Seeing double: the self and body through illness

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Seeing double: The body and self through illness

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Diana Burgess Lane

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
For my Grandmother, Christine Falk, who taught me the dream and desire for well-being, my Grandfather, E.W. Falk, who made a fine Daddy Warbucks, and my husband, John A. Lane, who even in his sleep, laughs.
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Seeing double: The body and self through illness

Forced by the exigencies of physical disease to embrace my self in the flesh, I couldn't write bodiless prose. The voice is the creature of the body that produces it....No body, no voice; no voice, no body.

--Nancy Mair, Carnal Sins
The Big Tent

When you grow up dysfunctional you zip up the big circus tent of personal life and walk-run away from it towards the outside world. You move fast but not so that you will stick out in the crowd. If everyone else is eating cotton candy and trying to win a giant stuffed Pink Panther, you do that too. All the while you are devising a plan of how you are going to live in this world. You do, after all, want to do well here...since the place you were before, the freak show home you grew out of, was such a disaster.

Four years ago, with my newly obtained bachelor's degree still unframed and stuck in a box generically labeled "papers," I sat in the passenger seat of a rented truck, immediate life plan securely pinned to identity. I was going to graduate school to write. It's what kept me from panicking, telling my fiancee, John, to turn back. We were driving through Indiana on I80 and the flatness had stopped being "fascinating" hours ago. The seam-line of the horizon was so low and airtight that I wondered if people who lived in the Midwest hyperventilated just observing the flat earth and vaulted sky. I found myself trying to breathe deeper and deeper, grabbing in the air. The ice in my Denny's cup from lunch had melted. I stirred the diluted soda with a straw, contemplated taking a sip but saw that the wax from the cup floated on top.

"You know," John said, finally breaking the silence, "you could have applied to graduate school in the Sahara. I mean, if you're into this sort of barren landscape. Suicide must be very high here."

I let it go. It was the middle of the day at the end of July. Less than a day before, we had been driving through hilly, picturesque Pennsylvania. The neat barns and the early evening sunlight that hit them made our plan seem doable. Sure, John would drive me from Baltimore to Iowa and then fly back. We would be separated as I worked on my first year of graduate school and John finished up his last year back home. Then he would move to Iowa and hopefully get into the same writing program. We would have a wonderful life. No problem. Through the dips and hills, we reviewed the outline of how our relationship would
be for the next year. The days would fly by, with class and papers. There would be Christmas break. Phone calls.

Now there was no breathtaking sunset to use as evidence that it was beautiful here too, only a sun, hazy behind clouds somewhere to our left. It was the kind of light that hurt my eyes and made me squint. I put on my sunglasses which were hot from the dashboard and gave John my best Greta Garbo look. I reached over two animal carry cases stacked between us where our cats, Nilla and Joe, slept, thankfully drugged with tranquilizers.

"Someone's a little cranky," I tried, "and it isn't me or the cats."

I stared at him for two minutes until he finally cracked a smile. Suddenly, John looked very urban. His profile seemed too engaged for the Midwest, not laid-back and patient. He was ready, body forward close to the wheel, ready to switch lanes and maneuver. Wasn't he always telling me from our apartment in the heart of downtown Baltimore's art scene, that he felt restless? How was he going to cope with living in a little college town plopped down in the middle of nowhere? I mean me, I looked the part. Even while growing up in Brooklyn, New York, people often asked me if I was from Pennsylvania. I could never figure out how the infinite number of personality traits and appearances could add up to a state—Pennsylvania. Maybe it was the red hair and freckles drizzled over my nose that gave me that farm girl aura. Maybe it was that I never had much of a New York accent. Or maybe because I was polite....

A sports car driven by a young woman with big hair zoomed forward to pass us.

"Bimbo!" John screamed to her car now in front of us, showing his middle finger so she would see in her mirror. "Jesus H. Christ! Did you see that!?"

"John, be nice." Yep, I thought, definitely a city type of guy.

"You're turning Midwest on me already," John returned.

What I was actually turning, was sick. There was something more than the stress of the trip and our impending separation going on that day. That morning I had been curled up in a stiff Comfort Inn bedspread, crying. Cramps, a few inches in from either side of my hip
bones, pulsed. I felt swollen. I counted days. This wasn't the time for my period. I stayed there in a ball, my groin too sore to even try massaging it. The cats jumped up on the unfamiliar bed, smelling my head. John had gone out to find a drug store for Advil and maxi pads. I felt bad laying there. It seemed to me that more solid women never seemed to make much of their menstrual cramps. Surely, plenty of women had them. Someone with a stronger countenance would get up, splash cold water over her face, and get dressed. A part of me thought it was all an act. "Oh, stop being so dramatic," I told myself. I imagined John navigating the U-Haul truck through the unfamiliar, blink-and-it's gone Indiana town. And it was Sunday—what would be open?

I took three. Everyone knows that it's two. You take two aspirin, two Tylenol, two Advil. Conservative over-the-counter pill poppers carefully read the label every time as if they'll find new dosing recommendations. But anyone who has had painful menstrual cycles knows, two just doesn't cut it on Day One. An hour later I was "functional" and chasing the cats around the hotel room to get them back into their carrying cases and onto the truck.

And then there was the smell. I kept sniffing myself down there. I had the odor of a bathroom someone had had bad diarrhea in. It had always gagged me, growing up, that smell with Lysol sprayed over it. "Was it a period thing?" I wondered as we drove on. I had warned John, in a small whisper before we started, that I was "a little gassy." How lucky I was that he was always so good about it.

"Oh, it's all right. I had really bad gas last night. I think it's the fine roadside cuisine we've been eating. Plus you have your period. Plus, you know, stress." He would give me a kiss, hug me, and tell me I was beautiful, that he loved me. I knew that he did. Hours later, driving with both our windows open, the hot air hit us and still there was no escaping the smell. Oh, no, it wasn't my gas that made John drive with both windows down on this 90 degree day. He argued that the air conditioner was giving him a headache. And besides, he didn't like to smoke with the windows rolled up. Sure.
Okay, I say to myself now, five years into this illness, you had to have known that something was seriously not right with you then. And still there you are, taking you, the cats, and all your second hand furniture to Iowa for graduate school. It had become progressively worse and I had been ignoring and diminishing it until every episode was a spicy meal, a stressful day. How did I do it? How was I sick and then not sick, moving with the rest of the world?

I had enough to think about in college. I was one of those who ran from high school to college, escaping a bad home. I left an alcoholic step-father, a tuned-out mother, and a long, ugly childhood history of neglect behind. And, of course, it went with me, a hefty emotional bag to unpack as I moved into a small dorm room with three other young women, all of whom had to like me. My mother had separated and gotten back together with my step-father, Skip, by junior year. Although I was four hours away, mother managed to undermine my life. There was always a shortage of money when it came to my needs. "Well, all I can tell you is that you better get a really good summer job when you come home this year...." My mother's voice would trail off. Paying the "family part" (I had a scholarship and maximum student loans) was never easy and my mother let me know it. It wasn't that our "family" didn't have the money. I could accept the fact that I wasn't one of the kids with a trust fund. As the mutual fund and CD statements with Skip's name on them regularly took up space in our narrow mailbox, we still lived in a run-down two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. When I left for college, Skip's money came out from lock and key. He and my mother bought a beautiful house in the suburbs and two new cars almost instantly.

It worked like this. When I was twelve, my mother married Skip. Soon after, Skip had labeled me the most awful child he had ever seen and declared that he would not financially contribute to things with my name on it. My mother swallowed this like she swallowed that fact her husband liked to watch pornographic movies. That she didn't put up a fight but instead
lived with the reality that her daughter was a second-class citizen at home is exactly what made us a "big tent" (freak) family.

In college, reaching into my mailbox only a month after the distressing "money calls", I would find a post card of a beautiful Carribean beach at sunset, on the back my mother's happy script, "Having a great time. Wish you were here. Miss you!" Under the advice of a school counselor, I had moved off campus and was working two jobs. Ann Marie, a genuinely kind person whose bobbed hair and features always made me feel that whatever she spoke, it would be French, was clear. "I think the less you rely on your parents for money, the less control they will have over you."

That sounded right. But it reminded me of advice I had gotten years before in high school: "Try to stay away from home as much as possible." Whenever a counselor got to know me and the family dynamics, they always told me the same thing, "Run. Leave them. Get out of the big tent and close the flap behind you."

I didn't have time or space to deal with my failing digestion and increasingly bad periods. I was trying to be "a gifted and talented young writer with promise." I managed somewhat, taking to heart every comment along the way. My stability could be measured by the positive or negative feedback I received from teachers. An "A" at the top of paper meant that I was moving towards a more balanced, normal world. Conversely, a "B-" was confirmation that I irrevocably part of a failing, unachieving group. B- = disappointing life. An "A" kept the B- suspicions away.

Interestingly, I returned to "the big tent" of family trauma in my writing. It was--dare I use the word--thrilling? Even when the writing didn't work, one or two other students might come up to me after class. "You know," one woman said to me, "our fathers must have gone to the same shitty-father school." I was not only learning to write but learning that there were other people with secrets just as bizarre as mine. I felt less lonely. Simply put, I was being to like my life and who I was becoming.
Eventually however, I would have to become someone else. I would have to get used to jokes under the breath and the funny reactions people had to my gas. I would keep a detailed weekly log of everything I ate on the refrigerator door, spending hours considering which target foods might be the problem. I braced myself as a tube was placed up and through my anus, a medical technician told me to breathe and not breathe, turn and not turn. I waited for medical test results. I was always waiting to see if some new medicine would work. 

Doctor appointments became routine, I canceled lunch dates and let theater events pass by. The embarrassment of smelling was getting to be too much for me. I went to the library, not for school but for my health. I poured over books with titles like *Your Gut Feelings* and *The Key to Gastrointestinal Health*. All of this, while in graduate school.

Good grades or not, my desired academic identity was being substituted with a sickly one. At the beginning of my second year of graduate school, a lively e-mail debate within the English department became my identity's turning point. Every day when I logged into my e-mail account, there were at least three messages regarding an article "Does Poetry Matter?" All of us on the e-mail list were urged to pick up a copy in the English department mailroom. The comments were interesting, from hilarious and casual to serious and in MLA format. One teacher wrote back in a poem. Each time I read a response, I thought to myself, "I have to get my hands on that article."

Finally, with an afternoon class canceled, I got a copy of the article and went to the library. I found a less populated nook and sat down. Afterwards, feeling passionate and ready to respond, I traveled down the library's computer lab in the basement. What I love about reading is how it always makes me forget time. It can be two hours later than when I started reading but it feels like five minutes.

I logged on to my e-mail account with the article at my side. I had marked the best parts with red brackets. I leafed through the pages a few more minutes then began, "Poetry matters and is not going anywhere...."
I looked up to get clear my thoughts and saw the clock. It was 4 p.m. If we had had class it would have been over by then. Panic rose in me. I was supposed to leave class early so I could get to a doctor's appointment. In attempt to stop what had already happened, I snapped off the computer. The chubby lab monitor with an army fatigue jacket was approaching me, saying something about not doing that.

Quickly, I made my way to the bus and just barely caught the route needed. The article, the root of my slip-up, was on my lap, as if I was reviewing it for a test. Twenty minutes later, people turned to look at me as I quickly walked through the clinic doors. My face felt flushed and I could hardly jog and carry my book bag and article at the same time. Once I got to the gastroenterologist's front desk, I was told that the doctor could not fit me in. The next opening was a month away. It was the time of day when my digestion was at its worst. Now I would get to ride home on the bus which would be crowded with the after-work passengers, holding my gut muscles tight in an effort to stop the gas from passing.

And that was it. I had lost my chance for a doctor to review my medical chart and take a stab at what was going wrong with my body. Does poetry matter? "What a stupid question," I found myself thinking. Now the question I tossed around was, "So, do I be an annoying patient and call the doctor tomorrow or do I sit and wait for a month?" Let's see, my life is falling apart because of my health. I know, poetry will save me. Right. I resented the entire English department, if not the love of literature itself. Literature was what I had studied and it seemed useless to me now. In the end, I would not blend in with the world as I had planned. Without even trying, I had won myself a seat in a life's freak-show --I was smelly girl. She looks like the girl next door...but get a whiff.

This collection of essays spans from when I first began to seek medical help, during my first year of graduate school, to the present. Although when I first arrived at Iowa State University, I thought I would be telling the journey of the neglected child grown-up, I am
instead tracking the path of a chronically ill woman. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised that these roads have often merged. We cannot talk about our illnesses without talking about the past. It is the first thing the medical world wants to get straight. What is your medical history?

*What did your mother have?*

An unwanted child at nineteen. An ability to tune life out when it got hard. Ulcers.

*And your father?*

He also had me, the unwanted child. He had Peter Pan syndrome. Diabetes. Alcoholism.

And now we've opened the Big Tent. The story begins.
Abracadabra

I like carnivals and candied colored anything. Mary Poppins, come to my door. Alice. I'll be your friend in Wonderland. Come on, give me that red-sugared apple. I don't care if I chip a tooth. I'm ready to ride the ladybug cars and levitating airplanes of childhood.

And none of you come. I've worn my collector's Felix-the-Cat watch as a signal, but still nothing. It's always been like that. This is how you disappoint me: you always make me come to you. The one time I need you, you stay like hollow puppets. Pathetic.

Look at me when I'm ten. I am a child who gets migraines that make me cry. My fist knocks on the closed door of the living room. Mom and her boyfriend are smoking pot at ten o'clock at night. There's a wet towel in my other hand. Every so often, I struggle out of bed and re-heat the cloth because it soothes my forehead somewhat. I think about calling my grandmother but am afraid mom will get angry and not forgive me for a long time.

Captain Kangaroo, where are you? I'm all set to jump down a rabbit hole if only you'll let me escape. Harold, take your purple crayon and draw me out of this.

My childhood passed like everyone else's does—with one added feature. It had speed. It skipped years the way smart kids skip grades, except the leap was no reward. I'm in graduate school now and spend long nights contemplating if toothpicks really hold open eyes. Still, the circles under my eyes these days are nowhere near the dark crescents that sat on my face in sixth grade. I cried at night when other kids slept. It's okay with me if this comes across as a sob story. Sadness had my childhood number.

The child stuck around like a stray cat that your mother won't let you take in. When the coast was clear, I would sneak out to the back porch, leaving saucers of milk. So now when I'm old enough, I rescue the cat but after such a long time of living without a home and security, the kitty is rather shaken up. This cat eats every meal like it's the last. There's permanent change. My childhood "yet to be expressed" is hungry for magic but is usually too skittish and wistful to reach out.
You are a person in one of my classes. One Saturday you spot me in K-Mart. You call and see me look up with alarm. A deep flush is settling on my checks. You've caught me in the crayon aisle. I've got the 68 assortment (built-in sharpener included) in my hand. I try to act like I'm holding toilet tissue or shampoo like the other adults. We talk about 19th Century American Literature for a couple of minutes until my nervousness rises and you say you must shove off. You still have to find toothpaste or pantyhose. Alone again, I put the crayon box down and discreetly leave to search other, more grown-up aisles. I don't buy the crayons, I never do.

At the check-out, there is one little girl there who breaks my heart. She is crying as her mother grabs a box of markers from her: "We're not buying anymore junk today." The mom is probably not as mean as she seems. In fact, the mother looks like she too was denied that same junk we call magic. Magic Eightballs. Magic Markers. Magic wands that sparkle with star juice when they're shaken.

On line at the K-Mart, that's where I am in life. Between wanting a box of crayons and seeing that others have the same desires. I watch the mother and daughter. Do they put sparklers in birthday cakes? Is there at least one rainbow somewhere in their house? Have they ever gotten beautiful packages in the mail for no good reason? Can they tell of one magical day?

I don't like that we can't fly. That's what makes it so hard--flying. At night, I can feel my left and right hands struggling like two opposing beliefs as they tap the keyboard: "It's all darkness and death. No, can't you see the sparkles?" My mind also divides: "I need things I'll never get. Hey knucklehead, you have something to give." I write my little fairy tales one night, and the next see the weak spots. Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, I talk to my characters. I ask them what they need to believe in the magic thrown their way. They always say, "It can just be anything, only think of us with little patches of light behind our eyes."
I try. They mean the kind of light that comes through branches and leaves. The kind that speckles where you walk. Small light spots that are first on cement and then on your shoe. The type of light that makes it okay to be a dreamer in the walks of dreams; in the night where it is day. Where you were once a child-princess and you flew. You flew to the highest branches and you plucked leaves from the most special tree tops. You put them in people's button holes, giving them away. So magical were these offerings that the people...I could go on. And for the sake of those two ahead of me at the check-out, about to leave without much hope or star dust, I'd better.
Jello Brain

They say that's what it's like. The moment of the worst truth. You go through the doors alone. They open wide for me. Emergency Room Doors. The morning sun seems reluctant to let go, like the warmth was a mother; not my mother.

There's no body part hanging off of me, no blood spewing out. I take calm natural steps. My winter coat is draped over my arm, a school bag bumps my hip as I go through. I have come here to take a test. Pictures really. They are going to take pictures of my stomach from the inside. They are going to look inside me and see it all. Emergency.

There is only one person sitting in the quiet Midwestern hospital and, of course, I know him. There's no blood spewing out of him either. Until now, he's been "Dave from class" -- a nice enough guy. Even though I'm about to have tubes pushed up and into me and needles stuck in, I feel obliged to chat. Is he alright? Oh yes, his girlfriend is in there, he says pointing to a closed door. She had a bad migraine. Geez, boy, I hope she'll be okay. Do you work here? Who me?! No, no, I say.

This is when I realize that I do look like I'm on my way to a job. I've worn something especially nice, the way I do a date. I haven't eaten in two days, unless you call that poison, known as jello, food. I'm having jello brain thoughts. Orange-flavored. Two boxes worth.

My explanation of why I'm strolling through the emergency room at 7:30 in the morning is vague. If only it was a blood test. I could say that. Blood test. There, I said it. But Barium Rectal Examination? The one even the medical community calls "the worst one". Oh what a coward. I can't even say "intestines". "Tests," I tell Dave.

As I follow the little pink strip in the floor that takes me to the other side of the hospital, Dave is transformed. He is no longer just some guy in class, but DAVE -- the loving, caring guy that would bring his girlfriend to the hospital and wait for her, subjecting himself to People magazine. And more than one issue. My light-headed mind holds him in direct contrast to my boyfriend who suddenly has a lackluster quality. In Maryland, how dare he get an education!
He should be here, like Dave. But I don't delve any further in that train of thought. It's not good to go in upset.

I sit facing a pre-teen girl and her mom in radiology. The girl is definitely the one going in. For what? She bites her lip and swings her feet nervously. I bite my lip and tap my foot. The two of us are blindly looking at each other, thinking about our own separate hospital fates, while biting down on a piece of lip skin. It dawns on me that I might be scaring her, the way my arms protectively cover my stomach. So I sit up and try to be a good role model. I give her a "nothing to worry about" smile but it must not be effective because she repositions her body so that she does not have to look directly at me.

When my name is called I stand. When I stand it must be about 8 o'clock because low music goes on. It is "Do You Know The Way to San Jose?" or one of those tunes that started game shows in the Seventies -- Our next contestant up to play Radiology Seek and Find is Diana, all the way from Brooklyn, New York. Diana, tell us a little about yourself.

"Well, Dick, I'm pretty scared right now and..."

Don't trust a place where you are about to do something scary and where the employees are especially nice. It means that the scariest part isn't the getting there, but in the actual doing. I hear the cynical voice in me say, "Sweetheart, you're in deep," as the nurse jokes about the fasting. Yes, just in time for shorts weather, I say, trying to find a laugh.

"Are you wearing knee-hi's?" she asks as she deposits me into a little dressing room. There's even a mirror. I take a long look at my face as I slip the paper gown over my head. I don't look sick. I don't have that gray "I'm dying of cancer" look about me. Just white. So pale that my freckles scream out that they're drowning in the pasty reflection that surrounds them.

It's good that I'm wearing knee-hi's. They're the one article of clothing I can actually keep on, one scrap of dignity. The nurse shows me to the bathroom which is sort of the vestibule between the outer radiology center and the examination room. Before I close the
door, I see the nurses exchange looks. Pity, I think. Soon I'll find out that they had pegged me for a fainter — first patient and they get a fainter. It's not going to be an easy day, ladies.

The nurse tells me to take just as long as I need. There's nothing inside of me though. On this second day of not eating my stomach isn't even moving. I sit on the toilet bowl like it's a chair and look around. I think of the laxatives I had to take for this exam. I find myself noting what kind of liquid hand soap they use.

Inside the exam room, there's a huge clock low on the wall so the patient is nearly eye level with the ticking hands when laying flat. There's a TV, and a contraption to the right of the table that reminds me of the copy machine at work. I see this long skinny bag filled with white liquid hooked up to my left. The bag is connected to a tube. I hope, I pray that the thing is for some other patient. But a knot in my throat says it's mine.

