LITTLE WONDERS:
A MEMOIR IN FOUR PARTS

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by

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Debra Fern Adair, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing and English, has presented a thesis titled, *Little Wonders: A Memoir in Four Parts*, in an oral examination held on June 29, 2017. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

My creative thesis, Little Wonders: A Memoir in Four Parts, is a manuscript of literary nonfiction. I reflect on the past with respect to marriage and motherhood in the lives of my grandmother, my mother, myself, as well as on the experiences of my two sons. I explore memories in order to uncover the significance of being able to remember them. This memoir reflects on my decision to make a new life for myself and my sons alone, a conclusion I consider against the life choices of my mother and grandmother, thereby shedding light on the intergenerational transmission of gendered expectations on marriage and on divorce for the women in my family. In exploring this process of negotiating loss and subsequent rebuilding, I examine how creative expression can be both an outlet from and a response to these stresses in our lives and I weigh the question of what is important to keep, leading me towards a consideration of the objects that symbolize and resonate with the past. I have been influenced by memoirists Lorri Neilsen Glenn, Haven Kimmel, and Alice Walker, concerning their explorations of memory, honesty, and seemingly small actions. Memoir theorists have informed my writing: Patricia Hampl, Vladimir Nabokov, Ben Yagoda, and Philip Lopate. These experts have educated me on the nature of creative nonfiction writing: Hampl’s claim that we carry only images of value, so that from revision and reflection—Nabokov’s process of “caress[ing] the detail”—significance and meaning from memory are revealed; Yagoda’s consideration of the imprecision of memory; and Lopate’s instruction to question why it is we want to write about others. In my critical introduction, I engage with work by theorists D. W. Winnicott and Jo Malin. The theoretical understandings of Winnicott’s transitional object are considered, allowing me to explore the power of our objects and their space
made internally available to us from these early associations. Malin’s ideas on embedded maternal narratives allow for new subjectivities for the women in my family, myself, and my sons, creating a dialogue within the memoir, validating all of our experiences, born out of their narratives and my own.
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DEDICATION

To Andrew, to Aiden,
and to Barb Boughner, my mom
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NOTE ON IN-TEXT CITATIONS

In keeping with the practice of other memoirs, including Lorri Neilsen Glenn’s *Threading Light: Explorations in Loss and Poetry*, rather than throughout the manuscript, my referencing is included at the end.
Introduction

Several years ago, I read a piece in *Victoria* magazine, a memoir by Patricia Hampl, entitled “The Need to Remember.” It was a small memoir, and I believe this was the first instance in which I was introduced to this literary form. Hampl’s piece was the first instalment of *Victoria*’s new memoir section. The memoir forum in this nostalgic, neo-Victorian style magazine is “dedicated to writers who remember, who capture the gestures, the furniture, and the fabric of bygone times, who help us all go home again” (*Victoria* 36). It began with how Hampl wrote letters in English for her Czech grandmother and ended with a description of how she herself is compelled to remember, to explore and to write about what she knows (36, 119). I have always remembered two things from my initial reading of her piece all those years ago: the first is that Hampl reflected on why she wrote memoir, citing after much consideration an inherent need to do so (119); the second was the surprise and slight optimism with which I still recall thinking, *You can write this?* A curiosity and a space for opportunity that I am now only beginning to recognize again formed in me back then, at that reading, and I am grateful that I came across her piece. As I save many things, I have held onto this issue; its pages are yellowing but the magazine is in perfect condition. Hampl’s memoir not only entertained and educated me but also planted a seed about the idea of memoir that has grown for me—how it offers writers a way to write about their lives and their families, how through memoir one can think about the significance of seemingly small things, and how it offers a way to write about memory and reflect on why we remember in the first place.
This project consists of a manuscript of literary nonfiction, more specifically, a memoir, entitled *Little Wonders: A Memoir in Four Parts*. In part one, “Our Funerary Summer,” my personal position is situated, as a single mother of my two boys, Andrew and Aiden. I write about my life as a single parent, challenges I have faced and experiences I have had with my children. I also write about my marriage and what led to its breakdown, including my preconceptions both about marriage and about roles we occupy within that institution.

In part two, “Pretty Things,” I write about my mother, what I know about her childhood and that of her siblings, and what I am coming to learn about her past. I explore some of the hardships she faced while growing up and some of the challenges faced by my grandmother. I write about little things my grandmother did, through which we came to know she cared about us. In looking back, I’ve come to realize that both my grandmother and my mother found self-expression through the smallest of ways.

In part three, “Tendrils Around the Sun,” I write about my own childhood, including that of my siblings, Shannon and Stephen, what I remember as a child about my mother and my parents’ marriage, including how we moved frequently, and how my perspective of my mother and her position in our family has evolved over the years. While her domestic life was often difficult, she remained married to keep our family together. Witnessing her struggles permitted me, over time, to eventually conceive of the necessity of divorce for myself, even though persisting in one’s marriage had been long instilled in me. I also reflect on specific events in order to determine the significance of being able to remember them.
Lastly, in part four, “Little Wonders,” I return to writing about being a single mother to my two boys and how I hung on to my children’s belongings in order to deal with the divorce. I write about the past and how being a mother has helped me understand more about my own mother and grandmother.

With respect to marriage, divorce, and parenthood across three generations, my memoir explores gender roles within these three. Writing about the limitations experienced by my grandmother and mother, I include how their difficulties have both hindered them and pushed them on to certain forms of expression throughout their lives. When their worlds were chaotic and confining they turned to little acts of creativity, to collecting objects, to a world of the imagination, with which to rebuild a sense of themselves.

In the construction of my manuscript, I look to Lorri Neilsen Glenn’s *Threading Light: Explorations in Loss and Poetry* (*Threading Light*), and to Haven Kimmel’s *She Got Up Off the Couch And Other Heroic Acts from Mooreland, Indiana* (*She Got Up*) as models for memoir. Alice Walker’s piece “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” also informs my writing. All three of these memoirs deal with mothers and daughters, all three reflect on the past, all three are working out on the page a way to make sense of their worlds. Hampl claims that while memoir “seeks to talk about ‘the big issues,’ of history and peace, death and love” (*Sojourns* 32), memoir must be written “because each of us must possess a created version of the past” (32) that is “tangible” (32) but limited by our “subjectivity” (32). Kimmel needs to recount the years of her childhood in order to arrive at a greater sense of this time in her life and her mother’s role within it; this deeper awareness and understanding is only achieved from examining the past.
Kimmel’s memoir is furnished with scenes, with recollections, with the best and most vivid recreations she can offer, and her memoir’s power lies in story. Through Kimmel’s structure of tiny stories she shows how writing about the everyday is worthy of reflection. Walker seeks not only to elevate the status of her mother but also of other mothers, mothers who were constricted by the limitations of their worlds but found self-expression from storytelling, singing, quilting, and gardening. Much of the power in Walker’s piece comes from her observations and conclusions about these women and, significantly, from her bold and candid tone. Walker is insistent about her revelations, and perhaps it is because she admits to seeing her mother and others with this wider, more appreciative understanding only later in life that her piece seems determined both to convince the reader of her beliefs and to atone for her earlier lack of awareness.

Walker writes about the beauty of her mother’s flower garden, and how prolific it was, something that made her mother revered among neighbours and passersby: “A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art” (241). I appreciate Walker’s honesty with her admission, and the intensity and emotion that inheres in her language of praise and atonement. Glenn’s memoir is the most diverse with its inclusion of epigraphs and words of wisdom, and the back and forth exploration of her memories. Glenn leads readers through her experiences of life and loss. She is a questioner, looking to other poets and teachers, looking for timeless wisdom with which to be and move within the inevitable instances of loss. She does not censor herself but allows her memory to roam, almost as if by its own inclination; what seem, at first, like
unconnected events form into an entire mosaic of a life’s joy and sadness. Glenn’s
musings of memory become cohesive and give validation to the personal and universal
journey through loss.

Memoir is a type of literary nonfiction, which is often purported to be the number
one genre at present. Lee Gutkind, co-founder and editor of Creative Nonfiction
magazine, writes that creative nonfiction is the fastest growing genre and “has become
the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities.” Philip Lopate
explains that creative nonfiction or literary nonfiction is often defined by its name,
understood by that which it is not—nonfiction (3), which means it is not a piece of
fiction but rather a true telling. Michael Steinberg and Robert Root coined the term the fourth genre to situate and label creative nonfiction apart from fiction, poetry, and drama (Moses). Literary nonfiction takes different forms, including autobiography, memoir,
and the personal essay. According to Robert Atwan in The Best American Essays 2009,
prose by the likes of E. B. White was able to serve as a twentieth-century model for
anyone wishing to learn the art of composition (xi). As well, Mary Oliver writes that
personal essays offer readers not a “didactic” (xvi) experience, but rather a “soul-felt
truth from the individual perspective of someone deft in the craft of expression” (xvi).
Even more intimately, such works are like “letters from a stranger that you cannot bear
to throw away. They haunt you; they strengthen you” (xvii). Oliver’s descriptions can
also undoubtedly apply to memoir; while the personal essay provides a space for writers
to ruminate on any topic they would like to, memoir specifically examines a portion of
someone’s life—and this nonfiction genre has the power to create a unique connection
between the author and the reader.
There is a conversational, almost casual style to memoir that serves to draw readers in. Memoir is not intended to be written like a newspaper report or like an academic article. By the very nature of the genre, readers expect to be taken on a journey of sorts with the author as she or he takes the time to recall memories, to reflect on these memories, and to consider what the significance of them might be. I write memories, because while memoir consists of pieces of someone’s life—events, experiences—these pieces are all from the past, even the recent past, and so, writing memoir is an exercise in memory and, more often than not, in many memories, often including an author’s early years. Oliver’s explanations that personal essays are like special “letters from a stranger” (xvii) indicate that something unique is being shared, despite the reader’s not knowing the author. Similarly, Hampl explains the increasing popularity of memoir by pointing out, “What characterizes the rise of memoir in recent times is . . . not a gripping ‘narrative arc,’ but the quality of voice, the story of perception rather than action” (“Dark Art” 45). In my memoir, I have, in essence, invited readers to join me as I reflect on the past, on events that I remember about my mother and my grandmother, about what it has been like to be a single parent, to remain with me as I begin to uncover the significance of these remembered fragments.

Lopate writes that memoir requires a “double perspective” (26) that allows the reader along for the actual remembered experience, while “benefitting from the sophisticated wisdom of the author’s adult self” (26). While he writes that his nonfiction students are often reluctant to share the latter reflective awareness, as they wait instead until the end to offer readers a “moment of revelation” (38), Lopate believes it is more effective to consider and reflect on memories as the author goes along, because readers
“cannot wait until page two hundred for the intelligent worldly narrator to show up” (38). Therefore, in part one, “Our Funerary Summer,” I offer some necessary context, but also, simultaneously, begin the process of reflection, in deference to Lopate’s “double perspective” (26). After introducing the early days of my separation and my life as a single mother, I construct a scene in which my sister-in-law and I find a dead bird on my front lawn. I evoke the experience with immediacy but also with the outside perspective of someone looking back in order to mine the significance of that event: “I’ve come back to this day, to this bird, to think about why it remains in my memory, why it seemingly calls out to me, asking me to look on it, asking me to remember” (1). Here, I begin writing a memory and consider the meaning of the memory all as truthfully as possible.

While memoir depends on memory, being as truthful as possible with respect to the accuracy of recall can be problematic. Ben Yagoda, in *Memoir: A History*, cites psychologists’ beliefs that memory is often reconstructed over the years and subject to “all kinds of influences, taking a heavier toll with the passage of time” (103). With respect to memory’s deficiencies, Yagoda responds with the assertions of writer Henry Adams, who believes one should acknowledge the predicament and move on: “This was the journey he remembered. The actual journey may have been quite different, but the actual journey has no interest for education. The memory was all that mattered” (111). Therefore, if the heart of the story is true, the memory is considered true. I have strived for honesty not only in the particulars of my memories but also in the essence of them; my memoir contains the truth, as best I can lay claim to it.
It is during this process of recalling and examining that the value of reflection is usually revealed to a writer. Hampl explains that memoir engages “the intersection of narration and reflection” (Sojourns 33), in that it often self-consciously “present[s] its story and consider[s] the meaning of the story” (33, emphasis hers) at the same time. This is the nature of writing memoir; Lopate writes, “the marrow often shows itself in those moments where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience” (26). Hampl also acknowledges the need for revision and “re-vision” (Sojourns 34) through continued exploration of a particular memory in order to reveal why it has been remembered. This process was perhaps the most key in writing my memoir because, repeatedly, significance was revealed to me as I wrote a memory down and considered its relevance. In part two, “Pretty Things,” my mother shares that the wildflowers she put on our table were often dismissed as weeds (54). In remembering and reflecting on her words and these events, I have more of an understanding of how important these wildflowers must have been to my mother, and how unwittingly neglectful I had been in not realizing this until now.

Hampl writes that to describe is to “trust that the act of description will find voice and out of its streaming attention will take hold of narration (“Dark Art” 48, emphasis hers). Hampl writes that this act of description involves Nabokov’s instruction, “Caress the detail, the divine detail” (48, emphasis hers). Hampl asserts that Nabokov must have felt he “could trust the truths to be found in the DNA of detail, attentively rendered in ardent description” (48). Details are the memories we carry that, when reflected on, become caressed into meaning. Hampl writes further that “all details are divine, not just Nabokov’s. . . . the poorer the supposed value, the more the detail requires description to
assure its divinity” (51). Hampl is asserting that all details are divine; however, not every fact is a detail. A detail is significant, often surprisingly so, and as such, can be caressed into meaning by this divine process of reflection. You might recall a memory, a moment from your childhood in which you owned a dog with a white collar. This memory, this image, surfaces now and again, as if a scene or tableau, always the dog with the white collar. Somehow, this image has been stored, and as Hampl advises, “We store in memory only images of value” (Sojourns 29). Through this process of continued reflection, you may caress this image into greater meaning and uncover the significance of its stored value (“Dark Art” 48, emphasis hers). By writing about the image, recreating the scene, recreating the day and events around it, by bringing in the senses, through renewed introspection and description, through this caress we bring meaning into focus. In this instance, you begin with the dog and its white collar, and then recall the walks to the park with the dog and your father. You may uncover memories of getting ice cream on the way home and happiness and security. Through continued reflection, you may then begin to realize these happy days became fewer and fewer until they stopped, altogether, perhaps because your father moved out of the house. The days at the park with the dog and the white collar may have stopped forever when your father left due to divorce. So, when you caress the detail the significance of the image is not really about the dog with the white collar but represents the loss of a parent, only made known through this process of reflection. In my memoir, from my reflecting on the details I remember, with respect to memories of my grandmother, my mother, and myself, their significance is revealed to me, often as if unveiled to me, through the process of memoir writing and through Nabokov’s instruction to caress the detail.
I have written my memoir with only a partial chronology to best position not only my story, but also part of my mother’s story. In the middle is what I know about my mother’s childhood and, later, her marriage. Part of her story is in mine and my story requires her story. In *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth Century Women’s Autobiographies*, Jo Malin writes of the relationship that is created when a mother’s narrative is positioned within a daughter’s. Malin writes that a mother’s narrative is then in a “textual relationship next to or overlapping” (6) a daughter’s, and this relationship can be “described as a ‘dialogue’ or ‘conversation’ between the texts as ‘intertexts’ and between the subjects as ‘intersubjects’” (6). Malin writes further that, within these combined texts, the mother “has a clear and insistent voice and an identity that joins the voice and the identity” (6) of the daughter writer. This combination of voices creates a dialogue or conversation between mother and daughter, between my mother and me (and my grandmother). It is not a flat, static telling—not only do my memories already weave in and around her, but also by including her narrative, part of her story, her voice, is established, both literally and theoretically, within the memoir. Her voice has helped to shape me from the past, and now, embedded within my memoir it continues to shape my memories, their telling and their significance, while my story cannot but influence hers, and influence what I can write of her, as well.

I am writing not only about being a daughter, but also about being a mother and this double role gives me a complex standpoint within the narrative. Janet Mason Ellerby writes that the practice of writing memoir “is an attempt to reconstruct a subjectivity that will be more capable of richer human possibility” (93). Including my
experiences of being not only a daughter but also a mother is like the twisting of a kaleidoscope, whereby another facet of subjectivity occurs. Malin argues that, while some writers “are also mothers who write and establish their identities through their writing” (91), a small number of texts “contain a speaking subject who speaks from this position of mother” (91) and texts “that are ‘sited’ in the writer’s identity as a mother are still rare” (91). While it would have been possible for me to write only from my vantage point as a single mother, this single perspective would have been limiting because I would then have been telling only part of my story. An exploration of memories concerning my mother makes sense to me because I couldn’t help but be influenced by her, her actions, experiences and worldview. This process of writing reveals both memories about her and their significance, and so including her narrative was both tempting and rewarding, in helping me to better understand her and even myself. Malin writes that an embedded mother’s narrative “brings the subject of this narrative into a position of ‘identity’ rather than ‘resemblance’” (6). Malin explains that theorist Anna Kuhn’s position is that “feminist writing practices resist asserting authorial supremacy over biographical material and, thus, allow the object of the narrative to assume a subject position” (7, qtd. in Malin). This subjectivity extends from me to my mother. My mother is my mother and is her mother’s daughter. I am both her daughter and a mother to my sons. Like a set of Matryoshka dolls, dolls that are both individual and part of a larger set, stories exist within stories; narratives within narratives work to inform each other, allowing for multiple dialogues and multiple representations of all of our subjectivities.
A piece of one such embedded story is my mother’s fragment *just a handful of times*. In order to increase the significance of small phrases so that a narrative is allowed to form and so that their meaning resonates deeply with the reader, throughout my memoir I have used repetition, for resonance, and for momentum. Perhaps the most notable motif, in part two, “Pretty Things,” is the phrase *just a handful of times*, the words my mother used to describe how often she saw her father after her parents’ divorce. In repetition, I aim to elevate this dismissal to echo the genuine, heartbreaking pain she felt at his absence (56). Similarly repeated is the fragment *little things* (36) whose recurrence helps to reinforce the truth in my memoir that it is the littlest things that often matter the most. I include some of the little things my son, Andrew, collected (36). I write about the objects my mother collected (50), with which she was able to express creativity and individuality. I also include the little things I do with my boys, activities, crafts, music, through which we are able to remain a family.

In my exploration of memories, some have been revealed to me, at first, as slightly humorous and then more significant, after the telling. Kimmel’s memoir *She Got Up* has a significant amount of humour, including her title, but this humour also works to reveal significant stress or hardships, specifically with respect to her mother. When Kimmel’s newly-slim mother has to wear her old, over-sized pair of pants, Kimmel describes the scene in the following way: “the crotch of the pants now hit her in the knees, so she put them on and practiced taking very small steps” (191). Her use of humour creates momentum and keeps the reader both engaged and entertained, wanting to continue along in this story with her. However, this humorous passage also reveals the challenges faced by her mother, with respect to clothing and access to the family
income. While Kimmel writes that her mother’s wardrobe “did not exist” (191), she includes how her father’s clothes “were [always] store-bought and fashionable” (191). Her father, the reader now understands, controls the money and ensures his needs are met. In just a few short words the differences in her parents’ access to money, to choice, and to their positions of power within their marriage are shown from simply recalling their clothing in an initially humorous but revealing way. While I did not set out to write humorously, I believe a few instances of humour occur which also shed light onto larger issues.

While I do have a timeline within these four parts—beginning with my life as a single parent, then writing about my grandmother, my mother as a young girl, my own childhood, and then returning to my position as a single parent—I do wander from the far past to the more recent past, as my memory guides me. In her *Threading Light*, Glenn easily moves from a time she sat with her elderly mother, who is now downsizing her apartment, who “want[s] all this gone” (79), to remembering how her own possessions as a child, during their frequent moves, “always fit in a single box” (79) and how her mother “wanted to return to the simplicity she, too, recalled from her days on a farm” (79). It is a seamless linking of the recent past with the far past, and the earlier events are brought forward, from the connection they have to the remembered events of visiting her aging mother. Not only is Glenn making sense of her mother’s desire to simplify her life by now eliminating many of her things, but Glenn is also drawing a connection from her mother’s past which helps to explain why her mother feels the way she does now. The readers are made more aware of what will provide her mother comfort, from what Glenn is now remembering.
Recently, I met writer Anne Campbell, and she told me that often nonfiction writers also write poetry because these two genres are similarly grounded in imagery. In her *Threading Light*, Glenn includes poetry at poignant moments, seamlessly transitioning her thoughts from an event into a poem that offers deeper emotion for that particular event. My poems “A Son’s Homemade Crypt” (37), “Recipe for My Mother’s Blueberry Jam” (99), and “Aiden’s Dragonfly” (116) are all my similar attempts to represent an image, a memory, more deeply than through description alone.

Throughout my memoir, I have included a myriad of things, photographs, poetry, in order to add texture and depth to my piece. Glenn’s poetry in *Threading Light* serves to enhance the immediacy of longing, coming just after her prose in which her first thoughts are revealed. I also admire Glenn’s use of things; while she does not include photographs, common in many memoirs, she does include poetry, dialogue, epigraphs, journal entries, among others, which add not only interest, depth, and a sense of validity to her remembrances, but also serve as ways for Glenn to underscore her themes of grief and loss. Glenn’s inclusion of this material gives her a deeper way to express her multifaceted experiences, which helps to reveal not only her story, but also the universal experiences of grief and loss. My memoir includes photographs, lists, poetry (my own and my mother’s), song lyrics, a recreated movie stub, a sketch, a recipe, definitions, the meanings of names, dialogue, text from my Uncle George’s book, text from my older son’s work, sentiments from Sinclair Ross’s Mrs. Bentley, text from Margery Williams’s *The Velveteen Rabbit*, and two of my younger son’s drawings. I wanted to include all of these because they not only add context, variety and texture to the memoir, but also because they symbolize the layered process we undergo in remembering and in creating.
By using them, I suggest that objects can prompt us to meaning, that seemingly simple memories often represent much more, and that through small ways, we can express a sense of ourselves; including these fragments helped contribute layers with which to form a whole manuscript, similar to the textured layers of memory.

