Relief

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Has it ever been absent, this desire
for every moment to stand in relief,
the unending row of them set
like solitaires into what passes,
burnished to unbearable depths?

—Melanie Rehak, "The Modernist Impulse"

I

I woke to a downpour the March morning in 1989, when I had to identify my mother's body at the New York City morgue. Drenched, the island of Manhattan smells cleansed, an idea of earth under all that granite and steel and glass. When I opened my eyes the bedroom seemed fashioned not of four walls, but of details. The shade covering the window; a yellow number two pencil in a cup; an address book opened to the B section—all these objects looked as if they had been placed on top of surfaces and polished while I slept. In spite of the day before, the day of my mother's heart stopping, of waiting and her two suicide notes, of possibly too much wine and definitely not enough sleep, I could make out with ease the rip in the shade, the eraser's rubbed-down edge, the phone number for the city coroner pencilled next to my mother's name.

I dressed and made my way downtown, toting an umbrella, identification, keys to my mother's apartment, all the necessary paraphernalia of a person attempting to fit into a world where the rules seem to have suddenly changed. Entering the lobby of the morgue I looked up to a large plaque with raised letters that pronounced Fiorello Laguardia, Mayor. Contem-plating the possibility that news of Laguardia's death forty-two years earlier had somehow not been communicated within this building, I felt the first trick of relief. I embraced the absurdity that you could die and still hold office, at least here where the city keeps the bodies of the unidentified dead.

The previous day I'd confirmed for the police, the paramedics, and the coroner that the naked body stretched out on the bed belonged to my mother.

"Yes, that's her," I said. Why, I wondered, had no one bothered to shut her eyes, wide open in terrified surprise? Her mouth was fixed into a perfect O, a scream I couldn't hear. She regretted her suicide, I thought, and was on the edge of dying when she realized her mistake. My mother had lived on edges—poverty, depression, having to be an adult before she completed childhood—and she died knowing their sharpness.

I was struck then by my mother's swollen feet, and in an attempt to relieve the swelling, I knelt on the floor and rubbed them. Maybe it was my guilt I was trying to rub away. Perhaps this act was simply the final performance of one I'd rehearsed throughout childhood on Saturday nights, when my mother and I would stay up late and watch old horror movies. The toes were almost too hardened to massage, the heels cool, the insteps stiff. As I massaged those feet, I knew it was the last time I would touch my mother's body.

After I'd talked to the police, I signed all the forms in which I acknowledged being the daughter of the deceased woman in the apartment. But because of a law about unattended deaths, I still needed to go downtown the next day to identify her body, and I resented this redundancy.

I see myself standing on the wet floor of the morgue's lobby. Pouring rain outside. Folded, dripping umbrellas hooked over peoples' arms. The smell of drenched raincoats, the wad of tear-soaked tissues in pockets. Presiding over this frozen moment is Mayor Laguardia, a dead man whose vital record, like my mother's, is incomplete.

The woman at the morgue placed a Polaroid head shot of my mother on the small table between us. I had imagined a more clinical episode, like something from TV, which involved a walk down a corridor, a stranger peeling a sheet off my mother's body in a room of white tile and surgical steel. Instead I sat in a small cubicle that was bare, save for a box of Kleenex and some chairs. Painted in a green that is neither sage nor olive, a color I believe is mixed especially for institutions. A liminal

zone between the announcement of death and its confirmation. A place governed by hidden people who typed memos, drank coffee, and washed their hands while I sat and stared at a Polaroid. The dead separated from us by walls and photographs.

No one had warned me that the features of my mother's face had experienced a kind of inexplicable shift, as though they had been moved to the right of the meridian defined by her nose. The O her mouth had formed only ten hours ago had collapsed into lips that should have been parallel but were askew. I thought of all the years she had meticulously spent "putting on her face," only to wear a final version that disturbed the structure of her cheekbone and eroded the curve of her lip. What if I had not been able to identify her? What happens to a daughter who cannot point with defiance and certainty to her own mother and say *yes, that's her?*

My mother's true identity was as foreign to me, I know now, as her face in that picture. She bleached her hair blonde and trained her skin to alabaster by avoiding the sun—who would look for a woman who was half-Jewish in all that paleness? To attract men she lined her mouth carefully with fire engine-red lipstick, but refused to kiss lest it smear. She used wigs and powders and different colors with elaborate care. She even paid to have her nose broken and reset so that no one would notice it. My mother had spent her life mastering the art of disguise, learning how to stand out and to be concealed, hidden in plain sight, as they say.

Perhaps the plunge into suicide had stripped away all that artifice and raised up the true design of her face, which seemed to emerge through the mask she had spent so much time fashioning. The face I saw in the picture was unforgiving, the cheekbones so chiseled they appeared stripped of the softness I'd relied on all my life.