The nurse asks me if I'm going to the Billy Joel concert tonight as she runs through the list of procedures. I think her name is Michelle. I say no, but I used to live close to where he had his big motorcycle accident. I lay on my side and apologize for shaking. When she puts the tube into me I think, "No way." No way for ten seconds, no way for 40 minutes. It hurts. It's not right.

I say I have to use the lady's room again. It's a lie. She takes the tube out and I spring up plotting possible escape routes. I could easily dodge out through the bathroom, grab my bag and clothes from the change room, and run to another floor — take the back stairwell. But I'm dressed in a blue paper sack, so I'm stuck.

I wonder if she notices that I didn't flush when I reappear in a cold sweat. A minute later the thing is back in me. Dr. Olsom steps in.

I'm glad that he looks "clinical" and not like a pervert. He introduces himself to me while tying a rubber band around my arm. Make a fist. I hardly do it. With a tube stuck up my rear, he puts a needle in my arm. I breathe heavily and stare at the corner of the ceiling. He warns me that if I breathe any faster I will hyperventilate. His face is stone.
Then the pictures are beginning. When I lay on my stomach, the lights shut off except one far away. The dark, the jello brain, and the fear all work together to key into a part of me that is old but largely un-used, at least it hasn't been active in years. Behind my straight hair that hangs covering my face tears come down. I wonder if they know that I'm crying.

They see it, I'm sure. The sum total of what I've been hiding. A neglected child who's all fallen apart. The jello brain I feel is familiar. Like going to school tired from crying and then day-dreaming all day. The kids call me spacey. I'm only good for the one day out of the year we write poems. The wrong work book is always out on my desk. My crayons break when I draw.

But you know what? The crying stops. Jello brain saves me like it always has. I can listen to them just enough for their directions to register in my brain. Turn to the right. Breathe in. Don't breathe. (Picture snaps. More air and liquid goes up.) Breathe. Turn to the left. I am thinking that in an hour I will be out of here. There is an end to this.

When the tube is out of me, I feel sore all the way around the inside of where it made its path. Nine a.m. and I am ready to go to bed. I am so grateful when they give me a cup of orange juice when I'm dressed. They are happy that I'm not driving.

I follow the pink strip in the floor until I'm in the main lobby. I see Great Guy Dave standing by the ladies room and he looks like he's had about enough. I wonder if I would torture my boyfriend with whining fear and projections of the worst. Yeah, sure I would, what are loved ones for? But I am alone and there is no audience so I just look for the sun when stepping through the door.

Before the day is over, I will go to two classes. In the first one, we review an essay about cancer. Is it just me or does my teacher keep saying "intestines"? The bandaid/ammonia hospital smell is still in my nostrils. I get up to empty the white liquid that is still in me five times. The teacher reads an essay that I wrote and I'm grateful. God, I think, you've done it all, reoccurring themes, action, drama, the works. The essay is about my crummy childhood.
How about a "the end"? No. In my second class I have to give my presentation. At this point, there is nothing inside of me. No more gas and stomach churning. It goes fine, except that my light-headedness makes it hard to reach real conclusions. The class is thankfully talkative.

Afterwards, while walking to work, I find myself thinking about what it would have been like to see my boyfriend sitting in the emergency room instead of Dave, waiting for me. I begin to hear my best friend giving humorous commentary about Florence Nightingale's questions on the Billy Joel concert. When she left the room, Jenn would say, "My God, she's a flake. The nurse is a flake." What would I do after that exam when I'd find John there in the waiting room? Demand a chocolate shake and make him sit attentively as my dejected slouched body would be able to do nothing more than sip from a straw.

I like to have those two to think about. Their personalities loom large in the sky for me. That's my jello brain kicking in, filling in the fear and the loneliness. With my head swirling in incomplete sentences while I consider how the light is like my mother -- it becomes clear -- this is how I get by.
Doggie Paddle

To swim is first to stay afloat, then to get somewhere. This truth is what makes the doggie paddle the initial swimming "stroke" that kids learn. You move forward a little but mostly you're just glad not to sink. Even more than tying my own shoes, swimming was one of my biggest childhood accomplishments. My grandmother taught me.

She wore one of the bathing suits she bought in Florida. They all had stiff bras built into them and big bright flowers which made her white skin seem to glow. She hated summer because she was "always hot to begin with". For this reason, a four foot pool in the backyard was a must. As soon as she came home from work, grandmother got into her suit. My grandfather, always the better cook of the two, prepared BLT's and cantaloupe slices and brought them to the deck for afterwards.

I wasn't one of those kids who would learn to swim because someone threw me into the water and I had to save myself. No, if someone had thrown me in I would have swallowed water and never forgiven the people who conspired to shock me into learning.

Grandmother had raised six kids and knew the bold and immediate from the hesitant and studied children. She knew there was nothing "instant" about me. I needed explanation. I needed visuals. The verbal part of the lesson was given while I floated in a tube. Acclimating, Grandma called it. She explained that dogs really could swim, the importance of the coordination of both the hands and feet, and how the body was so much lighter in the water. Then she would get beside me and do the motions. Soon she held my hands then didn't.
We counted the number of seconds I could do the doggy paddle, first to the pool ladder, then to the other side. At the age of six, the doggy paddle worked for me; I didn't like the other swimming strokes that required me to put my face down in the water.

For about two summers, the doggy paddle took over my concentration. When we went to the beach I was warned about the current but it didn't matter. Inevitably, I would get out of the water and be a half a mile away from my family's blanket. Panic would set in, like punishment for enjoying the swim, it seemed. The pool was safer but the ocean was bigger, more of a thrill. If I was with my mother I had to find her, doubting in my gut that she would be searching for me in the waves. There would always be a boyfriend or a book to distract her. If I was with my grandparents, I would find them close to the shore coming towards me and the dread of being lost would melt away with their recognition. "Didn't you hear me calling, silly? Don't forget to turn back every once in a while," grandmother would say, putting a towel around me.

Later, I would fall in love with the butterfly stroke. It had such an elegant name and felt much more graceful to do. Hands together, then around back, and up through to the beginning to point the way. You got the benefit of being under the water, but also could come up for a few seconds to see where you were heading. And you were actually moving forward.

I still hold the dog and butterfly stroke in contrast. One is practical, one is beautiful. One is like sleeping and eating and one is like art. The first is essential to know in an obvious way, the need for the latter is more elusive but still real.
I write to save myself. Not from illness but from the drift that illness has caused. *What do I mean?* Last year it was early December and I had an editing project due. Then a wave of bad things occurred—our car didn't start the day after I lost my wallet. The medication that had been keeping my digestion halfway normal was no longer working as effectively. My menstrual cycle was erratic again. I had wished for something catastrophic to blame that would coincide with this latest round of illness but there wasn't a reason and I was dumbfounded. *And then what?* I seem to remember not having enough time to finish. I took an incomplete. So? This is graduate school. Half the class took an incomplete. I went home for Christmas, dodged questions about my health and my master's degree with equal finesse. I was good about making a self-deprecating joke, letting my voice trail to a different topic. So? A lot of the world wasn't moving according to schedule.

Truth: I had lost my agenda book, literally. Calendar, important notes, gone. It was somewhere unreachable. Somewhere in my small four room apartment it was lost forever. I never searched.

Truth: Although I had never been comfortable ascending with the masses—all of us artists scrambling for attention and a space in academia—I had always enjoyed school. School and work were always pleasingly clear. Do the work, get the grade. Stay late, get a raise. Not like "Be a good kid and still come home to an alcoholic step-dad and mother who can't look out for you." I enjoyed the calculation of 33 credits for a degree. Predictability had always been a second, more elegant language which I enjoyed practicing. And what a good escape—the chapter to be memorized, 10 pages to be written.

Truth: My watch stopped working ("accidentally" getting wet in the shower) and I did nothing. This was about the same time as I took the incomplete. I put my watch in a small
glass dish my mother and I had found in "la-de-da" glass shop in Miami. Before getting sick, I had potpourri or mints in this bowl when company was coming. Now it held my frozen-in-time watch. The small revolving picture on the top was still, stuck on the moon. I didn’t buy a battery, or wind it to see if maybe, now that it was dry....I didn't touch it, or buy another.

Truth: I was slipping. I had slipped.

One year later and the project still lays undone. Sometimes when I take messages at work I hesitate at the date—not the day of the week, or a "gee, is it February already?" kind of negligence. I stumble at the year. 1994-1998. Isn't that a question they ask the questionably insane? What's your name? Who is the president? What year is it? I know—once I concentrate on it a bit. It comes into focus, it floats up to the surface, like straining to see goldfish in the water and then when you see them it is impossible to not see them. Of course, 1998.

The world asks an offensive amount of questions when one is focusing on a complicated puzzle. Yes, your blue sport coat is hanging in the closet. Yes, mother, I can tell you which plane I will be arriving on. Let me get the ticket. No, I haven't gotten to that yet. I haven't had the chance. Let me do it now. Everything a distraction. "The thing that gets in the way of your work, becomes your work."

Why was I not better? What was the bigger picture of digestive and gynecological malfunctioning? Where had my digestion slipped to? Who knows. But I had slipped out the door quietly to follow it. It had led me out far—sometimes clues, names that always downgraded into subtitles—endometriosis, irritable bowel, ulcer. Further out I floated. The constant rotation of medication. Doctor's appointments. Tests. Alternative medicines. Herbs. Soul searching. Goal: an answer and a solution and health. In this simple heart of
wishing and wanting, things are easy. Hop, jump, hop, pick up the stone, then turn around without letting your shoes touch the lines. One, two, three.

3,987, 3,988, 3,888? Pray. Negotiate with God. Don't let your whole life fall apart. Get up and go to work every morning. Maintain a sense of humor. Love your friends, fiancee, and family. Care for them. Don't let their birthdays and lives out of sight. Abbreviate your medical trials. Leave out the parts you talk of so profoundly in your head. Skip mentioning how your body has always been strange to you. Deal with the inevitable daily gas "one moment at a time." Keep afloat. Doggy paddle.

I have been with the world at least half of the time. Usually, I clear the dirty dishes out of the sink before bed. I get the rent and phone bill into the mail. This past summer, I had the foresight to take a required class I had forgotten about and got an A. I look at sparrows outside my bathroom window and feel great wonder and presence in the moment. I rinse my stockings on Sunday for the coming week.

And then I let things go. My illness hasn't allowed itself to be one of the things I can ignore. Most days, I am simply waiting to see how things like oatmeal and yogurt will do inside of me. Will I smell, be gassy and foul? The atypical endometriosis (holes instead of cysts) is a bad dream I worry about returning. It is a lot to carry, while doggy padding towards health. I must not drown. I must keep the job because I NEED money and the health care. I love John, other relationships have to be less "no fuss" though, many of the times I curtail the pseudo-psychological probes that used to spark me for hours. No more evening long discussions wondering, "What you think she meant when she said that?" To be bare-bones honest, unless it was about my digestive problems I don't care.
In the midst of imagining myself in an ocean, struggling, floating, swimming, a thought. A hole in the script, "big enough to drive a truck through" as John would say. Why am I here? Who put me in the water? God? God.

10,001, 10,002, 10,003. Stop praying to God. Start praying to Grandmother, the one person who could once take care of me. I remember her hot water bottles, flat ginger ale, bicarbonate, a pillow under the tummy. Soggy wash clothes of every varying temperature. The smell of witch hazel for a fever, vinegar and water for sunburns. Tweezers for splinters. Smiley faces of iodine over my knees. Weak tea with plenty of milk.

Advice. I imagine her giving me advice. "If not that doctor, then another. They're all not the same. And they're not all as good."

"Make sure you don't back down. Make it clear to them."

"Don't panic. The right arms and legs, then the left. See how light you are in the water. Don't forget you're feet."

I remember crying terribly in her arms. Crying for the fact that my father didn't love me, that my mother didn't want me. That I had a rotten step-father waiting for my next slip-up. I remember the robe, my grandmother always wore. Terry cloth, functional, blue with rust trim.

And then I see the awful bridge of her own health. I see her gaunt and pained in that robe. Cancered. Chemo-tortured. Arms limp, not nurturing. How awful to die in something so ugly. Something better for my grandmother, this person who raised six children and me. Silk, pretty, and floral.

Then last year, I sat in my mother's kitchen a day after my Grandfather's death. My grandmother had been dead a decade before but for some reason, the death brought up not only him but also my grandparents as a couple. My mother mentioned Grandmother. Yes, she
always wanted to be a doctor. A brain surgeon. That's what interested her. My mouth drops open. Everything that thinks or has any part in communication falls to the floor. A whole perception shift in one sentence. I am angry for my Grandmother in a way that my mother is not. A doctor? Well, she certainly didn't live out that dream. She was MOTHER, like Mrs. Ramsey in To the Lighthouse. I feel guilty for still wanting her back, beckoning her back even after death.

Back in the water. Swimming more or less. Holding everything I can. I cannot panic myself because the water is deep and I don't exactly see land. Boats? They are always blurry. I cannot scare myself but I want a pen and maybe it is one of the things I have discarded. I want to check for it in my fist to see if it is still there. What about the patience, the desire to write? Dread moves around inside me.

Truth: Writing is not necessary. Not when you don't feel well. Not when you can't digest toast without pain or embarrassment. That's why I need writing to bring me back. For the nerve and the assertion and the excessiveness of it, like the butterfly stroke.
The Woman Who Turned Into a Skunk Then Into A Flower

From a hard-to-digest meal or stomach flu, everybody has had gas of the smelly lethal variety. "Geez," a spouse may say half-kidding, "what the heck did you eat?!" The perpetrator sits there on the couch in fake outrage, naming every morsel consumed in a twenty-four hour period. It's embarrassing. Once my best friend who was hit by a stomach flu was so repulsed by her farting that she kept a can of Lysol next to her bed. Every half hour she would take a sip of ginger ale and spray. It happens. You shyly laugh then forget it. Like the way you forget about the windy day when your dress blew up while three young boys waiting at the bus stop watched.

And there is a side to the world of flatulence that is hilarious.

Children especially take joy in the Almighty Fart. Surely, you know the round song sung on school buses everywhere,

Going down the highway,
doing 99.
Diana laid a fart
that blew us out the door.
The driver couldn't take it.
The wheels went pop.
And all because of Diana's
super sonic fart.

There's also the great diversion from school work. Someone, usually the class clown, announces from his exiled desk in the back of the classroom that someone has cut the cheese. This is most of the time untrue but soon the inquisition begins. Everyone's face is closely scrutinized for signs of blushing and cracked smiles. Like amateur sleuths, they take turns walking up to a waste paper basket to throw out a crumpled piece of paper, all the while taking whiffs to smell out the villain. From out of nowhere a note is drafted and passed around the classroom: "Did you do it? If you did it, you know what we are talking about and we think you're disgusting. If you did not lay a fart, please pass this on." And of course, the dilemma usually fizzled out once someone recited the wisdom passed down through the ages: "The one who smelt it, dealt it."
I was sure I had discovered one of the great hidden rites of passage for boys when visiting home last Spring. Still in his parochial school uniform, in the midst of telling me of his great pitching and perfect math score, my ten year old brother stopped to show me something. I sat there in the backyard with my mouth wide open. I didn't even blink. I'll be darned if he wasn't performing the whole verse of "Jingle Bells" in arm-pit farts. Dan's facial expression was absorbed like the way it was in his band picture that was up on the refrigerator door. I could not help but clap and remarked to my mother who was trimming her bushes, "You know, I think Catholic school is really paying off for him."

Gas for an evening? Okay. Passing gas in a crowded area where everyone pretends they didn't hear? A devastating, but thankfully singular memory. The day the other kids tormented you for farting while giving an answer in social studies? Your heart still burns in disgust for the rotten kids who made you cry. There seems to be some contract we have as living creatures: Not all of our body functions will be in working order all of the time. We will throw up, cough violently, sweat too much, sob loudly, sneeze "wet" sneezes, and yes, pass gas occasionally and sometimes in inappropriate places.

But for almost three years having gas was a constant for me. For the last year or so of that period, it would be with me almost all the time. Although my flatulence was not of the "whoopie cushion" variety, it smelt terrible. It was so offensive to other people I had to either strategically sit away from others or not go out. For three years I had prayed every time I sat down in class that the spot closest to the door (easy access to the bathroom) was not taken and that no one would be so unlucky as to chose the seat down wind of me. For three years, there would be an awkward pause on the phone after a very lively and long conversation with a new friend. "Hey," she would say, "we have to go have lunch sometime. You should come over and meet my crazy dogs." I always wanted to jump at the invitation and most of the time I declined or sidestepped it with an excuse. I had a project, reading, the house was a mess. Although great friendships have endured through letters or phone calls alone, most are gelled
by a certain mutual trust. One person says to the other, "Here's my life. Come on in." But I preferred to stay on the sidewalk and talk from there. Why would I want to repulse my new friend?

It was no small irony that just as I was supposed to be focusing on making a good impression at graduate school my flatulence became so bad that I couldn't sit through classes very well. With what nerve or self-denying fantasy did I write my letter requesting a teaching assistantship? What would my teachers say? "She's a good student but I honestly can't say she'd show up to teach. She's missed several classes because of a weird stomach problem." But really, I hardly heard the compliments that graduate students obsess to get. I just wanted the right medicine that would make me well, a day out in public where I wasn't pre-occupied with smelling.

Before I was diagnosed with endometriosis and treated, before I found a factor who knew of a new digestive medicine that had "a little bit of everything in it" and that worked, before I discovered that I simply cannot tolerate wheat in any form, I sat through countless lightening-fast doctor visits and degrading tests. More heartfelt was the sad discovery that people could be cruel. Growing up, most of my trauma had been felt at home. I tended, if anything to be invisible among other children and was spared so much of the "lord of the flies" treachery that went on from day to day. Now as an adult, I was getting my share. Those kids who were obsessed with mean revenge to sniff out the farter in grade school were not so different as adults. Like when women who during witch hunts took up the task of pointing and accusing so no one would think they themselves were evil, these folk made sure everyone knew the smell didn't come from them.

This had to have been the case with a young man sitting behind me on a packed airplane. When I think about that day it seems to stick out as THE low point. I had done everything I could do, from diet to relaxation techniques to over the counter medicine and still, I was passing gas.
It was the day before Thanksgiving and the airport was packed. I had just flown successfully from Des Moines to Ohio and felt rather triumphant that my thorough food and drug regimens had so far paid off. From the very moment I had made the reservation to fly home I had worried over how my stomach would be. Even though my lower abdomen was constantly nagging with pain, I was anxious about the gas. I said the prayer that was by now my personal mantra, "Please let no one sit behind me." In a way, I thought that staying back in Ames might be less stressful than making the trip home—all those close spaces with the bathrooms so hard to get to.

A day before, I was extra careful about my meals. Only the blandest things: Beach Nutt strained carrots, plain rice, plain yogurt, water, two halves of a peach from a can. I took the ineffective over the counter gas tabs that the doctor recommended because, well... it couldn't hurt. I practiced deep breathing. I drank down yet another gluey cup of orange laxative because as my doctor put it, "If nothing is in the bowel to ferment, there's less chance of gas forming." I prayed. I recalled times where sometimes multiple trips to the rest room had greatly lowered my smell factor. I would bring a good book that would take my mind off my upset stomach so "my nerves" would not be a contributing factor.

I have never really had the urge to go to a mountain top to scream at God but by the end of the two and a half hour flight I felt as if I had a few things to say. The young man behind me purposely put his tray back roughly. To his girlfriend, he talked loud enough so I could hear. "When I get home I'm writing a letter to United asking for my money back. I'm gonna say I had to sit behind a smelly girl and couldn't breathe for two hours. It's disgusting."

This was my worst nightmare playing itself out. There was no door from which to escape. If the pilot hadn't announced the plane was full, I would have moved.

I saw the couple get on the plane before it took off. They were not striking. Living in a college town of 25,000, I see a lot of young adults under the age of 25. They leaned a bit to the preppy side, but the guy had a splash of "grunge" (crummy flannel shirt but no nose ring).
The girl's hair was brown and held back in clips. She was not terribly good or bad looking. The boy was tall and thin with light orange hair, kind of like a grown-up Opie. There were a lot of college students I didn't like on sight. Like a car full of blonde Delta Delta Delta girls cutting us off or guys who have a beer gut and curse loudly for the entire duration of their walk to class. But these particular two students didn't register with me in any negative way. If I hadn't been gassy, they would not have directed their anger towards me. I would have said "thanks" for stopping to let me get in the line to get off the plane, but that's it.

Instead, when the plane landed the boy stood up and I felt his eyes on my head. He made a few more comments about the smell and the rotten flight. A baby from the row in front of me popped her head up and looked right at me with a beaming smile and giggled. How could you not automatically coo back at a happy baby? But I could not talk or play peek-a-boo. I tried to find a dry spot of the only linty tissue I could find in my carry-on bag and sniffled feebly. Then my own anger level rose. Finally, I turned around to big Opie.

