

THE SMALL SELVES HAUNTING US IN THE STONES

The poem begins

Neither in word
Nor meaning but in the small
Selves haunting

Us in the stones

—George Oppen, “If It All Went Up in Smoke,”
from *Primitive*

I. FIRST MEMORY

1. *To be*

I open the faded, red velvet box to find the moonstone ring my mother wore as a girl, touching its slickness with a fingertip. The oval hemisphere, held aloft on four minute, gold palms, has the completeness of a sealed world, a snow globe or terrarium. The ring fits me—our girl selves nest.

I love looking at the world through transparent things. After the first still, cold night of winter, when a skin of ice grows over the cove, I shatter it into panes so I can view the world through it. But, even more, I love looking *into*, and losing myself *in* things. Looking into the moonstone is like looking down into the cove, when the sun illuminates sediments and lives too small for the naked eye, so that light radiates out around whatever point you stare at, the somber iris of the world.

My mother teaches me to look for moonstones among the small nuggets of rosy feldspar and smoky quartz on the beach. Like my mother, my head is usually bowed; I am looking for something rare.

If she were to be a stone, my mother would be the moonstone with its everywhere, ungraspable light.

2. *She is*

Lily, do you have any memories of Nana before her dementia?

I remember her standing on the shore. She seemed very tall, standing like this, with her hands clasped behind her back. Tall and like a queen. She was looking out over the water, but then she turned to smile down on me, and I saw your face in her face.

How do you know this is *before* her dementia?

Her hair isn't long.

3. *She is being*

Reaching through the rails of the hospice bed to stroke her hand, my wrists remember the bars of the hospital crib.

The crib is strange, a trap or cage. I've been sleeping in a bed since my mother came home with the baby a year ago. I'm reaching through the bars for her; I'm grasping them to climb. My mother is explaining that I need to stay in the crib. She sits on the edge of a cot, in her pale blue, crisp nightgown. Her voice is an unhurried heartbeat.

I remember the slide's hot tongue on the backs of my thighs, then tumbling through air. I was limp when she gave me to my father, who cradled me in the back seat of a bystander's car as they sped to the emergency room. She had to stay behind with my baby brother and older sister; she couldn't know my father dug the dirt out of my mouth, and I began to breathe.

My sisters and I sit with my mother long into the night. My youngest sister looks at her with naked yearning. *I used to sit on her lap and press my ear into her chest. I just want to hear her heartbeat one more time.* My older sister and I lower the bars of the hospital bed, and Liza sits carefully, then leans over and places her head between our mother's breasts, rubbing a fold of her nightgown between the fingers of each hand.

I take hold of my mother's finger, and we walk down to the viewing window to see the tightly wrapped newborns sleeping in clear basinetts. My first memory: the newness of having her all to myself.

4. *She was*

The coma sealed her off completely. But all my life I had wondered what was going through her mind. She often sat this way, eyes closed but a tiny crease of concentration between them. She always appeared to be listening.

Her journals reveal the parts of her—candid, fierce, and contrary—that she rarely shared. Once a year, when I visit my father, I steal them away to the cabin and read late into the night; in the silence, an owl call is the gentlest eddy. I walk the bridge of her words back to her, toward her voice; I pour her mind into my mind's vessel.

I have never, I realize now, not been depressed. Occasionally I feel extreme pleasure for the moment—a grandchild's birth, other momentous occasions—but as for being joyful on a regular basis, it is so foreign to me. I slip so easily into

a safety zone—a limbo where I don't have to deal with anything. Even the birth of our own babies didn't evoke the kind of passionate feelings I see in others. My mind is always on guard—against what?

In her journal, she repeatedly describes herself as *numbed down*. Was this, then, the quality that allowed me to recognize her as my mother, as my safety, the way a newborn can distinguish the odor of its mother's skin?

