

# Catch

## Wheeler Light

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## Caught

a spadefish  
even a shopping cart

in Brainard  
a seabass

in a lake of carp  
and in Virginia

a dogfish and you said  
*that's not good eating*

in my hands  
a Maryland bluefish

an inch shy of the limit  
*nothing nibbling*

the motor went out  
so you rowed us

to shore  
put on *Die Hard*

in Delaware  
you can see from pier to pier

to pier  
no reason to have a hard conversation

only one of us will remember  
our legs dangle but never touch

the surface

## **Gildersleeve Wood**

Houses have grown where you'd least expect

ivy-swept and sat behind long stone walls.

I walk to work and the unfamiliar remains so.

When he was young, my dad lived in that house over there

with the yellow shutters and yellowing white paint

in the apartment without heat in the basement.

I walk under the tree branch that spans the whole road

and notice some moss on the roof.

### **Early Stage**

Surprised by a tree  
yellower than yesterday.  
Keep saying my name.

## Calling My Father in a Target in Charlottesville, Virginia

Two days after the news,  
I ask how he's doing  
and he is doing wonderful.

He asks where I am,  
*it's so loud!* And I tell him  
I am at a Target shopping  
for budget furniture.

He says he loves Target.  
I, too, love Target. Target  
is one of many things  
we both love.

And he asks if I am in Virginia,  
so I say I'm in a Target in Virginia.

He tells me he loves Target  
and I stare at the throw pillows  
by the fake decorative plants  
which are tempting only because  
it is easier to keep something alive  
when there is no chance it will die.

I tell him I also love Target.

He asks where I am calling from.

I am calling from a place  
in between love and mourning,  
a space where grief happens  
about those still living.

Of course I do not tell him this.  
I tell him I am calling from a Target.  
He tells me he loves Target  
and I tell him I love him  
and he tells me he loves me  
then I say it again.



## **The First Test**

My father is to draw a clock, a circle and two lines.  
The accuracy of this test is certain as night is dark.

The purpose is to interpret colloquial descriptions of time.  
Ten past five. Quarter til nine. No, the purpose is to diagnose.

The worst part is his ticker thumps perfect to the stethoscope.  
Tick tock. Could be years left, but who's counting?

The result is what everyone expected but wanted to be wrong  
as though as though the only way to study for grief is to lose.

There is a grandfather clock in dad's office, a pendulum heavy  
in its chest that hasn't been wound for years.

The worst part is when he seems to be okay—  
the broken clock, right twice a day.

## **Clockwork**

Around the same time—  
time being both a measure

and a warning.  
A referee yelling *time*

different from a doctor  
estimating time left.

It should be said  
around the same time

his father went through this  
and lived twenty years

seeking what could be  
familiar, meaning

we cannot estimate  
the timeline of grief

nor will someone else  
declare when it ends.

## The Glove

It is important to put the ball inside the glove  
and wrap it in rubber bands for a week,  
to put the glove under your mattress, to sleep  
and when you sleep, to dream of wearing  
the glove, of making the catch, of being carried  
into the middle of the diamond lifted toward  
the sun. In the cul de sac, dad whacked  
a pop fly for the hundredth time. Obscured  
by light, plummeting toward me, I could see  
nothing until the ball hit me square on the head.  
It is important to dream. It is equally important  
to practice. Years later, dad wants to see  
the Tigers, even though Tigers fans don't  
want to see the Tigers. Dad's nostalgia  
transcends a losing record. He is proud in a way  
that transcends failures. He is always happy  
when he can remember, and maybe more so  
when he cannot. Smiling gleeful at strangers  
as though playing catch with his smile  
when others smile back. It is easy to be happy  
for his happiness, though easier to feel pain  
when he forgets or even pretend  
none of this is happening. Everywhere I walk  
I feel like I slept on a lump, like the lump  
is growing into something more true  
every day, and when I take out the glove  
to put it on, I will be able to catch meaning  
out of the sky, and when I understand,  
the truth will lift me into the light.

## **My Siblings Assemble**

to make decisions  
at the adults table.

They speak confidently  
of the will, of wanting

to be at the table  
where decisions are made.

They desire confidently  
assurance that their desires

are wanted at the table.  
I open my mouth to speak

but in order to speak  
I must answer an odd riddle.

Out the window which is now  
in view of the table, a squirrel

is eating the bird seed  
fallen from the bird feeders.

