

ANDREW KOZMA

*Prayers to Those Who Wait*

PART I

*Memory of Ashes and \_\_\_\_*

Things are not as they seem.

My mom and dad are resting in their bed. She rests on her side, cradling him—her eyes are open and unfocused in the direction of the far wall. The room is dark. It is late, later than you think.

With the shades drawn there is no telling whether there's a moon shining through clouds. Or if it's just rising and silvering the tree-tops. Or if the sky is empty except for a pale disk too low to see from this forested suburb. There is no sound but the fan turning so slowly the air moved is a continuous faint breath, exhaling everything without wheeze, without holding back, steadily.

The trick, the turn I was going to spring on you, is that my father is not there. Inside my mom's arms is an urn, inside which is a plastic bag, inside which is a dry, complex mixture of ashes and small, unmitigated bones.

There. Don't you feel better? Nothing to \_\_\_\_.

But don't underestimate the \_\_\_\_\_ of memory. At this moment my mom is reliving her marriage and attempting—failing—to not relive the time in the \_\_\_\_\_. I want to say consciousness presides over memory, memory presides over conscience, conscience presides over desire, and desire. Desire.

She tells me to take deep breaths, calm the heart as though forcing sleep, and pick a point in time. Reconstruct, from the ground up: the white of the walls, the sky leaking in through the window, that sound in the distance, some sound in the distance, as of arrival: the intensive care walls beep and the air smells \_\_\_\_\_. The heart and lung machine \_\_\_\_\_ like a dog at your feet. There is a swollen \_\_\_\_\_ on the bed.

PART II

*Far From Home*

I knew I had to go home: it was early December 1999 and I was on a balcony in Larnaka, Cyprus, that reminded me of the balcony Diana

and I shared in Athens. From here I could see her high school, a few empty soccer fields, and the tinge of blue that was the ocean on the horizon. In Athens, we had had a hotel room high enough that we could see the Acropolis while still in bed.

In Cyprus, I felt a drag, as though I was caught in a net, one of those gigantic ones slowly trolling the ocean so that, for the longest time, the captured fish don't realize their danger. I stayed in Diana's room in her parents' apartment (though, for that first week, we were by ourselves). In her room were twin beds, separated by a foot-wide gap, with yellow bedding and walls newly painted a dark green. At night we spilled over the gap into one another's arms.

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*The plane slips through clouds like a needle through skin.*

In late August of 2000 my mother and father drove me down to Gainesville, Florida, helping me move all my meager possessions to start my new life as a graduate student. Two weeks later my father collapsed in the front hall of their home. He had fainted, and it was nothing serious—it was simply very, very strange. Inexplicable. My father had always been in great physical condition, partly because being in top shape was required for Air Force pilots. He played soccer with my brother and me until he was fifty, and physicians told him that he had the lungs of a twenty-year-old (much better than mine; afflicted with asthma since I was young, my lungs have always been sub-par). My father was diagnosed with low blood pressure.

A month later he died; after my father had been on life support for a week, my mother and brother had the machines turned off. His vital functions ceased within the hour.

That is the language of machinery and medical euphemism. The last time I saw my father, his heart and lungs were a large plastic box by his bedside that looked like an aquarium of blood. Tubes pierced his sides. Even without Ovid's magic, a metamorphosis was occurring.

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How do you explain when you are in love, or when someone is in love with you? I mean, how do you *explain* the feeling? It comes down to metaphor, which means it comes down to instinct, to nothing at all. In Cyprus, sitting on my bed in Diana's room, eating breakfast at her parents' table, I knew I was soon returning home to Virginia even though I also knew I had nothing to look forward to except a life on hold while waiting for responses to my grad school applications. My parents said I could stay with them—as long as I found a job—and there were friends to hang out with.

This emptiness is what had made Cyprus so appealing. Diana could help me find a job, an apartment, and every three months, when my visitor's visa expired, we'd vacation abroad for a few days and return to start the cycle again. She was beautiful, artistic, playfully wicked; her family was open and accepting; Cyprus was a thick, addictive book—foreign enough to be exotic, but comfortable since everyone spoke English, the island having been a British colony.

