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## Getting to Chicago

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Getting to Chicago

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theater and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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May, 2013



*For my mother, Dorothy F. Rae*

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“Pistachios,” forthcoming in the anthology, *Ready for Consumption* (Spring 2013)

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## PREFACE

When I originally set up this work I had one vision in mind: an interweaving of poems on travel and on coming to terms with my mother's Alzheimer's disease, using the journey as the connecting motif, and the idea that the "journey" is never finished; there is always more to discover, more to learn, whether one is traveling physically or mentally. While those themes are certainly apparent in the work that has resulted, what has surfaced has also become a much more personal mission on my behalf, a quest to find my own footing, my own sense of stability, through the process of caretaking for my mother, suffering personal and professional loss, and pursuing my interests of writing and traveling. In that sense, the "journey" of compiling and writing these poems has certainly proved authentic; it has led me down paths both surprising and unnerving, and I have had no other choice but to follow its lead.

I employ varying styles and structures in this collection. In earlier poems especially, I use a free-verse narrative style; I tend to double-space the lines in older poems more, and repeat certain lines for effect. More recently, thanks in part to my classes with Kay Murphy and fellow students, I've experimented with structured formal styles, such as the pantoum and villanelle, the haiku and haibun, various syllabic forms, and have made other free verse poems more uniform. The free verse linked prose poem structure for "*Going Abroad: An Open Circle*" is the fourth form I've attempted for that series of poems, and it may change yet again. I credit Rebecca Seiferle's "A Broken Crown of Sonnets for My Father's Forehead," and Catherine Bowman's "1000 Lines," two linked poems, for influencing the form of that poem; I struggled and struggled with the structure until I recalled Seiferle. Her book, *The Music We Dance To*, containing the sonnet crown, was next to Bowman's book, *Notarikon (poems)* on my bookshelf; in the latter I re-discovered "1000 Lines," a syllabic, multi-stanza, linked poem, and so was inspired to try a



linked form also. I originally attempted a free verse sonnet-like structure for these poems; once it was apparent the poems would take more prosaic forms, I also found inspiration from Susan Schultz' *Memory Cards* in the way the speaker's narrative focus and the images shift from one subject to another. The form for the epistolary poem "Letter for My Father" comes as a result of reading some of Bobby Byrd's "letter poems;" his somewhat wry, often humorous free-flowing narrative style and word plays have also influenced my work in "Missing MJ," "Falling Back," "Getting to Chicago," and others. Many of the poems in Byrd's book *The Price of Doing Business in Mexico* make small, but significant references to his mother as well, who had recently passed away, and they inspired me to attempt similar references in my poems. Recently, my reading of Elizabeth Bishop's carefully crafted work has caused me to consider more deeply the relationship of structure, image, and narration, as it fits together to make a cohesive poetic whole.

The first part of the manuscript, "Getting to Chicago," which is also the title of the first poem, sets up the idea of "Chicago" as an end goal, a destination, both literal and figurative. It combines poems of differing styles, lengths, and forms, concerning my mother, my interactions with her, with other family members and friends in everyday settings, as well as observations while traveling (taking full advantage, I might add, of the travel opportunities afforded me by UNO and this program). It introduces characters, settings, and motifs that appear later and are explained more deeply in the middle section of the manuscript: family members such as Uncle Joe and Aunt Carolyn, for example; various lover and pets; locales such as Indiana, Champaign, Chicago, and Mexico.

Most of the subjects in the poems in "Getting to Chicago" try to attain goals of some sort, yet come up short, and therefore don't succeed in reaching "Chicago." The "*niño*" in "In the

*Jardín*” tries unsuccessfully to sell his *Chiclets* to several people in the park; the speaker and the immigrants in “At the *Alhambra*” may or may not reach the ever-elusive “entrance” to the monument, or to the country they are seeking; the new life the male subject attains in “*La Vida Nueva*” comes at the cost of losing a preferred old one. Chance intervenes in the attainment of a destination in “Playing the Game,” as the bowling ball does not go where it is intended, but, nonetheless, makes a successful arrival, fulfilling its quest.

Loss figures prominently in many of the poems of this section. The speaker loses lovers in “Affairs of the Heart” and “Havana Lullaby,” and she loses her bright hair color, which becomes a metaphor for loss of life, in “*Amtrak* in the Morning,” which ends with a reference to the leaves on her mother’s fencepost, which, like her mother, are mortal and will perish. “Breakfast Dishes,” in contrast, speaks of inanimate, unbreakable objects that remain with the speaker throughout her years of change and loss, as she recalls her first apartment and her first pet, a cat, whose nurturing traits she compares to those of a mother. The speaker deals with the loss of her mother’s cognitive abilities in many of the other poems in this section, countering her mother’s repetitions with obsessive thoughts of her own in “Steak;” answering the mother’s questions about destination matter-of-factly in “Getting to Chicago;” noting the mother’s reassuring still-present grasp on reality in “My Mother and the Squirrels;” attempting to escape and “numb out” from the existence of her mother’s disease in “Falling Back.” In “*White Castles* in the Car,” the repetitive form of the lines in the poem mimic not only the mother’s repetitive form of speech, but also the thoughts of the speaker, as they race and circle back through her head obsessively while she contemplates what course(s) of action would be the best to deal with her mother’s hunger, the time, and the schedule at the home where her mother lives. This poem

also evokes the fantasy of “castles in the air,” contrasting that unattainable ideal world with the quotidian reality of eating “*White Castles* in the car” on a stormy Sunday afternoon.

Paired with “On Cape Cod,” the last poem of the first section, “*White Castles*. . . “serves as a thematic precursor to the group of loosely constructed, free-form prose poems of the text’s second section. While “*White Castles*. . . “ evokes an unreachable ethereal world while rooted in present reality, “On Cape Cod” shows how one’s perception of the actual world can alter, as the clouds and light in the poem literally shift to illuminate and emphasize different aspects of the speaker’s physical environment. At the conclusion of that poem, the speaker’s world focuses back on herself and her personal reality, separate from the world around her, as her own “lens” zooms in on the blue and red necklace she is wearing, setting up the introspective reminiscences and reflections of the poems to come.

“*Going Abroad: An Open Circle*” has evolved, and continues to grow, into something far more personal and involved than I ever had in mind at the outset. This section is intensely autobiographical, as it details my situations of loss, fulfillment, and frustration over the last ten years especially, of coming to terms with my mother’s illness, my own potentials, and my limitations. My father’s death, my mother’s “official” diagnosis, both occurring in 2002, my increased travel, self-reflection, study of writing, and immersion into the fertile earth of family heritage and possessions (physically represented by the emotion-filled time capsule embodied by my childhood home) have also caused me to think more deeply about my relationship to my mother, father, siblings, and our relationship to the travel that was so much a part of all of our lives for many years. The poems shift perspective back and forth from the past to the present as the speaker (me) attempts to grapple with the both the concrete and the metaphorical journey-based events and emotions of different eras in her (my) life. In writing this part of the

manuscript, I've come to realize that my own quest to "get to Chicago" involves building a solid base of self-acceptance from which to deal with the rest of my life, without the physical support of my father, without my mother as I knew her, without my childhood home to return to, without the dream of becoming a mother myself, with considerable financial insecurity, and with uncertainty over the future course of a career that, a decade ago, seemed a much surer thing than it does now. I fully expect these poems to change and evolve further; for now, I'll give my excavations (internal and external) a rest.