I have also been influenced by Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” because Walker writes about the women in her family, her mother and other women, who were the foundations of their families. While living marginalized lives themselves, through small ways, they were able to express a sense of themselves. Opportunities for these women were scarce or non-existent; they were unable to go to college or to veer too far away from the restrictions and commitments of their daily lives. However, Walker writes about the seemingly small things, the gardening, the stories, the quilting, which mean more to Walker than she had realized before. From Walker’s maturity, the passing of time, and her reflection on the past and on these women, she is able to see the meaning and the significance of these works. Works which previously were considered as domestic and routine were later understood more fully because the “artist that was and is my mother showed itself to me only after many years” (240). Walker elevates the status of her mother and these women to that of artists, from the beauty and expression that is offered in what they produce. She writes of a quilt that is on display in the Smithsonian, insistent that the creator’s personality came through in its design of the Crucifixion; Walker claims this was made by “an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (239), moving beyond creating things that are only useful, that are only utilitarian, to things that are beautiful and individual. In her essay “Alice Walker:
The Black Woman Artist as Wayward,” Barbara T. Christian writes that within Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker’s major insight is “her illumination of the creative legacy of ‘ordinary’ Black women of the South” (128) and that, more than her literary roots, Walker invokes “the creativity known to her of her mother, her grandmother, the women around her” (128). Christian writes further that “Walker reflects on a truth so obvious it is seldom acknowledged: they used the few media left them” (129) in the creation of their gardens, cooking, and quilting (129). For Walker, her mother and so many of these women created to keep sane and to express themselves. I believe their creative works were also born from the limitations and pressures within their lives; there is a great possibility that these quilts would not have been so elaborate or the gardening so prolific had these women’s lives been easier. It is as though being marginalized, suffering, created the impetus for the work that followed, so that what they created was an outlet and a response, their pressures and limitations also a cause or impetus for their art and their work in the first place.

Through small acts of creativity, my mother navigated the world of motherhood and marriage in the best way she knew how, having to contend with the realities of her life which were outside of her ideals of marriage while holding on tightly to the security it did afford her and us. As her world was predominantly within the domestic realm, her acts were knitting, making jam, gardening, and writing, acts that gave her a creative outlet, and this understanding has been passed on from her to me. In part three, “Tendrils Around the Sun,” I include Virginia Woolf’s advice for women (90): “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2), in order to examine her claim further. Maybe this space for writing can also refer to
creating and imagining; when this necessary physical space is denied women, perhaps Woolf’s room can also mean an internal room, a room in the mind, where a woman can go, “to set a place for her thoughts, to visit, to reflect inwardly, especially when her physical world needs to be shared by others” (90). When both my grandmother’s and mother’s lives were confining and stressful, I believe they retreated inwardly “for nourishment of the spirit, to rebuild a sense of self, to be inspired” (90). Their making and collecting all began as an inspiration in their minds, and the output of their thoughts, the work they did, their created and collected objects offered self-expression and creativity; what began as inspiration internally was later realized and understood, also, as if within a little room in their minds.

The significance of these actions, of collecting these objects, was understood in the imagination—a work of the mind. Just as an artist experiences both inspiration and meaning of her work internally, so, too, do we; the meaning of our things, the significance of seemingly small actions, is all understood internally. When my grandmother’s world was limited by divorce, she held on to her crafts and her dreams. My mother gardened and made homemade jam. Through remembering and reflecting on their actions, I realize both of these women have passed these concepts on to me, and it is these ideas that I explore in my memoir, allowing for both a greater understanding of these women in my life and a strengthening of the bonds that we share; it is the awareness of the power from seemingly small things that I try to share with my boys, now, memories coming back to me when I can understand them the most.

As a child, my special toy(s) served as a kind of “transitional object” (Winnicott 14) for me. D.W. Winnicott identifies transitional objects and transitional phenomena as
part of the earliest stages of one’s development, which create the initial “realm of illusion” (14) which continues throughout our lives. He writes that these “start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” (12). While these transitional objects, then, seem to play a significant role in our development, they also allow for the possibility of any initial meaning and any continued meaning of our things. Caroline A. Jones writes, “For Winnicott, each departure into independence, each transition into separate existence, could be mediated by this evocative object” (241). Jones indicates that not only is this “realm of illusion” (Winnicott 14) a space made available throughout our lives, but also that this process of maturity can be negotiated with an object. Susan Pollak writes that the “evocative object holds more than memory; it holds healing potential. We create our objects and are inspired by them” (230). As a child, my toy(s) likely served me in this process, enabling me to move step by step into independence (and move within this maturation process literally from place to place). I believe I held onto this awareness, on some level, because, years later, in the early days of the divorce, I knew it was necessary to save my children’s objects because I knew it would provide a comfort to them and perhaps help them negotiate the changes in their lives. For Winnicott, this neutral area of experience (12), this space, allows for “the play area” (13) of young children, continues as space available for us, “and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative thinking, and to creative scientific work” (14). Winnicott advises how it is that we are able to experience a world of the imagination, a place where we can experience art or create. When my mother retreated to an inner room of the mind for inspiration for her
poetry, for creativity and sanctuary, this mental space was initially created from Winnicott’s “area of illusion” (12) available to all of us. Jones writes that “we evoke meanings from the special objects we call art, we become their willing subjects. We think with them, in order to think ourselves into coherent subjectivity” (242). What Jones presents as the very condition of possibility for subjectivity was created by the women in Walker’s family from the art they produced, as well as by the women in my family, especially my mother, from the works that she created and collected.

The idea of imagining art in one’s mind parallels the creativity that was also present in my mother’s mind when she wrote poetry, when she arranged her objects to create our home again and again. From our many moves and my mother’s ongoing taking down and putting up again, through the presence of her shiny, familiar objects, “we felt a sense of familiarity and tranquility” (56). Only after writing these memories down and reflecting on them is their significance becoming revealed to me, explaining why I have hung onto these memories in the first place. These objects hold significance because individuality and creative expression can be realized from our things, and our things can prompt us to feel tremendous emotion.

In part three, “Tendrils Around the Sun,” I briefly include artist Agnes Martin’s story of her own childhood, specifically, from her birth, because it has to do with adjustment—her adjustments symbolize adjustments we all make, and I think this can apply significantly to women, women like my mother and my grandmother. Whether it is an act of remembering or of self-mythologizing, Martin claims, in her documentary, to recall the moment she was born. She recounts this story, explaining that she saw herself as if a figure with a little sword and that she had the feeling that she was destined to cut
her way through life, victory after victory, but at the moment of her birth, half of her victories fell to the ground (*Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World*). Throughout her life, Martin searched and discovered meaning through her abstract-expressionist painting. I have been intrigued by Martin’s story, and in keeping with the specifics of memoir, I have tried to unpack why it remains significant to me. In recalling Martin’s idealism towards life and then her subsequent adjustment to life, I think her story is one about process, about acceptance and then, about becoming. She begins with an initial loss, for Martin, the loss of perfection, or a kind of ideal. She later must have been able to negotiate this loss to a new position where she could recover and then respond to life, to her life, on her own terms, in her own way—for Martin, it is through her painting, through creating. This seems to be a way to explain what Walker’s mother did and what my mother and grandmother did. My mother, I believe, looked up to the idealized position of wife and mother. She understood life the way society showed her it *might* work, and for a while, she determinedly held to this, in spite of difficulties and limitations. As in Martin’s story and as in Martin’s initial loss, I believe my mother, too, suffered a loss when coming to terms with the impossibility of perfection, with the necessary rejection of her initial idealism within a secure, two-parent family. However, from Martin’s story, I believe this adjustment can be thought of as a process. My mother, too, went from idealism to loss, to then acquiescing to her new life and from that, to search for a kind of meaning, for creativity, for self-expression. Martin’s story seems a process, then, just as my mother’s, my grandmother’s, and my own. My grandmother experienced moments of self-expression after re-stabilizing herself from divorce. My mother’s poetry, even her moments of Motherly Duty (52) which presented
an opportunity to be “seen as a good mother, teaching her daughter a valuable lesson” (108) all seem a kind of adjustment to her new life and a creative response to it, as well, a kind of negotiating loss, acceptance and becoming.

My memoir’s concerns transcend simply the personal. Beyond myself and my family, the larger issues of marriage and divorce, of single parenting, of collecting, resonate and become accessible to other readers. Hampl writes that memoir “seems to be about an individual self, but it is revealed as a minion of memory which belongs not only to the personal world, but to the public realm” (Victoria 119, emphasis hers); my memoir’s particularities reveal experiences that are universal: marriage, divorce, single-parenting, social expectations of gender, the need for individuality. Hampl also writes that the “great contract of literature consists in this: you tell me your story and somehow I get my story” (“Dark Art” 50). In this memoir, I explore not only specific memories, but also the possible reasons why I remember the things I do, and through a process of reflection, much of their significance is revealed. This memoir has allowed me the space to uncover the meaning behind certain memories, whose process has allowed me to understand more about my mother and grandmother, to explore the loss of my marriage and to embrace optimism for a future different than what I had always planned on.

In the creation of my memoir, I have written about my grandmother, my children, and most significantly, about my mother. Lopate feels that writers in this genre need to ask themselves, why is it they wish to write about the people in their lives. He cautions that writers must not write to enact revenge for a wrong doing (84), and that writers are always responsible for what they write (82). In writing about others, Hampl shares that she’s “lost quite a few people along the way” (Sojourns 228). I find this to be a
wonderfully dual message, in that Hampl both shares her actions and warns of possible consequences; she has lost people *along the way*, as well as she has *lost* people along the way—her sentiment can be interpreted as both a consequence and a cautionary message at the same time. Perhaps most profoundly, Lopate feels that literary nonfiction writers may write about others as a way to express emotion to them that would be otherwise impossible; writing about one’s family, while it could be “vindictive” (84), it can be “a way of communicating something to loved ones you never could before—a ‘gift’ of the truth of your feelings” (84, emphasis his). This is the explanation I have been searching for. I would like to offer empathy to my grandmother and to my mother. I can try for an understanding of their limited social positions and opportunities. I can appreciate their kindness and their energy. I can be thankful for their humour, their effort and their creativity. I can create a dialogue with them and a space for their voices, embedded within my narrative. I can understand hardships as both a response to and an impetus for creativity. Martin asserts that we have a whole range of abstract emotions but that we don’t pay any attention to them (Martin, Tate); perhaps this is another kind of Lopate’s “gift” (84, emphasis his), the possibility of a whole range of emotions being created and offered when we take the time to write and reflect on the past and on those in our lives. My grandmother and my mother inspired and continue to inspire me. Being a mother myself has made me more aware of all of our interconnected narratives. In understanding that what we create can be both an expression of our individuality as well as a response to life’s pressures, I hope my children find their own paths towards self-expression and creativity. These truths might just be coming closest to what I am trying
to express because these are what I am coming to understand from writing about my family, because these are what I’ve learned to remember.
Our Funerary Summer

I am not sure why we carry certain memories and not others, why some memories are eclipsed forever, evaporating into the ether, while others, seemingly small, cling to us, remain, and ask of us our time and our introspection, urge from us our patience and our contemplation.

One memory that is waiting for me, curiously peeking its head slightly around the curtain, is of the day I found a dead bird on my front lawn. I’ve come back to this day, to this bird, to think about why it remains in my memory, why it seemingly calls out to me, asking me to look on it, asking me to remember. I was newly separated from a marriage that had lasted nine years or maybe seven years—it’s hard to define when something is really over, to know exactly when begins the beginning of the end. Shortly into our separation, after my two boys, Andrew and Aiden, and I had moved into our new place, I found the dead bird on my lawn. I am moderately squeamish about some things. In that moment I wasn’t exactly sure what to do. That day my brother’s wife, Crystal, happened to be over. Because I am moderately squeamish, she handled it—she took care of it, for me. I was relieved when she picked up some newspaper to wrap its body in. Rather than hard and stiff, she told me, it was still soft. The bird must have only recently died. I remember thinking how strange it was to be near something that had just been alive, and yet now, while still soft, was not. How horrifying and yet how sad, I thought, all at the same time.
The first time as a child I remember seeing a dead animal was when my sister and I were playing with our friend in the trees behind our houses. We found a dog. It wasn’t lying on the ground, though, like the bird, as though it had gotten lost or had expired from the elements or even from starvation. This dog had been tied to the bushes, each of its four paws bound with string to four different branches, and then it had been shot. It was like a ghastly stuffed toy, tongue hanging out of its mouth, black matted fur, limbs hard and unmoveable, suspended like a creepy animal ride in some sort of underworld carousel. We screamed. Then everything went strangely quiet as we looked at it, its eyes and ours all wide open, the animal staring into nothing. And just now I remember that we called my dad to come and get it, to take it down, to handle it for us.

Handling the dead bird was something that I needed someone else to do. When I was young, it was always my dad—my dad handled anything disturbing like this. We would call him and he would take care of it. I never would have even thought to expect this from my mother. And when I was married, my spouse might have taken care of the dead bird, but then again, I am not entirely certain. I do know I would have asked him to. And he might have, early on, in the beginning of our marriage, while we were still communicating, while we were still connected in some way.

In the early years of our marriage, we did some tasks together. I remember our trying to cook some of his favourite meals. His mother’s recipe for shepherd’s pie calls for cracking one egg on the top of the mashed potatoes and then fluffing this layer with a fork, so that the top of the dish becomes slightly crisp in the oven. I remember our planting some flowers in front of the kitchen window—petunias and red geraniums. The two cedar trees planted by the front door remain there still, sentinels listening, witnesses
to all that was said and not said. But over time I just ended up doing most of our chores alone. Somehow, I became the one to regularly do the cooking, among so many other things: the laundry, the dishes, the vacuuming, the Christmas cards. While we might have continued to go grocery shopping together, we never did. I don’t know if he wouldn’t come or if he simply decided not to come, but it just became easier to do it myself—buying the groceries, bringing them inside, putting them away.

When we had one child, and then two, I continued this shopping with Andrew and Aiden, bringing them to the grocery store with me. Our favourite clerk always had a stamp pad and would delight my boys by pressing inky animal stamps, rabbits, monkeys, other ones, onto their eager little hands. It became part of our routine. I am slightly surprised now, at this memory, such a seemingly small gesture to recall, and yet, I remember it still. The clerk was kind and noticed us. She took time out of her day, never forgetting to offer the boys her stamps. As simple as this was, her effort, her slight happiness at seeing us, made us happy, too. One day, though, our clerk looked at me with a new, startled expression. She asked me what had happened because I looked so completely different than before. I still don’t know exactly what she must have caught a glimpse of, but I felt compelled to tell her that I was newly separated.

It’s intriguing which memories stay with us, which memories ask us to remember, ask us to keep remembering. Patricia Hampl, a favourite memoirist of mine, writes about exploring a particular memory of hers and shares that she happened to take that memory (not some other) from the figurative library shelf of her life’s experiences. She paged through it and found more detail, perhaps more entertainment than she expected, but the memory was there, waiting for her. I’m intrigued by this idea of
waiting memories. I like to think of certain memories as asking to be remembered and explored, lingering until we lift the latch and glimpse something that they have to offer us, standing by while we take our seats so they may come out and make their way to centre-stage. In remembering this instance of grocery shopping with my boys, I feel as though the memory has stayed with me so as to reveal to me, over time, a new significance in the kindness of our favourite clerk, as well as in her expression and her concern.

The last time we saw her, her face went from curiosity and mild approval to genuine worry. She asked me how we were going to manage now, how we were going to cope. She asked the same question I had been worried about myself—*were we going to be all right?* Her attentiveness brought me back not only to the real issues I was contemplating for our future—meals, money, making our new place a home—but also to an awareness of how necessary and even how elevated the status of being married can be to many people. Her comments made me wonder about the tenacity of the ideal of marriage, how being married could still be viewed as the most acceptable, or at least the most preferred, route to personal security.

Several years ago on a radio program about relationships, I heard a therapist explain that single women parents should really refer to themselves as divorced parents because it confirms that they have at least been married in the past. It seemed to make some sense to me, then, to be concerned with how others might perceive a single mother, how others could judge her (and, subsequently, her children) as *less than* those still married, yet somehow *above* those who had never walked down the aisle. Somehow I have remembered this program, and this speaker’s message to listeners, myself and other
women: that being connected to a man through marriage, even if the marriage had ended, was socially superior to never having married at all.

There is something in this process of recall, when we can see in our minds a dead dog in the woods from our childhood, red geraniums planted under a kitchen window, as well as the dirt trapped under our fingernails; when we can remember the concerned expression on someone’s face as we tell them we are newly separated, the advice given on a night-time radio program years ago. Hampl tells us we store only images of value. In reflecting on my past, my recalled memories seem to reveal something about why I have hung onto them in the first place.

In looking back on the radio program, I see an odd distinction now—one’s role with a partner is easily distinguishable from one’s role, past and present, as a parent. Parents that are able to stay together in a healthy way often help to create strong families. But hearing a therapist proclaim the superiority of at least being previously married confirmed the idea about marriage that I had grown up with, that marriage was a place or a state one had achieved, and that was a good thing, because it meant one had tried to do what was expected. When I was young, I wasn’t really aware of any other serious option for my life and so the eventuality of getting married was something I accepted. It seems, then, that I remember the program because I had felt this way, too, the host’s message confirming what I had believed at that time, and perhaps I also remember it now because it bothers me that I had believed so narrowly before. I think that marriage is what I came to expect for myself and because of that expectation, I ended up looking for it, believing it was what I should want.
Growing up, I saw my mother being very conscientious about being married. It was her job, her role, and she performed it dutifully—she still does. When she was young, her parents divorced and she was raised only by her mother, my grandmother Fern. While Barbara is my mother’s name, she mostly goes by Barb. My mother grew up not only with the real-life consequences from their divorce—having a lower income, rarely seeing her father, being raised apart from her brother, watching her mother struggle—but also, I believe, with specific opinions that grew out of that difficult life. Divorce created a hardship for them all, and in the 1950s, a time when divorce was rare, their lack of security and family breakdown undoubtedly served to reinforce my mother’s belief in marriage or her dream of marriage, her dream for a stable family that so many people around her were able to have. Watching her mother struggle, combined with her own childhood experiences, must have helped to create my mother’s desire for the security and the life that they were unable to have. To me, these thoughts, these experiences, helped to shape my mother’s determination to be a dutiful wife and to stay married during extremely difficult periods—our moving all the time, my dad’s being in control most of the time, the years spent living in isolated, rural homes, all while my siblings and I were growing up.

The words “single parent” make me think of the number one, of a lone parent. I fit both contexts in being divorced and in parenting often singly. When my boys leave their father’s house and come back to mine, as a single mother I’ve found myself doing things that I might not want to do but have to do, things that need doing, like figuring out how to put air in a leaky tire, how to unclog a slow drain, how to repair a hole in a bedroom wall. As there is no other adult around, there is no one else to discuss things
with, even briefly, no one else who can take over, no one to tackle the things I don’t want to do, the things I might not believe I can handle alone.

Usually it is just the three of us at home and it was just the three of us, a few years into the divorce, when another dead bird appeared, this time in our backyard. The boys came across it while playing one afternoon. But it wasn’t just a dead bird, like the sad one that had likely hit the front window, the one that my sister-in-law Crystal took care of for me a few years earlier. I am reminded now that she was brave in those moments, brave enough to know what to do and to be able to do it. But she wasn’t there that day—it was just the three of us. And this was a baby bird, likely blown out of its nest by a strong and unmerciful wind. I panicked. Every time I stole a glance at the tiny thing I turned my head away, only to be compelled to look at it once more. I knew that if I could wrap it in paper and pick it up, it would barely weigh a thing and yet it weighed tremendously on me. It lay on its side, pink from tiny head to little feet, small enough to fit in my palm, eyes closed and without feathers, bare, alone, still. I knew we couldn’t leave it there, so vulnerable and exposed. Its death seemed not only sad but also a kind of wrong, as if we were witnesses to something that wasn’t supposed to happen or something we weren’t supposed to see. I lamented over why this had to happen to it, and why to me. I wondered if this was some kind of life lesson being presented to us. Were my boys going to see me as unable to make a decision? Was this their first experience with mortality? Did it really matter how I handled it, or did it matter more than I could ever know?

When my boys and I were confronted with this little backyard tragedy, there was no one else to handle it but me. My youngest son, Aiden, became very protective and
shooed away the ants that had already begun to gather. I cringed and waited. I took a deep breath and held it in while scooping the bird up quickly, fearing I might soon lose my nerve. I actually owned a shovel. Then we buried it, the unlucky thing. I’m not sure what one is supposed to do, but digging this little plot, about three shovel scoops down, felt like the most sensible action. It seemed the right thing to do, to keep the little bird safely away from predators, deep in the dirt, wrapped in nature. If we couldn’t restore it to its nest, burying it seemed our only way of offering it a kind of underworld home in the ground.

At that point, I felt I had done it. We had done it—our ordeal was over. It was dreadful, it was hard, but it was done, and it was all over now. Well. My boys were very much present and aware throughout the whole thing. They noticed the baby bird in the first place. They brought it to my attention. They looked to me to handle it. My eldest son, Andrew, put a few flowers on top of the freshly turned ground as we each took turns in saying goodbye to the little bird. Our own little funeral. And somewhere in the middle of all of this, something shifted in them. Maybe they felt a great closure, maybe they felt that this had been the right thing to do. Because, after that day, my boys began to bring home all of the dead animals they could find.

At one point, I remember having the thought that if I weren’t a single mother, I wouldn’t be the one doing the digging and the burying. I wouldn’t be the one trying to casually tell my boys, Oh, you found another one? Well, let’s go and get the shovel. I had to decide where in our backyard would be the best place for all this digging. I reluctantly picked a small spot in the right corner near the back of our faded wooden fence. It was the furthest away I could get from their white and red playhouse, the
furthest away from their sandbox with its trucks, cars, and green sand, the furthest away from the basketball net that they were still too small to really use. All the while I’d be dreading the burying but digging just the same, trying to be stoic, trying to set some sort of good example, of what, I’m not entirely certain, but at least, hopefully, of someone who knows how to—and will—bury a dead animal, of someone who can do difficult things when called for.

This became a kind of ritual for us, the burying and the letting go. In watching me dig a hole for the baby bird, my boys understood not only that this was what you do, but also what needs to be done. We ended up burying several more animals that summer. There were a few gophers and another bird. Is it fair to think that a dead bird might be more tragic than a dead gopher? There is something about not being able to fly ever again that just feels sadder.

