Every Day Anew

The day after Christmas when I was twenty-three, my father handed me his prison diary through the window of my car as I was backing out of the guest parking spot at his apartment complex.

He'd strolled out of the apartment swinging his arms, a pack of cigarettes tucked in his sleeve. He'd been able to keep the lean angular body from his track-running days for nearly all of my childhood, but he carried himself awkwardly now**,** the weight on his body hanging unevenly, flesh from atrophied muscle no longer taut.

I put the car into gear and as I drove away, I saw his silhouette still standing in the parking lot, lighting a cigarette, then tilting his head up and blowing smoke upwards. It had darkened early, the moon was already rising, and the features of his face seemed newly hewn, delicate and young again, with the lit end of the cigarette visible in his shadowed hand.

December 31st: *From womb to tomb, every day is new.*

His diary was a daily guide to prayer written by a prison pastor, one prayer, aphorism, or quote for every page, for every day. *Thoughts for Every Day of the Year: Every Day Anew*.

I needed it to be in a place that was both innocuous but also hidden, equally safe from myself as from an intruder.

It ended up at the bottom of my wardrobe under a stack of my old UPenn Track Team sweatshirts.

My apartment on York Street in the Mission District was a small studio, where you could sense an absence just as much as someone's presence; it was a tight warm notch inside a stark brick building that had once been a wool processing plant.

It was a small, square space, with a large window taking up nearly the whole wall. From my bed in the loft with the curtains pulled aside, I could see down Potrero Hill.

Sometimes, if I became too aware of the ladder to the loft, and my mind grazed for too long, the ladder took me away from York Street and pitched me forward into a memory of the third grade in Broadbent Elementary School.

I could almost smell the blood and mucus from Tommy Bay's nose when he'd been pinned up against the playground ladder by the biggest kids in our class. Eric Hall had him in a chokehold while Josh Madden socked him in the gut. Andrew—or Andy back then, Tommy's twin, leaned his head down towards the asphalt and watched with dead eyes.

When the bell rang, Tommy would stay with one hand weakly clutching the ladder, other slung loosely around Andrew's neck, his chin dropping on his chest. I watched Andrew's lips moving very fast, forming the same shapes over and over. I don't know what he was whispering.

Thinking about Tommy's bloody nose, Andrew's eyes, and my father's book, I let myself out on the balcony where I sat with my American Spirits. I smoked until the apartment of Piano Teacher next door lulled and went quiet.

Inside, with shaking hands, I slid the book out from under my sweaters and I began to read. He'd written his name in neat capital letters on the title page; the ink was finely spaced and evenly pressed, unsettlingly so.

The first page he'd written on was in February. In the same handwriting that he'd printed his name, he'd written, *This cell is too big.*

The quotation on the page read, *As long as people speak my name, I'm not dead*.

My father's name was James Shipstead.

I turned pages until it was dark, then climbed up into my loft and sat up looking at the posters I'd tacked on my wall. One was of the John Muir Trail. The other was an old panoramic sepia print of the McCloud River Bridge, a train rushing towards me.

The very real, very heavy work of raw grieving felt only approximate, and very far away, as far back as I'd already pushed Broadbent in my mind and set it on fire.

April 5th. *Faith is to create something from nothing.*

On an especially windy day, when I was eight years old and my mother eight months pregnant, we saw a beached dead whale that had been spotted two days before at Sharp Park Beach. Other than going to school, it was the first time I'd been allowed out of the house since we had left my father.

My mother and I had left Broadbent two months ago. With her broken nose and visible belly, my uncle had packed the two of us into his Ford Ranger and brought us down to Pacifica. We stayed in his little bungalow surrounded by a high fence of mismatched boards.

The house trapped the moisture from the ocean, making the wallpaper warp and my skin spot white with dry patches while the salt slowly corroded the appliances and peeled varnish from the furniture.

For the last few months, she'd been too uncomfortable to sleep. She said she felt like an old tree trying to take deeper roots but unable to tap water.

Her feet were too swollen from the pregnancy to fit into any of her shoes, so she walked the three blocks barefoot, and with much reluctance, my hand in hers.

