

THE MOTHERS OF *THE MABINOGION* AND ME: EXPLORING
MEMOIR THROUGH MYTH

by

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To Gretchen, who pointed me toward who I am. To Kelley, who taught me that who I am is okay. To my Mom, who transforms the human inability to control things into stability and grace.

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PART I

Critical Introduction

Introduction

In this critical introduction, I have aimed to briefly discuss the development of the modern genre of memoir and to explain any historical or textual information I deem necessary to clarify the sources upon which I've drawn in my creative writing. By discussing the previous work of others and relating my approach to theirs, I consciously involve my creative work in a tradition of creative writing inspired by myth. By writing a memoir at all, I intentionally and emphatically claim my right to tell my own story despite my struggles with memory loss and dissociation, and despite the insistence of some critics of the genre on factual correctness over metaphor. I argue that, as a modern and vibrant subgenre of autobiography, memoir represents a distinctive set of approaches to representing the truth. One legitimate approach is the creative retelling of myths as a stimulus to and a companion piece for memoir.

Chapter 1

Defining Memoir

It is important to begin with a solid definition of memoir, so that we may explore its potential more fully. This is particularly true because it has been fairly common for both scholars and the reading public to confound memoir with autobiography. In a 2011 interview on National Public Radio, memoirist Marion Roach Smith made a point of differentiating between the two: "An autobiography is really the story of a whole life," she says. "A memoir, if you want someone else to be interested, should really be [about] an area of expertise within that life." Writer Ben Yagoda is slightly more precise: "The one clear difference is that while 'autobiography' or 'memoirs' usually cover the full span of that life, 'memoir' has been used by books that cover the entirety or some portion of it" (Yagoda, *Author's Note*). Both Roach Smith and Yagoda imply that memoir is a subgenre of autobiography, as are diaries or journals, collections of letters, and memoirs (always plural, this last subgenre is distinct from *memoir* in the singular). Emphasizing this idea that memoir is its own genre, or at least a more focused form of autobiography, is necessary to discussing its functions.

Although the word *autobiography* did not enter into usage until 1797, as a literary genre, autobiography could be said to have entered the Western tradition from Greece.¹ There, philosophers of antiquity created elaborate first-person narratives to explain their assertions or actions. These *apologia*, as they were called, were intended

as oratory and only written down secondarily. One of Plato's famous dialogues is a written version of his teacher Socrates' *apologia* speech, in which Socrates explains his philosophies. However, it was at nearly the same time in Roman north Africa that St. Augustine of Hippo wrote his *Confessions*, a first-person narrative account of his own conversion to Christianity. From these examples it seems that autobiography in Western tradition has always entailed more than simply telling the details of one's life; it has been a presentation of one's personal understanding of the world for public consideration.

The idea of writing one's *memoirs*—a first-person narrative account of the life of a famous (or infamous) person—began to gain popularity in Europe and the U.S. during the late eighteenth century. In the plural, memoirs came to imply that the subject's life was extraordinary enough to deserve to be documented. A well-known example is *The Confessions*, the 1782 memoirs of French philosopher and writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Named after St. Augustine's work, perhaps to mock the idea of saintliness or to highlight the writer's lack of it, *The Confessions* shocked the reading public because of its unflinchingly explicit (and often maligned as inaccurate) details about Rousseau's deed and misdeeds. That modern memoir, a literary descendant of *The Confessions*, is written for shock value rather than any higher purpose continues even today to be a common indictment from critics of the genre.

In the singular, *memoir* evolved through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be understood as a very intimate, specific kind of writing that focuses on a small

portion of the writer's life experiences, usually not covering a whole lifetime. What's more, this singular memoir implies a more general application; anyone can write memoir, famous or not. Yagoda remarks on the advent of this trend of universality: "The 1820s saw a flurry of books by tradesmen and artisans, and an article in the London Magazine fretted that if current trends continued, 'every keeper of an apple-stall might unstore his fruits of experience'" (Kindle Locations 958-960).

Yagoda also points out the many ways in which a memoir can be focused, including, for example: by relating the story of a particular time in a writer's life; by writing about an adventure or a quest (as in the popular *Eat, Pray, Love*); by relating experiences as seen from the particular vantage point of illness, religion, ethnicity, pet ownership, drug use, etc.; or by creating an experience with the intention of writing about it. This last example is what Henry David Thoreau did, living on Walden Pond and writing about it, and an analogy may be drawn to the personal narratives written by bloggers—including Julie Powell, who cooked every recipe in Julia Child's cookbook in order to write (and to make a popular film) about it.² Clearly, the modern memoir is more focused than the simple autobiographical act of relating one's own life, and just as clearly, that focus can manifest in many ways.

Complicating the definition is the fact that writers and literary scholars seem unable to settle on just one name for this type of writing. It is referred to variously as life writing, personal narrative, life narrative, creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, and

personal essay, among other things. The choice to use “memoir” here is based only on my perception that it has become the predominant term in common usage.

In their 2001 book, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narrative* (the title of which proves the point about the genre’s various names), literary scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer an interesting thought, useful to distinguishing traditional autobiography, or what might be referred to by the plural *memoirs*, from the genre *memoir*. They assert that the act of writing a life narrative confronts two separate parts of a writer’s self: “One is the self that others see—the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships,” which is the self represented in traditional autobiography. Memoir represents this self, but also “the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get ‘outside of’”(5).

Of course, all writers who write about themselves and their experiences represent their inner selves to some degree while doing so—in their style of writing, if nothing else. The difference may be clarified in this way: while writers of traditional autobiography aim to represent their actions and experiences, writers of memoir aim to represent their inner selves. As literary scholar and writer William Bradley puts it, “my memoir is a record of my own unreliable and occasionally fractured mind at work...representing on the page the world as I perceive and understand it” (210). Just like St. Augustine writing of his religious experiences or Socrates explaining the

philosophies that got him arrested, Bradley writes memoir to offer up his viewpoint to the world.

Author Stephen Minot writes that defining memoir is not actually all that difficult, that it is “distinguished by three basic characteristics: it is based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with a special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of nonfiction writing” (1). This simple definition is more controversial than it appears. One critic laments it as “so inclusive that it's almost impossible to imagine which life experiences do not qualify as memoir material” (Grimes “We All Have a Life”). Another calls the deeply personal aspect of memoir writing “exhibitionism with an agenda,” an example of a certain squeamishness which often meets the publication of deeply personal narrative (Wolcott 218). The public revelation of the personal details of a writer’s experience has sometimes been considered shameful or taboo, so some more conservative readers and critics dislike the popularity of a genre whose very existence unnerves them. However, as we shall see, memoir serves a number of purposes for both writers and readers.

Chapter 2

The Purpose and Appeal of Memoir

William Bradley writes that “human beings themselves are infinitely fascinating and that sharing our life stories can have a transformative and empowering impact on author and reader alike” (203). Anyone who has read and enjoyed a memoir might agree that reading about someone else’s life can be fascinating, but as for the nature of this transformation and empowerment of which Bradley writes, it seems more must be said. At its best, memoir grants writers the power to name truth and grants readers a broader sense of the human experience and, therefore, of themselves.

Towards these ends, one major effect of memoir is to establish what Nancy K. Miller calls “the path of identification” (*Enough* 10). This describes the personal development that can result from writing to be understood, as well as from reading to relate to a writer. Both writers and readers of memoir can and do use their experience with the genre to create themselves, in some sense. Writing memoir grants the memoirist the power of testimony, which is the power to act as a witness and to name the truth of his or her experience. As noted scholar of memoir Paul John Eakin notes, people build their very identities in part based on such sharing:

“When we tell or write about our own lives, our stories establish our identities both as content—I am the person who did these things—and as act—I am

someone, someone who has lived a valuable life, a value affirmed precisely by any life story's implicit claim that it is worth telling and hearing" (5).

Readers of this testimony can then respond with empathy, vicariously sharing the writer's experience, recognizing themselves in it, and benefiting from it in the formation of their own identities.

Equally important as an effect of memoir is what Miller calls "disidentification," which is what can happen when a writer of memoir offers up the story of his or her unusual or unconventional life (*Enough* 11). Although readers may react to such memoirs with surprised interest, their fascination is not that of connecting to the writer's experiences so much as contrasting their own experiences with what is presented. This effect allows a writer to use memoir to tell a counterstory, to give out to the world a version of an event or lifestyle that differs from the common understanding. It is the story of the *other*, and may even be used as a device to foster social change. This type of memoir amounts to what one scholar calls "the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression to a less oppressed other" (Spivak 7). Such memoirs can afford the reader insight into different understandings and worldviews, and ultimately broaden a reader's understanding of the human experience. For the writer, being able to write about the reality behind common assumptions regarding a particular lifestyle, disability, or ethnic or cultural experience, for example, is empowering in that it affirms the memoirist's right to his or her own story.

Within this stew of naming, building identities and worldviews, and effecting social change, the modern memoir manages to communicate truth, which is not the same thing as fact. It may even be said that, between the writer and reader of memoir, the truth is created. The reader makes meaning out of the memoir based on his or her own previous knowledge, understandings, preferences, and perceptions. The writer presents facts, but also his or her thoughts about those facts, descriptions of the emotional impacts of those facts, musings about the reliability of memory and the effect of that on the relating of those facts, ideas about which facts are important to the memoir and which are not...unmistakably, there is more going on in memoir than the relating of mere facts.

The purpose of memoir at its most basic is the creation of truth through empathy. This could perhaps better be summed up as the study of “how selves and milieus ought to be understood in relation to each other” (Gilmore 12). None of this is intended to support the claim of William Grimes and others, that the modern memoir is inappropriately confessional. On the contrary, I interpret the emotional openness bewailed by conservative readers as memoir’s primary strength: its ability to connect people by highlighting the details of our shared humanity.

Chapter 3

The Autobiographical Pact

Thus far, I have described the genre of memoir as a focused presentation of a writer's outward and inward self, and as a collaborative endeavor between reader and writer in which they are jointly empowered, and through which they may foster empathetic awareness of their differences and similarities, and even bring about social change. All of this, while true, has not yet addressed the truth value of memoir. We must acknowledge that the defining characteristic of the genre is its engagement with the writer's actual life. This is what distinguishes it from fiction, and what lends it the heightened interest and appeal that it has gained in the literary world. The reader understands the memoir to be, in some sense, *true*.

The existence of this expectation and of the memoirist's corresponding obligation to write of true things has been acknowledged and analyzed by many scholars, including Phillippe Lejeune, whom scholar Nancy K. Miller calls "our reigning autobiography guru" ("Entangled" 538). Lejeune gives form to this tacit agreement in what he calls the "autobiographical pact," or "the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth" (Lejeune *Signes* 31). But how may we define this "spirit of truth"? There is rarely a source of empirical proof documenting that the events a memoirist describes are

historically accurate or factually correct in each detail. The definition of “truth” for memoir must be broader than simply what is empirically true.

In fact, almost all writers could testify that they continually blur the line between truth and fiction, no matter the genre in which they work. In memoir, the reason is more often than not because memory itself is fallible. In writing about what we remember, we are accessing an imperfect record in the first place. Good writing, we are taught in creative writing classes, is writing that has an emotional impact upon its reader. The common advice to writers is that this is accomplished through the communication of precise sensory details.

What do we really remember about a specific event, though? A remembered event might be very specific and still lack key details that would bring it to life for a reader. Just for example, when I think about the bike I rode in college, I remember it was red and had ten speeds. I remember how it felt to use it to get myself to classes or to work, the sense of self-reliance. I remember the strange feeling of locking it up and walking away from it—is it secure? Would someone really actually steal it? But when I try to write a scene that communicates the emotional impact of riding my bike to school, I realize how few details are actually stored in my memory. I no longer know what kind of lock I used, nor how I carried my backpack as I rode, nor whether I rode on the street or on the sidewalk. How far was the ride? I don’t remember. If sensory details are key to communicating the emotional, then it must be okay to invent some sensory details. I don’t remember what the air actually smelled like during those bike rides, so if

I write that the air smelled like autumn leaves on my first day of college, I am communicating that it was autumn—which it was, whatever I remember or don't remember. If writing memoir about such a small thing requires a writer to invent details, how much more might need to be invented to describe the emotional impact of something larger, say a devastating medical diagnosis, or a ten-day trip to Switzerland?

Certain choices that writers make are based upon obvious needs to deviate from the exact truth. In his popular memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers makes use of a lengthy introduction to address many such concerns with truthfulness. He points to the problem of his having included dialogue, even though he doesn't have a photographic memory and, like most of us, he can't remember every word of important conversations. He dismisses any worries about truthfulness almost immediately by simply admitting to readers that his dialogue, "has of course been almost entirely reconstructed" (ix).

Eggers also acknowledges having changed the name of one of his characters because the real person behind the character did not want his name used. Beyond changing the name, Eggers writes that he found it necessary to change other details in order to disguise the identity of the person upon whom the character was based. As he appears in Eggers' memoir, the character is "less a direct facsimile, and more of an amalgam," he writes (x). As with dialogue though, Eggers seems to find it necessary to openly and extensively admit his deviation from absolute truth. Perhaps his impulse is

to mock the expectation of factual correctness as impossible, or perhaps he is protecting himself from accusations of fabricating parts of his memoir. Perhaps both.