Sitting in that room in the morgue, gazing at the Polaroid, I wondered how I'd confirm my mother's identity. I barely recognized her, and I craved the familiarity of her disguise. How could I say that her body, which was nowhere in sight, belonged to this image of a face that did not belong to her?

The woman at the morgue shuffled some papers. I looked up, but we never made eye contact.

"Yes," I said, "that's her."

Late October, 1990. Three days before my older half-brother Ronnie died, I contemplated sneaking into his hospital room and opening the morphine drip all the way. Instead I spoke awkward prayers to a creator I couldn't envision as I stood in a circle with my family in a hospital corridor on the AIDS ward, my head bent and eyes closed while a rabbi led us in prayer. How to petition God? I wondered then as somebody paged a doctor and people walked past us. I asked that my brother be relieved of his suffering. But my father and my brother's mother, I suspected, requested that he remain bound to them. Our prayers would cancel the others', and then what?

When my brother died, he wore such a peaceful expression that I barely recognized him. There was his salt-and-pepper hair against the white pillowcase, the same curls that were drenched in sweat several days ago now seemed soft and clean. The sheet, which had before only emphasized his emaciation, appeared to caress his body as if giving it back its substance. During the last year of his life, my brother's face seemed pulled down as his cheeks hollowed and his jawbone protruded. The creases at the corners of his eyes tightened, squeezed out the laugh lines, and hardened into an expression of permanent anger, or perhaps regret. It seems peculiar now to think that this man, who had raged his entire life, stopped raging when death approached.

I imagine that my brother welcomed death like a sentry who, relieved of watching for danger, succumbs to sleep. I like to think of him lifting off from the landscape of pain his body had become. Like a heron I once saw that unfolded its wings and levitated from the road. Gone, with just the slightest rustle of feather.

II

Procrastination and numb dread lay at the heart of my inability to scatter my mother's ashes, and so they remained on a shelf in my bedroom closet for almost two years. Sometimes when I opened the closet door to reach for a dress or a blouse, the sight of that plain cardboard box containing the can of her ashes on the shelf would freeze me in place. What kind of person keeps her mother's ashes on a shelf in the closet like a hat that's gone out of style? I reminded myself that no sacred niches decorated the walls of my apartment. There were no shrines. No one had taught me about the etiquette of ashes. Since I wasn't planning on urns or a mausoleum, the closet seemed the most discrete arrangement.

Arrangements. This is the word for everything that

must be completed once someone dies—the repeated telephone conversation with family and friends, the wording of the obituary, the date and time of the service, the crematorium, the paperwork, the transportation, the disposal of personal affairs, the deposition of remains. In arrangements, though, there is a hint of relief, the kind that is brought about by dissolution. "Wind blowing over water disperses it, dissolving it into foam and mist," says the *Yi Ching*. First there is the gathering, the accumulation of family and friends in one space (too small), the never-ending food (too much) that suddenly appears. In this swell of comfort you feel awkward and exposed, like the subject of an overheard secret. Then the gathering dissolves: you wrap and store the leftovers, wring out the sponge used to clean the counter, turn out the light on the fingerprints that linger on the refrigerator door. Later you touch and sort and discard and keep for another time the artifacts—a fur hat on my brother's bureau that my father cannot wear but which fits me; a tiny bear carved of jade on my mother's perfume tray. Eventually all these objects are not only handled more than once, but packed into containers, some resurfacing on shelves or from drawers years later, others given to friends, shipped off to the Salvation Army or carried off to landfills. These things we once thought were useful or beautiful disperse or are buried, as if there were no point to having them in the first place. But in the act of letting go of them, there is a relief that they no longer have to be carried or cared for or worried about.

Two months after Ronnie died, I made arrangements to move to France, as if I were another artifact left behind after my mother's death, as if I needed to ship myself off to some place where no one would recognize that I belonged to her. But before I left, I made arrangements to scatter my mother's ashes.

III

A freezing December day, old snow and ice hardened in the New Jersey suburbs where I've come to leave my mother's remains. I'm with Laurie, my mother's goddaughter, whose deceased mother was my godmother, and whose ashes she's come to scatter. We form a private club—gloved hands, cans of ashes hidden in the bags we carry. Something about how we are padded in layers of clothing, how we each chose similar canvas bags for this excursion, makes me feel conspicuous. We stand in the backyard of the house Laurie grew up in, where my mother and I spent Thanksgiving and Christmas when I was a child. The house is now for sale, and it feels eerie out here under the bare trees, two young women in winter coats carrying their mothers' remains in totes. The reflection of our shapes and the contours of the bags seem pasted on the surface of the dark windows. It would be easier, I think, to be that reflection of myself, temporary and raised on glass, than to stand here and shiver in the icy wind, ready to consign to permanency my mother's remains.

