

Digital Leftovers: A Love Story

Our relationship, compiled into one Microsoft Word document, numbered 647 pages. Since I had spent an entire day searching for all these remainders—in Facebook messages, wall-posts, IM chat transcripts, emails— and had long since lost any sense of proportion, I could not remember whether I had thought there would be more pages, or fewer. And I could not decide which I would have preferred. We were over, but there were just so many *words* — so many thousands of digital leftovers.

There have always been love letters, whether printed in neat script on tiny scented stationery cards or scrawled on long sheets of lined notebook paper. And the size of something, even, has no correlation to the pain it brings — a song heard over the credits of a movie seems as painful as throwing out a box of men’s clothes gathered up from hiding places in a bedroom that looks like a bomb went off in it. A single line in a book gave me more anguish than changing my Facebook relationship status had, and the stray phrase that recalls the lover is a very old-fashioned kind of torment: “The absence of a thing is not merely that, it is not simply a partial lack, it is a disruption of everything else, it is a new state which one cannot foresee in the old.” This is Proust, whose novella about Swann and Odette indicted my own emotional state so sharply that I wrote a paper about the story in between episodes of weeping in a library carrel.

Yet lovers before the Internet could box up love letters, stash them away to be discovered by grandchildren. Or they could burn them. I met a man once who was writing a book about relics—locks of hair, mostly, which were very popular as keepsakes for hundreds of years and often stored in envelopes inscribed with first names. He told me about a woman who, after she popped her blisters, pasted the dry skin into a scrapbook and arranged flower petals around it. From blister to stigma, he said, and he thought it was a beautiful story. I told him that remembering everything was not always good for a person. He, the unmoved archivist, answered, “It is good for the world.” What I didn’t say was that I understood that girl with her blisters; from one agonist to another, I know what it’s like to memorialize something that just plain hurts.

So I am not the innocent victim of a digital age. I exercise some tenuous control over my online profiles and archives. I hid Nik on Facebook, so that I would never see him unexpectedly. In fact, I hid him again and again as the site upgraded and reset its defaults. But I visited his Facebook profile more than 120 times in less than a month, three or four times every day. At my desk in the mornings, or in my bed at night, I opened the page furtively, not clicking or poking or writing, just looking. I was not an addict, just afraid — afraid that he had disappeared, now that I could no longer see him, now that I had deleted his number from my phone, now that we had mutually blocked each other on Gchat and AOL Instant Messenger. At the time I thought I couldn’t stand the idea of him being in the world and not thinking of me. Unable to make him think of me, I thought of him.

All of this, perhaps, would have been different had there been no Internet to make us fall in love in the first place. Nik and I lived half an hour apart in Ohio, and over the summer before my freshman year, we had first IM-ed constantly, then driven to and from each other’s houses so many times my mother jokingly asked if he were moving in. But we were not, at the time, *dating*. Looking back I think I must have been very foolish not see the possibilities for disaster.

But at eighteen, I had very loose ideas about what constituted a relationship and very firm beliefs about a long-distance relationship's place in college life. So the night before I drove down I-80 with all my things packed into a 12-passenger van, I drove between Nik's house and mine 3 times, picking up clothes I had forgotten, stopping at Steak N Shake for a Diet Coke, Wal-Mart for new bath towels. I don't remember if we slept, but it was all right—I fell asleep in the car as my mother pulled out of the driveway, listening to songs Nik had loaded onto my iPod, and this felt like a good ending. Of course, it couldn't end there, and I hadn't really wanted there to be an ending.

In September, Nik and I talked all the time as I tried to learn (how to study, how to drink, how to be in a new place), sometimes on the phone, as I leaned against a tree late at night, square lighted windows arrayed around me in dark castled walls. But mostly, we talked over the Internet, between my classes or *in* my classes. We waited to decide that we were dating until we were together on one of my visits home, but by that time it would have seemed strange if we had not first said "I love you" over AIM, which we did.