Reaching another level entirely of intermingling fiction with memoir is Lauren Slater, whose memoir is actually entitled *Lying*. Subtitled *A Metaphorical Memoir*, Slater's book calls into question how far one might take an extended metaphor without violating the "spirit of truth." The memoir describes her childhood struggles with epilepsy, describing in detail her seizures, her attendance at a special school, her consultations with various medical professionals, and her eventual surgery to have the two lobes of her brain cut apart. Throughout, Slater peppers in odd comments that call aspects of her story into question, as when she writes, "just for the sake of story, let's say that she even licked her lips" (22). And, "Maybe I'm wrong....Maybe it's just certain narrative demands, a need for neatness compelling me to say *that was the night* or *and this led surely to this*" (69). Sometimes, she even forces her readers to question her entire story: "This is a difficult book, I know. There was or was not a cherry tree. The seizures are real or something else. I am an epileptic or I have Munchausen's" (159). By the end, the reader is uncertain whether Slater actually has or has ever had epilepsy at all. But the issues of the Lauren Slater she writes about, her lying and stealing and inventing illnesses for attention and her difficult relationship with her mother, those seem to be true to life. Slater writes: "[I]f I were making the whole thing up—and I'm not saying I'm making the whole thing up—but if I were, I would be doing it not to create a character as a novelist does, but, instead, to create a metaphor that conveys

the real person I am” (Slater 162). Perhaps we can allow that the question of whether Slater has written her memoir in the “spirit of truth” is at least left open by this explanation.

In a way, the open acknowledgment of fictional elements in their memoirs that Eggers and Slater employ can be thought of as a reaction to unrealistic expectations on the part of those readers who clamor for absolutes. Case in point is the scandal surrounding James Frey’s alleged fictionalization of portions of his 2003 memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. In a media flap that lasted several years and featured supporters and detractors as prominent as Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, and Joyce Carol Oates, it became clear that for many readers, the Frey’s exaggerations had crossed the line between artful embellishment for literary effect and unacceptable dishonesty.³ In reminding readers that memoir cannot be written with perfect factual correctness, Eggers and Slater show that they know that the “pact” is flawed, that readers’ expectations are unexamined and impossible, so they innovate in order to continue writing memoir without having to eventually be disgraced for one “dishonesty” or another. Of Eggers’ approach to truthfulness in his memoir’s preface, Sidonie Smith has written that it suggests “that being suspicious about the ethics of autobiographical writing may be the one ethical act available to it” (“Rumpled” 9). It seems clear that a complicated ethics of memoir writing is at play.

In fact, the intertextuality of fact and fiction across all creative genres is a commonplace notion, and its purpose is no less than to create truth. Writers blend facts

and what we might call *nonfacts* in order to craft works of art that reproduce emotional truths rather than simply true events. As one scholar puts it, this “manner of truth-telling” may be thought of “as approximating much more closely what is at work, e.g., in Picasso's *Guernica*—that is, a set of carefully chosen images creating a comprehensive way of seeing and conceiving the world.” (Ross 528). Although Picasso's painting responds to and in some sense depicts the actual event of the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, no one looks to his artwork and asks, Who were these screaming people? What were their names? And who owned the bull Picasso depicted? Much as visual art is understood to convey emotional rather than factual truths, memoir must be granted a certain level of artistic license in its portrayal of a particular writer's understanding of truth.

The development of a more comprehensive and fruitful approach to the truth value of memoir seems to be in order. Among others, Miller has called for a redefinition of the autobiographical pact. “Perhaps it is time” she writes, “to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the ‘autobiographical pact’” (“Entangled” 544). With this in mind, we may begin to consider the truth inherent in the term *memoir* to be something akin to the collaborative awareness described earlier, which is created by the interaction of the work of writing and that of reading memoir—rather than thinking of it as a simple telling of facts. We can begin to read memoir as memoirist Amos Oz

recommends: "Don't ask if these are real facts. If it's what happened in the life of the author. Ask yourself the question. About yourself" (43).

Chapter 4

What Am I Doing With *The Mabinogion*?

Beyond the necessary creation of dialogue like that acknowledged by Eggers, and some reimagined sensory details used emotively, my own memoir has little outright invention in it. This is strange to say of a memoir written by me, a sufferer from somewhat extensive memory loss, but it is true. As others have innovated in order to write the truth of their personal experiences, so have I. For me, the need for innovation comes from a requirement to find a starting point; lacking breadth of memory, I required some solid base upon which to build my memoir.

In this study of memoir and myth and the limits of both, I have used a shared cultural source (*The Mabinogion*) to inspire my own creative reimagining of mothers in Welsh folk stories. In between stories, I write about motherhood as reflected in the stories and about my experiences of mental illness. This is participating in a long tradition of springboarding off folklore to create new fiction, but also in a more specialized practice of using myth as a starting point for telling a writer's own stories. Maxine Hong Kingston's acclaimed memoir *The Woman Warrior* uses the Chinese tale of *Fa Mulan* in a similar way, building on the metaphor of myth to engage her true experiences of her mother's storytelling. Her literary doppelganger says to her mother, "You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference...I can't tell what's real and what you make up" (202). Kingston

makes it clear that the myth she relates is of the “made-up” variety, and the contrast with the rest of her story creates a central metaphor.

By following Kingston’s example and rewriting myths, I am inserting pure fiction into my memoir. At the same time, I am seeking out my own truths as revealed by *how* I have written these myths. I am definitely not trying to engage the original cultural understanding of these myths to the Celtic peoples, except in the sense that such tales were actually intended to be used as I have used them; they have always been passed along in varied forms, inflected by the style and experience of the individual storyteller.

In fact, what I have done is not retell the stories, so much as amplify and embroider parts of them. The versions I have used as sources come from various medieval codices like the *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest* and were translated by Lady Charlotte Guest. As scholar Sioned Davies writes, “Although these Welsh tales were the product of a literary culture, the inherited rules of oral art surely played an essential role in their composition” (“Storytelling” 233-4). One of the attributes of orality that is preserved in the medieval texts is the presence of huge spaces in the stories that my storyteller’s mind wants to fill with details. The stories I work with are told in the ancient texts using a sparse style that, while probably the work of an author, is surely indicative of their spoken origin. They seem intended as bare-bones stories for bards to expand upon according to their personal styles. To a 21st century creative writer, the stories still beg for expansion, but within a written paradigm.

My first foray into writing portions of these tales is a six-page story based on only four paragraphs from the *Tale of Taliesin*. To me, this project is attempting on a small scale what Chretien de Troyes did when he took the basic stories of King Arthur from folklore and expanded on them for the enjoyment of medieval audiences. Only for me, this expansion is about character and scene, and about showing how these stories and their protagonists can be written about to highlight various aspects of motherhood, both positive and negative, that still relate to human nature, my own nature, and my own stories. I write about the choices I make as I tell the stories, and what those choices indicate about me—what I can infer from them, and how, lacking many of my own concrete memories, I can use myth in the capacity of memory as an entry into my own stories.

A lot could be said—undoubtedly has been said—about the transition of these texts from oral to written form, but I suppose I have to express overtly that I'm working with them in my own tradition, as written texts, and only secondarily thinking of the different understanding of story in Celtic culture. So, although there is an argument to be made that within their culture of origin, these stories, their orality, and the traditions surrounding their telling carried spiritual significance, I have not delved into that.

Chapter 5

The Mabinogion: A Brief Textual Background

Lady Charlotte Guest grew up in Lincolnshire, in the east of England. Intensely interested in languages from an early age, she studied at least seven before 1833, when she married, moved to Wales, and learned Welsh. Between 1838 and 1846, Lady Guest published her translation into English of twelve ancient Welsh tales, including copious scholarly notes, and entitling the whole *The Mabinogion*. In fact, “Mabinogion” seems to have been a medieval scribal error, an extraneous addition of the Welsh plural ending *-on* to the already plural *mabinogi*. Since Lady Guest’s translation was the first to bring these stories to the English-speaking world, her perpetuation of the error in its title has caused the work to be widely known as *The Mabinogion*, despite a number of modern scholars insisting on the more technically correct *Mabinogi*.

Etymologically, *mabinogi* comes from the Welsh root word *mab*, which means “son” or “youth,” so the stories clearly pertain to youth in some way.⁴ Perhaps these were stories intended for young people, or perhaps they constitute a repertoire for the young apprentice bard. This word appears in only four of the twelve stories Lady Guest translated. These four are the only stories in the collection that are connected to each other by both genre and character, and together they constitute what is known as the *Four Branches of the Mabinogion*.

Lady Guest found her source material in three medieval Welsh manuscripts, known in English as the *Red Book of Hergest*, the *White Book of Rhydderch*, and the *Book of Taliesin*. Dating from the mid-fourteenth to the early fifteenth centuries, these codices contain a variety of works in disparate genres including poetry, history, prose, and prophecy. Based on linguistic clues in the texts, the stories of *The Mabinogion* are believed by scholars to have originated in written form at least a century before the extant manuscripts were copied.⁵ However, this excludes the tale of *Taliesin*, which appears to be based on a slightly more recent version. Also based on linguistic and stylistic markers, scholars have agreed that the stories were composed by authors, but that the tales were probably originally oral.⁶

In translating and publishing these stories together, Lady Guest created an ad hoc collection of Welsh tales.⁷ Her purpose, as we know from her extensive personal journals, was in part to try to show a Welsh origin for the European romance genre.⁸ Indeed, several of the tales are counted as the earliest known versions of the stories about King Arthur and his round table—possibly constituting some of the source material for such works as Chretien de Troyes' medieval romances about King Arthur and the round table. The first eleven of the stories Lady Guest translated (*Taliesin* is often left out) have been retranslated in a number of scholarly editions since hers.⁹ They also continue to be of popular interest, as the subject of novels, plays, and films, and as a source of cultural pride to the Welsh people. My use of them as a fictional springboard into memoir is due, quite simply, to my love for and enjoyment of them.

PART II

The Mothers of *The Mabinogion* and Me

Chapter 1

Sundries

The nature of my memory is wobbly. My thoughts, too, stagger and reel, and pitch forward only to tumble backward and drop to stillness. So, I can't even conceive of writing about myself in a straight line; such a text would be a lie. Instead, I offer here a tangled text, lurching this way and that and only eventually meeting itself again in a series of asymmetrical centers. A tedious knotwork that probably fails to decorate, I think it manages at least to mark the borders of the world as seen from my position. Creeping and clambering like a vine on a trellis, this narrative attempts to draw together a typical midlife concern with the control that everyone strives for, but can never achieve, and very personal and specific issues of memory and loss.

I've begun a transition from the demands of mothering children to those of midlife and empty nest, and it bewilders me. In part, it is the same difficulty that parents have always had with letting go of their children and embracing the adults that their children have become. After years of living sacrifice as a lifestyle, it is yet another sacrifice; it is taking the active, physical parenting that has been my whole self and leaving it to burn on the altar of my heart. At the same time, it is taking on a new role, permissive and hands-off. For me, this shift is complicated by loss.

My memory, you see, is a burial ground in shifting sand. Sometimes a moment from my past seems to shine in my mind, as clear as a constellation in a cloudless night

sky—frozen like a scene paused on the television, but three-dimensional like a still-life that I can examine from any angle. But other times someone asks me a question that starts out like this: “Hey, remember that time when...” and what follows is an anecdote about me that seems like a thing not forgettable. A thing that, once experienced, might add texture to all that follows. A contextualizing event in a life. Yet I hear of it as if for the first time, like a story about someone else.

At home alone, I watch a beautiful film with no words. The soundtrack consists entirely of classical music and the subject is the world's ravaged places— desolate spots that continue to hold their trove of human traces like still-life sculptures. Somewhere there is an empty house, half-swallowed by desert sand that ripples through an open doorway and lies banked against a torn red sofa. And there is an entire town somewhere, abandoned after tornado or hurricane or earthquake or tsunami, where not-so-old cars rest wedged between broken brick houses. Where beside a half-unmattressed bed, a shelf of CDs is overturned and its contents lie oddly unshattered in their decay. Such places have their own art. A submerged shipwreck beauty, a terrifying and invigorating glory. Like one of those ruined places, memories rest in me, retaining every relic of vitality and sign of former habitation, but untenanted now, and eerie.

I see these places and let them penetrate beyond my eye, and understanding comes with a gasp. A quickly indrawn taste of air, like a fingernail scraped against my sharpest and oldest instinct, fans my *knowing*. It is not a knowing of the mind or of the heart, but a knowing of somewhere I grasp less well. The pancreas, perhaps, or the

transverse colon. I glimpse emptiness. I begin to suspect that there is a void which has more power than any human endeavor. Perhaps my memories are slipping into this void.

The film moves on with stirring images of the Earth's magnificence and of humankind's splendid accomplishments upon its face. I see a painted person, gender erased with smooth-skinned youth and extravagant ornamentation, performing a dance of jerky motions and odd finger wavings. I am bewildered by the enormity of our separateness. I see soaring pointed buildings of gold and a stone staircase that rises to a tower with cylindrical bells like water heaters. I see majestic mountain-top palaces and monks in orange robes painting with sand. I am stunned. How can such things be both human, like me, and utterly inaccessible to me? I see a world of gold brocaded cloth and a twenty-acre stone building that is a whole city unto itself. I hear music on another scale entirely. The film shows a world that I can never be a part of, where I could never belong. My places are the ruined ones, it seems.

Now I am sitting in a café in a crowd and watching a reading by some university people here at home. I try to fill my mind with their versions of life on Earth. I seek out the monuments and dances and ostentatious ornaments in their words. Moments when the writing touches a place of ruin in them, those are the moments that grab me by my ears and squint into my eyes. Still, I feel I am a bird in the rafters looking out across the room at something so *other* that I cannot fully comprehend it.

