

Boundaryland

by

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Thesis

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Boundaryland

“We show great loyalty to the hard times we’ve been through.”

- John Darnielle

“but sleep tight my love although in the/ O of our doubt.”

-Dana Teen Lomax, “Lullaby”

Marin County

When I was younger, my dad drove an old 1998 Ford Ranger with a cassette player and no airbag on the passenger side. When I was three and four he'd strap my carseat next to his, the stick shift between us, and play tapes of audiobooks as we ran errands or on the way to and from play practice or Home Depot. We got the cassettes from the library, and they came in these huge plastic bags with colored hard plastic handles organized with letters on their edges. His hands were thick with gray hair and he'd pop the handles apart and stick the tape into the player in the dash. I'd listen to the story but keep my eyes on him and after a few moments of silence, I'd watch as his hands began to move off the steering wheel and into the air, his mouth twitching with half-formed words. He'd replay the day that way, getting into fights with his boss, reliving the meetings he fell behind in, saying what he wished he'd have said under his breath with his only child there watching. We drove the freeway along the northern coast of the San Francisco Bay, then over a twisting back road next to the sewage treatment and glass recycling plants where they cut up Christmas trees and the smell lingered, shit and pine and crushed cans of soda and beer, well into summer.

The truck was the first place I really heard my dad swear or get angry, one fist clenched around the faded dark plastic of the wheel, the other with fingers straight and pressed out as if slicing through the air. My face turned toward him as cassette tape stories played through the Ranger's tinny speaker, and my legs strained as I tried to rest my feet on the dash. I would watch him forget I was there. He seemed to disappear into his own memory, muttering to himself "stop, no, that's not how it is," and then he'd

bounce back halfway, clocking the road enough to keep going where we needed to, though he missed turns and got honked at.

He'd turn to notice me riding next to him only when I said, "Dad, you're doing it again," and he'd reply "yeah, I guess I am," and then he'd make a big show of taking a big breath and he'd smile his cap-toothed smile and then, a minute or so later, he'd resume the same posture, eyes to the road, hand outstretched and swinging, and I'd feel myself shrinking in his eyes, blending in. I'd distract myself with the story for a moment but mostly I'd feel stuck and entranced, watching him. My first memories of my father are the ones of how he was then in the truck, this man trying to take command of some moments dying or dead. I watched my father act out the things he couldn't let go of.

We lived, when I was small, in a cheap rental on the edge of one of the richest counties in the world. What became the suburbs of San Francisco, now called Marin County, through missions, and gold rushes, and tech booms, all manner of propaganda and violence, is a partial shrine to white people's wealth and possession, nestled into old-growth redwoods. The cruelty of a National Park-ridden suburb is obvious. Inlets of bay become bird sanctuaries and luxury condos. Estuary water runs high into wine country and then low out to sea, where cliffs of serpentinite glow green through the fog. Hardly anyone can actually afford to see any of this, and the result is mostly a lot of rich people calling for the preservation of the land just down the street from them, while simultaneously expanding their gigantic properties. The richest people in Marin County act like boring gods, shining in solar-paneled light and svelte with farmers' market food. Conservation is, of course, usually in service of those who started the destruction to begin with, and growing up, it was common to watch schoolmates and their parents tout the

ecofascist wonders of their electric cars and wild wooded driveways and then take off for a private plane trip around the world.

This is all to say that late last fall, at twenty one, I was trying to decide whether or not to start talking to my dad again, and I thought a lot about local celebrities to negotiate what this was like. It's a habit left over from the days in the truck, a practice of dueling attention, my dad and a story played low. I read a feature on the celebrity chef Guy Fieri in *People Magazine*, and he said, "When I got into television, I'd already done what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a great dad." I couldn't tell if I was bored or charmed by this. It's rare to hear someone say they've done a great job at anything, let alone at fatherhood, and I liked the idea that you can learn how to parent like you learn how to be a chef. I imagined that if I had been born to different parents, my childhood would have been portioned out the right way for me, that each thing I witnessed, each new experience would have been intentional and planned. Growing up, I lived near one of Guy Fieri's homes, and his son went to middle school with my best friend's sister. People remarked on Guy's presence in his son's life, smiling in the bleachers at basketball games, dutifully shaking hands and taking pictures in the parking lot afterwards. A quiet father, a nice man supporting his son.

When I learned to read at five, my dad started taking me to the library. Back then, I read books so quickly I was accused of lying. Back then, I synthesized and processed information so easily, that I thought it made sense that I should be treated as a near-adult, capable of thinking and reacting as my parents would. I began to understand life as a series of intellectual challenges I had to prepare myself for. Hard things could be met, understood, and moved past, I thought, with proper academic focus.

When my dad and I made our library trips, we'd walk into the squat brick building together and then he'd deposit me in the children's section and then wander off while I selected books on my own. I remember the terror when on winter nights the sun went down early and the library shelves seemed to close in, and I would look up from my pages to find him gone. I'd scour the back corners by the ancient CDs, my heart pounding, until I'd locate him bent over a catalog computer, the gray of his sweater blending him into the carpet, or he'd be crouching low behind the New shelf, my father hiding in things.

When I was left alone in the library and could not find my father, I was upset both at the way I felt scared without him and at my inability to properly react to finding out that I did not know where he was. I wanted to know what to do when I could not see him anymore, to not be afraid but to spring into action. The outcome of my ability at that age, five and six and seven, to write and read as I could, is the way memory sits hard in me. I knew how I felt in the abstract way a kid does, in sudden fits of frustration when at seven or so I couldn't read the MapQuest directions fast enough, and my mother got lost on twisting San Francisco streets. I can remember what happened because I was trying to make sense of it. The only thing that language couldn't fix, back then, was the particular anguish of watching my father trying to love me but mostly forgetting I was there.

When I want to think of my dad without noticing rage under my skin like mites, I read celebrity trash magazines. I think *US Weekly* and *People* teach about redemption in the grocery store aisle. All these second weddings in Paris, all these stars getting clean and getting plastic surgery, these show that we can endlessly renew ourselves. Guy Fieri even, great dad as he is, talks about his comeback. He has a dark goatee that stands in

contrast to the bleached blonde tips of his thinning hair. He wears shirts with flames on them and sunglasses backward on his head, the shaded eyes caught in the folds of skin at the base of his neck. Guy is bold and absurd, his skin is a beautiful, impractical rust color like a penny, and he brings his kids with him, writes them into episodes of his TV show.

Sometimes, I think it doesn't even matter if my father actually notices me in a way that I can see or feel. I want him to speak with the declarative hopefulness of a magazine. I want him to speak directly to me for hours about trying to care for me, to tell me he wants to live a long time so he can see how it will end up between us.

Without totally wanting to, I wonder what Guy is really like as a father. In some interviews, he says he wants to make his kids aware of their luck and privilege. He tells an anecdote about how his son didn't get a fancy car in high school, he drove the family minivan until he could buy his own car. Guy Fieri is the highest earning personality on Food Network with restaurants and houses all over the world, so I wonder if the family minivan cuts it in terms of humility. Guy told *People* that a few years ago he decided he needed to get healthy if he wanted to live to see grandchildren, so he started drinking only on weekends, and now he does intermittent fasting, skipping breakfast in the mornings. I wonder about how much Guy drank before. How bad it had to be that a weekend liquor binge is an improvement. He owns a cigar line now called Knuckle Sandwich, and I think about his kids, watching their red-faced father not eat for hours and then take a cigar to the porch.

There is a distinction I've come to obsess over, between the type of neglect and loneliness I experienced as a child, and the neglect and loneliness of my moneyed peers. Of course, sometimes loss is loss and sometimes suffering is entirely unique, but still. I

wonder a lot if there is a difference in the way hurt lands when your father is working for other people versus when your father has everyone else working for him. I think wealth can make people feel important, and I think about what it might do to someone when the importance instilled in them through sheer net worth is negated by the ongoing neglect they face from the dad who should love them. Sometimes I talk myself into thinking I'm better off because I wasn't born rich. I say to myself, at least I didn't have to deal with double disappointment: thinking I was special and finding out I wasn't and then dealing with a dad who, special or not, didn't care what I did. When I was small, I thought my intelligence would save me, that I could reason my dad out of his inattention, just by reminding him over and over that I was there, by getting up and finding him, over and over, whenever he left me. I tried to make myself matter. And maybe some of my rich peers, having been taught that their wealth made them matter already, figured in their own ways that the thing that would save them from loneliness was becoming unforgettable however they could. They didn't need to be good or smart to be memorable, they just needed to do something big enough.