"Right here," Laurie says, pointing to two old trees. "We should scatter them right here, under these two maples."

I agree. In the fall, one of these trees burns yellow, the other red, just like our blonde and copper-haired mothers. We remove our respective cans from the bags. Remains, the stuff inside is called. Remains, I think, of women who orchestrated holiday lights, gifts, and party dresses. Women who presided over each year's variation on the turkey and pecan pie, twice a year within a month, every year. Women who said things like "beauty hurts," and who taught us that birth control, blush, and bleach are essential for life as a woman. None of this is written on the plain tins. Nothing about how they had invented themselves with ordinary tools like eyeliner and lipstick. It seems a disservice to them both to be reduced to *remains*, packed into containers like small paint cans, without even a label like *Butter Whisper* or *Adobe Dust*. I wrestle briefly with the contradiction of remains as matter that does not remain still, but that drifts and settles, settles and drifts, and refuses to stay anywhere for very long. I fish around in my pocket for a quarter to pry off the top of my mother's can.

I can't open it. Is the lid sealed with super glue? The superstitious side of me thinks my failure is the result of having waited so long to do this. Maybe I was wrong before about remains not remaining, maybe if I don't open this can, my mother will remain with me forever. I ask Laurie if she has a screwdriver. She doesn't. She tries to get the lid off and breaks a nail, which makes us both laugh until we cry, just as both our mothers would have done.

I keep working at the can until what seems like half an hour elapses. Under all my layers of clothing I feel cold and sweaty at the same time. The stubborn quality of this moment is not lost on me as the final

complicity of our two mothers, friends who considered one another sisters. After the sixth or seventh attempt to open the can, I feel a surge of adrenaline rush down to my toenails and out of my fingertips. One more pry with the quarter, and the lid opens, releasing a gasp of vacuum-sealed air. In this energy-charged state I'm also able to open Laurie's container.

I want to say that I felt shocked when I looked in the can and saw my mother, reduced to ashes inside a plastic bag tied with a twistie. I wasn't shocked, but relieved by the plainness of her remains, how their dusty grayness obscured the Technicolor complexity of my mother when she was alive. An emptiness settled over me, flooded each pore and hair follicle. Even though Laurie stood by my side, even though her hand was probably on my arm, I felt more alone than I have ever felt before or since.

I don't recall opening the bag to disperse my mother's ashes underneath the trees, or what I said at that moment, but once the bag was emptied, I sensed myself as very light and small, almost invisible. Anchored to all things, yet hovering above the world.

My father has come to Paris, where I live, to scatter my brother's remains. Mary, my father's wife, holds his left arm; on his right shoulder he carries a bag holding my brother's ashes. At the hotel, he unpacks.

The can with the ashes is still inside a cardboard box on whose surface is inscribed my father's name and address in worn letters. I imagine him unable to sleep, wandering into the den—where Mary insists he keep that particular package—and holding the box in his hands. I picture him absentmindedly rubbing his fingers over the name inked on the cardboard, as if that was not his name, and this box did not contain his oldest son. I wonder if he ever questions what part he might have played in my brother's death.

"Take that home with you tonight," Mary says. She's unable to look at the box, to even say the word *box*. I consider her request, the whisper of despair in her voice. It dawns on me: what first-generation Jewish immigrant, raised in a kosher home, would feel comfortable with the incinerated residue of anyone, let alone a child? Into my black canvas satchel it goes. I take the metro home with what remains of my brother in a bag that now hangs from my shoulder.

Writing this now, I am unable to summon those faces from the metro that evening. Perhaps I had cast my eyes downward, arms folded on top of the parcel in my lap. Maybe I was too tired to register any more information that described this episode in my family's life. But I can see all the implications now: the father brings the son into heaven, the sister takes the brother underground. They carry him in the same way to different destinations, one relieving the other of this obligation.

My brother had asked to have his ashes scattered on Mediterranean shores, but my father considers the request too expensive to honor, too complicated to arrange. In his final act as The Patriarch against whom my brother revolted, my father decides on the Normand coastline instead.

It's raining—a June mist promising rain, really—when we take my brother's ashes to Deauville. This is the France of Camembert and apple brandy, of Henry James and Marcel Proust. These are the shores of D-day, and the birthplace of Impressionism. Of course we are not here for any of that, but as we walk past the casinos along the grand boardwalk, I feel asthmatic ghosts beside me in the damp air.