The place is packed with well-compensated smiles projecting a smooth certainty that can only be gained, it seems, by living a long string of appropriately made decisions. The lives I imagine for them are another curious dance to me: interesting, its meaning mysterious. My own path has not featured long strings of anything. Mental illness separates me. For decades it has regularly taken me away, only to bring me back when decisions are already made and courses already determined. Perhaps all of my past is a ruined place. A bleak and frozen scene, full of artifacts of myself that tell an artful story. Perhaps it is worthy of exploration, of anthropological study, or journalistic reporting. Perhaps someone will appreciate in my odd, jerky dance the brief glory that is humanity.

Chapter 2

Parenting and Other Useful Metaphors

The wind from the east presses down the grasses, and then lets them up again. Their small seedheads bob and sway in sections; now the right and left portions are flattened while the center stands tall, now the center bows to me and the sides rise up whispering among themselves. The clean meadow scent means summer begins again. I want to raise my arms, throw back my head, and shout something meaningful or extravagant into that wind. But I inhale hard and exhale abruptly, letting my shoulders sag. My boundless prairie is only my unmown back yard, after all. I continue raking dog poo into the little shovel, and I dump the shovel into the paper grocery bag at my feet.

This is how my life goes: I feel the magic, I revel in it, I dream and plan and hope, and then I have to stop and pick up dog poo. Dog poo is an effective metaphor for many things I experience—all the things that *gum up the works*, as my Grandma Sanders used to say. When I get up early to write, sometimes I get into a groove. I just buzz along, blissfully engaged by creating a different universe where dreams and plans can become real and by writing about characters who can learn things I never have and do things I never will. Then the alarm on my phone chirps, telling me I have to get ready to go to work. That alarm is dog poo.

Right now that alarm only gets me on Mondays and Wednesdays, because I only work two days a week. There is some child support from my first husband, and a small

disability check from the Veterans' Administration to compensate me for the unspeakable things that serving my country did to my back. Still, only ten hours of paid employment per week means that the phone bill and the heat bill are also dog poo. The kids need groceries and new shoes and backpacks, and the city needs money for property taxes and water bills, and I need gas in the car...so maybe *needs* are dog poo. Also, the dog needs dog food, which brings this belabored metaphor right back around to where it started.

My understanding of myself in the world is full of small oddnesses like this. A strange pathos of motherhood inflects all the needs that pour out at me from various sources. If asked, I would say that I love being a mother. Still, the press of so many needs insists on being represented by such images as the one I've just treated you to. Being a mother is my time and my self-image, and it's my job and my psyche. However, being a mother is also something I'm beginning to understand soon has to stop being the center of me and become more like a backdrop for some other, not-yet-clear way of being. Because my children are almost grown up. Jacob, almost twenty-one, has already moved out and only visits about monthly to collect his mail or get my help with something tax- or insurance-related. Edgar is eighteen and graduating from high school next month. Tess only has two more years of high school. Not a one of them needs my constant concern, although I have yet to figure out how to sublimate said constant concern. I write about it to try to figure it out.

It used to be that my acts of mothering were mostly physical: clothing, feeding, bathing, cleaning up after, reading stories to. When my kids were younger I would take them places, too. I would wake up in an adventurous mood and tell them over breakfast that we were definitely *doing* something that day. Sometimes I called my friend Suzanne, who lived ninety miles away in West Allis, to tell her we were coming down for the day. Suzanne and her husband Adam and I met in California where we all attended the Defense Language Institute. We found out on our first day of Arabic class that all three of us were from Wisconsin, which was strangely out of balance percentage-wise, for our class of twelve people. Adam was Army, Suzanne was Air Force, and I was Navy. Within six months, Adam and Suzanne were in love. My first husband and I stood up for them at their first wedding in the Monterey County courthouse (they had a big Catholic wedding in Milwaukee later), and our firstborn sons came just a month apart.

During the times I'm talking about now, though, post-military times when we were all back in Wisconsin, they had two kids and we were at various stages of increasing from one kid to four. I would pack up all the necessities, strap everyone into the appropriately sized car seat, and drive the old van to West Allis for the day. Usually it was only moms and kids, so the kids played in the yard while we moms chatted. Occasionally, Adam was off work, and we would all wander the Milwaukee County Zoo trailing wagons and pushing strollers. In the midst of some moment of delight, of delighting in my children's delight, I would often feel sorrow, knowing that I probably wouldn't remember this moment.

The hardest part, though, was always the drive home. I've never been a happy driver because sitting still and staring at the road somehow makes me sleepy and anxious at the same time, and I am constitutionally disposed to walk an emotional tightrope when I'm responsible for something. Managing whatever task is at hand means balancing a stream of thoughts; on one side is my sheer terror of imminent painful death caused by some misjudgment or poorly executed action of mine, and on the other, the soothing logic I use to convince myself that most things come out all right, that all will be well. Driving a car full of my babies inspired something like DEFCON 3 levels of fear. That fear was physical, like mothering, like the van I was driving.

When I learned I was pregnant with my first child, I felt a panicked certainty that I would lose the baby. I read in one of those pregnancy advice books that it is a common fear, but that I should remember that the more likely outcome of finding out you're pregnant is that you will have a baby, and *that's* the thing to think about. Because it was helpful then, I've taken this logic and applied it to other anxious moments. The most likely outcome of driving ninety miles of highway in an old van is that I will bring my babies safely home.

The most likely outcome of raising three kids to adulthood is that they will become self sufficient and no longer need a mother's constant concern. That's the desired outcome, right? That's what I have to learn to live with.

“Mom, I hurt myself in gym today.” This from my daughter, who is sixteen and has stopped by my desk to check in with me shortly after school.

“Oh, no! Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I somehow managed to shoulder myself in the face during volleyball. I keep telling the gym teacher that I should probably not try to sports. But, required gym class....”

She seems unconcerned with her supposed injury, unconcerned with having to continue sportsing every day at school, unconcerned with grammatical standards. She isn't asking for help or advice, and I've already shown sympathy. There are no needs to address here, so I offer up a quizzical look to acknowledge her goofiness, because I know she likes to have it recognized. It's hard to keep from touching her, looking more closely at her face to make sure there's no black eye or even a red patch that might require tending.

“Want a snack?” I sound tenuous, because I've had to search my mind for an acceptably detached thing to say that still expresses my impulse to care for her. I'm not completely sure this level of concern is still allowed.

“Nah. I already nuked a burrito in the microwave.” She pronounces each vowel in “microwave” as a distinct syllable with Spanish-sounding vowels: *mee-cro-WAH-vay*. It's an old joke for us, so I don't grant her any sign of amusement.

“Well, make sure you start on homework by 6.”

“I know, I know.” She trudges up the stairs to her room.

“Mom. Mom. Mom.” Edgar is a fast talker and an impatient conversationalist.

“Mom guess what happens on *The Walking Dead*. Carl is gonna die. Did you get to the part where Rick dies yet? Everybody is gonna die, no one is safe.”

“I don’t believe anything you just said.” He grins. Since I started watching a show he’s already seen, he’s been tossing out spoilers of limited reliability. He’s such a young-seeming eighteen, still so openly enthusiastic. I want to reach out and brush his hair out of his eyes.

“Well, there’s probably one thing in everything I said that’s *probably* true, but you don’t know which thing or really why. So I didn’t spoil anything for you.” More grinning. He really likes knowing things, especially when someone else doesn’t also know them. Now that he’s had the pleasure of knowing more than me, and I’ve granted him what I know he wanted—my recognition that he’s messing with me—there is nothing left for me to offer in the way of mothering. I decide to play the food card again.

“Can I get you a snack?”

“I’m currently heating up the leftover Chinese takeout that was in the fridge. I don’t know whose it was, but it’s mine now. Claimed!” And he rushes off to the kitchen, where the mi-cro-wa-ve is beeping.

“So have you raged against the patriarchy yet today?” Jacob’s deep voice is like his father’s, but it has a permanent ironic drawl that’s all his own. He is sitting sideways

in a chair in the living room, his legs hanging over one arm of it. He stopped by because I texted him that his new bank card came in the mail, and now I think he's hanging around a bit because he feels obligated to talk to his mom before racing back out.

"Every day, son."

"Erry DAY!" I'm not sure if he's mocking me or the patriarchy or people who rage against it too vocally or people who don't pronounce all the letters in "every."

"How's your new job?" He recently started a full-time position at a car dealership. As I expected, he is eager to tell me about it. His voice takes on the responsible-adult diction I've noticed before, enunciating more clearly as he relates all the facts he deems safe for mom. While he talks, he takes off his red and black Chicago Bulls hat and rubs a hand over his head; he has recently shaved his hair down to fuzz. I mentally flash on that same head, much smaller but just as recently shorn, pressed against my shoulder. I feel again what it felt like to rub my hand over that bristly-soft hair. I have to blink back tears as I realize how long it's been since I've hugged this boy. He has stopped talking and is leaning back his head, staring at the ceiling.

"It sounds like you're doing pretty well." Okay, I've acknowledged that he's proven able to take care of himself. It's odd to think, but I believe he is here talking to me in answer to what he perceives as *my* need, for contact with him.

This is the desired outcome.

Chapter 3

What I Remember: The Idiot Box

“Don’t change my damn channel! MASH is on next.”

Vinyl groaned as Dad shifted in his orthopedic armchair. Situated only a few feet from the large cabinet-type television set, the chair would slowly rise at the touch of a button in order to set Dad gently on his swollen feet. He had to almost shout to be heard over the TV at full volume—set that way in order to be heard over the constant whooshing of his oxygen tank. My seven-year-old son, Jacob, referred to the squat, round oxygen tank as “Grandpa’s R2D2.” Dad referred to my seven-year-old son by the name of my oldest brother, who’d been dead fifteen years.

“I’m not changing it, Dad, I’m just moving the remote to set down my coffee.” I heard my voice and hated it; it was the even, patient voice that people use with unreasonable children and the senile. Before a series of mini-strokes my dad was a college professor. He used to speak several languages and argue his eccentric viewpoints brilliantly, so it felt odd to use that voice with him.

I didn’t bother to point out that MASH was on all afternoon every single day on that channel, and that he’d already seen three episodes in a row. Watching it a fourth time seemed like a punishment, but I had volunteered for the afternoon shift of Dad-sitting so Mom could get some errands done. I examined the familiar room. The dark brown carpet that had replaced the gold shag of my childhood, the swag of beige muslin

over the front window, the 2 ½-inch pine moldings that came standard in these 1960s-era HUD houses...and the television set.

At about three feet tall and four feet across, it constituted a heavy piece of furniture all on its own. The screen of convex glass was lightly etched in a crisscross pattern—the height of 1984 anti-glare technology. While Dad stared at Hawkeye and Corporal Klinger, I stared at the woven wood veneer beneath the dials, recalling the day I first saw that T.V.

I remember the screeching. Too loud and shrill to be mere squeaking, the brakes screeched as the delivery truck pulled into our driveway. I ran to the side door, unused and frozen shut at this time of year, and stood on tip-toes to see over the patterned frost on the window. Were the neighbors watching? I searched their windows for any sign that someone was witnessing the miraculous delivery to OUR house of something new. I searched until a sharp finger of cold poked into my skull where my forehead touched the icy pane.

Then I ran to the front window to watch two men wobble a huge box onto a dolly. The wheels kept sticking in the icy gravel—a thing that wouldn't have happened in the neighbor's driveway of smooth cement—but the men managed to rumble it onto the sidewalk and up to the front door.

I didn't see how they managed the porch because I'd retreated to the central hallway to observe. Two of my brothers moved the couch out of the way, revealing an

area of gold shag that contrasted with the dirty, brownish tinge of the surrounding carpet. The new TV was to occupy that golden rectangle of carpet in front of the shiny gold drapes. And none of my friends could call my family weird for not having a TV anymore.

Missy, the neighbor kid I hoped was watching the delivery, had once told me that good families can't have more than two kids. She and her little brother were the only kids in their house, and they had a TV. One more door down, there was another family with two kids and a TV. Across the street there lived an only child and her parents and their TV. At thirteen years old, I still sometimes wondered which among my five siblings were the unnecessary ones.

"We don't need one of those idiot boxes!" Dad raged.

This was at dinner time, the night before the delivery truck came. Jostling each other around the large dining table crammed into the small kitchen, my brothers and I barely registered Dad's shouting. He often took advantage of the captive audience of his dining offspring to hold forth on one esoteric topic or another, and we were accustomed to mealtime rants. We each, according to our various temperaments, learned to question, to argue, or to eat fast and leave.

"Well we never have needed one, but I don't see what the harm is," Mom replied. Rationality in the face of Dad's vitriol was her super power, her special skill, and one I never mastered.

“The harm is the ruin of the imagination! The harm is the sneaky way they control your ideas! They come at you in the ads, I’m telling you!”

Pre-stroke Dad wouldn’t have lowered himself to watch a sitcom like MASH. Pre-stroke Dad had very strong opinions about television. In the end, Mom paid for the TV with her own money and had it delivered while Dad was at work. He harrumphed when he came home and found us watching it, but must have realized he’d lost this battle. Eventually, he deigned to watch the news. Maybe we all lose parts of ourselves along the way.

“Help me up so I can pee before the news comes on.”

The orthopedic chair buzzed to life and I set his walker in front of him so he could thump down the hall to the bathroom. I picked up the book I’d brought along to read, tapping my foot to the furniture store jingle on the television. It was a catchy tune.

Chapter 4

Ceridwen

When I sat down to write about Ceridwen, I did it on a lark. The old stories of Wales are interesting for students of folklore, but they aren't exactly well-known to general readers. I first learned of them from googling various names, like Ceridwen and Rhiannon, that I encountered in the context of neopagan writings. To many American neopagans, Ceridwen is a goddess of rebirth, considered a face of the Great Earth Mother. However, when I read Ceridwen's story from oldest existing written source—the *Book of Taliesin*—I only understood her as a mortal woman. Sure, she had magical powers, but her actions only seemed comprehensible to me when I thought of her as a mother, like myself.