The squirrel must be aware  
of the approaching fox.

The cardinals must know  
what tree the crows wait in

to become known.  
At another table where my father

makes a joke, it is memorable  
that he has made a joke,

but the joke is not memorable.  
When I begin to say

what I wanted to say  
how I wanted to say it.

What I wanted to say.

## Caught

My father and I sit with our legs hanging  
off the dock—I am learning how to fish.

We biked to this spot—it is his favorite.  
I get a few nibbles and finally a bite—I take  
a deep breath and reel it in.

I realize I am supposed to be sad  
while stabbing a new worm onto my hook.

The hook goes through the worm into my  
finger. I start to bleed but my father doesn't  
notice what is pouring from me—he is busy

staring at my catch of the day. He says  
*the fish is unnamable—one of a kind.*

## Sonnet Diagnostic

When this all was a question  
I spent my free time imagining

answers—no, daydreaming.  
Pulling answers out of a

hat—*it's his bipolar* I would think  
or *he's just adjusting*

*to retirement.* Magician, I could turn  
a lie into truth—denial into

solution. *He should be medicated*  
and so he is medicated.

*He should be doing puzzles*  
I say about my jigsaw father

in pieces on the examination table.  
I put a blanket over him. Watch him disappear.

## Lamictal

My stepmother says  
*he is getting angry again.*

Again, I suggest  
treatment

treatment being  
a hard pill to swallow.

*Swallow this* then observe  
if he is any different.

The difference between  
one illness and another

another thing to worry about.  
Mania and forgetfulness—

forgetting is a symptom  
of both.

Both of us  
have this sickness

*sick* which suggests *impaired*  
from the old English etymologically.

Etymologically my father is  
*demens*—out of his mind.

I mind my language  
and explain anticonvulsants—

something rattles inside  
my father and I.

I explain how etymology  
places depression and mania

madly as opposites—  
two poles to bounce between.

Between my father and me  
our ailments rhyme—

rhyme like a word and itself—

ailment from *eglan*—to trouble.

A pill troubles the mouth  
hoping for progress.

An illness progresses  
like a clock failing time.

The time my father failed  
to draw a clock, time stopped.

Stopping to separate language  
from its history—

historically, my father was *angry*  
which etymologically does not mean

*mean*, it means sorrowful.  
Means troubled.

My troubled father takes Lamictal  
which are pills shaped like little shields,

*sheld*, meaning to protect, to defend—  
a board, means what it used to.

To define *treatment*  
we go to its root.

Root in its roots—*tractere*  
meaning *to deal with*

with compassion. To drag  
about or handle as in

handling a wild animal—  
the wildness its impairment.

I pare off a little bit  
of the story for a poem.

Poem about me and my father:  
Two men stand in a room.

The room between them fills  
with the ticking of a clock.



## Terminal Glossary

A side effect belongs to a pill.  
A symptom, to a body—  
an illness, too, a gift the body  
would reject. A gift, though, belongs  
to its receiver. Cannot be gifted  
back, can be passed along.  
In certain cases, new cases.  
A healing belongs to the pain  
it heals. My father belongs  
to himself then his family  
though I am unsure of the order.  
A memory belongs to a story  
until presented to the world.  
A memory belongs to the person  
remembering it, not the person  
they are remembering. My poem  
about my father belongs to me.  
Though, if he reads it, it becomes  
his memory. A question belongs  
to the questioner and the person  
being questioned. How to continue?  
I write a poem about a symptom.  
I know the answer to the question.

## Seroquel

the side effect is too much  
and the major effect too little  
to justify what the side effect  
has done to me—I present  
evidence despite desiring  
survival or something more  
than survival—living  
truly and making friends  
or watching the heat lightning  
which coats the blue ridge  
in mystery in the middle  
of the night finding myself  
composing a poem  
about family which means  
a poem about me  
and not abandoning the poem  
after the first line  
so in a way not abandoning  
myself and having dreams again  
even if the dream is to document  
accurately and beautifully  
my father's dying or more simply  
his mind getting lost in its memories  
as a coping mechanism  
which means I am in a state  
in which I can have coping mechanisms  
though since the diagnosis