A few years ago, this 16-year-old kid, Max Wade, rappelled down into the luxury dealership where Guy kept his Lamborghini, dismantled the building's fancy alarm system, and stole the car. Max was over-resourced and under-supervised, a rich kid from a couple of towns over from mine with a brain so powerful it could design ways to get almost whatever he wanted. Max got away with the car theft for months, eluding the police, going for night-time joy rides and hiding out in a rented storage space across the bridge from our wealthy suburb. He'd gotten kicked out of our super-funded public high school at fourteen for selling weed and fake IDs to other students. Local news says the

car theft was an impressive crime for such a young person. He changed Guy's plates reading "GUYTORO" for stolen ones that weren't as easily traceable.

Eventually, in a jealous fit, Max, having bought guns somehow, shot at the boyfriend of a girl he liked, not killing him but shattering the window of a local taco place and scaring the shit out of everyone. A few days later, Max tried to sell someone a fake ID, and that's when the police finally got him. They found the storage facility stocked with handguns and fake identities and heist gear. Still a teenager, Max was sentenced to twenty-one years in prison. From what I understand, he's doing time now. His mom was in the courtroom and was photographed lavishly, in an expensive leather belt and huge sunglasses. There wasn't coverage of his dad.

Outside the court, Guy appeared for interviews, his signature hair spiked and eyes glinting wet in the Northern California sun. He laughed, almost, when he talked about how long the car had been gone, how people would call him saying they'd seen it being driven around. "Brave kid," he chuckled, shaking his head. Max Wade is silent and still in the grainy court photos, slouching next to his lawyer, looking nowhere. Local access news recounted the way Max was caught, at his storage locker. He tried to run, a cop said, but a spare narcotics officer kicked him in the chest and got him down. Max wound up flat on his back like a kid at the playground, all the wind knocked out of him. The cop's face wrinkled and reddened as he recounted this detail, his eyes dipping down to his hands.

I am luckier than Max and less sick than Max, but I understand a piece of his longing. It doesn't make sense to steal the car of a famously garish Food Network personality unless there is a part of you not being noticed, unless you feel like someone's

eyes on you might make a difference. The luxury dealership Max stole the car from was stocked with other, less suspicious picks, but he didn't go for those. He was brilliant for his ability to dismantle a fancy car garage's alarm system and then sneak in, and he was predictable in his jealousy and entitlement. His violent rage in response to a young woman he couldn't possess is the stuff of every news story, a frequent kind of cruelty. Max lost his life as a free person to his own damage while he was still a teenager, grasping at someone else's father, someone else's girlfriend. There are a million horrible things about it all, but the one most overlooked is the way Max could think himself through a car heist but not into caring for others. Max's intelligence was a tool he used to manufacture power through violence, not to imagine the kind of love that might be out there for him for real.

Now, Max is a notorious punchline in our county. He's remembered, almost never by name, for wanting to be close to a b-list celebrity of dubious culinary skill, for wanting a piece of the most unlikely father-figure around. Last fall, while trying to make sense of my father who sometimes would just stand there looking away from me, no matter what I did, not saying anything, not saying anything, I read on USAToday.com about how Guy Fieri makes Turkey Tequila Fettuccine for his family. He was promoting his new tequila brand, and he talked about the thick cheesy sauce and the dark meat pieces that cement this rich dish as a staple of his home kitchen. I couldn't imagine someone actually eating cheese mixed with tequila, but I kept reading the recipe over and over as if I would make it sometime soon.

Palm Springs

I picture my family most easily against the backdrop of some wilderness or other. My parents took me hiking all the time when I was young, long trails in Yosemite and along the coast of Northern California, switchbacks and dust so hot I'd reach my tiny hands to tree trunks just to feel something cool. We went fast, and I'd start out holding my mom's hand until her palms would get slick, and she'd wave me off. I never knew how hard the hike was until it was over, and my mom would start to pull out her camera to take a photo of us at the top of whatever piece of rock we had been climbing. My father would stand at my mother's side and draw breath silent and slow, waiting to lift me into the space between them so our heads were level for the photo. She'd fumble with the zipper of the backpack, trying to reach a water bottle and catch her breath, her face red, her sweaty blond hair stuck at her throat. I used to look at the soft patches of sweat stain on the baggy t-shirts she wore and then begin to guess that if she was tired, I would be tired too when the hike finally finished. I never could, in the moment, understand how my body felt, so I relied on hers, a hint of my own.

My mom used to talk about how no matter what happened, my dad always looked clean. She said it all the time, when he got home from work still in his thick black shoes and khakis, at the end of a long trail, at night when they'd come home from a party and her makeup would be smudged and patchy on her face. She'd lean back and gaze at him and say I was lucky to have inherited this, that when they first got together he ran a marathon "and finished it looking like he'd just taken a shower." My mother often talked about my dad this way, with the fascination and disappointment of a woman describing her favorite disgraced musician. Who he is and what he did lived in the stories my mom

would tell. In the absence of his physical presence or emotional investment or his willingness to contend with the truth, she had her admiration and then disgust, a devotee wising up to his more current misdeeds, whatever glossy coverage he'd most recently curated.

For the first years of my life, every family photo is the three of us suspended in the forest, tree-haloed and bright with vacation. We smile at the summit, faces pressed tight together. Starting the year I learned to read, my dad would write a card for my birthday and sketch ponderosa pine trees and part of a snow peaked mountain with the sun hanging low. Every year since, it's been an almost identical drawing, the same message. "I love you and am proud to be your dad," he writes, "I had fun hiking with you this year and I can't wait to do it again soon." He writes wilderness over the year, drawing me out of my true memories, away from home, out of our conversations, onto the trail. When I want to, I fix my mind to match his words so everything looks easy. I place us all in the woods again at dusk. I turn his eyes towards me and my mother, and I point his hands at the moon.

If I want to, I tell the first part of our family like a fable. I say I was conceived in the mountains and christened in the ocean. My parents fell in love in a village in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains called Mokelumne Hill. My father had a duplex there, one that looked out on a wooded canyon and on towards the surrounding hills, and my mom moved to be with him. Before that, she rented a converted garage in Pacifica, a beach town near San Francisco, that had a Taco Bell Cantina right on the shore where she'd buy bean and cheese burritos and beers after a day in the surf. When she visited my dad in the foothills, they walked miles along the Mokelumne Hill river down the red dirt

and silt road, over the cow grate to its edge. My father collected stones from the bank and would stack them, making leaning cairns, little marks of their presence while my mom left words, I think, spoken to this man she loved, lost among the peaks that bordered the river. When they passed through the town's Main Street on the way home, so many leaves from the ginkgo trees littered the sidewalks like a new currency cast around generously, a gift for the lovers.

When I was a few months old, my mother took me to the ocean, and that's where I was unofficially baptized into the family. When I asked our religion later, at six or seven, she said "we're artists," without irony or a sense of superiority. When, at ten, we went to Catholic mass following the death of her father, I asked if I could take communion, curious about how the wafer tasted and she said, "sure," and taught me how to do it. I knew to cross my arms so I didn't have to drink the wine. My mother has a way of granting people permission to do things; the same sense of freedom she has is bestowed on friends and acquaintances. She made up for my dad's absence in all the ways it seemed possible. She would be energized for what seemed like days on end, driving back and forth to work, going grocery shopping, throwing sleepover parties for me and my friends, volunteering at my school. She wants everyone to try everything they can, just to see what it's like. Because of this, and in part due to my youngness, it was difficult to imagine the ways she felt unprepared for the life she was living. When I was young and I was with her, I felt the sun shine through my skin, through every bit of me.

And other times, the story twists. My mother says once, in the early days of dating my dad, the two of them sat on the porch of my dad's duplex at dusk, and she heard the terrified shrieks of a woman bouncing off the hills that surrounded them. She called the

town police even though my dad said not to, and she told them to listen, that a woman was being hurt nearby. The cops drove up and didn't even get out of the car. "It's just the call of the mountain lions" they assured her, no harm done. My dad was smug. He'd said not to call, that it wasn't a woman. He tried to tell my mom before she called the cops, so she wouldn't get embarrassed. It is worth it to note how alone she was up there.

