface left behind. In the water I see a yellow hue

of two bodies similar: so unafraid of the cold, so unaware of how hard it can be to release

one breath before taking the next.
Identity Bracelet

I. Shelter

She lives in a shelter for runaway girls.

It is winter in Davenport, Iowa. The roads are covered in snow.

Before they take the girls on a field trip, staff members quickly ratchet plastic zip-ties around their wrists, put them in a white van, take their shoes, slam the door, saying through their social-worker smirks: “you can run, butcha’ won’t get very far.”
II. Mental Hospital

A large sign sits
on sloping hills, shaded
by trees swaying
in a scattered way,
announcing the white
Victorian house
as a Haven.

After the plastic
bracelets are cut,
they walk single-
file onto a large
sun-porch.

There are two
dozent white
robed people
sitting, humming
listlessly, smoking,
vibrating like plants,
in front of a great fan.

(section break)
III. Retirement Home

She sits next to a man
in the corner
who tugs at his
identity bracelet.

He stops
every five
minutes,
asks to leave.

He pulls for forty-
five minutes
until the clear
plastic breaks loose.

He throws it
under his chair,
stands up, walks
toward the front door.

The orderlies distract
him, turn him
back down the hallway
toward his room.

She reaches down,
picks up
the opaque
hospital bracelet.

The yellowed paper inside states:

*Gustave Florence*

Faded grey letters
hunching over
his social security.
She was overheating

as the smoke tumbled out
from underneath
the dashboard
of my $500 Thunderbird,
traffic jammed up a mile,
keeping everyone idling
in -20 below, thinking
about what might have happened
if we had decided to take
that other turn, instead
of this standstill, going nowhere,
blocking my chance to pull over,
the thermometer in the red,
smoke creeping inside,
tasting of frayed wires
and old stale cigarettes.

Making me question
what other alternatives
I might have had
so many years later
when she has seemed
to calm down, no longer
snapping like she used
to, like this car wreck
I’m caught in on the way
to the store. After finding
Pavese’s poetry in the Annex
section of the library:

“beneath there was sometimes chaos.”
Wish Fulfillment

I

My mother dreamed of being an artist. She no longer draws or paints now, but instead spends her energy moving to and from the freezer and the cupboards, filling a yellow plastic cup with ice, cheap Canadian whiskey, and Pepsi. Whenever I visit, I watch her make the rounds throughout the day, inching her way into a drunken slur each night.

Once, when I was eight years old, there was a canvas sitting on an easel that was periodically moved throughout the house. On the canvas was a detailed drawing of a tropical forest sketched in pencil, enormous palm fronds cascading over the outlines of toucan birds and large, juicy mangoes. I remember aching to fill the empty spaces with color. One day I decided to breakout the crayons. At the time, I was getting pretty good at coloring within the lines, so I felt confident in my ability to put on the canvas what my mother would not. Immediately, I knew that I’d done something wrong and tried erasing the evidence. But I succeeded only in smudging the pencil and crayon into a fine mess, ruining the picture completely. Frightened, I hid my contribution behind the couch, never mentioning to anyone what I had done. When I looked the next day the canvas was gone. My mother never said a word. And I never saw her art again.

II

I’ve dreamt very little ever since my first child was born, as though the forty-hour natural birth flipped off the dream switch in my head. Each night for five solid years, I have fallen into a state of black sleep, only to be brought out of it every morning to the sounds of “MOM! Get up! I’m hungry!” Maybe the dreamlessness has something to do with the fact that I am no longer allowed to wake up on my own and reflect on the images that played before me throughout the night. Or maybe it has to do with sheer exhaustion. I have considered these possibilities. But sometimes I think that it has more to do with the fact that I have never really figured out how to translate my dreams into waking life and to be a

(section continued)
mother at the same time.

Freud called dreams the “royal road to the unconscious,” claiming that they were all about wish fulfillment, not in the sense that dreams have magical powers and can make our wishes come true, but that they show us what we really desire, the things that we may be too fearful or un-aware to acknowledge. The movie montages of sleep disclose what we deeply wish for, our aspirations and hopes. In a way, the dream is the self revealing itself, to itself.

III

When I was a child we lived on Moody St. In this house, I used to have a recurring dream about a surface. I could hear and feel the surface before I could see it. Before the dream approached I would hear a small rushing sound, like the quiet roar you detect from highway traffic ten blocks away. The physical sensation that would come over me was like hands wrapping slowly around my throat, suffocating me, and my chest would seize, my stomach would clench. I could feel and hear these things in my subconscious, and I would consciously know that the dream was coming. The dream always took place on a white surface, the main stage for events that would repeat over and over again. The characters: bits of sand. Throughout the dream, the bits of sand would topple over each other, and the grainy sound they made and my breathing would get louder and tighter until a sort of drowning sensation would come over me. Then all of a sudden it would stop. I could release a breath, blowing all of the sand off the surface, making it white once again.

