

at night when there was no moon

I

at night when there was no moon to show the way I'd pull
onto the gravel beside the cottage I rented in Maine, scout
the exact location of the porch, kill the car's lights, and
with arms outstretched, I'd shuffle like a monster-in-the-
night, hunting, overhearing in the dark distance as I did,
the cries of the ocean slapping the shore behind me.

then I'd count one, two, three steps up,
hoping the key I'd prepared mated with
the lock I blindly sought.

once inside, with Ursa Major
overhead, and Orion spinning with
the seasons, I slept.

in the winter months

I slept under a down sleeping bag
that I used to smother the bed. I
was cozy, after a while, and I'd
dream of little blue crabs creeping
along the brackish flow of the
tidal creek in the marsh out back,
or,

I'd dream of the lobster offshore and how,
when I snorkeled, they'd curse me with
their terrible claws agape,
brandishing them in a warrior's challenge, or
I'd dream of the daughter I left behind but
barely knew, or

I'd dream of the woman I left behind who I
thought about all day, or,

I'd dream about the girl down the road I'd met
waiting tables at the restaurant on Route 1 who
reminded me of a girl I had yearned for back in
the Ohio but never caught, and about whom I
never dreamed.

I dreamed of many things at night when there was
no moon to show the way.

Sometimes, I dreamed about my father—the fastest belt in the Midwest.
Sometimes, I dreamed about my mother—sitting at her manager’s desk in the hospital business office, chain smoking and cringing when her coworkers called her Dee. Sometimes, I dreamed about how my parents met in Kansas as soldiers during the war, got married in Buffalo, moved to Cleveland for a spell, and how it was they no longer loved each other, though they had eight kids that lived and one that died.

Once I dreamed about my father’s boyhood: Burying his father in the heart of the Depression, in a tiny cemetery tucked under a tree a quick march uphill from a withering train station hidden among the rolling hills of North Dakota. And the cemetery is nothing, only necessary, like a stamp on a postcard; and the cemetery might be sun-burnt, except for the snow; and the tree that helps define the location of the dead is so wind-whipped its shadow is as good as invisible. He is just eleven and teeters on the edge of surrender, can feel but not name something gnawing inside his gut, wearing him down. Except for his eyes scanning an horizon that might be endless for all he knows, he is like granite in the face of a stern breeze that beats the frozen golden grasses east and west in a kind of Lakota death-dance; and he doesn’t cry as his youngest brother, Lyle, pries his cap from his homesteader-son’s hands and puts it on his own head, and he doesn’t look down when three other siblings huddle around their big brother and hang on his sleeves, hoping he will soothe them, taking his cue from his stoic mother who cradles a newborn daughter in her arms and who oversaw the burial, then wrote her father in Kasson, Minnesota beseeching him to take them all in. Which he did.

I dreamed sometimes because my father never spoke.
And I dreamed other times because my mother rarely spoke.

Once I dreamed about my mother being shipped off to an aunt’s house during the Depression because her parents had too many mouths to feed. I dreamed about the heartbreak she was told would go away, but never did, was no more buried than a ghost. I dreamed about the callous necessity of those times and how they sapped her spirit and must have made her wonder: Why me? What have I done?

They say that adversity makes a girl tough, is good for her soul. But when I dreamed about my mother, that’s not what I saw. I saw my mother alone, a bright girl encaged in shadow. I loved my mother because when I was a young she was the best thing in my life. But when I dreamed, I only envisioned sorrow. In one dream, I remember her crying at the kitchen table when she heard her

mother had died--and wondering why she cared. And I remember not feeling close enough to her then to give her a hug. I remember too the dream I had about the time we visited Mt. Olivet Cemetery near Buffalo where she pointed out, but dared not walk to, the site where her infant stillborn son is buried, and how when I saw the tiny flat stone marker I choked up--right out of the blue--nearly sobbing at the thought of the big brother I might have had: but I didn't cry and now that's more often than not a daydream, not a night dream. Sometimes I dream that my mother, and maybe my father, smothered their troubled hearts under a wet pillow, only to awaken unrefreshed and no less overwhelmed, like kids forced to play high-stakes poker with only one rule: they couldn't fold.