We stand at the edge of a low soft tide, the open can of my brother's remains at our feet. My father takes the first handful and casts the ashes to the sea. He is crying. I start to curl my fingers around the dry, gray stuff where life once was fleshy and brown when I notice a woman walking toward us. For a moment, I'm a little panicked—what if she's patrolling this shore for people just like us, casting the ashes of the dead into the water? That seems unlikely, but perhaps she is on the lookout for littering. If I were standing where she is, I might see two people throwing things away.

I point her out to my father, put the lid back on the can, close a tight fist around the handful of my brother's ashes, and thrust that hand into my coat pocket. When the woman nears, I see that her wispy, dark hair is greasy, and her black pants and jacket are faded. "Do you have a light?" she asks. *Do you have some fire?* is the literal translation of this French query, and I realize she's holding a cigarette in her right hand.

I want to laugh, the absurdity is so complete, but I also want her to keep walking so my father and I can finish what we started. As it is, I happen to have what

she needs, a light, but it's in the same pocket with my closed and hidden fist. I reach around my back with my left hand to retrieve my lighter and light her cigarette. She takes a deep draw on it and exhales. I'm relieved she hasn't noticed my awkward movement.

"I simply love smoking in the rain on the beach," she says. She begins to walk away, then stops, her feet just inches away from the can of my brother's ashes, which she eyes.

"Collecting seashells?" she asks.

I nod. She smiles at me, continues walking. I've seen no shells on this beach, no starfish or sand dollars either. Nothing that would stop me in my meandering along the shore and beckon me to pocket some proof I was here. And the birds are strangely absent too, even gulls. It is as if the scene in which I participated occurred just above the surface of things, in a place where evidence becomes so light that it dissolves.

We had gone to that beach to leave something behind, not collect. Some part of me must have felt obligated to preserve that moment, so I gathered its details. Her voice, which seemed to match the wispiness of her hair and the fadedness of her clothing. The almost impossible maneuver of lighting her cigarette. The dialogue. I did what I always do when faced with a potential memory: I chose the most absurd part and catalogued its fragments.

"What was that all about?" my father asks.

Laughter would be a relief right now, but it would be inappropriate—my father will take it the wrong way and never forgive me. I explain to him without the slightest trace of a smile that the woman needed a light.

As soon as she's receded into the distance, I release my fistful of ashes. I watch the smaller flakes hover before they drift to the edge of the sea, and the heavier pieces fall directly into the wet sand. Suddenly all things water here have assumed a cadence that contradicts my urge to laugh: the raised rhythm of the waves against the shore, the rain falling in fat drops now, threatening to drench if we don't hurry. Something in the splatter, ebb, and flow suggests a flat seriousness that belongs to me simply because I'm standing here now, watching the remains of my brother float in the water and disperse in the air. I'm not too concerned that a fragment of my brother may have lodged in my coat pocket, tangled perhaps in a loose thread, his remains remaining. Instead I concentrate on emptying the can, and getting my father and me to shelter before we get soaked.

IV

For most people, rainy days signify sadness, and the cold instills loneliness. It works that way in books sometimes, or on TV movies. But for me, rain and cold backdrop those moments when grief—that ache we carry underneath like a secret aquifer—suddenly subsides into a sense of relief. I'm not talking here of release from distress or sorrow: the relieved sigh when you finally put down your heavy suitcase, or the body's sag after days of weeping. Instead, I mean the relief of contrast, of projected or outlined edges—think relief map, or a bas-relief sculpture where figures rise out of a stone slab. Or, for me, the shiny Polaroid that surfaces each time I hear the word *morgue*. Or the city corner where I stand, transfixed by the sunshine on a building where my dead brother lies, the front of the hospital pushing out from all the architecture next to it. In French, this idea of relief is expressed in the word *relever*, which means to rise again, to be raised. In ballet the raising of the body initiated at the toes is called a *relevé*. This pressing up and onto the balls of the feet begins at the ground, spirals up the turned-out legs and hips into the torso, and lifts the dancer's head. Rising again, raised.

I like the idea that emotional rawness can suddenly sharpen ordinary objects. Amid the monotony of grief, everyday things—window shades, pencil erasers—stand out and help me find my way. Some- times these projections manifest as the absurd of the ordinary—a dead Mayor who presides over the city morgue that holds my mother's body, or the woman who interrupts the solemnity of scattering ashes asking for a light, only to flick her own ashes away.

But perhaps it's the more subtle experience of relief as a kind of lifting up which most interests me. Relief lifts us up and lets us go—a daughter floats above the shadows while releasing her mother's ashes; a sister grips the edge of stifled laughter, suspended between the shards of her brother that drift in all directions. I observe as I participate, like those figures in the stone, who are both grounded in and raised above the slab. There I am, my feet firmly planted on the beach at Deauville, or on a frozen suburban yard in New Jersey, and there at the same time is my own absence, the shape of what is not there. Relieved of my weight yet holding onto it.