IV

When I was seven, I almost drowned. My mother, a group of her friends, and I had gone up to the mountains somewhere in Washington, and somehow I found another child to play with. She lived next door to the cabin where we were staying and had a dock on the lake below the cabins. One day, while the adults were playing their own games inside, we decided to grab some oars and pretend that we were on a large Huck Finn sort of barge. We

(section continued)
bellowed across the dock to one another, warning about the challenges ahead. In the middle of our shouting a pack of poodles ran down the boat ramp toward me, backing me up over the edge of the dock and into the water. It was cold outside, and I had layers of heavy clothes on. The shock of the whole situation disoriented me completely and I forgot how to swim. I remember choking on the water and trying to take in air, but all there was to breathe was green water. I remember a trail of bubbles heading back to the surface and the heaviness I felt trying to reach it. Then, all of a sudden, something grabbed hold of my jacket and pulled me onto the dock. But I will never forget how hard I fought to reach the surface and the weight that held me down. The sensation of inhaling water, when all I wanted, needed, was a little air.

V

Over the summer, my husband and I separated and have been going through the jaw-clenching process of trying to divide everything we own—our time with the children, the cars, the bills and bank accounts, ourselves from one another. As a result, our children have been going back and forth between my old house, where he still lives, and my new home. An upside to this is that every so often I get to experience the bliss of sleeping in. I wake up when my body wants to, write in my journal, and then slowly roll out of bed and toward the kettle for a cup of hot tea. I feel guilty that my children and former partner must be somewhere else in order for me to have a moment to remember my dreams.

I have been trying to capture dream images whenever I can by placing my journal next to my bed. But the details have been sparse and foggy: walking across a frozen and snowy Alaskan landscape outside a friend’s house during a party, climbing on my hands and knees up a set of stairs, looking for a flashlight with a flashlight.
III

Fire
You will let him
take you to the park.

~
Underneath a
street lamp,

you listen to the buzz
that is the middle of the night,

when no one knows where you are
because you slipped through the glass
door, tiptoeing out
of your mother’s house

slowly, silently towards
the car, making a monster

out of your shadow in the glare
of headlights blazing against the shed.

~
There is freedom between
the trailer in the junkyard

and the small brown Datsun,
driven by a man you barely know

and cannot really
remember where you met.

~
Back home your ears
vibrate in the quiet,

and you wonder if your mother
heard you run into the wall

on the way to your room,
and you wonder if you slipped

(stanza break)
up, told him your real age, 
in the haze and exhaustion of three a.m.

~

Because it takes a lot of energy 
to lie and find your way home 
at the same time.
Free Will

I am thinking of the cat
that Robert and Neal
lit on fire while
babysitting me
in the fourth grade.

One of them wet down its fur
with lighter fluid,
while one held
the howling thing down.

As certain as surgeons they
slowly inserted the knives
of their sinister chuckles,
and threw down the matches
one by one.

It lit-up like a firecracker
shooting off towards
the other side
of the road.

Pawing
at the flames
until it stopped
moving and fell
against a curb.
Monet, when I looked
at *Haystacks*, I saw
yellow sponge-
cakes. They shook
terribly in the sunlight.

Like the time
when I picked
up that golden
bracelet off
my friend’s
front porch, five
yellow squares
encased in plastic.

Lying, I told
my mother
that it was a gift,
but she knew better
and grabbed me

by the shoulders.
Her white knuckled
fingers lined up
like tines on a fork.
Wrapped around
my arms, shaking
the honesty
right out.
Her name means “Golden Happiness”  
(Ekphrastic poem written from the photograph of Kim Phuc, 1972. Taken after her village was hit by Napalm and her infant brothers were killed.)

When they dropped the Napalm  
her mother was pouring the clear  
broth with slices of leek  
into her bowl.

Sweet and oily was the smell,  
as the steam rose  
up the bridge  
of her nose,  
leaving water  
freckles.  

The sun was  
moving in  
and out  
of the clouds  
when it happened.

Right after the hollow  
sound of horse  
hooves could be  
heard, pulling  
the wooden carts  
along the causeway.

The soup would  
have been cool  
by the time  
she got home.
Replacement
(Dedicated to Kay Ryan. Inspired after hearing her read the poem “Glass Slipper”)

I.