So,
at night when there was no moon to show the way, sometimes
I dreamed about my mother. And sometimes I dreamed about
my father.

And sometimes when I dreamed, like Orion, I hunted. And when I hunted,
I hunted in a city to the East and in the plains to the West, searching for
my parents and the history they refused to share.

At night when there is no moon to show the way
I dream of many things, but most importantly I
dream about my parents ...

II

I dreamed as a boy too, long before
Maine came along, and long before
girls.

Most often
I dreamed about my brother, the one we
called "crippled," though what he was
was a victim of cerebral palsy, a
condition we kids didn't understand.
We didn't know about vaginas, sex, and birth canals.
Not then. Nor did we know about the kind of medical prudence
that kept a woman's legs tight till the doctor arrived, ignoring
head butts to the pelvis.
To keep it simple, my father invented the fiction that my brother
had fallen as a toddler and hit his head on the *corner* of the
television. When we looked at our 3-year-old brother crawling
around on the carpet on all fours, like a dog

never meant to stand up, then at the solid edge of our black & white television (which in the 1950's meant a 3-foot tall wooden cabinet) my father's stern certainty overwhelmed our doubts, became the story we used to explain why my brother couldn't walk and why his right side was so stiff and unruly.

Somehow, that *corner* thing my dad had dreamed up became the quintessential detail of an incident beyond our reckoning. I liken it now to the detail of the wind-battered tree that defined the N.D. cemetery of his father: apropos, it made all the difference somehow. The *corner of our TV* caused my brother's brain damage: that fiction seemed infinitely more plausible to us, as children, than the mysterious concept of "birth accident."

So we believed our dad's lie. Why not?

We were just stupid kids. Plus:

We attended parochial school: aka, a religious factory that hammered out good Catholic kids conditioned to believe all sorts of absurdity. Brain-damage-by-TV was just another brand of nonsense, a venial whopper, a father-fib, an eccentric joke, we accepted and found a place for in our nascent world view.

It was a small lie, really, especially when compared to the spiritual ruthlessness of the nuns who taught us to fear every little desire and earnestly confess every tiny slip up, lest the hungry flames of Hell devour us.

"Like eating bologna sandwiches on Friday?" the nuns asked, towering over our little desks as we ate lunch, their tiny fish lips pinched inside a black and white habit that snagged their faces in a net of stiff cloth. Predicting: "*Fried* bologna is the only kind of bologna served where *you're going!*"

So back then when I dreamed about my brother, my dreams were not selfish wish fulfillment; they were Prayers!

Prayers that Jesus would hear me and right a wrong! Prayers for a small miracle!

Prayers requesting a tiny correction! Not for me, but for my brother.

It didn't seem like much to ask for from a Guy who could bring the dead back to life.

It wasn't a test and I wasn't the devil in the desert.

Nor was I the bad, doubting thief hanging on Jesus'

wrong side. I was a believer. Besides, what sin had my brother committed to deserve his fate?

So at night when I still believed there was a light showing the way
I'd dream about Jesus and my brother: Oh,
Jesus, let my brother walk!
Oh, Jesus, let my brother walk!
Oh, Jesus, let David be normal!
Let him walk beside me to school!

In my dreams, I could see Jesus' face clearly, the kindness and compassion enshrined there. But, for some reason, HE never answered my prayers.
Maybe HE'd been driven deaf by the prayers of millions, or maybe, just maybe, HE didn't like the smell of Friday bologna on my breath, and the nuns were right and I wasn't worthy.

Verily I say unto you that, at first, my prayers were simple and unselfish.
Just as I've described. Honest. But as I grew, something began to foul my dreams—call it the snake in the Garden—and they began to include an addendum I dared never speak aloud:
Oh, Jesus, let my brother walk!
Oh, Jesus, let my brother walk!
Oh, Jesus, I'm so embarrassed to have a brother who's a cripple.
Please, Jesus, let my brother walk!