I have mostly wanted a funeral  
which is a book my family wouldn't  
like very much to read though  
I am not choosing  
the subject matter or to sleep in  
every day for twelve hours  
but I am getting carried away  
on a tangent  
which is to say wanting to die  
is a symptom and sleep  
and weight gain is the side effect  
of survival—no—again something  
more than survival—having dreams  
not in my sleep but explaining  
how happy I am not to be anything  
less than living in the way  
that someone celebrates  
a good job offer or a publication  
or celebrates waking up  
and remembering the appointment  
or celebrates waking up

## Caught

as in catch / as in hold / *cachier* to capture / taking  
photos of my father until one looks just like him /  
or *chacier* to hunt / down a memory together / find  
traces but no narrative / also *capere* to take, hold /  
though I prefer take hold / *catcher* used the first time  
in 1865 / to *catch on* as in to understand / for years  
my father was / fragments / of himself before /  
his family caught on / in the half-light of memory /  
care / light catches the edge of a story / the meaning  
not nearly as important as the telling / *caught* replaced  
*catched* in the fourteenth century / *catched* as in latched  
shut / a trap / the metaphor takes hold of itself / *catch*  
also meaning *ketch* meaning a fishing vessel / my father  
and I out to sea to see what we catch / on which we are caught

## On Chiasmus

My father visited over the weekend  
and I would like to write a poem

that doesn't grieve him while alive  
but everyone must have that grievance

with grief—making memories while  
my father loses his.

I would like to write a poem  
about the man he is—simply happy

making new friends with strangers  
he mistakes for old friends.

It doesn't matter if the friends are new  
or old, the purpose they serve

is easy—it is easy to smile back  
when my father is laughing

while he tells a story that's become  
tattered by telling.

I would like to write a poem  
about who he is—who he was

before he was sick but he is sick  
and happy so I should be

happy for him but everyone  
must have that grievance

with happiness—my father  
laughing at a joke

about what he doesn't remember.  
My sister tells him

*The neurologist had a bad bedside manner  
because he knows his patients*

*will forget how rude he is*  
and it is hilarious and it is sad.

I would like to write a poem

unconcerned with the sadness

but everyone must have that grievance  
with poetry—how it grieves

despite happiness  
ping ponging off of itself.

My father taught political science  
his entire life but that is not poetic

or who he is—my father once hit me  
but everyone must have a father

and that is not who he is. My father  
forgets my brother's name for only a minute

and I will never tell my brother until he finds out  
from my father what my father is forgetting.

I would like to write a poem forgetting nothing  
hanging the past in the sky for everyone to see.

Look, this is my father. He is happy.  
He is a lifetime collapsing in on itself.

He tells stories of his childhood I correct him on  
before realizing the content of the story

is not the best part. The best part of a story  
is my father's smile whether or not he understands

what is happening to him. To him, what is happening  
is a messy chiasmus. A life in one direction

remembered in the other in snippets.  
I would like to write a poem without metaphor

but everyone must have that grievance  
with what they want. What they want the most.

## Itinerary

Father, today I will answer your question.  
We will go to the movies, first to breakfast  
then your second coffee. Later, we will go  
to the movies, after lunch. I'm glad you liked  
breakfast. Thank you. I am glad you liked  
the coffee I made you. First, we have to go  
to the park and walk together. First, we must  
learn the names of the trees. Oak, ash, sugar  
maple, birch glowing yellow. Yes, that is a fast  
car. Yes, those were birch trees. I am glad you  
liked your walk. Then, we will go to the movies.  
Yes, last night's movie was bad, I agree. No,  
it was another actor but their faces look similar.  
Yes, we are going to the movies later, after  
dinner. First, I must visit a friend. Yes, they are  
from the program. Yes, they are from the program  
I am in. No, it is not at school. Yes, we are  
friends. No. First, we will see the house where  
you used to live. Do you remember which one?  
I would not know, no. I was not even an idea  
yet. I am glad I was born, too. Thank you.  
Do you recognize this photo? No, it is me  
as a baby. Later, we will go to the movies.  
Yes, we saw that bad movie last night  
and you had a grilled cheese. I am glad  
you liked your grilled cheese. Later,  
you will go to the movies. I will watch  
as you blink in and out of recognition.  
I will watch your leaves yellow and learn  
a new name for you. The plot isn't important,  
more so the colors. If I get angry, it isn't personal.  
If I am good, I will still not be perfect. No, I am not  
mad at you (about you). Do you want to leave?  
Do you want a friend? Later, we will be friends  
and after that, we will be strangers, my name  
a leaf lost in the wind.