When I mention
how I grew up
watching two
women try to beat
out of the other
what they them-
selves hated
the most
I always get
a nervous
chuckle. Almost
as if
it wasn’t
true.

(section break)
II.

When you said your

“main sufferings
are your mother’s sufferings,”

I wanted to replace
my mother
with you,
for you to be
what she
could not.

To erase her
broken arm
wrapped
in a sweater
the morning
I awoke
for school
in the fifth grade.

Her body
bracing
an ice-tray
on her hip,
the opposite
hand struggling
to twist
the cubes
free.

(section break)
III.

When you said

“so many miracles
don’t start far back enough,”

I knew then,
my miracle
wouldn’t come.
My time
could never
start far
back enough.

The coach
was always
a pumpkin.

The footman,
a forever dog
chasing
its own tail.
Marooned

It’s Caldwell, Idaho, and I am in the fifth grade. The painfully small town, saturated by the reek of a large stockyard, sits adjacent to the Simplot French-fry factory. My mother and I ended up here after she decided to leave Alaska in pursuit of her cocaine-addicted lover who received a basketball scholarship to Gonzaga. From there my mother lost the first house she ever owned, moving us from Washington to Idaho, where our living conditions became worse the farther south we got. Eventually we ended up in a junkyard full of old locomotives, free range cows and chickens, a large dark pond where some kid drowned in the 60s, trailers full of explosives, and a large drug ring that came from Mexico and landed in our living room.

In the middle of the night my mother wakes me up and tells me to get into the car, that her roommate Michelle is down at the bar and “we need to go help her.” When we get to the bar the police lights flash against the Mexican restaurant across the street. A few of my mother’s friends are already standing near the passenger’s side of Michelle’s El Camino while the cops stand at attention in the road. My mother parks so as to block my view of Michelle’s car, leaving our car idling on the far side of the parking lot next to the bar owner’s trailer. I can hear crickets in the bushes and cars belching out hacienda music while cruising through the neighborhood.

My mother gets out of the car, tells me to stay put, and walks around the building. I decide to stand up in the backseat to try and get a better look at what is going on. But the bar is in my way. So I wait a few minutes, open the door, and step onto the sidewalk. Tiptoeing over to the corner near the front door of the bar, I peer around the building, smelling the familiar stench of bleach, stale water, old booze, and cigarettes.

The streetlights yellow everything. I can see my mother in Michelle’s car talking with her hands, the way she always does when she is scared. Michelle’s head is cocked back with the barrel of a rifle in her mouth. She is still in her work clothes: military fatigues from the National Guard. The olive-green forest camouflage stands out against the shiny black leather seats. Her eyes are shut tight, tears stream down her face. My heart leaps the minute

(section continued)
everything registers, and like a child who walks in on their parents having sex, I immediately feel eyes watching me watching them. Breathless, I run back to my mother’s car, open the door, and dive in. Lying down in the back seat, I can smell the ashy exhaust of cigarettes and press my hot cheeks into the cool rim of maroon plastic dividing one seat from another.

I wait to hear the sound until I can’t wait anymore. My imagination plays tricks; every passing car becoming a shot fired. After it seems that fifteen rounds have gone off, I fade into a deep, stiff sleep.

I startle awake to the sound of the engine firing up. My mother is back in the front seat lighting up a cigarette. I ask if Michelle is okay. “She’s fine, Heath. She’s fine. She just needed to get some things off her chest. That’s all. Now go back to sleep, it’s late.”

I can see the sun coming up over the French-fry factory. The cattle are awake now, stranded in their dismal quarters, standing on ocean-sized piles of shit.
IV

Water
Rayleigh Waves

As the snow continues to fall
my husband is on a large, red boat

named Artic Wolf, listening for signs of oil.
Their wake trails through the bay

where as a child his family threw
crab pots over the side of their boat,

Ootka, milk goats tied down to the stern,
bleating. And I wonder what it feels

like to be pressed to the floor,
as my five month old screams,

resisting all my efforts to soothe
her. My grip tighter,

my inadequacy glimpsing through,
until I can’t take it anymore,

this breaking through. But then her
mouth opens revealing a small white

milk-tooth, pushing through her wet
and swollen gums. The grand force

cutting its way into the soft
flesh of this world.
To Bind Together

The scissors were too dull,
so his father had to rip
the caul open with his teeth.

