WRITING WITH CONSTRAINTS

Literary Arts. *Fall 2020*

Writings from a class with Perrin Kerns

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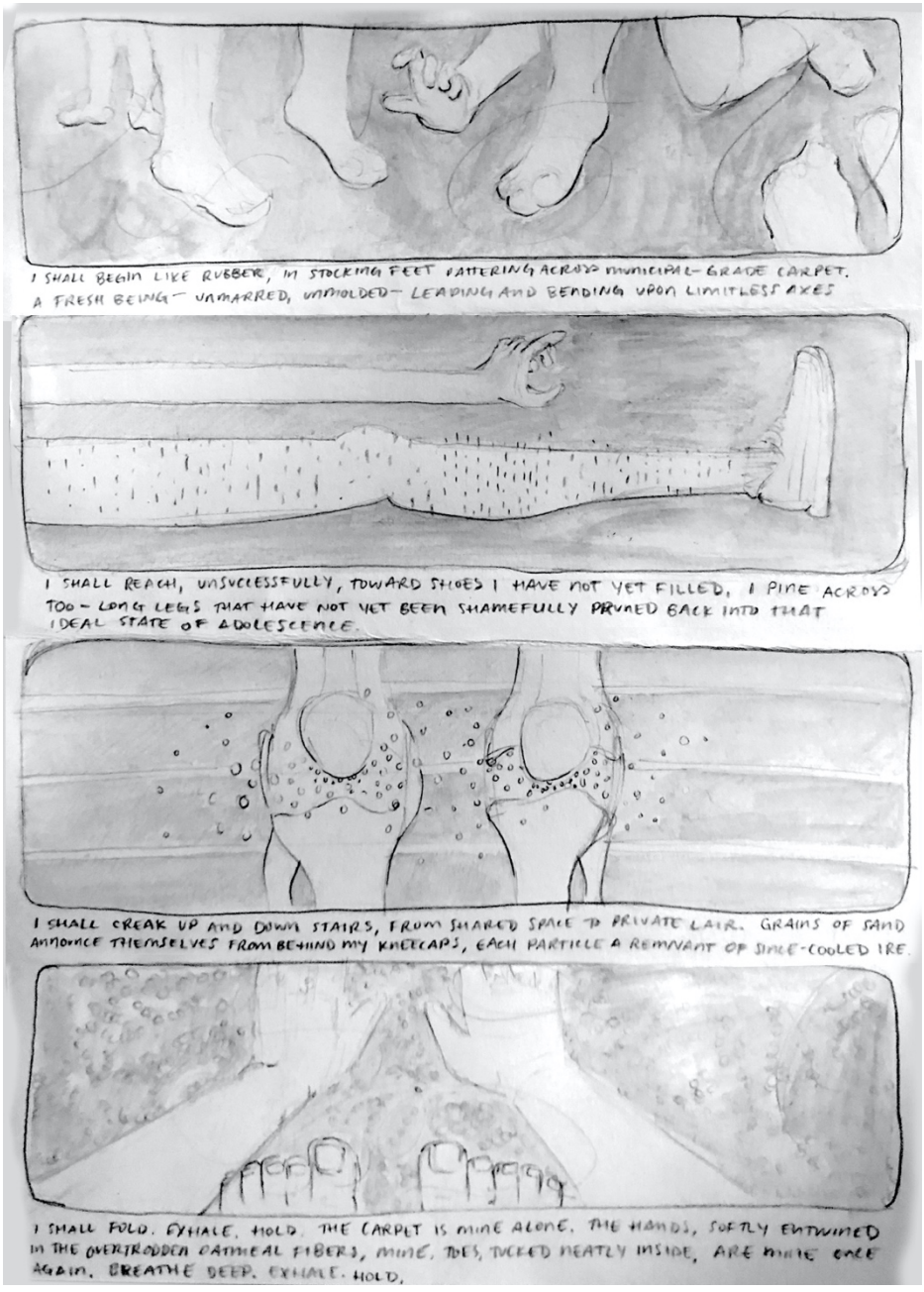
Reaching



I shall begin like rubber, in stocking feet, pattering across municipal-grade carpet. A fresh being—unmarred, unmolded—leaping and bending upon limitless axes.

I shall reach, unsuccessfully, toward shows I have not yet filled. I pine across too-long legs that have not yet been shamefully pruned back into that ideal state of adolescence.

I shall creak up and down stairs, from share space to private lair. Grains of sand announce themselves from behind my kneecaps, each particle a remnant of since-cooled ire.

I shall fold. Exhale. Hold. The carpet is mine alone. The hands, softly entwined in the overtrodden oatmeal fibers, mine. Toes, tucked neatly inside, are mine once again. Breathe deep. Exhale. Hold.

—Emily Vislocky

A Mosaic of Home

I was born in a country I have no memory of. We left when I was three. Not the palm trees of that land, but oaks, have lined the unsettled road that has been my life.

So the storybook mother says to the little bunny: “If you become a sailboat, I will become the wind and blow you into my arms.” Yes. No matter what, there is that in the universe, maybe it’s the universe whole, that will not be evaded, will not let me escape from myself, my true being as beloved, cherished, maybe savored, by that mystery no less in love with every leaf, acorn, breeze, or bit of rock.

At the age of six I moved with my family into another new home, this one in the country west of Corvallis. The house was just a shell still. My father stapled cardboard to the framing around the toilet. It didn’t matter to me—I was outside as much as possible, running in the field, tunneling under a stand of bracken, walking commandingly along a great fallen trunk of one of the ancient oaks there, creating water works in the tiny creek surfaced by winter rains.

