

Excerpt from “On Nostalgia” by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

Published in the literary journal *Passages North*.

Winner of the Hrushka Memorial Prize; a Sustainable Arts Foundation Award; and nominated in for the Pushcart Prize. This is part of my memoir-in-essays.

Palimpsest

Most people begin the story of the Archimedes Palimpsest inside of Christie’s auction house. It’s 1998. New York City. A decaying medieval prayer book shatters the reserve price and fetches over \$2 million from an anonymous bidder. The hefty sum prompts *The New York Times* to inquire about the purchase, but the proxy for the bidder refuses to divulge the person’s identity, admitting only that he is male and American and “not Bill Gates.” Not Bill Gates then gives the manuscript to the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. That’s where I live.

I like to begin the story of the palimpsest with the scraping of its pages. It’s 1229, somewhere in Jerusalem. A priest named Ioannes Myronas has the task of writing a prayer book. It will be more than 200 years before Gutenberg invents the printing press, so books are still handwritten on parchment made of animal skin. Scribes recycle the pages.

Myronas has before him a book, which he carefully dismantles. Stich by stich. Page by page. He scrubs the existing ink from the sheets with natural acid, possibly orange juice. He nails the pages to a flat surface to keep them taut as they dry. Then he takes a pumice stone and he scrapes. One text is erased, another written over top, creating a palimpsest. Myronas erases, among other texts, the writings of the 3rd century Greek mathematician Archimedes. Considered one of antiquity’s greatest mathematical minds, Archimedes proved the laws of balance and developed a theory on the center of gravity. He approximated Pi and laid the foundation for calculus. He was the first to measure infinity. For fun, Archimedes estimated how many grains of sand it would take to fill the universe.

The anonymous bidder at Christie's believed a rotting Byzantine prayer book contained the hidden genius of Archimedes. Buried intellectual treasure. And he was right. It would take scholars and scientists years, it would take the help of a particle accelerator, but a team led by the Walters Art Museum would unearth seven treatises by the famed mathematician, including two that had never been seen before. Like a trick of magic ink, the words and diagrams re-emerged. The conservators succeeded in raising the dead.

A city is like a palimpsest. You can never fully erase what came before. Think, for instance, of an urban street. Cut an archeological section and what would you see? A phyllo layer of the accumulated past: Packed dirt rutted by horse hoofs, packed dirt rutted by wagon wheels. Dirt becomes gravel and sand, becomes cobblestone, becomes tar laced with streetcar lines, becomes asphalt, becomes, at least here in Baltimore, something called Glassphalt. Crushed glass embedded in the asphalt mix makes streets sparkle in sunlight and go slippery with rain.

Asphalt is a terrible topcoat. It can't contain what's below. I live in a river valley in Baltimore city. Hidden tributaries run like roots under the hill near my house on their way to the Jones Falls River. A street intercepts their path. The streams bubble up through the blacktop forming sink holes that continually flummox city work crews. Water runs like rivulets of mercury over the slick, black bitumin before sluicing the riverbank and joining the river.

This river rushes from a source in the mountains of western Maryland, down through the plains and over a geologic break called the fall line, creating rapids. The falls are the reason my house exists. It was built near the rapids in 1840, before the electric light bulb, before weekends were invented, before the second became a pervasive measurement of time. It was built of 18-inch thick ballast stone for an industrial revolution and the workers who emigrated north from the Appalachian Mountains to labor in the cotton mills fueled by hydropower. My street is named for the mill race, the canal created to divert the water to the mill wheel.

By the 1970s, the mills had shuttered and my house became a kind of commune. The woman who rented it had an open door policy. You could come and detox from what

ailed you: drugs, love, the past. You could scour clean and start fresh. Not everyone succeeded. A man committed suicide in a car in the driveway. An artist told me of a guy who jumped from the second story window when his ex-girlfriend showed up.

The filmmaker John Waters and his crew would sometimes hang out. Waters filmed a scene for his 1975 movie *Female Trouble* here. Mink Stole stabbed Divine in my living room.

I bought and renovated the place in 2004, around the time that conservators at The Walters began excavating the surface of the Archimedes Palimpsest with x-ray imaging. Not long after my husband and I moved in, a middle-aged man with a thin, gray ponytail knocked on our door. He looked past me into the scrubbed white interior with a mix of confusion and sadness. I'd erased the original floorplan, knocked out walls, moved the staircase. "I used to come here," he said, standing on the porch.

