## Chapter I: Artist's Statement

I

I have always lived creative nonfiction. Coming from a family of story tellers, narratives defined us. At our evening dinners, Mom, Dad, and I gathered our stories - new and old. Meals were heaped full of stories more than casseroles and hot dishes. Suppers were so alive with stories that we doled them out between bites, adding our own revisions between helpings. Finally, the average meal would end with Dad telling another tale between sips of Folgers while I would bring up new stories between glances at my homework stacked on top of the refrigerator and Mom chiming in commentary between dishes at the sink.

We loved the stories. But we lived for their inconsistencies. *I told your mother to stand back while I was shaking the new can of grapefruit juice, but you know her, she just kept jabbering away about getting a new dryer. Then the darn thing just slipped out of my hand, flew across the kitchen and nicked her little toe,* Dad would begin. *Now wait just a minute, Kenneth,* Mom would interrupt, *you never said a word about standing back. You were going on about getting a new starter for the 730 when you lost the grip.* Then she would begin nodding her head, *And it most certainly did fly all the way across the kitchen.* Then she would begin shaking her head and rolling her eyes, correcting Dad's version, *but*

*it landed squarely on my big toe.* Eventually they would turn to me and exclaim, *You know I'm telling the truth, Kurt*. I would add, *I just remember getting to take the pick up to Crookston on a school night for Tylenol and a cold pack*. Accuracy didn't really matter. There was an emotional truth to each tale, an emotional truth that often moved Mom to tears from laughing so hard, that often moved Dad to pound his palm on the table in disagreement, and often moved me to shake my head in amazement.

Soon Mom or Dad would say, *That's as bad as the time . . .* and they were off on another story. That was our way to connect one story to the next. It was our way to braid our stories together to form the fabric of our lives, of our realities, of ourselves.

II

When I went off to college and enrolled in my first fiction writing class, I tried spinning fictional tales, but they never rang true for me or the professor. To salvage my grade, I resorted to writing about a true event, my father's open heart surgery, and to changing the particulars (names, dates, events, point of view) so I could pass it off as fiction. That was how I worked my way through the rest of my creative writing classes. But I always felt guilty. It wasn't fiction; it was deeply rooted in my life.

My expository writing classes were just as frustrating. I tried writing a nonfiction essay about my favorite Christmas, but I found myself struggling to fill the gaps in my memory. The entire essay was devoid of dialogue. I didn't trust myself to remember it verbatim. I was terrified that the professor would accuse me of lying. How could I recall something my grandmother told me 20 years ago? So much of my life had been spent in that blissful oblivion of childhood and adolescence that it was a miracle I even noticed anyone else in my life. In a moment of sheer deadline panic, I edited my sister right out of the essay in order to get it completed and pass it off as nonfiction. The guilt returned. For when I handed in the essay, I did so with a heavy feeling in my chest, knowing full well that I had taken liberties again with the particulars because I simply couldn't remember them exactly as they happened. That was how I worked my way through the rest of my expository writing classes. It wasn't nonfiction; I had taken liberties with something deeply rooted in my life.

It was not until graduate school that I realized there was nothing to feel guilty about. I had simply stumbled into the realm of creative nonfiction, which is the most truthful and natural genre for my writing. I no longer have to "doctor up" the truth when I'm writing, hoping to pass it off as fiction. Likewise, I no longer have to feel so restricted when writing, hoping to pass it off as nonfiction. I simply write what I have always lived, creative nonfiction.

III

The "truth" is something most writers likely grapple with. The most current example is probably the controversy regarding James Fray's memoir, A Million Little Pieces. When it comes to the concept of truth, writers seem to be divided into two separate camps.

In her essay "Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?" Mimi Schwartz gives the example of Anna Quindlen, a lifelong reporter, who was so intent on telling the truth that she referenced old weather charts before publishing an essay containing the single line, "'It was very cold the night my mother died'" (339). Catherine L. Hobbs's *The Elements of Autobiography and Life Narratives*, gives the example of author Mary McCarthy's shock at the creative liberties author Lillian Hellman's took in her memoir *Petimento*, about which McCarthy wrote, "'Everything she writes is a lie, including 'of' and 'the'" (33). These writers are concerned with objective truth, unwilling to invent even the slightest piece of information.

On the other hand, there is the Joan Didion and Maxine Hong Kingston camp where authors are not afraid to alter details, create composite characters, and condense time in the name of achieving an emotional or metaphorical truth, knowing full well that it's impossible to just transcribe memory. In Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction, authors Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola reference an article by Patricia Hampl called "Memory and Imagination," in

which Hempl reflects on a powerful life narrative she had just written, "'I must admit that I invented. But why?'" (82). They acknowledge that imagination must be used to flesh out a memory. The imagination must be used instead of just facts because "crafting one's *sense* of truth is what matters" (Schwartz 166).

I struggled with this issue of truth in my thesis. Should I write this memoir according to the former group, that stresses provable facts, or should I explore it according to the latter group, that stresses memory and emotion? Hobbs asks whether memoirs should focus on the factual, provable truth or "should they be metaphorically true, providing oblique glimpses into deeper truths" (33)? In the end, it was an easy decision for me.

I began writing from memory, trying to get the emotion and power of the events down accurately rather than worrying about the objective facts. At first this was frustrating because I was often working with a partial memory. Every time I felt the narrative gaining strength, I heard the Quindlens questioning my recollections. My mom, who worked initially as my proofreader, began disagreeing with my memories almost immediately. I answered first out of frustration by responding, "this is MY truth." Today, I would answer her with a quote from Peter M. Ives: "These are vivid, honest memories. But I would never swear to them as facts" ("The Whole Truth" 270).

Then I made a decision: I was writing neither an autobiography nor a biography. I was writing a creative nonfiction memoir. I would focus on "my

side" of the truth. If it varied from other interpretations of the truth, so be it. I need not worry about the Quindlens while exploring fragments of memory. Ives writes, "I would like to challenge the nature of memory, to question the notion that all must be known before an event can be rendered truthfully as story" (272). Or as Hampl writes, "I don't write about what I know: I write in order to find out what I know" ("Memory and Imagination" 262). I wanted to find out what I really knew about Myrtle and myself.

Eventually Mom's questioning of my version of the "truth" took two forms. First she simply questioned my interpretation of events. She argued that I exaggerated her reaction to an approaching tornado. But I simply responded by saying that not only was I working with a memory from 25 years ago, but I was also working from the point of view of a seven year old. If my description of her running from the house like a mad woman was exaggerated, I countered that a seven year old was very prone to exaggeration and it would fit with the authenticity of the scene. I was writing from a memory as truthfully as I could. Ives notes when doing the same thing that "the past is a moving image, requiring almost constant readjustment of the viewing lens" (Ives 272). The more I viewed the memory in my writing, the more I became convinced that I was telling it from the right perspective, regardless of what Mom said. I was convinced because that image of her storming out of the house screaming *feels*

right. That scene still triggers the same shock that it did a quarter of a century ago. It has become my truth, even if it isn't Mom's truth.

The other form Mom's questioning took was about a creative liberty I took in my memoir. She was horrified that I attributed a quote to the wrong uncle. I explained that my reason was simple: the other uncle hadn't responded to my request for a memory of Myrtle. I wasn't trying to dupe the reader or present Myrtle as something she was not. One uncle simply had not responded. Instead of leaving my memoir unbalanced by omitting him, I simply borrowed an extra memory another uncle had sent me and attributed it to my silent uncle. I suppose I'm crossing a line of some sort here. I'm sure the Quindlens of the literary world would scream "foul!" However, I feel it's a minor invention that I was willing to make to maintain the consistency and balance in my memoir. Maybe I am crossing into the same territory that Jack Conner crossed when he used collapsed time and composite characters in an essay. The authors of Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction don't have a problem with this type of creative manipulation of the truth because Conner's "intent was true" and it works "as long as he did not make up events that never happened" (Perl and Schwarz 171). I feel that my "creative adjustment" doesn't alter the emotional truth of the memoir. Eventually I asked my uncle why he hadn't responded. He said he was too busy with work. I think that reveals more about my uncle than anything about my grandmother. But my uncle did acknowledge,

after reading a draft of my memoir, that his brother's memory trumped any of his. I believe he sensed that my intent was true.

IV

I stood with my father and uncle, Dick Baril, at Myrtle's grave. It was Memorial Day and rain threatened from the swollen clouds. A stiff breeze made a jacket necessary. I stuffed my fists deep into the front pockets. Dad and Dick were engaged in similar tactics to guard against the chill.

We examined the new plastic flowers we just set beside the headstone. Dad held last year's faded flowers in his right hand. The new bright yellow, red, and white Kmart flowers seemed out of place. Mom always picked out the flowers and arranged them. We were visiting her grave next.

After making sure the replacements held their ground against the wind, we broke our silence. Dad said he was taking the old flowers back to the truck. I said that I'd be there in a bit and then reached into my jean jacket and snatched my journal. Dick turned his back to the breeze, plucked a Camel from the pack in his breast pocket while he fumbled a lighter out of his khakis. Then he cupped his hands and struck the lighter several times until I saw a red glow from inside his palms. He took a small drag and then the breeze snatched it.

I too turned my back to the wind and pried open my journal. I took the pen that had been crammed between the pages and scrolled, "Myrtle D. Baril

(Demann) Feb 21 1905 - July 30 1988." Then I peered at her husband's name on the headstone and wrote, "Theophile J. Baril March 7, 1905 - May 28, 1971." I was hoping to fill my journal with the key dates and places to fill in the gaps in my thesis. I needed to give the narratives a context.

My dad was great with the stories, but dates and places were not his strong suit. I was hoping to obtain them from Dick, who was up on his annual visit from the cities. This might be my last chance, for we feared Alzheimer's was setting in. Dick had been a day late. Normally that wouldn't have worried us, but Dick was well into his seventies. He had trouble finding his way home. Not only did he get lost on the way up, a trip that he made hundreds of times before, but he also began forgetting names and faces. The man who is my mom's oldest brother, my godfather, and who even shares my birthday, forgot my name at Mom's funeral last summer.

I tried drilling Dick about the dates when Granny first began teaching. I watched as he took another drag, noticing his hairy forearms ending in slender wrists. Forearms and wrists that were the same as the ones that held my journal and pen.

Dick took a shallow puff while I waited for an answer. He looked over at Dad who was now climbing into the cab. He talked about how Myrtle had to walk two miles to her first teaching job at a small country school.

I asked him about when Myrtle and Theophile - “Tuff,” Dick corrected me - had started dating. He told me they met at the Maple Lake Pavilion and spent Saturday nights dancing there in the summer. He never gave any dates. Finally, he pulled the Camel from the corner of his mouth, kicked up his brown Hush Puppy, and ground the cigarette out on the sole.

He exhaled and watched as the wind gave the final puff a new life. “Let’s get out of here,” he said turning his brown eyes on my mostly blank journal and poised Bic, “and I’ll tell you some stories.” He examined the polished black headstone and its dates one last time. Then he scanned all of the others lined around it. “These are just stones.”

I wrote those four words down and followed him back to the truck.

## V

I was willing to let my imagination fill in the sketchy details that my memory lacked. Dick convinced me of that after our conversation at Myrtle’s grave. I could gather all of the facts about Myrtle’s life. What would that really tell me? It might be interesting. But it wouldn’t have the emotional impact I was looking for. So I focused more on achieving an emotional truth in my memoir.

With my commitment to achieving an emotional truth, the writing process, which is at least for me, always creative, began taking over “because a large part of our lives can never be retrieved, it is a storyteller’s duty to use whatever

tools are at hand" (Ives 272). I was using all those skills Mom and Dad (and Granny before them) had ingrained in me as a storyteller. When I approached this material as a storyteller rather than a researcher or reporter, the process became much easier. Writing this was like mental time travel. And for all those summer and fall hours spent physically at my laptop but mentally years and miles away wrapped in stories, this was the most rewarding writing experience of my life because I felt a freedom I have never experienced in my writing before. There was none of that guilt I had felt as an undergraduate in both my fiction and nonfiction writing classes.

With that freedom, I began writing what would become one large braided essay comprised of smaller pieces of poetry, fiction, interviews, historical documents, and lyric essays. I wanted it to be a memoir, exploding in subjectivity, of my experiences with Granny, the lady I would later come to know as Myrtle. I wanted to relish my trip back to these experiences, most of which I had never set down in writing before. I wanted to revel in the conversations and lessons Granny had in store for me, most of which I had never fully explored in writing. William Zinsser writes in his introduction to Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir about his memoir Five Boyhoods. In it he writes unflatteringly of an aunt. When Zinsser's mom read the memoir, she tried to persuade him that he had gotten it wrong; his aunt wasn't really like that. Zinsser acknowledges that his mom is likely right; however, "she [his aunt] was

like that to *me* -- and that's the only truth a memoir writer can work with" (12). I believe Zinsser is referring to a personal kind of truth. This is the kind of "*sense* of truth" that Schwartz referred to earlier. It was this kind of truth, or sense of truth, I was after in my thesis.

Zinsser goes on to acknowledge that while his interpretation of his aunt is up for debate, his depiction of the family house seemed to please everyone, "All else being subjective, I probably got only one part of my memoir 'right' -- objectively accurate to all the principal players -- and that was the part about the much loved house and the site it occupied" (12). What makes this even more powerful is that Zinsser acknowledges at the end of his introduction that the house, which had held so many generations of his family, had been sold and resold and eventually plowed under. Now "the house survived only as an act of writing" (14). I feel that is the power of the emotional "truth" in creative nonfiction, specifically memoir. Myrtle and my childhood, full of the lessons she taught me and the adventures we had, only live on in my writing, which is a way of connecting snippets of memory and details into a narrative context rich with meaning and truth.

VI

My father is a man of black and white. There is no gray area for him. It either IS or is NOT. There are clear distinctions, set boundaries. So when he

read pieces of my thesis, he argued that I was getting them wrong. By wrong he meant, wrong according to HIS recollection. Of course, this led us to discussions of "truth."

"What is truth?" I asked him.

"It's what really happened," he said. What I think Dad really meant when he said that was, "It's what I *think* really happened."

I don't believe in one single TRUTH. Dad has his version; I have mine. While he frets about trying to persuade me to accept his truth, I am intrigued by the differences. Both of our truths are "true"; they are emotionally real to each of us. That's what counts. Could he 'prove' his truth with more facts? Could I prove mine? Does it even matter?

To this final question, I answer "no." Early on in the research process of my memoir, I realized it would be impossible for me to write an objectively "true" account of Granny's life. In "Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time,' or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction," Laura Wexler asks the key question, "Would you be able to write the single, true version of What Happened, with a clear and certain idea of who did what to whom, and when and why"? Not only did I realize I couldn't write "the true version of What Happened" because I am writing about events from 25 years ago, but I also realized that I was interested in writing MY "true version of What Happened" (25). I decided to relish the subjectivity that this memoir offered.

When I decided this, I realized that each member of my family - Mom, Dad, Kevin, Barb, and myself - saw Granny differently. We saw her from our own subjective view points, the very viewpoints Granny helped shape. Wexler observes, "postmodernism is *subjectivity*, the idea that the world looks different depending where you stand, both literally and figuratively" (26). We saw Granny as a reflection of the very people we would become.