The poems of the final section, "To Go On," address again the recurring themes of loss, choice, acceptance, and movement, endeavor to come to terms with them, and make them a successful and positive part of the fabric of everyday life. Several of these poems allude to a spiritual element. The section begins with an ode of sorts to my deceased sister, "A Song for Emily." In "At the Jumping Bean Café," the subject of the poem appears to effect a prayerful stance towards his book. The women in "In Morocco" defy stereotypes of meekness and invisibility in not only making themselves heard, but in impacting their outside world and others as well through their love of life, fellowship, and peaceful means of communication. "Pistachios" and "My Mother My Name" both emphasize positive, forward movement amid challenging situations; "Lunch at the Courier Café" comes to resolution as the mother makes a declarative, engaged statement after several repetitive non-sequiturs. "Madrid 2003" and "Letter for My Father" emphasize the interconnectedness of human beings, experiences, and generations, and the significance of personal influence after death. The collection ends with "Missing MJ," in which the speaker "misses out" on seeing the iconic Michael Jordan at a basketball game because she visits her mother instead, feeling a bit of wistfulness at the decision, but not much regret.

Journeying and questing make themselves germane to the artistic desire, the urge that drives us to create. Do we ever actually “finish” a poem, an artistic work? Or are there always new possibilities, new directions to explore? My answer to the latter question is resoundingly affirmative. As a work of art nears “completion,” furthermore, future projects, future ideas and extensions present themselves. The artistic process is, thankfully and reassuringly, ongoing, and never stops.

All of the journeys we make every day, whether we cross time zones or simply move from one room to the next, whether we do something as simple as washing dishes or as monumental as giving birth, involve both conscious selection and “fickle” fortune; in our quests to “get to Chicago,” we must make choices, set limits, and deal as best we can with the obstacles and opportunities that chance and outside forces foist upon us. While some choices come easily, others don’t. As Elizabeth Bishop notes at the end of “Questions of Travel,”

*Continent, city, country, society:*

*the choice is never wide and never free.*

*And here, or there. . . No. Should we have stayed at home,*

*wherever that may be? (66-9; italics original)*

With every choice, with every restriction, self-imposed or otherwise, comes a cost. It is up to us to celebrate, to revel in, and/or buck that restriction, and to garner needed support for ourselves while doing so. As the speaker in “Letter for My Father” notes, we can then embrace “the bittersweet beauty of it all, of human existence”(33-34).

## PART ONE: GETTING TO CHICAGO

## GETTING TO CHICAGO

*Your Grandpa bought this farm for \$6100 in 1938, on the courthouse steps, because it was in foreclosure, says Uncle Joe. Your great-grandfather Henry Kahre had lost the farm, made some bad loans, and that all led to his early death of a sudden heart attack.*

Mom turns to me, asks, *are you driving me home?*

*Jerry MacGaughy was counter bidding against Clarence McCormick, continues Uncle Joe. He didn't want Clarence to get the farm. Jerry didn't like Clarence, but he liked your grandfather, so he kept bidding against Clarence, so your Grandpa could get the final bid.*

Mom says, *when my grandparents lived here the kitchen table was pointed in a different direction. It had the rounded ends facing each door, not like it is now. Are you driving me home?*

*Your Grandpa had to borrow the money for the mortgage from his cousin Jennie Butler, says Uncle Joe. Clarence McCormick, the one who also wanted the farm, was another cousin, you know, and later became undersecretary of agriculture for Harry S. Truman.*

Susan Williams and her mother Imo Jeanne listen in. Imo was a year behind Uncle Joe in high school. She's an Osborne, the daughter of Riley and Helen. Helen's sister Emma Bobe married Clarence McCormick, the same Clarence McCormick who was Grandpa's cousin and wanted the farm, but didn't get it, thanks to Jerry MacGaughy.

Susan is my age, lives in Texas, says it's segregated there, says white middle class communities are mushrooming, new houses going up all the time. Julia and Aunt Carolyn talk about the Mexicans being there. Susan says the Mexicans work for the people moving in. *The Mexicans can't afford to live there, she says, just work there.*

She says in Texas people don't use the phrase to *run the sweeper* when they mean to vacuum the floor, they just say, *I have to vacuum the floor* (although I'm thinking since in her neighborhood it's usually their Mexican maids who do this, the homeowners probably don't say it about themselves most of the time). None of us mentions what the Mexicans might say.

I think to myself, *do I say run the sweeper*, and come to the conclusion that I usually don't, although I definitely know what it means—*seems like it's mostly a southern Indiana thing*, says Susan. Her daughter Rachel, who's going to college in Texas in the fall, agrees.

Uncle Joe says Susan's younger daughter Rachel is more like a Williams, as is Susan, while Susan's oldest daughter Sarah is an Osborne, like her grandmother Imo Jeanne.

Aunt Carolyn also says she says *run the sweeper*, and Julia does too.

I wonder if I'm more like a Farris from my mother's side or a Rae from my father's side, and what my sister Emily would be had she lived. Grandma Farris used to always say I had a *Rae*

*face. Before her dementia kicked in, Mom used to say to me, you're starting to look like more and more like your grandmother—meaning her mother, my Grandma Fairy Farris.*

Mom turns to me, asks, *are we going now?*

Uncle Joe tells again about Aunt Edith's last two nights on earth, about how she couldn't get comfortable, kept shifting position, kept asking for Anacin, before entering the hospital for the last time.

Aunt Carolyn, Julia, and I blink away tears. Uncle Joe is dry-eyed. *The table was not pointing this direction* Mom says, *it was facing the other way. Grandma sat at this end, Grandpa at the other one.*

Aunt Carolyn wraps up sweet corn and cherry tomatoes for me to take back to Chicago, asks if I want some pie, but I decline as Mom and I both need to watch our weight.

Mom asks, *is it time for us to go?*

On the way back, we eat at the *Farmer's Daughter Restaurant* in Bedford, have root beer floats at *Don's Drive Inn* in Kentland, continue through the town of Morocco, where the sign says *Home of Hoosier Hospitality.*

I debate taking a picture of it to send to my ex-fiancé from the country Morocco, but pass it by.

Mom asks, *are we almost home?* I say yes, *we'll be there in a little while.*

*We just have to get to Chicago.*



## BREAKFAST DISHES

I think all the cereal bowls may be in the dishwasher but then remember one may be in the far right kitchen cabinet—

one of the sturdy white ones with the flowered blue trim that my mother rescued from a dorm at the university where she worked in the fifties. Two cups, two saucers, three luncheon plates, three cereal bowls.

They were going to throw them away.

Those flowers never break. I've dropped them several times since my twenties when I moved to my first hometown efficiency in the eighties, the one with the worn red shag carpet and brown paneling, the one that was later condemned by the electric department due to improper wiring, the one in the redneck neighborhood next to the railway tracks with the swing on the front porch, the one where I had my first cat.

Essie Belle was her name. My resilient indoor-outdoor feline. She loved to venture outside. After she was done roaming at night, she would jump through the punched-out screen in the door at the bottom of the stairs before coming up to my door and meowing to be let in. Twice she brought me dead birds. I screamed the first time but the second time I petted her and thanked her since I had read that cats bring you their prey as a sign of affection, as if they are caring for you, almost as if they want to be your mother.

## AMTRAK IN THE MORNING

Checking my hair color in the lower level ladies room, I curse  
its supposed permanence,  
faded after only two weeks.  
Next time I'll get blond highlights, I think—  
then they won't fade like this red.

In the *Skyview Lounge*  
I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window;  
a voice behind me says  
*you look good*  
before it continues to the next car.

(OK, not so bad, I think,  
overweight and 44  
and, yes, this faded hair color,  
but I guess I still got it. . . )

The man connected to this voice is wearing a *Bally* fitness club sweatshirt,  
a hat that says *Give me a Break!*

Another man with blue feather tattoos on his forehead a few seats down  
talks to a woman in a suede fringed jacket and cowboy hat.

The feather tattoo man's name is Elvis and he's going to Minnesota;  
The suede jacket woman is from Mississippi and she's going to Chicago.