She'd taken to painting again, the only activity she found relaxed her enough to gather some strength, despite the moisture never fully allowing her canvases to dry. She started many

but did not complete any paintings in Pacifica. They were all different views of the beach. Some paintings were split evenly, blue ocean and sand as though there was a viewfinder straddling the point where the two met; there were others depicting just squiggles of people with no water in sight, and other paintings looking out onto the ocean from the cliffs. The beach was narrow where they jutted out and it was easy to get trapped on the beach at high tide, climbing past the tide pools and up the rock ledges.

There was only one steep path down to Sharp Park Beach; the rest of the street parallel to it was fenced off. Through the wooden fence I could hear children yelling and the deep bass of mystified adult voices. I could also smell, slowly edging in with the salt spray, a rancid odor.

When we finally walked around the fence we saw it: the carcass of a sperm whale on its belly, loose blubber flailing. Even from a hundred feet above the beach we could see the still-slick skin flapping under the sharp wind.

My mother gasped when she saw what they'd done to it: great stretches of its skin were missing, taken by researchers, and what remained of it was graffitied. Its entire body was shades of decay I'd never seen before. We both cried and at that moment, she said, that she felt my brother kick so forcefully, her breath caught in her chest. My mother believed in signs, and my brother was trying to say something to her, asking for his father.

When we got home, my mother started a new painting. She mixed her own paints, and she made a fresh gray, two parts more Mars Black than usual. She brought out tubes of Cadmium Red, Zinc White, and an almost-empty tube of Phthalo Blue. My uncle and I watched, perplexed, when she first painted the entire canvas gray. She watched it for a few days, settling on couch cushions, hugging her stomach. Then over three days, she slowly carved the dead whale from the cinereal gray. Different yellows made the beach appear as though the sky and ocean never fully

separated from each other. Compared to the hues she'd been using in her other paintings, the ocean and horizon were anemic tones of blue.

My uncle and I stopped in front of the painting every day. I found myself carefully touching the most textured part-- the whale, which looked more alive than any element of the ocean, sky, or land.

When the painting was done, she picked up the phone and called my father.

Two weeks later, she went into labor and my brother, James Matthew Shipstead II, was born.

I was sent back to our house in Broadbent to my old room, my sleigh bed still made up with the same sheets. While I waited for them to come home, I sat on the little swing set Pop-Pop built. Even when I swung back and heard the wind in my ears, I heard the wind from the Pacific and I thought of the whale. The one that had died at Sharp Park, and the one that had come to life in my mother's hands.

March 20th. *Life will respond to how much room you give it.*

First day of spring

The day after I began reading my father's diary, I called Andrew Bay. I called him in the same strained way he had phoned me immediately after his brother, Tommy's suicide, after we had graduated from our separate high schools in different corners of California. We'd reconnected and our voices had hinged on the thread of desperation.

"Let's go to Broadbent."

"Why?"

“I had a dream about going to the McCloud Bridge and hanging out by the River and I remembered that there’s still trails on the other side.

“An overnight trip?”

“I was also thinking about those chalk caves on the other side.”

“If you want to see the bridge and find the caves, we could stay at a motel off 299.”

“Okay.”

After I hung up, I spent a long time looking at my hands, lacing and unlacing them, undecidedly.

Thursday and Friday, I read through the book sipping some Johnny Walker Black and smoking a cigarette.

Then I packed my duffel. I stashed the book inside the pocket of a wind breaker which I folded and placed in the bottom of the bag. Then I left for Andrew’s apartment.

When he opened the door, he did not say anything, but he was the kind of person where you knew he was watching you with his whole body, every part of him seemed to be leaning into me until he let go of the door and I stepped in. It creaked twice. Sometimes I think the sound a door makes when it opens is different than the one when it closes. Something lost in the changing motion.

“I can’t believe you’d want to go back. Nobody who leaves ever goes back.”

I told him about spending Christmas with my father and the book he’d passed over to me.

“Now I feel like I have to because I feel stuck. You don’t have to come.”

“I owe you. I want to.” Thinking of the book in my jacket, I looked at him. He had disconsolately blue-gray eyes and even when the irises were still, I could feel something stirring when I passed through his vision.

"Then I want to, too."

"Good." He'd already packed, he told me.

We loaded Andrew's MB 300D and looked at the odometer.