Wanted: Help turning my sandals in the night. Like in the parable, I might sleep with my sandals placed beside the road pointing the way I’m going. My helper will secretly turn them in the night to point back toward return to my beginning

My desk for thirty years in a dozen apartments and houses was made from a single sheet of plywood cut into five pieces that just slotted together, quick and easy. It came apart just as quickly to move on to the next, and next, and next residence. I got the pattern from the book *Nomadic Furniture*. I got the book from The Folks and Uncle Leonard, an alternative culture shop in Marion, Iowa right next to Ollie’s Ham ’n Egger. My two older brothers and I were traveling through on our way back to Oregon from a family reunion in Maine.

I saw this book and was captivated. The idea of nomadic life—that possessions should be few and highly portable—rang true for me. Maybe still does. So I used most of the cash I had to buy the book. And that was most of the cash we three had between us for the rest of the trip. Middle brother Jim was outraged. I was defensive—it was my money and besides, oldest brother Joe had a gas card that would also get us truck stop meals.

The words "Thank you" and "I'm sorry" when spoken, thought, heard—or not heard—shape the space we fill in the world. I don't know that I've ever told my brother Jim that I was sorry for putting my book lust ahead of the common good. Not sure either if I've really said thank you to Joe, whose VW microbus and credit card made this trip possible.

Is it part of being deeply home with my siblings that we don't feel the need to speak these words? Or is that just evasion, denying the callousness of my youth that so often rode roughshod over others' desires? Perhaps saying I'm sorry and thank you, all these decades on, perhaps that's part of my journey now in retirement, my return, my way home.

When I dig into my doubt, I see again and again how little I know myself. I have long been easy with easy doubt—so many things matter so little. But when I come up against a real, solid doubt, a doubt that walks with me through all the day's tasks, that doubt asks me who I am and I feel new possibilities open. Doubts like that won't be put off with glib answers nor stay put behind distractions. Doubt, good doubt, wants me to know and be my best self. Doubt holds the door open for grace.

I think Jim stayed mad at me all the way across Iowa and the Dakotas, till we stopped for the night at a little county park just inside Montana. We didn't have much food with us but we did find some berries. Which brought out the half-remembered survival rhyme "Berries blue, good for you; berries red bring you dread; berries white, fill with fright" which got us all coming up with other colors and rhymes and laughing our way into the evening. And the next day we still had twenty-five cents when we found a jukebox with four plays for a quarter in a truck stop off highway 12 just before Lolo Pass.

“If you become a sailboat, I will become the wind and blow you into my arms.” Grace finds us so often in small things, in remembrances that recall us to ourselves, in breezes gently awakening and turning us .

At the age of sixty-five I realized how important oak trees are to me—not any oak, but our native Oregon oaks *Quercus garryana.*

This oak stands in a small grove with its fellows, youngsters all, maybe not even 150 years old. It notices me, walking in the grove, slowly. The oak appreciates that. I am, of course, ever so fast by tree standards, but as a human, I’m nearly still. The oak feels the touch, warmth and slight pressure, as I rest my outstretched hand on its bark and remain there. It thinks its slow thoughts, knows I am still touching its bark, almost unable to pull away. “It’s all right to let go,” the oak offers from its rootedness, “There’s time. I am home, always.”

—David Zaworski

Notes for a Stroke Essay

I've just spent some minutes looking for the glasses I need for writing, finally giving up. Turning back to my notebook, I see that it is here, right at hand, which I had already retrieved and immediately forgotten. This is how it goes now, fits and starts, back and forth, no path from one thing to the next and the next. I read, I write, I get up for something, I go back, I have something to say to my husband or my daughter and then I forget and circle back.

This is not new. I remind myself that this is not new. I must remind myself, because I am not certain that I am myself, that these are my hands, that I am sitting here and not there, that I live in this body, the only one I know, and that I am all here.

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It is late October of the interesting year of 2020 and I have just turned sixty-seven years old. In late August, my husband and I spent a few days at our small cabin in the trees beside Lake of the Woods in the Winema National Forest in southern Oregon. We spent our time reading, sitting by the dock, taking a few cold and perfect swims, quietly talking about our daughter's jubilant wedding, which was held ten days earlier beside that same lake. Over and over, we talked about that day, because such pure joy are in short supply this year, when the pandemic and the fragile world are so hard on every person on earth.

As our third day turned into late afternoon, something turned strange. I began losing words. I could talk, but I could not put the words in order or find the ones I wanted. Lake was *leak*, smoke was *smook*, bench was *barch*, galaxy was *gaxaly*. The unremarkable headache from the night before kept up its low thrumming in the back of my head. But we went on anyway – a visit with our niece up from Klamath Falls for the day, dinner at the lodge, trying to chat on into the evening, normally. But I was surprised at every turn by strangeness. It dawned that we should do something.

By nightfall, and our niece had headed back to Klamath Falls, we made a plan. In hindsight, this was too casual. We decided to pack up and clean the cabin, rest for the night, start for home in the early morning and call the doctor on the way.

We loaded the car before dawn, and left the cabin standing alone in the dark, the stars wheeling among the silhouettes of the trees. Our five-hour drive home took us straight up the middle of Oregon, in the ghost light through the firs and Ponderosas along the marshes west of Klamath Lake and dipping down out of the Siskiyous into volcano country – the wide flat valley near Fort Klamath ringed with cinder cones, Crater Lake just over the ridge. Morning came with gold light on the pastures and cows walking slowly in the mist.

Isaac drove. I watched the stripes of trees flashing by, and the silver and red of manzanitas lit up as we climbed towards Willamette Pass. I watched the empty highway unrolling ahead of us, as I tried to form normal little sentences like “The light is so lovely” and “We should be in Portland by eleven” and “Would you like some almonds?” I knew they sounded wrong. I was failing to lock the words together in sentences. I was failing at thoughts and plans. I could only lean against the window, tears rolling down and then stopping, terror and then beauty flying by.

***

Somewhere between Chemult and Crescent, in another long silent stretch, still early, I pulled in a sharp breath. A doe leapt and danced onto the highway, so fast, angled away and then towards us. Isaac swerved in a second, just missing that stunning flame of life running at us.

