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Smack in the Day of Distemper

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Smack in the Day of Distemper

Nancy L. Baumann, B.A.

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Masters in Fine Arts in Writing

ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories, essays, and poetry are written from a female perspective, often about women in conflict: with themselves, with men, with society, with their roles. The selections are ordered to track the progression from youth to maturity, and are linked thematically by a before/after theme, a “that was then, this is now” contrast that is evident in the individual components, as well as the body of the work as a whole.

The mixture of poetry is eclectic; several employ a distinct rhyme scheme, intended to offset the weight of the material by delivering a mature message in a juvenile container, while others hearken back to the Romantic Poets with formal, archaic language. The prose includes both fiction and personal essays, both of which employ the sharp language and themes found in the poetry.

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A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Adjunct Professor Eve Jones, M.F.A.
Advisor

Assistant Professor M. Beth Mead, M.F.A.
Chairperson and Advisor

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to two instructors who told me I had something to say, and then taught me to say it. Now I believe in my words.

For Mr. Dempsey and Eve.

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INTRODUCTION

Having failed at both music and athletics, I always felt at home in the crowd of a really good book. I gobbled books as a child. My favorite writer was a non-person, Carolyn Keene, the pseudonym for a myriad of ghostwriters—mainly men—who authored the Nancy Drew Mystery series. Nancy was my champion, and she was a lot like me. We shared the same name, were both inquisitive, precocious, imaginative and nosy; yet, while I had the inclination to meddle and snoop beyond my authority, Nancy actually did so. Through the adventures of *The Whispering Statue*, *The Clue of the Broken Locket*, and *The Mystery of the Ninety-Nine Steps*, I vicariously ventured into enemy territory, tracked leads and followed clues that led me into frightening predicaments during dark and stormy nights. While I munched on Pop Tarts from my bean bag chair, I became Nancy Drew, heroine supreme, and polished off most of her adventures in a single sitting.

When I turned twelve, I was allowed to ride my bike to the public library in downtown Deerfield, IL. The library was my sacred place—a holy temple that harbored boundless knowledge and limitless opportunity, where yet undiscovered characters played hide-and-seek and waited to be introduced. I tiptoed through the rooms, careful not to assault the silence with the flap of my sandals. I gazed at the stacks, perplexed, not sure how to plan my attack. Books beckoned me, invited me to slide them off the shelf, to crack their backs and dive deep into their

pages. How I would ever read them all? *Beezus and Ramona*, *Henry Huggins*, *Ellen Tebbits*; *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*; *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. I had to organize my attack, so I developed a rule of acceptance that still works for me: if the first page didn't grip me, the book was refused, forever cast off like a reject on the Island of Misfit Toys.

In the library, I was completely transformed. No longer the awkward Okie yanked north to the Chicago area, I was the girl the librarian liked, someone who was asked to read specific books so I could offer my opinion. She gave me Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and said she wasn't sure whether to put it in the children's section or the Adult Fiction section—would I please read it and advise her?

Instead of the customary three books per week, I was allowed to check out as many as I could cram in my bicycle basket. I became a serious wedger and stuffer, and often made my final selection based on what I could squeeze into the last breath hole of my basket. I could read forever. It was like crawling through the wardrobe and exploding into Narnia, then later having to return to a world where flowers didn't bloom and lions didn't talk.

That same year I entered sixth grade and Mr. Dempsey began my formal writing training. In order to learn grammar, we diagrammed sentences. By the time I was finished, my sentences looked like a rags rug splayed out on the page, prepositional phrases hanging down like stray strings. I loved it. I could spot adjectives and map out entire clauses of compound, complex sentences. He taught me to break a sentence down to the core subject/verb combination and,

from there, identify the central message. “What is this sentence *saying*?” he drilled the class. My hand shot up like rocket, and I blurted the answer before I lost the opportunity to show off in a class full of kids sprouting question marks.

Mr. Dempsey assigned exercises to stimulate our creativity. One time, he wrote three unusual and unrelated sentences on the chalk board. We were to use one of them in a two-page story. When I included all three in my paper, he went ape-wild, marking my paper with all sorts of colored comments, showing his appreciation that I went above-and-beyond the assignment. I couldn't admit I wasn't listening in class, and thought I had simply fulfilled the requirements. After that, he gave me personal attention and cheered me on. Mr. Dempsey thought I was smart, and I liked it. He gave me permission to be far-fetched and ridiculously creative. Anything was possible on paper.

Because I loved books, I loved to play with words, and at times I earned stern correction for avoiding fractions while lost in a dreamy haze. I liked poetry – the sing-song rhyming type I knew from greeting cards and Dr. Seuss. Birthdays and holidays were opportunities for me to proclaim my girlish emotions in iambic pentameter. I became a regular Hallmark card shop, and spent hours kneading syllables and phrases together, declaring my love for my family in heartfelt poems adorned with flowers and butterflies. I liked the swing and thump of poetry, as well as the challenge to find the precise word that described exactly how I felt. My vocabulary had exploded through my reading, and I plundered from that rich store of words, although most times the words invaded me, finding their own place without any help.

I was twelve. After that, I was flushed into a larger system, and the outside encouragement that had inspired me to write vanished. Distracted by competing interests, I lost direction and my writing abilities were arrested. Although I completed school papers and occasionally dabbled in a bit of self-reflective writing, my flash had dulled and the impetus to write went AWOL. My reading was confined to school assignments rather than pleasure, and since my high school was not strenuously academic, I was not challenged. Today, I'm convinced that every writer needs a personal cheerleader to propel their growth, and I am determined to play that role in the lives of other writers.

In college I was introduced to literature that required focused effort and concentration in order to glean the deeper meaning of the text. I was rebellious and lazy, and preferred to take literature at face value. Whenever a professor challenged me to identify the message of an allegory, or to articulate the sub-themes in a work, I sprouted thought balloons that screamed, "It means exactly what it says, you idiot!" Fortunately my mouth was a bit more respectful, but I felt ignorant, lost. Having received no training in the critical thought process, I struggled to identify layers in literature. Though it was a difficult learning curve, I eventually began to recognize the elements and techniques that brought depth to a story, although I remained wary that the professor might be making too much of a simple thing.

I was particularly affected, actually haunted, by two authors: Franz Kafka and Sylvia Plath. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*—a frightening tale about salesman and father, Gregor Samska, who transformed into a bug—introduced me to the

elements of literary suspense and drama. Of course, I knew no person could experience such a ridiculous tragedy as Kafka related; yet, after reading the piece, I felt as if I had been involved in the event myself. Kafka had taken an absurd circumstance and plunked me right in the middle of it. By describing the events in minute detail, then leaving me to process the emotions involved, Kafka yanked me inside that character, locked me in his bedroom, and turned me into a bug. Feelings of despair and futility flooded me, emotions I couldn't shake or neutralize for days. Twenty seven years later I experienced these same emotions after reading both Stephen King's "The Man in the Black Suit" and Julie Orringer's "Pilgrims" in this MFA program.

I was also deeply affected by Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*. Rather than reacting to her craft, the plot of her book crushed me. I was so disturbed by her chronicle of depression and attempted suicide that I was frightened—even repelled—by her story. The knowledge of her ultimate suicide caused me to view Plath's work as being dangerous, something akin to toxic waste, poisonous. I avoided her writing at all costs, lest some infected particles splash upon me. I did not welcome the emotions Plath evoked.

Fast forward twenty-seven years. In the fall of 2007, I slipped into Lindenwood University's MFA program to find out if I could write. I wanted to know if I could resurrect my former interest and fan it into a passion that could potentially turn into a second career. From the first Cluster, I was creatively charged. I was transported to another dimension, and all my neurons fired at warp

speed. Although I struggled with my writing, that very struggle gave gusto and I felt awake and alive, focused. Pinocchio was becoming a real boy.

Stimulated by—and somewhat fearful of—the workshop experience, I knew it was important to discover what *didn't* make sense in my writing, what *didn't* work. Although I left a bit bruised and battered on occasion, I learned from my mistakes. Never again did I change tenses in the middle of a paragraph or shift point of view mid-story. I razored my vocabulary, activated passive verbs and assassinated adverbs. Class assignments to “write a poem while naked” or “sit in a public place and describe one person using only culinary terms” yanked me out of my little conservative box. Before writing the fiction story “On the Phone,” I placed a personal ad on Craigslist and, from that experience, I formed the main character in the story. I cut lengthy introductions to essays and jumped squat in the middle of the story at word one. Poetry became framed as allegories that gave punch to tired themes such as death, betrayal, and divorce. When I volleyed my experiments back into workshop, the response was exhilarating.