A few months later, my mom got pregnant, and my parents got married. They rented the Mokelumne Hill Town Hall for 15 dollars and dressed the tables with rocks from the river and maple leaves that had been cast down in red and gold along with the ginkgos on its shore. My mother says a woman she admired once told her "only get married if you absolutely have to," if the longing to be married is greater than the critical knowing it's only a piece of paper. When your anarchism or cynicism or agnosticism fails you, get married. Get married because celebrating your love is the most radical thing you can think to do.

When I struggle to make sense of the things my parents did to each other, everything I saw and heard about, I comfort myself with the knowledge that they must have been in love, fully, on the day they got married. Both of them affirmed this fact, over the years, even as they fought on their anniversaries, even as my father told my mother, standing in front of the two of us, me sixteen and slouching next to her on the couch, that he did not love her anymore. "I want out of this family," he said, and I left the room while my mother, incredulous, begged him to stay.

I struggle now to place who we really were to each other outside of the stories everybody was telling. For a while, in my teens, I was so angry, I didn't even feel real. Events moved through me in secret. I finished school assignments and didn't notice any

of it going by much at all. And then, in my first year of college, I felt determined to sort it all out, to decide why everyone behaved as they did and to fix it by recording everything I could remember as part of a broader narrative. I acted as cartographer of nothing, hunting down facts about my grandmothers that would describe why my parents now told the dueling truths. Now, I think, maybe it's better to stick with little moments, one by one, maybe in sequence, maybe not. Maybe the whole thing is better if I avoid explanation and just try to remember what happened.

When I went out into nature with my father as a child, some of the only times I was around him without my mother there too, I felt a grand sense of surrender. I hiked and skied and ran beside and behind him, stepping where he did, scrambling and turning like him. Sometimes, we'd be on the edge of a mountain, staring at the plummeting hills below, and I'd feel the precariousness of my situation, balancing on my two little feet, as my dad looked out toward the sun, exclaiming "wow, how about that view." I did not usually have time to feel worried about what we were doing and where we were going because I was so concerned with the task at hand, getting up or down whatever mountain he'd brought me to. The times we summited together or the times I'd ski down a hard run were the only times I really noticed that he took photos of me. He'd tell me, "smile, here, look this way, say cheese" and I'd feel his knowing that I could keep up with him. I'd smile, lifting my arms or my ski poles in the air, a steep slope behind me or falling away beneath me, and I'd be able to tell how glad he was to be near me.

It was a matter of pride, for a long time, that I did not complain or pout on long hikes like some other kids did. I could grumble in the beginning, as I woke up in the backseat of a car at dawn, or as we began to climb the first steep hill, but after that I did

not talk back. I tried to follow my dad's lead, stepping where he stepped, not talking when he didn't. It was the easiest way to be good I'd found, just keeping pace. After our days together, I learned that it mattered how I told the story of what we had done. At eight, I tried bragging about the mile and elevation count, sixteen miles and 5,000 feet. At sixteen, I described rising in the middle of the night, the mist of the sierras burning off as we made our way past the timber line onto sheets of sheer granite hulking above the spread of the Yosemite valley. My mom had stayed home. When we finally finished the hike that day, I wanted my dad to talk to me about what it had been like for him, about the way he felt after the day. When it was the two of us driving home from wherever we'd adventured, I tried to goad him into saying something about how hard it had been, noting my stiff legs or sore back. When that didn't work, I'd fall silent and wait for him to call home to talk to my mom, eagerly awaiting the things he'd tell her about what we'd done, hoping he'd say, in his quiet voice, that I'd "done great" as he sometimes did.

Every year on my dad's birthday, my parents would take me to Yosemite, and we'd sleep in this tiny, orange tent. At night, they would unzip the sides of their sleeping bags and I'd crawl between them, half in the soft flannel of my dad's, half in the smooth synthetic of my mom's, the warmth of my dad's body traveling between all of us in the quiet.

He'd start on the trail at dawn to hike Half Dome, sometimes waking me with his jostling to get dressed and say goodbye, and when I'd get up hours later I would have almost forgotten it but not quite, that sweet kid-feeling of being in between seeing someone you love so much. My mother's present to my dad, all those years at Yosemite, was solitude. He'd walk the John Muir trail all day, sometimes taking along a friend or

companion to hike in silence with, while my mother stayed behind with me. She'd lace me into my hiking boots and take me up the beginnings of the long hike to Half Dome, a few miles up steep, granite steps to Vernal Falls. We talked incessantly on those rocks, me in front, checking in back of me for her. Moving through the mountains always felt easy, and my mom would comment on it, saying I was sure-footed like my dad. She stopped the hike every so often to ply me with water and trail mix. She fed me sliced apple and cheese from the family backpack, and at night, she'd buy me overpriced pizza from the Yosemite Valley store as we waited for my dad to return home in the dark. It's funny to tell this all now because my dad made a niche in my memories of him by paying attention to me only when we were together in nature. But my mom was with me and paying attention and teaching and laughing, most often, wherever we went.

When I was with my mother, everything was to be looked at. When I was younger and went to medical appointments with her, she'd spend the time between when she put the paper gown on and when the doctor came in "messing with shit," as she taught me to call it, joyfully and with pride. She'd remove all of the instruments on the walls from their handles, shining the light at me, at herself. She'd stare at the paintings, open cabinets, pump hand sanitizer, shuffle around on the papered bed. She liked to open the drawers, and in the bathroom, she'd steal any pads and woody tampons they had lying around and bring them to me, little as I was, like a prize. I took to this game slowly, at first embarrassed by her nosiness, but by the time I started getting my period at 12, I bought in. The rare times I was away from her, on trips with my dad, I'd bring back some souvenir of the bathroom: pads from a ski lodge in rectangular boxes with daisies on them, the good, orange wrapped Always with wings from my new grown-up doctor when

I outgrew the pediatrician, and an individually wrapped roll of double ply toilet paper from the blood test site that she placed in the hatchback trunk of her car like a spare tire.

On the way to and from school or playdates, whenever I asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror from my carseat in the back, she'd tell me the story of getting sick. Her hands had cramped so much and she'd had to forge a pre-existing condition form to qualify for Blue Cross. She'd struggled to bend her swollen hands around the pen, desperate to get insurance, all alone. One story always made her laugh, about the days of the worst part of her flare, when she'd been stuck in the hospital. Her father came to visit after the worst of it passed, and she, her dad, and her nurse went for a walk down the long corridor heading away from her room. She was so weak after surgery she'd needed a catheter, a "tube for your pee" as she told it to me when I was eight or so, that a nurse clipped onto her own waist while my mom walked. They were all halfway down the hall when the nurse got a code blue page and took off running, my mother's catheter bag still with her, yanking my mom down the hallway "in the nurse's wake, the long white pee tube like a leash between them." My mother doubled over in pain and she and her dad yelled to the nurse, so she'd stop running. Then her father "looked across the hall at me and laughed and laughed" she'd say, smiling. "It's not funny now, but it will be," he told her. When I was young and I did something I felt bad about, whenever I gossipped or broke a rule or said something I didn't mean and regretted it, she'd tell me I had "the snakes," the feeling of dread in my stomach that came from knowing I'd messed up. She'd smile and her eyes would light up, all wide, and she'd say "but don't you feel so alive?" She wanted me to tell her everything I thought. She and her twin sister called each other all the time, processing, she called it, processing processing processing.

When I was small, my mother was never shy about her body, and I was often being carried around in her arms late at night, after one of her poetry readings had ended. Sometimes she took me with her to the night classes she taught, and I slept with my head in the crook of her neck, my hands pulling sleepily at skin tags or moles that appeared on her skin, her hands moving mine away, to rest in hers, always freezing, sometimes swollen with cold. The underside of my mother's hair would be damp from walking and would stick to the side of her neck where I lay in strands like needles, brownish blonde like mine. I was never called away from looking at her or being close to her. I could go wherever she went and find that I belonged. I never had to tell myself a story about the day because I could remember it, all of the things we'd done, all of the things we'd felt, brushing up against each other, making sense.