Mom saw Granny as the consummate mother, who spoiled and defended her kids and grand kids. The very same thing my mom spent the last 40 years of her life doing. Dad sees Granny as a fierce adversary, always ready to remind him of his lack of education and his outdated notions regarding politics and women. The same role Dad now occupies for my sister's husband, Arnie. Kevin views Granny as the rebel, the young girl who was suspended from school for wearing trousers or the belligerent woman who spent the better part of her life fighting any and all who opposed her, whether it was the school board who forced her to retire or the Catholic doctrine she was forced to raise her kids in. Of course, Kevin has grown into a rebel himself, spurning my parents wishes for a higher education and moving to Texas after graduation before returning home (and stopping at Granny's before even coming by our house) and traveling the world on a whim. My sister sees Granny as a loyal mother who finally repented and joined the Catholic church in the last years of her life. Of course, my sister is a conservative whose life is defined by Catholicism and motherhood. I see

Granny as the ultimate grandmother and teacher -- compassionate, nurturing, and inspiring. I have followed her into teaching, taking the same path she did - graduating from Lafayette, attending BSU, and ultimately teaching in the same town from which she was forced to retire.

Using Wexler's idea of postmodernism and how it "shows us the impossibility of the existence of one true version of anything that matters," I started writing (27). Then something wonderful happened. My writing exploded. The narratives took off. A total fictional piece erupted. Poems took shape and flight. I wove in interviews. I experimented with perspectives. I bent time to fit my whims. When the dust settled, I took each individual unit and jammed them together into various combinations to see what resulted. Surprisingly, I trusted my intuition and I let them find their places in the memoir. Sure enough they found the right places and revealed the emotional truths. And better than that, I found myself, in the course of the four years it took to ultimately complete this memoir, changed as a writer. Now as I am trying to writing this "official" analysis or introduction of my memoir, I find myself exploding this the same way I did my memoir. And I'm relishing every word of it too.

VII

I sat securely in my grandmother's lap, my knees tucked under my chin. Granny's chin was tucked into my right shoulder while her spindly arms

stretched around me. I peered at the National Geographic she held before me and hung on every word she read from the article and captions. In two days I would be visiting Manitoba's Museum of Man and Nature. In the meantime, I had been talking nonstop about seeing the dinosaurs. To ease my suspense, Granny fished through her towering stack of National Geographics, which she had subscribed to for years (and she must have paid for well in advance since I continued to get them for a full two years after her death). Finally she located an issue devoted to a new T-Rex dig in South Dakota.

I remember little of the article. However, I recall stopping Granny at a double page spread of a stegosaurus that was recently completed and put on display at a museum (alas Granny informed me that it was not the Winnipeg Museum). I peered at the massive skeleton hulking in the room. As I looked closer, I saw a shaft of light streaming down from a high window. It fell across the dinosaur's back and rib cage, eventually landing on the paleontologists and museum director standing by a hind leg.

Granny told me how some scientists, called paleontologists, spent months unearthing the fossil inch by inch using toothbrush like instruments. I peered at her in disbelief. When I gazed back at the stegosaurus straddling the glossy pages, I began to see all of the different bones fused together to form the reconstructed monster. I even picked out several large iron rods running

through the beast, helping hold the massive bones in place. The more I studied it, the more individual bones I saw as if it were a skeletal jigsaw puzzle.

"It must have taken them forever to dig this dinosaur up," I said, thinking aloud about the men who looked tiny beside the stegosaurs.

"Oh dear, those bones never stood together in real life," Granny replied.

It was the most startling thing she ever said. So startling in fact, that I still remember the words 25 years later.

Then Granny carefully explained how most bones over time just disintegrated. Only a fraction of dinosaur bones ended up as fossils. An even smaller fraction of those had been discovered. Sure scientists often found complete fossils of small prehistoric animals. They even found skeletons of early humans. But dinosaurs were huge creatures, she nodded her head toward the stegosaurs in the article below, so it was nearly impossible for an entire fossilized skeleton to be found, especially when most dinosaurs often met rather grizzly fates - devoured by a T-Rex, caught in a volcanic flow, swallowed by a tar pit. As a result, she explained, there was often little left, except for bits and pieces. A skull in South Dakota, a backbone in Colorado, a few ribs in Mexico.

"Then they're liars," I said feeling betrayed by those little men beneath their fake construction.

"Not at all," Granny said. Not only were they working to piece together a creature that lived millions of years ago, she explained, but they were also

dealing with hundreds - if not thousands - of individual bones at a time. Some bones were probably chewed or worn away from the elements. So it really was incredible that scientists were even able to accurately reconstruct any of the dinosaurs.

When I scoffed that it wouldn't be that hard, Granny snapped that I was not one to criticize anyone when I could barely keep track of my Star Wars action figures' weapons - and it was true, I was constantly digging through her couch cushions and crawling beneath it to look for Luke's yellow light saber, which, if the truth be told, was actually lost, causing me to make due by using a yellow toothpick for the better part of a year - until I was able to trade away an extra storm trooper to Lance for his Luke Skywalker, whose legs had been blown apart during a Fourth of July reenactment of the Death Star explosion. Of course, I threw his Luke Skywalker away, but I saved his light saber for my Luke Skywalker.

Maybe she had a point after all.

"So how did they get this dinosaur together?" I asked.

"That's what I've been waiting for you to ask," Granny replied. She read a caption in the lower left hand corner. The stegosaurus was a collection of half a dozen different digs from around the world. But after years of work, it was now complete and ready for display.

"Well, that doesn't seem very fair," I finally said.

"It's not a question of fairness," Granny said suppressing a giggle. "It's a question of science. They want to give the most accurate representation possible."

I thought that over.

"Plus," Granny added, "would you rather see this dinosaur in various pieces around the room - a skull or tooth here, a thigh or a horn there. Or would you rather stand next to this," she added tapping the swollen joint of her index finger against the double page spread, "and feel what it would have been like to have a stegosaurus stride past you."

I looked back at the stegosaurus for a long time, imagining the different stegosauruses and their various fates - combined now into one single beast and one final fate. Finally I let the bones merge into this stegosaurus again.

"Just think what would have happened had a T-Rex stumbled across this guy in a dark alley," Granny said after awhile. "Okay, a dark part of the jungle then," she added with a chuckle, and she was off spinning a tale. With her words, the bones disappeared beneath blood, muscle, and flesh, beneath a coat of armored spikes beneath a scorching Jurassic sun.

## VIII

That memory of Granny explaining how fossils were constructed not from one single dinosaur but from several is a fitting metaphor for the form my

memoir finally took. Like a paleontologist reconstructing a fossil skeleton, I took fragments from various sources of Myrtle's life and fit them into an overall structure that would give the reader a better understanding of my grandmother, an understanding I alone could never have achieved.

When I first began writing the germ of this thesis, some four years ago, I had two separate creative nonfiction pieces. One was the story of cleaning up the demolished oak. The other was the story of visiting my grandmother in the nursing home. When finished, I wasn't satisfied with either.

The two pieces sat for several months until I read the essay, "A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay" by Brenda Miller in Writing Creative Nonfiction. When trying to write a normal, straight forward essay, Miller found that as she "tried to order this material of memory and image into a logical, linear narrative, the essay became flat, intractable, stubbornly refusing to yield any measure of truth" (17). Both pieces seemed to only reveal part of the truth that I wanted to illustrate. So I decided to try a braided essay; I wove the two narratives together. I wrote with emotion I didn't know I possessed. As I did this, the relationship between my grandmother's decline and the oak's sudden destruction leapt out at me in a way I wouldn't have noticed if I had not woven them together. "The heart," Hempl writes, "the guardian of intuition with its secrets, often fearful intentions, is the boss, its commandments are what a writer

obeys -- often without knowing it" ("Memory and Imagination" 263). Without knowing it, the emotion I wrung from every page led me to that connection.

This epiphany struck me so soundly that I began to write down all snippets of memory, dialogue, and imagery that I could associate with my grandmother. I wanted to see what other symbols and metaphors would present themselves from my jumbled recollections. Hempl states in Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction that, "'We find, in our details and broken and obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out its arms and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate personal truth always is'" (Miller and Paola 82-83). Now things that had once been a dead end for narrative possibilities, suddenly were rich with new meaning, new possibilities. "Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same event" (Zinsser 6). That is what I wanted to do - rummage through my remnants of Myrtle to see what truth I could find.

One of my strongest memories of Myrtle is sitting on the porch with her and watching a thunderstorm approach and eventually engulf us. I had been terrified of thunderstorms. My mom was absolutely convinced that every

thunderstorm harbored a tornado. She passed her fear on to me. Every summer I return to this memory when I see those bruised clouds come out of the west.

As I began writing the narrative, I decided to try writing a lyric essay. I wanted to weave in poetic description of the storm building and smashing into us. Meanwhile I was developing the narrative too. It was only when I began to weave the poetry and narrative together that I realized a new connection. I saw a Granny teaching me how to conquer my fear. This had never occurred to me. The feeling of safety in her arms always dominated the memory. In writing, I saw her lesson, which had worked. I never feared them again. But I didn't realize this until I wrote about it.

In examining the work, I also saw a clear juxtaposition of the oak tree and my mother. In one scene Mom flies out of the house screaming about a tornado approaching. There is a real image here - I see her fly out the back screen door, nearly ripping it from its hinges. She has her apron on and her arms are aloft. Her voice is rising hysterically. I am standing and talking with the men (my dad and a neighbor) as we watch the tornado several miles away. Then while I was writing the narrative I saw that image of mom juxtaposed with the image of the oak, as it frolicked wildly in the storm. I saw the connection finally - there could be fear on a calm summer afternoon and there could be wonder and excitement in the middle of a nasty thunderstorm. That new realization came roaring back

to me. If this could happen, what other comparisons awaited me. All I had to do was write and experiment with the form.

This same power of juxtaposition happened in the second lyric essay I devised. This one struck while I was writing about a snowstorm that left me stranded at Granny's. I woke early to find school canceled. I remember little of the morning except for finding myself staring out her living room window at this frozen world. I stuck my thumb against the cold glass and watched my fingerprint on the window. Then the cold from outside erased it. I did this several times. The next thing I vividly recall from the event was Granny bundling us up to venture outside. While we are trudging through the snow, I remember her talking about how no two snowflakes are alike. Then I remember looking around at the billions and billions of snowflakes surrounding us and thinking, "no two are alike." My head swam with the knowledge. It was only through the writing, through the "imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events" that I could see the connection between those fingerprints, of which no two are ever alike, fading on the window and the individual snowflakes we trudged through (Zinsser 27). Was this a deliberate plan on Granny's part? I don't know. But that connection was the payoff itself.

Besides finding the unexpected metaphors and symbols through the juxtaposition of images and narratives, I also wanted to to write in the braided essay to use various fragments, such as memories from Myrtle's children and

events that I remembered and captured in poetry. These things felt too raw to analyze in traditional prose. So I wanted to present them as fragments because, as Miller states in “A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay,” such fragmentation allows “for those moments of ‘not knowing,’ which, to me, become the most honest moments in the essay” (18). For example, I could guess at what Myrtle did to the nun who slapped her son and knocked him off his pew for scratching his poison oak infection. I could even try to talk to church authorities to see if I could find any proof or information about this. But I don’t want to, not because I am lazy, but because I like not knowing. That gap in the narrative, or that unknowing, is, for me, the most powerful moment in the memory. That uncertainty only adds to Myrtle's mystique. This uncertainty of how she accomplished things was a common theme that I found in many of the memories relatives shared. I wanted to present them without fully exploring them. I believe leaving them unresolved adds a key element to the memoir. I found that this fragmentation often, “invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known” (Miller 16).

Ultimately, this project serves as the culmination of a process I began as an undergraduate but abandoned because it didn’t feel complete. It was only in graduate school, after studying creative nonfiction, that I realized that most of my writing had been masquerading as either pure fiction or nonfiction, when the

most natural, and truthful, field for my writing is creative nonfiction. It was that discover that allowed me to revisit the basics of this memoir. As my thesis grew, so did my desire to analyze it using the theories of creative nonfiction. The research was nearly as enjoyable as the writing itself. That never happens for me.

IX

Granny's lesson on fossil reconstruction did come in handy that weekend at Manitoba's Museum of Man and Nature. While they didn't have any impressive T-Rex or Stegosaur skeletons, they did have one large skeleton of a prehistoric bear.

When our guide finally led us to the exhibit, I was able to cop Granny's explanation, passing it off as my own. Our guide's jaw nearly hit the floor when I explained to my fellow cub scouts how people often thought fossilized skeletons were actually one single dinosaur instead of bits and pieces of many collected from various digs around the country.

Most nodded, including our guide, as they accepted my theory. My chest swelled with this new found attention. Usually I was the kid in back on field trips, just trying to keep up. But Simon Geller, a friend of mine who usually had all of his theories readily accepted, piped up his dissension.

He further challenged my theory by stating he believed this bear had actually been discovered whole.

“Right, Simon,” I said. “How long ago did this thing die? Like a million years ago. And you’re telling me that the paleontologists were able to find every single little bone on this guy,” I said cocking my head toward the skeleton below us just as Granny had cocked her head down at the stegosaurus in the National Geographic.

“Yes,” Simon replied crossing his arms over his yellow tie and impressive collection of badges.

“Well, uh, actually,” the guide said once his jaw was back where it belonged, “you’re uh, quite right . . .” he said glancing at my name tag, “Kurt. This skeleton is comprised of bones taken from three separate digs in Manitoba and one in Alberta,” he added as he read the plaque on the display.

“Told you so,” I said to Simon, crossing my arms over my yellow tie and smirking so wildly that it made up for my two measly badges.

## Chapter II: Meeting Myrtle: A Memoir

I

First Lesson

Granny comes to calm the child's cries.
She covers him in his blanket,
  which had crept to the floor from the crib.
She coos an ancient rhyme

while caressing his brow.
Cradled in love once more, he is carried off.

Granny returns to calm the child's wails.
She wraps him in his blanket,
which had wriggled to the floor again.
She whispers a gentle fable
while wiping his brow.
Cradled in love once more, he is carried off.

Granny comes again to calm the child's cries.
She covers him in his blanket,
which he had cast to the floor.
She chuckles at his scheme
while kissing his brow.
Cradled in the love no fabric can convey,
his grandmother carries him off.

I sat alone in Myrtle's room. Well, nearly alone. Silently shrouded beneath the bleached nursing home linen was my grandmother -- I would turn 15 in a matter of days so I was too old to call her Granny, as I had done just a few years earlier. Myrtle was there, but barely. Mom left me while she ran back to the farm to pick up Dad.

The drapes were drawn, keeping the June sunlight at bay, except for the vertical crack where the drapes didn't quite meet. Sunshine cut a line down the middle of the room, falling across my grandmother's bed, glistening off the railings, and finally slicing a white line across the book in my lap as I sat in her wheelchair. I peered out the slit at the lilacs rustling in the courtyard, the squirrels hurrying from tree to tree in the yard across the street, but, most importantly, I kept an eye out for our Silverado.

The only sound came from my grandmother's battered square black alarm clock as it wheezed and clunked. Several pieces of Scotch tape ran across a nasty scar gouged into the length of the clock, like small bridges over a chasm. It split open several years ago when Myrtle fell and yanked it down with her. I patched the clock together as a welcome home present. The tape soured to a melancholy yellow; the scar looked fresh as ever.

