

ABSTRACT

If I See, Let Me See Double

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If I See, Let Me See Double is comprised of four essays, including one critical introduction and three creative nonfiction pieces, which consider the concept of negative space. The introduction places the theme of negative space within the context of contemporary considerations of literature, silence, and feminist discourse. These works reflect on early Renaissance and early modern Italian artists, and on the interaction of art history and personal narrative. Operating from within a framework of negative space as generative and relationally necessary, each essay works to probe, embody, and expand conceptions of the roles that silence, distance, and mystery play in the lives of individuals.

If I See, Let Me See Double

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER ONE	1
The Fruitful Dark: Negative Space and the Lyric Essay	1
CHAPTER TWO	19
Dust and Blood	19
CHAPTER THREE	39
Expecting	39
CHAPTER FOUR	60
The One Color I Would Choose	60
WORKS CITED	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction. The Fruitful Dark: Negative Space and the Lyric Essay

Giorgio Morandi, a twentieth-century Italian painter, made painting after painting of bottles in a subdued color palette. His paintings are quiet works that repeat themselves, placing objects in contact with one another over and over again. Morandi's work has plenty of negative space as traditionally defined; areas of blocked-out color figure significantly in the activation of the whole canvas, and spaces between objects vary with minute adjustments in the composition. But Morandi's whole body of work suggests a more complex definition of negative space—one predicated on choosing to remain focused on a small selection of objects, while leaving a whole host of other subjects out. I have always admired the esteem and wonder of Morandi's work; he considers subtle shifts in relationship through paintings that appear nearly identical, relates a small collection of bottles to each other repeatedly, works in the same city, the same house, the same room, for his whole life. A small section of the world was enough for a lifetime of inquiry. As an old professor of mine said, "You don't need to change your subject and do a bunch of different things. You just need to get some good jazz going." Variations on a theme, like Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, 38 takes on the same melody.

These kinds of repetitions are a reverence, an acknowledgement that the world is rich, varied, fathomless. I sense affection underlying everything in Morandi's paintings, and feel grateful to see someone love the world. He is an artist who sets things next to each other, moves them around a little and looks at them from a slightly different angle, and then lets the shifting negative space establish a changing and changeable relationship.

To some degree, the negative space *is* the relationship. Morandi's paintings, simple on the surface, are not just about the bottles, but about interaction in space, about color harmonies and the material qualities of paints and surfaces, about giving a sense of honor to the world by paying close attention to one small corner of it. Because Morandi's work keeps its scope small, the paintings are able to leave dots unconnected, intentions not-quite-defined. His works are not epic, but poetic. They are not about *many* things, which then distill down to a moral, or a meaning. Instead they are focused on a couple of modest things, which then expand out to contain so many more marvelous realities. They are quiet and suggestive, making room for viewers to bring something of themselves to the paintings, and to leave richer for the connections that those spaces draw out. This understanding of fruitful space-making is what I bring to my thesis project, a collection of lyric essays looking at broadly-conceived notions of negative space. Negative space as generative, beautiful, and beneficial, as reverence- and wonder-making. I am always compelled by the spaces between things, by the things not said and how those elisions communicate. So negative space as understood here is the words that sit unspoken between the spoken ones, the distances between people, times, languages, and places. Distance that means something, that plays a part in the identity of each of those entities and the relationships they make.

This negative/quiet/suggestive world has always resonated with me, perhaps in part because I am an introvert who spends a lot of time analyzing and observing, and maybe because I think the contemplative side of living gets short shrift. The contemplative is quiet, not attention-grabbing. And yet, while it isn't vocally demanding, it *is* demanding once you engage with it. It doesn't play all its cards but expects you to bring some of your own. It won't solve everything for you. It questions more than it

answers. Artists working in this tradition have always been the ones I am drawn to most. Morandi. Leonard Cohen. Early Renaissance painters like Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Piero della Francesca. Sufjan Stevens, Agnes Martin. So many poets.

Writing my thesis has pressed me to consider that resonance, and to ask why I am drawn to manifestations of the contemplative, the quiet, the subtle, the understated or even concealed. In many ways this introduction feels like a working backwards, a consideration of what is there and then a questioning why. I have been a bit surprised as I've tried to answer this question—surprised by the things that were underpinning my thinking without my realizing it, and by the voices I've loved and unconsciously internalized.

As I started graduate school, I thought my decade of being immersed in the singer-songwriter world and closely reading Dostoevsky would just gather dust like a foreign language class from high school. Interesting, but only very occasionally relevant. But those roots have shown up in this thesis project, and my hope is that by unpacking some of those voices here, I will be able to make plain the underlayers that tether and nourish my thinking. In this introduction, I will look at some Dostoevsky criticism, specifically the work of Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin, to draw out some of the more abstract constructions of this already-abstract negative space. I will consider the tradition of the lyric essay and some of its writers, and will ask how the lyric essay, as a form, interacts with ideas of negative space. I also want to differentiate negative space and silence from imposed silencing. Given the tangled relationship between silence and oppression, it is important to me to differentiate between silences that are expansive and liberating and those that are harmful and imposed. Looking at Cheryl Glenn's *The Rhetoric of Silence* will hopefully provide some of that distinction, as will the work of

feminist writers who consider the nature of discourse and identity-making. In essence, this introduction will be a look at the state-of-affairs underneath the surface of these ideas, the how and why of what I am trying to do.

I started graduate school a solid thirteen years after finishing my bachelor's degree in Writing and Literature, and in the intervening years I had immersed myself in work by or about Dostoevsky. I read all the big novels, most of the little ones. I read Joseph Frank's five-volume "literary biography," plus a whole slew of criticism. (I remember buying the book *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kafka* by William Hubben at Powell's Books, and the cashier giving me a deadpan look, saying, "Well *there's* a cheery crowd.") I was captivated by Dostoevsky's complex understanding and portrayal of human psychology, and my favorite of his novels was, and remains, *The Idiot*. But I always had a hard time explaining why, and frequently was asked how a novel about an ostensibly failed Christ-figure could usurp the peerless *The Brothers Karamazov* for first place on my list. I love them both, and while *The Brothers Karamazov* is the stronger and arguably more successfully-executed of the two, something about the strangeness and tragedy of *The Idiot* always intrigued me. I read most of the criticism I could find on the novel, and always was left feeling that the readings the criticism offered just didn't resonate. *The Idiot* as a true portrait of a gracious Christ. *The Idiot* as an indictment of Christ. *The Idiot* as Dostoevsky's rejection of faith. None of them felt right, and whether going for a positive or negative take on the Christ-ish figure of Prince Myshkin, they always felt reductive. I still couldn't understand just quite why *The Idiot* was my favorite novel.

A few years before beginning graduate school, I read Rowan Williams's *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*. My reaction to his chapters on *The Idiot* is

hard to describe, but I felt both exhilarated and relieved. I felt that Williams was explaining why the novel got under my skin in such a wonderful way and why its strangeness was so memorable and captivating. His reading of the character of Prince Myshkin differed from any I had ever encountered (although if I had read more Bakhtin, some of the thoughts would have been more familiar), and I felt that finally I could say why *The Idiot* was my favorite novel.

Fundamental to Williams's reading of Dostoevsky is the idea that his work presents a theology of language and writing. For Williams, the language of Dostoevsky's novels and the conversations of his characters set out a vision of humanity's relationship with the divine. This comes through not so much in direct linguistic references to God, though that is of course an element, but rather through the *interaction* and *relationships* of the language, through what kind of speech is allowed based on what else has been said. The nature of language in Dostoevsky's works, Williams argues, is rooted in a fundamental belief in the Christian doctrine of free will (25, 46). Robert L. Jackson agrees, suggesting that in Dostoevsky's writing, "[t]he concept of freedom...is inseparable from the basic metaphysical outlook of Christianity" (2). In the case of Prince Myshkin, his failure as a Christ-figure is a result of transgressing the freedom of others. Williams argues that Myshkin's "openness and simplicity" is "shadowed by the will to believe of [others] less than is actually true" (50). Myshkin's apparent unconditional love towards other characters in the book is actually undermined because his interactions with them function as a "last word" (Williams 111). This "last word" concept and its opposite are so important to my thinking that they warrant closer inspection.

A "last word" is language spoken without acknowledgment of an ongoing conversation. It is something declared definitively and with finality, and while the content

could be positive or negative on the surface, a last word ultimately impinges on the freedom of the one it is spoken to. In Myshkin's case, despite the fact that he sees the other characters in the novel as more virtuous than they really are (think Don Quixote's Dulcinea-construction of Aldonza), his vision of others proves to be oppressive rather than inspiring. The characters in the novel don't recognize themselves in Myshkin's idealized visions of them, but instead know themselves to be more conflicted, more corrupted. Last words in *The Idiot* leave a path of tragedy and destruction behind them. As Williams puts it, this kind of language is a "refusal of discourse" (121), an ending of the conversation, a full stop.

The opposite of a last word, then, is a free, open, and unscripted dialogue. Words that invite conversation, that acknowledge the reality of diverging views and the possibility of disagreement. This is where Williams draws on Bakhtin and his idea of Dostoevsky as the "creator of the polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 4). Bakhtin views Dostoevsky as creating worlds of free people in his novels, arguing that Dostoevsky departs from the "monological" novel (5) and gives up a certain degree of authorial control over his own narrative. Clearly Dostoevsky is the one composing the whole, determining the course of each work, so perhaps it makes more sense to say that Dostoevsky gives equal philosophical and aesthetic standing to a broad range of views, even those which drastically oppose his personal convictions. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky's novels present worlds of "*free* people who are capable of standing beside their creator, disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him," characters who are "*subjects of their own directly significant word*" (4, emphasis original). This can explain why divergent groups often see Dostoevsky's works as endorsing their own causes; his atheists have as much voice as his believers, his nihilists are as convincing as

his devout saints. As Williams notes, Dostoevsky's work is "fiction in which no formula is allowed unchallengeable victory" (46). His characters are *all* convincing, not least because they contradict one another, and this reality makes the novels both rich and bewitching. By giving voice and space on the page to a broad range of thought and personality, Dostoevsky actuates the theology of language articulated by Williams, a theology which upholds free will and resists a "last word."

These ideas of "polyphonic" writing, and of language that upholds freedom, undergird my conceptions of negative space. I see this linguistic and relational openness (whether between author and character or between individual characters in a novel) as a generative space-between, a willingness to relinquish control over naming and determining. Negative space is the undefined middle-place where many voices converge, the relationship between two things or people or ideas that connects to each of them, but has its own identity apart from them. Space that is not simply referential of or dependent on that which surrounds it, but rather space that makes its own meaning. Dostoevsky's polyphonic narratives uphold a reality that can look different depending on the interactions and relationships between separate subjects, just like Morandi's myriad iterations of bottles on a table. The negative space between separate entities will be shaped by the free action of the subjects and will set forth something new, which neither of the subjects could make on her/his/its own. So negative space is relational without being derivative, meaning-filled without being fatalistic, or definitive.



I often seem to find my place, my affinities, in a bit of a backwards way. After my first semester as an undergraduate, I nearly quit school because I didn't know what I wanted to study and felt bad about spending my parents' money. What I loved was song-

writing, but I didn't feel like I fit in with the Music major crowd. I wanted to work creatively, interact with writers, artists, and musicians whose work I loved. I wanted to learn to make things that would affect people in the way those artists shaped me. The Cranberries's *No Need to Argue* album. Portishead's *Dummy*. Paintings by Chagall, or Matisse, or Modigliani. But Music classes centered around theory, music history, principles of conducting and performance. I took some classes and felt creatively deflated. At Christmas break, I wanted to drop out. My mom recommended I take one more semester of classes, and just sign up for anything that looked interesting. So I enrolled in two literature classes and a creative writing class, figuring I would do the one semester and quit after that.

Soon after classes began, I had a required meeting with an advisor who looked at my schedule and asked, "So are you an English major?" I had never thought of that as an option, maybe because I didn't have the desire to go on and teach. But during that semester, things felt right. This was Oregon, at a school with foundations in Christian pacifism and social justice, and my classes were filled with thoughtful hippies talking about books. They held readings of Walt Whitman in the woods near campus. They traded CDs and books, cross-pollinating various interests and championing the causes of up-and-coming artists. They played music too, and we ended up playing shows together at the local coffee shop. One professor played there as well, a bluegrass musician and poet with a serious black and gray beard. Another professor had an office filled with pictures of Bob Dylan, her hero. A third had an organic farm, wore his long silver hair in a messy ponytail. I had found my people.



In much the same way, it turns out I was working in the lyric essay tradition before I knew what it was. In writing workshop classes, I was always encouraged to make things more linear, to tell a more straight-forward narrative and to put more of myself in my writing. That never felt right. In uncharacteristic defiance, I experimented with putting less and less of myself in the writing, breaking things into sections. I wanted the spaces, wanted to make readers connect things on their own, probably because that was the way many of my favorite songwriters operated. What would Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" be, if he had explained things more clearly? I can just hear an over-eager editor saying, "But what is *Jesus* doing in the song? Are you saying that Suzanne is Jesus? Are *you* Jesus?" The power of the song is the juxtaposition. The characters sit next to one another, and the listener is invited to make something out of their nearness. Suzanne, Jesus, the speaker, all have their own place in the song, linked by their "perfect bodies," but their connections cannot be reduced to a unified narrative line. The song creates images for the listener, draws her into contemplating the relationships between all of them. This contemplative and evocative work is what I am always drawn to. It's the work I attempt to do. But it wasn't until halfway through graduate school that I first heard the term "lyric essay," and got introduced to a whole host of writers in this elusive and poetically-informed genre. I started reading examples of the form, descriptions of it, and had the exact same reaction I had as an undergraduate in English classes. I had found my people.

The lyric essay is, predictably, hard to define. John D'Agata talks about trying to "figure out what the lyric essay is," and questions how helpful the use of the name really is (9-10). Brenda Miller works towards a definition by considering what such essays do, how they're described, looking at it this way:

Many excellent thinkers have tried to pin down the lyric essay, defining it as a collage, a montage, a mosaic. It's been called disjunctive, paratactic, segmented, sectioned. All of these are correct. All of these recognize in the lyric essay a tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known. By infusing prose with tools normally relegated to the poetic sensibility, the lyric essayist creates anew, each time, a form that is interactive, alive, full of new spaces in which meaning can germinate." (16)

I find this description both exciting and intimidating. Writers like D'Agata and Miller give me words (however circuitous) for what I am trying to do, and point me towards the long history of writers working in the tradition. On the other hand, the purported effects or tasks of the lyric essay put a lot of pressure on the intangibles, and, as with anything elusive, you run the risk of losing it by trying to hold it in your hand. In some ways it feels counterproductive to try to determine what the lyric essay really "is," and when I see attempts to "unlock" the lyric essay, I can't help but think of Billy Collins's poem "Introduction to Poetry":

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. (16)

Despite the perils of trying to define a lyric essay, I do think it can be helpful to observe what a lyric essay can do. Words like "fragmentation" and "poetic sensibility" seem like a fruitful place to start. They point toward the importance and intentionality of the language of the lyric essay, and draw out the way it moves away from or plays around with linear narrative.

The lyric essay's fragmentation and tendency to "explode the narrative line!," as Miller says (17), resonate with Bakhtin's ideas of polyphonic writing. Bakhtin differentiates Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel from traditional, "monological" ones (5), emphasizing that the narration of the polyphonic novel is fundamentally diverse rather than unified under an "authorial word" (4). Like the lyric essay (and the "braided" elements mentioned by Miller), in the polyphonic novel several entities sit in relationship to each other while remaining distinct. Bakhtin's dense but provocative description goes like this:

"The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices are in fact characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels. It is not a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world, illuminated by the author's unified consciousness that unfolds in his works, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness." (4, emphasis original)

I find these words helpful in conceiving of the relationships of a lyric essay. They speak both to a certain letting-go of control and also to a faith which authors are invited to have in the power of language, silence, and the interactions of the two. When various strands of thought/reflection/inquiry/etc. live together under the umbrella of "the unity of a given event," they can talk to each other, do different things from one reading to the next, suggest other things through their proximity. And the lyric essay conveys this plurality/unity on the levels of both form and content.