Of course, I didn't think about any of these things as I sat and wrote. I only wrote, and let my subconscious thoughts about motherhood shape Ceridwen's story. I don't mean to be overly explicit, to draw back too far the curtain between writer and reader. It's only that the theme of magic and control that threads its way through my version of the myth echoes so strongly in my version of my life stories. And that I write to try to figure things out.

The Tale of Ceridwen and Gwion

Ceridwen was a mother. She had the most beautiful daughter, known throughout the land as the fairest of the fair. That is not the child Ceridwen concerned herself with. She had a fine son, as well, strong and healthy and fit to represent her and her husband well, even in the king's court. But Ceridwen's story did not resonate for a thousand years on account of that child, either. It was her other son for whom she became a legend, sometimes portrayed as an evil witch-hag or as a cruel misuser of magic. The other son was not beautiful or strong. He was "ill-favored," as the medieval retelling of the story says. Probably he was not very smart or charming. It's tempting to say he was probably the kind of ugly that only a mother could love—except that even his mother couldn't accept him the way he was. She needed to fix him.

Ceridwen was a witch. Despite the many attempts to temper that archetype with sweetness and light, a witch is a witch. I can neither argue that her power sprang from the light of God within her, nor that she wielded the powers of hell. I will only argue for her humanity, for her equal share in both dark and light, no different than the rest of us. Like anyone, she could choose to act nobly or wickedly, and then choose again, and act differently. She had these particular gifts: she knew the properties of plants—both for food and medicine and for magic—and she could change her shape. She could *shift*, as they say, into anything at all.

Also, Ceridwen was rich. Her husband was a Welsh nobleman who had his home in the middle of a lake. In all of Celtic myth, it seems, islands are the proper places for

women with magical powers. Since she had wealth, she could hire people to do her less pleasant chores. So, when she set about making a potion to give her ill-favored son foresight, wisdom, and inspiration, she put a boy named Gwion to the task of stirring the cauldron, which needed to simmer for a year and a day. Every day, she would gather herbs and perform magics to strengthen her brew, while Gwion stirred and stirred. Ceridwen knew (although she didn't tell Gwion this) that all of the power of her concoction was in the first three drops. The rest was poison.

One day, near the very end of the year-and-a-day, Ceridwen was out gathering herbs when a fat bubble formed in the center of the cauldron. Gwion kept stirring slowly, but he couldn't help watching the bubble which continued unbroken for hours, trembling on the oily surface of the brew. After a while, he grew used to its presence and stopped really noticing it. That, of course, was when the great bubble burst. It sprayed liquid outward, but the cauldron was so large that nothing was spilled. Only, Gwion suddenly felt his skin burning. Three small droplets had landed on his littlest finger and, since it burned, the boy naturally put his finger into his mouth.

In that moment, Gwion knew all things that were to come and understood all things. A song sprang from his throat: an exquisite song of graceful meter and superb figures, full of equal measures of the joy and the despair of knowing. What is more, as he sang his song of knowing, he understood that he could take the shape of anything he wanted to. And he knew that he would have to do so soon, in order to hide from Ceridwen. Her anger would be terrible when she learned that Gwion had taken her

year's work and her son's grace. With his new wisdom and foreknowledge, he knew that Ceridwen's anger would lead her to kill him, if she could.

Then the chamber where Gwion stood echoed with an ear-splitting crack, and he saw that a fracture was creeping down the side of the great cauldron. The iridescent gleam was gone from the surface of the brew, and it stank like rotting meat now. Any moment the cauldron would split, and the remainder of Ceridwen's potion would flood the floor. Gwion turned and fled. In his panic and haste, he did not immediately realize that his new power of transformation had taken hold of him, changing his boy's body into that of a silky, brown hare. As he raced out of the house and across a meadow and into a nearby wood, he could feel his tiny, rabbit heart racing. He felt the air rushing over each fine hair on his flanks, and over his long, soft ears that lay tight against his neck, as his nose pointed the way. He leapt over tree roots and swerved around clumps of brush. Despite his fear, Gwion felt elated as he glided through the forest like a ribbon pulled through a weaving.

When Ceridwen heard her cauldron crack, she had been building power with which to spell the last ingredients for her brew—rue and gorse bark, which she hoped would give her son the skill of glamour to hide his ugliness when he chose to. Her magic demanded unnatural things of the world, and their darkness flowed from her fingertips like ribbons of smoke, brownish-purple and sickly yellow-green. They crossed each other in the air before her, twisting and writhing and reeking. When the sound of the great cauldron breaking reverberated off the stone walls, her smoky spells vibrated, and then

dissipated. Surprised and angry, Ceridwen dashed off to the chamber from which Gwion had just fled.

She stopped short at the threshold, eyeing the seething mass that had been her precious mixture oozing over the thick, iron shards that had been her cauldron, and steaming as it spread across the floor. Much as Gwion's involuntary song had burst from him, Ceridwen's overwhelming rage ripped from her throat in a shriek that tore through tapestries and soured milk throughout the house. In the weeks to come, the household would find that Ceridwen's shriek had had unseen and farther-reaching effects. Every small creature in the house, from spiders to mice to the finches nesting under the eaves, died in an instant. The maids kept finding them under the straw on the floors and in cracks and crevices for some time. Just the next day, one maid was on her knees scrubbing soot from the hearthstones when the corpse of a red squirrel fell down the chimney and became tangled in her hair. When, several weeks after the shriek, the one-eyed kitchen cat gave birth to three terribly misshapen kitten-things, several maids left the house, never to return.

Cowering in the corner, the old blind man who tended the cauldron fire whimpered as the shriek faded. Ceridwen fixed her terrible gaze on him and roared, "What has passed here?" The old man, since he was blind, did not know what had happened, and consequently did not answer beyond vehemently shaking his head and quaking with fear. Ceridwen was many things, but stupid was not one of those; she quickly grasped that the stinking mess of her potion was colorless and vile smelling, and

so could not any longer be potent. Someone had tasted the three drops, then. It was not this old man, who was as pock-marked and incapable as he'd ever been, and so it had to have been...Gwion! She noted his absence for the first time.

Calm now, and with vision magically enhanced by fury and hate, Ceridwen spied the hare that Gwion had become, just as his fluffy white tail disappeared into the gorse at the edge of the wood. With a bark of something like pain, the witch shifted her shape into that of a lean greyhound and lit off after the hare, intending to rip its bowels from its soft belly. Gwion, knowing the dog that ran hot on his trail would tear his bowels from his belly, raced even faster. He knew that just a few feet from where he was the woods gave way to the lake, so he sprang up as high as he could in a flying leap across the last few feet. In midair, the hare became a shining silver trout that dropped smoothly into the water with hardly even a splash. Gwion felt the water enter his gills and gush from his mouth, and it tasted like metal and boiled greens. He swished his strong tail and jetted away from shore.

Ceridwen did not miss a beat. Her greyhound leapt the same long leap, transforming into a glossy-coated otter that dove swiftly after the trout, intending to cleave its silver head from its scaly body. Gwion the trout felt the otter's wrath and knew that she would rip his fish head from his fish body. So, he swam upward until his sleek, wet body broke the surface in a great jump. He quickly became a tree sparrow and flitted back to the shore, racing among the treetops far from the otter's reach. He couldn't help the delighted song with which he spun and veered; the joy of flight was so

intense, swelling his small, feathered breast. Ceridwen the otter broke the water's surface just in time to see Gwion the sparrow dart gaily (as it seemed to her) back into the trees on shore.

Her mind blackened and a call for vengeance jabbed her like sharp shards of iron. She swam back down to get a good start, and then swam as hard as she could toward the surface. And with a squeak and a squawk and a mighty leap, she left the lake and the otter became a majestic hawk with wings as wide as a man's spread arms. She lurched and flapped, powering herself higher into the air until she was above the topmost branches of the trees. With her deadly sharp hawk eyes, she spied the little tree sparrow whizzing through the wood. She dove for him, intending to crush him in her powerful claws and slash open his back with her sharp beak. Gwion the sparrow knew that her anger was honed to a fine, cutting edge now, and that she would snatch him in her hawk claws and tear him apart. So he flew faster.

Just then, he spied the millhouse on the river's edge, right ahead of him. He flew down and right into the open window of the mill. Alighting on a pile of corn, he shuffled his little sparrow feet, making a shallow depression in the grain. Then he became a grain of corn that tumbled into the tiny hole he'd made and was covered, as other grains slid down to fill up the space. But Ceridwen the hawk flew very fast, and she came through the mill window just in time to see the slight motion of the grain pile. Landing on the mill floor next to the grain, she became a large dappled hen and began to eat the grain

all around the spot where Gwion hid. Before he could change again, she snapped him up and swallowed him down.

After that, we don't know what Ceridwen did—the story doesn't say. She must have felt satisfied to have beaten her hated enemy. She must have gone home to contemplate the possibility and the wisdom of trying her potion a second time. But the story does tell us that she was horrified to discover that a babe grew within her, and to realize that she would have to lie down in painful and risky childbirth only to bear this child, her enemy Gwion reborn.

And so Ceridwen got her perfect son, although not in the way she had planned. When he was born, he was so beautiful that his face actually glowed with magical vitality. He was so smart that he spoke well almost immediately, and so charming that a wet-nurse took him to breast even against Ceridwen's orders. Just as with her ugly son, Ceridwen could not love this child who did not conform to her will. But such was his beauty that she could not outright kill him, either. So, she tied him into a leather bag and threw him into the river, where the king's son found him and reared him. His name became "shining brow," which is in Welsh, of course, *Taliesin*.

Chapter 5

What's True and What Never Was

From my father, I learned to distrust logic. A large man who approached the world with a large sense of his own dominance, my father loved to talk. At family dinners he would hold forth on whatever topic had struck him, from the news or from a conversation with a colleague, or from discussions with his students that day. He taught German at the local university, but believed strongly in the broad mission of liberal arts, so his students learned German by discussing anything from classical philosophy to popular music. During his dinnertime lectures, my brothers and I were allowed—even encouraged—to respond, to question, to debate.

"Reagan understands that we the people need our second amendment right to own guns." He would begin with an even, reasonable tone. "The framers of our Constitution understood what was required to safeguard democracy and prevent government tyranny. Guns are power, and people can't be deprived of that power to hunt for food or protect themselves. Otherwise we're all just slaves!" His tone would rise here, emphasizing the direness of the problem. "The damned liberals want us to be defenseless against the government when no one has guns but the military and the police! My guns keep us safe from fascism! When the government comes for them, even the damned liberals will be running to me to borrow a gun!"

And then there was silence. We'd all learned there was no argument against this stance that wouldn't result in outright yelling and fist pounding.

Of course, this is a false memory. Or false-ish. It's a sort of conglomerate memory of many similar instances of Dad using logic to express an emotional truth. He was afraid of losing control of his life, of some phantom image of government limiting his personal choices. Years later, creating logical proofs in philosophy and geometry and learning the scientific method, I thought about Dad's style of argumentation and wondered at this subtle lesson I had picked up on as a child. It must have been his odd marriage of logic and emotion that did it. Logic is for firm and solid truths, it seemed to me, but bending words to the shape of one's passions creates a truer sort of truth. If something is so true for you that you can only feel it, only try to argue for its truth with the volume of your voice or the emotive vehemence of your examples, isn't that truer than a mere fact?

Ceridwen's story is not true, because I've only just made it up. At least, I created its details entirely in my mind. The bones of the story already existed, of course—I didn't make up the names and places, or the cauldron of rebirth, or the three drops. The general idea of shapeshifting is in the original story, too. If I insist on the empirical facts, the story I've written about is only six lines long, the medieval remnant of a popular tale of ancient Wales. Just as I've reimagined a dinnertime lecture of my dad's based on a few verifiable (just ask my siblings!) details of one of his favorite topics to talk about, I've reimagined Ceridwen and Gwion, filling in the blanks from my own stores of

experiences and understandings. Rather than a true story or a fictional story, I've told my story.

Chapter 6

Dissociative Disorder: Not Otherwise Specified

I'm not saying that I was already mentally ill as a child, but the way I remember some things happening falls, shall we say, outside the bounds of physical possibility. Perhaps I was only an imaginative child, introverted and dreamy with a penchant for solitary play. I don't remember much. It's hard for me to think about the relatively few childhood moments I remember, though, without seeing in my former self a mind already prone to slip quietly away.

My mother has told me about her own childhood memory of an uncle dying while seated in a green chair on the porch, a fairly specific memory which her older brother has claimed is entirely false. His memory is different, somehow—the wrong uncle, or the wrong chair, or not on the porch at all. Mom's memory could have happened, though; it's not fantastical or clearly invented. In contrast, many of my memories cannot be true—no matter how clearly I remember sitting at the dinner table, chewing my Brussels sprouts and watching my family's heads first contract and then swell on their shoulders until they resembled an assemblage of variously sized, face-colored air bubbles, bobbling about over the table.

If we think for a moment, we can all understand as obvious that human memory is subjective and changeable. As memoirist Thomas Larson writes, "our engagement with memory over time realigns the past" (60). That means that the act of remembering

an event strengthens the memory of the event in that particular version. So, if the last few times my mother thought about her experience of that uncle's death, she also thought about the green chair she remembers him sitting in more than once, then the memory of his death could have come to include the chair. How did I come by my remembered experience at the family dinner, then? I don't suppose I could consult a family member for verification. I suppose that memory is just personal myth, anyway.

