

Reflections of a History Professor
Looking
Through a Telescope at 4 a.m.

I
One morning at 4 a.m.,
you are able to view five
planets simultaneously
in the southwestern
sky. Mercury, Venus,
Saturn, Mars, and
Jupiter, visible in a
wide arc low above
the horizon.

When you are 70
memories fly at you like
conspiracy theories following a presidential assassination.
They are impossible to catch and hold,
let alone dismiss.

You would think that lived experience,
experiences that you claim you will never
forget for the rest of your life,
no matter how long you live—
would remain fixed in your mind.

I was in my forties when my wife and I
finally had a child, April.
I remember, moments after she was born
holding my daughter,
a football shaped package cradled in my arms,
with my head swelling and my eyes tearing.

In that moment I thought I would always
remember the new texture of her skin, the
pierce of her cry, the solid weight of her
body, brown piercing eyes,
the pressure building in my heart like a
plane on takeoff.

Memories, we think, should be concrete,
like a flashback played in a movie,
with sharp lines and indelible colors,

objective,
a camera lens.

But daughters grow old and the demands
of life continue to build and one day you
realize that you don't remember what it
felt like to hold her little-girl hand in the
parking lot or the smell of her sunshine fresh hair
after a bath or the
maddening joy/frustration
of a simple walk down the street—
a matter of a few hundred yards that
should take ten minutes and
serve the double function of getting your
wife off your back because she hasn't
"had one moment to herself," as well as
clear the head for another go at writing
that tricky chapter on the consequences
of the battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas,
only to become a series of starts and stops,
picking dandelion bouquets and
sorting rocks, idle questions
about God and the world he made,
and silly songs—
and by the time you get back to your
desk an hour later the writing trail
has gone cold and your wife is still mad and
your daughter needs a snack and that loose
step on the stairs is still loose.

II

Holding a child close to your chest
raises your body temperature;
you can feel your core rise and
flow out to the child, to
warm and protect her.

I know that intellectually—
It's a proven fact—and I know it
emotionally, because I've experienced it
and I remember experiencing it.

But what I don't feel anymore,
can't really remember,

is what it feels like to hold a child
close, with her body cuddled ever
closer, and feeling that heat
flow from your body to hers.

It has been too many years,
and I often took it for granted when
I bothered to reflect on it at all, or
worse, so many of those times I was
distracted by the thought I should be
doing something else,
something more productive.

Preparing a lecture, writing a
monograph on Southern history, grading
papers, even fixing that blasted step that
couldn't seem to ever hold a nail or even a screw.

III

One day you're holding your infant
and the next
you're grading papers in the audience
of her choral performance, and then
you're pausing in your typing, pretending
interest in her latest artwork or school essay
on the similarities between the *Odyssey*
and *Huckleberry Finn*.

A little later you notice she no longer
pauses at the study door; she passes
without speaking and goes
into the bedroom to talk things over
with her mother—the bedroom where your
wife spends her late afternoons and
evenings after work while you're secluded
in your study typing away at some
manuscript—and you wonder
what they're talking about.

When your daughter does say something to you
everything is "fine" and then she darts
up the stairs to her room.

You pick up on little things that you aren't

directly involved in or consulted on: the
constantly shifting composition of 9th grade
friendships, the wrong style of hair or clothes,
slammed bedroom doors,
slammed car doors,
awkward teenage bodies growing in
all the wrong ways--
periods, acne, braces--
gangly teenage boys with pimples
at your door.

The teenagers learn to drive and she's
out the door with only the briefest of
introductions or explanation of plans
for the evening, and you look at your wife
and she turns and goes
back to her bedroom without a word.

IV

You write four books and get your tenure,
but no one stands in line to have their
copies signed, and no one ever says
your books changed their lives.

Reviewers spent as much time
with your book as other historians have
spent with the Trans-Mississippi
battles of the Civil War.

V

And then she starts college—
not the college where you teach at, by the way—
and not long after your wife comes
into the study and says,
“Well really, why should we
pretend any longer?”

And you nod
because you've felt it coming
and you can't
argue for the pretense.

And as you suddenly realize your
wife is still beautiful and you haven't
thought about it lately, you find out

she doesn't want the house; she hasn't wanted it for years, you find out.

She's asked her company for a transfer to Memphis, where she plans to get an apartment and friends and who knows, maybe a boyfriend who lives in the 21st century and doesn't care about the Civil War, or tenure, or the stars in the sky that you look at through your telescope.

You're sixty years old and it feels like you're starting over. Or maybe you're just over.

VI

You adopt a dog and settle into a life of teaching and staring through the telescope late into the night.

You become a pretty decent amateur Astronomer, using a telescope Purchased through EBay that looks like it could launch missiles, an Orion SkyQuest XX14i. On dark nights you sit in the yard for the duration, drinking coffee and watching million-year-old light.

VII

You have a friend that teaches at your daughter's college, which is small enough that it's easy to know almost everyone, and he tells you that he hears your daughter is hanging out at the rock-climbing gym in town and camping with a bunch of hippies at Jamestown Crag, a climbing spot you hear kids from your school talking about.

You can guess about the people she is climbing with based on the slackers lazing through your own classes: muscular girls in tank tops and flannel shirts; barely-articulate boys with baby

beards and long hair tied up in man-buns;

and you think about those long afternoons and weekend nights camped out at Jamestown, where everyone goes to climb, and you imagine them drinking beer and smoking pot, and wonder in whose tent she sleeps at night,

and you hope she's making good choices, but you'll never really know because she doesn't come home anymore, and when she does, finally, a year before graduation, it's just to tell you she's found a job teaching rock climbing in Utah, and she's moving there with a guy who's sitting in the Jeep listening to music, not bothering to even come inside, and you hope he is a good man but you know there will never be a way for you to know. He could turn out to be a man who uses your daughter's ponytail to slam her head against the wall, and there is no way that you could ever know, no way to save her, because she has moved on and become someone you don't really know.

VIII

You get excited when, one morning at 4 a.m., you are able to view five planets simultaneously in the southwestern sky. Mercury, Venus, Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter, visible in a wide arc low above the horizon. You want to tell someone, but there's no one who cares. The dog just stares at you, an intelligent Border collie stare, but that's all there is.