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MYSTICAL BODY: ON FAITH AND WRITING

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ABSTRACT

"Mystical Body" seeks to explore the interaction of religious faith and the production of art by exploring my personal relationship with those two things as a student at the Pennsylvania State University. The primary question I explore is "What does it look like to be both a writer and someone of faith?" I begin by charting my history with faith and art ideas in the initial essay. The remaining thesis is a collection that explores a possible way to understand what it could mean for me to interact and engage with faith narratives in my own writing.

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Chapter 1

Antithesis of Faith

"Why is it that I, who have spent my life writing, struggling to be a better artist, and struggling also to be a better Christian, should feel rebellious when I am called a Christian artist? Why should I feel reluctant to think or write about Christian creativity?"

-Madeline L'Engle, "Walking on Water"

In October 2009, I met with Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Associate professor of English and Women's studies, on the recommendation of another department member. "She's in Italy right now for sabbatical. Maybe she will get back to you when she gets back." I was lucky enough for her to agree to meet with me after her return Stateside, still on Sabbatical as she was. I had an idea for my undergraduate thesis and it seemed as good a time as any to start trying to find someone who would be willing to walk with me. It was raining and cold when I came in Webster's and settled down at a table, open notebook in front of me.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask. I knew that I wanted to go to several conferences the following spring. I knew that I didn't know anything and didn't even yet have words for saying what I knew I had missed. I knew where I thought the answers to this search could be: away from Penn State, away from the middle of books, away from my experience. My experience? Christian. Studying English and creative writing. Believing my two "selves" were not in conflict by nature; I, however, consistently tried and failed to live a unified existence.

I imagined a thesis that would involve interviews, qualitative research (something I had never done and wasn't sure how to do), and lots of reading. I imagined a thesis that would collect scholarly evidence for my belief that religious faith and creativity--*making things*-- are uniquely dependent on each other. I imagined a thesis that would show me a way out of my uncertainty and finding

community in these two places. I was left to defend the question: "Can an artist be a Christian? Can a Christian be an artist?"

The question irked me. I had never questioned the existence of a Christian Artist (whole person, not fragmented). I knew they were not mutually exclusive. I simply had no idea how it could exist in me. I needed to know *what it looked like*, even though I had been given different hypothetical models for living it out. In fact, my life had been a series of models to what a writer of faith, and more specifically, a female writer of faith could and should embody.

It began with family; it began with reading.

Little Women

My great grandmother, Grammy Ray, was the first to write me a letter. She started sending birthday cards on my first birthday, before anyone else thought that cards might be something I would enjoy. I kept each one and wrote her back when I was old enough, at least until my sixteenth birthday, the first one she forgot, and the last she would see. One detail of her life that she shared with me was the first book that she loved. She and her neighbor both loved "Little Women". "We committed whole passages to memory," she wrote in one letter full of life stories. I hadn't read "Little Women" but only watched the movie starring Winona Ryder. I borrowed it from the library I could talk to her about it.

I devoured the book and declared it my favorite. I considered myself to have read a great deal at that time, so to finally have a favorite said something. Grammy and I never actually had a conversation about it. She couldn't even remember what had happened in parts of the book or why she had liked it. She passed away the first year she forgot to send me a birthday card: there was nothing to forgive.

Jo March kept me enthralled with the book. Even more than the movie, I was caught in her writing struggles, the pleasure of her "writing cap," ink-stained fingers, frantic scribblings, and ultimate successes (both written and romantic). She demonstrated a clear definition what it meant to be a

good writer. And Jo was *good*. She wrote passionately and often. She lost herself in her work. Her earnings were all for her sister Beth. The primary conflict was to not choose the wrong man to marry and what it meant to write "quality", meaning more upstanding moral content than craft.

Jo faced what I call "content conflict": what was she going to write *about*? When she moved to New York, she aimed to be published, and she was. She wrote what an editor asked of her and she made her way into the penny papers, writing "sensational" stories. These, from what I can tell in rereading the book, involved passionate romances, gothic houses and ghosts and murders, and melodramatic, swashbuckling conflict. But the results were less than desired.

"... unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society; and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us." (Alcott 103)

The message was clear: what she writes changes who she is. So to be a *good* writer, she had to write goodness. Write good society. Write justice. Preserve the "innocent bloom" as long as possible. I know now that I didn't know what constituted an "innocent bloom." I knew it was desirable though, in my person and my writing. Jo even had the integrity to give up writing for a time after Professor Baer told her it was wrong to write anything that was not from her "heart." And her relationship with the Professor? They fell in love.

From these observations, I developed an unconscious list:

- Wearing funny hats while writing will inspire you. *Check.*

- There are good things to write and bad things to write. Write good things (not scandalous or transgressing moral norms). *Check*
- Do not desire publication. This can cause you to be a bad writer because you'll want to please audiences instead of writing from your heart. *Check*
- Writing the right things will please the best people (and possibly land you a husband). *No check. (Still unmarried.)*

Age 13: I was on my way to being a complete writer.

Blessed

A dubious gift came from my church in early high school. There were yearly competitions in the arts for high school students that we called "Youth Round Up" or "Districts." Now that I've traveled further in art making and in church, I realize just how astonishing it was to gather professionals to judge student work *in a church*. It, sadly, no longer exists in my home church, but it was a big deal my ninth grade year. My piano teacher insisted that I perform for a panel of musicians. I almost quit piano after that and cried and hated the entire process of preparing to perform before people qualified to judge. I didn't believe any praise.

A smaller and, to me, far more interesting portion of the competition was the writing area. While no one actually "won," the feedback I got from year to year was always challenging. The year before, the panel had shot my conversion story (misguidedly set in medieval England) out of the sky with comments of firework proportions. Some comments were kind, some not so; it irrevocably improved my writing. My second try, I avoided the sound or feel of faith all together. Or perhaps that is not entirely true since I wrote in blatant imitation of George MacDonald, my favorite fairy tale composer. I wanted to write like him and C. S. Lewis more than any one else I had ever read. I lost complete track of time while

I was working on my fairy tale about a beautiful woman with a glorious voice and a beautiful man with a glorious voice who find each other by magic and accident and defeat an evil witch by their love and beautiful music.

I felt myself very original. Justice and Beauty. I was satisfied.

The panel was different this year. Rather than just receiving written comments, each writer had a meeting with the judges. I was nervous. In a small classroom near the sanctuary, a group of eleven young scribblers waited like patients in a doctor's office for a terrifying diagnosis. The judges met with one young student before me who had submitted a personal essay about the death of her mother. She wanted to write helpful essays for girls in magazines like Brio (a Christian replacement for 17 Mag). The female writing judging (a journalist) cried, and the two judges prayed earnestly for the student and her writing.

When it was my turn, I was anxious, guarded. I didn't want to be praised. I didn't believe praise. It can be easier to take either praise or severe criticism on paper and in pen than it is to have a conversation with someone about your writing.

"So. Dana," Kevin Bashore began.

They looked at each other and smiled. Reshuffled some papers, resettled into their chairs. I remember Kevin as leaning forward on his knees, hands clasped towards me.

"Dana, we just want to tell you that you are already a writer." The woman swayed and rocked, nodding. "We enjoyed it so much. You are already a writer. Look at this passage. And this one. Such realized language. And if you haven't read Lewis, we will eat our hats. Keep writing. My dear, you have more than you know. We want to give you something. We want to show you where this can go." Kevin took both my hands in his. I thought maybe he was going to shake them but he held them. Then I thought maybe we were going to pray, but their eyes stayed open and looking on me. I met and then did not meet the gaze. I repeated this. I shrunk, I sat up straighter, I shrunk again.

"We bless you and anoint you with the blessing of C. S. Lewis. May you have years of writing, blessed work, and glorify God with your words." The woman swayed and rocked more.

"Keep writing. You are already there and writing in strength."

I had hunched my shoulders forward. I wanted to curl into myself. I wanted to pull my hands away. But I couldn't. I didn't want to be rude. I didn't want to tell him that he had made a mistake; that I didn't appreciate being told I had talent when I didn't. I didn't know how to tell them that good evangelical girls like me didn't ever get blessed. We were strangers to the mystical. It was a foreign paradigm. Even Communion, easily a mystical experience, was permitted only a memorial status. Prayer was polite conversation, and expecting too much was presumptuous. Scripture had to be read in context, or at least searched for the appropriate, pietistic word. Blessings... what weight did that hold?

I thanked them and escaped.

I walked down the long church hallway with a grimace. My awkward junior high hunch grew stronger, as if to protect me from what I could not control: a calling, a command? All I could feel was burning anger creeping from my chest into my eyes, down my arms. Or anger was the only word I had to describe the affect on my sense of self.

Since that day, I have lived in both belief and cynicism of their declaration.

I frequently forget this incident, but when I remember, I grow anxious. I don't know what to do with the moment. Part of me likes to remember because here I am, graduating from Penn State with a degree in English and Creative Writing. Here I am, asking these questions, driven by a need for a whole life. Driven because when college came, I began to write away from the bounds I crafted that day, unconsciously chosen in my self-protective anger. I believed the blessing enough to write only what had been blessed: the fantasy story, the fairy tale, the just over the unjust, the *true*. Demonstrating the ultimate victory over evil was the truest story I knew how to tell, and best told in the strangest constructed worlds. When I stopped being able to write in this genre well, I feared I had lost myself.

Emeth

Writing a story about human trafficking, rape, and abuse wasn't exactly what I had imagined myself doing in college. After the "blessing", I thought fairy tales my natural domain and wrote them in various forms until graduation. No one gave me other short stories to read, to suggest the possibilities. But writing my short story "Emeth" (Hebrew for "truth," "firmness," or "veracity") changed me.

Morris Collins, an MFA student at the time, assigned our first story in the introduction to fiction writing class. Either by chance or by my own eagerness (I can't remember which), I was the first to be workshopped (whatever "workshopped" meant. No one told me in those first college weeks). Intimidated: "freshie" in a class of mostly upperclassmen; writing fairy tales not a few months before; lost in a large campus; taught by a young grad student who assigned disturbing short stories, instructed by gentle sarcasm, and who was, as Charlotte Holmes later described, "not hard to look at."

When it came time to write, my first college deadline looming, I was sitting on my residence hall floor with some friends. We were talking politics and I began talking about my recent studies on human trafficking, the first social justice issue I had ever studied, the first political issue beyond abortion that had inspired me to act. I wrote the story of a girl who could have been me. I wrote it from a distance, coldly and detached.. The genre could be called "magical realism" but I had no word for it at the time: a young girl is forced into sex slavery on a street corner, and each man carves his name into her body with a knife, the ultimate perversion of writing. She commits suicide.

Everyone criticized the story for being too vague, too dark, too grotesque. Too confusing.

"So what is the father doing here?" they would ask.

"I imagined him--" and Morris would interrupt, but kindly.

"No, Dana. You can't say anything,"

My cheeks burned the rest of the class and I said nothing. I wanted to disappear.

I was shaking after the workshop, shivering even though the summer was still strong. I walked towards Burrowes Building. The maple tree had dropped a few red leaves and seemed cool so I sat, calming myself, tearing out handfuls of grass and playing with the fallen leaves. Morris would be coming soon, walking back to his office, and I half hoped he would stop and talk with me. He took a long while talking with another student. I almost left. But he came and sat with me under the tree and asked if I was okay. I shrugged. "No one is going to think you're crazy, you know." I shrugged again.

"Well... are you sure?" I finally asked.

"Very sure. Have you ever been workshoped before?" I shook my head.

"Well that can be pretty terrifying in and of itself. It went well. You wrote a good story and with some work it will be ever better."

"It wasn't bad?"

"No. You have strong writing. It was good. And they aren't going to think that what you write is you. It isn't. Don't worry about it, seriously."

"Thanks."

I titled the story "Emeth" only after several more drafts that I let Morris read. I wanted to believe that what had come from me could be called firm, immovable, *true*. I titled it something I could not be sure of it being. Morris introduced me to the story of "the Golem" from Jewish rabbinic tradition. This used the word "golem" to refer to unformed substances: earth, text, etc. The matter became a form and a life when the word "truth" or "emeth" was placed on the forehead. The word "Truth" gave it life and meaning. A golem served man, but could be hostile to him in other situations. The term could be an insult when applied to another human being. It is a mixed blessing. A confusing presence. Made by human will but a weak, malleable creation. And so my words continued to be: a blessing and a curse, a creation that behaved beyond what I intended; my living failure.

The Women

I woke up to a text message during a late afternoon nap. I could have ignored it but I did not. It was too easy to open it. It was from my mother.

She had finally read "The Women," a story that I had completed almost a year prior. It ran in Penn State's literary journal, half-baked as it was. The fiction editor was a good friend from writing classes and he recognized its potential.

I had been leery about it being put in the journal. It was chosen without disagreement, he had told me. I think he expected me to be happier about the whole thing. I wasn't. I pulled him aside after class and told him that I couldn't let him run it without my mother reading it. It was pretty obvious that it was a thinly veiled discussion of my relationship with her and with my grandmother. I didn't try to hide that at all but I realized that she hadn't read it and I didn't want her accidentally reading it someday in the journal without knowing it was there.

So I asked him to wait. And he said he would. I called Mom the next day and explained that I need her to read this story before it was published. That I thought it wasn't bad and that I had sent her an email.

A week went by. And then most of another. Chris asked me gently in class if it would be possible for me to get him an answer by the next day. I called her and mentioned it again. "I'm sure its fine honey, really. I just don't have time. If you think its offensive then you decide. I just don't have time."

So I let it go.

The copies were handed out in April. My professors commented and then forgot about the story. None of my friends other than those in my classes noted that I was even in the book. The one poem I had in there was printed under the wrong name.

