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Second Glances, *Joy Mao*
Learn to Lose: or How to Win the Battle Against Softness

Michael Reinhard

When I decided to lose weight during the middle of my sophomore year in high school, I turned to the web to learn how. I weighed myself at 245 pounds, and I started my era of prohibition.

Dietary habits underwent a tabula rasa. A re-education of flesh through the viral internet. This is what I found, what I learned to be. I took a pad and paper and made a list of what to do—that is, how to be.

Weight loss is biological mathematics—if you burn 500 more calories than you eat every day for a week, you should lose about 1 pound. If you want to lose weight faster, you'll need to eat less (WebMD). Change is hard. That's easy to forget when it comes to our bodies. “People set up Orders from the Digest, suppressant.

eating the white.

going from just being, just eating whatever you want, no matter it's color—fucking the green and these sites always stress—change your life, change your body. But how can change be so simple, figures processed and internalized from brain to body. Weight loss is biological mathematics, but this transformation of food into moral rhetoric of right and wrong; food like the biblical commandments. These testimonies bleed together, a blend of blandness. I set my alarm for 5 a.m. to prove Nick and those professionals' wrong. Those people who think the body can't be harnessed, not made principled under the direction of an obsidian mind. My body is soft, but my resolve, strong.

I pay more attention to the color wheel. I avoid white foods (Reader's Digest)—“white flour and sugar can wreak havoc on your blood and lead to weight gain.” Whiteness is a poison. Be harmonious with the brown. It goes down and out. Whiteness clings to the abdominals, expanding out and out and out. One Harvard study of 74,000 women found that those who ate more than two daily servings of whole grains were 49% less likely to be overweight than those who ate the white stuff (Cited without source).

Goodbye marshmallows, goodbye vanilla ice cream (in hushed tones: chocolate is brown, it's okay). I'll miss you, you white tasty devils. Maybe I'll see you again in Paradise. Though I hope heaven is not too white, I mean, I hope it's low-fat.

Goodbye marshmallows, goodbye vanilla ice cream (in hushed tones: chocolate is brown, it's okay). I'll miss you, you white tasty devils. Maybe I'll see you again in Paradise. Though I hope heaven is not too white, I mean, I hope it's low-fat.

This transformation of food into moral rhetoric of right and wrong; food like the biblical commandments. I sat at the computer compiling mental registers of regulations for the flesh. A cluster of facts and figures. A recollection and internalized from brain to body. Weight loss is biological mathematics, but these sites always stress—change your life, change your body. But how can change be so simple, going from just being, just eating whatever you want, no matter it's color—fucking the green and eating the white. Bring the color blue into your life more often (http://www.livestrong.com) —it acts as an appetite suppressant.

I buy blue sweaters. I play the part of health fanatic. Flowers absorb the color of their water.

Blue roses, if you dye them. A reconfiguration of nature: that's what a diet is. A reconfiguration of nature back to a 'real' nature. What does that mean? Think it out yourself! Fuck the green, new fuck me, the green-[munching cow, regurgitating up the tasteless cud, all to be thin, that, thin.]

Orders from the Digest, Eat One Less Cookie a Day. If that is your will, it shall be done. Oh, glorious magazines of consumerist divinity, selling me this body—the ultimate accessory to American Happiness.

How can I eat One Less to weigh One Less, if cookies aren't my daily routine? Is it not madness, each day subtracting a cookie from your diet? I probably averaged three cookies a day when

all was said and done (those Oreo afternoons on Saturday really inflate the average). I tried it anyway, eating one less cookie than the day prior. By the following week, I was eating negative four cookies a day: I know not how! I just placed the negative cookies on my plate and choked them down. Delicious were they (perhaps, my fantasies). Reader's Digest says that eating one less a day saves you about 100 calories. I was saving myself 400—Seussal logic.

When I get hungry, I'm told to sniff bananas, apples, or peppermint (though I never did, never will). A research foundation in Chicago tried this with 3,000 volunteers, they found that the more the test subjects sniffed the less hungry they were and the more weight they lost [Thank God. A cure for hunger!?]

I sniffed a banana [nope]. I was not satisfied, so I turned to the apple [nic-cram]. I wouldn't try the peppermint [never]. I eat vegetables occasionally but mostly low-cal-frozen meals while my Dad's away on business trips, Tim Horton's chili, sweet potatoes; anything and everything try the peppermint [candy].

I eat vegetables occasionally but mostly low-cal-frozen meals while my Dad's away on business trips, Tim Horton's chili, sweet potatoes; anything and everything try the peppermint [candy].

Sophomore year of high school is waning down. I go on a school trip to Boston, dressed in a sized-large waffled green Henley [an accomplishment!]. My face is less prone to acne [a dairy sensitivity mixed with my skin's thirst for sun]. My ass is a third of its previous size. It feels more comfortable to be me. We gain from the loss. Healthiness is seemingly all about form, but it's more about bodily function; the efficiency of our daily machines.