Sitting on my futon with my friends around me, all unaware and talking of other things, I copied and pasted the message into a Word document and saved the document under his name. To this I occasionally added other fragments of text. Words of love, plans for the summer, phrases meaningless to anyone else. "Bye, sugar," he wrote. "Do a little dance, pat your head, and say goodbye."

After we broke up, I catalogued more furiously. It was all pain, it was all worth saving, the logic went—if there was a logic. Before that day I spent pulling the remnants, though, there was the break-up itself. Developing over the course of months, it possessed a multifaceted horror, fought out as it was over text messages, chat, and email. Given so many avenues to talk to each other, we argued in all of them more than we ever had in person—perhaps because we were different people in each medium. That was always a question: how could *you* do that? Say that?

The phone call had become a last resort, and the last night it was a phone call that ended everything. It came when I was at a party, after we had exhausted everything we could say over text. I left the party, walked outside into the rain, picked up the phone. I sat down on a curb in the rain next to a parked motorcycle, and screamed at him until he hung up. I looked at my red skirt, at my shaking hands, the black water pooled in the gutter. I walked home, and fell asleep with my phone next to my head on my pillow, ringer turned up as loud as it could go.

That was not the end (remember, I had wanted it never to end). It has occurred to me that in the Internet age there may never be a real end. Nik and I have not spoken in over two years, yet we are still Facebook friends. In the immediate aftermath of our break-up, casual Gmail searches for innocuous phrases turned up his emails by the hundreds, my fingers entered his name automatically when I opened a new email message. And of course, I checked his Facebook profile over and over again. At last I decided on a course of action: I would copy every bit of correspondence between us, delete each piece (wall-post by wall-post) and then print the file or bury it deep in an external hard drive, saving it for some future date when I might want to see it. Or when my grandchildren might discover it, cleaning out my computer after I died.

I began in the morning, early enough that I felt a little surprised by my own awake-ness, the focus I exhibited. I went through our emails first, conversations from more than two years. Lunch passed by as I went through the chat logs saved by AIM and Gmail. Facebook was last, messages first and then photo albums. Save, delete. Night fell. My friends came to take me to

dinner, and I went but sat silently in the middle of the dining hall. The real world was on my computer.

Which was always the problem, I thought, when I went back to my computer and saved the document under the title “Leftovers.” I had put too much faith in words communicated digitally, the text of our relationship. I built a boyfriend out of those words and took him apart again, in part because he became too real. If I tried to put Nik in my words, he would be a composite person. The thick brown shaggy hair that grew out while we were dating until it reached past his chin; pale green-hazel eyes; paler skin that sunburned when he uncovered it, which he never did, as he hated swimming pools and put all his clothes on again immediately after showering. He had agile fingers from playing video games while IMing me in a different window. He hated John Cusack in *Say Anything* because Cusack ruined romance for guys ever after with his boombox proclamation of love, and he could rant for ten minutes about the devastation of American culture—rants half-cribbed from Chuck Klosterman, but always witty and charming. He only listened to music he had not listened to before, except Modest Mouse. When he was angry, he became quiet and withdrew. Only when he was even angrier would he shout; I think I was the only person who ever saw him that way. But I was also the only person who received photos of his haircuts and lunches via text message, the only person he fell asleep with on the phone, the only person he ever loved.

Well, the first person he loved.

Even with the Internet, nothing lasts forever. I learned that from Proust, in search of lost time, and from Nik. I have forgotten a lot, busy with other things. My hard drive crashed; I lost the file. I looked at his Facebook profile after a year and saw that he was In a Relationship with someone else. Last summer, I again fell for someone through the Internet. I met Jeff in New Orleans. We were both spending the summer there, as interns in separate offices, offices connected by long Gchat conversations between bursts of productivity. We are still talking—on the Internet, over text message, between classes. I haven’t counted all the conversations since then, but there must be thousands of words, hundreds of pages in all.