"I think we might cross 300k together. Wouldn't that be something." And he slowly released the clutch, grasped the shifter, and put the car in gear.

Like Andrew, I'd learned how to shift when I was fourteen. The first Christmas after his release, my father taught me manual by having me start his Chevy on a hill. I'd ended up rolling into traffic.

"Yes, hills. It's the only real way to learn."

After showing me the pedals and putting me in the driver's seat, he'd climbed out of the car and shouted instructions from the sidewalk as I continued to roll.

Crying, I'd finally stopped when I engaged the e-brake and dumped the clutch, stalling the engine.

I'd wanted to scream and I shook with anger, gripping the steering wheel and shifter so hard that my hands became numb.

"This is something I would've taught both of you, and your brother would have counted on you to make it look easy."

My father had a habit of referring to my brother as though he was raising him alongside me. He often referred to himself the same way, living alongside me—as though he had simply been away, traveling, for all the other events in my life, like my UPenn Graduation, which he couldn't attend because it violated his parole.

November 11th. *Aflame, burning, or spent, ashes are just that.*

I was ten when my brother was cremated. My mother kept his ashes in a small wooden Himalayan tea box. I could never understand why she'd keep them in something so ordinary, stowed away in nothing but a shoebox under her bed while we stayed by the ocean in my Uncle's house again. I always imagined that the moisture would eventually make the ashes cake together and conform to the box forever when it dried.

A year had passed and this time I was used to the patched and sandy sidewalks of Pacifica. Even the stringent sensation of being enfolded in sheets of salt every time the wind blew in my face.

Summer had turned into fall and all my old classmates had started fifth grade. My teacher sent me the class picture.

Andy and Tommy, who had for so long always been positioned next to each other in school photos, were now apart; Andrew was now much taller and the photographer had put him in the back with the other bigger kids. He had blinked in the instant the photo was taken, but Tommy, slouching behind one of the girls, had the same glass-pane blue-gray eyes and an expression as though he was fighting to keep his neck straight as someone pulled the back of his hair.

The teacher sent a simple condolence card that the children signed, but only with their names. She passed on my new address to the other children and their parents so they might write, but I never got anything. Their own sympathy was too brittle and the only explanation they could serve their children was too soft to penetrate emotion. But mostly it was that no one knew what to say to the girl who had a mother in the hospital, a father in prison, and a dead baby brother in a box.

The only person from Broadbent I ever saw again was Andrew when I came back for Tommy's funeral. Tommy was packed away in a casket, first lifted into the air, then lowered into his grave.

Afterwards, I drove us to Heidi's Pies and bought slices of rhubarb and sour cream, which we devoured.

"I'm going to leave real soon too," he said. "Like you did. Up and off, away from here when I turn eighteen."

"I didn't leave by choice."

"But you wouldn't come back by choice."

"I did. I'm here now."

His ears turned red and he looked away, down at his black suit. "Thanks." And he used the handle of the fork to lightly scrape off some pie crumbs.

I can't fathom how we could have felt so hungry on the day that had punctuated that he was now un-twinned.

June 26th. *What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere, it hides a well.*

Birthday of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Andrew and I drove all night, up Highway One along the coast, passing through Bodega Bay, Timber Cove, Sea Ranch, Gualala, Mendocino Headlands, and only miles from Fort Bragg, we drove east towards Burney where we could cut across to Broadbent in the morning.

Before heading to the main street, we found a liquor store. It was 2:00 a.m. and the cashier said we'd be the last that night. Bottle of whiskey clanking in the backseat by itself, no mixers, we drove looking for a place to stay.

Burney had seven motels all in a row, like shoes on a shoe rack—all neatly spaced. We pulled into the Pepperwood Motel.

Our room smelled like cigarette smoke and burned coffee. On a round table in the corner of the room I saw a small basket filled with powdered nondairy creamer and freeze-dried instant coffee with two Styrofoam cups next to it.

"Is it too late for coffee?"

"No. Let's stay awake."

I opened the bottle of whiskey and tipped some into both of our cups.

I checked out the rest of the room while holding my coffee. The bathroom towels were starched and rough, but they were white. The sliding door closet was mirrored with a fold-out ironing board and iron inside along with a shoehorn. I wondered how many people actually used them.