I can sleep through the night without discomfort. I can talk to people without feeling insecure. I have more energy, and so on, and so on.

The scale is in my favor: 195 pounds.
I was eight years old when the pre-pubescent hairs on my skin unfurled into sharp follicles of dread at the first encounter. Death was something I had heard about in stories, read about in books, imagined to be the imperfect representations that flickered on the pane of glowing pixels – bursts of red and bodies that held life in one instant and nothingness in the next. It was a creature whose scarred features my mind had euphemized with the splendor and glory of violence.

So when it reared its head in that maliciously subtle way, the slightest tilt of the neck and a twitch at the corner of the mouth to let me know that it was, indeed, there, I was terrified. It was not a loud or imposing figure. It did not announce its presence in a screech of metal or crack in the air. Instead, it lingered in darkened corners, never overtly visible yet always a shade of light unlike its surroundings, the faintest of silhouettes serving as a constant reminder of the dark and dread at the horizon that made its presence known forthwith.

It was the ominous shadow that taile my grandfather, an inevitable doom looming over the horizon that made its presence known through the haunting ailments that plagued Ye Ye’s health.

Death was in the black soot he so forcefully expelled from his mouth. It was in the metal contraption that held up his withering frame, the needle permanently embedded in his sagging skin, attached to a colorless fluid that dripped, dripped. Even without my father telling me, I knew. Ye Ye was dying.

Grandfather spoke Chinese, and I, English. We exchanged few words other than the traditional greetings. I came to know him not through bedtime stories or anecdotes, but through warm embrace and chortling laughter, through the twinkle in his eye and the mischievous grin that always seemed to decorate his face. Even in his final month, that never changed.

His sickness did not stop him from wrapping his arms around my small shoulders as I gazed up, wide-eyed at his unwavering spirit. He steadied himself on the metal brace with one hand and reached into his pocket with the other. He took something out and placed it in my hand, stubby fingers. I knew without looking that it was a roll of Polo candies, his favorite rings of sweet goodness that served as tokens of affection. At every family dinner, every visit to Ye Ye and Ma Ma’s house, he would produce a stack of the hard candies and hand them to me with a pat on the head. His eyes beamed and his familiar smile returned, as if to say: why should today be any different?

That was the last time I would see him. Walking away from the hospital, I looked down at the roll of Polo – mint, not my favorite. I threw the candy into the garbage can. Not a moment later, my father’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Pick it back up. Please.”

Confused, but aware of his unusual solemnity, I fished out the mints and looked at him curiously.

“Without a word, he turned and we went home that day in silence.

A week later, our phone rang in the middle of the night. My father picked it up and nodded. His voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Ye Ye’s funeral the next day.”

Death was not the solemn, black-suit-white-shirt ritual that most memorial rituals were. It was a creature whose scarred features my mind had euphemized with the splendor and glory of violence. It did not make an appearance in the presence of death? This was not the solemn, black-suit-white-shirt ritual that most memorial rituals were.

The procession was long, and the Chinese costumes made for a strange scene. As costumed lions and dragons jumped and danced with vigor, my grandfather lay in his coffin, pictures of his life placed on the ground in front of him. I did not understand. Why this display of life in the presence of death? This was not the solemn, black-suit-white-shirt ritual I had come to expect. It almost seemed like they were celebrating.

Sadness turned to curiosity and I could not stop wondering why these hired traditional dancers were rejoicing over Ye Ye’s death. It was only when they stepped in front of the collage of his photos and took a deep bow that I understood.

They were not celebrating his death, but his memory. A funeral is a time of sadness because a life has ended, but it is also a time to celebrate the fruition and achievement of that life. The photos leaning at the foot of the coffin, the people gathered around the body of one man; these were all just representations of Ye Ye’s life – memories he had cherished, relationships he had nurtured, aspirations he had achieved and those that had fallen short.

Death, as I came to realize, is an ordeal whose implications extend far beyond the absence of life in a physical body. It is a mighty drop in the water, it is a mighty drop in an otherwise tranquil surface of water, and the ripples of shock and sorrow disperse only to leave behind an emptiness that bears no resemblance to a peaceful past. But in the midst of such tragedy, there is joy. The very fact that Ye Ye’s death was cause for regret means that his life was one of fulfillment, and while its end was regrettable, its memory, those lasting imprints which drew tears from bleary eyes, was worth cherishing.