He was looking at me the way I look at parents who beat the crap out of their kids on line at the grocery store. But I had left sanity and waited for the next comment, my mouth pregnant with reason, statements of health, how many doctors I had seen, of the friendships I wasn't able to develop, and what I had to not eat to even meet his effortless existence. I wanted to ask for his address, pay him back for his spoiled flight. I would send it in cash with a note: I HOPE YOU NEVER GET WHAT I HAVE.

But he stopped. I suppose it was enough to see that I was crying. As a space was made for me in the aisle, his girlfriend, who had been chuckling all along said, Maybe she's sick."

My mother saw me before I saw her. She enthusiastically "yoo-hoo-ed" me and I in turn stopped right there at the entrance as anxious passengers passed around me. I covered my eyes with one hand and sobbed. The green velvet dress I wore seemed useless, an ineffective attempt at trying to pass a pretty and pleasant person to be around. Bottom line: I was
disgusting. My mother's face turned to horror and she led me to the car. I blubbered the story like the time when I was ten and ran into the house because a neighborhood kid was tormenting me at the bus stop. I felt so terrible for ruining her greeting with the awful truth that I was mentally unraveling. All the while as I passively listened to her plans for me to see a New York doctor and foods she could prepare for me, I could smell the flowers. She had bought them for me to welcome me home. My mom, she was really trying this time. They seemed so beautifully arranged in shades of pink and lavender, baby's breath, carnations. Mother inconspicuously rolled the window down a crack and as she went on I nodded, keeping a dull focus on the floral pastels on my lap.

That night, asleep in the guest bed, I decided that pleading with God was getting me nowhere, as did praying for a doctor with answers. Now I would strike a deal. I was wholly serious about this. I mentally called to my dead grandmother to be a witness. Into the dark room my eyes were wide open. "Okay, if you take this illness away, you can give me back my migraines. I'll have migraines every night if only you take this away so I can move around people during the day."

Migraines. They had started when I was eight. I had hardly got them anymore though. By the time I reached adulthood I always knew by a feeling behind my eye that I could potentially get one as much as a day before. Having a migraine meant sitting in bed with a bowl in my lap, waiting for the inevitable throw-up. It meant that the pain in my head would be so searing that I would cry and the pain would throb even more. It meant that when I opened my eyes one of them wouldn't see right--there would be a very pronounced "black spot" when I tried to focus. Hey, but at least if someone came into my room they wouldn't be repulsed by the foul, rotten egg smell. They could give me a compress, pat my arm, and sit in the living room, not taxed.

This illness of mine was getting in the way of other people's living space. I couldn't stand it. The irony was that I totally identified with my unsuspecting victims. Before this gas
started I had always had a sensitive nose. Walking into our apartment growing up, I could always tell when my mother had watered the plants. And I was always the one eager to open every window on the first borderline warm spring day. I love fresh air. Even in the cleanest of public bathrooms, my hand covered with a pulled down sleeve would unconsciously go over my nose, or else I would gag. My nose had always been one of the talents I impressed people with. "Did you do laundry today?" Just the ghost scent of clean clothes being folded and put away and I would know.

* * * *

John pokes his head into the bedroom while I am at the computer. He is chewing gum, what must be the three pieces at once. He has given up smoking for something like the thirty-seventh time, but has made it to the third week. He cannot sit still.

"I'm going to Quick Shop for a candy bar, something sweet. Get you anything babe?"

I pause to consider this question. Old Me and New Me meet, come toward each other with hands on their pistols like a scene from Gunsmoke. Old Me is wearing the token black hat, has a lit cigarette, a cup of coffee, and a smirk.

"Yeah John, get me a Butterfinger, king size. I've got a paper to write. Oh yeah." adds Old Me, flipping open the cigarette lid, "better get another pack of these, too."

"There's no room for you in this psyche." New Me stares steadily at her more reckless twin. She unrolls a list, the kind you imagine Santa unrolling with the names of good and bad children. It hits the floor.

Old Me chuckles and looks lively, more than up for the challenge.

"You can't scare me with your heightened caffeine adrenaline. Let me tell you something. Butterfinger is made with chocolate, wheat starch, refined sugar, and a half dozen preservatives that your inside can't take. And put that cigarette out, we're not that kind of body anymore."

Old Me laughs under her breath.
"Let me ask you something, Little Miss Clean Livin', what time do you go to bed?"

"Well," New Me begins, hesitant to answer, "um, Saturday night or a work day?"

"HA! Any day. Give me your latest."

"Well, sometimes I make it past the news. About 11."

"11 P.M.! Who are you kiddin', Pollyanna? That used to be the time you'd begin to
write. Look what's become of you, where's you spark?"

"Um, hello?" John is still waiting at the door, restless for a task. He crinkles his nose,
rubs a finger under his nostrils quickly. It's eight p.m. and something is not settling right inside of me. *Maybe it was the mushrooms I had with rice. Or the fruit in the yogurt. Is my stomach no longer doing well with the oatmeal? On and on.*

"I'm sorry," I say in a small voice. "I smell. Do you think Quik Shop has air fresheners."

John assures me that he can't smell a thing. I think about him picking me up one of those car fresheners. Maybe I could wear one of those giant strawberries around my neck. I don't believe him. I request a flavored water and John is on his way. For a second I have a dark thought. I wish John was still smoking. Having been a heavy smoker since the age of thirteen, John's olfactory powers had been greatly compromised. Oddly good luck for me, as my stench often rose through the bed covers. Maybe he might catch a whiff of a hog lot driving down a country road, but in the past it has had to be overwhelmingly noxious, city dump bad.

John's nose is reemerging. I got my first clue last week when John returned from a conference. He had gotten stuck in an ice storm and his sport coat was soaked. Practically glowing with the news, John had reported, "You know, I forgot what wool smells like when it gets wet."

"Like a wet dog," I said off the cuff.

"Yes, exactly. A wet dog but something of the woods too--wet bark, right?"
Like some weird twist on Gogol's short story about the man who had his nose stolen, I found myself wishing someone would take my man's newly discovered sense. Of course I was happy for him. I don't want him to die of lung cancer or emphysema like his grandparents.

And maybe he could always smell my worse digestive moments. Maybe it didn't bother him that much. Or perhaps he subtly turned his head away from my body, literally burying his head in a book. I recall him pulling the blankets up to his nostrils sometimes, looking like someone who was just getting cozy.

John returns home red-cheeked and smiling. Let me guess: He's just found the scent of melting snow and mud. He puts the water down by the keyboard.

"And I got you something else as well." John reaches down into his pocket and pulls out a bag. The contents are an unnatural shade of orange.

"Circus Peanuts!"

Circus Peanuts: The candy of my childhood. A derivative of the marshmallow family. Although orange in color it does not have predictable flavor—neither orange nor peanut. Peanut-shaped but oversized. Spongy when fresh. When exposed to air for a few hours they can be used as a door stopper or to break windows. Everything in them is manmade. Even the sugar has been chemically twisted to produce this fine confectionery.

New Me is already censoring this eating event. Old Me can already imagine devouring the bag to the last neon crumbs.

"I checked the label. It didn't say wheat. Can you eat them?"

"Sure. I'll space them out. This is great. A real pick-me-up."

I eat one. God. How delicious. Old Indulgent Me is so content that I realize that is who John bought them for, at least partially. She is after all, the woman he first met and fell in love with.
Even if I strip myself of the layers of insecurities, pure curiosity drives me to ask this question: How has John managed through the various bouts of my illness, through the metamorphosing identity, and the swells of depression and hope?

Phenomenally well. Here's the simple truth: it's the rose-colored glasses thing. John's seeing the rest of the world just fine but then for me his perception is thankfully askew. The picture is always taken from my good side, as far as John is concerned. It's the same way for me but then John doesn't often test my love with odd ailments. He's wonderfully engaging. I could discuss the Sunday paper with him forever. A fast reader, too, which I find very passionate.

Of course there were moments. Like how on one day joking in the car became a touchy argument. John had tried to "cop a feel" and I moved away, still laughing. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," he quoted. That had been our little joke ever since we had taken Renaissance Lit together in college--back in the good old days when I still could eat everything. The line is from a Robert Herrick poem. It's basically a sixteen line, sing-song warning that sounds refined to the modern ear because of the "ye"s. Herrick urges the young reader that she should reap the "opportunities" for romance while they are still young because soon they will be old and wrinkled and will have nothing to offer. At least that is how our professor insisted we see it. A possible pick up line? It bothered me then as it bothers me now how long our professor (male) dwelt on this angle. There was nothing ambiguous as far as I was concerned. John always said that line just to get my goat.

John gave romance on 1-80 one more try. He squeezed my thigh, and putting on his best bad French accent hinted at his future plans, "Come on, baby, wait until I get home tonight."

"John," I said, serious all of a sudden, "I just told you my stomach is funny right now. I probably won't be able to tonight. Maybe in the morning."

"Do you know it's been like a year since we made love in the night?"
I hadn't realized. When my stomach was bad I had always turned away. It's hard to feel sexy when you are bloated, cramped, and gassy. And my digestion usually got progressively worse as the day went on. By night I was genuinely tired (no caffeine) and I fell asleep quickly, as if my body was eagerly trying to escape its condition through dreaming. But how nice of him to keep score. "I can't help it," I said miserably.

"I know. You keep reminding me."

"You know, I don't like this either. It's not what I envisioned for my 'rose bud' twenties."

We were silent. I had to bite my lip because I wasn't finished being angry yet and I was about to smile stupidly. We forgave and laughed before we got home. But after I worried and sometimes still do. My life is anti-spontaneous by necessity. Still, we don't just go to the movies or just make love or just anything. So much is contingent on my stomach. On the drive home after work on a Friday night, I both dread and love the bright marquees that announces that night's big theater event. On the one hand, I'm straining my eyes and turning my head back to catch all the details. And then John asks me. Do you want to go? The answer is never a quick yes or no. Of course, I do but just because my gut is settled at 6 p.m., doesn't mean it will be fine at 8 p.m. Do I take my chances? Sometimes. Well, once in a while.

John's understanding. But five years into this thing, I check myself. A person can take only so much "emotional dumping" no matter how much they love you. When I felt myself dipping into frequent crying spells this past summer, I got myself to a therapist fast. I reach for the phone, blab to a friend until I feel better. I hate leaning, but you just have to remember to return the favor.

People invite us out as a couple and since most adult entertaining is done in the evening we run into problems. Sometimes I stay for half the party, sometimes John goes alone. My leaving or absence may be taken the wrong way but I try to explain discreetly and lightly as
possible. We do the best we can. And it's fun to try with John. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"...Okay maybe I'll take another look at that poem again—not because I agree with that professor but because I want to have something to memorize when I'm feeling low. Or I'll surprise John with it one day when he, in spite of everything, makes me feel attractive on a long drive home.

* * * * *

How did I tolerate myself for the five years? Standing in front of my dresser, I wonder this as I am rotating my winter and spring clothes. It strikes me as funny that so much of my clothing has a floral design. A blue and yellow comforter with a dense tulip design is my backdrop as I lay in awe to consider things. My curtains too, are a pastel of soft roses. As I make my way to the living room I pass the framed print of van Gogh's "Wild Irises." I had carried that print for twelve hours of delayed and canceled flights this past Christmas. There above the couch is another print of three generations of women who are outside enjoying tea in a garden. I remember how excited I had been to find this painting—how the women looked like relatives. It is so unusual to find artwork with three redheads. They are sitting under a giant umbrella with painted flowers. On a back burner in the kitchen sits an old pot with the murky water of potpourri I burned the night before. I pour a glass of water and take a pill the way I do before every meal. Although I'm looking at a bland lunch of boiled potatoes and carrots, the day feels more indulgent. Almost noon, and I am still in my pajamas. While my lunch is cooking, I sit down on the couch, bunch my knees up to my chest. I pull my nightgown down over them and feel as small and homely as a unplanted bulb. Bitter thoughts like weeds string around my intentions that this day be for cleaning house—mind, home, and spirit. So this is how I did it. I should have been pasting the words and books I had read from great writers around my house, keeping my eyes on the goal. My internal mantra should have been, "Book in print. Have to have a book in print. Write." But I see that being a human skunk has done things to my wishes, made them more basic, less ambitious. I simply wish to smell nice and
pretty, something loved, like a flower, never mind what I have to say. I plan to write, finally, rest these experiences in the realm of fiction. There's no reason why everyone has to know it really happened to me. But I can't write it that way, I only get as far as the title.
How Not to Worry about Being Loved
(and Other Culinary Adventures...)

I had been whacking the hell out of some graham crackers when I said it. My life is just one big apology.

It was a bit dramatic but I meant it. Friends of ours had just bought a new house and invited us to dinner. Over a week ago I had offered to bring dessert, a homemade cheesecake—my aunt's recipe. But as I woke up that Saturday I was appalled by what had been neglected all week. Laundry, the tub, and a kitchen table that was well on its way to becoming a dumping ground for unwanted mail. Kitty Litter. Grocery Shopping. And I didn't even have a spring pan. I wasn't even sure what one was until I saw it on the shelf—its label luckily matching the index card I had been carrying. Cindy, who was elated to have her first official guests, suggested we come around six o'clock. That's not so bad, I thought. We would leave at five forty five.

I had forgotten that they had moved to the small town of Lacona—some two hours away. Well, I did of course know where they had moved. I had just spent fifteen minutes getting directions over the phone. I had asked, "How long of a drive?" and Cindy had told me. But we hardly ever ate that early and my brain hadn't correctly estimated how much time each chore would take.

And I hadn't counted in the baking time (one hour), the cooling time (at least another hour), the refrigeration time (two hours), and the preparation time (25 minutes, crust not included). What had I been thinking? Was it any wonder I didn't bake much? Look how many obvious ingredients I could leave out.

When John and I came through the door with our six loads of laundry, spring pan, and cream cheese, John had enough of my double-speeding us both around the town and I was just getting started. It was 3:30. We had hastily thrown our laundry back into their bags without folding anything—that would just be another half hour lost. Now as I plopped the sacks down
(everything, *everything* that was not underwear would have to be ironed now) I tried to forget
them with a determination that would have to be described as self-delusional. I was like the
last runner in a crucial race--it hadn't computed yet that I wasn't getting the gold, or the
cheesecake in this case. I ran-walked to the kitchen pulling out the fifteen dollar pan. Where
was the recipe, that damn index card?!

After ten minutes of searching bags, the car, and the walkway, the index card was
found in my wallet, its neat handwriting and long list of ingredients mocking me. I rushed
back into the kitchen. A picture of myself sitting in the car with oven mitts and a trivet in my
lap as I precariously tried to balance a hot cheese cake came to mind. I would lift the cake to
the open window, thereby cooling it faster in the two hour drive. "John, would you mind
calling them? Please tell them that we're sorry but we're running a bit late and ask if they need
anything."

"You do it, Diana." Even through the closed bathroom door John's voice sounded
annoyed, a rare streak of "don't boss me around" macho coming to the surface. I walked
down the hall, a wooden spoon still in my hand.

"I'm making a cake," I said through clenched teeth.

"You're the one who said that six o'clock would be just fine."

He was trying to get me with a technicality. I went back to my graham crackers. *Oh
no, I would never use a ready-made crust for people who are such great chefs, not for an event
like a first house.* I would call after the cake was in the oven, when I wasn't so close to tears.

The thin rectangles of graham cracker waited for me between two sheets of wax paper.

Another day, another apology.

I began whacking the crackers down, first for speed, then for anger, sadness. I was
formulating what I was going to say to Cindy. Every possible approach had a profuse
apology. But so what, that's what you do when you're expected at someone's house and
you're running late.
But I had been apologizing all my life.

For messing something up that was supposed to be easily accomplished. For not having a pen or knowing the time. For being late, early, too quiet, or too talkative. For being moody. For being born.

Most of all I regretted my very birth. I could see that clearly as I slid the pulverized crumbs into a bowl. I was sorry for being a burden, troubling the world with my presence. I wiped hot tears from my face with the high part of my left sleeve and brought out the last crackers to get smooshed.

"Do you know where their phone number is?" John said reproachfully. I supposed he was going to forgive me for setting myself up like this. He pulled my hair back to kiss me on the cheek and saw my crying face—blotchy skin, puffy nose.

"Hey, listen, it's just a cake. We can just get something."

"I'm sorry for being like this...." I could have slapped myself for saying it, again.

"We can get a really nice cheesecake from the Garden Cafe."

The Garden Cafe did have excellent cheesecake of every variety. Yes, that was special enough. Their presentation was pretty good. In a nice box, too. Yes, that was a great solution.

"But the pan," I said, "we bought such an expensive pan."

"Well, now you will always have it. It wasn't that much anyway."

Fifteen minutes later we were out the door. The cake was delicious. We had a great time. Nobody cared that the cake was bought. Except me.

In that two hour country drive I had felt so calm. I was tickled that the sky wasn't falling. But it brought me back to a memory of when I had been seeing a therapist a few years ago. It was a Monday evening and the week ahead seemed impossibly cluttered with due dates, bills, and work projects. Explaining all the different responsibilities I had going on---full time job, graduate school, poor health, and a long distance relationship (John was still in
Baltimore finishing his last year of college), Maura did the usual nodding and hmm's that go along with the profession. I ran out of things to say.

Maura looked down at the chart she had made me do for our session. On it was my small print of every time I got worried.

She crossed her legs and leaned forward. I waited for some sort of diagnosis.

"What could you do to make things easier on yourself?"

I was stunned. I doubt I even blinked. My eyes were large as if asked an algebra formula that has suddenly slipped out the mind. I hoped the answer would come to me. It did not. Finally, with my lifetime of trying to please people and an endless trail of sorry's, I asked. "What do you mean?"

I had always viewed life as a bunch of plans that I had to function within, no matter how unsuitable or impossible. And I was always sorry when I needed to raise my hand and say it didn't work for me. I didn't want to be too much trouble.

* * * * * * *

I was the worst thing that had ever happened to my mother. I was the worst thing she had ever done. It was not hard to understand this by the way the rest of the family loved me with a sort of "it's not the baby's fault" vigor while my mother's energy was more cool and less heartfelt. My aunts, my grandparents loved me to pieces. I was spoiled with what every small person wants--an indulging audience who would listen to my babbling stories with an interest that made me feel important. With my mother, I would talk to her every so often because I was afraid she would forget that I was there. I kept my eye on her in the store. I could too easily imagine her rounding an aisle, scooting through the check-out line, and then driving away without me.

She had only been out of high school for three months. It had been the first summer she had been aloud to use her own ID in bars. There were plans for nursing school but there
was no particular rush — she had gotten a good job in a bank right away and was with friends she had known her whole life. She had finished high school and her parents were happy with their daughter who always did well. They didn't worry over her.

Her body had finally fallen into proportion. For awhile her Campbell's soup kid chubbiness had lingered, then her bosom swelled almost overnight. Finally, her legs had thinned so that she could wear short mini's. Her skin would be tan by the end of September, her eyes—sort of a turquoise—would be even more striking. She liked to wear her hair in a modified Audrey Hepburn style. She wore a bit of make-up but not too much. She had a wonderful assortment of earrings—in every picture a different pair.

And I suppose she dated. In twenty-five years, she never divulged who she dated before she met my father, or how she met him, or how long they had been dating. She has never shared any single account of their courting. She didn't "go there" and I deeply, more than anyone, respected that. To be unwed, young, and pregnant in conservative Long Island in 1970 was to wear your newly found sexual pleasures before a crowd of shocked, judgmental eyes. Suddenly everyone's good girl became grandmother's reason for bi-monthly hair color treatments. My parents were married less than three weeks after I was born.

Again, as if by collective family wish, no one has ever talked about how my grandparents, either set, reacted to the news. From the comments my mother has made, I suspect that my grandfather withdrew emotionally. While describing him favorably, she adds, "but he never knew how to talk to us after we grew up. He only knew how to love us when we were small." The writer in me has spent many an hour concocting how the family dealt with my impending arrival. There weren't too many stories to go on, which makes me doubt there were many high moments, very little to laugh about years later.

No one mentions how it was decided that marriage was the route to go. Who pushed who. I imagine a lot of crying. I imagine growing in my mother as she cried, sitting on the toilet seat cover, like I do when I am deeply upset. I imagine her throwing up at my presence
in her body like the way my own system rejects anesthesia. Did she contemplate abortion somewhere in Mexico?

I have contemplated it for her. As I grew up and crossed the ages she had I constantly asked. Well, you're just out of high school now, would you have a baby now if you got pregnant? Now you have finished college—would you feel differently now if you got pregnant? Most recently, by the time you get married next year you will be 26. Your mother had a seven year old by then. Would you have the baby?

Probably but I would be afraid. Pregnancy was the thing that my mother's life turned on. It took what was simple and free and ground it into dull worry. Having a child, having the reminder of her ill choice of boyfriend when she was eighteen linger in the form of a daughter seems cruel fate. Even now, seeing a professor who is eight months pregnant walk down the English department corridor, I feel immense pity although I know she is ecstatic about her pregnancy, has a great husband, and the finances to raise a child. I still think, "It's weighing her down. Look what it's doing to her."

When I became an indestructible teenager and began to explain to my mother that her love seemed a little lack luster, she would pull the lines and voice out as if from a script. "No, Diana. That's not true. I love you very much. I am very glad that I had you."