My husband said he looked stoned. I recognized a different intoxication in his face. The man was locked in the past and wanted to feed his memories. Nostalgia is a powerful and fickle drug. Nostalgia made me buy this house.

I grew up in Appalachia, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. My father taught American history at a small liberal arts college tucked into the foothills. The place I was born, the place I live now, are strikingly similar. Honeysuckle, dogwoods, and cardinals in the spring; wood smoke, evergreens, and migrating geese in the fall. Thousands of trees populate undulating hills. These hills catch fire in autumn; by winter, the tangle of bare, gray branches resembles smoke on the horizon. Some locals call my street Little Appalachia. Others call it the holler. Nostalgia translates as homesick. *Nostos*, homecoming *algos*, pain.

About a mile down river from my house is a museum that curates nostalgia. My neighborhood became a stop on the country's first electric streetcar line in 1885. The trolleys ran until the 1960s when the automobile won out. The Baltimore Street Car Museum preserves a few of these trolleys. It also preserves the memories of the people who rode them. A woman writes: *Mom and I would take the streetcar downtown. We'd head over to Read's Drug Store and sit in a booth and order tuna fish sandwiches on toast and a coke with ammonia.*

A man writes: *Many a night I would lie awake in summer and listen to that curious signature howl of a streetcar rolling swiftly over the Edmondson Avenue bridge...Ah, nostalgia. Ah, progress?*

That question mark characterizes the conflicting pull on a human life. How do we reconcile our past with our present? Progress is tinged with loss.

Driving Baltimore today, some of the old streetcar tracks surface. There, emerging from the porous asphalt, the legible script of metal lines, blacktop riven by a scar of steel. The scars are visceral. They make your car tires *thwunk thwunk* when you drive over them. At the museum you can ride several hundred feet of track in a restored trolley. The cars go back and forth and never gain much speed. You never take a turn and see a fresh vista; you never feel the wind in your hair. Riding those tracks I think: Family history is like this. You get a piece of the past that you can see and feel and trace. You can ride back and forth as long as you like, until the steel wears thin from the retreading, but it never gets you anywhere.

My father kept secrets. Growing up, I believed him to be, like asphalt, porous. Affection and humor bubbled easily to the surface. He was gentle and emotionally present. Each morning, he'd bring our harried mother tea, then make my brother and me breakfast and get us dressed. He'd meet us at the bus after school and we'd walk to the rathskeller on the college campus to play video games. My father, the gifted professor, would get the high score on Asteroids and put in his initials as BFD—Big Fat Deal. When our mother wasn't around, he let us eat bowls of Beef-A-Roni and fistfuls of soft, white bread. My father instilled in me a love of reading and poetry and Stan Getz. He gave me *Corcovado*. He gave me Russell Baker and Linda Ronstadt. He gave me, for better or worse, the BeeGees. It was, after all, the 1970s.

When I was in third grade, he gave me a secret phrase. There was a girl in my class who could get mean. We had an uneasy friendship. I would play at her house after school some days and she always wanted me to stay for dinner. I would call home, the girl standing nearby, and my father would say into the receiver, "The crow flies," and if I whispered back, "in square circles," he knew I was ready to leave. Home + Sick.

As it turned out, my father was impermeable, at least where his past was concerned. He built a careful infrastructure around the life that happened before my life.

He allowed little to surface. This realization dawned on me when I was 37 and he was dying. Who was my father? Or, more precisely, who was William Joseph Evitts? I knew him as a father. I didn't know him outside that role, or in the continuum of a family history.

I do know one thing for certain: The birthplace of my father's secrecy. I even know the date. October 21, 1965. That was the night my grandmother shot herself through the heart with a pistol. She was 48. I don't know the caliber of the gun that she used to commit suicide, I only know that it belonged to my grandfather and that he was away on a business trip.

There are other details about that night that I'll never know, like why nobody responded to the gunfire. My grandparents lived on the second floor of an apartment complex in Arlington, Virginia, near D.C., where my grandmother had worked as a secretary for Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Labor Department. A neighbor must have heard the shot or the crack of glass as the bullet sliced a hole through the back window. Maybe someone mistook the pop for a car backfiring, or worse, knew it for what it was and briefly raised a head before bowing back to the remains of dinner.

