

Expertise

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There's a certain distance where his eyes focus when I know he isn't listening. It's close enough to where I am that I sometimes think he hears, but his irises aren't any tighter than they would be if they were watching headlights pass on the opposite side of a four lane highway. What he's looking at is diffused even before it gets to his lids.

"The hearing test was one hundred percent fine," my father tells me. "I just have a different listening style." I've been badgering him to get his hearing tested for months. I wonder if it is a "style" to know when is the right time to tune out – even public radio has commercials these days. He did not need a hearing test, he tells me. He is just too focused to hear me from downstairs, and I mumble, he says, and insert "like" where it confused him most. He can hear perfectly. He is just busy beginning things, I think, or recollecting where the old things start. I almost believe him that he can hear just fine, until I ask about a story and he does not respond.

"Have you thought of Adderall?" I ask, and immediately regret it. I can't have him thinking I've turned to drugs. He's always been hands-off, but not from miles. I try to raise my eyebrows, stretch the skin above my eyes with innocence, the blameless curiosity of those informed by pop-science features in magazines.

"I've tried it, but I was frantic all the time," he says. It's clear I haven't hooked him with the image of his daughter on pills. His tone is quick, the breath at the beginning of the sentence, and before

he is finished the comment is behind us. His forehead creases up and away, wrinkles folding into diagonals that point at the ceiling and backward. Either he is planning, or he is nostalgic, and they are almost the same. I see this in his eyebrows, which grow more brambly each year. They curl and then curve in, reminding us when we forget that our hairs are related.

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The day I learned the word “prompt” I knew it would be useful to me. The word reminded me of puffing out my cheeks on purpose, or the freeing feeling I got that first time a yoga teacher in wool socks told me to extend my stomach as far as it would go. *Don’t hold it in*, she told me, *feel how much air you’ve got pushing out into that nice round belly*. Prompt, the idea, was somewhat the same. A word that said “breathe big in the belly,” “stick it to me,” and leaned forward into what might come.

Think about a story you’ve been told more than once, she told me. Her skin looked tougher than mine in more than one direction, like instead of just being a good ten years older than me she’d been wading through the Amazon a few months too long. She was my first writing teacher, and I imagined the color of the bottoms of her feet. *Think about a story you’ve been told more than once*, she said, *and think about why they tell it, what is their prompt*. She squatted next to my fake-wood desk. *What makes them tell it? Is it about where you came from, about why they are the way they are, about the shape of your nose?* I nodded at her next to me, eye-level and in moccasins. Her green eyes made slits in her leathery face and the cheekbones moved in single pieces when she smiled. I wondered if she’d ever heard lies in other languages.

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“The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly ‘objective’ *expert*, in lieu of the master of older social structures, who was moved by personal sympathy and favor, by grace and gratitude.” (Weber, Max. “Essays in Sociology” ed. Gerth A. Mills, Oxford University Press, 1949. 216)

There was one specific moment when I realized my father could be wrong, my Papi told me. The moment when I realized that he was fully, ridiculously uninformed. It could have been *uniformed*, or *unformed*, but *unformed* seems unlikely since the patriarch is always the most visible in the story, even if he dressed only in grey-tones and you don't get to him before his hair's gone white. He's formed, alright. Most likely it was *uninformed*, because he always talked about his father reading the newspaper and this read well as a case-in-point interruption.

My father and I were driving in a minivan when he told me. We were driving in the van with some cousins that we didn't like very much, not for any terrible reason like a blue wedding dress or an illicit affair, but more precisely because the cousins wore pink dresses from Macy's that formed cupcakes just before their ankles, and white stockings in the summer. They were the ones who had insisted that we go to Disneyland. Papi told me stories about his family on the drive to Orlando, mostly in order to remind me that our family was still on this vacation, even if I hated rollercoasters and had to pretend I was ten to save on the entrance fee.

He told me the story in the sweaty rented minivan, and the insides of my knees stuck to the leather and caught my sweat from dripping down my dangling legs to the floor. *I remember exactly that moment*, he told me, and so I never could leave behind the idea that *that moment* happened also in a large car under temporary insurance that you had to be twenty-three to drive and you didn't get to pick the color. Often in rented cars we ended up with a red one and laughed at its sheen, the opposite of our blue Civic hatchback that threatened to disappear in slushy parking lots.