When home, I pulled them out and placed it in her hands and said, "Look. I'm in this." I think she was surprised and had forgotten all about it and was a little pleased that publication had happened

So she read it. I got a text saying that I should never let anyone from Georgia read it. Well, that was after she asked if I actually had a tattoo under my left arm as my main character in the story did. No (though that's exactly where it would go if I got one). I asked why she said that. "It's demeaning to your southern heritage. We'll talk about it later." That wasn't exactly what I had been going for. The South makes me feel homeless, like it's supposed to be my heritage but didn't manage because they took me away from it at age nine and I fell in love with the green of Central Pennsylvania and the color of winter sunsets and the sound of dry corn. But Georgia and extended family, especially in the last few years, makes me feel as if there isn't a place on earth that I can truly be at rest. That I can't appear even close to normal femininity because I don't wear make up regularly, my hair is a struggle, sweaters bunch up around my stomach, and I don't own a single set of pearls and only two dresses that can be worn in public.

But I talk about all of that in the story, and I talk about my grandmother and confusion and the complications of blood. Perhaps it should have been a personal essay. Perhaps. Now, there is no choice but to let it stand.

Then why did I feel so ashamed, as if I had let her down, done something very wrong?

Journeying

I believed in integration; I believed that living and working out of my faith and out of my literary and creative writing training were not contradictory; I believed that my life could be undivided. But I had no way to measure my success or failure, when my emotions were raw from the slightest distrust or unhappiness in my respected readers, of which my family was paramount. It could be done.

My young heart wrote in an effort to please and I discovered that pleasing was not always possible. But now, as a college student focusing on learning craft at a secular university, I became quite capable of transgressing both the craft expectations of my professors, my own conscious and unconscious moral boundaries, and my family's expectations.

I knew I needed to go. I needed to leave the spaces I knew, the voices I had grown familiar with. I needed to see these hypothetical artists of faith. I needed to know if they existed. I needed to know if the tensions and contradictions I had seen in myself could somehow be resolved.

So I went on a journey. Over three months with the support of an enrichment funds grant from Penn State Liberal Arts, I visited two gatherings: International Art's Movement Encounter and the Festival of Faith and Writing. The journey would not simply answer, but change the very nature of what I questioned.

International Arts Movement: Encounter
Cooper Union, New York City, New York
March 4-6, 2010

Cameron, slowly, with the faintest of his southern drawl blending in with the words, read out of a three-in-one Annie Dillard collection in a cafe around the corner from Grand Cooper Union in Greenwich Village. *"Your work is to keep cranking the flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair."* -Annie Dillard, *"The Writing Life"*. There were five of us crowded in a small booth where we could look along our shoulders and through the front window. People moved around a lot in the cafe, and there was talking, and the sound of the Italian owners yelling at each other behind the counter of packaged and tempting pastries, the black marker board behind them, declaring the drink menus that had provided us each with coffee and chai lattes. Stephen turned his curly brown head up and asked if Cameron could read the quote again. Cameron did and Stephen wrote in his notebook, slow, small lines to quote Dillard in elaborate font. He drew a picture of such a machine flying machine and a desk.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I'm an illustrator."

I. am. an. illustrator. I nodded as if I met illustrators all the time. I could not imagine what kind of work an illustrator would do. Later, I noticed that my own face, side profile, chin turned up from my enduring underbite, was sketched in the corner the next page over from the words.

Cameron put the book down. I took it asking, "Can I see?" I found my own favorite moment from "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" and read aloud. *"It's the first week of January, and I've got great plans. I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand."*

I watched these new friends carefully, a little amazed at my own boldness. But perhaps it could not be called boldness since I did not invite myself but followed the invitation of a few comfortable and easy souls.

Being with such souls was a wonder to me. They were what I had been looking for: the easy and comfortable artists of faith. I knew, being with them, that I had never fully claimed both of those identities. I was not a comfortable and easy soul. I was frightened and overwhelmed.

The Winthrop students (Stephen, Cameron, and Courtney) found me at Encounter, a yearly gathering of artists and catalysts in New York to celebrate and consider faith's presence in their daily work. Cameron and Stephen had introduced themselves and asked if they could share the only couch in the lobby. Courtney had come a few moments later to declare that she had found a coffee house/cafe that we had to visit. Shook my hand. Cameron had said, "You know Dana, you would be more than welcome to follow us around for this week." So I did.

Nigel

He greeted each attendee with a hug and handed a few of the women flowers out of the bright bouquet he held, the promise that an early spring was on its way. There were flowers everywhere that he brought in and placed around the book and registration tables. They were replaced with more each morning. He wore a gray suit coat, a purple vest and tie, and seemed delighted to be there to see us and

welcome in the first moments of the conference. His name was Nigel, and he was from England and helped start a church in Greenwich Village. At a concert, he took a young artist from the front row and began dancing with her and spinning, laughing for the fun of it. Everyone, including the musicians, cheered them on.

Cameron and Stephen had met him before and introduced me to him when I was too shy to introduce myself. He kissed my hand and bowed, "It is a delight to make the acquaintance of any friend of these wonderful boys!"

Someone later told a story about Nigel. He was once heard to say, "We aren't human doings. We are human beings."

Meeting Makers

Encounter is designed to allow the participant to encounter artists and art in New York City. Significant time gaps between main sessions allow this encountering of NYC to take place. Since so much time was set aside to explore the city, New York itself became my question's landscape and figured much in my attempts to re-communicate the experience later. Having been raised in towns somewhere between city and suburb and small towns, the city itself was a scale that generally overwhelmed me. Into this frightening place, I needed guides. I need people to follow, to go with me, to show me how to cross streets, and order in cafes and the best way to wander aimlessly (lost) in Greenwich Village late at night. The students from Winthrop were my most immediate guides. Guides? They felt more like welcoming, loving hosts. New York City, the madness I could not understand, was what they welcomed me into. The questions became a place of welcoming. And in Stephen, Cameron, and Courtney, I saw the person I wanted to become: a whole artist, faithful and generative.

One of the first places we first wandered to in our free hours was the International Arts Movement "space." The space is through a brass, oriental crafted door and up two flights. I learned walking up the dim stairs, wide and shallow, stretching seven stories up, that New York does not care

about the process of getting to a place so much as what is behind the door. The stair way put me off a bit but did not seem to surprise anyone else. Courtney and Cameron had been here before or near here when they lived in the city the summer before.

Once inside, it seemed like the world was all light: light shelves, light wood stained floor, a faint echo of shoes like in a museum but too small for that. We did not stay long. As we left, a man came in and asked familiarly if we could help him get his project into the room. He was an artist exhibiting that night. Cameron went to the street and held the door open while two men carried in a wooden frame. Courtney and I took the huge wrap of tin foil (like rolled up carpet) over the edges of the banisters and into the room. He shook our hands when we made it in without destroying the piece. "Wayne Adams," he said, looking us firmly in the eyes and then turning to talk to his friend and put the thing together. I told Courtney that I had never actually helped an art project before.

As we went into the street again and began walking several blocks before taking the subway again to another part of the city, I pulled a book of poetry out of my bag and read to the others.

Together

The movie started and I settled into my seat near the front, knees pressed into the chair in front of me. "Jitensha" was the movie of a Japanese man who is ashamed of himself and his failures and slips closer and closer to depression. Then God steals his bicycle. Yes, God. And he returns it by giving him hints and clues as to who has the different pieces. He must engage and interact with the world in a variety of ways, from seeing a young mother and her child to selling trinkets in the street. As the film closed and he put the pieces of his bicycle back together that would allow him to go out and search for a new job, God sent him one more yellow piece of paper:

"Sometimes you have to rely on others to find what you're looking for."

I opened my notebook and wrote the line by feel of pen on paper in the dark.

Cameron leaned towards me and whispered, "Are you going to put that in your thesis?"

Writer

Cameron lost us in New York. My dinner had not sat well in my stomach. My discomfort reached a maximum when we finally re-found our way back to the IAM space where a group of artists were presenting that night. I was not used to walking so far, dinner and the heavy sweetness of a cupcake on my stomach. The room was full and it took a while to make out way in. I opted to sit in a chair; mingling was exhausting. However, that did not prevent someone from deciding to talk to me though (how strange and awkward and often that had happened in the past few days!). I received the question, simply and innocent in expectation: so what brings you to Encounter? What is your craft? Ah, yes my craft. I knew how to answer this one after many prior fumbblings. Craft. My craft: that thing which brings me here, the hazy confusion in my heart. I kept shooting glances at the wide tinfoil covered structure that caught and broke the light like pieces of glass; it was the finished product of our earlier efforts. I kept looking so I wouldn't have to these strangers in the face.

"I'm a student at Penn State. I'm a writer of short fiction and poetry."

Slight pause. "Wow, I'm impressed! You really seem to know what you're about!"

In my head, there was a moment of silence and surprise at how I had come off. In reality, I think I back pedaled a little bit and emphasized the "student" part of my answer. I studied the art structure some more. But something had changed. I had answered with confidence, a hesitant joy of testing the freedom to be something that I knew I could be and wanted to be and was without a question. I had found a way to claim a craft and a work, something outside of my experience in any other setting or context. An identity that I could say without shame, without confusion, without even feeling the dreaded need of producing some copy of a published something to prove my validity. (Does any writer feel validated or real, even after receiving the highest accolades and awards? Does any of that feel any stronger than the first time I had a personal essay printed in a church newsletter or that short paragraph in the summer camp hand out?) Here I was. Christian. Writer. Or rather: Writer. Christian. Or Christian Writer.

I could not be ashamed of the question, "What is your relationship to the arts?" The answer was printed on my nametag. In that moment, I owned "writer". Freely and without fear..

Festival of Faith and Writing
Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan
April 15-18, 2010

A month later, my mother and I began our drive to Michigan for the Festival of Faith and Writing, a biennial gathering of readers and writers hosted by Calvin College. At the Festival, their goal is to, "provide a vibrant community where people come together to discuss, celebrate, and explore the ways in which faith is represented in literature and how it plays out in our world today." I had been to this conference before, two years previously as an even younger writer. I don't remember now what drew me to the conference then; there was little from the gathering that I remembered beyond the uncannily warm Grand Rapids April weather and the strangeness of a being a student on my own, making friends as I went.

There were no students to welcome this time. My mother and I stayed at a hotel a few miles from the campus and joined the throngs of readers, writers, and publishers each day to wander the strangely mapped campus in search of literary treasures.

And naps. I fell in love with the Seminary Duck pond. It hides at the base of the quiet and still Seminary building, below the chapel, sheltered by steep banks that run up to the Seminary chapel on one side and the school library and administration building on the other. The smooth green grass and frequent student visitors reminded me of the Alumni Garden at Penn State. Water and green: A good place to be.

But my body and soul felt like "butter scraped over too much bread". I blamed it on my mother. And I let her know that I blamed her for my weariness, though neither was sure why I felt justified in taking out months of academic and relationship stress on her. She had offered to drive me as a way for her to get away. She had not spent a night away from our family in over a year. I suppose it was the fact that while she was with me, she was a living reminder of family conflict I wanted to avoid, the place I was

learning I could never *know* how to be *right*. How could I ever be right when to know right could mean choosing one parent over the other?

The Festival of Faith and Writing had the main sessions in the arena; the Arts Center was under construction so the echo filled room and uncomfortable bleachers would have to do. The first plenary session was "Embodied Faith: Not What You Think" with Scott Cairns, one of the first poets I had studied and loved. There was a simple, wry tone to his words that moved me *Include a poem here?* He is part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a church unfamiliar to me, but grew up with a background in a Reformed church. There is a peace at the center of his words and demeanor, a calming voice. I had never heard of him until I attended a conversation between him and Kathleen Norris at the previous Festival. Everyone seemed to get more out of the conversation than I had done, so I did some reading to know his work like I did that of Kathleen Norris. I felt very comfortable with his wry and deeply kind tone, and the ability to see truth in spiritual things that I had not realized.

He began his talk with a story from the previous Sunday. When he told his priest that he was going to Calvin College to talk, his priest asked if he could send a message for him to share. "Please tell the Calvinists: they are not as bad as they think they are." The room laughed and Scott Cairns smiled his wry and kind smile.

"Embodied faith" was the title of his talk. To have faith is not to think, but to have a body that enacts and does. A performance even. That words are part of our recovery of the Body of Christ, of our bodies, to no longer be alone or alienated. He spoke about how writing can be an embodiment of the faith. How writing, poetry, makes a form to what was formless, visibility to the unseen, an *incarnation*. How this was to be shared in community, that the Body of Christ was not being alone but with others, and that writing was about mystery, what we don't know rather than that of which we are certain.

Then he noted, almost an aside, that so many fear writing what they do not believe. "And this [fear] seems to me a lack of faith, or rather its antithesis."

A weight had disappeared from my shoulders as he gently continued. I pulled myself up and sat tall. I smiled and held out my hands. I whispered too loudly, "That is what I've been asking!" to my mother. She asked what I meant. I shook my head. Too much to explain; too much right then, anyway.

I once heard Christian writers described as writing like they were sorting laundry: the lights and the darks, the good and the evil, the right and the wrong. Anyone with eyes (or a good nose) can tell what is to be washed and when. But as Jeffrey Overstreet pointed out in his talk at Encounter 10, "To imply that evil is easily identified is a lie." I had believed it easy to identify and had written as if it could be. I had written to be right, even though I knew it was impossible to be so even a respectable amount of the time. I grew anxious as I slowly learned the impossibility of discerning good from evil.

I saw it now. To declare myself a writer is to declare that I will wear my "being wrong", my intense uncertainty as a badge. It is not to declare my distance from wrong belief or action. It is to declare that I *am* wrong belief or action. It is to declare and embody *faith*, not try to mesh it together with something else in a pudding, but as yeast working through the whole dough, indistinguishable from the final result. To write without the fear of error was to write *faithfully*. Mystery, not what I know to be right. Faith, not fear.

After the session, weary of the grey, tomb-like, towering gym walls, I went to the pond while my mom went to another talk in the seminary chapel. I told her where she could find me and left, darting through the packed crowds, across the campus. Behind the chapel was the surest place to avoid people and to watch ducks. I leaned back on the pond's grass bank, feet stretched toward the water. And I slept.