Whatever the case, no one called the police because it was my father who found her the next morning. He and my mother had driven south from Baltimore, where my father was earning his doctorate in history at Johns Hopkins. He was 23 and a newlywed. He pulled into the parking lot behind his parent's building and told my mother to wait in the car. He had seen the bullet hole in the window.

He found his mother in a rocking chair, the pistol thrown a good distance from the recoil.

What he did not find was a note.

My father told me this story one time, when I was 26. I had left the East Coast for the foreign terrain of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I was living with a boy I believed I would marry. My father came for a short visit on his way to an academic conference in San Francisco. The two of us sat up one night drinking dark beer and looking out at the silver tip pines. He told the story straight, allowing himself a single narrative embellishment. "Once, she shot seven cents out of a dime with a pistol from a pretty good distance," he said. "At point blank range she couldn't miss her own heart."

The police found my grandfather a few years later, he told me, dead from suffocation after a fall broke his windpipe. It was ruled an accident, but my father knew better. He said the alcohol and tranquilizers flooding my grandfather's bloodstream likely caused his fall.

Then my father and I rarely spoke of his family again.

Except, of course, that we did. The absence of a topic in conversation doesn't mean the topic ceases to exist. It is there, always, just below the surface. My father and I discussed many things over our lives. Books, politics, music, writing. When we both returned to live again in Baltimore, we met regularly at a diner near our houses. We shared pots of strong coffee and talked for hours. I can see now that my father and I talked circles around the things that we didn't talk about.

I often contemplate the enormity of my grandparents' tragic deaths. I think about what it meant for my father and, by extension, what it has meant for me; what I inherited as a result of that gunshot. Other times, I zoom in on that dime. Who was the woman who could shoot like that?

Squaring the Circle

Archimedes, like many of his Greek contemporaries, was obsessed by geometry. In the book *The Archimedes Codex: How a Medieval Prayer Book is Revealing the True Genius of Antiquity's Greatest Scientist*, Reviel Netz and William Noel explain that, "time and again, Archimedes takes an object bounded by curved lines and equates it with a much simpler object, preferably bounded by straight lines." This is the basis of calculus, but Archimedes thought of it as the apex of Greek mathematics: squaring the circle.

Measuring that which isn't straight, measuring the invisible space between the lines, how do you do it? Archimedes became a master of using knowns, like squares, to measure unknowns, like circles. Archimedes was able to measure incredible objects this way. Parabolas. Ninety-six sided polygons. The solar system. How many grains of sand could fit into the universe? He posited an answer in a paper called *The Sand-Reckoner*.

Here, then, is the square.

Here are the defined edges of what I know about my paternal grandmother, Wilmeth Alvina Evitts (nee Paul). She was a redhead, tall and thin, but strong. She was born in 1917, when a National Honor Society induction and a partial scholarship didn't earn the right to college, when parents—who named a daughter Wilmeth Alvina because it never occurred to them that they would have anything but a son or would need any name but William Alvin—could refuse their child an academic future precisely because she was a daughter and not a son.

At the age of 20, she married Charles Evitts, a professional trumpet player who sidelined music for marriage and a civil service career. She had one son, my father, whom she named William, perhaps as an homage, perhaps as a fuck you, and she moved house frequently because Charles's government work demanded it.

She drank her coffee black and her scotch neat, played a fierce game of Scrabble, insisted on being called Mother—not mom or mommy or mama—and she knew how to handle a gun, which came in handy that time they lived among the wildlife in Juneau, Alaska, but proved tragic later. She cooked just two things, salmon croquettes and tuna casserole. She preferred a meal at the Hot Shoppe diner with a novel in hand to the drudgery of home economics.

Wilmeth loved her son, and my father loved her. I know this because in the rare moments when my father spoke of his mother, he spoke lovingly and, at times it seemed to me, with awe. "We were very close," he said of his family. He was an only child of two only children. They are all dead now. My father was the last one.

Here, then, is the circle.

Like Archimedes, I am fascinated with quantifying the invisible, with understanding that which lies between the visible lines. I take measure of my father's secrets.