Once, when her father found in her room a folder of clippings from fashion magazines—pretty dresses, hairstyles, instructions for giving oneself a manicure—he erupted in rage, then ripped the folder out of her hand. She never saw it again. In her journal, she describes sitting on her bed, losing all sense of time, repeating what became her mantra *I don't care I don't care I don't care I don't care—*

5. *She was being*

As a toddler, my mother leaned upon the door handle of the moving car as it went around a curve, and tumbled into the gutter.

I knew her scars intimately. Quiet as a shadow, I would watch her pencil a bridge over the sunken, shiny road parting the arch of her eyebrow. One nostril had been torn, and the family doctor had rejoined the cartilage with crude stitches, the mismatched edges healing to a ridge.

She saw these scars as proof her parents hadn't valued her. That when she was broken, she was clumsily patched up. Cinder and gravel from the winter shoulder would occasionally surface through her skin, even in middle age. Unassimilable grit of her past.

In my research, I read *Dementia is thought to be more common among those who have suffered a traumatic brain injury in early life.*

II. FIRST, MEMORY

6. *She has been*

When her father died, she repossessed the album he made of her childhood, padded with newspaper clippings reporting her swimming wins, race times, and diving scores. In each clipping, her father has encircled her name and his own carefully in red ink.

She stands on a box set on the silvery planks of the Shennecossett boat house, flanked by the second and third place girls. A lock of damp hair, dark and solid as if carved of mahogany, curls over her brow; her body's planes curve with muscle. She stands at attention, pressing her thighs together, her arms rigid at her sides. Resentment, shyness, and a hunger for attention smolder in her prematurely womanly face. Her father, her swim coach and head of lifeguards, is behind the camera. In summer, he woke her at dawn to swim a compulsory mile in the frigid waters of the Long Island Sound.

He's captioned many of the photographs: *Janie modeling for Daddy* [my mother at four, wearing an eyelet dress and black patent leather shoes] *Janie's still winning and still pretty to look at* [my mother holding a trophy in each hand] *How I loved her* [a series of photos of my mother as a voluptuous fourteen-year-old, the straps of her bathing suit pushed down off her shoulders]. This caption is written in shaky block letters.

I leaf through the pages in reverse to return to the beginning of her life. My mother is an infant, so young she cannot even hold up her head. Her cheek creases and her lips part, pressed against her

father's shoulder. We look up at the dark shock of her hair, at his deeply tanned neck. His back, clothed in a thin white t-shirt, is a muscular shield swelling to fill the frame.

7. *She has been being*

In a notebook, I find a square of pale green paper with the faintest penciling:

*A cry—I turn to
comfort, to hold—
and someone else
is there—my role
is someone else's now—how
can it be—20 years
slip away—I'm a
young ~~mother~~ now—
a reflection of my own
mother appears
at the door.*

Her firstborn, my older sister, had given birth. Her distilled, minimalistic meditation reveals that time was fluid for her—that she easily became “lost in time,” whether in an earlier age in her own life or in other lifetimes. That she had difficulty distinguishing another's emotions from her own, the empath's plight. But perhaps most importantly, in papers like this that filled her desk and in the five journals written in her fluid, lilting hand, I discover proof of what I'd always suspected: that she had the mind of a writer, and that I got this gift from her.

8. *She had been*

The morning of my first day without a mother, I find a cupped stack of snapshots on the glass topped dining table. Next to them, my mother's braid, the ends banded, enclosed in the plastic bag supplied by the cancer charity. I had held the cord as my sister's scissors chewed through the layered velvet of its body.

It takes me hours to write her obituary. I have to touch her braid; I'm compelled to examine this collection of photographs, all new to me. Here is my mother as a toddler, barefoot, her ruffled pinafore slipping off a tanned shoulder. She smiles impishly, leaning and looking to the side as if about to dash off, the ends of her curls sun-bleached, the skirt of her dress blown back in a breeze.

She had been whole; she had been joyful.