In our letting go of the animals, we were having to let go of something else, too. In the physical act of burial we were confronted with these endings but also the ending of things, a growing awareness of loss and of letting go. That summer I was evolving more than ever into this new role of single mother, burying and letting go of these animals, and getting closer to letting go of the way things for me had been before.

While we were married, my spouse might have buried the little bird for me, for us, before we stopped shopping together, before we eventually stopped eating suppers together. I wonder if my boys have ever seen their father do anything really unpleasant but necessary before. I wonder if I am simply thinking about my own dad handling situations like this for me.
And just now I remember that there was another time before the dog in the woods, when I was about five or six years old, that I saw a dead animal, or animals. I was with my dad and he was clearing up the backyard of our latest farmhouse in rural Ontario, near the town of Chesley. He had a huge fire going and he was throwing in everything he had piled around it, branches, shrubs, leaves. I was helping. I picked up a bag from the rubbish pile and as I was just six, I glanced only briefly at it before tossing it in. Inside the sealed bag were tiny baby rabbits—brown, eyes closed, about four of them, about the size of my hand—and that might have been the reason he started the fire in the first place. I only glanced at the bag and tossed it in—everything was to be burned and I was helping. I remember flinging it up and watching it in the sky, thinking I had tossed it really high, before it came down on top of the fire. Shortly after, the realization of what was in the bag started to come to me, that they were real animals, that they were, in fact, rabbits, baby rabbits, brown fur, eyes closed as if sleeping, rabbits because of the ears—unlike kittens, the tall ears always signal a rabbit. I felt a flood of fear and guilt, a horror at the time I wouldn’t have been able to adequately articulate, believing then that I had been the one responsible for their deaths by throwing them into the fire. I didn’t mention my discovery to either of my parents, and I know it was several years before I came to understand that the rabbits must have already been dead and that being sealed in the clear plastic bag, as odd as that was, confirmed this. I never understood why someone would put them in there in the first place, why someone wouldn’t pick up a shovel and bury them. Why leave them for someone to find? Why not handle it, and take care to do the right thing?
On the day when my two boys and I were confronted with the baby bird, I remember having the horrifying awareness that, this time, it was just me. And somehow I wanted to be determined, to do what was most sensible, intuiting on some level that it was just as important to me as to my boys to do the right thing this time. I think now some part of me also wanted to ensure that down the road my boys wouldn’t be burdened with any guilt or uncover any ghastly thoughts of regret about that day and about our not handling things the best way we could. While eventually I came to understand the baby rabbits were already dead, I can’t seem to undo the remorse I felt in the earlier years of not knowing. Close to the end of that summer, my boys came running full tilt to our backyard, their plastic bag weighted and dangling, ready for the shovel, as Andrew exclaimed that they had found another one for me. *For me?*

Enough. We had buried about five dead animals that summer. I decided just then that we had had enough—me, them, all of us. And so I tried to end our funerary summer. I remember searching for some nugget of wisdom to mine in that moment. I told them, *we don’t really need to search for the dead ones. Leaving them where they are is all a part of life*.... I wished for something a little more meaningful to say. And so we buried the last one in our backyard gothic menagerie, now a home to this handful who had met with tragic ends but gentle finales, at least as gentle as we could make them, these resting places, these nests in the ground.

Inside our new place I do have a kind of bird’s nest. It’s not a real nest, but a decorative one, a figurine, two crystal birds sitting together protectively over their little home. I’ve kept it even after I’ve got rid of other things from my marriage, after most of the things from that time are now gone. I saw it in a store window and was so drawn to
it that my spouse bought it. Funny that this was something he did buy. It seemed a sweet symbol of how my own family was growing, when I was hopeful and optimistic and looked forward to this new relationship of mother and child. It was only after my separation, in looking at it closely one day that I realized it isn’t a nest at all. It is actually two birds sitting together at a bird feeder. At that realization I was surprised and even a little disappointed. I wanted it to be the nest I always thought it was. And because I have imagined it as a nest for so long I don’t want it to be anything else. I think I can continue to see it this way—that it can remain as this to me, being one thing but meaning another, from this expectant time in my life. A nest is a home, built purposely, twig by twig, grass, string, where birds belong, where young are cared for. There the three of us were, in our new place, where I was the only adult, where I was trying to make a home for us, for them. Thinking on my crystal birds and the nest I want them to have reminds me of the baby bird we found that day. Burying the bird in its earthly resting place was the only kind of home I could give it.

That was not, however, the last page of our summer story.

One afternoon while gathering laundry in Andrew’s bedroom, as I looked for socks under his bed, I found a small Tetley tea cardboard box. I shook it slightly. What did I expect was inside? Toys or rocks, probably. Or a few pennies he had saved in there. He saved pennies sometimes; I always told him his hair was the colour of a shiny penny. Curious, I opened the box. Inside I saw what looked like little twigs or sticks, three or four of them. They were greyish white, small, completely smooth, barely weighing a thing. And just when I was about to put the box down, not thinking any more of it, I stopped. A realization of some
horror was coming over me as I recognized these weren’t sticks at all. They were bones, tiny animal bones.

Andrew had saved bones from a small animal, undoubtedly from one of his latest excursions with Aiden in the field behind our house. The alarm I felt was due to a small but instant repulsion that these were actual bones and part of something that had actually been alive before and now was not. After a few moments of standing in his room, holding the box, I thought about them and slowly became calmer, deciding at that point that they were only bones. Most of the anxiety I felt probably wasn’t necessary. But why had he hung on to these? We had buried several dead animals that summer. Why didn’t he give these to me to bury? Why didn’t he leave these in the field? Peering into the tea box once more, I looked more closely at the bones and saw how they were stripped completely bare, how they seemed so small out of their proper context. They weren’t outside somewhere, not in the grass, but in a house and even inside a little box. It was as if I was beginning to feel a slight pity for them, these bones which now seemed to exude a kind of vulnerability that I hadn’t at first recognized. Andrew had kept them, had hung onto these little things; I wondered about his need to save these bones, these fragments. Perhaps because they were already simply bones, he may not have felt the same need for burial or for ceremony we all had practiced earlier that summer.

Our city’s Cree name, Wascana, means the place where bones are piled, now simply referred to as Pile of Bones. I think about this little connection, from masses of bones to my son’s tiny pile. Andrew had his own kind of crypt, where bones were put, saved, an unspoken reverence, bones picked from the very ground where they were piled so many years earlier. I wondered about our summer ritual and the ending of things, the
letting go. Did this saving indicate simply his wish to remember that summer? Did he need to have something solid, an object to hang on to that he didn’t have to part with? Maybe saving these fragments was a way of dealing with his own loss, a way of trying to hold the fragments of his world together. In the middle of the boys’ new and increasing back-and-forth trips between two homes now, these bones, these fragments, could be found, re-housed, not lost, and remind Andrew that he could hold onto something delicate, take care to hold onto something fragile in the middle of his changing world.

_A Son’s Homemade Crypt_

Now flung between two parents’ homes, this back and forth unceasing like a pendulum; breathing now within an hour-glass, you run and stumble on what remains, stumble on tiny bones, lost and alone; as their witness, you cradle them home.

And can I account for your need, your urge to hold some remnant in your fingertips, dirty from plucking these fragments from the ground. Your small hands now those of a giant or a god. Your fragments because they are yours now, ours, these bones, their secrets unfolding to our ears. They whisper as if a tinkling, as if a psalm escaping your music box tomb.

I resist their white and moon-like shadows, a smoothness which would linger if I reached down to it. As they seep into our story, relics now of our history, let us borrow this exquisite grey, hold it within us; let its mist settle sweetly in the crypts of our memory, as we disturb the hush of their beautiful decline.

*     *     *

I have often wondered about how much to expose my boys to, how to gauge things like telling them too much or too little about the divorce or about other things. This involves making judgement calls all the time. While all parents juggle these kinds
of concerns, being a single parent means you balance these decisions alone. One recent summer the three of us were on our way back home after the boys had been on a camping trip outside of the city. When I realized we were near the town of Indian Head, I contemplated our going there, to see both the town’s statue and its gravestone for Sinclair Ross. I had read about these monuments a few years earlier. I wondered at the idea of visiting a cemetery with my boys, whether they should accompany me, or whether their innocence would make me regret my decision. Going might prove to be simple and even educational. Or I could be making a mistake in not shielding them from things that might require them to be too grown up, since the prospect of the children growing up too quickly is already a constant worry for a single parent.

I decided in that moment that we could try this little trip, so I drove the three of us out to Indian Head. The article I had read stated that there is a bronze statue of Sinclair Ross, made by sculptors Joe Fafard and Vic Cicansky, in the middle of town, a testament to the writer who went to school there as a boy. But there isn’t. What is there, though, is a monument with some text from Ross’s novel *As For Me and My House*, copied from what appears to be his handwriting and etched onto the metal on top of the stone. It is a nice monument, a decent monument, located on the main street, which is actually called Grand Avenue, in front of the town’s library. Nearby there’s a gazebo and a river flanked by huge trees, all amounting to a small kind of park. While my boys played, I asked a woman sitting at the gazebo if she knew anything about the missing statue. I assumed it must have been taken down quite a long time ago because she couldn’t recall ever having seen it. My article was dated. I wondered if the statue had been broken or vandalized. It might have needed repairs, or the town might have wanted a more
contemporary legacy for their hometown writer. I was disappointed that the statue wasn’t there, and I was disappointed in not knowing why it was absent.

The same article claimed that Ross’s cremated remains are interred in the Indian Head cemetery. That we found to be true. My boys and I drove around to the end of town, which turns into a dirt road, and walked there amongst the many stones. It took Andrew about two minutes to find it—Ross’s stone being somewhat larger than those immediately near it.

There is something hard to describe in walking around a cemetery with your children. The space was quite beautiful, if a cemetery, such a place of loss, can be thought of in this way. There were huge trees all around. The grass was perfectly manicured, evidence that someone was taking good care of the grounds. There were paths and benches and even a memorial flower garden. The three of us wandered on our own. After a while, my boys found me to tell me about the stones marking the passing of children. Aiden told me of a stone that had little toy cars beside it. Had they been the child’s toys? Had someone wanted to ensure he was not separated from them? Or had these been purchased recently and meant as a gift, as an offering? Had someone left these toys, a playtime symbol, more appropriate than flowers for a little boy? I wondered if this was becoming too depressing an experience for them—we really had only gone there to find Ross’s stone, and that we had already done. But it seemed we were all moved, intrigued, in a peaceful kind of way, and so we stayed and walked together through this quiet a bit longer.
My boys were confronted with a new sense of mortality that afternoon. Andrew even asked me if I was sick or if anything was wrong. As I shook my head, I understood why his mind would wander slightly down this direction, our being there amidst so much loss. Being there brought a hush to us all. I didn’t have to remind them not to shout or to run; they intuited a kind of decorum in their walking and in their noticing. And as the cemetery was like a park, it invoked a particular kind of feeling—a somberness in that these lives had ended, some so much earlier than others, but also a contentment in that they had been lovingly laid to rest in this park. The expression laid to rest for me now best invoke the sensitive consideration I experienced with my sons while being there.

My boys, too, seemed to experience a sense of this feeling when, in finding their own surname on a stone—which alarmed me, thinking this might scare them to death—they were not really startled but surprisingly curious and rather thoughtful. “They have the same name as us,” Aiden informed me, followed by a quiet pause. Then he asked me if I had known these people. Andrew asked if we might be related to them in some way. I wasn’t sure what to say other than to answer their questions directly, informing them both that I didn’t know these people and that we likely weren’t related to them. On an afternoon I was concerned might be too grave for them, I came away from our time at the cemetery slightly more aware of the years stealing away from us. This bittersweet twinge of awareness was reinforced for me even more when in the very midst of writing this I received a reply to my email inquiry about the statue. I was advised that the statue had been stolen several years earlier and was never replaced. The town clerk’s email went on to read that the original figure had sat on the same monument that still sits in front of the town library.
First the cemetery and now the statue, another instance of loss. Then I remembered the monument. Ross’s words etched there end with a description of a feeling: the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. I can only hope that the people who took the statue did so because they were fans, because they admired Ross’s work or Fafard’s work, and not because they simply wanted a valuable bronze statue. Maybe those responsible for taking it down are in some way attempting to provide their own home for it, for him; maybe their taking it is a response to his words, and by taking it, they might be trying to ensure that he no longer feels simply lost or dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. This is what I told my boys, how I tried to make sense of this to them, how I suppose I tried to make sense of it for all of us.

While Ross’s lines written on the monument might have inspired the theft, these words are from the journal of his character, Mrs. Bentley, from his novel As For Me and My House. I wish we could have known her full name. She is a housewife living in an isolating prairie town, constrained by her husband’s role of preacher and her role of preacher’s wife; she often goes either unnoticed or scrutinized, and she has found an outlet, a small means of expression, in her gardening, in her effort, and in her diary…The wind was hot and dry, and the sweat kept running down my face and stinging as it dried. I hoed with firm swift strokes at first, but in a little while my shoulders stiffened and my back began to ache. I kept on stubbornly, though, till the last hill of potatoes was planted, hurt at the unconcerned way Philip had gone off without me, afraid to face myself in the dark little house alone…Like so many women, like my mother, Mrs. Bentley is dutiful. She is digging, planting, working diligently to create a garden for
herself, for them. She is full of intention. She is slightly hopeful, yet lonesome, too. She does her duty. She is full of a myriad of emotions and also expresses her vulnerability. Yet she accepts her difficult life as her fate. She remains married and always conscientious in her role, despite the hardships in her life.

Watching my mother religiously clean and cook and hang the laundry on the line, watching her acquiesce to my father’s decisions in most things, where he would work, where we would live, I was being schooled, in a way, in what a good wife does, and I suppose now, in what a husband does, too. In her effort, a kind of faith in this life was revealed. I know several people today who seem to have good marriages or what I imagine good marriages must be like, contemporary marriages, where both spouses seem to share the work, where both spouses seem to get a chance to be listened to, to be noticed. But I saw my mother dutifully work sometimes desperately hard without much relief—at least not until my sister Shannon and I were old enough to start helping her around the house.

All of what we’ve seen in the past, of what we’ve experienced, of what we’ve longed for, helps to form us into who we are and who we will become, whether we really know this is happening or not. As a child I was being taught what a marriage looked like, built around expectations of gender roles, expectations put onto both of my parents, but undoubtedly constructs that left my mother in the weaker position. I couldn’t help but follow this, in getting married, and when married; like Ross’s Mrs. Bentley and like my mother, I often tried desperately to be conscientious.
I remember a few years into my divorce listening to a woman on another radio program share the story of her reluctant acceptance of the breakdown of her marriage, though she believed *she had done everything right*. And that had not been enough. Her words echoed in my mind and in that moment, her small fragment made all the sense in the world to me. In her brief admission or even confession, she revealed all I had been feeling without entirely knowing it. I thought about my marriage and realized more fully how performing tasks isn’t enough. A one-sided relationship doesn’t work; one person doing these *right* things can’t compensate for both. And I also realized, not only had I felt I was the one to do this *everything right*, but also I had believed that there was a bar or a measurement, a kind of grading of *this* rightness in the first place, and that my conscientiousness in my role represented the effort I had put in. While I had been the one to initiate the separation, there still existed another part of me that was frustrated or sad in the overall idea of divorce in the first place, and in the overall breakdown of my part in it, in this role I had also tried faithfully to believe in.

I think about my mother’s life, remaining married, and about my grandmother’s life, getting divorced, and how things were still difficult for them. Sometimes I wonder if I am sensitive to their pain because I am thinking about their experiences, and sometimes I wonder if the stress from my marriage was, in part, a culmination of all of the stress they felt before me. Maybe in my marriage I was, in a way, being stressed for the three of us; I wonder if my determination to succeed in marriage was influenced by their years of determination.

In cooking—and shopping, and making our meals—I was often determined in the early years. As with his mother’s recipe for shepherd’s pie, I wanted to try and please
him, to make him feel taken care of, to do *my* duty. I remember packing lunches for him and learning after several tries, after he showed me on several occasions, exactly how he wanted his peanut butter and banana sandwiches: whole wheat bread—fresh; butter—real butter; peanut butter—smooth, not crunchy; and bananas—just turning ripe. Cut the banana into nine equal-sized slices, place the bread in rows of three, cut the sandwich into threes along the same rows, use a square of wax paper—wax only—take up both sides of the paper, fold from the top and, finally, tuck the sides underneath. I don’t know if his mother made sandwiches like this or whether he had always wished she had.

While cooking is something I’m now starting to like again, being entirely responsible for all of the shopping, for all of the meals all of the time wore on me, and I wonder now if it wore on my mother or my grandmother in a similar way. I found out almost by accident that there are limits in trying to please another person and that there *should* be limits, too.

This awareness came to me over several years, several years of trying to be conscientious, trying to make a good dinner, the best dinner, or at least a dinner which would be as good as the shepherd’s pie. My perfect dinner was never quite realized. We would have the oddest exchanges about the dinners I made him. Conversations of ours would go something like this:

*So, I made lasagna!* I would say, and he would simply exhale loudly—

*(ME)* What’s wrong?

*(HIM)* Nothing, it’s fine. I like lasagna.

*(ME)* I know you do; I’ve seen you eat your mother’s lasagna.

*(HIM)* Well.

*(ME)* Well, what?

*(HIM)* Well, that’s my mother’s lasagna.
(ME) Do you like this?

(HIM) It’s good. It might be a bit dry again.

(ME) It’s not too dry.

(HIM) It’s just a tiny bit dry, that’s all. She uses an oven thermometer. I’ll get one so it won’t be dry.

(ME) You said you liked it.

(HIM) I just want you to be sure. These fresh mushrooms?


(HIM) Uber?

(ME) Extra tasty.

(HIM) Why didn’t you just say extra—why are you trying to get fancy?

(ME) It’s just an expression.

(HIM) I’ve never heard it before.

(ME) Do you want it or not?

(HIM) There seems to be a lot of grease around the cheese. What hamburger is this?

(ME) It’s lean—I usually buy extra lean but I thought that would be too dry for you. You don’t like it.

(HIM) It’s just a little greasy.

(ME) We’re putting cheese on it—

(HIM) Cheese is nothing but fat.

(ME) Does the hamburger really make a difference—we’re eating all this cheese with it anyway?

(HIM) We probably shouldn’t; it’s not good for you.

(ME) Doesn’t your mother put cheese on her lasagna?

(HIM) Yeah, but she uses extra lean hamburger.

(ME) Whatever.
Even now, I cringe at this snapshot of how our dinner times could be spent, how I felt, how I believed I responded to my now ex-spouse. Some people have told me they dislike the term “ex-spouse” and prefer “former spouse.” It seems a slight distinction but a distinction none-the-less. It must depend on the relationship, and more significantly, its ending. I use the prefix “ex.” It represents more permanence for me and I imagine that is why I choose to use it. I guess that makes his mother my ex-mother-in-law, too.

It is becoming less frequent that something in my daily life now triggers some image or event from my marriage. The more time goes on, the further away those memories seem to be. Cooking an old recipe can cause a memory to step forward. I have found holidays often have the power to conjure past events from their place in my mind.

While married, I wanted to get a special Christmas present for my mother-in-law. I had seen the perfect gift, a little tabletop ski hill with an animated skier going up the hill and down. As she is an avid skier, I knew she would like it. I wanted to run out briefly and get it for her. My spouse refused to watch the boys. He also insisted I take the truck and leave the car at home, in case he wanted to go out. But I was determined to get this for her, determined, I suppose now, to be a good and dutiful daughter-in-law, my duties now extending to her. So, I transferred the two car seats from the car into the truck and then bundled up both boys with snowsuits, toques and mittens, preparing them for this drive in a blizzard. I brought the umbrella stroller with us; I knew we would need it. It took a bit to get around in this Christmas store with its little villages and glass ornaments made to look at, but not to touch. I had one boy in the stroller and carried the other boy in his car seat. But we managed to get her present and later mail it to her. He didn’t seem too concerned with what we got his mother. I don’t know if she has this
present still or not. For some reason, I’d like to think that she does. I’d like to think that she still has it and brings it out at Christmastime. I’d like to think that when she looks at it, she remembers the time we gave it to her and that it was from us.

That same year, I was inordinately proud of our pretty Christmas tree, pink ribbons, white beads, two priceless baby’s first Christmas ornaments safely stowed near the top. It was now my turn to unwrap something from under the tree. I began tearing the paper, only to find out it was a book I already owned. This was not a new copy of my book, but my book itself, the actual book that had already been sitting on my bookshelf for years. At first I was puzzled, recognizing the familiar title, the slightly worn cover, the tiny crack in the top right. I turned it over and then back again. Still puzzled, I looked over at him, my spouse, my ex-spouse now, and he started to grin and then to laugh, a big hearty laugh. I couldn’t quite get the joke, at first.

Sometimes our minds know things, recognize situations, but don’t want to take them in, don’t want to accept them, and so our minds take their time, insisting that what we see isn’t exactly right, that what we’ve heard is somehow in error, or what we feel, we just might be mistaken about. Sometimes one’s entertainment can come, unfortunately, at the expense of another.

I guess these non-presents were a kind of joke or prank, but I was never really sure why. I reached for another item wrapped in the same paper, started tearing it slowly and then stopped. I asked him if this, too, was something I already owned. He laughed and told me to just keep going. At that point, whatever game it had been, whatever slight amusement there might have been from my being gullible simply vanished for me. I put the gift down. There wasn’t anything else to unwrap but these. It was almost a relief to
leave the rest unopened. Christmas is such a time of giving, yet the giving was such a difficult thing in our home. Perhaps the “gift” was the joke, or just he was. By the next year, there was nothing to open, just like there was almost nothing between us. And so it made sense, it was easier, it was more of a relief, this non-giving, this nothing.

We began to go to marriage counselling two months after my youngest, Aiden, was born. These sessions weren’t for one specific thing, but for a myriad of things, his control of the money, his late night rages. However, when we were at the counsellor’s office, often I couldn’t remember why I wanted us to go. At the appointments, I would sit there and not have anything to say, not have anything to explain. Why had I felt we needed to be there in the first place? I couldn’t remember. The counsellor advised me to keep a diary of important things, things I wanted to bring up and talk about. So, I began to write in a journal and kept it in my purse. It was a little notebook with a pale blue cover, lined pages and a spiral binding. I haven’t looked at it in years. It is just a little book, seemingly innocent, something one would expect to find simple notes or grocery lists within its pages.