I know, at the very least, that the moment when he found out his father could be wrong was a public one. *He was speaking to a whole group of people, and yet he was completely wrong*, my Papi told me. *It staggered me, how much he could be wrong.* I looked across at him from the passenger's side, palm trees dusty through the windshield behind him, and thought of just how lucky I was to be sitting up here in the front. *Oh, yes!* I said, *I know exactly how that feels.* My Papi blushed a bit and giggled, looked in his rearview mirror. I remembered for the first time that the cousins were there, and they laughed. *Oh, you know exactly how that feels?* one said,

her voice rising at the end, catching me with the fact that I'd already answered. Here I was trying to join the maturity club, and I had just gone and enthusiastically stated that I knew what it felt like to see my own father as an idiot. He pressed the gas pedal and, bringing his lips together, turned the wheel to the right.

That was not the only time I have tried to impress myself upon their histories by being an un-child. The danger for my doing things like this was always highest when I could feel their own resistance, watch the sweat down my father's neck and the regret of putting gasoline toward Americana, toward places where fluorescence reigns and migraines come true. This is the child I loved to be, the child who sniffs the air of Epcot for corporate sponsorship, toxic plastic, and artificial sweeteners. I knew Equal gave you cancer before the cousins knew how to spell "dismay."

*

Revolver

revolver

Function: *verb*

Usage: *Spanish word*

{89 }

transitive verb

1 : to move about, to mix, to shake, to stir

2 : to upset (one's stomach)

3 : to mess up, to rummage through <revolver la casa : to turn the house upside down>

--reflexive verb **revolverse**

1 : to toss and turn

2 : **VOLVERSE** : to turn around

revólver

Function: *masculine noun*

Usage: *Spanish word*

1 : revolver

(Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary © 2005)

I'll bet you and I don't see the same thing when we picture protective gear, especially not if I give you the prompt of dawn in Mexico City. You've already got sharpened metal on your mind, and you're turning it around in the first light through the blinds, looking for the blunt spots. When I speak of protective gear, I think of my grandfather Luis. Luis lived in Israel in the 1960s, and his comb-over was always rock solid. Abuelo Luis was the only Papi then, and would never have allowed his children to say his first name to his face. I can't quite call him my *abuelo* in my mind, because he was never my Abuelo, alive. I bite down hard on *Luis* and see his comb-over hanging slightly longer over one ear. I imagine he moisturized the crease of his neck, avoided all chance of blister. His hair was white by the time of this story and very rarely seen in any form other than the perfectly gelled flip over his bald spot. My mother usually chimes in at this point, and reminds me that she caught him once, leaning over the sink with two feet of hair hanging down over his left ear. He yelled *chingadamatredre*, a warning of outrage, slammed the bathroom door, and gave the maids the day off. At times like this my Abuelita would search the refrigerator for last week's tamales and a few cans of salsa, and before Luis was even fully dressed the table was set.

Abuelita knows very well how to calm men, and will sometimes pull me aside at family gatherings, desperate to pass her knowledge on. This data has got a timer on it, and my older cousins have not been listening for the tick. Her fingers dusty from fumbling through her purse, from imagining habanero peppers and tomatillos, she'll tell me: "Go for the arteries. Food, and then the heart." Abuelita's world has two tones – there is the meandering pencil desperate to underline the family tree, and then there are the succinct phrases of recipe. These recipes come from the world where my father had just met my mother, and was years away from giving into whole wheat, raw vegetables or tofu. This is the world where Mexico City is only *La Ciudad*, because there is no other urban possibility. This is where the windows of apartment buildings lean into one another, reflect back at you browning photos crouching behind you on the mantel. Drawers are lined in paper, old stockings, and forgotten *tallit*. Next to Luis in this world there is always a handgun in an underwear drawer, tucked just behind the neatly folded greys, but there was never any talk of loading.

I dreamt once that he wrote to me about the comb-over. In the dream he sat at the kind of oak desk you're taught to crave if you grow up outside of Boston reading Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau. Luis was unrealistically tall in the dream and crouched over the desk with a single sheet of paper in front of him. He penciled in, "It keeps me sane to have my head covered, it keeps me Jewish." They tell me my grandfather Luis would never have veered into the range of the poetic for any price, but my dreams can afford to contradict them. I was born a year after the cigarettes did him in, but he is everywhere in the trickles of water boiled to erase Mexico City sewage, in the dust between piano keys he never touched, in the lineage, linaje, the words my father repeats, in the bad sex jokes I'm only now beginning to understand.

Once, by a pool, Luis' brother teased my mother to bring down her bathing suit strap just a little more, hinting at the idea of breast, and I wrapped my head in a beach towel and began to weep. I could not make out where propriety fit here. *Muñequita*, someone called me and put a hand on my shoulder, a distant relative who I knew only through the silver chain they'd sent me when I turned thirteen. I crouched tighter below the hand and wished for a smaller extended family, wished for nursing homes and cleaning fluid, a grandfather who played golf and had a jiggly knee. I could not understand why they said Luis knew when to talk, but never laughed or put his hand in the small of your back.

