Provenance

Still Life of the Recently Divorced, c. 2000

I'm playing cards at my father's table. There's aluminum foil, left over from last night's dinner, mozzarella and red sauce speckling the inside. It's an alternative light source. Also on the table- an array of pool sticks, ashtrays, two empty packs of Marlboro Reds, and a spattering of white dust, maybe ashes, maybe not.

My dad holds a cigarette in between two fingers. He has four cards. I have ten. I warn him that the ash is getting long. He flicks it into the ashtray and shrugs off my acute awareness that he is smoking, and I am nine, and I recently witnessed a police officer show my fourth-grade class a detailed presentation illustrating the posthumous lungs of a chronic smoker.

He discards. I don't need the card, and he seems to have known that. I pickup a useless card, discard a useless card. I am hungry, and I don't ask for food.

"Rummy on the board."

I glance at the board. He's right.

"Do you know why it's Rummy?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you play it?"

"I don't know." I'm hungry.

His girlfriend comes into the room. She is not wearing pants. I'm the only one embarrassed.

She goes to the fridge and grabs a Coke. My mother says water is free, and free is all we can afford. There is a thrill in that red can, a financial security I feel only there, even if the couch
has cigarette burns, and the carpet hasn't been cleaned in months and the sink is filled with the entirety of the cabinets' kitchenware.

Despite the interior wreckage, I know tomorrow morning, my father will pack my lunch, and I will open it at school, and smiling up from the bottom of my plastic box will be a lunchable and a red and white, condensation-less can, and for thirty minutes, I will be "so lucky."

*Family Portrait, No. 2, c. 2000*

Same table, same array, same scenario. A month later. I am playing cards with my father, and Stacy is still here. She'll be wearing pants this time, and she'll be playing cards. I'm still hungry, and I still haven't asked for food.

"Fred, you should clean off the table," she says.

"It's not in our way," he says.

"You should at least wipe it down," she says.

And silence.

And it's as if I knew, looking back, that my dad's hesitation to wipe down the maybe ashes, maybe not would eventually account for the lack of Quality Father-Daughter Bonding Time in my Fiscal Year 2000 Report. Ticking recognition registered in my head. The transition occurred months before either of us saw it. Our relationship, shifting style and technique from the living-room-floor-rough-housing to the elegance of a bachelor's life, would seemingly be clumped into an era fondly looked on, but rarely referenced to.

And what made me even more vicious, besides the lining of my stomach crawling in on itself, and the fact that I was still losing at cards, would be Stacy. Stacy encroaching, and Stacy
imposing, and Stacy wearing pants or not wearing pants, and the Celtic cross she had on her
lower back, and the matching one on my father's thigh, which I saw swimming this morning.

It felt stupid, hating my dad's girlfriend, a shiny and new asset to his life and practically
to the world. Even at nine, I knew twenty-two was young for my father.

And she was currently preventing the time I would get to journal as time spent alone in
the comfort of my father's company. Already a miniscule amount of hours per week (per month
[per year]), the transition of Daddy's Girl to daughter with a father would advance faster when
she broke up with him.

My stomach growls, and I glow pride in hope it was a physical (cannot be helped)
reaction to my body's intolerance of Stacy.

"Are you hungry?" my dad asks. I nod in spite of myself.

"Want to go out?"

Again, comfort rises around me in a way I will be ashamed of in later years. McDonald's
reigns king in my mother's house. For my father, going out means Applebees, Fridays, or even
the pizza place down the street, with the tattoo-free waitress and the bowl-like pepperoni pieces.
And the financial security is exciting. I am comforted.

And I like McDonald's, and my mother's house. And the cheap Hamburger Helper put out
for only me to eat, and never her, and it would never occur to me that my father could put a Coke
in my lunch box and buy me a burger at a sit-down restaurant and have white clouds on the table
to maybe wash away or maybe not, because he didn't have to go hungry after his daughter.

Still Life of the Recently Divorced. No. 2, c. 2001

Fridgepack, 24-count red cardboard box, 14 soda cans left; a Newcastle Brown Ale
(bottle); horseradish mustard in the foreground juxtaposed against half-an-eggplant in a sandwich bag; along the point of reference, a bag of wilted romaine lettuce; an empty pizza box; more aluminum foil.

*Family Portrait, No. 1, c. 1998*

*The Nutcracker* is on in the background, the recording, because my mom did a stupid thing when I was five and took me to see a ballet, and I never stopped hoping. I'm trying my hand, my feet, my entire body at a *grande jete* in the living room, my dad has a tumbler in hand, and my mom is pressing the fork into the tops of the peanut butter cookies about to go into the oven. My landing is less Julie Kent, more I just broke an ornament. I look underneath my flat feet, dooming me before the cost of pointe shoes ever did, and there is the orb we bought yesterday, tucked, shattered underneath my too-small red leather mary janes.