Now

The question had changed. I had feared being a writer of faith because I feared being wrong. I could not imagine how one lived comfortably in both roles. Here it was, beautifully demonstrated that the

question didn't need to be asked. It was lived. Embodied. An incarnated mystery. Cameron, Stephen, Courtney, Nigel, Scott Cairns: each lived life without anxiety over the conflict I had lived in. "Easy and comfortable souls".

It no longer seemed important to talk or write up qualitative research. It seemed more important to *be* this person. And to do that, I needed to *make*, to *write*. The result was a new question and a new direction for the project. My question became "What are the moral and ethical responsibilities for a writer of faith?" Or perhaps another way of saying this is, "What is a writer of faith trying to *say*? What story are they telling through writing?"

This question initiated the making and collecting of the remaining pieces in my senior honors thesis. Uncertain of how to arrange them, I began rewriting the final piece, "Tell the Resurrection" as a way to establish a cohesive structure for the collection. This process opened to me further limitations in the question I was asking. The essay was hard and awkward to write, but one I felt was important. During one meeting with Julia where I blundered through my thoughts on communion and resurrection, I "resorted" to quoting from the Presbyterian Confession of Faith. Her face lit up. "That's what you need," she said, "Other voices. You keep trying to explain these things in your own words. Pull in the other voices. You aren't just an individual making this stuff up in a corner. Place yourself and your words in a tradition."

There is a lot of shame in me about using "Christian-ese", a lingo that makes sense and is explainable only to a Christian readership. I've made fun of this language and vocabulary. I avoid it in conversations and in the classroom. I avoid words or ideas because they carry tension. I had so effectively talked myself out of writing in a "Christian" voice, that I had jettisoned much of the vocabulary that makes up my thinking and my voice.

And what I had failed to realize, in a kind of arrogance, was that the resulting, "masked faith" vocabulary was necessarily weaker by avoiding the traditional vocabulary of faith. Throwing off the vocabulary established over millennia dilutes and confuses my writing. I fail to communicate the essence of my experience and my knowledge of truth in the process. I have aided no one by avoiding the words

and structures given to me by tradition: creeds, texts, hymns, vocabulary, doctrine. Rather, what I had actually wanted to avoid was Christian-ese: the attempt to individualize words and doctrine in a way that has made it shallow and weak. And as a result, I had created my own milk-watered version of this mistake. Individualistic expression of faith is certain to confuse and baffle a reader. Placing oneself in within the contest of a tradition and actively, consciously engaging that language grounds and clarifies abstract thought for a reader. Not the other way around. It's about time I got over my awkward inhibitions with vocalizing faith.

Instead, I could study history, explain and explicate words and ideas like "communion" and "resurrection" and the texts that have surrounded them. I could "talk back" to those texts as inspiration and challenges to my thoughts and words.

Structure of Collection

I chose to create an outline for the project by looking at words and phrases in the protestant Communion literature in a conscious effort to re-engage with the structures and vocabularies of my faith. Liturgy, originally a word to describe the order of a communion service, is a church's effort to structure worship in the service to communicate the whole faith narrative both explicitly and implicitly. I chose the liturgical structure as a way to observe both explicitly and implicitly ways the body of the thesis also interacts and mirrors my faith narrative. I concluded that this was a helpful way for any writer of faith to consider the intersection of their work and their faith.

As a protestant Christian, communion sits at the center of my own liturgical practices, revealing themes present and life giving to my writing thus far: body, communion, hospitality, brokenness, resurrection, hope. Through the slow creation of these essays, poems, and short stories, I have come to more fully understand my freedom to be "writer" and "faithful". Engaging in that narrative is indeed part of what it means to be a writer of faith.

Communion Services as Taken from the Presbyterian Book of Church Order.

The Bread:

"Our Lord Jesus, on the same night in which he was betrayed, having taken bread, and blessed and broken it, gave it to his disciples; as I, ministering in his name give this bread unto you, saying: Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me."

The Wine:

"After the same manner our Savior also took the cup, and having given thanks, as hath been done in his name, he gave it to the disciples saying: This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins: drink all ye of it."

Chapter 2

Mystical Body: A short memoir of the communion sacrament

communion late 14c., from O.Fr. comunion "community, communion" (12c.), from L. communionem (nom. communio) "fellowship, mutual participation, a sharing," used in L.L. ecclesiastical language for "participation in the sacrament," from communis (see common). Used by Augustine, in belief that the word was derived from com- "with, together" + unus "oneness, union." (Etymology.com)

Communion or Eucharist seems to be one of the hardest mysteries of my faith.

It expresses so much. It enacts so much.

It is immediate: ingesting bread and wine (or grape juice depending on whether or not your liturgy was set up by teetotalers, or that juice concentrate is cheaper in bulk).

It is mystery: changing the substance of one's body and spirit all at once with the changing of an entire community's body and spirit.

It is hard to swallow at times.

I am always hungry for it.

Communion hunger is a pleasure because I have known what it is to eat and be satisfied. I have learned that hunger is answered by food. Hunger is the physical knowledge that the body cannot sustain itself, that it must be given life from the outside. Hunger for communion is spiritual hunger. Communion is physical substance that feeds the spirit, reminding the corporate and individual Body that it cannot sustain itself, that it must be given life from the outside.

It is sacrament. St. Augustine said that a sacrament as "a visible sign of an invisible reality." The Anglican Book of Common Prayer says sacrament is, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible Grace."

I have felt a spiritual stomach quiet at communion wafer and wine. Communion answers (in hints) now. It will be answered in full, someday. It is small pieces hinting at a coming feast.

1.

"I am overwhelmed with the depth of this mystery." -John Calvin

I cannot stay in to sing with the others in the gym, the last night of the fall weekend in the mountains. I cannot. We are supposed to take communion together but I cannot. I take the piece of bread and juice and walk out the back door. I am ashamed of almost crying about a recent break up. I walk towards the pond and I start yelling. I am not sure what I am saying. I walk towards the pond and sit on the bank, watching the sky. I am crying, "Don't leave me, you can't leave me. I don't have anyone else. You promised you wouldn't." It is a prayer.

I see four shooting stars, one after the other. I stop crying and quietly weep. I say the communion words.

"This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me."

I take and eat.

The first communion meal took place the night before Jesus was crucified. Each of the four Gospels in the Bible tell the story of this final meal in a slightly different way, but each recount how Jesus took bread, broke it, and handed it to his disciples saying that it was his body and they should eat it. John adds a significant detail: that he first washed each of his disciple's feet, something only a slave was known to do. He then said that "If I then, your Lord and

Teacher, have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). Then he took the wine and had them pass it around the table, telling them to drink it, that it was his blood. He has such strange things like this before, as the Gospel of John retells. Jesus had been preaching to a crowd enamored with his miracles. When he told them they could not have life without eating his body, they were very put off. But Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69)

This meal, coming during the Passover week, was heavy with meaning, especially in hindsight. Passover recognizes when the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt and began their journey to what is now the country of Israel. They were commanded to bake unleavened bread (there would not be enough time for it to rise) and to cook a lamb and eat it quickly before it was time to go. Blood from the lamb was spread on the doorposts of every house to prevent a Divine plague from killing the firstborn sons. Jesus died the next day, body destroyed by beatings, blood loss, and suffocation by crucifixion. In the first Communion, he turned the Passover meal on its head, claiming that it was a precursor to his own death.

So for the early church and all other Christian churches that followed, Communion was a powerful tradition, established by Jesus Himself. It was like a play in the oldest sense of that word: performed sacrifice like the old Greek tragedies whose kings died as scapegoats, blood sacrifices for their people. It was a performance to tell the story at the heart of the new religion.

2.

I am in a car with young students. We are driving for a Spring Break service trip in Florida: service, because we should--Florida, because its warm and our bones are grown stiff in heavy winter clothes and deep cold. My driver grew up Catholic. I grew up Evangelical, the

nondescript kind that is its own distinctive. She's a freedom loving Protestant at heart, which thinks churches should meet in the outdoors, in the world. She serves at Catholic mass in the church she grew up in. I am a renegade Evangelical, who turned more liturgical Presbyterian and loves Calvin's theology. Road trips are easy ways for us to discover these differences and enjoy them. If we didn't enjoy them, the drive would be longer than it needs to be. She mentions how she never understood why mass was so important to Catholics or communion to Protestants. "It's just a practice for the individual. Important, but not that important. Mass is just Catholics getting stuck in human tradition." I consider being quiet but remember that I have a position of seniority here. I can tell her what I think. "I don't think so. Of all the religious practices I follow, that one is most dear to me." She is friendly and interested so I keep talking. I tell my understanding of its history in the Catholic Church and how it changed because of the Reformation. (A girl in the back seat doesn't know about the Reformation, but she recognizes the 95 Theses when I mention it as the start of the change). It takes a while to explain.

Then I explain how I now believe that something *happens* in Communion-- *something* beyond remembering, though it comes in the remembering and eating and the food becoming part of our bodies. *Unity* happens: between Creator and the created, between me and the others eating with me. I say that I cannot wait to eat on Communion Sunday. And how I wish every Sunday was Communion Sunday in my church.

"And Catholics," I say, "I love how you value it enough to have it every time there is a service. I love the tradition of it. You have some things going for you."

Because of the Reformation in the 1500s, Christians were no longer defined by being born in the Christian Empire, but became known by being Catholic, part of the ancient church, or Protestant ("protestor"). No one, not even the new Protestants, reformers, was sure what that meant in the long run. What they did know is that the heart of all theology was being disputed,

that things were not settled and had to be reconsidered. During theological and physical arguments, debates, persecutions, and wars that were sparked by Reformation, the meaning and practice of Eucharist acted as a center. Eucharist. The Lord's Supper. Communion.

What is it? How should it be taken? Given? Received? Who gets to take it? etc.

Many chose to die rather than change their confessed beliefs in its substance and effect. Protestant and Catholic were violently separated.

The Catholic tradition that had developed over the millennia began to take the words "This is my body" very literally. That is, the bread and wine actually became the body and blood, a stance called "transubstantiation." Taking communion was necessary to be "saved" in the faith; it was also a matter of control for the Catholic Church. Many Roman emperors were ousted because the Pope excommunicated them: meaning they could no longer take communion.

When the Reformers left the Catholic Church, Communion became a central point of the debate. Mass had been a center that was no longer there. How Communion/Eucharist/Mass was defined became essential for the new protestors ("Protestants" or "Reformers") to have words for their doctrines surrounding this. Lines were being drawn in the written word. Reformers such as Martin Luther in Germany resisted this kind of control and this interpretation of Jesus' words. Luther believed that while the substances were not literally changed, they were still surrounded with the presence of Christ. This belief was called "consubstantiation." Calvin, a father of sorts to the Presbyterian tradition in Geneva, Switzerland, claimed that this was still too literal of an understanding and that there was no physical or immediate spiritual presence in communion. Articulating the non-literal presence of Christ emphasized that Jesus had already been sacrificed once on the cross. There were, however, real spiritual results in individuals and in the Church through participating in a sacrament like communion. And in Zurich Zwingli, a traceable root of American evangelicals, claimed that nothing happened at all. This also aligned with the stance Calvin took in that it was primarily a rejection of the ideas that the Catholic Church had held.

Transubstantiation could not be true because it required a repeated sacrifice by Christ to be present, which did not work since Jesus' death was sufficient the first time. Communion only marked a memory.

And me? I come those who believed as Zwingli did, that practice has no result other than to remember on occasion a story one knows all too well. I come from a tradition that forgets it was born by human deaths. Yes, people killed and were killed over this belief. And in forgetting mystery, they forget and neglect eating the bread and drinking the wine. They save it for special occasions, served swiftly at the end of a worship service.

But in learning to remember, I grew away from my tradition of non-tradition and toward the love the Reformers had for this practice. Instead, I found Communion to be the dynamic center around which the rest of faith rapidly turns.

The Westminster Confession, Article 1 on the Lord's Supper:

*Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His **mystical body**.*

3.

My friend Amanda is a poet, a philosopher, and passionate snowboarder. We both grew up in evangelical churches. We are talking about how we thought about various aspects of being

church kids. She tells me over dinner, "My sister and I gave each other communion when we were little. We just loved it and we used it like playing house. I mean we saw it in church, why couldn't we do it? We would take our sandwiches and tear the bread and give them to each other saying, "This is my body broken for you." She laughs. "I suppose that is horribly sacrilegious."

I laugh with her and think of ways I've violated the norms of how to take communion. I find it beautiful that she gave her "body, broken" for her sister to eat. Later, I look up "sacrilegious" in my pocket dictionary: "Violation of something consecrated to God; gross irreverence." There is a laughter that comes, with perhaps fear underneath it, at having done something that abuses the sacred, the sacrament.

Perhaps it was not sacrilegious. Perhaps it is imitation of a grownup imitative remembering. Learning to remember is part of growing up.

My conversation with Amanda reminds me of a passage from one of my favorite novels, "Gilead" by Marilynne Robinson. It is a series of letters written from an aging Reverend Ames to his young son. He is the pastor of a Congregationalist church in Gilead, Iowa, and wishes to preserve memories of his life to pass onto his son, memories he would have been able to share if he was not to die soon. There is one moment in particular that I think of often from the book, when Reverend Ames shares a communion memory with his son. It is a memory that was not in church but took place in an unlikely place.

"I remember that day in my childhood when I lay under the wagon with the other little children, watching them pull down the ruins of that Baptist church, and my father brought me a piece of biscuit for my lunch, and I crawled out and knelt with him the rain. I remember it as if he broke the bread and put a bit of it in my mouth, though I know he didn't. His hands and his face were black with ash--he looked charred, like one of the old martyrs-- and he knelt there in the rain and brought a piece of biscuit out from inside his

shirt, and he did break it, that's true, and gave half to me and at the other half himself.

And it truly was the bread of affliction, because everyone was poor then....