Yellow papers are the stale route to family history. No one wants to read a letter any more. As much as I want to hear her stories, my vision goes blurry when she pulls out the family tree. She doesn't know how to use computers, really, so the detailed diagram folds out from several uneven pieces of paper stapled into one long line. I've always wondered why she doesn't have more paper cuts. My grandmother wears plaid pants, and once you get her rolling on pre-1970, the smudged Xerox copies never stop. Someday I find my hands full of envelopes stuffed with color copies and illegible notations of relation and I wonder when was the last time she flipped the channel through VH1. It's almost as if she knew collage was in fashion.

Even though she admires Dr. Phil, I feel I understand Abuelita best when I read German philosophers. It's like the denseness of

her love, the amount of melted butter she pours into a bowl, the curtains she folds over the balcony, these are blocking out Mexico City pollution just like convoluted sentences around the nature of Being historical. Sometimes Heidegger seems to echo my Abuelita playing scales in A minor, especially in those sections when he begs us to peel back the layers of our own history. She read to me, “The elemental historicality of Dasein may remain hidden from Dasein itself. But there is a way by which it can be discovered and given proper attention. Dasein can discover tradition, preserve, and study it explicitly.” (Heidegger 1962:41) *This Das*, she said, pointing inward under her bottom rib, *that's how you can memorize what Dasein means*. I tried to separate out the vowels of the proper noun, elongate its syllables into an almost-Southern accent, until I had something far enough from German that I could pronounce it inside my head. I've been taught so young to be scared by anything resembling the clipped syllables of Berlin that I can't hear them without a physical image, a hand jerking out from a forehead in swift greeting, *Heil*. It's hard to get away from concentration camps from back here, even when the language you're peeling back is your own.

It's best to write out quotes that long on old paper, the kind on which the ink won't stop seeping until you look away. Write on oily paper – the kind of dappled greasy paper you get when you let a warm *churro* sit in a paper bag too long. Not that I can remember doing that, or can recall the smell of sitting churros without prompting, but I'm sure someone in the family can.

These days I allow straps to sag, and laugh along equally to butt-pinchers and salsa-scented flatulence. I've decided this is where our family's tenderness hides. It is usually an aftertaste, centered in burnt jalapeños miles before you can see it coming. My Abuelita's apartment in Mexico City is full of Luis twenty-some years after he died, full of him in the portions she makes for dinner, full of the furniture she chooses to dust, full of him still in the size of the beds everyone piled into during the mourning period.

Your mother came to Mexico City for the week. It is like a report-card when Papi talks about when Luis was around. The pluses and minuses save the both of us.

I was sitting 'shiva,' and I was kneeling all the time. The last

thing I wanted to do was comfort other people, he tells me, and so they brought food. The plates were everywhere, and the maids had been dismissed the week before. Why and where there were maids in my father's childhood is not worth discussing, like you wouldn't ask why he couldn't chew before molars. I also never ask about what other people's faces looked like, and for the only time in memory the other brothers are absent. My father sits alone. I see him crouched in the corner of a couch, knees to his chest, a position I've always favored but have never seen him assume in my life. I don't believe his bones bend that way. I don't believe he can curve so far into his own chest.

And then your mother came, and it was that life again. We were together those few nights, before she had to fly back to Boston. I know the rest, though I envision it in a seedy motel, the kind my father would never enter in Mexico. They were together for that one week, and it is nine months later when I am around and they start to tell me this story. It is *conception* to this family, thinking bursting upon you, more expected than you could know. *La concepcion*, a Catholic word sitting awkwardly cross-legged on my grandmother's antique piano bench. Conceptions around here are never immaculate – I sometimes wonder if my father's comfort with sexuality is mostly projection, a lifelong battle that he's always had against the pointed Catholic fingers that surround and pocket-in the Mexican-Jewish community. The rabbi tells us it is a mitzvah to make love on the Sabbath and even when I am eight, my father will not pretend he does not know where babies come from. We don't consider nakedness or any of this *graphic*, there is no back page to turn to for the appropriate illustration, no fully-censored photograph that I have to consult to be polite. We don't accept print-outs or fashion magazines. He *conceives* of me.