These days, my father is always trying to get me back into the woods with him. When we make plans to see each other, he speaks eagerly of trails he has found, of ideas for landmarks and state parks we might visit. When I was eighteen, and my dad was first trying to recover the little bits of what was left between us, we went on a skiing trip in Reno. We could only afford one day on the mountain, and we went to the cheapest resort we could find, the one where kids go to learn. The parking lot was crowded with toddlers in brand new gear, their parents snapping photos, but the harder runs, though there weren't many, were mostly devoid of people, save the odd townie once in a while.

My dad tried to impress me on the slopes, going down harder and harder runs, taking turns tighter and tighter, urging me up the chair lift despite the wind that shook the cables above us. He has a bad knee, a permanent injury from the time he was helping move a refrigerator up some stairs and it dropped on his leg, and he'd wince as the days

on the mountain continued, trying to be brave, a cheap, sports store outlet brace wrapped underneath his ski pants. On one of the last trips down the mountain, he sent me ahead, said he would catch up and then caught the front of a ski in a drift of powder and lost balance. I waited for a good five minutes before I started to worry. I tried calling, and there was no service and the worry grew, so I kicked my skis off, and took off running up the slick trail. It was slow going with the sharp plastic of my boots digging into the bone of my shins as I fought back through powder. It was dim afternoon light, the kind that turns snow blue, and I was alone on a straightaway, panting as the insides of my waterproof pants made a slicing sound. After doubling back, I found him almost to the bottom of the hill, skis scattered. His bad knee had caught, and he'd lost balance, landing face first in the snow. We were staying with an old buddy of his in Reno, and that night after we returned from the resort, my dad recounted the story of this fall. My dad and his friend roared about the faceplant, their laughter making its way around the kitchen table. When I'd found my dad, sprawled out in the powder, we hadn't really said much to each other.

Nine months after my parents finally split, my father and I went to visit his sister and some cousins near Palm Springs. We spent a lot of time in his truck, driving around, trying to find things to do together. He still did not seem to know how to talk to me about anything, so he took me on a day trip to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway where you get pulled up a 10,000 foot mountain in a plexiglass capsule that hangs from cables. The ride up was nice. We were packed into the pod pretty tight, and every time we passed over one of the towers holding up the tram and wire, the whole contraption would shake from side to side and everyone would chuckle. There were some little babies being hoisted close to

the window by their dads, the mothers looking on, lugging strollers and containers of cereal, and a couple of rough looking guys in work boots and dirty t-shirts who smelled like cigarettes who pointed out the window, and talked in low voices. The view was a good one, Palm Springs in the distance, but mostly just sheer cliff face behind us and the long stretch of desert out in front.

When we got up to the top of the mountain, we climbed down a steep granite ramp and found signs for a five-mile trail loop that would end us back where we started with time to get down the mountain and be home before it got dark. We weren't very far on the trail before a ranger stopped us and asked where we were heading. When we told him about the loop, he frowned. "There's a storm coming this way, and if you don't have any rain gear, I'd suggest you go for about three quarters of a mile and then come back. We don't want you getting stuck out there. We don't want to have to come look for you." My dad and I told him we'd head back soon, and then when we got out of earshot, I shot a smile at my father and said, "we're not going to turn around, right?" because I didn't see much other than some dark clouds around us, and he smiled back and said "no."

Sometimes, when I think about things that have happened, I worry I'm making things up, that I'm trying to chronicle bad intentions that weren't really there. I wonder how scared or upset I actually felt in the moment, if maybe I can't remember it all the way because I'm too busy overblowing how I feel now. Sometimes, I think about my mother, alone with my dad, and I think I have become the keeper of what actually happened. I was young enough and removed enough to hear and see what other family members and friends, with their ugly allegiances, could not.

That day in Palm Springs, I felt almost able to relax as the first rain fell, and I made my dad stop next to a big sandstone boulder we found, so I could clamber up it. He took a picture of me 10 or so feet off the ground, smiling at him over the tops of my bent knees, and on the way down, I scraped my calf on the rough surface of the rock. It felt satisfying, the first little wound of the day, a kind of empty-headed pain that I always associated with being out on the trail with him. There is joy in getting outside again, a way our bodies can almost fall into step and usually the quiet of nature makes the silence between us seem natural, planned, and safe.

I began to lead us up the steep hillside, running ahead of him up the tree-lined switchbacks when we were startled by a bleating siren sound. We realized it was coming from my dad's pocket; his phone was screaming a flash flood warning over and over. I got nervous then, looking up at the hillside and noticing, for the first time, little variations in the soil we walked on, the remnants of water flowing fast downhill made visible through deep cracks in the surface of the ground. I turned around to him, unsure of whether to continue, and he said, "no, don't worry. We are so high up, there won't be any flash flooding here."

That day in the mountains, as we kept on walking, and he insisted there was no threat, lightning began to strike the nearby hills, and we heard the roll of thunder loud and close. I kept turning around to him, trying to understand what he saw, half expecting he would insist we go back. But as the lightning flashes neared us, and I began to get scared, my dad took his phone out and started to tape our hike, narrating the home video like he had on countless trips before. "Una and I are on the mountain. It's a beautiful day here," and I turned back to him, face half-smiling, eyebrows raised, trying to seem fun, trying to

get him to feel how afraid I was, and I said, “Well, the lightning’s getting closer, and I’m not sure that’s a great sign.” The sky around us, which had been light gray, grew ugly and dim against the pines.

After all of it, when we arrived at my family’s house, I watched my dad play the videos of our trek aloud to my aunt and my cousins, and smiled as they did, at the adventure of it all. I called my mother later that night, in the sweaty darkness of the California desert. “You get to decide what kind of story you will tell about this,” she said to me, “you get to say if it was dangerous or if it was fun.” I think I was afraid but not as afraid as I could have been. I had to decide how I was going to tell about what happened first because otherwise my dad’s story would be the one that everyone remembers.

Up on the mountain, my father finally put his phone away when it began to hail. The hailstones were the size of nickels and hit us over and over, and I said, as I lifted my arms above my head and neck to protect the bare skin from the blows saying, “We need to turn around now. We need to go back.” Between nearing flashes of lightning, he finally said, “Alright then,” moving out of my way, so I could take the lead, his eyes still following the path in the other direction, still looking out towards the unknown part of the woods. We ran as the thunder got louder, and when the hail finally died down, the rain started. We didn’t notice how much water there was until we started making our way downhill, and the paths were completely washed away. I looked for familiar boulders and kept my bearings by noting fallen trees, but still, once or twice my dad called me back from following the flow of water off the trail. “Let’s not get washed down the canyon,” he joked, as we shivered and searched the flooded ground for something familiar.

Streams of runoff ran high up over our ankles and pools formed where the ground had been uneven and dipping with sand.

When we reached the valley and the last leg of the trip before the ranger station, we were wading through flooded pathways several inches deep and the temperature had turned icy. The ranger station finally came into view, and I looked to my dad, still trying to be playful, and said, “The next time someone gets worried about lightning, you might want to listen to them.” My face was still half-smiling, trying to be as I remembered being with him, worn out and a little cold but proud of our adventure, but I waved my arms angrily as I talked and lost balance and fell backwards. I reached for a nearby boulder for balance, and my hands skidded down its wet surface and sliced open, layers of skin neatly pulled away, my knee pounding into the sharp-pebbled sand. “Be careful, you can always yell at me later, once we’re out of the storm,” my dad said then, his face in a wide grin, chuckling as I got unsteadily to my feet.

By the time we made it back to the tram station at the top of the mountain, when I looked down at myself, I was bleeding, and my hiking shorts stuck to my bare legs. The water had made the thin khaki see-through, the light wash of my striped underwear visible. I hoped that no one could see. My hands bled a little from where I’d clawed at the rocks, trying to catch my balance. In the line for the tram back down, I took off my soaking flannel and tried to wring it out as I tied it around my waist. I flexed my hands and stared at the cut in my palm. I was thinking, as I shivered and waited to board the swinging pod, how I’d known about the dangers of flash floods in high elevation, that I’d known we could be swept away, that I’d kept walking anyway, desperate to get back to how it could be with my dad. I’d proven I would do whatever he wanted me to do so we

could be together. I had led myself up the mountain into a storm, and my father had watched, laughing, talking, snapping pictures, as the clouds had caved in around us.

