In this creative non-fiction thesis, I present a collection of personal essays that examine my significant moments of awkwardness with failed communications or frustrated relationships when I wanted to draw people closer with language, but was unsuccessful. In the twelve stories, I discuss these issues in my interpersonal communication interwoven with sections of metadiscourse and theoretical thinking about my narratives to link my experiences more explicitly with rhetorical and pedagogical theory to show its commonality. I conclude by tying my thesis into our master narrative during an age of “mass-communication.” Through my experience, I argue that what does not get said is important, and show my interest in the absent, unclear, misinterpreted, or unreciprocated communication that led me to feel distant from others, yet desperately interested in creating connections through language, in understanding social interactions and relationships, and in feeling part of communities.
Scenes of Language

By

Gretchen Duerst

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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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Gretchen Duerst, Author
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At recess, the girls in my kindergarten class played imagination games about horses. They rode them around the playground, acted like them, and even formed a large Horse Club of members who laid out game rules and scripted dialogues, telling potential members that they had to play by the rules or not play. I felt already rejected. They probably would have played with me if I would have just played horses, but I convinced myself that I hated horses, blaming a neighbor’s horse that mistook my teal sweatshirt for food when I reached through the fence to pet her. Whether it was actually their interest in horses that turned me away, or my wounded pride when they ignored my suggestions, I felt unwanted.

So I made friends with Jennifer, the quietest girl in class, who lived just up the road from me, and we walked home from school together. She had long brown hair and big, wet eyes, and hardly said a word when we played on the swings, reminding me of a fawn walking noiselessly through the woods, delicate and timid. Then, she introduced me to her mother. I had never been inside their house, and remember only that the kitchen was dark where her mother was baking, and that her mother handed us a plate of cookies while conducting my interview, rapid fire questions about what my parents did and what I liked to study and if I went to church. No? She turned her back, disappearing into the kitchen, maybe only to take another batch of cookies from the
oven. I read the action as hostile. Soon after, Jennifer said she could no longer play with me.

At recess, I wandered around the playground, feeling unnatural with my peers, so my mother suggested I find someone, or something, to talk with. I chose a tree, fat and tall, with broad green leaves, standing on the edge of the playground's field without any other trees nearby, dominating its space. From the trunk, I could see the whole playground and my house on the next street. Most of the time, I watched the Horse Club girls play at the other end of the field. I could almost hear them.

Sometimes, I watched my house and imagined escaping the playground by slipping through the wire fence and running home down the short dead-end street that faced my house, although I knew no one was there. Once, I watched a strange car pull into the driveway and a man walk behind the garage to the backdoor. I waited for nearly fifteen minutes, and when the recess bell rang, I told my teacher the stranger had broken into my house, pointing out the car still parked in the driveway. It turned out to be my father, borrowing a car from the department to stop by the house during his lunch break. Then, I felt guilty watching the house, embarrassed that my teacher and my dad knew that I had nothing to do but spy on my house during recess, feeling rejected by the children who I refused to interact with.

I kept to my tree. Deciding it was male, I named him, and spent my time creating dialogues between us, and between him and a tree on the hill: separated lovers who communicated by wind. Sometimes I brought him gifts of buttercups or smooth rocks, which I pushed between spaces in his bark or laid next to his trunk, tucked safely under grass. I tried not to speak aloud or hug him, feeling this would draw
ridicule from anyone watching, but I sang quietly and communicated to him mostly through my thoughts.

On days I felt braver, when Mom lent me her dangly, silver feather earrings that made me feel mature and elegant, I walked around the playground's perimeter, running my fingers along the fence, hoping someone would think me thoughtful, maybe a genius, and would be interested in knowing what I observed on my walks.

I made friends when I was nine, just before we moved from the Oregon Coast to Central Oregon. On my birthday, it had rained for twenty days straight, and I ran with ten other girls clutching an umbrella, shiny black shoes slick on the gravel as we hurried to my house, our dresses already soaking even though the elementary school was just across the road. I smiled, feeling warm in the rain as the girls giggled and shielded bright-colored bags under their jackets, and as Sarah slipped her arm through mine. But I looked back across the playground as we slipped through the fence, regretting not visiting my tree, forced to stay inside at recess, and now hurried by my new friends to my party waiting at home.

After we moved, I forced myself on friends, and I joined the cross-country running team in high school, forming a group of regular running partners to whom I told long-winded stories during our runs about anything, excited to hear my voice being heard, encouraged by their nodding heads and pony tails as we jogged. At least it made the miles feel shorter. I was fueled by their giggles and teasing to tell "Gretchen-stories," so I told elaborate stories that made my near-encounters with boys seem nearly worthy of six girls' attention, somehow endearing me to my teammates. For the first time, communicating was easy, and I was confident. So I made a large
social group with the school’s most involved girls – girls who I admired for their participation, and who I felt close to, and accepted by. When I graduated, leaving them took months of adjusting. I struggled with depression. I wondered if I would feel close bonds, a sense of belonging and intimacy and community, again. I had been understood as never before, and my struggles with communication before and since stand out.

In this thesis, I try to examine my significant moments of awkwardness and failed communications or frustrated relationships, moments when communication seemed to fall short, when it did not create the intimacy or connection I craved, when it did not help me to draw people closer with language. Maybe I take small moments to mean more than they do, to represent entire complex relationships that have other moments that are just as hard to read. But the images in the following stories come to my mind when I think of communicating; these moments, crescendos of smaller moments and feelings built over time, swell and erupt.

Joan Didion explains in her essay “Why I Write” that her writing is fueled by images with a shimmer, images that stay with her for years, images that tell her the story she writes, and dictate her style. She notes, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear” (173). What haunts me, what stays in my mind, are these following moments when something seemed to “shimmer,” although I could not grasp the meaning.

These moments do not seem isolated in my own experience, however. They seem to be illustrations of what Robert Scholes calls “scenes of language” in our
culture. In *The Crafty Reader*, Scholes asserts that we live in “scenes of language” – “events scripted in a code that is already known” (79) – in “scenes of language waiting to inhabit our thoughts and direct our tongues” (81). Scenes of language are collective experiences, which may be individually unique when written, but which originate in the collective; Scholes gives the example of love stories, which all possess some variation of avowal, the will to possess, jealousy, and love souvenirs, despite each story’s unique details (81). Scenes of language are rhetoric’s “topois”: the “recurring rhetorical themes” in our texts (81). My moments seem to describe relationships or rituals of life that are, to a degree, commonplaces: I discuss relationships with a cousin, grandmother, father, best friend, roommate, and mentor, and rituals such as a wedding and a funeral, and experiences such as growing apart, living with others or befriending roommates, family bonding, communicating with foreign language speakers, “saving” others, and not knowing what to say. But my experiences as scenes of language do not quite fit the collective expectation; these moments share elements common to their scenes of language, but contradict the scripted and anticipated code, or are moments in which I want more than the code allows.

My “writing of a master’s thesis” story may not exactly fit the expected scene of language either. In the process of writing, I experimented with letting pictures surface, and letting them tell me what they had meant, keeping in mind Didion’s comment that writers write to find answers to their questions (176). I hoped my writing would emerge with pictures of beauty, and insight, and emotion. I imagined myself writing like essayist Kathleen Moore with elegant prose, images of the natural world, and details like the small bean pods I notice hanging from a tree I walk under
everyday on my way to campus. Instead, the images that arose were these moments of miscommunication, moments that did not substitute or supplement intimate touch, moments that I struggled even to write about, to find the language and voice to discuss them, naming them in one word titles.

My style somewhat implies my struggle to communicate. For Didion, the images not only give her substance, they determine her style. As Chris Anderson explains in *Style as Argument*, Didion relies on her detailed images instead of narrative, often struggling to articulate their meaning and using metadiscourse to explain her difficulty, “dramatizing her own failure” (150). This metadiscourse and her characteristic gaps between her images are “stylistic fragmentation and authorial silence or self-dramatization [that] effectively act out the fragmentation of the experience they seek to describe” (155). Her attempts, through vivid detail and through gaps, to explain experiences that she claims are inexplicable both reinforce her struggle to narrate, and ironically contradict her struggle because the images and the gaps do communicate the image’s significance. My style is less explicit than Didion’s: my scenes are not as detailed; and my discourse is not as direct, more so implied by my terse style.

Style can also, as Scholes suggests, explain the artist and the artistic process through what is present and absent in an image. As an example, Scholes argues that Norman Rockwell’s picture “Triple Self-Portrait” not only presents a self-portrait, but also “tells a story about his painting himself rather than [just] offering an image of himself” (89). Rockwell opens up the scene of language of self-portraits (99) by contradicting the stereotypes of the genre and making those apparent, which also
reveals his process as an artist. My style can be read as both a technique, and as a
narrative of my experience and of my creative process.

What Scholes seems to be discussing is narrative theory, the analysis of which
involves looking at what and how a text is communicated. In fiction, analyzing an
author’s narrative theory involves looking at the narrator’s telling of the story, at what
is said and what is not. As James Phelan discusses, narrative can be considered
rhetoric because a particular story is told to a particular audience in a particular
situation for a particular purpose, which follows Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric (4).
And rhetorical exchanges lead us to reflect on narrative’s power to disclose or
withhold information from audiences (7), giving us reason to consider what is
withheld.

Contrastingly, Hayden White asserts that narrative “substitutes meaning for the
straightforward copy of the events recounted;” narrative is the creator of meaning, and
the absence of narrative is the absence of meaning (2). However, this may be too hasty
because the absence can reveal what is there. As Scholes argues, reading the absences
is important because “by reading what is absent, . . . we can see more deeply into the
image upon which they are based” (96). This seems important to discuss both as a
rationalization of my style, and as an explanation of my underlying assumptions about
communication in these stories.

Applying narrative theory to life experiences is tricky because in real
communication, there is no narrator to interpret meaning from interactions but our
selves, who must base interpretations only on assumptions. And when some things
were not communicated, when essentials were withheld, when feelings were not
expressed, I have assumed, like White, it was because they were absent. When I did not feel connected, I assumed no connection formed. Because certain things were unsaid in my relationships, because this absence of articulation meant, to me, the absence of meaning, I interpreted these experiences influenced by what I felt missing from the interactions, whether or not intimacy or connection were truly missing.

Maybe I should have read Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gifts from the Sea* sooner, in which she discusses relationships in terms of a swinging pendulum, and asks “is there not here a hint of an understanding and an acceptance of the winged life of relationships, of their eternal ebb and flow, of their inevitable intermittency” (107)? In my relationships, I wanted clarity, intimacy, easy communication, and well-established avowal. I did not trust the absence of communication, the ebbing and flowing of relationships, or the silence of love.

Ultimately, what does not get said is important, maybe more important than what is said. In literature, writing, and communication, we are interested in what is written, what is there, what is said. In this thesis, I am concerned with what is not addressed, left uncertain because there are no words given to explain it. I am interested in this absence, the unclear, the misinterpreted, the unreciprocated, that led me to feel distant from others and unsuccessful in communication, yet desperately interested in creating connections through language, in understanding social interactions and relationships, and in feeling part of communities. These absences are important in understanding what is actually communicated, as Scholes suggests, and in understanding how we act as participants in communication.
In the following twelve stories, I discuss these issues in my interpersonal communication as I stepped away from my tree, created real dialogues that I misunderstood, and began to understand myself as dialectic and rhetorical. These stories share not only themes, but also images, most of crying and embracing. In each scene, I seem to want to touch people with language, and to feel a connection established through communication. And in most cases, I suggest that this connection was not felt. But my moments of crying and embracing contrast this. In my descriptions of these scenes, I show myself being physically moved by the experience, and physically connecting with that person, even as I assert that the communication failed for me. And often I position myself behind barriers that prevent touching—tables, walls, trees, open spaces, or social situations—so that I cannot reach out and touch that person easily. Despite my assertions that I wanted intimacy through language, it seems I ultimately wanted to literally be touched, or I at least wanted communication to strengthen the touch, disbelieving that actions spoke loudest.

Interwoven are short sections of metadiscourse and theoretical thinking about my narratives, which I call “Interludes,” in an attempt to further develop what the narratives allude to but neglect, and to link my experiences more explicitly with rhetorical and pedagogical theory to show their commonality and their connection to collective experience.

The stories are presented relationally, though almost chronologically: first, I recount my relationships with three important women in my development as a woman, in the Woolfian spirit of writing back through my mothers—my cousin in “Asocial,” my maternal grandmother in “Georgia,” and my best girlfriend in “Driftwood”—and
how these relationships fell just short of the intimacy I hoped for, complicated by not expressing my disappointment. The interlude following these pieces reflects my understanding of communication in relationships and in terms of intimacy, and forecasts the further complication of relationships.

The next section presents situations in which communication was fraught with differing expectations and desires. I present my first solo travel in “Empty,” an exercising of my adulthood or womanhood, which left me feeling unfulfilled when a new relationship failed, and I realized that the bonds I sought elsewhere, I had been trying to escape at home. To complicate these issues in “Co-Habitation,” I discuss the contradiction between my roommate’s expectations of our relationship and mine, which intensified by our lack of discussion. I further develop these issues in “Angel,” followed by an interlude that discusses these limitations of relationships and their tie to communication.

In the following section, I discuss relationships that reinforced my interest in the value and necessity of communication, particularly across cultures, beginning with “Assimilation.” I again complicate matters in “Boundaries” as I describe my failed attempts to find the intimacy I wanted from interpersonal communication through studying English, and a moment when my fears of inadequacy to communicate and my frustrations toward my education erupt, leaving me embarrassed yet feeling free to change. But only after discussing my most painful feeling of absence in communication in “Falling” do I begin a resolution, which can only happen after I literally fall on my face and realize my own misunderstandings and misforgivings. The “Interlude” that follows further develops my critical comments about the study of
English, and my understandings of the values of our discipline, which is partially resolved by incorporating my experiences into my education through this thesis format.

The interlude leads into my final three short essays, each of which trace my resolution with interpersonal communication: in “Companion,” I enjoy the deep connecting conversation that I wanted; in “Homesick,” I reflect on my sense of belonging in a community; and in “Instigation,” I begin to develop that community in my department. Finally, I draw conclusions on these issues, tying my thesis into a larger community, into our master narrative during an age of “mass-communication” and global networking.

The tree I leave here, not only as a symbol of the melancholy and disappointment I felt in failed communications and interactions, but also as a symbol of hope and comfort and silent acceptance. In one sense, this tree was my escape from relationships, my solitude. In another, this tree was also my source of strength, my recognition that I did need connections, and my attempts to begin establishing those. Walking away into the arms of friends demands acceptance of relationships – of the intermittency, of the inconstant ebbing and flowing, and of the swells and the troughs. It demands understanding the possibilities and limitations of language.
Every summer that I remember before age eleven includes a memory of Betsy. My cousin, four years older, my closest relative, was the one I looked forward to seeing at the family Christmas, rushing through my grandmother’s kisses and past the aunts to Betsy. We locked ourselves in the guestroom, playing on the springy bed until my younger brother Joe banged on the door and the adults yelled from the living room to let him join us. Or Betsy’s older sister Emily entered and sat on the bed and tried to talk about boys, but then retired to her novel, seeing we were more interested in Care Bears. The cousins on my father’s side run in ages by four: Emily, then four years to Betsy, four to me, and four to my brother Joe. But while Emily, fifteen when I was seven, seemed elegant and sophisticated, a teenager with long hair and posters of rock stars hanging on her ceiling, Betsy, at eleven, was approachable and still helped me chase off the younger cousins. On camping trips, we slept in my dad’s pickup canopy instead of our parents’ tents, sneaking away from the fire to read horror stories by flashlight.