I released one second of breathing out, of joy, of life free again, of dawn and grace and love, no care, just jubilation for the spirit of that doe.

And in the next, the semi roared down the highway in the oncoming lane, the doe cut too late. Blood sprayed across the air, fanning into the sky.

We drove on, as we must, as the truck must. As we drove on, the same road, the same morning, the same wonder, I began to cry. And cry. I cried for a long time. I could have said something, but I said nothing. I could have said that I have never seen that, even though I have lived almost all my life in Oregon. I could have mourned aloud for a fawn or two left beside the side of the highway. I could have said how remarkably beautiful she was, how deer are so gentle and how terrible it was to see, how terrible it was for us and how it was too for the truck driver. I said nothing, and only cried. Isaac said nothing, wisely, his hand around mine.

Something unfiltered and pure had hit me. My brain was being injured, but I had been offered a witness to life, in the extinguishing of that flame. I was opened for a second to the deer, to what it is to be leaping one moment, to be gone in another, broken, dead, gone. To be blown out in a gust, like a light, flickered, then blown out.

I was having a stroke, as I was to learn soon, but losing the deer, first free, then struck into sudden death, was the worst blow. She was a sister to me, and I lost her.

—Jane Salisbury

Twin Lions

The stairs are pristine, white, clean — like the rest of the house. Clear of dust or toys. Tidy in look and sound while your lungs fill with the secondhand smoke of around five cigarettes a day.

The Bat

She jumps to attention as the cats are mewling and making the strange noise cats will make when they've caught something. She does her best to shoo them away and tuck the small, startled bat into a shoebox where it may recover in peace.

Boys of Summer

A wide hammock under small shaded trees gives the perfect spot to speak of quiet and fragile things amidst watching the adults relive their youth at an annual reunion of high school friends. Here there are no prying eyes or recycled questions. Only discovery and friendship.

Best Friends

The talking goes on forever, sharing the deep corners of the mind and climbing back up to the simplest pleasures. And then she turns to me, saying, "You talk a lot about nothing."

I Shall...

I shall begin with the way my eyes crinkle at the edges, thinking of the excuses she will give me when I wonder aloud to her about why I would have trauma from so young an age. Crinkled in anger and sadness and wishing for the truth. It will come wrapped in placation and I'm not so sure that isn't worse.

I shall rake, gently at first, but then harder through the memories and backlog of my mind. Scratching with desperate nails for any weakness in the void that might peel back to reveal the stories I'm searching to uncover.

I shall analyze and dissect the memories I once considered benign, hoping that, if read from an alternative perspective, they will tell me why my chest seizes at simple triggers. Why my own self feels as if there is nothing left within, so I have to be useful without.

I shall mourn those realties that I do uncover. Laying them to rest in the graveyard of my past and making sure to tuck a blanket securely around them. To let them know that they are safe and remembered and anything but ordinary. To let myself know the same.

“Go on. Touch it.”

Go on. Touch it. You think as your young eyes examine the red-orange sap oozing from the tree. It’s sticky, it’s strange, it’s beautiful.

You fetch a twig and press it into the thick sap — *scrape, scrape, scrape*. It comes away in gobs, but you don’t touch it. Touching it means finding the citrus soap at home and scrubbing your skin raw because the sap doesn’t come off easily.

You stare at this substance, wondering why it’s coming from the tree. Is it upset?

Years on you know the sap was pouring from cuts and holes and whatever else the neighborhood kids inflicted.

Go on. Touch it. Press curious fingers and sticks into wounds slow to heal, because you think a different vantage or angle will make the sap make sense.

You scrape and gather and disturb, but no results surface. You get no answers – the tree’s silence stands for consent and resilience to your experiments – and yet the curiosity continues to burn.

So go on. Touch it.

Greetings from Your Gall Bladder

You used to forget I was even here. Just one more cog in the endless conveyor belt of the guts and bowels. Until the day I decided to say “hello” – though in all fairness I would

have preferred a better meeting. I was under a lot of stress, you see. *You* were under a lot of stress, and I had to wave before we all came to a grinding halt.

I was hurting.

Red.

Sore.

Inflamed.

I couldn't take what you wanted me to process and so I had to introduce myself rather more formally. I help you process the fats, but I also see everything that goes on through.

I'm sorry we couldn't be normal and that I couldn't be the workhorse I used to be. You wanted anything but ordinary, though, right?

Be careful what you wish for.

It may come back to bite you.

—Kharysa Watt

Contactless

—Emily Vislocky

Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel

Toward the end of church on an already hot summer morning, the pale, slender organist with perfect posture launches into the opening chords of a hymn meant to send us out into the week with clear resolve to be better, to work harder, to avoid sin so that we can continue on our earthly journey toward the glory of eternity. The music swells into the stuffy air as we all sit up straighter and join together to promise to "help the good work move along…do your duty with a heart full of song…we all have work, let no one shirk, put your shoulder to the wheel." We feel righteous, purposeful, and we belong to the Great Work.

All the years of my young life when I sang those words, I assumed they had come west with those early Mormon pioneer wagon companies, its up-tempo rhythms and exhortations urging them on across endless dry plains, up wheel-breaking mountain passes, across rivers so deep and steep they might steal your oxen, your wagon, your family, and all your worldly goods. We were bathed in those tales of hardy, undaunted pioneers, converts to the One True Faith, who had left homes far away to come to Utah, to Zion, to be together for the Last Days, when Jesus would come again and reward his people for all their sacrifices and suffering. I always envisioned those hardy souls responding, as the hymn says, to the call: "The Church has need of helping hands/And hearts that know and feel./The work to do is here for you./Put you shoulder to the wheel."