But even in Athens I was reticent. We almost had sex. Since I was a virgin, I figured that would add too many complications, too many ties between us, in case I had to leave.

Had to? I wanted to.

Why? Because of an urge, a desire, some insistent feeling that I needed to be somewhere else, that this wasn't the place, go home.

That's no answer. Tell me why? Is it me? She touches her face, then turns the motion so that she's simply tucking a stray lock of hair behind an ear. This past year her skin was slightly scarred by sickness.

No. I'm looking at you, looking at her, we're looking at each other, eye to eye—we're close enough to feel the breath of the other on our skin but, purposefully, there is no contact. I don't know.

Here is a summing up of the situation. October in Athens is cold, gray, and rainy. At times the sky is as clear as glass and the sun cloaks you with light, so much so it hurts to see. The day Diana arrived in Athens—I'd already been there two days—there was a riot sparked by President Clinton's arrival in the city. We passed by the long lines of people earlier in the afternoon, when it was still a peaceful demonstration.

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Two of my fellow students and I went to eat at Hooters, which was the only restaurant open at that time of night in downtown Gainesville. In twelve hours my father's heart transplant would be performed; I would still be in the air, waiting to touch down in Durham. There was a good chance he'd be dead by the time I arrived. In an older worldview his spirit could've passed my body while I was in the air, on its way to heaven. But in that older world there would be no airplane, and I'd have heard of his death through a letter, months after it occurred.

The two others with me at the restaurant—I don't remember who they were. My father sickened and died at the beginning of my MFA so I didn't have friends, just kind-hearted strangers who knew, through proxy, that I must be in pain. What I wanted was to laugh.

We did. At the absurdity of going to Hooters ~~for mourning and for~~ for comfort. At the absurdity of Hooters being the perfect place to go for comfort. Around death I want the Irish extreme of drinking and joy ~~and grief~~ all mixed together. ~~What is the purpose of sadness?~~ I laugh to celebrate life ~~and blunt the edge of despair~~.

In less than a week my family, and my father's family, had moved into the Duke University Medical Center and fashioned a new life around waiting. My life was fashioning itself around teaching and writing and taking classes ~~and the knowledge of my father's decline constricting all my actions~~. Days would go by, before my father was at Duke, while he was bouncing from home to the Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Virginia to home to Walter Reed in D.C., ~~when I would forget that my father was ill~~, when I would drink some coffee, read a book for school, and not wonder what things were like outside my world.

~~Steadily, proteins in my father's body were suffocating the organs. They were not prejudiced—they were not intelligent—so that each organ declined in performance by the same amount. The heart transplant, which was successful, was no help. The heart was not his problem.~~

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A week before I was going to leave Cyprus, Diana had surgery. My ticket was bought and I couldn't postpone the flight—my parents

were the ones fronting the money for my return. She had ovarian cysts that were causing bleeding and needed to be removed. This had been a problem before and the resultant scarring had already put in doubt the possibility of her having children.

The surgery was going to take place in Nicosia, and I traveled with her, her mother, and her brother for her preliminary visit. Most of the time in the city, the Cypriot capital, I spent in a bookstore next door to the clinic.

In the days after her surgery Diana mostly lay in bed, in pain, waiting for her body to mend. She was still bleeding. I read to her. At night we talked about what we were going to do in the future. She held out hope, and I held out the possibility, that I would still be here.

In the car on the way to Nicosia I watched the landscape. Diana was tired, she was hurting, and she was staring out her own window. The land was blasted. The dirt was a yellowish-gray, and the trees that rose from it stunted. Cyprus had been a resort paradise for the British Empire. I wondered why anyone would ever come here.

### PART III

#### *A Detailed Analysis of a Room in Transition*

The machine off center, to the back and the right of the bed, is the only thing connecting my father to this world. From this vantage point I can only see one wall—the head of the bed rests against it, underneath a high and modest slit of a window. This tunnel vision is selective: the top of my father's head, his hair thinned by his sickness; other machines turned off and pushed against the wall; the light blue of the wall; and though I can't see them, I know there are hands resting on my father's hands, his hands that are even now, imperceptibly, cooling.