On occasion, it tested me to read my classmates' writing. They were too wordy, or displayed an underdeveloped vocabulary, or bored me with description when I wanted dialogue—good teaching through bad examples. I'd heard to “show—don't tell,” but having to struggle through lengthy, summary manuscripts is what convinced me to eliminate that very defect in my own writing. When I read a piece that glazed over significant events, or if the student flinched at their own topic, I felt compelled to scrutinize my own work and become nakedly honest. I made a discovery: what I was tempted to conceal contained the power

of the piece. Time after time I busted my boundaries, and what echoed back was what something I'd never heard before. I found my voice.

Other voices blossomed too, and like crocuses we cracked the cold surface and broke ground, fresh and furious—singing out poetry, memoirs, flash fiction, humor, horror, short stories, and novellas. We were like grass sprouting through asphalt. Workshops became less slice-and-dice semantics and shifted to analysis of text and sub-text, theme, texture, character, substance and style. We developed layers, and if you accepted our work at face value, you were likely to miss the message.

And along came the girl I loved to hate: Sylvia Plath. She had not changed one bit, but I certainly had. After a detailed analysis of *Ariel* (and finally growing mature enough to appreciate her unique genius without feeling threatened) my regenerated heart grew to love her. Because I was rankled by her subject matter and enjoyed the effect, I copied her edgy style. I wanted to write something as gutsy as her opening line in *The Hanging Man*: “By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.” Emulating her tone and beat I wrote: “For the stripes of my skin they scissored sharp, deep.” Plath’s poetry abused me, messed with my sleep patterns, and compelled me to labor—sometimes hours at a time—over one solitary word, only to cough it up later while brushing my teeth or feeding the dog. Plath refined my voice.

My writing is distinctly female, and I often write about women in conflict: with themselves, with men, with society, with their roles. Some of my poetry expresses full-force anger while some is more whimsical, yet there is usually a

female who feels caught, trapped, betwixt, not quite there. She is frustrated by the tension she feels; a tension experienced by women of my generation who embraced feminist tenets, but were yanked back by the pull of the home and our own maternal instincts; who were expected to flow like a river between roles as a professional, a mother, a lover—and to look good while doing it.

The reader may notice the influence of Dr. Suess in my poetry. Several of my poems employ a distinct rhyme scheme, intended to offset the weight of the material by delivering a mature message in a juvenile container. “In Your Kitchen,” a particularly edgy poem, is sharpened by its visual layout on the page, as well as its relentless beat. “Captivated” employs a softer rhyme scheme while delivering a twisted, erotic message. “Revenge” hearkens back to the Romantic Poets with its formal, archaic language, while in “pet-u-lant,” the rhyme is buried deep within, and risks escaping undetected.

The title of one particular essay, “Before and After,” is characteristic of both the poetry and prose, and the thesis as a whole. There is a “that was then, this is now” thrust to this collection. On a microcosmic level, the individual poems, short stories and personal essays show a before/after contrast. At the beginning of the piece things appear one way, but once the pancake is flipped, the reader realizes that by the end, something is markedly different. Some of the pieces take a lighthearted approach, such as “What’s Left,” while others deal themes involving more darkness, anguish.

From a bird’s eye view, the collection as a whole has a before/after flavor, as well. The selections are ordered to track the progression from youth to

maturity—before and after. “Mannequin Song” exposes an emotionally immature woman who is crippled by her own vanity. Her “before” state is implied, but as the reader watches her transformation, she is discovered in an “after” state that leaves witnesses to ask “is anyone inside?” The collection pushes through youthful relationships in “Love at First Sight” and “Pity the Plaything on a String,” then confronts the reader with “On the Phone,” a manipulative conversation between a grown daughter and her mother. Married to an older man, the daughter is frustrated by a devastating death in her marriage. Before her husband’s surgery, the couple enjoyed normal marital relations; afterwards he is impotent. The wife feels justified in seeking outside sexual partners, and solicits her mother as an accomplice in this quest.

Further pieces suggest child-rearing years, followed by the challenges of marriage and its subsequent demise. Confronted by a myriad of difficult circumstances and conflicting desires, the resilient female either rises to the occasion or she falls flat before each challenge, her path always taxing. The reader is finally dropped on the doorstep of “Supper at Happy Valley Home for the Aged,” where two warehoused women experience an exchange in personal status, due to the natural aging process. The poem “Twisted Metal” serves as a bookend to “Mannequin Song,” and encapsulates the entire life cycle.

“Smack in the Day of Distemper” is the capstone to this collection. In this lyric essay, scenes of early family life alternate with scenes of tragic loss, inviting the reader to an inner circle that reveals a deep, personal transformation. The

before/after thread cannot be missed, and although the woman is nearly destroyed by her pain, she ultimately recovers and becomes stronger, better, solid—after.

Before I entered this MFA program, I wasn't writing at all. Now, I write every day. Since igniting my creative spark, I am bombarded with so many ideas they cannot all find their place on the page. But for those that do, there's a voice to express them—one that was silent, before.

Mannequin Song

It takes a lot of effort to prop this girl in place
It started with fake fingernails then traveled to her face
With Botox and Restalyne you'll hardly see a crease
Her skin is smoothed cosmetically with quite expensive grease
Her body was imperfect but you'd never know it now
Her boobs were flat and floppy, her hips looked like a cow
But she siliconed and lipo-sucked, reshaped the ugly pear
Now she's more like Barbie since she lasered all the hair

To abolish silver fillings and the stains from coffee years
Her teeth were primed and bonded with porcelain veneers
When varicose and spider veins roadmapped their pollution
She blasted them with violet light and burning salt solution

Her style is upper shanky, accessories are chique
In Gucci spikes—four inches high—her rounded calves look sleek
The Hermes bag and Prada shades, small pleasures yet expensive
Accoutrements all upper-crust, the shell is comprehensive

The laser-locked assault on time, relentless futile quest
Inflicts a violence on the mind and body she molests
She's sucked inside a cyclone twist, her own magnetic storm
This damned pursuit to camouflage her aging female form

It takes a lot of effort to prop the girl in place
She wakens every morning to this self-demeaning race
She's lacquered in a plastic shell, the plexi place she hides
And deaf to voices screaming forth "is anyone inside?"

... only wear underwear in months ending in 'y'

Sarah Weinke

Commando

No one knows what lies not
beneath, underneath
I'm free, beneath
just me

no borders
no boundaries

just me
wide open
femininity

Frost creeps
in months One and Two
duck and cover, cover
or freeze

May ushers floral satin
July covers my independence
in stars and stripes —

months ending in 'y'
I'm a fortress

Pity the Play Thing on a String

Around my finger you jerk
up, down,
 up, down
round the world
round the town
 round and round
spin

In the wind you lift
climb, soar
 trail the tail
swoop, dive
 dip, flip
 dunk
crash

On my lap you perch
pull this to smile,
 that to wave
you walk bow sit
 kick, tangle
 mangle
 twist

Around the neck you march
up the steps
 to the plank
 through the trap

drop

pet·u·lant

hurried,
pushy, irritated, testy,
touchy, mean, berating, insolent
impatient type, bowling over without right,
edgy sharpness, tetchy peeving, cranky, salty
snarky season, snappish nettle, crusty
crab, peckish waspish fretful brat,
cross and crossing, tense, annoyed, distempered,
hasty, stealing joy, edgy, anxious, chippy,
curt, never caring who gets hurt,
fiery, brusque and picking fights

me last night

Love at First Sight

At the grocery I watched you self-scan what I like: cinnamon Crest, Fuji apples, Oreos and skim milk, Earth Grains and Fleishman's, my brands. Your underarms hide Secret, your toes blush 'Passion's Pink," and inside, Massengill. My order was small, Speed Stick and Skin Bracer. Your hair shines L'Oreal and your skin wafts Jergens.

I had to smack into your Camry just to meet you.