In a vertiginous instant, I'm her mother. It's not too late to prevent her from being damaged. I slip this photograph into a pocket of my poetry notebook. Later, when no one's around, I open her braid and remove a lock of hair. I coil the lock and place it and the photograph in a cellophane envelope. I'm not ready to let go of her body entirely. For weeks I take the envelope out of my notebook many times a day, opening its flap to see if I can still catch her body scent, which my sister claims I share.

In my journal, in place of a date, I write *this is the fourth day without a mother in the world the ninth day without a mother in the world the twentieth day without a mother in the world*

Lily develops an intense anxiety. If she can't hear my presence in the house, she calls out for me, and sometimes runs, retching with sobs of terror, into the garden to find me.

9. *She had been being*

When I told her my wedding would be in Los Angeles, where my in-laws resided, my mother acquiesced dully. A few days later she called to tell me she could not afford, physically or emotionally, to make the trip.

I pleaded with her, using all the arguments at my disposal to induce her to change her mind. Pressure only hardened her against me. My father came alone.

In her journal, she is indignant at my inability to recognize her fragility in the wake of her mother's death, or how the cross-country flight would intensify the pain of her fibromyalgia. She thinks I'm capitulating to his family, putting their needs before my family's own.

The night of my wedding, she had a nightmare: a man batters his way through the bedroom door, lifting a long blade in his hand. A memory surfaces: a phallus, pale, disembodied, coming toward her in the dark.

All my life my mother had called her father her lifesaver, the only parent to show her affection. All my life she had been telling us, blank-faced as if hypnotized, that they had played a game in which she sat on his hips as he lay on the floor.

We began to notice problems with her short-term memory; she would make the same dinner three nights in a row. She'd make a pot of coffee and then ask, brightly, gratefully, *Oh how wonderful! Who made the coffee?*

After years of suppressing her memories, it seemed she had damaged her ability to form memories of the immediate past.

In her file, the neurologist attributes her memory issues to the trauma of recovering the truth.

III. MEMORY STONES

10. She would be

In Florida, my mother would wade into the surf, feeling her way along wave-planed limestone knubbly with shell; when the foam drew back she would scan the stones for net weights or tools. In Connecticut, she'd crouch on the shore, prying up stones, scanning for the cutting edge or the groove worn by a thumb or fingertips. *In another life*, she used to say, *I'd be an archeologist*.

When she found an intriguing stone, she'd grip it and turn it to feel how it fit her hand. She would attend to it, inclining her head slightly, as if the stone were imparting its residual human energy or charge of natural holiness.

I asked her, once, if there was a chance she had a Native American ancestor. Yes, she said, suddenly present and fluent during a phone conversation in which she had deferred to my father's flawless grasp of their daily narrative. Her grandmother claimed to be descended from an upper New York State tribe. She had a broad, somewhat flattened, hooked nose, and wore her white hair, which she never cut, in two braids coiled upon her head.

11. She would have been

Plastic bins filled the entire space under my parents' king bed in Florida; then the stones overflowed into the wild area of saw palmetto in the corner of their yard. Six or seven years before she died, she decided to photograph them. She selected her prized artifacts, arranging them on a square of dark blue felt.

I found the photos on her computer when I was looking for pictures of my children. A thief in an artist's studio, I transferred the images to my memory stick. I had no context for these portraits in stone, but I instantly recognized them as an artistic expression. Only later did I notice the quarter placed to show scale.



In each arrangement, the balance of shapes, textures, and responses to light compose a unique utterance.

Her journal describes the project as the attempt to reveal the stones' expressive physicality, as if the image were the medium of communication—a way to translate the stones' language. It was also an act of devotion and reverence. *I love these stones, their shapes in my hand, their soft warmth and ancientness. They speak to each other. They speak to me.*

As her dementia progressed, she anchored her mind through stones, searching for new ones, piling them in pleasing arrangements, because they held the dearest and most fundamental meaning to her.

Transcending language.

Being a language.

12. She would be being

My mother believed she had lived many lifetimes, each with its own path of learning.