"... I think of this because, on the morning of communion when your mother brought you forward and said, 'You ought to give him some of that,' I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my memory. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of the same memory, which has been very dear to me, though only now do I realize how often it has been in my mind." (Robinson 104)

I think of this moment of receiving blessed food in the rain and wanting to share that when Amanda tells me her story, because it seems she acted the same way: "This is what I have. I must share it with you." And here is the Church, sharing the "bread of affliction" in each bite. Here a voice in a novel, telling the memory of an act of memory, and finding in that action strength to continue.

4.

Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 75: *"and further, that he feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life, with his crucified body and shed blood, as assuredly as I receive from the hands of the minister, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, as certain signs of the body and blood of Christ."*

I hold the phone to my ear, tightly. I roll over in bed to be more comfortable. The lights are off. I was almost asleep but he called and I always answer when he calls. Most often, he does not. He is distressed tonight, anxious. He says that he feels like he *likes* Jesus, that he is almost like a Jesus groupie, but isn't sure what to do about it. And he should know, right? He grew up in church.

I am quiet, and pull my blanket over my shoulders. I play with the silk border. He asks what I'm writing about these days. I talk about how I want to write about communion. How it permeates everything I think and believe. How it feeds me. He says it is strange to love a practice so much. I describe how I took communion that morning and how I had needed it. He said he couldn't remember the last time he took communion.

"You should find a church sometime and take it," I say. "You would like it. It would be good."

"Yes. Maybe," he says. "I haven't taken communion in so long. I can't remember the last time."

"You should sometime."

"Yes. Maybe."

I tell him this because I believe he might find his way again if he could remember what it is like to not be so hungry, to not be made helpless by it. I believe that he might understand his anxiousness about belief if he could taste "the bread and cup of the Lord, as certain signs."

5.

"It should be enough for us to know that the intention of our Lord is that we use it often; otherwise we shall not know well the benefits which it offers us." -John Calvin

I talk to Steve, a campus minister ordained in my newly chosen denomination (Presbyterian Church of American, PCA), about communion. I tell him that I get hungry for it, that I don't like missing communion Sundays but that I do too often, and I question why we don't have communion every week.

"Don't tell the PCA'ers," he says, "but I'm getting crazy. I think I'm going to start serving it at my house meetings."

I like this answer. Some Protestants take Communion infrequently. For Presbyterians, this is left over from when the Scotts were at war with England and it was hard to hold services, so communion was rare. I dislike scarcity being paired with communion.

I believe in communion's holiness. I believe in its mystery. But I believe in holiness and mystery appearing everyday. I believe in things like the Divine walking around in a body and stopping to eat fish for dinner with his friends after waking up from the dead. Common, everyday kind of holiness and mystery. Dear as real body and blood, and just as common as people passing me on the street.

6.

Etymology.com: *Mass*: "Eucharistic service," O.E. *mæsse*, from V.L. **messa* "eucharistic service," lit. "dismissal," from L.L. *missa* "dismissal," fem. pp. of *mittere* "to let go, send," from concluding words of the service, *Ite, missa est*, "Go, (the prayer) has been sent," or "Go, it is the dismissal."

"It does not sit well with our modern sensibilities, the idea that you could be excluded from a group, asked to leave, shut out because you didn't believe something, or hadn't been doused in the right water. But there is something fitting to the privacy of a members-only Eucharist. The Eucharist is intimate. Watching it is a little like spying on a couple making love. This may be the place where Christ loves us best." - Lauren Winner, "Girl Meets God"

We were up early. Showered, but immediately began sweating again in the Andhra Pradesh, South Indian heat. We waited a long time for the children to be ready and to get in the

vans. We fit forty girls in one van. Our Penn State leaders do not go with us because they have been to local churches before and are not Christians anyway. The girls had sung to us as we avoided looking out the front window at the trucks and rickshaws and water buffalo and bicyclists and pedestrians we always just barely avoided. Now we arrive at an open windowed, one room church. Words celebrating Jesus in Telugu, the local language, and English are drawn with bright highlighter paints on the wall above the pulpit. The ceilings are strung with tinsel and other foil. It looks like a Mardi Gras party about to start. The service will be in Telugu. The music is blasted from the roof by a loudspeaker, the same kind that sits on every church or temple in India. There are mostly women and old men. The women wear bright saris. They all insist we sit in the few chairs in the back of the room and won't let us sit with the children. A few of our team seem nervous. They do not usually go to church.

Before the sermon, they ask Mark to introduce us. I bring greetings from America. After the singing and the sermon, two women walk through the room giving out pieces of flat bread. We each take a piece. My friend (whom the children refer to as "Jesus" because of his crazy beard and bright blue eyes) beside me also takes a piece, amused. We sing another song. I grow anxious and confused: it is not good to take communion if you do not call yourself a Christian.

This is hard to explain even to myself sitting stiffly on a bench blasted by the sound of Telugu worship songs and clapping, the eerie synthesizer sounds I am not used to, sitting next to my friend in the sticky heat. I think of several things. I think of verses, ones I cannot even place in context, just words. I'm not even sure if I remember them correctly: "Whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment on himself." If he eats, there is explicit judgment involved. I don't know what.

But I am afraid. I am also afraid of the words "Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin is worthy of death. It would be better for them to have a millstone hung around his neck and have him thrown in the ocean." I wonder if I don't say anything if I will have caused him to sin. I

also think of the book I was reading at home by Sara Miles, a gay Episcopal minister in LA who writes angrily about people who "fence tables" (controls who can take communion and who cannot); I think about how angry she would be at me. I think of Father Uwem Akpan, writer and priest, and him telling a story at a conference about letting three street children taken communion because he knew they were hungry and just wanted food. I think of the ways communion makes one body those who eat it, one body with Christ. I think of how serious a thing it is to be careful what one takes into the body. I think of what it would mean for someone who despises my beliefs to eat this with me. I think of these things and I am afraid to speak and to remain silent.

I ask my friend in a whisper if he is planning on taking the communion piece. He asks why he shouldn't and if it would bother me. All I can manage is to ask him not to take it. He does not.

I am grateful and ashamed. I am angry at having to be ashamed. But I asked because I was scared of not speaking more than I was afraid of silence. I was afraid for him and for me. For him to eat and not believe was, at the very least, offensive-- at the very worst, a spiritual crime. He thinks it is funny that I am so tense and that some of the old women seek his blessing because he looks like the American pictures of Jesus. Later, he will criticize something I said to the church when the pastor asked me to bring a greeting from America. I will cry in my room alone and wonder if I was wrong to stop him from eating with me.

Those who have taken the wafer and juice eat and then drink. We are not sure what the juice is made of and wonder if we will get dysentery from unfiltered water later. We do not.

7.

Horried, I stand in front of the communion table that I had pulled into auditorium shaped sanctuary not two hours before. It is an early Saturday morning and I am cleaning things

up from the week and getting ready for Sunday. I am a janitor, or what we called "maintenance staff". Sitting on the communion table is communion. The juice is poured into the small plastic thimble sized cups, all in their round and heavy trays. The small squares of dry, paper texture wafers are poured out of their plastic pre-wrap, ready and waiting. It is a little less than twenty-four hours before Sunday morning services. And the elements not covered with anything.

I clean this room regularly. I know what this building is like. I don't want to think about it. Not too much.

I take a closer look.

There are pieces of dust fuzz already settling into the grape juice.

I am completely grossed out.

Swallowing is a little harder the next day.

8.

Daniel sounds distressed. "Your mother did what?" He is not animated. He is rarely animated. But he is tense. He is thinking more than he says. His restraint constrains my story. I stop, waiting to hear his judgment. Waiting so I can craft my story to hide from his gaze. I grip the phone tighter. "I hear that something is wrong. What is wrong?" He waits a moment. "I'm just surprised your mother gave you communion. Communion is special. I think it needs to be given by a pastor." I am stunned. I did not know this kind of power was invested in the Pastors. They were just the dads of my friends or distant figures of questionable power and authority my parents and others criticized after sermons were over Sunday afternoons. And my mother loves communion. I wonder then if it is even possible to abuse a memory.

But I care for this man, so I tell him more than he asked for. "You know I organized a communion service once." "You did? When?" "In eleventh grade. Another student and I

organized it for a missions trip." "Was there a pastor there to serve it?" "I... I think... well yes, but he didn't do anything with it."

Our conversation ends. Later, I will reconsider what I said. I will reconsider memory. I will understand that remembering is practicing the past and making it present, and that abuse is always possible. I will be more cautious.

9.

"...and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other".

Westminster Confession

The week had been a long one. I was the oldest high school student, almost a co-leader, helping the younger students. We are 40 minutes from our homes in and around Hershey, Pennsylvania. But in Lebanon, everyone speaks mostly Spanish. Buildings are fenced in. We stay in after dark because someone had been shot a block away from the school building turned church. We were doing work with Iglesia El Faro, the Lighthouse Church, a Hispanic church in downtown Lebanon. This was not familiar to us. Neither are the students from the church who are our teammates, sleeping with their mattresses pulled up next to ours, the ones who slide easily in and out of English and Spanish and critique the different dialects of the language that come from their friends. There are at least five different countries represented by their families.

We are tired. The students have been bickering for much of the week. Nate, a leader, pulled the older students aside and asked if we have ideas of what we can do. I had been reading the book of Acts, the one where the early church gets started. They spent all of their time at "prayer and breaking of the bread": the beginnings of communion. So we decided to hold a communion service grander than any we had had at our home church.

Now, the lights are low. Floor space is covered with my white bed sheets. Grape juice is in a glass we found in the kitchen. A pastor bought us bread from a grocery store. It sits in an unbroken loaf by the grape juice. We have lit a candle too. Nate plays a few songs.

We wash one another's feet, like Jesus did to his disciples before the first communion. None of us had done that before. None of us is sure how people do it or even if anyone else does it as part of their worship. It just seemed like the right thing to do before taking communion. Having someone wash my feet somehow makes me weep. I am surprised that I am not the only one with this response to other high school students with pitchers of water and rags. We sing the doxology.

I tell the students we can take communion. Someone, perhaps me, says the communion words, "This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me," and "This is the new covenant in my blood. As often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you do proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again." We tear off pieces of white bread and dip it one by one into the juice. We eat the same bread and drink the same juice.

And then we are done. We laugh easily, running high on strange energy, tension released. We don't look in each other's eyes intentionally because the accidental glances are too much. But not watch each other's eyes.

I am bashful at something I don't have a name for. I am bashful to be one body. I am bashful at having seen and felt something sacred. I leave Iglesia El Faro convinced of this: communion is more than I have been told.

10.

"...To strengthen and sustain the one in earnest repentance." -Westminster Confession

Mom told me when I started taking communion that one should never take communion if you know you have not "taken care of" something you had done to be bad. "You should always make things right with your brother before communion. "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." That was a quote from the Bible somewhere, but I was not sure where.

I am 11 years old. I don't like men with earrings or tattoos or spiked hair. They scare me. I don't know what I think they will do to me, but I feel dirty near them. My basketball coach's high school aged son has all of these things. He is a coach of another fifth grade team. On Saturday practice, he tried to encourage me when I got hit in the head with a basketball. I pushed him away when he checked on me, glared at him and walked away. He stood there confused.

When the communion plate comes by me this Sunday, I don't take bread or juice. My mother notices and smiles at me encouragingly. I apologize to the coach the next day.

11.

I hold the thimble cup with care. I wonder whether or not I will mess up. I wore my favorite white dress today. I do not want to spill on it. Mom hands the grape juice to me. She has trusted me to hold it carefully since I began taking communion recently. I hold the small cup in my lap, hands cupped slightly to catch any juice that might spill from my hands shaking. My hands are small. I know they do not stay still, even when I try. The overhead auditorium lights make points like wiggling, bright stars in the juice. I start playing with the reflections of the ceiling in the juice by tilting the cup various ways. I pray hard because I believe that God will hear me as I take communion. I pray that God will let me go to India someday because we had just finished a unit study in school about it. I want a sari and I want to be Mother Theresa or Amy

Carmichael, women who go to another place and find a home there, taking care of other people. I want to go.

12.

Union Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida is large. Very large. About 1000 people in the auditorium. This is the first large, wealthy black church I have ever been to. The deacon's wives wear white clothes and fancy white hats on the first Sunday of every month. Communion Sunday. They hand it round to us in trays like the ones I grew up with. Heavy and silver, small thimble sized cups. But these communion cups are prepackaged. They are sealed shut with a plastic lid that I have to pull back. The first layer is over the communion wafer that is almost sheer and perfectly circular. Then the second layer opens to the juice. I balk. This is the strangest communion set up I have ever seen-- very efficient. There is a sound of plastic removal as people open to the styrofoam wafer, the flavorless grape juice. We take it at the same time in response to the words read by the pastor. No table fencing. It really is like how I grew up. Just prepackaged. I think of a youtube video I watched once of a pastor taste testing communion wafers in order to help pastors choose which to use in their churches: "What does it say to the world when the body of Christ tastes bad at worst, and nothing at best?" I take and eat anyway.

After the service was over, Alli, the young student who had been my driver for this spring break trip, comes up to me and said that communion today was a God inspired moment for her. "I thought of what you said the whole way through the service, about it being a moment of unity and grace for the Church! I was so excited to know I was taking communion with you today!"

I think of my shock at the plastic and the unpleasantly tasteless sacrament. And I think of the 1000 voices singing together and then eating together. And I think of Alli. I too am grateful that we ate together.

Food is digested. The teeth chew it until it comes apart in crumbs and atoms. It moves through the body until it is broken even further into energy, taken by cells. It is undone and made into what the body needs in the smallest fragments. Food becomes my body, my substance. Food sustains. Food is made into life. Food is made into my life and the life I share with those who eat with me.

That is communion. Communion is spiritual food. It is bread and wine coming apart in the body, and feeding the spirit. My spirit, the share spirit.

I can only wonder, echoing Calvin: "I am overwhelmed with the depth of this mystery."

