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Apparitions: Essays on Revisioning my Faith, My Mother, and Myself

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Apparitions: Essays on Revisioning my Faith,
My Mother, and Myself

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

By Susan Murnan
March 2006

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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Apparitions: Essays on Revisioning my Faith,
My Mother, and Myself

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University of Nebraska 2006

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Spiritual writing, like any type of nonfiction, can be a daunting task for a writer. Not only does the topic lack the certainty that we're all searching for, but its canyons have been surveyed and examined and trudged by men and women for centuries. Like a travel writer must look at a place as though it is untouched, a spiritual writer must write with the confidence that their words ultimately inform the audience about their own unique motivations.

Like a collection of travel writing, I use place to organize ideas. Or, perhaps, these places picked me, so that I might discover myself within their mysteries. As miracle sites, the five places I've chosen allow me to explore the maternal relationships in my life.

The image of Our Lady of Fatima, Portugal, the site of a Marian apparition in 1917, attests to the need for an identifiable, spiritual mother. This chapter considers how my own mother's fascination with exorcisms has informed the way I experience religion.

Our Lady of Guadalupe demonstrates the complexity of womanhood—the met and unmet expectations. The shared vocabulary of fertility, whether fertility is present or not, becomes a language about language—about the way women share the most intimate details of their lives.

Mary's message to the visionaries in Medjugorje, was an integral part in my understanding of spirituality. Her monthly messages, asking for prayer and faith, gave structure to her ambiguous person. When my mother's desperate need for order ends in disappointment, her pain allows me to understand Mary.

The miracles at Lourdes, France, give believers the much needed concreteness to faith. Likewise, St. Augustine's philosophical discussion of God's presence in our memories ignites a conversation about spirituality in physical places.

The healings in Beupre, Quebec, are perhaps the most corporeal of all the miracles discussed. This first-hand account of a pilgrim site, where signs of healing hang from pillars, remind me of the great love we have for mothers.

This thesis is dedicated to
my mother and father,
married 25 years,
who loved me more than themselves.

To my husband, Josh, with whom
I look forward to 75 years
of marriage.
We have built our house upon
solid rock.

To Mary, mother of the world,
mother of my heart.

And

To Dr. John McKenna
who supported an idealist
through her journey.

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Introduction

The Secret Harbor lay in pieces on the living room carpet. Blue, red, green, and periwinkle trapezoids made five columns and six rows of squares. Separated by gaps of cream carpet, they looked like lost cargo drifting further and further away from its ship. Grandma and I stood above them deep in thought.

You've heard it before—the quilt metaphor. A quilt pattern is an enigma and perfectly complex enough to represent almost anything. Switching, for instance, the blue pieces with the red suddenly reveal a completely different quilt. A different feeling. Secret Harbor, the name of our pattern, probably got that name because in each square, four streams of color meet in the middle, weaving a tight knot before they continue out toward the other side. It looks as if nothing can stop them. They are resilient and determined and straight. On each of the square's straight edges, a little triangle peeks through like a harbor among the crossing waves left by boats in route. In the wake of passing ships, they sway in the ocean, always waiting, always there.

“Let's turn the squares so that the border is blue,” Grandma said. We got down on all fours rotating each square to the right. Stepping back, we saw that the color blue dominated the pattern, revealing intricacies not noticed before. Putting a quilt of this size together is no task for a rainy day. It's more like a month's worth of rainy days. The process of finding enough fabric scraps alone can take a week. There is comfort, however, in knowing that the colors don't need to harmonize. The clash—the unification of different fabrics—becomes the commonality and the theme.

For me, creative nonfiction's appeal lies in its open, yet demanding structure. Whatever the focus—oranges, cancer, internet dating, turtles, walking along the interstate, having a baby, Vietnam, nudist colonies, or mothers—there is a responsibility to make connections between seemingly unrelated parts of life, and to put the meaning into words. It is perhaps even more crucial to make these connections in spiritual writing. The process of writing and crafting *Apparitions: Essays on Revisioning my Faith, My Mother, and Myself* has shown me that earthly relationships can reveal the spiritual realm. More and more, I have felt that tangible bonds inform those we cannot touch.

Like making a quilt, a spiritual writer must find out which fabric combinations will reveal a deeper, more complex understanding of faith and the mystical world. Writing about faith and religion requires a different lens with which to view relationships. This lens is like the way a quilter rearranges her pattern—each decision creates a unique piece of art.

* * * * *

“What are editors looking for today?” the question was asked from the audience. Uncomfortable, I moved restlessly in my chair, waiting for Joe Mackall, the editor of *Riverteeth*, to answer. It was the editors' panel at Iowa University's Nonfiction conference—the first nonfiction conference for the university and for me. The week began with keynote speaker Philip Lopate who earnestly and humorously defended the improbable art form known as creative nonfiction. Being in the presence of many great writers who understood the desire to write nonfiction was reassuring. They had chiseled

and widened the path for the rest of us. This panel looked promising: David Cooper and Mike Steinberg from *Fourth Genre*, Dan Jones from the *New York Times*, Dinty Moore from *Brevity*, and Ladette Randolph from the University of Nebraska Press *American Lives Series*.

“What *are* editors looking for today?” he repeated. “You know what I would like to see? Women write about their mothers like crazy, and men write about their fathers. I would like to see some father/daughter stories, or mother/son stories.” I thought about my thesis, half-done now, sitting in my computer, unoriginally, about the mother/daughter story. However, for me, it was a story that demanded to be written, because, as I was to find out later, the way I interpreted the world and the unexplainable, mainly, Marian apparitions, was formed by my mother. It deserved to be recognized and probed before all else.

Later in the conference, I found the panel titled “Spiritual Writing in Cultural Context” to be helpful because it identified the main obstacle in writing about spirituality. Hope Edelman, author of the mother/daughter series, said, “The first obstacle is, how does one write about what is intuitive rather than scientific? How do you attach language to experience that transcends words?” Her answer was one that Bernard Cooper articulated much earlier: you find the answer in the story and often in the structure. And so, I ask myself, how do I explain faith found in mystical apparitions? How do I connect them to the ever-changing relationship with my mother?

The structure of this thesis uses inter-chapters—a form based on the human need for the natural to explain the supernatural. In each inter-chapter, I try to make sense of a

spiritual phenomenon where I've encountered Mary either directly or indirectly. Correlating chapters about the more natural relationship with my mother follow. Each set hopes to show a commonality between the two stories.

At the end of the spring semester in 2005, as I was beginning this thesis, my intended subject was to be how my Catholic faith has matured within me. I began to tell a former professor about it, but before I could explain, he said,

“Oh, you mean you're going to write about ‘losing your religion. Like the song.’”

“Not exactly,” I said. I felt that spirituality was not encouraged within an academic setting.

As the months went by, one subject in peculiar kept reoccurring: my mother. Perhaps it is because I was planning my wedding during the summer, and so Mom and I had been spending more time together. Perhaps as my own roles in life were solidifying, I began to cherish and respect what my mother had to offer.

While these essays do explore the all-too-common “mother story,” they also record my search for a spiritual mother. During the 1980's, Marian apparitions in the town of Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, renewed interest and devotion to Mary and quickly fascinating my own mother. People felt a great thirst for her presence for the first time since the Vatican II changes, when the Church, in an attempt to identify with their Christian counterparts, placed less importance on her. People began to pilgrimage to this apparition site as well as others like Fatima, Portugal, Lourdes, France, and Cnoc Mhuire, Ireland. Not only is Mary referred to as the mother of the Catholic Church, but also the Church as a whole is referred to as “mother” or “bride.” As a child, much of my faith

revolved around an awareness of Mary and the supernatural. More specifically, my view of faith is seen through the lens of my relationship with my mother, which alone is complex, confusing, and wonderful. This thesis explores both maternal relationships, the theological Mary and my earthly mother, and how, somewhere along the line, or perhaps, inherent in them from the beginning, I discovered a unity in these apparitions and their connection to me, their daughter.

1—Cloistered Remembrance

At an early age, I spent hours sitting in the living room finding and pulling out every black hair in my head. Once my grandmother caught me doing this and scolded me for paying so much attention to myself. “Have you prayed today?” she asked. “Have you spent as much time praying as you have pulling hair out of your head? Hmm? You’ll go bald,” she said, staring at the pile of black hair on the table.

In a short time, I had developed the habit of playing with my hair—tugging on strands from root to end without actually pulling them out. Between the tips of my index finger and thumb, I repeatedly ran single strands of hair. When this became a distraction at school, Sr. Madonna announced to the entire class, “Susan, quit playing with your hair. If I catch you one more time, you’re sitting on the log for recess.” “The log” was actually a series of logs that ran along the outer edge of the playground—far enough away from the other children to be a punishment. But I could not stop doing it. As soon as I concentrated on something, my hand was above my left ear—and I didn’t know when or how it got there.