I realized this morning that my supposed lesson in this lifetime—being humbled—has been a dominant theme—someone else imposing their needs, wishes, emotions on me and having little care for the consequences to me. I feel invisible sometimes, vulnerable all the time, and very expendable. Dear God, how do I live my best life in the shadow of that? Dear God, please help me to find my true self, be my best self, while still following my path of learning.

She viewed the chronic pain of fibromyalgia as a lesson in humility. She confided this to me when I was in my early twenties, and I vividly recall my revulsion. All my ambitions have been defenses against these spurs to humility: the limitations—emotional, physical, interpersonal, and professional—that encircled her.

Had we, her children, limited her, making her feel invisible and depleted, coming to her with our problems and needs even into adulthood?

Or worse, intensified her sense of inadequacy? Over and over, her journal registers her sense of being *inept*. I now see the many subtle ways in which I showed her up by travelling alone, having my own apartment, and devoting myself to my career, as if to say *I am not stuck, the way you are*.

Or competed with her. Once, as a child, in one of our rare verbal confrontations, I hissed *Why are you being so veHEment*. She paused, and her frown lifted and broke into a radiant smile as she said, *VEEhement*. I was mortified; words were supposed to be *my* medium, *my* power.

13. *She would have been being*

In hospice, she grows agitated. We all have the sense of waiting to be seen by someone, for some labor to be induced. Suddenly she lifts the blanket off her abdomen, leans to the side and asks my father in a hushed and urgent voice, *is there a baby in there?*

Talk turns to her niece, who has just had a baby girl. *I want to breathe in a baby*, my mother murmurs. My father asks her if he can tell me about a dream she had a few weeks ago—she had woken up suddenly, crying out *I'm going to have a baby!* They had laughed together over this dream, imagining their children's and grand-children's surprise.

Weeks later, running and weeping on a woodland trail in a world without my mother, I have a vision that stops my tears: that all this life, from infancy through wrinkled old age, is a gestation, and our death day is really an emergence into a new element, a birthday into a new way of being.

As I stop to process this thought, my hair lifts off my neck; an antic whirlwind of energy has come up behind me and encircled me, goosing me, ruffling my hair and clothes.

IV. MEMORY, STONES

14. *She will be*

Mother's Day. I've given my whole self to my garden, planting out seedlings, weeding, raking the oak leaves out from beneath the lavender. I'm about to call my mother when my father calls me: she went into seizures and is now in intensive care, intubated and heavily sedated.

I fly East, my heart shuttling between hope and dread, as if, like fog and water, they are two states of the same matter.

After four days, she surfaced weak but disarmingly herself, delighted to find all four of her children in the room, deeply appreciative of a sip of ginger ale, and grateful to have been let out of the "submarine." She was moved to a sunny yellow room with a view of a shingled cottage. I spend the afternoon with her, amazed at how *herself* she seems, despite persisting confusion. When a young woman comes in to take her vitals, my mother looks up into her face and exclaims with pride and wonder, *All my girl scouts—they've all grown up!* Yet she has the calm of a person returned to themselves.

But at 1 a.m., the hospital calls. They've moved her into a glass-walled observation room near the nurses' desk; she's agitated and paranoid, a condition called sun-downing. *Can you reassure her?* they ask. My father and I both get on the line. She was just sitting by the fire, she explains, when these strange women came into the house and tried to give her drugs. My father reminds her with intense gentleness that she's been very ill; *you had seizures, remember? and the ambulance took you to the hospital.* She seems doubtful when he assures her she's safe. *Who is this?* She asks suspiciously. *It's Art, honey, Art and your daughter Karen.* I promise her that we will be there first thing in the morning; if she goes to

sleep, she will wake to find us with her. A brooding pause. *I wish I could believe you*, she says. My heart sinks. My worst fear is being realized: that she no longer will recognize us.