After the funeral, I reached down into my pocket. The mint Polo roll was still there, the familiar, ribbed wrapping reminding me of times gone and past. I decided I would keep it after all.
Lucky Striking Out

Jenzo Fernando DuQue

Three O’clock in the Morning

You turned these ottomans
into pews and made a
transparent altar
with coffee-mug rings on the glass.
Baptisms were bathed in the swirls of
the rug she used to trace with her
adolescent fingertips—cyclones of glossolalia.
You were always a builder, Pastor.
Sew what you reap!

Except you remind me of the way these
old buildings just pick up and move where they
think they are needed.
And my memories follow their paths because
the nightshade tickles my larynx.

It is not your fault. I am nauseous.
Margery flicks her wrist and lights my lungs from
red to black. She does her best,
like the notes she taught you to write on
your own skin. Stretch marks were engraved
in the swirls of the flesh you used
to trace with your adolescent fingertips.
I am sorry that my brothers and sisters
are tongue-tied and that we still
listen. Did the anesthesia work?
I know the phantom pain is real.

Except you remind me of the way these
old buildings just pick up and move where they
think they are needed.
And my memories follow their paths because
the blackout curtain tickles my larynx.
So in spite of the fact that it is the afternoon,
I lay here with Marge. I lay here with you,
hiding the scars you taught me to write
on my own skin, but that I never learned to
trace with my adolescent fingertips.
I woke, once, to chinking.

A Friday morning, early, before I was figured to wake, shower, and go downstairs for breakfast, to pack my bag. Snow was falling – I'd heard it, upstairs, landing soft on the wood sill other side of the pane. The deck boards, long, painted grey, ran slantwise into the house, and now snow white as almond blossom leveled where the wood had split. The boards were old, bugs chewed them in springtime, they creaked underfoot and Dad wanted them lifted out and trucked somewhere Uncle, whose pickup was green as pine, could burn them. Sliding one by one the boards from the bed—onto the ground, piling them crosswise where earth was packed, where no grass sprouted, kindling a flame – maybe all this they would do in a clearing.

Dad had just come in. I had been pushing around plastic bags in the bread drawer when I heard the door open, the rubber strip stapled to the edges squeak on the doorframe. I stood up and watched him close the door and turn toward me. An undone coat clasp scratched loud on the counter’s edge as he walked round the island at the center of the kitchen and approached the stove, each foot flicked water across the floor. From a pocket he yanked gloves, black knit fingers tangled, and stretched them flat, leather palms down, near burners still hot from breakfast. He walked back round the counter, breathing on his hands, rubbing palm with palm, and pulled a high wooden stool from under the countertop.

There was a muffled clang, metal striking wood, he went outside and propped a spade on the deck railing, then came back in. He sat on the stool and crossed his legs. I looked out at the spade. Scales of grey mud were hardening along the edge, and the shaft was notched. I’d heard it clatter before, in the garage, tipping onto the concrete floor, and last spring I’d chucked it as a spear into the wheelbarrow, its metal tip cutting the wood of the shaft. I’d driven it into earth, too, hard as I had garden stakes, till rock below turned it, chipping the blade.

Dad had then found it, leaned in a dark corner of the garage, and grunted when he saw the damage. He couldn’t believe the chipped blade, nor the markings on the shaft, and told me how the shovel moved with us, father to father, so each could tell his children how to use it. And when I gave a sigh but no response, with flushed hands he turned the tool, slowly, to show me a square brass plate, hammered round and nailed to the shaft, etched with name and date: O.G., 1923.

‘Only a carving, I think,’ I’d said.
He’d left the garage, then, laying the shovel with the rakes. Brushed with cool light, his face had been russet, settled as dirt.

Sitting, now, he angled his elbows on the granite countertop and weaved his fingers, one next the other. He pressed them to his lips, breathing warm on them, white, bent. Red skin stretched dry round each knuckle, and I watched him work with hard fingertips the spaces between, kneading skin against bone.

There’d been a cardboard box, sleeved in black trashbags, circled with wide blue tape to tighten the plastic folds round edge and corner. He’d carried this slotted between arm and ribs, crossing the ride. The spade, he’d held it spade-loose in his hand, dragging the tip on pale grass, and once he’d gotten to the far corner of the yard had set down the wrapped box and begun to dig, ramming the pointed edge straight into soil that flew up in small arcs, as cherry blossoms lifted in wind.

I stood on tip toes to look over his shoulders and see if the box was still there, left of the square pit he’d dug beside the birdbath, only feet from the bench with openwork moss had filled.

After digging he’d hunched over and lowered the box down, into the square. He’d gotten up, with a booted foot started licking dirt into the pit, which he then smoothed with the bottom of the shovel’s blade. Setting down the shovel, he’d knelt again, in snow, and with gloved hands gathered loose soil, enough to level the full pit. He’d wanted to walk away from that corner, I think, as if he’d been out only to admire the yard, the beds of headless cattails bounding its slope, the shale flags leading to the patio under the deck, those immovable things. But he’d raised himself, and with his right hand had slapped and rubbed his thigh, looking down at earth the cold had already packed hard. He’d stopped looking, had shouldered the spade and scuffed through light snow to the steps. He’d climbed to the deck, thudding across the boards to the door.