Silence is not an uninhabitable vacuum. The place where stories stop and silence starts becomes its own fertile ground and that silence takes a shape. It exists, even if not readily seen. A shaft of bright morning sun beams into the living room where my 2-year-old daughter sits on the floor playing. She startles and begins to cry. I think it's because the light has blinded her, but it's the dust, suddenly illuminated, and floating about her head. *What is it?* she cries, pointing, *What is it?*

When I was a little girl, about six years old, the ghost of my grandmother visited my room at night to talk. It was always very late and dark, the rest of the house shrouded in the deep hush of sleep. She'd appear at the end of my bed and sit perched on the edge. I cannot say how long she sat there, quietly watching, before I sensed her presence.

I would yawn and rub my eyes and sit up pin straight to listen. I never questioned her arrival at such a late hour. I was still young enough to believe that adults were in charge and that the mystery of childhood dissipated with a clear set of rules as we aged. I had yet to learn that adulthood held no such illuminating knowledge. I sensed that my grandmother regretted waking me, but she did it anyway, so urgent was her need to talk.

I understood little of what my grandmother said on those nights. The haze of sleep veiled her words. She was troubled, I knew that much. She seemed to be requesting something, but the specifics eluded me.

What is it? I asked. *What is it?*

My brother remembers hearing me late at night through our shared bedroom wall. He would tiptoe down the hall, open my door, and find me sitting up, talking to no one. I'd wake the next morning wondering if I'd dreamt it. The sensation of my grandmother's nocturnal visits colored my perception of the waking world. I carried something of Wilmeth into the brightness of the day, like a sepia filter over a camera lens.

My grandmother shot herself eight years before I was born. Her suicide and her life were a secret to me for more than half of my life. The nights that Wilmeth sat on my bed, when I conjured her or she materialized for me, was I communing with an actual ghost? Or was it something else, some form of genetic memory, or the intuition of a young daughter picking up clues from her father's long-contained grief? I grew up with the sense that the past, one that I did not fully inhabit or know, haunted my present. My grandmother's ghost resided in my DNA, in my strawberry blond hair and green eyes. She turned up in my personality. In an infrequent breach of the secreted past, my father would utter, "you remind me of your grandmother today." I came to understand myself to be like Wilmeth, this ethereal woman.

One day, a ceramicist who taught at the college with my father, came over for tea. She was everything you would expect of a potter living in Appalachia in the late 1970s. Flowing skirt, a jangle of bracelets, a mutiny of hair laced with streaks of color. She

smelled of lavender. I sat on the floor eating the chutney cheese sandwiches my mother had made and daydreaming while the adults talked.

“You,” the woman’s voice broke my reverie. Her calloused hands and bangled wrists reached for me. She touched my shoulders and looked in my eyes. “You, sweet girl, are an old soul.”

Later, I asked my father what she had meant by “old soul” and he explained reincarnation. “It’s what some people believe,” he said.

“Do you believe it?” I asked.

My father said that he believed life to be energy, but that he didn’t buy the traveling soul of reincarnation, or the static self forever retiring to some form of heaven. When our lives ended, he said, he wasn’t sure what happened to that energy. We sat on the patio looking out at the mountains. Our house was dug into the side of a forested hill and our view was the Blue Ridge. My father never understood the real estate of a grave. When my brother and I were adults, he instructed us to “donate what’s useful, cremate the rest, and throw one hell of a party” after he died.

At the bottom of our hill was a creek. I spent a lot of time there as a kid. I’d squat on its loamy shore. My eyes would take a minute to adjust. At first I’d see only the big movements—the water rushing over rock, the frogs hiccupping on the opposite bank, the occasional muskrat tail. Slowly, the invisible would rise into view. In a still pool, sheltered from the rushing water by a rim of rock, I’d spot the water strider floating over the surface. The first time I saw the insect, I moved as close as I could, careful not to alarm it. I rested my head in the dirt and looked at the place where its thread-thin legs met the creek. Tiny pinpricks dented the skin of the water’s surface. A creature so slight that it could walk on water without breaking through. I held my breath for fear of blowing it away. I have always felt the brevity of life. The startling fragility of existence and the looming loss of it. This world is so achingly beautiful and delicate. What’s to be done with that?