

## **“On Nostalgia” by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson**

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### **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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 banged 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?

### **A Prayer for the Dead**

On top of Archimedes’ mathematical calculations for infinity, the priest scribe Myronas wrote a prayer for the dead. Such an elegant juxtaposition. Binaries, attempting

to account for the same thing: The eternal unknown. Each expounds on the vast expanse of the universe, or of heaven, depending on your point of view.

The question of eternity, of the dead and the departed, preoccupies us. For humans, “what is un-set matters so oddly,” poet Kay Ryan writes, “as though only what is lost held possibility.” Our human mind cycles and recycles what is gone. Why can’t we leave well enough alone?

There is little in the way of neuroscience on nostalgia. What we know about it comes mostly from the behavioral sciences. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician who coined the term “nostalgia,” believed it to be a neurological disease caused by animal spirits inhabiting our gray matter. These demons, he said, traveled between nerve fibers within the deep recesses of the brain. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia was categorized as a psychiatric disorder linked to depression.

Today, psychologists in Southhampton, England say that nostalgia carries an evolutionary purpose. Their research found it to be universal. Whether you live in India, in China, in Africa, you experience nostalgia in the same way, as a memory or a sensation accompanied by a bittersweet feeling, a kind of ache. It’s different from mere reminiscing in that it’s marked by melancholy. An object, a photo, a smell, a particular piece of music, can prompt these wistful moods. (People born before 1930 report that the odors of nature—hay, horses, sea air—triggered nostalgia. Those born later in the century claim the same effect from the smell of plastic, gasoline, Sweet Tarts, and PlayDough.)

People the world over admit to feeling nostalgia at least once a week. This sensation has been shown to have a physiological response in the body. Our basal temperatures rise as we experience it. A story in *The New York Times* from 2013 explains that, “on cold days, or in cold rooms, people use nostalgia to literally feel warmer.”

Psychologists have categorized different types. “Real” refers to nostalgia sparked by memory of actual events that we have lived. “Simulated nostalgia,” happens when we listen to an elder speak of a past we never experienced, or when we feel sentimental at a museum dedicated to streetcars, despite never having ridden one. “Collective nostalgia” refers to a yearning shared by a group of people. Those of us who lived on the East Coast during 9/11, for instance, feel a pang each September on those impossibly bright,

cloudless days. “The past,” the writer Annie Dillard tells us, “inserts a finger into a slit in the skin of the present, and pulls.”

Humans struggle to stay present. This is the high art of Buddhism, the rhetoric of a Sunday morning yoga class: Remain in the now. We long to be linear, with our myriad timelines and forced progressions. Get a job, climb the ladder. Seek sobriety, move through the twelve steps. Watch a loved one die, progress through the five stages of grief. The mind, though, is circuitous, our lives an ever-widening gyre of concentric circles, of memories that we trace and revisit. And oh, how we fight it. We are forever trying to remain linear, to move only forward. We are forever trying to square that circle.

Our minds play tricks on us. The brain is hardly reliable. A light rail train runs near my house. The tracks are just across the river, hugging the edge of a hill. I hear the train sometimes at dawn, when I am coming out of sleep, and it sounds like wailing. As I wake, it takes me a minute to understand that it's only the brakes of the car gripping the tracks as it enters a curve. A *trompe l'oreille*. A trick of the ear. What did that man say about the streetcar? *A curious signature howl*. I am making something out of nothing, hearing a chorus where there is merely utilitarian function. My brain, though, my brain defaults to the howl.

In healthy doses, cognitive psychologists believe that nostalgia grounds us in our present by reminding us of the beauty of our past. But, they warn, it should be dosed, like alcohol or calories. “If you’re not neurotic or avoidant, I think you’ll benefit by nostalgizing two or maybe three times a week,” the psychologist Constantine Sedikides told *The New York Times* in 2013.