Julia Spicher Kasdorf draws from an early Christian Anabaptist metaphor in her essay "Bodies and Boundaries" that communities of faith are like "a loaf of bread, composed of many grains of wheat that must be ground together; it is like wine pressed from many individual grapes. Just as each grain of wheat must be pulverized and each grape must likewise be crushed, so must it be with the members of the Body of Christ" (Kasdorf 77). So it is. To crush the bread in the mouth, to be crushed into newness as shared one with the other.

I am eating and being eaten. I am taken apart: self displayed, undone, and reassembled. The self comes apart and is more fully understood. Another self is given. The body, the words, are made over and made new. We are made over and made new. This is not just a memory, but an *acting* memory, enacting and making a "mystical body".

Chapter 3

Poured Out

Dream Catcher

The hills were evening gold when Jen and I
came out of the woods, like we could run
up into the blue winter sky, right off

the dry, crackling hay field. We would make it
through Christmas by escape and trespass
over neighbors' fields.

She held my hand and I held hers, so she felt younger
and I felt old. She was afraid
in the thick grass. I said she was silly

as we stomped down the other hill.
I tensed. We stopped. I turned her by the shoulders
and crossed the frozen runoff.

"Is it a dead animal?" she asked.
"Yes." She shuddered. I watched,
making sure it was still there, still dead:

She had not seen the fur lump turn
from dead rabbit to dead deer--ear, head, body--
still in the road side ditch under thin ice, undecayed.

We walked together
up the cindered, cement hill,
our backs turned on death.

Love Letter

In July 2010, Webster's Bookstore and Cafe in State College, Pennsylvania was closed due to the termination of their lease.

My Dearest Webster's,

I am in love with you. I needed you. I was a pilgrim in your walls. I continue to need you now that you are gone.

I didn't know what you now teach me to know: the pilgrimage that asks me to sit, to write.

You taught me pleasure in taste that shaped the tasting of words. You taught me to pay attention to being alive. I miss the immediacy of your lessons in the front window seat, seeing the world and the street from one seat.

I could not escape the tangible *real* if I came to you. Feeling the rough texture of apple tea soaked biscotti falling into my mouth; smelling the loose leaf tea before I bought a mug of creamy Bourbon Street blend and paper and fresh curry soup heating up and cigarettes right outside the front door; seeing the fog grow thick on the front window on cold and rainy days, and the bright, badly made flyers for local events and the local, strange artwork; hearing rain off the front eaves and people sitting out there in the coldest weather.

Being near you reminded me of having a body, of being a person, of how to live. I could not be caught in my own mind with Elaine's loose-leaf blend. I would drink out of the blue and green and brown mugs that fit just so in my hand. I would be comforted.

You taught me to see. I saw people. I saw characters.

Families with children who would tear apart the children's section.

The man without words and a scraggly beard, pacing outside the front window and falling asleep on the chairs.

The man with his german shepherd, loudly discussing the value of home remedies.

Two girls fighting over the moral legitimacy of incest in a dialogue full of the filler word "like".

The pastor of a local church interacting with the anarchist who lives in the woods and only comes in to buy his coffee.

Ron, the lovely man who washed your windows and cleaned your bathrooms. He cleans almost everywhere in State College. I don't know him but I love him for serving you well and faithfully.

Seth, my tea doctor, recommending brews for a variety of moods, spirits, and physical ailments. I came with a runny nose, unable to work, utterly miserable. He gave me a tea with ceyen pepper in it. It burned my nose and my throat. But my nose stopped running.

The grey bearded man who sells the books, who told me that my edition of "The High King" by Lloyd Alexander was a first edition. He knew this because he worked in a children's bookstore in New York and even met Lloyd Alexander.

I saw the infinite space of the world on a green, to-go mug. Eric Levi and I drew on our mug atlas to show each other where we had been in the world and where we were dreaming of going.

You taught me to be found out, by myself, by others. You were always part of me being found out.

I changed by coming to you. My writing changed. And the people who changed my written words frequented your front counter. You were the place they came out of the classroom and into the world. If they did not belong solely to the classroom, neither were my written words.

Do you remember Morris, my first fiction professor? He found me writing my second short story in the children's section. I blushed when he asked how it was going, because I was convinced it was going poorly. But I was charmed by being found writing fiction in a coffee house. He was the first one to encourage me in the madness. I didn't believe him when he followed me under the tree and assured me that my first story in his class was not crazy. The second story, the Greek myth came in pieces in your back corners and he found me there.

And Charlotte. I saw Charlotte Holmes at the counter and you mixed up our orders so that we got to talk longer and had something to laugh about together, professor and student all in an accidental and joyful encounter. I accidentally paid for her mint tea and she paid me back. Ivan later told me that I shouldn't have, because you don't usually get a chance to say that you bought Charlotte Holmes a drink.

And Ivan. He came out of the classroom and into the world too. We met outside on a bench in the spring, when a tree was just coming into leaf to talk about what I had written. He said he had written comments on my story and motioned towards his bag. We never actually looked at the text. Maybe it wasn't even there. I believed I had found a writing companion. We would meet to swap our pre-writing workshop drafts. He would get smoky tea. I would get chai. We were looking at books and drinking tea when we broke the tea strainer. I'm sorry about that. We didn't mean to. He was talking and didn't look as he went to pour and it cracked. I hope you've forgiven us.

You taught me to be honest.

I tried to be honest when I was with you. I tried to be honest with Ivan and I didn't know until the fall why it was so hard to look him in the eyes. I tried to be honest about his writing. And he was honest about mine. He said I was too mean to myself and that I should stop. He said it was silly to critique my writing from class too meanly. That is wasn't all that bad, that he had no proof, but that it was going to be okay. It was easier to be kind to myself, believing that it was going to be okay.

I learned to write from honest need and not imagined goodness. I could not be better than myself sitting in your window. I could only need a place to get out of the rain, a place to study, a place to have a conversation, a place to see and know, and you made the writing possible. I have come to you in all manner of need, from hunger to friendship to word loss and gain. I have come to you in these last months as my parent's marriage became confusion and brokenness. I came as one hungry for physical comfort. I came as one hungry for words of comfort and strength.

You became both the expression of my need and the answer for it. You showed what was missing and offered it to me.

And now, *you teach me loss.*

I heard you were closing the day my community remembered the year anniversary of my two friends' death in a car crash; the day Ivan told me he was moving to Atlanta; the day before my mother moved out.

I wept.

Ivan was the first person I told that you were closing. He said it was devastating. "I'm leaving and it's devastating. I'm so sorry. What a screwed up world this is." You left me as everything left in those weeks: suddenly, without warning. Just gone.

Now, in losing you, *you have taught me a new way to write*. I learn to keep writing even when the place of learning is now gone. I learn what writing means without the former constant. I learn that what is new can become constant.

Now that you are gone, I learn to write patiently, reminded what my mind and hands are to do.

Your Devoted Lover,

Dana

Chapter 4

Take and Eat

Hospitality

enough rooms and enough chairs and enough tables and enough food.
Small house. Never getting bigger. But the people
always
fit.

Refrigerator Talks

I wonder if life exists beyond the kitchen.
My back slides down the closed fridge door.
I settle in. Get comfortable.
I see the grimy edges. I did not sweep well last night.
An ant crawls with a crumb in its mouth;
dried juice sloshed down the door;
sink and dishwasher running.
My fingers and mouth are sticky
with chocolate. I drink the last of the milk
straight from the jug. Kent and I talk
about being brothers, being sisters.
We talk about Time as our roof
our walls, our home, not eroding life
in hours, minutes, seconds.
Where we sit, there is glory.

Everyday Aesthetics: Apartment Living and "Rainbows for the Fallen World"

This school year, I lived off-campus for the first time. At first, I couldn't believe I was still in college. Living in a quiet neighborhood away from the intense activity that is the bread and butter of residence halls, school felt like "vacation" while I went about grocery shopping, doing laundry, and using my own kitchen for the first time. While there are overlaps and similarities between this kind of living and residence hall life, there are more significant differences and significant lessons I've had to learn. One that keeps recurring through living in an apartment is practicing everyday aesthetics.

I am a student of aesthetics, a life in process, overwhelmed more often than encouraged. Apartment experiences, through both the space and my housemates, have begun the slow process of training me to live intentionally. Often, the process sheds light on what irked (or delighted) me about three on campus years. The limitations of living in a long hallway kept this kind of awareness for me at a minimum. There is simply a lot more room for crafting an aesthetic space in one's own apartment, something I discovered early on. One of my housemates and I unwittingly embraced personal aesthetics when the first thing we *had* to do when we moved in was clean the apartment like crazy women. While I value the on-campus housing staff, there is something important about cleaning the place myself and feeling responsible for its appearance and atmosphere that I couldn't have sharing a building with 600 people. My housemates and I take greater pleasure in having a clean place, dishes put away and a lit candle. For three years, we had lived under the (wise) tyranny of the res life candle ban. What a difference it made to light a match and warm up our living room! Residence Life at Penn State, to their credit, wants to make life a communal and even "aesthetic" experience, but it isn't always possible. Cinder block walls, no matter how cleverly concealed, still leave an echoey constraint and coldness. In an apartment space, I've been able to learn that using space a certain way communicates value. I've enjoyed the

shoe arrangement on an apartment staircase, blue bowls in a cabinet, flowers in a vase, and pictures carefully chosen and hung. The space isn't spacious, but well loved. Aesthetics is in the details of what we have and make as well as in the spaces we live.

My housemates in Patty's Place (yes, we named our home after "Anne of the Island" by L. M. Montgomery) teach me by example: Sarah's care and attention for details and creativity, making each housemate her own mug inspired by our personalities; Maggie's graceful clothing style, acting as our advisor in every matter of appearance and room decor. Jillian teaches me aesthetics through her bread baking adventures, which leaves the kitchen and us covered in flour and dough! Even our dear guy friends practice this in their duplex, with an expertly assembled sound system for frequent movie nights.

The word "aesthetics" (especially when I say it with confidence) makes me feel smart and pretentious. However, that snobbish attitude was thoroughly dismantled while reading "Rainbows for the Fallen World" by Calvin G. Seerveld. This book, a touchstone for artists of faith for a while now, came to me in the first few weeks of senior year off-campus living. Thinking about the role of art and creativity as *work* in Christian life humbles me. One discussion in the second chapter "Obedient Aesthetic Life" is the necessity and glory of complete faithfulness to Christ, which *must* involve new knowledge of *sense*. An "aesthetic Christian life" is a life where the things we choose to see, touch, hear, smell, and feel are renewed by seeing Christ's creative and sustaining hand. This can even be done, Seerveld suggests, by seeking out the joy in life, in doctrine, in worship, rejoicing even as God rejoices in His creation. Nothing is abstract in "Rainbows." Seerveld backs it up with much needed practices to consider how God would have us live in this world--*without* giving a new list of "laws" for us to follow. For example, he asks:

-What do our clothes say about God's delight in the created world?

-When we use styrofoam cups, what are we saying about man's craftsmanship? What about when we serve the food that keeps us alive on such utensils?

-How and when does eating food make us delight in that food and not in its utilitarian uses?

Seerveld isn't saying we have to go buy fine china, but he makes me consider why I would choose a mug over a paper cup if I could, and even more so a mug that has a nice handle and fits in my hand. Why, if my friend made a mug in her ceramics class, I would enjoy drinking out of it even more? This is not elitism, which is an offspring of a humanistic story where man moves continually upward on his invisible Tower of Babel towards God. This is also not "extra" work but aesthetic practice infusing all things, from evangelism to preaching to quiet devotions to teaching, etc. And it is not asking poor college students (such as myself) to spend heaps of money to have "beautiful" or "high end" things. It has much more to do with taking what we do have and making of it what we can in the moment: glorifying God for made and crafted things even as we trash pick our living room furniture.

Where do I fit into this? This is where the discouragement comes in. As anyone who has lived with me can tell you, I am a terribly messy person. My life tends to clutter: my books fall over from their standing orders, my clothes fall from hangers, and I forget the details. Maggie and Sarah arranged the living room and insisted I hang curtains in my room. Am I lost in a world without aesthetics? No. Surely not. This is a practice for the world and not simply for those to whom order comes naturally. I did not believe this at first. How can I be required to make things "nice" if I struggle to remember to put my own dishes away? I felt inadequate. I'm bad at organizing. I have no ability to craft or sew or set up a sound system. My baking skills are limited to my family's chocolate chip cookies (though they are tasty, if I do say so myself). Too often, I feel as if I have nowhere to begin.

I try to remember in these times that it starts by appreciating. I must begin by making sure to enjoy beauty when I find it. Noticing and valuing are important, a fact that I downplay a great deal of the time, especially when I'm most convinced of my own ineptitude. There is not a better place to begin, however. When Jillian makes an exceptional dish, I can savor it slowly. When Maggie changes the light bulb in the living room so we have warmer lighting, I can thank her for making that choice. When Sarah decides that I should have curtains in my room and cleverly uses old scarves to make some, I can be thrilled!

And, whether it seems true or not, appreciation leads inevitably to participation. I want to enjoy and participate in beauty.

I continued to feel aesthetically inept in apartment life until we celebrated Maggie's birthday. At the end of her small surprise party, she asked me to read some poetry. I had not expected that request but obliged by reading poems by Rossetti and Yeats and Hopkins. I also read a poem about a spring break trip we both took to New Orleans. I'm rarely asked to read something I've written and found that I enjoyed the evening a great deal more by sharing those words with the party. In a note, Maggie said, "Thank you for the poetry reading. What a blessing it is when you are who you are!" When I am who I am... why am I more often frustrated by missing abilities rather than using the ones I already have?

Then, aesthetic life is, as Seerveld would agree I think, less about meeting specific requirements and more about a *way of seeing*. Each person has different eyes, skills, and talents. I can use what I have been given--ability to write and see the beauty in word craft--and rejoice. I can rejoice in my strengths and the gifts that others share with me. I can live an aesthetic life, grateful. I want to enjoy and participate in beauty.