Certain experiences, as real to me in memory as any other, make me wonder at the elasticity of mind I seem to have been born with. As a kid, I had many encounters with the fantastical—unrelated to anxiety or depression until later. The basic ability to detach from reality has developed into a diagnosed illness: Dissociative Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified. It's that last part that always gets me. Clinically, it only means that my illness doesn't exactly fit the criteria of any of the common versions of this disorder. Emotionally, I read it and feel that I myself must be somehow nonspecific. Blurry, maybe.

Still, I wonder how much of what I remember is truer than facts. Even if I have filled in the blanks with invented moments, even if what I remember couldn't have happened as measurable and verifiable occurrences, doesn't my story's truth still belong to me? Does the unlikely nature of my memories make them unusable as memoir, unrelatable except as fiction?

Chapter 7

What I Remember: Barb's Yard

Under the willows, I am a real person. A person who has no name, no family, no brothers. The slender yellow branches reach down to greet me when I come here, and I let their pale green leaflets graze my cheeks and arms. They tickle like the tassels on my grandma's bedspread when I would scoot under her bed and curl myself tightly between plastic covered blankets and cardboard boxes filled with her old lady shoes. Willow withes, Barb called those branches. *Withes withes* I say to myself now. It flows like breathing out a whole word without even trying.

I stretch my arms out to both sides, palms turned up, and rub my face sensuously against the draping leaves. Once Mom and I cut out paper willow leaves for a school project and strung them on lengths of yarn, but those felt dry and dead. Real leaves touching my skin move differently. Something felt on an instinctive level is exchanged on contact with them: unmistakable life, no different from touching warm living flesh.

Under the willows, I sit down as a real person. The trunk of this one is massive, grey, and gritty enough to tear the skin on my back as I slide down and my tank top slides up. This willow is one of a pair that I have named "the Sisters," and I think of them as my aunts or maybe my much older cousins. I pull my shirt back down and settle cross-

legged, leaning my head against her and looking up into her higher limbs. These are also thick and grey and rough-barked, and they trail bunches of the leafy withes.

As the backs of my thighs begin to warm the hard clay beneath them, I sit stiller than still and listen to the rest of Barb's yard. Her dogs breathe in their pens and occasionally rattle their chains or pant or sneeze. The leaves of the huge maples behind the house clatter against each other in the breeze. Forty or so feet away, the other Sister tosses her withes about to make a chattering noise like shaking a hundred tiny tambourines. Barb's house creaks. The crooked screen door claps against the door frame at odd intervals. A cricket chirps in the tall grass on the earthen mound that separates this willow and me from the sidewalk. A squirrel squeaks and scurries across Barb's roof.

Scamper, scurry, squirrel, I think. *Scuttle. Skedaddle*. So many words that mean moving like a squirrel start just like the word squirrel. *Scoot*. I think about sc- words for a while, picking at the weeds with one hand and absently grinding a piece of the willow's bark to bits between the fingers of my other hand. *Scram*. And some of them have the sc in the middle, like *escape* and *abscond*. *Sc-sc-sc-sc*, I think.

"Sc," I say aloud.

The sound of my voice confuses me for a moment, and I look around at the long grass and the leafy willow curtains. I feel that I am supposed to try to remember something, but the roughness of bark at my back and the cool smoothness of clay

against my ankles quickly soothe away my confusion. I close my eyes and hear the dogs breathing, the cricket, the screen door.

Now my roots sink into the ground and draw up warmth from deep down below the willow's deepest roots. My buttocks warm up and spread the heat upward through my torso and out to my fingers and toes. Branches spring from the top of my head and from my neck and shoulders, pushed out of my flesh by the current of warmth from the earth. The sensation of extending, of roots and branches erupting from my flesh is not painful or alarming, but perfectly natural. Like my hair growing, or like exhaling.

The tips of my roots and branches can feel the willow's roots and branches sending pulsing messages through me. Grass and weeds tingle with information that passes to me through my new extremities, and I share with them what I am collecting from below. I am aware of each animal—dog, squirrel, cricket, and so many more! Ants and earthworms, pointy-nosed voles under Barb's house, a cat sunning in a window. Pulses like electricity flow between each animal and each tendril of my extended self. And now my branches touch the clouds, which feel like moist lace, and we exchange messages, too—the clouds and I.

It is almost getting dark. I hear voices on the sidewalk: two of my brothers, sent by Mom to find me and bring me home for dinner. I wait for them to pass the trunk of the willow and then I slip around the other side of her and sneak through the pines at the edge of Barb's lot. I'll go home and, in the kitchen, I will sit down as another person. By the time my brothers come home with the news that they couldn't find me, I'll be

washed up and sitting at the table acting like I've been waiting for them for ages. I'll be acting like a bratty little sister. I'll act like sisters do toward their brothers.

Chapter 8

Power, Creation, Control

Throughout my time in the Navy I kept a journal, even though I hadn't an inkling why I should do such a thing. At the time it just seemed like a cool, writerly thing to do. I had a vague idea that someday I might want to remember this stuff. When I read those sporadic journal entries now, I feel no connection to the person who wrote them. There's some cool stuff in there, too. Some poems that I don't think are too shabby, for example. There are some turns of phrase that surprise me with their clarity and precision, and charm me with their offbeat artistry. I just don't know the person who wrote them. Are they true, these things written by someone with my name and my handwriting? They really happened to me, but I don't remember them. I don't control them.

My story of Ceridwen is shot through with magic. She is a magical being, who created another magical being using magic. I think magic is just an interesting way for storytellers to talk about power. After all, there's only one kind of power: getting what you want. Whether a person gets what they want with money or guile or sex or smoky ribbons of magic extending from their fingertips, power is being exercised. Writing about magic is writing about power and about creation—an exercise of power. Ceridwen's children and my own, these breathing acts of creative power, speak of a desire for and a lack of control.

I can't tell you why I chose to have kids, since I never made that decision. My children were visited upon me, it seems, as gifts from the mysterious gaps in my memory. And yet, I know that I did want them, that I did plan to be a mother. Or maybe it was not so much a plan as a seen future that I never thought to question. Motherhood, in my memory, seems to be something that happened to me, like when my back was injured in the Navy, or when grief eclipsed everything else when my brother died, when my small daughter died. Flawed memory has created in me an idea of myself as someone to whom things happen, a hapless pawn without volition. I have trouble seeing things uncolored by a basic understanding of myself as powerless; tossed about by events beyond my control. Once tossed into the air by the force of an event beyond my control, I can't untoss myself. No act of will could undo the acts of violence perpetrated against me by authorless events.

Writing about magic is a way to seize control.

This magic is physical and immediate, but many neopagans relate to another idea of magic, of participating in the life force behind all thought and story and life. Some say we create the world around us with our thoughts, and they believe it literally. We live in the matrix, created and powered by the thoughts of all living things. Others say the same thing, but mean it metaphorically; our understanding of the world we find ourselves in defines our experience of it, so that if we think about it differently it becomes different for us. We humans have creative power, but its source is beyond our control. The difficult lesson is that the fruits of our creative powers are also beyond our

control. In the story, Ceridwen had magical power, its source beyond her control, and its fruits proved beyond her control as well.

Ask anyone who has struggled with infertility just how much our biological creative powers are within our control! Ask any writer or visual artist how much what we create is exactly what we first envisioned, how much we are able to control our inspiration and its execution—not to mention the world's reception of our creation. Like any child grown, it goes its own way and affects the world and is affected by the world in ways we cannot predict or control.

In some ways, when I write about Ceridwen and Gwion I'm writing about the struggle to be myself, about experiencing the shifting shape of who I am. Also, I am writing about being a mother whose children perceive (if only half understanding) her expectations of them, and who experience in their turn the same transformative journey.

The way that I write about Ceridwen's disastrous quest to improve her imperfect son should teach me to let go of my idea of my kids, my desire to control their experience of the world—of who they are supposed to be or who I want them to be—and to accept who they are. I'm even writing about the struggle to release an artistic creation, to let it be what it will to those who encounter it. I'm writing about the struggle to accept the limitations of my power and to be at ease with my lack of control.

I remember that my daughter didn't learn to ride a bike without training wheels as quickly as her older brothers had. She was six on the windy day when I watched her

first successful attempt. She managed to peddle three times around without falling down, then she dropped the bike and ran off to play on the swing set. Baffled, I went to her where she swung, scuffing her pink canvas shoes in the dusty depression beneath the swing. I said, "You finally did it, you finally peddled your bike without falling down! Don't you want to go ride some more?"

"No, I just want to swing."

Uncertain now of my own reaction, I mumbled something like, "Okay," and walked away to sit on a bench and watch her play. What sort of unnatural child was this, to not want to revel in her accomplishment? I had expected her to exclaim, to show off a little, to make sure I had seen her feat. Her brothers certainly would have done all those things, and they assuredly had done on their first time without training wheels. Although it seemed odd to me, I had to admit that there wasn't really anything wrong with her way. So I just watched her swinging, her hair in her face.

Chapter 9

Rhiannon

Even magical characters can't control events, it seems. My writing of a story about Rhiannon happened just as casually as writing about Ceridwen. I simply wrote between the lines of the medieval text. In the ancient Welsh tale, Rhiannon is a magical being who marries Pwyll, the prince of Dyfed. When her baby son is stolen in the night, the nurses who had fallen asleep on duty, kill a puppy and smear Rhiannon's face with its blood, leaving its bones at her bedside. They spread the story that Rhiannon ate her own baby, and Rhiannon's husband is forced to punish her, to appease the public. He sends her to the stables to carry visitors to the castle on her back, like the horses she is strongly associated with in mythology. In wondering what such a punishment would be like, day by day, I found an empty space in the story and I wrote to fill it up.

Rhiannon's Penance

There was little traffic through the stable that day. Rhiannon sat cross-legged in the straw, leaning her cheek against the rough wood of the stall's frame and tickling the bottoms of her bare feet with the strings of her apron. Several horses stood idle in the other stalls, and she listened to their sounds—munching and blowing, swishing tails. Sometimes when the days got long and her muscles cramped from sitting on the floor, she took on a horse's form and stood four-legged in her stall making those same

noises—only if she knew the grooms were not nearby, though. The fear and hatred men felt when they saw what she was still stopped her breath and widened her eyes, even these many years after she had learned to hide herself in a woman's form. This day, although no one had come through the stable in hours, she wished to stay a woman so that she could feel the jabs of grief on the insides of her ribs that were hard to feel properly as a mare.

Was her perfect, golden-haired baby boy safe and healthy somewhere? In her thoughts, she vacillated between succumbing to throat-clenching sorrow and wildly grasping at some certainty that her newborn had been kidnapped by an enemy of her husband, King Pwyll, and was even now, years later, being carefully looked after in hopes of a ransom. Either way, he was not in her arms.

Rhiannon ached for her child, wrapping her arms around herself and rocking, breathing faster until her nostrils flared and she felt light-headed. Suddenly, the physical pain in her chest was too much to bear. She reached out her arms and, twisting at the waist, came up on all fours. With a deep breath and an arching back, she began to grow. Her neck lengthened, and her skin whitened; her arms and legs got longer and thinner. And then she stood in her stall as the white mare, stomping a little to clear away the last tinglings from the transformation.

The other horses bayed and whinnied, pleased that their mistress had lost the odd, alien smell that so confused them when she would walk among them on two legs. Her grief dulled now, she found that she was hungry. Turning to the manger full of

sweet meadow hay, Rhiannon munched and crunched peacefully. She knew she couldn't stay this way for long without someone coming in and wanting to saddle her and ride her. This, she would not allow. In her home country of Annwyn she was the favored daughter of a great queen, and to allow herself to be ridden like a beast would be unthinkable. Perhaps the king's advisors knew how humiliating it would be, and so had suggested exactly that as penance for her supposed crime.

Here in Dyfed, she had heard bards sing of such things before. Disobedient wives and women who failed to act *womanly* often got treated like animals in tales, although this was not a tale. Still, her husband had acted well. He had not given in to her accusers, had not ordered her death or sent her away. He had told her of the advisors' plan, to cause her to spend her days in the stable at the gate, where she must tell her story to those who came, and offer to carry people back and forth from the gates to the castle on her back. Together they had planned that she would accept the penance to appease those who cried for her death. So far, as long as Rhiannon stayed in human form, no man in the kingdom would accept a ride on her back. Those who chose to hear her tale felt only pity and love for their queen. Those who believed her a witch who had eaten her own baby, as her accusers maintained, feared her and stayed away.

Comforted by her meal of hay and her respite from grief, Rhiannon dozed. First, she dreamed that she smelled the meadows of home: Annwyn, in the land her husband's people named Otherworld. She took on her full form, that of both selves—woman mounted upon white mare—and raced through the heather and grasses. Now

she closed her eyes and felt warm air from the south blowing through her hair and through her mane, carrying to her the scents of black earth and moist bark from deep within the Nameless Wood. She opened her dream eyes, and saw that she was in the kitchen garden behind her mother's palace. The birds of Annwyn sang their magic down from the branches of the apple trees, and Rhiannon was filled with the unending depths of peace and joy that the birdsong wrought for all who heard it. If only she could stay here!

A loud scraping sound of wood on wood startled Rhiannon awake. She found herself lying on the floor of the stall, just a woman with her apron strings all knotted and straw in her hair. The long latch was being drawn up screeching against the jamb, which meant the great gate was being opened and riders would presently be entering the stable. She stood and brushed her skirts clean with her hands, then smoothed her hair back into place and readied to present herself to tell her tale and to offer the newcomers a ride.