He lowered his hands onto the counter and turned on his stool. I saw skin tighten over his jowls as he eyed the white other side of the glass. Then he turned back and looked down, at the granite, and said, flatly: ‘Never enough dirt.’

He lifted his head, looked at me. I turned and went back to digging in the bread drawer.
Are respect, responsibility, piety and modesty.

Once I sat in a restaurant in Shanghai and my uncle said,
You can see that you’re American without even speaking.
But I have yellow skin and small, slanted eyes,
the epicanthic fold that makes my eyelids so thick,
and a low nose bridge like everyone else, I suppose.
Then, why?

It’s because I don’t sit straight. Because I laugh loudly.
Because I look him in the eye when he ruffles my hair
and greets me by saying, “The foreigner has come.”
It’s because I yawn with my mouth open,
wave energetically when seeing people I like, and
take up more than my share of floor space;
because I eat meat by the pound,
tell uncles not to smoke, and sometimes
cut others off when they’re speaking.
Yang Guifei, they say, was one of the four
Chinese beauties, skin so radiant it must have
held the moon. She cast down her eyes
and knew to obey. The Emperor, who is the
Son of Heaven, moved all ends of earth for her hand,
plump, soft, and timid; when finally he held it, he thought,
Good-bye the painted ladies of the imperial consort!

If I am told I’m an American girl, at least
I’m a girl who does as I’m told.
I smile when I see people. I say pleasant things.
Words of criticism are hard to say, and
I feel embarrassed with attention.
I am trained to be polite. Polite, which means quiet.
I want to please. I want to be good.
I am told to wait for good things to come.
Bent over the desk, spine curved like a moon,
I dutifully work and wait for those things.

Wait with patience, and good things will come?
Under the lamp, I see my hand yellow.
There are butterflies in me, waiting
to be flown. These nights come and go.
I lose sight of the moon.
I wish I could chase the Emperor.
I arrived on campus dumped and confused. We had been together for more than three years sophomore when I started college at seventeen. He was almost two years older than I, already a to me the artist, musician, and literary genius. was already a part of the mysterious, ivory-who had just broken my heart, the one who I was going to triumph over the red-haired boy Frisbees in the leafy emerald quadrangles.

The Mind“ brochures flipping through my brain, see a warped view of themselves and the world Fountain. The amoeba-shaped pod of Cloud of glass that comprise the Loop, complete with Jay Pritzker Pavilion reflect the perfect panes The contorted metal and twisted wires of the  and all I see is steel, corporate blue mirrored charges across the Wells Street Bridge, over their eyes glazed and unmoving. The train cups as they watch a PowerPoint presentation, in navy pantsuits glugging coffee from paper is underway, filled with sleepy men and women absurdly from the chair. A corporate meeting lighting, the sleeping patient’s limbs spilling out of a haze of cotton, latex, and fluorescent An oral surgeon is wrenching something out around flour-colored steel and stone buildings through Chicago’s Loop, slowing as it veers to a Young Poet pain it causes you.” –Rainer Maria Rilke, “…Love your solitude and try to sing out with the world.”

I'm on my way to work as the train trundles through Chicago's Loop, slowing as it veers around flour-colored steel and stone buildings with plate-glass windows framing the life inside: An oral surgeon is wrenching something out of a haze of cotton, latex, and fluorescent lighting, the sleeping patient’s limbs spilling out absurdly from the chair. A corporate meeting is underway, filled with sleepy men and women in navy pantsuits glugging coffee from paper cups as they watch a PowerPoint presentation, their eyes glazed and unmoving. The train charges across the Wells Street Bridge, over the black, churning water of the Chicago River and all I see is steel, corporate blue mirrored glass, brown brick and stone, snow collecting on rust-colored metal beams, a crisp skyline. The contorted metal and twisted wires of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion reflect the perfect panes of glass that comprise the Loop, complete with the tired, smiling and spitting faces of Crown Fountain. The amoeba-shaped pod of Cloud Gate reminds me that someone's eyes like to see a warped view of themselves and the world because it’s playful.

I arrived at the University of Chicago with a suitcase and worried parents, the glossy “Life of the Mind” brochures flipping through my brain, the gargoyles, and the smiling boys throwing Frisbees in the leafy emerald quadrangles. I was going to triumph over the red-haired boy who had just broken my heart, the one who was already a part of the mysterious, ivory-towered University of Chicago—who seemed to me the artist, musician, and literary genius. He was almost two years older than I, already a sophomore when I started college at seventeen. We had been together for more than three years before our relationship fell apart weeks earlier. I arrived on campus dumped and confused. I knew no one but him.