I don't get her name.

They converse about the weather in Mississippi, Minnesota, Chicago,  
when they can step outside to smoke their next cigarette,  
various vehicles they have known. . .

Outside a man who appears homeless reads his newspaper by a fire.  
It's fall and most of the trees are yellow,  
except for one, a brilliant red, that startles my landscape—

(red like the leaves climbing up my mother's gated white fencepost  
glimpsed in the pre-dawn gray as I left her house this morning—

red like my hair color is *not*, I think,  
though I know these leaves will also soon fade. . . )

## IN THE JARDÍN

In the *Jardín*, the *Mariachis* sing.  
Corn roasts on vendors' grills; scents swirl in the air.  
*El niño* tries to sell his *Chiclets* to the heavily perfumed lady with the  
white lace shawl.

The newspaper man, almost finished with his day, makes his last sale,  
packing up remaining issues of *El País*, *El Excelsior*, and *The New York Times*.  
In the *Jardín*, the *Mariachis* sing.

Teenaged lovers entwine passionately on wrought-iron benches, while nuns  
in brown and black habits, walking stately side by side, pointedly pass them by.  
*El niño* tries to sell his *Chiclets* to the *señorita* with the strappy black stilettos, the purple silk  
halter top, and the deep cleavage.

Shoe shiners at each corner buff and polish, polish and buff, as  
children gaze eagerly at clown-dressed merchants with bright balloons.  
In the *Jardín*, the *Mariachis* sing.

Frantic mothers push crying babies in strollers;  
mature women in traditional clothes promote their vibrant hand-embroidered wares.  
*El niño* tries to sell his *Chiclets* to the retired American *ex-pat* with the red plaid flannel shirt  
and the khaki pants.

Lights illuminate the colors of the fountain, the buildings that surround;  
ice cream sellers scoop pistachio, vanilla, chocolate-laden treats.  
In the *Jardín*, the *Mariachis* sing.  
*El niño* tries to sell his *Chiclets* to the college students with the patched jean jackets, the tattoos,  
and the well-worn backpacks.

## FALLING BACK

At the bar across the street,  
drinking black russians  
(maybe they're white ones),

the Saturday before Halloween  
(really it's the Sunday morning),  
the weekend we have to set our clocks back,

not in disguise,  
no mask on,  
the bartender wearing an orange shirt with the word *COSTUME* on it in drippy letters,

after a party given by the friend of a friend  
who had already left by the time I got there.

The place fills up at 3:00—  
(really it's 2:00 since this is the night we set our clocks back).

*Hotel California* plays on the jukebox;  
a woman and a man who speak Spanish sit next to me.  
I have a suspicion the woman is really a man.

She goes by Zulema;  
her other name is Joaquin.

Her friend is Javier  
and he is also a man.

Javier has a Polish girlfriend and he shows me her picture;

she's blond, pretty, and young,  
and she's mad at him tonight.

I don't remember her name  
(maybe he didn't tell me).

His hand starts to move up my thigh;  
I let it linger slightly before moving it away.

Zulema and Javier know each other from prison,  
26<sup>th</sup> and California,  
(I don't ask how long or what for.)

Zulema works at *El Gato Negro*.

I ask if she knows Alicia. She says yes.

We talk about Bush, the *Cubs*, Moises Alou, that fucked-up foul ball thing that cost them the series, Luis Gutierrez, working, *los sueños grandes*, trying to make ends meet, *El Gato Negro*, *Lolitas*, other drag bars past and present, Richard Daley (the son), *Operation Silver Shovel*, the proposed hike in *CTA* bus fares—

Javier buys me a white russian as Diana Ross asks, *where did our love go*, programs my phone number into his cell phone.

I go home and go to sleep.

At 6:00 am (really 5:00 am) the phone rings.

I know it's Javier before I answer it, tell him no,  
cover myself with the quilt my grandmother made for me in 1968,  
happy it's Sunday now,  
that I can sleep late,  
that I don't have to work today,  
that I can set my clock back,  
that I'm finally too tired to think about my mother.

*(Chicago, Illinois, October 2003)*

## STEAK

My mother talks about her suitcase  
and all I can think about is steak—  
*USDA Prime*, squirting  
rivulets of molten fat as  
I cut pink-red flesh,  
black charred burned bits hitting  
the roof of my mouth,  
blue cheese crust edging  
over the sides,  
ever-so-lightly browned, complemented by  
garlic red-roasted new potatoes,  
an extra-large martini alongside,  
straight-up,  
dirty,  
with three enormous blue-cheese stuffed olives  
skewered inside—

—she's fixated on it, won't  
let it go, wants  
me to look for it again in her room  
when we get back,  
even though she's been living here  
nine months already, will not rest  
until I find it, show her, only to  
ask me again about it two seconds later.

(Most of all, I think about those charred bits—  
how I'll chew them slowly, tasting the juices, savoring them  
before they go down. . . )

## AT THE ALHAMBRA

thousands strong—  
we speak French, German, English, Italian, Spanish,

wait hours for tickets  
to see the ancient Arabic palace in Spain.

At the *Alhambra*,  
the guidebook says,

the medina, the heart of the old city, has been destroyed  
but the palace remains.

I have just come from a town in Morocco with its medina intact.  
There are no Moroccans here now.

At the *Alhambra*,  
we wait and are still waiting,

8:00 am and some of us have been waiting before dawn,  
several thousand of us,

to see the ruins of the last Arabic empire on the Iberian peninsula  
to fall to the Christian kings.

I commiserate in broken French with the man behind me;  
*il y a trop de monde*,

too many; only three hundred tickets left for the morning;  
more than twice that number of people waiting ahead.

At the *Alhambra*,  
we are: English, French, Italian, German, American, Australian, sometimes Spanish;

none of us: Egyptian, Nigerian, Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Libyan, Kenyan;  
*ojalá que podamos entrar*.

The Spanish *ojalá* from the Arabic *Insha'Allah*;  
*if God wills it*.

I take another glance at my newspaper;  
on the left of the third page, a secondary headline:

*Fishermen find the bodies of ten Moroccan and West African immigrants and their  
capsized boat as they try to reach Algeciras—*

now just 200 tickets left for the morning;

*while some manage the perilous crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar separating Spain from Morocco, many others perish trying as they attempt to escape grinding poverty in their native countries.*

we look at each other nervously.

*This year especially there has been an increase in the numbers of children and teenagers among them.*

At the *Alhambra*,  
*Insha'Allah*,

maybe we can make it  
to the coveted entrance

before our time runs out

*(August 2003)*

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article quoted: Lee, Keith. "Moroccan Immigrants Die Trying to Reach Spain." *World Socialist Web Site*, 16 August 2003. Web. 22 Jan 2004.



**LA VIDA NUEVA**

He comes to see her in the evening, apologizes  
for the dust in his clothes and in his hair.

*demasiado polvo*

He's been mixing plaster today  
yesterday, painted radiators.

She asks if he likes mixing plaster;  
he says no.

She asks if he likes painting;  
he says no.

He says he liked the banking job  
he had in Guatemala  
before he came.

## PLAYING THE GAME

Plastic hits hardwood,  
thunders towards its intended  
destination. Yet

now it detours, just  
slightly—passes Berkeley by,  
arrives in Brooklyn.

*(In bowling, a Berkeley strike occurs when all the pins fall as the ball hits to the right of the headpin. A Brooklyn strike occurs when the ball makes a successful hit to the left of the headpin.)*

## AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

I show you the picture of my grandmother.  
My mother tells me I look more and more like her as I get older, and as I look  
at her picture and then at myself in the mirror, I hope it's the steadfast  
gaze she means, and not the double chin.