It was like a cheat sheet my grandmother had given her: don't make the child feel like you never wanted her.

Mothers, no matter what their personality, seem to like to brag about their kids, the so cute thing the cherub did the other day, reliving the first word forever, the milk. Mine couldn't. She blanked out, pretended she didn't hear, or changed the subject. It was about the time I noticed this that I was swept away from her.

With divorce imminent (my father simply woke up three years after they had been married and told my mother that he didn't love her), my mother and I moved into the top floor of my grandparent's house. But I hardly saw her. My grandparents and three aunts who also
lived in the house, kept me away from my mother. I did not mind that much. When I think back to then, it is only that I am always with another family member out somewhere, never with my mother. I remember the trips to the park, the Bronx Zoo, Great Adventure, Adventure Land, ice cream runs, walking the dog, coloring Easter eggs, and going to the movie theater for the weekly Disney film that would be showing, done without my mother. When I turned around, climbing the school bus on the first day of school, it was my grandmother, not my mother who waved back at me confidently with a terrific smile.

Then my brain integrates her back in though. I remember my mother upside-down, head resting in my Mickey Mouse clad pillow. She was taking yoga. I remember her yogurt machine, wanting to peak at the congealing while liquid as it heated. She had a very bad ulcer. I remember her face as she, along with my grandmother carried me into the doctor’s office wrapped in a blanket and still in pajama’s as my fever reached close to 104. I can see her very clearly dabbing calamine lotion onto my chicken pox, patiently. She was around. But I must have been hard to look at.

I was worse than ugly. I looked exactly like my father. This fact may have been satisfying to my mother when she had me at nineteen (it dispelled any doubts from cynical in-laws who the father was). However, as her attempt to make a happy family out of us disintegrated, my face became a ghost of a person she was having dreadful second thoughts about. Almost as if making a cruel cake and could not help but put the right mean finishing touches, God also gave me my father’s body type and mannerisms.

My questioning left eyebrow: his. My tongue-in-cheek. The way I round my back when I’m in a bad mood and am not to be consoled. How my eyes drop when I’m deep in thought. The long spindly arms. My pale skin with the scattered freckles and straight, straight auburn hair. All his.
Except the height. Barely 5'4", as I physically transformed into a female version of my father, I would be able to squarely look my mother in the eye. We were the same height, there was no missing me. Very often she simply didn't look.

It is odd how one responds to a lifetime of someone not looking back. When my mother's eyes fall on me there is always a blink, a facial tick, something that inwardly snaps. My face surprises her, like seeing an old lover with whom things did not end well. She is not expecting the idea of my father, to be reminded of what he looks like in the echo of my own visage. For a few sentences she does not hear what I am saying.

And she was always trying to get me to look less like him. All mothers have a very stubborn sense of what color looks good on their child and this sense can carry through to a whole lifetime. "Oh, really, the black one?" John's mother has always said, "Black makes you look small. How about the blue?" With mine the criticism was less harmless and not so subtle. She was always trying to get me to perm my hair--"fill out your face a little bit so your jaw line doesn't look so long." Was it any coincidence that she had wonderfully curly hair and a round face? If I gave in and just let her do my make-up before a big family event, the first thing she would reach for was the blush—her dark shades of powder more suitable for her olive-toned skin. My hopeful, "how do I look" twirl before going out on a date was always met with a flat "very nice" followed by a more concerned "how about some blush?" Very often I had just put some on. She never got the bottom line. I'm pale, just like my father.

We grow up in our own recent history. This is how I explain how I came to deeply feel that I was to blame for my mother's lot in life. I eventually would be blamed for my mother and step-father's marriage problems. It was not the booze, the pot, my step-father's inclination to watch pornographic movies before he started the work day, or my mother's numbness to the awful way we lived. Home from school, I would sit behind a closed bedroom door and listen to the hideous acts I had committed that week. Skip's voice would be barking with allegations. Words like brat, bitch, fuck, and shit were peppered in every
sentence. I was always doing such bitchy things, acting like a brat, pulling "this" fucking shit. My mother would at best weakly defend me at first then abandon any protective strain left in her. "What do you want me to do about it? I'm sick of being in the middle."

I had purposely forgotten things on the grocery list that were for Skip. I had purposefully left the bread out and had not closed the bread bag back up. Now the counter was full of crumbs. I kept trying to do my chores after the allowed time. There was to be no dish washing after 9 p.m.--the racket it made woke my step-father up! There were so many minute details, conditions I had to meet in order for him to leave my name out of his swearing tirades. And there was always one more problem unfolding, something concocted in my step-father's paranoid, alcoholic mind.

I moved out into the adult world and adolescence without parents who loved me. But the other worlds of friends and school, were far more easy to navigate. It became hard to logistically work out my two identities: nice, sweet, Diana who always gets good grades and bitchy, bratty Diana who was trying to undermine the very fabric of her family's life. I simply blocked home out. And of course, home is always the place from which we leave. It is our springboard--from the first thought spring all others.

I know I said "sorry" a lot. My friends, my teachers were disproportionately important to me. I never wanted to displease them. Every caring gesture thrown my way was caught and then carefully stretched out like a band-aid to cover dozens of deep holes where my identity went black.

And sorry has always "worked" for me. In the world where adults won't speak to each other for years until the other one "apologizes first," many appreciate a recant of bitter words or thoughtless actions. Sorry. It is wonderful balm when it is heart-felt. It can be seen as polite, something to do when you're not sure how someone took very direct criticism.

But when a sorry isn't appropriate--that's the one I struggle with. For instance, one doesn't have to apologize for taking five minutes of a teacher's time during his office hours.
One doesn't have to apologize when she is asked for opinion and gives it. One does not have to say she is sorry for things she has no control over, like being born, or planning an outing on a day that winds up being rainy. Lastly, one does not have to apologize for apologizing. This is the first rule of not worrying about being loved. No one tells you that but it's true.
The Hole in My Head

I would pretend she was my mother except I wouldn't call her mom.

Every Saturday my grandmother got her hair done at McCrory's department store and I went with her. My grandfather would drive us, slowing his Cadillac to a smooth stop just in front of the door. The bargains of whatever season would absorb customers and I found it very comforting that my grandmother cared to consider Easter basket grass two days after Valentine's Day.

The obstacle course of stiff girdles and polyester underwear before the salon entrance no longer intimidated me. I passed the racks of training bras without blushing. This was the routine. I would hang out with my grandmother, flip through Family Circle, looking at the kids' faces for the secret to landing a normal home life—it was something about an elaborately decorated gingerbread house and sweater patterns, as far as I could tell. My grandmother would be under the clear helmet, and I would occasionally tap the hot dome, asking for the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Grandmother would lift the blow-dryer with a wink, remove a plastic ear cover and lean forward. Sometimes I would wear the ear covers too—just to see. I would eat her whole roll of mints and carry on an effortless conversation with the hairdresser, George.

"Is that your daughter?" a new shampoo girl might ask, working the suds out of my grandmother's hair. I would feel suddenly pinned, like someone had thrown light on my secret hope and it had dissolved instantly. On the other hand it suggested the chance. A complete stranger had been fooled. We even looked like mother and daughter. We had the same Irish skin, and although she dyed her hair these days, it had been dark red as well. More importantly, I believed, we behaved like mother and daughter.

Sometimes a woman would leave one of the blow-drying chairs before its timer had ended. I would slip under the dome of dry heat, all the while scheming. How would I manage
to live with my Grandparents? How would I convince my mother to give me up? She liked
having me around not out of love, but out of pride—she could so raise a child.

No, she couldn't. That's why I was with my grandparents all the time. I had tried to
put the idea into my mother's head recently in a long car ride, only to have her expression grow
tight as she glimpsed at my fantasy life, so very much without her.

Loyalty is everything in dysfunctional families—and it was clear I was of too fair
weathered stock. I was not going to pretend well, come out smiling in all the pictures. I
would avoid her hit-and-miss attention giving and go where they treated me best. Never mind
the pithy reward of an occasional dose of motherly attention after rave reviews after a
parent/teacher conference. I wanted the daily doting of my always interested grandparents.

"That is never, never going to happen. You must have a hole in your head if you think
that's ever going to happen! There is zero chance." My mother said, the zero like it was an
important paragraph all on its own, good enough to think over. She snapped the radio off and
we sat in silence. Every few seconds I would hear a tire bump to the form of the highway. I
found myself visualizing where the hole in my head would go and how big it would be. I
imagined at first gushing blood and brains, then a simple hole, like for a key, dark and clean.

I wasn't sobbing because it was too strange. Suddenly I wasn't in the car with my
mother anymore. There was jealousy in her voice, territorial protection in her eyes. I was an
only child and had to check my short mental notes on sibling rivalry. Yes, this was it. No
way was my mother going to let me have more time and attention with my grandparents than
she had. Was it from being one of six children? The weight of being the oldest girl, being a
second mother as her older brothers were out playing? Or was it that becoming a mother so
young in her own adulthood had brought her to a point far way from feeling like someone's
child?

Whatever the case, my mother was at times my sister. My aunts also played the parts
cool older sisters, letting me try on their lipstick and taking me to the movies. And my
Grandparents were often my parents. And my father, yes, why has he gotten off so easily in this? My father was like a platonic, lukewarm date who drank too much.

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I was fourteen and I still had the fantasy. Not in the same way—it was more fractured, more surreal because it had to be. My grandmother had died of cancer. Six months later, my mother still fell into crying spells on the couch. She would sit with the lights off in front of the TV, letting the sitcoms roll out before her. I would hear the sniffle first, like someone's allergy acting up, and then the low crying. Then the sound of the tissue coming out of the box. Even though I wasn't always talking to her these days (she had stopped even nominally defending me against my step-father's daily verbal abuse), even with that, I could never stand to see my mother cry. I would come out from behind my closed bedroom door and ask if she was alright.

Yes. I lost my mother. It's the most terrible feeling in the world.

I would nod. Apologize. Ask if she would like a cup of tea. I felt better because the crying would stop but then, after she had gone to bed, my resentment would bloom. We were like characters in a story my high school English teacher might use to show irony. I knew losing a mother was the most terrible feeling in the world, but try not having much of one at all, ever. Try having to pretend in your head that your grandmother is really your mother.

Hope Edelman, in her book Motherless Daughters touches on this invisible territory.

Victoria Secunda...describes this type of mothering as a 'sort of muteness.' The mother is physically present but offers no emotional substance, like the body of a car with nothing under the hood. But the daughter keeps turning the key in the ignition, hoping that if she does it just right, the motor might start up this time. (86)

Still, it was tough on my mother and she had a right to cry. I doled out sympathy during the waves of depression, though I privately resented it. Maybe at the end of this grieving and Valium-popping my mother would have an epiphany on what it was to be a
mother. Somewhere in my mind I had made that a possibility. I hoped her nurturing would finally kick on.

She stayed numb. The weather was warming up and still she remained frosty and distant. Mother cried less, but was resuming her old natural state. A caterpillar who turned into a sad caterpillar then back into a caterpillar. I had gone to see a guidance counselor. Skip was drinking heavily after work, cursing me, and mother did nothing, same as always. Ms. Millet, a woman with incredibly tired, raccoon like eyes, passed on the free advice that was to be my sole rule to live by until I went away to college, "Try not to be home that much."

It was logical, but still it shocked me. That was the solution? Avoidance? I was insulted by notion--it suggested that I accept that a decent home life just wasn't going to happen. Eat over a friend's house, sleep over when ever possible, work after school, go to the library until curfew, join a club. What teenagers normally do--just be particularly active about it. The goal would be not to grow but to avoid a crummy home environment. I was to do this non-home home living for how long--another four years?

I was fourteen and I still had the dream. I wanted to live with my grandparents in their spacious, no rules-comfortable house. True, it was only grandfather now. But we got along. He had a nice ritual of breakfast and a newspaper. He was one of the first people in my life who encouraged me to voice my opinions--I could say what I felt with grandpa who would at most give a soft endearing chuckle when he sharply disagreed. We enjoyed each other. And he would say yes. This man who listened to the Annie soundtrack year-round would certainly be my Daddy Warbucks.

I was scheming again. I imagined things going so well over the summer that grandfather would suggest I stay and go to school there. I would have my first job by then. We would have breakfast together, I would awaken to the sounds and smells of Grandfather burning then scraping the toast (he cooked everything on HIGH). When I brought the news of
a high grade home, he would beam, saying corny things like, "Atta way, baby. You're going to the top." He would glide his hand upward, a gentle plane.

Problem: How would I ask him? Grandfather, with all his magic, was still a 1950's man. Family problem? What family problem? It would disturb him terribly to know that his daughter had married a rotten man (again) who was abusing his family. In some ways he knew. No one could see the three of us in operation without knowing something was seriously askew. But the timing was bad. Grandfather, a resoundingly positive, keep moving man, was heartbroken. On the weekends he would pick me up from Brooklyn and drive me back to his house in Long Island, I saw his eyes well up late at night. He sat in the big, upholstered and reupholstered rocking chair next to my grandmother's side of the bed, listening to the radio. It was too painful to sleep in that bed by himself. In the end I decided not to slip him an emergency message about home.

My mother and I had several painful exchanges.

Mother, open your eyes. You married an alcoholic bully. (It was true but then I said it in a thick, fourteen year snarl, there was no compassion in my heart. At that age, you haven't had that much time to mess up yourself and any adult who wrongs you has a rap sheet as long as repeat felon.)

Blink. BlinkBlink. (I still can't stand her wax face glaze when she wants to shut something out. It has always made me question my reality: Didn't I just stay that aloud?)

Mom, did you hear what I said? Hello, anybody in there? (I'm getting desperate, dramatic.)

Yes, I heard you. I'm sorry you and Skip don't have a good relationship. But that's not my fault.

You're my mother. (I choke on the words. I feel my throat get stuck on the emotion of the sentence. She's been feeding me that line since I was ten.)
Yes, but you can't expect me to get in-between. (This is when I realize my mother's perceptions border on the fairy tale. She is thinking under the assumption that we have a normal family life. That Skip is a reasonable adult, not an unpredictable alcoholic. She believes Skip wants to be a father, my father. The truth is that he wishes I wasn't around. He won't spend a penny on me. Financially, my mother may as well be a single mother when it comes to me. She cries poverty then goes on a 3,000.00 dollar trip sponsored by Skip. The money is there, then it isn't. I go crazy with her selective vision. I resent the prospect of having to "avoid home" for four years.

I hate living here. (All teenagers say this. Again, these are dramatic words.
Tomorrow afternoon, on some soap opera somewhere, a teenager will shout it at her mother and storm out of the room. Mock classical "there's a storm a brewing" music will be piped in as the mother will crinkle her eyebrows and look into space, deeply disturbed. But I don't run out of the room. I'm waiting to see if she takes the bait. I am a few years older than the last time I tried this.)

Well, I'm sorry but you don't have much choice. (That's my mother: stubborn and closed. Keep going, I tell myself.)

Why can't I live with grandfather? At least I'd be happy. He loves having me around.

Absolutely not! (My mother's eyes suddenly focus. No wondering if she's mentally "in" now. It's just like in the car four years ago. When my happiness with her parents becomes a real possibility, down comes the angry gavel.)

Why not? I hate it here. I can't stand living like this. It's fine for you but why put me through it?

I'm sobbing now, spitting the words through a runny nose and wet face. Something internally hates itself for breaking down, ruining the delivery of my points with a cracking voice and tears.
Her gaze is unloving. Somehow her crying makes me feel bad but it never works in reverse. I am looking not at my mother, but a jealous sister. I cannot have a better relationship with her parents than she had. And there, just like before, is my disloyalty, spread out before us both. I have no intention of going down with the captain on this doomed family barge. I want to throw on my dinky life-preserver and swim towards Daddy Warbucks.

Well, you have two parents. Why don't you go live with your father?

It stings. She knows he has never offered. She knows he gets by with seeing me four times a year these days. He lives an hour and a half away but it may as well be different coasts.

I walk away. I try to live in that apartment, going home to sleep and to do my chores. The argument repeats itself, until I call my mother's bluff. I shout that I don't give a damn where I live, I just can't stand it anymore.

And then my mother is on the phone, dialing and talking to my father. (So it doesn't bother her after all to have me gone. Just as long as it isn't nice for me.) A few days pass, more telephone conversations. More arguments. I take my chances. I will be closer to my grandfather anyway. My aunts and I will go shopping. And I would be with my real father, someone who wouldn't be pulling that "not my blood kid" stuff. Jenn, my best friend, would be going upstate to be a C.I.T. in an all girls camp, so she wouldn't even be around.

I was going.

* * * * *

When I was still a toddler my father built a dresser for me. With its deep drawers and wide frame the bureau was big enough for a grown woman. That was my father's thinking--build it once, and build it right. I would grow into it, maybe using it until I went away to college.

It was one of the things that went with my mother and me after the divorce. As a child I never gave the bureau any thought. When the blue water from my broken magic eight ball
poured over the dresser top and into my underwear drawer, I cared only for the broken toy.

By early adolescence, as the weekend visits turned into infrequent, after holiday afternoons, I began to see the value of that bureau. The more I felt sad about my father not caring to see me, the more I loved what he had created especially with me in mind. I would glide my hand over the top after dusting, feel the smooth calm of generous shellac. There were no air bubbles or flaws. The handles were brass and lovely—curvy and feminine and everyday when I pulled them open it was like touching proof of my father's love.

There in my bedroom, I would stretch across my bed and stare at my wooden rectangle the way some people daydream while gazing out a window. The bottom was fascinating to the eye. It was carved out, arching in perfect symmetry at the center where the wood met in downward arrow. I would study the left side, then the right looking for slip ups. There weren't any. I myself was never good as making sides match. To this day my Valentine's hearts are hopelessly lop-sided.

The feet of the bureau fanned out, elegant, like a good pair of brown shoes on a fine Victorian lady. My father was mysterious to me. So deep in his alcohol and excuses, who was this man who also could breathe feeling into a lifeless object? It would have been better, maybe, if the bureau never existed so its loveliness wouldn't confront me with its daily assertion that father cared. How confusing it was, the truth versus that bureau.

From far away my father's house looked quaint. A one story yellow ranch house with white shutters. Even as you came closer and saw the occasional tanka truck or discolored plastic pail on the front lawn, it only seemed cozy and lived in. It seemed unpretentious, an average home in average Smithtown, Long Island, about forty minutes from my grandparent's place in Huntington. Even as you drove up into the gravel driveway and saw the plastic billowing from behind the corner of the house you just thought, "Oh, they're adding on a room" and that would forgive the stapled plastic and old dry wall piled on the side.
My mother didn't have the guts to drop me off there. No, instead we reverted to the old neutral zone, my grandparent's house. The first and foremost motivation of this arrangement was that my parents not see each other. Grandmother had always mustered pleasantness, heartfelt or not, and she would ask my father to come in as I found my shoes and coat.

Now my grandmother was dead but we were still operating by the old set of rules. I enjoyed a delicious week-end with my grandfather before father picked me up that Monday morning. We discussed the newspaper over rolls and eggs. We took a walk along Jones Beach, stopping to watch people a few people roller-skate around the outdoor rink that played outdated organ music. He would disappear for a few hours to go golfing and return with a Chinese apple—an impossibly slow food to eat that was one of my most favorites. For this man, I would quit the rebellious act and be the good young woman I was inclined to be. I would keep the house neat and be home by curfew. But it wasn't going to happen.

My father was at the door and my heart beat fast. I get the same feeling before giving a presentation—about to speak, about to be seen and judged. His bad posture was almost style, I always thought; a decision not to look on guard and perky. His hello was warm enough.

"Are you ready for your summer of fun."

It was my own sarcasm, lightly put, coming from my father's lips. He took my bags and asked, as always, "Where's my kiss hello?" I gave him a kiss on the cheek and it "broke the ice," as usual. Yet, as I looked up towards the car, I internally froze. The heads of two small children bobbed up and down. I could hear the occasional shriek as one took the toy of the other.

Damon and LeeAnn: my half-sister and brother from Dad's third marriage. They were five and six and they clung. They demanded. They competed for attention. They were often quite lovable but for this occasion, the drive to my father's after the being sent away by
mother, was just inappropriate. How thoughtless of my father to bring them along as if as if
he was going to the deli to buy a quart of milk. I tried to smile as I opened the door.

I just wanted to be alone with my father a little bit. I wanted to talk about my mother,
find an ally who would affirm how difficult it was to live with her. I wanted him to ask me
questions about school and the music I liked without the interruptions of a Barbie flying up
from the back seat. My father had yelled at them several times to behave. Every few minutes
they would do the one thing they weren't supposed to do. If it was rolling the windows down,
they would do that until finally there was no point in trying to talk.

Every so often my father would pointedly say to one of the kids, "Let your sister alone.
I'm sure your sister will play with you later." as if to incite some sort of sibling pride that was
nowhere in me. I liked Damon and LeeAnn. How can you not like two kindergarten children?
They thought the world was one big unfolding event. And yet I had seen them about ten times
in my life.