The sky cleared on the way down the mountain, but when we got to the parking lot, we saw the flood had washed rocks down the dirt road we'd taken, blocking our exit. Park rangers came on four-wheelers with shovels and began to cart away the biggest rocks, forearm sized things stuck deep in the wet ground. It took over an hour to get the roads cleared, so my dad and I sat in his truck, and I tried to clear the worst of the dirt from the cuts on my hands. He had old antiseptic wipes in the car, and I grimaced as I wiped the tender skin over and over, trying to dislodge a few stubborn chips of rock that had buried themselves in the scrapes. My hands burned from the pressure and the astringent. It's funny, if you'd taken a plane and flown over my dad and me that day, you'd have watched me lead the charge all the way up and down the mountain; you'd have watched me fall down all on my own. It would look like my dad just happened to be there, that he didn't do much of anything at all.

Sonoma County

In the lockdown of early spring 2020 when I was 18 years old, my mom told me to talk to a nonviolent communication specialist on the phone because I was so angry it was making the house unbearable. I slammed the back door, and I jumped when my dad entered the room. I stalked our small town on foot for hours and returned home wet with rain or sweat and fuming. I paced the loft we had haphazardly converted into a bedroom when I'd moved back from college.

When lockdown started, I ended up living in what was supposed to be my parents' idyllic retirement spot, two wooden A-frame structures on an isolated slab of California coast, one of the buildings with bedrooms and a large slick bathroom in 80s pink tile, the other with the kitchen and living room and a little loft above heated by a wood stove. The buildings were joined by a deck that stretched between them and bordered by old redwoods. I lived above the kitchen, in the peak of the A-frame, and the floor of my room shook slightly whenever someone entered the house and closed the door behind them too hard. In the early mornings, I would wake up to the sound of my father grinding coffee in the electric grinder my parents received as a wedding gift. The noise floated through the floor beneath my room as if it was coming from my ribs. In the daytime, my conversation with him was stilted: requests to be quiet for our respective online meetings, my mother and I making conversation at dinner, old light switches clicking on and off as we mumbled "goodnight."

The nonviolent communication specialist, this old woman named Victoria, gave my mom a discount cash rate because she was good friends with my aunt, and I was bitter and mean on the phone. I paced the narrow line of the A-frame, trying not to hit my head

on the beams as we talked. Victoria didn't know what to tell me, really. "Try calling your father Steve instead of Dad," she finally said at the end of our hour-long consultation, "if you can't bear to be near him, create some distance between you. That way he won't be your dad. He'll just be some guy named Steve." I tried for a minute, after the call ended, to make the switch in my head, and then gave it up. We were too close to each other in the house. Now, I get to choose when I see him, when we talk, and still I am angry. There is no way I have found yet to make him someone other than my father.

The only way to get out of the part of the state where my parents used to live is Highway 1, one lane of freeway in each direction stretching pleasantly between the kindly mouth of the Russian River to the south and Mendocino and Fort Bragg to the north, twin towns situated on a long bluff. If you face north, the ocean is on your left and pastures or vacation houses or a white walled general store or a white walled church are on your right. Further east are the northern coast mountains and silhouettes of redwood trees, either green or ashy depending on the time of day and year. If you face west, there are more vacation homes and inns trimmed in blue or white, bearing signs shaped like whales. Sometimes, pastures line the water and cows walk along a cliffside, the water below noxiously blue, the light to dark gradient mapping the continental shelf, making everything visible. In 2020, after it had been so long since I'd seen anyone other than my parents, it seemed like California was in conversation with itself; the darkening Pacific mirroring the darkening mountains and talking over the top of my head in patient, tectonic whispers.

It gets easy to self-mythologize to the point of self-immolation when you're stuck in the fortified darkness of an isolated coast. As the pandemic refused to abate, I started

to convince myself that I was put back at home almost on purpose, to repair things once and for all. In the process, it became difficult to conceive of myself as an entity outside of our family unit. Sometimes I felt less like a person than a collection of various upsets and truths. I gave myself a deadline, the end of the summer 2020, the end of the 2021 school year, when we could all be together again, and I was stern with myself about the ways I should be better to my parents. I would, I promised myself, be more generous and more direct.

When, at four months home, I asked my dad if he wouldn't mind grabbing me a bottle of water. He handed me a bottle filled with dirt and water and I said, "Dad, there is dirt in here" and he said "No there isn't," and I said "Look, no there is," and he said "That isn't dirt that's just particles," and I tried to be wise and forgiving. I tried to understand this as a way my dad was trying to tell me something that he couldn't quite say out loud. His lies and denials became a secret code that I worked on, assured that once I figured it out, things would be different. I would wait, catch him in a slip up, and then offer a response I thought would help him tell the truth. "Were you upset that you handed me a water bottle with dirt in it? Did you wish that hadn't happened? Is that why you said there wasn't dirt in it?" I asked him like a child. "Yeah, I guess so," he responded. He offered an excuse about perfectionism, about trying to get things right. I thought it made a lot of sense. I didn't let it go.

Sea Ranch, where my parents lived in 2020, used to be a hippie commune, back in the 1960s. It started as a place where people built houses of plain, light wood so they would blend in with the scenery. I saw an exhibition about it once, at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. The artist constructed a mock house in one of their upper

galleries and completed the exhibition with a map of California's topography and some photos of the land art people who built their little homes. My parents didn't see the exhibit, but they had heard about it and found a fixer upper about a mile from the cliffs of the coast. Now, though the wooden architecture persists, most of the houses here have been modified and sit squatly as expensive vacation rentals or second homes for young rich people looking to escape the city. The population hovers below a thousand, and most of the residents are in their sixties. It is so far from anything else, people almost forget they can leave. There are rec centers with tennis courts and swimming pools.

My mom was sick throughout my time at home, her hair falling out in patches, her body exhausted as she tried to walk the length of the neighborhood. Intermittently, she and my dad made the emergency drive two hours to the emergency room and for bloodwork and prescription pickups. My father was inconsistent with his care. He lied about the people he came in contact with at the grocery store, forgot to wear a mask, all the things that could have killed her in the early days of COVID. He sometimes said sorry, other times not as much. It was so early on in everything, there was no way to know what was safe. When I caught him in those lies, he would reluctantly retreat to an isolated bedroom, haphazardly quarantining again.

Being home was like having a boring sickness. It was like high school. My family fought and watched TV, and I walked, my mind dim with worry. One day, following a large gust of wind, the fence in our yard blew over. It cracked in half neatly like an ice cream sandwich does when the dark brown of the cookie is soggy with warmth from your hands. It didn't make a creaking sound or anything, but the way the boards lay on the ground made it clear that the whole house would rot like that if our family was not

careful. There was never a precise reason why fights started, and it was dissatisfying to pin them to a person. My mother and father walked circles around each other, always convinced of how the other person was wrong. There is a part of me still trying to prove what happened, like I will be able to point to one thing my father did, and everything I feel about him will make sense. I want to impress everyone with my memories of being home, so they understand the particularities of why I do not want to go back. It is a vindictive thing too, to show a family home in disrepair, and my father in his disregard.

My dad gaslit us about everything for no reason. I could be more specific, but, really, that just makes it seem more exciting than it was. Sometimes, abuse in a family doesn't look like anything except what it has always looked like, which is a dad and a mother fighting to keep coping with themselves in the particularly fucked up way they have always coped with themselves. My dad took power where he could, in secret car rides and stealing off in the middle of the night. My mother sometimes believed my dad's story about a thing over my story about a thing, and then they both acted like I was sick and dramatic for causing problems. Pretty much the whole time I was home, my dad acted like I was crazy, but he was really nice to the dog. The dog who, six months into the lockdown, took to dragging his ass across the living room carpet. Sometimes Quinn, this dog my dad bought sort of out of nowhere my senior year of high school, would squat in a low armchair or jump up on the bed and begin scooting there too, itchy and embarrassed.

My dad didn't train the dog to be anything but greedy and anxious. Quinn, this dog, would whine for food and scream an almost human sound when we left him alone. He keened like an abandoned seal. He didn't know how to walk on leash very well

because my dad had promised to teach him but hadn't done a good job, and Quinn would run towards cars on the street whenever he saw them, straining against his collar like a suicidal bear. I loved him because it is hard to not love a dog. Quinn loved my dad and did his best to get food out of me. When the ass-dragging really picked up speed, I drove the dog north to the vet's office, the one on the left side of the highway, west, with white, practically made walls that block out any view of the ocean. The family had two cars then, a good quality used one for long car trips and a shitty 1500 dollar thing from the 90s with an inside ceiling that chipped down on you as you drove. My parents took the nice car for another of my mom's appointments, and my dog and I piled into the other one, sweating and panting with the windows up.