The tall man who came in had bright orange hair that made him instantly recognizable to Rhiannon. He was Teyrnon, a lord from Gwent in the east. He led his gleaming chestnut stallion into the second stall and then turned and greeted her with all the formality possible in that place. He called her "my queen" and bent at the knee, acting for all the world as though they stood in the great hall.

"I've come with news for you," he said. "Let me tell you it in the shortest version. I have brought you back your son. He came to my household as a foundling two years

ago, but now anyone can see how much he resembles his father, your husband.” And he handed the boy over to her.

Here, the story goes on to detail Rhiannon’s further adventures as the queen of Dyfed and the wife of Pwyll. But here, I found I must stop telling her story. Perhaps I truncated it because I wish it to be, like my own story, ongoing in my imagination. Perhaps I finished the portion of the story that matters to my own, and so my subconscious wouldn’t let me imagine further. Things like this, I’m figuring out as I go along.

Chapter 10

Occupying the Middle

There is so much more that could be told about this story, about Rhiannon's reaction to this news, about the punishment of those who swore she'd eaten her son. The meat of the tale, though, is not in the happy ending, but in Rhiannon's confrontation with events beyond her control. In my telling, I've placed her in the liminal space between her condemnation and her acquittal, between the loss of her son and his return, and between her human self as a noblewoman and her magical self as a horse goddess.

Liminal spaces are the meat of my own tale. Memories that stay with me are often the moments in between rather than the action itself. In my grade school days sometimes I would suddenly find myself lying in bed at night, as if I were waking up without having gone to sleep. Staring at the web of springs under my brother's top bunk mattress, I'd try to remember what had happened to me since the last time I noticed things were happening and time was passing. It might have been hours or days since the world had seemed real enough for me to register. The images that came to mind then, the few that I could actually remember, were things like pulling on my puffy winter boots to walk to school in the snow (tying the drawstrings snugly over the tops of the felt boot liners), swinging on the playground at recess ("How high can you go?" the other girls shouted. And "Get off my party line!"), and staying after school to clean the

chalky erasers for the teacher (the great metal vacuum brush spinning chalk-flavored dust). Before school, between classes, after school. Whatever part of my brain sat in class and learned things, it apparently didn't need me to notice it.

A certain compulsion to fill in the centers of things is borne out in my writerly choices; the part of Rhiannon's tale left untold in the medieval codices is that part that I wound up telling. The version that was written down includes this brief mention of her actual punishment:

And as they drew near to the palace, they beheld Rhiannon sitting beside the horseblock. And when they were opposite to her, "Chieftain," said she, "go not further thus, I will bear every one of you into the palace, and this is my penance for slaying my own son and devouring him." "Oh, fair lady," said Teirnyon, "think not that I will be one to be carried upon thy back." "Neither will I," said the boy. "Truly, my soul," said Teirnyon, "we will not go." So they went forward to the palace, and there was great joy at their coming (Guest 357).

Earlier in the tale, the medieval author has recorded the details of what Rhiannon's penance would be, and here we have the end of it. The middle—the actual day-to-day carrying out of her penance—is left out, like my blank time in the classroom. Although it is a story about a woman who, magical powers notwithstanding, lacks the power to keep hold of her child or to disprove the terrible accusations against her, my telling of it is an attempt at control. As if filling in the blanks in Rhiannon's story could substitute for the blanks I cannot fill in my memory.

Chapter 11

What I Remember: Army Hospital

The Army hospital in Georgia smelled like any hospital. I remember the sharpness of it stinging my nostrils as I carried my small boy into the emergency room lobby. His face was sweaty against my shoulder, his labored breathing rattling and buzzing my hand on his back. Something—my clumsy half-run, some wild look in my eyes—made the woman behind the front desk jump up and run around the counter, slamming the silver button on the wall that slid wide the doors to the ER. She didn't ask me anything or try to help me carry my son, but she quickly pulled over a wheeled cot from against the wall and said, "Put him here, sugar."

I laid Jacob on his back, peeling his limp arms from around my neck. He seemed surprised to be set down, looking up at me with too-shiny eyes under heavy eyelids.

"Now you just come on with me," said the front desk lady, grabbing my arm. She raised the side rails and pushed the cot straight down the hall with one hand, still holding my arm in the other. The cot slipped smoothly between two curtains, where she kicked at the wheels to set the brakes and then disappeared from my life forever, as the tiny space swarmed with people.

"Has he been sick?"

"104.8."

"How much does he weigh?"

“Get X-ray in here for a chest film!”

“Ma’am, are you the mother?”

I remember the barrage of questions to which I must have responded, but I don’t remember answering them. Each excruciating second of the sixteen attempts to start an intravenous line is etched into my nervous system, though. When they started looking at the blood vessels in his neck, I went out into the hall.

Sitting beside his hospital bed later that night, I touched just the pads of my fingers to my son’s forehead, his earlobe, the center of his throat, his elbow. He slept on. I tried to memorize the tiny crinkles in the skin near the corners of his eyes. When the nurse quietly came in to check on him, she found me chanting half-aloud, “Stay here, stay here, stay here, stay here...”

“You know he’ll be fine, Momma,” she said. “At his age he’ll bounce back from pneumonia so fast you’ll have trouble keeping him down.” She patted my back. “He’s not going anywhere.”

I looked at her in bafflement. Of course he wasn’t going anywhere. I had been addressing myself.

Chapter 12

Here and Now

I have arrived at a moment. In this moment, one which I hope I will be unlikely to forget as I've forgotten so many moments, I must begin to write about the heart of the thing. Having pushed through many doubts about whether my creative work is worthy of a university degree, and pushed through many fears about the judgments of those rigorous academics whose place it is to judge the rigor of my work, I have arrived at the spot where truth lives. I understand now that the difficulties and toils of creative work are different from those of academic work, but no less demanding. Certainly more painful.

As my high school English teacher of long ago once taught me, one must begin a creative writing project by writing *around* a chosen theme. At first, a writer writes tangentially and at kitty-corner to the point because the point is so often at center of the tightest of knots, felt somewhere high in the chest. Coming at the point directly, as with a sharp blade to cut away the tangles that hide it, only cuts away the threads one might follow in order to find the true center intact. I have written around, all around. For years, it seems, I've been writing around the center of the matter.

And here is the thing: I feel cheated. I want to move on, to live as a mother of grown children, a mother whose central concern is no longer the day-to-day moments in which her children need her, but I've forgotten as much about the years of their

growing up than I remember, and it's hard to move past wanting more time. Amidst a cultural clamor of self-determination and personal responsibility, a dense grid of social norms that insist on all my shortcomings being relics of my own poor choices, I insist right back. And my cry, like Ceridwen's shriek, wails that I have lost, that I have loss, that I suffer from having lost. Chunks of time, moments when I made decisions and took actions I don't remember deciding on. And Julia.

Ah, now we know that I've arrived at the moment because the heat at the center of that tangled knot in my chest—uncovered now, glowing, palpating—radiates upward and out, flowing through my sinus cavities and out of my eyes. Caring for children starts with taking care of their physical needs, and somehow I failed at that most basic of duties. I couldn't keep my daughter alive. The critics in my head cry out "Monster! Witch! Devourer of infants!" Like medieval monks naming the mythical Ceridwen an image of devil-worship, like the people of Dyfed crying out for Rhiannon's punishment in the story, the nameless faultfinders censure me. My lost moments don't include those excruciating ones, the thirty-six hours between the first symptom and her death. I am not sure if I wish that they, too, were stricken from the record.

A Sunday afternoon. One of my almost nine-month-old twin daughters, Julia, seems listless; she won't eat, only sleeps. My own left ear is painfully infected, so I decide we should both go to the ER. It is literally the first time the twins have ever been apart. At the ER I am given antibiotics, and Julia is subjected to tests. She has a slight fever. They listen to her heart, her lungs. They take blood, and she cries. They place her

in an immobilizer, a clear plastic cage that traps her arms straight up over her head so a clear chest x-ray can be taken, and she cries and cries. Everything seems okay. They do not swab her throat for strep. It's a virus, they say. We go home.

The next day, Monday, she is warmer and still too sleepy. I call the pediatrician who says, "Bring her in." It's the same pediatrician who looked after me and my brothers when we were kids. He examines her as I tell him about our trip to the ER. He says that if they did all those tests and found nothing, then he has to agree that it's a virus. Fluids and rest. He does not swab her throat for strep. This is when I tell myself over and over that if I had only said something different...presented the information about what was done the night before in a different way so that one or both of us could have noticed that no one ever tested her for strep....

My husband works second shift. By the time he comes home around 10pm Monday night, I'm exhausted. I am still sick myself, my left ear blocked and aching all the way through to my teeth. Everyone is asleep except for me and Julia, who hasn't eaten all day and only stops her small, mewling restlessness if I sit up and hold her. He takes her and sends me to bed, settling down in front of the television. I sleep instantly.

"Get up! There's something wrong with her eyes!"

I wake up and, like any mother of little ones, I am up and walking toward the baby before I'm really awake. One look at her and I'm fully awake and terrified. Her eyes are rolling up into her head and her breathing is very fast and shallow.

"Call 911! Do it now!" I shout.

She is lying on the stained tan carpet. I am afraid to pick her up. I stroke her cheeks and whisper to her, but I have no idea what I am saying. Part of my mind is, as always, on the upstairs bedroom where the other three children are asleep. Who will stay with them? My husband was still on the phone.

“Call my mom, tell them to call my mom.”

My mother lives on the same block, right around the corner. I don't know who finally gets her, but I know she shows up on foot in her nightgown and robe. The police get there first, then the EMTs. They bend over my tiny girl with their dark jackets, strange equipment, tubes. They have left the front door open and I go to it and hide behind it, between the open door and the wall. One of the cops, a woman, reaches into my cave and takes me by the arm, drawing me out again. A few months down the line, my mom would tell me that later that day, she heard that same cop on the phone saying that the house was very messy but that the grandmother had cleaned up a bit. They were assessing the scene for signs of abuse.

I ride in the front passenger seat of the ambulance, answering with her age and weight when the emergency workers called out questions. The next thing I know is that my husband and I are in the hospital in a tiny private waiting room. No windows, lemon-scented air fresheners. The room is all ivory and beige, but the door stands open to the glare of steel and white curtains just outside. I try to pray, but all that I can think is “she has to be okay, she has to be okay.” I try promising eternal perfect goodness in exchange for her being okay.

She isn't okay. The nurse comes and says, "I'm so sorry, but we weren't able to revive her." And I fall. Or else I run. I think, both. My instant pressing need is to touch earth. I run outside, where I find a strip of grass between the ER door and the ambulance driveway. I sit there and feel an instant of something like relief, but I am not allowed to stay. The messenger nurse has chased me out here and, like the cop who wouldn't let me hide behind the door, she takes me by the arm and detaches me from the soothing ground. There is more torture then. Holding Julia. My mom has arrived in the tiny room, and my husband's mom, too. The cruel nurse brings her, swaddled like a newborn in a hospital blanket, and we take turns holding her. I am not certain I even want to hold her, but I am not given a choice.

This is one of the clearest and most coherent of my memories, when I was fully present and cognitively functioning, and I didn't have any choices to make.

Chapter 13

What I Remember: Grandma's House

I am seven or so. I sit on my Grandma's back porch on a warm sunny day. The hill on which her house is situated slopes toward a brook, revealing a growing wedge of the house's foundation. The huge main garage, the largest of several outbuildings, mirrors the house across a narrow corridor of grass. With cautious steps, I descend this hill-corridor to a line of evergreens that I know marks the edge of a drop-off; the brook that curves around the back of the property has cut a deep trench over many years. This was explained to me by my eldest brother, who demonstrated the concept by pouring water down a hand-carved "brook" in the sandbox. To my right is the way to the street, cars, neighbors. I turn left.

I go downhill a bit more, past the bottom entrance to the main garage—this downhill side of the garage is just like the topside, only with a dirt floor. My dad told me that this was where they put the carriage horses long ago. Walking past its wide doors terrifies me. Covered with peeling white paint, the two doors meet in the middle where they have been fastened together with heavy chains that clank grimly and leave brownish grit on my fingers. Each door has a black glass window across the top, and I creep past with the certainty that things that mean me harm peer through the dirty glass. It feels only right, though, that I should have to bravely cross such a dark, infected place in order to reach a magic one.

I turn left again around the garage and I am beside the brook. It is narrow enough here that three hopping steps from rounded stone to rounded stone would carry me across it. Dense woods crowd close to the other bank, radiating secret, rustling calls that speak to me of hidden things yearning to be found and gleaming things that conceal inexpressible joys and threats. The brook sparkles and chuckles as it curves out of these mocking woods, slips around the foundation of the main garage and then turns again a short way downstream.

The builders took care to incorporate the natural beauty of this brook when they built here. At the very top of the hill, they built a triangular covered carport that juts out over the brook and leans on a steel column with a concrete base on the opposite bank. The brook curls under this triangle. Windows wrap around the carport, looking down on my spot and also upstream around the curve into the woods. In the shade of the carport and the enfolding trees, I am cool and happy in the wet sand. I dabble my feet in the water and look for tadpoles, minnows, and crayfish. Strange, spindly waterbugs race among the rocks, and I watch their tiny feet creating dimples in the surface of the water.

I am myself here. Mossy stones and nodding ferns are my playmates, and I speak to birds and chipmunks and dragonflies. The water's song lulls me, even as the mysteries of the woods beckon and tantalize. My senses stretch to include awareness of the many tiny lives being lived out beyond my normal human grasp. I sense mushrooms, wet and heavy incarnations of soil beneath overhanging fronds. I feel crawling things navigating the cracks in tree bark and the undersides of leaves. I become like the rabbit

that crouches unmoving beneath the lowest pine boughs: a sphere of alertness around a center of stillness. The world is a net, interconnected in all directions, woven with strands of light and dark and all that is in between. I am of the world. I am the world.