And while I continue to struggle in learning unique fashion, furniture arrangement, and cooking beyond pasta, I can, at least, make another mean batch of chocolate chip cookies.

Leaving Traces

I try to teach my roommates
to leave their dishes
on the table,

the breakfast crumbs
untouched, the last orange juice trace
still coloring the bottom of the glass;

to leave the flour on the counter
and the tea bag, two days old,
in the sink.

It will not kill us
or our reputations,
I say,

to run the dishwasher
because its voice
comforts more than silence,

and the unmade bed,
door open to indecent exposure,
is better for being seen.

We disagree.

They teach me instead
to clean the used tea mugs
as a gift;

nobility as
the wiped counter after a batch of cookies
comes from the oven,

and squishy vegetables
from the crisper drawer
thrown away.

The order of chair and desk,
books by spine length, a bouquet
of pens, is grace.

But my socks still trade partners

in the drawer,
limp, twisted.

My clothes still dance,
fall still from exhaustion
in every corner.

The comparisons
no longer seem
justifiable.

We each practice
leaving traces
of this living.

Chapter 5

Body, Broken

Yellow Flame

Mother, the stove burns
and I don't know what happened.
I tried to cook. I did as told.
Something caught like gasoline;
the empty space below
my hunger sizzles silence.

It's a pretty yellow flame, mother,
and it licks the ceiling

and I don't know
what happened.

This body and flame, a tremble to name.
This body: not the sturdy tear of bread,
but rising yeast
and garlic in the sautee pan,
unwatched and popping grease.

This body once
remembers the ungiven caress
as the first long sparking line,
swirled as a tongue holds wine
after the gentle sip, after the strong swallow.

Now these flames--
breath and skin charred to ash
crisp and black,
fat sizzling
on my bones.

All I can do is confess.

In Word and Dance

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,

As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

-Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism"

I've been standing straighter since ballroom started. It is affecting my hunched over look, the one that exudes a contemplative writer lifestyle that I adopt out of habit or out of a desire to imitate some sort of writerly posture. Don't ask why I assumed that writer's hunch. Ballroom dancers never hunch. Jolene, the dance coach, will wander the overheated gym adjusting bodies like a sculptor: pushing in bellies here, grabbing butts and hips to align them under the ribcage, slightly adjusting the minute angle of an arm connection. I've begun noticing when my shoulders come forward toward my chest and up towards my ears, and the middle of my spine begins to twinge and ache. There is a sharp pain in my left shoulder from where I've strained it into good posture.

Making my body dance is like making my words work on a page--making me pay better attention to the world, to myself, to ideas, to physicality. Nietzsche said, "Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum of all noble education; dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and, need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen?" Writing and ballroom have become two partners in my own dance of being alive. They challenge me to constantly practice attentiveness and concentration to the world, keeping my body and mind aware and moving, intimate partners that cannot perform without the other.

Grounded

"Grounded. Cha-cha is about being grounded," Jolene insisted. "The problem with you two," (here she looked away from me and towards my partner, James), "and it drives me crazy to see you doing it, is the way you both live on your toes. What are you doing up on your toes?" We shuffled our feet seriously as if it had never occurred us to do anything as silly as stand on our toes. I didn't look at James. But *why* couldn't I stand on my toes? I liked my toes. I thought it made me seem "light on my feet."

We tried the routine again. She stopped us three lock steps in.

"No. Look. This dance is about your relationship with the ground. Your weight is always pulling you into the ground. Push into it, against it. Don't try to escape it."

We tried again. Better.

"Dana, land on your whole foot." She leaned all her weight into my shoulders, pushing my heels onto the ground, taking the lead's position. We did the basic step. "You're still back leading. Stop leading. Wait for my weight transfers." We tried it again. Better this time. And then again. I wasn't even paying attention to my own feet pressed on the floor but to the feel of hers, as if I could really experience the feeling of gravity pulling on her and not me. Basic again. This felt completely different from how I had been dancing before.

We were dancing *with* gravity, playfully teasing it with coming and going. Keeping weight centered, pushing the ground, staying low, keeping grounded:

That's how to look like we're flying.

Flying is not easy in words. My poetry prof said: "I think it's sometimes easier for the people who just fill their poems with real life things and then find out weeks later what it all meant. It's harder for someone who has complete ideas and then looks for real life objects for images." I'm the second writer. My arms start to move as I become abstract, motioning in circles,

my fingers curled as if my hands could shape something solid and comprehensible out of my verbal goo. I'd like to think that abstraction is valuable for its airiness when, in reality, it is as flimsy as a carnival balloon, rising and rising until the atmosphere shreds it. I'd rather have a hot air balloon that rises steadily, heavy with canvas and basket and fire maker and sandbags that comes down when it's time, watching the ground and playing with gravity. Trying to leave the ground permanently just gets the writing all tripped up.

Presence and Poise

I swallowed another spoon-full of my tomato soup. A sip of water. Our dance team was on the way home from a ballroom competition.

"Jolene... can I ask you a dancing question?"

"Sure."

"What would you say is my biggest problem?"

"Presence and Poise."

This wasn't what I was expecting. I thought I knew my problem. I did. I thought it was frame. I thought it was my shoulders. But no. This.

She sat quietly, eating her apple. "I'm not sure how to explain presence. It's a way of existing on the floor. Of being seen that isn't quite the same as performance."

"Performance implies force, action. It isn't that?" I asked.

She shook her head slowly, choosing words carefully. "The only way I can explain it is that your movements look lazy a lot. Very soft. And you go, you stand tall, but you still look limp."

I nodded. I knew this.

Poise. "It isn't a straight back. It has to do more with things that go on here." Jolene motioned towards her core. "It's a way of being present, controlled and controlling, of self and audience. I'm sorry this is so abstract."

I understood this hesitancy, inability to fully explain. She sounded like a writing instructor, not quite able to put into words what is missing in a paper. *Your grammar is fine. Your structure is fine. But you aren't writing yet.* Writing with the whole self and not with tools. Dancing with the whole self and not just the body. It is the skill to take the spirit, my spirit, and make my words express me. It is the skill to take the spirit, my spirit, and make it alive in my body.

I had forgotten what I have learned in writing words: technique will never bring presence or poise. Technique is the accurate expression of that center, and not the other way around, even though the learning often takes working from the outside in. The spirit of the things has to come from the inside changing and working its way out in the body.

Body and mind

I was getting a tad frustrated. Quickstep lesson. Confusion. I raised my hand. "Jolene, can I see that again? One more time, really slowly? I'm having trouble. My brain understands but my brain and my legs aren't talking."

There was general laughter of agreement. "That's exactly the point of this exercise," she replied. "You need to connect your mind to your feet. If you aren't getting, that's okay."

It didn't seem right to have my mind and my body so at odds. To see with my eyes and my mind. To not be able to replicate with the body. I could imagine what it was supposed to feel like but I could not get that to come in my muscles.

It is a lot like trying to learn how to raise an eyebrow. Lots of lying in bed at night or being coached by a friend. Trying. Trying. Trying. No movement.

And then it clicks.

The music started again. I took practice hold and we started moving

We ran into Chip and Rebecca -- hard. Got her heel stuck in my heel and down we all went. James, at least, broke the fall so it was an awkward slide to my butt rather than a crash. I started laughing. Chip was horrified. Jolene stopped the music to make sure I was okay. James helped me up and we moved to avoid further collision. Cecilia pulled me aside. "Dana, its three steps, kick, four running steps. Try it again." I tried it by myself. And then again. And then a third time. "Exactly."

We made it around the whole floor with even a perfectly executed "fish tail" step. Jolene said, "You already look better. Having fun, lighter legs. Really great work!"

My mind and my body had connected.

What my mind comprehends and what I am capable of doing is a present disconnect while writing. I think or speak my words aloud and they feel smooth and complete. Taking those words into the physical act of writing them down muddies them, necessarily dilutes and confuses them, lessens what I imagine them to be. I am capable of imaging greater writing than I am of writing that out. The two seem so often in greater conflict than in unity. I wonder at times if they are not just natural enemies, though I have learned that I cannot comprehend the world without them both together.

Words often act as our go between. I have to put words to the body to make it familiar. Words are familiar. Thinking is familiar. This is because I "became" in thought long before I

became in body. I chose my mind over my body when I was young. I chose thinking and reading because I was good at it. There was approval to be won and I suspected that since I was not as good as my peers in this area. I chose reading and thinking. I chose what I felt I could succeed at. And the two parted ways and have not talked very much since.

Opposed

"The Waltz" started my first active animosity toward another person. Three of us-- at least-- had a thing for Mark. He was a good-looking, good-hearted fellow who knew how to spin a girl until she was giddy. He didn't really know this consciously. Until this point, he was a rather stiff fellow so it was with great surprise that I fell head over heels for his swinging spins. The problem is that Megan was there before me and was lighter and was just better as spinning. So he fell for her.

My date to "The Waltz" was a guy my age who didn't want to ask me, and I didn't want him to, and he never actually did. A junior told us we were going together. It was extremely awkward especially when he tried to make the best of it. The night of the Waltz came and there were lots of people breaking it down with their ballroom moves. We only knew swing, and loved it alone with reckless abandon. Megan swing danced alone with Mark in a reckless abandon. Jealousy made me irritable. Self-reflective. Un-talkative. I was walking off the floor with my own date (who I had refused to call a "date") when another swing song came on and Mark pulled Megan out to the dance floor to spin and spin and spin. She leaned towards me as she passed and whispered in conspiratorial voice, "Here we go again! I'm soooo tired!"

I wanted to slap her. I felt slapped.

My body was rejected. I danced rarely after that, though not because I didn't enjoy it. I knew I was good. The kinder women said that the men were intimidated and that is why I wasn't danced with. I had tried to ask them to dance but the slow reluctance, the hesitation before the "yes" was worse than not being asked. And there were never enough men. To ask would often mean taking someone else's boyfriend. In high school, such a thing was unheard of. I knew. I knew that if they wanted, they would ask me to dance. I knew that the night I went to swing dance at Adele's house, that if my body was really me and if that was worth being, someone would have asked me to dance. Instead, I sat two hours in the living room watching other couples dance. And no one asked. Not one. I sat in the front seat of my car and cried, wanting to start driving, but I couldn't see and my hands were shaking too much.

If this body wasn't wanted, then this body must not be me. There must be something else in me that could be called *me*. I had already started crafting my mind as my strength years before. Did they not ask because I was not worth dancing with? Or did no one ask me to dance because I had already communicated that my body was not and could not be *me*?

Confronting this has been necessary to make it anywhere in ballroom dancing in college. Dancing is the story of a relationship. Standard dances (waltz, quickstep, foxtrot, tango) can be seen as the story of a man's successful pursuit. Latin is about the woman instigating and controlling that pursuit, dominating the steps and the narrative landscape. It is said that the lead, or the man directs the steps and the timing. But the woman creates the movement and the drive.

She is very much desired. And she has to believe this, or the stories get lost. But it doesn't always work. Women often have to learn to lead because sometimes there aren't enough men. I know of three excellent follows who don't have partners right now. The system doesn't work well enough but somehow establishes itself as the way to enforce all the wrong things a mind can believe about the body.

Learning to live in a body that could be claimed as *me* came in learning to practice dance. It came in letting go of my own perception of myself; losing in order to gain.

I told Sam--dear friend, latin dance diva, constant encouragement-- about my high school dance experience. She said, "Oh my god, I can't believe that. That is horrible. But just think, isn't it crazy how it's changed?"

"What is?" I asked.

"How everything changed once you got here."

"I don't understand."

"I mean, look at you. If you went to a social dance now, everything is different. Every guy out there wants to dance with you. You're amazing and sexy and hot. And I mean, heck, I wouldn't have had the balls to dance like I do now back in high school. Time changes things."

Boundaries

There is a bit of insanity in dancing that does everybody a great deal of good. ~Edwin Denby

The day had been tense. I had been cold as we began salsa dancing. It took a while to stop shivering. My friend Robbie was the only man I knew dancing. Knowing only him was enough. He was the best dancer there.

We were dancing. It was clear he was having a very good time. And in one movement disorients me, some unspoken line crossed. I touch the small of his back with the tips of my fingers, measuring the space between us, awkward. He turns, laughing down at me; puts his head near mine to talk over the music: "It's fun making you blush."

Called me out: I am blushing. I continue to blush. I had never fit in at the bar, though I had pretended otherwise. There are things I don't know how to do, like play in response to physical playfulness. So instead, my hand held distance without thinking.

I am embarrassed. "Great. Thanks for the comment. Now I'll be awkward the rest of the night!"

He laughs at me again. "No, you won't."

And he is right. I keep dancing. He teaches me more salsa moves. I am getting better and I love it.

Creating boundaries is the most natural instinct I have, as a writer and as a body. I tell myself what I can do or say and when I can do or say it. I measure interactions based on comfort level. I can skirt around the edges of discomfort.

Or I can head straight for discomfort and see where the words take me. I can learn foolishness. I can learn embarrassment. I can become a better dancer. My mother reminds me often: "*The moment you feel stupid is when you are about to do it right.*"

A week later, Sam came with a whole group of us to the same bar for salsa night. She hadn't salsa danced in a long time herself. I was soaked in sweat in a short amount of time and sat down only three times in two and a half hours. I danced the rest. As we walked to the car at the end of the night, she said I look completely in my element, something she's never seen before, me just letting go. James says I look euphoric. I smiled. I slept better after dancing that night than I had in weeks.

Commitment

Holding boundaries is a sign that I am afraid to fail. Ballroom, on the other hand, forces me to "commit". I learned "commitment" when Tal, a dancer from New York, came to teach some workshops.

Neither James nor I knew how to dance Paso Doble when Tal chose us to demonstrate the routine, which consisted of struts, spins, dramatic head tosses, flying arms, intense glances, and marches across the floor. "You have to think you're the hottest shit to ever walk out there," Tal kept saying.

Hottest shit. Right. I laughed nervously. James shook his head.

