



Spring 2013

Hold the Cracks

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Kirkland, Chandra R., "Hold the Cracks" (2013). *Student Publications*. 60.
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Abstract

My medicine has its own special place in our downstairs bathroom. It rests on a little metal shelf by the shower, standing among the bright orange bottles of multivitamins, B12, vitamin C, and calcium chews. My mother is obsessed with natural healing practices – she slathers on bitter goldenseal for infections, feeds us capsules of powdery white willow bark for headaches, and strange clay mixed with water for stomach aches. My little bottle of pink goo looks lost and confused amidst the hand-written labels and bottles of earth-colored liquids.

I feel guilty taking it, but almost proud at the same time. It feels so official, taking “real” medicine. It’s like the feeling of eating “real” cereal, as opposed to the hot mush my mother always makes when we’re home. It’s like going to tae kwon do class and being a “real” student as opposed to one who learns everything at home. I never felt quite real, quite normal. I knew that I wasn’t. As I swallow the thick, candy-flavored substance, I try to block out the voices seeping in from the kitchen. There is nothing more upsetting than those voices – the low, fearful, angry ones that mean they are either displeased with us (my siblings and I), or talking about money.

Keywords

Non-fiction, Childhood, Virginia Woolf Essay Prize

Disciplines

Nonfiction

Comments

A personal essay addressing my upbringing as a "family employee" and the conflicts that arose through our financial troubles.

First place winner of the 2013 Virginia Woolf Essay Prize, judged by Jon Pineda.

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Hold The Cracks

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A non-fiction piece to be considered for the Virginia Woolf Essay Prize.

There's something vital about the dysfunctional twists in life. It feeds a part of me, keeps me going in a way. Would I really want to live without tension, without hardship, without grief? You take the light and the dark and you get shadows, some darker than others. When I was ten, I loved my life. I thought it was perfect, full of joy. It was hard, but I loved it. Looking back on it now, I still think I love it in a way. But I also flinch. It disgusts me, saddens me.

I caught pneumonia on the road, late one fall in 2001. I remember trying to hold back the cough as I waited in the doctor's office. I had only been to a doctor's office once before, for a check-up. My family couldn't afford regular visits. I had never been to a dentist. I wasn't scared, sitting in the room alone trying to fight back the racking cough by holding my breath. I kept thinking that if I didn't cough, maybe the doctor wouldn't know I was sick and my parents wouldn't have to pay him. This was my lopsided, child logic.

It is no surprise I got sick. My family had been roaming Pennsylvania in an unheated, remodeled red school bus for weeks. This was a way of life for us – it is how we made a living, from the time I was born up until we opened a store close to home in 2005. The bus was a beautiful thing, in my eyes. The front was similar to a motor home, with a sink, cabinets, a futon, and a stove. We even had curtains! My father had removed the seats from the back, and for each market we packed the thing to the roof with boxes of home décor, vats of homemade potpourri, and baskets tied with bailing twine. We were like gypsies, traveling merchants bringing our wares to festivals and flea markets all over the state.

We returned to our dim, three-story home in the woods only to rest and restock our bus. Some mornings, we rose at dawn to meet the truck from Philly that delivered fresh wares every few weeks. I remember the excitement of finishing the endless lifting and inventorying, the sleepy movements in that dark warehouse perched alongside an empty roadway. The warehouse

was a converted wholesale health-food store. It lay a quarter mile from our house, which was nestled behind rustling pines on a hilltop. We often ran back to the house, dashing down the long dirt lane, across the low cement bridge, and up the creaking steps to our almost-fixed porch. The house was always warm, permeated with the aroma of incense and the breakfast warming on the stove. I felt whole during these times, when it was just me and my siblings, when the wood stove crackled comfortingly and our parents were absent. They usually remained at the warehouse for hours, pricing and preparing for the next market. We all slept warm those nights at home, buried under heaps of tapestries and old comforters. In the morning it was back onto the bus, where we would squabble over the best place to curl up during the drive to the next market.

It was exciting, to be swept into this fairy-tale like lifestyle as a young child. I didn't even mind the work – at eight in the morning, we rose from our cocoon of blankets and began. But the bus was not like home. The nights grew frigid, and only the front of the bus was heated. Sometimes, we slept with our boots and coats on. It was always a relief to emerge from the cold metal insides of our “home” and into the sunlight and bustle of market.