Twenty-six years later
his daughter’s sac
also refused, as his wife

labored for three days
until the midwife
broke open the waters

with a silver hook,
it sat on the edge
of her middle finger,

a small thimble barb.
Breaking open
what muscle would not.
While looking at the shape of the Northern Jacob’s Ladder

I see flower’s maroon,
jagged brown
diamonds, buds
curled against
themselves. Alive
the Sourdock
showers itself in
pale-blues, purples.
Like this arctic-
blossoming, I too
am blunt. Reddish
below with stem
leaves acute.
On Giving an Artifact Back to an Extinct Nation

**North was always good at beachcombing. He found one of your stone lamps in a pile of sloughed off earth at the foot of the bluff.**

Did you notice how it’s smooth all the way around with a shallow basin carved out of the top. The lamp is oval and flat. It reflects the shape of Kachemak Bay. Our home in Alaska.

**He took an archeologist from the university to the site. He showed him the layers of stratification, revealing an old dug-out that may have been your home.**

You had to pick it up with two hands. We made it 3,000 years ago.

**As they were leaving, the archeologist noticed that he had lost his wedding ring. North turned back to the site and found the ring within a few seconds.**

On one side of the lamp’s basin is a small hill, a small stone teat a little ways from the center, inside a grooved out area in the middle of the lamp. This is where a braided wick of dried sea grass leaned against the nipple to drink up the seal oil, lighting up our hut at night.

**North took the stone lamp to a tribal meeting held by the chiefs of the Kenaitze nation, a neighboring tribe that lived 80 miles north of the bay.**

We made that rock so smooth, created a shallow bowl inside.

**A combination of friction, heat, and water can wear any surface down, until it becomes open and hollow.**

Can you imagine the long fingers, how one small rock weathered down the other?

**The room was dark, full of long moments of silence. North asked if the Kenaitze tribe wanted to make a case for the lamp, but no one said a word.**
I was unofficially adopted by a Mormon family when I was in the fifth grade. There were thirteen children in the family, and I quickly became a part of the pack. The kids ranged widely in age, and there always seemed to be a baby lying on the large bed, surrounded by piles of laundry in the parents’ room. This room also seemed to be the only place their mother lived, always watching TV while ironing an endless supply of sheets.

In the basement of their large and run-down house lived the eldest sons, preparing to go on their missions. Their rooms were littered with socks and decorated with inspirational posters displaying temples rising up through the clouds and the warrior Nephi, standing in a threatening pose, holding the carcass of a dead buck over his right shoulder while grasping a feathered hunting bow in his left hand. I loved going downstairs to sneak into the big-boy rooms, eyeing the large intimidating black bible that sat in its omnipotent way on a desk in the corner, imagining the oldest sons staying up late at night leafing through the onion-paper text with devotion.

I vividly remember the basement. It had different caverns hidden throughout, small nooks underneath the stairs, hidden spare bedrooms tucked into corners, all potential places to hide when other people were seeking. But what I remember most was a cross spray-painted on the wall directly across from the bottom of the stairs. At the time the cross gave me the creeps; there was something sinister about it, a sort of rebellious protest against a doctrine that doesn’t embrace the image of the cross since it represents the death of Christ rather than his resurrection and the Atonement. Even now, twenty-three years later, I wonder about this stencil on the wall. The cross was blue and two feet high. The edges bled over where the spray paint oozed out around the cardboard cut-out, showing haste and carelessness. Maybe they were trying to exorcise the demons that lived underneath the house, or maybe ward off ghosts, as though the cross could fend off invisible threats.
One of my favorite objects in the house was the piano. Brown and yellowing, the piano was missing a few pieces of ivory but was always in tune and ready to lend its magic to the otherwise frenetic events of the day. Whenever someone struck a hollow chord, the incessant cry of a baby would quiet, the screaming of un-supervised children would end. The piano sat directly across from the front door and was visited intermittently throughout the day. My favorite times were those when some of the kids and me gathered around to sing songs. I learned chopsticks on that piano, my fingers always yearning to know more. I would often sit nearby and watch intently as one of the girls would play sheet music, effortlessly pushing the beauty of songs back into the world.

One day while we were singing at the piano, their father came out of his office and sat down to listen. I rarely saw him. At this moment their mother also came into the room, and I realized that it was the first time I had ever seen them together. I decided to sit right on his lap with the intention of arranging a family picture in my mind. I became a part of some strange tableau, with a mother and a father, and sisters who played the piano. Their father was shocked at first, but then he gave a loud and jolly, “Well, hello there,” at which point he went on to say that I was the first child he had ever met who wasn’t afraid of him. At that moment I felt a mixture of bravery and fear, wondering if his own children were afraid of him, taking notice of his large hands. And I thought about my own father, who lived thousands of miles away, whose hands I had never really known.