Second Look

I looked
you in the eye
and said 'I do until death'
but didn't know that I said
'I do' to a slow searing death
by the slice
of your tongue.

On the Phone

Really, Mother, don't be so shocked. It's not like I was ever the "good girl" type who stayed in on Saturday nights—even though you would have liked that. This is not a big deal. It's just a thing, not a fling. It's not as unusual as you might think, and it's not weird, not in my opinion. I mean, if you think I've gone off the deep end, just look online. Go to Craigslist and click on "casual encounters." There's all sorts of relationships that didn't exist when you were my age. Read a few, it'll open your eyes.

Mom, please. "Your day" was thirty years ago, which might as well be a hundred years ago. Don't judge me as if my lot in life is to darn socks and wait for The Beaver to come home after school. Women are different now. We're responsible for our own selves and our own happiness. We don't wait for someone else to dole out our portion, according to their needs. And besides, what would you have me do? Wither up and die at 34 years old? Yes, I chose to marry Ken and, yes, he's older, but I didn't sign up for this. No one warned me about the surgery, told me that he'd be like a flat tire afterwards. But just because part of him died, doesn't mean I'm dead, too. I know we're married, but we're separate people and—you know what, Mom? Men still find me attractive, and after what I've been through with Ken, that feels pretty good.

I am not feeling sorry for myself, Mom. I'm not. I'll tell you what I am—I am starving. I can't go through life being hungry all the time, it's not healthy. It's like being on a zero-calorie diet every livelong day, it makes you sick and

crazy. Except if you're on a real diet, you can blow it anytime you feel like it. I'm a good wife, and I love Ken. But we both know what they say about relationships—you have to take care of yourself or else you're no good to anyone else. That's what I'm doing. Just taking care of myself.

Please ... slow down. Take it easy! So what if he is "up and about now," as you say? He really isn't, trust me. Yes, he's back at work, and I know he doesn't look sick anymore, but that's not the point. The point is that this situation isn't going to change. He won't get better, and I still have needs. Real needs. I can't go through the next fifty years double-clicking my mouse, pretending I don't need a real man.

You know what I mean, don't act so innocent.

...well, thanks for the suggestion, but have you tried "the alternatives," as you say? It's not the same, not even close. The old BOB doesn't work for me.

No, not Bob across the street, Mom. BOB. It's an acronym — *Battery Operated Boyfriend*. A vibrator. Why don't you try one yourself, then tell me how you think it compares to to whatever you're used to? I promise you, it's no substitute. No marriage was ever rescued by buzzing off in bed.

Oh, well ... okay. That's definitely .. a surprise. I didn't ... I didn't picture you that way. So, I guess you know how I feel, then. That should make this easier.

I didn't say "easy," I said "easier." Try to have an open mind, Mom. I know you didn't raise me to be a liar and a cheater, and of course I don't expect you to be party to deception, but why don't you think about it this way: this is

something you can do for me *and* Ken, because at this point, it's the only thing that can save our marriage — which is what's best for everyone, isn't it? For us to stay together? You'll be contributing to — no, you'll actually be re-energizing our marriage, without putting out any real effort, without expending yourself. It won't cost you a thing, and I'll be very discreet. I'll quietly let myself in and lock up when I leave. And we won't be eating and drinking or making any mess, so you won't even know we were there. We'll be invisible. Transparent.

What "other mess?" Good Lord, Mother! I'll change the sheets if you want me to. I can throw them in your washer, or even take them home. Don't worry about the linens — what we need to figure out is what you can do three afternoons a week.

Three is exactly right—it's the magic number. Read the research. The journals say the optimum number of orgasms — stop sighing, Mother, it's a medical term. Anyway, a person needs three orgasms per week to stay healthy—physically and mentally. Every week. And you of all people, know how depressed I get when I don't feel well and, honestly! I think my own mother should be more concerned about my health. You didn't take me to the doctor all those years to get shots and checkups, put braces on my teeth and a cast on my broken arm just to sit back watch me suffer now, did you? Aren't you always asking me, "how do you feel? are you eating enough? are you sleeping?" and telling me to "remember your pap smear ... get more rest ... check your cholesterol ... take care of yourself." That's what I'm doing, Mother. I'm taking care of myself, and I need your help.

... probably about three hours ...

Damn it, Mom, it's supposed to take time. Besides, you're never home anyway. Your shopping marathons last forever, and you've never needed to "stop by the house to drop something off" before! That's just an excuse. You already play tennis and golf several times a week, so nothing will change. Just schedule your games accordingly...

Okay ... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Mom, but I'm really frustrated! With this, with this whole thing. I'm frustrated with Ken, and with you, with goddamned Ken, everything.

Is that your answer to everything? To take a deep breath? I'll try to calm down, but will you at least listen to my idea? Just hear me out?

I understand your concern, and you may have to get used to the idea, but this is how I think it would work: I'll be there around two and leave by five. In and out, no complications. Completely under the radar. I'll be back home before Ken gets off work, and out of your way before dinner. Simple. Straightforward.

I can't really tell you that, Mom, and besides I don't know his name ... because it isn't a ...

no, of course it isn't a woman. I just don't know who it is yet, and it could even be several ...

No. No! Just one at a time. But I don't want to be stuck with the same thing every day, not at first, not until I know it's a good fit. A girls needs to do a little shopping first, don't you think? Remember how you used to make me try on practically everything in the store, to be sure the size and fit were right for my

body? God, you made me crazy! I got so angry because what I wanted to wear—because it was the “in” thing, or looked good on the hanger, or because Mary Murphy was wearing it—usually didn’t look or feel right on me. It could be a disaster, but I’d beg you to buy it anyway. Then I’d have to wear it, uncomfortable. I felt cheated, like if I wanted to fit in, I had to suffer for it. I’m past that point, Mom. I’m not suffering anymore. You were right. I’m going to try on a lot of things until I find the right fit.

Of course that’s not what you meant, but it’s still true and, no, I’m not worried about my safety. Stop being so dramatic. I won’t be “parading a cast of characters” through your house or “inviting perverts into your home.” And stop worrying about your things. No one wants your stuff—they’ll want me, not your little figurines and whatnot. And even if something got lost in the shuffle, you have insurance, don’t you? Have you checked your coverage lately? People can get screwed if they’re underinsured. If you haven’t reviewed your policy recently, you should see your agent, probably even one afternoon next week. You know, that’s not a bad idea—why don’t you set it up for Monday?

So Monday’s golf. Could you do it Wednesday?

I know you’re not committing, Mother. I just asked if you could take care of your insurance on Wednesday.

Great. Then what about Friday? You haven’t seen the azalea exhibit at the Gardens yet, have you? Don’t you and Doris go every year? You could go Friday.

Well, call her. I think the weather's supposed to hold all week. I'll even spring for your tickets. Oh, and I have the book you wanted to borrow. I'll leave it on the kitchen counter. Monday. While you're playing golf.

I know you didn't say "yes."

It's not evil, Mom. It's just Monday.

Captivated

Lash my wrists above my head
scatter ashes on the bed
fill me with a darling dread
charm me

Lace red ribbon through my toes
thorns and roses juxtapose
melt me into limp repose
woo me

Wrap your arms around my waist
blow your breath upon my face
bite my lip and love the taste
win me

Trace your tie across my breasts
lower down your ample chest
parallel meet nest to nest
lose me

Grab the cord and pull it tight
promise me that all is right
usher darkness, scatter light
charming

Smart Woman Struck

If I could construct
my own body I would brick
over the pit where fear
seeds and feeds,
where love aches
and breaks
me, where need breeds
mistakes that harm
me to heal you, hollow
me to fill you, where panic obstructs
reason, compels
me to seek the lure that leads
back to the void
of this pit

La Femme*Even if*

You negotiate contracts
and sign the checks, swing
stethoscopes and palm scalpels,
trial before judges and
govern
if your strappy shoes
slap, slap, slap
they call you
girl

Boy

For seven seconds I thought
I saw a man, then you wailed
and stomped, not finding
your keys,
your wallet,
your life
so I reached down
your pocket and fingered
the treasure
found

Morning

I woke with a crick
when last night I slept
upon your treasured
chest, rode your wave
of cotton snores, tucked
tight in the crevice,
to savor your man
musk spell

Success

My morning tongue begs
 for the brew, blended
 but served with warning: not too
 strong, not too
 hot, not too
 bitter, burned, black!
 Shall I cut mine with creams and sweets?
 Serve yours first, then
 let mine grow cold?