I listened to the mechanical whir as the clock spun the black numbers, painted on a series of square white panels, into the right alignment. The last minute panel on the right finally clicked into place, reading 2:47. The small light, designed to illuminate the panels so you could see the time at night, flickered randomly. It had never been the same since the fall. The clicking and whirring continued, pulling the 7 block down millimeter by millimeter, second by second. I waited as the grinding continued, dragging a new white square into place from the top. The very bottom of the number 8 was just visible.

Beside the alarm clock, Myrtle's hand-knit green afghan, which she crafted years earlier, and which Mom draped over her before she left, was the only hint of familiarity in the entire room.

At times it was hard to believe that the tiny lady in front of me was my grandmother. Her hair, once rich and brown, always styled and pampered at the salon, then faded and gray, and now ghost white, frizzed around her head, which rested on her pillow. Her skin, once supple and rosy, then loose and pale,

gradually dangling from her dwindling frame, and now bruised and wrinkled, pulled tight around her eyes, which were twin pools of shadow. Her glasses, once stylish, then bulky and thick, and now useless bifocals, really worn strictly for pride, rested heavily on the stand next to her bed, which seemed to swallow her whole. At times it was hard to believe my grandmother had become a stranger.

Myrtle was so frail that I had to lean forward in her wheelchair to see if she was breathing. I thought about grabbing her old hand mirror, which was probably stashed inside her bedside stand, to check her breathing, but decided to inch closer. Finally, I was able to detect the slightest rise and fall beneath the afghan.

Relieved, I eased down in her wheelchair. There was an old chair of ours in the corner, but it was too dark to read over there. I cursed Mom for charging me with this vigil. But even this was preferable to cutting hay. A trip to town was a trip to town. So before peeling my book open and trying to forget this place, I peered out the split in the curtains. Of course, our truck was no where to be seen.

> A few years ago, accompanied by some of my grandchildren, I visited the farm which had been the homestead of my grandfather, William Demann, Sr. The farm buildings had been almost entirely demolished. We saw the huge oak

logs which supported the hay loft, and we collected as momentos, some pieces of hand-carved trim and some square nails and wooden pegs which were used in its construction. The land is now a Wild Life Area under government management.

My grandparents, William and Maria Kluth Demann, came from Hanover, Germany to the United States soon after the Civil War. They settled in Rice County, Minnesota, where some relatives and other German people lived. My father, William C. Demann, was born there in 1867. His early education was bilingual and he spoke and read the German language equally as well as English.

In 1879, the Demanns and other families from near Northfield came northward, following the Mississippi as far as St. Croix, then took the Woods Trail to Polk County. They found this was the worst of the established trails. It involved rough ground, woods, bogs and streams to ford. The Demanns brought two wagons, five horses, three cows and all their possessions with them. They located on a homestead of eighty acres in what is now Lake Pleasant Township. Later they acquired another eighty acres as a "tree claim." On that land they planted fifteen acres of trees, mostly pine and spruce. Their first buildings were of sod and logs.

Since my father was an only child, he had to assume much of the hard work and management of the farm at an early age, and soon became joint-owner of the property with his father.

This was my first trip *in* to see Granny all summer. Mom and I routinely visited her twice a week, usually Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons, but I always stayed in the truck. In the winter, I ran the heater; in the summer, I hoped for a breeze. Neither wind-chill nor humidity, though, could drive me into Hillcrest Nursing Home.

The past three years saw Myrtle rarely spend more than a week in her own apartment. A few winters ago she refused to wait for Dad to come over and give her a ride to the grocery store. When Dad arrived to pick her up, he found her splayed out on the sidewalk leading up to her apartment, a small bag of groceries clutched in her determined arm, which was jutted out at an odd angle. Thankfully it was not broken, only badly bruised. The same could not be said for three ribs and worse, much worse I would later realize, her right hip.

She had only been fifteen feet from her door. Fifteen feet. I wondered how things might have been had she made it. Fifteen feet. A matter of a dozen steps. A matter of a few extra seconds. Fifteen feet spelled her doom. Or as close as one could come to it as I saw it: The Nursing Home.

The clock read 3:14. Where was Mom? What was taking her so long? I eyed the outside world again. No traffic came up the hill. Myrtle breathed slowly - the afghan still rose and fell. No movement beyond the closed door.

The artificial lighting from the hallway reflected off the hard linoleum and tried to sneak under the door. But it couldn't penetrate the shadows.

I sighed and willed the gears on the clock to grind faster, but the 5 was barely half way in place. I entertained the notion that the clock finally gave out - freezing time with it - leaving me trapped here - a young man in an old folks home. Irony like that was straight out of the Twilight Zone, which she loved. I later found this was because decades earlier she used to huddle her three sons and two daughters around the radio for programs like Dimension X and Inner Sanctum. Of course, the Twilight Zone often reworked the same stories and plots as those early radio programs.

Years earlier I had squirmed with a mixture of tension and terror in Granny's lap, a mixture of tension and terror that somehow turned into sheer delight with her arms wrapped around me, as we watched William Shatner frantically trying to alert the airline crew that a creature was ripping apart the engine just outside his window. When the show was over and we turned in, it was hours before I slept. And then I had a nightmare. But when I woke, Granny was right next to me asleep. Her breathing steadied my nerves. And I soon fell asleep. I never told her about the nightmare. The next weekend I squirmed in her lap as we watched another episode. That night I had no nightmares.

When I looked at the clock again, it read 3:16. How many minutes had this old clock dragged into hours and how many hours into days and days into

weeks and weeks into years? How many years since we bought it for her on Christmas? How much could it hope to chronicle, wheezing and sputtering as it did? My right temple ached from the effort. I glanced at the outside world again for our truck.

Myrtle always seemed to have a penchant for punishment. She often boasted about breaking every rib, in addition to every finger, over the years. The broken bones were only inconveniences next to her asthma, which often acted as vice grips on her lungs. Her fading vision did little to phase her by the time her cataracts began to cloud her world.

While her physical injuries piled up, her internal gears continued to grind along just fine. People who tangled with her about politics (she was a devout Democrat), education (she was a former teacher), and women's rights (she was a former flapper who was the first girl in town to cut her hair and wear trousers) found her as bright as ever. Despite being into her seventies when I was born, my childhood was filled with her voice instructing and her hands guiding. She was my favorite teacher and best friend. Until that fall in her bedroom. Then we had to put her here in 1985.

For a time in the early ‘80s, Myrtle did live with us. Dad and Mom had a downstairs bathroom put in just for her so she wouldn’t have to battle the two flights of steps - the very steps her father built a century earlier. When her hip

finally healed, she returned to her apartment. But the fall coming back from the grocery store - just fifteen steps from her door - re-broke the same hip.

In the spring of 1984, we moved to a farm ten miles south of Red Lake Falls. She couldn't possibly stay with us there though. The work, baling hay, harvesting wheat, shearing sheep and lambing, required all of our efforts. If she fell in the house, as she did the first time she came to visit, who would be there for her? Her reliance on pills mounted until she grew confused and either took the wrong ones or took too many. So Mom put her where she would have constant care.

Years later, sifting through the remnants of Myrtle's life in our attic, I would find dozens of letters from friends and relatives wishing her improved health and adding that they were sorry to hear about her moving to the nursing home. I can't imagine what a catastrophic blow to her pride that must have been.

When my parents discussed, in a hushed conversation, most of which I didn't understand at the time, placing her in Hillcrest, they worried that she might resent it and just "go downhill." Now as an adult, I know that "go downhill" really meant "give up and die." And looking back, I think she did give up. But looking back, I believe Granny was just so tenacious and stubborn that it took her the better part of three years for her to finally give up and die.

> In 1888, my father married Hattie Wichterman, oldest daughter of Edward Wichterman. She had been born in New York State, near Niagara Falls. The family had moved to North Dakota and later to Lambert Township where they farmed. William and Hattie had four children: Charles, who died in infancy, Edythe, Rose and Me (Myrtle).
>
> My father ran a lumber camp near Gully for two winters and my mother did the cooking for the logging crew. They hauled lumber by wagon back to their farm to build the barn, two houses (one for my grandparents) and other farm buildings. Parts for a windmill were hauled from Crookston to erect a windmill on the barn. This gave power for pumping water, grinding grain, and cutting fodder.
>
> Farming in those days was, by necessity, diversified, since everything possible was raised or made at home. We had livestock, poultry and bees. I can remember my grandfather, without veil or protection, working among the bees and smoking an old corn cob pipe. My grandmother never did learn to speak English but I could understand by the tone of her voice that she was scolding him. My grandparents died at the ages of 86 and 88.

For several days now, Myrtle had slipped in and out of consciousness. She had mumbled something that Mom interpreted as ‘hello’ when we walked in, though the light of recognition didn’t seem to glow in her eyes. Mom bent

low, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered something. I knew not what she said, but I knew, after listening to the clock grind away the minutes, that I was miserable sitting alone in her dark room.

This old folks home was the worst place on earth. Mom glared holes in me every time I referred to it as that. She preferred “the rest home.” But I knew it - even at 14 - for what it really was - the place my granny came to wither away. Judging from her slight form, there wasn’t much left either.

Simply getting in the front door scared the hell out of me. Inside the main entrance doors sat the same four men. I never knew their names, certainly didn’t stop to ask either, but I dubbed them “the four horsemen.” They were always propped at the entrance, whether it was a routine Sunday visit or Christmas Eve. I don’t know if the nurses just discarded them there or if they had a choice about where they wanted to whither. Granny didn’t have much choice either. But at least she was in her room and not on display.

One man had ridiculous hose socks pulled up to his knees, which poked out from beneath his gown, pointy as another set of elbows. He vacantly watched every person stroll in and out in front of him while his mouth slopped open, showing his gums. The man sitting next to him, was wrapped in a sophisticated green and red plaid robe. His monster comb over was only matched by the hair protruding from his ears and nostrils. He fixed his gaze blankly in front of him.

The two on the opposite side of the entryway were even worse. The third man sat slumped so far forward in his wheelchair, his head nearly rested right between his knees. If he bothered to look, he could see right up his own robe. The only information he seemed to take in, other than the pattern of the tiled entryway floor, came from the monstrous hearing aids that bulged from his ears.

The last man was the most depressing. He was completely bald, and his eyes were ridiculously magnified by inch thick glasses that made him look like a bug. His eyes stalked each and every passerby. Of course, I averted his gaze, so I always looked down; unfortunately this offered me a view up his robe. His thighs were the color of slugs I saw once when I lifted up a board that had sat in the grass too long. He was the only one who ever uttered a word. He barked random thoughts and commands at all who passed.

On one of my last visits, he ignored my entire family, except for me. I was bringing up the rear, as usual, when he eyed me and growled, “You don’t look like much. They’ll chew you up and spit you back out.” I acted oblivious, something that was quickly becoming my specialty - and not just here - it was a trait I was familiar with since I entered junior high. Then he snagged my wrist with a claw and said, “That’s right, sonny. Chew you up and spit you right back out . . . .” By the end of the sentence, I had torn free and was right next to Mom, that all-too familiar heat rising on my cheeks and the back of my neck.

Today I avoided the four horsemen all together. When Mom and I approached the entrance, I pretended that I forgot something and ran back to the truck. Then I walked around to the back entrance, where the ambulance parked for the regular pick ups.

I didn't know it at the time as I sat in the dark hearing the clock whimper, but my last visit to Granny would be in a matter of days. It was actually on Mom's birthday. I should have used the other entrance then too. Instead I strolled up the sidewalk with Mom and Dad. I had my headphones on and eyes ready to study the floor. I was set to ignore the four horsemen and breeze in. But that scheme ended when Mom said, "What are you doing out here?"

I lifted my head and saw Myrtle propped up in her wheelchair on display with the four men. I don't know how she managed to get in her wheelchair. Maybe it was some last act of pride, knowing it was Mom's birthday. Maybe the nurses, some of whom knew Mom quite well, had gotten her into the chair and set her out there as a surprise. Maybe it was a last ditch effort to break her out of her downward spiral. I don't know. But other than lying in her casket, that was the last time I ever saw her.

> My father was interested in education and the district school was built on a corner of our farm. He served on the school board for many years. In 1895, Red Lake County was established and he was elected first County Commissioner of the

district. He was involved in the controversy with Thief River Falls concerning the location of the county seat. For sixteen years he continued to serve in the office.

In 1918 my parents found a renter for the farm and moved to Red Lake Falls where father built a home using oak lumber he had saved and seasoned himself. My mother died during the influenza epidemic in 1919. My sisters were both married and had families of their own so my father and I lived in that house for six years while I finished school. He then sold the house to R.J. Poirier Sr. and also sold the farm land which he owned in Garnes Township.

After spending a year in California and Oregon, he returned to his farm where he lived for the rest of his life. He had a well-equipped carpenter shop and a blacksmith shop where her made furniture and repaired machinery. He expanded his bee keeping to two hundred hives and made it a profitable business. His interest in politics and government was still active and he again served on school and township boards. He kept his membership in the Modern Woodmen of America. In 1943 at the age of 76, he died having lived to see and enjoy all of his ten grandchildren.

His daughters are still living, Edythe Schonauer at Plummer, Rose Schehr at St. Paul and I, Myrtle Baril, in Red Lake Falls.

The truth was I loathed those trips to the old folks home. I was even starting to prefer Sunday mass with Father Philion's unending sermons. Even a trip to Aunt Edythe's, where we seemed to do nothing but sit on her stiff couch covered in plastic and rot while we watched Lawrence Welk, seemed preferable.

The nurses were stern behemoths. They often addressed the inmates like they were talking to their damn pets, "Ooh, Mr. Fornier, you ate all of your green beans today! How splendid!" or "Good job, Ms. Schonauer. You got yourself into your chair all by yourself. That's a big girl."

It smelled. This was different than the hospital smell I had grown accustomed to earlier when we visited Granny countless times. That was harsh and antiseptic. This had that strong odor too, but something else lurked beneath. I would say now that it was death. The place reeked of death. Death looming. Death staved off by drugs, breathing apparatuses, and emergency surgeries. Death hovering, inevitable. Just a phone call in the middle of the night away.

Even though Myrtle's room was only the second one on the right, which saved us a trip deeper into the bowels of the place, it was the opposite of her old apartment, which was a sanctuary where I spent most of my childhood. I missed her volumes of Collier's Encyclopedias that lined her bookcase. Those encyclopedias were all boxed up and sitting in our back porch. I missed her stacks of National Geographics that transported us once a month to exotic

destinations. They were rotting at the bottom of the Red Lake landfill. I missed her massive oak roll top desk that her father built in his own carpentry shop. It had been full of wonders, likely leftovers from her teaching career: finger paints, scented markers, tablets, coloring books, scissors, scrap books, yarn, tools, everything my imagination needed to thrive. That desk was now stored in Edythe's garage.

I didn't know it then, but twenty years in the future, I would spend a great deal of time collecting the remnants of that apartment - either physically or mentally. I even tracked down the black alarm clock. The tape - not even Scotch tape at all, for this is a cheap type with adhesive threads running through it - still bridges the deep crack. A few pieces of tape are missing. But a few still hang firm. The remaining pieces are shriveled around the edges and the threads have broken and curled.