While lyric essays are diverse and not easily classifiable, they are particularly themselves, distinct from a straight-forward essay. Two writers whose work has opened up the lyric essay for me, Maggie Nelson and Leslie Jamison, each do very different work. But common to both of them is the fragmentation mentioned by Miller, and the

juxtaposition of diverse elements which communicate via association rather than through narrative telling.

Nelson's *Bluets* is a collection of 240 numbered sections of roughly paragraph-length, none of them over a page. What Bakhtin might call the book's "unity of a given event" is a rumination on the color blue; underneath that broad cover, however, are reflections on the wounds of a break-up, on depression, on illness, philosophy, and the functions of blue in history. Nelson's book is written as an amalgam of direct-address and personal reflection, so that its form sits somewhere between epistle and diary. By addressing the ex-lover, the text evokes the presence of the now-gone individual through close attention to the individual's absence. Some sections speak to the loss directly:

71. I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do. (28)

237. In any case, I am no longer counting the days. (95)

But others that don't address it directly still echo with it, conveying more of a feeling than a statement.

35. Does the world look bluer from blue eyes? Probably not, but I choose to think so (self-aggrandizement). (14)

60. I like to look too. 'Saint Lucy, you did not hide your light under a basket,' begins one Catholic prayer. (24)

Bluets reads like the raw emotional state of someone processing profound loss, and its piecemeal construction serves to convey, through both form and content, the disorienting nature of pain. Readers are drawn into the pain viscerally, emotionally, and find their own losses implicated in the specific yet roomy details of Nelson's reflections.

While Nelson's book sits in proximity to the prose poem camp, Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams* is more recognizably essayistic in its form. The book is composed of eleven essays, each of typical essay length, with a traditional look on the page. The

unifying motif of Jamison's text is the theme of empathy, but from that launching point the essays diverge in directions one wouldn't expect to find together. The topics of the essays range from medical maladies to ultra-marathons, artificial sweeteners to teenage criminals. By inviting readers to witness the diverse subjects through the common lens of empathy, Jamison forges connections that are completely unexpected yet believable, light-shedding and filled with possibility. In some ways I see Jamison's work as a mirror image of Morandi's paintings: where Morandi sees so much in so little, Jamison sees much and crafts it into a unity. The final essay, though still specific and focused, draws the whole collection together. "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," is made up of thirteen numbered "Wounds," looking at the experience, perception, and shaming of female pain. This essay, which connects directly back to an earlier essay, "In Defense of Saccharin(e)," advocates for true vulnerability ("I want our hearts to be open. I just wrote that" [218]), and resists the minimization of pain. Jamison's collection enacts empathy as it gives voice and attention to realities and people sometimes easily dismissed. And because Jamison includes herself as both the one being dismissed and the one doing the dismissing, the essays read like an authentic admonition rather than a judgment.



In this inquiry into negative space, I want to make some clear delineations about silence. While I am thinking about negative space, vocal silence, and distance as generative, and about all of these as (not-quite) absences which are filled with possibility, it has to be said clearly that many iterations of silence are anything but generative. A vital, contemplative silence is something else entirely than an oppressive *silencing*, and, while such a statement is obvious, I believe it's an important distinction to make, particularly in configuring myself as a woman celebrating silence and negative space.

In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn looks closely at the rhetorical moves of silence, and the functional manifestations of silence historically and culturally. Glenn positions silence primarily as a gendered reality, analyzing the traditional associations of silence with feminine and/or oppressed groups, and suggesting that silence may be “the most undervalued and under-understood traditionally feminine site and concomitant rhetorical art” (2). While in the first and last chapters of *Unspoken* Glenn states that silence does important work and can be a “strategic choice” (13), the book spends the most time with oppressive forms of silence, particularly looking at the silencing of women by men in power. The revelations of the #MeToo movement and issues raised with the most recent Supreme Court nomination starkly demonstrate the importance of speaking into this silence.

In the final chapter of *Unspoken*, Glenn states that “people use silence and silencing every day to fulfill their rhetorical purpose, whether it is to maintain their position of power, resist the domination of others, or submit to subordination—regardless of their gendered positions” (153). I agree with this statement. In this inquiry into negative space, however, I am primarily occupied with silence/absence/distance as a fruitful choice with generative or expansive potential, rather than as a position imposed or taken defensively, out of necessity and in response to an outside power. Glenn does consider individuals who in some ways choose self-imposed silence, such as Anita Hill (“Witnessing Silence”) and members of North American tribal groups (“Commanding Silence”), but silence in these situations is still configured more as a defensive response than as a proactive choice.

Silence, the contemplative, distance, negative space, etc. can be fruitful sites for opening up the world and can be configured within feminist discourses. While Glenn

focuses on oppressive and defensive silences, she does acknowledge in the final chapter, “Opening Silence,” that she has only scratched the surface of the possibilities of silence. Glenn mentions the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose work is particularly relevant as it relates to Bahktinian thought; Glenn identifies Minh-ha as advocating “multiplicity...for disrupting hegemonic thought” (157). There are many overlaps between Bahktin’s construction of the polyphonic and Minh-ha’s description of multiplicity, particularly in their views on the author and their advocacy of dialogue. Minh-ha states that “[t]he multiplication of voices constitutes a form of decentralization. The abdication of the author-God is here not an impoverishing of perception, but an enrichment through plurality” (123). I see this abdication/decentralization as a form of negative-space-making, a resistance of a “last word” in view of creating a community of equal voices. Writers like Minh-ha, or Foss and Griffin who advocate for invitational rhetoric, show that there is a silence which is rooted in relationship, in listening, in sharing and responding. Rather than being a form of oppressive silencing, this listening silence necessitates “both sides taking turns at being productively silent” and creates a “moment of inherent worth, equality, and empowered action” (Glenn 156).

There are many writers who frame this relational negative space in terms of feminist criticism. I situate myself in the midst of some of these voices to make clear that silence (or the contemplative, or negative space) can be feminist and liberating. Writers like Luisa Muraro, Elena Ferrante, Luce Irigaray, and Trinh T. Minh-ha all reconfigure the nature of relationships and the elements of identity-making. Both Ferrante and Muraro point to a feminine view of reality, in which many sides and realities exist simultaneously, and in which the work of thought is mediation. Muraro creates a type of negative space in her construction of the “unthought,” which she describes as an

“awareness of being elsewhere and otherwise,” a state of being “in relation and in the verbal exchange of an autonomous and liberating practice” (60).

Like Williams’s descriptions of the last word and of a free and open dialogue, Muraro’s thought/unthought duality contains both autonomy and relationality, suggesting that reality is made up of connections and possibilities based on the self and others, with all positions being part of the exchange. The author who writes under the pen name Elena Ferrante enacts this “elsewhere and otherwise” through the choice to separate personal identity from authorial identity. I see Ferrante’s choice to maintain distance between personal and authorial identity as a type of empowered hiddenness, based in personal and volitional action. Ferrante’s authorial anonymity aligns with Williams’s thoughts on Dostoevsky’s theology of language: “Actual authorship, the writing of a specific human writer, like actual choice . . . is a protest against premature closure” (79). Luce Irigaray overlaps with Williams and Bakhtin as well, advocating for a “mutual recognition . . . building your own world while recognising the irreducible otherness of the other” (“Interview”). Irigaray views silence, what I conceive of as one of the negative spaces of relationship, as an essential element of gendered dialogue, suggesting that by “preserv[ing] a place of silence,” we can come to know the identity of the other (“Interview”). Like Bahktin’s idea of the polyphonic narrative, the view of discourse presented by these feminist writers allows for a valuation of diverse voices and ideas by maintaining an element of negative space.



In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi writes that “Genres maintain the desires they help writers to fulfill” (145). When I set out to write on negative space, I found that the lyric essay was the most apt of genres, enacting my focus within

its own form. Lyric essays are space-makers, they are sites of contemplation, they allow for white space, fragments, openness. In my conception of relationships as a key manifestation of negative space, I love John Underwood's description of building a work as an "open habitation" ("On Poetry"), a place for various people to live, to make meaning in. While Underwood is writing specifically about poetry, the degree to which his words speak equally to the lyric essay is testament to the genre-overlaps of this synthesized form. Underwood's articulation of the unknown relationships and possibilities within a text is one of the best descriptions of textual negative space I have read:

If a poem works it's because you've made it such that other people might participate in making it meaningful, and this participation will always rest on another person's understanding of the poem and its relationship to a world that is not your own. Your own understanding of the poem will evolve over time too, as you reread it in light of your changing world, just as you will find the world altered in light of the poem you wrote to understand a small uncertain corner of it. With poems, you never get to settle on a final meaning for your work, just as you never get to feel settled, finally, as yourself. ("On Poetry")

This description of making a text "work" is sufficiently nebulous, characterized by a lack of proscriptive advice. You'll know it's worked because of what happens after, it says. You'll write something, send it out to meet and impact people, and will end up becoming someone else yourself.



When I began graduate school, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to study. Because my husband is in a tenure-track job, I applied only at the school where he teaches. Going into the program, I knew it wasn't the one most suited to my interests; my first choice would have been an MFA program, and even my literature focus didn't really match, with the program concentrating on British and American while I gravitate towards Russian, Italian, and Latin American. But as is frequently the case in my life, I found out

what I wanted to study by seeing what I didn't: my time in graduate school solidified my assurance that I don't want to go into academia, and that I fall more decidedly on the creative than the scholarly end of the spectrum. Semesters of writing academic papers, punctuated by two creative writing classes, set me decidedly towards creative nonfiction. My time in graduate school has taken me in directions I didn't anticipate, and, in Underwood's terms, I have "[found] the world altered in light" of what I write. You know something works because of what happens after. You recognize distinct elements as you discover their context.

So the writing alters the world and the world alters the writing. The walls shift, invite, and open out. Control is given up, taken hold of, taken away again. The world is the same, I am the same. The world is different, as I am. This is what I have done, this is what has been done to me. Set in the open habitation of seeing double.

CHAPTER TWO

Dust and Blood

I saw my first Giorgio Morandi painting at the Museum of Modern Art in 2006. My husband and I were living in Philadelphia and getting tired of it, so took a weekend trip into New York City. MOMA was crowded, overwhelming in its wealth of art, and the Morandi painting was a welcome point of quiet. People huddled around the famous paintings, took photos of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and Morandi's still life, with its cluster of bottles, its subtle palette, had plenty of room for viewing.

Morandi is a cult figure in the art world, a “painter’s painter,” but doesn’t have the popular recognition of many other early 20th-century artists. He was a reclusive man who hardly ever left his native Bologna, Italy, and lived with his adult sisters until his death at age seventy-three. Though Morandi was a contemporary of artists like Matisse, Picasso, and Modigliani, he wasn’t part of the famous Paris milieu, and didn’t even visit until 1956. He seemed take-it-or-leave-it about the art scene, content to remain in Bologna teaching drawing at elementary schools, and later printmaking at his alma mater. Morandi made paintings, prints, and watercolors, and in each medium is most well-known for his still lifes. He did a fair bit of landscape work, a couple of self-portraits, but still lifes of bottles dominate his oeuvre. Bottles painted in muted Early-Renaissance colors, against an impasto background. Bottles all clumped together, bottles set slightly apart, architectural and formal. A whole spectrum of tans and grays, the occasional spot of color: a blue pitcher, an orange canister.

With the exception of his earliest pieces, which were a part of the Metaphysical painting tradition, nearly all of Morandi's work is made up of the nuanced color palette, carefully-constructed relationships, and compositional repetitions that characterize his mature work. His paintings are what I like in a person: not too overbearing, sincere, relational, underlaid with a certain reverence. Morandi's work anticipated the Minimalist movement, with its attention to painting as a material phenomenon, and its continual inquiry into how much is enough. Morandi figured something out, and stayed with it; or perhaps to say it better, he never ran out of things to figure out in the limited environs he set for himself. Morandi saw so much in so little.

That first painting I saw at MOMA was a still life, one of the more crowded ones, with nearly a dozen objects clustered together, painted in close view. Thinking about it now, I keep seeing just one of the bottles, the lapis blue luminous against a cappuccino brown. My husband Benny and I had moved from Portland, Oregon to Philadelphia, where he was pursuing an MFA in painting at Tyler School of Art. I was unsure about eastcoasters and their curt delivery, unsure what job to get as an English major who would only be in the city for one year. Unsure about myself. The year before moving to Philadelphia, I had spent a year being "retired," as a friend of mine compassionately put it. My early twenties were filled with mental and emotional hemorrhages which built to the point of breaking, and eventually even regular function and interactions were painful. I dreaded going to gatherings of people. I hyperventilated in our small kitchen over some failed bread. My chest got tight when I had to decide what to do, what to say, what not to

do, not to say. Benny had kindly suggested I take a year off from my job, to have space to just exist, to heal.

The year of quiet did a lot. I smiled more. Decisions didn't feel quite so hard. I went for walks in the cemetery by our apartment, played the piano, watched birds in trees, planted flowers. I was excited for the upcoming change of the grad school years, which would mean one year in Philadelphia and one in Rome. All in all, I was better, but not great. Over the years of my early twenties, my relationship with food and body image had been getting more and more skewed, without my realizing it. People started telling me to eat more. Asking if I was ok. Countless people told me I "ate like a bird." I thought they were all mistaken, thought I was overweight, should be thinner, should eat less. Blurred vision. The trickiness of my situation was that I didn't starve myself to extremes, like eating only an apple a day, and I wasn't bulimic. But I didn't eat enough, and what I did eat had so few calories that my diet was one of attrition. Lunches of raw vegetables and yogurt. Child-sized portions of pasta. No desserts without guilt and close calculation of how much exercise I would need to do to compensate. Foods were good or taboo, safe or threatening. The scale numbers went down, and down, and I was glad.

At a doctor's visit in Philadelphia, shortly after we moved, my weight was down nearly twenty pounds from what I had weighed when I got married. I hadn't been overweight then. In a reverse coming-of-age, I stopped having my period. The doctor told me if my weight didn't start going up by my next appointment, she would want me to get some help. Even then, I didn't think it was serious. *I'm not anorexic! I'm not bulimic!* I held onto that as proof that everyone was mistaken. My clothes got looser, which made me happy. I saw not a warning sign, but a movement in the right direction. To put it simply, I thought my body was fat. There was too much of it. *Minimize.*

Amenorrhea is defined as “the absence of a menstrual period in a woman of reproductive age.” A rather unfortunate and grotesque word for the absence of something, a void, something written and then erased. My body saying, We don’t have enough for ourselves, let alone a child. Looking back now I sometimes wonder how years could go by, with a part of my woman-life steadily shutting down, and without me being able to realize the grave nature of what was happening. It’s not like I was an elite athlete, someone whose lifestyle had a precedent for this loss. I was simply an analytical twenty-five year old, convinced that thinner was better. My periods became more and more irregular, more infrequent, slipped quietly off the calendar without my giving them much thought. But how do you notice something characterized by lack, by absence? I had no blood to spare.

Giorgio Morandi painted negative space like no painter before or since. The paint of what might be the wall behind a cluster of bottles is so thick, so opaque, that it sits on the surface of the canvas, rather than receding into space. The swatch of paint which depicts the space made by a pitcher handle is so dense that it’s almost in front of the pitcher. This push-and-pull, the strange nature of how the viewer is meant to read depth, is one of the most captivating elements of a Morandi painting. Background is not background: the space made by a pitcher handle isn’t empty, and every part of the painting offers itself to the viewer. This is what takes hold of me in Morandi paintings, the *thereness* of it all, the value placed on everything, the attention paid to the object and its other.

Negative space is the space that surrounds an object, the between, the background. Great artists have always paid attention to this “other” as an essential part of any composition, and it’s nothing new to care about it. But what Morandi did was to activate negative space to such a degree that he placed it on equal footing with what is “really” there, so that the background/foreground line becomes blurred, or unimportant.