On that first day, waiting in line to move into my neo-Gothic dorm, I watched a boy and a girl, both with long, frizzy hair, dueling with cardboard swords and shouting with feigned, gleeful anger in some fantasy Parseltongue. I was intrigued. I was never comfortable in high school. I’d chosen books and escapes to New York City over the suburban house parties of Long Island, and I thought that the University of Chicago, with its legacy of eccentric, highly interior people, would be where I would find likeminded friends. But the students had intellectual preoccupations that were wildly different from mine. Alien subcultures quietly operated throughout the dorm, with common rooms full of Super Smash Brothers players and programming lingo. My brilliant, computer-scientist neighbor from across the hall would sometimes help me with my calculus homework and I edited his papers. He would sit slily on my bed and we would try to communicate with each other, but neither of us had anything to say. We were more alike than we could have known at the time: frozen, suspended, uncomfortable with ourselves, and profoundly not at home in the world. Every social interaction drained me of energy. I mimicked the ease and fluidity with which I had seen others converse, and my imitation was stunted and insincere. Never have I seen so many lonely, bullied, frightened people in one place, each in their own little cell, with the student film society’s poster taped on the wall, the classic Pink Floyd catalogue poster with their albums painted on the backs of naked models, and the Facebook statuses sharing GPAs and academic jargon. The dorm had a kind of science fiction monastic severity.

One morning I woke up confused. I dreamed that I was walking around the campus on a rainy day. It was deserted, and I felt like I was walking around one of those miniature architectural models placed under glass. One of the neo-Gothic buildings on the quad was turned on its side, inflatable and painted, like the bouncy castles in which I had played at birthday parties as a child. It dawned on me that all of the campus buildings were empty, slightly deflating, and that I was alone in this gray maze of toys. The kid who loved those bouncy castles was nowhere to be found.

The Sanskrit word leela means “divine play”; yogis say that the most important work of yoga involves a loosening of bridled tension,slowly creating space for a sense of childlike wonder that has been kept in the past. Amidst the loneliness of those early moments, I remember inhaling a carton of Ben & Jerry’s Phish Food ice cream in sweatpants with my roommate in our bathroom, talking about what it meant to be a big sister and picking out all the dark chocolate pieces. Running through the streets of Hyde Park lined with rickety, pastel-colored front porches and wind chimes. Waking up in my dorm with dusty shafts of light streaming through arched windows onto my long twin bed. Making creases in the spine of William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Squinting at the computer screen at photographs of medieval manuscripts, squinting through eight hundred years—sycophantic letters of monks to God, of kings to God but really to themselves. Scanning the audience in my black heels at a concert with the University Symphony Orchestra without looking for anyone, neither friends nor parents, just playing music—that was an accomplishment. Stumbling past a judgmental dorm desk attendant at 5 a.m. after a night of dancing at some party whose host I didn’t know. I remember the newness of noticing the slow emptying of shampoo and face wash bottles, the steady erosion of deodorant sticks, and watching razors lose their sharpness; at home, these things were all replaced before I could even notice the power of their slow expiration. Watching, with half adoration and half horror, as my new boyfriend ran frantically around my room armed with a poker from the old fireplace by my bed, chasing enormous flying roaches that had infested it.

The summer before my third year, I went to Israel and hiked up to Masada at 4 a.m. in my workout shorts and sneakers and wept looking over the Dead Sea, feeling young, and small, and happy, and agnostic. Study abroad took me to Paris for three winter months that same year, where I wandered through the muddy catacombs and the cream-gray stone of Haußmann’s perfect avenues, wondering if I had yet become independent enough. I climbed...
to Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh and marveled at
to Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh and marveled at
the oatmeal browns and mossy greens of the city
below. I figured out Danish public transportation
among the half-timbered urban cottages
of Copenhagen, my vision blurred by food
poisoning. I walked through Sachsenhausen
concentration camp, inched along the East Side
Gallery of Berlin and took pictures of the murals
depicting post-war psychosis. I learned how to
travel well and cheaply, how to pack efficiently,
how to be enthralled by artifacts and events
from a different time. I quickened my museum-
plaque reading skills and my ability to observe
people, heightened my tolerance for beer and
near-fatal twenty-euro Ryan Air flights. Yet, when
I think of my college years, I will always think of
Chicago on gray, damp days. It took the escape
of frenetic travel for me to realize that it was in
the dreariness and clarity of everyday life in this
prairie city that I was able to find my childhood
innocence.