I would read these entries over so that I had something to contribute at counselling. I was surprised each time, because I had forgotten what had gone on the week before. I’ve been told that we often forget things that are difficult for us, that stress can make us confused or perhaps we only ever remember fragments. Remembering can be a work of excavation, as if prying something out of the ground, to uncover the significance of something we’ve long buried away. If memories, as Hampl tells us, are waiting for us, certain ones must be closer to centre-stage than others. Some memories work to resist our exploration of them, and so, to avoid pain, we decide to leave them be.
When my boys and I moved into our new place, I brought this little blue notebook with me. I’m not entirely sure why, but it seemed like something I should hold on to, even though I never wanted to re-read it. It sits in the bottom of a box deep in the basement, probably so that I won’t come across it in daily living. After all this time, I haven’t retrieved it. Maybe it’s a symbol of why I left, like a little piece of validation that I hold on to. Or just a record of events near the end of my marriage, and I keep it because so often then I had forgotten. I keep it in the basement so that I don’t have to hang onto the entries in my mind. Rather than the events from this journal being stored internally, as other memories that are retrievable and then examined, I can leave them down there, separate from me, a part of me but apart from me, buried deep below ground. It is my own testament to how I had felt, too, that I had done everything right, my own crypt, my own little box of bones. While reflecting on those memories likely would reveal how far I’ve come since then, I resist this more thorough contemplation, which leaves me, for now, to leave them be.

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Pretty Things

My mother saved things, held onto things and brought them with us when we were young, when she and my dad were raising us, when my dad, working in construction, decided to move our family from one town to another. Often our packing and unpacking, putting up and taking down again, this moving, this transience, was a kind of constancy in our lives. And with the constant of moving also came the constancy of her things—pictures for the walls, special books, crystal glasses, plates with yellow flowers forever placed into new cupboards—appearing no matter what house we lived in. Always the mirror over the couch, always the shiny green drapes in each new living room. She had the same paperweight with its green and blue swirl sitting on the same narrow bookshelf filled with the same old books. These rooms were constructions that offered familiarity, a sense of comfort, the security of home, for us, for her. With these objects my mother created and recreated our home again and again. In reflecting on these items, on these little things, I remember clearly the paperweight with the green and blue swirl. I see the shiny green drapes around the living room window. While I can’t quite place each landscape, I remember the drapes framing whatever window we looked out of. And I am coming to see these objects as more significant than I could have known at the time. Before unpacking the latest box in the most recent kitchen, my mother knew what the outcome would be, the meaning of her things already long determined, so that the unpacking, the arranging, was really just the final aspect of creating our home, of realizing some self-expression, of re-establishing a sense of meaning from these things, as she had already seen this furnished room in her mind.
My mother married at eighteen. While raising us in rural Ontario and New Brunswick, she must rarely have been seen in our family without the label of mother or wife we attached to her. I never thought of her, really, outside of this context for many years; I don’t think any of us did, either, including our father. They both had traditional gender roles, he going out to work and she staying at home with us, with the responsibility for us and for our home. We recognized her as someone whose job it was to create and maintain a home, to be at home, to mother, without a lot of awareness or consideration for her outside of this role. This lack of perception on my part stemmed undoubtedly from my youth, from typical adolescence and immaturity, when my world was inward and concerned with the immediate. I like to think of this as a common response, as a get-out-of-guilt-free card, believing how I felt was likely how other adolescents must feel.

However, these opinions also came from my belief that my mother was doing what she was supposed to do. This thought requires more attention and more reflection, even as it provokes discomfort in me now. Maybe that is the price we pay for a deeper awareness—discomfort with the past. Growing up, I was left without a larger understanding of what I now feel must have often been a limiting familial position for her. I believe I was unable to appreciate or take in completely the little details, the little moments that I am coming to remember, seemingly small fragments that have worked their way forward in my mind. Actions that I barely noticed as a child have somehow remained and now they ask me to take the time to consider them. Because I am now an adult and a parent, because I was married and am now single, I try to understand more about my mother.
There were times tension existed between the two of us from my inability or from my slight unwillingness to understand her stifled position in our home. On days when she seemed distant or aloof, frustrated or even angry, as a child I could never understand why. She, a creative writer, must have felt deeply about things, wondered about things. She used to keep journals; she still does. She reads voraciously, she writes poetry. She used to put wildflowers on the table. She still cans and gardens and has a houseful of pets. As ours were so often rural homes, opportunity for a wide social life was limited. We only ever had one car, and my dad always took it to work, so access to regular transportation was also limited for her and for us.

My mother could have, should have, gone to university but she married young. From her conscientiousness, her acquiescing to my dad’s decisions about when we moved and where we lived, and her determination to remain in what was often a stressful marriage, I understand ever more clearly how important she perceived her roles as wife and mother to be. While marriage can be loving and motherhood a noble use of time, loneliness and isolation within these positions can be devastating. This isolation can be even more affecting for women with a creative impulse; I think of Ross’s Mrs. Bentley and the isolation that drove her to find solace in her diary. Often the house would be spotless and dinner prepared—her dutifully performing everyone’s expectations of her, including, I think, her own.

But other times dinner would not be ready and I would be frustrated by her lack of Motherly Duty. I remember a time coming home after school. I hopped off the school bus and bounded into the house. “Hi,” I hollered out as I stepped into the kitchen. No one was there. Empty. No supper cooking. Nothing on the table. I was hungry but
wandered around looking for my mom. I found her, lying on the couch. I wanted to say “hi” again but didn’t. The way she was lying, settled with her back to me, made me not want to keep calling out. I just stood there, wondering if I should leave her be. I was surprised to see her there, in the middle of the day, and surprised she hadn’t started cooking yet. She must have heard me come in. She slowly turned around, sat up, and rubbed her eyes. I could tell she had been crying, even though she just looked at the floor. “Why are you crying, Mom?” I asked. Seeing her like this was alarming. I reached out to wrap my arms around her, but she pushed me away before I could complete the hug. We weren’t a hugging family, but it seemed like I should offer her something. I felt awkward, even more so when she pushed me away not once, but twice. I guess she didn’t want me to console her. She didn’t seem angry, exactly, just dismissive. This surprised and hurt me. Why is she rejecting me? Does she not love me; does she not love us? I was unable to comprehend the complexity of her world and just how confined I now realize she often must have felt. I left her on the couch and wandered back into the kitchen, looking for a snack from the cupboard.

When we were living in Ontario, an abundance of trees and flowers always grew behind our rural homes. I remember fields filled with daisies, butter-and-eggs, Queen Anne’s lace. Often my mother would plant flowers, such as peonies, and, once they bloomed, put a few in the house. At other times, she would go for walks, long walks, and bring back flowers she picked along the way. She liked the black-eyed Susans that grew along the road. I thought that anything growing wild was a weed and told her so. Her response was a long, slow exhalation of breath. Years later, I had a conversation with her about our childhood, moving all the time, living in the country, living with Dad,
and she said, “Well, you do what you can. Sometimes you try to make things pretty. You pick flowers and put them on the table, but then everyone complains that they’re just weeds.”

I cringed. I just couldn’t tell her that “everyone” had been me, that I had said that, I remembered that day too, I was the one who had not seen the flowers as they were, who had not seen what she had been trying to do, who had not understood that this small act was important to her. *Just weeds.* Such a small phrase, said in an instant, but now I am unsettled, still, at these words so easily given. I realize now that in dismissing the wildflowers I was, in a way, also dismissing her. The erasure of rarely being seen apart from her roles, the endless drudgery of her daily life, the lack of choice regarding where we lived, the effort of supporting my father in our many moves. And then, on top of it all, there being no-one to listen to her poetry, no-one to appreciate her creativity or even her flowers—just weeds in a small glass vase—how that must have been for her.

My mother loved and still loves to read, and she has always wanted to travel. Like her own mother, she longed to see far-away places, to go on safari, to see the pyramids up close. She packed again and again, suitcases filled and unfilled, but only because we were always moving. And while it was somewhat precarious and often transitory, home was what she provide for us. I remember the shimmery green curtains. I remember her collection of bottles and jars, cobalt blue, her tin of pretty buttons. Her wine glasses never saw a drop of wine, but she would put them out for special occasions and fill them with juice. I was always happy she let us use them. She never seemed worried we might break them. And when I wore her gold chain to school and lost it in the grass at lunchtime, she never got angry. She knew it was a mistake, an accident. I
was heartsick, but she never mentioned it again. She let us use tea cups and saucers, wine glasses filled with cranberry juice, light shining through them on the table. She took the time to pull them out of the cupboard. I would watch her climb on the stool to bring them down. Why do I remember the pretty things? Well, you do what you can. Sometimes you try to make things pretty. Standing on the couch, I’d look into the mirror, sometimes smiling at my reflection, sometimes trying to look away and then catch a quick glimpse of myself indirectly, to see what other people saw. Why do I remember these objects, smooth, pleasant, noticeable, things that caught the light, that were slightly luminescent, that called out to the senses? I remember picking up the paperweight, where it was placed on the low bookshelf not too far from my height, one of the most interesting things in the room. It was heavy, dense and cool in my hands. I sat studying the green and blue swirl, wondering how it came to be in there, knowing it would be in there forever. These little things helped make our home and I believe afforded my mother some satisfaction, some form of self-expression. These objects were welcoming, surfaces that were enticing, textures that I knew would be pleasant and smooth to touch—flowers, buttercups and wild roses, petals soft as silk.

There’s an intriguing little story about a rose that belonged to artist Agnes Martin, told by Arne Glimcher, her long-time friend and art dealer. His granddaughter was mesmerized by a rose in a vase at Martin’s apartment. Martin asked the little girl if she thought the rose was beautiful. She replied, yes, the rose is beautiful. Then Martin put the rose behind her back and asked the little girl if the rose was still beautiful. The little girl replied, yes, it’s still beautiful. And Martin explained to the little girl, you see, the beauty is not in the rose, the beauty is in your mind. I remember my mother’s pretty
objects as slightly incandescent, permitting just enough shine to be worth noticing, to evoke a feeling of home or a kind of peace, to make one slightly hopeful. Through them we felt a sense of familiarity and tranquility, their ability to reflect the light coming back to us time after time like a gift.

My mother is the fourth child in a family of five children, four girls and one boy. Her parents divorced when she was very young. Divorce in the 1950s was uncommon. Her eldest sister was fourteen years older than she, and this sister was married and moved out of the house for most of my mother’s earliest years. After the divorce, their father left and took their brother, George, with him. For most of my mother’s childhood, it was just she and her two sisters, Margie and Sharon, at home. After the divorce, for the next few years, my mother actually believed her father had died. I am not sure if she also believed her brother had died. She told me that once. She rarely speaks about her early years—memories, for the most part, she likely wants to leave be. When I asked her that day if she ever saw her father again, she replied, “Just a handful of times.” A handful of times in someone’s life isn’t very many. I never met this man once myself and now I can never meet him because he died several years ago. We can mourn the loss of someone we know but we can also mourn the not knowing. My mother mourned his absence, the years he was missing from her life, but also the loss of any chance to be near him, to get to know him more than she did. Because of her loss, her mourning, I think I also mourn too, slightly, for the loss of not knowing him, but more significantly, I am sad for my mother.

While she rarely talks about his leaving, his absence, she did write a poem about it once. Her brother George published a book on his childhood and her poem is printed
there. I imagine a poem about her father evokes a spectrum of emotions for her. I can sense her longing, building every year. She waits for his visit, but it seldom comes. I can sense her joy, her surprise, when he comes back. She mourns again, each time, when he leaves—that crushing handful of times. I can sense her hope, her ever-present expectation:

*Where’s Daddy’s Kiss Good-night?*

*She scurries off into her bed,*  
*This little tot year old.*  
*He waits until her prayers are said,*  
*And all her troubles told.*

*Before he gives her that big hug,*  
*Which wipes away all pain—*  
*He tucks her in all warm & snug,*  
*This love they share is plain . . . .*

*None can hurt her, none can know,*  
*Her Daddy made it right.*  
*With just these words spoke loud yet slow,*  
*“Where’s Daddy’s kiss good-night?”*

*Just make believe—just fantasy,*  
*All little girls pretend,*  
*How real a dream to one can be,*  
*How sad to see it end.*

*Times passes fast—all people age,*  
*Look back—look hard—look deep,*  
*Imprisoned thoughts no longer caged,*  
*These memories do we keep.*

*No Daddy really tucked me in.*  
*No Daddy held me tight.*  
*Just in my mind did Daddy grin,*  
*Or say “Where’s Daddy’s kiss good-night?”*

*Yet long I yearned throughout young years,*  
*Time empty dark and long.*  
*One day my Dad will dry my tears,*  
*And right that has been wrong.*
God bless my Daddy anyway,
And make him young & well.
For I know there will come a day,
I too shall hear the bell.

That’s when this fantasy comes true.
When God alone makes right,
All wrongs of life be me—be you—
Mine with “Where’s Daddy’s kiss good-night?”

I imagine to a young child it would feel wrong to have a parent simply go away . . . No Daddy really tucked me in. No Daddy held me tight . . . . I feel these sad lines show not only how much she longed to see him and how pervasively he wasn’t there, but also how reluctantly she abandoned her hope that he ever would be. Only as a fantasy did she permit herself to imagine seeing him again, but as she grew up, over time, while she writes it was sad to see it end, sad to let go of any hope of connecting with him, she also includes the eventuality of seeing him in Heaven . . . when this fantasy comes true. It seems, then, that she never completely let go.

The day I asked my mother how often she had seen her father after the divorce, I expressed surprise at the infrequency of his visits. I remember her justifying the fact that her father had moved on. She told me that often divorced parents back then simply moved on. She was trying to help me make sense of what had happened in their family. She continued to tell me that some parents left not only their spouses but also their children to begin new lives, even starting entirely new families while rarely looking back at their first ones. This is what my mother’s father did. My own father refers to these scenarios as having replacement children. His parents, like my mother’s, had also divorced, although divorce was as rare in the 1940s as in the 1950s, and he and his siblings were raised by his mother and step-father. Just like my mother, he rarely saw
his father again. In thinking about his comments now, I imagine that not only my mother, but also my father both had felt replaced by the children in their fathers’ new lives. Did they both feel like replacement children? In his comment, his label, I also sense a nod towards his belief in the role of a parent, in that even in divorce, it is wrong to leave your child. The fact that my mother’s father had a new family might have made my mother feel replaced. She wondered, she waited for him, for years. Growing taller, celebrating birthdays, earning higher grades at school, buying new clothes and bigger shoes, learning to ride a bike, falling down and getting hurt, having sick days and hospital stays, reading new books and wanting to share these with him, watching the seasons coming and going, wondering about him, always waiting.

My mother’s casual phrase just a handful of times to describe how often she saw her father after the divorce seems significant. I have always remembered this fragment. I believe it dismally but accurately describes his lack of visits. But there’s something else about the phrase that disturbs me enough to think on it more. The infrequency of his visits likely indicated to her on some level how he felt about her. This is what most children would undoubtedly feel. To them, a parent rarely coming to see them indicates their visits must be less important than other things. A parent’s inaction leaves its own kind of scar. She told me he had moved on, which implies he had somewhere else to go, somewhere better to be, more important tasks to do, more important people to be near than she must have been. Her choice of words, her thoughts formed into her own particular fragment. While longing so much to see him, because he came so little, even as grateful as she must have been, even in explaining away his absence as a normal part of divorce, it is as if she also casually dismisses these times, this handful of times, just as
she felt so dismissed. Her childhood house was small and she shared a bedroom with her two other sisters, Margie, seven years older, and Sharon, three years younger. In one picture of my mother as a girl she has a round, full face. After having been ill during a long hospital stay, she became a lot thinner. I imagine her being at the hospital for weeks, feeling alone, especially at night because we feel more lonesome at night than ever during the day. It might have been on these long hospital nights that she wanted her father more than usual. I don’t think he ever came to see her there; he might have called for her at the hospital, but she never said he did. She told me once that the telephone at their house was so high on the kitchen wall that she could barely reach it, but then years later, as a married woman visiting her mother, she was surprised to see the telephone was actually placed quite low. I wonder at the telephone in her house when she was young and when it rang, how many times did she hope, even slightly, that it might be her father at the other end of the line, the line so high up on the kitchen wall.

And when her father left, he took her brother, their brother, George, with him. My mother and her brother are only about a year apart. I know he was the closest sibling to her in age. George had left with their father due to the divorce, or to their parents’ ideas about divorce.

She reminded me that sometimes boys would go with their fathers, girls with their mothers, showing how gender informed and perhaps trumped everything else, with respect to determining the future of a child of divorce. However, my mother and her
brother George would both come to yearn to see their father because, when George was five years old, his father ended up leaving him, too.

It was only a few years ago that I learned this story. My uncle George’s book contains nostalgic remembrances of growing up on a farm, and it is in his first book that I had learned his story for the first time—his story, which also touches my mother’s story. Their father began his new life. While his young son was with him for a short time, he remarried, and at some point shortly afterwards, my mother’s brother was left. Abandoned. It is a harsh word, but it seems appropriate. George was left to live with an older couple who owned a farm. He had never met these people before, he had never been to their farm, he didn’t know who they were, his father had never told him that they would be his new parents, that he would be leaving him there, that he would never come to see him, that it would be ten or more years before he would see him again. At the age of five, my mother’s brother was abandoned at this farm and he cried and chased the truck as his father drove away, as if he were trapped in a scene from a movie scripted for heartbreak.

The couple that raised him took good care of him. After a while, he ended up having a good life with them on their farm. Knowing this offers some relief to me. It is the first thing people ask, when I tell them about my uncle—after an acknowledgement of his heartrending situation they, too, all seem comforted to know he was treated well by them. I guess it is enough to comprehend he was abandoned; it likely would be unbearable to know he was mistreated or that he was neglected, again. They weren’t even his parents, yet they took him in and were good to him. I only remember meeting my uncle George once when I was young, when he came to visit us in New Brunswick.
Through his books, my mother and he have reconnected and I am now connecting with him, as well. He writes stories about milking the cows before school, making maple syrup, taking care of his horse. He and my mother share a love of animals. When he wrote about the day his father drove away, he had believed he must have been really bad to be left there for good . . . *In my mind I felt that I must be a real bad person, as if I wasn’t, why would my own father just up and leave me with these strange folks I never seen before*. . . . In reading this sentence again, now, I’m not sure what bothers me the most—his being abandoned, his not knowing these people he was left with, or his blaming himself in the first place. I wonder how long it took for him to realize that it wasn’t his fault, that he was only a little boy, and that nothing he could have done at age five or six could ever justify the rejection he was made to feel, the bewilderment and self-blaming he must have endured for years and likely carries within him even today.

After his father drove away, George went into what would be his new bedroom at this new farmhouse and shut himself up in there for two whole days, angry, frightened, hungry, until the smell of chocolate cake coming from the kitchen lured him downstairs, and he collapsed crying into the arms of his adopted mother.

He writes that now, as an adult, the smell of his wife’s cake at the moment of his writing might have made him think of that first chocolate cake on the farm. I wonder, over all these years whenever he has smelled chocolate cake, is this memory automatically triggered for him, does he go back to those first few days on the farm, does he think about his father, does this smell provide him comfort, or when he tastes it in his mouth is it forever a bittersweet sensation, the sadness of the past combined with the brief delight of the present moment? In a movie I saw with my boys a few years ago—
Because of Winn-Dixie—there is a magical candy that combines both sweetness and sorrow, called Litmus Lozenges, and no-one knows how. When the candy is eaten, it tastes sweet while invoking feelings of individualized, particular, sadness. The father character tries it and says that it tastes melancholy. When my uncle smells something chocolate baking or whenever he tastes another chocolate cake, are these two emotions, grief and pleasure, inextricably entangled for him?

After reading my uncle’s story, I remember asking my mother about her own mother, asking why she didn’t go and get her son, why he couldn’t have stayed with them instead of being made to live with these other people. I can’t imagine my brother Stephen being raised without us. I can’t imagine our childhood without him in it. Part of my questioning what happened to my uncle George comes from knowing what it’s like to have a younger brother. The fact that their brother was gone makes me mourn their not knowing. Because my mother herself was so young, a lot of the events are not entirely clear to her. But she said she believed that when they found out about her brother he had already been living on the farm for a few years. She told me that she thinks they decided it was best he stayed where he was. This explanation is unsettling to me because her answer doesn’t really satisfy; perhaps I am projecting my own disbelief onto this situation, as well as my own incredulity at how both of my uncle’s parents could have allowed this to happen. Perhaps this situation was more complicated than I am able to fully realize. Sometimes the truth only offers us fragments.

After he was grown, my uncle George reconciled with their father, and over time, somehow the two of them ended up fairly close. I am happy for him, happy that he was able to reconnect with his father. That he did so suggests that my uncle longed for,
waited for, the opportunity to be near his father again. I wonder at their reunion, why they reunited while my mother and her father did not. To reconcile means to win over to friendliness; to bring into agreement; to be resigned to; to compose or settle. She saw him only the handful of times. It doesn’t seem as though she had the same opportunity or maybe, over time, the same inclination that her brother did. Interestingly, though, both of them seem to have had their own kind of reconciliation—George with his to win over to friendliness, and my mother’s, in a way, with to be resigned to her loss. Too many years had gone by for her and with them too many birthdays, events, too many little things.

While he was an absentee parent, my mother’s father continued to have a lot of dominance in their lives. This makes me think of a painting, of what’s painted and of what’s left simply as negative space. I can’t help but feel that they continued to be affected by his impulse or inclination. His visits with my mother were rare, her brother left and boarded out for years, even my grandmother, being left in the dark, not aware of her son’s new family, having to acquiesce to her ex-husband’s plans, decisions and actions, even to the extent of sacrificing a life with her son. I wonder at the decision for George to leave with his father in the first place, and then to be placed within a two-parent household. Would it have been that bad to have let a single mother raise a little boy? Did his father feel that he would be better off with a married couple? Would George not benefit from having his own mother, his own sisters with him? Was it a punishment, too, for his ex-wife? My role as a single mother of two boys makes me all the more sensitive to and all the more angered by his actions, and I feel somewhere a new ache for my grandmother. It seemed she was being judged as now divorced,
without a spouse, without a man, and not as the mother she continued to be. I don’t believe George ever reconciled with her, at least in the way he did with his father. His reconciliation with her seems similar to my mother’s with their father, just to be resigned to an absence. Being the head of the household and having the power socially inherent within that role continued after the divorce for my mother’s father. In thinking about this part of their lives, I appreciate even more that both his influence and his power were most evident through absence.