The clock still works. It sits on my mom's dresser, still whirring away the minutes. Though it doesn't keep time for Mom anymore - she passed away two years ago. Right now the time reads 12:56. And when I watch it, the 6 is jerked under. And the bottom part of the 7 is dragged into place. It is smaller than I remember. The light has finally burned out. It keeps time for Dad now.

> Theophile and Myrtle Demann Baril, both natives of Red Lake County, were both born in 1905. Theophile, better known as "Tuff," was the youngest son of Ildage and

Odele Baril, pioneer farmers o Red Lake Falls Township. He attended St. Joseph's and Lafayette schools. He was employed by John Savard at the time of his marriage to Myrtle Demann, youngest daughter of William and Hattie Demann.

The Demanns lived in Lake Pleasant township and Myrtle attended the rural school there before her parents moved into Red Lake Falls. She then went to Lafayette and the Teacher Training Department and taught in rural schools.

After their marriage in 1927, the Barils lived in Red Lake Falls except for a short time during World War II when Tuff worked in the iron mines and the family lived in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. He was also hired as a painter in the Naval Yards at Bremerton, Washington.

Returning to Red Lake Falls, he was employed by the Red Lake Falls Municipal Liquor Store and as manager of the local American Legion Club establishment for several years.

Tuff and Myrtle were the parents of five children who attended the local schools and were active in music and sports.

Myrtle resumed her education along with her children and then taught in Gary, Minnesota and Thief River Falls for ten years. During this time the Barils lived in Thief River Falls. In 1970 they returned to retire in Red Lake Falls and Tuff died the following year after several years of poor health. Myrtle continues to make her home here.

Their children are Barbara Jean, married to Charles Roehl and living

> in Rock Springs, Wyoming; Richard married to Valerie Theroux living in Hopkins, Minnesota; James who is married to Bonnie Bishop lives in Gunnison, Colorado and Jack and Colleeen Wager Baril make their home in Cumberland, Wisconsin. Susan and Kenneth Reynolds are living in Red Lake Falls. There are fifteen grandchildren.

I looked over at the clock. Another five minutes had been dragged down. How could Mom leave me here? I longed for the old TV that used to be in Myrtle's room, but it had belonged to her roommate. She had run out of drugs to hold off death a year ago. It took her TV too.

So I opened my book, Pet Sematary, by Stephen King. I squinted against the shadows and tried to read. This did little good. I thought about how four years earlier, Granny and I journeyed to the new library in town. Granny raised my mother as a reader, and when we moved to the farm, Mom and I often stopped at the library prior to our weekday visit with Granny. And, indeed, in the years ahead, the interlibrary loan program would be my main escape route from the farm. I looked forward to getting the call, usually on Tuesdays, to come in and get my new arrivals.

On that first trip, Granny explained to me that I could take these books home for two weeks at a time. Within minutes I had a stack of books ready to take home. She helped me whittle my stack down to the ones I might actually

read. In fact, this very same novel, fresh in its hardcover edition, was one that I clung to desperately. Earlier that year, I spied Kevin, my brother, watching Salem's Lot on HBO one evening and now recognized the author's name. Finally, Granny relented, knowing that I wouldn't be able to comprehend much of anything in the novel. She was correct, which was why I was currently reading the same novel now after recently working my way through Carrie, The Dead Zone, and The Shining. When we left, I cradled three books in my arms and had my new library card in my back pocket. The same library card I used to check out this book. I wondered if it was the very same book. I flipped to the back of the cover and eyed the stamps there. One of the first entries read in faded green ink, 15 August 1983.

Then Myrtle mumbled.

I froze. The book lay open in my lap. The clock gasping in the background.

She mumbled again and opened her eyes.

These were her first real words in days. I knew she was ill. Now I know two weeks earlier she had suffered a stroke, which left almost half her body paralyzed.

She mumbled something louder and lifted her right arm.

What was I going to say? I shook and eyed the door; instead I forced myself to rise and move closer.

Myrtle stared directly at me with a clarity that had not been seen in months. I could tell from Mom's reports that she had not been doing well. But she looked right at me, as she had done so many times before, and the right corner of her mouth hooked into a smile.

I expected her to say hello and ask how I was. My response was taking form on my tongue. We had so much to catch up on.

Then she asked, "Did Dad get the cattle in before the ice storm?"

What?

Her eyes searched mine for some comprehension. I didn't know what to say.

"Did Dad get the cattle in? The temperature is dropping. The rain is freezing." She seemed to shiver slightly as she said this.

What? She stirred, trying to sit up.

"Raymond. You've been a naughty boy. I told you to stop picking on Simon. How would you like it if we treated you like that?"

Her words were clear, but they weren't directed at me.

"Take your seats now."

Something was going on inside her mind. Her memories were spinning out of control. She had lost her context. The light was in her eyes, but it wasn't shining on now, June 1988. Her mind cast a beam of comprehension into the recesses of her memories. In one moment she was helping her dad on the farm

in the early 1900s. Later she was scolding a student. Minutes later she was delighted about the motor she and Jim rigged together for a college class they both had to take from Bemidji State in the 1950s.

Those are the only details I recall. I panicked and dashed down the hall for a nurse. Of course, there was no one at the main desk when I actually needed them. I felt foolish asking for help and looked around, that heat rising on my cheeks and back of my neck. My fears were eased when Mom and Dad walked through the door.

“Mom,” I said too loudly in the quiet hallway. Two of the horsemen looked at me and that heat singed my forehead. “Granny is talking, but I don’t know what she’s saying. I don’t think she does either.”

Mom ran, something I had not seen in years, down the hall to Myrtle’s room. Dad wrapped his arm around me and guided me to the room. Myrtle was still recounting vignettes from her life while Mom held her right hand and nodded in recognition. Her shoulders hunched and shook as if she was crying. Then the nurse gave Granny something to help her rest, and she was still again. The clock read 4:33.

What gnaws at me to this day is that I had a chance to record those memories. All those thoughts that who knows if anyone knew of them or not? All of those moments. Who knows if she had ever shared any of them with

anyone else? Had she complained to her husband about Raymond? Had they gotten the cows in before the ice storm?

I can't imagine what other memories she shared when I was out at the nurses' station.

A month later, Myrtle was gone. Died in her sleep. All those memories. All those stories. Gone.

Or are they?

II

She gazes out from
her senior portrait -
not yet 18 and set to graduate.

Her image preserved
in the black, white, and gray,
of 1923.

But she is etched
in full color and motion
in memory.

Her hair, usually auburn,
later drained white in the nursing home
rather than this dull gray,
is curled in waves
and cropped short -
just below her earlobes.
The bangs, swept to the left,

fall on her forehead.
This is the very haircut
that earned the valedictorian
a week suspension,
  which she spent writing the school song
  and hitchhiking across the iron range.

Her broad nose, a family distinction,
is pale and level,
  not nearly as haughty
  as many would believe.

Her lips, always painted red,
like her nails in later years,
at first appear pursed in a slight smile.
But look closer,
the right corner is hooked
ever so slightly
into a smirk,
  which she snuck in before the flash,
  thwarting her father's wish for an obedient picture.

Her eyes, so tender blue in my youth,
later clouded over with cataracts,
are twin dark orbs,
but nothing -
    not the plain black, white, and gray,
    nor the yawn of 82 years,
    not even the grave,
can shade the cool defiance
that glows behind them
and paints a permanent
portrait of her
swirling in the hues
of love, family, and imagination,
  forever alive in my memory.

*We woke early for school*
*only to find our Wednesday*
*morning world*
*wrapped in white.*

*Christmas came early*
  *the night before*

*when first*
*rain fell*
*then froze*
*followed by*
*fat, wet flakes*
*that soon*
*were filed sharp*
*and rode fiercely*
*on the wind.*

*The radio confirmed*
*Granny's suspicions.*
*School was canceled,*
*and this was to be our*
*secret holiday.*

Dad's trucking company had their Christmas party in Thief River Falls. So Mom bundled me in my snow suit, moon boots, and face mask and shuttled me off to Granny's. This was an unexpected gift. Trips over to Granny's were routine during the summer months, for her apartment was a few blocks away on my bike, but the during the winter months, the drifts, ice, and slush made it seem like she lived in another town.

I wasn't out of my snowsuit before I was eyeing Granny's end table, which just happened to have a stack of new National Geographics. Resting on her dining room table was new white construction paper to fold and cut into snow flakes. Beside the TV sat a new red, plastic pail with a shovel poking out to scoop snow and then roll into snowmen.

Mom called my name three times as she left, shaking her head each time from the doorway, snow whipping around her. I tore myself away from the construction paper and waved my scissors at her in a quick goodbye.

We were through our first set of snowflakes and a bowl of popcorn when Mom called with the news: they didn't dare drive home because of the weather, so they were staying at the Best Western. This was another gift.

> "Behind Murphy's old house the neighborhood boys had a rope tied to an old elm tree. It became a rite of passage for us to swing out on the rope. The tree was on the edge of a cliff. And the limb extended over the cliff. We were about 25 yards from the river itself. You know the place where all the houses are condemned because it's sliding into the river? Well, that's the place.
>
> Of course, all of us being 13 or so, we thought it was cool to swing out over the tops of the trees below on the river bank. Sometimes our shoes caught the leaves below when we swung out. Most of the younger kids were chicken to go out on it, but we bullied them until they all took turns swinging.
>
> The only catch was that you didn't want to fall. I suppose it was about a 50 foot drop. We figured with all of our teenage logic, that we'd crash through the tree branches and not just go splat.
>
> This was how we spent many summer afternoons. Unfortunately, one day we bullied Puffer onto the swing. He didn't hop off when he arched back to the ledge. So each time Puffer dangled out, he got more and more nervous. Each time he swung out, his momentum became less and less until Puffer finally came to a dead stop about ten feet from the ledge. He was dangling there on the end of the rope. Then he started bawling, and you know that high-pitched voice Puffer had.
>
> Man we figured sure as hell someone would hear us and call the cops. So I climbed up the tree, shimmied out on the branch, and then crawled down on the rope to Puffer. Then I started swaying back and forth until I got our momentum going to where Terry and Hood grabbed hold of us and pulled us in.
>
> I was pretty proud of myself for going all the way out there to get the kid. We told Puffer if he ratted us out, we'd pound him. Plus we

promised not to make him go out on the rope anymore. But sometime later I made the mistake of telling Barb.

Well, it took her about a grand total of ten seconds to blab it to Granny.

I don't know if she followed me or staked out the tree, but the next time we gathered at the rope, it wasn't ten minutes before Granny comes down the path carrying Dad's big orange handled saw. The saw was almost as tall as she was. And she comes down the path carrying it across her shoulder like she's a damn lumber jack.

You should have seen the looks on the guys' faces when they saw Granny in her slacks and blouse come walking down with that saw. They all scattered. I don't know what they thought she was going to do, but they evaporated. Leaving me there.

I don't remember what she said to me, but the next thing I knew we were taking turns sawing that branch down. Of course, she left the final turn for me so I could see the branch and our rope plummet.

Fortunately, I watched where it fell. It wouldn't be hard to sneak down the cliff later and search for the rope. Then I'd just haul it back up and tie it to another branch. I was making the plan all out in my head as we headed back home, except this time I was lugging the saw over my shoulder.

A couple days later, we were down the cliff looking for the rope. We sure found it, but it was under the elm tree. We looked up and saw where the tree had been pushed over the cliff, roots and all. There were back hoe tracks all over up there." --- **Kevin**

*The world*
*outside Granny's window*
*glared white,*
*as the sun rose above*
*the neighbor's roofs*
*and turned the frozen drifts*
*into a million minute jewels*
*making my eyes ache.*

*Snow drifted up*
*doors and windows,*
*spilled over*
*lawns and sidewalks,*
*rolled through*
*streets in great dunes*

*that would later be broken*
*and plowed high*
*into banks.*

*Not a single flake was*
*stirred by wind*
*or disturbed by steps.*

*Smoke*
*swirled in heavy coils*
*from neighboring*
*chimneys*
*in the midst of the own*
*secret holidays.*

I peered at the frozen world from Granny's window. How could a single layer of thin glass keep that outside world - full of snow and chill - out, while it kept our world - full of warmth and comfort - in? I tested the pane with a single finger. Cold nipped it. I yanked it away, leaving a perfect moist replica of my fingerprint. It held for a moment. Then swirl by swirl the pattern was erased. I pulled my other hand from my pocket and placed it against the glass, counting slowly to ten despite the cold needles in my palm. I saw a mist forming around my fingers on the cold glass. When I pulled it away, the imprint hung there. I began the count again. By seven the cold had eaten it away.

I bent closer to inspect this discovery. I reddened my thumb on the pane and yanked it away. Again I counted silently. My breath fogged the window the way my mom's did on the Plexiglas when she watched my brother's hockey games from the warming room. The mist hung on the glass even longer. I

looked at the frozen world through this balmy mist. With my index finer, I traced a tree and stood back until it disappeared.

Then I inched closer to the pane and took a deep breath. I warmed the air deep in my chest and exhaled it across the window. The outside world was fogged over. I went to work with my finger, drawing the summer world that I knew was out there beneath that skin of snow and ice.

"Quite the canvas you have there," Granny said.

I breathed deep and fogged the window again, drawing more trees. Granny added a bird's nest on a branch. I smiled at the memory of discovering blue shards beneath a tree and running them back to Granny. She walked me over to the park, and we listened for the chirps in an elm tree where we found a robin's nest. I drew a mother hovering over the nest. She added tiny beaks rising above the nest's rim.

With the right combination of breath, distance, and heat, we canvassed the entire window. She added a picnic blanket and basket. Then I drew the park itself, the swing set, with its three swings, the monkey bars, the merry go round, the crane and its scoop shovel, and the teeter-totter. Finally in the upper right corner, I added a smiling sun beaming down.

We stood back and watched our masterpiece fade.

"Well. What are we waiting for?"

We waited in the doctor's lobby
for the third time this month.

My grandmother had another appointment.

This time it was her hands.
They were withered into claws.

I gazed hard at how
they curled into knots
that she rested on her knees.

*"Arthritis"*

An adult word that
Mom muttered on the ride over.
She hadn't spelled it out like other adult words.

So now as I stared at my grandmother's hands,
I tested it on my tongue -

*"Arthritis"*

Mom cuffed me on the ear.

"*Oh, Suzie, it's perfectly fine. The child is curious."*

Granny offered them to me then,
palms down.

I scampered from my mother's lap
eager to explore
the knuckles
swollen and gnarled,
like the bark on our oak
the blue veins bulging
just beneath flesh
the color of crumpled paper.

*"Arthritis"*

I tried it again on my own.

*"Each morning it creeps*
*into my knuckles until*
*every joint is inflamed,*

*rendering them into these."*

I saw her crooked fingers,
warped around her
wedding band and class ring.

She tried to uncurl them
and for the first time
I witnessed pain flash across her face.
I felt mine flush hot with guilt.

"*You know, dear, they always*
*feel better, though,*
*when you hold them."*

She rested them in my lap.
I caressed from the base
of her wrists up to her knuckles.
Then up to fingers, brittle and bent,
over her joints, creaking in my small grasp
until I reached the tops of her fingers.

My grandmother's fingers ended in long nails,
perfectly trimmed, painted,
and polished red.