Negative space in Morandi’s work isn’t just a “useful” thing, necessary to set off the *real* objects of attention. Morandi’s use of paint draws the eye everywhere, to the vases and the tabletop, the bottle necks and the slivers of space between them. Unlike kitschy images where the negative space around a vase becomes two faces in profile, until eventually you see only the faces, Morandi’s compositions make you see both positive image/object and negative space as present on the surface, altering what the mind perceives as distance. The negative space doesn’t just serve the objects it surrounds, it relates to them. There is a back-and-forth from the opaque, taupey bottles to the equally opaque background, if a thickly-painted linear band across the top of the canvas can even be called that. Objects and negative space bounce off of one another, not competing, but keeping the canvas in perpetual motion. This makes the paintings endlessly interesting, despite the humble nature of the objects and the near-replication of some of the compositions.

I imagine Morandi working in the same room, the same house, his entire life. I think about him painting the same vases, bottles, canisters, over and over. Wearing a gray suit and his coke bottle glasses, pausing for meals with his sisters, Anna, Dina, and Maria Teresa. I think about his apparent lack of interest in being a part of movements, of art scenes, his contentment with Bologna. I think about him painting one canvas, then moving one of the bottles only ever-so-slightly, painting the whole thing again. The

paintings are inquisitive while not striving. Reverent while not overly serious. Presence and absence are notable not as contrasts but as equal realities. Morandi's quiet affection for the world doesn't problematize it, but rather pays attention to it. Morandi's aim is not *less*, but *enough*.

When we lived in Philadelphia, I got a job at a coffee shop. I worked the opening shift, and had to get up at 3:45 to be ready to catch the train from North Philadelphia. I would stand on the desolate platform under the light of one foggy street lamp, holding in my hand the pepper spray Benny made me carry. I liked the train ride in, seeing the night's charcoal slowly erased, watching the city go by, the people get on. One older gentleman, always with his rosary; men in suits, all business with the rose-colored newspaper; east coast old-money-looking women in lush overcoats. I felt separate, but I didn't mind. Too early to talk anyway. The only time I remember anyone talking to me on that commute was when I arrived in the city underground, heading toward the stairs up to City Center. A middle-aged man who had slept down there was doing push-ups, underneath the station sign, and called out to me. *That last one was for you, Baby!*

One reality of my too-thin body was that I started getting a lot more attention from men. I don't know whether it was really because I was skinnier, more waif-like, or whether it was just being a woman in a bigger city, but the thinner I became, the more notice I seemed to get. After work, I would walk to a bookstore off Rittenhouse Square to read, work on writing, to look out the floor-to-ceiling windows onto the park below. I eventually had to stop going because men would stop to talk to me, and I couldn't get anything done. At my work, middle-aged business men, regulars at the café, made me

uncomfortable with their looks, their questions and their *Really good to see you*'s. All the advances were confusing, and felt like an affirmation that I was more attractive when I weighed less. A paradox of voices: words that endorsed my unhealthy body, words my body desperately needed to reject.

When I first got feedback on this piece from a friend, he asked me, “Why isn’t there much about Benny in this?” I felt bad at first, and asked myself the same question. Benny was so present in the midst of my fear, speaking love and desire over my body, peace over my mind. I wouldn’t have come through age nineteen through twenty-five if not for him. But I realized the answer to why there wasn’t a lot about Benny was because that is the nature of isolation; I kept company mostly with my own worried and analytical mind. The story is a lonely one because I lived it lonely, but not because the people I love didn’t try to be with me. I couldn’t register people’s concern, couldn’t take it in just like I couldn’t ingest so many things. The care from Benny and my family, the unsolicited attention from other men, it all settled around me. But my body was retreating, turning off the lights in some of the rooms. I was cold that winter in Philadelphia, my body just bones under my coat, thighs that wouldn’t touch. Snow slipped over me like fleeces. Deceived.

Morandi allowed layers of dust to accumulate on the objects he painted in his studio, wanting to pay attention more to the objects themselves than to reflections of light on their surfaces. Concealing not to obscure but to focus, dust as Ganeshian remover of obstacles. Removing some elements of sight in order to see more fully, intimately.

Legend has it that one day while Giorgio was out, one of his sisters came into his studio and dusted everything. I imagine the muttered Italian under her breath, as she marveled at her brother's messiness, and I wonder whether he got angry when he came back, if she ever realized what she'd done. I am always drawn to the dusting story, to the way it shows the pervasive insistence on making things clear, tidy. The world will intrude on mystery, and perhaps it must. That dust is a significant presence in nearly all of Morandi's paintings—the paint and the color palette both have an opacity, a muted quality that gives off a sense of quiet, a sense of the reserve that the tall man in a gray suit was known for.

Morandi himself is somewhat obscured, and still isn't a big-name painter. In a recent check on the MOMA website I see that the museum holds twenty-two Morandi pieces (*none on view*). The Metropolitan Museum has thirteen (*none on view*). Most non-artists I ask have never heard of him. When Benny and I visited the Museo Morandi in Bologna, we were the only ones there. Still, Morandi has gotten some fairly significant nods over the years: his work has appeared in films, on book covers, and in the work of countless painters who are influenced by him. When Barack and Michelle Obama picked out artwork from the National Gallery to put in the White House, two Morandi still lifes were among their choices. The most famous Morandi homage is probably in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, when Marcello Mastroianni's character admires the Morandi paintings hanging in the luxury house of his friend Steiner. The juxtaposition of the paintings and their owner is chilling, unforgettable. The sophisticated and taciturn Steiner, who, like a nihilist out of a Dostoevsky novel, will go on to kill his children and himself. The subdued paintings of quiet reverence, active calm.

Benny and I would be heading to Italy that August, for the second year of his MFA program, and I figured I should get a head start on learning some basics of communication. In the early spring of Philadelphia, I started taking Italian through a community continuing education program. I had always been a language person, and I took to Italian pretty well, with the benefits of Romance language roots. I don't remember a lot about those classes—curiously I have more memory of getting to the class than of what we actually did. A non-descript highrise in downtown Philadelphia: up an elevator, down a neutral-tone drab hallway, through the Italian-American office with its cheap prints of Italian vistas, then into a long rectangular room with bare tables that made me feel like I was at a board meeting.

As I started trying out the language, I imagined what it would be like to live life in it, to shop, travel, read in it. I didn't know then what it would be like to get frustrated in it, to talk about beauty in it, to argue in it, to feel humiliated or elated in it. I didn't know that I would stand in line at the post office for over an hour, only to learn that I had pushed the wrong button and gotten in the wrong queue. I didn't know how hard it would feel, as a writer and a word-person, to have an Italian on the street ask me what I thought of Italy and to only be able to respond, *I like it, it's amazing*. Words built up in me, all kinds of feelings and reactions with nowhere to go. So much beauty everywhere, so much I wanted to say in gratitude and admiration. Another language is another life. Different metaphors, unspoken suggestions, rhythms and allusions. I didn't know then that I would be wrapped up in the language, that ten years later I would still be studying it, admiring its own encompassing beauty.

I felt happy anticipating our year abroad, practicing the language, getting our passports in order, reading Italian travel books. I was happy, but still not healthy. That

spring I went back to the doctor for a follow-up, and my weight had dropped even further. I hadn't had my period in nearly a year. I looked at the low number and was conflicted, happy about it but knowing I wasn't supposed to be. I felt in trouble, like I hadn't completed an assignment. My doctor gave me a referral and the number of a local non-profit that counseled people with eating disorders. But in May the school year ended, and it was time for us to move out of our apartment. I never called.

Thomas Merton describes "fictitious identities," versions of the self whose nothingness we build "into something objectively real" (3). My body was an object that I saw wrong. In isolation. I couldn't recognize myself getting dangerously thin, because I genuinely thought I was becoming less fat. I didn't think, *I'm going to get really thin so that I will get more attention from men*, I thought, *I don't like my body*. Fictions are easier to believe than truths.

Our time in Philadelphia drew to a close, and we planned to spend the summer with family in our home state of Idaho, before leaving for Rome. In Philadelphia, we got ready for a cross-country drive, getting rid of most of the second-hand furniture we had acquired and filling our white Subaru wagon completely to the roof. A large roll of canvas down the car's mid-section made it so Benny and I couldn't even really see each other. We stopped in Indiana, in Iowa, in South Dakota, making the trip in four days, talking about what Italy would be like. When we arrived in Idaho, we exploded the contents of our car into my in-laws' garage, and had to relearn the pace of our small

northwest town after the urgency of Philadelphia. During the Philadelphia-to-Idaho drive, I had used my pink and gray Polaroid camera to document our trip; seeing those pictures now, I am shocked at how thin I looked. Shocked at remembering how I still thought I was fat and would like to be thinner. Would be happier thinner. More attractive thinner. Erasing myself, one line at a time.

Later in his life, Morandi produced a large number of watercolors, works whose spare and reticent depiction make the oil paintings look like near-realism. A lifetime of mark-making, and eventually all the marks siphon down to an economy so sparse it's nearly invisible. The paper is there, and a swath of sepia paint for the outside edge of a pitcher, one brush stroke for a handle. The body of the vessel, though absent, is there, conjured from the desire of the eye for closure. Morandi trusts that desire, asking a great deal from the viewer, offering little. And maybe that is a part of why Morandi's name has never become like Matisse, Pollock, Warhol. Matisse's colors are effusive and joyful, Pollock's gestures urgent and insistent. Warhol's day-glo demands attention. Yet Morandi's works are quiet, demanding by way of subtlety rather than ostentation or ebullience or shock. A face that is lovely rather than beautiful, a presence of strength rather than compulsion. There is just enough, and what is not there has its own weight.

The fundamental difference between Morandi's negative space and my own is that his is relational and mine was isolated. Put another way, his is true, while mine was

false. Bottles and the space around them existing in generative, dynamic relationship with one another. My own body, viewed out of context.

I can't really say what made a word of caution stick in my mind after spending a couple of years dismissing people's concern. The month before we were going to leave for Italy, Benny and I were staying with my sister, painting her house to earn extra money for our year abroad. While we were there, I checked out an old VHS from the public library, a PBS program on eating disorders. I'm not sure if I checked it out as an acknowledgement of a problem, or out of guilt for never calling the non-profit in Philadelphia. Maybe picking it up off the shelf was one of those instances where the body circumvents the mind. But I checked it out (with some embarrassment), took it back to my sister's house, and waited for a time when no one was home to watch it.

Even now, years later, I remember sitting on a high bed with a dark comforter, watching the video by myself in the bedroom. Most of the contents of the video are lost to me now, except for two images which showed radiology scans of a woman's bone mass, one showing a healthy woman, the other a woman who had gone five years without a period. They looked like those multi-colored thermal images: the first one a dense and continuous skeletal line, the next one eaten away, with what should have been connected hanging only by slim red lines, or falling off into nothing. I felt a full-body chill, couldn't get the images out of my mind. I remember eating a lot of dinner that night. Having a big bowl of ice cream. A frantic attempt to compensate. I imagined my own body nibbled away and brittle, wondered if I could reverse any damage done. That video was not so

much an epiphany as it was a scare. I ate that night out of fear, and thought, *Well, I guess I have to be fat.*

The Morandi Museum, which is for now regretfully subsumed into the larger Bologna museum, MAMBO, used to occupy a handful of rooms in a palazzo off of Bologna's Piazza Maggiore. Benny and I traveled to Rome in August, and made a trip north a month later. We went first to the Cinque Terre, five small hill towns along the Italian Riviera, then traveled to Bologna. We parked on the edge of town, walked through the russet and coffee-colored neighborhoods. Bologna doesn't have the chaos and physicality of Rome, but feels more professorial and inquisitive. A little more Parisian sophistication than *dolce vita*. Walking through the streets I imagined Morandi living a day-to-day-the-same life, in his reserve and his gray suit. Espresso at the bar on the corner. Buying the paper, sitting on a bench. Days in the studio, meals at home with Anna, Dina, and Maria Teresa. I imagine him living this simplified life, remarkable perhaps for how common it was, and for its difference from the lives of artists like Picasso or Modigliani in early-twentieth-century Paris. It could look like Morandi's simple life was a sort of shutting-off from the world, but I think it is a testimony to how much he saw in the world that he didn't need to have a broad circumference, didn't require much to stimulate reverence and affection. His life was like his paintings. When reality is so abundant, what need is there to try to expand it?

When we arrived at the museum, we were happy to learn it was free of charge, and practically empty. Besides a handful of staff, we were the only ones there. The entrance was grand, but the rooms themselves were intimate, meandering, filled with

Morandi's etchings, paintings, and watercolors. Many objects showed up over and over—an off-white, paddle-shaped bottle, a squat orange canister, a quirky, two-toned jug looking like a funnel upside down atop a cylinder. In one of the rooms, Morandi's studio had been transferred in total—clusters of objects on tables of varying heights, his easel lined with an enormous pile of dried paint, a palette, an old hat brim. I felt strange and quiet standing there, my physical body there with Morandi's physical objects. Those recreated settings—Morandi's studio, Julia Child's kitchen, Keats's bedroom—carry a degree of sacredness, as the distance between ourselves and our heroes diminishes a little.

That visit to the modest Morandi Museum was the most perfect museum experience I've had. No crowds, no gift shop, time to be alone with one piece after another. I looked at a painting, circled back to the studio to see the flat, golden bottle really sitting there. Existing in context. The staff seemed pleased that we were spending so much time there, but I couldn't talk to them then, beyond blush-faced attempts to make the scaffolding of a sentence. Something along the lines of *Bella arte, mi piace*. Beautiful art, I like it.

We lived in an apartment just north of Rome's center, in the Flaminia neighborhood where all the streets are named after painters. Via Antonio Allegri da Correggio, no. 1. We rented a small, IKEA-furnished apartment on the seventh floor, with quirky dimensions, a mattress so hard we called it the "monk's bed," and a view of St. Peter's. Benny was in the studio every day, and so my hours were free for wandering around, going about the business of living a life, walking all over the city. Street names like "Jesus Street," "Street of the Holy Father," or, my favorite, "Little Street of Divine

Love.” After about a month in Rome, I was surprised how much I missed the familiar, at the same time that I felt completely bewitched by the ancient city. I loved the cadence of the Italian language, loved the way really good art was everywhere, part of life and not just set aside in museums. I missed being able to say what I wanted to say, to understand what I heard. I wished I could talk to the man at the music shop about Fabrizio De André’s songwriting, rather than having him look at me like a dumb tourist. I wished I could respond when the woman at the bread counter talked excitedly about the day’s *pizze*. I both loved and marveled at the relationship Italians had with food. Food never a threat, always a pleasure. Daily something to get excited about. I was fascinated. Days were so much more beautiful, and so complicated.

In Italy I felt vibrant and thoroughly uncomfortable, saturated and eager to take everything in, separate, but content to be so. Living in a foreign language is well-suited to writers, a life often set back from the current of day-to-day goings-on, limitations that force reflection rather than action. Complicating life by stymieing language, creating more need to work things out. One day I walked to the post office, rehearsing the whole way there the two phrases I would need to buy a stamp and pay our phone bill. When I finally faced the clerk through a wall of plexiglass and delivered my phrases (pretty well I thought), my heart sank at the look on his face, his eyes squinting, straining to comprehend my words.

During those early months, this was more often the scenario—the ardent effort on my part, the disappointing and sometimes futile result. Once in a while, everything would work, I would accomplish what I came for, maybe even exchange an extra piece of Italian small talk, and then laugh on the way back at how small talk is the same in any language. The weather. Food and traffic. Celebrity gossip. Slowly but steadily there were

more of these times: the grouchy librarian congratulating me on my verb usage, the fruit vendor suggesting how to cook the eggplant and me understanding, the barista giving me exactly what I had asked for. I tried language, phrase by phrase, and it felt different in my mouth. I watched Italians with their food, tried to imagine what that affection would feel like. The complications of life in another culture forced me to live in it, to wrestle with it, to know it. My own body, walking on the Little Street of Divine Love. Each day I learned to ask, failed, asked again.