All the Words I Knew

A Memoir of the National Spelling Bee

linnet

li-nət / *n.* Middle French *linette*, from *lin* flax, from Latin *li-num*; from its feeding on flax seeds circa 1530 : a common small brownish Old World finch (*Acanthis cannabina*) of which the male has red on the breast and crown during breeding season.

Hannah Due was from Grand Forks, North Dakota. Like me, she was home-schooled, although she was the kind of home-schooler who wore blue denim jumpers and blushed when people said hell instead of heck. At the 2003 Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee, I stared at the back of her head for several rounds because bee procedure dictates that the next three spellers line up behind the person currently spelling, so that everything proceeds decently and in order. The Master of Affairs will not call your name, because it is the only word in a bee that does not matter. You are expected to know that you are speller 1, or 21, or 251, and to stand in the proper sequence because no one will call your number either. So I, number 41, followed Hannah Due, 40, for six rounds, studying her wilted blond ponytail and her hands wringing behind her back.

In the sixth round, the Bee Pronouncer, Dr. Jacques Bailly, intoned “*linnet*,” and Hannah’s hands stopped wringing. I tensed in anticipation as she requested the definition, then asked to have the word used in a sentence. Some spellers use these tactics to triple-check that the right word is the one they are visualizing rather than a homonym; others use them to bargain for time and scraps of aid before the bell rings. It was clear that Hannah belonged to the second category. I scoffed at her doubt. I had read Yeats, hadn’t she? She ought to know that you could “never tear the linnet from the leaf.” So I had already mentally wrung her out when, in the final seconds of her allotted time, she guessed the double N that saved her for one more round. She smiled at me, vibrating with relief, as she returned to her seat.

When I stepped up to the microphone, I was calm and too small for my white XL official bee polo shirt, which would have reached past my thighs had I not been instructed to tuck it lumpily into my black polyester pants. The lights, positioned for ESPN cameras, made me sweat. Their glare made it hard to distinguish individuals in the crowd, with the exception of J. J. Goldstein’s yenta mother, easily identifiable because she was sewing bee-themed pillowcases a few rows back near the center aisle.

I adjusted the microphone to stop my hands from wringing like Hannah’s. Dr. Bailly said “*byrnie*” in his stark clear tones, and I knew at once how loneliness felt. In every other

moment of my conscious life, in every other bee, in every other round, I had been in the company of words I recognized and understood. They unwrapped in my mind like shiny italicized gifts, and tapped themselves out like telegraph messages. They were newspaper headlines, bold-faced remnants of the *ursprache*; they were eldritch beacons; they were fragments of radioactive pitchblende picked up for their peculiar luster. Most of all they were unlooked-for treasure. But here, standing on the stage in front of cameras and my family and a hundred other spellers, I did not meet words I knew, but the wrong word, letters mixed up until there was only blankness. After a brief pause, I asked for a definition.

kamelaukion

/kɑ mi'lɑfkiɔn; Eng. ,kæm ə'lɔ ki, ɒn, ,kɑ mə'lɑʊ-/ Medieval Greek kamēlaúkion, alteration of kalymmaúchion (derivative of kálymma veil, covering; see calyptra), perhaps by association with kámēlos camel, but sense relation unclear; a tall, black, brimless, flat-topped hat, worn by the clergy of the Eastern church.

I came to spelling by an unusual path, though superficially I was like any other speller who wakes up and realizes she is almost out of time to gain glory through verbal prowess. I was always a good speller and decided to compete in my last year of eligibility (eighth grade, or age fourteen). I was thirteen and in eighth grade, so in a fit of recklessness, I entered the local bee for home-schooled students, who were excluded from the public school bees. I envisioned myself at sixteen—or sixty—watching the bee on TV and saying, “I could have done that.” I didn’t want to miss my last opportunity.