Richer roasts beckon:
 sip, taste, sample, swill

lust
 lust
 lust

Lust

I am blind and you are a braille map
 my tips trace your terrain
 probe crannies and crags
 grabbing, starving
 seeking, tasting
 lips, tongue
 feasting, lead
 me, lose me
 let me
 go

Tiger

For the stripes of my skin
they scissored
sharp, deep

ripping fur
like the mats off a cat
scouring the streaks with God-wrath

to un-ink tattoos
un-pink scars
un-stain glass

indelible,
the constellation clings
in maiden form

To School

Snapped in time I watch
 you hold hands
 fingers laced, arms swing
 sidewalk sweeps you
 to Big Chief and times
 tables, show and tell and spelling
 blonde heads bob
 pink bows, backpack slings
 Minnie over one shoulder.
 Fingers twined, you stop.
 Look both ways. Unclasp.
 Straighten frilly socks that spill
 over pink-piped sneakers.
 Between you
 just one
 skinned
 knee

Run girls! Defect!
 Flee before you fracture, escape
 before you find your fat father whoring,
 your drunk mother keening, scam
 before you know pine-box playmates
 and vacant values, before you ache
 for yester things and yester ways.

Abscond together!
 Sprint past your cradle, bolt
 through your blooming, blast
 through politics and propriety
 grad school and girlfriends,
 mathematics and med school,
 cadavers and crying. Lunge
 forth, grab holt of hero
 husbands who pluck
 your pink, hold you and hear
 you and balm those
 fat
 pink
 scars

Was it so Bad?

When heels and pearls were kitchen tools
dinner at six on the straight,
downy laundry found empty drawers,
children were tucked by eight,
the structure was carved with him at the helm
blowing his sails with his wind,
but the rudder was mine and firm
was my grip on the ship and all cargo within

Before and After

I am a liar and I don't plan to stop. Here's how I do it: I look at old pictures and manufacture a more palatable time. I reminisce about my daughters, about their tender years when life had a sweet rhythm, a firm beat that I not only heard, but effected. A time when innocence was real: mine and theirs. Old pictures, younger days, pictures that tell a story, but not necessarily the truth.

I have a before and after life, and this is how I process it – before my husband cheated, and after; before he destroyed our family, and after; before the truth, and after. I like to lie about the before life. I like to think that before things fell apart, we had it together. The more I tell it, the more I hear it; and the more I hear it, the more I believe it. It's my story, and I have proof. I have this picture.

Look at this. These are my daughters. Megan's in first grade and Alison is a kindergartener. I remember taking this picture. I stood behind them as they walked to school. Megan has a CareBears lunchbox and is wearing her Minnie Mouse backpack – you can see that it's empty because it folds over in the middle – and Alison has her little pink backpack, empty as well. See how Ali is shorter? How her head only comes to Megan's shoulder? Of course she's four inches taller than her sister now, but back then she was tiny. That was before.

I love how her head is turned slightly towards her sister, and you catch just a glimpse of her profile. She's talking. Alison talked all the time, and still does, and she doesn't tolerate interruptions, which is probably why Megan isn't saying anything. Megan listens—before and after, then and now.

Here's why I like this picture. The girls are holding hands, see? They're walking that concrete line with their fingers laced together, their blond hair glowing, empty little backpacks bouncing. This is how I remember them—going out the door and into the world, together. That part is truth.

I like to remember that time, the time before. The time when our family was budding, our lives were growing. When we were doing everything right: we went to church, helped with homework, ate dinner together every night. We limited television and played in the back yard. My husband and I enjoyed once-a-week date night, and made time for ourselves. We were the perfect young family. This is my evidence.

I want these little girls to come home to hot banana bread and chocolate milk, to play on the swingset, then run inside sweaty and stinking, forgetting to wash their hands before they sit at the table. I want them to look at their daddy and believe his words before they fall out his mouth, to laugh at his silly jokes, to fuss over bedtime, then sleep undisturbed. I want to freeze them in before time.

Of course, I know this picture is really after, but I didn't know it then and I don't care now. It's my picture. My life. My lie.

Replaced

I saw them fork the shingles off a roof
of twenty years, now mossy
stripped to naked planks. It leaked
 in the spot
above the cubby where we secreted
at night and kissed each other's toes,
 our spot
where your credenza now roots under the dripping.
A field of nails clawed sunward and in
 that small spot
the rent wood pulped,
cleaving to its skin.
The debris composted
a litter wreath around our haunt.

Your new roof is green, only brighter.

In Your Kitchen

Did you want to
 fry me,
 dip my wings in spicy
 batter, drop me
 deep in sizzling oil,
 watch me spit and spatter,
 then burn me
 to a crispy crust,
 and serve me on
 a platter?

Or did you aim to
 broil me,
 roast my peppered
 skin til searing,
 slam shut the door, torque
 up the heat,
 suffocation nearing,
 then toss me on
 your smorgasboard,
 fresh canapé appearing?

Or did you slow
 sauté me,
 gourmet broth and butter toss,
 an even-tempered bridled
 flame controlling
 moisture loss,
 to sprinkle me
 like garnish,
 in your own
 reduction
 sauce?

Or did you mean

to grill me,
 blistering flesh
 on hellfire heat,
 charring me
deliberately
 over charcoal
 and mesquite,
 to carve me on
your menu of

mistakes
not
to repeat?

Revenge

The heart, a shrunken
hardened core
that panic stuffed
till chambers tore, and malice
seared my conscience weak
to blackened crust
in devil heat

The mind, a shriveled
salted leech
vindiction crammed
recesses deep, with scheming grand,
destruction mapped
to retribute
the anguish past

The mouth, an open
viper pit
when finally spewed
dyspeptic shit, the fetid blast
malignant pus,
dank chronicle
of bucket rust

The soul, embattled
wretched mess
once acid flung
achieved no rest, yet amplified
the rotten spore
and vanquished not
one open sore

Not to Be

I'm not who you want me to be.

You're not who I want.

I want to be who I want to be.

Who I want you to be is not you.

Then be, not with me.

Bastille

This house -- your comfort
and keep, caste
in concrete
a fortress without
 look out

My cell
under layers and levels and stories,
 lies under
your lies, your stories,
quashed under gables and gutters,
 the greenhouse, the gatehouse, the cookhouse
 a hot house
 this hell house
Your house!

Cherish your chambers
and buttress the keep

I'll escape
before the bridge slams
black

What's Left

In the middle of my sales career I realized I needed to improve my professional presence, to finally overcome a life-long limitation. I felt inappropriate and wanted to change. The problem was my left hand, although I suppose that everyone else thought it was just fine. My nails were neatly manicured, and even though I have a nervous habit of picking my cuticles, they were neat and polished. My skin was softened with scented hand cream and I always kept my jewelry clean. Realistically, no one probably even noticed that hand—that is, until I started writing.

Here's what happened: I would be negotiating a contract, sitting perfectly poised, confirming details and approving appropriate points. But when I started taking notes, I lost all credibility. My left hand seized into an arthritic claw and my elbow clamped on the table. My forearm crossed over the top of the paper and my wrist wrenched south, forming a protective partition, as if I were taking a test in a room full of cheaters. I looked like a total spaz, a contortionist in a room full of properly postured executives. Soon an ink shadow formed on the side of my hand that looked like a bruise gone bad, which was then tragically transferred to my attire. My skirt was stained before the deal was inked. I was ruining my wardrobe and tarnishing my professional image.

I'd had plenty of problems with that hand, and when I first started school it got me in trouble. We wrote in pencil, and when you're a southpaw you smear over everything you write and smudge the lead from margin to margin. In third grade we were rewarded for "Neatness." My papers were not—they looked like I'd just juggled charcoal at a cookout. In fact, there were fully formed fingerprints that could have been registered with the FBI and later used to identify me for my future crimes, which I now think is a brilliant idea. I bet that if teachers had collected the papers of left-handed children through the years and developed a national registry, the FBI could have nabbed hard-core crooks like Jack the Ripper, Billy the Kid and the Boston Strangler before they even got off the playground.