*"Arthritis"*

*"will not keep me from looking*
*presentable in public, my dear.*
*Especially to Dr. Nelson,*
*whom I taught in fifth grade."*

*While we were armed against*
*the outside world,*
*it was armed against us.*
*Trees cracked and wheezed*
*their trunks, branches, and even*
*a few stubborn leaves,*
*all glossed thick.*
*High line poles were glazed -*
*their transformers dripped frozen daggers,*
*their lines drooped almost to within grasp.*

*The flagpole and its limp flag*
*were suspended where they stood*
*as if they were glass.*
*The stop sign at the corner*
*glistened with a quarter inch*
*of its clear second skin.*

Granny believed in dressing in layers. She first draped me in my Yoda t-shirt from the night before. This was followed by a sweater that I had left in the fall. Then she lifted up one leg of my jeans to make sure my socks were pulled up high. I giggled at how she strained to get first the left and then the right up to my knee caps.

"You won't think this is so funny, mister," she said tugging on the elastic, "when we get out in the snow." I didn't care how high she pulled them, though I usually just let them bag around my ankles, as long as she put them on inside out - I hated the feel of the seams on my toes.

She left for a moment and returned with a balled up pair of socks. They were gray with orange patches at the toes and heel. "A second pair never hurt. These belonged to your uncle Jim. He wore them for cross-country skiing," she said and wagged her finger in time with her head as she snuffed my protest before I could start it.

The socks, both sets, were followed by my snow pants. They were followed by my winter coat, zipped all the way up to my Adam's apple. Finally she set my moon boots next to the door with my gloves and face mask.

I stood feeling damp beneath my arm pits as I watched her open the closet. She parted the coats that hung from the single rod. Then she ducked and walked to the very back of the closet. This piqued my interest because I had never realized how deep her closet was. This warranted a later investigation.

Finally Granny emerged with a pile of clothes so high on her tiny arms that I couldn't even see her gray hair. "This should do it," she said from behind the stack. Then she neatly set them on the couch.

She huffed as she lifted a large red coat with thick black lines crisscrossing the shoulders. The lines turned into a checkered pattern at the waist. Then she wriggled into it. I giggled as she swayed back and forth. After a short struggle, her gray hair finally puffed out the top and her hands clawed their way out the sleeves. I giggled again as I noted how the jacket hung well below her knees.

"Keep it up, mister," Granny said, winding a black scarf around her neck. "It might look funny to you, but they don't make warmer coats. Your grandfather got it when he was working on the iron range," she finished, tucking excess scarf down her collar.

I had never seen Granny dress like this. She had plenty of coats, most of which she got from department stores in Thief River Falls or Grand Forks. I was partial to the Grand Forks store because it had an escalator. She had plenty of

scarves, most of which were colorful and thin, which she wore tied around her neck with her summer blouses. But she seemed like a different person bundled up in these clothes.

If I thought that jacket and those old socks were funny, they all paled in comparison to the Elmer Fudd-style hunting cap she placed on her head. I couldn't help but giggle louder. "Keep it up, funny guy," Granny said as she reached up and pulled the earflaps down over her ears. I giggled so hard, I had to bend over at the waist. "Keep it up, but I'm not unwrapping you to go to the bathroom. And you don't want to have an accident. Do you?"

That made perfect sense. I turned to put on my moon boots.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Granny said. Then she pranced back to her kitchen as I pulled on my face mask and mittens. I was not the only one eager for our voyage.

She returned with a large silver spoon, which she deposited in her right hip coat pocket. I opened my mouth wide behind my ski mask, but Granny answered me with, "What are you waiting for?"

Ready to venture out, I turned to the door, like an astronaut at the hatch. Granny tugged her front door open, and I rushed to take the first steps. But I came face to face with a three foot wall of tightly packed snow.

I stopped, my foot in mid-step, and my mouth hanging open under my ski mask. We were literally snowed in. I turned back, disappointed. Granny nudged me forward.

"What are you waiting for?" she said and strode past me, without even glancing back. She trudged through the hip deep snow. I followed.

> "When Granny moved to Fairview Manor, they didn't allow pets, and she had to put her beloved cat, Smokey, to sleep. She'd had Smokey for many years. Needless to say, it was hard on Granny.
>
> I remember Mom and I taking her to Doc Hazard's. I sat in the middle while Mom drove and Granny soothed Smokey, who was unnerved by the ride. I couldn't bring myself to look at Granny or Smokey, so I just stared straight.
>
> We waited in the car while she carried Smokey in. I wanted one last look at Smokey, so I watched Granny carry her into the vet's. Smokey was peering over Granny's shoulder back at us, her tail swishing. She was so big and long that she looked nearly half Granny's height as she was draped over her shoulder.
>
> I stared straight ahead when Doc Hazard opened the door.
>
> Ten minutes later, when she finally came out empty-handed, I silently started to cry.
>
> Granny got in. It was her turn to stare straight ahead. I continued to sob as quietly as possible.
>
> Finally, Mom asked me what was wrong, but I was a girl of 14 and didn't want to seem like a baby, so I said I had something in my eye.
> Granny leaned over, squeezed my arm and said, 'Me, too -- it's called tears.'
>
> I knew if Granny could cry, it was okay for me to cry, too." -- **Barb**

*We ventured into*
*the frozen silence*
*that pounded heavy*
*on my covered ears.*

*My eyes narrowed*
*to slits behind*

*frosted lashes*
*and squinted ice cubes*
*at their corners.*

*Every breath took shape*
*in the sub zero temp*
*and every word took flight*
*and rose as vapor*
*to the sky.*

*My wrists were nipped pink*
*at that tender region*
*between glove and sleeve*
*where the flick of my hand*
*left flesh exposed.*

*Our lungs took in air,*
*even filtered by scarves,*
*that felt like needles*
*poking their way through*
*our wheezing chests.*

*But these were minor hazards*
*on the way to revelation.*

We stepped out into the silent, frozen world. Ours were the first footprints in the uncharted snow. The only sound beside the crunch of our steps, came when Granny pulled her front door shut. The outside world was silent - no traffic, no dogs, no kids, no wind. Just silence ringing heavy in my ears. Great plumes of mist rose from the corner sewer vents.

"Let's go," Granny said and waded past me, her arms working in turn with her legs churning through the drifts.

I took a step and my boot quickly disappeared in the drift. I felt the pressure of thousands of flakes press against my leg, trying to find a way in, but my snow pants were snug against my boots and Granny's tugging at my second pair of socks held firm around my knees, keeping any flakes that might find a way beneath my snow pants off my bare skin. My boots crunched as I stepped on the thick layer of ice at the bottom.

We plowed our way around to the edge of the apartment complex. I lifted and heaved my knees high and plodded through the drifts. "What I like about this," Granny began as she trudged next to me, "is that we don't have to follow any path. We can make our own way." It was true. I had no idea where the sidewalk ended and the lawn began. We worked our way around the corner.

With silence heavy in my ears and my heart hammering in my chest, we stopped beneath a huge range of icicles drooping down one of the eaves. I wished I had my sled, for one of my favorite things to do was to lift my sled above my head and rake it across any icicles I found. They cracked and fell to the earth, slicing tiny holes in the snow banks. Then I fished them out and sucked on them, nature's popsicles. That was until Robbie, a neighbor boy who had the same bright idea as me, had the bottom of a nostril lopped off by a particularly wicked icicle. After that, Mom forbade me to go anywhere near them.

Granny turned so we were facing the park across the street. The sun, just above the homes and trees, spread its rays, which hung pink in the sky.

“Look at this,” she said, pointing her glove at the largest icicle, a monster, thick as a tree branch at the start and sharpened down to nasty point. It had to be at least as tall as me. “Look at the ice when the sunlight hits it.”

We counted the moments by our steamy breaths. Granny alternately stomped her feet and clapped her hands, which echoed a muffled sound from her gloves. I imitated, though my Thinsulate gloves couldn’t replicate that cool muffled sound Granny got from her heavy leather gloves.

The light began to creep closer, chasing the lingering morning shadows further down the side of the complex. Finally, the beams fell on us, bringing only light, though, not warmth.

“See the colors?”

Where?

“Look in the middle of the icicle. Here,” she said, grabbing me by the shoulders. She lifted her legs out of her spot and guided me in to them, so I was standing in her spot knee deep in the snow. “Now, look into the ice.”

I squinted into the icicle. It glared as it caught the sunlight. It filtered the rays and reflecting blues, pinks, and yellows arrows of light in a hundred different directions.

I was so shocked I forgot to breath and began to cough.

Granny waited for me and then asked, “See the purple?”

I chased the colors with my eyes, but there were too many to track.

“See the purple?” she repeated.

Then she knelt down level with my gaze. I peered hard at the spectrum inside the icicle, narrowing my eyes to slits against the glare. Just between the pinks and yellows, I caught a purple ray.

“My grandmother believed that shade of purple trapped there in the ice is a combination of frozen air, fresh ice, and bright morning sunshine.”

I stared deeper.

“My grandmother,” Granny began, her voice just more than a whisper, “believed cold, early mornings are the only times that color exists. There it is. Here we are. Witnesses.”

When our radio faded,
so did the stove.
Wind rattled the living room,
and then our teeth.

Mom noticed
the blue flames from her desk
and asked us
to fetch some coal.

Jack and I whined
cried
lamented
reasoned
pleaded
about
the cold

the wind
the dark
the whipping snow
that would swallow us whole.

So Mom,
small and silent,
just simply

bundled up in Dad's Mackinaw coat,
which swallowed her whole,
and her tiny hands crawled out the sleeves
and fastened the buttons

fished a wool scarf from the rack
and wound its length about
what little of her chin poked out the collar

pulled on Dad's red and black cap by the bill
and tugged the dark flaps over her ears

stepped into Dad's oversized rubber boots,
which nearly came to her knees.

She pried the door open,
looked us in the eyes and
lugged a bucket in each hand.

The cold snatched her,
and we shouted
begged
screamed
wailed
implored
please

come back,
we're sorry,
we'll go
just come back.

But the door shut
and she was taken
by
the cold
the wind

the dark
the whipping snow
that would swallow her whole.

Twenty minutes later,
an eternity of tick-tocks
echoing on the grandfather clock,
she stumbled into the house,
both buckets heaping.

Mom never said a word
as she shed the cap,
the scarf,
the coat,
the boots.

Mom never said a word,
as she
fed the black bits into the stove's belly
as she
settled back at her desk.

Mom never fetched coal again.

*This world was*
*dressed in layers*
*just like us.*

*A covering of clouds*
*the color of spilled milk*
*hung empty across the sky,*
*for their cargo*
*now blanketed all below.*

*Puffs of chimney smoke*
*circled their stacks*
*and strayed*
*about the roofs.*

*The trees, which were coated*
*in frost, snow, and ice,*
*groaned with the white*

*burden in the black branches.*

*Frigid air wound itself*
*tight around us,*
*snatching each breath.*

*A flimsy layer of morning sun*
*finally fell across us,*
*but it offered no hint of heat -*
*only crisp clarification.*

Granny marched us back around to the front of Fairview Manor. The icicle still hung in my mind's eye, glaring bright on the back of my eyelids whenever I blinked.

"Just think. No two snowflakes are ever alike."

I nodded my head.

"Can you imagine? Out of all the snowflakes around us now, no two are alike," she said and reached down and scooped a gloveful of snow. I peered at it and saw the flakes piled together in her palm. As I peered closer, I began to differentiate the individual flakes.

"I find it hard to believe," she said, breaking my concentration and renewing it all at once. "But I've read that it's almost impossible, at least mathematically. What are the odds that two tiny, yet infinitely complex, ice crystals freeze the exact same way?"

I zeroed in on the flakes in her hand again. Squinting, I began to see their individual edges and angles. Then I thought of the ones we made last night.

Those were all different too, and they were monstrous compared to these. My head was heavy with such wonderment. I peered down at the heap of snow surrounding my waste. There too I could see the individual flakes fallen one on top of the other.

"So it's remarkable," Granny began, but my concentration was waning. I tried to calculate how many snowflakes must be in front of me. "That out of all the snowflakes that have ever fallen - from when our ancestors still lived in caves thousands of years ago to today. No two snowflakes alike."

Now why did she do that? I was beginning to feel a little unsteady just trying to imagine how many snowflakes were piled high in the drift in front of us. But when I tried to imagine how many individual snowflakes must have fallen over the ice age up through today, my brain shut down the way it did when it tried to comprehend such things as the never-ending universe, an idea raised by our science teacher or an eternity burning in hell, an idea raised by our catechism teacher.

I grew dizzy with the knowledge.

"It's hard to imagine," she said, steadying me with an arm around my shoulder. Then she tipped her hand upside down and the flakes -- how many? A thousand? A million? -- spilled out in a white cloud. "But then again, people are different. No two alike. Just like us."

"I'll never forget when Granny began to slow down. This would have been around the spring of '77. She just began to slow down. She started sleeping later and later until we couldn't get her out of bed, which was unusual for her. I always kidded her that it was because Carter was doing such a lousy job in the White House.

We eventually brought her to the hospital. They ran tests and couldn't really find out what was wrong. Something about her electrolytes being off. She just couldn't get any energy. Finally, she slipped into a coma. I guess you'd call it a coma. She just slept and slept.

Of course, your mother and I spent every night there for the entire week she was there. At the time they didn't let anyone under 15 up to visit, so you were left in the lobby where one of us always went down to check on you every so often. You even made the comment that you didn't like this new apartment because they didn't let you see her. She spent so much time at the hospital that you thought she actually moved in there.

I remember it was a Sunday and your mother and I were up visiting her. You were down in the lobby with your koala and your books. The doctor told us that her vital signs were finally beginning to slow down. He didn't seem very optimistic at all. Well, that hit your mother pretty hard. She had to get the priest to administer last rites. We sat huddled around her for I don't know how long waiting. But while her vitals were slowing, they didn't stop. The doctor said he often saw this go on for quite awhile, so we thought we'd get you back home.

We were just pulling into the driveway when I had a feeling that we had to head back up there. I don't know what it was. Something just told me to get back in the car and go up to visit her. So we left you with Barb and went all the way back up to the hospital.

When I walked into the room, Myrtle was sitting up in bed jabbering away with her doctor about where he did his graduate work.

I'll never forget that. We had all given up on her. And there she was sitting up in bed talking like she had never been in the hospital at all. She lived another ten years." -- **Ken**

*Ice clung clear and cold*
*on the links*
*and dripped tiny icicles*
*from the black*
*plastic seats*
*of the swing.*

*The ice groaned*
*as I hopped onto the*

*frozen seat.*

*Then with just a wiggle*
*a thousand spider webs*
*cracked across the links.*

*I sat suspended*
*in the wonder of this*
*sudden revelation --*
*holding my breath,*
*sitting painfully still,*
*before hissing hot breathe*
*through clenched teeth*
*as I craned*
*my neck up,*
*following those cracks*
*from link to link as they*
*fissured all around me.*

*Then I couldn't take the*
*suspense any longer,*
*thrusting my legs up,*
*pumping them hard under me --*
*raking the icicles clean off the seat*
*and shattering the ice which*
*showered down on me in*
*a thousand tiny shards.*

*I heaved higher*
*through*
*the biting air -*
*feeling a peculiar freedom -*
*swaying higher and higher*
*in this silent world*
*bound by ice and*
*burdened by snow .*

*Then, in a final act of freedom,*
*I took flight*
*for a few precious*
*moments --*
*joining only*

*breath and smoke*
*aloft in the sky*
*flying up and out,*
*not worrying about tucking*
*and rolling on the way back down.*

*Instead,*
*I swung my heavy boots out*
*and spread my arms -*
*suspended*
*a single*
*second*
*before falling*
*flat on*
*the arms of a billion flakes.*

We trooped over to the playground, which really didn't look like a playground at all. The rides were so still and so white and so silent that I restrained my muscles, which were eager to play, not wanting to disturb the perfect blanket of snow.