But now I have discovered that these inspiring exhortations came much later, over 50 years later in fact, and were written not by a Mormon hymnist but by a man in East Liverpool, Ohio, William L. Thompson, a devout member of the Church of Christ. It passed muster for purity and rectitude and was adopted into the Mormon hymnal in the early 1900s, I am quite sure, because of the way it captures the culture of hard work and sin-resisting that I not only grew up with but carried into the rest of my life, even after I left behind the One True Faith. The tune rings in my head even now, not a simple memento but a twist in the threads of my character. Also a cause for guilt when I shirked or "stood idly looking on," or refused to "push every worthy work along," as the lyrics say. As for the heart full of song regarding work, that simply sagged in the face of reality.

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To push by putting my shoulder to the wheel—
Not just me alone but joining a larger work.
Pushing for a purpose, to move along—what?
But cheery, that old heart full of song,
Shoulders gladly engaged,
All doing their part
Or more than their part.
Don't be a slacker.
Duty. Do your duty.

###

Shoulder: A rounded bone and socket structure at the top of the arm, one on each side of the chest, encased in powerful muscles, usually hunched up near the ears, used to push open doors, express indecision, turn coldly away.

Wheel: A round shape usually found in twos for fours, in our era mostly but not exclusively on motorized vehicles (c.f. exceptions, bicycles, baby strollers) and often circled with rubber tires but in the past made of wood and metal found in pairs on chariots, wagons, buggies, and carts, as well as multiples of twos, e.g., on the surrey with a fringe on top. Requires pushing or pulling or other modes of propulsion, i.e., work, to move.

Heart: A sturdy blood-filled pump that beats steadily all day and night, in a dub two-step, but also the seat of the soul and the person. Strong but fragile, liable to be broken in love, at work, in families, and often ignored when most needed.

Song: An expression of human life in melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ways. Takes many forms—hymns, ballads, arias, folk tunes, for example—and moves the heart with its power, which may be sentimental, brash, pious, intricate, simple, or infuriating.

Work: That which one does to (a) make money, (b) feel useful, (c) create, (d) run a household, or (e) accomplish some elusive goal. What one does when one is not playing or sleeping or eating but can be combined with some of the above activities, especially with other people.

Duty: That dull compulsion to do what others expect and what one's little conscience requires. Part of participating in a group, in following its rules, in pushing, pulling [the wheel] along. May be freely entered into or not. Often not. Like medicine one has to take no matter how it tastes or its side effects.

###

At the age of 12
My mother volunteered me
For babysitting
What girls do
50 cents an hour
The first wheel I put my shoulder to:
    Push the buggy,
    Chase the toddler,
    Change the diaper,
    Sneak some ice cream,
    Clean up kid vomit,
    Watch TV and fall asleep.
    Waiting, waiting, waiting.
Was this the for-real fate?

At the age of 23
I had my first real job
At a publisher!
I escaped Utah and had:
    A title
    A business card
    Student loans
    A husband
    Maybe a life
But there was so much more glowing ahead.
I do it the hard way.

At the age of 65
I left the world of books
Of cover copy, sales pitches, proposals
Of deadlines, marketing, sales meetings
Of shaky teamwork and tedious meetings
Of salary reviews and bosses and goals
And corporate owner and
Their preposterous peacock execs.

And at an Irish pub
We drank beer and laughed.
And then I walked out
Into the cool night air,
Leaving the wheel behind
And taking my shoulder with me.

—Sheryl Fullerton

Covid-19 Journals—The Beginning

March 1, 2020

After last night's rain few are out on the Wildwood Trail. The path descends into the redwood grove where you hear women's voices and pounding feet. Round the bend come three runners in single file. The first one slows and reaches into her waistband to pull out a bandana that she clamps over her mouth. Behind her you recognize the runner who also pulls out a red bandana and covers her mouth and nose as she passes. *Didn't she work at OHSU?* All the way down the trail and across the creek you ponder those acts. On Monday you bring your own yoga mat, blocks and belt from home to class.

Later that week in Hoyt, you stop and step aside with a sheepish grin when the first walker you meet comes toward you. Within a few more days, you're stepping off the trail and turning your back, or the one encountered does. You smile, thank each other and laugh. By the weekend you're wearing a buff to pull over your mouth and nose as soon as someone approaches. If they don't slow down, step aside or cover up you jump to judgement and in another week to anger.

Last night a veiled full moon shone through the fir stand like a locomotive beam aimed at the house. From the street it looked smaller, white as snow but hazed as if behind sheerest silk. This morning in the west it beamed alone in the wide black sky.

March 11, 2020

Inside Chiles Center, the Beaverton High girls' basketball team warms up for the quarter-final game of the state championships. They're ranked # 1. A win today and again on Friday and they'll head to the finals where they could win it all. This afternoon, spread throughout the arena, singletons slump in the fold-down seats while parents and grandparents sit in groups of two or three separated by empty rows and vacant spaces.

The students are crammed in the balcony at either end with their bands and cheerleaders. During player introductions, each girl races out, bumps elbows with the opposing coach and referees, giggling.

After the Beavers win, you buy a ticket for Friday. In the courtyard, the school principal spots you, waves and walks over, opening her arms for a hug. You step back for a nanosecond — *shouldn't we be bumping elbows like the kids?* — and then forward into her embrace.

The next day, the NBA announces that two players have Covid-19 and the season is over, just like that. By Friday the state basketball championships have also been cancelled and then the NCAA play-off games. Tickets to the high school semifinals and the NCAA women's tourney still hang on your fridge along with the season tickets to Portland Baroque Orchestra, Arts and Lectures, Third Angle and the symphony. They'll probably be there until the lockdown ends, promises of a future no longer on the way, sad reminders of what might have been – BHS state champs, Sabrina Ionesco shooting University of Oregon to the Final Four, Monica Huggett's last season playing Vivaldi in Portland, Rose Bond's magnum opus projected during Berio's Sinfonia onto the Schnitzer symphony walls.