When the dog and I arrived at the vet's, we parked and watched a man and a woman stand outside their truck. It was a dark, utilitarian green Chevrolet with a beige brown topper. The door to the front seat and the half-bench door to the back were thrown open. I could see a small black-brown head peek out from a purple towel, a sick dog, or an old one. The woman, wearing a blue mask and shiny stud earrings, a shiny diamond wedding band, and a jacket emblazoned with our local plumber's logo bent to the figure, saying something. Her husband, a burly maskless man with white hair, left her side and walked to the driver's side and pulled a pack of cigarettes through the window. He lit one and began the slow walk back around the car to his waiting wife and their dog. After some time, the town vet emerged from the building and spoke to them. The woman talked to him mostly, the man popped down the hinging truck bed and signed papers against them. My dog began to cry then, and I hoisted my body over the driver's seat and into the back of the car. I nestled his body in the space between my elbow and hip. He

leaned over into me, stretching his neck to place his heavy little head in the crook of my arm. We looked out the window together.

Soon, the doctor approached my car, and I struggled to open the back door. When I finally wedged it open, my dog jumped out, pouncing on the doctor, wagging his tail, whining delightedly. I fed him treats, tried to make jokes, explained the situation with his asshole, kept my eyes on the couple to my left. The doctor told me and my dog to wait, that a nurse would be out in a minute. I look straight ahead for a minute, at the shrubs growing between the lot and the highway. A big lupine was blooming blue.

Before anyone came to get my dog, the vet and the nurse went back over to the couple waiting by their car. The vet was a tall man, wearing a thin blue jacket, a pair of scrub pants. He spoke kindly in clipped, German-accented English. The man with the beard lit another cigarette, leaned into the cab where the woman's hands were moving with the little dog in the back. The woman eventually stepped back, and the vet approached. The couple stood by the curb, watching. At first the woman seemed to be shaking. It is difficult to know which of them took the other's hand. The husband stood, hip cocked to the side, one hand in his wife's, one flicking ash into the flowerbeds as the doctor worked, administering last rites and a lethal dose of medication. The woman began rubbing the man's back, up and down then side to side, making a cross with her wedding ring and white tip manicure. Halfway through another repetition of the cross, the man buckled silently, hands on his knees, then stood up quickly, taking another drag. The vet emerged from the cab holding empty medical supplies. The technician moved to the cab and cleaned some of it up, but she didn't take the dead dog out of the car as I thought she would. The couple moved back to the car, getting in, the wife on the passenger side,

the husband on the driver's. Everyone was wordless as the vet and nurse retreated to the office. I watched the woman take a pink towel from her seat and throw it in the backseat without looking behind her. They backed out of the parking space, and I watched the man haphazardly buckle his seatbelt before revving the engine for the long drive home.

Soon the nurse came back for my dog. She wound a loose leash around him and he pulled her towards the office, unbothered and trusting. I got back into the car again and waited there. I started crying, for a minute, about the dead thing in the other peoples' truck. My dog came back, and I learned his anal glands had been manually expelled and that it was very expensive. I loaded him back into the car, and we took the long way home, heading north first past the schoolhouses into the pasture land and brittle forests further north planning to turn around three towns over. On the way back, the car kept stalling and dying. I pumped the brakes, threw it into drive, it spewed black smoke and kept starting. By the time we got home, the dog was thirsty, and I was tired.

The damage done those years at home is mostly to the atmosphere of my body. If I were a planet, I'd turn in a fucked-up way, my poles messed up a little, jostled, my core gone jelly-beaned shaped instead of circular. I stopped trying to account for my father's lies about eight months in. I just lived my life as a reflection of whatever my parents did and said about me. My dad said I was a liar, and I believed him. My mom said I was trying to figure it out but could be too angry, too unforgiving, and I began to count the ways I was not as mature as I thought. Days blended together for a lot of people, and they did for me. A visit to the vet, the car eventually breaking down all the way, that time we bought a thousand piece puzzle of the Golden Girls, and the dog tried to eat pieces of it, so Betty White didn't look quite right when it was all over.

The deck outside started crumbling for real after a year, following the worst of the rain. When I stood on certain sections of it, it bent like a trampoline, rising and falling beneath my weight. The wood floor near the stove became a place I sat on the carpet, my back to the flames most nights. I watched slivers of ocean go deep blue in fading light. In the early evening, the sky went orange and purple and then nearly gray so fast I couldn't tell if it was windy or not. Everything looked still compared to the sky.

La Brea Tar Pits

In Los Angeles and the areas surrounding it, where my mother's side of the family lives, an emergent plastic surgery trend allows celebrities to remove patches of fat from their cheeks. The procedure, called Buccal Fat Removal, is the process through which doctors make small cuts in the face to reveal and carve away pads of mouth fat. The incisions are small, the healing times brief, and the results almost instantaneously eye-catching in the way supermodel faces always are. Celebrities and internet personalities, after a few days of recovery, have a steep concave space below cheekbones where their full cheeks once were. Buccal Fat Removal is not covered by insurance and costs between \$5,000 and \$20,000 depending on the quality of a surgeon, so it is mostly available (barring trips to foreign countries for less regulated, cheaper surgery practices) to the rich and famous. Racist and classist negotiations of face fat and shape pursue and catch up to us all, so it is no surprise this procedure, the emaciated results of which indicate an impossible delicacy and restraint, appeals to the celebrity who almost always is tasked with beaming thin whiteness back at the culture that demands it. Their bones jut out, poking through skin in a stained glass window kind of way. Their jawlines are eerily visible under fading bruises. The dull glow of hunger hangs on these famous people like an ancient, haunted thing.

Through Buccal Fat Removal, celebrities beautify themselves by removing all ties to the past life of their puffy-cheeked faces. Famous people, supermodels and washed up actors and Broadway stars, become, for a time, chiseled monuments to a specific kind of aged personhood, not quite full-cheeked youth, not quite cracked with age. Their humanity is unreadable from a distance, any unpleasant thought that might, at one time,

have registered in the cut of a mouth becomes obscured by the sheen of healing skin. Supermodels, washed up actors, and Broadway stars teach us that past experiences can be yanked away bit by bit, procedure by procedure, as a tattoo can be removed. I conjure the idea of so many famous people walking into a Beverly Hills plastic surgery clinic and stumbling out again bearing no resemblance to their parents. That is to say, sometimes I think that if I could get famous and get my cheek fat removed, my face would mostly stop looking like my dad's and this would be a good thing.

My dad has never been particularly good at remembering me. When I was seven, I was home with the flu. He forgot to check on me for hours, so the children's Tylenol wore off, and my fever spiked, and I lay shivering, dehydrated, alone on the couch. I think of that day and how I shuffled from room to room trying to find my father, with those glassy eyes from the fever and the sweet-sick smell on my neck and behind my ears. I wanted him to put his cool hands on my forehead like a washcloth. I did not understand how someone who was so like me could forget I was there. My hair was the same short length, the color of his, before I bleached it. My chest is broad and rounded, my thumbs and nails the same strong cut as his.

When I was young, I assumed each time my father overlooked me was a reflection of my own forgetableness rather than his precarious relationship to reality. The solution became, from elementary school up until I left home for college, to perfect myself, to attempt to polish myself into someone memorable, someone recognizably great, a person who could be excavated from my father's potent, painful rejection by the force of my own apparent brilliance. My mother urged me on, assisting with interviews

and scholarship applications to the most prestigious schools we could find. “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well,” was her constant refrain.

In high school, I learned everything that was put in front of me, picking up useless skills and hoarding insignificant knowledge to make myself remarkable, jazz trumpet, tap dancing, the structure of the United Nations, the characteristics of a Fellini film. I got free student tickets to symphonies and operas on the weekends and sat in gilded concert halls, reading all the program notes about the composers, trying to be moved to tears by the sound that radiated through me from the musicians on stage. I fortified myself against neglect with devotion to becoming extraordinary, staved off feelings of loneliness with obsessive pursuits of knowledge. Sometimes my father seemed shocked by my independence. I would breeze by him in the few hours I spent near him between school and activities and work and homework. “How are your friends,” he’d ask and forget their names.