I spent a week at her house each summer, where Aunt Kathy would take us to the fair and let us sleep on the deck so we could watch the night sky, where Betsy explained to me about shooting stars and wishes. Their house was actually a large mobile home, and was always a mess with stray papers and cluttered clothes and the strange emptiness of an unused recliner because Uncle Dale died in his thirties. I regretted not knowing what to say to Betsy about losing her dad, but she never mentioned him. And it was nice to be without men when I visited, like staying with our single Auntie Ann, who sent her son to Grandma’s and told Betsy and me that it
was "Girls Only." She played with our hair, showing us how to use her curling iron. She had thick dark hair that reached her bottom, and I envied Betsy for looking like Ann with dark hair and Grandma’s brown eyes. We baked chocolate chip cookies and watched my first Miss America pageant, and I felt like a woman, a real adult, to be able to laugh and play with the older girls.

But one year, it changed. I was eleven. Our growing apart had been subtle enough; already at Easter, it had been difficult pretending to like the same old things, as if nothing was changed. Betsy’s preferences seemed a little odd to me for a fifteen-year-old, following Star Trek instead of rock stars. And while I was grateful that Betsy had played with me when she was eleven and I was seven, I was too mature to play make-believe, but worried what we could do together on my week-long visit. I wondered if she knew about boys yet.

Kathy’s two-bedroom mobile home had a small, two-room building next to the back door. The rooms were built for storage but had windows on the walls opposite the doors, so the girls were allowed to live out there once they were old enough. It was cold, even with carpet over the concrete floors, but they had privacy. Betsy had just moved out there. We stood outside her door, and I twisted my bags in my hands as she reached for the knob, anxious to show me her new room. She pushed on the door, leaning into it with her weight because it stuck on the new carpet, and then, as I watched the sunlight on her back, her bobbed hair swishing into her eyes, her face quiet and downcast, something seemed wrong. What was this place?

The door hopped open. She flipped the light switch and headed for her bed under the window. The room smelled damp and stale, and the single overhead bulb
and small window gave off little light. One wall had shelves with a radio, old stuffed animals, and the many books she read. Betsy may not have excelled in school, but she read avidly. The other wall had a small TV and, surprisingly, a lineup of over twenty Star Trek the Next Generation action figures, each posing with his plastic prop. Betsy usually had an obsession, some item or activity — Care Bears, certain movies or songs, Star Trek. I remembered her interest in the show, but I hadn’t known the depth of her dedication. On second look, most of her books were Star Trek series. I was horrified, wondering if I would have to talk about Star Trek or hear about it or watch it, having already talked about the only episode I ever watched, and wondering if this meant she knew nothing about boys.

I looked at Betsy rocking on her bed, ignoring me, staring at the wall. She rocked slowly front to back, her arms tight around her knees. The old mattress hummed under her. I watched closely. I had seen her rock before. When we were younger, she ran to beds, jumping on them on all fours and rocking the mattresses playfully. Now, it seemed queer. I guessed she liked to hear the bed frame squeak, or feel the mattress give way underneath her. But how she rocked now seemed manic, somehow telling and wrong, her face blank, almost smiling, meditating. Something was different. My throat closed tightly. I thought, I’ve passed her.

This should not have been a surprise. Uncle Craig had the same problem — slow to speak, antisocial, still living with Grandma in his thirties — as did Grandma’s brother, keeping to himself on his property with his three-legged dog. But it took years to make the connection, to realize Betsy had a problem other than a problem with discipline and with paying attention in school. I assumed she still grieved for her dad.
“As Berger’s Disease,” a mild form of autism, I heard Kathy explain. She found out doing research, wondering why her daughter was slow, talking with the aunts in hushed conversations over coffee in the kitchen, why Betsy was “special.” Hiding behind a wall, I listened, wanting to defend her from their scrutiny, to shout, “she’s not weird. She’s just different but there’s nothing wrong with her!” But doctors confirmed it, and even Betsy probably felt relieved to name her struggles to make friends and do well in school. How much of the explanation she understood, only she knows.

Years later, after ten years of nodding and feigning interest in her newest obsession – country music – of trying to make small talk and feeling discouraged, I visited Betsy again at Kathy’s house. But now, Kathy’s mobile home was replaced with a beautiful new home, and a new patio and garden where the storage rooms once stood. And now, Betsy was twenty-five, and in the garden was an altar.

Because the wedding was small and informal, my parents and I arrived early. Now a woman, I was allowed in the back room where Kathy did Betsy’s hair, insisting that she stay seated when Betsy tried to rise to hug me. So she just cooed hello in the same tone she always used, and shyly held out her bouquet. In the front room, the men made a ruckus, as I closed the door before the groom snuck in. “No, no Robert,” I heard Kathy’s husband Chuck chided, a thick arm around Robert’s shoulder as he led Robert to the snack plate in the kitchen, a child ushered away. I followed the men, feeling unhelpful in the back room. Robert, who was usually cheerful and smiling his crooked teeth, looked nervous and paced the kitchen. I assured him he looked handsome, and he humored me by holding out his arms and half-spinning so I could admire his suit. “He picked it out himself,” Chuck added, nearly shouting, “didn’t you,
Robert?!” I cringed, annoyed that Chuck and Kathy spoke loudly to Betsy and Robert, and simplistically. Robert had his own “specialness,” and I hoped he and Betsy would be able to take care of themselves. Robert just nodded and stammered a few sentences about finding the dated suit.

Escaping the house, I wandered onto the new porch where the wooden deck once stood. Now there was a porch swing that faced Kathy’s garden, and I sat, remembering that Kathy used to pay Betsy and I a dollar to salt slugs that ate her flowers. I swung a little until I was joined by Nicholas, a younger cousin, his feet dangling off the swing as he told me in his slurred speech about his kindergarten and speech therapy classes, while I kept the swing steadily rocking, lost thinking about growth and family and the awkwardness of the event.

“Okay,” Kathy yelled. “We’re starting.” I helped Nicholas off the bench, holding his hand as he escorted me to my seat. Plastic chairs of all sorts were placed in a half circle facing the altar, but with few chairs, I stood next to my dad near the wildflowers as he fiddled with his camera, the left side photographer. On the right, next to the house, Uncle Neil played with his camera, already snapping photos, the two brothers competing for the best wedding pictures.

With whispering inside the house, a tape cassette started, and, to their favorite country love song, Robert and Betsy walked out together, holding hands in front of their family and a few coworkers. The minister took lead and introduced Robert and Betsy, a sweet couple who met in a roller skating rink when Robert asked Betsy to skate. Betsy fidgeted with her new blue dress and Robert stared at his shoes. “It looked
good when you were holding hands,” the minister stopped to whisper, so Robert grabbed Betsy’s hands, both looking down. I lost myself watching.

With a few words, the minister announced it was time for their vows, and Robert pulled folded sheets from his pocket. Concentrating on their words, they spoke slowly, pronouncing each word carefully, hands shaking. Both vows were simple and sweet: “You – are – my – best – friend,” followed by a quick smile and Robert shoving the sheets back into his pocket. It was beautiful that they could find each other to take care of and rely on, that the world was kind enough to let them struggle together, find their own way of succeeding, and not be alone.

“Remember to breathe,” the minister added, and Robert and Betsy both rose with their heavy breath, looking more relaxed until he concluded, and the aunts giggled anticipating the public kiss Betsy was dreading. But it ended smoothly as the moms applauded. And I wiped away tears.

There was just enough time for a few pictures and gift opening, Robert and Betsy silently reading each card and nodding before handing it to Kathy to read aloud for the guests. Then the limousine arrived, dusty up the gravel driveway, and it seemed to excite the couple more than anything. If I hoped for a special moment with Betsy, to congratulate her and connect briefly, it was futile because they rushed to the limousine, nearly forgetting their bags, and were off before I could do more than give her the quick, customary hug.
Georgia

Her house was the last place I wanted to spend a vacation. Walla Walla was not the most exciting town, and something about her house bothered me. As a child, I dreaded visiting: too stuffy, too many breakables and doilies, too small of a backyard with only a tetherball pole and Grandpa’s garden. The basement, where the guest bedroom was, next to the makeshift bathroom with a shower curtain strung on a pipe frame for the walls, was too dark. And all her Finches in their cages lining a shelf next to the canning cried loudly at dawn. At breakfast, there were too many questions about how well I slept and what I wanted to eat. Mostly, there were too many dolls in the playroom. I hated dolls. With their beady eyes and painted half smiles, they feigned happiness. The majority were porcelain dolls, and these had cold, hard hands and required careful handling. Her collection was large, lined up on their own loveseat in the playroom, pink ruffled dresses and lace falling to handmade crocheted booties. She wanted to make me a doll.

This woman, my mother’s mother, seemed a stranger. My dad’s teasing set the stage early on, my brother and me overhearing him countlessly say “that old bat will be kickin’ dirt in my grave,” and laughing until my mom stopped him. I never understood the words, but his tone said “that woman never liked me.”

During one visit, alone without Mom, we had to go to the craft store. I expected warm lights and light music and isles of Christmas tinsel, picture frames, small jars of paint, fake plants, and lots of glitter, somewhere comforting and inspiring. Instead, Grandma’s store was dark and cold, like a cellar, with small windows next to the door, and a smell like sawdust or chalk dust settling onto the
floor. She told me not to break anything as she disappeared into a backroom with the cashier. The store was one long room filled with tall shelves of porcelain and clay items: pitchers, bowls, angel statuettes, garden figurines, and doll parts. Each piece was an earthy cream color and hollow. I picked up an angel and examined its delicacy.

I never liked ceramics or angels, but this piece was beautiful, with a sweet smile and large, soft looking wings. I envisioned painting it iridescent, or Mother of Pearl, and it would be the only angel I liked. Grandma would appreciate my choice because she was Catholic, or at least raised my mom Catholic before becoming Seventh-Day Adventist. I imagined her embracing me when I held up my choice, proud that we shared religion or artistic vision.

Instead, she came out with a bundle wrapped in plastic bags, a doll she was picking up. She told the woman she would see her next week at doll-making class, and hollered for me as she headed out the door. I replaced my angel and never mentioned it.

The craftsmanship was admirable, the intricateness of the work beautiful. The doll’s tiny nails were painted with just a touch of red, perfect edges. Her hands and feet were smooth where Grandma had sanded down the edges of the mold, a tedious stage in doll making. Her eyes were glassy and clear blue with thick eyelashes that seemed to jet out of nowhere – I couldn’t find a seam. She was a masterpiece of years of practice. She was also horrible to play with. Her porcelain hands and face screeched when rubbed together, her thin, bright red lips pursed into a tight mouth that barely smiled, her eyes stared somberly, her hair felt brittle. Plus, she was wearing a pink dress. Why hadn’t Mom told her I hated pink? I didn’t own a single thing that was
pink. Maybe Grandma hoped she could change my mind. I put the doll among the
others in the playroom – the prop, the decoration to be seen, not touched.

The only doll I liked was Mom's childhood baby doll Martha, affectionately
nicknamed "Mar-cuts," because she had fatty baby arms and a wide round face made
from a soft plastic that made her feel warm. Her body was stuffed cotton worn thin
over thirty years, but she could still be squeezed. She was faded, the paint chipped off
her nails, the color dulled. Someone had shaved her original hair, perhaps to fit a wig,
so she was bald except for the dark hair follicles poking through the surface. And she
had missing toes, nibbled off by some cat. She looked so ugly, she was beautiful. And
I liked that her eyelids closed when she was laid down, so if I shook her, head
bobbling, she click-click-click-clicked as she blinked.

Elizabeth picked up my new doll, cooing at its cold face, doting over it like the
other dolls, like real babies. Elizabeth, the "other granddaughter," loved Grandma's
dolls, and informed me that she was making her own doll with Grandma. She was one
of two sisters Grandma babysat since their births, girls who attended Grandma's
church and spent most of their time at Grandma's where they did all her projects –
painting, doll making, sewing – and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about crafts.
Because I lived in another state and Grandma's other granddaughter Erica was grown,
Elizabeth was treated as a real granddaughter, sharing all the bragging rights at the
dinner table. Stories about Elizabeth and her horses, or her good grades, or her 4-H
project, interrupted my story of winning my softball game.

I was not only jealous of Elizabeth, but also irritated by my obligation to play
with her when I visited since we were the same age, our birthdays only two weeks
apart. Worse, Elizabeth liked me. She begged her parents to spend the night whenever I was in town or to let me stay at their house where we had to play with her dolls or stay out in her cold barn feeding her horses. I would have rather played with my older cousins Jake and Levi, who lived in Walla Walla, but for some reason, they rarely came over when my family visited. I thought it was the incident in the yard. We were wrestling, the boy cousins and Joe and I, and at one point, Jake got close to my face, maybe whispering a threat in my ear. Grandma, peering out the kitchen window as she washed the dishes, swore he kissed me and told my parents.

I figured she just didn't like me playing outside with the boys, thinking I should be in that playroom with the flowered wallpaper and the dolls. I suspected she wanted me to be a homemaker, setting the table every night for dinner at exactly 6’oclock, like she had. At least Mom had a career, I thought, and she looked beautiful and professional in her business suit, long straight skirt, fitted jacket with shoulder pads, dangly earrings, and curled hair, as she dropped me off at the babysitter on her rush to work— a woman of the ‘80s. I respected Mom, and wanted to be a working woman myself.

Grandma had never worked, except babysitting, because she had children young and had to raise a family. Although she was her high school class’s valedictorian, she was expelled when she got pregnant, so she married, occupied herself with crafts and Finches and canning, and, I assumed, thought I was trouble out playing with the boys.

But Grandma did support me. Years later, she came to my high school cross-country race, and stood on the sidelines cheering. It was a hot day, and she was never
too healthy, but she stayed in the sun watching, patting my shoulder when I finished, not hugging me, maybe because I was too sweaty. She gave me a bottle of Gatorade.

Still, she wasn’t huggable and warm, always seeming too delicate to hug, somehow fragile. She’d been sick most of her life with Lupus, spending months in the hospital when her children were young. Maybe it was the result of a hard life: an uncertain parentage after her parents left her with a stepmother, a teenage pregnancy and many miscarriages.

It all came to Grandma and I not talking, not relating, not until years later, when I was twenty and home for Thanksgiving, and she looked across the table at me. The others were busy, Mom and my aunt washing the dinner’s dishes in the kitchen, and Grandpa standing at the counter pouring us mugs of coffee. She had been staring off, slouching in her chair. She’d gotten worse and was on dialysis, her kidneys completely worthless, and she looked bloated and old, her hair crumpled. All weekend, she sounded confused, sometimes with us and sometimes gone. Her head moved slightly side to side, as if she was listening to soft music that no one else could hear. She sagged over like a droopy doll.