One of the first pieces of advice Papi gave me, way before *don't procrastinate*, was how to think of sex. I am a young chubby girl who resents having to buy her first bra, and he tells me *sex is the most beautiful thing human beings have*, he says, *and it shouldn't be dirtied*. Papi came up into sex around Luis and cockroaches, where sex was never mentioned but was always dirtied, I imagine, always hidden. In my head, Luis' pants crease only at the heel.

*

I think most about pronouns when stretching, when I'm told my core is softening, when it is hopeless to believe that my nose will meet my knee. I've never been good at sticking to the full syllabic extent of proper nouns, and pulled "mom," and "papi," apart before I even learned 'dad.' I never say "my papi" aloud to anyone else, but only "paps" to him, fearing the edge of rap songs seeping in on Spanish paternal terms. Sometimes I say "papi-tus," adding the affectionate endings, the terms of endearment add-ons like "ita," that soften and lengthen anything at the same time, that draw out the word so that you can listen to that name in vowels longer. "Softens," "lengthen." I hear a dance teacher in the background, pausing at the stretch of the knee and my nose touches limb flesh, foreign air. I pull my weight toward the floor, the palm of my foot yielding oddly, flexed against wood, and the woman says, "Where, now, is your center of gravity? Come, soften, soften, and stretch."

I already have too many names for my own father and not enough opportunities to list. I have always referred to "my dad" to friends and, while speaking, pictured a different man. This man is more rumpled, his wrinkles so deep they look blue from afar, like soft substances could gather there, like skin flakes or coarse hairs could make roots in his pores. This man has darker skin that pales around the neck before it slips into his collar. I cannot picture my father's skin folding so far over his collar. This "dad" learned to drink earlier and grouped shot glasses in the sink. He has a strong accent in which the second person always sounds that Mexican prompt, like a religious accusation ("Jew").

"Abale," I said once to myself, calling not the name that he told me to call him, but relying instead on another language he wishes I spoke. Thinking maybe Hebrew will take us somewhere new, where there is no history of pincushions or Edward the Thirds. According to grammar I've got the subject on backwards, but we have too many languages to keep those uniform, a bright button down, a wilting collar and the springy consistency of pronouns.

*

Deciduous – a legend in two parts.

Leaves fall fastest in New England, and become a legend before the sentence before. Colors crunch under foot until you've forgotten where they fell, first.

1.

Deciduous plants flower during the leafless period
increase the effectiveness of pollination they'll tell
upon the Wikipedian definition falling apart at the leaves
of stemmed acorn crossing season, genre

From Shel Silverstein to Horror, god forbid, to Romance,
the back of the video store, a familiar reminder of how our parents
met

or can meet (because we've thought, hard, if they made it up)
over Judie's popovers and half-red leaves, a car slipping up Mount
Washington

Whether that tire was last time we celebrated their anniversary
or the actual November of 1978 I'd guess
the figure of years before I was on the horizon speaks
the power of western Massachusetts, college towns of half-leaves

(the power of leftover green beans, just as appealing, more
as frosted chocolate cake if you've been jumping in)

The absence of leaves improves wind transmission of pollen
so one could say they exposed their yellow uppers to me,
to an audience on purpose of crunching under bare feet
of frozen toes for the sake of desiring winter, gasoline.

2.

I practiced in the mirror how to remove, take a jean jacket off sexy
how to pull a t-shirt, rustling, over my head instead of through
each arm

Keep my head still, without leaves the deciduous are more visible
to insects

Pollination, you know, is not for everyone, a dangerous game,
forget buttons

a risky strategy; flowers, fluttering edges, damaged by frost
You've seen where the brown takes over from the borders and
spreads

(Justification; by losing leaves during cold days, the deciduous
reduce their water loss through ice, less branch and trunk
breakage

They survive when a pine might split and block the trail behind
Amherst

(Lemon 1961) improperly cited, missed magazine, published
without cause)

Apples-to-apples upon last week's motorcar, mocked nausea
I'd pretend we played driving games, counted elk, but
really, we listened to tapes, we buckled our seatbelts and
reminded,
we rewound James Taylor's greatest hits twice

(Anatomy; Other body parts, shed, can be deciduous;
antlers, old skins, family legends
I Spy for the sake of Seventeen,
Peter Paul and Mary for the sake of cool jazz)

Deciduous teeth, also called milk teeth
the ones that fall out normal in the course of development
only ones that hurt when we bite on ice, go sour
when our mother overuses the term "my high-school honey"

teeth or leaves,
kept in a small clear box to recall kisses goodnight,
deciduous remain whitened by un-use, cavity-less

uncelebrated, wax,
and on birthdays, broken candles, fed on spinach

*

“Walk backwards and wipe your hands on the seat of your pants like they’re dusty,” you say. The backyard has us stumbling unfamiliar with the spots where the grass has caved in to pockets of mud. “They’re not dusty, they’re cracking,” I say. I refuse to follow directions when it is clear you’re only giving them to keep us moving. You lift your knees higher and say, “This is practice, see?” “Practice on a lawn?” I imagine I should have cleats on and handfuls of soccer balls, rather than compost clumps. “Clippers are not only for the garden,” you say. “Someday, you’ll learn garage tools.”