The house that my mother grew up in has since been torn down, but I remember going to visit my grandmother there, going to 11 Drew Street in Guelph, when I was young, because even though we moved frequently, she did not. I remember fruit trees, the pear tree my grandmother had in her backyard, the toy monkey that always sat perched on the top of her couch. I can still see its brown fur and dark glass eyes, not the soft and cute ones of today, but a realistic-looking monkey, slightly jarring for a moment until one realized it was a toy. In all the years we visited her, it was always keeping watch, a kind of sentinel observing us, observing her. It had been a gift to her from her brother. She had always longed to have a real monkey from the rainforest. I know it was special to her because she gave it prominence of place in her living room. When entering her home on each new visit, I always had to check that it was still there. I don’t know what I would have done had I found one day it was gone.

I think the monkey was special for my grandmother also because it came from her brother. Stephen and I are close, too, and just last year, I gave him a toy monkey when he was in the hospital. Some part of me remembered our grandmother’s monkey, how it provided us a small comfort because no matter what, it was always there. I think it also
must have symbolized a bit of her dream to see faraway places. Stephen’s monkey now sits on his couch and I am suddenly reminded that my sister Shannon also has one, hers brown and fuzzy, on her couch, as well. I am struck by a little urge just now to go out and get one for myself, for my boys, a testament to my grandmother, to the past, to sisters and brothers, to constants and familiarity, to her, and to us.

My mother told me that her mother had longed to have a pet monkey from the rain forest. I wonder about the rain forest and about my grandmother. When she looked at her toy, could she imagine being in the rain forest, surrounded by monkeys, surrounded by trees in the middle of a world so unlike her own? It was just a toy, yet it must have meant so much more to my grandmother. It was a symbol of her whimsy, her carefree attitude which enabled her to permit our playing with it in the first place. It was always there and she was always there. Like Martin’s rose, its significance was realized within us.

My grandmother’s dream of a world so far removed from her own also included an acknowledgement of the dangers that would accompany any visit to the jungle. She was deathly afraid of snakes and strange insects and so her dream became a fantasy, really, one which she said would have allowed her to move safely behind a screen or a glass partition, so that she could see the strange beauty up close, the exotic wild flowers; hear the rush of the waterfalls, the calls of the wild birds and other animals; be amidst the feral lushness without suffering anxiety or confronting the real dangers there that are impossible to take away completely.
An exotic trip would have been not just difficult but quite impossible for my grandmother. As a single mother, she worked in a nursing home near their house. For many years it was only her income that provided for them. Later, she did have a boyfriend, a partner, a man who was retired by the time we would visit. We called him Uncle Walt instead of Grandpa, at his insistence, because he reminded us that he was not our grandfather. While a trip like this was out of reach, maybe by hanging onto her monkey my grandmother hung onto her dream, really a fantasy now, this tiny daydream hoarded away, an internal escape, something to think about, somewhere for her to go to in her mind that was so different from the strain of her everyday life. My grandmother’s name was Fern—my middle name, too—and it seems fitting that the word fern in German translates to far away.

Thinking of her and her name and the jungle so far away makes me imagine the myriad of tropical plants and the innumerable shades of green that must exist there. The English meaning of Fern is a green plant that loves the shade. One of Martin’s poems offers the idea of a plant as a metaphor for what one can know, for what is understood internally:

The underside of the leaf
Cool in shadow
Sublimely unemphatic
Smiling of innocence

The frailest stems
Quivering in light
Bend and break
In silence

Martin says that her poem is about what is known forever in the mind. For my grandmother Fern the idea of green plants that love the shade, of ferns that grow so far
away may have been something she held onto, in spite of all she had experienced herself—the loss of her marriage, the loss of the years with her son, the years spent working as a single mother at the nursing home. The rain forest was real, even if she never got to go there, so the rainforest gave her something she could count on, knowing in her mind it was true.

In the rain forest, a kind of fern called an epiphyte can grow outside of any soil. Epiphytes grow on top of tree branches without harming them and derive their nutrients from the air, rain, leaf debris, the sun. How amazing to think things can grow and thrive in this way. Energy inheres in all things. The epiphytes, the ferns, cling and find nourishment, and find a way to create a home.

My grandmother Fern spent a lot of time away from her children while working at the nursing home. How interesting is the label of nursing home, a place where she helped to take care of others, a place that provided a necessary income for her, but gave her less opportunity of nursing home. Often it was just the three of them, my mother and her two sisters at home, making simple suppers to eat in front of the television because their mother was still working. They must have missed her, missed being able to talk with her and to share with her little things about their day. I wonder if my grandmother was seen beyond this role of mother, beyond this role of worker. Was she acknowledged by others? Was she able to be truly seen as an individual, or did she feel recognized only by these roles she played out every day?

My grandmother really felt for the people living at the nursing home. One resident was always keen to have my grandmother stay to visit in her room. This woman
usually had bouquets of flowers, boxes of chocolates, and other presents, gifts sent to her from her family. Sharing in the treats, my grandmother would tell her how fortunate and cared for she must be, and the resident would agree but softly add that she’d rather see her family than receive any of their presents. Was she able to enjoy the flowers and the sweets they sent her or was she reminded, from these little things, of her loneliness? I wonder how significant it was for her to visit with my grandmother. I wonder how long she waited for her family to come.

And then there was the resident with the beads. My mother told me that on one occasion, my grandmother watched as one of the caregivers assisted a resident with her outfit. The caregiver hastily grabbed the first set of beads she could reach and threw these quickly over the woman’s head. But these beads severely clashed with the woman’s outfit. It seemed this hasty decision hadn’t involved much effort because there had been no attempt, however brief, to find something complementary, to find something the lady might have chosen for herself. The caregiver then said a dismissive or self-satisfying there—that looks wonderful, looking in the mirror for both of them. Off they went, the caregiver swiftly wheeling the resident, as my grandmother watched them go down the hallway. My grandmother noticed when a resident was lonely, when a resident was being reduced in some way. I believe my grandmother’s struggles and difficult life experiences made her all the more attuned to little instances of suffering, to little instances of neglect in others.

There is a figurine of an old woman entitled Old Balloon Seller which has always intrigued me and agitated me. I’ve seen the figurine in shops and in a friend’s home. Other than the distinguishing mark on the bottom of the piece labelling her as Old
Balloon Seller, she hasn’t been given a name. Another Mrs. Bentley. She is beautifully made, with detailed facial features. Her eyes are open but she doesn’t look you in the eye. Her expression, like her posture, is slightly downturned. Her forehead is wrinkled, and her mouth is set with neither a smile nor a frown, her cheeks are slightly flushed, her hair is grey and parted in the middle; she seems thin. In her face I see a woman who is used to selling balloons and has likely done so enough to be comfortably resigned to it. The balloons are a pleasant mixture of purples, yellows and greens. I am sure it is a quality piece, and I imagine that many people who own it enjoy it fondly. My friend now owns this figurine, which had belonged to her mother, and I see it in her living room every time I visit her. For some it was a gift that continues to be passed down in their family, as in the case of my friend. Or it has become associated with the owner(s) or with special occasions, even unconsciously. But somehow, in reflecting on this piece, I am unsettled. It suggests something different than simply an elderly woman merchant, something different than a familial keepsake, a well-made figurine, even an antique of some monetary value. This figurine is just a figurine, but it makes me think of real women like my mother, my grandmother, the women in the nursing home.

Her hair is a soft grey, and her face wears a rather serious expression, lines drawn on it, presumably to represent a life that has somehow resulted in her spending her aging years as a merchant. What intrigues me about her? Perhaps it is her posture, bent over, avoiding the chance of any eye contact, her gaze downward in perpetuity, forever held in a kind of frozen acquiescence. Or the balloons themselves—thin and plastic, objects that could break at any moment, objects designed for temporary celebration and then destined to be discarded. These precarious things seem to reinforce her vulnerability. I pause to
consider the inexpensive nature of her wares; selling balloons could not result in any great compensation for this woman. The fact that she is selling balloons in the first place suggests an economic need to do so. She must forever be at the mercy of the weather; I would think that very cold, rainy or even windy days would hamper her sales. And any opportunity for her at all relies on her being out of doors and dependent, ultimately, on being noticed by others. Elderly, shawled against the cold, face furrowed and downturned, she sells such a slight and perishable commodity. What is her name?

My mind wonders what a story about this woman might be. What might have happened to leave her a vendor in this way? Is she content in bringing a smile to the face of a child? Is that what keeps her going? Or is this simply where her life experiences have led her? She could be a kind of representation of the indomitable human spirit, persevering in spite of the hardships life often brings. Being a balloon seller may provide her some small means of self-expression, some small but crucial outlet for a need to be seen. If she were real, I would like to offer something to her; rather than taking a balloon, I would like to hold out my hand, reach out and help her up, look at her directly, watch as she looks me in the eye, and ask her if she is tired, if she is cold, if she minds being a balloon seller.

Thinking about a possible story for the figurine makes me think about my mother and the individual stories we all have. I sometimes think about my mother’s life, how I saw it as a child, how I am coming to see it now—as a true story and she the central figure. Like those of many women, my mother’s life was shaped and constricted significantly by the limitations and expectations put onto her; with respect to both to class and gender, opportunities for her became both realized and unattainable. I can
recall instances of her creativity, brief moments within the pressures of her life that she found to express herself, personalized sweaters she would knit for our cousins or when someone had a baby, acts that were almost lost on me as a child.

Every year, our grandmother would send us a new pair of knitted mittens, always soft, always wrapped in tissue paper. Whenever we would visit her, she would always sit down in her little kitchen, pull her huge black purse up on her lap, and dig out a quarter for each of us—Shannon, Stephen, and me. She always had a few in her purse for us to spend. A quarter meant that we could run up the street to the corner store and buy 25 penny candies and bring them back in paper bags. This became a tradition, even a ritual. When arriving, we would hang around her in her kitchen and linger, waiting for our quarters but never needing to say anything. She knew what we were hoping for and she never disappointed, she never ignored our presence. We asked her many times how old she was. Without missing a beat, she always replied the same—*I'm 102*. Waiting for our quarters and getting them from her gave us a thrill. Running to the store full of anticipation was just as exciting as getting our candies, maybe more so.

After one visit to the candy store with my mouth full and my paper bag of goodies, I sat in my grandmother’s kitchen contentedly. She watched me as I swung my feet and tossed my head, so that my hair, blonde and shiny, would flip from side to side. At seeing this, she smiled a huge, surprised smile at me, so that I tossed my head several more times, and she told me I was her idol. I was surprised she didn’t believe it wrong for me to enjoy
this attention. Such a slight memory, only an instant or two, and yet I remember that I felt important. She wasn’t irritated that I was seeking this little moment of attention; she never called me vain. In her smile I recognized she noticed me and cared for me, all at the same time.

While Grandma’s monkey was just a toy, she always had a real bird, a budgie in a cage. This was the closest she could get to something exotic, her bird a symbol of the birds and animals from another world that was not attainable but only imaginable. In having a budgie, she seems to have been expressing her desire for the exotic. When we would visit, she would talk to the bird while it chirped back in response. She covered its cage with a sheet at night so that it would go to sleep, her way of tucking it in, of taking care of it. I remember the little cage with its tiny swing, bell, and mirror. The little bird would look in the mirror and believe it was seeing another bird. It would preen and sway back and forth, not understanding it was seeing its own reflection.

The little bird and its cage were fascinating. When the sheet was pulled over, the bird suddenly became quiet. When it was pulled off, the bird would begin to twitter once more. She told me the cloth made the bird believe it was nighttime. Dogs and cats were the only pets we regularly had, with the exception of having a Shetland pony for a time. Birds, to me, were wild, part of nature, never kept as pets and only really witnessed outside, in trees or on the grass. Once we did go to a nature park. There, many birds were behind a wired fence, not entirely wild but not entirely tame. We saw peacocks doing the same thing that my grandmother’s bird had been doing; when peacocks are being watched, they preen and sway with their grand plumage. They and the mock eyes on their feathers seemed to watch us as we watched them. Peacocks proudly getting
admired and my grandmother’s budgie swaying at its reflection in the mirror, thinking it, too, was being seen by another, were fascinating to me as a child. They demanded attention, demanded to be seen. I thought their displays vain at first. I was happy when my grandmother noticed me and smiled as I flipped my hair. The more I thought about the bird’s blatant demands for attention, the less unreasonable they seemed.

When my mother got married, she was eager to begin her new life, one that would offer security and stability. She told me they had a small wedding with just a handful of people there. She wore a blue dress. I’ve never seen a picture. She said someone did take a photo but she never got a copy or never pursued getting one. While my father went out to work, my mother was at home, a stay-at-home mother, or a work-at-home mother. There were times she was happy, being productive, doing what was expected, keeping herself busy. Other times she must have felt pushed into a corner, ambushed into this role that was supposed to be more rewarding than it often was.

My father worked as a journeyman carpenter in the union. He could have worked on the building of the CN Tower but he said she didn’t want him to; it was too dangerous. While I believe that to be true, I imagine he must not have wanted to work on the tower. The last word was invariably his. We moved frequently, sometimes so that he could take a job, sometimes so that he could find a job. There were bouts of unemployment. We usually lived in the country as my dad preferred the quiet. Also, he knew where my mother would be—at home, without any vehicle, alone. She didn’t really get angry about our many moves; she just accepted them, as part of her duty to support my father in these decisions. I can’t help but wonder about the isolation, though: living in the country, without a vehicle, staying at home, because often the only other
people she saw were us. Because my dad was the breadwinner, he felt he should be in charge of the money. For my parents, gender roles were defined to the extreme. He decided where we lived or what the money was spent on. He believed this genuinely was his responsibility.

My mother received a child tax benefit, the government’s Family Allowance, but she referred to it as the baby cheque. I always hated that name—children don’t want to be referred to as babies. This always felt like a kind of dismissal, like a kind of continuous infantile association from that label. The baby cheque kept the focus on infancy, not on a growing child or even the caregiver. This label implied a woman received the cheque because she’d had a baby, not because she was caring for a growing child.

My mother was the only one who ever took us shopping. I remember going for shoes. She would always say how important new shoes were. She wore penny loafers with real coins in them as a teenager but said dimes were even cooler. She had a pair of long white boots—Go-Go boots—in style when she was a teenager in the 60s. She kept them tucked away in a closet and let me wear them to school in grade five. I imagine now that I must have looked like I was playing dress-up, but she never said a word. She didn’t care when I put a flower behind my hair for school pictures in grade six. She let me wear what I wanted. She wore tap shoes as a kid at school and tapped all down the hallway as she went along.

I remember my mother wearing her green and white hat. It was like an odd sun hat with a huge crown and a large floppy brim. The green and white were flowers or
leaves, humongous splotches. It was really big—it was almost ridiculous. Even as a child I felt it was funny-looking, that people were staring when she wore her hat in public. A younger child would have laughed at how funny it was, but I guess I was too old to laugh at it. I was afraid she would wear it somewhere and embarrass me and herself. And then, when my sister was in the hospital to get her tonsils out, my mother wore her hat. I couldn’t believe it. I asked if she was really going to wear it inside. She replied very definitely that *this was her hospital hat, and that when she wore it, it would make them think on her and the hat, and take their mind off their troubles.* While I could understand that was a nice idea and it might work to cheer Shannon up, I still wouldn’t be brave enough to wear it. It was too strange and people would stare, not from amusement but simply to laugh. I remember thinking that somehow she was courageous, though, not to worry about what other people would think, that it was nice for my sister, and that I wouldn’t have been able to wear it.

I realize now that something else was happening when my mother wore her humongous hat. She provided some comedic relief for my sister and for anyone she visited who ailed, taking their mind off their sickness or injury, likely making them smile, however briefly. It was a great conversation piece. She may have remembered her own bouts of being in the hospital as a kid and how lonely a place it can be. In thinking about her decision to wear it, I realize that in this hat, she was being herself, as she had counselled me to be myself—wearing go-go boots to school, putting a flower in my hair on picture day. She was being seen by everyone in this hat, offering care and comedy, and her crazy hat afforded her a small way to express the campy part of herself. This hat gave her a short but significant break from her everyday life, where she could
express a theatrical side of herself, and find, as with her tap shoes, a small way of being noticed, not for being a mom or a wife, but just for being herself. Not able to travel the world, she created adventure out of the smallest of things; the name Barb means *traveler from a foreign land*.

It is these seemingly small things that I remember, that have stayed with me over the years. The purposeful walk my mother had while wearing her hat at the hospital, the paperweight that reflected the light in every new living room, the wildflowers on the table in homes she created for us again and again. My mother’s marriage was not only stifling but also an impetus for creative expression; in remembering, I understand more that it was through the littlest of things she was able to express herself the most. I think these memories are coming back to me when I need to remember them; in reflecting on them, I have come to see my mother as more complex than I had before. By finding ways to express herself, she was passing on a kind of lesson to me; this newly inspires me to reflect on the little things I do with my boys, and offers me a renewed optimism for our future. Perhaps self-expression is what she learned from her mother, if not in words, then in the little things she saw her do. In spite of working long hours at the nursing home and the limitations in her life from her divorce, my grandmother, too, found ways to be herself. And when I remember her toy monkey, her quarters for the candy store, her budgie with its bell and mirror, these too live in my memory; their significance comes to me when I can understand it. From these memories and from my grandmother, I can understand more about the need for individuality and even small ways to find it.
She smiled when I swung my hair; we laughed at her budgie preening in the mirror. Birds will do what they are driven to do, preening, nesting. Wild birds find homes in all sorts of places—trees’ hollows, holes in the ground, reclaimed nests—or build new ones. Once, a bird even nested and laid its eggs in our mailbox. But some make nests within plant epiphytes; while epiphytes grow on trees, they can become hosts to birds who nest within their leaves, a home within a home, one created out of the other. Without roots extending into the ground, epiphytes can grow, thrive, make their own homes, and offer homes to others, all at the same time. We all need a place, a home, and a way to our own nourishment, beyond physical sustenance, to something we can cling to, a branch strong enough to hold the roots we may have to wrap around it and the tendrils we stretch far above it. My grandmother and my mother both found ways to create homes and find self-expression, in spite of the hardships in their lives, and out of the hardships in their lives. These women that came before me found a way to themselves, a process, a belief system, a faith, which I am only now coming to see as a shiny little gift.

*       *       *
Tendrils Around the Sun

My mother was determined to maintain a home for us, in spite of her hardships and ours. In thinking on her childhood, I am beginning to understand the influence her past must have had in shaping her beliefs. After her parents divorced, she was thrust into a new position herself, now living the life of a divorced child. No matter what age, a child is always a child in the make-up (and breakup) of a family. She would have felt and, rightly so, believed herself to be in the minority of children to come from a divorced home. Bouts of loneliness and witnessing her mother work and struggle must have helped inform her ideas for the future. Children remember much of what they see and how it makes them feel, and then recreate these behaviours when they get older, but children can also internalize something with the desire to do the exact opposite. My mother was very determined to remain married, to give us the life she never had, the stability of a two-parent household, even when remaining married was often very difficult. Her past must have helped shape her fears and aspirations which couldn’t help but contribute to my own.

I am not sure exactly how many moves my mother had to contend with before we became more settled in rural New Brunswick. I do remember going to a new school every year. From the homes I can recall in southern Ontario to when we got to New Brunswick, we moved eleven times by the time I was nine.

My mother never seemed to complain about them, at least in front of us. I think she mainly believed it was her duty to support my father in these decisions. Why did we move so often? I still don’t really know the answer to this question. There must have
been times she didn’t want to relocate, again. My father working or looking for work, always believed something better was around the corner. Like my father, my mother would say things like, “onward and upward.” And so we were all propelled forward, perhaps not exactly onward and upward, but propelled on, always towards something different. I think their optimism was a combination of hopefulness and apprehension, my dad more hopeful, my mother more apprehensive, but in their comments to us the message was an instruction. Be optimistic for everyone.

At one new house, my sister, Shannon, was going to a party for her Brownie group and she had to bring a snack to share, but our mother was either sleeping or not at home—a rare occasion—so our dad put Cheez Whiz on some crackers and she took these to her group. It was a mother-and-daughter evening but for some reason our mother didn’t go. Shannon was glad to have something to share. When it was her turn to talk about herself and our mother, one of the other mothers rescued her—she introduced Shannon to the group and told her to stand beside them. A few years later, my class at school was having a party and we were to bring something to share. I didn’t bring anything from home because my mother told me she would come later to school with a treat. I didn’t ask what it would be or how she was going to get there. As everyone starting getting their food out, I was becoming increasingly anxious, sitting in my seat, looking often at the door, hoping she would come. When I saw her face in the doorway, it was more relief I felt than anything. I can still recall what she brought: a large bottle of ginger ale and a bag of gum drops. It wasn’t homemade cookies or fancy cupcakes but at that point, she could have brought anything and I would have been grateful. Even now I am slightly surprised at remembering how relieved I was, but I
was, just the same. I got to walk around the classroom like all the other students, pour each some pop and pull out a gum drop, one on each desk.

I know that parties and treats like these are important to all children and that my anxiety was due to the fear of having nothing to share, of being singled out for that reason. Part of my anxiety also came from knowing there was a chance my mother wouldn’t come. On that day I saw providing a treat for my party as part of her role, something all mothers would do, and so when she came to my classroom, it was not just my mother, but a mother whom I saw, whom I was relieved to see. My expectations for her to come stemmed from my understanding of Motherly Duty. She wasn’t really involved in our school life. The many schools we went to must have confirmed for her that it was pointless to get too involved. Just as we learned to adapt, while hoping each new place would be our last, we became increasingly noncommittal. Perhaps my mother was responding in a similar way to what we had come to understand.