When I began to collect the stray strands of hair that clung to my navy blue sweater and tie them in knots, Sr. Madonna insisted on breaking me of this habit. Right over left, over and over, until the whole strand was a two-inch gnarled mess. If the knot wasn’t just right, I discarded it, beginning with another.

Running my fingers through my hair became part of my everyday behavior. My fingers started in the temporal region on the left side of my head. Smoothing the hair against my head, I felt for hair that was not straight, or coarser, and separated it from the

others. My fingers slid down the hair, locating any mutations in the strand. Quickly pulling out a rubber band, for example, could easily break hair, or stretch it, causing creases or impressions, and not pulling them meant I couldn't think about anything else.

Finally, fed up with my distraction, Sr. Madonna called me up to her desk during a study time. "I'm going to write a note home to your mother," she said without looking at me. "She needs to sign it and bring it back." I felt ashamed because of my stupid and, in fact, odd habit. Why couldn't I just pick my nose or bite my nails—something normal. "Whenever I see you playing with your hair, or whatever you're doing, I'm going to put a strike up on the chalkboard. If you have three strikes by lunch time, you will sit on the log for recess." I nodded in understanding and walked back to my seat, my face steaming with embarrassment.

Nuns have a way with tough love. On the last day of that school year, Sr. Madonna stopped me as I was leaving the classroom, called me over to her closet, and handed me a slightly dented tin container in the shape of a heart. It had Precious Moments on the top and she had filled it with M&M's. She smiled and finally said, "You were one of my favorites."

By the way they dressed and by the way they lived, the nuns taught us the value of simplicity. Even a disastrous school year could be easily forgiven. And I learned to see the beauty in simple things:

- In my father's sigh as he knelt by my bed at night for prayers.
- In the day's freshness as I opened the curtains every morning.
- In the way my mother twists her knife in two crescent shapes to core an apple.

- In the way summer dandelions droop like tired soldiers.
- In the urgency felt when my grandmother went out quickly to gather delicate peaches before a storm.
- In the way spindly branches of a pear tree are overwhelmed with healthy fruit, like an expectant mother.

Chapter 1 – In the Garden of Eden

Images of peaches and pears stir my memory. On a hot August day, Grandma and I walked down to her garden in our sandals to check on the eggplant, hidden under large leaves. We checked their swollen bottoms for ripeness. The green ones, she told me weren't ready. "Here," she pointed, "see these little white flowers? That blossom will turn into the eggplant." We checked the peppers and the cantaloupe, veiled by overgrowth.

"Here's one!" I said. She bent down to look at it, turning it in her palm. The grass on which it sat was wet with dew.

"Nope," she said judiciously, "not ripe." And she hid it again under its leaves. "Hide it from the rabbits," she explained.

We walked up the hill to a pear tree I had known was there, but never looked up into the branches to notice the pears.

"This one?" I asked with disbelief and feeling foolish for not noticing it before. Several pears lay on the ground, split open and bruised but others were hard enough that they survived the fall. I picked up a pear the size of a large grape. It tasted perfectly sweet and I gave it to her to try.

"You're going to laugh at me," she smiled, "but I always think about my mother and this lady at church when I pick these pears. They were both very small women, with petite frames, yet they had at least twenty children between them. I say that because—see these branches—" she pulled off a piece of bark, "see how they are just so brittle and

thin? But look how fertile it is—all the fruit it produces. Well, they're a lot like that I guess." She mused to herself on that thought.

Turning around, we walked to the peach tree, where a metal bucket surrounded the trunk, placed there when Grandpa planted the tree. Smashed peaches lay on the sidewalk not yet discovered by ants. "These branches are the same—see them?" A metal splint supported one of the bigger ones. "We have so many peaches ripening in the shed."

Through the window, I could see buckets of pears underneath a large wire rack that was covered with peaches. She picked up a few, squeezing them and handing me the soft ones. "Take these, they're good to eat."

Inside the house, I rinsed the fruit and lay them on a drying towel. She asked me if I was hungry. I said I was. She took a towel off a dish of apple crisp and cut two pieces. We ate in the living room, which had a window overlooking the garden, and talked about our lives and fruit.

The phone rang—it was my aunt calling to tell Grandpa that a storm was on its way to the farm. A storm can drastically change an afternoon for farmers (and their wives). I looked out to the west. Darkness was stretching toward us as if pulling all of Nebraska behind it. My grandma yelled down the stairs to Grandpa that if he wanted to bale any more hay he had better do it now because rain was coming. All at once, everything became exciting and urgent. But it wasn't like the urgency and busyness that plagues the modern world. It was an urgency based on necessity and survival.

The temperature had dropped ten degrees in ten minutes, and the garden that was noisy with insects was now silent and still. The wind was terrific, so I climbed to the top

of a hill alongside the bean fields and let it tangle my hair. The fields rippled with refreshment and moved with oceanic undulation. I wanted it to swallow me whole. The wind lifted the bush bean leaves, rousing them mercilessly, yet their roots remained stationary. It was a terrific feeling to stand there on land that raised my grandfather—that perhaps served no other family in the history of the world but ours. This moment belonged to no one else.

I then remembered the peaches; hail or strong winds would ruin them. I bent down to look for grandpa under the trees. He was there, on a ladder, picking peaches. The world rushed about him, but stoically, his arms went up toward the branches and came down again, placing each peach into the bucket one at a time. His gentleness seemed out of place. I ran to him and lifted the bucket up so that he wouldn't have to bend down each time. He did not see me until he bent down again, and I knew he wouldn't hear me even if I spoke, for his hearing aid would be off due to the wind. With one quick motion, he could turn off the noises of the farm—but he would hear them anyway. The sound of the trees. The moan of the gate. The jingle of the swings. He has them all memorized.

We unloaded the peaches in the shed. I could hear nothing but wind. On the way back to the house, I noticed another peach under the tree, but when I picked it up, I saw that it was crushed so I left it there. Grandpa looked at me and picked it up again, examining it. "I'll eat him," he said, and we walked back to the house without a word.

The house was wonderful with this unexpected animation. We looked forward to the rain and thunder and waited patiently for its fist. I felt safe knowing that we had saved all the fruit and thought how boring the day would have been without the storm. How

blandly we would have finished out the day, paying no attention to the weather, letting its meaning go unnoticed.

I thought about my moment with the field and how there seemed to be a holy spirit in that wind—stirring my soul so intensely that it nearly burst out of my chest. It was hard to exhale with all the wind against me. How wonderful it was to feel that way—exposed, stripped naked down to the soul. Spiritual. And I thought, this is how prayer should feel.

* * * * *

Meditation—repetition opens our minds to spirituality. When I discovered the piano at the age of ten, I progressed at a rapid pace. I was particular about my posture—back straight, wrists level with my elbows, feet flat on the floor, fingers delicately curved. A right chord was good karma. All was right with the world when my fingers drifted easily over the keys, releasing sharps and flats. My hands moved fast and clean. I ran technique drills repeatedly until I not only memorized them, but could also add my own variations smoothly. Playing the piano kept my hands busy, which my teacher appreciated, but I was soon frustrated when I couldn't advance beyond what I already had mastered. I liked being able to play something without thinking—letting my hands float by themselves. I cared only about the seamless movement. Meditation. Repetition. The counts, the measures, the brief time you devote to a single note or chord.

It would not be until later that I would experience the “runner's high,” a state of elation achieved when the body repeats the same motion over a long period. The

distinctness of each movement merges, prompting higher modes of thinking. At one point, I was running five to six miles a day, letting the repetition of my breathing disconnect me from the moment. I did not feel my legs or the aches in my muscles. They were not my own, but merely parts of the movement. After the first mile, the act of running disappeared and I could think. The objects of my thinking ran seamlessly through my mind like a movie reel.

In these ways, running is not unlike Benedictine chanting. Known for its earthy, cavernous sound, the chanting of the monks tethers each earthly word to heaven. Like flutes, they are the woodwinds of the earth. Before St. Benedict integrated Western traditions into traditional chanting, monks practiced an antiphonal style, where two choirs took turns singing biblical psalms and verses. It wasn't uncommon for the first monks to recite up to 150 psalms daily. Ultimately, the repetition and monotonous tone of chanting can create a state of elation for those singing and listening, giving way to unique, personal prayer. The words are more powerful each time they are said, and because each verse is the same, one's concentration shifts from the performance to what the words mean. How wonderfully human are the chants, but how divine their purpose.

Gregorian chanting, a modification introduced by St. Gregory, simply combined contemporary music to the chanting—drastically influencing the way the Catholic Mass is celebrated today. Like the monks, the congregation sings a single psalm back to the cantor, creating a slow wave of prayer. Often, Latin verses are sung with the same plainness:

Veni Sancte Spiritus : Come Holy Spirit.