Yet, Chicago forced me to grow up. Never in
my life has so much joy intermingled with so
much alienation and sadness—I was forced to
sit with that, to watch the ebb and flow of my
moods as I slowly found myself again. I dyed
my hair a plum color to protest the desperate,
resume building pre-professionalism I saw in
my nonprofit consulting class. I moved into an
apartment on 54th and Harper with a group
of acquaintances. They needed an extra girl
and I needed to leave the dorm. On another
rainy, slate-gray day, my new roommate told me
about her home in New Delhi and her uncle’s
passion for yoga. I had just started training to
be a certified yoga teacher. I taught her how
to do headstands against our living room wall.
I began to play again, to reclaim and salvage
the sweetness that I had forgotten how to
experience.

Three years after that first day outside of the
dorm at the start of college, there were nine
of us stuffed into a rental car, music blaring in
Hindi, speeding on Armitage in search of a retro
ice cream parlor about to close for the night. We
ended up bringing our ice cream sundaes into
the nearest McDonald’s because it was so cold
outside. One Turk, two Indians, five Pakistanis,
and me, a half-Jewish New Yorker—ironically
oblivious to the American films they were
discussing, stuffing our faces with ice cream
and French fries, I have never felt more at home
with myself. And, I had not eaten “junk food”
for fun since elementary school. It took three
years to find these people with whom I felt so
at home, yet who came from places so far away.

With graduation looming, I wake up every
morning and walk barefoot across the knotted
floorboards, feeling, my own weight, and
alive, grounded, and grateful to trust in the
random ways things turn out. I know now that
independence means being comfortable as
a stranger, as an observer. I teach yoga in a
warm apartment tucked away from the snow.
I teach my students to pause at the top of deep
breaths—an ancient technique called anuloma
viloma—to feel what life is like when it’s savored.
I go to my internship in the early frozen mornings
and practice this breath, as I ride the 6 Bus,
full of sleepy commuters, as I climb up to the
boardwalk of the Brown Line and wait for the
next train to take me through the Loop, and the
next flickering reel of morning office spaces and
apartments.

I am awake in Hyde Park, and the streets are
empty and silent. The empty bank on 55th and
Kenwood displays a blinking digital screen: It is 11
degrees outside, 12:58 a.m. The drive-through
ATM tollbooths next to it appear unchanged since
the 50s. Old men in thin, synthetic windbreakers
walk feeble dogs. The stillness is punctuated
every few minutes by the roaring of a single car
engine. Lamp-lit apartment lobbies illuminate
faux floral wallpaper, hipsters’ vintage bicycles,
and graduate students’ baby strollers. I am
home. Branches and vines pierce the sky while
the black-coffee-colored brownstones sleep
soundly; their jagged edges snugly fit together
like giant stone puzzle pieces.

Bodies, Joy Mao
A bucket of mutated pomodori. 
Ten cents a barrel, after the mining in Jo-burg, after the farm, living under Mussolini.

The mountain. Cherry trees. Breath blossoming meadows in lungs, seeping effectively like gossip.
The 1940s volkswagen that paints the first stroke on the empty canvas and carves freely a dirt road. Couples, together, wild asparagus picking. Shepherds observe indifferently.
He watched his father – wrinkles sealed, fixed, cemented – unblinking. The cow gave birth, a bucket of blood vigorous, slamming, onto the earth. He watched his father with his pipe - unblinking.
Slaughtered and salted, pigs hung in his living room. The UK soldiers illicitly fed upon - —ah, prosciutto!— age 5. His father lifts him to hide the vouchers* beneath the maggot plank. age 7. Stumbled, like the other headless chickens. Il vino rosso. The empty berry stained bucket.

Searched in the night but Mussolini did not find, Sogni d’oro, sogni d’oro The little boy smiled.

It was war. A new continent – Mining. Friends dying here too. Crouched but then tall with the sun behind him looking down at the dry sticky earth heavily saturated unlike the photographs. To breathe was to suck in an acid ghost, and flakes of exasperated crumbs wail silently from eyelashes. The apartheid.

A new continent – Ten cents a bucket of mutated pomodori. The immigrant bed and breakfast along the outskirts of Toronto. The kettle whistle, and the dialect, and the broken earthy skewed chuckles. Warm teeth. She ran his finger down the crenelated skin on the apex of his aquiline nose.

My family friends.
His linen shirt, complete with a pocket. Pens, a screwdriver, glasses. White drywall tainted denim. The vouchers!

*Vouchers were given by the allies to citizens who aided them during the war, where they could be cashed in if they ever came to America, which Grandfather did, after his employment as a tomato-picker.
The first time my dad made a ham for me, I was thirty-one. I had awake much of the night, smelling the ham in the oven, where it had been sitting for hours. The oven was set at what my dad called “one-eighty,” an undefined space just above the oven dial from WARM, but not yet in the printed numbers.

Was that safe? Were we courting food poisoning? I had no idea.