Morandi's body of work doesn't have many big changes. His career spans roughly fifty years, and after the short stint in Metaphysical painting in the early twenties, Morandi's work becomes recognizable as Morandi. Close-in point of view, a collection of curated objects, soft colors, simplified forms. Unlike an artist like Picasso, Morandi's shifts are barely there. A carved candlestick in one painting, moved two inches to the left in the next. A single burst of blue in a brown-spectrum canvas. I think of Morandi in his studio, his tables of different heights for setting up his still lifes. Arranging a cluster of objects on a three-foot-high table, then a five-foot one. Painting the difference. Morandi's affection is so obviously for the small changes, his mode of work a *long obedience in the same direction*, a phrase I've always liked and bafflingly discovered comes from Nietzsche (67). *Piano, piano*. Slowly, slowly.

I carried with me to Italy a nascent hope of changing the course of my health, spurred on by fear. Food was everywhere in Italy, beloved and obsessed over, but not in

the way I obsessed over it. Where food for me had been isolated concept and an abstract threat, in Italy food is fundamentally relationship and pleasure. The seventeen-year-old at the corner market, telling me the right temperature for optimal taste of pecorino romano. The green grocer telling me to smell my fingers after choosing some tomatoes. The waiter bringing more wine and another plate of food when we said we were all done. *No, dovette rimanere qui più lungo*. No, you have to stay here longer. I took in the Italian way with food as a phenomenon, a curiosity. Food was so viscerally enjoyed, the table a place you stayed for hours. But I had forgotten how to eat, didn't really know the feeling of hunger anymore. I had no sense of how much food was enough, let alone what it meant to feast. I wanted to be healthy, but didn't know how to be, didn't even know what healthy was. I didn't want the vanished-bones picture to come true for me, and knew I had to eat more. But I didn't embrace my body as soon as I got to Italy, some sort of Julia Roberts, *Eat, Pray, Love* move. I just thought I had to be fat, but that maybe that was better than disintegrating.

At the Morandi Museum, most of the pieces were hung by themselves, plenty of space left between. Rounding the corner of one hallway, we came to a wall with a mass of paintings all clustered together. Twenty-one paintings in rough rectangle. Benny and I stayed with those paintings a long time, their collective effect becoming something altogether different than the works viewed one by one. Still sparse and reverent, yet somehow forceful and luminous. Control. Dense, inquiring. The work confident and insistent, the repetitions not stagnant but abundant. We were quiet. Filled with joy. Filled. A body of work, collected. Relationships made, suggested, made again. *Here is my body*.

Shortly after we arrived in Italy, we took a bus with the five other graduate students to have dinner at an *agriturismo* north of Rome. The bus drove through the countryside towards the Umbrian village of Todi, veering off the main road and onto small, narrow ones. Eventually we wound our way to a centuries-old villa perched on a hill. A rambling brown-gray mansion surrounded by chalk-white tufa stone walls, with a 360° view of the surrounding hills. After we unloaded from the bus, we walked along the walls and took everything in, the burnished hills, the umbrella pines, the russet-tiled roofs sporadically dotting the landscape. We talked with some of the other visitors, some new to the *agriturismo*, as we were, others who came often and told us we were in for an amazing evening. Employees of the *agriturismo* started to bring out trays with a variety of crostini. I took a few, to be polite. Worried about getting full on the small appetizers and then still having to try to eat a big feast.

Eventually the owners of the *agriturismo* called us inside, leading us under vaulting medieval archways to an enormous banquet room. There was a long chestnut table, and the air was cool, castle-like. Each place setting had three nested plates, three glasses, one for water, two for wine. Servers came around the table and filled all three glasses, something they would continue to do all night. Never an empty glass.

Benny and I settled in at the table, along with the other grad students. We were still getting to know each other, so there was much to talk about, not much to talk about. The plates started coming in steady succession. *Frittata, Pappardelle al Ragu di Cinghiale, Carciofi alla Giudica*. I made myself try everything. I tried to drown out my inner protest by seeing it as a cultural experiment, and was spurred on by the fact that I didn't want to draw attention from the other grad students to my eating or lack of it.

Sitting at the table, several glasses of wine in, course after course just kept coming. *Coniglio Arrosto, Polenta ai Porcini, Insalata Mista*. Each of us was bewildered. So very much food. I didn't eat nearly as much as everyone else, but still felt beyond sated, which made me anxious. But it relaxed me to hear everyone talking about the quantity of food, not to be the only one noticing what I was always so acutely aware of. When dessert came out, all of us laughed out loud. Crostate, Gelato. Espresso and Limoncello. We stayed at the table that day for over four hours.

We would spend a lot of time together at the table: two American Thanksgiving meals, a hard-won, expensive Mexican lunch when one of our friends missed his mom's cooking, pasta on the terrace, pasta at sidewalk tables, pizza in the Campo de' Fiori for lunch, pizza at midnight on the piazza in front of the Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere. I never told any of them about my fraught relationship with food, even though we shared so many meals together, even though we are still friends now. I don't know what they could see on their own, what they wondered. I don't know if they saw my body slowly getting healthier over our year there. I didn't. Honestly, I was surprised when, a few months after that meal, my body quietly decided it finally had blood to spare. I told hardly anyone, as I felt my shame and my joy. Blood as vivid proof that I had been starving myself, blood as my body giving me thanks. A strange false, wanting to be true. And also a space inside, empty but fruitful.

When we left the table that night, the sky over the villa was heavy dark, scattered with vivid stars. The bus drove along the winding roads from Todi to Rome, and everyone sat, quiet and reflective. My mind was filled with guilt, laced with wonder at how quickly so many hours had passed. At how we began the meal not knowing each other and ended it feeling a kinship brought on by endless food and wine and hours

together to talk about this new life, in an old land. I stared out the dark window,
alternating views of my reflection and the shadowed landscape outside. Mind tensed,
body relaxed from all the wine and forced abundance. A witness to feasting.

CHAPTER THREE

Expecting

I first realized I was feeling my babies move on my birthday, on a temperate August afternoon in Oregon. I turned thirty that year, and my husband and I went with my parents to the Oregon Coast, a place special to all of us. We stayed in Lincoln City, at a hotel with the quasi-nineteenth-century name, “The Inn at Spanish Head.” The hotel sits right on the beach, each of the rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on the expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

My belly was just starting to show, and I was proud of it. I had wanted to have my first baby before I turned thirty, but when I found out shortly before my thirtieth birthday that I was pregnant with twins, I figured two by thirty-one would be work. This was my first pregnancy, so I hadn’t recognized what in retrospect I realized was the twins moving. A few tiny pebbles dropped in a pond, almost imperceptible. The small flutter of a baby’s early movements, doubled in my case, is enigmatic and startling. A sense that there is a wild animal somewhere, only the somewhere is oneself. On my birthday it was suddenly unmistakable. Two tiny bodies with wills outside, but inside, my own.

From the first time I sensed my twins moving inside of me, I felt a talisman of sorrow in knowing those days were limited. They would be born, separate themselves from me, and move steadily away from that togetherness, into their own individual becoming. The time of shared existence felt so short, so directly on a path towards irreversible change.

That year for my birthday, my husband Benny painted a version of Botticelli's *Primavera*, one of my very favorite Renaissance paintings. It's a romantic mash-up of beauty and mythology, grace and violence, threat and vulnerability alongside peace and renewal. The three graces in their lyrical dance. Mercury dispelling the clouds of winter. A nymph being abducted by the wind god Zephyrus, who transforms her into the goddess Flora. The painting hangs right next to Botticelli's famous *Birth of Venus* in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and is thought to have been a wedding gift to one of the Medicis in the late 1400s. I love the lush reds of the painting, the tilt of the head of Venus, who stands placidly in the center, the intricate patterns on the dress of Flora, the strange, silhouette-like leaves and orange trees that make up the background. With my own new and expanding life, I loved that painting more than I ever had. Venus looked like I felt—serene and beautiful, aware of all the miracles springing to life around her, confident of her role in some of them.

I found out I was pregnant earlier that spring, and two days after getting the news I went to my first appointment with the midwife in Portland, where we lived. She was one of a handful of midwives at the Kaiser Health Center, a friendly woman with glasses and unruly ringlets of dark hair. We chatted a little, and she wanted to do an ultrasound to clear up some uncertainty about how far along I was.

“Hmm,” she said evasively, during the exam. Immediately my happy expectation was all anxiety. *Can she already see there's a problem? Was the blood test wrong, and I'm not actually pregnant?* “I'm going to send you over to radiology,” she said. “It's just a little hard to tell what the state of things is.” My mind raced, but I was too nervous to

ask questions. I took the slip of paper she handed me, walked over to the radiology wing in a fog of stress. Handed the receptionist the paper, sat down to wait.

Benny didn't come to the appointment with me that morning—he had to teach a drawing class, and I was planning to go in late to work. Since it was my first appointment, I expected I would get some blood drawn, get some pamphlets. I sat there imagining various scenarios, all of them bad. *It's too early to hear a heartbeat, but maybe the exam could somehow detect the baby isn't alive? Or maybe instead of being pregnant I actually have some sort of illness?*

“Sabrina Fountain?”

The sonographer called me back, and we walked to a large room with dimmed lights, a draped exam table in the middle, a large screen on one wall. Once I was on the table, she squirted warm gel on my smooth, flat belly and ran the probe over it, while I held my breath. Nervous fear like a lead weight in the back of my throat. “Hmm,” she said, over and over again. Vague, non-committal. “Am I actually pregnant?” I finally asked. “Oh yes!” she replied, with no elaboration. She was quiet. Sensing my distress, she made some apologies, gave a few caveats—*I can't really read the exam 'officially' like a radiologist, so I'm not supposed to say anything...*— then said hesitantly, “Actually...there are...*two* babies.” I lay on my back, the low whirring of the ultrasound echoing in my head. She pointed out two circles on the fuzzy, blue-gray image, and on the rim of each circle was perched a pulsing little dot. Two hearts.

After the sonographer finished the ultrasound, she sent me on my way. *That's it?* I thought. *What am I supposed to do now?* Everyone in the medical plaza seemed to be going about their day in a way I didn't understand. Every sound was loud, my head was

blurry. I went back to the midwife's office, fumbled through a request to use the phone. My husband and I don't carry cell phones, and I wasn't sure where he was or how to get a hold of him, so I used the black hospital phone to call my work. Told them in a shaky and certainly suspicious voice that I wasn't coming in.

I left the hospital in my shock-fog and drove across the Broadway Bridge to Powell's Books. Walked to the pregnancy section and found a handful of books with titles about "multiple pregnancy," that vague-yet-intimidating phrase. I took the books to the Powell's café to browse. One of them, *When You're Expecting Twins, Triplets, or Quads*, almost made me laugh nervously out loud. *Thank God I'm only having as many babies as I have breasts!* I looked through the books for an hour or so, progressively frightened. Pregnancy was brand-new to me, already filled with unknowns, but as I read through page after page, I discovered how truly foreign my life had just become. It was a grace to me that I didn't (couldn't) know how my life would change beyond imagining as my body carried my babies. And then how it would change beyond imagining again once they were born. One (two) thing(s) at a time.

I decided on three of the books. One really thick one that looked like it would answer a lot of questions. A slim one for when the thicker one was too overwhelming. A cookbook for "eating for 2+." At the check-out counter, a middle-aged man in a Patagonia vest rang up my order. "Are these for you?" he asked. Pause. My response: nothing but a shocked and grave, "Yes." It was the first vocal acknowledgment, the beginning of the shift from abstract idea to my own, physical reality.

In times I've told this story, friends always laugh at the fact that my first impulse was to go to Powell's. Turning to books is still what I do when I am feeling confused,

afraid, in need of something. After the news of that morning, my world felt like a place of unknowing. And the fact that the unknown was in my body made it that much harder. The body, made a stranger. A change set into a motion so drastically beyond my control, so outside of the bounds of the ground my imagination had already covered. *Try to understand.* I wonder now if this turn-to-information impulse I have is a controlling move I need to temper. Do I really value negative space and mystery as much as I think I do? What does it look like to really exist with the space between desire and reality?

After buying the books, I headed home, lay on the couch to read, to stare at the ceiling. “Mothers of twins are advised to get 120 grams of protein per day.” *But I’m a vegetarian!* “Moms should gain between 45 and 55 pounds with a twin pregnancy.” *But that’s more than one third my body weight!* The added information just made me feel more overwhelmed, only confirmed my anxieties that my life had suddenly become exponentially complicated.

That afternoon, Benny called to tell me he would be a little late coming home. I protested, vaguely. “No, you actually need to come home right now.” His voice was immediate concern. “Is everything ok? What happened at your appointment?” I didn’t want to tell him over the phone, but couldn’t help blurting it out. “They said I’m having twins.” A pause, and then Benny just started laughing. I remember thinking, *What are you laughing about? This is serious, hard, complicated...* but he just kept laughing, saying, “That’s amazing!” He rode his bike home and we sat holding each other, our strange oil and water emotions.

Before I could embrace my double pregnancy, I had to cry and say goodbye to my idea of the less-complicated, more straightforward one. For that day and a half before I found out it was twins, I daydreamed about walking to my favorite coffee shop wearing my baby in a wrap, about the snuggled closeness of breastfeeding. With those two little circles, suddenly the dreamy image became entangled with logistics and mechanics. I have twin nieces, so knew the realities of two crying babies, the potentials of preterm labor and bedrest and preemies. I didn't feel like the right type of person to have twins. I like to be slow and take things in. Benny and I are both quiet, contemplative. Twins seemed better suited to those people who always seem to have an abundance of energy: camp counselors, church youth group workers, Spin Class instructors. But from the beginning, the pregnancy ranged outside of my expectations, past the border of control.

Over the course of those first weeks, I began to absorb some of Benny's excitement, while he took on some of my apprehension. It started to dawn on Benny that his adjunct art teaching probably wouldn't stretch far enough to double everything. Car seats. High chairs. Diapers. He didn't have any paid time off, and insurance was through my work, which I wasn't planning to go back to after the babies were born. As all these things began to sink in for Benny, I started seeing the concrete signs of the pregnancy—I felt sick, horribly tired, couldn't stand the smell of coffee. My body started to take pregnancy on as its story, and I started to take on the story as my own. We started to tell family, some close friends.

I called my best friend who lived across the country. "I *knew* you were going to have twins!" she said. My eyes widened as I held the phone. "How in the world could you know that?" I marveled. She knew we were trying to get pregnant, but we weren't

doing fertility treatments or anything that would make twins more likely. She read me a page from her journal, written before I even knew I was pregnant: “I see Sabrina with more joy than she expects, with a double portion.” A strange, prescient, shimmering word that settled inside me like a smooth stone.

After that conversation, I felt the beginnings of a profound anchoring. Started to feel that I *could* carry two babies. I didn’t know it yet, but my pregnancy would be filled with voices telling me I could not. People whose words were casual and perhaps not intentionally disparaging, yet nevertheless hard to encounter, over and over again. The pregnant body is strangely public, as I would quickly discover, and the body of women carrying multiples is publicly strange. Twins, triplets, and beyond are so out of the ordinary; people can’t seem to help but look, marvel, ask questions. As it became public that I was carrying twins, friends, acquaintances, and even total strangers casually offered their opinions that I was too small, that our apartment was too small, that I would get no sleep, that I would have no life. I can’t even count how many times someone said “Double trouble!” when I told them I was having twins; people still say it to me when I’m out with my kids. With that word from my friend, that external yes that made me feel this pregnancy was right, and was mine, a fierce assurance began to take root in me.

At thirteen weeks I found out my pregnancy was designated “high-risk,” not because it was twins but because the babies shared a placenta. This meant there was danger of one growing more than the other. “Twin-to-twin transfusion” became my dread. The midwife transferred me to an office of perinatologists, doctors who specialize in high-risk and complicated pregnancies. I would need frequent appointments, regular sonograms to monitor the babies’ growth.

My first visit at the new office was with a doctor whose name I no longer remember. I have always been a big question-asker at medical appointments, but she was matter-of-fact, even dismissive of my questions. During an ultrasound that day she told me, “One of the babies has a velamentous cord insertion, so the umbilical cord isn’t protected where it joins the placenta.” When I asked her what that meant, she didn’t even change her tone—“It can result in still births”—then went on to talk about measurements she was taking with the ultrasound.