*

Shrubbery

I didn’t learn how to climb up to the shelf with the clippers until after I could already clip my own nails. Only until I could see the shelf from eye-level did I realize there were actually two clippers in that corner of the medicine cabinet shelf—one extra large, presumably for toes, glossy and never used. The other, the little one, was covered in thumbprints always in that way that glossy metal has of letting you down, even though Papi always wiped it clean with a Kleenex after each use. Guilt, I think, for the clippers’ baptism in blood.

Mom never used nail clippers, but rather stuck with the long thin scissors that curved and so could never be appropriated for anything else. I only watched her trim once, and that was enough to make me a clipper for life. The scissors arced into the center of nail bed as she cut, pointing neatly toward the wrinkle in her knuckle. The nail clippers were Papi’s domain, and he knew exactly how to place my fingers over the toilet bowl so that not one single clipping escaped the flush. We certainly couldn’t have a piece of nail flying off to get lost in the rug, especially after he installed the hairy blue one that snagged just about everything. He was always thinking of the potential to pierce when it came to us. Only I really knew why. It’s surprising that he told me the story, because even though it was

my vein he cut, I was young enough to forget. Instead I am stuck with the image of my father, the blood-shedder.

He tells this story each time he clips my nails, and only while my eyes are down, watching the slivers of nail pirouette off into the toilet water. He starts out sympathetic to himself; he was a first-time father and fell asleep after the second chapter of Doctor Spock. He mastered Lamaze breathing techniques along with my mother and cut the umbilical chord neatly. He just always had a thing with nails. Maybe it was his mother's days as a pianist or maybe it was the recent and rapid improvement in the hygiene of his home. Whatever the reason, he could never tolerate in-grownns, and on that fateful Saturday, twelve days after they brought me home from the hospital, he decided to trim my nails.

My skin was extremely flexible, he says, and accepted the curves of the clipper easily. He had finished one foot and was on to the next already when I started to hum. He looked over, attentive to a fault. I was more pink than usual, and the hum quickly rose to a whimper. It was not until then that the specks of blood began to appear along my toes. As the specks quickly increased to a spread and then a flow, my father screamed. *Why don't they tell a young parent not to cut any part of their kid?* he always asks me at this point. He always answers himself with some lesson that he doesn't believe in, usually centered on the learning potential of injury or the poetry of scars. At the moment that he cut me though, he did not contextualize in any of these ways. He couldn't tell where my skin ended and the saran wrap of my toenails began. Everything was flooded in scarlet fluid. He'd cut his new born daughter and he'd opened the flow of something that he couldn't swab up.

I usually look up at this point in the story, whether out of a young child's embarrassment at the reminder of diapers or to save him getting to the panic section of the story and the shrillness of my mother's scream. I usually flush the toilet at that point, re-checking the porcelain bowl just in case some sliver hasn't gotten all the way down. Without the discipline of this bathroom ritual, I might forget and let my nails grow jagged. In our tradition, I kneel with my father once every ten days and I refuse to clip without him. I have no scars and do not believe that every father will make me bleed. I do, however, keep my clippers in that same spot on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet, and promise future daughters they will go

months without a trim.

*

Sometimes when we end up at an amusement park I think he is making something up to me. When I'm afraid, he doesn't comment, just notes, his neck wrinkling looser these days, and sits down beside me, stares in the same direction. Like he knows I'm allowed to save my own skin.

One has to wonder why the other kids on the tilt-a-whirl enjoy the ride so much. They have the same digestive system, after all. I imagine their stomachs as strong and steely, the color of a well-used kettle that its whole life has only had to deep-fry. These stomachs will never admit to their tongues that vegetables are tasty. Other kids' stomachs see roller-coasters and think, hey, that'd be a good challenge, keep my abdominal muscles strong. These are the stomachs that can often be caught beaming at the world in midriff-bearing shirts, even cut-out patterns. When the kid says no, these stomachs do not take that answer. My stomach, on the other hand, is, regrettably, fully under my control.