While my father had grown up in the kitchen of his Minnesota farmwife mother and her Real Country Cookin’, a phrase my father uttered the same facial expressions. “What’s it like,” JoJo asked, “to look like him while you’re looking like him?”

I was four. That accident prompted No. 5. (The report also included a schematic of the accident scene, with Xs to denote splatters of nacho cheese here and Os to denote bits of torn scalp there.) It’s incredible that my dad survived, but he did.

I count on both hands how many times I’ve seen my dad since my parents divorced when I was four. That accident prompted No. 5. (The ham was No. 9.) When I was little, I mourned his absence, but throughout my teens and twenties, I decided I didn’t care. My sisters and I gathered at his bedside in the ICU in Phoenix. There my veil of anger ripped in two, and I once again felt my heart ache for him. I realized that I wasn’t done with that man yet. He was an alcoholic and a deadbeat dad. He had never tried to know me.

He lived in a pay-by-the-week hotel, the latest in a string of such hotels after his second marriage broke up, his path over the past fifteen years a string of such hotels after his second marriage broke up, his path over the past fifteen years zigzagging from Wyoming back to Nebraska to Colorado and down to Arizona. At each stop along the way, there were jail stints for DUs, writing bad checks, driving with a revoked license, and failure to pay child support.

He had never tried to know me. He asked, “to look like him while you’re looking like him?”

It had never occurred to me. What was it like to resemble someone I barely knew?

My husband and I flew my father to Chicago ostensibly to help us finish our basement. When he wasn’t in jail, my dad paid his rent as a handyman and a carpenter. But I had another goal for that visit: to get to know him, on my own turf. And probably I wanted to show him that the little girl he left behind had turned out just fine.

During the day my dad taught my husband how to hang drywall and how to sweat copper. In the evenings I cooked, proudly placing my best before my father. Invariably he praised my presentation, the sprinklings of parsley and scatterings of paprika—“It looks just like a magazine picture”—but he didn’t have much to say for the food itself.

I started the day he arrived with fennel and garlic-crusted pork roast, a recipe that has more than once prompted my husband to lick the platter clean. My father’s main comment was on the expensive cut of meat, the price of which was even higher than he suspected because it was sustainably raised. I ratcheted down my offerings and the next night placed before him baked ziti, clandestinely chopping the fresh mozzarella while he was working downstairs. The recipe came from Mark Bittman’s Minimalist column in the New York Times. “These kind of noodles are just too heavy for me,” my father complained.

I made black beans from a Moosewood cookbook, simmered with orange juice and thyme. “I really can’t digest legumes,” he apologized. “Although I do better with these black ones than those pintos everyone eats down there.” Duly noted; no Drunken Pintos from Rick Bayless’s Mexican Kitchen. I offered a garlic-crusted pork roast, a recipe that has more say for the food itself.

Heat approval of the sharp cheddar but couldn’t get his teeth through the thick, crusty country bread I’d used. (His teeth were a constant bother. During his visit, he literally pulled a tooth out of his head at my kitchen table.)

I dug out a recipe for Doro Wat, an Ethiopian stew some friends had recently served me: chicken pinwheels braised with peanut butter. That wasn’t highbrow, was it? By now I was frustrated and filled with self-doubt; I failed to turn the heat down low enough on the braising chicken. While I sautéed fresh spinach, my father talked about slow-cooked meat that falls off the bone, of joints cooked so long they fall apart at the nudge of a knife. Nervously I put my peanut butter pinwheels before him, and I’ll never forget the clunk that joint made as my father forced the high-heat off the leg. “Found it,” he grunted. Was crestfallen.

The next night I gave up and ordered Thai. My father had never had “lah-foo” before and was eager to give it a try. It was exactly as he’d always heard it would be: flavorless. Were it not for dessert, I would never have touched my elusive goal: to get to know this man. That week, we worked our way through a lemon Bundt cake (from Under the Tuscan Sun by Frances Mayes), which I slathered with sour- cherry jam ($7 a jar, from my local specialty store, a fact I did not disclose to my father). “It’s not a pucker unless your tongue hits the roof of your mouth with a clang,” he said, which I took to be a compliment. By the end of the week, dessert consisted of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup, which my father—and then I—ate mounded on saltine crackers.

It was about this time that my dad began reminiscing about Real Country Cookin’, and I was flooded with memories of him in the kitchen. It’s not as simple as that. My four-year-old mind had filed away not images of him, but the evidence of his presence. A dowel hung in the street. It was midnight in Page, which isn’t much of a walking town. He was on his way home from the Windy Mesa bar. He was carrying containers of leftover nacho cheese from a local gas station. Apparently my dad had convinced my mother’s (albeit delicious) cream of mushroom soup was not a pucker unless your tongue hits the roof of your mouth with a clang,” he said, which I took to be a compliment. By the end of the week, dessert consisted of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup, which my father—and then I—ate mounded on saltine crackers.