We lie on top of the quilt she made for me.

You tell me you're going back to your former girlfriend,  
the mother of your child. For your daughter's sake, you say.

You will need a new job. A new apartment.  
One with three bedrooms.

I say I'll let you know if I hear of anything.

I ask to see a picture of your daughter and you show me the one in your wallet.  
She sits surrounded by a bed of neon-brilliant yellow-green grass. Her brown eyes  
shine out at me with hope and expectation.

Like yours, without their hint of sadness.

We have the same name, your daughter and I, except for the last syllable, and when you  
leave you call me by her name (our name) and I don't correct you.

## HAVANA LULLABY

Aquamarine Packards float dreamily by  
as sun bleeds purple into golden velvet.  
You walk away.  
Che Guevara watches from the billboards.

As sun bleeds purple into golden velvet,  
we eat steaming red snapper on the beach;  
Che Guevara watches from the billboards  
while mint swims green in our mojitos.

We eat, steaming; red snapper on the beach.  
Sunscreen glistens on your chiseled thighs.  
While mint swims, green, in our mojitos,  
roving musicians wail—*el cuarto de Tula, le cogió candela*. . .

Sunscreen glistens on your chiseled thighs;  
you walk away.  
Roving musicians wail. *El cuarto de Tula, le cogió candela*.  
Aquamarine Packards float dreamily by.

## MY MOTHER AND THE SQUIRRELS

### I.

They are what I see.  
No people, this Saturday  
morning in the park.

They gather nuts. With  
long, delicate nails, they  
hold acorns gently

before they eat. They  
dart through leaves, in branches, play  
on their backs. Their tails

flip up, exposing  
soft white undersides; light gray  
fur shines in the sun.

### II.

I recall such an  
underside, one time, driving  
my mother to a

cousin's wedding in  
Indiana. A squirrel  
appeared on the left

side of the road. She  
hesitated, as if she  
had calculated

her risk. Then she ran.  
I felt no impact as my  
tires crushed her and

we continued on.  
Mom asked again and again  
about where we were

going, what day it  
was, who we were to see. She  
didn't say any

thing about squirrels,  
until another one ran  
across the road—then

she turned to me and  
said, as I sucked in my breath—  
*That one just made it.*

## WHITE CASTLES IN THE CAR

I buy *White Castles* for my mother and me  
we eat them in the car

we eat them in the car  
since it's raining and starting to hail and only one thirty and they don't serve supper until five

since it's raining and starting to hail and only one thirty and they don't serve supper until five  
she won't remember she said she wasn't hungry

she won't remember she said she wasn't hungry  
so it's a good thing we stopped, because now she reaches eagerly for that *Junior White Castle*  
hamburger with cheese

so it's a good thing we stopped, because now she reaches eagerly for that *Junior White Castle*  
hamburger with cheese  
while she wonders what's for dessert

while she wonders what's for dessert  
she looks in her purse and pulls out a package of sugar free cookies

she looks in her purse and pulls out a package of sugar free cookies  
after I squirt ketchup on the fries

after I squirt ketchup on the fries  
then give her another napkin

then give her another napkin  
tell her not to immediately wipe her nose with it and put it in her pocket like she usually does

tell her not to immediately wipe her nose with it and put it in her pocket like she usually does  
which she does anyway

which she does anyway  
because her nose is starting to run

because her nose is starting to run  
I wonder if she should see the doctor soon

I wonder if she should see the doctor soon  
even though the resident nurse examined her last week and said she was fine but that she'd  
gained weight

even though the resident nurse examined her last week and said she was fine but that she'd gained weight  
they didn't change her diet that much

they didn't change her diet that much  
so she really shouldn't be eating fast food

so she really shouldn't be eating fast food  
although I don't have time to take her to a sit-down restaurant like *Baker's Square* today

although I don't have time to take her to a sit-down restaurant like *Baker's Square* today  
I did take her to church this morning

I did take her to church this morning  
and we had a snack during fellowship time after church

and we had a snack during fellowship time after church  
but I worry it's not enough to tide her over until five

but I worry it's not enough to tide her over until five  
since it's only 1:30 now

since it's only 1:30 now  
we are here

we are here  
in the parking lot of the *White Castle* fast food restaurant, corner of Peterson and Ridge,  
Chicago, Illinois, Sunday, April 5, 2009

in the parking lot of the *White Castle* fast food restaurant, corner of Peterson and Ridge,  
Chicago, Illinois, Sunday, April 5, 2009  
because it's storming and starting to hail and it's only one thirty

because it's storming and starting to hail and it's only one thirty  
I buy *White Castles*

I buy *White Castles*  
we eat them in the car



## ON CAPE COD

Clouds travel in the sky, transforming it to slate gray and blue, then back to pink and yellow. Their inky imprints shift on water and sand, on plant-laced dunes along the road. Houses stare out to sea. Water bounces boats up, down.

shade deepens, then fades,  
illuminates, darkens,  
pauses; retreats to light

I park my car and emerge. When I get to the shoreline, a woman suddenly appears and demands to know my business, pointing to the *No Trespassing* sign that I've overlooked. When I say I just want to take a picture, she relents and says to go ahead, says I look like a nice person, says she likes my necklace of turquoise and coral. She tells me to *focus well*. I smile at her implication that I have an expensive camera with an adjustable lens, and pull out the disposable one I purchased for \$7.99 earlier in the day. It is near dusk. The sky is leaden. I hold down the button that will turn on the flash.

no contrast of sun  
and cloud now; no pink, yellow;  
my blue/red necklace

## GOING ABROAD: AN OPEN CIRCLE

*Months and days are the wayfarers of a hundred generations, the years too, going and coming, are wanderers. For those who drift life away on a boat, for those who meet age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey, the journey itself home.*

--Matsuo Basho

*Sometimes it's better if we don't know what lies ahead of us.*

--my mother, Dorothy F. Rae

## **TELL ME, AM I GOING ABROAD TOMORROW?**

Mom asks me this nightly, as we talk on the phone, as she sits in her room at *The Hartwell*, in the small facility we found for her in Chicago. The photograph of the nave of *St. Patrick's Cathedral* looks down from the wall, the smaller pictures of stone faces—angels, devils, animals—carved in sculptures peering out, surrounding the larger one. My father takes the photo in 1979, during what will be his last trip to Ireland, to supposedly finish his life's research (though he never really finishes it). *I had never thought we would go abroad so much before I married your father*, my mother muses once. *The intention was that we would stay here, settle down, and raise you and your brother here.* Still my father goes every summer, and as a family we have gone five times by the time I am sixteen. The first time is in 1962, when my mother and I sail on the *SS United States* to Europe, to meet my father there, who has gone on before to do his research. She is forty; I am two.

## THE UNITED STATES

At her age of forty and my age of two we sail the ocean blue, our very first time to leave the country, my mother and I, setting out on the *SS United States*, the fastest ship on the transatlantic run. The toilet is strange. The bed is strange. The pillow is strange. I cry at night. I cry, maybe for my sister Emily, who has just died. Because I am constipated and not yet toilet trained. Because I no longer have my trusty stuffed rabbit. Because I am scared of losing my mother, as when she leaves for the hospital and almost dies too and I don't know why. I stay with Uncle Joe and Aunt Edith for two months while she's there. Aunt Edith starts to toilet-train me. She tells me "Good Girl!" every time I pee in the toilet. For years I think urine is called *goodgirl*.

In therapy when I am thirty-five it hits me that my father did not return from Ireland for Emily's funeral. I confront my parents about this. My mother is calm. *Your father had to finish his research*, she says. *It was a difficult time and he was feeling so much pressure from the university*. Dad almost weeps, strains to keep the emotion from erupting, says when he learned about Emily's death he walked and walked around St. Stephen's Green in Dublin saying her name over and over. *Oh, dear baby*, he writes. I find his journal in the basement in Champaign in 2010.