Within two days national and local sporting events, the Metropolitan Art Museum, Broadway, the Oregon Symphony, all public and private schools in Oregon close. It's a rolling "collapse" of institutions, ones expected to provide relief, entertainment and safety in times of crisis. A friend calls you from Seattle cancelling her visit. "I don't want to be the one who kills you," she says. When you tell your son you're considered elderly, he says, "I know, but I don't believe it."

Late afternoon in Hoyt: Robins hunker, one eye to the ground, on the hillsides. Everywhere leaves push out of sheathes, flowers open: Indian plum with dangling white lanterns beneath green rabbit-ear leaves, bright singular salmon berries, clusters of red currants and among the trees, trilliums, wood violets and unknown tiny white flowers. My mind slides around while walking, watery thoughts and sounds blur until a squirrel's cry

or a wren's rustle pulls me back to the surface. Soon I'm wondering what day it is and whether I fixed dinner at home last night? Then the evening pops back and I remember: Oh! I had a class and heated up the last batch of last year's nettle soup. The memory returns clear as the moss on the tree where my foot rests.

March 15, 2020

You're walking down the long corridor from the west-end pool to the women's locker room. The exercise room is only half-full and it's quiet in the Zumba studio. Across the hall, vacancies for massage appointments are posted. Before you get to the locker room door a stooped woman pushes out muttering to herself, "It's all so overblown." She's the former president of the Multnomah Club which has announced a two-week closure for "deep cleaning." Today will be your last pool swim for seven months.

Trail music: Pluff. Pufft. Thwap. Snow-clumps drop onto lower boughs, trail, my head. Sword ferns have completely surrendered without a sigh. In the woods, a sharp crack. Wildwood is littered with tippets and boughs, heavy fir branches still laden, a vine maple collapsed and uprooted blocking the track. Gravity and sun create a second storm of falling snow.

April 2, 2020

You need to know what exponential means now. When newscasters first started using the term you didn't know what it meant, something mathematical you figured. But pretty soon it is clear: one becomes three becomes nine and etcetera until one, three, nine etcetera becomes 750,000 Covid cases by April in the U.S.

For a few days in February and March you record the number of deaths in Italy, and then begin adding in the US death totals. You record them on Sundays: March 14, 1400 dead in Italy. March 20, 10,000 dead in Italy. March 29, 1000 dead in New York

City. By early April exponential has become a galloping horseman. More than a million cases worldwide and 50,000 dead. At this rate, what will the numbers be in October? You can't do the math. You know that basically it means too many people are sick and too many have died and too many are going to die.

Today I found a new nettle bed with plants ready for harvest. When the clouds lift the green shimmers all dewy fresh and pure in contrast to the squishy squash of muddy trails. The creeks run clear.

April 15, 2020

Your son calls you from New York. "The ambulances go by every five minutes day and night. We aren't sleeping. It's worse than 9/11," he tells you.

Your five-year old granddaughter tells you she wants to be Willa Jean, the baby from *Ramona Quimby.* You are to be her babysitter. "My house is corona and I have to go to another home," she says. She's moving to Oregon to live in your house. Ramona's dad is an architect so he will lift off the roof and build a whole upstairs where the kids can play. She's bringing her cat, Picky- Picky, also.

Mid-April—154,350 dead; 20,000 in New York

I hear the death counts but they drift away as numbers often do. One week we have three dead and two weeks later, twenty or worldwide now a million cases. Deaths rise from one hundred to sixty thousand in two months. As predicted, the growth is exponential. We've learned that word.

Today I gathered a bag of nettles at the new site, a mudslide area topped with coltsfoot and black berries and foot-tall nettles, enough to make four cups of luscious deep-green soup. At home, the wisteria buds edge open from swelling, lavender arcs.

—Carolyn Wood

WANTED: A Grandmother

My mother was eighteen years old when I was born. I think she must have been so angry at herself, allowing herself to be placed into such an untenable situation. Her parents (I understand) were furious. She says they called her a whore. One day years later, she and I were talking about the pro-choice movement, and I was shocked by her quick reply "God, if I could've had an abortion, I would have." Not thinking, of course, that she was talking about me. She married the boy, because that's what you did those days. I don't know how long they stayed together, or whether or not they loved each other, or who was chiefly responsible for my care. I do know now, that we all lived with my grandparents for the first two and half years of my life, until my mother married Jack, the only man I have ever known as a father.

WANTED: *A Grandmother. Must be alive, and a good storyteller. A bit of Alzheimer's won't disqualify so long as memories of daughter growing up on Ivory Avenue in North Pittsburgh are intact. Prefer older woman, graying hair in a tight bun, slightly pudgy, minor German accent acceptable. Cotton apron and slippers to be provided by client. Must cook and bake, knowledge of family recipes from the "old country" preferred. May apply as couple provided grandfather is even tempered, likes to play horsey, and is also alive.*

I have only a handful of memories of my grandparents, most of them through the eyes of a two-year-old. I remember laying on the floor of the dining room next to the kitchen door, playing with a plastic circus set. I remember Grampa's gigantic black car, and I remember Nana at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes. I remember the dollhouse that Grampa built for my mother when she was a little girl. Later, after my mother married Jack and we all moved to the house on Elm Drive, we didn't see my grandparents anymore, but at the time, I hardly noticed they were missing.

I think Jack wanted to rescue us. He was quite a bit older than my mother, and I'm fairly certain I was irresistibly adorable at that age. I've seen the photos. Years later, when I was five, and sitting on the wood stairs to our basement, watching my mother iron, she was reminiscing about her early years with Jack, "Yeah, your dad bought a house and filled it with furniture," she said, "Now, that's the kind of man you want to marry!"