I slide down onto the stacks of cinder blocks, trying not to catch my coat on the bus door handle. My brothers are shoving up behind me, bickering and trying to jump past me out of the back door. The sun is bursting across the thick canopy of golden-and-brown fall leaves that are just beginning to dwindle as the wind plucks them free. The one-hundred foot long stand stretches out before me – the warped, funky-looking tent that my father pieced together with massive gray tarps, blue bungees, and metal connectors; the warped tables constructed from thin boards propped on metal “legs”; baskets heaped into the dewy grass. The rainwater from the night before makes the entire tent contraption buckle in some places, and my brothers rush to

grab poles so they can shove it off into the grass. The water crashes down, narrowly missing the baskets that my father is just uncovering. He hollers, and they stop.

We uncover the tables, rearranging the birdhouses, plaster cows, painted slates, doll chairs, and candle holders. Rohan, my oldest brother, bustles around the tables with a price gun, slapping it down with too much enthusiasm. As he passes Oren, my next-to-youngest brother, he slams a sticker onto the shoulder of his faded red T-shirt. Oren screams, flailing with his hands, until my mother's curt voice cuts the exchange short. The customers are peering under the crooked tent, and a few venture in to lift items up for inspection. They handle everything like glass, and they smile at us like we are too.

The sun is burning the sweet-smelling dew from the grass, and hundreds of feet churn up mud, mashing in the fallen french-fries and wisps of abandoned cotton candy. I'm at the register now, fingers flying over the grubby plastic keys. A woman beams at me over her thick scarf, commenting on how hard-working we all are. I just make myself smile back. It's only noon, and the crowds are swelling to form a thick line down the basket-filled isle.

We often worked until dark. Our father paid us a maximum of \$30 for a weekend. That's \$30 for up to 36 hours of work. But to children, \$30 is a lot of money. If we saved it, we ended up with hundreds to spend by the end of the market season, which usually lasted until mid-October. But this year, the season didn't end in October. We didn't have enough to pay the bills. We couldn't stop yet. We kept traveling, to shows we'd never been too, and I got sicker and sicker. I kept working. I ate cold cereal for breakfast and cold sandwiches for lunch, with the occasional french-fry if I was willing to spend my own savings. I don't remember how the frigid days and nights on the road ended. I don't even remember feeling terribly sick. I do remember the doctor's

office, and the awful, pink, bubble-gum flavored medicine they gave me.

My medicine has its own special place in our downstairs bathroom. It rests on a little metal shelf by the shower, standing among the bright orange bottles of multivitamins, B12, vitamin C, and calcium chews. My mother is obsessed with natural healing practices – she slathers on bitter goldenseal for infections, feeds us capsules of powdery white willow bark for headaches, and strange clay mixed with water for stomach aches. My little bottle of pink goo looks lost and confused amidst the hand-written labels and bottles of earth-colored liquids.

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I slip the bottle back onto the shelf and slide out the bathroom door, tip-toeing back to my room. Guilt is rising up with the unease that is always stirred by those low, breathless voices. I wonder if I would have been okay without the medicine. I wonder how long it will be until we're on the road again. I wonder if I could have changed this, made it better.

My parents paid for my illness. My father complained about the cost, called the doctors “monsters” for sucking so much money out of sick people, but he still paid. This is the way he

reacts to what little authority he is forced to bow to – he rants and drags his heels, but goes eventually. If he can avoid obeying an authority figure, on the other hand, he makes up his mind to do so and doesn't budge.

This is something we have in common. This is why he beat me down for years, physically and emotionally – I refused to bow. In the rush of hard work, sweating bodies, cold nights, calloused hands, and the smell of diesel gas and dust from old baskets, violence flared. In the days between the markets, when our family of strong wills and hot tempers stayed cooped in that big wooden house together, we all collided. But my father and I collided the hardest.

My family is a dark monster in the background of my life, a shadow that few people understand. But they are also the center of everything, the inescapable central piece of who I am. My family brings me shame.