One day I went into the father’s office when he wasn’t there. I sat down in his large, brown leather chair in front of his desk. I looked through the drawers and played with the paper clips, making a long chain by hooking one to the other, beginning with the largest, connecting them together, and ending with the smallest. I wanted to tell the father what I had done, that I had pretended his office was mine. But then I remembered when he said I was brave, and quickly lost my courage.
Birds

Looking back, I wonder what I didn’t see as a child. I recall their mother, always in her room, a caged bird with her babies and endless piles of clothes to iron and fold. One moment in particular involved hearing a sound as I was walking to the bathroom down the hallway. When I stole a glance into the parents’ bedroom, I caught a glimpse of the mother with her face buried in her hands, crying. Quickly, I turned and walked into the bathroom at the end of the hallway and locked the door behind me.

Crush

Sometimes I went to church with the Mormons. It always amazed me how all the girls wore the same kinds of skirts and had long, blond hair cascading over their backs, over long-sleeved, button-up denim shirts. It was as though they had all called one another on the phone that morning and asked, “So, what are you going to wear to church today?” The Mormon boys were always cute, and I wondered if it had something to do with all the milk they drank. I often made it a point to sit next to one of the older brothers in order to fall asleep on his shoulder during the long talks. The whole event seemed like a kind of prom, with lots of conversation instead of music, a place where young people would come together and map out their future families, preparing for an impending adulthood that seemed to descend too quickly on Mormon children.

The Land of Milk and Sugar

Milk was always in abundance at the house of my adopted Mormon family. The fridge was usually stocked with at least five or six gallons, and one of the kids’ favorite dishes was something they like to call “cereal.” Their sacramental recipe consisted of white bread pulled apart and thrown into a large bowl of milk, with three heaping tablespoons of sugar thrown on top. I tried to eat it once but decided that the soggy, sweet bread tasted too much like sugary snot and gave my bowl to one of the cats that lived in the house. White flour was also

(section continued)
in generous supply. There were large plastic tubs full of it, the white powder dusting nearly every surface, taking sandy ownership of the floor, the counters, the unoccupied cupboards, even the bottom shelf of the fridge, a neglected place that often displayed a few wrinkly vegetables forgotten about in the corner of the crisper.

_Great Plains_

One of our favorite games we played was called “running away.” It involved walking out the front door and into the middle of the country road in front of the house. From there we would decide which way our journey would begin: right or left. After the crucial decision was made, we would take a sharp turn in the direction agreed upon and embark on our colonial migration toward a large hill in the distance. These trips would often take place during the summer, which in southern Idaho often meant 100-degree weather. Sweltering, we would pretend to cross the Great Plains by foot, pulling covered wagons while exhausted horses followed behind. Calling one another “Pa” and “Ma,” crying out against the heat and lack of food and water, we played out this dramatic scene for about a mile and then gave up, crying out, “I can’t make it, I just can’t take it anymore,” right before reaching our final destination. Sometimes all of us made it, but sometimes we had to leave the dead behind.

_Sickness_

It was late at night and the kids and I decided to play a game of delirious-tag. It was pouring rain outside, and for some reason I decided that I should run out of the house toward the barn. In my drive to run as fast as I could I almost missed the horse in the darkness and mud. It was lying down in front of the barn as the rain pelted its side, heaving in quick spurts as its eyes rolled back in its head. Without thinking I sat down next to the horse and pulled its head onto my lap. Soon more kids came and discovered the condition of their animal. Some went back inside to get blankets, returning to cover the horse up in a futile attempt for comfort. We all knew it was dying, but we decided to spend the rest of the night in shifts, going back and forth between the house and the yard. We talked about

[section continued]
getting the horse out of the rain, but the idea of five or so kids tying a rope to its neck and dragging it into the barn seemed impossible and more likely to hurt than help. Instead we used an umbrella for shelter and rotated shifts until the sun came up. By morning the horse was barely alive.

I was told later that, around noon, the father had gone out to the yard and shot the horse, put a bullet through its head as it lay unconscious on the ground. Afterward he had his two oldest sons dig a large grave near a tree adjacent to the driveway. It took all of the men to pull the horse's body onto a large tarp. Then they dragged the tarp over to the grave, pulled hard on one corner to roll the body into the hole, and promptly covered it with dirt.

*Suspended*

When I reached the seventh grade something shifted inside of me, and I became interested in boys and heavy metal. I met a girl named Rorie who looked like she had been held back in school for the past five years, a teenager with the sexual maturity of a forty-year old. On the weekends Rorie and I would hang out at her trailer, ignoring her parents, while listening to Megadeath and David Lee Roth albums, practicing the fine art of inhaling. I was on my way to becoming a genuine, self-destructive butt-rocker. Soon the principle suspended me for drinking stolen whiskey in the girls’ bathroom, and my interest in school faded away quickly. Looking back now, I can see that I was suffocating in the same pain and isolation that afflicted every kid my age. I had dreams and expectations just like any child, but when I caught sight of the possibility that they might not come true, I looked to escape a world that had been screwed-up by the adults. I chose a path that would leave me standing in the parking lot of my school, waiting for the buses to arrive with a group of other flannel-wearing teenagers, covering our sleeves with a thick layer of clear spray-paint that we could huff on our way home.