That evening I felt afraid and helpless. I could control my diet, I could exercise and rest, but what went on in utero was its own, dark, untouchable story. I called my uncle, a neonatologist in central Oregon, talked with him about what the doctor had said, and breathed slightly easier as his compassion and insight tempered her bluntness. He told me he had a colleague who knew the Portland perinatologists, and he would ask for a recommendation for which one I should try to see.

I called the office a week later to ask that my care be switched over to Dr. Jason Hashima. I wondered if I would like him, or if he wouldn’t feel like a good fit either and then I would have to ask to change again and feel awkward. I am a medically-averse person in general, so anticipating extra visits to the doctor made me nervous. Every visit as a potential invitation to bad news.

After the terrible experience with the first perinatologist, Benny wanted to come with me to meet the new doctor, and even thought of finding the first doctor to give her a piece of his mind. The office was on the edge of Portland, and we drove along a highway weaving through forests of pine trees. Once at the office, we got checked in and waited in the exam room. I could feel my pulse racing, the memory of the visit with the previous

doctor raising my stress response. Dr. Hashima walked in, a man with a cheerful face in his late-thirties. He was very Oregon—wearing fleece, super laid-back, not a fast talker. He joked around with us, giggled even, listened to our questions and kept asking, “What else?” I asked him about the velamentous cord insertion. “That’s just something we’ll watch more closely at delivery,” he said. “We’ll keep an eye on things and it should be fine.” He left the room to give the nurse some test orders, and Benny and I looked at each other with eyes wide, smiling and feeling like we had won the bedside manner lottery.

To this day, Dr. Hashima is the one doctor I have ever really liked and fully trusted. Surely that says something about me and my own paranoias, but it also speaks to how deeply meaningful it is when someone walks us through confusion and doubt. When someone is a presence of assurance, and speaks confidence and peace into the midst of our fear. The culture of birth can be so fraught, complicated from diverse angles depending on where you live. In Portland, I had friends who couldn’t believe I was letting doctors do ultrasounds, that I was going to have my boys in a hospital with a doctor instead of at home with a midwife and a doula. In Texas, where we live now, I have met no one who had a home birth, and most everyone I know follows mainstream medical practices for prenatal, birth, and pediatric care. Finding a path between the two extremes of the spectrum can be so challenging, especially when a woman is trying to decide what she really thinks about the many issues she is asked to have an opinion on. I had so much to learn, so much to figure out. Many things that friends with kids, and even my sister with six kids, just couldn’t answer because having twins is different. For every visit with Dr. Hashima, I came with a long list of questions, written down in a journal covered with green *fleur de lis*. Every time he asked me, “What else?”

I dove into the doubly-complicated multiples + high-risk pregnancy like a research project, reading all about proper nutrition and ways to give my body its best chance at carrying the babies to term. How, in fact, *does* a vegetarian get 120 grams of protein a day? I made high-iron, high-protein food diligently, ate eggs and cottage cheese and quinoa and Greek yogurt. As someone with a history of an unhealthy relationship with food and body image, I worried whether I would be able to handle gaining the recommended minimum 45 pounds for twins. But the task and objective felt so clear—*keep the babies in as long as possible*—that I set out to follow every recommendation to the letter.

That fall my belly began to grow, subtly at first and then at an accelerated pace, double the growth. The soft flutters turned into kicks, jumps, and hiccups, limbs folding and unfolding. Sometimes all the movement kept me awake. Often I could tell which movements belonged to which baby—Baby A and Baby B as they were called at my doctor’s appointments, Cacio e Pepe, as Benny and I called them, after a favorite traditional Roman pasta.

When I was eighteen weeks pregnant, I began having ultrasounds every two weeks, to closely monitor growth patterns. Benny and I went in for the twenty-week appointment—usually the one ultrasound a woman has in a typical pregnancy, one of so very many for me—and had decided that while we didn’t want to do extensive genetic testing, we did want to find out the sex of the babies. Inexplicably, we both already knew they were boys.

Once we were set up in the dim ultrasound room, Benny and I stared at the monitor as the sonographer ran the scope over my belly. We saw one, then two grainy little profiles, in that strange view through the body. A measurement of each torso, of

each head, of the many tangled limbs. “Everything looks even with their growth so far,” the sonographer said. “And do you want to find out the sex of the babies?” We nodded, shared a knowing look. “Baby A is...a boy! And...Baby B...another boy!” We looked at the fuzzy little images of our boys, suddenly and assuredly our sons. They kicked their legs, brought small hands up to their faces, stretched and curled back up into a ball. “Here is their placenta,” the sonographer said, pointing to another of so many barely-discernible sections of the image. “Now, it looks like they are more than likely identical. There is just one placenta, so unless they had two placentas which merged very early on, they are sharing one, and identical.” The profiles again came into view—one, and then the other—and we imagined, in those bleary-eyed pictures through my belly, two faces taking shape. The same and so very different.

We learned so much about the boys at those ultrasounds, things that would hold true to their personalities as kids. Pepe was the mover, head down at one appointment, feet down at another, stretched diagonally across his brother the next week. Cacio was more predictable, always head down, and often leaning towards my right, stretching the ball of my stomach oddly off-kilter. With less and less room as my pregnancy went on, they stretched out, bumped each other, curled around each other in two crescents, separated only by a thin membrane. I still wonder what it was like for my boys to grow and come into being in such closeness, folded up with someone else in a space like a walnut shell. It’s no wonder that as newborns they often found their brother’s hand, head, nose, to suck on, thinking it was their own. Recently one of them, now five years old, saw his brother’s school picture and said, “Look how I’m smiling!”

I joined a “Moms of Multiples” group to get some help and insight from people who actually knew what to expect. Again, I thanked God that I was only having twins, as I met women with triplets, quadruplets. These moms were some of the best people to talk to, telling me it was really hard but really amazing, that things started off insane and got easier and easier. They gave me books, a twin nursing pillow, hand-knit hats. At the same time, I got a lot of unsolicited input from people who didn’t have twins but knew someone who did. They told me stories of women on bedrest for months, women gaining a hundred pounds. I heard things like, *You’re going to be huge!*, *Did you use fertility treatments?*, and the ever-pointless, *But you’re too small to carry twins!*

One afternoon I went to Walmart to get the oil changed on our car. The smell of tires in the waiting room made me feel sick and uneasy, so I went to look around the store, to pick up a few things. At the check-out line, the clerk asked me when I was due. When I told her it was twins, she didn’t miss a beat and said with a laugh, “Better you than me!” I felt continually startled by the commentary strangers offered on my body, my situation, and developed a fiery protectiveness over my pregnancy. It felt ok for *me* to be afraid of having twins, but when other people started to cast twins as a problem, it just made me mad, defensive for my babies and for my experience. *These are two children, my children. This is my body, surrounding their bodies. We are not a problem. We are just a reality, just people.*

With the many ways in which my pregnancy was not turning out how I had planned or hoped for, the input of strangers and acquaintances felt like it was working against me. Working against my continual process of embracing my story. Working to validate uncertainty and fear. I needed bolstering, confidence, needed belief to walk into, instead of doubt. My own fear began very privately and abstractly, and diminished as I

talked about my pregnancy with people I loved, as I felt the reality of it physically. Strange, then, that as my body became public through its inevitable changes (all of which come earlier in twin pregnancies), I had to face renewed discouragement from strangers. I took refuge in the words of friends and family whose outlooks I can best describe as hopeful realism; they didn't act like having twins was no big deal, but they were utterly certain that I was strong enough to do everything I would need to do.

That fall, I continued my job at a public middle school, working with kids with emotional disturbances. The kids were mostly boys twelve to fourteen years old, tough kids with even tougher backgrounds. I saw with no small amount of joy the ways they got upset with each other if someone swore "in front of the babies," the ways they asked sheepishly if they could try to feel the babies move. Aiden, a short seventh grader with buzzed hair and one thin, eighteen-inch braid hanging down his back, liked to play one-on-one basketball with me at recess, and after finding out about my pregnancy he asked, "Is it ok for you to jump?" He talked for months afterwards about how I beat him.

Autumn settled over Portland, the maple trees dropping their leaves everywhere. Following suit, my own body entered a season of rapid change. I quickly outgrew many of the maternity clothes a friend had let me borrow, and was often surprised by my own reflection in the mirror. As my body expanded, I still did most of the things I used to, but I rested a lot. I knew so many stories of women overdoing it and ending up in preterm labor, and was determined to do whatever I could to avoid it. I listened to a lot of classical music, played the piano for the boys, especially Chopin's *Nocturne no. 9* and Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. Every Wednesday Benny and I went to brown-bag lunch concerts in downtown Portland, where we sat with a dozen elderly people in Portland's

“Old Church,” listening to chamber music. The other listeners never talked to us, just gave me warm, knowing smiles. We ate grilled cheese sandwiches and poured little bowls of tomato soup from a Thermos. I used my belly as a little shelf.

One week I went to the doctor’s office for my bi-monthly “non-stress test,” an ironically-named procedure in which they attach your stomach with little sensors and monitor the babies’ heart rates for twenty consecutive minutes. I sat in one of four curtained-off stations, strapped in. Over and over the nurse “lost” Baby B, my mover, and so the twenty minutes kept having to start over. Suddenly through the curtain, I heard urgent voices, rushing around. Something was obviously wrong. *The heartrate is dropping! Call over to the O.R., tell them we have an emergency c-section coming in.* A flurry of voices through the curtain, the sound of a hospital bed being wheeled away, then all was quiet again. I never heard the voice of the woman. My own test finished uneventfully. I walked out, dazed. Why did I get to continue on my day as usual? Some strange shift of wind that makes a tree fall one way rather than the other. I was shaken that day. Got into the car feeling cold with fear, wondering what was really unfolding in my belly. Were they really ok?

My frequent visits and ultrasounds provided so much opportunity for alarm. The possibility of twin-to-twin transfusion, the question of how the placenta was oriented, what my blood work would reveal. Plus, with twin pregnancies the placenta can kind of just give out, taxed to the point of true exhaustion. The body saying, *That’s all I can do.* Having babies is all paradox, the most intimately you will be involved with anything while simultaneously having the least amount of control over it. In pregnancy I felt more powerful and more out of control than I have every felt. The task at hand felt so clear—

give the boys the best possibility for health—and my role so obvious. I marveled that my babies were just there existing, part of me but separate. I felt a profound responsibility to take care of my own body so it could take care of theirs, so vulnerable, so utterly dependent. But their bodies followed a way of change unknown to me, natural to them. To an extent it would go on regardless of what I did, playing itself out, concealed.

When I got back home after the non-stress test, I lay on the couch, trying to catch my breath, to slow my heart down. I worried for my boys, longed to see inside to their little bodies and to know they were healthy and doing well. I tried to slow down my thoughts, told myself, *stress isn't good for the babies*. Yet what bigger potential stress is there than the imagination left to wonder what harm might be befalling your children when they're veiled from your view? How thin is the gap between everything being fine and everything changing irrevocably? I got mad at myself for crying. Listened to Bach and breathed. Put my hands on my belly and listened through my hands to the boys shifting in slow rolls, sudden jumps.

Benny and I decided I would work my job into November, and start maternity leave around 30 weeks, hoping that extra rest and time off my feet would help me carry the boys longer. That year one of the kids at school told me I should be Buddha for Halloween. That made me laugh, glad someone saw the comical absurdity of the situation. But I didn't know how to respond to all the teachers who told me that if I was this big at 30 weeks, I was going to be enormous. It happened so many times, each time leaving me speechless. What *could* I say to that? Laugh? Make a joke? Say, I'm the one whose internal organs are being squashed and who can't even take a deep breath so mind your own business? I just seethed inside and stared back, with one of those nervous and

awkward chuckles that is a mixture of incredulity, anger, hurt feelings. Pregnancy makes a woman's body public, while at the same time it undergoes changes not even public to her. She exists in that muddled space—more seen and scrutinized as she becomes less seen to herself. My pregnancy was so obviously, viscerally specific to me. How could anyone know what was in store for me when I didn't even know it myself?

Around Christmas time that year, I was about 34 weeks pregnant, close to the 35-36 weeks when statistics show twins often arrive. I went to my weekly appointment and got a sonogram to take measurements, to check on things. Afterwards, I brought my usual book into the exam room and waited for Dr. Hashima. "The boys are looking great," he told me when he walked in. "Their growth looks even and steady, they're right where they should be." He paused, looked apologetic. "But...the placenta they share is too close to your cervix. We thought it would move away as the boys grew, but it hasn't." He paused again. "We don't have to do anything now, but you're going to have to have a c-section."

He told me it was called *marginal previa*. That going into labor posed a serious risk of bleeding out for me, of oxygen-loss for the boys. I nodded quietly, asked a few questions, but disappointment pooled under the surface of my flushed face. I wanted a natural birth. No epidural, no drugs. My mom had natural births. Both my sisters did. Many of my friends had natural births, at home. This news was yet another letting go of my imagined pregnancy, a swing to the farthest extreme of what I had hoped for.

To this day, when women start talking about their birth stories, hours of labor, birth balls, tubs, doulas, pushing, I feel a sense that I am somehow less of a mother, less

of a woman even, not having experienced “real” birth. I didn’t bring my boys into the world with 36 hours of agonizing strength and pain and resolve. I showed up at the hospital on a scheduled day, the 38 weeks Dr. Hashima had deemed healthy. No labor pains, just waiting around a few hours, two babies an hour later.

I get upset with myself when I notice feelings of being somehow “lesser” as a mother. I never think that about any other woman who has had a c-section. Why should I be embarrassed that I didn’t have a vaginal birth? Having babies takes so much out of us, regardless of the actual birth process. Our bodies, broken, laid open in one way or another, forever altered. With my boys five years old now, I am dealing with hip and lower back problems that are most likely from carrying them. Just last week at my appointment with the orthopedic surgeon, he said the exact words so many others have said, “But you’re too small to carry twins!” Which may be both true and false. My body bears its own aching from the birth process, if not true labor pains, and my story is nothing to feel inferior about.

But I don’t quite convince myself—I know I will still get a sheepish feeling when women start talking about birth and swapping labor stories. Now that it looks like I won’t have any more kids, I will feel a loss at getting older and realizing I will never “go into labor,” maybe because my romanticism wants the full extent of experiences available to me as a woman. While now I’m in love with twins and can’t imagine if I’d had only one baby (so lonely!), I still wish I could’ve had a natural birth, still wish that the placenta that sustained my boys could have moved. But it didn’t. No choice. The so-very-natural process of pregnancy led me to the alien and profoundly unnatural procedure of being cut open at the belly. When I had to give up the idea of a simple, one-baby pregnancy, I was given something expanded, two babies I quickly couldn’t imagine life without. But

giving up my birth plan for a c-section was just loss, disappointment. The opposite of what all my books reminded me, *Birth is natural*. A long recovery, heavy pain, a scar longer than my hand.

Dr. Hashima scheduled me to have a c-section at 38 weeks, which would fall on January 20th. 38 weeks is considered full-term for twins, and with the placental issues, it was safest for me to not actually go into labor. But I was certain I wouldn't stay pregnant that long. A darkening December unfolded, and my belly swelled. I felt there was no way my small frame could continue to hold up under the boys' growth. *These boys are going to be born before the end of the year*, I thought.

As hard as it was for my body to continue stretching beyond what felt possible, as the time for the boys' arrival drew nearer I cried thinking of that separation, the end of something. As complex and fraught as it was, I loved being pregnant—reading parenting and sleeping books, nutrition books, birth books. Learning how to use elaborate baby wraps, collecting children's books, hearing stories from other moms. And most especially the feeling of the boys' movements, the miracle of my body sustaining theirs, of their little bodies taking shape. Even while I felt a surreal pleasure in realizing we would meet our sons soon, I felt an equally surreal sorrow at knowing we would separate from one another. They would begin their inevitable and right yet painful movement in a path away from me. I cried for that distance, for a union meant to be broken but nevertheless undone with sadness. Looking back now I'm surprised that I wasn't troubled by those feelings, that I didn't analyze my sorrow and accuse myself of not loving my kids or not wanting to be a mom. But I was just sad and thrilled at the same time, myself in communion, myself solitary.