Moving around so much was hard as a kid; I remember leaving pets behind, dogs and cats. Once, for a few months, we had a Shetland pony, Queenie, who never really wanted any of us to ride her; she had a habit of trying to bite us. Still, it was sad to say goodbye to her when we moved on. Leaving friends you’d finally come to know was the hardest. You could be invited to a birthday party or get a great part in a school play, but not be able to do these things because you were leaving, again—was disappointing. I remember doing an audition for a part in Cinderella and my little performance changed from something demure to something adlibbed and quite dramatic, like “well, I’m not Superman, you know.” Sadly, I was not cast for the role of Cinderella. That decision
was probably a wise choice. I was cast for the role of the step-mother or of the king’s wife; I can’t quite remember now because we didn’t stay to do it.

We moved rarely at the beginning of a school year, but usually somewhere in the middle. We got quite good at it, too, never hiring movers—I imagine we just moved too often—but doing it ourselves, packing up our own rooms, each of us children disassembling and reassembling our own beds and frames. And I discovered that it took exactly two months from when I’d enter a new classroom to when I would have a few friends and feel comfortable, again. At the same time, I learned not to get too comfortable, knowing that at some point we’d probably be going to another school. After one particular move, my previous class sent homemade cards to me, to wish me well in my new school. My siblings also received a similar package from their classmates. When I received all these cards I was so surprised; some had little things taped to the insides of them, like pennies or rocks or little pencils. Many were addressed to Shortcake, my nickname in their class. These cards were things my mother said to save onto. When we had something special, she wouldn’t tell us to save it, but to save onto it, meaning to take good care of it, to cherish it and keep it close.

In this previous school, a friend and I used to entertain our class, putting on puppet shows during the lunch hour. This friend’s card asked, “How do we end The Family Johnsons Go to Castle Creeps?” After all these years, I barely remember our puppet family, The Family Johnsons and Their Problems, but I know I enjoyed doing it. My siblings and I would sometimes put on little shows at home for our parents—we would put out chairs for them and they would watch us perform. While my siblings and
I all became pretty good at packing, still, some things would get lost or damaged. Once I lost my bag that held:

- a toy pony with removable bridle and reins,
- a gold cup (both the pony and cup were a present from my grandmother Fern),
  and
- a blue change purse that snapped shut with $4.00 in it.

I don’t know what I was going to spend the four dollars on, but it was my pocket money and I was happy to hold onto it. Maybe I remember these things because the gifts were from my grandmother. I wanted to hang onto my bag myself, keep it with me. These were my things, I was saving onto them, but my father put them in the back with the trailer or somewhere and the bag with my little treasures was lost. I began to be really careful with my belongings after that move, because I realized that if I wanted to keep something, it would have to be up to me. It was as if I had to be the keeper of my own childhood, even as I went through it. I still have the envelope from my classmates with all of their good luck cards and charms, a testament to a time when we did stand still, if only for a short while.

The packing and unpacking we did of our own things as children mirrored all the disassembling and reassembling that my mother did, recreating kitchens to create the same recipes. At one house there was a vacant trailer nearby and my mother let me put empty kitchen items in there—apple juice cans, cereal boxes, other kitchen things. I would go in there, sit down on a chair I’d brought and look around, surrounded by my own little kitchen now, having created my own mini-version of home.
Most of our houses were nice but some were nicer than others; I could even tell this when I was young. Some houses had crystal chandeliers and shiny wood floors, some were really small and my sister and I would have to share a bedroom. We lived in my aunt’s trailer for a while. There was one time we lived in a motel for two months. My siblings and I still remember living at the motel; as chaotic as it sounds, for us, it was a great adventure. In Ontario we moved to a farm that had an old cookie factory on the property that had closed down years before. Knowing that cookies had been made there, in the rooms with the big ovens and metal tables, gave my siblings and me a little excitement as we would explore the abandoned equipment and dream of starting our own cookie business.

One large, brick house near Chatsworth, Ontario had an apple orchard with a pear tree directly outside Stephen’s window. We never could quite reach one of the pears from the window but we longed for the day we would be tall enough. The driveway was so long it allowed for a set of train tracks to stretch directly across. We would often climb trees and wait for our pennies to flatten on the track. Our mother was usually gardening or inside cleaning or reading one of her books and more often than not told us to go out and play for the day, to go out, sometimes just to go away. While we often had houses with gardens and trees, it was the only time we ever had an orchard to ourselves.

I had some of the best times with my siblings, Shannon and Stephen, while living there, the house with the long driveway, the apple trees. We would pack lunches and play in a nearby barn that stored cars and boats. We weren’t supposed to be in there, but
the boats and cars weren’t locked and so we’d pretend we were driving them, each in our own vehicle, going on our shared adventure. We hiked and found a huge boulder and would camp out on top of it. We would roam all day. When we were not in school, we would do our own thing and our mother would do hers. Though I think I longed for time with my mother, she and I never spent time alone. Meanwhile, my siblings and I kept each other from being too lonesome. I wish I could go back now, sometimes, and demand a little more attention; I don’t think she really knew how I felt. Maybe it would be as it was and I am simply reflecting now from my position of parent where I would want to recognize this need in my boys.

I do remember unpacking my things at one new house, and while I was taking my belongings slowly out of the box, having the thought or really, the question, *What are you doing to us?* I was getting tired, physically, from unloading the boxes, but also from having to readjust again. My mother didn’t seem to express much disappointment with our father about this constant moving, at least in our presence, but I know it must have affected her, too. They did have arguments or even loud fights sometimes at night when they believed we were sleeping. And we might have been sleeping, but it is really hard or almost impossible for a child to remain asleep when their parents are arguing. During these arguments, we three siblings had our own little system of communicating. The heat registers vented into each of our rooms and so we would call to each other through the registers and stay talking to each other until the fight was over. Sometimes during their heated arguments, we three would have an Emergency Meeting through the registers and then meet outside, in the orchard, and wait it out. The fresh air and the smell of the orchard were a calming presence then and whenever I’ve come across a
strong scent of fruit, especially over-ripened fruit now, the sickly-sweet scent that lingers, it has always reminded me of my grandmother Fern and the fruit in her kitchen, and perhaps, too, her pear tree in her backyard. Maybe the slight peace this sensation has always afforded me comes also from these other memories, the sleepiness of our old apple orchard, the calm and security it offered on those long nights we three waited outside.

While it’s impossible to entirely understand the context of parents’ arguments as a child, I really wonder if some of the reasons for these might have been all this uprooting. Or, maybe they argued because my mother wanted, needed, some money of her own. She always had to ask my dad several times. He’d want to know what it was for and she’d have to tell him. Then he’d reach in his wallet and examine slowly what was in there and then he’d pull out a five or a ten dollar bill. He would snap it, so that it made a sharp pop sound, and after all that, he would hand it over to her. Maybe she was tired of needing my father to drive her places with our one car—he wanted to be the one to drive her anywhere—or maybe she was tired of him going out or staying out partying. Maybe she was tired of my father believing it was his place to make decisions and her place, and our place, to follow.

One day, at the brick house we had near Chatsworth, Ontario, the five of us were all drinking cans of Coke, a treat, and my father finished his quickly and wanted some of my mother’s. Surprisingly to me, my siblings and our father, she adamantly refused. We thought this was rather funny but still odd, too, in that she wouldn’t share hers with him. It seems such a slight thing to remember, such a small, almost indistinct memory. In thinking about that day, I realize that this was one instance where she said “no” firmly
to our father, in front of us. I wonder if its significance for me now lies not only in recognizing her small defiance, but also in recognizing my strong belief at the time, unsettling as it is now, that her duty was to share with him. Did I know even then, intuitively, that his demand was a bit unfair? It seems memories come back to me when I am finally able to understand them. I want to remember her refusal, one seemingly small word that spoke volumes towards a defiance of the power division in their relationship and which was an affirmation of her own independence.

And then one day we left this house for one in rural New Brunswick, further away from our grandmother Fern, our “Grandma down in Guelph,” and her house at 11 Drew Street. We left the candy store, our pear tree, her toy monkey, our friends, pennies on the track, lunch hour puppet shows, and birthday party invitations. On the day, our parents arrived to pick us up instead of letting us take the bus like we usually did, and when we were driving away, they announced that we wouldn’t be attending school there anymore. At this latest revelation, I wasn’t so much surprised as frustrated that I couldn’t clean out my desk or say good bye to my latest friends. And if I was frustrated, I can now only imagine how this continued to make my mother feel. While I was going to miss my grandmother, I never really thought about how my mother was also moving away from her mother. While I was thinking about the immediacy of my loss, of friends, of relatives, she, too, must have been experiencing her own, and acquiescing to move yet again, to accept more changes, in order to keep our family together.

In a conversation I had with my mother about her childhood, she told me that her mother worked a lot at night and so, was often not at home. In her words, I recognize a loneliness for their mother resonating for her and likely for her sisters. She told me that
now that she was grown, she had a larger understanding of their early life, how their world was very simple. The suppers she and her sisters made were often without meat, cold plates they would eat in the living room in front of the television. She confided that she and her mother never really had conversations about dating or about marriage. Because my mother was the second youngest, maybe my grandmother was also getting tired. She had lost a lot in getting divorced. Her eldest daughter was married, her son gone, the next sibling seven years older than my mother. Maybe my grandmother was acquiescing to this new life, of single parent, of single, working mother. This would have been quite a readjustment, to her, to them. My mother doesn’t seem to have very many memories about living with her father; it seems most of her memories about him are of living without him. Once, when my mother had a big blow-up with our father and was thinking about leaving him, she told me that her mother advised her that it would be best for her to go back home. And when we all moved from southern Ontario to New Brunswick, my mother lost the ability to go to her mother’s house, to visit her, to stay when things at our house were rocky; when we moved to New Brunswick, my mother’s safety net was gone.

Undoubtedly, our often chaotic life influenced my mother’s responses to these constant changes. Sometimes she would only make her presence known in a quiet, subtle way, not talking to us, reading in the living room or at the kitchen table for hours, lying on the couch, almost oblivious to everyone and everything around her. And her bedroom, my parents’ bedroom, was strictly off limits. I always thought it was because we weren’t old enough to go in there, it wasn’t our room, maybe we would break something, and as we never played with our toys or belongings in their room, I guess we
didn’t belong in there. We all need a place of our own to go to, for quiet, for rest, for reassembling a sense of ourselves. I understand this need more now, living as an adult, as a single mother—the need for quiet moments, however fleeting, and the difficulty that often occurs in finding them. Maybe her room, that space, gave her moments where she could gather herself, her thoughts. But she did share it with my father. It would have also felt like their room to her, so this room offered a bit of space that was private, but not completely.

I did go in their bedroom, her bedroom, though, just a handful of times. I wanted to look around, to see what she had, what she liked, what she had saved onto over these moves. I wanted to see her jewelry, her sparkly bracelets and beads, which she kept in a jewelry box on her dresser. There is a kind of peaceful delight that comes from seeing and touching pretty things. Once, when I was about ten, in her closet I found a notebook with a purple and gold cover. She had written poems in it, among them, one for each of us three children. It took a few moments for me to understand what I was actually reading. At the moment of realization, I sat there stunned. I had uncovered a secret thing for the first time. I can only recall the odd word from her poems about us:

*firstborn*—Shannon; *chatterbox*—me, not a surprise; *little man-child*—Stephen, in her handwriting, slightly messy but legible, her being left-handed, blue ink on the white pages. But I don’t think I knew she wrote poetry, or I knew but had never really thought about it. Now I was seeing my mother in a different way for the first time. I wanted desperately to talk to her, to ask her about these poems but I didn’t want to risk getting in trouble, either, so I never did. This encounter with her words, with her thoughts on the page, came as quite a new idea to me. I sat there crying, thinking of my mother as
someone who had had these thoughts, someone who noticed us and thought about us enough to write them down.

As I sat reading her lines in secret, my mother became both more of a mother and more of a person to me. I think I also began to think about myself a little differently, too, as someone slightly more real than I had been before. The times she read or laid on the couch, when she was cleaning or gardening, when she was slightly removed from us, if not physically at least mentally, these moments must have helped her to rest and rebuild, to cultivate and nourish something of her own. In my loneliness for my mother, I found her poems, and I came to understand that she had spent time thinking about us, even though I hadn’t realized it.

Virginia Woolf advises that for women to write they need their own room, their own physical space to do it. Woolf’s opinion, she writes is that *a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction*. I wonder, though, if Woolf’s room could also mean an internal room, a room in the mind, where a woman might go, to set a place for her thoughts, to visit, to reflect inwardly, especially when her physical world needs to be shared by others. Could this be a space like the one where my grandmother thought about monkeys and the rainforest, where my mother formed the ideas and the lines for her poetry? When lacking an individual and private physical space, one’s mind can be vital in affording somewhere to go for nourishment of the spirit, to rebuild a sense of self, to be inspired. When the opportunity for solitude is minimal, when there’s stress, familial obligations and drudgery, when being a woman requires extended mental energy, the ability to find and somehow unlock this mental space is vital.
My mother’s life experiences propelled her to particular expression and behaviour. While there were times she withdrew into her books or into herself, other times she would work frantically, scrubbing the floor or peeling potatoes with an intensity as if the house was on fire. Sometimes she would work for hours this way, in this frantic state, and then take a coffee break at the kitchen table with a cigarette and all would be quiet again, her with her coffee mug and ashtray on the table, her smoking slowly. She often responded to us, to the changes around us all, with varying degrees of empathy and emotion. Without many opportunities to cultivate and shape her life to what she needed and believing she should stay and want to stay married, my mother could be remarkably inspiring and creative. Yet there were other times when she exuded an almost hostile maternity. Her retreating inwardly not only allowed her to create her poetry but also to conceive of a place of security and meaning, furnished with pretty things that added up to a comfortable idea of home. At other times, the frustration from her lack of power and the uncertainty of our home life resulted in her quick temper, in her responding to life in extremes of both frustration and creativity.

My mother can read an entire book in one day. While I only recall one set of books she read aloud to us, she never scolded me for reading at night in my room. I became an avid reader after her example. I began reading *Nancy Drew* mysteries in grade two and was so thankful that no matter where we lived, I could always find a new story in each school’s library. She would often read mysteries, too, gothic stories, she called them. Maybe that’s how I got into *Nancy Drew* in the first place.

My mother writes creatively: she pens poems and journals. She now writes articles for her community paper sometimes. Marrying so young, she never went to
university but she is a great fan of William Shakespeare and of Charles Dickens. When I came to understand she wrote poetry, I liked that she wrote; I liked the idea of her making these ideas more permanent by putting them on paper. Sometimes it seems poetry is within us, waiting all along to be written down. I saw her writing as an important thing; I still do. Our father always has the same response to her poetry. She will hand it to him and he’ll smile and then snap the paper in his hands once or twice and then, almost officially, he’ll scan the words. Then he will say, “deep,” and that’s that. He gets more out of her little articles. For years, she really had no one with whom to discuss her books, her writing, her thoughts. A one word response offers just a hint of acknowledgement, like a fading musical note, the key played, soft but then silent.

I remember getting the Scholastic book order forms from school as a kid. They didn’t come out that often, maybe two or three times in a year, and regardless of cost, we three siblings were always allowed to place an order. Our mother told us that it didn’t matter, we could get whatever we wanted—one thing, carte blanche. To be able to pick whatever we wanted was very exciting, especially because we never really were given choices like that. After a while, it was just a given; we knew that when the order form came, we could order one thing. My favourites were books that came with extras, like bookmarks or pencils or maybe a necklace. When our school sold magazines, she let us order from that form, too. I remember the Highlights series. While they were my brother’s choice, I also read them. And when I started to write a few little poems at school, she came to my room one night after supper, as I sat at my desk, and she held out an orange notebook and simply instructed me, “Fill it up.” One of my poems was about one of our dogs that ran away and another was about “an old oak tree,” quite solemn; I
don’t imagine they were great, and we never really talked about them, but I always remember her giving me the orange notebook.

Because of our frequent moving, my mother wasn’t able to bring every book she owned. Like us, she accumulated new ones, but there is one box of special books she has saved, insistent on bringing it each time. One is a 19th-century textbook, some kind of a math book, with handwritten lines of a Longfellow poem on the inside cover and his signature underneath. This book might have come from a garage sale in southern New Brunswick, one where my parents, my father, bought the entire garage sale or, rather, the entire barn sale. He had bought literally everything a woman had in her barn. I never even had the idea that you could do such a thing. I think it was Norman Mailer who kept all of his books in a barn. But these weren’t only books—it was an entire barn full of things. After several truck loads, we got everything back to our house. My father would go through boxes and crates, asking if anyone could guess what some obscure item was used for. One box was curiously filled entirely with wooden doorknobs, and I didn’t know what he planned on doing with them; were they doors from many houses or perhaps doors from many rooms from only one house? He stored most things in the basement and we ended up having a summer-long sale of our own.

How long this collection had been in the woman’s barn before we came along, I wasn’t sure: years, probably. And did the lady really want to sell everything she had? Maybe she just wanted people to come and look around, maybe talk about the weather. Maybe she was just lonely. I remember the lady was startled, at the idea of us taking…everything. When my father asked the lady, we all instantly withdrew from watching his face to searching hers. It was as if we saw on the lady’s face her thoughts,
just as she was thinking them, from her initial surprise, and then a quick sense of panic, as she immediately scanned the barn. And then all this washed away from her in an instant, as if she had made up her mind on the spot, and became resolved with this thought, and the longer she thought it, the more resolved she seemed. Then, she smiled. And this now permitted all of us to smile, too, all of us a little more relieved. Her property was near the community where I ended up going to high school, where I would meet my spouse. Before we got divorced—actually, before we got married—he told me about a relative of his nearby who had sold her entire barn sale to a single family. That was us, I told him; we took the works.

I know that the things we carted around from move to move were important to us. My things were to me. I wonder about the lady getting rid of everything. With the textbook and the Longfellow poem, my mother never wanted to have this handwriting authenticated, in case it was proven not to be genuine. Rather, she holds onto it as a possibility. Then can imagine that she might be holding the real thing.

She might have read to us children when we were young but I can only recall one instance of this. I was about eleven or twelve. I know that at that point, I had already been reading by myself for years. We had expressed an interested in C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, specifically, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the best book of the series, after watching an animated version of it on our television. In a surprising move, she ordered the complete set in hardback from the publisher. The three of us children would take turns picking a bed and then we would all gather with her so that she could read to us aloud, one chapter every night, for several months.
It was such a small thing, in a way, reading aloud at night before bedtime, but sitting on a bed with our mother was something that never happened to us children. Yet here we were, all together, our mother reading these stories to us. We each had our pyjamas on, Stephen holding his stuffed animals. The person whose bed we were on was under the covers. This was her first experience with these stories, too, and so perhaps she decided to read them to us as opposed to reading silently, knowing we would be excited to hear them. When she read a portion out loud, she and the three of us were experiencing these words, these thoughts, all at the same time. I believe now that added to the level of enthusiasm she brought to these evenings and I still remember fondly these few times we came together to transport ourselves to Narnia—the wardrobe, the forever-winter, the white witch, the Turkish delight, the bravery of the Pevensies in battle.

Now that I am a parent, I think I have about three sets of the Narnia series. We also have some of the new movies but The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe is still my favourite. I won a trip to England, of all places, several years ago and decided to take my girlfriend, Jackie, along. My boys were just babies, really, at that time, and the trip was for two adults. It was significant even then that I didn’t want to take my significant other. At that time, we were going to marriage counselling and I was coming to know that it was the beginning of the end. A year after the trip, my boys and I moved into our own place. While we were to be in England, I had arranged for my boys and their father to visit his parents—the best solution I could think of, he getting a trip, too, and getting help with the boys. Jackie and I had arranged a C.S. Lewis tour in Oxford and spent several hours being shown everything from The Kilns with its rose bushes and quietness,
to Lewis’s final resting place, where he is buried alongside his brother, Warner. Being at the cemetery was both solemn and rewarding, in that it provided even a small connection to the person who had given us children so much. While I’ve read some of his works, I still think his books for children are what inspired me the most. As a kid, I always remembered how the Pevensie children were in charge in Narnia, they could make choices, they were important and listened to, and I always loved that. It is a series my siblings and I still think about fondly and I am glad to be able to share this with my boys. I think in a way I am hoping to pass down not only the stories, but also, somehow, the connection we made with our mother, during their reading. The stories are significant to me because of the personal power of the children within them, and for the way they brought our family together.

While we were growing up, our birthdays at home were always great. Birthdays were simpler than the parties of today. Back then, they usually involved going to someone’s house to play, where there would be balloons and cake. While these parties were relatively simple, they were something special to look forward to. At one party there was a cake with coins baked into it. You would receive good luck if you found one. I remember the children around me jumping up and down when they got one and I was scared I wasn’t going to find one. When I tasted the coin in my mouth, I was elated to also have found a piece. I also remember the father of the birthday girl seeming just as happy as I was that I had found a coin, he smiling at everyone that day. I remember a pool party for a girl named Michelle. We were told to wait thirty minutes exactly before being allowed back into the water. To me, these were extravagant parties and I was so happy to have been invited.
Birthdays at our house were a lot simpler. While my siblings and I never had parties where we invited others over, my mother ensured that all three of us enjoyed each other’s birthdays almost as much as our own. She would invent little games for us to play, like riddles or trivia questions or contests to see who could complete a puzzle the fastest. The winner could then pick a prize from Mom’s prize basket. All of these were wrapped, so each was a surprise. They were all little things—gum, stickers, whistles, tiny toys—inexpensive tokens she had collected specifically for the party but to us, to me, they were special, they brought us together; in playing these games, we were happy. These prizes were symbols for our enthusiasm and for her effort. During these times, we were close to our mother, engaging with her mentally and physically. And in watching her face, I saw that she, too, was always delighted in these little exchanges. Wherever we lived, her creative birthday baskets became a kind tradition for us and for her; they were something we came to expect, something we, including, I think, our mother, all looked forward to. Just like our grandmother’s quarters for the candy store, these baskets were a small piece of security that never got lost, no matter how many houses we lived in.