But my problem went beyond my papers. By mid-morning my left hand was fouled with graphite from pinky to wrist, and I was often polluted clean up to the elbow. As I went about my day, I smeared the lead all over my school clothes, but not just on my west side; I got it everywhere. I grimed my blouse and white socks, my skirt and even, on occasion, my panties. And that was back when your school clothes were special, a step down from church clothes, but a big step up from the play clothes you wore at home. My mother was not pleased.

In fourth grade my problem grew when we learned cursive writing. My teacher was mean. I don't remember her name, but I remember her disapproving glare and caustic comments regarding my penmanship. We were judged by the

slant of our letters, and mine were all wrong. Mine leaned backwards, as if they were blown back by the strong gale of an easterly wind. She was determined to rectify that, and instructed me to turn my paper so the lines pointed north and south rather than east and west, and to push my pencil uphill in order to achieve the appropriate cursive slant. But the upward angle created additional pressure on the lead and it snapped, and I frequently left my seat for the sharpener—something she construed as fidgeting—a punishable offense. So I reoriented my paper the way I was comfortable. But when I turned in my work, my script slanted backwards and Mrs. Mean gave it back to me to write over again. She made me do my work twice—my natural way, then her way—often during recess. I finally got so angry that, just to spite her, I found my own way. I formed my hand into the now familiar claw and wrote in that ridiculous posture. My penmanship was perfect, and I started earning A's.

The next year we graduated to ink pens, and I thought writing would get easier, but it actually created a whole new set of problems. Permanent ink, permanent problems. Ten-year-olds are like puppies and like to chew on things. I was a little beaver and gnawed on everything – fingers, barrettes, glue caps, rubber bands and the end of my Bic pen. Those cheap, mass-produced pens were an affordable school supply, but weren't designed to resist the force of a clamping jaw; when they broke, they exploded with flair. Before the ink could spill on my paper, my teeth and lips were stained blue, my chin was smeared, and my hand—

which scouted from my mouth to my nose to my hair to my eyes—traced its itinerary all over my face. And that was before the dripping began. My paper soon looked like an inkblot test from a psychiatrist's office, and you can imagine what became of my clothes.

I never knew pens could be so difficult. If I used a medium point, the ink was too wet and was messier than a pencil. A fine point pen was sharp as a weapon and so stingy with ink that it sliced right through my paper. Fountain pens, which were fashioned after the quill and ink of earlier times, flowed like a river and I wondered how the venerable Thomas Jefferson ever produced a clean copy of the Declaration of Independence, writing from his southern hemisphere. I pictured him at Monticello, sitting in the Cabinet room by his alcove bed, windows thrown wide to the wind and writing of inalienable rights. I wondered why he didn't declare them to be life, liberty and left-handedness. According to his own papers, he slept only two hours a day and from this, I figured out how Jefferson wrote his 1,328-word manuscript, perfectly penned without smudge or smear, in just seventeen days.

Here's how I think he did it: I multiplied 17 days times 22 waking hours per day to get a total of 374 hours. Then I multiplied 374 hours times 60 minutes per hour to get 22,440 working minutes. If you divide 22,440 minutes by 1,328 words you get an allotment of 16.89 minutes per word. By my calculations he wrote one word, waited a little over fifteen minutes while it dried and he decided

what to say next, then he layered word upon word for seventeen days until it was finally complete and ready to be John Hancocked. He needed a better pen.

I was sure that finding the perfect, non-smearing pen would solve my problems, too. I was a Senior in high school when I discovered it clipped to the checkbook in my mother's purse. I'd never seen a wooden pen, and as I pilfered a dollar from her wallet to buy a pack of Marlboro Reds, I wondered why she was hiding it there. It was heavy, yet felt balanced in my hand, and was sculpted from fine-grained walnut that was perfectly sanded to a soft sheen. The tip and clip had been dipped in gold and when I wrote, it slid over my paper like a sleigh through snow, leaving its blue trail of perfectly postured letters without the slightest smear. I had to have this pen.

When I asked my mother to give it to me, she said "no."

"That was a gift," she explained. "If you want one, you can buy your own." That's when daylight hit the dark hole. They carried these upper-crust pens at the stationery store, along with a \$75 price tag. That's a 1976 price tag. I was thunderstruck. I couldn't believe a pen could cost more than two bucks. I calculated that I'd have to babysit for 75 hours, a little less if I got overpaid, which wasn't going to happen since I couldn't stand kids and no one wanted to hire me. The pen was beyond my reach, although my mother's purse was not, and it took all my resolve for her not to lose it.

Speaking of losing it, I've discovered the key to a troubling aspect of my personality. Only about ten percent of the population is left-handed, and if you think we're backwards, you're spot on. For right-handed people, the left side of the brain controls speech and language, while the right side controls emotion. In my case, the pattern is reversed, which is how I explain the fact that my emotions are so easily short-circuited and I go ballistic. I can't help it; my poor brain is at war with itself, flipping right to left and back again which, I suppose, is what gave rise to the term "flipping out." I'm simply wired that way, and recently the National Geographic news confirmed my case. Lefties have something the rest of you don't have—our own gene, *LRRTM1*, that was discovered by a genetic research facility at Oxford University. That gene affects the symmetry of the brain. Of course, the same gene is considered to be a contributing factor in schizophrenia, which results in severe behavioral changes and impaired perception. Now I understand why actors like Tom Cruise, Angelina Jolie, Robert DeNiro, and Shirley MacLaine can change character personalities like they're changing clothes. They have the gene for it.

Schizophrenia aside, the fact is that most left-handed people are intelligent, and we often have higher IQ's than our right-handed counterparts. In fact, a study last year concluded that left-handed men earn about five percent more per hour. But can you really trust sociological research? Studies also show that my kind have superior spatial relation skills, but you won't find that in me. I am terminally

clumsy, and I have the injuries to prove it. Even though my house has been arranged the same way for years, I crash into the furniture all the time, clip corners with my hip, bang my hands on the counters, open cabinets into my own head, and lumber into doorways. I call it “bonking,” and I do it a lot.

But I don't just bump around at home, I do it in my car too. I run over curbs, sideswipe fence poles and have earned a first-class ticket to the body shop, coupled with a sky-high insurance rate. Just this week I backed into a little black BMW that was parked directly behind my driveway. A blind person could navigate more skillfully, and I hope that Helen Keller got my portion of our birthright—the superior spatial skills I don't possess.

There's something else seriously wrong with me that escapes my understanding: I can't tell right from left. Honestly. If you say “turn right,” I turn left. If I tell you to turn left, you better go right if you want to stay on track. This is infuriating; I should be able to orient myself by using my left side as a benchmark, but I simply cannot do it. So I revert to a visual cue, a trick I learned in grade school. I hold both hands in front of my face, palms out, thumbs at right angles. Whichever hand forms the letter “L” is my left hand, and it's always on the same side. If I'm quick enough, I only have to let go of the steering wheel for a few seconds.

But these private problems are ingrained issues I can't overcome. I just wanted to change my writing posture, to preserve my dignity and protect my

work wardrobe. I remembered Mrs. Mean and her instruction. I went back to basics, turned my paper north and south, and wrote uphill. Big mistake. The only time I tried it, I came away with notes I couldn't read. I'd negotiated a complicated implementation plan, and while I'm sure I was the picture of poise during the meeting, I later didn't recognize my own handwriting. I had to call my customer the next day to retrace my steps—a sure-fire credibility killer. That's when I threw up my hands and forfeited appearances in favor of function.

But I'm in good company. I'm not the only one handicapped by the south paw clutch that undermines a polished appearance. There are hundreds of famous politicians, artists, actors and renegades that share my orientation, and we are making our mark. In fact, five of our last seven Presidents are lefties, and their pens are potent, regardless of how they're handled. Case in point: I just watched President Obama sign a bill that pumped trillions of dollars to the public, with his hand clamped in that painfully pathetic posture. He looked just like me.

Suppertime at Happy Valley Home for the Aged

Even old sluts end
up in homes, placed in urine
stained rooms with dignified
mothers, principled women. They prop
in bed and scratch
their scalps, reach for rubber
footed walkers, then glide to the commode
to lower their frail, saggy asses
onto plastic platform toilets,
holding tight to the guardrails. They wipe
and sniff and flush, then stand
before the sink and count the cracks
on their faces, scored by hours spent
flat on their backs under
suits who grunted and spewed,
then went home to beefsteak
dinners and lipsticked wives.