Granny, however, didn't hesitate. She lifted her spindly legs one after the other high into the air, her knees swinging up almost to her chest, and plunged into the park. I fell in line with her tracks. I followed her as she wound around the buried merry-go-round and the mounds that were the cast iron duck, horse, goose, and donkey.

I followed her trail over to the slide, which was, as far as slides go, pretty average, just a gently angled slide, a mere ride of 15 feet or so. This wasn't fancy like the one at Riverside Park, which spiraled down. It wasn't even like the one at our elementary school, which at least had two bumps on it. The only

slide like this one that I ever enjoyed was at Lakeview Resort, but that one at least dumped you into the lake. It took me all of one ride last summer to deem this the plainest slide ever. Even the stupid little duck, horse, goose, or donkey could give a better ride if you could build up enough momentum, bobbing up and down.

Granny brushed off the steps and delved into her coat pocket to retrieve the kitchen spoon. She then neatly peeled away the thick sheet of ice on the rungs.

When she cleared a safe path, she pushed me up by my bottom. I longed to go back and try to knock down that huge icicle, but Granny followed me right up the steps, pushing me on all the way. Finally, I sat at the top of the slide, which had a good four inches of snow built up on it, and waited for Granny to come around to her customary place at the bottom of the slide.

“Ready,” she called.

To please her, I let go of the railing. The thin layer of ice beneath the snow acted as an accelerant. I zipped down the slide, feet straight out. My moon boots acted as a plow, sending the snow billowing up and over the edges and up and over me. The first sounds to fill the morning air were my screams of sheer delight, screams that even took me by surprise, but I screamed sheer delight nonetheless all the way down.

Granny was hunched over laughing too, thumping her gloved hand against her hip as she watched me spill into the soft bank beside her. Snow sprinkled down my collar and crammed into my sleeves, but I didn't care. But that was when I realized Granny's purpose behind this morning expedition. For when I looked back at the slide, I had already plowed a path and I could see the silver belly of the slide glisten.

I had only been given one shot at this.

"I have never seen anyone slide like that before," Granny said, no doubt beaming behind her scarf. She grabbed me by the back of my coat with one hand and hoisted me up with her other hand. Then she patted the snow off me with one hand and located all the ticklish spots, beneath my arms, my ribs, and my thighs, with her other hand. I squealed with an unexpected delight that, in all my life since that moment, has not been equaled.

III

*That is quite enough of that --*

was my only warning
as she snatched

my latest coloring book
from beneath my hand,
which had tried so hard to finally stay inside the lines
on the final scales of the dragon's tail.

Granny whisked it away
like a magician pulling the linen from a table
without disturbing a single dish.

*This just will not do --*

was her only explanation
as she plucked the stubby red crayon
from between my thumb and index finger,
which was left tracing my mouth
gaping at me from the polished table.

Granny used the coloring book
to herd the Crayolas over the table's edge
and into an ice cream pail,
which she carried off into the bedroom.

*This is much better --*

was her only response
as she emerged with a tall sheet
of construction paper,
special ordered
from the local department store,
billowing around her.

Granny smoothed the blank sheet out
and slipped a black Sharpie in the vacuum
between my thumb and index finger
and sat next to me, placing a new
box of permanent markers
beside us.

*Now, let's see your dragon --*

was her only instruction.

*Above the neighbors' roofs*
*and beyond the depot's tracks,*

*Clouds congest into giant anvils*
*and hammer the horizon.*

When Granny said we were under a thunderstorm watch, I abandoned my Star Wars action figures and immediately began the response Mom had conditioned in me: tears, arms flailing, screaming, and a mad dash for the neighbor's basement.

But when Granny clamped onto me with her bony fingers and commanded, "That's enough of that," I immediately began the response Granny had conditioned in me: eyes focused, back straight, silent and totally attentive. Then she led me to the porch.

We pulled the couch away from the wall and nudged it with our hips until it rested in front of the windows. "We'll have a front row seat," she announced. Granny then marched to each of the porch windows and closed them, save the one in front of us.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," she scanned my dad's shelves. Amidst the clutter of Cheeze Whiz and Skippy jars, nailed to the studs by their lids, full of bolts, nails, and screws; various containers of lawn mower, car, and chain saw oil; old bicycle tires and tubes, she found her prize, an empty ice cream pail. It was just shy of her 5'2'' reach. I offered to scale the shelf via a lawn chair, then our kitchen window pane, and then onto the shelf itself, but Granny refused and teetered on her tip toes until she was able to nudge it off and into her arms.

Then she scanned up at the bare beams of the roof, cocked her head to one side, took two small steps to the right, and set the pail in the middle of floor.

"Now, we're ready," she said and hoisted me onto her lap.

We peered out our window.

**"**To give you an idea of what kind of strength Mom had, I'll tell you about what she went through when I was born.

For much of the first three years of her marriage, Mom had to keep it a secret. At that time, female teachers weren't allowed to marry. Of course, that didn't stop Mom one bit. However, when she became pregnant with me, that presented a problem.

She was set to resign her teaching position at the Lake Pleasant Township country school until the parents got together and forced a change in the policy.

But that was the only thing that would really go right for Mom that year. It was 1930, during the last years of prohibition. It wasn't two months into Mom's pregnancy when Dad was arrested for bootlegging at Dupante's, which was used as mostly a pool hall and restaurant. But in those days a dry pool hall and restaurant didn't make much money. Paul Dupante was a good friend of Dad's. So when he smuggled in some booze, they would re-open the bar side of the restaurant at certain times. Unfortunately, Dad was working during one of these certain times, and it was raided. Dad was sent to St. Cloud for six months.

Mom was left to bear her first child alone. She taught as long as she could and then she took a leave of absence and worked as a grocery clerk. Unfortunately, with a little more than a month to go before she was due, Mom had an attack of appendicitis. She was so stubborn that she never went in, despite the pain. Finally, she keeled over at work and Mr. Eckstein rushed her to St. Francis' in Crookston where they removed her appendix. The doctors had to be careful where they cut because of the fetus. Mom was left with 35 stitches.

Three weeks later, just as her incision was almost healed, Mom went into labor. Sister Bennet, who as you know, is Mom's sister-in-law, always told us how much pain Mom went through as she tore the old incision open. I can't imagine what that must have been like for her.

Yet, Mom made it through. She also gave birth to four more children. Next was Dick. Then the twins, Jim and Jack. Poor Jack was so small, he was only two and a half pounds -- it really is a miracle he survived at all. I remember Dad putting Jack in a cigar box! That was

how tiny he was. Jim was only three minutes and 12 seconds older than Jack. Dad said that the doctor told him that Mom asked him when Jack was born. The doctor replied that Jack was just a few minutes younger than Jim. But that wasn't good enough for Mom. Despite giving birth to twins, she hounded the doctor until he could get her the exact time of Jack's birth. Dad always suspected that the doctor fudged the time, but Mom believed him. Then your mother was the last to come along in 1939.

I think Mom's first pregnancy gives you some idea just how tough and determined your grandmother was." -- **Jean**

*Above sky the color of milk.*
*Beyond that the sun smothered in gray.*
*Across the yard a heavy breeze stirs the humid air through our giant oak tree.*
*Toward the west clouds the color of deep bruises hasten.*

It had been a dry summer on top of a dry spring. My fireworks arsenal still sat on my night stand, and it was well past the Fourth. Dad refused to take the chance on account of everything being so dry. I didn't see what the big deal was. It wasn't like we were going to start a forest fire. In fact, the grass looked perfectly healthy to me.

"This will be good for us. We need a good boomer," Granny explained.

I snuck a peek over at the Hasbys'. I saw their TV flickering from their living room window. I couldn't help it.

"Just look at how dry the grass is," Granny said.

I followed her nod beyond the window and into our yard. Suddenly, brownish yellow patches dotted our yard. Gone was the green of summers past that I had been seeing.

"We need the rain one way or another," Granny said.

Then she leaned over and almost whispered, “To tell you the truth, I prefer thunderstorms.”

We straddle the abandoned tracks
with tar baking up from the ties,
gravel grinding under our shoes,
and grass rustling our knees.

I hoist the 7 Up bottle
  loaded with the sizzling
  Black Cat
  heavenward.

These are the glorious seconds
that any six year old lives for --

the gray fuze hisses orange,
  as pieces flake off like a snake’s discarded skin,

        sparks nip my hand,
          as the rocket takes on an existence all its own,

              until the slim red body tears free,
                as smoke seeps from the green glass

                    leaving

                                the trace of matches on my tongue.

Granny, shading her eyes,
with her hand
watches
the tiny rocket
        twirl up
              and up
                    and up
                          until pop --

Pleased as a boy can possibly be,
I reach for the next candidate,
eager to ignite everything.

*"Don't you ever enjoy their flight?"*

This has never occurred to me.

So we watch the next rocket
climb
twisting and turning,
leaving a faint gray vapor trail
until
Pop --

*"I wonder what it looks like from the rocket's point of view."*

In those few seconds
as we rig a last rocket
I see the neighborhood and town differently.

I see

the oaks overlooking,
and pines pointing

our roof and chimney
the flat, gravel roof of the high school
and the blinding dome of the gymnasium

yards sectioned into neighborhoods
and blocks neatly squared off by
streets and alleys

the Catholic church steeple
and the small cross atop it

the old depot's tracks
running parallel south out of town
and hundreds of ties pounded into place.

a tiny boy with his grandmother
peering up
and growing smaller.

Each Fourth
I launch a single bottle rocket --

the old 7 Up bottles are gone,

thick glass replaced by cheap plastic,
until I learned to simply
hold the rocket's tail,
knowing the precise time -
a blend of tension and heat
and 26 seasons of timing -
to let the rocket roar free.

And I watch it go up
and up
and up
until I see the boy grow
smaller.

*The sky above us collides with the blue-black clouds.*
*Like wounds, they swell .*
*From their depths a flash.*
*Followed by a snarl.*
*They deepen then darken until there is no way to discern ground from sky.*

"Thunderstorms," Granny said as we eyed the grumbling sky, "are just a part of summer, like going to the park or the pool." Her voice lighted with a singsong grace, as it always did when she was imparting something important, like when she showed me how to make all the secondary colors from just red, blue, and green paints or how to find words in the dictionary.

"First, cool air rises, forming odd things called cumulous clouds," she said calmly. "See them out past the old train yard?" she asked pointing a gnarled finger out toward the west. I nodded at the clouds that looked like hammers.

"Every once in awhile they do produce tornadoes, like that one by Dorothy a few years ago."

I squirmed a bit.

Granny gripped me tighter, and we eyed the coming storm.

"I have heard many people say that Mom had a bit of arrogance about her. However, I feel that if she was arrogant in her pride, it was because of her respect for education. She worked at teaching, as a grocery clerk, took out loans, and who knows what else to get funds to send us kids to college. And all but Jack went (though he attended a professional school), your mother went too, even though just for a short time.

One of Mom's proudest moments, I remember, was her graduating from BSU with a Bachelor's of Science degree at the end of one summer session, right after I had graduated earlier that spring. Essentially, we both got our B.S. degrees - from the same school in the same year. How many parents and children can say that!

I don't think it was at all surprising that Dad's family selected Mom to research and write up the biographical history of their/our family for the 1976 bicentennial publication: A History of Red Lake County. We may not have been as socially or financially successful as they were, but I think that, educationally, she felt we were far superior." -- **Jim**

*An odd change -- the neighborhood is drained of noise.*
*All is silent. And still.*
*No dogs yelp.*
*No kids holler.*
*No cars pass.*
*As if the humidity isn't enough,*
*the stillness adds another layer,*
*smothering everything.*
*Then the screen is sucked out*
*until it strains at the hinges.*
*From the west the mass of*
*contusions growls and flashes.*

Mom loathed thunderstorms. Our house was the lone one on the block void of a basement. When Dad was gone in the truck, she slept with her

hand-held AM radio wedged between her shoulder with the lone earplug snug in her right ear. Just in case.

Thus thunderstorms meant only one thing to me - a trip over to Hasbys'. The trip always took place in the middle of the night when I was ripped from the clutches of sleep.

It always involved Mom dashing around with her large bosoms heaving in her bra, for she was too panicked to worry about her housecoat, which hung open to her waist, as she scooped me up and got Barb and Kevin out.

This regularly involved waking up Mrs. Hasby and her kids too, for she didn't seem to share Mom's attention to thunderstorm warnings.

Worse than being torn from sleep, worse than the threat of hail, strong winds, or even a tornado, worse than intruding on someone else's house in the middle of the night, worse than all of those things combined was the embarrassment that burned hot in my chest like coughing up a half digested meal. It singed me as I huddled between Hasbys' washing machine and dryer, clad only in a t-shirt and underwear, while Mom frantically tried to zip her housecoat.

That, of course, was followed by a trip back to our house, which was always standing, despite my mom's fears of a tornado cloaked in the storm.

But with Granny's arms wrapped around me, things appeared different.

Your silences were legendary.

This one struck from a clear sky
and deafened us in the car.

You wanted to pay for dinner at the A&W
but we refused.

So you showered a wad of bills over
the bench seats and divided
your meal among the kids.

You huffed and crossed your arms
and sat with your chin high and your back
painfully vertical, two inches off the seat,
and bored straight ahead
concluding the argument
in typical fashion.

The hum of our wheels on Highway Two,
the burgers and fries we tried to taste,
and the air whistling through the vents
rose above the quiet clamor.

But air conditioning did little to dispel the tension,
thick and humid, that
your silence brewed.

Our ears rang with the thunder
that didn't crackle from your pursed lips.
Our tongues sought shelter in their mouths --
to break our silence would only
remind us of yours.
Our eyes avoided your glare
no one wanted to get caught in your path.

Milky cataracts and Coke bottle-thick bifocals
couldn't conceal your
mute tantrum.

You didn't pretend to
gaze out the window
as the children did.
They slouched beneath the adult hush
and escaped in the trees and fields.

I could even feel your glare
  pelt the back of my seat
  but I hunkered down
    and counted the mile markers

Dad even stopped checking the rearview mirror
  he knew you would flatten him there.
   Instead he focused on the horizon.

In silence and blindness we drove all the way home.

*The gray wall washes toward us.*
*The depot is swallowed.*
*It wipes out Skjimonkie's.*
*Moser's is smudged out .*
*It spills onto our block.*
*The roaring sounds and*
*the gray reaches out to us.*

When I was five, Dad, Mr. Whistler (our neighbor across the alley) and I calmly watched a funnel cloud north of town descend as if we were all taking in a ball game. There was no thunder, no rain, no sirens. Just a thin white spindle that had crept from the clouds. It seemed nothing more than a slender finger flicking dirt into the air. I spent several lucid moments taking pictures with Dad as the men explained how there was nothing to fear since the funnel cloud was at least fifteen miles north. We had plenty of time to seek shelter, if needed.

Then fascination was shattered.