I did marry, but not a man like Jack. We had three sons, and I learned how to survive in a testosterone laden environment – track meets, smelly socks, boisterous off-color banter at the dinner table, hockey sweats, baseball, football. Acne. Girls. Smack talk. Being around males is as natural a part of my life as good hygiene and regular exercise, but I often wonder what it would have been like to have a daughter? Would she borrow my clothes? Make cupcakes with fluffy pink icing, binge on popcorn and ice cream as we snuggled on the sofa engulfed in an enormous down comforter watching sloppy chick flicks on TV? Would she share her innermost secrets, her most passionate dreams? Would we be best friends forever, like Lorelai and Rory on "The Gilmore Girls?"

Or, would she hate me? Relentlessly point out my faults? I'm too fat, too old-fashioned, hair's too short, makeup's too plain, I never understand anything. She hates me. HATES me! Bedroom door slams – and then the predictable CLICK of the lock.

With my own mother, I would never have dared to talk back, much less slam a door. That would have certainly earned me a beating – not from her, but from "when your father gets home." I would have gone to my room, NOT slammed the door, and waited on the bed until he pulled in the garage, climbed the stairs, retrieved the hairbrush from the bathroom. Once he asked, in a very kind voice, if I wanted the bristle side or the hard side – such an odd question for a four-year-old. I chose the bristles.

It wasn't abuse. By today's standards – perhaps, but in those days, it was the common parental method for ensuring compliance and control in the home. In my case, it was an incredibly successful strategy. The only true rebellion I remember from all those many years ago was my refusal to eat canned spinach, and although I can still see my little self, sitting erect at the table from dinnertime to bedtime, staring at the cold clump of green strings, and even though my father scolded that if I did not eat it, it would be served again at breakfast, I held strong. Fourteen years later, once I reached the age of independence, I simply moved out and began to live a life of my own. Looking back, I confess that I did not spend a great deal of time working on my relationship with my mother. I was much more focused on simply staying out of trouble.

My little brother called on a Tuesday evening in October. I could tell right away he had something hard to say — and after a long pause, the words came out: "Mom died."

"What?"

"Mom. She died."

"No. Are y--, are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. Dad's just called. The ambulance is on the way."

"Oh the ambula — but then we don't know for sure."

"No Mike. She died. She was eating dinner and she fell out of her chair. Dad thinks she had a heart attack."

This was unexpected. A sucker punch to the gut, the neurons of my brain scrambling to make sense, with an implausible certainty that a mistake had been made. This cannot be true. It can't be true because I was just there with her in Pittsburgh, having dinner at a nice restaurant while Dad convalesced at the nursing facility, and we were just talking about her life, her future, how different things might be now that Dad was in nursing care. She could spend more time with friends, maybe teach art classes again, maybe travel? She always wanted to visit Alaska – and in my mind I was saying "I will take you

to Alaska!" And all the while, my brain continues to process the inconceivable, and the words that flash across my conscious mind over and over are "MOM! Where are you? Where are you?" A sob, and a desperate plea: "But I wanted to take you to Alaska."

The worst part of death is its unrelenting, unforgiving permanence. And the immediate crush of grief can be so self-involved, my profound sense of loss focused on the unfairness — to me — of her unexpected and premature death. She was supposed to last another five, maybe ten years. We had agreed as much just the prior month, when we were working through the final restatement of her trust documents. "I've probably got another five years, don't you think?" My response was quick and sure: "Of course you do! Five, ten years, maybe longer." I mean, isn't one of the advantages of being born to a very young mother, that they last longer? I always believed we would have time, at the end. Dad was so much older, ten years! And now with him in the nursing home, we were to have our time, time for me to really know her, and her to know me. But then, the unthinkable happens, and I am left with this bitter, gnawing ache of never knowing, never fully understanding — and so well, this is why I need my grandmother. I need to talk to her, if only for a minute.

—Michele Goodwin

Eight Things I Know About Patricia

1.

You could sashay when you were six, sweeping side to side with your sisters along the sidewalk in south Chicago, the lively youngest of a blonde trio. By sixteen you jitterbugged, unafraid to be a little wild. I imagine that your mother blushed and sputtered, "that is a *Negro* dance." You wrote a high school memoir, typed and pages long, promising yourself freedom above marriage. Just as well, the young men rode the tide toward Europe and the Pacific to fight the Second War. You enlisted as a WAVE, plotted maps by day and danced fast numbers to the Andrews Sisters in D.C. jazz clubs by night. In middle age, your husband stood aside as you Can-Canned across the living room with a party guest. Up late, your children spied from behind the hallway door and wondered at the rules of being an adult and whether you had broken them. You grew old, but never elderly. Your mind and your moves faded but, to the end, you held to the conviction that there was a tune, a beat, a partner somewhere, waiting. You always asked, "Shall we dance?"

2.

In 1954, when you are 32 and you've seen the world surge to the brink, dangle one foot in empty space and step back, when you have taken a few of college classes but find no sustaining interest, when you have been demoted from wartime duties to secretarial support for men, always men, who are your bosses, when you find yourself pregnant after a "fling" with a decent man (you were both just having fun, it wasn't serious), you choose elopement over a back alley abortion. Have all your friends married and do you wonder, now or never? Perhaps you wish there were another choice. Together, you and the decent man pack the car and drive across state lines to stand before a justice of the peace in Yuma, Arizona, to become Man and Wife, 'til Death Do Us Part. Together, you drive east for several more hours to arrive at your parents' house at the very first, least pregnant instant you possibly can to share the news of your marriage.

3.

Rules prescribe how you should live as a married woman and a mother. Rules of decorum instilled by your mother: do use the bone china and lace tablecloths for teas and holidays; do keep a copy of Emily Post and notecards on your desk; if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all; don't complain, that's tedious; children should be seen and not heard. Rules of tradition are a gilded cage offered by your husband: this is how we do things, because we always have; the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for Christmas dinner; the (vile, you think) side dish of mashed rutabagas. Rules of obedience from the Lutheran Church hold you as firmly as your Playtex girdle. Expansive, energizing rules about entertaining and style splash across the color pages of *Sunset* magazine. Rules about child rearing unfold from the pages of Dr Benjamin Spock serve as your motherly compass. You comply. You improvise. You chafe.