Mom and Aunt Carolyn had planned a fun weekend for Grandma, setting up our guestroom with a Hawaiian theme, like a honeymoon hut. Grandma and Grandpa’s 50th wedding anniversary was three months away, but no one thought she’d live long enough to wear the frilly pink dress she’d bought in case Grandpa agreed to have a second wedding. So Mom and Aunt Carolyn dolled Grandma up in the dress and posed her with Grandpa, taking pictures as she slumped further down in a rocking chair. Then, they dressed her in a Hawaiian muumuu. Joe edited the pictures on the
computer and added a Hawaiian scene background, so surprisingly, the pictures looked almost real, like a great second honeymoon, except she looked sick and weak, leaning heavily on Grandpa’s arm while he pretended to play a ukulele. The whole ordeal was sweet, but made me uncomfortable. Like a mean, sick joke. And I couldn’t look at the pictures.

At the table that night, she suddenly looked at me, looked right in my eyes, the last time I saw her, and everything seemed to freeze. She looked my way, maybe for the first time all weekend, and we shared a moment, and we seemed to float, just us, all else suspended. I held my breath. Had I ever noticed? Her eyes were the same color as mine. And suddenly, all my ideas of her faded away, thinking that our eyes were the same strange blue-green, and suddenly realizing where I got that color. For a moment, she looked pretty, her face soft, like my mom’s face, like my face. But the shimmer was gone from her eyes, masked where there used to be energy, and years I might have known her. I never knew we were alike. She wavered, and dropped her head.

Before she left, I wanted to tell her “I’m sorry that I don’t like dolls, that I hate pink, that I can’t sew.” I wanted her to know that I did like her, and that I was thankful for how she raised Mom. I wanted to hug her tightly when she left, standing in the front door as the cold wind blew between us, as Grandpa threw bags into the car trunk, and Mom waited by the steps to help her down. But she was frail, sinking into her walker. So I touched her shoulder and said goodbye.

For the funeral a month later, I bought a new dress that I couldn’t afford, and tried to look relaxed at the church, composed for Mom, holding myself like a lady. I avoided Elizabeth, whose face was already red and blotchy. She was not sitting on the
family side, and I had to walk past her to the front pew, wondering if she was more
entitled to sit there than I was. I held Mom’s hand through the service, only crying
when I saw her cry, wondering why I did not try to know Grandma, for her sake, and
realizing that she must have learned the qualities I admired from her mother. At least I
should have appreciated that we had Mom in common.

That spring, I agreed to go to the coast where the family gathered to spread her
ashes. We rented two cabins at Rockaway Beach, right on the shore, because Grandma
had loved the Twin Rocks. I wanted this to be perfect for Mom, and tried hard to
interact with the family I barely knew. Most of the weekend went well enough: we had
a bonfire between the cabins and told stories about Grandma and the children growing
up – the field trip to the moon, vacations running out of gas – all the stories I’d heard
before; we drank hot chocolate and rum, which Mom poured too strong, teasing me
when I asked for more hot water; Carolyn with her bright red hair read my Taro cards;
Mike told stories about locking Brad in the closet as kids; and, only five months after
Grandma’s death and before her ashes were spread, Grandpa snuck away to the beach
to call his new fiancé. And for the first time, I enjoyed my mom’s family, and felt part
of the group, not just the granddaughter or niece who never came. I felt like a Lorang.

At sunset, Grandpa took a copper-colored box from the car and brought it into
our cabin, along with red plastic Dixie cups. We would each get a cup of ashes and
then walk to the beach together to spread them. Despite the planning, the process did
not go smoothly. My cousin Erica, who was close to Grandma, went hysterical seeing
the box, screaming that she didn’t know we were spreading Grandma’s ashes that
weekend, and locked herself in a bedroom crying.
And they couldn’t get the box open. Mom and Carolyn took a can opener to the lid, and struggled for ten minutes to open it with a screwdriver. Inside, the ashes were contained in a plastic Ziploc bag. The event of such importance, spreading a person’s ashes, felt disrespected — prying open the box and finding her ashes in a Ziploc bag, something so common, like dirt from the garden, or leftovers.

We each took our Dixie cup and headed down to the water in silence. Even Jordan, my hyperactive ten-year-old cousin, looked thoughtful and respected the moment. It felt odd to be on the beach with her ashes, strangers passing with their dogs, on the same beach that Grandpa walked down talking to his fiancé. And we stood, without a permit to spread the ashes, staring at each other, waiting for leadership. Finally, Carolyn said a prayer as Mom drew a heart and a big “G” for Georgia with the ashes, and Grandpa drew a smiley face, remarking that he always loved her smile, even when he knew she faked it so he would not worry. I took my cup to the water’s edge and waited for a small wave to reach my feet, Jordan and his mother Debbie next to me, squinting into the sun sinking on the horizon.

Then, the spell was broken — Debbie stepped into the water, tipping her cup to let the ashes fall out into the ocean. But it was windy. And the wind picked up the ashes and blew them right into Jordan’s face.

“GRANDMA’S IN MY EYE!” He screamed, and dropped his cup into the water, running up the shore. “Grandma’s in my eye!”

And because the moment was so tense before, I burst into laughter, thinking how horrible it was and how much it ruined the beautiful moment for Mom and
Carolyn, who were crying and hugging each other behind me. So I tossed my ashes into the water, and stepped back to them.

When Jordan returned, he retrieved his cup bobbing in the shallow water.

"Where'd she go?" he asked, turning to me. I shrugged. "She's in the waves," I pointed.

"Grandma's in the waves," he sang back, running full speed into the water, hopping over small waves, his arms swinging. "In the waves. Dance, Grandma. Dance in the waves," he sang.

I had a dream about her, so real and vivid that I almost believed. I was with her in a kitchen somewhere, big and open and warm, and sun streamed through lacy curtains on the windows. She was going to teach me how to cook. I followed her up a staircase to get something, maybe her cookbook, from her sewing room. I thought, she could have taught me how to cook before she died. We both liked cooking; we could have cooked together. She must've read my mind. She turned toward me, smiling, and said, "it's okay; it's not your fault." But it was, I thought, starting to cry, because I should have tried harder to know her. I looked at her, hoping she'd forgive me, and she was suddenly young and healthy and beautiful. As she leaned in to hug me, she told me there was nothing that could be done. "That's just how life turned out."

She held me, stroking my hair, and I decided I would try learning something from her as I buried my head into her arm. The doorbell downstairs interrupted us. So I ran to answer the door, thinking she was too weak, just starting to get sick and slow, and I found a package of pastries that she was going to serve, raspberry danishes. As I...
turned from the door, she glided down the staircase in a pink gown, looking strong and vibrant. She stood in the kitchen doorway smiling, small pearly-white flowers scattered in her wispy blond hair. We arranged the pastries as relatives arrived, guests I did not remember meeting but recognized as family. They looked old, but happy. And she glowed.
Maria sang in the shower, loudly, lungs so full I heard her in my room. I put a pillow over my head to drown her out. It was early and she was singing Carol King off-key: soprano “You make me feel,” lowering her voice to a baritone, “you make me feel!” I swore she did it just to annoy me as I turned over in bed, sighing. “You make me feel like a mansion or a woman! . . . (high pitch –) WOMAN!” I cringed and almost yelled “NATURAL woman!” through the wall, but then, I smiled, thinking it was more creative than “Secret Asian Man.”

My first memory of Oregon State University is a night just before Fall classes began my freshman year, running with Maria. Under the orange campus lights, the pavement seemed to stretch forever, and the evening air was warm and humid and full of possibilities. I felt alive, my lungs burning, my heart ready to take on the world, my best friend beside me. But she soon transferred to the University of Oregon for Sam, her high school sweetheart, who I helped her get over a few months later, sitting in her car on the U of O’s campus under the street lamps, brushing the hair from her wet face. I repeated what she’d told me during my first heartbreak: “time, it brings the truth sought…” and took her to buy a pint of Ben & Jerry’s.

She used to drive a Chevy Nova, old and bare with its primer coating, and everyone at our high school knew it was hers. It had long bench seats and buckles that fastened in the middle and only AM radio, but she liked the country music that came in scratchy. It was quirky and fit her perfectly. But now she drives her grandma’s Oldsmobile wagon, beige, a car so common that I think I see it everywhere. Whenever I see it, I think Maria! – even out of state, I think Maria! and look to see. Once,
walking home from college in Corvallis, I saw it pass on the street a few blocks ahead, and stop briefly at a stoplight. *Maria!* But I knew it wasn’t because she lived in Eugene and she wouldn’t have come up midweek. Although the windows were up, I saw the driver listening to music, moving her head, and I thought of a song Maria liked, hummed, and walked to its rhythm. The driver looked at me as the light changed, from blocks away, startled to see me walking to the same beat as the song in her car, before she realized who I was. She parked on the next street. We walked faster toward each other until we were running.

Once a week that year, I walked home in the afternoon, and when I turned onto my street, I saw her car parked next to my house. She sat on the front porch with her braided hair flopped to one side under a bandana, which made her look a little like Rosy the Riveter, her face, round and German with big cheeks, always in a book. I liked staying with her in Eugene better because she made her own tea with peppermint and served it in old jam jars. But finding her at my place, just up for the night to surprise me, I knew she loved me.

I liked knowing little things about her. She hates cooked carrots and her middle name – Gerlinda; she’s afraid of drowning but loves sailing; she likes Cyndi Lauper and daisies; she reads the *Eugene Weekly* personal ads every week to see if anyone wrote about her under “I Saw You;” she wears cowboy boots and skirts in the rain.

We used to walk from her house to a coffee shop near the University of Oregon, and study at Café Roma where she drank tea or decaf coffee, and I thought it was silly to drink decaf. She was good to study with because she could focus, but also because she would talk from where she was thinking, laying down her book and
looking across the table to ask if I thought we were just societal machines and
programmed, or if I knew why humans are so violent, or if I wanted to join the Peace
Corps with her. Or she told me a story so crazy that it must be true, although I
wondered, shaking my head.

At a friend’s house, Maria grabbed a colored scarf, and with her back to me,
she wrapped it over her head and held the ends under her chin. Suddenly, she turned
around and sang deep and dramatic, “Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match!”
her body swaying side to side. Everyone stared. Only I laughed.

Once, I confused us. Our friend and I sat in a dark theatre, waiting for Maria’s
entrance in a play. I listened to the lines she’d read to me, telling him that she should
be onstage soon, and remembering the first time I saw her, onstage as Snow White in a
middle school play, and how I wanted to be her friend. Her cue came, and he touched
my arm to alert me as Maria stepped out in a gaudy dress and too much makeup, her
voice loud across the room with a fake Southern accent. I thought, “that’s me. There I
am,” immediately and easily, like looking at myself in a mirror or a picture or a
dream. And then, just as suddenly, I knew it wasn’t, because I recognized Maria’s
walk and it wasn’t mine, because I was in the audience watching her.

We waited to take her home after the curtain call, and through the pictures and
people telling her that she should be a model because she’s tall and beautiful and
dynamic, waiting for her to return in overalls and hair down. When she and I were
alone, I mentioned my displacement, thinking she’d laugh. “You too?” she asked; it
happened to her looking at pictures of us in groups, when she picked out me, more
than once, thinking, “I looked good that day,” or “I don’t remember wearing that.”
Last summer, she was leaving to work in the jungles of Ecuador, and I was going to live at home and waitress. Before she left, we had a barbeque to celebrate my college graduation and my parents’ anniversary. Relatives and my parents’ friends mingled in the yard while Maria and I sat at a picnic table bored because she was the only person I invited who came. We drank too much beer, talked about her trip, and both said we wished that I was going too because I had planned to go, but when the time came, I didn’t have the money. I promised to visit.

She got a headache from the beer and the sun and went home early, leaving me with my dad’s drunken friend, who cornered me as soon as Maria left. “I watched you two,” she said through crooked teeth, leaning back on the table. “There’s a lot of love there. But you’re worried about her going. You’re jealous.” I inched away, not wanting to hear it from a drunk. “You’re afraid she’ll grow and leave you behind, and experience things you’ll never know.” I said that I was happy for Maria, but not that I was afraid, or that I knew I wouldn’t visit because Ecuador was her idea and, truthfully, I never wanted to go.

On her last day, Maria came over but didn’t stay long because she had things to do, and her new boyfriend was stopping by. We stood in the driveway, kicked gravel, and didn’t know what to say, so I traded my lucky necklace for her favorite ring and hugged her goodbye, swearing it would be okay. But I saw her crying as she drove away with a honk. I didn’t cry until I got her first email about the images that haunted her, then I couldn’t get them out of my head either: her taxi driver pulled a knife that she kicked out of his hand; her bus rolled in a mudslide; and she had to give CPR to a girl who’d been buried in the mud while the mother screamed “Madre
Madonna!” beside her, as the girl went limp in her arms. But she never wrote about how sick she got from a parasite in her stomach, needing hospitalization and going numb from the waist down. She never wrote about nearly dying. Why didn’t she tell me?

I sat with her mom in their garden, rubbing her back as she cried. Or I listened while she played me answering machine tapes of broken messages from Maria – because the phone systems were not adequate there – insisting that they sounded as if she’d been kidnapped and her voice distorted. I promised Maria would come home okay, although I wondered. I assured her that at least Jason, the new boyfriend I hadn’t met, was going to Ecuador to bring her home. I never visited. I was poor, and I fell in love that summer too, with Richard, who Maria didn’t meet for months. I thought I’d at least be at the airport when she returned, holding her mom’s hand, flowers under my arm, but when the day arrived, I wanted her to be with her family and Jason, so I waited until she came home. Driving to her parents’ house that day, I was afraid to see her, worrying about what to say since we had not emailed as frequently as I expected, thinking she’d be too thin because she was hungry and sick in Ecuador. But she looked the same, except she looked tired. I crossed the room, but I didn’t know what else to do than hug her, and just keep hugging her.

Can women hold on to their girlhood friends? Now I don’t tell her my secrets first, but second, or sometimes not at all. Months after her return, I mourned for us, knowing we changed, wishing we hadn’t. So I left messages on her machine, unanswered, and called her mom to leave a message there. Women’s friendships are dynamic and complicated – I’d been jealous, and protective, and supportive, and I’d
been hurt by her lack of attention and her putting boyfriends first. And I’d been comforted by her braiding my hair, like a mother, and crying with her because life can be unfair. I talked to her in my head when she was gone, complaining of the new development in our hometown that destroyed her favorite old mill. But I was afraid to admit that friendships also wax and wane, worrying that our boyfriends replaced each other. So I put a personal ad in the Eugene Weekly in the “I Saw You” column: MAPIA — I always mean “Mapia” with love, teasing you for wetting your pants yrs ago. Been so long since I saw your face. Hard to meet, but I think of you in all I do. You are the bravest person. And you make me proud to be your friend. And I hoped she read it.