*Test*

After completing a Scantron test in my social studies class by filling in the bubbles to

*(section continued)*
create a smiley face, I walked out toward the hallway and bumped into one of the boys from my old Mormon family. He was ten years old the last time I saw him. I commented on how grown up he was and asked how everything was going. He told me that his father had hung himself in their barn that spring, and his mother was the one who found him. She had to get all the kids to come out and help cut him from the rafters. He was such a big man that it took all of them to carry the weight. Working in unison, they shuffled his body slowly down a ladder, each picking up where the other left off, and gently laid his body to rest on the dirty ground.
V

Spirit
I want to grab onto a rope
tied to the branch of a tree,
like the ones Native American
women used while giving birth.

Wrapping their white knuckles
around the braided fibers
of dried grass, twisting
it over and over the palm
of their hands, cutting off
the circulation, standing
in a semi-squat position.

I want to bear down. I want
to stand up, squat down. But instead
I become like a dog on all fours,
taken over by some
uncontrollable shaking.

I want to cut it all off. I want
numbness. In the middle
of losing hold
of my voice,
my legs,
my body.

The old crone
howls out of me,
kicks out the mother
living at the base
of my spine. Tries to
shake the pain,
its hold so taut.

To force a separation
between myself
and all my maiden ways.
Driving Through the Interior
(According to Norse legend, Odin hung for nine nights upon the world tree, wounded, without food or drink until he finally saw the reflection of the runic alphabet in the water.)

When we hit Denali
you took your clothes off
in the front seat of the car.
The wind blew your hair
around in swirls, picking
up brown strands, twisting
them mid-air, then dropping
them back down.

Your dirt-covered feet
pressed the tan passenger’s seat,
dimpled around each toe.

Your ankles wobbled
from the strain,
somewhere between
your mother’s death
and that nothing
supposed to fill up
the void, where
there is no index
for those thoughts
unnamed.

Frozen you were,
a naked witness,
the mistress of Odin
hung upside down.
Glass-Bottle Windows
(Emily Fortin, Martha Purdy Black, and Mrs. Willis were real women that joined the Klondike Gold Rush. The events referred to in these poems came from historical references about these women during those times.)

I. Emily Fortin, 21 year-old French Canadian

Before she came, the one room
log cabin was overtaken
by miners. Her French tongue
echoes off the whiskey-bottle
windows, reflects her
body, warped and hazy.
Crouching down, she scrapes
the wooden floors, encrusted
with molding layers of tobacco
spit, wads of spent chaw, snot,
and gold ash, framing this new
world full of the burning
desire of men, bulging
like the bellies of dead horses
lining the trail of Chilkoot Pass;

a bladder of smells. Enough
to overwhelm anyone
into submission.

II.

Martha Purdy-Black

They say she is wild-eyed
when her husband leaves her empty-
handed at the train depot in Seattle.
She turns and climbs onto the next steamer
barrels up-river toward the nearest trailhead
in Canada, arrow pointing to the Taiya River,
glacial silt draining past Deya. She joins

(section continued)
the 23,000 dreamers, attempts the trek
over Chilkoot, dreams of sliding into gold;
32 miles of cold. White. Slush. Mud.
Heavy bones and dead horses.

2 month pregnant, she sheds
the buckram collar, heavy-ridged corset,
long corduroy skirt. Wraps her sealskin coat
around the starchy billows of knickers,
a white sail, catching gold winds.

III.

Mrs. Willis

The 750-pound sled
complete with a washboard,
baking tins, a solid cast-iron
sewing machine is enough
to break anyone, but not her.
She digs
her leather wrapped
boots into the toehold divots
of snow, wraps hemp rope
around the body of her palm,
three times, and gives a hard tug
forward, releases
a deep breath,
a sigh,
then bites down.

IV.

Martha Purdy-Black

The smell of tobacco bodies
soaked in moonshine
wafts into the bedroom

(section continued)
above the brothel. Mrs. Purdy
howls out childbirth through the wall
of her brother’s bedroom. Tin buckets
of hot water and white cloths
steam the windows blurry,
piano music plays down below.

Miners with steady hands
catch the slippery dew
of babe as it falls
from the mother,
like a nugget,
into a watery pan
full of the features of sand:
rutile, zircon, gravel, fool’s gold.