Of course, the real reason, the one that doesn’t fit so neatly into the story of what I might have regretted, was that when I was eleven my father started keeping me alone in my room for a week or two at a time. In this punishment, I was allowed to talk to no one but him. My family obeyed these rules for the most part, though occasionally one of my sisters would sneak in to talk to me. At first, the silence covered me so thoroughly that I thought I might suffocate in it. In the first few days without sound, the air felt heavy and seemed to shift until I thought I could hear the dust motes circling around my head. The light weighed on me, but even more, the dark, which muffled every sound.

Eventually, I took comfort in words. Usually, my father gave me a Bible to remind me of my need for repentance. Sometimes he highlighted passages for me to remember. I read the genealogies of Genesis and Numbers without comprehension, tonguing the words as they fell out of my mouth and into the air. I collected words that surprised me and kept notebooks stuffed with favorites and lists of names. I took delight in cataloguing and pronouncing, learning that *Aoife* was EE-feh, and *lazuli* was LA-zhuh-lee. I learned to love the sounds of words I didn’t understand. I also learned that I had an almost-perfect recall for words I had seen only once.

Yet I never remembered the first word that made me an official spelling bee champion. There are multiple levels in the bee world: first, the local bee, which was sponsored by a

home-school association; then the regional bee, sponsored by the *Columbus Dispatch*, which then funded the trip to the national bee in Washington, D.C.; and finally, the Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee, the culmination of spelling bee study for 251 students from the U.S., Guam, and one American school on a military base in Germany. Hardly anyone knew the exact hierarchy of bees, but everyone grasped the basics of competition. For months, whenever people heard that I had won my local bee, they invariably asked me to spell my winning word.

This is the question every speller I know is used to, the one that both good and bad spellers ask. Whether or not you are a good speller seems to be a universal categorization, a line that divides every group of people in two. Good spellers ask this question because they want to test themselves against your range of knowledge; bad spellers ask it because they want to be part of your club, the exclusive group of people who know the shapes of words. I never knew what to say to anyone, however they categorized themselves. Finally, I settled on *chthonic* for the good spellers, and *camouflage* for the bad.

During the regional bee in Columbus, Ohio, I watched number twelve, a hearing-impaired boy, boldly spell *magenta* as N-A-G-E-N-T-A after scrawling virtual letters on the backs of his wrists and asking to hear the word over and over. Fewer than five minutes later, his parents had appealed the judges (claiming, among other things, mispronunciation), and we spellers sat wriggling on our seats, thrown out of the competitive vacuum into a strange world where the next word—*the next word*—no longer arrived on schedule.

“What was your last word?” the girl in front of me whispered as she swiveled in her seat.

She was another one of the arm-spellers, the ones who used the tender undersides of their arms as if it were a post-it note. She had long straight hair that covered half her face, which she pushed out of her eyes as she repeated her question.

“I have no idea,” I answered honestly, though she stared at me as if she suspected me of mocking her. I looked back at her without smiling, knowing she wouldn’t believe that each word emerged glossy and untarnished, revealing itself to me with intrinsic perfection, before vanishing. She wouldn’t believe that this trance-like state was so complete that I forgot each word as soon as I spelled it.

“I don’t remember any of them,” I clarified.

“*Kamelaukion*,” said the boy next to me, who smelled like puberty. “Your last word was *kamelaukion*.”

At that moment, the bee resumed. The challenger had not been re-admitted, to the chagrin of his parents and no one else. M-A-G-E-N-T-A, I thought as I waited for my number to be up. K-A-M-E-L-A-U-K-I-O-N. O-E-R-S-T-E-D. I-N-T-A-G-L-I-O. I fell again into the world of words.

patronymic

/ˌpɑ-trə-ˈni-mɪk/ *n.* ultimately from Greek patronymia patronymic, from patr- + onyma name, 1612 : a name derived from that of the father or a paternal ancestor usually by the addition of an affix or patronymic : *adj.*

I remembered my winning word after the *Dispatch* bee only because a newspaper columnist reminded me, asking if I had known *patronymic* before I spelled it. “Had you seen it before?”