## EMILY AND OCKY

My father writes: *Ash Wednesday. Received the telegram late in the morning. Dear little one, I hope you know we loved you. God bless you, dear Emily, my poor dear little mite.* Gulping sobs well up and overtake my body. I cry for my father. For Emily. For my mother. For my two year old self who was not consciously aware, who was not yet toilet trained, who was on the ship going across the ocean for the first time, who was crying for her beloved stuffed rabbit, her sleeping companion when her mom and dad left and she didn't know why, for my adult self who years later must confront her abandonment issues, her need for approval, her tendency to numb her feelings and plow ahead.

The old stuffed rabbit is discarded before we board the United States and Aunt Caroline gives me a new one when she bids us farewell. It has hard scratchy fur and a strange shape and does not fit well in my arms and I hate it. *The worst thing I did on that trip was take that rabbit away,* Mom says, years later. When we get to England my parents buy me a pink plastic pot to help with toileting in the car. And they buy Ocky. I find him in our basement, on the same day I find the pot, as I clear out the old house in Champaign years later. Ocky, the beautiful, golden-haired dog so named because he's from Oxford. I love to take care of him. He is soft and cuddly and fits in my arms. I can sleep now.

*Dear baby, this is probably the most effortless sleep you have had in many months,* says my Dad as he finishes his journal entry.

## NEW YORK AND NEWARK

Ocky has lost all his fur, but I still sleep with him every night. His head almost falls off, and Grandma sews a pink collar for him that helps to keep it straight. In August 1965 I am five. We're in customs at Newark Airport and I think it's New York Airport since New York sounds like Newark if you say it fast. Green and pink, pink and green—colors that swirl all about me, my world. My green suitcase, with my favorite green dress with the white piping that Mom and Dad always put me in for the important pictures. A grumpy pink-faced man rifling through my green suitcase in a room filled with stinky green sweat. Lots of people lined up, waiting. The man flips past that green dress, my pink nightgown, past Ocky. My legs ache and I have to pee. I'm tired and cranky and want to lie down. Mom takes me to the bathroom with the pale pink toilets, leaving Dad with Thomas, my one-year-old brother. When we get back, the pink-faced man is finally finished. He leaves Ocky alone and I take him in my arms to carry, relieved he's safe with me now. The man zips up my green suitcase, handing it to my mother.

## PEELING SKIN ON THE *QUEEN ELIZABETH*

My favorite suitcase is the small soft-sided green plaid *Grasshopper* she buys with *S&H Greenstamps*. I take it everywhere—with me in 1968 when we go over on the *RMS Queen Elizabeth*, after visiting Aunt Florence and Uncle Frank near New York. Aunt Florence brings us to the beach on Long Island Sound. I play again and again in the waves. I ride them to the shore. I love how they can wash over me, how I can jump up to greet them, as equals. I revel in their swell, their buoyancy, their freedom, their undulating force that that melds so completely with my own.

On the ship, in our stateroom with the navy blue shag carpet and the round porthole, Mom lets Thomas and me sleep in, orders room service. Hard-boiled eggs, toast with marmalade. Mom suffers a bad sunburn from our trip to the beach and her skin starts to shed and peel. She lets me pick off the dead, crinkly, stretchy scraps from her back since she can't reach there. It's gross and fun at the same time, and makes me feel grown-up and proud. I'm glad I can take care of her in this way. The new skin shines smooth and pink underneath.

## **TRICKY DICK AND THE LEMON CAKE**

Skin color is an issue in my central Illinois town in 1968. Some of my friends say they won't play with black kids. I don't really have an opinion, but I don't know any of the black kids very well either. University students are protesting the war in Vietnam. There is an election going on. I'm for Humphrey because Mom supports him but most of my friends are for Nixon. Mom hates Nixon, always has since the time of his *Checkers* speech, which she recounts with loathing to the rest of us, the way Ike put his arm around him afterwards and said *That's my boy*.

Mom hires a black housekeeper before we leave for Dad's sabbatical year in Ireland to help her clean. The housekeeper wants to make a special lemon cake for us but for some reason she can't bring it over and we go to the north end of town to pick it up. A lot of black kids are playing outside a white cement apartment building. It reverberates in the sun and makes my eyes ache. Mom asks one of the kids about the cake and he gets it for her, offering it up to us, standing out in relief against the blinding white concrete of the structure behind him, the golden yellow cake framed by his outstretched arms. The lemony glaze, reflecting the sun.



## REUNIONS

Cakes and pies stare back at me on the kitchen table at the Fourth of July Reunion at Uncle Joe's and Aunt Edith's. Meats, salads, and vegetables line the counters, but it's the desserts—peach and blackberry cobblers, banana puddings, chocolate layer cakes with butter-cream icing—that get center stage, and it's those that Mom asks the most about. In a support group for caretakers of family members with dementia, others talk about how the sweet tooths of their loved ones have amplified with the disease, how aides sprinkle vegetables with sugar in the assisted living facilities so the residents will eat them. I'm not very consistent in handling Mom's repetitive wishes for more sweets. *Now, will I get some dessert?* I usually deny her after two servings, but then give in later, slicing small portions.

The timing of the reunions is awkward, usually coming right before I'm due to go to Mexico or Spain or Scotland or Italy to study poetry as part of my creative writing program; sometimes I must arrive late, wherever I'm going, to fit the reunion in before I leave. The six-hour drive each way is wearing. For years running I fight with my brother Tom beforehand concerning the wisdom of bringing Mom, nearing ninety, with her walker, her *Depends*, her meds. *You've got to be crazy, bringing her all that way! She could have a heart attack in the middle of nowhere!* We don't speak for days afterward.

## ***SUPER 8***

*July 4, 2012.* Just this year, Tom has softened his stance about bringing Mom to the reunions, which adds much relief. My cousin Ed helps me get Mom, our luggage, and her walker into the *Super 8* room in Vincennes, Indiana. We've stayed in the motel for the reunions ever since Aunt Edith got sick and Mom became more confused, wandering through the halls at night, looking for the bathroom, sometimes trying to get into the wrong bed afterwards. I'm worried at first how Mom will take it—will she talk all night, not sleep, become agitated? The social workers, her doctors, all think she'll rise to the situation, and that's proved to be the case.

I help her take down her hair, comb it out, show where her slippers are, make sure her pull-up is securely fastened, point out where the bathroom is, leave the sink light on so she can find it when she has to go in the middle of the night, give her the inhaler, check her meds, plant the walker at the side of her bed. I tell her good night, tell her I love her. *And I love you, too. Very much.* Soon the questions stop, she becomes calm, and her breathing starts a faint but determined rhythm. Queen Elizabeth of Britain is celebrating her Diamond Jubilee on TV. I turn down the sound, check my email, look out the window at the fireworks—the ones my cousins are watching from the banks of the Wabash River.

## CLOSE TO THE BONE

Those windows at the tops of the double-decker buses, in front—those are the ones I always seek out when we live in Ireland, and always still seek, when I visit as an adult. Up above, looking down, from a distance, but not too far. The best view. Thomas and I take the city buses to school, go with Mom to downtown Dublin, shopping on Saturdays. The 44. The 46A, past *Stillorgan Shopping Center*. The 86 bus that goes all the way to Dun Laoghaire—the one we take to a house we rent for the first two weeks when we arrive in 1975, for Dad’s second sabbatical. That first day, when we go to the butcher, Mom remembers the correct term for the beef, *minced*, as they say it in Ireland, and not *ground*. She buys the meat, some tomatoes and peas for dinner, asking directly for what she wants, in control and in charge. The rest of us stand around dumbly in our jet-lagged daze.