Every now and then, she would make homemade candy. It looked just like glass, broken in the pan. We called it her Glass Candy. I remember smelling the sugar and the vinegar as she stirred it, bubbling, on the stove:

1 cup w. sugar, ¼ cup w. vinegar, ¼ cup butter
Combine sugar & vinegar
Boil then add butter, can add colour, flavours
Continue boiling until the hard-crack stage
Test by dropping a pinch into a glass of cold water
When it forms hard threads that break, it’s done
Pour into greased pan (or molds)
Crack into pieces when cool
At one of our houses there was a currant bush. Our father taught us how to
distinguish between snake berries and currants, so that on the days we roamed around we
wouldn’t eat the wrong ones. I remember my mom’s currant jam. That was another
thing that I remember learning there, how they were currants and not currents. My
mother used to and still cans. I remember the fruit and sugar in the pan, bubbling red, so
that we could see it glisten, the jars on the table waiting to be filled, the temperature
hotter than normal, but then the air sweeter than normal, too. Even with her face flushed
from the heat and steam, she was always happy in this place, in this act of making
homemade jam. We would have jars upon jars of it, and she would also give jars to
relatives and friends; she would even sell them whenever we had a garage sale and
people would come back simply to buy more jam.

Blueberries, my favourite, taste the best from the Maritimes. Perhaps my
memory consists of one part accuracy, one part nostalgia, but this sentiment feels true.
Picking the berries after a rain is the only time I didn’t mind swishing away a cobweb
from a spider who had found the same great spot I had, these blueberry plants so close to
the ground. Mary Pratt’s painting, *Jelly Shelf*, which depicts jelly jars, sealers, glowing
from the sun behind them, illustrates that a beautiful everyday thing is worth capturing.
Pratt created a work based on another created thing. She captured domestic work that is
often seen as small, predominantly done by women. Her art suggests to me something
not only about the end result, about the tableau, but also about the process and about
time. It is as if she is capturing intention and effort and time, all integral to making
preserves. For my mother, I would add happiness and personality and anticipation. This
canning gave my mother a small creative task, an outlet for her energy, a connection to
the natural world, a nod toward the domestic chores she felt compelled to do, a chance to create something useful but beautiful, a chance to hand out her jam, to interact with others, to be herself.

**Recipe for my Mother’s Blueberry Jam**

*I remember small kitchens,*  
*small or large or in between.*  
*Sealers lined up on the table,*  
*water dripping down their sides as perspiration ran down her face.*

Empty, these jars stand at attention,  
waiting with mouths open.  
Free of fingerprints,  
though her fingerprints were on everything.

Surrounded in steam and heat  
and single determination,  
a wooden spoon stirs  
from her rhythmic hand,  
stirring us into a timeless past,  
into our own fairytale.

*I hear the scraping of the pot;*  
not a regular cauldron,  
she doesn’t laugh out loud.  
The only chant a hiss of sputter and spit.

*To everything add a pinch of love—*  
this pinch, this birthing,  
berries once green, now ripe and blue,  
pop and brew and glisten in the pan.

*With berries in their beaks, birds pose for artists,*  
*and children in ribbons drop them into straw baskets.*  
*We and neighbours and friends all share*  
*and feast like Tom Thumb on pancakes and jam.*

*Pushing the spoon, stirring down and down*  
to an inner light, sweet and warm, I understand that whenever they say, “it was the making of her,”
Sometimes it takes a woman to understand another; I think my mother believed this. Because we often lived in rural homes, my mother’s friends were usually our neighbours. And it was always something whenever one of these ladies would come over; it was only the ladies that would come—my dad never wanted their husbands to come unless he was around. My mom would make a coffee cake if she had the ingredients, she’d always serve coffee, and they would sit at the kitchen table and talk. More often than not, smoke, too. Though she and my father quit smoking years ago, they smoked all the time when my siblings and I were young. It wasn’t as taboo to smoke around children as it is now. But what I remember most about Mom’s company is how different she was when they were there. She was the same mother and yet, somehow different, too. They would have conversations about all sorts of things: politics, religion, family news, recipes. I used to think she was always a little happier when someone came around. Visiting someone, having a friend, taking a break from her daily grind, was a small but vital outlet for my mother.

I think now that describing my mother as being a little happier from these visits is only party right. She exuded a kind of energy, an internal glow that began when our neighbour would arrive. She glowed softly but brightly until the lady left, her exuding a peace which did not factor into her daily life in the same way. In the company of another woman, she could share commonalities; they could understand each other in a way that she and the rest of us at the time could not. She must have felt on the same
level as these other women, that she didn’t owe them anything, didn’t have to take care
of them, didn’t have to do anything for once, but simply be.

Just as these memories offer me times when my mother’s extensive effort was
favourable and exciting, where she could be fun and creative, there were other times
where she seemed to react to us unsympathetically. I think the pressures of her life
propelled her to be seen as a mother, and doing her motherly duty. I think this pressure
seemed to propel her to respond and seize opportunity in the extreme, almost out of the
necessity to be recognized as such.

One time we were in a department store and I began playing with a little set of
dolls. My sister and I often played with Barbie dolls but these dolls were smaller, about
half the size, and Shannon was playing with me. Our mother had wandered away for a
while shopping but came back and announced we had to go—right then. If there was
anything we learned, it was that when our parents said we were leaving, we knew that
meant right now. When I got home, I took off my jacket. Inside my hood were the same
two little dolls from the store. I guessed that my sister had simply let go of them when
we had to go. While I knew we didn’t buy them, I also knew I wasn’t the one to put
them in my coat. There they were, for me to play with.

After supper, I was up in my room, playing quietly with these new dolls. My
mother came in after doing the dishes and saw the dolls. She was immediately startled
and asked where I had got them. I felt nervous knowing my answer wasn’t really going
to satisfy her; still, I told her the truth. And since in my mind I wasn’t the one to take the
dolls, part of me thought she just might understand. She didn’t. I told her that Shannon
must have dropped them in my hood. By this point, she was becoming quite angry. She
accused me of taking them deliberately. I was adamant—I did not! She said we’d have to return them to the store first thing in the morning. I wasn’t allowed to play with them anymore. At the time I felt this was mostly reasonable. I believed that once the two little dolls were returned, everything would be fine. Looking back, I know now that she was really just getting started.

She marched me into the department store early the next day. I do remember marching as there was never an action that indicated my mother’s bad humour more than this determined stride. She quickly found the sales woman, the same woman who had been working near the toy aisle the day before. My mother promptly produced the two little dolls and gave them back to the woman. As she was handing them to her, she declared fastidiously, almost formally, that I had stolen them the day before. Her words and tone brought me back into the tension of the moment and I immediately spoke up to say that I had not. The sales woman had been slightly smiling when my mother gave the dolls to her but I remember her expression quickly becoming apprehensive. My mother reiterated that I had stolen them and told me to admit it. The saleswoman’s eyes were growing wider and I imagine now this scene must have put her in a difficult position. I held firm and said, again, that I had not taken them but that my sister had put them in the hood of my jacket. This scenario went on and on, back and forth, and it makes me slightly agitated even now to remember it in such detail.

And the saleswoman—she was unable to leave, unable to go back to doing whatever she had been doing before we descended on her morning. My mother was standing straight and prim. From her body language and her tone, I don’t imagine this lady had any other option but to stand and witness our feud. I kept denying the theft,
telling her how my sister must have dropped them in, again and again, and I wonder now just how long this actually went on. I wonder how long my mother insisted I tell the woman I had taken them, or how long she kept the woman bound to her part in our scene. I remember crying, crying for the injustice of the thing, as my mother seemed resolutely impervious to me, to everything. It became a battle of the wills, and I was breaking down. I shudder to think about just how uncomfortable this made the saleswoman; at one point she said that it was all right, that the dolls were returned and that there had been no real harm done. Perhaps she believed me even if my own mother was not going to.

I can remember how this ended, too. I remember my mother shifting gears, somewhat, and telling me that if I told the woman I stole the dolls, she would buy me an ice cream. It seems odd, now, to think of that, to think of giving a treat or a reward for bad behaviour—I imagine that it was my admission of the theft and not the theft itself that would warrant this ice cream but part of me still couldn’t give in. Years later, I read that when children are adamant about something, they are usually telling the truth.

I remember at the department store having the thought that we would never leave, that we would have to stay there forever, that this woman would continue to be held up as a kind of a prisoner or witness to us and that this push/pull nightmare would continue indefinitely. I know, at last, I decided to acquiesce. Or perhaps I needed to acquiesce. I avoided any eye contact with the both of them by looking at the floor. And I said to the saleswoman that I was sorry that I had stolen the dolls.
This is exactly what my mother had been waiting for, had been holding out for, and she, the adult, must have known that I would be forced to give in, eventually. I am not sure entirely what I am most agitated by, the fact that I had to admit to taking the dolls or the fact that my mother didn’t believe my whole story. We did get ice cream after that, my mother proud and satisfied, but I don’t remember the rest of the day. I don’t remember what kind of ice cream it was or where we got it. I don’t think I enjoyed it. It was a mixture of messages that day, having to say I stole the dolls and then getting a reward for it. I remember being angry with my sister for dropping them in my coat in the first place and I told her so that evening. She didn’t seem to think it was a big deal.

Since that time, I don’t think I have ever taken anything that wasn’t mine in my entire life. I almost wrote the words *taken anything again* just now, but as I didn’t actually take anything in the first place, I only have to simply write *anything*. I guess the message to never steal was firmly entrenched in my brain after that and so, as that was likely part of my mother’s plan, it was a success. When I became a mother, certain memories of my childhood came back to me. I have read this remembering is a common occurrence in parents; that memories will come back to you once you are acting or seeing things in your child that are similar to your own past.

One time, at the grocery store, I was shopping with my youngest son, Aiden. He was about five years old. He had asked me if he could have the pack of gum he was holding in his hands. I said no and told him to put it back. I remember my being or trying to be in the *no* phase and so, *no* it was; I was trying to establish the idea that he didn’t *always* get a treat every time we went to the store. That was fine and he didn’t really complain. It was rather odd that he just quietly accepted my refusal. Gum is
inexpensive and sometimes I did let him get a little thing for being good at the store. Not
long after we got home, I saw him chewing some gum. I asked him, immediately
suspicious, where he got the gum. He answered with a shy but satisfied smile, and held
up the package—the same package of gum from the grocery store, only this package had
been opened, hence the chewing.

I told him we were going back to the store, to return the gum he had taken. I
remember saying that I had told him no and I meant it and that taking the gum was
actually stealing. I also remember at that realization being flooded with my own
memory of the day I was made to march back to the store with the two little dolls. In our
drive to the store I couldn’t help but think of myself back then in a similar position he
was now in. I found myself unsure with how to handle it, exactly. I knew I had to take
him back to the store—he had taken it and I couldn’t miss out on this opportunity for a
“life lesson.” I didn’t want a boy who got away with chewing gum to end up as a man
with sticky fingers. In these instances, having a partner might make things easier, when
both parents could decide what to do next. I don’t know whether my mother ever
discussed the incident involving the two little dolls with my father. However, it was just
me, and so, I had to do something.

I did understand that returning the gum was a must. I thought back to my mother
and her anger. I have to admit that getting angry didn’t seem as strange now that I was
faced with a similar situation. Unlike me, though, my son had taken the gum when I had
said no, whereas I ended up with the “stolen” dolls by accident; I also think that he being
only five or so, meant that he was only about half the age I had been then. A significant
thought came to my mind as we were driving back to the store with the gum. I had
decided to play with the dolls knowing where they must have come from. I realized, while driving my son back to the store that, I did understand somehow that I shouldn’t really have these unexpected playthings, that they weren’t really mine, that, even though my sister had dropped them in my hood, they hadn’t been paid for, that there was a slight shadowy feeling to playing with them. In all honesty, I should have been the one to give them to my mother.

I think about my department store confession. What had felt like coercion then seemed now to be more like only a partial injustice. Driving to the store with my son and the gum was the first instance where I really thought about the dolls from an adult perspective, from a parent’s point of view. It was the first time I admitted, at least in part, to being somewhat to blame back then. Being a parent is a complicated thing because your decisions are informed by your own past, your own experiences, as well as the circumstances of your present situation. These circumstances can inform you for better and for worse. In thinking how my mother handled the incident with the dolls, I realize that it hadn’t been long since we had been uprooted from southern Ontario and from Grandma, and that these changes likely influenced her that day.

With my son, I tried to say only what was needed and not go overboard. I can see how overreacting can be easy to do, though; I was disappointed with his behaviour. Parenting classes and books often advise you to tell your child you are disappointed in their behaviour and not in them as a person—although it is impossible to separate the two entirely. The implication is still that the child is at fault for the behaviour, but I know that we all make mistakes and I know that we can learn from them. Making mistakes are valuable opportunities for growth and character. A life lived too narrowly,
without any rocks or weeds, would actually be deficient of any real growth; these thoughts I tried to remember as we entered the store. However, as we approached the customer service desk, I think the two of us were marching in, just as my mother and I had marched before.

I plopped Aiden up on the counter. I decided to speak for him and tell the clerk he had taken the gum. She immediately smiled and my countenance changed to a frown. I said, “No, he shouldn’t have taken this gum” or some such parental declaration. He told her he was sorry. She picked up on my mood, my mom-face, my authoritarian-like impression, my own Motherly Duty, and she quickly stopped smiling and frowned as well. She said something like, “Yes. Well, thank you.” We paid for the gum and gave back to her what was left of it; I didn’t think he should have the rest to chew on and I think at that point we both just wanted to be rid of it, to have all this unpleasantness over and done with. I can remember, too, at that point, that I felt this situation was done, that I handled it, that I had said and done all that needed saying and doing.

As we went back to the car, not exactly marching now, my strides of being in official parent-mode diminishing, he asked me, “Are you going to tell Grandma?” His question made me think that he not only knew it was wrong to take the gum, but also he knew enough to be embarrassed by it. This pleased me, because it made me think he did understand. I told him that he was never to take anything that wasn’t his ever again. I also told him that the situation was done and that I would never bring it up again, to Grandma, or to him. And I never did.
I think the difference between my handling of this theft and my mother’s is a matter of degree. We both basically did the same thing. We made the child return the object. We were even both satisfied when it was done and neither of us has ever brought it up since. I guess, though, that I remember how it felt, to be on display, and so even though Aiden took the contested gum, I knew that a few minutes of shaming or accountability was really enough. That part, I remember, and so I dialled back the aggressiveness in our time at the store.

I was also remembering what I didn’t know that I had known: that this was all occurring in the aftermath of our recent move, that there was suddenly a great deal of physical distance between my mother and her mother, that there often existed a measure of powerlessness in my mother’s life. Part of my agitation from that day with the dolls lies in the fact that I was being made to be an accomplice, of sorts. If I admitted to taking them, she would be seen as a good mother, teaching her daughter a valuable lesson, and so I was made to go along with the story in order to satisfy her own need for validation. Our feud was really about both of us wanting to be seen and heard, both of us wanting to be recognized.

My mother was shaped a great deal by her upbringing and so was I. Watching her mother struggle as a single parent, I believe, made her determined to stay married. For me, watching my mother struggle in a difficult marriage likely allowed me to imagine the alternatives, to eventually think of divorce. Reflecting on the past, on memories, on things that have stayed with me, on seemingly small remembrances, seems to help me understand a bit more about my mother, about where we are, and how we each got here.
My parents finally stopped moving, after all of us siblings were gone. They’ve now lived in the same place for the past twenty years. My mom calls my boys regularly; she is quite an involved grandparent, aware of their activities, cheering them on. My boys don’t really have a concept of moving, other than when we moved here, into our new place. When they see their father, it is in the same house we had together. They think the idea of moving a lot is exciting but I tell them it was hard; I know now it was hard on everyone. Moving around was chaotic and difficult but it pushed my siblings and me into self-reliance and even confidence: a positive, I suppose, that grew out of those stressful, early years.

Agnes Martin once said that she could remember when she was born—she saw herself as a figure with a little sword, and felt she was going to cut through life victory after victory, but then at the moment of birth, half of her victories fell to the ground (Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World). Martin says this is about adjustment. She later discovered meaning through the beauty of her abstract expressionism. I think Martin’s story is about process, acceptance and becoming. She begins with an initial loss, the loss of idealism, of a life of a kind of perfection, and an understanding of her need to negotiate this loss to a place where she is able to recover, to now respond to life on her own terms, to create. I think this is what my grandmother did, what my mother did. I believe my grandmother’s humour, her quarters for the candy store, her dream of the rain forest, her noticing others were all seemingly small but profoundly significant elements of her personality, care, and consideration for us, for me. These actions were what she did after re-stabilizing herself as a divorced woman. My mother looked up to the idealized position of wife and mother. She understood life the way society showed
her it might work, and she, perhaps nobly, held on, in spite of hardships and difficulties, in spite of sacrifices and limitations. As in Martin’s story, as with my grandmother, I believe my mother also suffered a loss when coming to terms with the impossibility of perfection, with the rejection of her initial idealism of a secure, two-parent family. However, like Martin, I also believe this adjustment to be a process, where my mother went from idealism, to loss, to acquiescing to the life she had. From that, she searched for her own meaning through creative expression, her pretty things, her hat, her jams, her poetry. Martin’s process, then, seems like my mother’s process, like my grandmother’s, like my own. When I call my mother now, she stops whatever she’s doing and listens to whatever I’ve written. She’s eager to listen to my poetry. Writing is the one thing in common we’ve held onto, or that I’ve saved onto. I remember the past and try to bring forward the best fragments. I try to pause what I’m doing and listen to my boys, attending to what they have to show me, what they’ve created. Their need to genuinely be seen, to be heard, is one thing from the past I’ve remembered. It’s one thing I have to offer.

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Little Wonders

I have always been a saver—pretty Christmas cards, jewelry, craft items, letters. As a child, relocating to new houses, and packing up our own things again and again, my siblings and I learned to save onto anything special. It was only a few years ago that I sifted through a large box of cards and letters to decide what was most significant to continue keeping, because up to that point, I had kept every card and letter I had ever received. And after a divorce, when you move out on your own, people give you things, so you keep those, too. You get people’s extras, like pot holders or glasses or dishes. They want to help and give you what they no longer need but perceive that you will, like blankets and tea pots, especially if they’ve purchased new ones. I was given a lot of these things. I received cook books and clothing and toys. When I decided to leave my dysfunctional marriage, the bedroom in my new apartment quickly filled up with things. While on some level I recognized the large number of items to be legitimately a kind of clutter, I have to admit that there was, for me, a sense of security and peace being surrounded by these things. I now not only had the permission to have what I wanted in there—lace curtains, magazines, an old teddy bear—but also there was a kind of comfort within this space. From all of the years we moved when I was young, I developed an understanding that it was our special things that converted each new house into a recreated home. This new room of my own was an escape from the outside world and from the pain of my marriage. When my young boys and I would sometimes sleep together in this cluttered bedroom, I often told them we were just like three peas in a pod, and in this space, together, surrounded by these things, it felt as if we were safely stowed away.
When we left our old home, Andrew and Aiden were only four and two years old. I was terrified, knowing that this decision was going to affect them for the rest of their lives. At the same time, I had to admit that if we stayed, I wouldn’t be able to continue to parent them anymore, as I was suffering from a deepening depression. To Stacy, my counsellor, I’m a success story. I began to live life as a single parent. Shortly into the separation, I took my boys to see *Meet the Robinsons*, the very first theatre movie I took them to as a single parent. When we left the theatre, I held their hands and the movie’s theme song “Little Wonders” by Rob Thomas kept playing in my mind . . . *if it's me you need to turn to, we'll get by* . . . . As we walked to the car, their small hands in mine, I wanted so much at that moment to make a life for them, to create a home for them, for us. This song reminds me of that feeling, a kind of fear and subtle hope together . . . *Our lives are made in these small hours, these little wonders*. . . . Here I was, taking them to our new home from our first movie and I was doing it as a single parent. We could do this, I could do this, two children and two hands, each of theirs in mine.

I can only convey a part of what I was feeling, but somehow so many of these feelings are contained for me in this song. After years of living in an increasing kind of numbness, I was actually feeling something: nervousness and guilt, but also a kind of optimism, or a hope for a kind of optimism . . . *I cannot forget the way I feel right now* . . . . If I had a token or an object from that night—if only I’d kept the movie stub—it would remind me of all of these complicated feelings, the fears and anxieties, the wish for a life for us and the crazy belief that it just
might work, the guilt in not being able to keep our family together, a lightening of my earlier depression, and a hope they would one day understand why this had happened, why I had made this choice for us . . . Time falls away . . . these small hours still remain . . . all at once, a whole world prompted from one, small fragment. It gives me a kind of comfort to recall the lost movie stub, knowing what it symbolizes. While I don’t have the real paper copy, I remember it and I remember the song, safely stowed in a little room of my mind.

Walking with my boys out of the theatre, it was as if I felt a little shift in that moment. I felt that that evening was significant and I wanted to hold on to this thought. I wanted my boys to have some sense of security, even though I knew they could never again have the security that comes from being in a two-parent household. At the same time, I was determined that I could do something. I felt empowered. And I began to create a life for us. We began to do the things as we once had done, going to the park, reading stories, making crafts. The divorce became a life event for me, for us. Our lives had now been divided into two sections, our old life and now our new. And because of this, I didn’t want them to miss out on creating memories. I felt the need to be present, to be aware, to notice things, to save them, to be a good mother, to find meaning in the littlest of ways.

Some of the things my mother did when I was young I have tried to continue with my boys. For a long time, our nightly ritual was bathtime and then stories. My boys and I, like my siblings and I, would gather on a bed and I would read aloud, just as my mother did for the Narnia stories. I’ve tried to consistently bring treats to school for class parties and to encourage my children to join up for activities both in and out of
school. While I didn’t do all of the creative things my mother did, I remember that she
was creative and it seems to work better if we also come up with some ideas of our own. Once, Andrew wanted us to have an owl wedding with his toys, and so we set up chairs in the kitchen, played music, and even put apple juice in champagne glasses.

Making crafts—we made a ton of crafts—we had our “creative music” and would play it to inspire us. I remember on several occasions having our own little party, where we dressed up, me with bright red lipstick and the boys with glitter gel all over their arms, and I would take turns spinning them around and around in the living room. When you’re a single parent, a single mother, while there’s no other adult in the house, no one else to help out, it also means you get to do what you want, and dancing around the living room until way past a proper bedtime is something we got to do.