I keep a picture of her on my bathroom mirror of a day when we drove west on a whim, Fall air rushing in the open windows, the car’s heater wastefully high to combat the coolness, and the radio loud over the rush of the wind. We squinted through the dirty windshield, passing green farms sprinkled with cows, noting the season’s change, and taking another picture of us driving. The beach was solemn, a gray and windy day typical on the Oregon Coast. We traced the edge of the ocean, in and out of the water, searching for smoothed shells, looking out to the horizon. We said little, and Maria cradled a pink cake box as we walked, keeping its contents secret. Driftwood dotted the shore, and we chose a log, kicking off our shoes, sitting with our feet bare in the cold sand for the novelty of it, digging small holes with our toes. We watched the waves crash, not needing to talk, thinking we already knew. She opened the pink lid and we propped the box between us, shielding it from blowing sand, eating the cheesecake she bought me with plastic forks.
When I was twenty, I read Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, a novel sparked from a short Biblical story about the wives and daughter of Jacob. Within the Red Tent – the women’s tent that the men considered a place of banishment when the women were menstruating or bearing children – the women found solace and a gathering space where they could communicate as they could not with men, sharing their deepest moments of womanhood, competing for Jacob, yet relying on each other for support and companionship. The story moved me more than I could explain, digging in deep, lodging itself in a feeling beyond analysis. I craved that connection and intimacy and comfort, and seldom found it. My bonds with women were never solid.

I sought, and still seek, a connection, a shared feeling, a sense of being moved, and a feeling of belonging to something bigger than myself alone, particularly with women, but not exclusively. I sought this through different forms of communication. But when conversations fell short, when I did not feel moved or connected, I felt frustrated, as if the entire relationship had failed. I tend to be dramatic. Perhaps this perception was mine alone. The other person may not have shared my sense of dissatisfaction, may not have been aware of any distress. In relationships I believed should have been closer, close enough to say the hard things without ruining the relationship, I could not express myself, or establish the connection I wanted. Had I felt that I could be honest about my feelings, to be forthright, I may have been eased by knowing the relationships were fine, given the sense of sharing a resolution. But my inability to psychological go where Betsy was going in her development
discouraged me. My relationship with my grandmother felt unnaturally cold. And above all, I struggled to adjust to the changing of relationships as people grow. Even my writing about these people feels distant. Writing about Maria, I was only able to compose fragmented moments with her, trying to capture my feelings and her personality in snapshots from years of friendship.

But I learned something more about relationships than just my desire for connection and communication. For the brief time I kept a personal journal, I speculated about relationships, particularly my parents' relationship because they have seemed a mismatched couple, my mother being open and affectionate, and my father being reserved and somewhat autonomous. February 2001 was an epiphany – that people love each other differently, in different ways – that how relationships are may not be as important as that they are. And with this came the realization that the degrees of commitment and communication vary within relationships. And that relationships can be frustrating both because they are not as close as I would like them to be, and because we do not know all that is communicated.
The Montana bar was smokier than any I’d seen in Oregon, and the smoke hung in the air, creeping up the brown log walls and slipping out the doors. The only real light came from under the beer signs and the pool lamps. Although it was December, with snow piled up outside, the bar was muggy, yet most people still wore heavy clothes. They tried to look like they had planned to stay home, but got convinced to go to the bar, even on a Tuesday night, to have a beer and a game of pool. Visiting from Oregon, I didn’t know, and I wore a skirt.

The few young women who lived in Whitefish moved there with boyfriends, so the bar was filled with mostly young single men. Yet Geoff managed to flirt with another girl, the only single one there, while I acted cool in a corner, pretending to ignore them. I was alone except for his friend Mike, who tired of pool games and stood next to my stool, leaning back on the railing. He sometimes yelled to me over the music, telling of his travels from the Midwest to Colorado, and then Montana, working at ski resorts to snowboard for free, like most of the men there. He smoothed out a beer stain on his pants, and told me about the freedom of the skies. But I could barely hear him over the band and started thinking, staring into the smoke, that I was boring, never living anywhere but Oregon, never moving anywhere alone. This was my first solo trip, my first adventure, and that I’d already been left on my stool. I pulled my jacket tight, and leaned in to hear him better, appreciating Mike’s attempts to include me, and liking the confidence and courage in his words.

But he turned his eyes down, and shuffled his boots. Maybe it was just the smoke or the beer, but he stared down for quite awhile, watching the beer swirl in his
glass. He looked suddenly discontented. I wanted to reach out and hold him, transfixed by him—letting his face drop, forgetting the crowd. And he loves it here? I was captivated by how his expression contradicted his stated love of freedom and Montana, and I forgot myself.

Suddenly, the whole bar looked different. Every face looked lonely, each body leaned closely into another’s. All the confidence I admired in everyone else faded, and I saw a little sorrow in everyone: the older woman with messy hair at the bar, tracing wrinkles under her eye and ignoring the woodsman with his back to her; the funny guy at the pool table elbowing his friend and trying to smile bigger; even Geoff reaching out to touch the girl’s shoulder as she leaned into his ear to whisper; and me, traveling far from home to be with someone I hadn’t known long and would leave soon. Everyone seemed alone.

It lasted only a minute, until I was pulled off my stool abruptly by Geoff’s roommate and drug onto the dance floor. He mumbled something about the band, the first words he’d said to me those few days. But I was busy thinking that I didn’t want to miss what was missing, or go out trying to find it. And I couldn’t help thinking that we seemed just as lonely as when we’d come. We danced, and his baggy overalls and blond dreads flopped to the music, his beer spilling on the floor. I smiled, hoping Geoff would notice, but I wanted to go home.
Co-Habitation

I waged my war against her with dirty dishes. Her clothes, *US Weekly* issues, unopened mail, and wrappers left scattered in our living room I still piled neatly just inside her bedroom door. The bills I continued to pay without nagging her to pay her share on time. The food she left molding in the fridge — yogurt containers of leftovers, cans of garbanzo beans, remnants of delivered pizza — I threw away. But I refused to wash her dishes, letting them pile up in the sink without a soak, because she never used the same glass twice and always used a plate, even for a quick sandwich. Plates piled up in the sink under pots crusted with macaroni, topped with nearly spotless glasses. When I needed a spoon, when she had used all the spoons, I dug out what I needed, washed and used and replaced it in the pile.

With my own dirty dishes, I kept careful inventory. After use, dishes were hand washed, since she forgot to empty the dishwasher. I took care to always know which dishes I dirtied, cleaning them quickly after use, so as not to have any responsibility for contributing to the smell and mess that grew in our kitchen sink.

"The kitchen sure is gross," Lindsey remarked as we walked home from campus. I nodded. She offered, "I guess it’s probably my turn to do the dishes."

I nodded, "I think so," and I slipped in, "they’re all your dishes anyway," as we began to cross the street to our apartment complex. She flinched, nearly stopping in the middle of crossing the road. "No way."

"Yes," I continued walking without waiting for her.

"No. Some of those dishes are yours. There’s no way I could have used *that* many dishes," she protested.
I concentrated on keeping my voice steady, pretending I had not rehearsed this reply, hoping to passively address the issue. “Well, I wash my dishes after I use them because the dishwasher needs emptied. So, those are all your dishes.” She cocked her head looking at me, maybe wondering what kind of maniac kept such close track of our dish use or what kind of a user she was, though I guessed the first, and continued walking.

It was a combination of the piled dirty dishes, my boyfriend Richard moving in with us, Miracle Grow and missing Cokes. Admittedly, I had watered my plant with Miracle Grow and left it sitting atop the television that we had jointly bought from our last roommate to share until we moved. The water damage to the television did little, but the Miracle Grow ate a circuit board the size of credit card, which would cost more than a new television to replace and still might not solve the problem. The TV, split to expose its inner workings, leaned against the wall in the dining room, probably noticed each time she entered the kitchen and the dirty dish smell.

But Richard we discussed over coffee. I let her decide, giving her, honestly, few options. Since we moved in together, Richard had been a stable part of our living, staying with us for weeks, spending his time when I was in class either reading, cleaning, or trying to decide what next direction to take. It was January and the rain beat down the coffee shop windows, fogging the shop with the smell of espresso and chocolate that made me feel warm and safe. I explained that he was moving to Corvallis for a few months and could either move into a room with old friends or move in with us, only until April. He would still be at our apartment often because the
room in his friends’ house was small and inconvenient, so I explained I didn’t want her to be upset if he was at our apartment. Or he could help us pay rent. She swirled her mug of coffee and quickly agreed that she would like to pay less rent and that she did like him around, suggesting we could have group dinners. We smiled.

She started by slamming the refrigerator and cupboard doors in the morning. And she left for campus without me. That evening, Richard and I waited for her to finish making her dinner so I could make ours. The apartment was quiet. There were things going on that we may not have put words to, and being that she loved to talk things to death, twisting words and dropping innuendos, manipulating what she thought were the hidden meanings, Lindsey hated silence. Moving around the kitchen, she intentionally avoided looking at us in the dining room. Then, she slammed the refrigerator shut, saying something about one of her Coke’s missing, the Cokes she had brought and warned us not to touch. I looked at Richard, since he’d wanted one.

“So! Who took my Coke?” She stood braced in the kitchen doorway, arms tight against the frame, blocking the space. We shook our heads. “Well, there’s one missing.” She looked at me, coiled. And I realized I’d never actually seen her angry.

“I don’t drink soda.” I left Richard to answer for himself, unsure if he had taken one, unable to resist. “I didn’t drink one either.” She accused us again.

“Maybe you just forgot and you drank one. We haven’t touched your Cokes,” Richard reasoned. A plausible explanation.

But this was about more than missing Cokes. Both Communication majors, Lindsey and I knew this was something else, something I didn’t fully understand about her, or about our relationship, something I only knew was beneath the surface every
time I shut my bedroom door. Regardless of why I shut my door, she seemed to take it as a personal insult, denial to an exclusive club, though I said, “come in,” whenever she knocked.

She seemed upset by my relationship with Richard when I told her that summer about meeting him, perhaps disappointed that her plans for our living together would be altered if we were not both single and lonely. The man she loved, her almost-fiancé, dumped her the year before but strung along her hopes that they would get back together. Or she strung along her hopes herself. Their current relationship was a bizarre set of rules about seeing each other as friends only once a month and not talking otherwise, in hopes that he would discover that he missed her. With her best friend’s recent marriage and her parent’s recent divorce, she was obsessed with weddings, the joining of people, community.

We used to take long walks together, and sometimes, she was a great listener and a good friend. But generally, I felt overwhelmed thinking she tried to put the burden on me, to make me share that Eric didn’t love her, that she wouldn’t move on, that her parents divorced and her best friend married, unable to care for or take responsibility for herself. I cringed whenever she called my name, “Gret-CHEN,” her pitch rising at the end, like my mother’s when she was about to accuse me of something. So I got defensive every time Lindsey yelled my name as she asked me what she should wear to class or eat for dinner, or if I thought Ross and Rachel on Friends were ever going to get back together. And then there was Lindsey-and-Gretchen-time.
She would knock and then plop herself on my bed, staring at the pictures on my closet. My brother used to plop himself onto my bed when I lived with my parents, and when I asked “what,” turning from my reading, he answered, “nothing,” shrugging and lying stomach down, head hanging over the bed. It bugged me. I wanted to know what he wanted. “What, Joe?” He sighed, “nothing.” Lindsey followed the same routine. I turned from my computer, but hoping she wouldn’t take long, I continued to type slowly. “What’s up?” She sighed, “nothing,” as she watched Richard studying on the floor from the corner of her eye. “I was just thinking that we needed some Lindsey-and-Gretchen-time, and wanted to get coffee with you.”

I pointed to my computer. “I would, but I need to finish this. Don’t you have homework? You could come in here and study with us.”

She stared at pictures of Richard and me hiking that summer. “It’s done. I guess I’ll just hang out until The Bachelor is on. I just thought it would be nice if we hung out, since we don’t see much of each other.”

But we lived together, I thought, turning to my screen so she wouldn’t see my irritation. I hated the phrase Lindsey-and-Gretchen-time especially, which reminded me of self-conscious, trendy talk-about-your-feelings, plan special family-time communication that I decided did not work. We talked in the morning as we prepared for class, we talked walking to campus and home from campus when we ran into each other, we talked when we went on walks together, at least once a week, as I listened to her talk about Eric, and marriage, and felt her prying into Richard and my relationship, asking nearly-innocent questions that were laced with other intentions. I felt there was no need for Lindsey-and-Gretchen-time, especially because we had only been friendly
roommates from the beginning, and I resented the implication that our friendship had declined. And for some reason, I thought of Elizabeth, the girl my grandmother babysat, who used to sit too close to me on the couch, her arm around me, telling me how much she missed me although we barely knew each other.

But Lindsey, I think, meant something else. Having taken Communications classes together the year before, maybe we should have just discussed it, but I thought hearing what I wanted would hurt her. She gave up. “Well, do you want to watch The Bachelor with me in my room?” I said maybe, but I hoped she’d invite her friend Kate over instead.

She screamed – the missing Coke led to the broken television, led to the dishes, led to my failure to be a good friend. She threatened that we could just co-habitate, while I braced myself, dumbfounded that she actually said it, or surprised that she had chosen this moment. I listened, my face flushing deep red, my mind racing with accusations of my own. I could level her. But I kept quiet, and waited for her to finish and storm out without eating her dinner. Later, when she calmed down, and came to apologize for how she addressed the issues, I resisted the urge to tell her that co-habitation was exactly what I wanted, and instead, I apologized for not being the friend she wanted, excusing myself from the responsibility by telling her that I was sorry that I didn’t have the time or energy to be what she thought she needed from me.
Angel

I had been bragging about how many My Little Ponies I had. So said the girl at my preschool whose mother, a large pushy woman, demanded an intervention with my teacher and my mom, although likely, Sarah had bragged to me, or lied to her mom. It was the first time I had ever been in trouble, and the second time solidified our friendship because Sarah encouraged me to chase a girl during free time, which got us in trouble together, giggling on the time-out bench. We were an odd pair: I was creative, quiet, and reclusive if not with my brother; and Sarah was rowdy, loud, and ornery, with a face like a Troll Doll – cute, almost creepy, bulbous nose – and she decided which games we played, practicing her control.

My family moved from the Oregon Coast to Bend around the time that Sarah’s elderly father began to die. We wrote each other, and I believed her absence explained why I felt lonely and empty in my new town, my best friend living across the state, although we saw each other in the summer when our moms would drive us to the Springfield mall, buying us matching dresses – polka dot, waist lined with ruffles in neon green and pink, accessorized with jelly bracelets. She wrote me that my tree had been cut down. And I sent her a card when her dad died.

In middle school, Sarah’s mom worried about her family: that town was not the safest place to raise kids, and Sarah’s older brothers were into trouble. So they moved to Bend, knowing only my family, and I was excited to see Sarah everyday. We spent the summer before 8th grade together, bouncing on her new trampoline, or riding bikes to a park until, one afternoon, we saw her brother coming from a nearby store, and he showed us a pack of cigarettes he had stolen. Sarah joked for one, then
promised we wouldn’t to tell, and told me to shut up when I mentioned later that stealing was wrong. Then my mom wouldn’t let me ride bikes with her.