One of the most recent attempts of my father to work out a place in my life was a month or two after my twenty-first birthday when I was living with my mom’s sister in a beach town just north of LA. I had hardly spoken to him since he and my mother split up, but he drove to Southern California from Seattle to see me anyway. I was still stuck in trying to make something about his dismissal known. Trying to get people on my side, like if they knew about the way he overlooked me, they would do something about it. They’d talk to him, so he could fix it, maybe retroactively somehow, maybe now. My mother and aunt commented on this journey of his, the sweeping drive from north coast to south coast of the country, its generosity.

As he drove, we talked on the phone and made plans to take day trips to Los Angeles together and then visit some of his family further south. Before he arrived, I booked us tickets to the La Brea Tar Pits Museum. It's full of old mammoths and saber tooth cats that got stuck in an oil field and sunk slowly beneath the surface of what became Beverly Hills. The flesh melted off these animal bodies, but the tar goop preserved their bones, leaving mounds of ancient beasts waiting to be dug up and put on display. They waited to be discovered years before anyone in Hollywood even thought to want that. I had visited the museum as a kid and remembered slices of it, dim lighting and old bones. I imagined going back as a delighted homecoming. I thought about all of the information I could learn that I didn't have before and all of the signs I would now be able to read. I thought maybe the memory of it would help me and my dad, like we could make sense of each other if we thought hard enough about how it had been years ago.

Los Angeles and the La Brea land changed hands many times before it was made into a Museum. The Tongva tribe, whose members populated the Los Angeles basin, used the sticky asphalt of the tar fields for their canoes and as glue before bones were dug up. Then Spain sent colonizers into California in the form of Portola and his sailors and his friars, who made quick use of the oily earth they found there to fortify the buildings they forced the Tongva tribe to build. The bones beneath the tar pits were largely ignored, presumed to be remains of livestock, until scientists in the early 1900s caught wind of them and began to send the fossils to UC Berkeley for study—a paleontological explosion, a big break.

Before my dad got to Southern California, and without really knowing why, I bought us all of the Tar Pits ticket add-ons they had: passes to a 3D movie about the Ice

Age Tar Pit formation and a Sabertooth Cat puppet show with puppets designed by Jim Henson, the guy who made the Muppets. When he arrived from Seattle, my dad stayed in a Motel 6 at the edge of town. He picked me up from my aunt's house early in the morning, and we drove down the freeway, passing through canyoned suburbs into the city.

In LA, there is always the option to avoid seeing anything that reminds you of death. Though the city is full of haunted mansions and sabertooth graves, it is possible, on the dreariest, smoggiest days, to wander from strip mall to strip mall and ignore the coastline before you with its rotting smell of washed up kelp. Beverly Hills itself, where the La Brea Tar Pits is located, was made famous and first populated by actors, and now every part of it radiates a sweet falseness, a grass too green, streets wide and caked with luxury cars. Plastic surgery clinics populate shopping centers. In Los Angeles, the process of waiting to be discovered is deceptive. The days are so long, the weather so mild, that it is possible to forget you are living at all and instead to assume you are merely suspended in an ageless sea of billboards and shrubby apartment parking lots. Everything underneath waits, quiet and slow, for someone to point it all out.

Los Angeles is the perfect place to take a father you do not know anymore, who has made himself hard to know. You are lulled into a timeless sense of trust like a pet who comes to believe their owner's house is the whole world. As you drive along a block composed of restaurants that sell only salad, you begin to believe hardly any time has passed at all since he forgot you so thoroughly that you began to question if you really existed at all. The world around you, this long block of palm trees, appears soft and flimsy with wealth and you think, now, maybe, in the soft light of this gluten-free bakery,

he will be able to understand what you might have felt. You shoulder all of your hope and gaze across the expanse of the car's center console, and he does not turn to you; he asks you if he should take the next left.

When my dad and I arrived in Beverly Hills, each part of the museum seemed like a joke played on us, the parking garage that scraped the impractically high top of my dad's gigantic new truck and the day so warm I felt faint on the walk through the opening gates. A main attraction of the Tar Pits is the semi-functional excavation site, a bed of sticky asphalt that oozes the gaseous scent of construction into the air. The primary clientele is children, and all of the exhibits and signs are designed so they can be read by a kid three or four feet high. My body adopted, between the smell and the signs, the dead-legged resignation of someone slowly being poisoned by a force too small to see. My father kept trying to take pictures of me, in front of the pit, under the museum sign, and amidst the crowds of children pushing and shoving down the steps to see the bones, something he had never done much before, like he was trying to make a memory for real. I smiled through sweaty sunglasses and tried to keep my balance.

The museum itself is housed under a grassy hill just across from the pit. You walk down a steep-sloping ramp and then go through tinted glass doors, embalmed in the layers of building, sheltered from the relative glamor of the luxury apartments nearby. The inside is filled with models of mammoths, plastic-y skin cool to the touch. You are encouraged to stand next to them and to see how small you would have felt in the Ice Age. Their skin is not real, you are told by the miniscule sign on the wall. It is a model of how it might have been.

Animals got stuck in the tar pits one by one. Usually a mammoth would wander into the tar bed on accident, the surface of the tar hidden under a shallow pool of water, and then other creatures would make the same mistake, attracted by the vision of water, ignoring the stationary beast and its cries, sure they would not be stuck fast. Soon, a cluster of mammoths and wolves and sabertooths and other, smaller creatures would be stranded, screaming and shaking until they eventually died of exposure and starvation. The tar is packed tightly with centuries of beasts stuck together in the sludge. The 3D video we watched attempted to describe this while still glossing over the worst of death, trying to protect their young audience. I watched the animals be sucked down into the earth and then fell asleep, my head lolling back against the hard plastic chair, 3D glasses askew. Sometimes, when I'm with my dad, I feel exhaustion creep into my bones. I fall asleep in the passenger seat of the car, the movie theater. I wake up thrashing mad, my head jerking, my eyes focusing and then narrowing. One wall of the museum was made up entirely of the skulls of dire wolves, huge packs of creatures who had succumbed to the oil fields.

I wondered, as my dad and I milled among the toddlers, why this museum was designed for children. I marveled at the parents with kids in their arms, screaming in joy and reaching out to touch the fossils. They shrieked and ran underfoot and leaned over the edges of the tar pit. In the gift shop, there were countless tiny t-shirts and infant onesies decked out in bone print or with images of mammoth tusks and skulls. Children bought stuffed versions of the prehistoric beasts that sat dead around us. My dad really wanted to get me something, a keepsake, but there wasn't anything I needed, so he just started looking at stuff for his nieces' and nephews' kids while I watched.

The puppets of the Tar Pits specialty show were larger and mangier than we could have imagined. They were not quite scary, though the roaring sound effects were meant to oscillate between frightening and intriguing. The puppet show was run by this redheaded gay guy who kept a constant stream of *Ice Age* jokes going. I could imagine how hard the guide had prepared to make the script his own, and the jokes were really good, and his timing was great, but the microphone that was strapped to his cheek was turned too low, so his voice was drowned out sometimes by the ambient coughs and whispers of the crowd. My dad laughed patiently at the announcer's gags, and I imagined how humiliating it must be, day after day, to work a crowd of toddlers and their exhausted chaperones.

When the La Brea announcer guy introduced the puppet, and it came out, everyone stopped paying attention to him because the sabertooth was actual size. There was one huge guy in the sabertooth cat suit, and he'd crouch behind fake, spray painted rocks and then jump out, all while the announcer guy would play up pretending to be afraid. He looked sweaty up there as he tried to project his voice about how the tar was really asphalt, how saber tooth tigers aren't tigers, they're just large cats. He worked so earnestly to tell us the truth about the pits outside, about the scientists and plants and animals and how fossils were made, while the kids in the audience cried and shrieked, waiting for the puppets to come back again. I felt sick and sorry for him. He must have spent so much time memorizing all of those facts. He must have started this job thinking, in some little corner of his mind, that he'd get discovered, that a producer could be sitting there, waiting for him.

When I was sixteen, my grandmother died. My mother was away from the house taking care of family, and it was the winter break, so there was no school and my father disappeared from the house, to go to the store, to go to work, to go out, for so long I barely saw him at all. I had visited the hospital many times before she went. I had been with my mother. And when we returned home, my father often locked himself in his room, and so I sat in mine and read books and felt sometimes as though I were drowning a little bit. In the moments my dad and I were together, eating a silent meal or watching tv, he didn't really look at me or say anything. I tried to joke with him and asked him about his day while he stared at his plate with watery eyes. He treated me like a place he was stuck, unsuspecting and a little bored, waiting for something to happen.