V.

(This section is an Ekphrastic poem written from the image of two women proudly wearing trousers in a gold camp. Narrated by a woman standing in the background wearing a dress.)

They made their plans
the night before. Drifted
their whispers past
the ears of the men,
hypnotized by the haze
of campfires, long hours.

You would think the feel
of wool pants would be enough
to make a woman ashamed.
That daring show of suspenders,
breasts pressed down
until there is none.

They stole those trousers
in the early morning
light, gave their favors
to the weakest, drunken
two men in camp.

(stanza break)
On three
they stepped
through the flaps
of the white-walled tent.
Together, spines straight,
proud as men.

At first the early risers
sat on crates, slowly chewing
tobacco, sipping, sucking on black
grounds in coffee, their eyes
shocked open by the spectacle,
slowly wincing
into unbridled howls.

That canyon echoed,
shook. Tents
flapping open
like hungry mouths,
pouring everything out.
The Duplicity of Shadows

1.

For some people shooting
rockets into the moon
is a perfectly normal thing to do.

Creating craters
in a crater riddled place
is definitely something that happens.

2.

I am frozen within
these moments. When
that downpour brings

a slip of water
underneath
the rush of tires,

where any minute it could…
or when the plane hits
turbulence in clouds

and you think that this might be that moment.

3.

Reminding me there is no
exit, pointed to with the bony hand
of a smell-good attendant.

Once we agree to go
along for the ride
there is no way out.

4.

Where sunlight twists
in the lazy afternoon
rays, shining through

[section continued]
the living room window,

twirling in a cloud of dust
which is really just a cloud
of decay.

Demanding its own form,
proof for its own mass.
Skin

From the skin of an elk, my friend Ivan made a knife sheath for his daughter. Their bloodline comes from the Lenni Lenape, the Delaware people who migrated to Idaho from the East Coast. The tan sheath is unadorned with beadwork, but has tassels down one side; the thin leather hide wraps around a knife with a handle fashioned from a deer antler. Small rivets hold the envelope of skin together. In a photograph I have, I can see the empty sheath hanging from a belt at his daughter's waist. She is holding back the skin of a fish carcass with her antler-handled knife. The side of the knife's blade reflects the crimson insides of the fish, exposing its old life and its death.

While hunting for deer, Ivan spotted a coyote eating a cow carcass in a ravine, sharing the feast with a flock of crows. When the coyote caught his scent, it ran up a hill and onto a ledge. The coyote was then in the perfect position for taking a bullet and, almost as if it knew this, stood there ready. In a split second, Ivan stood with his feet shoulder-width apart, pointed his toes toward the coyote, pressed the butt of the rifle into his scapula and squeezed the trigger, killing the coyote instantly. Afterward, while skinning the animal for its pelt, he became curious about the path of the bullet. He cut into the pericardium, through the double-walled sac that holds the heart, and discovered that the hidden interior of the organ was riddled with thin, white worms that would have eventually killed the coyote. When Ivan found the bullet, it was lodged between the coyote’s hip socket and the hypodermis layer of skin. The bullet was still intact.

Ivan tells me that his best friend has been diagnosed with a spinal tumor. He is 32 years old and a father of four sons. After years of chronic back pain, he decided to find out what was happening to him, to look beneath his own skin and see what it held. After the MRI, his doctor told him that cancer was spreading swiftly through his spine and into his brain. A form of spinal cancer known as neurofibrosarcoma is a malignant tumor that

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develops in the cells surrounding peripheral nerve sheaths of the spinal cord. This form of cancer is presumably as old as the human race and has been observed from the days of the ancient Egyptians, who even practiced a rudimentary kind of spinal surgery. In their records, the sheath tumors were first described as small, thin, white threads, almost worm-like. I wonder if this is what the MRI image showed, the thin cord of his spine riddled with white threads indifferent to him and his family. I wonder if he had a moment of regret that he’d opened that door and found out what was on the other side.

My mother smoked her first cigarette as a child on the family farm in Hazen, North Dakota. She tells a story about how she and her younger siblings would sneak behind the barn with a couple of scavenged cigarette butts in hand and puff away. I can see her short bob of light-brown hair; she is wearing her favorite pair of coveralls, bare feet blackened by the dirt.

My grandfather first supported his family by working at a dairy farm, but soon had to look for a different line of work as the family became larger. When he got a job as a silver miner in Osburn, Idaho they moved west. But as the conditions of the mines became too harsh, he opened up a bar. Growing up in an abusive household of sloppy alcoholics, my mother learned to tend the family bar when she was fourteen and in time became an alcoholic herself. Like my mother, I was also raised in bars and have found myself quite at home among their familiar smells and sounds. Yet unlike my mother, I have made a conscious decision never to find “my bar,” that other place I could so easily call home.