Christened with jewel
names—Ruby or Opal or Pearl—
their mamas expected
them to extend their graces
and polished fingers to bonafide
beaus, to smile coyly and break
hearts, rather than spread
their snatch at nary a wink. They fancied
banker and doctor husbands, men who churched
on Sundays and spent
evenings by the fire with scrubbed
children and loyal dogs, who retired
upstairs to reach for their duty
wives, then slept satisfied
sleep — not passers-by who smeared
the sheets and bolted.

The fragile hands, gnarled,
stroke her fallow hair, then spritz
Jean Nate on wilted breasts,
long forgetting for those who had nestled
there—who buried their faces and burdens,
borrowed comfort, laughed
lustily, clung to compassion. She sticks
her finger in the pot to smear rounds
of rouge on liver spotted cheeks, set
with a puff of powder. Fissures gouge
her mouth, bleeding a faint halo
around her lips—lips that shot
whiskey, locked on lovers and kissed
their crotches, lips that pursed,
that grazed hot ears, lied
to lovers and mothers, begged mercy, begged
money, begged marriage, begged
meals, asked nothing, expected nothing
and received

The evening meal
is set, tables adorned with plastic—daisies
at breakfast, pansies for supper, forks
spoons and knives. The frail are set
first—the vacant mother, bathrobe flapping,
is wheeled to her spot, chest strapped
tight to pin her upright, properly
postured waiting to eat, wanting to live, waiting
to die, fingering her fork and counting
the tines, this woman who ordered
her family, ordered her kitchen, ordered
her husband, this mother who churched
the children, judged the guilty, damned
the delinquent, laid the fire, laid down
the law, lay cold at night,
stiff and tight
and right

The slut sits
and smoothes her slacks, napkins
her lap, nods at the mother
whose head bobs a syncopated
beat. The hussy forks her ham, slices
proper portions and eats, dabbing
her corners between bites. She crosses
her ankles and eyes her pie but polishes
first the peas, while in the corner
of her eye the mother spoons
sweet potato and smears
her chin. Ruby reaches out and wipes
the mouth, the pious mouth that spat
at sinners, disdained evil, spewed
judgment, the mouth
on my mother, who stares
ahead fish-eyed,
drooling.

Twisted Metal

When I became A Paperclip
I wasn't very strong
a thin and flimsy metal self,
been twisted far too long

I used to be The Paper
transformed from time to time
each parchment a progression
that chronicles my life

Born strong Construction Paper
the thick and textured kind
created artwork joyfully
my simple, childish mind

A kindergarten Big Chief,
fat ruled and grainy gray,
my crude initial penmanship
forgiven every day

Matured into A Notebook
white, narrow lines inspected
I had to write much straighter now,
with margins all respected

An adolescent Love Note
from hopeful, eager heart
emotions trumped all reasoning,
each crush was doomed to part

The pressured college Blue Book
exams compelling me
to dump out thoughts in record time,
be judged accordingly

Professionally, a Print-Out
tight schedules governed time
and forced the rapid solving of
emergencies not mine

Reduced, then, to a Scratch Pad,
quick scribbles, inky rage
no margins here, no time for that,
I spilled flat off the page

And now—I'm just A Paperclip
I'm twisted back and forth
my paper life is held in place
with precious little force

Smack in the Day of Distemper

I'm not an artist by nature, but my sister is very good. She is, in fact, a professional painter whose work hangs in a gallery that also displays a Picasso. Terrie's talent claimed her when we were children and, being wise, I let her own it. I don't do art. When I landed on the 17th floor of Barnes Hospital—the certified looney bin—and was given my own box of crayons and a coloring book, I was a little intimidated. It was only art therapy, designed to accelerate my recovery, but I was afraid of it. I didn't want to color, and I didn't want to sit near the schizo who argued with the other fellows in his head.

“Should I use green or blue?” he asked.

“Not green, not blue, red, red, RED!” the alter-ego replied. The green crayon clattered to the floor.

I belonged here. No one expected anything from me, knew anything about me, or gave a hoot about what I'd done. I was just one of the psychos, one with a distinct privilege: I had a day pass. I clocked out every evening and came back the next morning. Most everyone else stayed. They could color all night.

I've heard that when someone is serious about suicide, they have a plan. Mine had been percolating for about two years, when the wind that turned into the whirlwind sucked me up and whipped me like a rag doll, repeatedly slamming,

hammering me like a headless nail until, in the end, I lost my head. May 13, 2003 was the first strike.

My husband and I were a compatible sort. Rooted in our 22-year marriage and totally invested in our family, we had two daughters, one in her freshman year of college and the other just graduating high school. Deeply religious, we were leaders in our evangelical church, one of those couples you look at and think, “they are really solid.” Affluent, spiritual, the parents of model students—it was a pretty picture with a solid frame.

We had our routines and most mornings I went to the gym around 5:30, worked out, then showered and dressed before commuting to work. This day I finished around 7:30.

When I got in the car my phone rang. It was Jim.

“Nancy, you need to come home.” His voice was flat, quiet.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Just come home, please. Now.”

Something in his voice told me not to argue, not to press, just go home, no questions asked.

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

When red flags fly, I have an acute physical reaction. My intestines twisted and I felt the press of oncoming diarrhea. My stomach flipped and my mouth got bone dry as if I’d been smoking pounds of pot, or had run a waterless

marathon. My mind raced through a checklist, and I actually heard the blood rush, felt the gears grinding. Could it be this, or this, or—oh Good Lord, please—not that.

I knew. I called him back.

“Listen,” I said. “I know this is serious. Whatever it is, I’m coming home with an open mind and an open heart.”

When I walked in the kitchen Jim was standing at the center island, his lips and face flat and colorless.

“Let’s go in here,” he murmured, ushering me to the dining room where the table had been set with coffee cups, creamer, and a full thermos pot. There were three place settings. One was occupied.

I stopped at the doorway and clung to its casing. “Oh, God. This is bad, isn’t it?” I cried out to Judy, the counselor from our church. I could barely breathe and felt a ripping in my chest, as if my flesh were attached to two vice cranks that wrenched me apart.

“Yes, it’s bad.”

We were at the table for nearly three hours as Jim told his story. My husband—my Bible thumping, chastity teaching, hypocritical “above reproach” elder in our super-evangelical church—was at it again. He was hiring prostitutes. Again. He’d gotten caught doing the same thing ten years earlier, after a long period of secrecy. It had started a few weeks after our first daughter was born.

Jim was traveling on business and slept with a hotel hooker. It must have come easier after that, because it turned into a pattern he repeated when he was out of town—for nearly twelve years. When I finally found out, I honestly thought I would die of grief, and then later, of shame. I never suspected a thing.

It was a hard, hateful road but we worked through it. Jim repented, we formally renewed our wedding vows, and after months of counseling with our pastor, things gradually got better. It was the worst year of my life.

Ten years later, and here I was again. This time I wanted to kill him.

“There’s more,” Judy interjected, nodding for Jim to continue.

There was more. Over the course of several months, one particular hooker dug in her claws and demanded money, which he initially refused her. But then she showed up at our church, and one Sunday she walked up and introduced herself to me. She told me she was a newcomer, and I greeted her with warmth. After that she joined my Bible study. Jim couldn’t bear this direct strike on his home front and he caved in. He gave her \$30,000 and told her go away. But he couldn’t spend \$30,000 without my knowledge, so he wrote a check on our home equity line of credit, increasing the debt on our mortgage.

She wanted more. She knew me and our phone number, and she threatened to make the call. Jim was being blackmailed.

“She said she’ll pay it back. I had her sign a note.” He couldn’t meet my eyes.

I'm not always as quick on the uptake as I should be, and it took several minutes for the truth to sink in. My husband looked really sad, devastated, in fact. Before I realized that this stinking bastard was fucking whores, wiping out our accounts, and exposing me to God-knows-what manner of diseases, I actually felt sorry for him.

Poor Jim. He messed up again and needs comfort.

There, there, now. I know you didn't mean to.

Still battling that low self-esteem inflicted by your overbearing mother, are you?

"Get out. I want you out now."