We stayed in Oregon for a quiet Christmas by ourselves, near the hospital, in case. We kept close to home, kept all our plans decidedly loose. Demurred on invitations to New Year's Eve parties, talked about next week as a completely unknown and remote future. Our tenth anniversary was that year, on January 5th, and since I continued on with no problems, we decided to go out to dinner. I remember walking to our table getting all kinds of looks—*How pregnant IS that woman?* As the new year began, the 35/36 week mark came and went, and still no babies. Each unknown day, all expectation.

In those last few weeks before the boys' arrival, I had contractions frequently, and it was hard to distinguish real ones from Braxton-Hicks. One afternoon I lay on the couch with my belly tightening in steady waves. When the contractions didn't seem to let up, I timed them, not trusting myself to know whether or not they were "real." They were close, so I called the doctor's office and they asked me to come in and get checked out. We grabbed an overnight bag, to be on the safe side—*maybe this is it*—and drove through the pine trees to Providence Hospital, wondering.

In the exam room, I expected Dr. Hashima to tell me to get ready to head to the O.R. Instead he said, "Your cervix looks great, you're hardly dilated. False alarm." I went to the next room for another non-stress test to make sure the boys' heart rates were strong and didn't show any signs of distress. Everything was fine with Cacio e Pepe. No babies today.

On January 20th we drove to the hospital in the morning—Benny, my sister Nicole, and my parents. I got checked into a triage room where a nurse did some monitoring. I was scheduled for a noon c-section, but an emergency patient came in, so

we had to wait a couple of hours. I laid in the hospital bed and Benny balanced an apple on my enormous belly. My parents sat with me for a while and my dad read to me from a book about organic farming, while my mom said, *Tom, I doubt she wants to hear about that right now!* My sister, a nurse and mother of six, translated for me after the anesthesiologist stopped by. Everything felt inappropriately casual. Even though I agree with those who emphasize that birth is natural, that it shouldn't be treated like a crisis, an illness, a "procedure," I can't understand the apparent goal of hospitals to keep things about birth casual. What is happening in and to a woman's body is not casual but drastic, natural, yes, but also perilous and pain-filled, not to mention metaphysically mind-bending. A new person is about to exist, here. But as we waited for our turn in the operating room, medical personnel just stopped by now and then to check on us, to check vitals and make some small talk. And we waited there, just hanging out, knowing that in a matter of time Benny and I would suddenly be a family of four.

The operating room. Large, open, and stark gleaming white, lights glaring and medical personnel milling around in scrubs, just like a TV version of an O.R. My eyes automatically stinging with tears, my body involuntarily resisting what is about to happen. I breathe deeply—*It's ok*—Benny, standing at my head, squeezes my left hand. In minutes I can't feel anything below my chest. I have an oxygen line in my nose, an IV in my right hand. A blue paper sheet forms a sterile barrier over my belly, my boys. I am conscious, but dreamy, a strange blend of fear and calm and joyful disbelief.

Dr. Hashima says they are going to begin. I feel nothing. Can't see beyond the barrier. A few minutes, and then a tiny, crackling cry. One minute later, another. *Given to*

the light. Dr. Hashima is talking fast, asking the nurse for something. *Right here...we need...bleeding...too much blood.* I barely hear the people hovering over me, my ear listens for my unseen babies across the room. Nurses with the babies talking sweetly, no alarm. Dr. Hashima, urgent.

Emergency over. Under control. I don't know how.

A nurse walks to my left side, baby B swaddled tightly, cheek pressed to mine. He makes a little growl like a sleeping dog. One minute later, baby A on my right cheek, his index finger pressed tightly along the side of his face. Given back to me. I remain, expecting nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The One Color I Would Choose

But in later years I understood that the arresting strangeness, the special beauty of these frescoes lay in the great part played in each of them by its symbols, while the fact that these were depicted, not as symbols (for the thought symbolized was nowhere expressed), but as real things, actually felt or materially handled, added something more precise and more literal to their meaning, something more concrete and more striking to the lesson they imparted.

— Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

Giotto di Bondone was an ugly man. Why this is one of the facts remembered about him, when so many others are obscure or lost, is a mystery. Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari (also ugly, apparently), saw Giotto as the artist responsible for initiating the art of naturalistic painting, for breaking from the Byzantine style. Art critic Erwin Rosenthal likens Giotto to the Picasso of his day (53). Giotto, a Tuscan born in the thirteenth-century, is often credited with opening the way for depicting the “real world” in paintings—landscapes out the window, depth and space, smirks and anguish and adoration on the faces of the saints. There seems to be art-historical consensus on this estimation of Giotto, yet somehow, he remains popularly obscure. Vasari’s *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* places Giotto in company with Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti, but he doesn’t share their name-recognition. Most self-described “non-art” people I ask don’t know who Giotto is. Many of the books about him are expensive, hard to find. Is his obscurity simply a result of the fact that Giotto is from an earlier time period, and less is known about him? Or because he doesn’t have as much

of the artist mystique, the scattered-curiosity genius of Leonardo, the other-worldly, larger-than-life accomplishments of Michelangelo?

Folly

I saw the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua in 2007, and being with it remains the most moving art experience of my life. The chapel, also called the Arena Chapel because it was built on the site of a Roman arena, is Giotto's masterpiece, completed when he was likely in his thirties. Like many other treasures in Italy, its genius sits modestly tucked into the folds of the city. My husband Benny and I were living in Rome for a year, while he finished his MFA; since we were in our last few months in Italy, we traveled whenever we could, eager to experience all the places and art and food we had meant to. In May, after a weekend trip to Venice, we decided to visit Padua on our way back, just to see the chapel. We got off the train, consulted maps, walked through a seventies-era section of the city that was filled with posters and billboards advertising politicians and cellphone companies. The neighborhood felt dingy, run-down, streets sparsely-populated. We followed the signs to the chapel, and when we reached the grounds we rounded through a well-maintained garden, the nicest thing we had seen so far.

We reached the building and couldn't square what we knew was inside with the exterior. The façade of the building itself was plain, with coffee and cream-colored bricks and minor ornamental details around the edges. The form of the chapel reminded me of architecture that shows up in icons, and in Giotto's own paintings: boxy and out of scale, almost like a child's drawing. At sixty-eight feet long, and forty-two feet high, the chapel looked sweet and small, especially when compared to the towering, domed churches we were used to seeing throughout Italian cityscapes. Facing the blankness of the façade, I

thought of rough crystals I had seen at a gem shop in my hometown. Deceitful drab on the outside, surprising dazzle on the inside.

When I think about Giotto, I wonder, if I had been in his position, with my reputation established and talent recognized, would I want to work on the chapel of a notorious family of usurers? So many of the Renaissance artists must have had more than a bit of the fool in them, taking on extensive, taxing commissions for people in power whose satisfaction could make or break them. Did Giotto have the freedom to respectfully decline? Did he think about whether he wanted his art connected to the powerful Tuscan Scrovegni family, his name forever aligned with theirs? We don't know if Giotto took on the commission gladly, or for the money, or out of compulsion, but he agreed to it, painting the expansive pictorial cycle, which Andrew Ladis calls "one of the most comprehensive to have been realized by a single painter in the trecento" (5–6), in roughly two years in the early 1300s.

Prudence

Before we could enter the chapel, we had to buy our tickets and then spend fifteen minutes in a climate-controlled room. The room felt like a library foyer fitted out with airport security; its glass walls and industrial metal formed an antechamber to Giotto's chapel, just out of sight. The space controlled the micro-climate, in order to disrupt the chapel's frescoes as little as possible, and only twenty-five visitors were allowed at a time. There was no line when we went, so the stanchions, those posts with retractable belts that guide crowds, felt superfluous and comical. *You can see the art after you complete this embarrassingly easy maze.*

I am often torn over the measures taken to preserve art, the ways that precautions like climate-control, alarm systems, guard rails, timed visits, all instituted to make the works last so people can continue to enjoy them, at the same time end up Othering the art, turning them into a spectacle. *THIS IS ART*, they say. When does such prudence enable alienation instead of intimacy? Which cautions preserve and which ones just mess things up? I don't think I would argue against the antechamber at the chapel, but it offered an odd and disjunctive preparation for the stunning experience of the chapel.

After the fifteen minutes passed, the guard told us and a few other visitors that we had another fifteen minutes to spend in the chapel itself. When we walked in, my breath caught in my throat. I could've spent the entire visit staring up at the arched ceiling. A mournful, nourishing, royal, bottomless blue hovered over everything. The exact color I would pick if I could only have one. Imagine standing on a cliff and staring out at an endless ocean. Then imagine lying flat on your back well outside the city, under a sky dense with stars. Then put those feelings together. I felt as if I could eat it, as if it was illuminated from within. A lapis-blue umbrella-swoop ceiling, punctuated by small golden stars, laid out straight.

In many ways the ceiling distills and embodies the whole experience of the chapel—vast and captivating, calm and unassuming. It's extravagant, using the extremely expensive pigment of lapis lazuli, yet simple. Giotto's ceiling doesn't try too hard, doesn't put everything in, like the Sistine Chapel, but relies on the emotion and resonance and under-the-surface effects of that blue. It is carefully ordered while abundant, simple while lush. The stars are stolid, planned and evenly distributed, yet the optics of row after row fills the ceiling with movement. Though not the "main thing," the ceiling sets the context for everything else, and the cycle of frescoes below, like the visitor, could never

be the same without it. It is the irreplaceable climate, the stunning and silent presence of the whole.

As we walked around the chapel, I thought about Giotto the person, about him working hours upon hours to complete the frescoes, chatting in Italian with his assistants. I've always imagined him as a quiet person, humble and insightful, with a dry, subtle wit. Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, tells a legend about Pope Boniface VIII (whom Vasari misidentifies as Pope Benedict IX) seeking an artist to complete a commission for the Vatican (102). The pope sent his messenger throughout Italy to gather drawings from various artists, and planned to evaluate the drawings and choose the lucky winner. Apparently when the Vatican's man arrived at Giotto's studio asking for something, Giotto took a piece of paper and dipped a brush in red ink. He stretched out his arm, used his body as a human compass, and drew a perfect circle. The emissary was put-out, believing he was being played for a fool, but when he asked Giotto whether that was all he was going to get, Giotto said, "'Tis enough and to spare...Send it, together with the others, and you will see if it will be recognized" (Vasari 102–103). Needless to say, Giotto got the commission and the legend of "Giotto's O" was born.

One reason I love this story about Giotto is that it speaks to his deeply-held artistic integrity. Giotto didn't feel the need to make something eye-catching, to show off his draftsmanship. *He* is the one testing the Vatican, and not the other way around. As if to ask, *Do you know beauty when you see it?* The prudence of that O, knowing what and how much to include, is Giotto's brilliance and perhaps his concealment. Giotto's works are quieter than Michelangelo's or Leonardo's, and probably for this reason less well-known. Some art, like some people, demands attention through volume or technical dexterity, through expansiveness of personality or drama. This is more of a distinction

than a judgment, since plenty of big-personality artists are fantastically talented: David Bowie, Picasso, Elton John, Madonna. But some art is demanding in another way, accessible only if its quietude is returned, its prudent caution respected.

Inconstancy

Giotto couldn't have imagined what visits to his chapel would entail, the ways it would be limited by time, the reality that people like Benny and me, from halfway around the world, would go to Padua with the sole purpose of seeing this place smaller than our own modest house. But Giotto had to have known it was his *capolavoro*, his masterwork. I have never felt so much aesthetic affection in one place, and would love to have seen his face when he completed it.

The chapel was commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni, who acquired the land in 1300. Enrico had the building constructed as a personal chapel on his palace grounds, but Giotto certainly knew it would draw visitors from far beyond the Scrovegni family. The chapel was dedicated twice, in 1303 and 1305, and in 1304 Pope Benedict XI decreed that indulgences would be granted to its visitors (Ladis 6). I am intrigued by this double life of the chapel: commissioned as a family chapel, on a family estate, but then understood as playing a part in the lives of all the Catholic faithful. Were indulgences always part of the plan? Did Enrico Scrovegni pull some strings? Did someone from the Vatican come see Giotto's work in progress, and decide it was worthy of sin-remission?

Inextricably connected with this double life is the role of Enrico's father, Reginaldo degli Scrovegni. A few years after the chapel was dedicated, Dante Alighieri began his *Inferno*, in which Reginaldo appears (Canto XVII). The Scrovegni family was a wealthy, prominent family in Padua, and Dante infamously immortalized Reginaldo as

one of the usurers occupying the seventh circle of hell. Some historians see the Scrovegni Chapel as Enrico's attempt to improve the dubious reputation of the Scrovegni family. Despite the unknowns of what Enrico knew and when about Dante's opinion of his father, the fact that he dedicated his family chapel to the Virgin of Charity stands out as significant, given his family's line of work.

To be honest, when we visited the chapel I looked at the Virtues and Vices as an afterthought, too taken with the beautiful vibrancy of everything above. Having only fifteen minutes in a completely-fresco-covered space creates an urgency in deciding how to portion out your attention. Giotto depicts the fourteen Virtues and Vices around the lower perimeter of the small chapel, just about at eye-level, and below two layers of narrative frescoes that take up most of the wall space. The Virtues and Vices are painted as *grisaille*—paintings done in gray-scale that often have the *tromp l'oeil* appearance of sculpture—and so are separated from the densely-colored images of the narratives of the Life of Christ and the Life of the Virgin Mary. Where the larger narrative panels are filled with Giotto's characteristic realism—the emotive faces and gestures, the landscapes painted with depth and distance—the Virtues and Vices are fantastical, images of allegory or metaphor that evoke the underlying heart of the concept rather than seeking to enact it. As Proust said, “Charity devoid of charity” (85).

I wonder how and why, exactly, Giotto decided to place these colorless, enigmatic figures at eye-level with the viewer. The vibrant, deeply human narrative panels, and the expansive blue above it all seem to be what is really true, what is reality. So I wonder what it means that I, the visitor, enter that color-filled world above through the strange, monochromatic dichotomy of the Vices and Virtues? Are they somehow my invitation to

participate? Proust looks at Giotto's *Charity* and sees a figure with "an ordinary and rather heavy burden," one in whose face it "seems impossible that any thought of charity can ever have found expression" (84). This is relieving. Most of the people I know, myself included, feel like they carry rather ordinary and heavy burdens. That life is often less blazing virtue and harrowing sin, more often ordinary kindnesses and simple neglect.

Giotto's *Inconstancy* is a vertigo-inducing, tilt-a-whirl of a woman, no limbs touching the ground, hands reaching for an impossible recovery of balance. To me she is the least grotesque of the Vices—not as hard to look at as the tragic Despair or the horrifying Envy—but her flat look in the midst of her free-fall somehow gives the image its own chilling quality. She is powerless and at the mercy of who-knows-what, perched precariously on a strange disc whose swirling is echoed by the out-flung garment orbiting her head. If Giotto's central innovation was his pathos, the emotions of his figures, then the staring, unmoved face of *Inconstancy* is especially unnerving. She is out of control but clueless, or care-less, her fixed, glazed look of apathy forming a stark dichotomy with the motion around her. Giotto's *grisailles* are hyper-real yet fantastic, there, yet impossible. Giotto sets at eye-level something misleading—the *grisaille* look like actual sculptures but that is just a trick of the eye. They appear to be ornamental to the rest of the chapel, their gray-scale palette sitting quietly below the vibrancy of the narratives above, but they are intricately woven together with the whole composition. The Virtues and Vices make us do a doubletake, and so help us see them.

Fortitude

Benny and I paid to go into the chapel twice, fifteen minutes feeling terribly inadequate to take things in. We went through the whole climate-control situation again, this time enlivened by what we'd seen, eyes wide and talking fast, comparing elements we'd noticed. *How is this just sitting here in the middle of this run-down neighborhood? How are there not a ton of people here to see it?* We were the only visitors on our second time through.

Giotto is a bit of an enigma, a border-crosser. Giotto's paintings hold onto the strength and transcendence of Byzantine figures, their gilded haloes, their readily-apparent connection to the divine. But he works something new, not replacing the transcendent but quietly insisting that it dwells in a blood-and-bone world of emotion, of place, of the space between individuals. Giotto's figures are solid, earthy and rooted. While he includes the world around the people—the architecture, the landscape, the sky—the figures remain central. The buildings are often small, doll-house-like, making for a scale that emphasizes and honors the human. Giotto's scenes are crowded with people, sometimes layers upon layers of them so that little shards of faces and hands and robes peek out from the background. I love how important all the people are, how you can look at them and imagine the weight of their bodies on a chair, their feet moving on the staircase.