In this same fashion, my mother taught us to say the rosary, a meditation on the Gospels. Five sets of ten Hail Mary's and one Our Father make up the main part of the rosary, represented by different colored, but simple beads. The prayerful of many religions carry similar strings of beads, upon which to meditate.

Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you

Your thumb and forefinger gently hold the bead, sometimes rolling it for repetitive movement.

Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus

Your last words end in a low pitch, only to rise again for the response. But first, a breath.

Holy Mary, mother of God

You unthinkingly pause, unsure if a pause indeed did occur.

pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.

Without confusion, you begin again, now comfortable with the rhythm. Your fingers slide to another bead only to anticipate the next. They move with the ease of a bird, peacefully rowing the wind with its wings.

Remembering Fatima

In 1980, a year before the recorded Marian visions in Yugoslavia, Edward Bernardo Martinez from Cuapa, Nicaragua saw apparitions of Mary on a cloud, preceded by sharp flashes of light. She came barefoot, in a long white dress and always in a veil. Her message to Martinez was simple: that families pray the rosary daily. “Her hands were held together over her breast,” he reported, “like the statue of the Virgin of Fatima.” Rays of light extended from her hands, and her voice was the sweetest he had ever heard. The statue he refers to stands in Fatima, Portugal, where, in 1917, three rural children began to receive visions of Mary.

A handful of people, often children, claimed to have seen Mary. She appears to them as they would understand—regularly in their culture’s own dress and likeness. The events at Fatima sparked controversy in the town and later in the Catholic Church, which has been ridiculed by other Christian religions for the veneration it gives to Mary. We cannot, they say, adore her in the same way we adore Jesus Christ. It is, however, through the mother that we can know the son in a uniquely intimate way. For this reason, more of her life deserves attention.

Chapter 2 -- Exorcism

We stood in the kitchen, my mother hitting the rewind and play buttons of the radio back and forth. She tweaked the volume, adjusted the antenna and demanded that my sister and I stand right there until we listened to what she had recorded earlier that day. I leaned on the door of the dishwasher, hot steam flowing out of its belly and through the delicate, slightly translucent blouse of my school uniform. It made my skin moist and prompted me to untuck my shirt to let the air rise all the way to my chest and out my sleeves. My mother finally looked at me with eagerness and adjusted the volume once more.

“Listen to this,” she said. A man’s strong voice commanded and beckoned another person. He repeated order after order, demanding the other person to speak to him and answer his questions. I looked at my mother with irritation. I had no idea what I was about to hear, but could detect a looming restlessness coming from our kitchen radio. Finally, the other person spoke with hesitant grunting:

“No, I will not speak to you. You have no power over me.”

“Leave this woman in the name of God,” the man shouted.

“She doesn’t exist any longer. She is mine now,” the voice replied.

“I will quote from scripture, then, and we shall see who has the power,” the man warned.

The voice on the other line shrieked and bellowed with a guttural beastliness. It drained my sense of confidence, placing my mind in a trance-like state—no longer aware

of anything except his haunting voice. Never would I be able to describe or imitate its timbre or quality. Then I heard the *pop* of my mother pushing the stop button on the radio. She looked at me.

“Wasn’t that weird?” she asked excitedly. I could not answer her, could only keep rewinding and playing that voice in my mind. “I’m not sure if I believe it,” she said.

“They could make up anything on the radio and no one would know.”

“What was that?” a weak, yet brave inquiry.

“An exorcism,” she said. “That man, the host of the show, was trying to get the devil out of this woman who called in asking for help.” Even though my mother was uncertain of the show’s authenticity, she did believe in the potentials of evil. And, like all the other things I believed because my mother believed them, demonic possession became real possibility to me. The minds of those weak in faith, of those people who never seemed to have passion for anything in life, I especially thought, were bordering on that edge of grayness and vulnerability. Possession, it seemed to me, occurred when the spiritual void was left open.

Some time later, I found myself again with that same sick feeling. My mother sat me down on the couch, holding two identical books. “Here,” she said, “this one is yours and this one is mine. We can read along together, taking turns.” The cover of the book gave no clue of its content. I had only been slightly wary of our reading together like this because it was common for my mother to make us read a chapter of the catechism or of the children’s Bible before we could play. She did not sternly force it down our throats, but felt that they didn’t teach us enough of our faith at school. Now, what began like

another story of a saint's life soon took an ominous turn. I again began to feel a terror come over me, not wanting to read any further.

"No, Mom," I said. "I don't want to read about this."

"This is interesting, Now keep reading," she commanded.

Stories of supernatural occurrences and unexplainable incidences to people in small, unfamiliar countries supplemented my life for as long as I can remember. I had already known about stigmata, the burden of Christ's five wounds from the cross, accepted as penance by its sufferers. The scabbed lesions surrounded by purple and blue skin.

Often, my mother would finish reading one of her newsletters, describing account after account of how the end of the world will come about. "This woman says that when the time is right everyone will see their souls as God sees them. Time will stop; for this moment, even planes in the air will be fixed. And then, after that moment, we will return to our life with this knowledge. It will be a warning, this woman said, to fix whatever it is we need to fix in our lives." Nauseous from tears, I began to stay awake all night, having nightmares of evil things when I would sleep. Beasts of all kinds popped up from the sides of my bed and out of my closet with that voice ingrained in my memory. During the night, I slowly dragged myself into my parents' bedroom, as not to awake the stories heard during the day.

"Start reading," she said. The book retold stories of exorcisms in small Iowa towns and in neighboring states, dated years ago. One was of a woman who, while possessed, spoke in several languages—backwards—and spoke as if several voices were

coming out of her. The voice claimed to be the spirit of Judas, Jesus' betrayer. Fearing these stories, I began to associate anything supernatural with the sick feeling from that day in the kitchen. Bleeding crucifixes covered my room at night and crying saints invaded my dreams. With this fear inside of me, I could not tell what was real and what was not. I told my mother that I didn't want to read anymore of these stories—that they only gave me nightmares. She said that not believing is a weakness that makes you vulnerable. At night, I cursed the devil in the darkness of my room, spitting and throwing things onto the floor while I wept. Resisting evil was a daily obstacle and becoming evil was somehow inevitable; I vowed never to give into his tricks. I slept with my rosary around my neck and never opened my eyes once they shut. Night brought about a sober maturity that I despised.

When I was older, my mother would ask me, "You know what Satan hates?"

"No," I said.

"Women. He hates women because they are beautiful and pure. He hates them because they bring life into the world and so he wants to take it away. That's why Mary is our strength, she is stronger than him."

And, because I feared the devil, Mary became for me a female protector—a model of feminine strength. I took interest in the claims that Mary had appeared to this person or that, and had given them secret messages. Paintings, medals, statues of her intrigued me and offered me some concreteness to the person that at times seemed imaginary. In particular, the statues that reveal her anguish—expressions of sorrow—are the ones that gave me peace because they are expressions of a mother.

And I knew that I was not alone in this admiration. Since her apparition in Yugoslavia, millions of people have flocked to the humble city for spiritual healing or direction. It is tempting to accuse her life of forever binding womankind to an inferior status. Maria Warner, for instance, an influential feminist nonfiction writer, and author of *Alone of All her Sex: the Myth and Culture of the Virgin Mary*, argues that Marian interest is cultish, and has contributed to the “structure of society and women’s roles within it,” constructing male dominance within the Catholic Church. Yet her images tell me different.

Mary was, for me, synonymous with womanhood and life. I became aware of how religion, the reason for my otherness, had formed me. Mystical possibilities had filled my life.

- If I kissed my scapular, God took one day of purgatory off my debt.
- If I prayed for the Pope after mass, my slate was wiped clean.
- If I fasted, my suffering would help unbelievers.
- If I recited a certain prayer, I could release a soul from purgatory.
- If I drank holy water, infirmities and wounds could be healed.
- If I carried a blessed object, I was protected from certain evils.
- If I wore medals around my neck, I would go directly to heaven when I died.

I found comfort, then, amid the spiritual of which I was also constantly afraid. It was frightening, unavoidable.

Years later, I would tell my mother how the exorcism stayed with me.

“I can’t believe you even remember that,” she said, as if evoking a favorite song, or an old friend.

Remembering Guadalupe

Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Marian apparition in Tepayac, Mexico, in the year 1531, has captivated me for years. I have never seen an image of Mary where she is smiling and this one in particular looks as if she is even frowning. She wears a blue veil brilliantly decorated with gold stars. Behind her, gold rays extend outward from a hidden source. Centuries of artists have repeatedly painted Mary holding her Son. Yet this one—not a painting at all, but a miraculous image—shows a pregnant Mary. A mother. To the Mexican culture of the 1800s, the belt around Mary's waist symbolized an expected birth. I think of her when I look at pregnant pictures of my own mother. In one particular photo, my mother stands in profile toward the camera, her hands clasped underneath her sagging belly. She wears a shirt that becomes translucent under light—revealing the heaviness taking over her body. Although she is smiling, her eyes are sunken, underlined by dark crescents. They draw me in and call me woman.