My grandfather died of emphysema at the age of 72. My mother, also a heavy smoker, never admits she could share his fate. As I was growing up she used to say, “I never get sick.” It’s strange now to see her come down with colds, to see the veneer of impenetrability she fought so hard to maintain become cracked and worn down with time.

My mother reminds me, at least 25 times a year, that when she can no longer function on her own, I am to break out the Dr. Kevorkian kit, cremate the body, and then

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spread her ashes on the Chena River in Fairbanks, Alaska behind her favorite bar called The Boatel. I have never directly asked my mother whether she is worried about having cancer, nor have I even asked if she wants to know. Instead, I have chosen to diagnose her indirectly myself. Whenever I visit, I find myself rummaging through her bathroom, looking through the medicine cabinet, under the sink, trying to find some sort of sign, some sort of label telling me whether her lungs and liver are functioning properly. But all I find are bottles of Pepto Bismol, Milk Thistle tablets, packets of Tums, and cans of Crack Cream for her psoriasis.

I’ve tried to imagine my mother going to a doctor and checking to see how her body is holding up under the strain of all her abuse, but instead a different image wants to play out. I see her sitting outside of death’s door, relaxing at a glass-topped, plastic picnic table with a large golf umbrella. With a whiskey-and-Coke in hand, she is decked out in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and scuffed up white sneakers, exposing her first tattoo (a unicorn under a rainbow directly above her ankle), saying, “So what if it’s on the other side of the door, who really gives a shit! It doesn’t make a difference if I open the door or not, might as well have a good time while I’m here. Did it happen two seconds ago? Yep! Then it’s history.”

Sometimes I envy my mother’s ability to jitterbug on her way out. But other times I wish that she would open herself up, expose her fears to me, revealing a humanity underneath that leathery, pickled skin of hers. Maybe this way we could both be free.

For the longest time, like most children of addicts, I fought against my mother’s marriage to self-destruction. I broke up packs of cigarettes and threw them in the trash, dumped bottles of liquor down the drain. Growing up, I was always angry at the fact that she was the agent of her own death, the knife within her own sheath, and had no qualms about taking her daughter down that painful road, even when I myself was a secret, pocketed within the recesses of her womb while she tended bar and managed strip clubs during the pipeline boom in Fairbanks.
Our existence is forever at odds with itself. We are our weaknesses and our strengths. We are blueprints, maps of the things that keep us moving forward. We are the fear of knowing and the fear of not knowing, the inability to understand the uncertainty about ourselves. It is this uncertainty I am trying to accept. I am trying to learn what it means to love all the things that crawl beneath our skins, to acknowledge their existence and to see their beauty. I wish to carry this awareness with me like a blade, to lay bare the interiors we are sometimes too afraid to open. No matter how much I have wanted to dissect my own mother, to stand her up, expose her weaknesses, I am learning to see an honest and beautiful reflection of myself. All of my mother’s imperfections are mine; they live in my heart and my nerves. I have tried to shake these things my whole life, but they remain, like a shadow.

“Everyone,” Jung writes, “carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.” I want to flense these shadows, to expose their flesh and their decay to the light.
It is Forty Below in Fairbanks

I am four. The street lights hang muted in the ice-fog, glowing yellow embers made soft by the stillness of snow.

My footsteps crunch on top of white, frozen ground. My arms are tucked, folded inside my jacket.

Eager, my moon-boots slide, squeak, crunch across the road, ready for my meeting with Santa.

My mother’s hand lies across the middle of my back, under frozen plumes of air, condensed in the swish of sub-zero.

I wonder now if my breath actually escaped once it came out, or did it stick around, turn into ice-crystals, to then fall apart.
Notes:

p. 9: Earth/Chi:
The hard, solid objects of this world such as stones. Stones are resistant to movement or change. Bones, muscles and tissues. Stubborness, stability, physicality, and gravity. Desire to have things remain as they are.

p. 16: Air/Wind:

p.26: Fire/Ka

p.37: Water/Sui
Fluid, flowing, formless things in the world. Plants adapting to their environment, growing and changing according to the direction of the sun and changing seasons. Blood and other bodily fluids. Mental and emotional adaptation and change. Defensiveness. Suppleness. Magnetism.

p.48: Spirit/Void/Ka
Highest of the elements. Pure energy, thought. To communicate. Power. Spontaneity. Inventiveness. Often invokes the power of the Void to connect to the quintessential creative energy of the world.