Each of the Virtues and Vices are depicted in rectangular frames, and *Fortitude* almost entirely fills her frame, holding a body-high shield and a blunt sword. On her head and wrapped around her body is the skin of a lion, and on the shield is a lion with bared teeth and outstretched claws. Here is *Inconstancy*'s opposite, this stalwart woman, fierce

in the best sense of the word, the kind of person you would want on your side. Looking at her there is no way you could knock her off balance, and her eyes are fixed, her grip firm.

Now as I sit with books filled with pictures of the chapel, I find myself drawn to images I neglected before, some paintings meaning more to me now than they did a decade ago, when I saw them in person. One of the paintings in the narrative cycle shows Mary Magdalene kneeling and reaching after Christ, who walks away carrying a banner and is nearly out of the frame. I love this part of the resurrection story, first the charming humor of Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener, then the enigmatic exchange between Mary and Jesus once she recognizes him. This moment is known as the *Noli me tangere*, directly-translated from Latin as “Don’t touch me,” often described as “Stop clinging to me.” When Jesus speaks Mary’s name, she suddenly knows who he is—I imagine her grabbing hold of him, crying and beside herself with bewilderment and joy, disbelief and hope. Giotto’s image is the moment after, just after Jesus has gotten himself out of her grip. Mary still reaches towards the resurrected Jesus, and Jesus stays her hand. *Stop clinging to me*. Mary is the first witness of Jesus raised from the dead, she is the one who will go to tell the disciples the good news. She stretches her arms towards Jesus, but he is on the move, dressed in white like the angels that sit jauntily on his empty tomb.

The *Noli me tangere* seems to me like a flip-side Inconstancy, a reality of life as dynamic, moving. After all, in the chapel *Inconstancy* is paired not with constancy but with *Fortitude*. Mary is not like the tilt-a-whirl woman but instead is firmly planted on the ground, a solid, weighty figure. Her rose-colored robe almost conceals her entirely, and she reaches toward the divine Christ with adoration and longing. The triangular figure of Mary kneeling on the ground is an accessible Fortitude, a figure whose strength stems not from any super-human might but from how close she is to the ground. Between

the hands of Jesus and Mary, in the space of that longing, a whole riot of plants has sprung up, while the hill in the background is barren, and beneath Jesus's feet grass is sprouting with each step. Newness, happened and happening. Jesus is fluid and about to slip away, and Mary is just kneeling there, reaching. One desperate, loving, bewildered gesture. *'Tis enough, and to spare.*

Ire

When we first went into the chapel, after staring at the ceiling for a while we looked at the frescoes “in order,” left-to-right reading fashion. Still, despite the linear pull, that second time through we found ourselves drawn to the ways a particular image echoed the composition of another. We circled back to remind ourselves which disciple wore the golden robe. We noted the ways postures were repeated, how different figures performed the same gesture to drastically different ends.

The Scrovegni Chapel is a space filled with parallels, with narrative repetition, with visual mirroring to guide the viewer. While the narrative stretches around the chapel chronologically—starting with the parents of the Virgin Mary, on through the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection—its repetitions lead to a more circular reading. Andrew Ladis describes Giotto's chapel as having “an all-embracing figural structure...visual cues that encourage readings that transcend narrative time” (3). I've always been drawn to this layering of time and acknowledgment of overlaps, perhaps because it seems most true to my experience. Things don't just happen in order, moving from point A to point B. Old wounds resurface that we thought were healed long ago. We hear a song and are deluged with emotion from a particular moment. Time, unfolding, is laden with memory. In the same spirit of contemporary lyric essays, Giotto's chapel

works associatively: a small vignette of Jonah being swallowed by the fish sits between the *Crucifixion* and the *Lamentation*, the creation of Adam is tucked modestly between the *Wedding at Cana* and the *Raising of Lazarus*. Images interact with each other. Colors show up, show up again. We are invited to notice and to observe what happens, in the images and in ourselves.

One of the strangest series of associations stems from the image of the vice of *Ire*. *Ire* depicts a woman with mouth and eyes squeezed shut, her head thrown back, her hands rending her garment so that her chest is almost entirely bare. James Stubblebine describes Giotto's *Ire* as the "anger which is itself unreason" (89), an anger that is unseeing and consumed by its own fire. In contrast to the other Virtues and Vices, *Ire* doesn't have any props, any accompanying referents. Giotto gives us hardly anything to work with, nothing but the (literally) bare reality of a woman blinded and consumed by her own seething.

In the narrative cycle of Christ, Giotto mirrors *Ire* in the person of Caiphias, the high priest who questioned Jesus after his arrest. Caiphias tears open his green robe and exposes his hairy chest, filled with fury at Jesus's enigmatic responses, enraged by his lack of deference. This image and the next, the *Mocking of Christ*, are the only ones from the Life of Christ where Jesus is the lone haloed figure, his goodness radiating in the midst of anger and hatred. Giotto makes clear that Jesus is not welcome, not among the faithful. As Jesus appears before the high priest, Caiphias's head is thrown back, yet unlike *Ire* the Vice, his eyes are open, making his own fury even worse. He is not blind but seeing, and still Christ is beyond recognition.

Strangely, the other figure in the narrative who mirrors *Ire* is one of the angels depicted in the *Crucifixion* fresco. An angel just below one of Jesus's outstretched arms,

with its head thrown back and its eyes closed in pain, rips its robe open in the traditional Jewish response of mourning, the rending of the garments. Giotto repeatedly flips and redraws his figures and gestures, and in the *Crucifixion* he shows the connectedness of anguish and anger. Both words are rooted in the Latin *angh-*, “tight, painfully constricted, painful,” and *Ire*, Caiphas, and the angel all rip their clothes in response to the taut clenching they feel, the emotion that is just too much. By connecting his angels (and in other places, his saints) with the gestures of the Vices, Giotto offers a world filled with overlaps. The saints are human and not untouched by Vice, but Vice is also often shown to be a twist on an emotion not inherently evil. Jesus’s fury at the moneychangers in the temple, the anguish of the angel at Christ’s death, these show anger stopped short of a self-perpetuating and self-referential trap. Anger as generative, even generous.

I am not someone who gets angry easily. My vices tend more towards the despair/anxiety/inconstancy end of the spectrum. But I do get hurt in relationships easily. I have a hard time forgetting things people said that made me feel bad, read things into what someone does or doesn’t do. And I wonder to what degree that pain is its own eyes-closed anger, quiet as it may be. When does our pain over injustice or neglect (perceived or genuine) close us off, create not an atmosphere of welcome but of narcissism? All but two of the Vices (*Inconstancy* and *Folly*) are unseeing. They are not open and receiving but contained and closed. What is the line between them and the anguishing angel? When does pain wall us off from the world, and when does it open us up to it? Put another way, when does it help us to see?

Temperance

I have to admit that when I read this definition of temperance—“moderation in action, thought, or feeling; restraint; habitual moderation in the indulgence of appetites or passions”—Italy is one of the last cultures I associate with it. Most Italian meals I have been to have lasted three times as long as American ones, with three times as much food and wine. An Italian pop star I follow on Instagram just this morning posted twenty-nine photos of his concert the night before. Part of what captures me about Italy is its effusiveness, its unabashed romanticism, its insistence that aesthetics and pleasure will always trump being practical or “sensible.” Even Giotto’s chapel, with its contemplative, quiet spirit, isn’t particularly restrained. Andrew Ladis describes Giotto’s undertaking as “painting every paintable surface above the floor” (5), and standing in the chapel, it really does feel like Giotto has touched everything, not leaving any actual white space. The chapel feels abundant, lush, even extravagant.

I look at library books on the chapel, taking advantage of the unlimited time to notice all the little details that fill in the whole. I see juxtapositions I missed before, glimpses of the underlying plan. I notice the orientation of images, particularly the way Giotto placed *Temperance* below the scene of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, which itself is below the *Adoration of the Magi*. Both of the images from the life of Christ depict a royal man, kneeling in service and reverence, giving an offering to someone else. One of the magi and Jesus have identical placements in each composition, with the same posture, the same gestures. The wise man kisses the feet of the infant Christ, embraces them with his right hand. Jesus holds the foot of Peter to wash it, raises his right hand toward Peter in a sign of blessing. If *Ire* is a non-seeing, self-consuming

vice, then *Temperance*, *Ire*'s opposite, is self-giving, attentive. Giotto's *Temperance* seems to be about restraint on self-preoccupation and self-honoring, rather than restraint for restraint's sake. The one being kneeled to in the *Adoration* image is the one doing the kneeling in the feet-washing image. Full-circle reverence. Temperance as an outward, abundant giving of the self, an extravagance for the sake of others. Which actually is a wonderfully appropriate description of Italy. Italy was extravagant with me, open to me, when I was young and empty-pocketed. It helped me. Restraint on self-preoccupation, then, is generosity, and true, deep-rooted generosity is never restrained.

Injustice

In the Lamentation, I can hardly take my eyes off the figure of John,
the one Jesus loved, dead-center with his arms flung back.

Horrified, disbelieving, believing, the angels a sky
of writhing above. One line, halo-after-halo,
John to Mary to Jesus. Love, to love, to
dead Love.

Justice

During these days I've been writing, the world has exploded with images of kids separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. A cruel and inhumane politics, with young children getting crushed under the wheels of it all. I talk to my own boys about what has been happening, and can't get two Giotto images out of my mind:

Massacre of the Innocents and *Christ Cleansing the Temple*. Setting the images side-by-side, the two central figures are near-identical. A robed man, severe face, right hand

raised to strike. The massacre image is a visceral horror, a pile of dead children under the feet of the executioner, who is in the act of grabbing another child by the ankle. The right side of the image shows a crowd of women, huddled together, their faces all agony. Over the shoulder of the central executioner, and nearly indistinguishable from his robe, is the bent leg of a child, the clutching hand of a mother on his ankle. The unseen death-blow filled in by the mind. The layers of injustice are so many, made all the worse by the figures of three cowering men on the side opposite the women, soldiers who look away, clutch their hands, do nothing. This is the only one of the narrative panels that includes no haloes. God-forsaken, -forsaking.

In Giotto's image of *Injustice*, the figure of a man sits with eyes closed, presiding over a violent world below. One body is being trampled by a horse, a naked woman is being dragged by a figure while soldiers look on. Between the unseeing ruler and the chaos below is a canopy of trees, abnormally high and obstructing his already-obstructed view. This is the one in power who does nothing, sees nothing. Passive injustice above, active injustice below, just like the *Massacre of the Innocents* with Herod sitting up in his high tower, ordering the killing. But in *Christ Cleansing the Temple*, Jesus is the ruler who sees, who responds to evil. When I saw this image in Padua, I was mostly captivated by Jesus's anger towards those who were turning the temple into a marketplace, God into a transaction. Now, in the midst of all the news from the border, I am suddenly noticing the children in the fresco. The disciples shelter the children, one of them tucked into the robe of Peter, another clutching the robe of a disciple who shelters her with his hand. Giotto gives a critique, an alternative to injustice, provocatively depicting Jesus in the same stance as the executioner, and mirroring the passive soldiers in the disciples who use their hands to protect.

I can't help but wonder whether justice felt more possible in Giotto's time, if it was more conceivable then because his scope was limited, his world smaller. How much brokenness and evil can we take in before it stops being real, before it just becomes an abstraction? The *grisaille* of *Justice* shows a crowned woman, sitting with eyes open above a thriving world, holding the scales of a balance in either hand. Justice in the chapel means paying attention. So often I try to pay attention, I want to respond, but don't know how to and so I don't. Or I do respond, and acutely feel how meager my response is to the scale of the problem. But how often does justice really feel sweeping, decidedly victorious? I think of my dear friend working in immigration law, fighting injustice by helping one person, then another. I think about that day at the temple; other injustices were going on while Jesus drove the moneychangers out, but he chose to address that one. Maybe now we just see too much—*saturation point*—to see much of anything well.

Idolatry

Between our two visits inside the chapel, Benny and I browsed through the attached gift shop and history rooms. Reprinted images of some of the frescoes, a small model of the chapel, a large and gorgeous book on the chapel that we now kick ourselves for not buying. The displays in the history room described the story of the land, the background of the Scrovegni family, and the life of Enrico, the patron. We couldn't help but speculate about public opinion of the Scrovegni family. Did Enrico feel a chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Charity would absolve his family of their questionable profession? Was he that self-aware, or was it just the all-too-familiar political move, doing something that looks good for PR purposes? We don't know exactly what Enrico

knew about Dante's opinion of his father, but surely the view of usury, described in Canto XI of the *Inferno*, was a common one. Before Reginaldo appears in Canto XVII, Virgil tells Dante (the character) why usury is an offense to God:

From Art and Nature, man was meant to take
his daily bread to live—if you recall
the book of Genesis, near the beginning;

but the usurer, adopting other means,
scorns Nature in herself and in her pupil,
Art—he invests his hope in something else.
(*Inferno*, Canto XI, lines 106–111)

So did Enrico take a different route than his father? He certainly seemed to think so. In the chapel's *Last Judgement* fresco, Enrico is pictured on the side of the blessed, offering up a little toy-version of the chapel to the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, and Saint Catherine (Ladis 49). Catherine takes hold of the chapel, and the Virgin Mary's hand is extended towards Enrico's, nearly touching. No doubt as to whether this offering will be accepted. It's hard not to take this image of Enrico as one enormous eschatological humble-brag—*Here's this little chapel I had built for myself, I am SO honored to be right here by the Virgin Mary, can't believe I get to be here on the side of the blessed...*

Seeing Enrico kneeling there with his chapel, I can't help but think about Pope Benedict XI offering indulgences to visitors of the Scrovegni Chapel. I don't know any Catholics who think the sixteenth-century practice of selling indulgences was a good idea, but I was not aware that indulgences, though no longer sold, are still offered today. And not only are they still offered, but they have been on the rise throughout the 21st century. From what I can gather, there is certainly controversy over indulgences among Catholics, but they do have a presence in Pope Francis's pontificate. In 2013, Pope

Francis declared that attending the Catholic church's World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, or even following it on television or social media, would merit an indulgence if accompanied by certain acts of piety (Gibson, "Pope Francis"). The pope also granted indulgences to attendees of the 2018 March for Life (Smith, "March").

The idea of indulgences makes me uncomfortable. It feels like bargaining with God, and seems hard to divorce from questions of power and a history of greed. At the same time, I realize that as a non-Catholic I don't fully understand the place indulgences occupy in the life of faith. How do external acts of devotion reflect interior realities? And yet, I can't help but wonder what "counts" for an indulgence; would someone attending the March for Life get an indulgence regardless of their position on abortion? Is it the exterior attendance or the internal belief that merits the indulgence? And should we take part in events and causes because we believe in them or because they offer to grant us a future reprieve?

Giotto's *Idolatry* is a somewhat androgynous figure, holding a small god in hand, while the god holds the rope looped around the figure's neck. The eyes of *Idolatry* are closed, body in apparent contrapposto, leaning away from the doll-like god and its rope. So many of Giotto's Vices are off-balance, sightless, falling, losing their footing. Vice appears to be rooted-in or manifested-by instability, by a lack of weight and solidity. *Idolatry*, like several of Giotto's Vices, looks undesirable less for its embodied and specific vice than for its off-kilter stance, for the sense it gives you that you could push it right over. And maybe this off-kilter-ness is what underlies my discomfort with indulgences, and my sense of the irony at Scrovegni kneeling with his little chapel. Are these things sincere? Do they have roots? Can we barter with the divine? The small god,

the toy chapel, reflect a perceived power in the one holding them. The system is transactional and closed. *I will do this for you, so what will you do for me?*

Faith

This is the underlying structure of things.