4.

You have a boy first, then a girl. When you become pregnant for the third time, your husband insists you have an abortion, which a psychiatrist can prescribe if you are overwrought. Two children are enough, your husband says. Being in this situation—being told what to do with your body, a body that knows what to do without any telling—makes you overwrought. You comply. What is taken from you is too much. Perhaps you feel you should have had another choice. You suffer and you rage. A few years later, when for the fourth time you find yourself with child, you yield to no one. You choose the child and daylight enters your marriage.

5.

"If you had fed Mittens her dinner, she wouldn't have crossed the street," you said. It was evening, we stood in the kitchen. It was the old kitchen, the first kitchen, with the knotty pine cabinets, streaky gray linoleum, a window that faced the neighbor's yard. It wasn't

large, we stood close. You held a spatula loaded with chocolate frosting. The layers of John's birthday cake were stacked. You spread the frosting up the sides in smooth scallops as you turned the plate. I quivered, the saltiness of my tears mixed with the rich smell of chocolate. You had given me a Siamese kitten for my fifth birthday a few months earlier, we had named her Mittens. Now, she lay still on a bed of fresh grass clippings after being hit by a car. I had no words for the feelings that had swallowed me. I needed consolation. Perhaps you did, too. But taking a child in your arms to soothe was not what you did. You frosted the cake and left the child to take in the lesson.

6.

You were a former smoker who kept a carton of Tareytons in the freezer. In case. You were usually on a diet—a grapefruit diet, a cottage cheese diet, a Rye crisp cracker diet, but you bought one-pound bars of Hershey's chocolate and tried to hide them from the kids. When you were small, your father kept his job through the depression, but was paid in cans of beans. When you were old, you tucked dinner rolls into your purse, because you thought they shouldn't be wasted. One minute you enjoyed our childish antics, the next you packed your suitcase to "go home to mother," you'd had enough. That time you threatened to have the dog put to sleep because we hadn't remembered to feed her dinner and, *by God, do I have to do everything around here?*

7.

Eventually, your husband allows that you can take a part time job, *if*. *If* you keep up all the housework. *If* the children's needs have been met. *If* you can still have cocktails waiting when he returns home from the office and *if* a home-cooked dinner stands ready for the family to eat together each night. That you have to have his permission rankles. With just that much slack in your leash, you become a part time publicist for the International House of Pancakes, arrange pancake eating contests. Later, you take a position in public relations for the new University of California Extension, promote short courses on specialty topics to the public. It was never about the money. You earn a

measure of independence and self-regard. A cool wind blows through your marriage. You obeyed. You improvised. You enjoyed being your own person again.

8.

You were the kind of person who kept a stock of familiar phrases. You didn't go looking for a new one when an old one would do. If something was askew, you called it *cattywampus*, as in, "Your bedspread is *cattywampus*." Whenever you and I were at temperamental odds, which was often, you said, "You're too sensitive," a summary that felt like a lid screwing down tight. When feeling affectionate, you would call a child *Toozigoot*, because you liked the sound of that. *Toozigoot* was cause for delight. Later, I was puzzled to learn that you borrowed that name from a thousand-year-old pueblo in Arizona. What is the story of that? If something was not going the way you wished, you'd say in a bruised voice, "I've got rights!" In the presence of a pouty child, you'd sound like a movie gangster, asking, "What's the matta wit' you? Chicky lay an egg on your lip?" And through all the years, when the conversation lagged, you'd look around the room, blink, and ask, "Shall we dance?"

—Nancy Austin

Life with Avery

The Hamster

When she was eight her hamster went missing. She searched the whole house for it looking behind furniture and checking every cupboard; hoping the hamster was hiding there. I helped her create tiny missing hamster posters and we placed them up around the house. The search for the hamster went on for months. Her dad kept it to himself for years that the cat killed it.

The Eiffel Tower

When she was nine her nose was cut by falling glass, the result of a friend throwing a ball too high and breaking a light fixture. She would arrive at school with a bandaged nose, and she would hear all day from everyone she saw that the bandage looked like the Eiffel Tower.

Bloody Nose

After camp one day she thought it would be a good idea to grab me from behind and start tickling me. At first, she had fun while doing this, but what she did not see coming was me accidently throwing back my head and hitting her in the nose. There was silence, then crying, then a lot of blood.

The Hammock

One summer she thought it would be funny to run and jump onto the hammock I was lounging on. She landed hard on the hammock causing it to flip sending both of us crashing to the ground. Her funny prank led to both of us spending a week with bruises on our backs from hitting the metal hammock stand.

Ice Skating

When she was eleven, she invited me to go ice skating during Christmas time. She asked if I wanted to play tag on the ice, she shouted, “your it” and ran on to the ice. Her skates hit the freshly cleaned ice, her legs flew into the air, and then her body hit the ice and slid into the wall. She hobbled off the ice and asked her dad to go home. She did not the find the incident funny, but the teenagers who she slid past found it incredibly entertaining.

No Offense

She once told me in middle school, “no offense, but I enjoy Camp Fire Girls way more since I left your group.” She screamed at me that I was not allowed to be offended, as I told with her with anger in my voice how offended I was.

Halloween

When she was thirteen, I asked if she wanted to go trick or treating with me. I was going as Cinderella, she wanted to go as a Disney character too. She made her own costume, it was bright green and had wings, she said she was dressed as “Tinkerbells Distant Cousin.” When she told a woman handing out candy what her costume was, the woman laughed so hard and so loud that we could still hear her even when we crossed the street.

Cookies

In eighth grade she missed her bus to school. She called my dad and he gave her a ride. To thank him she made him a plate of cookies. She gave me the cookies at school and trusted that I would get the thank you gift to him. I never told her that he only received half the cookies she made; I ate the other half while at school that day.