Abruptly I am only a girl again. A presence has intruded, tearing me from my expansiveness as if someone had torn the page of a book while I read it. Sitting at the brook's edge, I glimpse movement above. A blur of blond hair and red shirt ducks down under the window of the carport overhead. A brother, spying on me from above. I feel invaded, although I know that all he could have witnessed was me, sitting still beside the brook.

Within moments I hear what can only be all of my brothers galloping down the hill, shouting insults at each other, thumping and rolling and laughing and slapping. They round the garage, careless of the monsters inside, and jump past me over the brook like a sudden strong gust of wind. One of them brushes my shoulder with a foot or an outflung hand as they pass. They charge between the trees and brush, disappearing into the woods. Three cars in a train entering a tunnel. I hesitate for only a moment before plunging through the water to follow.

My feet are callused from long summer months without shoes, so I hardly feel the twigs and fallen acorn shells that crunch beneath me. Branches snap against my cheeks and I feel spider webs breaking on my arms and legs. My brothers are moving so fast, I'm afraid I won't catch up. I can still hear dim voices, though, and I follow them.

Winding my way around impassable clumps of bushes and slide-stepping over a fallen tree, slick with shaggy moss, I strain to hear the boys. I can't hear them.

Now I realize that the crickets have begun to sing and the woods are getting dark. I know I can't be too far from the brook and the house, but I'm no longer certain which direction I'm headed. Not yet afraid, but feeling confused—the boys were just here, weren't they?—I take three or four more faltering steps and stumble through some brush into the open. And here are my brothers. They are lying on their backs in the middle of a round clearing, the existence of which I have never suspected. In fact, I have never been farther than a few steps beyond the brook before.

As relieved as I am to see the boys, I am becoming afraid of the darkness that seems to have caught me out with no warning. I creep over toward my oldest brother, who turns his head and beckons me with a brisk sideways nod. Gratefully, I sink to the ground and curl up under his protecting arm. We all watch the sky in silence for what seems like hours, until the stars begin to appear.

"That's Cassiopeia," he tells me after a while, pointing up. "See the 'W' shape right there?" He traces a 'W' in the sky with his extended finger. I line up my eyes to follow his arm, and I do see it! I am his rapt pupil now.

"She was a queen who told everyone that she was more beautiful than all the mermaids in the sea. So the mermaids' father, the king of the sea, locked her up tight in a cage in the sky and she'll never escape from up there now."

“That’s not how the story goes, ya knucklehead,” says my next oldest brother.

“She’s supposed to be tied to a rocking chair! That’s what the ‘W’ is!”

“Just shut up.”

I feel certain that my oldest brother could never be wrong, so I ignore the other input and say, “What are all those other stars?” And so, I cuddle close to him, sucking my thumb and nodding to whatever he tells me. He shows me the big dipper and tries to make me see a strong man with a bow and arrow—Sagittarius, which I can’t see, but I nod anyway. I am nodding as I drift off to sleep, right there on the hard ground of the clearing, against my brother’s warm side. I wake briefly some time later to find him depositing me in my bed upstairs in Grandma’s house. I don’t remember the trip home through the woods. He must have carried me.

Chapter 14

Askew

I once wrote a poem about a brick wall that I walk past pretty regularly. I wrote about how much I love that wall, because it has one crooked brick that seems to have been mortared in purposely askew. Whoever made that wall knows what it is to feel at odds with the expectations of the world-at-large. Even if the brick's asymmetrical placement was just a joke to the mysterious mason, the permanency of it had to have struck home as the mortar was being slathered. There had to have been an intent behind it.

I like to think that the builder of that wall felt, as I do, that symmetry is false. That neatness is artificial. That all the houses in the neighborhood around that wall, with their perfectly weedless flowerbeds full of predictable daylilies and hostas and their evenly clipped shrubs and carefully edged sidewalks, represent the labors of some foolish soul desperate for control. Someone for whom it perhaps seems that, if they could just get everything in the yard, in the house, in the world *just so*, disaster could be staved off. Having worked to achieve the straightest of edges and the strictest of separations between what is planted and tended and what is the unintentional result of a stray dandelion or thistle seed, such a person must feel protected somehow.

After all, our work is what we have to offer the world. The sweat of American Protestant-work-ethic brows. If you don't put in the work, if you don't pay the price, our

culture teaches us that you don't deserve much of anything. So we should prune our bushes geometrically and mortar our bricks neatly and evenly into our walls so that everyone can see that we get it, that we are doing the work, that we deserve what we have.

The frightening truth, my truth, is that no one has control. Evenly spaced, symmetrical bricks always call out to me the pervasive lie. No matter how hard you work to manifest control, to fight off the wildness and the seeds of weeds on the wind, they find you. Loss finds you. So much better off, then, is the person who accepts the chaos inherent in living. So much better to take comfort in it and to revel in it than to live in stiff, neat denial of it.

Surely I'm not the only one to feel this way! That brick gives me hope.

Chapter 15

Branwen

Branwen's Gift

The butcher's arms dangled from his thin shoulders like the strings of sausages hanging from the ceiling behind him. Branwen no longer trembled at the sight of him, knowing now that his daily blows were only dutiful. His palm, seeming overlarge on his bony wrist, met her cheek with just enough force to make the sharp, skin-on-skin clapping sound that so satisfied the rest of the staff. She gasped a little in response, raising her own hand to her face in a protective gesture intended to convince the onlookers that it hurt, that she'd suffered her due.

The butcher turned his stiff back and left the room then, as did the several kitchen workers who'd gathered to see Branwen's scheduled slap delivered. With her head slightly bent to convey humility, Branwen turned back to her table near the window and the turnips she'd been slicing. As she looked out the window at a gloomy sky, a strange sense of being elsewhere and out of time came over her. She felt that she was already dead and gone, somehow. A feeling of loss, greater than she could bear, pressed down on her and she greeted it with relief, grateful because this feeling was the signal that she was done, she could leave this world. Was this her future she was feeling?

“Keep up the slicing, there!” yelled Cook, lobbing the end of a carrot at Branwen’s head.

Branwen started from her odd daydream and tossed the piece of carrot into the bucket under the table. The injustice of her plight struck her harder than any carrot or butcher could. Offended by her hated half brother’s foul act of maiming the king’s horses, the people of Ireland insisted on punishing their foreign queen. She’d been demoted from queen to kitchen maid, and the morning visits from the butcher were to continue indefinitely.

Her best moments now were glimpsing the nurses walking in the kitchen gardens with her small son. The first time she saw them out there she had run outside, crying out his name and reaching out to hold her child. But the Irish nurses had spat at her and kept her baby away from her.

“This is the king’s own son, you filthy servant!”

After that they walked with a guard, but they still made a point of passing the kitchen windows on the child’s regular walks, just in order to taunt his mother. Her worst moments were these same moments, because sometimes when she saw her baby across the lawns, her spine tingled and the small hairs on her ears prickled and she felt her child’s death in her guts as if it were a thing already accomplished.

A sudden hush in the room behind her broke into Branwen’s thoughts. She turned toward the center of the room, finding herself alone. *Strange*, she thought. With supper in a few hours, this should have been the busiest time of day in the kitchens.

Then she felt warmth on her back and turned back to the windows, which had abruptly lit up with strong rays of sunlight that slanted between the open shutters. The light seemed yellower than any sunbeams she'd ever seen. It illuminated everything it fell on until the edges of things began to sparkle.

In that light, Branwen saw that things were more than she'd understood before. The massive planks of nicked and scarred wood that made up the table were not just chunks of dead trees, but they were the flesh of the earth. The flat stones that paved the floors were the earth's bones, and the warm sweet breeze that now drifted through the windows was the earth's breath. Someone called to her from the kitchen garden, someone she couldn't see clearly through the bright sunlight. Wiping her hands on her apron and checking the room once more to be certain that no one was there to accuse her of sloth, Branwen walked out the garden door.

Mounted on a silvery white horse that stood in the middle of the vegetable beds was a stunning woman. She was large, although not a giant like Branwen's real brother, Bran. Her black hair twisted into a thick rope over her shoulder, and her fine dress did not hide that she rode fully astride, like a man. Branwen could still hear her calling, although her mouth didn't appear to be moving. Stepping close, Branwen addressed the woman.

"Who are you? Have you come to take me home to my brother in Wales?"

"That, I cannot do, for I am only here a moment and only to speak with you, to give you a gift that will help you."

The woman reached into a leather bag at her side, removed something small, cupped in her hand. She reached the hand out toward Branwen. Drawn forward, dreamlike, Branwen reached up to accept the gift from the strange woman's hand. It was a tiny bird, greyish brown and speckled with white, now cupped in her own hand. As she looked at it in wonder, the bird suddenly burst forth in song.

Hearing its song was like honey on her tongue, like snowflakes melting on her eyelashes, like laying her palm across her baby's back and holding him to her breast. When the song stopped, Branwen felt as if her very bones had been softened into clay. Blinking and shaking her head slightly, she looked up at the woman.

"It's lovely," she said. "I can't possibly keep it, though. As soon as any of the others in the kitchen heard it sing, they'd take it from me. Kill it, probably."

"It will not sing, then, but speak. And only to you, Branwen. Only you will hear it, and anything you say to it will go unheard by all but the bird."

"Oh," was all she could think to reply, unsettled by the woman's unmoving mouth.

"It is a rare bird, much like you." The woman seemed to smile. "Teach it to find your brother, King Bran. Teach it to tell him to come get you."

"Oh!" Branwen said, this time with understanding. Spellbound, she did not even think to question the truth of these fantastical events.

Before she could thank the woman—indeed, before she could properly grasp what was happening—the silver horse trotted away. Despite its easy pace, though,

horse and rider were gone in an instant, seeming to move ten full yards for each small step. Branwen stood alone in the kitchen garden, the bird now silent in her hand, and felt the warm yellow light draining away like an ocean wave retreating across the sand.

A sense of urgency occurred to her, and she ran back to the kitchen, searching frantically for somewhere to hide the small bird before the other servants saw it. Her eyes lit on the long kneading trestle where she toiled for hours each day, working the dough for the endless loaves required by the castle's inhabitants. Tearing away a strip of linen from the backside of her apron hem, she formed it into a makeshift nest and tucked it away, bird and all, on one of the crossbeams under the trestle. Quickly, she gathered a palmful of bread crumbs from the floor and deposited those, too, in the linen nest.

"Thank you," said a quiet, melodic voice. The bird's!

"You're welcome," Branwen replied, standing now once again in front of her table by the window. The other servants bustled in and preparations for the night's supper resumed, as if they had never ceased. No one appeared to have heard Branwen's words.

Chapter 16

What I Remember: A Gift of Magic

The day my sister was born, I went inner-tubing with friends. Reclining on huge black rubber doughnuts, patched and discolored enough to make one believe that they may actually have once been used inside the tires of some truck or tractor, we floated and splashed down the Crystal River. Or maybe it was the Wolf River, or some other river. I was entirely new to such a pastime, although my friend and her family seemed to have tried this plenty of times before. We zipped through the small rapids, knocking elbows and skinning knees on the great rocks. And we lazed, burning in the sun, where the river widened and slowed.

Meanwhile, my mother braved a different journey—one I couldn't conceive of at the time but came to know myself years later. I imagine she was quietly accepting of the situation, steadfast and practical in the face of the pain of childbirth. Or else I imagine she slipped, shaman-like, beyond the edge of this world, did battle heroically, and then re-emerged with her hard-won trophy. Or else I imagine she screamed and cursed herself for refusing pain medication. Probably, a small part of her mind occupied itself worrying over my safety on the far away river.

As we left the river to drive back home, my friend's mother broke the news to me that I had a sister. My instant relief came mixed with a difficult to define sense of dread; what if this daughter turned out to be a better one? At thirteen, now no longer

the youngest child or the only girl child in my family, it occurred to me on some deep level that I might no longer be necessary. I don't think I ever felt guilty for not being present at the hospital that day, selfish child that I was.

The whole family gathered in my mother's hospital room that evening. She appeared to be something of a star, the belle of the maternity ward ball, because at forty-two years old, her "geriatric" pregnancy and delivery of a perfect, healthy child interested the nurses more than I would have expected. They kept popping in and out of her room, and one of them handed me a tightly wrapped pink package shaped like a jelly bean. I sat to hold my sister. I admit to some disappointment on that first meeting; she was red-faced and had black hair growing too far down her forehead. For some reason, I had expected a chubby pink cherub, blond like my father.

"She's kind of ugly."

"Oh, she is NOT!" Mom said, chuckling.

Within a few days, though, I became vastly more interested in that pink jelly bean. I watched my mother feed her and bathe her and tuck her tiny wet-spaghetti-noodle limbs into the non-gendered green and yellow onesies we'd purchased—Mom never once admitted to hoping for another girl. I learned to take various shades and consistencies of spit-up and poo in stride. And when I got to just sit in the rocker and hold her, all warmth and talc and gurglings, I felt both present and transported. It turned out that seven pounds of baby could be a thousand-pound anchor.

I learned about the fear that loving a helpless thing brings. In my mind, I wove magic webs of protection over and around my sister, nets that would keep her from rolling off the couch or the changing table, charms that would shield any car she rode in from accidents and act like an invisible helmet around her tender skull. A child myself, I instinctively turned to magic as a means to defy the powerlessness I felt to adequately protect her. Magic helped me to convince myself that I had some control. My sister was my first baby.