I veer toward addict. I binge. It’s the winter of 2012, a year after my father dies. I drink too much wine on New Year’s Eve in the quiet cottage where we’re staying with friends. It’s late. Everyone is asleep. Our babies are asleep. I play the BeeGee’s “Edge of the Universe” over and again on my headphones. *Now I look out on forever / And it must be nice down there/ And they call me Shenandora in the air*.

I always mistook that last line for “and they call it Shenandoah...” the name of the valley where I was born. That’s what I wanted to hear.

It’s not just music that makes me nostalgic. My throat catches on passages in books as I read to my daughter. *Good night stars. Good night air*. I am suddenly eight

years old, standing at the picture window in our living room and watching as the earth spins from day to night. The evergreens lose their needled precision and blur into a darkened mass. The world shifts; a heaviness descends. I look to the stars and want to weep.

I find myself growing sentimental about something even as it is happening: a slant of light, a good meal, my daughter's laughter, pure and clean as surf's spray. I think: *I will miss this*. I think: *I will remember this*. There is a name for "this." It's called "anticipatory nostalgia," what one psychologist describes as building "nostalgic-to-be-memories." We act in the present in expectation of reminiscing about it.

I am in good company. Anticipatory nostalgia pervades our contemporary culture. It's in the sepia-soaked shades of our Instagram accounts, in the self-conscious posing of our selfies. Facebook is a veritable nostalgia generator. We are forever thinking of our personal history and how it will be remembered not just by others, but by ourselves. It's an odd trick of time travel. We consider ourselves in the present with a mind to the future and how we might recollect this moment. The future and the past burnish the present. What we lose, then, is a legible self in the moment. We lose right now.

"Nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon is on the rise," a Swedish psychology student writes in a dissertation paper. We're in a loop, rapid-cycling nostalgia and suffering from what researchers call retro-hysteria. Product designers excel at exploiting this. Our high technology is now cloaked in throwback features, like a recent ad for "vintage" iPhone cases. It explains the resurgence of things like the Edison light bulb, with its spindly, candle-colored filaments.

We are as obsessed with nostalgia as the Victorians were with death. We fill our virtual curio cabinets with the ephemera of our lives, but we present a single facet: The curated self. The common complaint against social media is that we display only surface. We exhibit that which we long to be and expunge the rest. Look at Instagram, at Facebook, and you see portraits of longing and desire. We are a people yearning to inhabit that singular person. We want to make real this staged portrait of self.

What, then, becomes of the rest of us? The messy, other selves? What's incredible is that we manage to live with these myriad selves in the first place.

## Consilience

The greatest scientific mind of antiquity was written over by a religious text. Science versus scripture. Fact versus faith. The biologist Edward O. Wilson, who was raised Southern Baptist, works to reconcile just such a tug between science, religion, and the humanities in his book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. “We are obliged by the deepest drives of the human spirit,” Wilson writes, “to make ourselves more than animated dust, and we must have a story to tell about where we came from, and why we are here. Not by surrender, but by liberation of the human mind.”

The danger with nostalgia is that it does not liberate the mind; it traps it. Let’s use a nostalgic metaphor and compare it to amber. The mind, under nostalgia, becomes a fossil, entombed in honey-hued resin.

Netz and Noel, the scholar and the curator, respectively, who led the team in recovering the Archimedes Palimpsest, did their best to eradicate nostalgia from their scholarship. Stories about Archimedes existed like trapped fossils. There is a famous one that says Archimedes died an old man of 75 in Syracuse, Italy. Chip away at the story and it turns out to be just lore. “Here is the problem,” Netz and Noel write in *The Archimedes Codex*. “Archimedes was so famous that legends clung to him. And now, how are we to separate history from legend? This is the historian’s problem.”

Irrefutable facts can also be meddlesome. “The problem that faces the historical researcher,” author Penelope Lively writes, “what weight should be given to any single piece of evidence?”