We looked up at the tilt-a-whirl together and thought, hey, that is just not the way humans were made to be. Thought, being cool has less metallic taste to it than the security of sitting on the park bench while the other kids risk their lives. Just one cup of Dippin' Dots can leave as much excitement on the tip of your tongue, you sitting on the park bench, flattening your thighs against the metal slats beneath you and guessing at the different flavors as they pass to the back of your mouth. I like the taste in my mouth I get while waiting for brave people. I like the taste of remaining on the ground. It smells like wet pennies.

*

Belmont was: a ghost story in 3 parts.

The way they read it,
Belmont was where
she swallowed him
whole wheat bread and all
and they became American.

Eventually he took over the kitchen
but suburbia reigned rough in
ingredients. Cambridge and
food stores labeled ethnic
weren't far, but before he knew
it there was jello in the cabinet,
organic beans.

1. We were chemists all along

It's a polymer, he told me
handed me a small envelope
of threaded white dust.
it held only three sheets of the stuff,
thicker between fingers than
backyard oak leaves before the mow

they let us touch what they did,
science museum on call
most of our fathers made super-absorbent fibers
or other chemical experiments of the 1980s
now in use in every Walmart in town

“There’s a great future in plastics
– think about it” films of a 1970s beginning
that we pretended was our own,
without the backyard swimming pool

as if we’d just escaped
from Woodstock, too
and were rearing our dreadlocks
(freshly trimmed)

at the factory man

We were chemists all along

2. Centerfold

Sheets of polymer still lie lean
along the edges of my father's desk
without industrial context you slip
out a leaf and want to see a red drop bleed

from the center of the sheet outwards,
forcing an oblong shape
onto the 8x10 rectangle of fiber

(all I understand about superabsorbents until
the new house was they went into diapers,
I pictured only body fluids in yawning colors
mushrooming from here on out)

“It’s my invention,” my father told me,
left it sitting next to the silverware speckled
with last night’s dessert

He laid on the table what he could bring
home from the factory like any man
it made a good centerpiece, the envelope
and we were lax at keeping flowers on the table
pollen flaked, and
scattered before heat came on

I keep the sheets now behind
old Playboys copyright 1974
the threat of super-absorbent fibers rears heavy
over my square kitchenette

I open sometimes when I drip
a tiny droplet of sink water
onto the sheet,

it stops far too soon for me
leaves just a centimeter-wide pimple
in the top left corner

A small hill before the production of pride,
like the warp in the neighbor's driveway.

3. Highway agriculture

The corner of Oak and Acorn was far too close
a full head wolf mask in a square back yard,
kids picked it up, brushed off white grass
and hid in fur for days

for play, we turned the other corner
to the reservoir
and its encasing in still blue rubber
biking you said hold me and
I thought perhaps you meant en route

Nothing wobbled in our neighborhood
but the occasional aching tree
they say of Belmont it is where you cut down all
the trees and name your streets after them

Walnut before the Pike
was the closest we got
to root rings.

*

I dreamt my father took me to a diving board. It was the old Deportivo in Mexico City, where I've only been once and all I can remember is that the cement on the tennis courts buckled, inviting you to pretend you weren't looking so that you could most legitimately trip. In the dream he took me to the Deportivo, the health club, where he used to sweat the sauna out with his father, soon before he took over the family money. I insert a bit of the mafia here, and see two unfamiliar men sweating in white towels, rivulets running down

the center of their chests. The older one puts his hand up against the tile and looks into both of his companions' eyes, which you are not supposed to do in the sauna without a really good reason. "*Mi hijo*," he says, "*There's a lot I am going to need you to manage.*" My father is calm in this scene, though his posture folds. He always told me they called him too skinny. When I hear this memory I am a son, suddenly, and I imagine that my father wanted boys. In my favorite books there are always a million daughters and the father loves them but always imagines a son, like he could put him on a leash and carry him inside the subway on the way to work. The first time I read "All-of-A-Kind" family I ate saltines under my pillows for a week, because that was what they did, and when I was finished I asked my father if he missed having a son, because the father in there did. I almost didn't want to believe him when he shook his head and laughed easily. I wanted to hear him squeeze his throat tighter, "hem" or "haw," or in any way, really, make a noise I'd never heard before.