Andrew looked me and cocked his head, leaned his body to one side, as he had when he'd let me into his apartment that morning. He watched as I felt around for the windbreaker inside my duffel, unzipped the pocket, and brought out the book.

Andrew and I sat on the duvet. He put down his cup, opened the book and began to shuffle through the pages with his thumb. He stopped on one of the marked-up ones.

"Did you dog-ear these?"

"No, and all that writing is his."

My father had circled the quote, *Truth is motion; Denial is paralysis.*

Andrew moved his lips as he read the quote. Then he closed the book and looked up at me.

"What do you think baggage is?"

"What?"

"A made-up thing. Like it's something you can't get away from. As if damage marks you forever with an imaginary anchor in hell."

Suddenly I felt hungry, even as he refilled both our cups with whiskey.

"When Tommy would get beat up-- you used to talk to him. What did you say?"

He studied me before answering, watching at my mouth.

"I said 'don't fall.' Just over and over, 'don't fall over.'"

He gave me one very long look. By the light of the motel bedside lamp, his eyes bluer than they really were, all hints of gray gone, and I could see contrast with his dilated pupils. I thought of the intensity of Phthalo Blue. Blue like the McCloud River with a black train running over the tracks.

He sat upright and reached for me in one swift motion, still looking with those river eyes. Something was washing over us.

September 19th. *I cannot love you the way you want me to. I can only love you how I think I deserve to be loved.*

"The views. The views are great," he'd said. "That's why people will come."

Since we had moved back into my father's childhood Broadbent house with my baby brother, my father promised he would find a real job. In an office. That he was going to build us a real life with real things and he'd expand my room so I would have a desk where I could do my homework, and my mother would have a room that would overlook the creek where she could paint and craft.

Tomorrow he was going to the Real Estate Offices of Croop and Baxter, where he swore they would hire him to do some of the smaller projects for the time being, until they would help him get his official real estate license and start managing the sale of the big properties they were going to build further into the valley on the other side of the river.

But first he needed to impress them. My father had only one jacket: the one he'd worn to my grandfather's funeral, his high school reunion, and my baptism almost a decade ago. Even so, no alterations needed, just dry cleaning and ironing.

My mother was ironing shirts and starching collars behind the couch, where my father was watching syndicated re-runs of *I Dream of Jeannie* and I was lying on the rug on my stomach.

I was nine; too old for paper dress-up dolls, but I'd just discovered them in a box in my closet while I was moving my things back into my old room. The dolls hadn't held up well. They had the texture of a book that had dried after being left out in the rain. Even though she seemed mildly pleased that I was re-examining the paper dolls she'd made for me so long ago, my mother was throwing me distasteful looks because she'd told me so often not to lie on the floor, but didn't want to scold me in front of my father.

Baby James was in his crib, which had been moved into the living room because my room was too small for another bed and my father couldn't sleep with him in the same room. My mother kept the door to their bedroom cracked so she would always hear him in the night.

From my peripheral, I saw my mother suddenly lose her posture and sigh dispassionately.

"This was my last clean blouse," she said to no one in particular, although she was looking at the baby. She'd milked through her shirt.

My father turned his head from the television and looked her up and down.

She was dabbing at her shirt now wringing the fabric between her fingers, clicking her tongue against her teeth in an impatient way.

"You're burning the shirt."

She started and immediately lifted the iron—she *had* burned it. Not badly, but markedly. She was paralyzed for a moment, her brow furrowed as she was looking down. It made me think of an expression a child might make if holding two puzzle pieces that she knew should fit together based on the shape of the oppositional feminine and masculine sides, but for some reason, didn't.

He limped over to her and picked up the shirt and held it up, and then I thought he might punch her. His eyes bulgy, his double-jointed knees locked. And I could tell in the way his ears were turning red that he was fighting it. He tossed the shirt back at her then threw back his shoulders and began to walk back to the television.

From behind the ironing board my mother said, "I'm sorry," very softly.

I heard the buried sentiment in her apology— that what she was sorry for was not for burning the shirt, but because he would not get the job.