### **Middle Stage**

Crape myrtle, cherry blossom,

redbud, rose.

You look like someone I know.



## **Clockwork**

Time coats bad news  
in silence.

Time passes differently  
from a loved one.

*It is time I told you*  
different from

*I'm telling you*  
*for the last time.*

*I love you, Buddy*  
and saying it back

however many times  
it is said.

## Target

A light shield—*sheld*, to defend. To attack. To focus  
the attack. Target practice—to rehearse one's focus.

The Leqembi is a drug which targets.

The Leqembi targets amyloid plaques which litter  
the brain with the opposite of meaning.

The Leqembi targets amyloid plaques which are the target  
of scrutiny. The research said *we have found the reason*  
*for this lack*, for this life—a flipped coin stuck in flight.

The research said one thing, though, indicated another.

A needle slides into my father's vein between bicep  
and forearm and releases its dose. It hurts him.

He goes home. His head is hot. A red ring rises  
around the injection site. *I can't take this*  
*medication anymore* he says again for the first time.

## Scoreboard

My father and I stand in a baseball diamond  
playing catch. He is throwing too fast  
and I am growing up too fast. I grow out  
of baseball glove after baseball glove.  
Under my mattress is a number of baseball  
gloves wrapped around a number of baseballs  
equal to the potential of all the love in my heart.  
If I could break myself in quicker  
I'd be an athlete, a home run. I'd be my father's son,  
Going, going, gone.

### **Sonnet Paying Attention to Pain**

When all this began, I tracked  
his forgetting—took notes

like watching paint become wet again  
before slipping from the wall

or a yard of green grass retract  
back inside itself. Phone calls

close listened, stenographer  
in my brain read the script back

after. Years ago, I injured my back  
and took medication for the pain.

On occasion, I'd skip a dose  
just to know it was still bad or how bad

it was. How to be sad about the truth: I ask  
my father who I am. Then I ask him again.

## Catch

My father and I stand at twenty paces in the backyard.  
He throws the ball. I throw it back and take a step  
closer. He throws the ball and I throw it back harder.  
I ask how he has been and he takes a step closer.  
He tells me he has been better and throws the ball harder.  
Soon. We will face each other like a mirror and its reflection.  
I tell him what I'm forgetting and he tells me everything  
I already know. Snow falls on a field of sunflowers.  
Soon. We turn to walk the twenty paces again.  
I open a page to write the book I knew I would eventually  
write about *Dad*, though it wouldn't call him that.  
He deserves better words, the best words, bouquets  
of language. I pluck a dandelion and it explodes  
into an obvious wish. I throw and he throws. I catch.

## Closer

I walk around my neighborhood  
photographing fire hydrants.  
I should be writing about nature.

Behind a yellow bungalow  
new-construction condos loom.  
Poems in millennial grey.

In the distance, a modern hospital  
blots out the sun. It looks like a cloud.  
I should be worried about the environment.

I walk by where my dad used to live  
or at least that's where he said it was.  
Later, he said a different address.

To be neighbors with my father's past.  
This Wednesday, my siblings and his wife  
will hold a meeting about where he will live

and why—he will tell us how he wants to die  
and where. I should be documenting the daffodils  
tipped downward, bloomed too early in a late-February

heatwave. I should have something to say  
about them dying in the following frost—  
should have a metaphor to make of the night

dense fog blotted streetlights into kaleidoscopes.  
Crystalline astigmatism of thought.  
If I had a way to show you what was going on

I would show you.  
Here is a photo of a fire hydrant  
bright as the sun up close.

And closer.

## Secret Spot

My father and I are swimming in a lake  
in Minnesota. We are kept afloat by the  
many fish in it. He calls out something to  
me but I cannot hear him.

He is surrounded by water.

I am in his arms. I am tiny and surrounded  
by memories. He calls out to me. I haven't  
said my first words yet. *Dada*.  
He is not calling out to me. *Disaster*.

We catch a fish and I am born.

I fall out of my bouncy chair into adulthood  
and my father is calling out to me.  
I begin to make out what he is saying before  
a memory asks me to follow it under.

Everyone has regrets.

I try calling to my father but my mouth has been  
filled with water. When I speak,  
a rainbow trout slips from my mouth into his ear.