I turn from the bed to the balcony and open up the heavy red curtains. With the glass doors slid shut it appears to be a hot day in Greece: the Acropolis burns a bright white like a wedding cake decoration. Diana adjusts behind me. There is an intake of breath, but no words. Again, we have not had sex. We'd have to lean out precariously over the balcony's edge to pinpoint the towers of garbage stationed along the street. There is a garbage strike, but at least it is not summer, not a time when the heat would ferment inside the

black plastic bags and you'd feel, as you passed, the strained surface swelling towards you.

She steps from the bed towards me, the sheet she takes with her announcing itself with a rasp. Her arms are around me, but it's the soft fabric I feel first. I turn my head towards hers and brush my chin along her scalp.

I watch my microwave and toaster oven against the far wall, both lodged in a rolling entertainment center, and the door. The door is on the far left of the plain white wall. A sign hangs above it:

**No Exit  
Entrance Only**

The room is bright and the broken couch I'm sitting on, as long as my back is against the wall, is a cliff I'm scared to approach the edge of. Gainesville never sleeps and, here, with the shades drawn, the stark light, the ceiling fan cutting the light into sections of subliminal darkness, I am not sleeping either. I am imagining that at some point tonight I will feel my father's life be cut, his soul depart, a sudden subtle change noticed like the passing of time strained through the hands of a watch. It is Sunday, and I think maybe the light will change, a slight fluctuation, and it won't be a car's headlights glancing off my window.

Through the window the sights of York County, Virginia, flash by. Trees, trees, strip mall, fast food restaurant, more trees, industrial park, and trees. There is silence in the car and so, I guess you could say, between my dad and me. His truck, his diesel baby, allows me to inspect the roofs of all the other non-truck traffic though it keeps me from surreptitiously learning what the lives are like in those other cars. I've asked him about Vietnam, and what it's like to fly fighters, but I don't know the right questions. He's answered me—there's never been a question he's refused—but I'm still unsatisfied.

I realize, though I don't stop asking, that I don't want answers. There's nothing that can be written down that will satisfy me. What he's gone through, what my dad has lived is intangible, untouchable, and that, that is what I want. I can almost feel him looking at me, glancing over, wondering what I'm thinking. Why can't we talk? Have we talked? Is this what talking is? Or is this communication?

He says, "Andrew?"

I turn back. I am trying not to look at his face. I mean, I am trying to try to not avoid his face—bloated—or his skin—yellowed and bruised where the tubes dive in—or the hospital gown that is only a thin pretense of cover—stained ochre and russet. His heart has not been working so water and waste masses in his body, like workers preparing to strike or revolutionaries scattered throughout the capital for revolt: At the signal.

Because his heart has not been working his blood can be tracked, still purple, through its plastic circuit. The machine that keeps my father alive is quiet. I only stare at it a short while, but it fascinates me, watching my father be swirled through tubes. Instead, I turn to my other fascination, the horror of the thing I am touching—

"Hello, Dad."

"Hey, Andy."

"I don't know if I can stay here. Everything's great in Cyprus. I really like Diana, and we get along wonderfully, and her family is great. I just... I don't know, I just feel like I need to leave. Like I need to come home." I'm using Diana's phone on Diana's parents' balcony on a day when the weather is fine and dry. I can feel the ocean in the air, just like I feel the desert reaching from the ground, reclaiming the concrete. My dad is silent. Behind me, I picture Diana on the dark leather couch, focusing on the television. I picture one of her paintings: on a black background is a man's face sharply defined by strokes of bright, almost garish yellows, reds, and greens, the strokes never touching. I look behind me.

Behind me is a mess, but an organized one. It has been two years, my entire life in Gainesville, and there are still half a dozen boxes stacked by my mattress of a bed, unopened, unorganized, ready to leave. Nobody ever comes back to my bedroom, anyway, except me, and I always knew this was temporary.