I wanted to tell him that it didn’t matter if I had or had not because I *knew* that word in itself. But I told him about learning its Greek origins from reading *The Odyssey* the year before. Finally, exhausted by trying to explain, I said, “It was just so simple.”

He laughed at my answer. My mother hovered nearby to beam her pride and disavow any credit for my win, insisting truthfully that I had done it all myself. The newspaper asked my mother and me to appear in a photo together, though it was never printed. In the photo that did appear with the article, my hair is a crazy halo and my shirt is askew. I am not looking directly at the camera, but instead past it, into an invisible horizon. I can’t stop smiling.

My father learned about my win from the newspaper article. I hadn’t told him I was planning to compete, afraid that one of his sudden rages would prevent me from going to the bee. But, surprisingly, he congratulated me and called all my aunts and uncles to tell them the good news. When my name-plated trophy was delivered to the house, he placed it in the center of the mantel, even though I said it was too conceited and my mother said it was too gaudy.

A week or so after the *Dispatch* bee, I knocked on the door to his home office to ask him a question about dinner and heard him telling someone on the phone that I had known *patronymic* because of his teaching. I couldn’t speak. The words I had thought were mine seemed no longer in my possession. He had moved in to occupy the space I had staked out for myself. I wanted to shout at him all the words I knew that he never would. I wanted to whisper that my revenge would be to win without his help. When I could speak again, I told my mother that I didn’t want him to accompany us to the national bee. She said I should reconsider because it would hurt him to know that I didn’t want him there, but I refused to listen to her, stoic against all potential repercussions.

In the days that followed, I began to compile a binder full of hundreds of pages of words. The first word on the first page was *aardwolf*, then *abecedarian*, and so on past *croquemouche* and *gnathonic* to *zwieback* and *zymotic*. I sat by the bay window in the kitchen every day until my father returned home from work at 5:30. I copied words and word roots and definitions, repeating them to myself until I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing a page in front of me, penciled words arranged neatly on lined paper. Every day when he told me to go upstairs I took my words with me. My dictionary weighed twelve pounds, my binder almost as much. The words, in my head and in my arms, were my armor, my strength.

chiaroscurist

/kē-är-ə-'skyur-ist, kē-er-, kē-a-rə-, -'skur-/ *n.* Italian, from chiaro clear, light + oscuro obscure, dark, circa 1798 : an artist who specializes in chiaroscuro, the pictorial representation in terms of light and shade without regard to color or the interplay of light and shadow on or as if on a surface

I won the *Dispatch* bee at the end of March; I competed in the national bee at the beginning of June. In the intervening months, I studied an average of eight hours a day. Some days I managed only six, and others I made it up to ten (I noted these times down with accompanying dates in the corners of my binder, creating a ragged timetable of study hours).

During the mornings and afternoons, I usually memorized words, transferring them from dictionary to binder, or binder to notebook, in a constant recycling of verbiage that left my hands cramped and my eyes red. I had a binder of words I knew, a notebook of words I needed to know, a sheaf of papers full of words I had catalogued in order of their likeliness to appear in the bee. In the evenings, I practiced word roots and learned characteristics of different languages, the hardest part. Discovering the underlying fractures in words that ordinarily seemed whole was like a jigsaw puzzle for which you had to cut out all the pieces yourself. I was most comfortable with Romance languages and Greek, least at home when diagramming words from Germanic languages or Sanskrit.

Most spellers have coaches, parents or teachers who devote themselves to learning from Merriam-Webster's unabridged dictionary exactly how to pronounce *bodhran* in all its tricky Gaelicism or how to differentiate between macrons and schwas and dotted D's. My mother tried her best, but she was not one of these parents. She had eight children and no leftover time. When she came to my room to offer me help, it was always late, after everyone else had fallen asleep. And after the first few times, I always refused, telling her it was easier if I studied alone. She accepted this, grateful, because she was tired and anything non-Latinate thwarted her.

I did want someone to help me. I daydreamed about a beneficent guide who would take over my spelling life with spelling guides and helpful hints. But after a while, alone was the only way I knew how to be.