But my two year old brother back in Brooklyn, I missed. Maybe because I spent every
day with him and because I had been almost a second mother to him, I ached for my Dan Man.
Would he look for me while I was living at my father's for the summer?

It occurred to me as I walked through the door. Of course, there was no room for me.
I had only slept over once and that night I spent on the couch. True, my step-mother Sandy
had tried to make things nice for me. She made sure I had bedding and pillows. Sandy was
extremely easy to get along with. To this day, I can never claim that she ever said anything
negative to me. If my being there was an inconvenience to her, she never let it show in front of
me.

Sandy was fundamentally different from my mother. The day when my mother left the
house without a scrap of make-up on was a day when something was going very, very wrong,
like a death. Sandy only wore make up for big events. If my mother wore jeans it had to be
Saturday and the they had to be stylish and tapered. Sandy's jeans were everyday Levi's,
straight with fold lines by her stomach. My mother kept things neat, not immaculate, but "picked up." Sandy had no cleaning schedule, admitting without guilt that she was lazy. Sandy drank diet coke with chips as we geared up for our favorite soap everyday. My mother would have done water and a piece of fruit. I sometimes wondered how my father could fall for two very different women. Certainly, somewhere there had to be a link. Later I would see the connection that they both lived with alcholics and put up with the life that went with that choice.

Sandy had a son, Tommy, from her first marriage who was about eighteen. He had a room there but was hardly ever home. His door was always closed. Late at night he would come in and go straight to his room. Tommy owned two dozen offensive heavy metal tee-shirts which he rotated. Late in the morning, he would get up and make food which always seemed to have ketchup drenched over the top. Tommy spoke under his breath to his mother about my father when he wasn't around. He was not impressed at all with my father but was always stinging, I felt, from the fact that his real father had walked out on his mother when he was a baby. Tommy was bitter and sarcastic and I knew my presence was the height of this family irony. I did not want his dark, narrow eyes to fall on me with their criticism. I tried to stay out of Tommy's way.

To be fair, Tommy had reason to be critical. My father was an alcoholic and a diabetic. Mornings, lighting his first cigarette, my father's hands shook severely as if he had a nerve disorder. True, even when I was small, I saw him with a cigarette in his hand, walking through the rows of his garden during the early morning. He took a drag infrequently, almost preferring the smell and presence of smoke more than the nicotine. But I hadn't remembered the shake or the blood shot eyes.

It was the first time that I noticed the alcohol, too. Growing up, I had never thought the glass of scotch resting between his legs as he drove as a problem, just an impressive coordination trick. He seemed fine. When my dad had been drinking all day, he never called
me names like Skip, but only became depressed. Down he went into heavy thoughts that always landed on his pitiful situation—whatever bad thing had happened to him at the time. The diabetes. How he got stuck being a father so young. The fact that he was had to work as a "floor manager" at the Fairchild airplane plant rather than a flight tester because of his diabetes. My mother wanting child support. On and on.

In the living room there was a small hole in the wall the size of a fist. "Oh I got lost my temper one night," is all my father had offered for explanation. I wondered why he hadn't filled in the spot. Was it some kind of warning? And how come I had never seen this raging temper? I wondered if this was his good behavior.

In every room lay an unfinished project. Half of the kitchen cabinets were off, displaying the spice rack and boxed meals all summer long. The door frame had been striped of its wood. Two sides of the bathroom wall revealed dry wall and pipes. The door to the backyard revealed the half finished porch. You could sit on one side but had to jump to get off of it, since the stairs had not been completed. My father liked to sit with a Scotch and water in his hand and point to the porch door. Eventually, there would be sliding glass doors. Plastic covered a large part of east side of the house. He would knock the window out and build another room.

I nodded and said that sounded nice. This was my stunned mode. I took out my stationary and wrote to Jenn, who was in upstate New York being a C.I.T. for an all girls camp. Like a woman on the prairie a century before, I walked out to the post box every day to meet the mailman.

Stuck for two months in this unfamiliar suburban town, I tried to find things to do. Certainly my father felt no obligation to entertain me. Never did we spend a day together, "just the two of us." And it seemed nearly impossible to meet other people my age without school. Where did the suburban fifteen year teenagers meet, I wondered, taking a lonely walk to a nearby park.
Mostly, I cleaned and read magazines. The cleaning part was interesting, since it was really not in my blood. I don't "put away" as I go. But probably because I had no private space of my own, I began to want to make the general areas neat. Every morning I had to fold my cot, which just barely fit in the living room's free space, then roll it into a nearby closet. Sleeping late was never a choice since the kids got up early and would stand over my head until I opened my eyes. Sometimes they would drop things on me, speeding up the "waking process." So I cleaned. There was always laundry. A few dishes. And there was always a layer of dirt in the living room. There were no rugs, and for the life of me the floor always felt dirty. I could not walk barefoot without the bottoms of my feet feeling the dust which really unnerved me.

Compared to her own son who barely came home or contributed to the household chores, I looked pretty good to Sandy. "God," she told everyone, "how polite Diana is. And what a help around the house." At least this step-parent liked me, I thought. At least my father didn't curse at me or critique me.

But I could hardly stand it, without a bedroom to be alone and without a group of friends to escape to. The children were always pulling at my arm. My father was either at work or somewhere remote, drinking. One day while passing their bedroom when my father thought the door was shut, I saw him hunched over a shoe box, rolling a joint. Just like Skip, I caught myself thinking.

This "other parent" option, the last escape hatch to a normal family life, proved to be the same play, just with different actors. Yes, I understood why Tommy didn't respect my father. Two small children to support and raise, a wonderful wife. And there he is, getting high. A man of 37! It seemed terribly negligent. And familiar.

Sometimes I closed the bathroom door, sat on the toilet bowl lid, and sobbed quietly into a wad of toilet paper. I had run out of possibilities. This home was hideous. Home with my mother and Skip was also grim. I wasn't the sort to run away. I didn't want to live on the
street or in some wacky group home. I wanted my grandfather's stability, his easy-going, "you're going to the top" compliments. It was there, a logical possibility.

But never going to happen. I saw this that summer. This was STUCK; my lot, so to speak, until adulthood. I felt the hole in my head entirely close with the truth. And somewhere inside me, as if the wish had to find another air way to keep from suffocating, new holes began to burn.

One night, late in July, with less than one week to go, I joined my father outside on the half-finished porch. He had been drinking but I didn't care. It was only for his company—as if additional time with him would give me more clues to work with when I tried to figure him out back in Brooklyn. We had been quiet for a moment and then he asked.

"Does he hurt you?"

I thought about the time I stayed over Jenn's against my mother's wishes. I had come home the next morning and when I got into the living room Skip was there. I could hear the shower water on. While trying to walk into the kitchen, he grabbed me and threw my body across the room, cursing furiously and calling me a punk. I kept chanting "I hate you" the way they repeat prayers in horror movies when faced with the devil. I did not want his possessed spirit to get me. As I huddled up against the bookshelf, my mother came out of the bathroom in a towel, demanding to know what was going on, as if my position and torn jacket didn't spell it out. As if she hadn't heard the thud of my body and the venomous swearing that followed.

I thought about the weird back rub when I had had a migraine two years ago. Skip had gone up by my bra, almost fondling my breasts before I pulled away. I thought about the pornographic movies that offended my eyes if I got up a little too early, needing to cross the living room to use the bathroom. I thought about the his daily put downs.

"Well, no dad," I said back, "He's just not nice. We don't get along."
He's just not nice?! Who knows why I lied. Maybe I didn't want him to know. Why expose myself to more shame when this guy clearly wasn't going to be my white knight?

"You know, you could stay here, if you want." He mumbled something about adding on another room. The ice hit against his glass of scotch as he changed positions in his chair.

"Oh, well, thank you, but I miss my friends. It will be okay. I'm hardly around the apartment when school starts, anyway."

I knew this request was obligatory, something to ease his conscience. Two months had passed without him working on the potential "addition" to the house. If he had wanted me there, he would have made more of an attempt. Out in the backyard, my little sister, LeeAnn, ran in circles through my father's garden.

"Diana," he called out to her, loud and sure, "Diana, stop stepping on the plants."

"Daddy, I'm LeeAnn." she sang back, giggling, finding the notion silly. I sat facing him in the dusk, feeling like a ghost of a guilty man.

"Oh," he said, looking up at me, trying to cover up his mistake, "that gives you an idea of what you were like at that age."

I couldn't find a thing to say. I just laughed without opening my mouth, the final proof that I had been replaced by a younger version of myself having come fully to the surface.

Back in Brooklyn, closing the door to my old bedroom, I saw that dresser and never missed my father so much. True, I had spent a summer with him, but that wasn't the man who built my beautiful bureau. That older man couldn't finish one single building project. His hands shook too much to produce such symmetrical arches. Damon and LeeAnn had no handmade dresser to causally say when someone complemented it, "Oh my father made that for me when I was a baby."

I missed the my bureau making father. He was entirely gone.

* * * * *
"I wish we had just told you that your father was going away somewhere very far. You were young enough. We could have told you that. I wish he had had the courage to be honest enough to at least admit that he didn't want to be your father."

My mother and I are sitting in her backyard. It has taken the sun forever to set but finally it is gone and we drink homemade ice tea under the uneven light of bug repellent candles. Neither one of us is crying or angry at each other. My own coolness amazes me. I have just told my mother that in college I had tried to get back in touch with my father. He and I had phone conversations. I was going to school in Baltimore at the time. I pushed to forgive him. I tried to stay in the present, keeping things honest but not too deep. My father was interested the way no other person was that my tub drain was slow to drain and that there seems to be paint chipping besides. He listed types of paint, didn't catch himself and said that's something he could fix. He had said he would like to come see me and I said sure, just let me know when and I'll tell work I need the weekend off. I waited. At the time I worked at a mall shop where the managers were always being overly difficult about taking week-end days off. But I let them know. I explained (bragging it felt like to me since I had never been able to claim it before) that my dad would be coming down to see me soon and I was going to need a Saturday and Sunday off. I was ready to quit if they would not give it to me.

I waited. It would be odd to call again since those past couple of months I had done most of the calling. Besides, my father said he would get back to me. It was in his court. Clearly. I made plans about the kinds of places I would take him, a crab house, to the Innerharbor to see all the ships. I would buy a coffee maker. I imagined him going out to his car and coming back with tools. He would fix the lingering rumble in my bathroom toilet. He would suspiciously stare at my apartment door. "Is that supposed to be safe? What kind of lock is this? Oh no, that's not any kind of decent lock," he would say.
Months passed. And I just knew. I knew how he operated by then and that he had not changed. I knew that sure, he could play the part of my father in a fifteen minute phone conversation but that he just didn't want the job.

My mother's eyes are wide with interest. I wonder how often her thoughts slip to my father. How often does she think about what to think about him? Her last encounter with the man was in a court room when I was a junior in high school. For the fourth time, she had taken him to court because he had failed to pay his child support. A deadbeat dad. This new information is what pushes my mother to say she wished I had been told that my father had left to go someplace far, far away.

I do not tell my mother, or anybody, about the tub. One day, I had about an hour to spare between classes and work and thought I would stop home for a little down time. When I opened the door I had a funny feeling. The cats came out of the bedroom to meet me a bit shyly. I walked forward a few feet and my heart stopped. The bathroom door was closed. I was the last one to leave that morning and I had not left it like that. The light was on. I always shut the light out. I was going to run but then I saw a bit of the rug on the outside. It was saturated.

The tub had flooded. I could see a vague boot print in the pool of water. Someone had been in the apartment. As soon I realized this I saw my nightgown and one of my more racy pairs of underwear resting on top of the toilet bowel cover. Some stranger must have seen this, I thought, blushing. My orange cat, Joe, rubbed his face against the door frame, meowing towards his litter box which was wading in the water. John and I were living paycheck to paycheck so our total supply of towels numbered four. I grabbed them and began trying to absorb as much water as possible. Water began to come up through my shoes. I flung them across the room and let my stocking get wet. I took off my dress and walk-ran back and forth between the kitchen and bathroom with pots and pan.
The phone rang and I started to cry. I swallowed and picked up the phone, tried to at least sound neutral. It was my landlord Greg, who, as John and I have always said, is the most laid-back guy a person could have for a landlord. He was a pharmacist and had bought this small apartment as an aside investment. Although he probably looked forward to our $350 monthly rent check, he hardly needed it too buy food or pay the electric bill.

This time he was more alert, but still not angry. I apologized profusely. Honesty, at least of a sort, poured out of me. I explained that since we had been late last month with the rent I didn't feel right saying anything about the tub. He in turn, was truthful too. He knew the tub pipes were in bad shape. Greg did make me feel bad though. We lived on the second floor. Our bathroom was right over part of the main hallway. The building custodian had noticed a water stain and now Greg would have to pay for repairs. I stood there with my stockings wet, in my underwear, holding a giant Tupperware bowl. Someone would be by tomorrow morning to check it out. I had a paper due the next day. I had to work until 9:00 p.m.

And now I had to straighten out the apartment--i.e. don't leave underwear lying about. I kept moving--I had had bad days before and I know this was the secret to surviving them. I called work and methodically told them what was happening and that I might be late. I drained enough water out of the bathtub and brought the kitty litter out. I fed the cats. On the edge of my futon, I waved a hair dryer over my stocking feet. I threw my dress on and left.

That was it. Final. No way was my father getting a second chance. What had I been thinking? The hole in my thinking that had suddenly been opened for a chance for my father to show love closed soundly, as if by cement.

* * * * *

I am surprised my body has not chosen fevers as its illness expression. Other than the aches and chills, I have always found the altered state of mind a fever can bring interesting. Instead, I have gas. And holes, holes, holes. On my ovaries. In my stomach. In my foot
when a bad infection had to be cut out. With some people, it is growths, or an organ.
Shakespeare always centered on the spleen. There are the asthmatics, with their "can't breathe in this atmosphere" metaphor just begging to be plucked.

I have nothing extra to be removed. I have nothing missing. But my skin, or fabric is thin. Thin-skinned? Or there is something so strong, so acidic that it can burn through the layers of my being to produce small windows. I could turn the illness around and around, making the holes the work of a "disappointment" parasite.

Instead, I have learned to respect their presence. I merely know, "I once had a hole in my head but then I closed it so completely that now holes appear on my body, a record and memory." I may not want to go down "memory lane" but my body will not lie to itself.
Body Parts

I don't eat meat. It's not for religious reasons or noble ethical concerns about the cow's quality of life. It's a veins and bone thing. I remember trying to eat a chicken drum at the age of four. It was near Christmas and my grandmother was trying to coax me into "three more bites." "Santa's watching to see who's good and bad." I had looked up, trying to see past the darkness of the dining room window. Where? Where exactly was he? Did he see what I was seeing? "Grandma," I asked, turning my wrist up and finding a small purple vein. "Is this the same as that?" I pushed the drum stick, its own small vein hanging from the bone, towards her. "Just eat three more bites of your vegetables," she said.

Growing up, I was always spending weekends at my grandparents and sometimes my cousin Sherry would stay too. This made the fantasy of my grandparents becoming my parents more exciting—I could pretend I had a sister as well. We were both the only child and so the two days we spent together provided just the right dose of sibling practice we craved.

Grandma and Grandpa had a pool. A Pool. Having this "easy access" to a pool as a child was incredible good fortune. It was better than any toy and when I think about the giddiness Sherry and I felt pulling on a bathing suits and running outside to it, I understand one thing: water makes children silly. We compared underwater head stands and somersaults. We played Marco-Polo. And then, when we were really warmed up, we acted out scenarios using the whole back yard, and of course, the pool. The four foot, above ground circle was the thing we pretended to drive around. The deck was bedroom and kitchen. The dog, Bear, if he was unlucky enough to be around—a horse. Sometimes we would just drift together, arms roped around either side of the big black tube, sharing secrets. We told what we knew—from boys that we liked to more serious things like the gossip about one of my aunts, Laura. Was it true that her first boyfriend had gotten her
pregnant and gone to prison? We tried to imagine what he had done, spinning around, our hair, two shades of red, mine darker, Sherry's strawberry blonde, floating on the surface of the water.

And then there would be the jingle. Many writers have tried to describe the ice cream truck frenzy. The sound of its ringing, the radar children use to try to distinguish how close and what street the truck would come down next. Sherry was good on her feet. I always heard the bells and stood still, waiting for the reality to become more real. Sherry would be out of the pool, screaming to grandmother for money, telling me to check out front. Even though she was a year younger, Sherry was better about being in the moment and I admired that. It felt reassuring. By myself, I doubted my position in world, with Sherry, there was no uncertainty. She would keep me afloat. We would be fine.

Operation Ice Cream a success, we turned our Italian ices upside down and continued scraping them on the front porch. The brick steps were hot but our bathing suits were still dripping from the pool. I lifted up my foot to and turned it up for consideration.

"My mother's friend knows a woman who had her feet read. You know, all the lines on your feet mean something. The foot reader said the friend's kidneys were bad and three months later she died." That was my job, to bring up really weird stuff. Further discussions on unexplained phenomenon led us to agree that Sherry and I were both deeply psychic. It was so riveting and spooky that I would get a chill from time to time. My hands were so cold from the ice, but my feet were too hot to put firmly on the sunned porch. A single drop of water would run down my leg that was warmer than the skin under the bathing suit. How warm was I? At least six different temperatures from head to foot. Sherry told me she felt it too and I was relieved. We went back in the tepid pool, our eyes becoming cloudier. We both felt it, saw the film of white over the world. The doppleganger of each other's bodily condition, one of us would say, "My cheeks hurt
from laughing so much," as we climbed into the big guest bed at the end of the day. "Me too," the other would truthfully chime. That night I went to bed without fear of the dark. planning our double wedding, double fame. Our babies would both have "M" names. Or rhyme. May/Fay, Martha/Molly.....

I was waiting for the doctor to come back. My legs had turned to a splotchy purple color in the drafty examining room. The nurse facing me tried to make small talk. Am I almost done with my degree? Is my boyfriend from out East, too? The doctor came back with a book like a photo album. "Okay, now here's regular endometriosis. You see the cysts, there and there." I had never thought of a body part as having a purple, bulbous attachment. The ovary itself looked raw and pink. The cyst looked like it had been caused by a burn. Dr. Lawler flipped through a few more pages, nodding his head. "This is A-typical endometriosis. You have more of a hole. Now it's not too big, not enough to remove the ovary. Let's try a few more weeks of doubling up on the pill." My eyes began to well. We had already done one month of "double birth control." I had my period twice and spotting in-between that. What kind of schedule was this? I kept hearing the word in my head "atypical" and felt suspicious. I walked and I hurt. I woke up with it, the slight low bulging and ache. Everyday was day one or two of my period.

It was so unsettling not to have a pattern. I craved for someone else's medical story to match my own. I had never brought the gas up in casual conversation, that is something people don't mention like, "Boy, you know this back is really killing me." You can't do that with gastrointestinal problems. In our culture, gas is either a bawdy joke or a repulsive and impolite. But this, this was cramps, my menstrual cycle and most women had their own story to tell.

Before class one day, Cindy, an acquaintance who sat in front of me in a literary research seminar, remembered that I had vaguely complained of a bad period the week
before and asked. Her brown eyes blinked, waiting. I took a chance. As other people filed into seats around us, I put the textbook face down, as if so academia couldn't hear.

"Well," I talked lower, "actually it's endometriosis, but supposedly it's not so bad. Supposedly, there are a couple of holes. They have me doubling up on the pill."

"What?!" Cindy squinted her eyes and shook her head. Class was beginning. "I've had some stuff like that," she said, "and I never heard of that. Let's talk during break."

We did. Some "stuff like that" was actually an ovary that had to be removed at the age of thirteen. "You can probably tell by looking at my face that I have really bad acne. That's from some sort of hormone imbalance. I would never go near the Pill though. There's so much breast cancer in my family."

"Yes, sometimes I wonder about those small print warnings. I just haven't heard of anyone else doing this. My period is all over the place."

"I bet it is." It was comforting just to talk about it, to drop the graduate student pretension. But still, no one ever said, "Me too," to this method of treatment, to the holes. Searching for a medical doppelganger, I began to disclose more information about my physical condition—I even began mentioning the bad digestion. During a slow Friday afternoon, I had let it slip to my boss, Sharon, that I didn't know what "a normal body" felt like anymore. She pulled up a chair, the one the other secretary usually sat in. In an hour, Sharon explained how she had had a rare form of cancer that had cost her both ovaries. She took hormone pills everyday. It could come back anytime. That's why she never ate very sweet stuff and took meticulous care to stay "balanced."

The histories fanned out of the woman around me—it was like that, a fan of information. Folded out then snapped shut. On the surface the women around me operated in the realm of the healthy, never seeming preoccupied with growths, ovaries, or looming breast cancer. But then, if you opened the door, so to speak, many women had or were presently experiencing some complication with their reproductive system.
So why wasn't it instant knowledge? Why was it that when Dr. Lawler had shown me the holes in my ovary, I didn't have a mental subheading of what that was about? I've never had diabetes but I know the basics. The same for migraines, high blood pressure, heart disease, varicose veins, back problems. Were we all just waiting silently for another woman to give us the secret handshake, the coded message of having "female problems?"