Except a year and a half ago, in the fall, when a friend had a party where the main delicacy was a mix of white wine, champagne, and strawberries. The apartment was laid out with rooms running in a line horizontal to the door and I promptly took a position in the middle room, where the punch was, and kept a glass in hand. The drink tasted bad at first, but soon I didn't notice the taste, downing five or six glasses in a few hours. I remember, vaguely, that later that

night I was standing with a full view of the kitchen and there was a sink there, fortuitously full of dirty dishes.

Three friends drove me back here, took off my vomit-smeared clothes, and put me to bed. They knew then. They must have known. One of them, Emily, gave me a book when he died, a purple, hardcover journal with a sympathy card inside. I named it *The Notebook of My Father's Death*.

*Lights up. The stage is divided into two clear sections: the front and the back. Ideally, the back is raised higher than the front, maybe by two steps, and the front extends across a wide apron divisible, at least, into two further sections. The front is bare of furniture. The back section is dominated by a large dining room table that seats at least ten. The table is set with plates, silver, and napkins, and several large candles burn along its side. ANDREW'S father, enclosed by the ex machina, is the centerpiece of the table. The faint sound of machinery, both in terms of beeps, whistles, etc. and actual mechanical motion (think pistons), can be heard. The stage is empty.*

I know the paper napkin in Diana's pocket is empty, even though I hold out hope, at least the *possibility*, that it contains the hundred or so dollars in drachmas that she gave the gypsy. It's her money, after all, so why should I care? It's cold, the ground is wet from the morning's rain, and the sky is a sullen gray. We're not talking. She gave the money to the old, toothless gypsy woman because the woman explained that her bad luck was in the money. Diana gave the woman her money, the gypsy wrapped it in a napkin, said words over it, then gave the napkin back.

"Of course there is no money in the napkin," Diana translated the gypsy's answer to my question, "but in a few hours, you'll see, by four o'clock the napkin will have changed back into the money, in your pocket, and your bad luck changed with it."

That was hours ago, and now it's evident the garbage workers' strike has ended—the streets are clear, if dulled by the water. In this crowded city, for a brief moment, we are the only two walking down a short alley. I take her hand.

But it is not my father's hand that finally drives me from the room. The hand feels warm, normal, hand-like. A sleeping hand. The hand of a sleeping body. Sleep is a kind of coma.



It is the smell. The machines are fine, with their subtle assertions, and so is the openness of the room—behind me there is no door. This smell, though, it must be the antibiotics, the yellow smeared all over his body so his face takes on the pallor of jaundice. It's not the bloating so that his unshaven beard clearly ends on his swollen face simply because that's where his hair stops growing, a spot normally on the throat, when the throat isn't pushed outwards. The smell of something unnatural. Not death. Not antiseptic. Not filth. I have turned my face again and again to his body on the bed and it is not that vision that will push me away. But I stand and walk away.

#### PART IV

##### *Concessions*

This is not about my father.

Say five feet, five-two in height with black hair ending well past her shoulders. Her physique is small and thin, but defiantly curved.

In the first picture Diana is in a hallway of a school, her arms entangled with those of a friend. Through the glass sides of the hall the sky is blue with a few clouds over a thick forest. Her face is close to the camera, close enough to see fine details: striking eyebrows, naturally heavy, but plucked to a thin, unapologetic line; a pixie's chin; large dark eyes; a smile hiding teeth.

In the second picture she is on a porch, the steps of her family's hotel, with a small number of guests. She is more distant here, standing at the side of the group. Her apparent height is subdued through the illusion offered by the steps. I want to say she is wearing a cream-colored skirt, one with tiny flowers scattered over it, but the picture is gone. The scene, though, the scene is distinct and real and has been repeated countless times: these travelers have made their home here for a while, played games, been drunk with the staff, and have left promising, of course, to return

*soon. We'll be back next year and we'll bring all of our friends! Don't rent our rooms out to anyone else. We loved the drinks. We loved the dinners. We loved the lights at midnight, the coffee tonguing our noses in the morning. Remember us!*

Married at nineteen to another Cypriot, she went to university in the U.S. and then stayed until her husband, name unknown, left her for a man.