I was alone, but the words were still there. If I found and collected enough words, the world would hold together. Although I knew the world could not be catalogued like words, it could make sense if I did the right things, an art akin to painting only in light and dark. A print-making technique called chiaroscuro, I learned, popular centuries ago and based on relations between dark and its absence. It suited me, and I went at my task with a vengeance.

grok

/gräk/ *v.* *US slang.* Infl. -kk-. [Invented by Robert A. Heinlein (1907–), US author.] 1.

v.t. Understand intuitively or by empathy; establish rapport with. 2. *v.i.* Empathize or communicate sympathetically (*with*).

In an ideal world, or in the kind of story I used to write and then tear up, I would have read a Heinlein novel during those months of studying. I would have read the right Heinlein novel, the one that would have given me new vocabulary so that when I sat down to take the written test at the national bee, I would have heard Dr. Bailly say, “grok,” and known it immediately. I wouldn’t have had to waffle while letters reconfigured themselves in my head: G-R-O-C-K or G-R-O-K? But instead, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

My mother took me to the bookstore one day in early May so I could choose a book. Throughout my childhood, she had never bought me books because they took up too much space. But today, because it was spring, or because she wanted me to stop spending so much time studying, or perhaps because she was struck by the hedonism that makes one crave ice cream cones with two well-balanced scoops or cheap grocery store checkout line chocolate, she wanted to buy me a book. I chose *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it was a hardback with a black cover and red lettering. The red letters were embossed and I could close my eyes and run my fingers over the front of the book without losing them. My mother approved because it was a movie she had seen as a girl. “I had such a crush on Atticus Finch,” she told me. “Gregory Peck played him, and he was so dreamy.”

The next day, I started to study at my usual time, around nine a.m. But the pear tree outside the window was white and blooming next to the deep green of a Russian olive tree. I looked past the pear tree to the willows off at the edge of the yard and thought about climbing up until the branches swayed under my weight, the way I used to when we played hide and seek. I couldn’t focus on word lists, and my hand felt even more cramped than usual. I left loose sheets of words on the table without re-inserting them into the binder so they scattered to the floor when I opened the back door and abandoned my lists for my new book.

We had an overgrown garden filled with peonies whose stems were as thick as sailor’s ropes, strange gigantism in the middle of the Midwest. I sat down in a gap in the undergrowth and started to read. I didn’t stop until the sun was too hot on my head, even in the shade of the peonies. When I returned to the house, I realized that everyone else had left, an unusual occurrence in a house of ten people. I was alone. I stretched out on the living room floor under the skylight and finished reading. I didn’t let myself feel guilty for not studying until after my family came back to find me, still prone on the living room floor, the side of my face pressed into scratchy green carpet, one hand resting on my book.

The next morning, I redoubled my studying, frantic about all the missed hours when I could have been cataloguing words. And months later, when I encountered “grok,” I wondered if I might have known it if I hadn’t read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I might even have read a different book and been saved from the tears at the end of the written test, from the way my throat felt as if it were too full and the way my lips pressed against my teeth until

they were sore. But I was alone with words that day in a different way, and for a while I was guiltless and free.

byrnie

/ˈbɜːni/ n. obs. exc. Hist. Also (earlier) †*brinie*. ME. [ON *brynja*. Meta-thetic var. orig. Sc.] A coat of mail.

When I asked for a definition, I couldn't visualize any part of the world except the opening B, even when I looked down the aisle toward the top of the far auditorium door, where God sits when you are onstage. Dr. Bailly gave the definition in his habitual monotone: "a coat of mail, or hauberk." I wished for the word *hauberk* as a substitute. I wished for *linnet*. Hannah Due had no idea how lucky she was. No one had ever used *byrnie*, unlike *linnet*, in a poem. There was no romanticism in missing *byrnie*, only battle-scarred reverberations and years of people making disbelieving faces until I explained, no, not *Bernie*. At last, I asked to hear the word used in a sentence.