The significance of the Guadalupe image, Mary's interpretation of herself, stems from its elucidation of feminine complexity. She is a master at communicating to individual communities. Her presence travels from culture to culture, capturing the attention of artists, writers, composers.

In a 19th century painting titled "Madonna and Child," Antoine Auguste Ernest offers a mysterious Mary, veiling her head so heavily that the color of neither her hair nor her eyes is distinguishable. Kathleen Norris writes that the *Black Madonna*, a Polish

painting originally titled “Our Lady of Czestochowa,” captivates her. The darkness of the piece complicates it, yet it is interesting to note that the painting acquired its blackness from decades of candle vigil being burned before it. Artistically, the Virgin Mary is the most frequent female image and it is this fascination that frees her essentially from being a patriarchal instrument. Her life is unexplainable, ever changing, and ever-present.

Chapter -- 3 Puzzling Through

“Piebald.” Thirty points. We all look at Mom as she selects seven more letters from the pile. She is winning Scrabble by at least one hundred points—we don’t stand a chance. “What? It’s a word!” she protests. I look at my letters: E E E Y G T N. I can’t make anything.

“Skip,” I sigh. To beat her, I would need a couple minutes to check the dictionary. It’s not just the points that win someone the game. It’s being able to put down impressive words, ones that have been forgotten like old family members. But Mom gives us five minutes to make a play, or our turn is up.

“Skip? You can’t skip. You can do *something*! Do you have an *i*? Make *in*. Do you have an *s*?” my mother repeats with impatience. *She* can always do something. Scrabble is her game, along with Boggle, Crosswords, Word Finds, and Jumble. A sharp woman, she spent her life working in hospital labs as a medical technologist, unearthing abnormalities amid a disorder of cells. Her mind could work through confusion to make perfect order.

Growing up, lengthy dissections of our disobedience, as well as exhausting discussions of what logical steps we should have done to prevent the problem, were worse than the actual punishments. There was never an excuse for absent-mindedness or clumsiness, only some blunder on our part in analyzing our actions. Once, as a child, I had accidentally put a partially eaten fudgesicle in the refrigerator instead of the freezer—an understandable mistake, considering how many times one mindlessly opens

the refrigerator. Needless to say, melted chocolate covered the top of the shelf, creating a sticky film. I knew it was stupid. I knew it was careless. My mother, on the other hand, saw this as failure to think through the logical steps.

She sat me down, “Now what went wrong here? What could we do differently?” She always used *we*, as if the new chocolate-lined refrigerator affected not only our household, but all of humanity.

“Um, put it in the freezer.”

“And what should we do from now on, every time we want to put something in the refrigerator?” And on the conversation went until there was a confirmed plan of action.

* * * * *

“Let me see your letters,” she finally said, reaching her arm across the table to spin around my letters. “There’s got to be a word you can make.” She would end up finding an opportune spot, on double word score, rewarding me twenty-some points. This defeated the purpose of having teams, but she seemed to forget that in her quest for words such as *lavalier* or *vanadium*. What she cared about went beyond competition: the overall need to find order. To distill chaos down to its basic elements.

Just as the word games we played (she referred to them as “thinking games” distinguishing them from games of luck or chance), Mom and I share an intimate vocabulary. I’m twenty-three, yet she is still helping me play my hand, make sense of things. I had begun to see that we shared much more than a love for organizing words.

My grandmother tells people that the only time she ever wanted to have sex was when she had Dan. “She tells people that,” my mother said. “She told Dad that before we even got married.” We were having one of our one o’clock-in-the-morning talks—the first one since I had been engaged. A couple days ago, my mother sat at the kitchen table drinking her coffee, waiting for me to wake up. She had recently switched from mocha and hot chocolate to coffee because the sugar was affecting her weight. Ever since she started taking sleeping pills, her body had a mind of its own. When I walked down the stairs, she immediately spun off her chair whisking me back to my room.

“Hold this in your mouth until it beeps three times,” she shoved the thermometer under my tongue. “You need to start taking your temperature every morning and recording it on this chart.” She began labeling the axes of the graph paper, assigning a date to each vertical line and a temperature to the horizontals.

“Mom, I haven’t brushed my teeth yet,” I protested, as I took the thermometer out of my mouth.

“No—you can’t brush your teeth. The water will change your temperature dramatically,” she shoved it back in. I could feel bite marks on the plastic stem as I squeezed it with my teeth. My mother used this same thermometer when planning her own pregnancies. The teeth marks were deep—maybe from the weight of a sleepless night or anxiety over the future.

I knew what she was doing. My mother was a staunch opponent of the pill, and still had bitterness toward the doctor who persuaded her to go on birth control in her early twenties. “It’s their answer for everything,” she says. “N.F.P. is what you want to do.”

N.F.P.: Natural Family Planning. Its effectiveness relies on consistency—one quality I lack. My consistency lies in deficiencies: consistent tardiness, consistent hunger, consistent confusion, consistent insecurity, and consistent inconsistency. My mother knew that getting me to do any action every day at the same time under the same circumstances was a toss up. With this form of N.F.P., subtle changes in temperature signaled the body's cycle.

My mother lives practically, where recreation entwines with usefulness. Showing me how to decipher my temperature chart was, for her, thrilling—an adventure—because it entailed finding a pattern, a concrete result. It was not uncommon for the kitchen to be cluttered with various experiments: she grew germs in Petri dishes in the refrigerator, compared the durability of batteries by letting machines run in vain all day, and drew architectural layouts for energy efficient homes. Being a medical technologist likewise gave her the intellectual high she craved. And when it came to talking about sex, which is where this N.F.P. thing was headed, she remained static.

“Now, what I did when I was your age...I put this,” she held the chart and the thermometer, “on my bedside table so I would see it every morning.” I wanted this conversation to be over with as soon as possible, but excitement sang in my mother's voice. She handed me the graph paper as if passing on a secret family recipe.

“Now when you see a dramatic rise in your temperature, you're ovulating.” As if she was also learning this for the first time, her face blushed with womanly pride. We guarded the delicacy of the conversation as if it was fine china. With pinky's out, our sentences balanced on one another, adjusting only when necessary and with ladylike

poise. Our questions—the questions we both wanted to ask, but didn't know how—were spooned in gently. We depended on one another's strength.

I was embarrassed to say that at twenty-two, I did not know *exactly* “how it all worked.” The chemistry. The timing. “The egg lives about two days, and then it starts to disintegrate,” she traced a line through the air, as if drawing the egg's route on an unfolded map. Your temperature will slowly start to drop back down, and the cycle will begin again.

But, sometimes bodies work on their own time—ignoring normalcy altogether, which is what we were talking about when my mother said, “Grandma tells people the only time she ever wanted to have sex was when she got pregnant with Dan.” Like my mother, my grandmother also had trouble conceiving her first child. And, also like my mother, it snowballed after the first child.

My grandmother saw sex as utilitarian—work—a duty. Her mother died when she was still in high school, leaving her to raise fourteen children while her dad supported the family on one income. It was not easy during the depression to raise children, and her life seemed bound to that practicality forever. Once she gave me a Christmas ornament in the shape of a flower basket. Red knitted poinsettias popping through a white background. If you squeezed the sides together, the middle popped open, making a convenient slot for money where she placed a crisp ten-dollar bill every year. She didn't realize that it was the ornament I would treasure. It reminds me that she once had to make her brothers' clothes out of the living room curtains.

I began to chart my temperature everyday, knowing that its slight changes would tell a story about my body. I always knew that I wasn't "textbook" like other girls, but now the chart showed me just how atypical my body was.

"Oh, that just runs in our family," Mom said. "My charts were everywhere until I had a few kids. That'll make you normal."

My mother had a slight bit of trouble getting pregnant with me. After two years of a childless marriage, she went to a fertility doctor who first pumped her up with birth control to "jump-start" her system as if she were a dead car battery, and then injected her with a drug that sheds the fertile lining of the uterus. What she didn't know, and what the doctor didn't find out, was that she was already pregnant. "Lucky for you that drug didn't make me miscarry," she said, looking up at the ceiling, sipping her coffee.

I recently saw a television ad for a new birth control. The monthly dose replaces a woman's period, reducing its frequency to twice a year. When I saw it, my feelings about N.F.P. were changing. I began to like the idea of forming a relationship with myself. The chart was like a daily dialogue where the temperatures were words, sentences. There seems to be something inherently wrong with a magic pill that reduces a woman's vibrancy to biannual flickers.