In Cyprus the genders are stratified: the women rule the kitchen while the men talk and smoke cigars. In her sister and brother-in-law's house, this arrangement meant her brother, her brother-in-law, and I played video games while she and her sister prepared the food and, afterwards, while they cleaned up the mess. They tolerated me when I helped—I wanted to be a part of the conversation.

Though she smokes, she doesn't taste like smoke, or if she does it's like that chimney smoke from a fireplace burning weathered oak that's been beaten down by the cold to your nose while walking out to get the morning paper. She's curled into a black jacket that's so thick it doubles her girth. This is Virginia, where she's never been, yet the tightly knit cap that hoards her scalp and just barely allows her eyes freedom fits like a dream. It is a dream.

I'm sorry—this is about my father after all.

It is cold enough for coats, but the sun burns through a clean Colorado sky to make the mourners sweat as the priest concedes his blessing. "Taps" is played by a gray-haired man who looks like a high school music teacher with a big moustache and a rumpled, unbuttoned suit. Seven Air Force Academy cadets barely out of high school shoot their guns three times to the careful rhythm called out by their commanding officer. Three of the shell casings are collected in a velvet bag and, along with a newly folded flag, are handed to my mother. My brother carries the two symbols for my mom and, for convenience, tucks the bag of shells into the flag which, we won't find out till later that day, our mom returns to the Academy—she already had a flag from my father's retirement ceremony.

Though he died four years ago, the funeral, the laying to rest of his ashes—most of them—is happening only now. I have never seen this city before, and chances are I will never see his grave again.

They say when William Kozma was younger he was wild, he was cocky, he had a moustache. They say he looked like Omar Sharif. They say that, along with the rest of the pilots, he once dressed up as a prostitute for a squadron party, but he couldn't stand his hairy chest sprouting from the top of a strapless dress, only lasting ten minutes before being reduced to Bermuda shorts. They say he was a stand-up guy. They say he had a temper. They say he'd lose a fish, he'd lose expensive fishing gear, he'd lose his sunglasses all over the side of a boat, watch each twirl and flip its way to the bottom, then grab a beer and laugh. No, they didn't say he was a Viking. They

didn't say he was a teddy bear. They didn't say what he wanted to say to his children when they were younger and he was involved with work, when distances of age precluded open conversation and where the right questions to elicit the correct answers couldn't even be conceived. And if they could be conceived, the answers couldn't be understood. And if they could be understood,

I meant this to be about Diana.

She painted from a rainbow palette on a black background, portraits constructed of small streaks of paint, the black running through it all like the lead in stained glass. She knew she was a good artist, in drawing, painting, and ceramics, and her parents did too, but what sort of occupation can an artist expect to have? And why would someone want that sort of "job" in the U.S., far from her parents, her brother, her sister, all her relatives? In Cyprus, her father set up a studio for her in an abandoned shipping container. Here she can throw clay on a slightly used wheel and still have room for a kiln to cook the breakable whole, all only a short distance from the family-run hotel.

This is a family business and what family does for a family business is work for it. If you don't, then are you part of the family? For a long time, Diana resisted working with her family at the hotel, preferring to pursue her own studies in the States. After her husband left her she returned to Cyprus, her family, and the hotel, even though the grind of hotel work meant she had to push her art to the side. Still, family has its privileges. Through connections she is able to rent a pricey hotel room in Athens in a choice spot and show a beau there her ear. Her ears, you should know, are triggers for orgasms, or at least for incapacitation. Why she told him, she doesn't know since it turns her into a light switch.

Directions for meeting your lover in a foreign country:

When arriving in a foreign country, even one that you are familiar with, do not trust the taxi driver that escorts you from the airport. You are new (even if you've been here before) and they can tell from your accent (even if you speak the language) that you're new and a freshly minted mark. Keep your eye on the meter, or keep your eyes on the scenery spinning by and realize that when the taxi stops the first thing you do is remove your luggage. Then, and only then, will you listen to what the taxi driver says (speaking in a language he knows your lover doesn't understand) and pay the exorbitant

amount (you know you are being overcharged) to silence his voice, to watch the car speed off, and make your winding way through the hurdles of a hotel check-in until you reach your darkened room and the already turned down beds.