When she returns to the house after her week-long fugue, she looks around with delighted uncertainty, as if she is a tourist. Then she catches sight of her window boxes, which she had planted before her collapse, and her face dawns with pleasure and recognition. She greets them tenderly: *hello, all my little boy flowers and girl flowers.*

15. *She will be being*

My mother lived alone in Florida for two considerable periods: in her early forties when she spent winters there to ease her fibromyalgia, and in her late fifties, when she had recovered the memories of sexual abuse.

Finally, she was able to pursue the hard work of recovery without having to consider others' needs, or being defined by her roles as wife or mother. She felt stronger and healthier on her own, more secure in her sense of self. Her diary gives me glimpses, now precious, into her daily life. She would often walk to the Loxahatchee waterway, strip to her bathing suit, and swim out to the sandbar to bask in the sun. I can picture the beauty of her natural, confident strokes. Floating on her back, she watched ospreys gliding, circling, and riding the updrafts, thinking *I want to do that*. She believed a person's spirit could enter an animal, that if a bird or manatee approached her, it was a message from a lost loved one. Whenever she looked into the world, the world looked back into her.

Three months after her death, I go away by myself to a cabin surrounded by ferns, nettles, and trillium, needing to restore my sense of myself, as if my *self* were a disturbed body of water that only solitude could clear. I set down the weight of others' needs and expectations and am alone with my

heartful of grief. A small black snake with eyes like obsidian beads pauses on the path to observe me. It doesn't move, even as I crouch before it, even as I stroke the pliable fine mail of its back.

A year after her death, I'm diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

A lifetime of mirroring my mother—on what verge will it stop? Is this a drastic tactic in my struggle to come close to her?

16. She will have been

I still have the faint picture of my mother's hand, lit only by the monitors, which my sister sent to me on Mother's Day. On the night flight toward her intensive care room, I depleted my phone battery, looking at the pale, oval nails, the shapely fingers that will not have time to thicken or gnarl. By the time I arrived at the hospital, the breathing tube had been removed, and in her drug-induced sleep she murmured continuously like a brook—she who had been so quiet, who always had spoken her inner thoughts reluctantly. As if she is an oracle, I lean close and transcribe the fragments into my journal.

Now it's Valentine's day, and I know I will lose my mother, most probably within the week. As each hour of my night flight passes, I struggle against the desire to arrive, because arriving brings her death closer in time and space.

She will be able to speak for a single day. Gradually, she falls into a coma that seems like a dreamless sleep. Her dying seems like one long day, since she never wakes. The days are marked by the hibiscus flower we put behind her ear; when it grows limp, we replace it with a fresh bloom. For five whole days she will not move at all; the olive shell we put in the palm of her hand is there for her last breath.

Whenever I work on this essay, I'm overcome by the urge to sleep. I curl up on the small couch in my university office, dimly aware of the conversations taking place in the hall, my colleagues' offices, or the classrooms nearby. Whole sections of this piece come to me in dream, as if fed to me.

17. *She will have been being*

Her death was not so much a surprise, as the disorienting acceleration of what we feared. When my children and I visited in December, she could repeat all my daughters' favorite stories, such as how she met my father on the beach at Bluff Point when she was fourteen. She had gotten her hair cut and bought a pale pink bathing suit with her own money. *I wanted to be*, she said, hesitating a little, *all new*.

My father chose not to reveal to her the diagnosis, because she couldn't have remembered it, and he would have to repeat over and over *glioblastoma*, that terminal decree. She thought that, like her mother, she had had suffered a stroke and been moved to a rehab hospital. *I hope they can help me*, she said the first day, but as more of her brothers arrived and as her children flew to Florida from Connecticut and New Hampshire and Oregon, she stopped speaking of treatment.

Glio, from the Greek root for clay; *blastoma*, from the Greek root for budding. There is a poetic justice to her brain tumor. It was the size of a palm-filling stone. There is a mercy to the tumor, which spared her the terrifying dismantling of advanced dementia, taking her gently and quickly, with little physical pain.