Oh, Jesus, I'm so embarrassed?
That's when the dreams ended:
The same time I learned shame.

Despite my failings, David never fell victim to shame. Not even when he hung a metal bucket from the handlebar of his modified trike and pedaled down the street asking for handouts. He made a compelling beggar: four flattened steel rods enshrined his pale little calves, and a dark steel-gray metal brace ran up the rear of his bike and cradled his upper back and spine. A cute cripple, he always returned with money. And he was always so proud of himself, earning his own cash for snacks at the corner store.

I never asked him if he dreamed about Jesus and miracles.
Never told him, I had.

Dave is 60 now, lives alone, gets around in a motorized chair.
I don't dream about him or miracles any more. Except when
I recall the dreams I had in my youth, before my fall.

III

In April, following the Blizzard of '79 which had
paralyzed my home town, Toledo, I was living in Maine
where there had been no blizzard that year and on New
Year's Day it had nearly hit 60 degrees.

One night, on the eve of her birthday, I
dreamed about my first daughter, and when
I woke up I wrote the a poem entitled
"On My Daughter's 7th Birthday".

In the dream, I could see my daughter vividly, and I
imagined she was sitting on my lap, looking at my face,
quizzically, as if she was having trouble remembering
who I was:

"But you just glance at me, as you would
casually at an old scrapbook. Slowly,
unconcerned, you turn the pages. Now the
shadow of an old black and white stops the
turnings, and you rub your delicate and
numb fingers over its surface like one
who is blind and must conjure other
powers of recognition.

A question crosses your face.

Then it is gone. So you turn on.

You were younger then, during my toying with black
and white days.

And I was fatter with your mother's cooking.

Of course you would not remember."

The dream and the poem ended with the following lament:
“You amble off the bed, tuck the album under your pillow,
turn off the lamp.

A book of frozen dreams.

You had such a memory when you were a very young child!

Where has it gone? And is there no room left for me?

‘Will you kiss me good night?’ I yell. But the light
cuts through your window, piercing me, and I am
gone like a bursted bubble.”

Those were difficult times, living paycheck to
paycheck. learning to use an oil-burning stove for
heat, watching the oil man dip a stick into the storage
drum and me calculating how much the cold was
taxing my pocket. Plodding through the snow at
night to work the midnight shift in the Psych Unit.
Waiting tables at Paulsen’s Donut Shop in the morning, then
being delegated to the kitchen to scour every dirtied pot-- and
there were always many--before driving home across the salt
marsh that blanketed Route 1 in Scarborough. I had taken off
for Maine with \$100 in my pocket and no savings account;
and there was child support. In my spare time I was making
all new friends, finding all new lovers, wondering about my
daughter, knowing I was losing her, and certain there was
nothing I could do about it.

It wasn’t just the distance, it was the divorce. And my ex’s
quick remarriage. Running. In some ways I was running, but
my dreams pulled my back.

The dreams that rose out of the tidal marsh, like
crabs, like steam rolling out of a lobster pot. At
night, when there was no moon to show the way,
my dreams showed the way. And the way led back
home.

When my father died in 1996 on the night of July 10, after my second wife and I had ushered him back from Florida to spend his last days in hospice, only my youngest brother, Mark, cried.

From his bed, my dad told me that he thought he'd live longer. Thought he could have done a better job raising us kids, which was true, but I lied and told him he'd done a fine job.

He also told me he had hoped to live until he was a millionaire; if he'd had the extra years before the tech crash of 2001, he might have made it.

When I was young, my dad was quick to punish, but years later, when retirement loomed and the pace of his days had slowed down, my dad needed a buddy, and my youngest brother, ten years my junior, was that bud. So when my dad died, Mark cried. Because whether he knew it or not, he had enjoyed the best of what my dad could be.