"I wish we would have had more, though," she finally continued. She was talking about children. "Your father decided four was enough," her lips folded inward with regret. There, in the darkness of the kitchen, we explored the silent rooms of our femaleness.

“So, when are you and Josh planning on having children?” This could have been weird—talking to my mother about being a mother and about having sex. Instead of seeing my mother, though, I saw her freckled hazel eyes, her perfect eyebrows, and a certain French beauty in her fair skin. She looks good in true colors: red, blue. The muted shades do her no justice.

Earlier that year my parents had their 25th wedding anniversary, my sisters and I threw them a brunch. While setting up for the party, my sisters and I went through their wedding album to pick out a good picture to set on the table. The pictures had yellowed; the pages stuck together. A few sheets of loose paper with my mother’s handwriting had fallen out of the album. It was youthful, girlish, unrushed—different from the way she writes now. On the paper, which she had torn out of a wedding planner, was a detailed account of my parents’ courtship. I scanned to the bottom of the page where it read, “Date of the first ‘I love you.’” She had written a date on the corresponding line: April 6, 1979. I tried to imagine how the “I love you” came out. Did he whisper it to her the way Josh did to me? Did it melt away years of feeling like a simple Catholic girl? There on the page, I saw my mother as a woman.

I told her that we wanted to have children right away. The words left my mouth so effortlessly, so autonomously, it was as if they did not belong to me. I got up from the table to make myself a cup of hot chocolate. Coffee would have kept me up all night, and I had been having trouble getting to sleep on time as it is. Lately, staying up to three in the morning was normal. The house was dark at three in the morning. I could roam alone, without interruption. Of course, sometimes my mother would be up too, doing the

crossword, or watching detective stories on the Discovery Channel. She was the reason my own sleeping schedule was off. I had somehow absorbed her insomnia along with everything else.

While the water heated, our conversation continued.

“How’s your chart looking?”

“It’s all over the place, Mom. I’m just abnormal. The temperature never changes; it’s always the same. I can’t make sense of it.” She went to get it from my room.

“Weeell,” she called from the back hallway. “It just looks like you have an extra ten days in your cycles.” She did not look at me but flipped the pages back and forth. Interpreting. Diagnosing. “You won’t know when the temperature’s gone up unless you look to see what it was before. You determine what it *isn’t* instead of what it is.” Like a relationship, it gains meaning when you look to its past.

* * * * *

As the wedding plans solidified, Mom and I ran around Omaha getting bids and tours from reception sites. Our search started off with the more expensive halls. There was one I particularly liked called Erin Court. It had a great fireplace in the middle of a large room that resembled a log cabin. A staircase led to a balcony holding more guest tables. By the end of the day, we were walking around the Serbian bingo hall across from Bag N Save, our neighborhood grocery store. She had given me a lot of freedom when it came to cost, but she drew the line here. “Sue,” she finally said, “you’re having it here. I have two other weddings to pay for.” And that was that.

I found out later that I would have to rent my own table linens and place settings if I didn't want plastic. "Plastic is fine, right?" my mother said more as a statement than a question.

"Well...I guess I always thought I would have real plates but—" I didn't even finish when she began to yell.

"You are so spoiled, Susan. Your wedding is going to be so much better than what I had." She threw her face in her hands and began to weep. Something painful from the past had been resurrected. It wasn't about the plates anymore. "My life is such a waste," her words caught in her throat. I had never seen her cry like this, or say such a thing.

"What do you mean a waste? Your life's not a waste."

"Do you know what my wedding was like? Do you? At least you're having hot food. We had cold sandwiches. And centerpieces! No one told me you should have centerpieces. My mother didn't tell me to make centerpieces. The tables weren't even covered!"

I could do nothing but listen, which is, at that moment, what I think she needed.

"I had no one to help me—no one to show me. I wore a long-sleeved wedding dress in June. The reception was in an un-air conditioned church basement. There was no dance, no music, no alcohol. I can't even throw a decent party." For a long time we just looked at each other without a word, not yet sure how to navigate the new surface of our relationship. There is a reason women can bore the pain of another so easily. Spiritually,

physically, we are receivers—an identity that can take a lifetime to understand. My mother was still learning to accept imperfection as I was just discovering it.

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About an hour later, she opened my bedroom door. “So. Are you using roses or lilies?”

“Lilies” I said.

“I like that. I like that a lot.”

Remembering Medjugorje

On June 24th, 1981, two farm children living in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, are walking home when they see a blinding apparition atop a hill. It is a beautiful woman, silent and praying. For the last fifty years, communists have forced the several Slavic communities together as one nation. Ten years from this date, on June 24th, 1991, Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia. Hostility permeated the country—a memory of World War I.

The beautiful woman tells the children to pray for their country, to keep peace within their families and neighborhoods, and to spread her message. She tells them that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. These children's lives will revolve around this one moment. They become visionaries—sources of strength for their little town in the midst of a brutal war.

When I was thirteen, one of the visionaries children claiming to receive apparitions of the Virgin Mary, was visiting several cities in the United States to give talks about her. My parents drove my sister and me to St. Joseph, Missouri, to hear Mirjana, because, not only did they believe her, but they were considering a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. Some are excited when seeing celebrities or politicians; my mother is motivated by spiritual warriors with urgent messages. Mirjana had exclusive knowledge of the divine world—it was just too tantalizing for Mom to pass up. More importantly, the visionary had answers, things Mary asked the world to do. The call to action, usually prayers and sacrifice, made sense of an ambiguous world.

I was, at this point, knowledgeable about the several apparitions happening around the world. I did, and do still, dream about what these visionaries know—what they encounter. But I also wanted to know what Mary looked like. She fascinated and impressed me. Artists have tried to capture her image through visionaries' descriptions. She comes on a cloud, they report, and appears to them in full dimension—not a ghost of any kind. As a child, listening to stories about men and women who received visions as children, I wondered why I too was not receiving visions. Often I would lie awake at night praying, asking Mary to appear to me—demanding it of her.

I don't remember much of the day we saw Mirjana except that we were outside in a garden and that it was hot. The visionary's voice absorbed me, but her delayed message from the translator only distanced me even more from Mary, because it seemed she only appeared to poor children from small countries. Catholics believe that God assumed Mary into Heaven at the end of her life, as it would be impossible for death to touch such a person. As I considered Mary's choice of these children, I considered God's choice of Mary. Who was this woman with so much presence, and what did she deserve from me?

Mirjana did not see Mary while we listened to her, as she only sees her once a year on her birthday. The frequency and time is different for each seer. However, in their response to her, in their rapture, they are one. When she enters the room, their bodies immediately turn to face her. I remember watching a video of this, which was possible because they know the time she will appear. Mary must have appeared behind the woman, because without warning, her body whipped around 90 degrees, simultaneously

falling to its knees. Her head was fixed, looking slightly up and did not flinch until Mary was gone. She was drawn to her—a mother, a beautiful woman.

The day before we listened to Mirjana outside, my mother tells me, we went to her more formal talk in an old basilica. We arrived late, something common for our mother with four children, and Mirjana had already begun. The greeter asked if we were “the family from Nebraska.” Surprised, my mother told her we were. The woman said, “Follow me,” as if she had been expecting us. Thinking the woman was trying to find us interspersed seats, my mother walked slowly, embarrassed that she was dragging four children in late. But the woman moved past the middle of the church, past the chapel, and up to the altar area. My mother blushed when she seated us not four yards from the visionary, who stood at the podium, pausing for the distraction. She smiled at my mother—two women with so little in common.

The day she spoke in the garden, however, I remember. Mirjana repeated many of Mary’s messages, as they are now called, asking for peace, sacrifice, prayer. There were pictures of Mary everywhere—magnets, postcards, jewelry. Everyone trying to comprehend this woman kept quiet in the background of history, yet living today. Even in the Bible, Mary’s life is unexplored. I think that is why images of her are so important to me. Medjugorje writers say that when the visionaries saw her for the first time, she was wearing a silver-grey gown, having dark hair and a pale white complexion and appeared to be holding a baby in her arms—the only time that the apparition would appear with her Son.

Years ago, my uncle took a pilgrimage to Medjugorje to see the visionaries and visit the shrine that Mary asked the town to build there. One night, after dusk, the town and visitors gathered in the valley, surrounded by the hills burdened with large rocks. Mary was present. My uncle took a picture when, in the middle of the dark sky (as night is truly night in a small farm town), twelve balls of fire appeared perfectly aligned in a horizontal ring. A crown of twelve stars.