*

Cousin speak

Emma taught me the word
onomatopoeia, she said, woof,
she said through chewed lips
streaked in horizontal teeth marks
like there was something to be held
before the chap

the small breath of the o's from her lips
sending flurries in small tufts
of the curve of her hair, wet
segments orange estranged
from one another,
falling in front of her chin
the last two inches a wave
before her jaw bone

meow, Emma said, her small bones closer
to the animal than the sound

Emma taught me how
to make sounds with lexis,
dictionary in hand at twelve years
and yesterday announced she was a lesbian
her mother called long-distance on a landline

meow, Emma said, ring, ring
I am still not sure if my seventeen year old cousin
is suddenly sexual or if her lips smack when she kisses,
if she is gentle in sound, unlike an animal
and wants to hear the future, birth wise

in the female minds of this family theories ripen long in gossip
duplicity of hearing in which you can thank

and hear a wedding
over Chinese dumplings,

still remember
to pass the
granulated

the female minds here reach horizontal for sound
perhaps because we live too long, outlast our spouses
and our singing voices, though I can't point quite
to when I fell behind
on that

I haven't heard Emma's voice since she could meow
and qualify as a child
but now she is a lesbian who
creaks slightly over the phone
in sweatered winter celebrations
older than when Emma shoved
her face in puppy flesh,
the brave cousin
that had us all barking
down the stairwell feet first

Emma taught me the word
onomatopoeia, her high pitched voice
skinny legs, she leaned into the "meow"
shrill, firm-mouthed

I worried her calves would snap
cracking staggered mid-bone
if they got too close to
a right angle with her thighs

I saw Emma last screeching sounds
and now she is talking sex talk in my mind
I wonder if there are animals in it

if she chirps or maybe ahs silently
or whispers fuck me into the snow
like a puppy or a cousin who stubbed her toe
three seconds before turkey in 1992

they say Emma may love women or sound, or both
they say she's down to monosyllables
so perhaps she loves
the clarity of line
shadow, plop, sucking sounds
a stone into a pond

where the last three words
complete, fold her body inward
and wait for a frog

onomatopoeia, Emma licks haiku

*

A praying mantis drops with a thud, doesn't forget his axes
Discussing things called facts, persimmons lying around
-Hōsai Ozaki, 1993

You asked for family stories, mocking high cheekbones like a new friend; I pulled up at my skin from inside and hoped it wouldn't show through. Freckles help there. *You're guarded*, you said, *but you get away with it by smiling*. I showed my teeth and I took from this your permission to steal a piece of hand fruit, a serving of one. That heady rush you force on yourself when you're trying to fast forward the getting to know someone, like how long will it take before you can liken me to my fourth grade teacher or, in the worst case, my grandmother. You eat away at those syllables that I say oddly, where you think I may have an accent but I am actually just holding my breath between letters, concentrating on which character speaks next.

Behind the one I said was the narrator there is a bowl of persimmons, browning on the bottom, waiting for permission to rise and turn their peels to the knife. In response to your plea for stories I reached back and told you she slapped me on the wrist for eating too many persimmons once. You said it was the tannin, and, if I think about it, the wrist slapping was probably a lie I've repeated myself so many times I can't quite tell anymore where on the spectrum it is now. I told you my diet last year consisted primarily of persimmons, figs and artichokes – also a lie. I don't even know when artichoke season was and assumed you were not in tune enough with crop cycles to check me.

As an excuse for the lie, I offer you an I-did-it-because, I-did-it-because you create a wrap around me, a sticky plastic that squeezes out metaphor and asks that the best symbolism comes out of me. If I don't supply it you might let me down and come back from market with the seedless. I told you she slapped me on the wrist because she was worried about my diet. Told you that the wrist-slapping was supposed to induce me to eat meat, I thought. Something about the flesh on flesh.

*

Rind

Learned storyboards in third grade,
am only recently beginning to see
their use. Without them I have
trouble starting where the *they* first met
introducing the past you didn't know
at first, her uneven skin tone, his
vacation socks.

Am particularly bad at beginnings. You
say I tell it best when
so full of air and, leftover, body
so empty of sleep that information
can't slide in my pores any more than
giant chunks of steel could slide in my mouth.
Corners would catch
lifeless and stretch
against the tough scraps
just inside my lips.

When telling only my stories I try
to reach around the night
when you bought
the drinks and I remembered
asking questions louder
was something to be proud of. I
interrupted

You were opaque,
thick to me then, like melting rubber
in a bright color, something sliding
on the side of the palette with orange.

I asked first,

*do you know that eye trick where
you put two fingertips together before the nose*

cross your eyes and suddenly (my voice is
rising as your face opens, I am
younger)

the two fingertips overlap into a tiny ball
with softened edges and (your top
teeth are showing)

you can draw it apart, (I breathe) *little by*
little, and you laughed

before
you even touched my hand you could
see the spots, no liver,
where we were sticking.

Then there was worn green
felt on the wall behind us
and we were drawing
out of balls into un-focus,
puddling our feet
edges going viscous
even while the middles
still held.