We eat burgers that night and discover gritty, tiny bone flecks that scratch my throat on the way down. I think of an old cat we had once, a big gray stray my brother found who would chomp chicken bones, crack them and grind them in his teeth, never getting hurt. I am reading the book about the famous English vet, James Harriott, *All Creatures Great and Small*. The house also comes with the owner’s two cats. They like to burrow under bed covers and walk on the kitchen counters. They drive Mom nuts. *Now you get down! Get out of here! Get!* She yells every morning, shooing them out as the back door slams.

## MAYA

My gray cat loves the weekly trips to my parents' house in Champaign to ready it for the coming estate and house sale. This time it is me who is taking the sabbatical, allowed only once per career from my secondary school district. Little do I know that I will not be assigned a counseling position when I return, but instead will be sent *back to the classroom*, teaching English, something I have not done since my student teaching experience almost thirty years prior. I take small comfort in the fact that many qualified professionals are also treated this way by my district, but the situation rankles as I try to find my career footing.

Maya purrs loudly as she sprawls in the middle of a bookshelf in the north room of the basement. She loves to explore the intensity and complexity of the room, the damp, pungent smell, the thick dust, the boxes, the books, the files, the antique chests and tables. The ages-rich vibe, full of family artifacts of several generations. My father's study, doubling as the mother of all storerooms. Seated at his desk, I come across incredible finds mixed in with more recent memorabilia: a document from Inverness, Scotland, where my great-grandmother was from, dated 1799, detailing a sale of some sort, filed next to a group of photos my father painstakingly labeled of the trip he and my mother took to Guatemala in 1993.

## CLIMBING THE TEMPLE

It's me who inspires them to go, that spring of 1993. I go to Guatemala the previous summer to study Spanish, and come back energized and brimming over with experiences: the color of the indigenous markets and religious worship, the intensity of the still-present civil war and the political actions taking place, the thrill of learning Spanish and living with a host family. It is my stories of visiting the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal and the colonial buildings of Antigua that pique my father's interest most of all. My parents eagerly sign up when the *The Society of Architectural Historians* sponsors a trip the next year.

Mom and Dad come to Chicago and to spend the night before their flight with me, leaving their car at my apartment complex. I drive them to *O'Hare* early next morning. We eat pancakes with maple syrup, drink the Guatemalan coffee they've brought back when they return. My father proudly shows off a handmade certificate from the tour group that lauds him in Mayan hieroglyphs for climbing the high Temple IV at the age of 82. Mom does not climb, and now regrets it: *I really should have gone up.* . . . In a snapshot, my father is looking down from the top of the temple, a little unsteadily, at the lush jungle below, framed against the blue sky. Ever close to the edge, like me.

## THE PROPOSAL

*Close to the edge.* A good way to describe the course of my life the last ten years, especially its financial aspects, ever since Dad died and Mom's disease became apparent. Three unpaid leaves of absence, one of them in Champaign, living across the street from Mom and working at my old high school. One sabbatical leave, in part to clear out her house, make sure all the antiques find a suitable home, get the house ready for sale, deal with all of my father's research artifacts and archives. The process on-going. My debts continue to mount. Creditors ring my phone daily; I don't pick up.

I'm determined to keep my own interests and life going while attending to Mom's, afraid of letting her life consume mine, as I am also afraid of not doing right by her—by her health needs, by her possessions, by her desires to remain independent for as long as she can. I keep Mom in her house for as long as possible, setting up transportation to the day center, hiring aides to look after her at night, driving the three hour trek back and forth from Chicago every other weekend. I take writing classes, pursue another degree. In the early days of her illness I still have hopes of *finding the right guy*, maybe even of having a child. I convince myself that Bruce in Morocco might be the one, spend money on several trips to see him, apply for a fiancé visa for him from the *Department of Homeland Security*. It falls through. Bruce wants me to come to Morocco and marry him there, live there for a while. I say no, not while Mom is still alive.

## THE OTHERS

There are a few others—Isaac from Mexico City, living in Chicago, secretly bisexual and in love with Alicia, the Cuban cross-dresser. Despite his gender confusion and alcoholism, he's there for me the night Dad dies, answering his door when I knock at 3 am, offering to drive me to Champaign on his suspended license, telling me to pack *as if you're packing for a party*. It helps. Venustiano, from Oaxaca, supposedly divorced, whom I meet in Mexico and travel to Cuba with, whose wife calls me months later on my cell phone as I drink coffee in my neighborhood *Starbucks*. Manuel from Guatemala, dead-ended yet steadfast, who goes back to his daughter's mother soon after we begin seeing each other, though our affair continues.

The most promising opportunity occurs with a cab driver from Iraq, a filmmaker, with whom I strike up a conversation while my car is in the shop one day. I ask for his card, and he gives me a disc of a movie he's made about the *Baha'i Temple* near Chicago. A good sign, I think. I hang on to the disc for a couple of weeks before misplacing it, missing the chance to record his information. I'm still looking for that disc. *Everything happens for a reason*, says my friend Lisa, when I tell her about it. Yeah, I think, and sometimes some of us just have shit luck.

My friends tell me to go on *Match.Com*. My brother Tom has found all his recent girlfriends there. I look at it for a few minutes, but it doesn't grab me. With all of the ups and downs of my career, looking after Mom, and my writing pursuits, it's just another chore and takes time I don't have. I settle for what I can get.

## THE BASEMENT

The biggest chore, clearing out the basement. I do have some help at times, from friends who come down from Chicago to lend a hand, from Tom occasionally. Aunt Carolyn comes over with some lists of family heirlooms that should not be put in the estate sale. I set them aside, take pictures of them, send the pictures to aunts, uncles, cousins, so they can have first dibs. I rent a storage locker in Champaign, pay movers to take items there. I contact antique dealers to sell some of the remaining objects after the sale, put the proceeds in my mother's trust fund at a bank in Champaign.

Family treasures are unearthed: in a dog-eared manila folder, my great-grandfather's Rae's citizenship certificate, showing the date he became a citizen: October 17, 1876, 83 years to the day before I was born. I reel at my seeming karmic connection to the first Thomas Rae, the hard-driven immigrant, purported to have acted so stern and uncompromising with his family, such that his oldest son, my grandfather, buckled under the pressure, losing money from the contracting business his father had created.

Some of my mother's letters to my father before they got married. *Sometimes I feel like I can just reach out and touch you.* . . The tender, vulnerable side to my mother, not revealed very often. A pink plastic bracelet that says *Girl Rae* on it, and the date of my birth.



## HIM. HER. HAT.

Mom's wearing her pink blouse. No bracelet. She has never worn them much; only her watch adorns her wrist. She sits with the other residents in the living room. I hold her hand. Celia tells them to name three-letter words beginning with *h*. As usual, Mom is one of the star pupils. *Hot*, *Him*, *Her*, she says quickly, before anyone else can. Perfumed air freshener almost succeeds in masking the faint shit smell coming from the adjoining bathroom; one of the aides is cleaning up. *Hop*, *Has*, *His*, *Hip*. Celia writes the words on a whiteboard. Other residents chime in. Celia mimics putting her arms around Josie's neck, to get Elizabeth to say *Hug*.

I check Mom's room; two toothpaste tubes almost squeezed dry in Mom's bathroom cabinet. I note that on the comment sheet on the way out, sign her latest care plan, make small talk with the new director. She's griping about having to go through a set of unlabeled keys left her by the previous manager, checking each one in different places to see if it fits. *Hers*. *Hit*. *Hat*.