I was standing in my grandmother's light as she was trying to catch a spider. Oh. *Diana, I think we lost it for good. O wait. There!* My grandmother was trying to trap the bug and put it outside. She wouldn't kill spiders. It was an old superstition from her own mother. The general idea is that you shouldn't kill something that does good work--spiders eat the bugs that eat the garden. Soon we would go out to the back yard in our nightgowns, taking our spider our in a plastic cup. We would leave it in the wet grass and walk away. I got the lesson, "The good ones will be spared."

*I'm a pretty good person.* I was desperately taking to God in my head again--this time from a bathroom stall during the encore of classical pianist Awadagin Pratt. John and I had moved once to get a better seat and because of the smell factor. We had almost a whole area to ourselves. Then, at the last minute, someone sat down right behind us. I almost wanted to turn around and explain to this stranger that their time would be ruined by having to smell me. I wonder why I never do. It seems like an odd first thing to say to someone. The whole audience had stood up in the end. There were even a couple of "bravoes" from the Iowa audience which meant more than a few spirits were moved. Everyone wanted a little bonus playing time. They all clapped until Pratt came back on, while I mumbled a meeting place to John, then darted.

*I'm a good person. So why is God, yes, I'll say it, why is God doing this to me?* My sobs echoed in the bathroom. It was interesting to hear the sound of myself apart from me--like some other woman was also dressed in her best black dress and crying her
eyes out in the bedroom, too. I wanted to enjoy the music with everyone else. Instead, I felt ashamed. What diet regimen hadn't I followed strictly enough? Was I guilty of having stress? What? What? Answer me, God, what's the damn point. because I'm not getting it.

I cook meat. It doesn't bother me to cook it. John likes it. I could preach but I myself hate when someone decides to enlighten me to their "thoughtful" way of life. The rest of the world seems to like the taste of meat—who am I to go on a crusade? People think it's weird to be able to fry up something I would never even consider eating. Just the thought makes something internal turn away and flinch. I just detach. It isn't the chicken with the vein by its leg bone, but "chicken" the thing John likes to have on the side of vegetables and rice.

There should be more explanation, I know. It is my job as a writer to clear this up. Not many vegetarians would fry up a burger for their meat-eating loved ones. Instead, I can only tell the reader my odd exceptions to cooking meat.

1. There can be no bone. I cannot get over the frail rib cage under the chicken's breast. The white arch around a raw piece of steak makes me light headed if I stare at it long. John cooks all his own meat with bones in it. I don't remember ever talking to him about it. It's just understood.

2. I don't like to put meat in soup, even if I'm not having any. The idea behind that rule is that the meat can't be hiding in the food. I know, strange. If the meat is on the plate it has to be in plain vision. It can be mixed in with things, just as long as it isn't covered. Although, separating the meat makes me feel better, as if reaffirming there is a difference the thing that came from the animal and the things that felt no pain.

3. It has to be seasoned and dressed up a little. John is always telling people that I prepare meat the best out of everyone he knows. It's true, I take time with it. Sometimes I marinate stir fry steak in Worcestershire sauce and add dash of wine. But
the herbs are the most important. It's like the religious rites. I feel a little like God, sprinkling the dead body with layers of dry green leaves.

I test myself now. "Think about bringing a piece of meat towards you mouth." I instruct my imagination. The salvia in my mouth goes funny and my neck becomes tight. I feel like my teeth might do what my cat's did the week I had to give her a pill. They had clamped down so tight, the maneuver became a two person job. I get a chill. God, it's so awful.

Maybe, that's it. I'm testing, or proving myself. The act of eating meat makes me sick. It feels like an odd sort of cannibalism-eating, not another person, but a being with arms and legs who feels pain and pleasure. Most vegetarians have an air of almost superiority about them. They have seen the truth and the illogical thinking of the human carnivore's way. I've seen some in action. It's never an inappropriate place to give a lesson. Me, I felt like a worse person. Somehow, I had the nerve to reject something the rest of the group did with ease, even ritual.

And isn't cooking meat, in some primitive way, my job as a woman? The man brings it home, the woman prepares it. Of course, like many women of my generation, I grew up on take-out more than homemade. There is a ten block radius in my old neighborhood in Brooklyn which will forever know me as The Little Take Out Girl. I had no problem with that. Good for my mom. But could I deny how John's compliments filled me up? "This is great. You did it again, babe. This chicken is great."

I always wondered about chicken...why doesn't the meat have another name? Cow has beef, steak. Fish is like chicken but with fish we tend to say the type—flounder, halibut. With chicken is only gets worse as you try to describe it. Wing, breast, thigh. Drum stick, that's the best we can do to cover the identity up. That's the piece everyone always tried to sell me on as a kid. But even after a few bites, I knew what I was eating had nothing to do with music.
What has happened to me and my body? I was staring at the lace white curtains of my normal seventeen year old room. Shocked and wide-eyed and still. Some friends had picked my best friend and me up after work at Haagen Daas. It was after midnight by the time we locked the heavy glass doors. Our boss had a motto: we don't close until the last customer is out. On this steamy Saturday night in Brooklyn, everybody came out for a walk. The shift had been long. First there had been the after work crowd, then the on-the-way-to-visit-someone people (they bought mostly cakes), the pre-teens and the young families with their screaming babies would start filing in around seven, then the teenagers, dates, drunken teenagers. Anyone who came after 11 was grab bag. They usually wanted a half dozen shakes (each shake took about three minutes to make). We hurried through our chores—mopping and filling the topping trays. I was suddenly excited about not going right home.

Jenn had been talking me into it all night. Rick, a nice looking (charming and he knew it) guy that worked with us, would be there. How would that look, she said, if she just went by herself? She sort of liked him but her older sister Patty had warned that "He liked to play around." I pointed out that there would be other people there. She didn't want to walk home alone. Okay, okay. I hated home anyway.

Teenagers in Bay Ridge drank in two places: in the homes of kids whose parents were away and at the park. The park was about three long avenue blocks down. It spanned around thirty blocks wide, from 65th to 97th and rapped around Narrows River. You could see the Verazono Bridge from wherever you stood. We usually hung out just outside the park, on the endless benches. Kids got caught there all the time. But I never did. It was just lucky I supposed.

There were about seven of us. Rick had brought a friend with him, a Catholic school boy from St. Pius. "This is one of my best friends, Paul. He's going to college tomorrow. We're trying to send him off right, so be good to him." Rick jiggled the paper bag full of beer in his arms. Paul looked like Rick's less cool but loyal friend. He shook my hand and I
noticed his pudgy, tanned hands. Even in the middle of August my hands were cold. I made myself let go of his. He had brown curly hair made him look cherubic.

I was very interested in Paul—it was more than his body temperature. It was his "going to college status." Ever since the guidance counselor had told me freshman year to stay away from home as much as possible, I had counted the days when I could leave for college. Now, one year away, I was edgy. Home had gotten measurably worse. My step-father was going into my room when I wasn't home. He was going into my room when I wasn't home, taking things like a shirt that had fallen onto the floor (I was too messey) and pouring whatever was left in the cups I hoarded onto my bedding and floor. I always had a few glasses in there, so much did I loathe to be in the same room with him and his alcholic anger. Mother worked late. For me, "college" was synonymous with "new home"; it had nothing to do with learning.

Never mind my nerdy red tee-shirt with the words "Haagen Daaz" over my chest, I wanted to make Paul my friend. I liked him. He probably did have a lot of friends who were girls. He was sweet, not dangerous or intense. I absent-mindedly found myself checking his waist line—not exactly chunky, kind of thick though. I imagined that I could out run him. Maybe this nice guy Paul would write me letters from college.

Between the first and second beer, Paul pulled out a small silver flask.

"My mother's peppermint schnapps."

"You're kidding me," I said, slightly loosening up "You swiped your mother's schnapps and you actually have a flask? Afraid the prohibitionist are going to get you, Mac?"

Paul chuckled under his breath, bringing his lips very close to my ear, "It's a gift from Rick. I'm trying to like it." He unscrewed the top and swallowed.

"Want some? You don't exactly look like a beer drinker."

I accepted. He was right, I didn't like beer. He put his arm around me. Usually I didn't let boys get that close to me. I was always on guard. Three out of three times I let a
boy touch me I had been drunk. And even then I had "fled the scene" when Mr. Unlucky had reached for the bra hook.

There was a breeze coming off the water. The lights from Staten Island we dotted along, soft and white. I shivered. He felt my cheek.

"God, girl, doesn't your body know it's summer. You're freezing."

"Oh Paul," I told him with a sigh as if I had known him for years, "I'm always cold."

And he had kissed me. I had known him two hours. Someone had brought a radio. Santana was playing. They were in the middle of one of their long guitar refrains. The beat of the music spun around, taking my concentration away. Where was it, that stupid nervous inner voice of mine—think think think? I was tired of being on guard. Tired of taking care of myself. I gave up. No, this isn't what I wanted. But I liked having this warm man's arm around me.

Our group got bigger. We took up more benches. People I vaguely recognized from school were there. Every so often people came by to say hello to Paul, wish him good luck. I stayed there, the cool stranger. Jenn would come by every so often to check on me. She was sticking it out, trying to see if Rick liked her and some other girl had shown up.

When Paul didn't want to kiss me, I asked him questions about college. I still wanted his friendship. I wanted the occasional thoughtful letter from him about Catholic University. Even as he pushed the last of the Schnapps on me, I tried to relax. God, what am I worrying about? He's going to a Catholic college. He's not exactly a tattooed punk.

Jenn announced she wanted to go home. Paul still hadn't asked for my address. However, he didn't want to say good-bye yet. So instead of the private chatter Jenn and I had after such a reviling social evening, Jenn was silent as Paul held my hand. Poor Jenn I thought, it was too bad that she had to be the third wheel. Why did it matter so much
that this stranger care about me? Jenn said good-bye to me at the usual point, 75th and 3rd, one block away from each of our apartment buildings.

"Paul, I have to go now." I waited. He walked with me to my building. Grabbing me by the waist, he brought me forward, kissing me harder than before. My balance was totally dependent on him.

"I wish you weren't going tomorrow. I really like you." This was my attempt to be honest, as if it would break the spell of what was happening. I methodically found key to the vestibule doors. He walked in with me. Against the stairwell his body suddenly covered me, feeling me quickly, as if collecting a quick survey of my body parts.

This was passion? I wanted this nice boy to kiss me at the door once. Then days later, when he couldn't stop thinking of the charming young woman he had met and had found so engaging, he would ask for my address through Rick. Less than a week later I would receive a play by play account of his first weeks at college.

I pulled away, told him I was afraid someone was going to open their door and see. He rubbed my cheek.

"I live on the third floor in 3F...with my parents," I offered, lost. I slid down against the wall. I couldn't tell which was worse, eyes open and dizzy, eyes closed and spinning.

"Can you walk?" When he asked he looked less cherubic. A cherub losing his patience.

"I can crawl, but it's not much worth crawling to." I thought this highly ironic and laughed under my breath. Paul was stronger than I thought. He scooped me up and held me tightly by the waist. In-between landings he stopped and fondled me. I felt numb. This wasn't right. Going home wasn't right either. We reached my floor. I swallowed. I just couldn't pretend anymore that I was a normal person. It was the worst timing in the world.
"I can't stand home. It would just kill me to have to go inside now. Could you just take me to the roof?" I meant could he just pick me up like he had before and deposit me there.

I often went up on the roof in the day time with a lawn chair (tar beach) and during a summer night it was one of the few places in the city you could catch a nice breeze. It was quiet and away from things. Some of the older ladies in the building hung their laundry up there. One of the ladies, Mrs. McGuire, a widow, stopped to chat with me often. She was spreading the word around the building that I was a really lovely young lady, always pleasant, helping out the family, reading a book.

When we got up there, I asked for a lawn chair. When my new friend didn't get me one, I sank down, using his legs as a balance. He said nothing. I kept my eyes closed and then I felt the back of my head hit the floor.

On my back, pinned down. It was like being in a strong current underwater but I could breathe. The pudgy hands were still there but they no longer had a temperature. This person I hardly know kept trying for sex, roughly, trying to get inside of me but the coordination was off. He panted "come on" low, with a hint of anger in his voice. He said I was so strange, like it was a turn on. And then, unsuccessful, he just stopped.

Paul zipped his pants up. I felt for my shirt. It was like some big joke. Just another high school kid, working a summer job at an ice cream parlor. I felt a quarter on the floor. Maybe he had dropped it.

"Did you drop your money?" I said, holding the quarter.

"You keep it," he said coldly. I still needed him to help me down two flights of stairs.

"Paul, good luck in school," I finished as if we had just spent a pleasant plane ride together. "Don't worry, you'll do just fine."

My mother grounded me when I stumbled through the door. It was over two hours past curfew. Fine. Fine. Punish me. I just want to get into my bed. And by the way I hate
I said it all in one level, devoid of much energy. I wasn't sure if I had even said it aloud. I was glad to be grounded for a month.

That next morning I peeked under the covers, under the Haagen Daaz work tee-shirt I was still wearing. There were little bruises all over me, small dark ones on my breasts. I went to turn in toward the wall because I was about to cry and wanted no one, spirit or otherwise, to know. As I brought my legs together, my eyes fell open again, as instant as a doll's. The sore burn between my legs was a shock. I felt bad, rotten for my body, like it was separate from myself. I knew this situation was complicated, something to do with wanting affection and really messing it up.

I waited for the bruises to fade. I wanted to forget the flesh that I saw that was mine. It was a half eaten, then forgotten body. The quarter was on my dresser.

"So, are you still not eating meat?" Sherry asks me when I tell her, vaguely, that my digestion has been giving me trouble again. It is so good to hear her voice. I wonder why we don't talk at least once a week. For a second I try to imagine Sherry, tres New York, coming to Iowa for a visit.

I laugh low. Humor is necessary when you're the black sheep of the family. It's been over a decade since I gave up eating "my fellow creatures" and still they ask, forever waiting for the fad to be over.

"I'm actually thinking about buying a dude ranch. Grow my cattle right there...since I live in cattle country now. I don't know though. Would John feel obligated to become a rodeo clown? Would he have to call me littl'Missy?"

"That's optional. But you'd have to learn to ride a horse."

"What's that sound?"

"Oh that's my cat. She has a litter box fetish. She'll stay in there for a half hour if we don't pull her out of there."
We laugh remembering grandma’s cats—Maggie with the crooked, actually crinkled ear. That wasn’t the end of Maggie’s woes though. No, her tongue was apparently a little too long so when she was at rest it stuck out just a little. And then there was Patches, always chasing after nothing, hallucinating, we finally decided. I consider telling Sherry about what’s really going on with me—how I stay away from people at night because of the gas. I want to tell her about the endless slew of doctors, how I don’t care about graduate school anymore. But I don’t.

“So have you picked a bride’s maid dress yet?” Sherry asked.

“That’s one of my other identities lately: bride-to-be. The world of registry and china, dresses and floral arrangements. It is an endless dimension of material fluff that everyone, including me, likes to talk about once in a while.

“Well, I do have a few picked out. I see a lot that I like but then I think ‘Will that look good on everyone?’”

“Trying to find a dress that won’t look make me look like a cow, huh? Good luck. Just give me a moo-moo with a satin sash and send me on my way.”

I fumble. Sherry says this jokingly but it has to hurt. She is under five feet tall and over sixty pounds overweight. The entire family gossips about her size. She has “such a pretty face” status. I try to meet her in “You think your body is so bad” camaraderie.

“How would you like to be two entire different sizes? On the top I’m forever Little Junior Miss. On the bottom, I’m hips woman. Pear shaped, really.”

I could tell her of my digestive nightmare, of how I feel so detached from my body. I could confess about the night I was drunk and molested. What other experiences was I hiding from the world? It would be nice to crawl in grandmother’s big guest bed with my cousin, sharing secrets and cherry licorice strings. We would pour out the volumes of our life experiences—just throw them out into the light. And then when we were empty of the shadows we would sleep.
But Sherry is no longer like a sister or my physical doppleganger. Like someone who has known me a long time? Yes. A family member? Yes. Yet our lives are very different. While I am considering the nuances of a sestina, Sherry is cutting hair and doing nails at The Lemon Tree. How would she understand my guilt for taking forever with graduate school? After a year of nursing school she had pulled out, plainly telling everyone it wasn't for her. I imagined Sherry standing in front of a crowd of hairdressers and women with curlers and treatments in their hair. “And did I tell you—my cousin has this really bad farting problem?!”

I mentally block out what is emotionally vulnerable. One never knows how someone will react to a physical condition that is so often a bawdy joke. And would I make Sherry uncomfortable? What if she stays silent, or gets off the phone fast and acts weird the next time I see her? She would tell her boyfriend and he would make jokes about it whenever my name came up.

Sherry and I stay on the surface of things. We enjoy each other's humor still. When I get off the phone, I go through the ritual of getting ready for bed. It occurs to me, while I am making a horrible face in the mirror as I brush my teeth, how stupid I have been. I see Sherry, the adult version walking around the last family function—Thanksgiving. Wasn’t she having her own problems with her body and with food? My aunts had caught her reaching for seconds and glanced at each other not so secretly and so Sherry had changed her mind abruptly, almost dropping the serving spoon in mid-air. I imagined her pretending not to hear the degrading comments some teenage boys might make as she passed them in the mall. Hadn’t she also slipped from the fold of desirable, pleasing women? Our bodies had betrayed us, but we were, each in our own way, walking with the rest of the crowd, actually as if everything was normal when in fact we were stunned. I was sure, call it an educated guess, that Sherry sometimes woke up in the middle of the night with insomnia, wondering where her other, pre-adolescent, pre-obesity body was.
Have you ever had any sexual traumas? Any bad experiences? What!? I just came in for my yearly pap smear. "Well, it's just that you really tensed up," the doctor says and it's not the first time I've heard it. I get nervous when doctors come near me with instruments. The waiting to be touched is unnerving. Will it hurt? I always want to take my body away from the exposure. I lie and say no. Like an animal who gets mean when you go near its hurt leg, I protect what's psychologically broken and try to play the part of the Healthy Young Woman.

John and I are watching the "local-yokel" six o'clock news. There is a "hog lot" cover story on, the kind that used to send John and me into culture shock when we first moved to Iowa. They show the farmer move into the barn with his pigs. And they all scurry away from him. Run. My eyes bulge with alarm. Something inside me meets their reaction with recognition. Of course they're afraid of this man; he isn't kind to them and ultimately, he's going to kill them.
White Coats and the Abdominal Woman

So, this is what has happened to me. I am sitting on the edge of my bed in my underwear, head empty. For the life of me, I can't figure what I'm supposed to do next. Put on jeans, brush my teeth, look out the window? The lotion container in my hand brings me back. Oh, I'm taking care of my skin. It's Saturday and there is no need to rush. I bend back up from rubbing cream into my ankles that felt so hard and unappreciative. There's an ache in my back. My posture has gone to shit. As pain has risen from just over my groin to just under my ribs, the spine has been lenient and protective. It has let me bend in at the middle while talking my shoulders into a collaborative effort. I continue with the lotion, into my arms. It's not that my body feels like a stranger's, just that we both have other things on our mind. I, the one inside the body, is waiting for AN ANSWER, a doctor with a good idea, a cure. My body is holding out for BALANCE, it is hungry to feel NORMAL. The two meet in odd understanding. I imagine two women sitting in a busy train terminal. They have entirely dissimilar interests and lives. And yet they are comforted by each other's presence, a little less alone in the world. We share the waiting in silence.

Still, as the two are transposed into one, there is an uneasiness. I think of Lady Macbeth's command, "unsex me now." When I had heard it for the first time in high school there had been snickering. The teacher had been brave. What you do think Lady Macbeth means? We had guessed that she wanted to run away from her femininity. But now the words returned out of context and I got a new take. Unsex me now: take me about from this perversion of the sensual world. When I am touched I don't want to feel hurt. I wish to be above, or better yet, away from the feeling.

I dreamt of my doctor.

Like most women who can get away with wearing a Teen Spirit training bra, in my sensual dreams I usually have an "ample bosom" and am just about to fall out of some
camisole. But not in this one. I'm dressed. Sitting up on the doctor's table, I let my stocking feet swing comfortably. It is just like when Dr. Johnson has finished feeling my abdomen. I sit up and he gives me his verdict. Testing. Concern. Dismissal. In the dream he doesn't talk. We are eye to eye as he approaches me. Just as we kiss I feel his hand graze over my upper abdomen, beginning where the ulcer is and continuing to the back. I feel like he understands some secret. I touch his cheek, run fingers across his lips. And that's it.

It was 2:33 a.m. in July and I woke up chilled. The air conditioner had been on HIGH all night. I got up to shut it off and couldn't help but notice my innocent love, a trusting mound under the summer blankets. I felt bad for having the dream and even guiltier for having deep satisfaction from the lingering feeling that stayed with me as I began to come out of sleep. It was that sense that made me replay the dream again to fall back to sleep.