Told you later it was like touching
something wide and gooey like
melted rubber, maybe, or hummus –
touch your finger to it
then pull away
and when you lift your fingertip
that paste comes up a little bit
toward your finger and then,
blop, sinks
back down
into the rest
of the goo.

That's what it was, us reaching toward

consistency that doesn't
ever move without
sound. That unusual sudden slow
when a first night you don't feel fluorescent
desperate rushed to get to know all
of them at the same time - you can
let the top parts of the stuff
pucker, pull away
from where you meet them,

wait to lie and say *first sight* is just
a lack of oxygen and
first sight throws
off the storyboard,
heaves a spike into the pyramid
of where the bricks brown over time
build back.

People are the thickest ooze, you laugh,
highest boiling point, You
are not a reporter, you said,
over lemonade.

No wonder my fruit history is
ooze, I'm a juicing lemon.

Tell you the story was
a set of months
watch closely for
the right time of season,
might slip on those thirty-
firsts.

You can't have a
moment repeated
fourfold under ice
if the one time you stepped
on me it was spring.

*

The first time I sleep next to you I dream that I am a packet of papers. An alliteration, almost, and even when I know that I am fully awake the image does not sliver away from me. Your back curved away from me at night, full of more skin than I expected – I could only make out three vertebrae in the dim light before we went to sleep. You stated the hour and curled your back away, just like that. I slept echoing you, facing away from the wall full of window. I think that the packet of papers started as a dream, but when I am more than half awake I can still feel myself in sheets of recycled 8 by 10, with you turned away from me, ignoring the wholeness of the packet. My pages are dented in spots, like they've been shuttled around a few times in an old briefcase. Only the center of my pages is written on, like I'm clenching my stomach, holding my breath in and tightening my lungs for the sake of margins. There is something around my middle, tying me in, and I've forgotten that I can speak other languages. The binding around me is something less elastic than a rubber band but close enough to what you'd use to hold a set of papers together if you don't want to pierce. You had told me you hated staple holes, said that it finalized a version - if you returned to stapled stories you always had to cut, you said. I slid a fingernail under the staple in the top left corner of your latest draft and pulled upwards, the thin slice of metal unfolding and coming away from the stack before I expected it to give. The group of papers hung together in the top left corner, still, refusing to loosen from the staple spot until you picked them up and shook them apart.

The papers I am this morning are not flat. This morning I am a rustling packet of handled papers, loose and re-read, and you lie there with your back to me, rejecting the whole lot. Without moving, I try to feel around my edges for an excess appendage, a place where I am sticking out, bulging, where the paper might have pimpled or ripped, but I cannot catch anything. We spent the afternoon talking of our own writings, our own histories and how to separate ourselves from our own writing, how to pull back and take critique of one's own limb. You toss questions from the shadows of the cab, questions that make me arch my back when the right angle of leather behind you has me expecting silence, or, at most, a wink. Still, suddenly, here I am now, just lying here in these sheets,

loosely bound and holding still so as not to rattle against myself, not to wake you. Why would papers be of use to you now? You have an old fashioned computer and a history with word processors, and what do you need with rainforest, anyway?

Starts are easy for you, you said, you just begin typing and the rest of the story awaits. You roll back eventually to those first lines and cut out the parts that didn't lead to where you were going, to the origin of the arc. I lie awake, naked next to you and think, *forget a hearing test*. You've fallen back to sleep and I can see in the slack of blanket that your knees have loosened at the joint. I roll to face the shuttered window. *Forget a hearing test*, I think, *you've got sheets and sheets to go before the binding*. My eyes, closed, shoot around the inside of my lid in squares, looking up left, right, down, left, and up, as if I am tracing the four corners of the paper, searching for the right-angled edges. I can feel the small muscles moving quickly under the brow bone, bouncing and holding sway for a few seconds at each corner they meet. I think, *there has to be a starting point*.

Someone told me once it was these nighttime eye dances and closed eye movement that left my eyes sticky when I wake, my lashes crackling with pus. It is that pus that I pull away from my eyes in the morning when I stretch my lids sideways from the outside corner and collect small bits of dust beneath my nails. It is yellowed like the flakes that peel out in stripes from the inside of the back covers of my favorite books, that peel away in flexible lines, reminding you that even if now they're just flakes, once they were glue. I can tell already this morning that when I open my eyes they will be murky and pasty around the lids, that if you place one thumb under my lid you'll feel the water weight and have no choice but to notice that I've been rattling here next to you, unbound but collected. There has to be a starting place.

8c