Chapter 4 -- The Bag Lady

My mother packed empty shoeboxes with small kids' toys from fast food restaurants. She packed them with used sunglasses, opened bottles of soap, deodorant she had gotten free by using the drugstore rebate, calendars sent to us in the mail from the firefighters' union or an Indian mission in Wisconsin. For a week, she spread a year's worth of stuff on the floor, and packed as much as she could into shoeboxes. From our living room, they would travel south, past the border, into South America, to the missionaries for Christmas.

Sometime later, we would receive a letter from the mission in the mail, attached to a picture of a child with our opened shoebox—wearing my softball t-shirt from second grade or holding a coin purse my sister had won at the church festival. My mother would hang it on the refrigerator until next year's picture arrived.

Boxes filled much of our house. Not just shoeboxes, but all kinds. That was how my mother organized things. We never thought of her as a packrat, but I guess she was. At the grocery store, she would even look for boxes that had once housed jarred pickles or bottles of Champagne to bring home—to put stuff in. These boxes had nowhere to go except the basement, which happened to be Stephanie's and my bedroom. Over time, our minds unconsciously associated the pictures on the boxes to what they contained: a waffle-maker on a blue box meant Christmas ornaments inside. A garage door operator in red sprawled across the top of a box meant, to us, hunting magazines within. Seeing these same boxes outside of home did not change this correlation.

We called my mother the Bag Lady. Like boxes, it seemed she was always attached to a bag of some sort. Not nice cloth bags or book bags, but plastic bags from the grocery store, or more popularly, Walgreen's Drugstore—a white bag with an antiquated blue pestle swirling dependable remedies. Trademark of Walgreens *and* Janet Murnan. Walgreen's cashiers, often long-haired, dark circle-eyed ladies in their thirties and forties, knew my mother by name.

When anyone opened the passenger door, bags spilled out of the gold minivan my mother drove for so long. Often forgetting that the front seat was claimed by an assortment of plastic bags, we'd run to it, swing it open, and, remembering the bags, throw our heads back with a loud sigh and slam it shut again. "Sorry," she'd say—the bags rattling and crunching as she scrambled to collect and stuff them in-between the seats.

Her bags were not filled with secrets, but like the bags were themselves, practicalities—lunches and coupons and reading material. Things she had to take back. Things she had to have signed. Things she meant to give to someone last month. Things that needed to be fixed. Papers she needed to copy. Documents she needed to fax. Letters she needed to mail. The bags were a convenient filing system. And, they were free.

Whether my mother realized it or not, our house, to say the least, was always cluttered. The bags simply allowed the clutter to travel, offering no relief to the mess in the house. As children, our parents constantly accused us that *our* mess caused them insuppressible nauseousness. We were slothful, lame, forgetful, and thieves.

“Where is my toothpaste?” my father would herald after finding that someone had indeed *stolen* his tube of toothpaste. “You guys know that you’re not supposed to use the one with the clip on it. You’re so lame it’s un-be-lievable,” he’d mumbled while shuffling around in the bathroom drawer. My father labeled everything for this reason. The initials “SM” in black magic marker were like the mark of the beast—an omen—a forewarning that it was not to be used, moved, handled. He branded everything. His socks. His bathroom cup. His scissors. The last brownie. Stephanie and I could not use the excuse that we also had the same initials. He had claimed those too.

It was telling when we found out that it was *Mom* who had taken his toothpaste to work. When ordered to clean the kitchen, we realized that it was *Mom*’s stuff that covered the table and counters. The clutter was embarrassing when we brought friends or boyfriends over. In an attempt to create normalcy, we’d clear the counters in one sweep of the arm and pile it in the basement. But it soon crept its way back upstairs, covering the house like lichen or moss.

It was easier for Dad to blame the mess on us than to accuse my mother of being a slob. We all knew how dangerous it was to criticize her. She became defensive about the way she lived when her insomnia started. The clutter was something she could control—her way of organizing the mess of life when sleeping no longer was a choice, but a gift. It started after she had my brother. Some nights, she was lucky to get two hours of sleep. There was a death sentence to anyone who woke her up. As long as I live, I will never forget that fear. The woman once heard a mouse chewing something at the other end of the house in the middle of the night. She could hear someone cutting their fingernails in

the basement, or a page turning in the next room. Slowly she began adding more and more rules:

“Alright,” she said one morning “who opened the garage door at 1:30 last night?” Frozen with fear, we stared at one another. “The new rule is that no one parks in the garage if it’s after 9:30. Got that? It woke me up last night and I cannot take this anymore.” She waited for each of us to acknowledge that we understood.

On another bad day, it was “whose friend rang the doorbell at 4:00?” “In the morning?” we wondered. Deep down we knew that four in the afternoon was just as dangerous as four in the morning. Insomniacs sleep whenever they feel an inkling of fatigue, so family members must always be on their guard. Opening the squeaky fridge was like disabling a bomb. It took orchestration—skill.

Her insomnia introduced us all to the novelties of late night infomercials. It seemed every week the UPS man was bringing large packages to our doorstep. The medication made her gain weight, and so she succumbed to buying clunky Bun and Thigh-rockers, and large rickety Ab-loungers. The stuff kept piling up, yet we didn’t dare say a word.

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It was only natural that when my fiancé, Josh, bought a house, our ways of living, which had seeped into us from our parents, clashed. I never thought of myself as a messy person, but compared to him I lived like an orangutan. We knew we were going to get married and we’d share this house, so moving in a lot of my stuff early didn’t bother him—even decorating the house in a French restaurant theme affected him the same as if

I would have painted the walls white. But even I wasn't ready to realize that sharing a house with someone teaches you more about yourself than you ever wanted to know. I began to feel like I lived in two houses and used bags to transfer my things when I went to one or the other. I had bags everywhere: things I needed to take back home, clothes I'd needed for that night, papers to grade, books to read. I had become a bag lady. Even worse, I was that person who left every single light on in the house when I left. The person who didn't turn off the space heater, left the dishes in the sink, and didn't take out the trash.

One day I was putting Josh's laundry in the dryer and caught myself ripping a dryer sheet in thirds, so that I could get three loads out of it. "Just because I'm frugal doesn't mean I'm my mother," I reassured myself. Then I started saving empty Cool Whip containers to use as Tupperware and taught Josh how to reuse baggies by rinsing them out and drying them upside down on the soap dispenser. Josh could appreciate my mother's efficiency, but the other careless things made him cringe.

I think I realized that my family was cheap when my parents built a new house. We already knew my grandparents didn't acknowledge inflation, as five dollars appeared in our Christmas stockings year after year after year. Even the tooth fairy even seemed to understand basic economics—the buying power of a dollar—when it came to other families. But we *didn't* know how much junk our parents had saved and stored. After 22 years, my parents decided to build a house closer to the western part of the city. In order to have all of our belongings out of the house by August, we had to begin moving in March. Luckily, my family's garage door business had an extra warehouse we could use.

Load after load of old shoes, unused exercise equipment, toys with half the pieces missing, 120 oz. cans of powdered milk filled our moving truck. “Mom, when will we need this pair of pink saddle shoes that I wore in the first grade?” I said.

“You never know when you’ll be desperate for a pair of shoes.”

“A size two?”

“I can keep them if I want. I bought them.”

Dad and I tried to convince our mother that they needed to be thrown away, but the thought alone made her teary-eyed and hysterical at the same time.

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Josh and I spent a lot of time in his new house, since we couldn’t afford to go out. This exposed Josh’s football appreciation as an obsession—a sickness. Our “date nights,” already a sign that we are like an old married couple, had to be confirmed by the football schedule that he cut out from the Saturday newspaper. He will do anything in his power to fit other obligations in between games. I had never seen so much time wasted watching, what seemed to me, the same thing over and over. I’d sit at the kitchen table, doing homework, when he’d interrupt me during a commercial, “Who holds the record for the most complete passes at a home game during the first quarter?” When I didn’t answer, he’d turn back to the TV whispering the answer to himself. Football has a record for everything and that really bothered me. They’d tally the most butt slaps in one quarter if you suggested it. He likes football because there are rules. There are definite, inarguable endings: someone wins and someone loses. A play was successful or it wasn’t. It’s clean.

Since I'm not interested in the sport, he often invites his mom and her husband, Pete, over. His mother doesn't really watch the games either, but comes to talk to me. I always have something productive I can be doing instead, but I stay. And it never fails that she finds something dirty in the house, or something that needs to be changed. She does this to Josh's brother too, so you never know if you're supposed to feel mad or guilty. Grabbing the dog, she'd look it in the eyes and say, "Mommy hasn't taken me for a walk in months. I'm sooo sad." Or, focusing the baby's attention on the dirty sink, she'd say in a baby voice, "Mommy really needs to clean the sink, doesn't she?" We wonder what it is she will comment on when she visits next. Just when we think she'll complain that's it's too cold in the house, she's sweating. It just got ridiculous when, after two weeks of downpour, she said we weren't watering the trees enough.