## The Matter of His Residence

matters—waits at the edge  
of conversations to remind  
conversationalists it is waiting.  
It continues to wait. He continues  
to live—impossible to predict

what is possible. What is possible:  
like his father, he might outlive  
prediction. Like his father, he might  
forget everything but how to breathe.  
Like his father, we will celebrate

birthdays we remember for him.  
*Blow out the candle.* He'll remember  
how, *like this*. A flame flickers. A flicker  
of flame flits. A metaphor for life  
sits easy to pin in place. In conversations

we place him in a home—*don't call it*  
*a home*. We place him in a room  
that will become familiar on repeat.  
We take him and replace him  
with an idea of him, of who

he will be. He will be hard to predict.  
Unpredictable. We ask him what he wants.  
He wants one thing, then another.  
He doesn't remember the first.  
Then later, another. He wants

something to eat. He gives us  
something to chew on. It gnaws  
at us. We disagree about his home.  
Whether he should be homed  
near his home or if he should be

moved near his family. I am moved  
when he calls and remembers  
where I live. A friend reminds me  
*stanza* is a word that means *room*.  
I tell my father I am struggling

to write poems after he tells me  
he is struggling to do research.  
We are struggling for different reasons



but about the same thing. He tells me  
the Lamictal is working and I don't ask

about the Legembi. People talk  
about whether a poem is just prose  
with line breaks and poets talk  
about tragedies that defy metaphor.  
Sometimes at home, I feel as though

this is one of those, talking to  
myself in my notes in this familiar  
room. I always say I will visit soon.  
Semantic satiation is the process  
of becoming numb to language.

The origin of *grief* is *to make heavy*.  
To move my father, we must pack  
heavy boxes, make a heavy choice,  
must choose for someone who cannot.  
The origin of *grief* is *a burden*.

We decide to wait to decide.  
The broken clock waits to be right  
and I am moved when my father  
calls to ask for the time.  
*Terminal* refers to *Terminus*

which is both an ending  
and a boundary line.  
My father calls and we talk  
about what he is forgetting  
but not why.

Dementia is considered  
a terminal illness which is a prediction  
for a diagnosis, that things end.  
I come towards the end of a stanza  
and don't know what to do

with all the choices we will know  
were the wrong ones later.  
We decide that we will know  
when it is the right time  
to decide. We decide time

will let us know when it is done  
waiting. My father calls  
and I pick up the phone.

We talk about the weather  
as though there isn't anything else

we'd been meaning to say.

## Less Seroquel

Haven't written a poem  
in a month. Dad's still

dad. Father, still father.  
Object meet signifier—

he calls and leaves  
a voicemail. I call back

or don't. Each call  
a diagnostic exercise

and today, I don't want  
to know. Today, slept

past noon. Yesterday, too.  
This drug kills me

to take so we're lowering  
the dose. I think

*If only he'd been medicated  
sooner then Don't.*

Life is primarily understanding  
the risk factors of life.

I search to see how likely I am  
to become someone I don't

recognize. The likelihood  
is both massive and insignificant

like wondering about the size  
of the sea while trying to see

the shore you can't see  
on the other side.

The shore you can't see  
swallowed by the tide.

## Home

My dad lives in my sister's basement.  
My dad lives in a state of fear  
we cannot understand—he does not  
understand. My dad lives in spite  
of his life. My dad lives through stories  
I have learned to believe. My dad lives  
in the way light drains from photographs.  
My dad lives where he doesn't  
recognize his home. My dad lives  
and everything is cyanotype lithe—  
light etching the fog alive. My dad  
lives getting ready for the rest of his life,  
his day, learning how to take a shower  
at 71, learning his children's names.  
My dad wakes up and every day  
is a brand new day, save for the aphorism.  
My dad wakes up and moves  
into a new apartment, we call it his home.

## Pedagogy

My father says he is excited  
to teach this spring

and we have been reminded  
not to remind him

of what he does not know  
so I ask him what

will he teach?  
He explains he will teach

what he has always taught:  
students

*who pay too much to learn*  
*so little*—he will teach

social entrepreneurship  
though he does not believe

the world can be saved—  
it can at least be understood.

He has begun a brand new project  
that he began

a few years ago  
researching government failure.

I ask him  
what failures he has found

and he says over two-hundred  
but there are surely more

so I ask him what the point is  
of the research

and he says it is so people can see  
exactly what went wrong and when.

Then he says he is excited  
to teach again

though of course  
he will not teach again.