When we emerged from the museum into the sunlight of the beautiful city, the stench of asphalt fresh again, I felt the empty heat of misplaced longing. In high school and after, as my disappointment in my father grew, I began to anticipate responses to his missteps, so I could catch him in the moment, ready a defense for his inattention that no one else was willing to give. When we fought, I began to prepare for his flustered responses to my questions, the way he would begin to look through me and call me by my mother's name. In the interim between homework and sleep I'd shout from one end of the tiny kitchen, "It's like I don't even matter to you. Like I'm not even real." And he'd huff out an angry breath, not quite looking at me, and go, "Listen," choking out my mother's name instead of mine, the ugliest of misremembrances, one hand on the countertop, the other slicing through the air. I'd stare back across the room, nearly laughing from the way it was wrong.

His voice cramped in his thin mouth like a whisper, the skin around his teeth taut in a grimace. When I tried to tell my mother or my aunt about the way he seemed baffled by me, mixed up by me as if just seeing me for the first time, they were unsympathetic. “He’s never been good with words,” they said, “he can’t come up with the right thing to say in the moment. He’s not like you.” I waited for anyone to understand or to look for the ways I was ignored and to right everything that had happened with their attention. Instead, well-meaning friends and family told me I was smart and mature and that my parents were lucky. They told me I was talented and wise beyond my years. My father told me he loved me, even when we fought, and he has not yet found a way to remember me all the way.

Articles on Buccal Fat Removal sometimes discuss the disastrous consequences of the surgery later in life, regardless of how well the procedure has been done or how famous a person is. As we age, fat shifts, and cheeks hollow. In forty years, the young women of Beverly Hills will become older, actresses and models once made beautifully slender with the procedure will become gaunt and shifty-eyed. Everything once hidden beneath the surface of them will have already been erased, except for fraying edges of muscle, dented shards of collagen and bone. Their implants will make their true beliefs seem far away. Their feelings will not register on faces so matted with former injection sites, so thoroughly excavated and repopulated. They will stop resembling anyone they have met, and their children will be embarrassed.

My dad and I are not wrapped together, or even really connected anymore, save the repetition in our bodies. We are structurally the same, everything matches up height wise, like if we were fossils you might group us together somehow. When I was a child

and I would wait for my father, after school, at a friend's house, in the twilight of my room scared to sleep, it mattered that when he finally appeared I could see myself in him. When I had nightmares, I would run and wake him up, and he'd shuffle behind me on the way back to my room. He'd sit on my bed, half asleep, and I'd match my breathing to his breathing, our legs laid long beside each other. Sometimes he would sing "Sunshine on my Shoulders," the old John Denver song. "If I had a wish that I could wish for you, I'd wish for you sunshine all the while." Later, when I could listen to music on my own, I learned the tune was only half-right and the lyrics half-remembered, a shadow of what it really sounded like, a flimsy recollection. Still, when I was young, in the soft night, every whisper of the song seemed whole.

I have come to believe, in the dry heat of our dysfunction, that there is something simultaneously repulsive and sanctifying about looking like where I come from. Celebrities surrender familial attachments as they go under the knife, outrunning the reality of their families and past lives with more and more striking physical changes. Most of us do not have that luxury. I have waited for my father to look at me and recognize anything he has put there. I have mourned the presence of someone who, if we were both young, could have been my twin. I have waited years for apologies. I have fretted on the phone and in the kitchen and wanted to see him and not wanted to. And then my father has brought his car around and has taken me to the museum, and we have looked at a mass grave, a sea of dead things, buried with a scream half stuck in their throats, and after all that, we have not reached towards each other at all, nor have we fought about anything that happened. We have merely looked past each other into the sun of the building's exit.

Providence // Pasadena

Up until recently, I usually couldn't sleep and so I'd spend the whole night reading about my favorite celebrity, the one who used to look at all of her boyfriends like they were her dad. There are years of photos stacked neatly in articles and lists and in sweetly curated posts if you look for them. Her eyes were so gentle and all of those men, all older than her, all with half-mussed hair and reformed-tweaker eyes, stared at her with duty and disgust. Sometimes she seemed cooler than them, other times just cleaner than them, or maybe just young. For a while I couldn't tell why I was doing it, night after night. I listened to slow songs and sad songs and stared at her face in the dark. It was a little like loving her in the way that trying to understand someone means you love them.

The habit started back in the covid lockdown and persisted through my slow return back to college in Providence. Sometimes I'd wake up just minutes after falling asleep, my heart pounding and breath catching. I'd feel like I was going to throw up or die or get put in jail. I'd open my phone and plug headphones into my ears and breathe with my mouth open. I began, after a few months of watching her interviews and reading articles, to mimic parts of her speech back to myself, imitating her voice, sometimes sending joking videos of myself doing it to my friends. Those closest to me came to expect this, a near encyclopedic knowledge of her work, her relationships, her friends, her family. She grew up in Pasadena. She was almost prodigious in a way I understood. She spoke about her parents and their divorce when she was in her early twenties and how boring it is to be traumatized. She said "dude" a lot.

For a while, after I left home and returned to Providence, I did not know how to plan for beautiful things so I waited for good things to happen to her. She dated a popular

musician and then an actor. She got a dog. She got more famous. It is subtle, how self-belief comes back. At first, I would picture her face over my face like a sweet, resilient veil. Then, I began to look at myself again sometimes.

The physical space between myself and my parents, and the subsequent space they put between each other was a good kind of balm over everything that had happened. In watching her, I learned how to expect things. She released new work, and I enjoyed it. I persisted in my own life, sometimes present in it, sometimes not. The longer I was separated from the various homes my family had lived in and undertaken together, the more memories of them came back. When you love someone, distance is a halfhearted omission of them. I couldn't see my parents but I thought and think and write about them all the time.

There are memories that make a sweet kind of sense now. Back then, when I was small, I knew my father loved me by his labor. My mother once found a play structure free on Craigslist, a solid, hulking wooden thing, six posts in the ground holding up a yellow plastic slide on one end and two swings and monkey bars on top. The only catch was it had to be dug out of the ground where its previous owners had dug postholes and cemented each piece of the structure in. My family spent a day of it. My dad drove us all out to this Craigslist house in his truck. The richest people in Marin lived the farthest out in the woods, and it was warm that day in the dappled sunlight amidst the expensive properties and sports cars. My mother entertained me, playing the truck radio and then we walked around the fancy driveway while my dad spent the afternoon digging the playground up.

He hacked the cement off the base of its posts and scraped dirt and moss off the beams above the swingset. I struggle to think my dad looks powerful. The kind of influence he's had is so subtle, so secretly painful, that it's sometimes hard to picture him as a force. But, that day, as my mother and I stretched back the tree-lined path, down the drive, it seemed that the earth was crumbling beneath him. I watched him from far away, swinging the pointed end of a shovel into the earth over and over, the swingset's wood limbs trembling with the impact. He disassembled the whole swingset that day, and he looked like how I thought a dad was supposed to look, loading felled trees into a pickup. He put the playstructure up almost immediately after we were home so there wasn't much time for me to wait until I could start playing.

I remember my desperation for my dad's attention, but I can see now, in little slices of calm, how the things he did for me might have been his best offerings at the witnessing I wanted. Sometimes I think that my family, in addition to the purported and expressed and felt love we have with each other, share, deeply, perhaps even more deeply than that love, a sense of loss. There is so much potential, at the beginning of a journey into the woods, to be together, really together. There is so much beauty we saw and there is so much, an entire coastline's worth, a dog's worth, a museum's worth of missed opportunity.

When grieving gets too much, though I can sleep better, I think about my favorite celebrity. It's funny how a celebrity, this dimmed down version of a human person, can make me feel more real to myself. But I pay attention to her, and really trying to know things about her sometimes grants me more permission to conceive of the things I know about myself. There are a lot of ways to tell stories about my family and all of the ways

we are grieving the loss of each other and have been grieving this longing for some time. I like to imagine that part of remembering what happened is thinking like a celebrity trash article or a bad ghost written book. They are entertaining at times, a little predictable, but mostly undertaken with the earnestness that means love.

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