While I wanted to notice the little things, I had only to watch my boys, because it is the littlest ones who seem to notice the smallest of anything. Andrew would check on flowers we planted in the backyard and when they were past blooming, he would say a soft “goodbye” to them. He noticed the school’s No Smoking sign had a line through it and told the staff that that must mean No No Smoking. They got a new sign. If I was wearing a shiny necklace when he came home from school, he would exclaim, “Mom, you’re all dressed up!” I still remember so clearly when, as a kindergartener, he got off the school bus with a huge brown paper bag, filled to the brim with wrapped Christmas presents, from a special room set up for kids’ shopping at school. He was beaming, and put the presents he had for Aiden and me in his room for safe keeping. Aiden still has
the little blue truck that Andrew got him that day. I still have the candle holder he got and the flower pot and flowers he made me. They’re sitting in my china cabinet even now. And, it was Andrew who remarked somewhat surprised one day, while watching a family on a children’s show, that family all lived in one house together.

Aiden never went anywhere without his blanket, his Blue B, which my mom knit for him. He would hold an edge of it tightly in his fist and suck his thumb. For a long time he would cry if we ever went in the car and he didn’t have it, so, we always had it. When making drawings, he was often not satisfied until he had glued all sorts of objects onto his page. Sometimes he poured water over his drawings, and we would have to let them dry. If we packed a picnic, whether for the park, or just the basement, Aiden always found some treat I had stashed away in the cupboard, and would pull these out to share. One time, my car was at the garage, and Aiden pulled out snacks. If I had a piece of jewelry on, Aiden wanted one, too, and would search out something from my jewelry box, looking for a “shiny” as he called it. Aiden could recall songs that he had only heard once before on television, recognizing them if he ever heard them a second time. I asked the boys, once, if they remembered me living at the old house, at their dad’s house. Aiden thought for a moment and then said that he remembered me making popcorn once and that a kernel popped down and touched him on the toe.

Both boys had bug keepers, where they could put a bug in a plastic box, and look at it close-up, through the built-in magnifying glass. Aiden would put grass and leaves and sticks in there, to
give the lady bugs or ants something to eat, and something to crawl on. I never knew how long the bugs should be in there and after a bit, told them to take them out. Once, they had the idea to put two different bugs in together, but when they started fighting, it bothered them and they hurriedly dropped them out. And, on one occasion, it was Aiden who came to me in a panic when he found a blue dragonfly swimming frantically in their blue plastic pool outside. We ran back out together, and there it was, swimming and swimming, with nothing to hold onto. Aiden quickly grabbed a stick and held it out to him; the little thing reached for the stick and hung on. Then Aiden slowly lifted the dragonfly out of the pool and laid him in the sun. At that moment, the little blue face turned, as if in slow motion, likely exhausted, but seemingly aware, as if thankful, as if to offer gratitude with its gaze, to the hero who had pulled him out.

_Aiden’s Dragonfly_

*Blonde curls wisp and whip,*  
*a dog barks twice and you turn your head.*  
*Lemonade spills on the grass as*  
*the neighbour’s car soars*  
*up to the clouds.*  

*You advance, slow and sure;*  
*the Blue B cape blankets your shoulders.*  
*Ice cubes tink and clink of armour,*  
*flags snap and wave,*  
*car trumpets sound.*  

*Castle windows mirror your reflection;*  
*eyes search for smoke and horses.*  
*The drawbridge lowers and you begin across,*  
*a flash of silver from your*  
*sharpened twig.*  

*You catch a shift in light,*  
*a prism on the water;*  
*a winged baby, shadowy blue—*  
*distressed and*
dying.

*You* sword, *your* stick, *your* broken piece,
*held out to him by noble hands,*
*an offering, a prayer.*

*You rest him on the sparkling grass;*
*the tiniest eyes now stare into yours.*
*Saved from a watery grave,*
*he breathes, almost smiling.*
*And you rise and bow and listen again*
*for horns in the distance,*
*for trumpets in the wind.*

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I’ve read that the magpie is one of the only animals to be able to recognize its reflection in a mirror. While most species believe their reflection to be another animal, another bird, as in the case of my grandmother’s budgie, the magpie is believed to be self-aware. As it knows itself, we say that it is intelligent. Growing up in the Maritimes, we had a neighbour whose living room was filled with taxidermy—I remember a baby bobcat, teeth bared, it perched on a branch, forever held frozen in that moment of fear. I also remember a magpie, stuffed, eyes like marbles, black, dead. The magpie is thought of as the collector, the packrat, the hoarder among birds. The magpie might be considered intelligent for its ability, however real or mythical, to notice, to collect shiny things. I don’t know if the bird is doing anything more than making a nest, but it seems intriguing to think of a magpie as moved to notice pretty things and to want to bring them home.

My bedroom in our new apartment after the separation went through a process, from minor to major clutter, and then, with a renewed awareness of space and necessity, to minor clutter once more. Being organized, almost minimal, that’s in vogue now.
With a world that is so often focused on acquiring possessions, it’s actually odd that we’re never really supposed to have any. I am more aware now not only of my things, but also of my need and the likely cause I had to create this cluttered space. As a child, moving around a lot, I learned to save things, to recreate homes again and again. It was our objects that always made us feel at home, that offered a sense of comfort. With divorce, life destabilizes and leaves you in a precarious position. As time has gone by, I suppose this need for things in my room has diminished because of my renewed sense of security and personal authority. While putting my new life into motion helped me manage my own clutter, I was just beginning to collect the things associated with my children.

I wanted desperately to create something significant for my boys, while at the same time, being conscious of the new past we were now also making. As they were already at a disadvantage, going back and forth between two divorced homes, I didn’t want my boys to miss out on a kind of history. And from this thinking, I began to attach emotional significance to everything associated with my children.

Scent is thought to be our strongest recall for memory. My friend’s daughter recently purchased the same brand of perfume that her grandmother had worn, so that her mother would have another opportunity to remember something of her mother who had passed away decades earlier; so that her mother would be able to see the bottle, be able to recall the particular scent she wore. This perfume must evoke a lifetime of memories for my friend. My grandmother wore Evening in Paris perfume and it came in a lovely blue cobalt glass bottle. Maybe this is partly why my mother has always collected blue glass like this. Maybe it reminds her of her mother. I remember my uncle
George and the chocolate cake his wife was baking and how at that moment he began to think back to his first days on the farm. I can recall the sweet and ripe fruit from my grandmother’s kitchen, and the peaceful nights my siblings and I waited in our orchard. I remember the heat and the overpowering scent of sweet sugar and berries in our kitchen when my mother would make her homemade jam.

Sometimes objects can continue to conjure meaning years later from people not connected in any real way. Some objects that powerfully convey meaning are from the Foundling Museum outside of London. For over two centuries, the Foundling Hospital raised orphans when their mothers were unable to care for them. Now it is simply a museum, and on display there are trays of tokens left by desperate mothers who relinquished their children. A keepsake was kept as an identifier, with the hopes of the mother one day being able to return and reclaim her child. Today, there are trays and trays of these tokens which were never reclaimed, little buttons, felt hearts, and other tiny fragments. The children wouldn’t have been able to keep their tokens, as these would have been a form of birth document—another kind of separation. Each token continues to symbolize sadness. I wonder if my uncle ever had a token, a special toy or even a teddy bear, from his family to hold onto in those early years at the farm. I wonder if my grandmother was able to keep even a little something of her son before he left them for good. And my mother, was she ever able to have an object, something small that was kept, saved onto, from any visit she ever had with her father?

A few years into the divorce, when Andrew was about eight or nine, he was trying to remember things from when we four lived as a family but he couldn’t recall much—this was proving to be very frustrating for him as he wanted to remember
something specific from those early days with his father. I searched my brain and remembered that he and his dad had gone to see *Curious George* in the theatre when Andrew was about three. He thought for a moment and then beamed as he could remember that day, somehow saved in his memory, significant perhaps because it was a memory of him and his father, coming back to him just when he needed it. I think about my mother and her father and the *just a handful of times* they were together. Staying married was difficult for my mother but she held on. I am coming to recognize her determination not only to provide us security, the life she wasn’t able to have, and to be a dutiful wife and mother, but also to ensure we never felt the loneliness for our father that she felt. By keeping our family together, she had made certain we would never endure the not-knowing, the wondering, the initial loss she felt when she believed he had died, and the continuous loss in the years he was absent. Divorce is a complicated thing. Once, when a parent was rude to me at one of my boys’ extra-curricular functions, my ex-spouse stepped in to say he didn’t like the way I had been spoken to. Every now and then he’s somewhat supportive and it’s good for my boys to see. While he and I will likely never agree on most things, including why we got divorced in the first place, I find it slightly heartbreaking to see my boys each clasp his hand when he picks them up and I guess I would rather he play some part in their lives than have them endure a similar longing, years of not-knowing, a sorrow like my mother’s.

Early into the separation another movie resonated for the boys and me, *The Rescuers*. I had watched it with my siblings when I was young, so when I saw the title on a book cover years later, I sought out the movie. Sometimes we forget key details of a story and what lingers is just how much we liked it. I believed I had remembered the
story because it had been entertaining and so I felt my boys would enjoy it. I thought it would be a good movie for them, animals coming to the rescue of their friends, a good kind of life lesson. However, watching it as an adult with my boys, I was struck with how desperate a situation the little girl Penny is in, how alone she is, just an orphan, made to search for a diamond, something shiny and full of light, deep in the ground. And just at the moment I realized that this movie was getting darker and darker, my son Aiden cried out, “All she has is her teddy bear!” I understood more, now, how vulnerable the character Penny was, how important her teddy bear was to her, and how this toy was everything she had in the world.

Incredibly, my mother recently found an old box of some of my childhood toys, things saved that I had believed had been long gone. When I opened the box, I was immediately struck with the instant recognition of one of my old toys—Andy—a little green and white clown doll with a cloth body and pointy hat. While the name of my eldest son is Andrew, when he was born, I thought we would call him Andy, because Andy is what I imagined but Andrew seemed to fit him better. Not only was I struck by my instant recognition of this old toy, but also by my surge of emotion at this recognition. In finding this toy again, I was finding an old treasure, a long lost friend, something precious and significant, and I was flooded with memories of how this toy accompanied me everywhere, to the hospital to get my tonsils out and to each new house we moved to.

While I understand the toy is just a toy, it had the power to bring me back to my childhood and its re-discovered significance makes me recognize how much this toy
comforted me and just how much I must have needed to be comforted. It was a toy I had
even mentioned to my boys, and so when I exclaimed, “It’s Andy!” they smiled and said,
“Mom, you have your old toy back!” As their toys are important to them, they knew it
was significant to recuperate a lost one. Seeing Andy again showed me just how
emotional we can feel towards our things. I was reminded in that moment to remember
the emotional significance of my children’s things to them. After the separation, my
boys expressed a strong desire to create bedrooms that were as much the same as they
had before. While to date, we have been fortunate to have moved only once, I
understand the comfort and the necessity of familiarity and how it is often the little
things that have the most significance. After the divorce, in trying to create a space
where memories could be made for my children, I felt the need to overcompensate. I had
been married, believed I should get married, tried to stay married, but could not. I
wanted to alleviate some sense of guilt I felt, as well as make a kind of testament to our
new life. I began to hoard their individual things; I became a collector, a keeper of all
the treasures connected to my children. I’ve always been intrigued by little things, and
the sadness surrounding the Foundling tokens has become significant to me. Once I read
that, in French, Debra refers to an orphanage, a foundling hospital, and I wonder at the
connection between my name and my obsession with little things.

My saving began simply enough. I did what all parents do. In the beginning, I
kept pregnancy photos and ultrasound scans. I kept locks of their hair and baby teeth. I
kept their coming-home outfits from when they left the hospital. I have birth certificates,
soothers and two tiny glass baby bottles. I had photos and continue to take more photos,
all the time. (I did not, however, keep their umbilical cords. I don’t think I had known that this was an option.)

I kept every piece of clothing that they had ever had, their little boots and tiny mittens. I kept every scrap of paper they wrote on, every craft we made together, every rock they picked up from the park, every penny they found lying on the ground. These were our treasures, my treasures, and I was their keeper; I was the steward of these little things. I didn’t want them to miss out on remembering something special. I wanted them to be able to recall the fun we had, the wonderful feelings associated within each souvenir, with each craft. I felt that this documentation was a vital part of my role and it gave me a lot of comfort to be the family archivist.

I kept every book that I read to them and every book they seemed to find interesting. I kept every stuffed animal, every little toy, even the ones from the gumball machines. I kept photocopies of the letters they wrote to Santa Claus and all of the letters he wrote back. And when the tooth fairy wrote letters to them, I kept those, too. I kept every school bulletin where their names were printed. And pretty gift tags and bows from their gifts.

I am not sure at exactly what point, but I began to find it difficult to distinguish between the things that should be treasured and everything that came into contact with them, and so, I kept everything. Every time we went to a restaurant and were given crayons and a place-mat to colour, we took the picture home with us, perhaps to finish later or perhaps to put up for display on the refrigerator. I saved old medicine bottles with their names on them simply because their names were on them. Not only were we
given a lot of toys by friends, but also I had brought a lot of their toys from our old life. As well, they received gifts on birthdays and Christmases. It seemed that there was a constant supply of toys coming into our house, puzzles, stuffed animals, books, cars.

Over time, some of these toys would break: a wheel might fall off of a toy car, or a stamp pad might run dry. I didn’t want to get rid of anything, though. The idea of getting rid of their things caused me a lot of sadness and anxiety. Getting rid of anything was like another loss, and these items would then also be lost, and I don’t think I was prepared to do that. Thinking again of one of our many moves when I was a kid and my missing bag with the tiny horse, cup and change purse, I didn’t want my boys to be sad about losing something that was special to them. One night, while getting out of the car, Aiden dropped his tooth for the tooth fairy in the driveway. I found it with a flashlight. He had a toy cellphone that broke; I was able to glue all of its eight pieces back together. But, even if something was broken, I felt a great sorrow in throwing it out. It seemed somehow wrong to let go. While some of this feeling came to me from my children, if they became upset with the idea of throwing out a broken toy, I realize now that their sadness was likely due to the fact that the toy was actually broken, and not so much in the idea of getting rid of it. Sometimes we would lose pieces of toys, leaving them basically deficient. This happened if a puzzle piece or a card from a deck of cards was misplaced or if a figure from a chess board went missing. Rather than getting a new chess set, I just decided we should keep it anyway. How odd to play chess with a checker for a man.

The problem I found in trying to hold on to everything is that eventually the lines blur and everything becomes indistinguishable, everything becomes special, everything
becomes just as valuable as everything else, because everything represents your child.

You can explain, you do somehow explain to yourself, how every fragment is significant. And so each thing becomes very important and nothing can ever be purged because everything is valuable, everything tells a story, however small, and even the smallest story, if connected to your child, is a treasure.

Objects in this way can become metaphors for feelings. Aiden once told me he was feeling a lot of things all at once. He said that he was feeling good and bad all at the same time. I thought for a moment and then suggested he might call this feeling rainbow. He agreed and said “Yes, I’m rainbow.” Just as we can experience several emotions at once, I believe our objects, our souvenirs, can prompt us to more than one feeling, to more than one emotion—how one item might signify metaphorically all the shades of the rainbow; when we look at an abstract painting, for example, it has the power to evoke emotion in us, and when we look at our objects, they have a similar power. What significance we know about them, what we think about them always takes place in our minds.

Maybe, too, parents save things because time goes so quickly, and when they look at their children, they are literally watching time slipping through their hands. Some of my boys’ books were significant, and I knew even while reading them that I would always save them, that they were souvenirs, that these books were symbols of this fleeting time of childhood we had together. I read *Green Eggs and Ham* to my boys, memorizing the story. I could get tired of the same pages and lines and would make up new endings, improvise with new characters. For a while I was afraid that my boys would get mixed up, that I would have permanently destroyed their association with
something like *The Three Little Pigs*, but this never seemed to happen. I read in funny voices, adding emphasis and extra bits. I read *Good Night, Moon* followed by its Halloween parody, *Good Night, Goon*, side by side. This was a big hit. I didn’t improvise anything out of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, though, as I found that story to always be so beautifully sweet and sad at the same time. I’ve never been able to read it aloud to my boys without getting emotional—Andrew, when prompted by me, will read it out loud for all of us. I can still hear the resonance of . . . *his ears were lined with pink sateen* . . . like a kind of mantra, trancelike in my mind.

As children, we never had a pet rabbit, neither did our parents. I only ever saw them in the fields or in the woods. My mother has a folder with some of my childhood drawings in it. There are tons of crude, brown rabbits. At one of our rural homes in New Brunswick, I woke to the sound of a child crying in the woods. The sound would pause for a few moments and then start up again, the same desperate cry. I couldn’t understand how a child could have come to be out there. While I was terrified of knowing the cause, I think I was more terrified of not knowing. Just then my dad went down the stairs. I watched him from my window getting smaller and smaller as he went into the woods. He came out holding something limp and left it by the door. I asked him who had been out there. He said it was a rabbit caught in a snare. I said, “I heard someone crying,” but he said it was the rabbit. I don’t think I believed him, at first.

While at elementary school one day, a visiting theatre troupe came to perform *The Velveteen Rabbit* for us and back then, I hadn’t heard the story. As I was an avid
young reader, this is still slightly surprising. Anticipating their performance was like holding a shiny, little present in your hands. That day I heard how the rabbit was so important to the boy, how he knew he was important to the boy, and how he had to be thrown out, set onto the rubbish pile to be burned with all of the other things tainted by Scarlet Fever, toys just things now, and at the moment the rabbit becomes lonesome in the pile, he cries . . . And so the little rabbit was put into a sack with the old picture-books and a lot of rubbish, and carried out to the end of the garden behind the fowl-house. That was a fine place to make a bonfire, only the gardener was too busy just then to attend to it . . . Of what use was it to be loved and lose one’s beauty and become Real if it all ended like this?

And when I heard about this bonfire for the Velveteen Rabbit, how afraid he was, how it would destroy him, destroy something that was already real, some part of me remembered the fire we had had when I was six, when I was helping my dad, how it was a bonfire and how we were burning rubbish from the rubbish pile and how I threw in the plastic-wrapped baby bunnies and how their ears revealed them as rabbits and at that moment I wondered if there had been anything else they had wanted to tell me but could never tell me because their fate had been sealed. That day I was reminded, again, how I was to blame, thinking I had silenced them, devastated that I had been the one who so casually was responsible for their deaths, I who had put these velveteen bunnies onto the fire. I also hoped against hope that if the Velveteen rabbit in the story became real, his fear and sadness gone, then perhaps I could reimagine the end for the rabbits in my memory, that I could rewrite the ending for them, at least in my mind, that perhaps they
might have become real, too, somehow, and that my guilt and sadness could be rewritten and the memory reimagined from this, my first instance of loss.

Recalling significant moments from my childhood makes me more aware and more nervous about handling difficult situations with my boys. I wished the bunnies would have been buried long before we ever got there. I hope my boys feel that our burying the baby bird was the right thing to do. I hope they remember that he was already dead, that we didn’t hurt him by burying him and that we were trying to protect him in the only way we really could.

Toys and books and other objects can powerfully bring us back to moments we didn’t know we had forgotten and while some objects prompt much more than others, my saving with my children has slowed down over the years. Time has helped diminish my insecurities from the divorce into an increased peace in being a responsible single mother. I don’t always feel obligated to hoard every item that has passed through their hands. I’m letting go of a lot things, including pain from the past and fear for our future. Another part, however, has come from my boys themselves. In an assignment for school when he was eleven, Andrew had to write about any significant life event . . . When I was four years old, my parents got divorced, due to the fact that they lacked an ability to live in each other’s company for an extended period of time. And when that happened we were much unprepared to undergo such a serious transaction in our lives. The impact of this was helped by counselling. We had to be able to navigate the maze that was switching back and forth constantly from my mother’s house to my father’s household—and how we were able to do that was by putting affection towards both of the parents, at one time . . . . While this is a poignant paragraph, it always saddens me in that I wasn’t
able to give my boys the life they could have had. Being married, with all it promises, is a hard concept to break. But in Andrew’s words, too, I sense a process, a becoming, a shift through acceptance towards optimism. The boys are becoming quite capable at interpreting things of value and it means more to me now that the things we save onto are things we mutually love and not simply every object. What we now collect are treasures for all of us.

After my divorce, I enrolled in university. I figured that if I was ever going to go, I had waited long enough, and that it was now or never. My good friends, Jackie, Laurie and Mary-Ellen, all encouraged me, even pushed me in the best possible sense, to go. While my mother eventually joined in their enthusiasm, she was hesitant at first. In my house, growing up, university wasn’t really discussed. It was never a real option for me. It’s hard to imagine a future that you’ve never really thought about. In thinking about my mother’s childhood, if it was hard for me to imagine a future at university, I can only imagine the distance between this awareness and my mother’s understandings of the options for her life. While she has since become a champion supporter for me, often listening to me read my poetry, there are times when I talk about university too much, and she drops the phone. It’s her signal for me to change the subject. While I don’t believe I knew there were many options for my future, I don’t believe she did, either. Just as I never received encouragement to go to university back then, neither would she have had any.
My boys have been affected, too, by my decision to go back to school. When Andrew and Aiden would catch the school bus in the mornings, they would call out to me, “Have a good day at school, Mom!”—everyone in my house goes to school. Not long after I first enrolled, Aiden was in his room, drawing a picture, and when I asked him what he was making, he told me he was working on his essay. He continues to paint and draw and when I bring home a book about a new artist, he is genuinely curious. Andrew and I have conversations about writing and he has begun writing creatively, winning a few competitions and reading his work publically. By going to school and by writing, I am now doing what I always wanted to do—I just never really knew what it was before or maybe how to go about it. It’s my dream that my boys see that. I hope they hold onto the freedom of creative expression, even in the smallest of ways. I hope they always embrace being individuals. I hope that I can imagine a future of possibilities for all of us.

I’d like to read through my mother’s purple and gold poetry book again, the one I found in her closet so many years ago. I’ve never forgotten that day. I’d like her to read some of her poems to me. I share a similar childhood photo with her—Christmas morning, in front of the tree, both sitting on the floor, both with our sisters, both of us holding our dolls, these photos, these Christmases separated by twenty years. While each of us had difficulties, she choosing to stay married, I choosing not to, from her I learned that we can be individuals through little things, that we all have the ability to be creative, even in seemingly small ways, and that parents will do almost anything to avoid pain for their child. All of this makes me wonder about holding on and letting go. I wonder about change and acceptance. I wonder about negotiating loss and how we must
all have our own timeline of communion. We must all have our own unfolding, helping us find our way through.

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Works Cited