The MRI images reveal  
innumerable tangles

in which his brain  
has failed to make meaning

and while his condition  
cannot be treated

it can at least be named.

## What I Want

I wake up intending to write a poem later. It will be a poem about bipolar or loving my father despite his being my father. Or it will be a poem about my father's bipolar, which I have too. Or it will be a poem about my greying beard—how I look just like he did at this age, how my first teaching job is where he first taught. It will be a poem with metaphors and images which have been eluding my poems lately. I wake up wanting one thing and getting another, a poem about my brother. A poem about my sister. A poem about the clouds, how many names we have for them. A poem about my cat, my apartment, about going for a walk. A poem about wanting to not want, a poem about hypomania, a poem about cleaning the sink. Cumulonimbus. A poem about doing a spell. A poem about a word I can't stop thinking about so the poem repeats it until I don't. *Poem*. It will be a poem about how I used to want to die, a poem about medication, a poem explaining my life to my father who is forgetting his, a poem I take with water, a poem I swim in, a poem at the edge of the lake, a poem that wonders about the edges of the page. It will be another poem I write, not the best I have written. That's alright. I wake and I want to capture this moment, no—this one. This one. I wake and the robin out the window bounces on the crape myrtle, white ovals encircling its eyes. I wake and I open the can of wet food that has a smell which can only be described as the can of wet food. I dump it in the bowl. I give it to my cat. I make the coffee and I sit on the porch and I read a poem by Arthur Sze. It will be a poem that echoes, a lie about Eros saying I understand mine. It will be all of the poems I cannot write,

Stratus clouds pebbling the sky.  
Wren with a bad wing on the porch.  
It will be the poem where I say  
Who I once was, I am not now.  
It will be the poem in which I say  
I forgive my father which I only say  
because of all the poems I wrote  
before I had. Cirrus clouds. I've been  
meaning to say all that I don't know how  
to say, though I imagine I am not alone in that.  
I've been meaning to say that I miss you.  
I've been meaning to say I am not alone.  
I wake up and I wake up and I wake up.  
I want to write a poem about mental illness,  
not in spite of it. I make a record of forgiveness.  
Sitting on my porch in the rain, I put the wren  
in a shoebox, though there must be  
a better way to heal. I want to know how.  
It will be the poem in which I know.



## Inheritance

If I send my father the poem  
about the street he used to live on,  
his day will turn yellow.

If I email him the poem,  
he will find it over and over again  
for the first time.

He will call me crying, *beautiful*.  
He will call me and I will remember  
the phone call.

He will call again and this time,  
I will let it go to voicemail.  
The voicemail will belong to his voice

and the voice will belong to my father.  
Years from now,  
the voice will belong to me.

## Grilled Cheese

My dad comes to town so I am responsible for him. “Responsible” as in I am to be responsible, to take care—*care*, of course, being a word that refers primarily to grief etymologically. *Care* as in the Germanic *chara*, “wail; lament.” *Kara* as in “sorrow.” My dad comes to town and I am to take care of him so I am to take sorrow from him, too.

I spend my free time on [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com), searching for meaning in my father where there used to be memory, *memory* being a word that has always meant the same thing, fittingly. Memory remembers itself. My father knows I want to be a poet—that I am one already. My father knows I want to write a book he wouldn't be nervous to read. I take my father out to dinner and he gets a grilled cheese.

The grilled cheese comes with tomato soup he says is too spicy, but the grilled cheese is perfect. I am not sure if this research process is sufficient, if I will become myself through an imperfect understanding of *language*, a word that comes from the French “Languet,” meaning “a narrow and sharp blade.” For years, my father was fragments of himself. When we found language for his illness, it went clean through me.

I have never cooked for him—we've always lived in different states: physical states, emotional states. When I see my dad, it is always a special occasion no matter how often it happens. However often it happens, one of us has always traveled to see the other. However often it happens, one of us is always leaving, one arriving.

*State* is a word that used to mean “to stand.” Standing, of course, is symbolism. To stand up to, up for, up at all. To get out of bed is to defy gravity. I wake up with a missed call from my father and a voicemail that sounds like every voicemail he has ever left. Left as in left behind. I wake up and am reminded that he is soon to leave.