## CHICAGO, NOT CHAMPAIGN

Mom sometimes misplaces the key to her room, but she can always find her hat. It's the brown crocheted one, with the velveteen ribbon, that she made years ago, before she was married, before she took up knitting and all the intricate stitches. She likes to wear it constantly, even if the weather is warm. It's the one I remember her the most in, from my childhood, from Ireland, from Champaign. From everywhere.

She still speaks of *going abroad*, that classy phrase she often uses, interwoven with the other questions about her present. Uncle Joe makes a joke of sorts, saying because her short-term memory is shot, everything is always new to her. Every moment, a new discovery.

*Now, where am I? Am I in Champaign?*

*No, you're in Chicago.*

*I'm in Chicago? I'm not in Champaign?*

*No, not in Champaign. I'm in Chicago too.*

*Oh. I didn't quite realize that. I just got here. Do you live near here?*

*Yes, not too far away.*

*When am I going home? You know, I'm from the farm. When am I getting back to the farm?*

*You are home, Mom. This is where you live now.*

*Oh. I'm not traveling? I'm not going abroad? I thought I was traveling.*

*No. You're staying right there. It's a nice place, isn't it?*

*Well. It seems all right. This is my first night here. I'll do the best I can. I thought I was going somewhere.*

*You're just fine, Mom. We've had some wonderful times traveling, haven't we? All the times we went to Ireland?*

*Yes, yes we did. Yes. Thank you. Am I going to bed now, in this place?*

*Yes, Mom. Good night. I love you.*

*And I love you too. Very much.*

**PART THREE: TO GO ON**

## A SONG FOR EMILY

*St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, Ireland, August 2012*

Green air presses on  
earthen black stone, blankets the  
roar of buses outside.

This place pulls at me, this pungent oasis in the middle of the city, the place where my father came after he received the telegram, where he walked around and around, saying her name, before writing her name again and again in his journal. I feel his anguish at her death, his pain at not returning for her funeral, frustration and sadness at his decision to *stay for the sake of the research*.

There is only one picture. My mother holds a doll-shaped white blanket. Emily's face is not visible. I'm standing next to my mother, with my trusted rabbit. It's my second birthday. We are in the back yard in Champaign, with Grandma and Grandpa, Uncle Joe and Aunt Edith. Dad must have already been abroad.

*I feel as though she were indeed an angel, poor little thing. Maybe her little spirit is around somewhere.*

Aunt Carolyn says she had a fighting personality, to last as long as she did. That's all I know. I speculate on the rest.

*O, valiant sister,  
let me keep your strong spirit  
alive, in words, in  
memories ethereal,  
tangible as earth, as air.*

## AT THE JUMPING BEAN CAFE

He asks if he can put  
his coat and hat  
on my chair, sits  
at the table facing me—

large white man  
with salmon  
colored sweater,  
fades into salmon  
colored wall  
behind,

pulls out a  
Latin grammar book:  
bright blue,  
it jumps out  
against the sweater.

He mouths words,  
takes his glasses off,  
puts them on again,  
holds his hands together,  
as if in prayer.

## IN MOROCCO

*Women spend a lot of time at home. . . a regular highlight is the afternoon visiting or receiving of friends.*

*--Lonely Planet Guide, 2003 edition*

In streets I hear them, through concrete  
painted blue, green, red, from open  
windows, curtains billowing wild  
into the wind--

not from the cafes, the *salons*  
*de thé*, with their rough, scuffy floors,  
crowded-up tables, mis-matched chairs,  
sharp, male faces

who bark insults, furrow brows, one-  
up, conspire, posture, huddle close  
in packs, glare all too intently  
into charged air.

These vibrations swell, fuller than  
singing—swirling, lilting, tickling  
the breeze, springing from hidden realms  
inside. Women

laughing, Women whooping, Women  
brimming over with joyous noise,  
Women screaming, guffawing, hands  
clapping in glee!

We are not talking giggles here.  
No polite titters, sly smiles, side-  
ways knowing winks. Oh no. These are  
knee-slapping, high

five-ing, belly-aching, pee-your-  
pants, red-faced weeping, rocking back  
and forth torrents that attempt to  
engulf us all.

They flood into public, these waves--  
they strive to sweep away walls that  
divide, grimaces and frowns that  
argue and fight,

the dark countenances, the sharp  
accusations. This ecstatic  
deluge breaks barriers, gushes  
to the streets! It

raises the roofs, washes over  
customers in the market, sits  
with patrons in cafes and tea  
rooms. It incites

dogs to howl and cats to yowl, and  
children to bound with delight— it  
makes the men look at each other  
quizzically,

puzzled by the power of its  
spell, its unceasing, effortless  
rhythm. It refuses silence.  
It will not be

stopped. It soothes our wounds, invites us  
to the sacred places inside.  
This laughter, this soul, this song—it  
wants us to live—

## PISTACHIOS

Shiny shells litter the floorboards. She works  
each nut open with her thumb and forefinger,  
goes beyond the membrane to get to the green of the meat,  
keeps her other hand on the steering.

The shiny shells. She recalls  
smooth pebbles that sat in the round fishbowl atop  
clear-coated shelves in her childhood basement, along with the plastic chess set,  
Barbie doll, black and red wooden checkers, then forgotten—

now not forgotten—the layers of varnish her father painted the shelves with,  
the way he carefully set the finished wood.

The black ink of an approaching storm seeps through clouds in front.

She drives ahead, into the weather.



## LETTER FOR MY FATHER

It was the look in your eyes, Dad, that I remember the most,

that time we passed by the church in Italy, which I came to know later as the *Basilica of Sant'Apollinare en Classe*, on the way from Venice to Assisi. We spent the night in Assisi, saw the Good Friday procession, before returning to Naples and then flying back to Ireland. We were traveling on the Irish tour-bus (I think it was Irish—everyone else on the bus was Irish anyway,

except for us, though the tour director was British), since we were living in Ireland that year for your sabbatical. It was 1976, the week before Easter, and you were so happy that finally you could bring us, your family, to Italy, one of your favorite countries, and also to Rome, your favorite city. But then there were those mosaics that you really wanted to see, that somehow you

had missed seeing when you were in Italy after the war, the ones at Ravenna, and you had even spoken to the tour director about possibly veering off the trip for a while, going off on your own to see them, and then later joining us in a Assisi via train or bus or some other type of transportation. But that did not come to pass. And then, that too-cruel irony, us peering through

the windows of the tour-bus near a highway interchange an hour or so out of Venice, passing by the *Basilica of Sant'Apollinare en Classe*, one of the major sites, and the look on your face, as if you had just had the golden carrot of your life snatched away, the shock, surprise, and chagrin in your eyes all at once, as you turned to my mother and told her that was one of the most important

places you wanted to see, and then pretended how, oh well, it didn't really matter that much, it had been too complicated anyway to try to arrange a side trip, as if you were telling your eyes to calm down, but the eyes refusing, the hurt and regret pooling into them, even though the rationalizing words were forming in your mouth. The tour director saying that you would come

again anyway, of course, and you looking at him with that face implying that you knew better, that you would not come again, would never see the fabled mosaics, the Biblical composites of colored stone. Although, now that I think about it, you had the time, Dad, you were only 65 then, you still had 25 more years to live, you were in good health, you had the money to do it,

and why didn't you come again? But life gets in the way, somehow there are always those things we never get to do, and we can't control it. Just like Aunt Edith who passed away last year and who always wanted to go to New England, New England especially in the fall to see the leaves, and she and Uncle Joe had the trip planned, paid for, but the tour company canceled the

trip because not enough others had signed up, and then she got worse again and was gone before Christmas. Just like when Mom showed me how Grandma crocheted the borders for her tablecloths and would leave a little part undone, to symbolize the fact that our work on this corporeal earth is never done, never finished, and that's the bittersweet beauty of it all, of human

existence. Yet others can come to finish the work that is undone, and that is beautiful also, and thus the cycle continues. And so I am here, at this Basilica, in July 2009, over thirty years later,

and I do this for you, Dad, I come here to complete your trip. The mosaics gleam and shimmer as I knew they would. The saints, the stars. The Christ. The cross, reverberating against the field

of green, sheep lined up at the feet of Saint Apollinare, and, above, the golden hand of God, reaching down, seemingly unattainable to the world below it, steadfast, until it itself ordains the action, the final moving through the firmament, and reaches down, pulls us up from under. . .