When school started, Sarah took over my social group, a few misfit friends who sat with me at lunch. She called them “losers,” but hung out with us anyhow. She only liked my neighbor Courtney, and soon they each had a gold, half circle necklace charm – Courtney’s “Best” and Sarah’s “Friends” – though Sarah told me that she found it, not knowing who had the other half. At first, we three played together at my house, the only place we could have privacy without a mom intervening. But they both had older brothers and loved to pick on my younger brother; it was hard to defend him without their ridicule. Then, they went out without me, saying later that I was “too good” to sneak into The Craft, an R-rated movie, without paying. And Sarah started teasing me in front of my friends.

Her mom asked, right in front of me, “why aren’t you more like Gretchen?” Sarah rarely did her homework, and sometimes skipped class. She was terrible on our basketball team, lazy, bad attitude. “Look how proud her mom is when she brings home good grades. And she tucks in her shirt and brushes her hair! Gretchen, I keep telling Sarah she’d be pretty if she ever tried.” Sarah glared at me. This wasn’t the first time.

They said I was supposed to save her, and I knew her mom picked Bend because of me. But Sarah and I both resisted; I wondered if it was possible to “save” anyone but myself. I knew Sarah, knew that she hated her nose, that she felt lonely, believing only her late father had ever loved her, and that she wasn’t good enough. I
knew why she teased me. But I was also fourteen: a little chubby, shy, struggling myself. How could I save her?

When I was nineteen and home for Thanksgiving, I spent the weekend studying in my room to avoid my Uncle Brad and his family. Brad married quickly after a messy divorce, and so he brought his kids and his wife Debbie’s hyperactive son and pregnant teen daughter, along with the new additions to their household. With a heart bigger than his head, Brad adopted Debbie’s two nieces, bringing them out of their bounce-around between relatives and foster care, hoping to save them by giving them religion. Anita was thirteen, tight clothes and heavy makeup, clinging to Brad’s fourteen-year-old son, and Donette was fifteen but seemed younger than her sister, slow, maybe shy, eyes on me whenever I came into the kitchen where they all gathered at the dining room table. I had heard they had it rough, but I was still annoyed at the interruption when Donette knocked on my door and slipped into my room, stepping over where I lay on the floor studying and plopping onto my bed with a sigh. I closed my book, trying to be polite. “So. How do you like living with Uncle Brad?”

Donette pulled her striped shirt down over her stomach, and adjusted her necklaces as she scanned my room: bare except for a few pictures left up since I moved out, old CDs on the stereo in the corner. Instead of answering, she asked about college, so I told her about studying English and living in an apartment. She nodded, nervously looking everywhere else. “I can’t wait to move out by myself,” she said, and
I felt the need to tell her she had plenty of time to grow up before then, unsure if I should lecture or listen. Instead, I said, “I know.”

Suddenly, she wasn’t shy, and stories about her life came easily, casually: bad homes, abuse, her fears about her sister’s problems, drug use, everything she saw and could not get away from. She was only fifteen, but she sat up straight and looked at my face, talking about the problems like she had dealt with them. She shrugged.

I wondered why she told me. I nodded while she talked, but I couldn’t relate, thinking about how I grew up in a backyard lush with grass and trees where, at the end of the yard, there was a cluster of Douglas firs, branches intertwined but separate enough to leave a small room-size space between them. Mom had cut a doorway into the room, and removed the sharp branches and raked out the needles, placing two homemade wooden benches inside – my secret room. But I never had to hide, never had to survive anything, and yet I believed I would have made a strong survivor. I suddenly wished to trade Donette places, to let her sit in the tree room, or near the fence where the buttercups wound around the bottom of the rusty wire, just a few feet away from the raspberry bush the neighbor planted for me, to let her eat as many raspberries as she wanted, her fingers and mouth stained red. What could I tell her? – life gets better? That it’s beautiful despite the pain?

So I let her take some CDs, ones she probably would not have picked out under any other circumstance. She smiled, nodding with her whole body, “cool…” and hugged me tightly.
I gave my number to Travis, the cute new dishwasher at work on my last day that summer before moving back to Corvallis, but because his friend Justin was in town from Salem, the date was the three of us hanging out that night, drinking beers, sneaking into a country club spa, and listening to Justin play guitar. Of course I liked both guys vying for my attention. Travis had a sweet face with stunning blue eyes and a warm smile, but I couldn’t date him because he was religious. And Justin seemed obnoxious, too dramatic, and his face seemed harsh with a sharp nose and deep-set eyes. And I was moving the next day. But I gave them my new number.

The next afternoon, my Subaru broke down mid-intersection while I was moving, the back loaded with everything I owned. By the time I had it towed, and moved my things into my new apartment, it was dark, and I only had Ritz and peanut butter to eat, and none of my friends’ new phone numbers. So when Justin called, just back to Salem, wanting to see me, I asked him to drive down to Corvallis. He took me to the store, bought me half a chicken, and laughed when the cashier thought we were married. We played Checkers, and he seemed sweeter than before. September 10, 2001.

I listened to the news the next morning, worrying about a friend in the Navy, wishing I could drive home to my family. With only a radio, I saw nothing, but I felt the fear, the hate, the loss and the compassion, and the want to help. So when Justin called that night, I let him take me to dinner because I didn’t want to be alone, but I felt guilty for going out. Something felt wrong about enjoying myself given the circumstances. He brought me wildflowers that he had picked from the side of the freeway, apologizing if they were dirty because he was going to steal some from a
cemetery but he took a different route. Strange, I thought, but smiled and put them in water while he insisted that we dine in Salem where he knew good restaurants.

On the drive, he told me that, when hearing the news, the first and only thing he wanted to do was see me, which shocked me as I thought: you've only known me for two days. In Salem, he had forgotten things at his father's and his grandmother's houses, so we stopped by both before dinner where I met his whole family, wondering if he planned it as I waited in the front room with his uncle, making restless small talk. During dinner, I was irritated by his complaints about his food, and felt uncomfortable by how he listened to my every word, captivated, commenting on my intelligence and how fortunate he was to date me. He probably said "wow" thirty times.

But then, we stopped at a waterfront park on the way home, and he gave me his jacket to wear as we walked under the pale lights, so I let him hold my hand and I tried to enjoy the moment. Near the end of the path, we stopped by a bench and stared down the bank into the black river, the ripples lit by the city, orange and white. It was a fairly warm night, so we sat awhile, talking about 9/11, trying to understand, unsure what to say. But then, he shifted into his own tragedies – depression and attempted suicides – and I felt the park grow colder and darker. A girl left him, he wanted to die, but did coke instead, liking the way the lines looked drawn across his dad's glass coffee table, and the rush of the first hit that he could never duplicate. I tried to move further down the bench, feeling strange and uneasy. He had quit after admitting himself to rehab and finishing, but that was only two months ago. And his intensity scared me, the way he suddenly quieted and stared into the river, his eyes, with dark
shadows underneath them, slowly turning to me with a look that was somehow forceful, as if pinning me in my place.

On the drive home, Justin cursed the slow traffic, banging the steering wheel, and I couldn’t wait to be home alone. We talked for a few minutes when he dropped me off, getting in a petty argument as he screamed at me and stormed out leaving his jacket on my couch. So he called the next night, wanting to apologize, and to come get his jacket. Although I said no, he showed up half an hour later, haggard, guitar in hand. He confessed to doing coke earlier that evening with his uncle, but swore he had disowned him, and sobbed with shame. I tried to keep him on the porch, but begging my forgiveness, he pulled a sack of pot from his pocket and drug me into the bathroom to watch him flush it down my toilet, his purging, his wanting to be clean of everything, his true rehabilitation. Which was more than I wanted to handle.

I walked to the living room to hand him his jacket, but he begged me to sit, leading me to the couch. He grabbed his guitar, saying he wrote a song for me, a love song, which he played loud and tragic until I stopped him. Laying the guitar down, he crawled to me on his knees, and took my hands, a gesture that bothered me, and I asked him to stand up. He ignored me. “I don’t deserve you, but I will. You can help me.” I pulled my hands away. “I will be so good to you. Let me. You’re an angel…” He made promises and covered his face, heaving with sobs.

Watching him on his knees crying, I was moved. And I reached down to touch his face, to share the sadness, regret, and pain. The loss and need for comfort, I felt, was everywhere that night, and I imagined millions of Americans coping with the first full day of mourning, with a fear for the future, for lives without peace or lives without
a loved one to share, and hoping their pain would heal. My sympathy overwhelmed me, and in it, I felt the power to help, at least to help Justin. Imagining six months, perhaps a year, into the future, I saw him clearly – healthy and happy, leaving work early, he threw his jacket over his shoulder, winked to the guys inside, and slid into his truck to drive down to see me after my classes, clean, his life changed, healed. I had saved him. And it felt powerful and real.

It only lasted a moment. Then, I knew I wouldn’t love him, not really. Because when I saw myself as his girlfriend, talking gently, smoothing hair from his damp forehead when he felt weak, I felt the weight of his dependency, and of my guilt for wanting space, heavy on me. I didn’t have the energy to help him without sacrificing myself. I started to cry with him because I wanted to help, to let those in need have it easy, to love them and make their lives better. “But we can’t always be loved by who we want to be loved by. Or love who we want to love,” I explained, pushing him away. Sometimes, we can’t help. I told him not to call.
During this time, I also read, and reread, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, attracted to the restless wandering and independence of the characters, their self-reliance yet their desire for an unknown more of something. I met and idolized independent people, and I came to believe that I should need no one, that I should not feel lonely and yearning for connections, and that this wanting for others was a weakness. I had a sense of young people seeking out the adventures and intimacy they felt missing, the restless sort of men I dated who wanted to move somewhere exotic, at least somewhere far from Oregon, and who I envied when they did leave because I wondered if far from home, I would find better connections. Visiting Montana, I realized that, for me, that need for adventure was an escaping from intimacy and comfort, a drive to make continually new relationships, which left me unsatisfied, and seemed to leave others unsatisfied as well. In the end, I was unable to connect with anyone there, including the man I was dating. Yet these resistances complicated many of my relationships.

And through these experiences, I came to realize that relationships could also be frustrating because they are more than I would care to commit to. With Lindsey, Sarah, Donette, and Justin, I felt inept to help, unable to talk to them because they needed something I did not know how to give, or I refused to offer. Either I did not know what they wanted, why they seemed to reach out for me, or I thought they asked for too much, for relationships with too much dedication and too much given energy. The degrees of required commitment and communication overwhelmed me. And although I wanted to help, I felt incapable of being what they truly needed. In these
moments, I felt that I failed them because I did not connect with them; this only
enhanced my desire for intimacy and clear communication.
Assimilation

Marvin Hernandez could not say Pez. That was the first thing I learned about him when my friend set me up on a blind double date. The dark skinned, dark eyed boy was not my type nor was I interested in more than a free movie ticket that night, but out of boredom or sympathy, I went on a second date with just Marvin. His interest was apparent, although I assumed he mainly appreciated my willingness to listen. He had a curious way of being, an air, a certain way of walking around a room that struck me as defensive, a turn of his head, the slanting of his eye when someone spoke to him, a scoff for others’ comments. He could be quite critical of others, with a stinging sarcasm, and a grudge, a deep secret hurt that explained it.

Sitting in his car in my driveway after a second free movie, I prepared to bolt for my front door, hand already on the car door handle, ready to avoid the awkward moment when a boy drops me off after a date and the car idols in the driveway and seatbelts unbuckle and there is potential. But I stayed a little longer under the influence of the partial moon, the clear, cool night, and the talk of distant countries. He probably meant to keep me longer in the car by talking about Guatemala, his home, which worked. Moving to the U.S. at age thirteen was a struggle because he knew little English and felt persecuted by his classmates. Although by then, his English was flawless, with only a hint of accent when he said “Guatemala.”

Thinking I could be supportive, I begged him to speak to me in Spanish, to tell me anything, about math or his favorite commercial, or about the night, something to take pride in. For a moment, it felt romantic, sitting under the moonlight, the radio playing softly, and I moved closer, anticipating the foreign words sounding like a
beautiful song. "No. I never speak Spanish," he blurted, looking out the window, so shortly that I wondered if this was his hurt.

"When I came here, the kids teased me. Because of my accent. Because I was dark. They would ask me to say a word, then laugh at me, telling me to go back to Mexico – I was from Guatemala! So I never speak Spanish. And I won't say some words in English."

Not knowing how to reply, I just explained that all middle-schoolers were teased, and that his being bilingual was a gift, not a flaw. And the least he could do was to tell me what the moon looked like in Spanish. So he smiled and told a story about la luna, and I managed to slip out of the car with only a "buenas noches."

Working at a restaurant the next summer, I met Europeans on work exchange. Employed as bussers and banquet servers, and hostesses if their English was good, they gained experience working abroad and making money that was a good amount in their home countries. They kept to themselves, united by their alienation and their need to speak English, even to each other since they came from Poland, Slovakia and France. The servers generally ignored them, except when a certain table needed bussed immediately. Then the servers spoke quickly to them and were frustrated when they did not understand.

I felt drawn to them, maybe interested in other countries because I had hardly traveled out of Oregon, or maybe sympathetic because I felt, not pity, but frustration for them when they could not understand, when they leaned quietly on the kitchen counter as the servers, backs to us, joked and teased each other. I wanted to defend
them from our manager when he gave them directions, and they pleaded with him to slow down his speaking, and when he ignored them, storming out of the kitchen. It broke my heart. I began to hear his words from their perspective, a blurred slur, and I wanted to reach out and hold them.

Silvia, a Slovakian girl, looked defeated. “I tell him again and again, please, to speak slow. I understand the words but he speaks fast, and when he do speak slow, he speak like I am stupid.” She shrugged at me. “Trabco,” she muttered, something like, “Ti ci a la trabco,” a Slovakian insult meaning something like “you’re an idiot,” which became her new reply to our manager with a wink to me. And when he left, I translated what he had said.

So I adopted a group of foreigners and felt satisfied helping them, as if I was doing something meaningful for the first time. And because I also felt alienated from the servers, from the life of partying and working full-time, alienated because I was a student and only working for the summer, I was grateful for their friendship at work. Although unlike other friendships, it required a lot of patience.

“Raygoola?” Emilien asked me one day in the kitchen. I should have understood; he had just asked, “Grey-chan, would you like me to coff-ee your table-als,” hoping he would get an opportunity to practice English on real customers, to which I had said “oui.” Now he asked, “raygoo-la?” But I shook my head and asked him to repeat. He leaned toward me, and seeing my confusion, repeated himself louder. “Ray-goo-LA? o de-caugh?” His French accent distracted me. I couldn’t understand until he actually grabbed the coffee pots and showed them to me. “Ray-goo-la or decalf coffee?”
I took the girls shopping. But they spoke to each other in Slovakian, holding up different tee-shirts and looking for ones that said USA. I only knew a few words in Slovakian, but when they held something up and said “doob-re,” I understood that meant “good,” and I nodded.