I am ashamed that I was schooled at home – so many stereotypes trail behind that concept. Am I socially awkward? Am I a sheltered, overly zealous Christian? Was I properly educated? I'm an outgoing atheist. I'm generally an 'A' student. I skirt around the topic of pre-college schooling, to avoid having to defend against whatever assumptions people might make about me. I regret that lonely time of my life, often interrupted by the need to work for my parents, to support the family. Yet I often missed the hard work of the market season as winter closed its cold fist around our home, nestled in the forest, invisible from the road. I sat with my head in a book from 8am to 3pm, teaching myself biology, math, spelling, history, art. I was given the books and told to finish them by the end of the year. In this constricting cage, this home/school/prison, I was left to independently teach myself.

By the age of twelve, I was largely responsible for my own education. It was understood

that if I studied hard, I would go to college. If I chose to slack, I knew I wouldn't make it. And I had to. I had to get out. I love my home and my family – I can honestly say I do. But at times I struggled to not hate the father who screamed “Bitch!” at me, knocked me in the face, and beat me with a mop handle over the porch railing.

I had to get away from that.

I learned to build masks, to hide everything so as to not provoke him. I learned to play the “perfect daughter,” to smile despite the fights. If I held a grudge, his temper flared, and the cycle continued. It took me years to learn how. For a long time, I stubbornly resisted his control, that domination driven by violence. I talked back, disagreed with him, pointed out his flaws, and defended my brothers from his ever-flaring temper. I enraged him. I was not the way he wanted me to be. My brothers obeyed, and so they were only punished occasionally, usually for breaking something or failing to do a chore. But I challenged his authority on a daily basis. He didn't want to hear my opinions, but I gave them anyways. Even my mother tried to convince me that I should shut up, and be humble – she had been doing it for years. But I refused to be treated like less. He wanted a sweet daughter, a loving daughter, but above all an obedient daughter. He wanted a daughter who held him with the highest respect. But he gave no respect, and so he did not get any. All he got were masks.

We are working on my bike. I am fifteen, gangly and serious, crouching over the oily gears of my yellow twenty-one speed huffy. We're trying to find a new tire for the front – we've been picking through the skeletons of abused and abandoned bikes scattered around a corner of our huge back yard (which is full of trees and rosebushes). The sun beats down, but not too fiercely. There's a slight breeze stirring about, passing first through my unkempt curls and then

over his long blonde hair and chest-length hippie beard. He never really got over the seventies. In fact, he's telling another of his stories – something about doing acid with a friend, something else about living on a beach for an entire summer in a tent. I listen intently, drinking it in. My father's stories are like something out a bizarre independent film directed by a stoner, but he tells them with such conviction that it's hard to doubt they are true. His eyes are alive when he tells those stories, and I know he wants to go back. I want to go to – I want to hitchhike across the U.S., live on a beach, and sleep under the stars in a strange new place.

He's in the basement now – the front has been converted into a workshop – digging around for a tool. One of our many cats slinks over, and I stroke her back with a smile. My father emerges, looking irritated, and we continue to work. But the light mood is gone. His temper has turned foul. He's gone from jovial to dangerous, as he often does.

I don't remember how it started. I don't remember how any of our countless fights really started. I mostly remember the endings. I remember the middle, the vicious, screaming voices. I was never really afraid, and that's why he kept hurting me. I was always as enraged as he was, and that drove him to the edge. He was seeing in me a part of himself that he resented – the belligerent, rebellious side that led him to leave home for good when he was fifteen. Maybe he was afraid I would leave. Maybe he thought that forcing me to obey was the solution. I don't know.

The bike lay forgotten, and the cat had fled as our voices rose in the warm, sunny air. He advanced slowly, screaming in my face, spitting in my face, hitting me in the face, backing me against the basement door. I glared through tears, refusing to look away from him. I barely felt the brim of his baseball cap digging into my forehead, but I wanted to gag at the smell of his breath. His eyes were suddenly so ugly, so gray and murky, like mud. I pushed, wanting to run,

or hit him, or kick him to the ground. His fist clenched over my throat, cutting off my angry yells, and my back slid a few inches up the rough wooden wall. *He has never strangled me before. This is not okay. This really hurts, and I'm afraid now.* My mind kept going in those circles until he let me fall, shoving me toward my bike.

You must move on from these things. Otherwise, you'll never move in any direction at all. I dealt with severe depression for years, but my parents never acknowledged it. Once, when I was around fifteen, I climbed a tree fully intending to throw myself from it. My oldest brother talked me out of it. I cried constantly, whenever I was alone. I felt like I was breaking. But there was a point when it all simply came to a head. I still remember the day the violence stopped – it was an unexpected victory following yet another defeat, and I still don't know what caused it. Perhaps it was my mother. Perhaps he finally realized just how much he was hurting me emotionally. I don't know. It was early spring, only a few months after I climbed that tree.