Our divorce was swift and uncontested, granted in seven weeks. Because our house was large and both girls were going to college, I didn't want to keep it. It sold in two weeks. On July 6, the very day of our divorce, I closed on a home in a nearby community.

Four weeks later our youngest daughter started her freshman year at Mizzou, and our oldest returned to Pepperdine.

I was alone in a condo, and it was achingly quiet.

You're either a dog person, or you're a cat person. I like dogs, and although I've had many cats, I never quite connected with any of them. It's not that they're aloof or independent; the problem is that cats aren't fun. Once you

get past the dragging a string across the carpet phase, they don't do anything. They won't bring you a ball or lick the jam between your toes, or even try to cheer you up. They lurk behind the furniture and eyeball you. Cats don't care.

My daughter gave me a kitten before she left for college. I named her Mercy.

Back then I was selling software and traveled for business. One day I'd be in Kansas City, and the next week in Chicago. Or perhaps I'd be with a customer in New York, or working from home. I wasn't always in the office. One night as I was racing to the airport to catch a flight home, the truth hit me hard: No one was waiting for me. If I missed my flight, no one would know. No one would care. No husband, no kids, no neighbors. Just a cat with a continuous feeder. It didn't matter if I caught a flight that night, the next night, or ever. I wouldn't even be missed at work, that's how fragmented our sales force was.

Driving to work the next day, I caught something I hadn't seen before. The Wall—a thick concrete abutment that was at the end of the outer road that flanked Highway 64 in St. Louis, a road where traffic flows at freeway speed, although it's marked with a much lower limit. That long approach appeared to dead-end straight into the concrete, but the road actually made a sharp right turn and continued on. If I fully accelerated and crashed into that wall, I would smack right

through to the oblivion I craved. It was an open option, and I flirted with it every day.

We all have our anchors and mine were family, home, church and work. I lost them in exactly that order. Shortly after my divorce I started losing my friends—it seems those upright evangelicals didn't know how to deal with a case like mine. I'd been decoupled in the ugliest way, a dark sex scandal that belonged in the "world," not the church. After excommunicating Jim from the pulpit, they didn't know what to do with me.

It was subtle at first. People whom I'd considered friends abruptly stopped talking to me, looking down and clearing their throats like they were embarrassed. Whole groups would disband when I headed their way, and I felt like a slut in Jr. High. I overheard one of the elders, someone we'd spent lots of time with say, "It's just another example of the woman making too much money." He was talking about me. I earned more than my husband had. Did he think that if I earned less money, my husband wouldn't have hooked with whores?

I later told a friend about another concern of mine: our church had only a scant few members who'd been divorced. This didn't seem balanced to me, since half the world is divorced. She replied, "Well, we don't really want divorced people here."

importantly, that short name was easy to yell across the hunting field. I didn't know I wanted a dog, but my dad was a bird hunter and he needed a bird dog, so we got this puppy. Chris wiggled. He licked. He was mostly white, with big orange splotches, and I loved his peculiar puppy breath. But something was wrong with Chris. He would be playing and wagging and bouncing in all directions when all of a sudden, at full force, he would run headlong into the wall. Then he'd do it again. And again. After a couple of days my parents called the breeder, who took him back. We soon found a new breeder and another puppy, one that did not have distemper.

“Why did he run into the wall?” I asked my mother.

“He couldn't help it,” she explained. “He didn't get all his shots. He was sick and his brain wasn't right.”

How could I brace for what came next? My sister is my only sibling, and although we hadn't lived near each other since childhood, we are emotionally close. Terrie's children are my flesh and blood, as mine are hers, and that means that if one of our four kids needs anything, we provide it as if that were our own child. Anything.

Her son, Nolan, was the only boy in our family—one that had produced fifty years worth of girls. For this, he held special honor. Loud and rambunctious

as a child, he entered college in North Carolina as a strong and assured young man, the kind of guy you'd want your daughter to marry. He had a big heart and a fantastic smile. On November 1, as he and his buddies were leaving a football game, they came upon the scene of a grisly accident—even before the authorities arrived. Nolan pulled the young driver out the window of his burning car, and lay him on the side of the road to wait for the ambulance. He needed to cover the victim and, remembering the blanket in his trunk, he turned to get it. At that precise moment, Larry Veeder, drunk and thinking he was driving off-road through a stand of trees, plowed through the accident scene. They weren't trees. They were people, and he killed six of them, maiming numerous others.

Nolan was the youngest to die.

It's no wonder that three weeks later, on Thanksgiving Day, I barely reacted when we got word of Natalee's death. We had known Natalee since she was two, and the girls had gone all the way through high school with her, sharing sleepovers, summer camp, school dances and cheerleading. At twenty, she was found dead, naked in a field in Colorado outside the Young Life camp she was visiting. The official cause of death was exposure; Natalee had frozen to death. They finally determined she had been in a state of delirium brought about by two factors: altitude sickness and fasting. She hadn't eaten in a couple days, wandered outside in the middle of the night, and got lost. I don't know why she

was naked. I didn't go to her funeral, and I didn't send flowers or a card. I didn't even miss her.

My hair came out in handfuls.

I started traveling more and my cat, after spending long stretches of time by herself, preferred to be alone. She didn't like it when I was there. If she wasn't hiding behind the refrigerator or slinking past me, she was on the attack. Whenever I watched TV, she climbed up the back of the couch and pounced on me, biting my head, clawing my hair and leaving marks on my face.

I eventually returned her to the SPCA. I wanted to return the whole year.

There was a single ray of light at the end of 2003, and it found me on December 1, precisely at 7:00 p.m. I had joined "It's Just Lunch," a introduction service for busy professionals who want to meet equally successful, self-defined professionals. Cash was the qualifier. If you were willing to fork over the \$1,600 it cost to join, you were a professional. People join dating services for various reasons, and I had mine. I didn't want romance and I didn't want a relationship. I simply wanted to meet people, to make friends with both men and women, and to fill my vacuum of empty hours. I needed a new life, and I desperately needed friends. Other than working during the week and occasionally volunteering for Habitat for Humanity on the weekends, I had absolutely nothing to do. Nothing.

No kids to cart, no swim meets to cheer, no yard work, no laundry, no church functions, no going out for dinner. I didn't even need to grocery shop. I stared at the walls and ate cereal over the sink.

Herb had been single for twelve years, ever since his wife walked out on both him and their kids, who were eight and five years at the time. He tells me now that he knew—that very night—that he wanted to marry me. "I'd dated a lot of women," he says, reminiscing, "and I never found anyone like you."

Oh, sweet Jesus, I think now, it's a darn good thing you didn't tell me that then. My next thought is, *You didn't know what you were getting yourself into.*

He really didn't.

But he did tell me about his rule. "I never date anyone who's been divorced less than a year."

When he called me the next evening, and the next, and called the following night to ask me to dinner, I reminded him of his rule. I'd been divorced only five months.

"Rules are made to be broken. I'll pick you up Friday at 7:00."

Herb's attention was intoxicating. He is the type of man I like, one who knows what he wants and pursues it with a steady persistence. He knew when to press forward and when to pull back, never pushing, but always guiding towards his desired conclusion—and he did it with great charm. He was painstakingly attentive to me and wooed me tenderly, sending me huge bouquets of flowers and

giving thoughtful gifts. We talked and talked and talked, finding that rare mental match that comes around, if you're lucky, just once in your life.

I fell in love with Herb, and it wasn't a rebound love I'd been warned about. I really loved this man. On occasion, however, our relationship hit a snag, and at those times I would fantasize about the wall. Even a small fracture with Herb terrified me and I'd think, *If this doesn't work out, I'll go to the wall*. But our problems were minor and we were married the following October.

Looking back, I see that Herb rescued me—he was my unwitting savior of sorts, giving me love, hope and a future. All my foundations had been shattered, and I'd been shredded by those broken pieces. Spurned by my church and disgusted with its hypocrisy, I abandoned its tenets. I was enraged by the fact that you could be doing everything right, and life would go horribly wrong anyway—and that praying or claiming Bible verses didn't mean squat. I'd been taught wrong, and I was madder than hell. It must have been hard on Herb to watch what flowed from my wounds, especially since he sometimes had to deflect my anger, inappropriately directed at him.