He must have thought so too, because he wrenched himself back and with a swing of his arm, he threw the ironing board aside and grabbed the collar of her milk-stained blouse. The iron clattered on the ground, backwards toward the electrical outlet. She suppressed the choke through her nose when he was nearly dragging her, her toes twisting under her feet. The sound of her strangled breathing made me feel sick.

"Don't you do that," he said in that tone. That tone I knew he used right before my mother cried. Just as she'd done when we discovered the whale.

He yanked on her collar again and she stumbled, about to fall and he raised his leg as though to kick her neck down onto the floor.

The breath was knocked from her and she managed to push out her arms as she was pitching forward and she cried out when she landed on her wrist.

She tried to thrust her broken wrist out from under her, but my father was now on his knees, one of them on her lower back, holding her down. She was still moaning, moaning louder than my brother, who had begun to wail.

“If you’d fed him you wouldn't have soiled your shirt. He wouldn't be crying!” And he raised himself and shoved a foot into her hip.

“Get up.”

I looked at my hands, looked at the crib that had once been mine. The tension in my body amassed so tightly, my thoughts collapsing into chaos. I was unaware I’d torn the tabs off all the paper clothes in my hands.

My brother was screaming louder and louder in his crib, my father had walked over and lifted him out.

In his arms, my little brother looked like one of my paper dolls; his patterned sleeper was wrinkly, still too big for him, but underneath it, I could sense how soft he was, how little. My father held him in the crook of his arms, cradling him like in a hammock and walked back to my mother. With the baby in his arms he walked back to my mother who was still lying on the floor, her hand finally out from under her body. My father pushed his foot into my mother’s side.

“Give him to me…” she was sobbing. “Please, James.” She was still crying. “Please stop, let me hold him.”

“So get up then.”

But they were both still crying.

I saw him lift his foot. He was lifting his foot to kick her again and I knew it would be bad. His foot hit her ribs and she screamed again, James screamed louder, and then I screamed too.

My hands were sweating, I'd ripped all my dolls. My cuticles were bleeding from the way I'd torn at the skin around my fingernails, and when I saw the blood oozing onto my nails, my thoughts redlined.

I grabbed the iron, which had fallen from the board but was still plugged in. The water in it had steamed away, but I yanked it out of is socket, pulled it towards me hand-over-hand and with the chord in my hand, I ran at my father, on his knees again, one of them on my mother's lower back, holding her down, Baby James in one arm, and at that moment, we all screamed, screamed at what felt like the same pitch, when I held the hot iron into my hand and thrust it into his hip.

Even though he howled the moment it touched him, I didn't let go. I shoved him with the iron again.

"Ariana!" My mother screamed and suddenly I was out of my stupor and I let go of the iron, just as my father dropped Baby James and he fell.

I don't know what sound he made when he fell. I don't know if my father had fallen over and I don't know if my mother had gotten up, but I knew I was about to say something before a force bore down and crushed my teeth together. They caught the inside of my cheek. I felt something loose in my mouth when I landed on the side of my face. I opened my mouth and blew out the crowns of two teeth, stuck grotesquely, stickily, in blood and spittle. I fell unconscious.

In my state, I hid inside myself, desperately held fugitive in the space between what had been hard and what had been right, except that I didn't know one side from the other.

February 29th. *A human life is only two things: a birthdate and a death day. Everything in between are memories.*

I woke up the next morning in the Pepperwood Motel with my leg asleep, tucked under Andrew's; his arm under the curve of my hip. His breathing was in timing with a soft pelting I could hear bouncing from the hood of the car outside.

It was hailing.

We didn't smile at each other in the way that so many people do the morning after, still processing the night. We simply looked at each other, and slowly, when we rose, we dressed each other in the same purposeful way we'd undressed each other the night before. He wet his hand and combed it gently through my hair, even tried to slip a bobby pin by my bangs. We took in the silence together, let it belong to both of us as we walked out to the car, hand-in-hand.

To get to the bridge, Andrew and I had to cut across 299, a narrow two-lane highway surrounded by Redwoods. I was slumped in the passenger seat, my neck resting on the adjustable headrest and my chin on my collarbone. Under one palm, resting on my knee, I had curled my fingers loosely around a bottle of Canada Dry. In the crook of my other arm, I had *Every Day Anew* pressed to my chest.