The sentence talked about girding up for battle, offering no further clues about the spelling. When I strained to see the word in my mind, it circled itself, U's and I's and E's and Y's trading places with abandon. As the audience waited, I saw the head judge move her hand to the top of the bell, preparing to ring me out. I closed my eyes and, for the first time, envisioned nothing but the dim recesses of the ceiling above the camera lights, the judges' expectant faces, the darkness of my own eye-lids. So I opened my eyes and started to spell. A little too fast, and softly, into the microphone: B-I-R-N-E-E.

The judge slapped the top of the bell.

Ding.

I have never seen the recording of myself in the moment of failure. For months and years after the national bee, I couldn't watch any of my family's videotapes. Even catching glimpses of dramatized movie versions of spelling bees made me sit up straighter, shoulders making a break for my ears, as if I had suddenly moved from an overheated room into the Antarctic. I have never seen *Spellbound*, the most famous documentary about the bee, nor have I watched any subsequent national spelling bees. Even after years had passed, the sound of spellers released in me the same frenetic anxiety, the same shudder of defeat that I felt as soon as I heard the bell. If people say that failure is a plummeting sensation in your stomach, they are describing only the immediate aftermath. Failure, properly done, settles inside the bones like a weather ache in hurricane season.

When I left the stage, I did not break down. I refused to go to the Cry Room, where staffers waited with cookies and gathered your family for private condolences. I seemed so composed that the staffers assigned to escort me off-camera let go of my arms and let me

walk away. So I kept walking, past where Mrs. Goldstein sewed, past the rows of journalists, past my mother, past the other losing spellers clustered at the back of the auditorium. I knew I should stay and be gracious about losing, or let myself be comforted in the Cry Room, but I couldn't stay where I could hear the words. In all my attempts to make the world the way I wanted it, I hadn't counted on failing.

I did not stop moving until I had left the auditorium behind. I needed to leave the sounds of the words (as I walked out, someone else was losing, spelling *betony*, a word I knew, as B-E-T-T-A-N-Y). I stopped in the middle of the main lobby, an atrium filled with palm trees and plastic bromeliads, unable to keep going. My legs shook. A piano floated on an island in a clear green pool reeking of chlorine. A man floated there, too, playing imitation Chopin that tinkled up to the distant ceiling of the atrium before falling back into artificial light. Some people were eating a late lunch in the café by the water's edge, near the floating piano. They may have looked at me with curiosity or indifference, but I couldn't tell. My eyes filmed over like windows in a heavy rain. The world grew silent as I thought of all the words I knew.

Family History

By the time I am diagnosed with bipolar disorder type II, I have known Dr. Bradley for years. I know that he is divorced with two children, that he dated a beautiful Russian nurse who quit last year under obscure circumstances, that he colors his hair to stop the gray from infringing on his catalogue-model looks. He delivered my littlest sister, now seven, and he cried when my youngest brother died after several days in an incubator, his lungs hesitantly fluttering like moth wings before they finally deflated. Dr. Bradley has spent years counseling my mother after suicide attempts. In many ways, he knows us better than my closest friends who, blithe and unsuspecting, have always accepted my selective disclosures about my family. So when he pauses, clears his throat, and asks if I have a family history of bipolar disorder, I stare at him without speaking. It seems impossible that he doesn't know about my father.

For several minutes, I have trouble comprehending what he's saying, though he's kind and clear. Based on what I've told him – that I've had to leave parties because the urge to scream was so uncontrollable I felt I might disintegrate, that I've stayed up for days without speaking or going to class, that I've frightened my boyfriend with my bursts of rage – bipolar disorder seems probable. It often manifests in people around my age, especially in creative high-achieving people. There is no blood test; he will give me medication, a combination of new antipsychotic drugs and traditional lithium pills, and see if I improve. Confirming my family history is the last piece of the diagnosis. Heredity strikes most people as soon as they look in the mirror, in how much the jawline protrudes or how adamantly the earlobes crease, so I should not be so surprised at being confronted with my own history. Studying a chart of the cardiovascular system, I briefly wonder if I have always known that I carried with me more than my father's curly hair and dry sense of humor. But this is impossible, and far too mystical for the sterility of the exam table. It is true, though, that I have always feared my father, not just the physical reality of him – those thick hands that have left bruises around my throat and shoved my mother's teeth through her cheeks – but the lingering effects of his presence.