My mother blew out the front door, her apron still around her waist, and, no doubt, our dinner still in the oven, her arms aloft, waving wildly. One of our neighbors, likely Mrs. Erickson, had spied the tornado and alerted Mom.

Seeing her move so quickly, contrasted by the calm of Dad and Mr. Whistler, made me giggle.

Then Mom turned and saw the funnel for herself.

That was when she shrieked.

There was something guttural in hearing her scream, a sound totally different than her angry tone when I broke or spilled something.

I tore my eyes from her. I looked at the tornado again. Her shriek had opened some flood gate in my mind. I knew the tornado was the same as I had witnessed moments earlier with the men. Later we had the reports of no damage. And later than that we had the pictures. But the finger flicking dust into the air from miles away had suddenly become a fist clutching chucks of earth and homes only a few blocks away.

Mom scooped me up. She knocked my father out of the way. Then headed for the alley.

“Where are you goin’?” Dad asked, on one knee.

“To Mr. Wilson’s. I just hope he’s home. Hasbys are at the lake. Come on. We’ll crawl in through a window if we have to.”

Mom was oblivious to the fact that she had knocked Mr. Wilson to the ground too. All the while I was pinned under her arm, shrieking.

> "Mom was suspicious of Catholicism, even though she married a Catholic, had two sister-in-laws who were nuns, and ended her career teaching at St. Joseph's. So she refused to send us to the local parochial school. She felt the nuns there were more interested in proselytizing than in teaching. But part of the Catholic laws of marriage required that, if she did not send her children to Catholic schools, then she must send them to catechism classes during the summer.
>
> So away we all went. One summer, I came down with a severe case of poison-ivy: couldn't sit still, was constantly scratching and shuffling about. During class, my teaching nun had scolded me several times, ordering me to sit still. I tried to tell her what my problem was, but she didn't care to listen.
>
> Finally, exasperated I guess, she rushed over and slapped me so hard she knocked me out of the pew.
>
> Of course, I told Mom when I got home. Mom raced down to the convent, got a hold of that nun, shouted my situation at her, and chewed the living-day-lights out of her.
>
> The next day in catechism class, the nun came over to me, knelt before me, and begged my forgiveness.
>
> I think I gave it to her." -- **Dick**

*A sudden cold breeze is exhaled.*
*The screen is spat back in.*
*The leaves rattle once again.*
*But just once.*
*Then the oak is smeared out and the gray wall slams into us.*

"Ahhh," Granny gasped. Then she set me down and hopped up. She pushed the clips on the bottom of the window edges in with the knuckles of her index fingers. It slipped down, shielding us. The drops splattered across the

window. Granny's hands glistened with rain that she shook off and then wiped on her hips.

"That was close," she said, picked me up, and snuggled me back into her lap. And for the first time since standing out on the lawn with Dad and Mr. Whistler, I wanted to know more about tornadoes.

"Tornadoes are rare. I've lived here for 70 years, and I've never even seen one. Not one. You've been here six, and you've already seen one. Just think how lucky you are to not only have seen one but to also have taken pictures of it."

I never thought of it that way before.

"Your picture is, if I remember right, the only picture of a tornado I've ever seen in Minnesota."

What?

"I've seen pictures of their damage, but not of the actual tornado."

Wow.

"I bet you didn't know tornadoes could drive pieces of straw through signs and boards."

No.

"I read a book about it. There was one picture that showed a police officer holding a stop sign with a dozen slender pieces of straw driven perfectly through it."

How?

"Tornados produce very strong winds. Some winds inside tornadoes have been measured at three hundred miles an hour. Remember driving to Minneapolis last summer to see Dick and Val?"

I nodded recalling the excruciatingly long voyage.

"Well, if we had been traveling the same speed as those winds inside that tornado, we would have driven down there in just an hour."

She had me. And we both knew it. The lesson continued.

These you sewed in me --

sympathy for feelings
consciousness of moments
need for narratives.

Soon they took root in me --

knuckles that knew handshakes
better than fists

eyes that sought marvel in a single sunflower
growing in the middle of a highway

fingers that found the stories gouged and nailed
into the oak tree in our backyard.

Now they have matured in me --

hugging and jesting in the face of
politically correct school policy

awed by the simple mystery
of clouds and sky on the horizon

lost in words woven into

stories written, read, and recited.

These things you planted so long ago
now have grown into me.

*The rain crashes onto the roof.*
*There is no rhythm*
*as with lazy all-day showers.*
*This rain is wild . Irregular and erratic.*
*Like my heart that seems to replicate its disharmony against my rib cage.*
*Soon, though, a steady rhythm emerges from the*
*chaos. It is the*
*drip . . . drip*
*of rain*
*into*
*Granny's*
*ice cream*
*bucket.*

"In the same book, I saw an entire farm ripped to shreds. I mean bricks from the silo were scattered all over the yard. Their car was flipped upside down by a tree. Boards and shingles from the barn were everywhere. It looked like my apartment after you've been into my desk."

Gra-anny!

"Well, guess what was right in the middle of the picture?"

I could only shake my head.

"A small billy goat tied to a fence post. He was standing there looking around like nothing happened. The tornado had destroyed the entire farm, but

when the people emerged from their basement, they found that goat still tied to the post."

I was hooked. After all our afternoons hunkered down in her apartment pouring over National Geographics and watching Wild Kingdom and In Search Of, my particular favorite, hosted by Spock from Star Trek, my grandmother knew me too well. She knew my love for the unusual, the mysterious, and the unexplained. All she had to do was reel me in.

> "Jim and I used to downhill ski a lot on the hills north of the house. One Sunday while we were skiing there, I crashed into a thicket of plum branches and tore up the patella tendon in my knee.
>
> Jim helped get me home, but I was bleeding pretty badly.
>
> Mom got a hold of the doctor (on a Sunday, which was almost impossible), and she also got hold of an automobile and driver (none of us could drive, since we never owned a car) to get me to his office - God knows how: we had no phone and, since it was Sunday, most everyone was gone somewhere. But she did it.
>
> The doctor stitched me up, stopped the bleeding, but then left the office - I don't know why. Ten minutes passed. The stitches broke loose, the blood poured out, and I was turning white.
>
> Again Mom was off. She found him, then chewed the hell out of him for leaving his patient before he'd totally finished with him. Probably saved my life, though I've no doubt that, had she not found him, she would have torn off her scarf and applied a tourniquet." -- **Jack**

*The gray is split wide by lightning.*
*I glimpse the oak, branches aloft.*
*Above the clatter on the roof*
*thunder bellows.*

I jumped a good two inches off Granny's lap when the lightning hit. She held me tighter. We peered into the water and wind but all was gray again.

Then we were offered a glimpse. Another streak flashed. I jumped again. I nearly stood to flee.

“Shhhh,” she said, gripping me tighter. Even Trixie, our border-collie, knew enough to abandon the porch and scamper beneath the kitchen table. Moments later a crack of thunder sent my feet to the floor and Trixie to the living room.

“Now, now,” Granny said louder over the rain. Then she hoisted me up and back into her lap. “What you need to do is simply count the seconds between the lighting and the thunder to see how far away it is,” she said. “Wait until it happens again. Then we’ll both count.”

I leaned forward, waiting for the next flash. It came only few moments later.

Is this how it ends?

A life - or what is left of it -
 packed away in
 shoe boxes and
 garbage bags
  stacked in a corner of an attic
  collecting dust and cobwebs.

Is this all that remains?

Bible-sized photo albums
  that crackle like bone when opened.
Black and white strangers
  caught in equally colorless landscapes
  all under protective plastic.
Three photo albums in all.

A collection of recipes
the cook books, and the cooks too, long gone
some neatly snipped from the Gazette (chocolate chip cookies)
some torn from the Grand Forks Herald (scallop corn)
others scrawled in cursive on note cards (sauerkraut),
post cards (Wiener schnitzel),
tablet paper (pea soup),
the back of a phone book cover (sour cream and raisin pie),
more than a few on yellowing napkins (Swiss steak).
Seventy recipes in all.

A collection of cards
Christmas (1974-1983),
birthday (Happy 65th),
get well (sorry to hear about your broken hip),
congratulations (congratulations on your retirement)
cards all spilled into an old shoe box.
One hundred and twenty one cards in all.

Other miscellaneous momentos -
two birth certificates (Sue and Dick)
three diplomas - all Myrtle's -
high school (Lafayette, Class of 1922, valedictorian),
Associate in Education degree from Bemidji State Teachers College Certificate (19th day of August 1955),
Bachelor of Science Cum Laude degree from Bemidji State University (17th day of July 1962).

A box of letters -
all to my mother while Myrtle
was off visiting her other children
("the religion issue has not been a problem with Chuck")
("I walked up a total of 220 steps at the Escalante Needle picnic grounds. Not bad for a 73 year old woman at 8000 ft. elevation!")
("Jack works too many hours at the hospital. I have barely seen him.")
("Melanie is getting so big. Dick and Val have a hard time keeping her out of everything. That's what I'm here for now.")

Is this how it really ends?
A whole life stashed away in an attic
for mice and moths?

I hold her graduation picture - retrieved from

an old General Electric box
My grandmother, gone now nearly 20 years,
and I know -
I mean I know -
on the same level
that I know I breath this air
that I know my heart pumps this blood

that this is all that there is --

the rest is the oblivion of loss.

Except for the miracle of narrative.

Narrative transforms
strangers into flesh and blood relatives,
takes me back to the celebratory meal, Sunday, 5:30
sends me on a boat trip down the Gunnison River.

Narrative drives loss into oblivion.

*Light rips the gray world open.*
*The oak is still dancing, branches waving wildly.*
*Then all outside is swallowed again.*

One, two, three . . .

"To yourself, please," Granny said just as the thunder clapped.

I missed it.

"Try again. Did you see the oak? It was dancing."

The sky crackled and this time we saw the oak as it frolicked in the storm. I giggled with Granny. My terror was gone; in its place, excitement as electric as the molecules in the air.

*Another strike . . . then gray.*

Silently - one watermelon . . . two watermelon . . .

*Thunder rattles.*

Two. It was two miles away.

“Yes. I counted two also.”

*A flash, a roar, then gray.*

Soon the strikes and thunder coincided. We stopped counting. We sat and just enjoyed being in the midst of the storm.

"Mom and I went to Super Value to pick up groceries for Easter dinner, which I would be preparing this year. It was Mom's first year in Fairview Manor. You would have been about three at this time. And, of course, she insisted on carrying you around the grocery store instead of placing you in the cart. She was trying to quiet you down since we had been over at Eckstein's and you saw a huge stuffed Koala bear. Of course, you wanted it, but it was too expensive. I think it was $15. So you threw a tantrum. Mom cradled you in her arms and sang you a song.

Myrtle was still adjusting to living in Fair View and relying on us for things. After all, her teacher's retirement wasn't extravagant and her rent at Fairview consumed most it. Still she was fiercely independent. She refused any help your father and I offered.

So I told Mom that I was going to cook a ham for Easter. She selected the largest one. Then, and I remember this clearly, she slung you

over her shoulder, used all of her 98 pounds to lift the ham with her right arm and set it in the cart, all the while shooing me and my attempts to help her away with her left arm.

As I was picking up a few last things, I lost sight of you and Mom. When I turned toward the cash register, I saw her haggling with the poor young girl at the check out counter. It seems that Mom was trying to pay for the ham before I got to the check out. She knew full well I would not let her, especially with her fixed income. But the cashier didn't know what to charge her since the price tag was on the ham, which was in the cart, which I was pushing toward the check out.

Mom told me that she was paying for the ham.

Naturally, I refused.

We must have argued over who was going to pay for that ham for five minutes as the poor check out girl added up our bill and the Nelson boy bagged the groceries.

You should have seen Mom. Of course, I paid for the ham and she was absolutely livid. If it wasn't for you, I'm sure she would have stormed out and walked all the way back to her apartment.

Well, Easter Sunday came and I called and called and called, but Mom wouldn't answer. I sent your father over to her apartment while I cooked dinner, but she wouldn't come to the locked and bolted door.

That was the first Easter dinner without Mom.

Of course, she found a way to get us back. I don't know how she did it, because the stores were closed that day, but when Kevin went to let Trixie out the back porch, he yelled for us to come and see what was sitting on the steps.

There sat your koala bear. That bear is still in the attic somewhere." -- **Sue**

*The dark clouds rumble again,*
*shaking us in our skins.*

God's bowling. I said this to impress Granny with my wealth of knowledge, this being a fact Dad revealed to me long ago.

"I think God has more pressing matters. Though the Greeks used to call Zeus the god of thunder. They believed he hurled lightning bolts down at certain

unfortunate mortals." Then Granny's voice began to almost sing as she was outlining the highlights of Greek mythology, again playing upon my love for the bizarre and the destructive. I forgot the storm as she revealed how Cronos swallowed each of his children to keep them from taking control.

The storm was reduced to drips and puddles when Granny finally chronicled how Zeus rallied against the Titans and ascended to the throne of Olympus.

With Zeus in his rightful place, she pointed out the window. Patches of blue were wearing through the gray.

"Now the best part . . ." Granny stood and opened the window, "the smell." It rushed in through the soggy screen and wound around us. The entire world seemed scrubbed clean. Scrubbed hard, but clean.

"I don't know about God bowling, but this comes as close to God's breath as I can imagine. Or at least that's what my sister-in-law used to say." Then she propped our screen door open and watched me scamper for the dark puddles and the patches of blue reflected in their depths.

IV

Highway Two was a minefield of tree branches, shingles, high line poles, fence posts, and wires. I weaved in and out of the treacherous mess as best I could. But every once in awhile, when a piece of debris thumped under a tire, my dad shot me a disapproving look. The chain saws and shears rattled in back of our old battered Chevy Silverado. One hundred mile an hour winds had torn through North Dakota and Minnesota the night before, leaving all this debris, most of which, judging from Dad's glare, I was gleefully bouncing over, scattered in the storm's wake.

I wasn't looking forward to this. We left our farm a little after seven and already the humidity clung to us like second skins. My T-shirt stuck to the middle of my back and clung to my armpits. To make matters worse mosquitoes rose in dark clouds from the ditches.

We were headed into Red Lake Falls to clean up any damage to our former house and yard, which we left when we moved to the country ten years ago. From the turn of the century until our move to the country in 1984, that old house fostered three generations of my family on my mom's side. It was built by my great grandfather. Then my grandmother, the matriarch of our family, inherited the house and raised her family in it. Finally, my mom inherited the place and raised us in it until we moved when I was eleven.

We returned to the old place a few times each year, shoveling snow off the roof and knocking down dagger-like icicles in the winter, unclogging the small culvert that ran beneath the alley so the backyard could drain in the spring, mowing the lawn in the summer, and raking the blankets of leaves shed by our giant oak in the back during the fall. But that upkeep was pretty minimal; I had a feeling this was going to be different.

I had not been to our old place for the better part of five years since I left for college. So I mentally surveyed the damage. I imagined a good share of shingles torn from the roof and peppered across the yard. Windows were undoubtedly broken. Other than that, the clean up would probably come from the trees in the yard.

There was a large pine in the front yard. In the back yard was an elm next to the porch and a cottonwood on the border between our yard and Hasbys'. At the very back

of the yard stood the oak, which outside of a tornado, a lightning bolt, or some other act of God, seemed impervious to harm. All but the oak were probably shredded.