"We're here."

We leaned against the dusty car, smoking and surveying the scene.

The bridge was very high over the river, even more so now that the waterline was low. On high school graduation night, my father accepted a dare to jump into the river from the bridge. Drunk. He'd fractured his pelvis and femur.

After the incident, the bridge was barricaded; they erected high barbed wire fencing and blocked off both ends of the bridge with shoulder-to-shoulder staggered stacks of cinderblocks. They were still there, graffitied and worn. Dirt underneath the fence had eroded and was now steeply sloped down towards the riverbanks. There was a large enough gap that I could crawl under the chain link fence and onto the bridge. Andrew and I sparred over the planks and I could see our stray shadows skipping across the water.

On the other side, the path was red although the rest of the terrain under the trees was gray from dead pine needles. Blocks of white chalk were scattered by the way. Andrew picked one up and prodded it with his thumbs; it fell apart in sheet layers, like shale.

The real chalk formations appeared around another bend of Redwood trees, they sprung out of the red dirt like loose teeth in a gum.

The outside stone was finely textured and grooved by wind although chunks of its bulk were missing here and there, as if it was ice on a snowcapped peak that had melted from a shifting streams of sunshine between trees.

We saw the entrance at Andrew's knee-level. It was hard to tread through the opening while crouching; the grain was so fine, it was hard to wade inside, and the arched walls were crumbling. My fingers traced a sheaf of chalk along the tunnel, slowly sloughing off the interior. I wondered how much dust would have to fall to make the cave collapse on itself and bury us both.

Once in the first cavern, small as it was, I found I could stand up straight without hitting my head on the ceiling and I could plant my feet flat; the dust had caked hard and for long enough that it was solid. Andrew too. I was surprised by how well I could see inside and I marveled. The walls were pure white with rust deposits high on the walls.

"I think this was a mine." Andrew, like me, was running his hands compulsively along the walls. As we moved further from the entrance and it became darker, I gripped the walls tighter and with my fingers I could trace patterned grooves.

We turned a few corners—the walkway felt systematic, packed earth beneath our feet and clearance for our heads. Then I could sense an end to the mine. I saw a stream of light entering from another direction and the ceiling dipped and chalk dust clung to my feet again, but I could sense we were moving towards an exit. The tunnel widened and felt much larger because it took so much longer to walk towards it now that our pace had slowed, feet sinking in the dust with each step. The tunnel opened up until we were in a wide, light and very high cavern. There were multiple notches above us that lit up the space with sunlight and several feet above us there was a window.

Here I could clearly see patterns and markings on the walls. Someone had carved an intricate pattern of lines—complicated whorls, ulnar and radial loops, buried arches—all framing etchings left by other visitors. Names, places, dates.

Andrew ran his fingers along the patterns, then turned around to look at my face.

"Do you ever feel like there should be a word for this specific type of graffiti and writing? Like when people say so-and-so *was here*…"

"Something with vanity. It's a vain thing to do. People like proof. Like to see things in writing. So they can see read it out loud over and over. Hear it over and over."

"I think it's morbid. Think about the only other times we ever put our names together with a specific date."

"Birth announcements."

"Gravestones." He paused and looked at me, eyes round, pupils like pins, twitching, still getting used to the extra light. His hair streaked with settled chalk dust.

"You don't want to leave anything?"

"You first."

I took the car key he handed to me and directly over the rust deposits, I wrote, *Every day is new*.

He read my engraving, then turned around and as high as he could reach, in a smooth space by the window opening, he wrote: *A. Bay / A. Shipstead were here today.*

"People will wonder when that actually was."

"I think people will care less. Dates prompt people to think on what they might have been doing that very day in whatever year they read it. Now it doesn't matter to them. It has nothing to do with them."

We climbed out the opening and found we had come out away from the trail, but closer to the bridge.

In the middle of crossing it, the hail from that morning resumed. Our faces reddened from the pelting ice. The staccato of falling hail sounded almost like crackling heat and it was as though we were sitting in the midst of a burning fire that was pushing the banks of the river apart. With the widening of the McCloud, I felt my own emotions, somehow less dense, diffused on a grieving plane, unsettled by hailstones, plunging back down to melt into a new river.