When I was six, I went to the kitchen expecting breakfast and found my father frying Sesame Street videotapes in the cast-iron skillet. The charred plastic littered the kitchen for days and smoke stained the walls for the whole summer, until my father was released from his month-long stay in the hospital and repainted the entire house as penance. He also mended the holes he'd made in the walls and bought a new couch to replace the one he'd gutted with a butcher knife one night while we were sleeping. To celebrate, we ate store-bought pecan pie in a kitchen that smelled of fresh white paint. He talked about repairing the furnace and my sister showed him the stuffed dog named Rosie she'd gotten for her birthday. Although this cycle – destruction, then rehabilitation – has happened many times, I have always recalled the precision of his hands as he stood so calmly by the stove stirring twisted plastic with a metal spatula.

A month before my diagnosis, my sister and I fought about who would use the car, a typical sibling fight, except in its escalation. I started screaming and threw a book at her head, threatening to call the police on her and report the car stolen if she took it. When she moved toward the door, I got a knife from the kitchen and told her I would slash the tires before I would let her leave. She stopped arguing with me to say, disbelievingly, "You're just like Daddy." I wanted to tell her that I couldn't be like him because he is crazy and I am not. Instead, I began to weep soundlessly, collapsing to the ground, my mouth gaping and silent. Now, in the exam

room, I feel that type of ache again, beyond expression because no noise can cure it. It is here that I realize my entire life has converged in a dark pattern newly revealed.

When my father was nineteen – the same age I am now – he cut up houseplants in precise segments and neatly ate a plateful with a fork before his brother found him and rushed him to the hospital. Later that month, after the doctors bandied around the word “schizophrenia” for a while, he received his own proper diagnosis. In 1979, lithium pharmacology had been approved for the treatment of manic depression, as bipolar disorder was called then, so his illness was manageable if he took his pills. But he never liked lithium, or the other medications his doctors prescribed. I wonder if I too will feel blunted and blurred without other forces sharpening themselves on my mind. Dr. Bradley asks if I have any questions before he writes me a prescription, and I say no. I am familiar with the required monthly checkups and learned the difference between the words “manic” and “maniac” when I was seven. Years before I grew up a little and participated in the national spelling bee, I was awed by the crucial distinction created through the addition of an A.

The strangest part of hearing the diagnosis is that I suddenly want something I haven’t wanted in years: to talk to my father. I know that he ran away after the doctors told him the news and his brothers found him four days later on a beach in California, but I know nothing else. I would like to call my father and say, “I know I’ve always hated you, but as it turns out, I’m just like you.” Perhaps he would tell me how he felt when he found out, if he slept on the beach and wandered through a shabby town looking for the anonymity that would let him lose his label, or if he blurted his diagnosis to people to try it out. Mostly, I would like to know if he would have come back, had they not found him, or if instead he would have woken up and walked into the ocean one day, the only person to separate the sky from all that water. The lure of water in the lungs, of the non-breathing world, is one that I too will face in the months after the diagnosis.

But my father and I haven’t exchanged more than a few words since I was fourteen, when he tried to strangle me, saying that he had brought me into this world and he could take me out of it. After that, he left us, hauled out by police officers and kept away by court orders; I no longer know his number. I will not call him, nor mention when I see him for a few minutes at Christmas that I am also bipolar. Yet months after, when I am assigned *Paradise Lost* for a class, I will start to cry upon reading a piece of the poet’s invocation:

*though fallen on evil days,
on evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
in darkness, and with dangers compass’d round,
and solitude; yet not alone.*