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my birth until I was three. There, he helped his friend Mustafa slaughter lambs and make kebabs. Photos in our family albums show pickled eggs (hard-boiled eggs peeled and packed into the jar of leftover tah-foo, ice cream, and sallatines. I wish I could repeat word for word the conversations we had those nights at my table, while the ham was cooking and before that, too, when the disappointment over my meals dissipated and I relaxed. He talked about sitting alone in the courthouse when he was three, hoping the judge would consent for his foster parents to change his name from Charles to their choice of Darrell and so, as he understood it, allow him to become their son forever. He talked about the orphanage where he spent his first two years, among humongous jars of peanut butter and nuts. He remembered exactly where he was when he first heard “Ring of Fire” and nearly every other song by Johnny Cash, his favorite vocalist: “In the basement, washing eggs.” He told about building a retirement center in Lincoln, Nebraska, which seemed to be the crowning achievement of his career. He told about the different personalities on a building crew: he said the “rockers,” the guys who hung sheetrock, were usually “speed freaks.”

A sometime mechanic, he told about the time a car fell on his head (his words), which, he said, explained why he talked so slowly. His voice was deep and rumbling, each word slowly making its way out of his brain as if we had all the time in the world. At first it was all I could do to sit still. My son was ten months old. There was laundry to fold, a sink full of dishes to wash, a high chair to be scrubbed. I may have grown up in a cow town, but I was a city girl now, a multi-tasking mother who talked fast and never stopped moving except for the quick yoga sessions I squeezed in whenever I could. Gradually, though, I settled.

This was why I’d brought him here: to know him. For the past ten years, he’d been calling me at random intervals, sometimes three or four times in a year, other years not at all. Usually the calls came while I was out on a Friday or Saturday night. He always left the same message: “Hi, Sharla… I just called… to say hello… And remember… Your Daddy loves you.” Every word would spear my heart. But the way he said it, slow and slurred, incensed me. Like an otherwise forgotten ex-girlfriend, I was his late-night drunken phone call. But now, as he sat at my table, with a full day’s work and only one beer under his belt, I realized it was just the way he talked. Maybe a car had fallen on his head. Maybe all my assumptions about him were wrong. Maybe he was a good guy after all. Maybe it was okay to love him the way I longed to, the way a little girl loves her daddy.

When it was time for bed, the smell of ham already hung heavy in the air. My father took it out of the oven. It looked delicious, perfect for a Sunday table. According to the ham’s label, it was ready to eat. But my dad reached over and turned the oven temperature down to that mystery place called one-eighty. He took a Ziploc out of the refrigerator, one of two he’d brought for me, packed full of roasted New Mexico chilies. He shaped them across the crisp, scored skin of the ham. He slid the ham back into the oven, where he intended to leave it until the bone fell out. So there I lay half the night, under a blanket and jumped on the bed, wondering what was happening to my parents. They were wrong. Maybe he was a good guy after all. Maybe it was okay to love him the way I longed to, the way a little girl loves her daddy.

It’s a mystery to me how my dad ended up in a rent-by-the-week hotel on a dead-end road in Page, Arizona, walking at night with cups of nacho cheese, which was destined, no doubt, for some hot-platter casserole with New Mexico chilies. He never really recovered from that car accident. He died last June in his sleep. His heart just stopped beating. I made the ham for Easter this year. Calculating the cooking time for an early-evening feast, I rose before dawn and slid it into the oven at 4:30 a.m. Thirteen hours later the bone still hadn’t fallen out. We’d been drenched in that ham’s aroma since hunting for Easter eggs in the early-morning light. By 5:30 p.m., the children were ready to eat. There were chocolate-induced meltdowns brewing and baths to be had; it was a school night, after all. I gave up and put the ham on my wedding china in the middle of the table. I winced as my husband tore the meat off the bone.

“This is a recipe I intend to perfect,” I told my guests. “What’s to perfect?” asked my friend Megan. Her two girls gobbled their ham and asked for seconds and then thirds. “It’s supposed to fall off the bone,” I replied. How could I explain? It was Real Country Cookin’. When it gets done to it, you’re not the one in control.
Bone-In Ham
Here are the notes I jotted down when my father, Darrell Paul, cooked a ten-pound ham shank: “Stick a knife into ham till it hits the bone. Turn it. Drizzle liquid smoke down blade. Repeat. Set overnight. Preheat oven to 325, to cook 15 minutes per pound. Score skin and fat beforehand. Add cranberry juice (one cup) with cumin (2 t), or water with curry powder. Turn down to 180. Lay roasted chilies on to taste. Leave in till the bone falls out. Save juice, let fat accumulate on top. Freeze bouillon. Remove skin and render. Save fat as rendered lard.”