Chapter 17

Limitations

A certain quotation has several times caught my interest, appearing in various internet forums and attributed to fifth-century Christian philosopher Saint Augustine of Hippo. It characterizes hope as the product of two disparate emotions: “Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain as they are.” The anger comes easily, fed by my recognition that from nursery school on, I was taught to believe a lie.

You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set your mind to—that is the message I got as a child. It came from school, from the Electric Company and Mr. Rogers shows we sometimes watched in class, and also from the teachers who wanted to inspire a new generation to achieve. I heard it at home from my parents, and it featured in many of the children’s books my mother read to me. It was not true. Even as a relatively privileged, middle-class American woman, my options have been limited by my shortcomings. And no less by my culture’s understandings and expectations about mental illness, cognitive function, gender.

With what bit of hindsight I have, I can recognize some of it happening—the coming up short. For example, in eighth grade, I stopped trying to do well in my honors math class because I didn’t want to seem too smart to Charles, the boy I wanted to like me.

“You’re like, really smart, right?” he asked me at recess.

“I don’t know.” I looked at the blacktop, at my shoe, at anything but him.

He bent down and craned his neck to look into my downturned face. “You won the spelling bee and you get like straight As, though. Right? You probably want to be a rocket scientist or something.”

His tone remained neutral, but I knew he was pointing out the difference between us. He got Cs and Ds, and he got in trouble sometimes. I had never been in the principal’s office except to read the announcements over the P.A. system. You didn’t get chosen to do that unless you were one of the good kids. And I hadn’t won the spelling bee. True, I had outspelled the eventual winner, Sarah, in the practice session in class. I was number one in the pre-spelling bee line-up. But when the top ten of us had to stand in front of a big group of teachers and parents in the media center and spell into a microphone, I threw in the towel on my second try. I misspelled “chocolate” so that I wouldn’t have to go again. I still remember the relief of sitting down with the other non-contenders.

“You’re in the smart class for math, too. I suck at math!” He laughed. I couldn’t fathom being so okay with being bad at something—so okay that you could laugh about it!

I don’t remember how that conversation ended, but I remember thinking about it from time to time ever since. Very soon afterward, I started experimenting with not doing my math homework and showing up to class unprepared. It turned out that

nothing much happened. I discovered that math teachers don't actually expect students to do everything exactly as they are told. Suddenly, I saw that the time I spent doing algebra problems could instead be more time to practice hanging out with my few friends who were "cool" kids rather than "good" kids.

I don't think I actually said to myself, *I should try less*, so doing less well in math wasn't exactly a conscious choice. I simply understood in a non-analytical way that Charles would not like me if I seemed smarter than him. Also, it wasn't a single moment's choice, as this retelling of it might make it seem; it was a conglomerate of actions and inactions over a period of months, all of which seemed like the thing to do at the time. That is the nature of cultural conditioning. I made choices in a complex matrix of beliefs and perceptions from which I drew conclusions, both intentionally and subconsciously. Charles valued cool people, not smart people. I wanted to be the kind of person he would value. I worked to be cool. That's all.

When I became a mother, I was dismayed to find that the daily work of nurturing my children was not really valued. My then-husband often needled me to "get a job" because he wanted more household income to pay for more stuff. Clearly, he didn't consider what I did all day a *job*. My belief, then as now, is that my work of those years is the most important work I will ever do. Because of that belief, I worked hard, blissfully engaged and productive. In the business world, you might say I spent my time optimizing my resources to bring about my key results: that my babies' bodies and minds could flourish, firmly rooted in the safe and nourishing place I worked to create

for them, and that they would be able to spring forth into their lives with complete assurance that they are cherished and with the security of an immovable foundation in my love. Not such a tall order, right? I felt and still feel that my continuous presence and engagement with them was an indispensable element in accomplishing my purpose.

The State of Wisconsin believes differently. After our daughter died, my kids' father and I got divorced. I can't count the times I've read or been told how common our situation was. Marriages rarely survive the loss of a child. Whatever counselor or state aid worker might say this, they said it as if to excuse me. As if to say, *Yes*, you are a single mother with little income. And *No*, you don't deserve financial help, but we have found a way to rationalize it so that your asking for help is less shameful. At barely thirty years old, with three small children and no spouse, I was hardly a rare bird. Apparently, though, my having suffered through such a loss marked me out as different from those regular, run-of-the-mill single mothers who just wanted to not have to work. I had paid into the system.

With no education other than a useless diploma that said I had gained advanced proficiency in the Arabic language (there were no jobs for linguists who were not native speakers), I found myself unable to get a job for more than \$5.25 per hour. I also found that state law prevented Family Services from helping my family with food stamps unless I left my kids with someone else and worked at least 20 hours a week. The state *would* pay for childcare while I worked, though, since my pay wouldn't even cover that cost. They would pay for someone else to take care of my kids, but not for me to do it.

I had my record of military service and the G.I. Bill, so I thought I would go back to school, and finish the bachelor's degree I had started before I enlisted. Then once the kids were all old enough to be in school, I could get a better job. But the law required that even a fulltime student with small children work those 20 hours a week in order to qualify for any assistance. I was required by law to either be away from my kids or to be able to afford to stay home. In essence, it seems, my state believed that my children did not deserve to have their mother with them in the way that children in wealthier families do.

I threw away with both hands my math potential, my spelling championship, my marriage. On the edge of sleep, I ponder these things. These are only the decisions I remember making. What other unremembered ones directed my course? Did I somehow throw away my children's possibilities along with my own?

Chapter 18

Who They Are

When my oldest son was in first grade, my second son started pre-school at a local church. Most days I would bring my two-year-old daughter along to the church to pick up her brother. There was one time I remember, though, when she happened to stay with my mother so I could more easily run a few errands. Time alone with my middle child being hard to come by, I saved a few errands to do with him. We visited the bank.

I'm certain that it is for me as it must be for many single mothers who struggle to pay for their lives and always fear that their insolvency will prove someone's excuse to take from them their right to their own children. This insecurity cuts deeply, and makes things like the experience of going to the bank into something more than a practical errand; going to the bank feels like a confrontation with the forces of an evil world, poised to take away whatever tiny sense of stability I may have managed to muster. Not to be melodramatic, of course.

The professionally friendly smile-at-the-clients-so-you-don't-lose-points-on-your-job-evaluation smile that the tellers offer always unsettles me. That smile feels like a practiced sarcasm, intended to let me know that they know how small are my balances, how infrequent are my deposits, how ridiculous a thing is my credit score.

Now imagine trying to enjoy a rare moment of positive one-on-one interaction with the middle child whom you fear you might neglect while also confronting the dark side of the force in the form of a financial institution. I smiled with cheer just as false as the teller's and affected a light and friendly voice just as irritating because I didn't want to communicate my tenseness to Edgar. He was busy taking in the vastness of the space I'd led him into by the hand. Alert and interested, eyes snapping from the wood-paneled desk fronts to the glass windows and doors of the offices, he seemed to find the bank engrossing.

"Thank you for coming by today. Have a great day!" said the teller as I pocketed whatever money or paperwork she'd handed me.

"You too" I mumbled automatically.

"May I give your son a sucker? Is that okay?"

Edgar looked at me with rounded, questioning eyes.

"Oh, sure."

"There you go, sweetie," she said, holding the clear plastic drum of suckers out so that he could choose one.

"Um, I need three," said my child.

"You do?" Her voice was unnaturally high, the voice childless people often use with kids. "Won't that many suckers hurt your tummy?" She looked at me, at least a little offended at the effrontery of my ill-bred preschooler.

“No, I need one for my brother and one for my sister. For when I get home.” My little bird speaks! His look was serious and he enunciated carefully, as if he were teaching her about fairness.

“Will you really give the extras to them, or are you just trying to get me to give you more?”

Now it was his turn to be offended. “No, I want them for *them*.” He emphasized each word with an emphatic nod. She laughed and gave in.

I knew without a doubt that he would not have his sucker until he had handed out suckers to his siblings. I’d noticed his innate sense of justice before, but I’d never seen a small child insist on it quite in this way before. As we left the bank, he tucked all three suckers into the pocket of his shorts. I smiled, all the time wondering if I had taught him this somehow. Perhaps his appreciation for fairness came from some stray words of mine, heard only by him, during a lost moment on a forgotten day of child-rearing. Perhaps it was a secret gift, all his own.

His tiny act, one moment out of two decades of parenting, always comes to mind when I think about who my kids are. What I might have planned or expected from my children has faded from my mind. I probably mostly just wanted my own jelly beans to hold and rock. Like most parents, I think, I had a reluctance to admit to myself exactly what I wanted from this massive investment of my mind and body and finances. I think parents often really only want our children to be for us whatever it is that we are not. Do we think that our children will rescue us, come to us like a magical gift to save us

from our human predicament, which is certain death? The yearning to have a child to love may be biological, in part, but the people we end up creating strike down that yearning and build up awe in its place.

Chapter 19

What I Remember

This day was the first day. The light looked different. The whole world seemed changed. I had slipped out of the house quietly, leaving my sons and their father still fast asleep, and I carried my nine-month-old daughter. My one daughter.

With no destination in mind, I walked on autopilot and wound up just around the corner at my mother's house, the house where I grew up. A single drop of water seemed balanced on the top point of each piece of grass, and I thought that the morning sun must be refracted a million times through those small prisms. *That must be why the light is so different*, I remember thinking. I held my daughter close and sat in my mother's swing under the trees, knowing that Mom would soon be out to sit right here. She has always been an early riser, and like me, she enjoys drinking her morning coffee out of doors.

I pushed off with my feet and swung gently. Tess seemed to share my desire for quiet, nestling her small head under my chin and sitting still. We breathed the early air, smelling the flesh of the trees and the cool earthiness of the flowerbeds. I reached out with my leg and touched my toe to one of the flat stones that lined the beds; the stone was cold, but also thrumming. Several small birds landed in the branches over us, calling to each other in some twittery language we could not speak. None of it was much different from the world I had always known, I realized. Only I was changed, really.

When Mom came out, she wasn't exactly surprised to see us. She just seemed worried that we'd been sitting there a long time unnoticed by her. She insisted on bringing out an afghan and wrapping it around us, then she sat in the quiet and rocked with us.

I thought about Mom, about how she looks. Her hair has always been darker and shorter than mine, but I'd noticed lately that gray mingled with the brown. Her hands, one around my shoulder and one on the baby's back, were speckled with darker spots that I hadn't noticed before. I wasn't looking at her, but I wondered if her eyes were really how I remembered them. I pictured her eyes, reconstructing the image from memory—green, like mine, but with heavier lids that gave them the appearance of being slightly downturned at the outer corners. Something in them had always made me feel my feet were on solid ground. They were steady eyes. Sincere eyes. A little bit secretive, maybe, like they knew a lot of things she would never tell.

She shifted, moving away from us just a bit, so I turned to look at her eyes. Just as the whole world had seemed different ever since I'd been outside this morning, my mother's eyes had changed. I recognized them. I realized that the way I had remembered them was not the true image of them. I was seeing the truth of them now, for the first time. They were still green, but they were familiar to me now as they hadn't been when I'd sensed secrets in them. I wondered what my eyes looked like this morning, in this changed world that wasn't really changed but only refracted through my changed vision. But I think I knew that they were different eyes, these eyes that had

only one daughter to care for now. And transformed, they saw now in my mother's eyes more than I'd understood before.

Coda

Writing about magic is my way to weave a theme of control into a story. The magic I write about, the shapeshifting and potion making that zaps the world into the magic wielder's desired forms, is unobtainable. Just like control. By embracing the wildness of my noncontrol, I begin to accept the losses that represent, after all, the human condition. By loving the crooked bricks and the weeds instead of seeking to fix them, I accommodate my terror. I find a place for it inside the walls of my heart, rather than submitting to the unending work of building up defenses against it. The mundane magic of loving a child leads to losing that child on the world; noncontrol made manifest. This is the expected outcome. There is no defense against the wild, ruined world, only surrender.

The power of these myths that I have written about, as of all story, is to stand as versions of truth. They can substitute for those mislaid memories of the specific incidents and proceedings that have made up my life, those things that might otherwise have been what spurred me to write about the person I have been. How I write the myths reveals the necessary metaphors with which to shape my own story of motherhood, of loss, of rescue. I am Ceridwen, shrieking my loss, and I am also Gwion, transformed all unaware. I am Rhiannon, slipping between worlds. I am Branwen, rescued by magic.

PART III
Appendices

APPENDIX A

Notes

Notes

1. Although Ben Yagoda puts forth 1809 for the first usage of the word “autobiography” in English, Merriam-Webster lists the year as 1797. See Babcock, et al.
2. See Gilbert, 2006; Thoreau, 1971; Child, 1983; and *Julie & Julia*, 2009.
3. See Hylton, 2007.
4. According to *Geiriadur yr Academi: The Welsh Academy English-Welsh Dictionary Online*.
5. See Davies, 1992
6. Ibid.
7. “Despite many common themes, they [the eleven tales of *the Mabinogion*] were never conceived as an organic group, and are certainly not the work of a single author” (Davies 2007 ix). Also, “Yet, *mabinogion* has become a convenient term to describe this corpus of prose tales, although we should not perceive them as a unified collection of any kind—they all vary in date, background, and content” (Davies 1992 234).
8. See Guest and John, 1989 and Guest and Ponsonby, 1950.
9. See, for example, Jones and Jones, 1949; Ford, 1977; Mac Cana, 1977; and Davies, 2007

APPENDIX B

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APPENDIX C

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