I was afraid the next day. Dr. Johnson was a married man and my doctor, a person I had spent little over an hour with total. And I was an almost married woman.

For the past year I have tried to look chronic illness in the face to see its features, the steps one's goes through. There is first the noticing—the "ouch that hurts, gee that doesn't feel right" stage. Then comes the worrying, the denial, more worry, then scheduling a doctor's appointment, the actual visit, a test, another visit, maybe shades of an answer or maybe no answer at all. In between doctor's appointments are the trips to the library to find out more about whatever you have. One finds it necessary to establish a succinct summary of the illness—the level of detail dependent upon who you are talking to, how much time they have and how much they really want to know. At some point one's mind starts to sort friends and loved ones according to their ability to be compassionate. I personally have another list of friends who have been to Illness the Place. These are the friends you hang on to which leads me to another stage. Even a best friend can seem strangely remote. In fact, at times it seems like you are working on one principle (from sickness to health) while the rest of the world is concentrating on another (from goal to job accomplished). I replay the curt way the nurse
responded to me when I reminded her of my prescription. They recall snips a rude co-worker made at a staff meeting. Oh, you too, have a job—it's just that it doesn't consume your thinking time. A person with a mutating illness is too busy trying to turn facts around to see the one thing the doctor missed. Small things, a good day with my digestion that allows me to go see a play with a friend, can bring great satisfaction. Too much satisfaction. At some juncture a person with a long term illness feels her standards for happiness dive. It is a blessing and a curse. This is the way I used to feel if I just turned in a final paper or observed a new raise on a pay stub.

I sense that each of these stops must confront anybody with a life-impairing ailment that stays around indefinitely. However, it was not until I had began dreaming about my doctor that I truly knew I was "in deep" with this thing. I privately pressed my lips together and wondered not if my mental health had slipped during the night, but by how many notches had it had fallen.

* * * * *

Yes, I was scared. I was in my first year of graduate school and I didn't want to be sick. I had a deep feeling that my life plan was altering. My eyes went wide and I got that feeling in my chest the way I would growing up when a doctor announced I needed blood work. I had only been sent to a specialist once in my life, an ears, nose, and throat guy. And that had been no surprise—I had strep throat and ear infections every year before then. But this, this transference from ordinary doctor to one who concentrated on the more exotic stuff, as Dr. Patterson had put, was fast.

Three weeks before I had done it. I had walked into the Student Health Center the students lovingly coined Student Death. There in the waiting room with a few fake hanging plants and flushed looking undergraduates, I had plopped down my knapsack and filled out the forms. The top parts were easy—Last Name, First name, Age, Year of School. The bottom was more tricky. Reason for visit? Its thin black line drew itself out to the margin of the page.
Stomach problems, I put in with my best "think well of me" script, then added, indigestion.

My cheeks blushed.

But I had said it. I'm having a lot of gas. And cramps, low. I had told the nurse, who took me into a small closet of a room reserved for taking height and blood pressure. It was good to practice saying it to a woman first. Thankfully, her mouth did not smile in a quirky way and her overall expression was even. My complaint rendered only the softest nod. I took a deep breath.

"Have you experienced any weight gain or loss?" This question stunned me so that I forgot the joke I was about taking my shoes off first before getting on the scale. I didn't know. Had there been a change? I never weighed myself.

"The same clothes still fit," was all I could say.

"Do you notice the cramps when you eat certain foods?"

"Well, yes," I stumbled, "I think so, but I never really thought about it before. It doesn't seem to have a pattern." Was I supposed to come in with some sort of log book? Was this what people with digestive problems did? I sat there and waited for the final step, blood pressure. There always seemed to be things that the whole world knew to do that I had to secretly acquire at some recent, late date.

The nurse's brown eyes stared at me as she let her stethoscope rest back around her neck, "You have a very low, quiet pulse." She said it the way someone in a writing workshop would say, "I really like what you did in line 10, the rhythm." Yes, irony of ironies, as nervous as I could be, my pulse was always steady and below normal. It did not comfort me. It was just another way my body and I didn't match up.

Dr. Patterson wasn't my dream doctor. That is, he didn't tenderly pat my arm as I told him briefly about the gas all day long, how it was hard to sit in public places. There was no doubt about it. He was old school, objective with a capital "O"—all authority and white coat. With my new file under his eyes, he barely leaned over the counter to translate my story into
one word descriptions. I noticed the shine on his thinning hair. He still wore hair tonic, just like my grandfather. That's it, a part of me was thinking, this guy is just from a different time, a time when a woman was sick, it was proof to the male world that women belonged at home. He's going to tell me not to worry my pretty little head.

But in fact, Dr. Patterson was alright. At least he didn't make fart jokes. (Those doctors were out there, too.) So he wasn't going to chat about the weather. In the world of personality types Dr. Patterson had one savable quality, he said what he was thinking.

Doctors are like translators. You give them the symptoms, they try to figure them out like a math problem. It's like algebra, a methodical breaking down of the equation down until finally: \( x=2 \). Some doctors do all the math in their head as you talk, editing out and ruling in all sorts of conclusions. You can actually see the wheels working. They can chose not to tell you that their crossing out a possible test. I've met those physician's and you can never tell what they're thinking, really, about you.

But Dr. Patterson, who in my mind wears the special halo of being the first one, the first of many doctors who I would bring my body to, thought aloud. He laid out the possibilities—stress, or irritable bowel, Crohn's disease, inflammatory bowel. He gave each equal play time. I might need to see a gastroenterologist, if we couldn't get this thing figured out. I felt less lonely when he said "we." I love honesty, the sense that the person talking with you is thinking and saying the same thing. In the end, he sent me home with a antispasmodic (something that would relax the intestines, ideally) and a slip with a "check back" appointment.

I walked back to my apartment as if I had been put to the test and passed the worst part. For me, it was like being nervous about having to do a class presentation and having it go better than okay. Now I could rest, I kept thinking. A representative of the medical world now knew. I felt light, one layer of fear lifted.

That night, sitting in front of the TV. with an uneventful bowl of vegetarian vegetable soup and some soda crackers, I really got all the jokes on Rosanne. My laugh was as full and
surprised as the audience's. When I had spoken to John who was still finishing his degree
Baltimore, I sounded excited rather than drained for a change. I'm so glad I went. It was kind
of embarrassing but I was glad I went.

The pill, something that started with a F or a ph, was small and blue like a birth control
pill. However, unlike the Pill it had a terrible after taste. It tasted the way window cleaner
smells. So I bought mints and waited to join the rest of the world again.

The only other prescription I was used to was antibiotics. Doctors always told me to
take the whole bottle, even if I felt better in a few days. You need the full treatment for the
medicine to really beat back the infections was the reasoning. And I usually did feel better in a
few days, feeling guilty as I remembered the rest of the prescription there on my dresser at the
end of the day. With this new stuff, I never forgot. I never felt good enough to forget to take
it.

When I could see the pill bottle's bottom, two weeks later, I tried to stop the feeling of
alarm. I've always had a quiet alarm system that usually just begins with stunned eyes. It
builds from there. Five days later, the pills all gone, the gas and cramps still there, small panic
made me check the calendar. I rummaged through my purse to find the appointment card.

The "appointment" was made for a burlesque comedy scene. I kept hearing Grouch
Marx say, "Ma'am I glad you've come. It seems we're going to need to get you an
appointment for this appointment." An appointment for an appointment?! "Nurse, pencil me
in for a time to make an appointment for this lady."

We hadn't spent much time in the exam room. Thankfully, I didn't need to pour out
my digestive trials again. Dr. Patterson told me he didn't like that the medicine hadn't helped at
all. Quickly, he decided that I would be better off with a specialist. "Our facilities don't have
all the equipment to rule the sort of things we need to rule out Why don't you get dressed and
meet me in my office. You need a recommendation which I will quickly dictate right now. I'll
have one of the nurses make an appointment for you." As I had put my jeans back on I spotted
a phone and had the urge to dial out. I wanted to call a friend and let them know what was going on before anything else happened. But instead I tucked my shirt in and moved along.

From Dr. Patterson's office, removed from the maze of exam rooms, the chatter and coughing sounded tame. I could hear Dr. Patterson say my name but that was about it. I took in the room's objects, not many ever made it to the doctor's private office. Dr. Patterson was the director and his quarters were the biggest. Just like in the Legal Services office, the wood was dark and real, the windows were clean and really opened. There was actually sun coming in through the window. I let its strip of light hit my feet, trying to relax. Photographs of two teenage children smiled back big eared, braces, and all. I judged from the girl's "wings" haircut that the picture was at least five years old. They were probably around my age. I was glad they weren't upper class perfect looking. I was touched, then jealous, of how proudly the pictures were displayed. Trying to ignore that old sting that rose to the surface at the oddest times, I let my eyes become fascinated by the wooden sculpture of two grazing gazelles separated by a floor of grass between them. Having seen this piece in the Boston Museum of Art catalog before, I wondered again, "Who would look at that and think, yes, that's what I want? Here's my 400 dollars." Ah ha, maybe it's the balance of the two gazelles.

I was thinking too much. Just as I was imagining where Dr. Patterson had gotten his Egyptian mummy prints (Were they from a museum or did he actually go to Egypt? I saw him riding on a camel, black nylon socks up to his knees), he walked in, taking big strides.

"Okay, here we go," he said, handing me another card as he slid behind his big desk. He located a small tape recorder from under a stack of files. "I managed to get you in two weeks from now." I said "thank you" because it seemed to be the thing to say but I had no idea that the usual waiting period could be as long as two months. I stared down at the new appointment card. It ran over class time but everything seemed final. This was the first actual moment I thought, "Well, health before school."
"Do you know where McFarland Clinic is?" I laugh now to remember a time when that clinic was merely the middle point, somewhere between my apartment and the mall. Three years later, there would hardly be a foot of the health center's terrain I hadn't stepped through.

"Yes, I think I've passed it on the bus."

"Alright then, I'll indicate to Dr. Johnson that I want him to call me with his findings and keep in touch, okay?"

"Sounds good." I was hardly out of the room when he began the letter. Confused, I wondered how I should be feeling. On the one hand, Dr. Patterson had worked his paternal charm on me. He had "gotten me in" to a specialist and had let me know in his own stuffy way that he cared. But still, I felt dumped; I was a problem too troublesome to be bothered with. I couldn't help it. I wished to be one of the homely, happy kids smiling on the shelf, behind Dr. Patterson--one of the permanents.

* * * * *

But there was something more physical to deal with--my smell. The fact that I couldn't digest a meal properly, no matter what I ate. The day of my appointment I literally sat up and thought, "today's the day" as if it was the first day of school or a new job. My heart actually did quicken as I boarded the bus that afternoon, straight from class.

How should I put it? The McFarland Clinic was, well, not what I was used to. I grew up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where most of the doctor's offices were in brownstones. They were mixed in with residential houses, the only distinction was a small plac in the corner of a window--Joe Wonderful, MD. Some were even in apartment buildings. But alright, so this was a center.

So why did the complex have to be so flat? Why did everything in the Midwest have to be so flat and sprawling? I knew the answer to that, the tornadoes, the overall design of the land, but still. At the core of me, I wanted something a little more homey.
The waiting area was decorated in burnt orange and dark wood. Five people scattered around the U shape of chairs looked up as I came closer as if to say, "You one of us?" I was younger than all of them by at least two decades. A couple of receptionists chatting about some television show behind the front desk abruptly stopped talking.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling bad for interrupting their lively conversation, "I have a 3:30 appointment." I half-expect them not to have any record of it. But they did.

And so I filled out forms and in-between glanced up at the department's sign, breaking the syllables down in my head. GAS-TRO-ENT-ER-OL-OGY. It didn't exactly roll off the tongue.

"Norma Barts?" A couple in their fifties stood up together. They had been sitting across from me and hadn't said one word to each other in the past ten minutes. They didn't seem "angry" silent, just a Midwestern kind of still waiting. The woman's figure reminded me of the expression "pleasantly plump." Was her husband going in with her? I wondered if that happened a lot in the Midwest. Woman couldn't talk for themselves and so "their men" went with them. Maybe she had something serious. It wasn't until two years later when John had caught me crying in the bathroom in the middle of the night that I understood.

"John," I had said, trying to articulate myself clearly through a stuffy nose, "I just can't take it anymore. I keep going to the doctors and they keep playing this down. Look what's happened to me. I can't sit through class anymore. And going out at night is just about always a no go. Will I be like this forever?"

"No," John replied. He put his arms around me which made me release a round of heavy silent sobs. I tried not to do this, break down and cry on my fiancee's shoulder. In fact, I had hardly mentioned this latest bout of failing digestion, the subsequent doctor's appointments only coming up after the fact over dinner. What was going on with me medically couldn't dominate all my thoughts. I was trying to protect our relationship from my mystery illness. Sick people are needy people. Self-absorbed. But now it all came out.
"That's it," John said, his hands gesturing to stop. "Next time you go to the doctor, I'm going with you. Sometimes I think they see you and think, 'Here's a young woman who's under a lot of stress in graduate school.' I think they intimidate you. Some these doctor's have such monumental egos. They can't diagnose you so therefore no one else will be able to find anything either. Maybe with a man there...."

In my head I was already deciding this was not going to happen. I knew John's presence would not change my doctors' perspective. But I was touched that John wanted "to protect me." From then on, whenever I saw a couple get up and go into a doctor's examining room together, I wondered.

"They really announce your name," I thought. True it was a big room with competing attentions but still—it was like being called onto a stage. There were at least five different exam rooms. Chris Ann, a tall, attractive nurse greeted me kindly and deposited me into one of them. Just like the nurse at Student Death, she took my weight and blood pressure then reviewed my family medical history.

"Has anyone in your family ever been diagnosed with colon cancer?"

"Not that I know of."

"Crohn's disease?"

"No. I don't really know my father's side of the family too well. I'm not really in touch with them, um him."

Was that too much information? Couldn't I just answer "no"? I reminded myself to sit up straight. A picture behind my head caught the corner of my eye. I turned. A flexing wrestler in a stretched unitard scowled back at me. I was still trying to get a fix on this college town's reverence for its local sports celebrities. What kind of doctor's office art was this? The print looked at least 15 years old.

"Is this one of the doctor's success stories?" I asked.

Chris Ann smiled. "No, he was a really big deal in the seventies but he died young."
"Oh." The nurse told me the doctor would be in shortly. That left me to stare at the only other decoration; a cross section of the digestion system—from the mouth to the colon, complete with complications. Pouches stuck out from the colon (hemorrhoids), pink areas in the intestines (inflammatory bowel disease), and red, sore like infections (ulcers) marked the stomach. A year later I would sit in the same spot, still with the same symptoms, imagining armor that would fit precisely around these soft organs, so vulnerable.

Dr. Johnson walked in and I liked him. He was younger than Dr. Patterson, a little less stuffy. I found myself apologizing for my cold hands as he introduced himself. Sometimes you can know someone is a good doctor but still recognize that they're probably arrogant and difficult outside of the office. Dr. Johnson seemed like "a nice guy." He had a neat hair cut and round cheeks. The "introduction" of future visits would be just like this first one. We spent a minute of two chatting about Baltimore, his kids, my writing, the weather, the temperature of the room (the one at the end of the hall was always drafty). And then we hit the chart. Sometimes later I would catch him on a bad day and there wasn't as much conversational fluff. But I forgave that. For heaven's sake, I told myself, "this man probably has to tell people they have colon cancer every day."

By the time I had walked out of my first appointment I had a rectal exam, a barium enema test set up, a pamphlet entitled "Gas Management," as well a return appointment for two weeks. It took me hours to mentally recover from the rectal exam. I hadn't seen it coming. Suddenly, I was in a paper gown in fetal position with two medical strangers standing over me. Chris Ann rubbed my arm ("Try to take deep breaths.") while Dr. Johnson quickly felt around my colon, getting stool samples. My body had shuddered for reasons beyond the physical fact of the procedure which was awful enough. I had been flipped out by the touching of areas that were usually out of bounds, even to a doctor. I disliked that the two strangers saw me that vulnerable. "They're medical people," I had to keep telling myself.
Six months later, tested as far as Dr. Johnson was willing to test me, I found myself defending him to friends who didn't like that I was still "sick" but relegated to a once every six month appointment. "No. Diana, you call that doctor back and tell him you want an appointment now." This was my work supervisor, Cindy talking. She had also had problems with her digestion (stomach reflex) and reminded me that I had to be very clear and firm with my doctor.

I didn't want to go back. Not really. So far I had been the model patient. I had given up smoking, caffeine. When my doctor said more wheat, I stopped on the way home and bought raisin bran and five grain bread. When the barium enema didn't find any cause for alarm, he introduced the term "irritable bowel syndrome" to me. That's what he thought I had and there was nothing he could do for that. It was a functional disease. What about the gas? His theory was that my bowel movements weren't moving fast enough so waste was fermenting, thus causing the flatulence. Dr. Johnson's remedy? A filmy orange Tang-like laxative. But what about the diarrhea? Take Pepto-bismol. I bought them both and spend months trying to figure out what I was doing wrong with them. Where was this balance I was supposedly to regain after making significant changes in diet and lifestyle.

Going back would mean that I was a nagging patient. I remembered the tone that last appointment had taken. "You may want to evaluate areas of stress in your life, since irritable bowel has been linked to emotional, psychological health." If I went back, trying to squeeze one more test out of Dr. Johnson, and nothing was found, how would that make me look? I turned the options around in my head. Meanwhile, I had dropped a class because it was too late in the afternoon and the gas was unbearable. Walking the signed drop slip over to the registrar's office after explaining to my teacher why I needed to skip the semester, I decided. Yes, I would be the pushy patient. I needed some answers.

My nagging won me a Cat scan. The cat scan revealed a very enlarged ovary.
Imagine the Sound of Music's Van Trapp children singing "So long, fare well..." in that small doctor office as Dr. Johnson reported the results. He was taking out a pad, getting the nurse, writing a doctor's name down, telling me follow the little pink line to the other side the building.

"I'll ask Dr. Lawlor to keep me posted." He thought he was getting rid of me. He should be so lucky. For the another nine months I would be bounced back and forth from Gynecology to Gastroenterology. Each specialist thought the other's designated organs were the root of my ill health. I wished there were some way to get them together so they couldn't just pass the buck.

Dr. Johnson wasn't a rotten physician. He had a fine reputation as a surgeon. But he was the wrong doctor for anyone diagnosed with Irritable Bowel. Not once had he referred me to a helpful book or support group. He never suggested a different doctor, or said, "Let me call a few colleagues and see if they might know where they specialize in Irritable Bowel." It was another year and I was back in Gastroenterology. Gynecology had finally cured my ovary problems but sadly, the digestive disorder was still there.

I sensed that Dr. Johnson hated going back on this diagnosis. Even after E. coli had been detected in my blood, hinting that I was harboring an ulcer, it was hard for him to consider other causes for why I was always so gassy. I rubbed the area where the ulcer pulsed, just under the ribcage.

Dr. Johnson had quietly prescribed ulcer medication. He never actually called me to apologize for treating me like a hypochondriac. The diagnosis, the explanation of treatment, and calling in of the prescription were all done by his nurse, Chris Ann. When the medicine wore off and the pain was still there, I came back yet again, the proverbial medical bad penny. At this point, I had given up being the good patient. I was polite, but not quiet.

"It's still there."

"It's very unlikely that an ulcer could still be there"
"I'm just telling you what I'm feeling, Dr. Johnson. I've had a lot of the same symptoms for three years now. Does it add up to anything other than irritable bowel to you? I mean the endometriosis, the high white blood count, the weird spleen, the ulcer?"

"Well, sometimes irritable bowel manifests itself in odd ways. The endo and the ulcer could be separate or connected."

"Dr. Johnson, I still have really bad gas and now this pain. Don't you think it would be a good idea to maybe take a look at this ulcer area? I mean, it's been around all summer." I couldn't have been more articulate and direct if I had tried. Wasn't I being a partner, seeking health options with my physician, the way so many self-help books suggested?

"Look, it's my sense that the ulcer will go away by itself. I'm not the kind of doctor who just runs every test just for shock value just to find something. It you look hard enough, sure you'll..."

"What?" I interrupted him, my mouth falling open, genuinely stunned. We had shock value in writing too. I didn't like my quest for health compared to a manipulative approach to gain a reader's attention. I just didn't want to smell anymore. I wanted to sit on a crowded bus and not worry about who would be offended. Of course, I wanted him to "look hard enough" to find something, the something that had made me unable to live normally with other people.

I got it. My nice man Dr. Johnson was not the right doctor for me. Sure, he was a family man, a reputable surgeon, pleasant to talk to. And he seemed to like me as a person. But he wasn't helping. I had told myself that going to another gastroenterologist would be futile. In Ames, they all worked in the same clinic in the exact same wing. When one of those doctors opened my file and saw Dr. Johnson's name all over it, surely they would consult. Consult and concede.