It's all still very clear; the overheard conversation drifting up from the kitchen through the heater pipe that runs through my room. My father had almost crashed the car in his fit of rage against me earlier that day. He snapped without warning, pulling the car over to pummel me and tear at my hair until I curled into a ball on the floor and screamed. I am so embarrassed, so upset with myself for caving so completely. And mentally, I feel broken, finally crushed.

I'm laying limp on my stomach in my room, head throbbing from the blows and the tears. His voice, low and uncertain, curls up through the floorboards with the wood smoke. My mother speaks softly, almost pleading, and I feel a huge surge of love towards her. She doesn't always stand up for me, but she pulls through when I need her most.

He says "I'm never going to hit her gain."

He never did.

My first day at Gettysburg College felt like the beginning of my life. In the giddy haze of freshman year, I attempted to remake myself. For a while, I pretended that my life before had never happened, and the depression even receded for a little while. But it grew worse again sophomore year, when the supports from freshman year fell away and, alone and uneasy, I started holding myself up to my fellow students for the first time. I began to feel like the lowest, most repulsive piece of shit on the planet. Poor, weird, black – I felt unworthy of attending classes with some of the smiling, well-dressed students I encountered. I wanted their lives, and I resented them at the same time. I doubted my intelligence, my worth as a human being. I never spoke in classes, and was terrified of being judged. I wanted to leave, but the last thing I wanted to do was return home.

I began to find some kind of peace towards the end of sophomore year. I wrote about my problems; I revealed everything to my close friends; I fell in love. I came to terms with who I am, who I was. I spent two summers at home without fighting with my father. The first was accomplished by a haze of work, an avoidance of the problem. I worked five jobs for three months, bought myself a car, got my license, and began to feel truly free for the first time.

By the next summer, I allowed myself to really look at my father again. I realized the tension was easing. Seeing him did not put me on edge – he was simply exhausting to look at. I realized how gray he is, how weak his shoulders look, how soft his middle has become. I saw how gentle he is with my youngest brother, Shaman. The rage seems to have faded. Shaman has never been hit. He is comfortable bantering with my father, without fear of being struck. He

never had to work weekly at markets all over Pennsylvania. He gets paid minimum wage, and has even saved up enough to buy himself a small motor bike. I would often come home to see him and my father crouched over the green, rumbling contraption, talking excitedly. Things have changed in my household. With the departure of four of their five children, my parents have finally emerged from their small world.

I emerged too – I began to like myself, value myself. I don't love who I am, but I like myself a lot. I like my flawed childhood. Many things about it were wonderful: the evenings by the wood stove with a cup of tea, the days spent romping giddily in the snow with my brothers, the nights when our house swelled with my mother's beautiful singing voice and my father's low guitar. I can't overlook those things just because some times were difficult. I love my family.

Sometimes, as I'm caught up in a haze of homework and sleepless nights, I imagine that this is all I've ever been. I stand in line with the rest and go through the motions of this new way of living; the endless studying and the drama of youth, the fading of my calluses and the gradual process of integrating myself into the competitive academic world. It's just like swallowing that bubble-gum flavored medicine – it coats you, sweet and pink, soothing the wracking cough, making you forget. But I will never forget. That vital dark will always exist, no matter how deep I bury it, and I'm fine with that. Our lives are only varying shades of gray, looked at from multiple angles, torn apart in a hundred ways, or embraced as they are. I will always be that kid backed into a corner with bared teeth, or huddled under a blanket on a cold night with boots on. I will always know how to walk barefoot in the woods, how to fix my ugly, yet loveable bikes. I will always remember the gentle sway of my family's red bus as we rolled down the highway towards a foggy, barely stirring flea market. But I can distance myself from the tough parts,

pulling it out and writing it down, piece by piece, turning it into a story. That part of me is just a character now, as real as any other, yet distant. We all have past skins, skins that we may choose to take out and wear each day, and others that we bury deep in prisons of shame or regret. But when considered as a whole, those skins create a colorful albeit imperfect picture, as unique as a fingerprint. I wear mine with pride; my dysfunctional, multi-colored suit of armor, a callous that will never fade.