In the summer of 1997, two of my sisters, my wife and our two daughters drove to Haynes, N.D. and spread my dad's ashes over the grave site of his dad's grave. Just as I had dreamed, it was a small cemetery out in the literal middle-of-nowhere, just as Haynes was a nowhere dropped in a plain of rolling hills. The cemetery had two trees, not one, and a rather large bush that needed trimming. Someone tended the grasses, for they were not tall. My grandfather's gravestone was small, perfunctory, maybe 24 x 8 inches. The dates 1895-1931 bookended his name. The wind for warm. Gusty. It spread my father's ashes admirably. Some years earlier my dad and my youngest brother had come this way. Stood where we stood that day. When my father looked at the marker which bore the name he shared too, how well did he remember his first visit, standing in the snow, staring at the horizon? Could he recall his father's face? His kindness? Did he see any of his children in the horizon? Did he ever dream his eldest son would be standing here someday, putting him to rest?

Of all the places I've traveled, that was the most important.

V

My mother lasted a full seven years longer than my dad: she died in 2003. I remember getting the call from my brother. I was at the high school where I taught English and the day had just ended, so it was quiet. I stood in the mid-gray shadows of my office, receiver in hand listening to the message my brother had left.

Hospice had gone that very morning to help my mom.

We knew mom was failing, but we thought we'd have more time with her. Her decline came so quickly that to me it seemed as if she'd fallen off a cliff. Receiver in hand, I felt stung. I wanted to cry. Felt I should. But didn't, being too much like my father. We did not cremate my mother as we had my father. We bought her a plot in a newly opened Catholic cemetery, and bought another right next door for David.

My mother had been fine two weeks earlier. Sure, she had slowed down, repeated herself, forgot stuff, had been scammed by some guy making the rounds in the old neighborhood offering to fix things. She had become disoriented, but I attributed that to the fact that after fifty years in the same house, my sisters had imposed upon her to sell the two-story house where she had raised her family and move into a ranch house. Sure my mom had gotten in the habit of sleeping on the couch because it was easier than scaling the fifteen stairs to her bedroom. And sure she feel asleep too many time with the front door wide open. But she had never been robbed, or hurt, and my mom wasn't a ranch-house girl. And now she was a stranger to neighbors without names.

On top of that, my sisters bought my mom a new bed. Hell, I needed a ladder to get into that bed, it was so tall. So I took the box springs back to the store, purchased one of those thin frames for under a mattress and that brought the bed down to a height my mom could handle. But she didn't. She kept sleeping on the couch. Daughters be damned!

She muddled through the last two years of her life, never comfortable with her new house. And then one day in September, she died. And then her dog, Misty, who just about the sweetest dog in the universe died too.

VI

A couple of years later, on the eve of my mom's birthday, I dreamed about my father. The timing struck me as odd. I can't recall the dream's setting, and it isn't fair to make one up. What is important is that I saw him in a room somewhere, and that he came up to me and gave me a hug. And I hugged him back and told him I loved him. And I was overcome with a feeling of contentment and peace and my soul was at rest. That was only the second time I'd ever told him that.

The first time was in Florida after an especially good Spring visit along with our daughters for Easter break. My dad was always a great host, took us to the State Park to see armadillos and alligators, trespassing in restricted areas as was his custom; taking us to the alligator farm down on Route 27 south of Sebring; letting the girls drive his golf cart illegally around the mobile home park after dark; taking us for breakfast at Dot's; and biting his tongue when I missed putts on the executive golf course he drove me around on but no longer played because of his knees. One year as we were hugging goodbye, right out of the blue, I told him I love you. It just slipped out.

It was the first and only time I'd said that to him while he was alive.

And then there was that dream on the eve of my mother's birthday.

And that dream, more than any other, has put my soul to rest...

When there is no moon to show the way, sometimes

I dream about my mother. And sometimes

I dream about my father. And more than any other dreams, they

have done the most to put my soul to rest....