Months after Josh was fully moved in, I was still unpacking boxes. He was on the couch watching football while I sat on the kitchen floor, unwrapping breakables from newspaper. I knew the mess was driving him crazy, but he didn't say a word. I think he just started to accept that I make messes, and eventually, I clean them up. I unpacked a leopard figurine carved out of wood that my father bought for me on a trip to Africa. His hunting excursions were reasons for constant arguing in my parents' marriage. My mother's own father was a hunter, so she knew what the hobby could do to families. She seemed plagued by an infinite stream of men with guns and few words. So often I'd hear them arguing—my mother saying, "You get to go on these little vacations all the time, while I'm left with four small children. When do I get a vacation?" He'd always leave

anyway, and she'd repeat all her sad stories to us until he came back. "Did I ever tell you that when I was nine months pregnant with Stephanie, he left to go hunting?" We had heard it several times, but it was easier to say we hadn't. She has always felt like hunting was first and she was second.

"And you remember the time when he gave me the claw, don't you?"

"Yes."

On her 43 birthday, my father had gotten her what we all assumed to be jewelry. It was in a flat box covered in fake velvet, used to display necklaces. My dad excitedly ran the video camera, while we all looked on. We could not see what it was when she first opened it, but we could see her face. Tears smeared her mascara as she blinked to clear her vision.

"Hold it up, let's see," he looked into the camera and then back at her.

"Look girls, it's a claw from Dad's lion—on a chain."

"It's a pendant!" he beamed.

"Girls, wouldn't you like to wear this with your prom dresses—or maybe at your wedding?" Now she was just being mean. "Pass it around," she said, "show the camera what your father gave me for my birthday." It took him a minute to understand her sarcasm. It was painful to watch him slowly turn off the camera.

"You don't have to wear it, I guess," he stuttered.

Later on, I told Mom she was being a little hard on him. "You just don't understand—you don't understand marriage," her makeup still stained under her eyes.

I once read in a book about cultural interpretations of Mary, that just as we love our own mothers, and are angered and upset if they are hurt, Christ, in His humanness, felt the same way about His own Mother. It is always through the body that we know God. Our mothers, within whose bodies we are formed, are gifts for understanding.

I placed the leopard back into the box. I didn't know where I would put it anyway. My bookcases were still at home. As I threw away the extra newspaper, Josh yelled, "Who holds the record for the most touchdown passes in a winning season?"

"Tell me," I said, sitting down next to him.

Remembering Lourdes and Augustine

I am especially familiar with one saint: Bernadette Soubirous, a poor French girl from Lourdes, France, who at the age of 14 began to receive visions of the Virgin Mary. She was my school's namesake. Bernadette's visions began in 1858, on a day that she was passing through a small grotto near her home, known for its sewer-like riverbanks where only the poor would retreat.

I remember watching animated film versions of Bernadette's story as a child, intrigued by Mary's affection for a poor teenage girl. I watched several versions of Marian apparitions, all of poor children going to perplexing measures. They were as familiar to me as the Saturday cartoons watched by other children. But the unwavering belief of visionaries, despite the questions they never asked, frustrated me. Why did they not demand her name and the purpose of her unannounced meeting?

When the cartoon ended, it gradually faded into real footage of the grotto, panning large groups of tourists drinking of the spring. As the cartoon's simplicity gave way to an adult seriousness and gravity, I again found myself preoccupied with the same spiritual images I hid from each night. Every action, every mundane event seemed to require an examination of conscience—a meditation on the supernatural I knew existed. But most of all I felt a connection to Bernadette because of her intensity, which matched my own.

- Saints' stories were like fairytales, and often the two would merge.

- There were fairy godmothers and guardian angels.

- There were magic potions and healing waters.
- There were glass slippers and miraculous medals.
- There were enchanted castles aside consecrated churches.
- There were mysterious spells and sacred prayers.
- There were the saints that became epic heroes.

When Bernadette died at the age of 35, the convent that she had joined buried her in her habit, rosary in hand. Today, her body lies in a glass coffin, still untouched by decay—pure even in death. A church now stands at the grotto, and the spring, which Bernadette dug, heals thousands that pilgrimage to it each year. Her remains give faith concreteness—something to hold onto. They also give it a sense of place where, when our human need for proof lingers, we can find confirmation.

St. Augustine also wrote of this need for a spiritual place in *The Confessions*. The essay, like prayer, dissects confession to find truth, meaning. Memory traverses both of these wild places and becomes Augustine's "place of self-awareness." Concrete images of nature and the visible presence of his words enable him to move through this landscape of memory, but without the embodiment of truth in the man of Christ, Augustine's own embodiment or awareness was impossible. He needed physical landscape to explore his own existence. For me, it rests in the fields.

Chapter 5 -- The Landscape of My Confession

Every Sunday afternoon, after church at St. Bernadette's Church, my family drives to Mineola, Iowa, to have lunch at my grandparents' 160-acre farm. The only house visible from the front door is the house in which my grandfather was born. It sits adjacent to their lemon-colored house, in the shade of a tall pine tree. We always eat deer meat in one form or another. Deer steaks, deer hamburgers, deer meatloaf. I have wild venison in my blood.

We exit the interstate at the Iowa School of the Deaf, and, making a right turn, roll off into a space that seems pretend and temporary. On the gravel roads, our Sunday mornings begin. We drive past the leaning corn tower, the house with the trampoline, the house with the long driveway, the pigpen, and the bluff that hides my grandparents' house. It's our little mountain pass.

When he lived in the city, my grandfather was a mechanic. His mind was like the refrigerators and dryers that he repaired: intricate, disciplined. Because he grew up on a farm under a German father in a German town, where the land protected history and familiarity, he did not attend school beyond the eighth grade. And because a town like his survived on the land—the vitality of manual labor determined his skill.

One Sunday when I was visiting, my grandfather pulled me aside with an eager expression. "I got something you might be interested in," he baited me.

"What do you got?" I asked.

"I went to one of them auctions last week, in an old nursery, and they were auctioning off rooms of supplies and equipment left behind. I bought you a file cabinet

for three dollars.” He was in his glory. Nothing excited him more than finding a deal except finding someone who actually needed the stuff.

This is possibly the most he has spoken to me in my whole life. Grandma was the one we talked to. Grandpa’s loss of hearing and the fields’ constant need for attention left him alone with his own mind. I like to think about how many conversations he has had with the fields. One time when he had been harvesting all day, Grandma suggested that we take him up a snack. We packed a brown paper bag with bananas and popsicles and drove the station wagon up to his tractor. A great hum permeated the air—it would have been impossible for him to hear us talking. As he came closer to the car, he put the tractor in neutral and climbed down. In a heavy walk I had seen so many times and would still see in my mind when I remembered him, he lifted his right hand to his right ear, lowered his head toward the newly broken corn stalks, and turned his hearing aid back on. I could not help but feel like we interrupted a private conversation. He sat on that tractor for hours, its hum a pulse running through them both.

This kind of intimacy is rare, and I’ve seen it only twice before. The first—when we had just received communion during a mass. Someone had dropped the host on the ground and, rather than picking it up, they had simply walked back to a seat. The priest immediately stopped his communion line to pick up the host and consume it. His body was frail with severe arthritis. The pain he endured from simply bending down to the ground was equally agonizing to watch. His whole body trembled; I imagined each joint burning, sweating from weakness. Kneeling, he then began to press his fingers apologetically onto the remaining crumbs. His head was nearly touching the floor—

bowing to his faith as if no one else was in the room. I wished I too could see Jesus in those crumbs.

The second was while reading St. Augustine for the first time. Sitting on the third floor of the university library, I randomly selected a passage to read before the library closed. In between shelves of other ancient texts, I again felt intrusive. Like the farm, the pages of *The Confessions* let me enter the mind of a reverent man:

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And what is this?

I put my question to the earth, and it replied, "I am not he";

I questioned everything it held, and they confessed the same.

I questioned the sea and the great deep,

and they replied,

"We are not God; seek higher."

I questioned the gusty winds,

And every breeze with all its flying creatures told me,

"Amoximenes was wrong: I am not God."

To the sky I put my question, to sun, moon, stars,

but they denied me: "we are not the God you seek."

And to all things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said,

"tell me of my God.

You are not he, but tell me something of him."

Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried,

“he made us.”

My questioning was my attentive spirit,

And their reply, their beauty. -St. Augustine

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These intimate moments remind me of a year ago, when I sat praying in an empty monastery chapel. Seeking silence, I counted the number of hours I’ve spent sitting in the tired pews of aging churches. On my journal, I calculated that I have spent 2,134 hours celebrating something I did not understand. When I was only five, daily mass began my day. Soon songs, prayers, responses effortlessly flowed from my mouth. Like a favorite song, initial notes or inflections released the words from my memory, but meaning did not develop.