When we married, I moved into his house. We had too much furniture, too much of everything, so as we combined households, I gave most of my things to my daughter who was furnishing her first house, happy that she would have the familiar comfort of our family belongings.

With that move, my erasure was complete. Gone were the vestiges of my former family life, the familiar walls, the shared memories and common history, the simple items that brought comfort: the rusted carrot peeler that was an original wedding gift, the metal bowls the girls threw up in when they were sick, the green crock pot I took from home after college. I felt like I'd moved to a foreign country, one where I knew the language, but not the customs. I constantly sought affirmation that I was doing things right, yet I always felt wrong, wrong, wrong. I didn't know who or where I was, nor how I got there. So just when it appeared that life would be a smooth sail, I fell overboard.

When the girls were little we raised puppies. Cocker spaniels. We had several litters while they were in elementary school and, of course, our home was wildly popular whenever puppies ruled the roost. When the first signs of labor struck, I raced to school to bring the girls home for the delivery. I needed their help. Our dog wouldn't remove the birth sacs and in order for the puppies to breathe, we had to rip them off. As I received each pup from the birth canal, I passed it, dripping with fluid, to one of the girls who tore open the sac and rubbed until it wiggled and squeaked. She placed it under the heat lamp and the puppy, only seconds old, scooted blindly to pile with the other pups.

At six weeks they needed their first shots. Children hate shots. They don't understand the protection they offer, they just remember the pain. I

explained that the shots would keep the puppies healthy and I told them about Chris, my first dog. Later I overheard them re-telling my story and drawing this simple conclusion: “If they don’t get their shots, they get mad and run into a wall. They get a temper.”

On December 1, exactly one year after Herb and I met, we took some friends to dinner at the restaurant where we had our first date. We ate and drank and laughed, but on the way home, my personality took a nasty turn. I don’t remember what set me off, but I suspect it was a common trigger I often experienced back then—he probably referenced something prior to our history together, something that made me feel like a blank slate, a black hole. I got angry and, fueled by drink, unleashed a barrage of attacks against him. When we got home, I collapsed into wracking sobs and, already drunk, grabbed a half-full quart of Jack Daniels and my car keys. The wall was calling.

Sick puppies scare me. One minute they can be nursing heartily, and the next they can be pushed from the litter, separate and stranded. The bitch provides only one thing to her pups—nourishment. And when she’s tired of nursing, she gets up and leaves the nest, shaking the babies off her nipples. Puppies need the warmth of the litter to maintain their body heat, and they need to maintain their

body heat to survive. If they don't pile together, they die. The cardinal rule is this: don't ever let a puppy get chilled.

I knew it was wrong to drive drunk on the heels of Nolan's death, but I didn't care. I was no fool; dying would hurt, and I needed a buffer. I choked on each swig of the whiskey, but drank it anyway. I was afraid I would survive the crash and be disabled, so I rolled down all my windows, opened the sunroof and unlatched my seat belt.

But I didn't realize that things look different in the dark when you're drunk. I was headed in the right direction, but missed the turn for the outer road and entered the freeway instead. This was not in my plan. It forced me to loop around for about seven miles in order to make another run for it, but I missed it again. Before my next attempt I drove through White Castle and ordered a couple burgers, some fries and a shake—the greasiest, most caloric last meal I could think of—and pulled onto a side street before my last run.

I needed to say goodbye.

I didn't know the time, but was sure my family would be sleeping, and since my children always silenced their phones, I knew I could leave touching mother-messages of love and pride, I'm-sorries and I-love-you's, without disturbing their sleep. I was right. I told them I loved them, and to be strong. I left Terrie a comparable word.

And then I called my ex-husband, the bastard who'd started this mess. Asleep next to his new wife, he answered the phone. "Jim," I slurred, "I want to apologize for everything. I won't be calling you again." Click. He must have been relieved to know that I wouldn't be assaulting him with his mother-fuckingness anymore.

My parents have a cell phone they only turn on if they want to make a call, and even then, they usually forget they have it. I dialed that number, checking my address book to be sure I wasn't dialing their home number. I didn't want a conversation, just closure. After the second ring, Mom answered her home phone.

I broke down at my mother's voice. I was hysterical, weeping and telling her I was "finished" and that I was "going to the wall." I don't remember her words, but somehow she talked me into driving home, begging me not to hang up. I hung up.

The whiskey was gone and I was nearly to the blackout point. When I got home Herb was on the phone with my mom. He immediately hung up and tried to hold and comfort me but, beyond his or anyone else's help, I spun away and screamed that I was finally going home—home to the wall. I was out the door again and driving blindly when I heard a loud thump as I plowed down my neighbor's mailbox. I mowed it down like a tree.

That's the last thing I remember. Herb says I called a few minutes later, stranded in the middle of an intersection about a mile away, deserted in the early hours. My front wheel had simply fallen off—not the tire, but the entire wheel—having been bent so badly from the collision with the mailbox. My car simply stopped. He pushed it to an adjacent gas station where it waited for tomorrow's tow truck, then took me home. Oddly enough, there was no body damage to my vehicle, not even a scratch. Herb told the insurance company I had skidded on black ice and hit a curb, disabling my vehicle. They believed him.

If a puppy gets chilled you have a couple of options, but you must be quick. You can soak it in warm water for a few minutes, rubbing briskly to distribute the heat, then swaddle it tightly and lay it directly under a heat lamp; or you can rub vigorously and blow your warm breath on it until movement returns, then put it at the bottom of the litter pile.

A chilled puppy usually dies, but it's always worth the effort.

I woke up the next day—I don't know if it was morning or afternoon—with Herb by my side; concerned, perplexed, and very distant. I couldn't meet his eye. I drifted in and out of consciousness, suffering from some level of alcohol poisoning. The physical agony of that drunk was excruciating, but took a far back

seat to my emotional anguish. I'd made a wreck of wrecking myself, and I was still here.

Herb fielded calls from my family, discussing how to get me the right kind of help, and how to get it quickly. When I woke that evening, Terrie was sitting on the bed next to me. She'd been on her way to downtown Minneapolis that morning when Mom called and told her what happened. She turned straight for the airport and was on a flight to St. Louis within an hour, arriving without a toothbrush, a hairbrush or a change of clothes.

Terrie stayed for several days, wrapping me in blankets and feeding me hot soup. She lay down next to me, and told me I'd be alright. I could barely eat because my stomach was stripped of its lining, so she fixed hot tea and forced me to sip it. She took me to the doctor, and helped Herb arrange my place at the hospital. I felt like winter. My head, my heart, my hands—icy cold and resistant to thaw.

She never mentioned my drunk driving.

When an animal, human or otherwise, experiences imminent danger, the brain releases a rush of chemicals that illicit one of two responses: fight or flight. Under prolonged stress, the actual structure of the brain undergoes physiological changes that are reflected in the body. Hair grays or falls out, sleep is disrupted or

unattainable, the skin dries and thins, and the chemical balance of the body is disrupted. You can't think straight.

My medical treatment included a battery of tests, physical and psychological. I gave blood, urine, family history and recent history. They scanned my brain, tested my heart, checked my reflexes. Then they gave me drugs—Lexapro for depression, Trazadone to sleep, iron to build my depleted reserves, and a large shot of prescription strength Vitamin D, the sunshine vitamin, that had leached out of my body due to stress-induced malnutrition. I had lost thirty pounds. The skin on my face and around my eyes looked like crepe paper, and almost half my hair was gone. I was told it could take a couple of years to fully recover from the trauma.

Herb and I have two dogs now. Sophie, our terrier, came first and we got a little Maltese we named Jake a year later. I like to train puppies. We hung a bell on the back door, and by the time we had Sophie for two weeks, she was potty trained. She rang the bell to go outside, and I almost always heard it in time. Teaching Jake was even easier—he had it mastered in a week.

Animals learn best in an atmosphere of positive energy, and they take a submissive role when they have a calm, assured leader. If the leader isn't balanced, the dog is out of control. When we travel with our dogs, we sometimes take them to outdoor restaurants where they lie at our feet while we eat. They

don't beg and they don't bug the other diners, and if they start to sniff for something they think they might like, they're back on the floor at the snap of my fingers. Our dogs were easy to train. They'll do almost anything I say.

In the winter, we like to pile in bed with them and hunker down.

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