And I took them to the county fair after Silvia called, saying she wanted to go to “rowdaodoo,” with her heavy Eastern European accent. The embarrassment of her having to repeat this several times was felt on both ends of the line. “Rowd-ay-ow-do,” she tried again, “with the horses, and the men and hats.” – “The rodeo!” I called in relief, and took them to the dusty stands at the fairgrounds to watch the cowboys hogtie calves after lassoing them to the ground. “And what is the purpose of this sport?” They all looked to me, with my limited rodeo knowledge. “And why do they disqualify him?” I shrugged, and occasionally made up reasons. For the first time, our culture seemed strange to me. Walking around the fairground, I noticed several screaming kids wanting more money, and fat men with huge t-shirts stretched tight balancing nachos and elephant ears and ice cream that dripped down their arms as they tried to find shaded seats. I wanted to shield them from it, a hostess hiding the dirty laundry, worrying what images of America they would remember.

And maybe I misunderstood them more than I understood. Rafael, a Polish boy who looked sixteen but was actually over twenty, stopped me in the kitchen to invite me out again. “You know where is good to eat here, no? Would you have dinner?” Assuming he was asking me to take everyone, I agreed. “No, I think I speak wrong. I pick you up. I have car now. I buy for cheap.” He blushed from the misunderstanding. And so, we went to dinner alone. That night, when his nearly broken car stopped in
my driveway, I greeted him and asked if he’d like to come inside, thinking he’d like to see how an American household looks. “No, please, it is not right,” he said, trying to explain Polish courtship rules. Because I didn’t know how to explain what I meant, and because he considered this a date, I quietly got in the car as he held the door open.

At the restaurant, I ordered our meals at his insistence, and played with the straw in my drink. His English was good enough to converse, but somehow not enough to make an understanding. He tried to explain Poland to me, how it was different than American – the diet, special dishes his mom made, health insurance, and the school system. And although we both spoke English, it wasn’t enough to bridge the gap between post-Communist Polish life and American life, so that I felt I barely understood what he meant, and he sighed and ate his pizza, giving up because the meaning did not have to do with the words. We couldn’t talk to each other. At the end of the night, I tried to say good night in Polish, struggling to move my lips and my tongue the right way, to form the sounds of quite a different language: “muy way neach si.”

I met Xiaolin at a sunny picnic table in autumn and we spent the first minutes practicing each other’s names – Show-lin. I was volunteering for an English conversant program and was going to help him and his wife practice English once a week. A PhD student from China, he spoke English very well, but blushed when I did not understand his major, although I probably wouldn’t have understood it in perfect English either, something having to do with electronics and circuit boards. His wife was nicknamed “Bo.” Married for only a few months, she had moved to the U.S. with
him, giving up an economics career and her family to support him while he worked on
his degree. Unemployed, speaking English hesitantly, spending most of her day
watching television, Bo spoke quietly, usually staring at her small hands as she talked,
Xiaolin often interrupting her, explaining, “no, no, sorry, she is wrong. She means
this.” I learned to curb my tendency to scold Xiaolin for hushing or interrupting her as
I began to see how different cultures interact, and what a woman’s place may be. I
noticed they rarely touched.

During our experience, I became hyper-aware of my speech, carefully
choosing my words, evaluating them before speaking to decide if they were easy
words, spoken clearly, and slowly, without slang unless I wanted to explain it. After
meeting with them, I still spoke English carefully when I came home, my roommates
teasing because they said I talked to them like children. I studied the English language
more, preparing myself to use new words with Xiaolin and Bo, to explain their
meanings, and practicing describing American holidays and customs. I became an
American culture guide, explaining street names, terms on health insurance forms and
political cartoons, and why the hamburgers they tried from McDonalds were always
served cold. I gave them their first taste of butter and cheese to explain the difference.

As our tutoring continued, their English improved – although Bo also attended
an English Language class – and Bo became more assertive. She was only a few years
older than I was. “Gretchen, I see girls out lying in the grass, in the sun. They wear
only small suit here and here.”

“A bikini? Two pieces?”

“Yeah. And what they doing on the grass?”
"Sun tanning?" I asked. Seeing her confusion, "getting their skin darker."

"But, why?! In China, the beautiful girls are white. We stay out of the sun."

"In America, it is beautiful to be dark and tan. It’s a cultural preference."

Whenever I explained American culture, it sounded odd for the first time.

"I think is strange," Bo said, shaking her head. "To be white is more beautiful. But I like their two-pieces. I want that suit."

Xiaolin, blushing, put his arm in front of Bo. "No. Is not good. Is not right."

Bo pushed his arm, "I am talking to Gretchen. They’re cute. He does not like."

"Of course, they may be good for some. But it is too revealing. Not decent."

"I think it is okay," she smiled at me. "I think Gretchen probably has one, too."

I admired how hard they tried, rarely speaking Chinese around me and refusing to teach me a word. "It is very hard," Xiaolin explained one day. "She is so brave." He spoke softly, barely audible, and patted Bo’s leg. "To leave her home and her family to be here with me is brave."

She touched his hand. "I want to be with you. I am happy to be with you," her eyes glimmering. Her life especially seemed isolated, alone with an English-speaking TV for company, away from family and comfort. I wondered how she managed. They tried so hard to learn. And Bo even got a job working at a Chinese buffet, so I taught her phrases to memorize: "would you like something to drink? Can I get you something to drink?" Still, I wished I could’ve made it easier for them, or met them in the middle with some Chinese.
I know “Restaurant Spanish,” enough to ask for certain items from the
dishwasher or to ask my busser for a favor. But because my Spanish is limited, and
because most of the restaurants I’ve worked in hire kitchen and bussing staff that
speak little English, communication can be difficult. It was hard to know which staff
spoke English, or if it was appropriate to address them in Spanish. If I asked a cook,
“dónde está mi pollo para mi ensalada?” would he feel relieved that I asked him in
Spanish where was the chicken for my salad? Or would he feel insulted because I
assumed that his complexion and Spanish-sounding name – Luis, Poncho, Jesus –
meant he didn’t understand English? Whichever language I chose, I usually felt
foolish.

But Sonia made it easy, letting me practice Spanish on her and teaching her a
little English. At my last restaurant job, she worked as a busser, a plump woman only
two years older than I was, who spoke only few words in English. Every day she
asked me, “what’s up?” And I replied, “nada mucha,” to which she shook her head in
mocking disgust. We had to dumb our languages down to talk, as we would do with
children. But I thought, since we were so close in age, maybe we had things in
common.

On break, she smoked on the back porch while I sat on a milk crate. “Mi
esposo,” she looked closely to see if I understood, exhaling a long cloud of smoke.
“Sí,” I acknowledged. “Mi... husband” she tried. “We marry ten years. Diez años.
This Octubre.” She already had three children, her oldest daughter nine years old, and
she had been married for ten years. “He, mi husband, work for una restaurante, as
dishwasher.” I wondered how a family of five survived on the wages of a dishwasher
and a busser as I watched her flick ash. In Colorado, where we worked, bussers made only $5.00 an hour plus tips, which ranged from $5-$15 from each server depending on the business that night. On a busy Friday night, when she ran and bussed and watered tables and worked harder than most servers, Sonia probably only took home $60 from her only job. I wondered where they lived and how they afforded rent in that trendy tourist town.

“Ellos speak English, mi children. Necesito aprender English.” She shook her head, putting out her cigarette. We had completely different lives. But she was kind and tried to speak with me everyday. We spoke Spanglish and had only a vague understanding of each other, which made me wonder if we would have even liked each other if we spoke the same language.
Boundaries

His office was cold with all its windows, and my seat felt uncomfortably straight. “I’m concerned about you,” he said over the wide desk. “How are you doing in graduate school?”


“My wife mentioned that you are taking four classes this term. That’s quite a lot of work in graduate school, in addition to working. Most students only take two or three classes a term.” I watched his hands move as he talked, his short fingers and shiny nails, as I shifted in the hard chair. Clearing my throat, I explained the advice that people I respected, people I felt indebted to, had given me. It sounded logical. Taking classes now so I might be able to teach next year.

“It’s just that in graduate school, you learn so much more. You can’t rush through it. You need time to really learn the material.” I felt the blood rushing to my face. “Do you feel like you’re really learning?”

I cleared my throat and shrugged again. He must know his wife had given me a Rewrite for my essay in her class that morning. I envisioned them sitting at the breakfast table over coffee, she leaning over to say “Gretchen’s not doing very well,” and maybe giving him a knowing look, an apology for recommending me to him as an assistant, and he shaking his head.

I shifted my weight; “everyone told me graduate school would be difficult so I guess I expected it.” I did not say that I didn’t think it should be as difficult as it was, or that I cried most nights trying to understand the readings and trying to complete them on time, that I wondered how anyone else got through it, and that I felt stressed,
like I should always be reading, like I was failing every moment I set my book down. I felt guilty for everything I did that wasn’t studying. But I assumed that’s what graduate school was like, a life of complete study, which is why not everyone went to graduate school. Thinking about school made me feel nauseous, my stomach anxious, my head light, like drinking too much coffee. I wanted to go to the bathroom, rest my arms on the toilet seat, and stay there. It didn’t feel normal. I expected reading more in graduate school, concentrating harder, writing and editing my papers sooner. No one told me how I’d feel.

I fantasized about dropping out, the joy and the rebelliousness I would feel snapping up a newspaper, flipping to the classifieds and finding a restaurant job. But I felt a queasy guilt when I considered what I’d tell people about quitting. They’d assume I failed out, which wouldn’t bother me as much as me thinking I would eventually regret quitting, one day looking at myself in the mirror before work, believing I just didn’t try hard enough. That fear kept me going.

He shuffled through stacks of papers on his desk, explaining that he could help me withdraw from a class. I nodded and twisted my scarf off, ran it through my fingers on my lap, and looked out the window, feeling I had failed somehow. I sat up straight, trying to look confident. Picking up the phone, he decided I should talk to his wife, a member of my English department, and he told her I would be right down to her office. I tried to keep my face calm. She was the last person I wanted to talk to that day, again, after I had already blushed hard during her office hours, hearing why my essay did not meet the requirements and how I should rewrite the essay that had
already taken me twice as long to write as anything I’d written before. He hung up smiling and told me where her office was.

Yellow and brown leaves plastered the sidewalk, packed down by pelting rain and rushing students. I trudged along, pulling my red hood tighter around my head as I passed under the dripping trees lining the sidewalk. The only time I remember walking slower was in elementary school when we lived facing my school playground and I walked to school up the gravel road, through the fence and blackberry bushes, and across the empty playground every day, late. My mom bought me a raincoat, black and puffy, which she nicknamed “the black storm cloud” because I pouted and begged every morning to stay home, and often turned around midway to school, running back down the gravel road, coat flying like a dark cape, as she watched from the window.

In graduate classes, I played my part and sat in what was too large to be a good discussion class, watching the clock above the blackboard. I remembered that my friend Ben and I used to drive to the coast on rainy days like these, picking up some 40oz and Sunny-D on our way, then walking along the jetty feeling the rain and wind pushing us back, running in slow motion against the wind and then as Olympic athletes with it, returning to campus at daybreak. He was my male-counterpart, our birthdays only two days apart, because we shared ideas about life and I liked how he referred to friends as “companions.” But we were mostly opposites: he was religious and I was agnostic; he was overly-social and I was shy; he worked the night shift at a grocery store in Portland, driving there on weeknights because he refused to find a new job, able to see himself making a career out of the corporate climbing and
wondering why he was in college, and I stayed in college for fear of his reality being mine. He only wanted a family.

Class discussion bounced between the usual students. Occasionally, I commented, feeling that more was probably expected of me now that I was graduate student. Surely they thought I was shy or stuck up since I did not speak much in class; I didn’t have anything I wanted to say. Sometimes, I listened closely, trying to take notes and follow the conversations, but discussion seemed pointless. It seemed that English majors had a knack for playing off small points of another’s comment, and twisting it into a radically different comment that seemed unrelated to me. I struggled to follow the logic. We sat in that stuffy room discussing broad, subjective intellectual concepts while most of the time, I observed the cracks in the paint or the fluorescent gleam of the floor, things that were more real and tangible, and wondered about people dying all over the world right at that moment. Does anyone care? Shouldn’t we talk about something relevant, something practical? Something that could solve problems? I forgot why I had been interested in literature and writing in the first place.

I drug my feet on the way to her office, wishing I had time to get coffee and prepare. I could handle talking to him by just watching his hands move, concentrating on his watch slipping down his arm when he raised his hand too high. With her, I was afraid I would cry.

Her office was hot and a little dark despite the windows. We sat at a large table in the middle of the room, but she chose the seat closest to me and leaned in, her arm resting on the table. I wondered what she was thinking. “How are you doing?” she asked, in a way that reminded me of my mother, of how much I missed her support
and how lonely I felt in the department. Even the classmates I liked only talked just quickly before and after class, rushing to their next thing, dropping the last word and sliding out the door before I could say that we should hang out. I felt like I barely knew anyone, though I’d been in that department as an undergraduate. All the other first-year graduate students seemed to be doing fine. I thought I was the only one who wasn’t handling the lifestyle well. It felt cold and distant, the intellectual writing and discussions about literature impersonal, joyless and without meaning, without sharing it as a community.

And I measured myself against a graduate student I met the year before, a young woman who spoke up in class with examples from underground newspapers, angry and political and brilliant. She dressed in black, a dress suit, sophisticated with slightly healed shoes, black hose, her hair pulled into a low ponytail, opinionated, educated. I’d never heard of Foucault, or Stanley Fish, or Bahktin, Marxist theory, Machiavel, Derrida, or Freire, whom she quoted like family.

So when my professor leaned in, the office stuffy and too cluttered, and looked me in the eyes and asked, “how are you doing?” I felt my control slip away. I shrugged, keeping my lips and knees tight, and pushing my hands under my legs. Already intimidated by her intelligence, already guarding my words, I forced answers to sound intelligent, inwardly chanting “think fast, sound like I understand. Hide my frustration, and fear, and inadequacy.” Maybe she said something else. Maybe she told me it was okay, or maybe she just looked at me. She was an intelligent, capable woman with a Ph.D. and knowledge and experience, a woman who held her own and surely had never broken down and cried in front of her professors when she was a
student. I just let it go and sobbed. Sputtering, I tried to apologize, to somehow explain
I didn’t mean to think of her like a mother, didn’t mean to be a weak woman.

She sat up quickly and looked surprised. She glanced around the room for
something. An escape? Someone to help? She reached over to the bookcase and
grabbed a box of Kleenex. I thought she looked uncomfortable and wondered what she
thought as I reached, shaking and red, for a Kleenex. The sobbing wouldn’t stop; the
hotness overwhelmed my face. I tried to brace myself with the table and the chair, but
I just couldn’t get the words out to apologize. My head pounded. She talked about
stress and about still being able to drop classes. “Are you worried about failing out?” I
shook my head, and nodded, because I thought that was not what I meant. It was not
only about failing. It had something to do with owing them, the faculty who took a
chance on me, who seemed to believe in me. It had to do with letting them down,
people who did not have to take a chance on me. And it had to do with feeling alone.