*State*, of course, means to say plainly. To remind my father that he has Alzheimer's could be considered abuse. The neurologist says not to, says he'll get confused, lost. Alzheimer's is a condition that renders the affected unable to process the condition. A bad relationship renders the abused unable to believe they would be better off on their own. A fact is tested. The truth is symbolic. We assume what is wrong til we know what to call it.

The next night, I take my dad out for dinner again. Still, I haven't cooked for him. I have made him coffee. He wants to know why it tastes so good. I like to think it is because I am good at making coffee. I like to think it is because I am the one who made the coffee. I like to think it is because he loves me and I love him. I write a poem about fishing with nothing in it but fishing. I make a coffee and he is hooked.



The next night, he gets another grilled cheese. It's all he eats and he should get to eat what he wants. My brother convinced him to stop drinking sodas with aspartame out of suspicion it is making the Alzheimer's worse. I convinced my father to take bipolar medication for the same reason. Of course, the Alzheimer's is already worse. Of course, it was worse before we knew its name. We all want something to blame.

*Blame* comes from “blaspheme.” Of course, all this etymology doesn’t mean a thing. I’d just like it to mean something more than *suffering* which comes from the old French “sofrir,” which means “to bear, endure, resist, permit, tolerate, allow.” I wonder about what part of suffering is what we allow. I am out to dinner with my dad and he asks if he can have a Diet Coke. Who am I to say no?

## Light

Outside my window, a light in the parking lot  
is broken and flashing. In the middle of  
the night, I wake afraid someone is taking photos  
of me without asking. I wake up afraid  
of what is happening, of what I don't know  
is happening, of what is illuminated briefly.  
The light, a knife through the air of the dark.

## **Late Stage**

Holding my father's hand  
as he threatens to make  
a fist out of it.

## Believing Dad

In the post-cherry blossom spring  
which came early, the asphalt wears  
pink petals like a dress. In this way,  
when I drive dad to the store  
to buy him clothes he forgot to pack  
and he forgets my name, I have a distraction  
already. I say *isn't it pretty?* and he says *yes*.  
He calls me *Max*. He says what he wants  
then later something else. My family tries  
to chase his whim, a flower petal  
scooping the air out of the air toward  
the ground. My family is convinced  
that they can talk him into remembering  
anything, though anything is what he  
doesn't remember. There is a moment  
before bud and bloom when cherry  
blossoms look like any other tree.  
I tell my brother our dad thinks  
I am my brother. My father laughs  
after telling a joke only my brother  
would understand. My father laughs  
and his laugh drapes the world in color.

## What I Remember

I am writing a letter to my father  
in which my father is not a monster  
about how forgiveness isn't dead  
hiding inside the casket of my childhood  
it is just a grave I can't dig yet  
I believe one day I will wake up and be  
a pile of dirt full of memories  
holding pillows over my ears again  
waking to the daylight of *sorry*  
after a night sky decorated with fear  
and the burning desire to believe  
there will be a life after trauma  
I will survive the morning again  
the sleepless artifact of memory  
I will survive the diagnosis  
the pills forced down my recovery  
the envelopes of chemical sorrow  
I'll undo the story I learned to swallow  
this isn't the letter  
it is the pain I regurgitate to remember  
this is one way of saying *dear*  
the past reminding me to remember  
how my father is dear to me  
how memory is not a monster  
despite what I remember

## Elopement

is what they call it. Running away  
to get married, but also running away

from a facility, an individual married  
to the idea of another life—my father

calls to say he is going to New York,  
to Minnesota, to Sioux Falls, to kill himself

first thing in the morning, always  
in the morning. And always he makes it

two blocks from his *prison* he calls it,  
he makes it two blocks closer to a life

where he understands his life. He tells me  
we can't keep him locked up and he is right.

He tells me he has a job to do and he is wrong.  
He tells me he knows he was a bad father without

context. Last Sunday, we sat by a fountain  
on Connecticut Avenue eating sandwiches.

The water from the fountain split as it hit  
the water in the pool below, merging with the air.

The water in the air washed over us, coolwarm  
early summer night in DC. The sunset behind the fountain

colored the water alive. We wondered  
who lived in the big houses at the border of DC

and Maryland. We wondered how much  
they make. My father calls every morning

at the border of belief and understanding it.  
He tells me he will be home soon.

## Ars Poetica

For a long time, memory eluded  
violence—the poems, images.

It was important to be descriptive  
more than it was important

to be beautiful, and so the poems  
went without redbuds, robins

dancing on the patio rail, espressos  
every morning in the little red cup.