Late at night of the last evening she was conscious, she said to my sister, *I know I need to leave, but I'm not sure how. Can I leave out the window?* she asked, looking wonderingly at the night sky. *Can I leave that way?* she asked, looking toward the door.

In the morning, I try to open the windows so her spirit can leave, but they are nailed shut.

V. THE SMALL SELVES HAUNTING US IN THE STONES

18. *She be*

Returning home for her August memorial, the first thing I do is walk down the steep trail to the shore.

Still there, the stones she fit into the seams of the boulders and packed between the roots of trees.

I crouch at the tideline to look close, to see if I can find any particle of her ash among the pebbles, sand, and shining flecks of mica. Years ago, she had said to my father *scatter me everywhere*, so he had placed a third of her ashes on this shore, a third at her favorite beach in Florida, and a third on the beach where they met when she was fourteen. She could be in the North Atlantic, in the Gulf Stream; she could be incorporated into anything that lives in or near this cove, from a minnow to a shore reed to an osprey.

I wonder how long it will take for storms, tides, and time to scatter her stones. I will look for them the rest of my life.

In the back yard of my house, half-hidden between two tall sedums, I keep a pile of stones selected from collections. My daughter has placed a trio, one atop another, on her windowsill. They *be* her; they are a way to draw her close. They soften the rending paradox of *She is dead*.

Three months before her death, she comes out of her bedroom in her peacock blue robe, pulling her long braid over her shoulder. When she sees me in the sunroom, her face lights up; *how on earth*

did you get here she cries out softly, in delight and wonder, crediting me with materializing out of nowhere. She doesn't remember yesterday's ride to the airport, and my girls running to be enfolded by her.

19. *She were*

A few days after her memorial, my father and I visit a new museum dedicated to the Pequot Indians who had a settlement on our shore. My mother had looked forward to visiting it, but she died before it opened. Among the museum exhibits, I see amulet pouches that contain tiny animals carved of stone. I remember my mother approaching me on the shore softly, reverently, a flake of stone balancing on her fingertip. *How do you suppose they were able to carve a snail so small and yet with so much detail*, she had exclaimed in a half-whisper, so full of awe that I had claimed to see it, too.

We wander paths and trails through a garden of medicinal plants, where pestles rest in mortars ground into the glacier-scarred bedrock. A pile of stones catches my eye; near it is a supply of cobbles in a barrel. *Please take a stone*, the sign says, *and add it to the memory pile*; it was the custom for the Pequots and Mohicans to mark the location of significant events or holy sites with piles of stones, and to pile stones on the graves of their people. My father and I take one and gently nest it near the summit.

20. *Be*

I'd thought the loss of a parent was the experience which would complete me, grow me up like labor and a child of my own. One of those experiences which, while shattering, is also the making of us. As if we are incomplete until we are—incomplete. Instead, I felt orphaned and bewildered; how

could I continue to exist in the world without my mother, my maker? Shouldn't I be disappearing too?

After I returned from my mother's deathbed, my eldest daughter said through her choking tears, her glance dire, *you cannot EVER do that to me. If you left me I'd be so...flustered.* Such an unexpected yet perfect word, merging the confusion, agitation, and irreality I felt at the loss of my mother. I've learned that adulthood is not the end, but the lifelong diminuendo, of childhood, which flares back into life in the whirlwind of grievous loss.

Perhaps my mother held on to stones because she saw that, even as they were acted on by the gradual violence of time, even as they lost substance and altered in form, they acquiesced to change in ways that augmented their power and beauty. My mother's being was not diminished by dementia. Nor was her sense of beauty worn out or away. Rather, they drew inward, purifying and intensifying.

She built her own memory piles, stones that hold her place in the world, even as the gentle pressure of her spirit recedes. Even as we learn to let her go. When I hold one of her stones in my palm, I feel her continuing presence in the world. I hear in some tactile language the message of her life in its most compressed, luminous form: *Seek beauty.*