I tried to talk. Through my gasping and sobbing. Broken pieces. Harsh stops to
my words. But I just managed to nod my head, slipping out a “yeah” to her questions.
“You can do this,” she said, nodding and offering me another Kleenex. I stood,
adjusting my scarf as she watched me still with concern. Like I might just scream and
run out of the office. Like I might try to hug her. Or I might throw down my backpack,
sit back down, and cry again. I broke the boundary between us, so I slipped my
backpack on and mumbled a “thank you” as I left.
Falling

I built up my courage and asked him to go hiking with me after work. That summer, I waitressed at a restaurant at 7,500 feet, midway up Mt. Bachelor in a ski lodge open for summer tourism. Mom had been nagging me to do something, spend some time together, and make the effort to invite him out instead of waiting for his invitation. “Will you be hiking with your friends, or me?” he asked, eyes downcast, in the same sad way my brother Joe used to ask if he could sleep in my room for the night. I assured him it would be just us, and worked out the logistics of how he could meet me at the restaurant so we could hike up the mountain from there, another 2,000 feet to the summit, while my anxiety about this date with Dad grew.

Most pictures of me at a young age are me and my father, and in my favorite, he plays the harmonica lying on the couch with me, a toddler in a bulky diaper, hanging off the edge playing my miniature version as the dog barks along. He used to take me to the movie theater where he snuck in candy corn bought from the gas station, plastic crinkle giving us away, and he taught me how to ride my bike down the hill in our backyard, attended all my sports events, and volunteered as a coach in whatever sport I played. But in sports, he never let me win, pushing right past me in basketball to keep his score at least ten points above mine, or ending our never-friendly jog with a full-out sprint for the garage. Until the day I beat him, when I was sixteen, after weeks of his bragging about being a better runner, when we extended our six mile run to eighteen miles, which left him sweating and breathing hard and jogging just faster than a walk, proving to me that he was mortal and that I was growing up.
He is a quiet man, Mom explained, putting on an old record of Pablo Cruise singing “I love you in My Own Quiet Way.” Some people are just quiet about their feelings, she said, despite my insistence that he tell me. I used to stand in their bedroom doorway after I kissed him goodnight, waiting, repeating “I love you Dad;” “I love you;” “Hey, Dad, I love you,” until he finally turned from the TV and replied more than “okay, goodnight.”

On the phone, he still too anxiously hands it over to Mom. If she answers when I call, she slyly asks if I would like to talk to him, already forcing the phone on him. I freeze, the words sticking in my mouth, my mind scrambled, discomfort filling the line, seeping into me, leaving me desperate to say anything to fill the silence. Part of growing up has meant that he doesn’t know what to say to me when I no longer play sports, and when I study literature he never read, and date men he refuses to know. My friends of ten years have barely heard him say ten words because he gets shy. And, Mom explained, he’s never been good at talking to women.

But I think it also involves a moment when I was twelve, angry at him for making me do yard work, pulling sagebrush on a hot afternoon in our dusty yard in Central Oregon, when he slipped in my nickname, jokingly, “Little Missy.” Irritated, I snapped back, “I’m not little. And I’m not your missy,” immediately regretting my comment, nearly to tears, as I saw his face turn away, and knew he’d never call me that again.

We have minimal conversation, which Mom insists is not what matters to him as much as just being in the same room. But being interested in communication, in meanings and words and connecting, I struggle to feel okay without regularly talking,
feeling that we barely have a relationship because we don’t know what to say to each other, and wondering how such different personalities can really be from the same family.

Our hike started from my restaurant, a worn trail winding its way around the top of the mountain, starting from the service road, which was supposed to be the easiest way to summit. Otherwise, the 2000 feet from the lodge to the summit was steep boulder fields with a few remaining snowfields. Since the mountain was a ski resort and the only vegetation at our altitude was stubby trees, there was no strict leave-no-trace/ stay-on-trails policy, but gauging Dad’s fitness level and accounting for his lack of altitude adjustment, I led us along the service road. Because the road led down the mountain before reaching the trail to go up, we were walking downhill. Within minutes, he announced that walking downhill was counterproductive and, pointing straight uphill, suggested “let’s just go up,” as he headed for the bank leading to the boulder fields.

The hiking, therefore, was challenging. We pulled over boulders and worked our way past rock obstacles, heading for what I knew was the false summit from that angle, the true summit hidden. But, with utmost authority, he asserted that his approach would work as I followed politely. The difficulty did allow us comfortable silence together, filled with heavy breathing and his occasional “whoo” as he reached for the water bottle tucked in his backpack. It was hot, just after 4pm and the sun felt like it was directly over the mountain. The slight wind only picked up cinder dust and blew it our direction.
I felt exposed. There were no trees, just boulders tumbled down the mountainside and the sun beating down. I regretted my planned hike, realizing that starting in the trees would have been better, more sheltered, more conducive for talking and feeling at ease with each other. So I hiked on caught in my own thoughts wondering what I hoped to accomplish by this hike, or if the purpose was just chalking up time together. I wanted change, some feeling that we were growing and creating a grand memory together, so that when I went home, he would grab my shoulder and remind me about this hike we took together. Our entire relationship felt at stake.

Although hiking and mountaineering can always be dangerous, most accidents happen on the descent. Unlike the ascent when, red faced, he struggled and huffed, going down Dad leapt easily from boulder to boulder. I followed on the rocks he chose.

I had a recurring dream as a child, a nightmare: our family was camping, and Dad and I were returning to the campsite on a mountain dirt road. On one side, the mountain rose high, but on the other, the ground dropped away hundreds of feet to a rushing river teeming with snapping alligators. Tall rock pillars standing in the river were even with the road, their round tops paralleling in height, like stepping stones. Dad
yelled, “Come on; short cut,” and he jumped from the road to the nearest pillar and began hopping from pillar to pillar further away. Trying to follow, I struggled to catch my balance each time I landed, lunging over the edge high above the river, arms swinging. And then, I started to fall backward. Which is when I awoke.

Trying not to jinx myself while we hiked, I pushed the dream from my mind and instead linked hiking with Dad to my favorite book, Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*. In one chapter, the characters climb a mountain together, picking their way through a boulder field, and Japhy relates boulder-hopping to Zen Buddhism, a metaphor for life: “don’t think. Just dance along.” And Ray tells his hero, “Ah Japhy you taught me the final lesson of them all, you can’t fall off a mountain,” as they enjoy their peace and company and nature. I almost mentioned it to Dad, but he wouldn’t understand my connection even if I explained it. So I kept quiet and followed.

Then I did fall. My running shoes slipped off a boulder as I stepped down, the rock shifting under my weight, and I fell, straddling the rock, legs spread in two directions and one wedging into a crack. The shock hurt more than the fall, although, as I stood, I noticed my hand and legs were cut, and blood was streaming sticky into my sock. The cuts stung in the dusty wind, but nothing was broken or needed stitches. Dad heard me cry out as I fell, turned, and looked at me more confused than concerned. Perhaps he wondered why I cried out, or what he would do if I’d broken anything and needed to be carried down.

“Are you okay?” he asked, shielding his eyes from the sun and looking at me with his eyebrows pushed together, his mouth open slightly. Noticing his body still
turned downhill, I said I was okay, untying my extra shirt from my waist and dobbing the blood.

"Okay," he said, continuing down without another word. I expected he’d come over and look, have something in his bag to help, offer a hand. "Okay" was all he said, and resumed the hike. And although I wished he’d helped, somehow feeling lonely standing there, shirt pressed to my shin, I felt like an adult when he left it at "okay," and I limped to catch up.

But it was that event that broke the tension, that or reaching the service road winding down the mountain through the trees and the blooming gully meadows. We began to talk, and I explained my Masters program and work at the restaurant, to which he nodded politely. He told me stories I’d never heard about his training and education as a district attorney, seminars on detecting the causes of fires and on how fires spread, his busts with the DEA, and his teaching community college classes, all of which fit in with experiences I’d heard from friends, feeling oddly congruent in a way I had not expected. He stopped and pointed to a wildflower, pulling out his camera to take its picture, and I realized I’d never known how much he loved wildflowers. He explained where it grew, and the fields of them he’d seen while hunting in the Wallowas. And walking with him, listening to the stories, and feeling like a fellow adult, I thought he felt more like a person, not just my father, but a person who had habits and interests and personality quirks that were uniquely his, and that affected how he interacted with everyone. So I felt like leaving it all on the mountain—my insecurities and issues and conflicts—to be buried under the winter’s snow, to be crushed into the cinder dust, leaving me free to walk down the mountain feeling
accomplished, and climbing into my dad’s truck and driving home together as the sun set behind our mountain.
Sitting in Café Roma recently, I reminisced coming there with Maria, remembering that she once knew the cashiers by name as I examined the room she liked: cozy and academic, student photography on the yellow walls. The café was filled with students quietly studying except for the two people sitting a few feet from my table, whose conversation about treating diseases caught my attention. The young woman, dark hair pulled back and bright lipstick, mentioned her application for a fellowship as the man tucked long blond curls under his knit hat, nodding. He must have been her writing tutor because he asked her questions about her ambitions and reassured her that he would help. Looking down, she seemed unconvinced; she’d heard the fellowship was competitive, students applying from across the U.S. And, after all, who was she to compete with students from Harvard?

They pulled out a draft, and she explained the requirements as he discussed strategies. I kept thinking about her question: “who am I to compete with kids from Harvard,” wondering, who is she to not? And I felt compelled to help them.

Writing is an important form of communication, a powerful skill that enables me to communicate my meaning, and I realized then that my interest is not only in communicating myself, but also in helping people communicate, to participate, and to understand each other, helping them find their talents to enable them to pursue whatever goal they want, to feel empowered. My experiences with my language-learning friends were thus rewarding. I could, limitedly, help them because they only asked that I listen, encourage them to speak, and let them practice communicating. They wanted to share language with me. We experienced similar feelings of exclusion,
although for different reasons and to different degrees, all struggling to belong and to communicate ourselves to others. I felt honored to offer them that tutorage.

Ultimately, the belonging I felt lacking in my personal life I sought in my education. I hoped for connection to my own life not only with literature, but also with the lives of my classmates and professors. I was drawn to English by the opportunity to read others’ stories, to connect in intimate ways with others’ thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears, and to share my experiences and my interpretations as valid contributions to a community of readers. I hoped for classrooms that Judith A. Langer describes in *Envisioning Literature*, classrooms that encourage students to share their multiple perspectives, enriching each other’s interpretations of texts in understanding context, culture, their own ideas and subjectivity, and each others’, and allowing them to see literature as a social activity (79).

However, for whatever reason, I believed that in academia I needed to divorce my emotions and personal life from my intellectual pursuits. Robert Probst, in “Five Kinds of Literary Knowing,” argues that “[e]fforts to make students read closely have tended to do so by asking them to suppress their own feelings and ignore their own associations and memories, and that is likely to make reading distant and falsely objective, rather than close” (61). Wendy Atwell-Vassey supports this in “The Conflict Between Private Reading and Public Reading,” as she asserts that classrooms try “to address the collective quality of the classroom by focusing on those aspects of texts that are common to all” (25). Like the students Atwell-Vassey discusses, I came to think of “individual response as private and irrelevant to public life” (26). Yet I could never accept the feeling that these were separate. I felt frustrated thinking that
the university was an irrelevant place for personal stories, then more frustrated that I
still wanted my experiences to merge, to feel congruent, and to enhance each other.

True, I adapted well to writing researched academic essays, which fulfilled my
mind in a unique way. But I became more interested in composition theories that
focused on more personal connections with literature. I was hungry for a sense of
practicality and meaning, inspired by Allen Carey-Webb’s Literature and Lives, in
which he argued for a reader response/ cultural studies approach to English that would
“further and more compellingly elaborate the connection between literature and lives”
(7) by creating classrooms based on “thematic curriculums… with a particular
emphasis on how those issues touch real people in the present day” (8). I was looking
for answers, feeling empty in my heart towards my education.

Jane Tompkins expresses similar dissatisfaction in her autobiography A Life in
School: What the Teacher Learned, in which she analyzes her experiences with
education and ultimately criticizes our education systems for not focusing “on the
inner lives of students” (xxi). She argues that school “never turned our gaze toward
ourselves or each other. It never suggested that we might reach out to one another”
(xv), and instead, that the “integrating function [was] left entirely to the student”
(222). I found Tompkins’s exploration of her educational experiences similar to my
own, thankful to read that someone shared my feelings. What Tompkins would like to
see from education is “an attitude toward learning that accepts the importance of the
inner life,” that helps students deal with their real problems, that “recognize[s] that a
person must learn how to be with other people, how to love, how to take criticism”
(xvi). She suggests that a holistic approach to education “would address the need for
purpose and for connectedness to ourselves and one another; it would not leave us alone to wander the world armed with plenty of knowledge but lacking the skills to handle the things that are coming up in our lives” (xvi). Like Tompkins, I wanted education to help me integrate my knowledge and my personal life, to help me learn to communicate better, to create relationships, and to function in a community. But when I believed education did not bridge those gaps, I blamed my unhappiness on myself. Or maybe I just felt inadequate, like Parker Palmer, who explains in *Let Your Life Speak* that he masked his fear of inadequacy as a scholar by rejecting the university (28).

Whatever the cause, this frustration exploded with my professor when I could not divide myself from my feelings, could not just be the professional intellectual that I wanted to be. I believed as Tompkins did in her essay “Me and My Shadow” that “you can’t talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that [your work] has nothing to do with your life, that it’s more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) *transcends* the merely personal” (25). But I also could not ignore my private life. All my fears of my inadequacy to communicate, of my inability to suppress my personal feelings with my intellectual thoughts, and of my failures in and outside of school were amplified by my overwhelming desire to be real with my professor and to feel supported and justified in my feelings. But in how I communicated with her, I felt weak and ashamed for crying, an inappropriate behavior for the academic atmosphere. Yet, after this outburst, I felt humbled, which somehow made me believe I had been wrong about the possibilities in academia.
This, in turn, changed my outlook on my personal life and the possibilities of communicating there. For years, I felt distant from my father, disappointed by the lack of intimacy and connection that I felt missing because of our lack of conversation. But during our hike, I realized that I might have misunderstood him and how he communicated with me without words. I understood, at least, what I felt was missing. And that day, I decided that I could accept what he could give, and how he knew to interact. I could handle people being different and conversations being different. So I felt more comfortable in my home life, although there was still more I wanted from communities and connections.
I felt like I had not talked to anyone in weeks. Although I talked to my parents, and walked with my mother up the butte in Bend almost every day, laboring over personal issues and dealing with my recent graduation, with moving home, and with each of my close friends moving to other states and cities, I had not talked to anyone my age for nearly a month. I already missed my English classes' discussion groups that I thought I'd be happy to leave. So when Richard, the manager at my new job, though my same age, asked me to join him and a coworker for milkshakes after work, I was overjoyed.