Pennies

She decided one day during a visit to the mall that she wanted to help people have a good day. To accomplish this goal, she started dropping pennies in different areas of the mall. Her theory was that people would find these pennies pick them up and all day long they would have good luck. Her plan backfired when people started handing the pennies back to her thinking she was accidently dropping change.

Question

She once broke the silence during a study session to ask me, “what would you do if right now your entire family ran into the room naked and they all shouted PARCHEESI?”

Dirty Dancing

She spends one summer obsessed with *Dirty Dancing*. She watches it every day and forces all her friends to watch it at a sleepover. Her love for the film leads to her signing up for a dance class. She lasts one month in the class, her high energy and desire to learn the Dirty Dancing lift made the other students think she was not taking the class seriously.

Moulin Rouge

She insists one summer afternoon that I need to see the movie *Moulin Rouge.* When the movie ended, she got very upset with me for not crying at the end of the film. I tried to explain to her that it is difficult to cry when someone is staring at you and asking, “are you going to cry?”

Curly Hair

In high school she called me multiple times a week to ask if she should leave her hair curly or if she should straighten it. This conversation always ended the same way, with

her telling me, “I need to get up early tomorrow to straighten my hair. I’ll be tired at school, but I’ll look better if my hair is not curly.” I always said she looked better with curly hair.

Mary Poppins

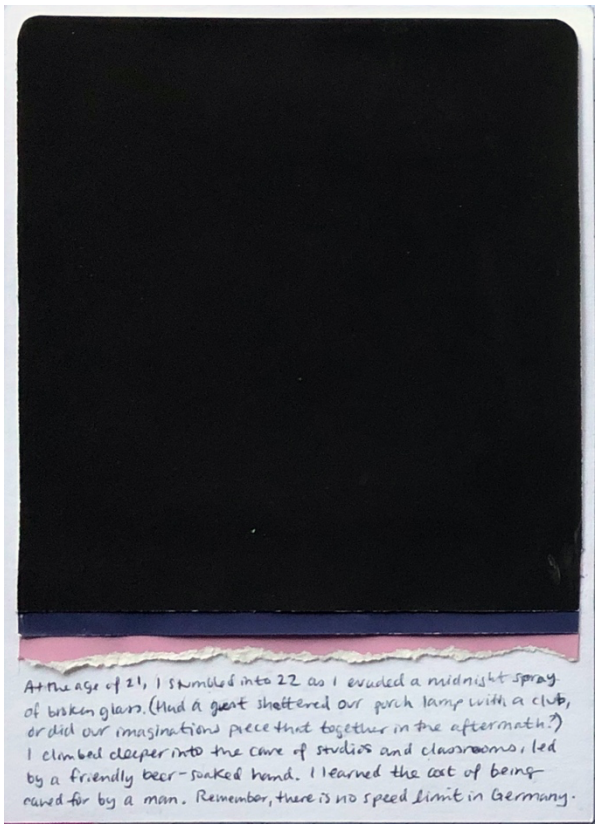
She had a bag that all of her friends referred to as the Mary Poppins bag. It was called this because no matter what someone needed, she always had it in her bag. If someone needed a Kleenex, she had one. If someone was hungry, she had a bag of almonds they could snack on. If a friend ripped their tights, she had an extra pair they could wear. Her bag was prepared for every situation.

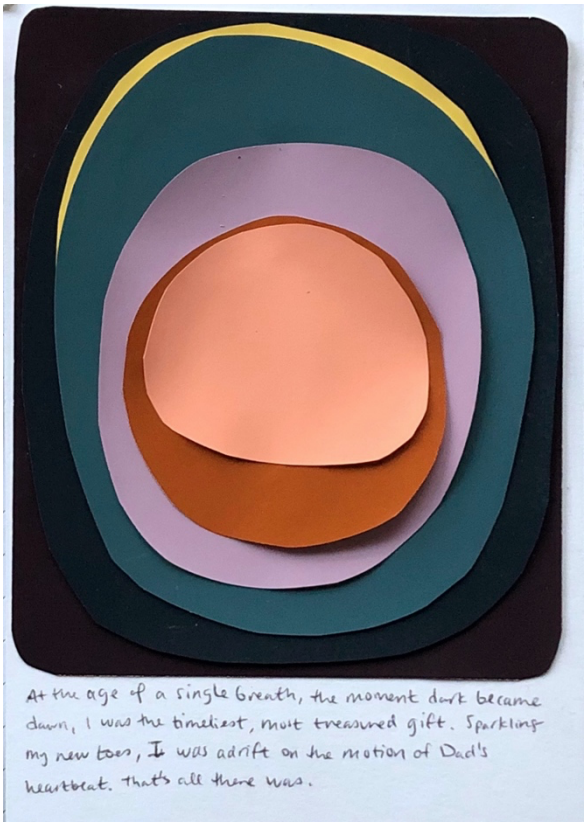
Birthday

She made me a cake for my eighteenth birthday, she brought matches to light candles, but she forgot the candles. I tried explaining to her that I didn’t need candles on the cake, but she decided to hold matches that I could blow out. It is still the only time I have heard someone yell, “blow out your birthday matches faster, my hands are about to burn!”

—Kinsey Campbell

Birthdays





Weimar

At the age of 21, I stumbled into 22 evading a midnight spray of glass. (Had a guest shattered our porch lamp with a club, or did our imaginations piece that together in the aftermath?) I climbed deeper into the cave of studios and classrooms, led by a friendly beer-soaked hand. I learned the cost of being cared for by a man. Remember, there is no speed limit in Germany.

Father's Day

At the age of a single breath, the moment dark became dawn, I was the timeliest, most treasured gift. Sparkling my new toes, I was adrift on the motion of Dad's heartbeat. That's all there was.

Time Capsule

At the age of 62, I dig three feet deep and thirty years back to an existence when night and day were mere suggestions, and the future was no longer guaranteed.

—Emily Vislocky