The shadows of stained glass windows walked across the chapel floor, over me, and back to themselves again—illuminating otherwise unseen things. Dust. Spider webs. Stillness. Ancient stories shined secrets into my eyes. Their mouths shined over my ears. My eyes became their eyes. A man walked in—his rosary keeping time against his pants with each stride. The man’s image is blurred, but the sound of the beads is what I need to remember. They were comforting and constant—ticking away everything else in the room. The colored shadows, the murmur of voices downstairs, the need to scratch a persistent itch on my neck, all flickered out with each beat.

I remember this time clearly, because I also had a Bible with me. It was a large red paperback with several loose pages tucked in at uneven intervals. I’ve never found it easy to read the Bible and to feel as if I belonged somewhere in its numbered verses. I

flipped to Jeremiah and read the lines repeatedly, yet could not squeeze anything out of them. Then I remembered what a priest friend of mine had told me. He said to remember that the Bible is the history of you. He told me to try replacing Jeremiah's name with my own:

Before I formed Susan in the womb, I knew her, before she was born I dedicated her, a prophet to the nations I appointed her.

“Ah, Lord God!” I said, “I know not how to speak; I am too young.”

And I saw the world as it should be, suddenly, peacefully. It seemed time had been leveled, that moment touching centuries of ancient tradition and pain and radical faith.

That Easter began a new liturgical year for the Church, and a new cycle for me. Every three Easters, the readings for Mass start over again. A new landscape. A new space. Easter is also when new Catholics are initiated into the Church. On Easter Vigil, the catechumens walk down dark churches toward altars that had been empty—stripped for the previous forty days. Lenten altars now burgeoning with white lilies. During this time I sat in that chapel, shedding my old skin. I saw my reflection and began to peer inside.

As my grandmother and I drove back to the house, the uneven ground jolted us out of our seats. We did not see Grandpa until dusk.

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Each spring, my grandmother raised chicks and ducklings in a cardboard box under a metal reading lamp. They were runts left behind and abandoned eggs that

couldn't be snuck into another hen's nest. By the end of spring, she had a collection of orphans in an incubator. But when they hatched, they lived together in a little box that smelled of wet corn powder and life. A new family.

When holding the chicks, Grandma coached us how to let our fingers cage their fragile bodies without crushing them. I remember now how they felt in my hand—their feathers folding into one another, revealing tiny bones. Tiny claws and webbed feet prodded my open hands for solid ground. Rarely having something smaller than ourselves to protect, we would muzzle them to our faces. It was hard not to squeeze them. We made mazes out of our legs and books, redefining the kitchen floor, preparing them for the land that awaited.

But there was a peculiar thing about the chicks, almost endearing. As much as we wanted to hold them to our faces—our lips to graze their bodies and feel their pulses beat—we could not hold them close to our eyes. This was because when they see shiny things, the chicks will peck at them. I can't help but wonder if it is because they see themselves. It is such a natural thing to be drawn to, the self. Our hands and legs served as transitory landscape and space for these tiny beings, just as the farm that held them was for us. Perhaps there is a desire to make contact with the soul. And this space that encompasses our bodies, our homes, our landscape, and our ideas about faith cradle us, counting our bones.

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When Grandma tied the handkerchiefs around our heads, we walked toward the windmill that stood in the distance. It was a water-pumping windmill, made of metal

paddles that we could watch from the front room window. Facing east, it sifts air that rises when the sun heats the land. As it rises, it creates a vacuum in the space it once occupied. The surrounding air floods the space, making wind and energy. And we were curious about the windmill, so we went, veiled in our grandmother's paisley handkerchiefs, toward the gravel road. The walk seemed like miles. And we walked perpendicular to the rows of corn that ran east to west. The corn leaves, which had grown up to our bellies and then our necks, and eventually past our handkerchiefed heads until my grandfather harvested them, scratched our little legs. Broken and bent, the thick stalks scraped our skin and refused to crumble under our feet as we crossed row after row toward the windmill.

American farms today use over one million windmills to transport water from under the plains into houses. Egyptians first learned to harness the wind's power around the 4th century B.C. The wind never had to be replanted like the corn and bean fields that surrounded an equally temporary pond, which shed layers of its own each year. And each year, we looked at the pond and remarked on how much it was shrinking, how it used to be so big we couldn't believe a nearby farmer had dug it himself. The water irrigated the crops, returning to the earth.

This pond reminds me of baptismal ponds and rivers used in the 1st century. It is not unlike the waters that penitent men and women descended into with faith. Today, water is merely poured over the forehead, but centuries ago, the person was held completely under water past the point of needing another breath. And just when the water began to rush into the empty space in their bodies, the baptizer released them into the

world again. It was death. It was birth. The year that we went to the windmill, the farm was already beginning to soak up our pond. Today, it is completely gone.

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During Easter, especially during Good Friday, the priest leaves the Host out on the tabernacle in a holder called a Monstrance. The church is left unlocked all day, giving people a chance to view the sacrament. Often, when I'm the only one in the church, I will walk right up to the Host and rest my eyes upon it. In 1970, the Holy See ordered the scientific investigation, using spectroscopic analysis, of a Consecrated Host over twelve hundred years old. Pilgrims from all over the world come to see this Host in Lanciano, Italy, where the Host had originated and miraculously bled. What they found was not wheat grains, but incorrupt heart tissue. After the Holy See asked other scientists to attest to these findings, they agreed, saying, "Without reservation, this is a slice of tissue from a human heart, as though it had been expertly excised by a surgeon's scalpel through the center of the heart." The Vatican then published the findings in 1971.

I've tried to get close enough, so close that the Host is all that is in my view, so I can envision it as flesh. Instead, the host looks like miles and miles of land. It looks like the fields of my grandparents' farm. Places—land—are significant because they show me where I've been and remind me of my faith. I know now that it was a physical landscape that I needed. It was communion. Captivated by this incarnation, I think of the priest, of Augustine, of my grandfather.

The words I write also create a space that becomes tangible and passable. "Now I arrive at the field and vast mansions of memory," St. Augustine writes, "where are

treasured innumerable images brought in there from objects of every conceivable kind perceived by the senses.” This field is not only the common idea of memory, but also the words he was writing at that very moment. As I walked physically through the fields on which my great-grandfather survived, I now walk spiritually through my essays, my sentences, and my ideas. I am my own landscape.

The Confessions reveal something more than a man struggling with his own existence; Augustine is questioning the value of his public confession. I picture him physically and emotionally controlled by these thoughts. He writes, “What point is there for me in other people hearing my confessions? Are they likely to heal my infirmities?” As a prayer, *The Confessions* predictably expresses penitence for wrongdoings. As an autobiography, these blatant admissions he gives with caution. But both forms implore the self—both invoke memory to reveal the higher design. He remembers his past life of sin and debauchery. Likewise, he remembers a happiness not found on this earth. Although hesitant, Augustine must write these words for others to read because his written confession is the embodiment of his faith. It becomes a space that can be physically traversed, controlled, and cultivated. It is rich and deep like soil.

Remembering St. Ann in Beaupre

In the summer of 2002, I walked around the church grounds of St. Ann's church just outside Quebec City in Beaupre, Quebec. Busloads of tourists unloaded and reloaded in the large parking lot near rural acreages. This was my first trip outside of the United States, and so everything seemed fantastic—the food I ate, the bus I took, and the sites I saw. Our tour group spent much of the site-seeing time on churches and chapels, which are the centers for many historic towns and cities.

From a distance, on the way toward Quebec City for example, the houses pepper the verdant landscape like sporadic strokes in the background of a pastoral painting. With my father's Olympus OM10 camera around my neck, I search for images worthy of immortality. It is a huge church overshadowing a long set of stairs, and neighboring the St. Laurence Seaway.

St. Ann, for whom the church is named, was the mother of Mary, Jesus' mother. A large statue of St. Ann stands inside the church toward the front. Kneelers encircling the statue are vacant only for seconds before tourists, religious or not, fill them again. While I wait in line for one of these kneelers, I survey the many images that surround me. An oddity caught my eye, and I had to squint through the dimness to verify what I saw. Two large pillars toward the back of the church were covered floor to ceiling with crutches, canes, walkers, braces, and eyeglasses. According to the tour guides, they belong to hundreds of people who believe St. Ann has cured their handicaps.

I slip out of line and head to the pillars. They seem to be a signs of despair and hope. A demonstration of how these miracles have defined the town, informed its

livelihood. Kneeling in a crowd of people, I position my camera vertically catching the left sides of both pillars, one closer than the other. Up the aisle toward the statue, the line is still long with waiting, hopeful pilgrims.