But there was also something else as well. I kept returning, hoping Dr. Johnson would take me seriously. Sometimes he did. Sometimes not. I wanted that paternal man in that
objective white coat to tell me this was truly a problem. Now as Dr. Johnson went on about his testing philosophy, I wondered why I had so needed him to validate that the state of my body wasn't good.

"Medical procedures are expensive."

"Oh, I am aware of that but I have health insurance." I said it optimistically. Maybe Dr. Johnson was worried about how I was going to pay for all these procedures.

He looked at me funny. That was just it. I had health insurance and my irritable bowel, endometriosis, and now ulcer was costing my HMO plenty.

I left that day with the same pamphlet on "Gas Management" I had received two years before during that first visit. Nothing had changed. I took it as a divine sign that I was my suspicion was right. Dr. Johnson hadn't been listening. He had heard "excessive gas", figured in the fact that I was a woman and had exaggerated my claim, and sent me on my way. Even if I had noticeable gas during many of my appointments, neither the smell nor my voice of thoughtful explication could be heard over the steady presence of my female body.

* * * * *

Enter the "abdominal woman." I was sitting up in bed, skimming over possible research to apply to my essays when I found her: the abdominal woman. Mentally I instantly filed her between "abominable snowman" and "bionic woman." In his 1989 book, Gut Reactions, W. Grant Thompson summons up the words of a doctor in the 1920's to illustrate the doctor's frustration with certain patients. I suppose Thompson's point is that such patients are timeless.

Incessant demand for sympathy and understanding makes the abdominal woman a veritable vampire, sucking the vitality out of all who come near her. Half an hour with her reduces the doctor to the consistency of chewed string and is more exhausting to him than all the rest of his daily visits put together, for she is always discovering fresh symptoms, will not admit to any improvement in her condition, and has an objection to everything that is proposed. (217)
Thompson revises Hutcheson's words. No he assures us in a single line at the end. There is also the abdominal man. But there is no doubt this vampire exists according to W. Grant Thompson, M.D. a leader in the gastroenterology field.

I wondered about this Godzella of the patient world. Was she just one big five foot five inch abdomen with a female voice emanating from the belly button? Why were her "teeth" so sharp? I found myself wishing I could have known this woman, who in the 1920's was so vocal and opinionated about her own health that she unraveled the patriarchal world of medicine. As I moved to other books, I felt camaraderie for her and considered what she might have really had.

To be diagnosed with Irritable Bowel is a gastroenterological curse. Put plainly, the medical community doesn't really know a lot about it. Cause: Unknown. "Stress" gets some credit as does the ambiguous title "emotional disturbances." Of course, it doesn't take a brain surgeon, or a gastroenterologist to realize those terms are used as causes for many illnesses. When we are stressed our immune systems go down, and wa-la, we get sick.

In actuality, Irritable Bowel, or "angry gut," as it is often called, is a grab bag of symptoms. This symptom pool is so large and varied that if a doctor can't find a place for someone's digestive complaints, that patient's malady can be placed there. Although the perspective on IBS can vary greatly from text to text, the symptom list is fairly consistent.

Consider the following signs that could mean a patient has Irritable Bowel as listed in *Irritable Bowel Syndrome & Diverticulosis* by Shirley Trickett. (18)

- abdominal pain, aching, heaviness
- bloating
- diarrhea
- mucus in the stool
- poor appetite, weight loss
- headaches, backache
- depression
- difficulty bending down
- wanting to eat frequently to 'move things along,' weight gain
- rectal discomfort, never feeling the rectum is completely cleared
- excessive wind
- constipation
- incontinence
- small ribbon or pebble-like bowel movements
- tightness around the waist
- anxiety
- painful periods, painful intercourse
Is it any wonder Hutcheson's abdominal women was always coming up with new symptoms? Look how many she was prone to as someone with irritable bowel! It is also worth notice that at least five of the above symptoms can also be found in endometriosis (constipation, painful periods, painful intercourse, backache, & bloating) which does not center on "emotional disturbances" as a cause. In fact, with endometriosis, the disease can cause mood-swings and depression, rather than the mood causing the illness as it is in Irritable Bowel.

Next, IBS is a functional disease, meaning that one can get about and is not at home sick. It's a problem, a nuisance but with some behavioral modifications in diet and lifestyle, we are told, symptoms can subside or be at a minimum. Of course, anyone who one day finds that she is passing white strands of mucus with her stool knows that the daily surprises that come along with IBS can be quite unsettling. I was told, before being diagnosed with endometriosis and ulcers more recently, that Irritable bowel rarely led to other things. So, I wondered, was I misdiagnosed? This disease certainly wasn't life-threatening. Life-compromising? Now that's another story.

Speaking from my own experiences, if an individual is not well but looks okay, society has a hard time recognizing the illness as real. Add to that the various symptoms that can emerge that may need medical attention to make sure they are not signs of something more serious. Combine those two dynamics with the prevailing notion that emotional disturbance is a primary cause for IBS. Not wanting to plead ignorant, doctors may shift the responsibility of correcting what is medically wrong onto the patient, making her feel guilty for ill health. Finally, consider the tendency for women to be labeled as over-reactors, the more emotional sex. A picture emerges, the needy hypochondriac, or the abdominal woman.

Woe to the abdominal woman who does not want to delve into her psyche to resolve her "angry gut" issues. The labeling of psychological disorder is inextricably linked to gastroentestisional problems as a whole. Cecil Helman, in her study "Psyche, Soma, and Society: The Social Construction of Psychosomatic Disorders" provides a very telling
experience of one woman's discovery of this connection everyone—from medical books to non-medical friends made.

(25 year old medical student with ulcerative colitis) Other people were saying there was something wrong with me psychologically. If I'd had appendicitis or a cough, I would have been spared this. Some of these friends were doctors, others not, it's often associated with a psychological component. I search very hard and for a reason—Why me? Everyone told me it must be psychological, there must be a large psychological component—it's in the medical textbooks. Our society associates the bowel and stomach with nervousness—it's more sensitive to tension.(14)

Without defending Dr. Johnson, I have to concede that he is no medical boogie man. He was, however, constructing who I medically was and determining his course of action based on that. But I wonder, if the part of that assement covered the psychological, where was this evaluation? Dr. Johnson never asked that I go for an psychiatric evaluation as part of the diagnosis. Three years ago, before the first appointment there had been a "check all the following that apply" kind of sheet, but that was about it.

I was always uncertain about how I was going to be treated when I sat down for an appointment with Dr. Johnson. It went back and forth. In one appointment he said to focus on emotional factors, the next he seemed to think I was normal enough—an adult with a genuine malady worth looking into. Now that I review those appointments in my mind, I remember feeling as though I had to prove my psychological health. The psychological information must be gleamed from the visits themselves. So if I teared up describing how I had to drop out of class because of the gas, that could be a sign of depression. Asking questions in a direct matter could be translated into "defensive" or "extremely worried" if the challenged doctor felt offended by the inquiries. It seems an incredible power, one that plays not only with diagnosis but identities.

I return to the "sensual" dream about my doctor and I that had caused me so much guilt. Wasn't it odd that I had been fully dressed? Dr. Johnson and I had been "eye to eye." He said nothing but approved by kissing me. The power was more equal. Not only could he touch me, I could touch him and on the face—a sign of familiarity. Dr. Johnson had understood the
nature of my abdominal pain then as his hand grazed over my skin where the ulcer lay underneath. It had been thoroughly satisfying. I don't remember Dr. Johnson wearing a white coat while I, the abdominal woman, was also just a person. We were just two people meeting in understanding on equal footing.
Dear Dr. Lucak

I was at work in the unversity's Intensive English office where I am a secretary. The director asked me to pull some information about a conference in Chicago from the Internet. I was finding things, falling into the rhythm of click, search, read, etc. Looking at the clock, I registered that it is almost lunch time.

My fingers were faster than the part of me that said, "What if someone walked by and saw all this vagina/bowel stuff on your computer?" So what if they did? Like my co-workers don't know by now that I have a major bowel problem. They work with me eight hours a day; eight hours of smelling time. It would be no surprise.

The mucous that can come with bowel movements that I had was now coming from my vagina. Three weeks after I realized this, I told John. Then I told no one. I didn't want to go back to the doctors. The fear of being labeled a hypochondriac was stronger than my fear that something was going wrong with my digestive system once again. Well, I should say that these fears ran neck-and-neck.

I did a search on "gastrointestinal" and "vagina." It is striking to see entries that are clearly there to help women become more medically empowered (the Harvard Medical Association Gynecology Newsletter) can be right next to cheap enticements to pornography. I have never been able to see pornography from its obviously ridiculous angle. Its presence strikes me as aggressive, probably since my step-father got so much perverse pleasure from the obvious female exploitation depicted. He didn't care and, in fact, watching pornography while two women were in the house might have been a real power trip for him.

I came across names, doctors in New York. I found myself printing out some specialists who dealt with Irritable Bowel. Later that night, at home and staring at my computer with the intent to work on my thesis, I began to write a letter to one of the doctor's I learned of that day.
Who is she? I didn't know. Dr. Lucak could be awful. I just wanted a woman. In my whole health care catalog of physicians, all the gastroenterologists had been male. This seemed odd. Didn't my nationally known insurance care about having a female on the list? Gastroenterology does have to do with "private" areas, and very often gynecology and gastroenterology meet. Also, some women just feel more comfortable with a female physician for those kinds of exams. I was just tired of being the abdominal woman, femme fatale in the gastrointestinal community.

As so I wrote the letter. I left out the mucous part. I would see if Dr. Lucak was even interested first. Now, as John rushes to the mail everyday to see if a journal has accepted one of his stories, I also check for word from a stranger who might take pity on me. No matter what your professional inclination, the fact is that if you deal with an illness for an extended period of time, you come to understand the idea of the succinct summary. After finishing telling my medical "sob story", I felt proud to get everything onto two pages, single spaced.

Dear Dr. Lucak,

I found your name under the Columbia research internet directory which mentioned that your special interest was Irritable Bowel Syndrome and thought I would take my chances. My digestion has been bad for several years with little improvement.

My digestion began to act up in college, five years ago. Once in a while I would have terrible gas and cramps. I had painful periods. By the time I graduated I had gas everyday, almost all the time. I still was too afraid to go to the doctor, wondering how I would bring myself to say the word gas, fart, whatever. By that point, I had become a master at hiding my smell. I sat strategically away from others so they would not catch the order. I tried to schedule all my social activities during the daytime since the gas would get progressively worse as the day went on. I was having bad cramps but I could care less, I just wished the gas would go away.
I went off to graduate school and made myself go to the doctor. I was given a recommendation to see a specialist. Thus my medical, epic-thick, file began. The barium enema showed nothing abnormal. After describing my back and forth bowel movements---from diarrhea to constipation, my doctor suggested I take Fiber Con and when that didn't work, Citrucel. And I had to give up the cigarettes, the caffeine, and consider what could be causing me stress. Irritable Bowel Syndrome was diagnosed over two years ago. That was over two years ago. I gave the cigarettes and caffeine up in one torturous month, telling myself all the while that it would eventually help my digestion.

Meanwhile, a cat scan had detected an enlarged ovary. My GI. doctor had sent me down the hall to gynecology. For the next year those two departments would bounce me back in forth. Eventually a laproscopy (sp) was performed but nothing was removed. My gynecologist told me my ovaries were only "slightly cystic" but also that my endometriosis was "atypical"--there was a hole or two rather than cysts. To treat the pain and swelling I was doubling up on birth control pills, under my doctor's direction. I was having my period every two weeks. Eventually, I was given Lupron injections for six months, which did wonders for the ovaries and cramps.

My digestion was still bad. I went back to the gastroenterologist. I had irritable bowel, he repeated. I started to doubt him. When I came home to New York my mother insisted I see a doctor there. That GI. doctor said there was little he could do for me since I was only in town a few days, but prescribed Kutrase tablets, which I am still taking. They help with cramps. But, even with all the simethicone tablets and being careful about what I eat, the gas is still there.

Trying to become more informed and less "helpless", I started to do research, on diets, on gastrointestinal problems, on non-traditional approaches. I drank teas with fennel and ginger. I did yoga-like exercises. I would do anything not to smell.
Another year later, I was once again sitting in the waiting area at the gastroenterologist’s office. I had pain up high now, on my right side. On that particular late morning, most of the other patients were old men who looked like they had spent a life time eating steak and eggs. How was it that I, a twenty-five year old vegetarian, had the same digestive track as a sixty-five year old man?

Eventually, after pleading with my doctor to please run just one more test, an ulcer was found. An ulcer that my doctor said wasn’t there (it was part of irritable bowel, he believed.) initially had to treated all summer. It just wouldn't go away. I still can feel it at times but is not so bad anymore.

An ultrasound had been done with strange results. It picked up odd results from my spleen, but my doctor dismissed it. I had mono when I was a baby and at the age of ten. I wondered about that too, mono as a baby--and twice? My blood work was always normal, except some of my blood cell counts were off. By that time my file was thick and my doctor looked at me suspiciously. In HMO world, I was an awful expense. The doctor told me, "I don't just order a bunch of tests for shock value, just to find something." Why did it take three years to hear what he was saying? That exactly what I needed. I needed to find out what was happening inside me. When I suggested that he take a culture of the different gases/bacteria inside my intestine, he looked offended. "That wouldn't be very revealing." I still wonder why it wouldn't be. One the way out he had his nurse hand me a pamphlet on "gas management." It was the exact brochure he had given me three years before. Really, I thought, finally angry rather than confused, you mean all those beans and broccoli I've been eating aren't good for gas? Didn't this man know how bland my diet was?

This has been hard and lonely. I have met people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome but I have never met another person, my age or otherwise, that had terrible gas all day long, for years. If it was anything else, I think I would ignore it but because the gas makes socializing
less than spontaneous and sometimes impossible, I take myself to the doctor. I get yet another book.

I will not be in New York until June (between June 18-June 23?) but would very much like to set up an appointment with you. Until then, I was hoping you would look at my medical files in lieu of an appointment. Of course, I would pay as if it were an appointment. If this does not sound good to you, I would really appreciate it if you could point me in the right direction of someone who deals a lot with flatulence.

I know I am asking a lot here and I thank you in advance for any help you may offer. I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope, in case you want to send something.

Thank you.
The Rope’s End

I remember the rope in gym that went all the way up to the ceiling. It was held up by a spider-like metallic fixture that I didn’t trust. At the top of the rope was a red flag. All of us girls, ranging from seventy to one hundred fifty pounds were supposed to shimmy up, knot by knot, aspiring to see how far we could leave the ground using our bodies.

What the point of this was, I cannot say. It was and wasn’t competitive. There were no points, no sense of team spirit. We would all stand around, waiting for our turn or talking about the burn in our hands and thighs if we already went. All the while we would be watching the girl on the rope. We evaluated each other but not without camaraderie. My friend Dana, a thin, slow eater with an incredibly wide smile might turn to me as someone wiped out. “That’s gonna be me. I’ll probably slip on the way to the rope.”

The whole procedure took a lot of balance, physically and otherwise. As one moved up the knots, she moved further and further from the group. Even the teacher was beneath her. One had to get over any fear of heights. She had to look down, at least enough to position her feet so she wouldn’t slip. One had to tell herself that the hands weren’t burning, sweating, or tired even if it was true. And once she got up there, one had to change her whole mind frame to coming down. At the end there was the reunion of the adventurer and the group. And the jump off had to be quick and clean, not desperate. This is what our teacher showed us in a very clinical demonstration before the start of class.

Did the gym teacher think that one day this would come in handy? Did she picture her girls as full grown women hanging out of a window after being pushed by fire, men, or life in general? This was the city, we didn’t have any ropes in our urban jungle, let alone trees. It could not have been a goal setting exercise. After a few gym classes the rope would disappear and we would move onto basketball or gymnastics.

I resented the red flag and the coarse rope. Just like volleyball, it hurt to play. But put the goal in front of me, and sure, I would try. I imagined being able to do it, a natural. As
soon as body met the physical task however, my mind's reach readjusted. I went up a few notches past the "pathetic" marker, two below "exceptional", and came back down. As I jumped off, the rope got tangled between my legs. Laughing at my clumsiness I stepped away, but the rope continued to get underfoot and I tripped. I landed in such a strange way that I fell on my side, ponytail grazing the sneakers of girls waiting close.

They laughed. I laughed—a fake chuckle. It took me a few seconds to get my bearing, I was actually dizzy.

"That's okay Burgess. Your mother was probably a prima ballerina. It skips a generation." said Miss Wagner, checking me off her clipboard. And then as if to get away from my failure, she called the next person.

Throughout the rest of the day, the pronouncement, "clumsy" stuck. As I gave the right answer in algebra, as I erased the boards for my biology teacher, and while I copied French declinations for "to be." Je suis, tu es.... I felt it. Someone had just given me a new adjective to describe myself and it wasn't so appealing. It seemed permanent. All the other girls had heard Miss Wagner's comment. Was I truly so ungraceful?

In my head I was graceful. But my body had a different agenda. One part of me wanted to climb up the rope, inching, steadfast toward the prize while another conceded to the body who just wanted it to be over. Finally, I would be unsuccessful. My head was on the mat, as if my body was trying to tell me to check my ambitions.

There is something key about the image of that rope. The process of going up and coming down is so basic to all story telling. The struggle up (the evolving conflict), the top (climax), the return back down (reflection), and the clean jump back to the ground (ending). I think about this thesis, this illness narrative and the old anxiety grows. I have not climbed properly. I never got to the flag or "answer" and I leave the reader not with an image of myself healthily and well, looking back. Instead all I can offer is the image of the girl still tripping awkwardly onto the mat. Simply put, this is not over yet.
I am still not well. I am still searching for a cure, an explanation, a message. It seems a disadvantage not to be able write from the sure point of view of having "passed over the bridge". As I meet myself on the page, it seems I am forever crossing. There seems nothing left to do. I've been to the doctor's. Done the tests. The therapy. The reflection and yes, even the writing.

The only thing that has moved in me is perception. I put myself back in that gym class, having stumbled at the rope's end. Maybe this time it is my spirit's exhaustion that caused me to trip. I stay there on the dusty mat. Before I had gotten sick I would have imagined all of other girls staring at me, waiting for me to move. I would not have bothered to explain or try to be understood. If they laughed, I would laugh. I would have picked myself up, sore ankle and all, and drifted back into the crowd. All the while, privately, I would be upset.

Now these girls are women. The rope, or challenge presenting itself, is still there. I sit up on my elbows and clear my throat. Talking aloud, especially in front of a big group, has never seemed natural to me. But I try. Pointing to the area between my ribcage I tell of the story of child neglect. Some woman, looking nothing me, comes forward, knowing a similar secret. Gaining my confidence, I go on. Some have collapsed down beside me, interested and empathetic.

I describe my body's malfunctioning and the countless doctor visits, the confusion over what I should eat. I review the physical pain, the flatulence that has socially hemmed me in. It is not just me talking now. The whole gym sounds with the echoes of conversation. In addition, there are more women present than can be seen with the eye. We bring our grandmothers, sisters, and friends to the issues of health care and the body's connection to the soul. "My sister's friend had that for the longest time...."

Word spreads. Somewhere, my physical doppleganger will emerge. She will lay down next to me on the mat, along side of that rope and I will feel less lonely. It will comfort the soul—the idea that someone else could know, perfectly, what it is like to have a body like
mine: wrong, and strange, and mysterious. Some other person will have walked in this world where HMO's rule her medical fate and where her body betrays her, spinning her out to the far margins. And then two of us will speak.

In some ways this has already happened. I have collected information in the informal way women often do, as they learn through each other's life-stories. Many have had encounters with a dismissing doctor. Several have had dramatic things happen to their reproductive system. I have received the silent nod of recognition when mentioning child abuse. It is like gathering a ball of wax. I have two things in mind to create from this unformed mound. First, exposure. I want to let the multitude of painful secrets out. Second, there should be change. Maybe gastrointestinal problems will one day not be a taboo topic, the way breast cancer once was. Maybe I will turn on the tv. and find some evening news program doing a cover story on Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

Until then, I move into the community, bringing the body with me...or are we one and is that a given?

I remember in high school reading Thoreau. When I came across the writer's words on civil disobedience it was recognition, not discovery that I had felt.

I did not for a moment fell confined and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar...In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand on the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog.(242)

Yes, I thought, that's true. They cannot hurt you, inside. Inside you can protect yourself from harm. Let the outside (like abusive parents) try to ruin you, your spirit will remain intact. Even in Christianity we understand that while Jesus' body was tortured, his soul was free and uninjured.

So the idea of body/soul split is all around us. It is supposed to be reassuring. It is no doubt how I survived living in a dysfunctional home and later in a foul smelling body. And yet
the two are not so separate. There is also the notion of witness. The soul has vision while the body has eyes. They watch over each other, recording what happens, for good or for bad. The dream, of course, is that they both be fine, equal, and at peace.

Through illness, the body has collected, rather than displaced my inner self. As I run soap over my sore abdomen while in the shower, I am not just a writer, but a translator—this pain means.... Or maybe it is better to assume the role of the student learning a complex language, patient in my confusion as I consider, drying off in front of the medicine cabinet, what to do next.