This is how
life frames
 life
Meaning-maker, reference point

Idon'tknowwhatI'mdoingthisisbeautiful

Standing in the middle of the chapel, surrounded by the frescoes, everything felt solid and ordered. The scale of things seemed right, my place within the whole as it should be. The chapel was so small that it didn't feel too overwhelming, not vast and heaven-touching, just deeply beautiful and modest. We noticed the ways Giotto used formalism, like Piero della Francesca would go on to do, to control the images. Geometric structure for weight. Mirrored gestures, repetitions. Verticals for strength, diagonals for dynamism. In a way this is Italy, the underlying structure of everything, the intentional aesthetics of architecture, art, design—and a chaotic and vibrant and breathing life lived within it all. Majestic twin churches framing a main boulevard, a crowd of anarchist teens smoking on the church steps. A scattered street market below imposing Roman arches. In the mess and change and shiftiness of life, steady presences that insist on meaning and strength are welcome.

When Benny and I stood in the chapel during that second visit, we were barely-thinking. Taking it in, the *thereness* of it all. The form working on us. External experience affecting internal realities (to trouble my earlier reflections on indulgences). Giotto's space was so obviously made for someone to be in it; the visitor completes the whole, finds her place in the pictorial cycle by becoming the viewer Giotto intended his frescoes for. Whatever Scrovegni's motives for the chapel, pure or suspect, Giotto was able to work something remarkable within them. If, as Dante wrote, the usurer "scorns nature and her follower, art," then Giotto honors both, not transcending nature or using art as servant, but presenting the interconnectedness of the two. Art and nature as dynamic while steady. The spiritual and the down-to-earth not in conflict but radically unified.

The image of *Faith* in the Virtue cycle stands in a full-frontal posture, gaze fixed forward, body centered, nearly symmetrical. She looks regal, holds a long staff with a cross on top in one hand, an un-furled scroll in the other. Where *Idolatry* was shifty and about to topple, *Faith* is fixed, robust. Nearly all of the Virtues and Vices are expressionless (*Faith* especially so), making them a strange accompaniment to the shimmering emotion in the colorful panels above. The *grisailles* Virtues/Vices are painted as faux-sculptures, contrasted with the real-life scenes above, and that definitely plays a part in their emotional distinction. But I think Giotto does something more fundamental, more bold with the *grisailles* than just contrasting living people with personified virtues. The Virtues and Vices, by their nature of being what Proust called "real things, actually felt or materially handled," are not an ethereal high-road/low-road, but instead real and intimately-connected presences within the moving and changeable

world of the narrative cycle. The people shown in the Life of Mary and Life of Christ narratives participate in the Virtues and Vices, living out their anarchist teen lives on their steps. The spiritual life not as ethereal other, but as the underlying structure of things.

Often when I try to describe to someone how a particular work of art affects me, I feel limited, afraid of not conveying enough and cautious about appearing overly effusive and dramatic. *You just have to see it for yourself.* To some degree, that is true; you have to feel your own physical presence in relationship with that real, present, blue ceiling. I can't describe it. But having been there with it, I can remember it, and can feel a weight of joy in knowing that it is there, existing. Seeing Giotto's chapel sets off the circle-of-art-uplift: *How could someone do this, It's amazingly beautiful that a human being did this, I am a part of this.* And not just a part of beauty being made, but a part of the complicated, many-layered, dark and troubling while fundamentally luminous whole. Stories are limited, replies are partial. *Idon'tknowwhatI'mdoingthisisbeautiful.*

Envy

I didn't really want to look at Giotto's *Envy*. Of all the vices in the chapel, *Envy* is the most grotesque, disgusting really. A snake comes out of her mouth, circles back to bite and blind her eyes. Horns curl out of her head and frame a huge, elongated ear. With one hand she clenches what looks like a money bag, while the other is outstretched, reaching claw-like towards nothing. The entire base of her body is engulfed in flames. Many spots on the fresco of *Envy* have been damaged, defaced (if you could call it that) before the days of climate-control and timed visits. Perhaps representing scores of

visitors over hundreds of years taking their stand against the awful embodiment. We stood there in our second fifteen minutes and took a brief, shuddering look at it.

In *Giotto's O*, Andrew Ladis draws attention to the fact that Scrovegni's chapel, dedicated to the Virgin of Charity, chooses not to pair Charity with its usual vice, Greed, but instead with Envy. Ladis calls this unconventional pairing a "shrewd defensive posture" (46) on Enrico's part, flipping potential condemnation of the Scrovegni family's vocation of usury into a warning against wanting the good things other people have. Enrico trying to keep the emphasis on Charity and to minimize the dubious financial dealings of his family. This Envy/Charity pairing makes me curious about Giotto's own position on it. Did Enrico say, *Let's leave Greed out* and Giotto complied, as Ladis seems to imply? Was a certain priest, or a group of intellectuals, assigned to oversee the chapel, to guide the choices of Giotto (Frojmovic 195)? How much freedom did Giotto have?

The more time I spend with the chapel, the more I wonder what sort of guidance Giotto received as far as what to include, and how. The theology seems so creative while orthodox, filled with imagination that keeps everything shimmering, vibrant. I think again about what Giotto's personality must have been like, about his affections, about him planning the cycle of frescoes and unfolding a vision of unity in diversity. He is too intentional for the inclusion of *Envy* to be merely a concession to Enrico. And with its placement below the *Way to Calvary* and the *Crucifixion*, not to mention its sheer repulsiveness, *Envy* seems to get special attention in the chapel.

I didn't realize it then, because I didn't want to spend much time looking at the repellant *Envy* with so much beauty around, but when I eventually came back to images of the Virtues and Vices, I noticed that *Envy* was the only one with fantastical, sub-human effects. The curling ram horns. The flat, oblong ear the length of a hand. The

blatant curl of a thick snake exiting the mouth and striking at the eyes. All of the others, Virtues and Vices alike, are “real,” possible. *Envy*, on the other hand, is extreme, beyond. Giotto could have made his *Envy* fresco less grotesque, but he didn’t, instead leaving the viewer with the unavoidable, visceral response to the snake in the mouth, the venomous bite to the eyes. And then, if that weren’t awful enough, Giotto echoes *Envy*’s gesture of clutching the money bag in the figure of Judas Iscariot on the chancel arch. The betrayer, the deliverer-unto-death, the ultimate villain.

I wonder about *Envy* as ultimate villain. I think of the ways I envy other people. People who don’t have to live in Texas. People whose bodies don’t keep them from running with their kids. People who get to live in Italy and be surrounded by art and sculpture instead of strip malls and big-box stores. How does *Envy* disfigure me, skew what I hear, what I cling to and desire, what I am blind to? Some things I envy have changed—bodies without pain, people with spare time—while others are the same—the ability to be at ease in any social situation, artistic success. If *Envy* is the ultimate Vice then it is also arguably the most ubiquitous, the most “natural” and unremarkable. Which makes it funny that it would be the one most unnaturally-depicted, the most far-out. Maybe Giotto has to make *Envy* an Other for us to see it better; it’s too common, too easy to live with, and so Giotto makes his *Envy* something that would make anyone squirm. Ultimately the emotive current of the chapel forces us to admit ourselves as part of the whole narrative. Our hearts breaking with John at the Lamentation, exulting with Mary at the empty tomb, and even clenching the dirty money with Judas.

Charity

In *Swann's Way*, Proust's narrator, Marcel, describes the namesake Virtue of the Scrovegni chapel, *Charity*:

she is holding out her flaming heart to God, or shall we say 'handing' it to Him, exactly as a cook might hand up a corkscrew through the skylight of her underground kitchen to some one who had called down to ask her for it from the ground-level above. (84)

I love this passage for so many reasons. For one, I collect corkscrews, for two, I love the world that it builds around *Charity*. This isn't stuffy art criticism, but images of real and common life. I love the physicality of the description, the vividness of imagining the exchange between the basement and the ground floor, the everyday smallness of the whole situation (not to mention the way God is the one asking for the corkscrew). The point Marcel makes is that Giotto's Virtues are not what one would expect, not idealized and unattainable, but down to earth and ordinary. Charity is not beatific-looking; on the contrary, "it seems impossible that any thought of charity can ever have found expression in her vulgar and energetic face" (Proust 84).

Reading this passage from Proust makes me feel especially conflicted by the depiction of Scrovegni at the Last Judgement. His gesture echoes that of *Charity*, reaching up his hand, offering up his chapel. Mary extends her hand toward Enrico's to accept his offering. How should we take this? Is he like Marcel's idea of Charity, one in whom you would never expect a charitable thought, yet who is charitable in his own earthy way? Or is he brazen and cocksure, nullifying his generosity by emphasizing it? How ordinary can our virtues be?

In a way Giotto's Virtues and Vices, with their flat affects, their colorless worlds, invite all of us normal, flawed, tired people to see that we are not excluded from the spiritual world, from the world of saints and miracles and resurrection. There is so much

joy and sorrow and anguish and betrayal and delight in Giotto's chapel. And there is monotony and doubt and apathy. The chapel as a whole is transcendent, but not Other. Giotto's people could be us, as could his Virtues and Vices. Sometimes handing my heart to God sounds less intimidating if I imagine it as a corkscrew. *Here is this small thing.*

Despair

During the months I was working on this piece, Anthony Bourdain, the beloved and acerbic, endearingly misanthropic yet humbly inquisitive traveler and chef, committed suicide. He hung himself in a French hotel, and the world was aghast. From all sides of social media and journalism, responses, articles, and tributes multiplied; everyone shocked and dismayed, seeking for a way to put into words what Bourdain had meant to them. Anthony Bourdain's suicide felt...different somehow. All suicides are tragic. Sadly some of them are less surprising. But with Bourdain's death, everyone I talked to, all the pieces I read, all of my own emotions, were filled with confusion. Disbelief.

Maybe why his suicide felt more gutting, more incomprehensible than other celebrity deaths, was because people felt like they really knew him. Like he was a friend. His on-screen persona was, or seemed, so authentically himself, so uninterested in pretensions and formalities. He was so honest about himself, about his past drug use, about not being a particularly happy person. His don't-give-a-fuck attitude felt so blessedly real. He traveled around the world with humility, with curiosity, with reverence for the people and cultures he visited. He critiqued oppressive powers, shed light on beautiful people and corrupt governments all over the globe. And all of us millions of viewers admired him, respected him. And we respected him for his unvarnished realness

probably more than anything else. Bourdain felt known to us, un-abstracted, and so it was easier (and therefore so much harder) to see him as a real person, in a real moment, deciding to end his life. I struggled to get that loop of tape out of my head, Anthony sitting in a hotel room in France, sitting on the bed, feeling whatever acute weight he carried, reaching for his bathrobe.

Giotto's *Despair* hangs limp and powerless, hung by the neck from a thickly woven cord. Her eyes and mouth are closed, her head drooped over to one shoulder. Both arms hang, outstretched at her sides, her fists clenched. A sort of flipped image of Christ's upreaching arms on the cross. A demon figure swoops in from *Despair's* upper left, taking hold of her head with bat-like talons. Compared to many of the other Vices, *Despair* looks like a normal woman. There is no snake, no spinning floor, no engulfing flames. *Despair* is all quiet and sorrow. One curled tendril of long hair peeking from behind the thick folds of her gown.

As I looked through the chapel, I was surprised at how many people Giotto could cram into one fresco. His images are such a departure from so many of the one- or two-figured Byzantine icons, with frontal view, gilded background. Instead, whole swarms of people fill up the frame, like an Italian tram where one more person always insists on squeezing themselves into the dwindling inches of standing room. These are not lonely images (except for maybe the first one, of Joachim cast out of the temple, plus the trial and mocking of Christ); instead, there is always a throng of people around. Witnessing, condemning, marveling, eating, drinking. Giotto depicts the holy stories as full of life and vibrancy. No stodgy presentation of the Life of Christ—*No fun to be had, this is serious*—but instead realness, color and sorrow and sweat and drama and back-stabbing

and exhaustion and friendship. I imagine visitors in the 1300s, coming to receive their indulgences; even though they came to the palace of a rich man, to a chapel named for the family that likely extorted what little money they had, those visitors encountered something real, something very much like themselves. Looking at Giotto's narrative cycle, I can believe that Jesus lived an everyday life. He ate and drank, slept, laughed with friends. These lives are normal, remarkable like all lives.

The crucifixion fresco brings that earthy realness into acute focus. The one other figure in the cycle that echoes the slumped, hanging gesture of *Despair* is not Judas, or Joachim expelled from the temple, or a faithless disciple, but the Virgin Mary beneath the cross of her son (Ladis 39). This is the prophecy Mary heard when Jesus was eight days old at the temple. *And a sword will pierce your own soul*. Giotto audaciously links Mary with a Vice, suggesting that this world of saints and sinners is blurred. A key difference between the two figures though: while *Despair* is alone, accompanied only by the bat-devil carrying her away, Mary is held up on either side by the Apostle John and another woman. Her body hangs collapsed, as if she has lost consciousness, yet she doesn't fall to the ground. Mary's robe—the color of the sky, of that ceiling, that ceiling—is nearly of a piece with the sky behind her, so that her body is almost not even there. She is heavy and weightless. About to fall to the earth and nearly swept away into the firmament. I see her lapis-blue robe bleeding into the sky and think of the times when I haven't been able to pray, when the prayers of others are the only things between me and the ground. I am a twenty-two year old questioning all of her beliefs. I am a mother of twin infants, with no sleep, no energy left for longing. *I have nothing to give*.

Hope

On my thirty-seventh birthday, when I was nearly done with this piece, Benny gave me lapis lazuli earrings. Small and marble-like, two perfect spheres. I had just started my last semester of grad school, gratefully anticipating the nearness of completion, while at the same time already feeling tired just thinking about approaching deadlines. Some hopes for my thirty-seventh year felt more assured—hope of finishing a Masters Degree, of Benny finishing his tenure process, of our boys thriving in first grade. Others hopes can only be intimations, maybes—I hope we will get a job somewhere north, hope this is my last year in Texas, hope I will feel better on my next birthday than I do now.

Benny bought the earrings in our home town of Moscow, Idaho, at an amazing little shop called Gem State Crystals that has been there since we were kids. It's crowded with fossils, gems (many of which I have never even heard of), with jewelry and a real, living rattlesnake. With each item they sell, they add to the box a little slip of paper, not much bigger than a fortune from a fortune cookie, telling about the particular gemstone. History, geographical origin, healing properties. Benny and I laughed when we read the slip for lapis lazuli: "Some say it has the power to aid creative expression through writing, raise vitality, and overcome grief."

Of all the Virtues in Giotto's chapel, *Hope* is the only one not standing on particularly firm footing. The winged figure, a woman with bare feet and hair coiled at the nape of her neck, looks like she is floating, or about to leave the ground, her body a diagonal across the image, her clothes swept back. With one foot peeking out from under her hemline, she stretches both hands upwards, reaching towards a crown being held out

by a small, angelic figure. *Take this small thing*. As the last in the line of Virtues, *Hope* occupies a middle-ground in the composition of the chapel: it is the Virtue closest to the side of the Blessed in the *Last Judgment*, the sweeping fresco which fills the western wall, but it is also nearest to two of the most difficult narrative frescoes, *Massacre of Innocents* and *Mocking of Christ*. In this in-between space, Hope seems precarious, fragile, mingled.

Giotto's chapel was hard to leave, especially since we didn't know if and when we would ever make it back to Padua. We considered going in again, but had to catch a train back to Rome, and didn't think our grad student budget could swing another sixteen euros for admission anyway. With all the intricacies of the frescoes, the unfolding of the narrative, really it was the radiance of that blue that I was most loath to give up. I didn't want to go back out onto the streets, to weave our way through the drab buildings and back to the train station. I loved the colors of Rome, the russets and peaches and salmons, the golden light bathing it all, but that blue was something altogether set apart from the warm Southern Italian palette. A cool, luminous color. Warm colors are predictably light-filled and radiant, but lapis blue is all dichotomy of chill and glow. The perfect foundation for the chapel, an underlying vocabulary of unified contrast.

Vice. Virtue.

Massacre. Resurrection.

Christ in the arms of Mary. Christ slipping out of the hands of Mary.

Betrayal. Love.

Despair, and, still, Hope.

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