In the evening I go to a concert by Herbie Hancock and Lang Lang, the last concert of the Ravenna Jazz Festival. It's amazing, the innovation and flamboyancy of these two pianists. The backs of their two pianos align up against each other as their fingers dance and flail on the keys. The concert has been sold out, but some tickets have opened up at the last minute and I'm able to get one, down front, off to the side.

Dad, you inspire me to be passionate about my work and my life, as you were about yours. I'm glad I got this chance to come to Ravenna for you. You would have loved the mosaics. And even though jazz isn't really your thing, you would have appreciated that I got the chance to go to the concert also.

Love, your daughter always.

## MADRID, 2003

In Spain I think about my father.  
I work with a teacher who had him as a professor in 1965.  
He loved El Greco, the Greek.  
My friend Susan is a communist.  
She is excited to hear I am reading George Oppen in Spain.

I read George Oppen;

Oppen went to Mexico.

I am in Spain.

El Greco lived in Spain

but he was from Greece.

My father was from New York.

Oppen also lived there

and he worked on Long Island

for *Grumman Aircraft Corporation*—

as did my uncle

and another teaching colleague's father.

I live in Chicago now.

I take the subway in Madrid.

*Todo el mundo* is in the subway—

in Madrid New York Mexico City Chicago Greece Long Island.

I hold onto a pole;

my hand touches that of a woman sitting down—

*piel a piel,*

skin to skin,

*todo el mundo;*

I see a man in the distance and for an instant he is my father;

I am with my father.

My boyfriend's Mexican father fought for the U. S. during the Second World War,

as did my father,

as did George Oppen,

and another uncle,

and another friend's father,

skin to skin,

in the subway,

*todo el mundo,*

dead yet living,

living yet dead,

*an unmanageable pantheon,*

*piel a piel.*

---

The phrase, *an unmanageable pantheon*, appears in "Of Being Numerous," (16), by George Oppen.

## LUNCH AT THE COURIER CAFE

Mom sits across from me in the front booth.

She asks me, *what is the day today,*  
*what is the month,*  
*what is the year,*  
*where is my purse,*  
*are we in Champaign,*  
*how are we going to pay for lunch,*  
*is my credit card still good?*

*Is that my dessert?* she asks about the quiche on her plate.  
Then, she repeats her questions.

When I ask her how her quiche tastes, she pauses,  
chews carefully, swallows. She puts down her fork,  
she takes a sip of her tea, raises her eyes.  
*Actually, she says, it's not bad.*

## MY MOTHER, MY NAME

I have a laptop. In my laptop I write my poems.

I have a *Toyota*. In my *Toyota* I play CD's and sing and eat and drink and drive.

I have postcards. Che Guevara smiles and smokes cigars and looks tragic and intense in the postcards.

I have my mother's ring. In my mother's ring the colors look like skies.

I have my grandmother's gold watch. The watch works erratically and the band is not original.

I have my worries. In my worries my mother dies and she does not know my name.

I have my pictures of boats at Puerto Angel. I took them myself.

I have my retro skirt. Orange and yellow and salmon and olive green and periwinkle blue collide.

I have my flowered red rug from Morocco. My boyfriend said to use one of the sides during the summer and one of the sides during the winter.

I have my mother. I have my name.

## MISSING MJ\*

I missed seeing MJ the other night. He was at the Sectional Boys Championship game between *Morton* and *Whitney Young*. (I work at *Morton*. MJ's son Marcus plays for *Young*.)

I didn't know he was going to be there.

I was driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Western Avenue, on my way to the game, when I decided it wasn't worth the hour it would take to get there. I turned back to go see Mom instead.

Mom was wearing a cotton maroon and white striped shirt, with her maroon slacks and her white sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, as like it always is. I think her shirt was one I had bought for her a few years ago, maybe for her birthday or for Christmas.

She had her gray sweater on. She always has to have her sweater. Even in summer. I think it's like her security blanket or something. She's a bit lopsided on top, ever since her single mastectomy in '85. Mom wore padding for several years after that, to even things out, but now she just lets things be. You can't really tell. Her bras don't fit well, so she keeps putting her hand under her shirt to adjust her bra strap. It doesn't seem strange.

She smiled big when she saw me, like she always does. We hugged each other hello and I sat next to her.

Carol said she saw MJ at the game. So did Chuck. And Barb. Matt didn't actually see MJ, but saw pictures of him that students took on their cell phones. Carol raved about how he looked. She said she lusted after him, as she always had.

Barb said he was wearing a navy blue hooded sweatshirt.

Matt disagreed. He said it looked from the kids' pictures it wasn't really a navy blue but more of a royal blue. Maybe not quite a royal blue. He reconsidered. Somewhere between a navy blue and a royal blue.

I remember one time when Nick Anderson\*\* was at my bowling alley in Champaign and I got his autograph. He was wearing a blue T-shirt then too. I loved the fact that I had his autograph, but honestly, now, after so many moves, I couldn't tell you where it is. I'll have to look for it, but first I want to go through the boxes of family memorabilia from my parents' house to find the old family pictures to display, like ones of Mom and Dad when they were younger, when they graduated from high school.

Everyone at Mom's place was catching balls that Hannah, one of the aides, was throwing to them. Lourdes sat on one side of Mom, and Elizabeth sat on the other side. Lourdes comes originally from Cuba, and Elizabeth cries a lot. She wasn't crying then, though.

Mom caught every ball. She has always prided herself on being a good softball player when she was young. She says she could out-catch and out-throw her three brothers anytime. She probably still can.

Chuck reported that MJ sat in the balcony and didn't get there until the second quarter. He crouched down in his seat to try not to be seen. A Cicero police officer sat on one side of him and his chauffer sat on the other side.

Carol thought the police officer was from Berwyn, not Cicero.

Matt described his chauffer as a white guy with a head of white hair that you could see a mile away.

Carol said no, he was really a light-skinned black guy.

According to Barb, MJ's son Marcus didn't play that well, even though the *Chicago Sun Times* reported him as one of the leading scorers the next day. (She's probably a bit biased, since her nephew plays for Morton.)

Everyone claimed that Juanita\*\*\* attended the game too. She didn't sit with MJ, though.

We went to Mom's room to watch TV.

*I Love Lucy* came on. It was the show where Lucy and Ethel make chocolates in a chocolate factory and then end up stuffing themselves with them because they can't keep up the pace. Mom and I have always loved that episode. It never fails to make Mom chuckle.

We talked about what day of the week it was, what month it was, and what city we were in, what kind of a day it was outside, how funny Lucy looked with chocolate smeared all over her face, and how eating all that chocolate would make you sick.

Mom and I hugged each other goodbye between *Lucy* and *The News*. We told each other how happy we were to see each other, that we loved each other. I told her I would call her the following day, as usual.

Too bad I missed seeing MJ. Maybe he'll be there next time. . .

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\*Michael Jordan, former professional basketball player for the *Chicago Bulls*.

\*\*Nick Anderson, star forward of the University of Illinois basketball team that earned an *NCAA* Final Four berth during the 1988-89 season. He later played for the *Orlando Magic*.

\*\*\*Juanita Jordan, ex-wife of Michael Jordan and mother of Marcus Jordan.



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