It's tradition, was tradition, for the Carter family to go out to Wal-Mart, look at the wall of new ornaments now on display at the front of the store. My favorite were the crystals, hanging in icicle form, dripping dangerously, catching light, threatening accident. My mom liked Christmasy ornaments, images of a garish beauties holding fat, feverish babies, all winged. Dad liked baseball momentos. Or velvet covered orbs, gilded with beads. Or even mechanical animals, popping their heads out of pine tree limbs.

I happened to step on the newest velveteen orb, forest green with a web of gold thread mapping out careful snowflakes. Underneath my foot, the orb has been squashed flat.

There is a tangle. My dad sweeps me up. I am in his arms and off the ground, swept onto the nearest high ground (an arm chair). Mom comes in, peanut butter apron, peanut butter fork.

My dad is checking my feet, but they are safe, crammed into the too-small Dorothy
slippers.

My mother is confused. I stare at the flat ornament, the pas de deux finishing in the background. My dad stands up, takes a drink. My mom goes to the kitchen.

Nothing is wrong, except the ornament is broken.

*The Card Sharks*, c. 1500 something

Dad stops playing cards, due to an interruption, an intermission, a lack of interest, dangers in the waters, the clouds came in.

I will forgive the awards ceremonies (I was published at ten, Daddy, it was a poem about my imagination), and my eleventh birthday party, and the unveiling of my braces, or the time I shattered my new mouth against the pavement and broke the front teeth, and I will forgive the middle school years, and the early high school years, and the waves of social, personal, hyper anxiety, ripples of depression, layers of hatred, and I will forgive the thirteen birthday where you told me to go fuck myself, threw a beer at me, and left me to my own devices at twelve-thirty at night. I will forget how you fucked Stacy in the room next door, loud enough for both me and the neighbors to hear, especially me (nine. nine. I was nine).

What I can't won't will never forgive or forget, the hollow feeling of regret. The deity worship of Daddy, little girl obsession, bordering on delusional, falling for your impossible antics of bowling, and hockey arenas, and movies with buttered popcorn and ice skating rinks with unlimited day passes and the energy to carry me across soccer fields and the Coke in the lunch box.

And the coke. In the lunch box.
Landscape of the Child Casualty, c. 1999

“Aggie”

I turned to my mother. I’m holding on the large tank that held my hermit crab, once. My dad had the house fumigated. It died. It was laying there now, dead, its water, its food, untouched, the rocks, unmoved. She wanted to leave. At eight, I was oddly nostalgic.

“One more minute.”

“Hurry up.”

“Aren’t you going to miss it here?”

My mom pushed her limp hair out of her eyes, after shifting a box on her hip. “No.” I sighed, because I didn't understand. No one told me anything.

“Daddy killed Crabby.”

“He didn't mean to.”

“He never liked Crabby.”

“He's just a crab, Aggie.”

There would be lots of “just a crabs” in the future. “Just a house” and “just a cat,” my favorite willow was “just a tree.” “Just an orchard.” “Just a room.” “Just a friend.” “Just a school.” “Just a teacher.”

Portrait of Agatha Carter, c. 2009

Standing outside a dumpster behind a diner in Conway, South Carolina. There’s some standing water. And a fuckton of mosquitos. And it’s my third cigarette break in an hour, but it’s because Stacy Wren is sitting in my section (wearing pants), with her six-year old and her husband of a little more than six years who isn't my father. In my apron pocket, the one where I
keep my pens and my change, is a child's drawing. And her child is beautiful, with big blue eyes, and long blond hair, and a smile that makes you understand that there's a reason to the run, run, love, to the married-too-quickly. To the starve for your daughter, to the yearn for forgiveness for not wiping down the table, or even to the need to wipe down the table in the first place.

And there is a dark looming, in and out with cigarette smoke, circling in on the chipping paint of the diner's exterior and the stench of boiling garbage in July. I am slipping in and out of a heaviness, yanking my heart down to an empty pit questioning the habits of a decade.

Unsure of why Stacy, with the Celtic tattoo on her lower back and her taste in stereotypical, college student music, and her knack for picking up married men in dark pool rooms gets that. Gets the smiley-face-pancake-drawing-daughter with the bright eyes. Gets the clarity-inspiring smile, and the husband of, at least, passivity, if not passion, and the coffee and the orange juice, next to the chocolate chip pancakes, all of it, all on a busy Sunday morning after the 9:30am Presbyterian service.

I put out my cigarette, tuck the drawing into my apron, and I go in to drop off their check.