At the café, we sat out on the deck, shielded from the late afternoon sun by a striped umbrella that cast patches of color on the glass table. I kept my drink close, both hands gripping the cold plastic cup, content to listen to Richard and Erin chatting about coworkers I did not know, thankful to hear new voices and new conversation, and feeling like a newcomer to my hometown. They were nearly the only ones my age that I knew in town, my new friends. They tried to include me in the conversation by asking about my education, but I felt it always somehow alienated me from coworkers, as Erin sat back in her chair and added that she never had the discipline to finish school, rubbing her stomach and changing the conversation to her pregnancy. When she got up to leave, I thought I'd only stay a few minutes longer talking to Richard, and I kept my seat on the other side of the picnic table although the sun blinded me. But without Erin, I felt more comfortable talking, Richard being the better conversationalist and now focusing his attention on me. At first, I hesitated, worrying
that he would think of me as just a simple girl, just a waitress, or that he would just flirt. I wanted to be bright, whether or not his looking at me meant he liked me. He encouraged me to talk about my education: I discussed classes I’d taken, the ones I found interesting but rarely found occasion to include in conversation, ones that he had taken also at OSU when he was a student there years before, or classes that he seemed interested in hearing about. I talked on, feeling suddenly intelligent and articulate, something I hadn’t felt during most of college. He nodded and smiled and made comments that added richly to what I was saying.

Our conversation took off, shifting topics and issues with ease, from English to philosophy to religion and death. We laughed, felt witty, moved our hands in the sun as we talked. My mind sparked, neurons linking ideas and insights from Richard’s comments, and I wondered if my courses and critical thinking were all practice for conversations like this. I made new connections I have never considered, thinking of Lewis Thomas writing in “The Tucson Zoo” about “hear[ing] shouts across [his] corpus callosum, from one hemisphere to the other,” and finally understanding exactly what he meant. One of those rare conversations that happens once every few years with someone unexpected. And I switched chairs around the table, trying to find a place where the sun, as it set behind Richard, was not directly in my eyes when I looked at him, until I was sitting next to him, without a wonder of how much time had passed. And impressed by his insight, I studied Richard closer, his brown eyes, the light behind his face, suddenly thinking how handsome he looked with the mountains behind him, although I worried an attraction would cheapen our intellectual
atmosphere. But I could not remember the last time I had such a good conversation, a conversation that lasted for hours.

Eventually, a café employee stepped onto the deck to shake out mats and roll in the unused tables. So we walked to our cars to check the time since Richard was supposed to meet his manager for dinner that night. But over three hours had passed and he was already late. He joked that we might have nothing to say to each other, as we fingered our car keys, and agreed to do homework – to listen to NPR, to read the newspaper – to bring something to our next conversation, just in case we had exhausted ourselves. We hugged goodbye awkwardly, not knowing how to end, and I threw in a quote from Lindbergh’s Gifts from the Sea: “good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.” He promised to take his lunch break with me the next day, as he finally got into his truck. Driving home, I couldn’t stop smiling, still enjoying the connection and the energy and sense of belonging.
I couldn’t wait to move, to get distance between us, thinking I needed to go somewhere, needed to learn something my family and friends could not teach. So Richard and I moved to Colorado for the summer, anxious to be leaving Oregon, to explore and see new country. We drove through Bend to see my family before we started the two day drive, where I kissed Mom and told her it would be okay – 1000 miles being nothing. I looked back at the driveway as we left, Richard grabbing my hand saying “here we go,” as Mom waved with both her arms and blew kisses. She turned to go into the house, so I knew she was crying. I wondered if I’d miss it.

As soon as we were in Colorado, we romanticized Oregon. Every co-worker, every customer who showed a moment’s interest, every new friend, we told of Oregon. People always added that they wanted to drive Highway 101 along the Oregon Coast, visiting the cheese factory, and buying saltwater taffy and shot glasses with lighthouses and kites. So we felt the need to inform them about all aspects of Oregon: the cold and wet beaches lined with driftwood and scotch bloom and wind-twisted trees, the Valley’s summer flowers and berries, and warm, sticky, lackadaisical feeling of long anticipated sun and full rivers, and the Cascades’ dark red peaks, the high desert growing in browns and dark greens with fields of wild sage and pines, and rain that I can’t smell, falling with a low thud into sandy dirt, the perfume of juniper and sage growing strong in the air.

Where we were living in north-eastern Colorado, we could look outside our small rented trailer and see the Rocky Mountains, 4,000 feet taller than Oregon’s
mountains, where hikers must be below tree line after noon due to thunderstorms, where nothing lives but lichen and inch-tall grasses that take hundreds of years to grow. Of course it was beautiful there, with breathtaking mountains and high alpine forests. We left Oregon to see something else, complaining of the Valley’s rain, and how the fog kept people down, and the wetness kept everything cold. We dreamed of sunny mountains and places without the worry of school or rain or our struggles. But once living in Colorado, we looked forward to September.

I especially felt a profound sense of loneliness. States away from family and friends for the first time, with only Richard and our friend Jake who also came, I cried almost daily. My adventurous spirit was overshadowed by homesickness for the people and the land. I even missed the rocks in Oregon. Richard, because of his companionship with Jake and their hobby of rock climbing, felt this to a lesser degree. And the friends I hoped to make, our new coworkers, had already established their social groups, so I felt intrusive and awkward when we joined them after work at the bars. And all the women already had their best girl friend, so I had little connection with anyone except Richard, Jake, a few coworkers who barely spoke English, and those I talked to on the phone.

Talking about Oregon was a connection. I wanted a button so people would know I was from Oregon because I shared something with anyone who mentioned it, and I sought these people out, my ears listening for the word like a traveler in a foreign country listening for a stranger to speak in her home language. Oregon became a more beautiful place than we ever noticed living there. Every new site we compared to Oregon. And every helpful person or new friend reminded us of someone in
Oregon, so we missed people that we barely remembered. Despite my feelings at graduate school, and my frustration toward some relationships, I suddenly loved being from Oregon, as if meant belonging to something bigger, a community that shares a love of the places we live. Oregon was home. I understood being from somewhere.
Instigation

Roseanne stared at me across our office and asked what I thought of her hair, if it was too Scott Baio, the cut she had settled for, short and messy, when the hairdresser refused to cut a mullet. I smiled. She reminded me of the kind of people I admired and always wanted to befriend, and sometimes did, those with wild sudden comments and nonchalant wit and atypical wardrobes, a flare of energy and innovation. I felt all at once too preppy with a one-tone cable-knit sweater, clogs, matching belt, highlighted hair pulled back, annoyingly common. Yet she drew me out by her forwardness and confidence, allowed me to be quirky and random and honest. She struggled with graduate school also, with remembering her motivation to complete it, with remembering the purpose of studying literature and teaching writing, and feeling, sometimes, defeated and low.

She dropped the book she'd been reading into a heap of books on her desk, papers scattering onto the floor, and she leaned closer as I typed on our computer. She breathed deep through her open mouth, faintly smiling. “Will you tell me, ‘Roseanne, you’re killing Mommy’?” She raised her eyebrows slyly, and bit her lip. I did not understand the reference.

“Roseanne? You’re killing Mommy?” I asked. She smiled, laughing slightly, then leaned in again, her face straight and hands clenched, enthusiastic, eager. “Yeah, but, can you say it like you mean it?!”
I turned from the computer, eyes and face serious: “Roseanne, you’re killing Mommy!” She snapped her head back laughing and lay back in her chair, kicking one tan boot up as she laughed heartily. I smiled and giggled, still not understanding.
Conclusion

“When will we learn to take the trough of the wave?”
-Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gifts from the Sea

These experiences are not mine alone because, surely, others can understand the struggle, frustration, want, and need for community and connection. In Teaching as Believing, Chris Anderson asserts that personal writing is never truly personal, but caught up in something else (85). And Robert Scholes stresses that personal chronicles attempt to connect the personal to the historical (119). The personal cannot help but reflect and alter elements of the master narrative of its age, connecting it to collective experiences and community. Reflecting on what our historical situation may be, I am at a loss to explain it, except to say that our culture seems nearly obsessed by communication and ever-advancing technology to help us “reach out,” with cellular phones, and faster internet connections for email, text messages, and blogging programs. And despite this mania for communication, it does not seem to have been successful in my life in creating stronger, more intimate relationships. Yet my narrative is part of this larger historical and cultural moment, even if it offers a variation.

In this sense, all personal narratives are representative of their cultures and also texts of that culture. Robert Scholes asserts that the whole human condition is a textual condition because “much of what happens to us... falls into patterns... in the culture” (78). We live, to a degree, in scripted codes of language use and communication, but it is important to acknowledge when these codes are inhibiting relationships instead of helping us recognize our common experiences, or when these codes are altered. We
value writing and texts because they give meaning to “events of our ordinary lives” (77); they help us understand our communication as well as enable us to communicate. Scholes stresses that the importance of reading texts – and I would include writing texts – “is to understand the world itself as a text and to be able to read it critically” (103). To do so, we need to recognize that the unspoken is crucial, shaping what is spoken, and that what is missing or unclear should be our concern just as much as what is present and clear, to help us understand our communication and ourselves as participants in rhetoric.

Yet interpersonal communication is different than reading literature or writing. Reading people is more challenging than reading a book, though both activities are filled with our assumptions and interpretations. Reading people is less accurate because many verbal and nonverbal messages can be interpreted in multiple ways to mean quite different things. Conversing with someone is more complex than writing because I respond, react, and revise my words, all instantaneously, all in a dialogue. Writing could be considered dialogic if, as David Danow asserts, “we consider dialogue to occur as soon as there exists a medium by which a response is articulated” (115), theoretically. Generally, however, writers anticipate readers’ responses but do not always receive them, and do not receive them in the process of writing.

In writing this thesis, I also complicate these moments of communication because I am not entirely forthright. I omit things, and I leave things unsaid. I claim to want more explicitness in communication, but then I am not explicit myself. Raymond Carver explains his theory of writing as “no tricks.” Even so, in his short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” Carver very cleverly describes four
friends sitting around a table drinking and talking about what love is, indirectly and implicitly, almost reaching a thesis statement, almost getting to it. But they hold back, only alluding to the fact that love perhaps cannot be defined. In this thesis, even in articulating these experiences, I perhaps write too tersely, leaving too many gaps, or failing to grab my audience’s interest. And I also communicate my frustrations not orally, but in writing, and to an audience uninvolved with the relationships. Tricky.

As a writer, I make readers listen; I force myself on you. As Joan Didion notes, writing is active and forceful, the act “of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind” (172), a way for me to impose on your “most private space,” and make you share my experiences. Yet what I truly want from you, what I search and yearn for from all my relationships, you, as my readers, cannot provide me, not directly. Didion’s style, Anderson argues, with its parataxis and authorial silence, forces readers to participate by creating those links and filling in gaps (176). Does my writing engage readers? Do my experiences connect with collective experiences? Do I draw people nearer with my language? Does my writing bridge the gap between us – does it cross, or fall in? And can I finally accept the challenges of communication? Can I accept the intermittency of relationships? Can I “learn to take the trough of the wave?”

We had one visitor in Colorado, despite our efforts to encourage everyone we knew to visit while we lived in the Rockies. Jen, my friend from high school, was passing through from Annapolis, heading to Santa Barbara after graduating from the Naval Academy and before beginning a Masters program. Despite her living on the East Coast for the past four years, I saw her once a year when she drove or flew back
to Oregon, though her parents now live in Florida, to visit friends with whom she didn’t keep in touch. Since high school, I often wrote her letters, maintaining my promise, because she left for college without much support and without knowing anyone there, and because I was afraid no one else would write.

Thus, Jen knows more about me than most people because I wrote her long, rambling letters about whatever, mostly ignorant of my audience, caught in my own thoughts and re-interpretations of events, which I then shoved in an envelope and mailed. But she seemed to enjoy the spontaneity of it, reminding me how she liked randomness when I mailed her a shoebox of various items: my fourth-grade softball award, pictures of my room, an orange crayon, cutout magazine stories, puzzle pieces. I usually wrote during class lectures, so my letters were eclectic, including class notes and commentary, as well as diagrams when I could not quite explain something. She rarely responded, sending one letter for every five of mine.

Each year when she visited, since she usually stayed with me, I agonized about entertaining her. Unlike other girlfriends with whom I could sit and talk and let the conversation flow, with Jen I felt uncomfortable and unprepared. She never divulged much information. The deepest thing I knew was that she was in love with her best friend Kevin, and had been for years, and never told him. Otherwise, she rarely talked about herself, her military experience, her social life, her family, her politics, or much of anything, even when I pried. She let conversations drop. And I never knew what she wanted from visits, what she hoped to do or see or say, what she came for. So I felt responsible for keeping her entertained and ensuring a pleasant trip, one that she would feel thankful she took.
Her visit to Colorado was no different. I planned activities down to the hour, irritating Richard who encouraged me to just let it be, to see what happened. More than anything, I was terrified that the conversation would just awkwardly drop, that I would not know what to say or what she was thinking, that we would be left in silence. What was I afraid to hear in that silence? So, in our small trailer, I folded the kitchen table into a bed, and stocked the kitchen with snack foods I thought she liked, and made several plans for outings.

One night, near the end of the visit, we took Jen and our friend Jake to dinner at the restaurant where we worked. I reserved the best table on the deck, close to the live music, far enough away to have conversation, in our favorite coworker's section, good view. But before we arrived, there was a miscommunication between the hostess and an angry couple who insisted on our table, putting us in a separate section but still a decent spot. And Richard and I, touting our knowledge of the menu, described nearly every dish to our friends and ordered wine and steamed mussels and pear and stilton salad and grilled ahi and tiramisu and after-dinner drinks, compiling a bill as much as our paychecks. We dined for hours.

Since this was the first night Richard and I had actually dined at our restaurant, we were a popular table, with almost every server and busser stopping to talk. Even Sonia, who spoke to us in broken English, mostly Spanish, which Jake and I tried to translate into English for the others. And Richard and I smiled all night, proud to have made new friends who would visit our table between serving their customers, who wanted to talk with us, who joked and laughed and would have sat down and joined
us. And I was thankful that others would talk because I felt that Richard and I were trying too hard to keep the conversation alive.

Jen hardly said a word. I watched her across the table, how she moved her silverware and handled her glass, trying to interpret her mood. Did she like the food? Was she bored? Was I talking too much, trying too hard to make us feel a connection, disclosing more than she wanted to know? Was she sorry she came? Or did she feel uncomfortable with our coworkers? Did she wish it were just the four of us? And that we asked her more about herself, even when she only gave short answers, that we would encourage her to open up? Or was she thinking about the drive to California, and about finding a place to live, and about starting graduate school and adjusting to civilian life? Was she thinking about Kevin? Was it the wine?

I sighed, but felt happy that she had visited, that someone from home was there with me, despite how much we had changed since high school when we would just watch Monty Python together and laugh. But I wanted to feel more secure and comforted by her visit. I wanted to talk to her about it, to ask her what was happening without sounding insecure. I just wanted more from her, as I had from all the others, more than the table between us, more from what she said, more explicitness, more divulgence, and more intimacy. Reciprocity.


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