My father's face looks out from the back of the house, the rest of his body hidden in the darkness of the room, obscured by the dimness of the day. Diana and I are in the backyard surrounded by bare trees. The whiteness of the sky is thick and we look up together. She smiles, and I smell wood smoke. This, too, has not happened.

## PART V

### *Final Fragments*

DIANA

The question you have been asking: How is she connected to the loss of your father? But here there is a double loss. We had a chance at happiness (how clichéd) or, at least, a relationship and it was ended on a whim. A feeling. There was no excuse for my leaving Cyprus, Diana still in pain from surgery (still bleeding), except that I knew I had to go.

If an image is repeated again and again, does it accrue meaning like minerals abandoned by the water dripping off a cave's ceiling, formations grown in darkness and never

ANDREW

What I don't talk about is the nine-month stretch between leaving Cyprus and arriving in Gainesville. I'm not sure I'm going to talk about that now. Who remembers normality, who remembers the bits of everyday happiness without sadness to spur them? Once the switch is flicked off. Once the house is stripped, cleaned, and sold. Once the sky has been blocked with an apartment building. Once the page has been written over.

It's this bookended null space that doesn't manifest in my memory. There is

WILLIAM

*I'd write volumes but this single page will have to do.*

A year before my father died he suspected he was sick. He grew winded climbing a hill in Yorktown, an asphalt-covered, seldom-used road up from the pier. Always active, always healthy (even if a little overweight), his breath caught and stalled. Soon after he began a journal where he kept his fears sealed, as in a box, hid his growing awareness that something was turning in his body. At a certain point, without medical evidence, without dis-

expecting the brush of light? The earth cracks open—up to the sky or down to the lava.

She spoke two languages, one mine, and still we could not communicate. I was obsessed with mastering Greek and speaking with all her tongues. The dictionary I bought to translate *The Life and Times of Alexi Zorba* goes unused, even to transform the last note she wrote me into something I can understand. Those Greek letters on a folded napkin tucked inside the tight bilingual dictionary say something distinct about love, she told me. And that (her) language divides love so well. What does it say, that English's *love* encompasses everything while in Greek there are separate words for "loving as a friend" and "loving with passion"?

Her lips cracked open to let my tongue in and is that as far as

no reason to obsess over what went right, about time well spent, a bond more closely forged. A safe never cracked and, so, what's vaulted never checked, not even enough air and space for dust to settle.

X=Y or X=Z.

Z=These months, waiting for acceptance to graduate school, could have tied me up in a love affair, working and living in Cyprus, settling expatriate memories on my head like wreaths. Those nine months would have seeded my writing for the rest of my life, established some solid experience as a foundation for my words.

What lives here is in the imagination, a golem made of metaphor. A heart has been removed three times, replaced an equal amount of times with different hearts. Each operation was a suc-

cussion, he accepted that he was dying.

I don't know where it is and I don't know why I don't know where it is but somewhere in my apartment is the last letter my father wrote me. Before going into the hospital the final time—of course, not knowing it was final—my dad wrote a letter for each of us: my mother, my brother, and me.

What do I still have of yours? A light green, hardcover journal; various suits and jackets, one tailored in Thailand; boots, cowboy and otherwise; a watch band—metal, custom-designed—with a different watch; the disease. See, there are two kinds of amyloidosis:

- A) the extremely rare version that strikes without precedent, without warning
- B) the extremely rare version that strikes

we understood each other? We shared a tense comfort, tense because what held us together was so tenuous—two months of Internet interaction and declarations of love. Is there a word for love without physical presence? Is there a word for love that exists only in proximity to the chance of pushing itself into the world?

There were eight days in Athens, and she barely knew the place better than I. One night was dedicated to a restaurant on the edge of Athens (a far, far edge) near water where we ate a buffet-style Greek meal. I remember the salad being smothered in a layer that looked like yogurt. The sky was a black fabric so worn, and so close, we could see through it to the next day, the next day I want us to have woken up in the same bed (the hotel room had two, the layout she

cess, though only two of us live—medicine has all the answers, but lacks all the questions.