Though I hadn't seen the oak in some years, it came easily to mind. The giant rose high above any other tree on the block, if not the entire west side of town. A vigilant sentinel. A pillar of the block. It had been full-grown before my parents ever met. The oak's branches stretched out across the back of the yard and even towered over parts of the alley, though the city always used to trim them to keep them out of the way. The roots crawled out beneath our yard and burrowed under the alley and neighboring yards. If we ever did cut it down, I imagined it would fuel our house for several winters.

Like every kid in our family, I was drawn to the oak. I suppose a large part of it was just the fact that kids are drawn to trees for the sense of adventure inherent in the mazes of their branches. But I think we were also drawn to it because it was massive. When I was six, it took four of us -- me, Robbie Schultz, his big brother Chad, and Lance Hasby -- to join hands and encircle the tree.

The tree was the hub of the neighborhood. We met there each morning to organize ourselves before playing football or baseball, biking downtown, or playing with our latest toys. We met there nearly every evening to decide if we were going to play kick the can, hide and seek, ditch, or hunt for night crawlers.

A tire swing hung from one of its branches. I inherited it from my older siblings. It was some time later that I realized my mom had also inherited the swing. Actually, each of the generations that lived in our house took advantage of the swing. Originally I thought my brother had scaled the tree and tied the rope to an impossibly high branch. I

recalled as a four year old listening in awe as he bragged how he risked his life scaling the tree with the rope and tethering it to the highest branch. Of course, the branch did seem impossibly high to me then. Indeed, later when I examined it on our last night in the old house, and the branch had to be a good 20 feet off the ground.

Each summer after that in late August, when we were done baling hay on the farm, we returned for the final summer mowing. It was on one such visit that I learned from Mr. Whistler, an elderly neighbor who always came over to visit, that it wasn't my brother who tied the rope to the branch: it was Myrtle, my grandmother, the pillar of our family.

*Sitting in front of the boy and his mom at the Hillcrest Nursing Home was a history volume in the flesh, Myrtle Baril. Time, cruel and inevitable, had taken its toll on the treasured piece, the boy's grandmother and the woman's mother. Her skin, once creamy and taut, now was wrinkled, sagging on her dwindling frame. Her hair, once auburn and long, now was drained of its vitality, leaving it a vacant white. Her clothes, once stylish slacks and dresses, now were relegated to one or two gowns that zipped up the back, making her look so dated. Her eyes, once vibrant blue orbs, now were clouded and scarred from cataract surgery, rendering her thick bifocals nearly obsolete. The boy's mom feared that Myrtle's last stronghold, her mind, would soon be breached.*

Over our Silverado's crackling AM radio, the announcer for 1230 KTRF was going on about the 100 mile an hour straight winds that tore through the valley the previous night, but I was years away as I recalled how Mr. Whistler, who must have been a boy at the time, revealed that Myrtle, my granny, had tied the rope. The Granny I knew

at that time had been my childhood best friend, but had, in recent years, fallen ill and spent much of her time in and out of the hospital. I recalled her as the slender woman who had struggled to lift her groceries and spent much of her time using a walker, before breaking her hips and being sentenced to a wheel chair. My brain couldn't picture Granny scaling a huge oak with a heavy rope and shimmying out on a high branch and binding it in a knot. But Mr. Whistler went on in some detail about how he and Myrtle and some of the other neighborhood children would play on it. Myrtle's mother, my great grandmother, died when Myrtle was five, and she was left alone a lot of the time while her dad worked at the mill. And to keep herself occupied, she simply decided to build herself a swing. Like later when she simply decided to hitch-hike with her roommate to the cities over spring break, to canoe the boundary waters, or to cut her hair short, don pants, and dance the Charleston. Much of this information didn't register with me at the time. I was too busy peering from Mr. Whistler's back porch to our oak which loomed higher in the above the neighborhood than ever before.

Sure enough, years later when I was doing a family history research project during my junior year at Bemidji State University, my mom corroborated the story. Granny did, indeed, scale the tree as a young girl in the early 1900s to fasten the rope. Back then it ended in a wooden plank with a hole in the middle for a swing. Once my grandmother married and inherited the house in 1927, my mom and her brothers wore the board out, so they just stood on the great knot and swung. Once my mom married and inherited the house in 1959, Dad scrounged up an old tire and bound it to the rope for us.

“Dad,” I said over the AM static, “what year did you rig that old tire swing for us?”

“Gosh. I’d say early ‘70s,” he said as he knocked his cap back, took his handkerchief from his back pocket and smeared the sweat from his forehead. “Yeah. Had to be. You weren’t born yet. Kev had fallen off that old knot and got bruised up pretty good.”

The last time I ever saw the swing was in the spring of 1984, right before we moved. Some of the remaining neighborhood kids must have broken it, or maybe a worried parent cut it down, but it had been missing ever since.

Once I was big enough, around the age of eight, to grasp on to the thick chunks of bark that served as the oak's armor and step on a huge knot in the trunk that conveniently made a perfect first step, I was able to scale up to the first branch, some ten feet off the ground. It was only a matter of a week or so before I built a tree house, and while I couldn’t be the first to claim tying up the rope, I was the first to build a tree house in the oak.

I managed to piece together a few stray boards from around the neighborhood, borrow my dad's hammer, straighten a few recycled nails, and build my "fortress." Of course, that "fortress" only consisted of about four planks haphazardly nailed to the trunk in a makeshift ladder that led up to a few more planks nailed even more haphazardly to a suitable branch, some 15 feet off the ground. I spent many afternoons cradled on that limb. There were rumors, though, that Granny had also built a tree house when she was

young. However, upon further expeditions into the tree, I never found any evidence. So I laid claim to the honor of building the first tree house in the oak.

*Sue noticed how her son was losing his enthusiasm for the regular trips to visit his "Granny." The glare and the later lecture he received once when he called it "the old folks home" didn't help. Plus, she noticed as a ten-year-old, he was realizing that Granny wasn't the same person she used to be just last year. On more than one occasion, Kurt decided to remain in the truck. The hospital-like nursing home was totally alien from Myrtle's apartment at Fairview Manor, where he had spent nearly every day of his life. Until three fractured hips left them no choice but to place Myrtle here.*

I turned the truck down the alley. “Jesus Christ,” I said. I was so stunned that I let this curse escape in front of my dad. He paid no heed.

Shingles and broken glass indeed dotted our old yard, as I had imagined, though the elm and cottonwood were still standing, minus several branches.

It was the oak, or what was left of it, that leveled me. It lay across the alley and into what used to be Mr. Whistler's yard. It looked like a crumpled umbrella.

I pulled up to the tree. The oak's mighty trunk and base were almost entirely hollow. The wind had easily snapped it. The cracked wood reminded me of the first time my mom informed me Granny would be confined to a wheelchair. When the doctor tried to set her hip, which she had broken for the third time, he simply gripped the bone and it splintered in his hand. Previously, I envisioned us sawing huge chunks of one of the trees

and hauling them back for firewood. But there was little left worth cutting, let alone using for firewood.

I got out and surveyed the fallen relic. Dad rummaged around for the chain saws and rakes. “How could this be?” I asked.

“Kurt. That tree’s been dying for years. I think it was mostly hollow when we moved out to the farm. I half thought of us coming in here and cutting it down.”

I was shocked. How had I not known? I played in the thing thousands of times, clocked days cradled in its branches. And it was dying?

“Look at it. Only a few of the branches have any leaves on them. I bet when we moved, less than half them bore any at all.”

Sure enough it was true. Mentally I remembered the tree billowing in the summer breezes of a decade before. In the fall it literally rained acorns so that we often slipped on them when raking. But now I could count the number of branches baring leaves and acorn buds with one hand.

From this perspective, the oak looked awkward. Part of me felt ashamed to look at it, but a larger part of me felt curiosity: all its formerly lofted secrets were exposed. It was littered with remnants from the past. A few rusty nails still punctured its bark. They ascended to one of the lowest branches, which had broken off and been cast few yards from the tree. There was nothing left of my old "fortress." The planks long rotted away, but some of the tiny nails still poked out from the skin.

I paced down to the base of the trunk, peering inside. I grabbed a gloveful of old wood. It was brittle and snapped into splinters in my hands. I let the chips float to the

ground in a dry mist. I gripped the bark and noticed how it seemed to be drained of any color. In fact, much of the bark had been stripped away in chunks, exposing a smooth, pale skeleton of wood. It was riddled with tiny empty holes.

Even the ants had abandoned her.

*The morning sunlight streamed through the lone window in her room. Myrtle slumped in her wheelchair with her back to the window. Time weakened her bones until they refused to accommodate her slight body. The boy galloped behind her and grabbed hold of the handles eagerly.*

*"Kurt, be careful. You can't rough-house with Granny the way you used to," the mother said. Kurt immediately frowned and dropped his hands to his sides.*

*"Oh, Suzie, it's fine," the elderly woman said. Kurt smirked at his mother, for he was not used to seeing her scolded, and instantly latched on to the handles and slowly, well slowly for an eleven year old, spun her to face his mom in the doorway.*

I walked over and examined what was left of the oak's stump. Jagged pieces of wood were left where it had snapped. I was cheated. I longed to count the rings to estimate the oak's age ever since we visited the Winnipeg Museum of Man and Nature on an elementary school trip and saw a huge section of an ancient tree. I spent half an hour trying to count the rings, but I always lost count. Finally a curator noticed my interest and informed me that the tree was so old that it had been alive when Christ walked the earth.

Our oak's rings were nowhere to be seen. The tree had rotten through, consumed by the very time the rings were designed to mark.

"Hey, Dad," I called. "What about the stump?"

"We'd never get that out. Who knows how deep the roots go?"

Then my dad's chain saw barked to life.

*Looking at her in that wheel chair was a real blow to Suzie. Myrtle's legs were useless to her now. Both hips had broken numerous times in recent years. Her arms were so thin. The skin that clung to her brittle bones was as white as the bones themselves. Now her sight was almost completely gone, though she refused to acknowledge any of her newfound frailties. She looked so diminutive and helpless. Sue recalled how Myrtle was always a woman of slight stature, but her intellect and nerve more than compensated for that. She was a very proud woman, who taught in six different schools in four different decades. A mother of five, who almost single handedly raised two daughters and three sons while her husband was either in jail or off looking for work. She could sense in her mother's faded eyes that the loss of her independence stung worse than the physical pain.*

*All morning she had been recounting stories of her childhood. Because of her strong will, she made it a point to lavish the memories with the most vivid details she could muster, compensating for her lost vision. She explained how she loved the kaleidoscope of brown, red, and yellow leaves that were shed every year from the massive oak in her back yard. The tree still stood proudly in that yard.*

I left the stump and found the branch from which the old tire swing hung. Half way down the branch was a huge lump. A few strands of rope still jutted from the swollen spot. The bark had grown over the knot, which had cut so deeply into the limb itself over the years that the two had really become the same.

I quit inspecting the tree and got to work. Dad cut through the trunk as best he could while I lopped off the limbs and severed them into smaller sections. We were nearly to the top of the tree, probably some 50 feet high, if the tree had been erect, when my chain saw nipped into something, stopping it dead. In the heat, I tugged on the machine, trying to wrench it free. My saw had snipped into an ancient nail. As I looked closer, I saw that it actually was a series of nails. I set the saw aside and bent over, amazed. Several long square-headed nails, nearly eaten through from time and the elements, jutted out from the branch.

I walked over to Dad and tapped him on his elbow which was slick with sweat and scratchy with saw dust. I guided him over to the branch.

"Look at this."

"Hmm," he pronounced. "That must have been Granny's tree house."

"What?"

"Yeah, Myrtle built it a little while after she put up the swing. She always used to tell us how she would climb up and watch summer thunderstorms build."

I just stood there feeling the sweat trickle down the back of my shirt.

"She was quite proud she built it so high," he finished and shuffled back to his saw.

*Myrtle kept recounting her memories until she was interrupted when a nurse quietly knocked on the door. She wheeled a breakfast tray into the room and smiled at the boy and his mother. Myrtle didn't acknowledge the nurse.*

*"Myrtle, it's time for your breakfast, dear," the young nurse cooed to her like she was a child.*

*I hate it when they talk to the residents like that, Sue thought. Were they taught to do that? Or was it pity?*

*Truth be told, she talked to her mom like that at times too. Kurt was the only one who still treated her the same. Of course, he couldn't really comprehend what was happening to his "Granny."*

*"I'm not hungry," Myrtle said through clenched teeth and pursed lips.*

*She can still detect your condescending tone, Sue thought.*

*Nevertheless, the nurse uncovered the food. Faint steam rose from the eggs and toast. Kurt hovered over the food from Granny's side.*

*"Kurt, Granny needs to eat."*

*"Here you go Kurt," Myrtle said, throwing a defiant glance in the general vicinity of her daughter, as she raised a frail and trembling hand clutching a piece of toast. "Put some jam on it," she continued, pushing the jam towards the boy with a gnarled, arthritic knuckle.*

*"Mom, you need your strength," Sue said, pushing her son out of the way and grabbing her mother's hand.*

*"I can feed myself you know."*

*She struggled to lift a quivering arm. What little skin she had left hung from the bone. She finally relented and rested it on Sue's hand, though it never quit shaking.*

How did she dare climb so high? I never risked venturing even half that high.

I tried to picture the elderly woman, who let me wheel her around the nursing home, the nursing home she lived in because she fell and broke her hip, her hip that confined her to this wheelchair, a wheelchair that must have felt like a prison, as a young girl in pig tails scaling the tree and building this tree house. I tried to picture the elderly

woman, who hugged me with her brittle arms, arms that were covered in pale skin and blue veins that seemed to bulge from beneath her saggy flesh, flesh that felt like the skin on a piece of fruit left out on the cupboard too long, as a young girl in a dress perched atop that tree house peering down the alley for her father.

I couldn't imagine it, yet the proof was splintered in the grass.

*Over the boy's smacking of wheat toast and strawberry jam, Myrtle said, "The robins are up now." Their chirping was audible from outside the window behind her. "It seems like just last week I had to get after Smokey when he knocked down that robin's nest from the tree." Smokey was her cat. Smokey had been dead for years. "Does he leave them alone now?"*

*"Yes, mom," Sue said. Now her hand was shaking beneath her mother's hand as Myrtle strained so hard to see out of the window that she mistakenly believed was right in front of her.*

*"My how it gets dark so early, my dear," she whispered to her daughter. "I hardly see the trees outside the window," she said leaning forward.*

*Kurt saw that his granny was facing the wrong way. He was about to speak, despite a mouthful of toast, but his mom's gaze made him swallow the words with his toast.*

*"It never used to get this dark so early," Myrtle continued now gently stroking her daughter's arm. "I guess it must be that time of year already."*

*"I guess it is, Mom," Sue told her. Then she wrapped her arms gently around Myrtle's brittle build in a protective gesture. She gave her an affectionate kiss on the cheek. Myrtle smiled.*

*Then Sue peered with her into the closet .*

I wanted to look back at my former tree house to compare the distance between mine and Myrtle's. But what was left of the branch and my "fortress" and her tree house was long cut up and stacked into several neat piles along the alley.

Over the course of the day we loaded up the piles and hauled them away. After the last load, I looked at the broken stump with its gnarled roots burrowed deep into the earth.

"Come on, boy," Dad said, clapping me on the shoulder, "that is never coming out."

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