So we tried. Tal said to try it again. And then again. We danced the routine three times before he let us stop. I was blushing, but I was doing it. Each time, my feet moved a little more confidently. I threw my head a little more. I started walking like I was the "hottest shit out there" and lost awareness for the audience. Jolene just kept saying, "Wow, they really don't have the technique but they win on commitment alone!"

I called my ballroom friend, Jesse, that night and asked him what Jolene meant by "commitment."

"It means that you looked like a complete idiot but went for it and didn't care."

Writing and writing badly can be as awkwardly visceral as learning Paso. Muscles tighten, heart rate rises. Tight neck muscles, oncoming head ache. The audience does not exist for the writing yet, but I blush to imagine them reading my sentences nonetheless. But why not just let go and let them look ridiculous? Why care? Why not let characters and words strut like mad peacocks to a dance of their own invention?

Imperfect

My first State College salsa night was a cool early summer evening; dark, lively, the way only summer evenings seem capable of being. It was dark and warm, the dense sound of talking, and the middle floor filled with people spinning and twirling.

I noticed Matt, a rather good-looking fellow who had helped me in ballroom class, on the other side of the room. He nodded his head, came over to me, reached out a hand wordlessly and took me to the crowded dance floor. My back and arms were tense, trying to read his motions, trying to be a good follow, to not make him sorry he asked me to dance.

"Hey, loosen up!" he said. "This isn't class. Loosen your hips. And look at me."

Turning the mind off, letting it come, follow without thinking, without trying: this is dancing.

I try too hard to write. I have perfection in my head but forget that even my head probably has the wrong version of perfection. There is a bodily difference in unforced writing. Attempts at accuracy instead of spirit are felt in shaking hands, tense back, and bad following.

But in letting go, the body settles into focus and concentration, physically comfortable and content from hard word making.

Partnership

The physical stillness after dancing is the closest to silence I can imagine. Air is clearer, freer. Movement slows and the breeze feels cold and gentle. There is an awareness that comes when the body is tired from moving and moving well, from music in the ears that are now listening to its absence. The ear is trained on the body and its sound.

The quiet after writing is the same, when the work is done, the process complete. It comforts. I listen and am attentive. Mind and body move together. Mind and Body are partners. I return again to Nietzsche: “Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum of all noble education; dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and, need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen?” And writing is the supreme partner for the mind and the dancing body. Learning is write is learning to dance. Dance is attentiveness and care, presence and performance. It is a practice. It is staying more alive.

And it is addicting, this being more alive.

Profile

I turn profile to the mirror
and look my body up and down,
pulling pelvis under ribs, sternum
to the corner of the room--
dance frame, a straight line
from crown through spine.

I stretch and watch the rise
and fall of the my shirt's gentle neck line
(too low if I ever asked my mother).
I am happy with what I see.

Someone laughs
at a joke. In the room
with the others, I turn
back to them, letting my shoulders
slide forward, shaking my head
in case someone saw me.
I am not supposed to show
I am pleased with my own body.

But I was seen seeing.
My dance partner says, "You're lovely".
I roll my eyes, laugh,
as if I didn't believe
what I feel to be true:
this body is me,
limited and beautiful.

Chapter 6**Until****Waiting**

The moment I take
hot chai
through the van window
in an Indian village,
I think of you.
The plastic cup,
melting from boiled
milk and spice,
the color of afternoon sugar:
the color of your eyes
when you asked,
"Are you done
with me now?"

The mouth I made words
to know you by
flakes scalded skin.
Love and waiting: both
the moment before
and the moment after
I sip too soon.

Intercoastal Fire

In the full and late gold hours, a small fleet of brightly colored boats put in from the Intercoastal Waterway at the abandoned church campground just north of Charleston. A pelican swooped above the long salt grasses, broken swing sets, and slides rusted in the salty South Carolina rains. They set up their tents at indeterminate spaces: one behind a bush and under the shelter of a low pine; another in grass clear of the red anthill; and a final single tent nearer the water and the thick cypress tree. Kaleb soon set an old fire ring burning.

The long unused bathroom a mile up the dirt road was still functional; the water, copper flavored and colored. Spiders hid in the safe, dry corners of the shower. Most of them, Darci knew, ached to be clean. It had been long enough from their time as wilderness trip leaders that they each had forgotten, in their own way, how to live in the South Carolina Low Country. Each was learning how to relearn memory. It was lonelier than the first leaving.

Darci was the last to wash. The cold water hit her skin, streaking the salt and sand in her scalp into mud. She massaged shampoo it through her hair, slowly, then viciously; sand came out under her fingernails. She scrubbed her feet, putting soapy fingers between each toe. She scrubbed her legs with cucumber soap and washed her neck and face. Bones ached in the cold water. A spider climbed up the corner and around the curtain. The motion of water over her unmoving head startled her somehow. The water knobs creaked and groaned as they closed and the water stopped coming. The bathroom had dirt dusted into corner piles, the red earth and silt of the southern swamps and cobwebs in all the corners. The mirror had been removed and left a square hole in the wall. She brushed her short hair. Arms and legs and head were lighter. The humidity crept back into the room and sweat restarted dripping down her clean back. When had she forgotten having a body? She must have at some point in the last two years since she worked

for the Outfitter with this group she now hardly recognized. Two years since the last night of the hurricane. That was not true, she corrected herself, that the team wasn't recognizable. She just must be tired. But it was a good silence to know that the others had left her for the campsite without telling her, to the laughter she had thought she would be comfortable settling back into. Darci had come back to find herself again a stranger.

Darci sat on the concrete walkway to watch the sun fade overhead. Trees shook dryly. Dry hacking coughs came from the culvert that drained the shower water: a hidden animal, most likely. The sound seemed to come not from the present but from the memory of their summers spent leading trips into the Low Country swamps. She remembered being unafraid in those days. She did not remember the light going like this or wanting a flashlight to see or how every stick seemed the threat of snake underfoot. So she wished that the sun would move another direction in the sky, dreading the walk back.

Strange, being even a stranger to a sunset. Darci felt the trees must be giving her strange thoughts, must be making her feet heavy and her hands shake.

The cicada cries made a thick darkness between her and the soft sounds of camp. She watched the spot of flickering orange, drawing her like the grey moths around the buzzing lights at the bathhouse. It was time to return. They were each leaving in the morning. There was no turning away.

But the others were asleep in their tents, early sleepers after a long paddle against a tidal current and wind from the south. She was the only one left to listen for the sing and snap of the fire, alone in an unnerving silence. The smoke stung her eyes.

"Can I join you?"

It was Kaleb, watching his fire till it died. He had swiped a cigarette from a sleeper and begun to smoke. He sat down in her line of sight. He tossed his shaggy hair to the side, tilted his

head back; watched her; watched the fire; watched her again; opened his pocketknife and began sharpening the end of long stick.

"You didn't shower?" she asked. He laughed and kept his focus on whittling.

"Why shower when I smell good all the time?"

"To which animal?"

"Seems you've forgotten how to live in the swamps. At least I don't have mosquitoes all over me 'cause of cucumber soap."

She had forgotten some things. But not everything. She had not forgotten, as she once felt in her bones that she had, the wood smoke smell in her hair the morning after a camp fire, the sound of the water under the boats as they scrapped a shell beach, or Kaleb's laughter while they watched the hurricane from the cabin porch.

"You practice your knife throwing?" he asked.

"I wish. Don't really have a place to throw knives in a South Philly row house. I don't do much outdoor work anymore. I haven't even been in a boat since then."

He stopped scrapping the bark.

"You haven't been in a boat since that summer?"

"No."

Kaleb handed her the open pocketknife. "Show me."

She fingered the blade; remembered hearing the sweet knife strike in solid cyprus trunk. She stood with her feet apart. Picked a tree in the ring of firelight. Threw from her hip. Missed and spent some time finding the knife in the sea grass with a flashlight.

"Getting rusty there?" he asked.

"Like you can throw any better!" she replied.

"Just you watch. I got second in the state for knife throwing since the last time you saw me."

She leaned back, and lit a cigarette. "Prove it."

He spread his feet apart, flicked the hair out of his eyes, settled into his knees, and threw. It firmly rested in the cyprus veins.

"What the hell, Kaleb," she breathed, "Where did you learn to do that?"

Kaleb leaned into his knees. He whispered, "I've never thrown a knife before." He smiled a slow, creaking smile, like a practice trial.

"Some things don't change. You still lie," she said.

"Yes."

"Just feels like I've walked in a great circle and come back: kayaks on the trailer; the wet, kelpy smell of the straps; the misery of salt and sand; bad guitar music; chacos sinking into the rice canals; you lying to me."

"You still have those chacos? You were obsessed with them." He breathed in the smoke and then out.

"I kept 'those' chacos until the soles broke when I took a nasty fall crossing a river. Those were good shoes, like wearing my own feet."

He looked down towards his shoes. "You didn't get what you wanted in coming back, though."

She did not answer.

"Yeah, you didn't get what you wanted," Kaleb continued. "You try too hard to be perfect with us. Way too hard."

She watched him throw the whittled stick into the fire, stand and rearrange the logs. He balanced on the ring of stones. He seemed thinner. New scars on his hands. Stiff knees. She hadn't gotten what she wanted. She had forgotten how to want.

"Darci, lean forward." She bent her head toward the fire. "Do you see that?" he muttered to himself, scraping out the cigarette on a log. "You hide things with that damn color. I know you like to think they're green but they aren't."

She put her head down and pulled back so a shadow would cover her face. Kaleb was like the dolphins that would nudge the edge of the kayaks in the center of the waterway, just to see what would happen. "I'm not the only one trying to keep something I once loved," she said.

"Damn straight," he mumbled, reaching for some sticks and throwing them into the fire. "You heard I went to Mexico?"

"No." No one had heard anything from Kaleb.

"Yeah. I didn't tell anyone so no way you could have." He lit another cigarette. "Haven't you missed this?" He motioned toward the woods. "There is nothing like going out and having nothing. Have you ever just gone into the woods by yourself, just you?"

"Yes," Darci said. "I had just gotten back when the hurricane came in. Thought I wasn't going to make it. If you don't put up that tent, if you don't make that fire for some reason, you have no shelter and you aren't eating."

"Exactly. Scared me to death. I've never been so scared as I was the first night I hiked out into the woods on my own."

"Sometimes."

"Darci, what scares you more than anything in the world?"

"Nightmares."

"What kind?"

"Screaming and not being heard. Wanting, like wanting someone after they died. Something I can't get. I don't want much anymore."

She slid tensed fingers along her thighs.

"I'm scared of Potrero Chico, if you wanted to know," Kaleb started. "It is a mountain in Mexico. Have you ever been to Mexico, Darci? People call it beautiful. The sky is this weird blue color that isn't even close to what it looks like on the hottest days here in Francis Marion. It is intense, really dark while every other color is burnt cinder and dead trees. Found my way there from Monterrey just at Christmas. I just showed up with a tent and wanted to find a way to get up that mountain. This mountain is hard, Darci. The original plan was for a friend to join me. And he didn't. Got the phone message from a guy who didn't really speak English. But the next guy in line was American so we started talking. A climber from National Geographic. He offered to climb with me.

"So we climb. In the first day, first stretch, he is up ahead of me, securing some ropes. The rocks go loose and he turns down at me, asking if I'm okay, and in that head turn, the rope goes slack, and I fall. He didn't tie a single knot correctly. All I could feel was my ankle and I couldn't move and didn't want to. There is blood trickling out from under me on this rock and I couldn't tell where it was from. Turns out I had a stick in my back. And then he panics and tries to move me. He doesn't check to make sure my back is safe. He tries to move me.

"I wake up in my tent. There isn't a stick in my back but I'm all twisted up and bandaged with something like band-aids and there is a note stuck next to my head. The guy leaves me money and takes off. He's gone. Somehow, another climber at the camp found me and managed to get me a call home. I couldn't walk, not really. Calling home was hell; the line went out in the middle and I thought I was going to die in Mexico. Somehow, my dad figured out where I was and showed up two days later.

"What scares me so bad is the idea that I would do it again and not make it that time."

Darci shifted, had her fingers in her hair, her back poked with leaves and the old sticky dirt mixed with marshmallow. She felt the bottoms of her shoes go soft, melted from the heat of

the dying fire, but her toes were still cold. She felt his anxious weight, expectant. Knowing that she could not speak.

"Darci?"

He waited. She waited.

"So you aren't going to say anything?"

She felt her toes. "What were you *thinking*?"

"Leave it to be Darci to be mother." He threw a log on the fire and the sparks caught her jacket; the smoke, his eyes. She hit the jacket on the ground but the sparks grew. Kaleb took it from her and hit it harder on the dirt until only black ash stains were left. She kicked the fire back towards him as she put the coat back on.

"I should be dead and not here. I should be drunk to tell you these things. I'm just scared to death of Potrero Chico because it meant to kill me and didn't. I wanted you to know."

"You give me nothing and now you give me your fear."

"Yes."

For the first time, he did not watch her face but looked at his hands, ran his fingers up and down, shaping his knuckles and their scars. He zipped up his jacket, and walked out of the firelight for a moment.

"Just do this for me. Watch your eyes, watch how you look at me."

She met his--for once--unguarded eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You're the look in that guy's eyes right before the rope came loose."

Her limbs contracted into a fragile hunch, and she rocked herself, her head in her arms. And she wept through the low cicada hum and deep-throated tree frog calls. There was salt on her mouth. It tasted like the nightmares where she wanted and couldn't have, where wanting dropped them both over the bottom of a cliff.

He sat down beside her. She felt her headrest on his shoulder for a moment. Just one.

"No point in not doing what you want in life," he said, removing his arms. "You can't be angry at me for almost dying. I can't be angry with you for looking. Why on earth I'm comforting you when I'm the one who fell, I don't know."

They moved away from each other. He leaned his head back on a log and stretched his feet toward the fire. She watched the ground and then the coals, watching for shapes.

"I can't stop running, Kaleb."