Y=These nine months don't appear anywhere.

I am on the balcony of Diana's parents' apartment talking on the phone with my parents. This is the moment that will be called back endlessly in the future, the deciding moment, a decision like striking up a conversation like striking up a match not knowing what exactly is meant to burn, when I tell my parents yes, please, buy me a ticket home. Nine days from now I will be flying over the Aegean again with a perfectly clear view of the islands and the clouds like islands above them, the whole a perfect recreation of Narnia from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Except the sun is bright above the plane, and bright above me on the balcony and, lis-

with precedent, a genetic hitchhiker

*I'm a little scared but that's OK.*

This connection—according to my mother—I'm not allowed to keep, not supposed to let others know about. My father's legacy is an insurance detriment. Inside me there might be a clock slowly winding down, the hair-spring my father left me methodically discharging its function.

I have read the letter twice. Some parts of it make no sense, in context. *Don't worry about me.* Any mention of hope. I talked to my father beyond this point in time, beyond this pen on paper, but those conversations are forgotten. I can still remember his face in his hospital bed, but no voice, no words. Stupid as it may be, I want to remember a smile. I do.

planned for her room redesigned a month before my arrival) but my memory is not that clear. I can feel her skin, the sheet half-covering my body that is slipped, like a wall, against the back of her body. We have outlined the future (What is true: I find her family entrancing, their desire for Diana's happiness a veil enhancing everything; We grow closer—love or simply understanding?—though we still sleep in separate beds) and how we'll divide our time (What is false: I'll stay until the summer, and in those six months find a job, a place to live, some irreparable connection with her life; Diana will keep me as she did not her husband).

In the moments before her plane's arrival from Cyprus, I wait in the airport lobby. Though I know Diana is attractive, I know this fact in only two dimensions. Soon she'll be here and

tening to my parents' responses, I'm aware that I don't know what I'm doing or why.

In Gainesville, as my father's disease progresses without being recognized, I discover that I believe what is crazy. The only reason I can come up with for leaving Cyprus when I did, when I could have stayed until leaving directly for graduate school, is that my father was sick. I did not know this. I did not *know* this. Still, I went home to Virginia and spent those nine months with my parents and then he fell sick and died.

A sacrifice is what one chooses to give up.

A rationalization is what one concocts to sand away guilt over time.

I haven't seen my father since his heart surgery, but now I am going back to his room in intensive care

Death is a point, *the* point where life ceases to exist. Death is not a state. It is an un-, a dis-, perhaps a re-. Even an atom has mass and, therefore, consists of something smaller than itself, something partitionable, understandable, able to be put aside, to be saved.

In his last years my father read more and more about spirituality, focusing mostly on religious scholars—any religion—deeply concerned with questioning their religion in order to shave away obscuring, inarticulate details. He was concerned with shedding the ego and the idea that, post-death, the soul would recombine with GOD, rejoin the one, be the one. But what is the purpose of life if we lose everything we gained (had forced upon us) while here?

At soccer games my father would be exiled to the empty section

what? How do I take a beauty only seen head-on and understand its complexity from the side, how the angle of vision adapts her nose, her eyebrows, her chin, how the breasts define a body differently from the side? A man is selling roses the shade of red I will always associate her with. He is selling flowers as prayers to those who wait.

by myself. He is in a coma. There is no door outside this room where I can collect myself, just a space in a hallway lined with similar rooms, nurses and doctors shuttling between them. I will be unable to deny that what is in that room is my father, no matter how bloated, how yelled, how unlike. I want a lover's hand in mine, an arm around my waist, a murmur in my ears. In there, I don't want to be alone. What frightens me is that I won't be.

of the bleachers. So wrapped up was he in the game my brother or I was playing that he wouldn't just yell or cheer, he'd kick out at the ball for us. A disconnect between the vision and the action, a belief in the ability to influence what you see happening before you.

*If you're reading this things haven't worked out as we'd hoped.*