Learn of Wilmeth’s suicide, see her only child standing before the wooden rocking chair, and you could deduce an unending trajectory to that bullet. A son’s psyche destroyed, a trust betrayed, an exit wound that never healed. It would have been understandable, acceptable even, if my father had detached from the world after finding his mother. Or a few years later, when his father, devastated by his wife’s violent death, medicated himself into an early grave. My father could have raised my brother and me with a vice grip, skittish of the unknown and vigilant against the encroachment of foreign influence. The neighbor with differing political views. The wrong suitor. He could have become calcified, xenophobic, letting private horror transmute into public intolerance. But instead of looking into the faces of his newborn son and daughter and fearing the

vast, open space of a human life, instead of closing off, my father took the great risk of allowing himself to love us. How did he do that?

I suspect that my father made a choice, and it meant concealing the past in order to live, with presence, in the present. To know my father, was to never suspect that he had lived through such a thing. He simply never spoke of the suicide, and subsequently, he never spoke of his life before that gunshot. My father willed himself to live in the now, to obscure his previous selves.

A few months before he died, I drove my father to Georgetown University Hospital where an oncologist was to examine him as a potential candidate for a pancreatic cancer trial. The path took us from Baltimore to D.C., and had us skirting Arlington, near where he had found his mother. Wilmeth and Charles were both buried nearby at Arlington Cemetery. I braved a question. "Do you blame yourself for not getting to her in time?"

"I don't," he said. He looked out the window. We were driving along the capital beltway, D.C. coming into view. "It shocks me now how little I understood what was going on with my mother, despite the closeness between us. I still don't understand."

Later, he wrote me an email. "I regret most of all that you never knew your grandmother. You would have liked each other, and had much to say back and forth. I do not understand what befell her, or what demons she battled with."

I wanted to ask him more, to keep asking.

What has he thinking as he walked toward that bullet hole in the window?

What did it feel like taking each stair in his parent's apartment building, each step down the hall, to put a hand on the cold brass of the doorknob knowing what he might discover inside?

I imagine he felt physically sick opening that door, dread being such a corporeal emotion, and that the horror of what he found seared that dread into the very bone of his being.

How, then, did he turn and walk back out again, to a young wife waiting in the car, to the rest of his life?

I never asked. My father was tired. He was dying. I didn't want to cause him additional pain with my probing questions.

In the final days of my father's life, the morphine loosed his mind and bits of his story rose out of the depths. My brother and I kept vigil near his hospice bed as the palimpsest that was my father, the fragments of the erased selves, finally started surfacing. He talked in fits and starts about his boyhood, about his parents, and it was far too late.

The morning before he died, my brother and I left our mother at hospice to get breakfast. We'd been up all night and it was still early. Rush hour hadn't yet clogged the streets. The only thing open was a 24-hour, fifties-era diner, an aluminum clad torpedo-shaped restaurant with teal vinyl booths and boisterous graphics. My brother and I walked in and pretended to be normal. We ordered coffee and omelets. We stared at the mini jukebox on the Formica table. We left a big tip. We left full plates of food.

As we drove back, we spoke of the weather. Look at this December day, we said, the crisp air, the smell of snow, the weak fluorescence of winter daylight. Here is the weather that will forever remind us that our father died.

That afternoon, I sat at the edge of my father's bed. White stubble, like hoary frost, dotted his cheeks. The hair was returning after months of chemo, even as the body failed. I had a familiar sensation watching the unnaturally deep, slow breathing of a man nearing death. *This*, I thought. This is what you have feared your whole life. The death of your father. The death of what is most dear to you. That prescient childhood feeling had finally found its home and I sat with it, in actuality.

In the midst of that deep and still sadness came something else, a twin sensation that felt equally familiar. I was six years old again, cradled in the soft dirt of the creek bed, watching the water strider. I was wonder-filled and sad; joy and sorrow conjoined. What is to be done with this exquisite and fragile life?