"From?"

"Wanting more."

"Look," he said. She met his eyes. She felt the three swift eye motions as he took in her body. Her face, her body, her feet. "How did I not know?" asking neither herself nor him. Not know what? That she looked like that? Yes, that. And this: she had never given wanting a name. Now she did; it shamed and relieved.

"I could have made all of this up completely. You know I lie all the time."

"Like hell you did."

He laughed. He had her angry and was satisfied. She had believed him.

A bat cried.

She watched the rusted playground gleaming in the moon. "Are you happy?" she asked.

"Loving never made anyone happy. It's a living hell with a deep blue sky. And I'm okay with that."

"No. It never did make anyone happy."

The night moved forwards in the breeze from the near Atlantic. Several bats now, wheeled and hovered, crying and crossing paths just beyond the fire glimmer over the sleepers in their tents, over the arm's length between Kaleb and Darci.

She smiled, stood and poured the last of someone's water over the last of the coals.

"Goodnight, Kaleb."

But Darci did not sleep. She walked past the tents, past the rusted, creaking swings, and watched the sky. The stars were strangely different so far south. Even Charleston seemed to hold back its light from the southern sky to let her see what she could not name, the constellations of the old stories. And she sang to herself, *Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts/ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, an old line that seemed reverent and correct. The distant barking dogs seemed, in that hour, as if they could really be the extinct red wolf running toward the campfire in the dark. It was the heavy gratitude for the *almost* that moved her to awakeness, that stilled something she hadn't known was anxious. It was the feeling of her clean scalp after the shower and bones aching in the cold, existence restored. Her limbs felt like her own. When had they stopped feeling that way? And the air lightened slowly, sounds like still depths holding her like the lap of the water, and the wakes of the shrimp trawlers as they passed in the early morning

Chapter 7

Do This In Remembrance

Home: Raising the Dead

"Yeats said you had to choose between the perfection of the life and the perfection of the work and a lot of people believe that... To me, now, it just seems like bullshit. I think the greatest art is mired in life, marred by life. Scarred by it." -Christian Wiman, "Poetry" editor

I prayed for resurrection when my grandfather died. I prayed during the funeral silently. I had seen a movie over Christmas called "Miracle of Pennsylvania Avenue". The daughter is praying in church in the final scene for her father to come home, to be let out of jail. He appears in the doorway at the back, in a long winter coat. She turns, trusting he will be there and he is. The family yells and runs to him, jubilant that he is with them again and on Christmas day! But this was February and my grandfather's body had been cremated. Still, resurrecting decayed bodies couldn't be any more difficult than cremated ones, right? The atoms were still the same. So I prayed. My grandfather stayed dead. I felt responsible to pray for him to be resurrected again and wondered if the grief my family showed was faithless. Why wouldn't they pray too?

My father lost the only man he looked up to. My mother would watch my father grieve. She would weep for him, but it never comforted him. My parents lived separate griefs. It was the first time I remember seeing them as strangers to each other, the moment my dad told my mom after he called the hospital on the way home from church.

I did not yet know then that life other than the physical could die. I did not know that relationships could die too.

People don't hold funerals for marriages. It is a slow death. Sometimes, I pray for this death to be reversed like I prayed for my grandfather's ashes to become him again. I pray for resurrection. I have begun to wonder, though, if what I imagined life to be is something other, different, richer than my childhood imagined resurrections.

My younger sister Hannah and I told our earliest stories through Playtime. We used Mom's old bridesmaids dresses as the richest gowns in the world. We were queens and princesses of the most lavish kingdoms. And then we were servants of those queens and worked hard at cleaning our play dishes. And then we made tents with blankets and chairs. Mom taught us the most wonderful invention: the westward wagon out of four chairs together and a draped blanket. It doubled as a carriage, and then as a buggy to hide us, the run-away orphans. More than any other story, we played runaway orphans looking for home, being chased by an evil headmistress and ultimately finding our way into either a new family or hiding out and surviving on our own for the rest of our lives. We told our own combinations of the musical "Annie," "The Little Princess," and "The Boxcar Children."

Making, or finding home became *the story*, the incomplete made complete, something completely dead being made over, being made alive again.

"Home" is a nostalgic idea for me, starting in the young orphan story telling. I imagine "Home" as a space that answers *need*, what is immediately necessary, essential. "Home" is not without need--the urgency of things being necessary, essential; Home is the place where those needs are quieted, perhaps permanently.

I have known moments like this, moments that have convinced me that perhaps Home does exist: Home known in long van rides the summer I worked at camp, the weekends traveling

between locations when I would fall asleep on a friend's shoulder and wake up to someone sharing pieces of dark chocolate. Home known sitting by a fire eating roasted chicken, and the sound of Kalob singing "Rock Me Momma." Home in the warmth of a humid summer night, the night I jumped the fence to go swimming and stayed awake till three, watching the moon. Home known drinking tea and debating the merits of a Jane Austen film adaptation. Home known taking communion on a cold night, weeping and afraid of what is coming.

But these were moments, minutes, seconds. They were not permanent. I wonder if Home is something even possible in this life. Salmon Rushdie in his critique of "The Wizard of Oz" in "A Short Text About Magic" concludes that the "imaginary Homeland" is more powerful than a realized one.

"So Oz finally became home; the imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that... there is no longer any place *as* home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began." (Rushdie 57)

I run from this unalterable fact:

That I need.

Or,

more specifically:

that I need God.

I write from need: desperate, self-conscious, hysterical, human. I've always known need. I have not always known how to give "need" a name. Writing is how I've articulated it and tried to find hope against it. Writing is a way I've tried to come up with some sort of "Home". An Oz. A way of taking what is not and pretending that it is.

But pretending is never enough. Imaginary is not enough.

Home has to have a body. Home answers need, both the seen and the unseen.

My childhood "Home", the place I learned who I was--daughter, oldest sister to five--was a place where Jesus and God were as assumed as water. I came to know Jesus and his stories the same way I gained self awareness: over time, slowly, without memory of anything else. He was both my decision and not my decision. I understood the world in two dichotomies: life and death. There was a before and an after, of "once was blind but now I see." I accept dichotomies easily. The world is easier to understand in choices of true and false, right and wrong.

But the place where I came to understand the structure of the world stopped working the way I was told it should. Understanding has to be made over again. There is no "Home", at least not how I told myself it was. Certainties are no longer certain. I had always "needed", but now I felt pain, like having always needed to eat but suddenly there was not any food.

I think Rushdie was right: Home is not what we thought it was. I write because I've come to hope that Home is not defined by one location. Nor is it the result of romantic, nostalgic imagination. Home is a different kind place altogether. It operates by a different set of laws, laws where resurrection is still possible. Spiritual, but not any less embodied for that.

I once assumed that Home could be as certain as the braided rug that came with our new house in Pennsylvania. The rug had sat so long that the wood floor underneath kept its original

color while the rest had faded in sunlight. But even the rug--once the place we sprawled to complete work--was rolled up and stored in the basement. And then it was gone. We threw it out after a few years in The Hill, to make the house more modern, on the chance we would sell the house and move again for Dad's work. He and I redid the floor in the middle of winter and had to sleep outside because of the fumes. But my family didn't leave Pennsylvania. We stayed in the fixed and newly furnished house. Now, the new has begun to decay. It fades like the rugs we threw away, broken and frayed like the looks between my parents, the ones they don't even bother exchanging anymore and try to avoid. I believed they were happy until the house I called "Home" could no longer provide what its name promised.

Time can undo even the deepest human commitments. What I called "Home" proved itself to not be what I called it.

Am I then homeless?

Homeless God

Peter looked and saw
 the dead man's grave clothes
 (head cloth, body wrapping)
 neatly folded, corner to corner
 in the grave,
 bed made first thing
 before the day begins.
 Here was human habit after three years sleeping
 where Hospitality would offer the homeless God
 a place to sleep: bed left neatly
 ready for the next guest.
 This homeless man would not need it again.
 Even death was no place
 for the Son of Man
 to lay his head.

One of my favorite moments in the Jesus' life is the catastrophic realization that his dead body is missing. No one understands what the neatly folded grave clothes mean. An angel explains but Mary still can't find the words to tell anyone. People do not come back from the dead. People do not fold their grave clothes neatly and walk away. The mind does not comprehend this. I cannot comprehend resurrection either: to see dead things alive; to see everything made new yet still wholly themselves.

I believe its mystery. Resurrection, need, and hope are similar to the components that make Communion. There is not a measurable or articulated chain of events but the cause and effect is the same: "I am overwhelmed with the depth of this mystery" (Calvin). The physical bread and wine serves to feed the invisible, sustaining life. Resurrection, a mystery, makes new life both material and immaterial.

Communion, after all, teaches the participant to remember: the once dead and now living Jesus will return someday, bringing Home in His wake.

I love the Apostles Creed. It is blunt. No frills. A list of must know facts that mark heavy mystery with clear words. It states the quick facts of his life and death. In regards to Jesus Christ's resurrection it says, "The third day He arose again from the dead." The Creed concludes:

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. (emphasis added)

Out of one resurrection, another is determined. The decomposed body, my grandfather's ashes. Resurrected. The impossibly dead: alive. Not something invisible or imaginary, but physical and tangible. Real. Knowable. Home, place of met need, "made for us" (Rushdie 57) and not something our own dead hands or words can make on their own.

The proof of life is in the marks of death-- a paradox, a marriage of the invisible and the visible. Christian Wiman, editor of *Poetry*, in an interview with *Poets and Writers* said, "I think the greatest art is mired in life, marred by life. Scarred by it." So is the body, even the resurrected body. Jesus proved his resurrection to terrified friends by showing his body full of holes from nails and spears.

I would like to see Resurrection as hope running through this thesis. It is, as I noted before, the concluding thought in the Communion liturgical structure. A sustained meditation on faith and writing through a Communion service structure would not be complete without thinking about how resurrection acts as an influential idea and metaphor. What narratives and metaphors one chooses becomes formative to aesthetics, to work, to writing. Talking about resurrection is a way to acknowledge and articulate the themes that became apparent in this collection-- interests in beautiful tensions and paradoxes between the material and the immaterial, the physical and the spiritual-- and their implications in my living and writing. I have found that you cannot have one without the other. It is not enough know in my mind that writing and faith is a possible marriage: it is necessary to write as if it were true, to see real people ("Antithesis of Faith"). It is not enough for Communion to be memory alone: it must pay attention and value the physical elements in order for spiritual food ("Mystical Body"). It is not enough to be able to think: I must live in my body ("Body, Broken"). It is not enough to make "imaginary Homelands" when what should have been Home dies: Resurrection is a tangible reality.

All of this I have learned through writing, strange faith taking its immaterial self and making words on a page, the manifested material of thought and belief. There was a chance I

could have found another way to talk and think, another way to carry Need. There was a chance, but it didn't happen.

Writing is how I hope and hope is a necessary *Need*.

The Nicene Creed defines hope this way: "...and I *look* for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen." Rushdie was right that "Home" as we have all once known it is imaginary. But he is wrong in implying that we construct a home anywhere. Home is not anywhere or everywhere, but coming. It must be sought. And because of avid, needing hope, I *look*. Resurrected Home is not "anywhere and everywhere," something we make "armed only with who we are." It is "...homes that are made for us..," not in Oz, but when the helpless dead are made alive.

So I write to *look*.

Appendix A

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- Phi Beta Kappa, inducted 2010
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- The Robert Byrd Scholarship, annual award, 2007-present
- The Cranage Poetry Award, College of the Liberal Arts (Second Place), Spring 2010
- Benjamin Cantwell Memorial Scholarship, College of the Liberal Arts, 2007-2009
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- "Intercoastal Fire," short story, *Kalliope* 2011
- "Waiting," poem, *Kalliope* 2011
- "When I Return from India and Someone Asks Me How It Was" poem, *Kalliope* 2011
- "In Word and Dance", Curator Magazine, March 25, 2011
- "Aesthetic Faithfulness: Apartment Living and 'Rainbows for the Fallen World,'" *Comment Magazine* online content, "Delights and Comforts" column, March 11, 2011
- "The Women," short story, *Kalliope* 2010

- "Hospitality," poem, *Kalliope* 2010

PENN STATE EMPLOYMENT:

Writer, The Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension Newsletter, Summer 2010-present

Supervisor: Rachael Perry

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- Two feature articles for monthly newsletter
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- Semester-long training course in collaborative peer tutoring
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Resident Assistant, Simmons Hall, Fall 2008-Spring 2010

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- Student member of five-person conference planning team
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“The Festival of Faith and Writing,” Conference at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, April 15-18, 2010

“Encounter,” International Arts Movement, Cooper Union, New York City, March 4-6, 2010

“Jubilee Conference,” Pittsburgh, February 20-22, 2011 (annually since 2008)

LEADERSHIP:

Roadblocks to Conversation, Schreyer Honor's College Interfaith Dialogue, March 2010

- Event organizer
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Leadership Training Program, Ocean City Beach Project, Summer 2009

- Weekly seminars on issues relevant to student living, including: racial reconciliation, personal identity formation, vocational callings, interpersonal relationships, and mentoring preparation.
- Communal living with fifteen other students and four leaders
- Community involvement through local church

Leadership Camp Counselor with Worldview Academy, West Coast, Summers 2006-2008

- Supervised middle and high school girls
- Led small group discussion and leadership training activities
- Modeled and taught leadership qualities and values and critical thinking skills through interactive activities, lecture discussions, and small group community
- Team member of twenty-one college-aged staffers

Leadership Advance Training Program, Calvary Baptist Ministries, State College, January 10 -13, 2008

- Leadership and personality assessments (Meyers Brigg, Strengths Finder, and DISC)
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- Seminars on positive leadership and vocation discernment

COMMUNITY SERVICE INVOLVEMENT:**Service Trips:**

- Orlando, Florida, "Frontline" after-school programs, Spring Break 2008
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International Justice Mission campus chapter member, Fall 2007-Spring 2008

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