Without the walk to work under ginkgo  
leaves that look too much like toenails

to not laugh at. Without giggling at  
the wind turning an oak into

maracas playing without a rhythm  
in the distance, like how a child

might play them. For a long time,  
the poems would not compare

the wind to a child, had no need  
for peace. Would not observe

agog a bee asleep in the little red cup  
of a flower I don't know the name of.

I look at my father and in his face  
is something which eludes

image—red from years of riding horses  
without sunscreen, leather crackles

while smiling. Precancerous brown dots  
disappear into wrinkles while he laughs

and he usually laughs and laughs. I catch  
my father gazing into the middle

distance on a bluebird day in the country.  
I catch my father revealing what

was missing from his imagery. My father



is crying about what is gone from  
his memory, what has wilted and fallen  
from the branches of him. The longer  
he is sick, the worse it gets. The worse  
it gets, he becomes violent. Violence  
of this kind is normal—I remind myself  
this. I struggle to distinguish a bee  
from a hornet at a distance. The cherry  
blossom blooms are over too quick.  
I go to the creek to skip stones but the rocky  
shore has eroded into the water.  
I hug my father while he describes how  
he will hurt me or he will hurt himself  
or he will not be here at all. There are days  
I cannot see him through the canopy  
of his suffering. To love someone who is forgetting  
they love you is to be lost in a forest, too.  
In one direction there are trees and in the other,  
there are more. Trees without names. Trees  
which used to have names. Trees that used to be family.  
“Confessional” poetry suggests there is something  
to confess. At night my father searches for meaning.  
At night, I wonder how long this might continue,  
the searching. I wonder how long it might be til he lay down,  
a snow-covered road, lonely surrounded  
by everyone he forgot loved him. I confess  
I hope it is soon. In a moment  
of perfect clarity, he tells me he has lost everything  
of who he is, and there is no beautiful way  
to say this.

## Caught Line

How everyone knows not to stare  
at the sun. Glint off a lure in  
father's tackle box. No one needs  
to be told what is pain. Pain is what  
is painful. The lure is the shape  
of a smaller fish. You hold your thumb  
on the button, flick your wrist  
and let go. You hold your thumb  
after baiting a worm and the hook  
goes through. I hold onto the memory  
though the features blur. Images of  
my father, legs dangling over the edge  
in a blue Hawaiian shirt I will have  
inherited. My father asking if we went  
fishing when I was a kid. Saying yes.  
Handing a memory to him in a box.  
Saying all this. Making him look  
and look and look as though memory  
were a vision test. What can't you see?  
Saying in a motorboat, yes, and the motor  
broke. Saying you rowed us to shore.  
Saying in a canoe. Saying kayaking  
in the bay. Saying waist deep in a lake.  
Saying in Brainerd. Saying the date.  
Saying place after place after place.  
Showing the photos. Staring at the lure  
and following where it goes.  
How everyone knows what will hurt most.  
My heart goes out. And out.

## My Father

I am telling myself his name  
to remember he gave me mine.  
How our mouths make the same  
regrets of sentences. How we wait  
for others to apologize. My father,  
don't you remember  
forcing shame down my becoming—  
did I not, like someone  
who wanted to make death proud,  
hang myself by fine silk? I don't  
remember too much of the silver  
fish nibbling our toes  
spoon feeding me dinner  
which is not to say it didn't happen  
but this could also be said of the abuses.  
How I want to accept the apology  
which drifts between resolution but  
I remember too  
the sunset burning at the edge of the lake of us  
consumed my childhood and reminded me  
I was your son and you were the sky, distant  
yet visible. Home yet intangible. Growing up,  
I was easily sunburned. You told me how  
I could do anything  
one day, I might even stop being a disappointment.  
And I never did that but you did began  
looking at me the way I looked at fish, something  
to catch and release but not eat. The wound is  
healing and I am swimming. I could be miserable  
but I chose  
wading in the bottom of the sea. I could have  
bitten the bait of resentment and not let you speak  
to me. My father, how you have changed from leech  
to algae. How I could not grow without memory,  
but I will remember what I don't want to. I remember  
fishing with you.

## **Daybreak**

Somewhere, my father is still living  
in the way that those who don't know

the story of their life  
wake up to the unfamiliar sun

draping their unfamiliarity  
in daybreak, meaning even the day

is broken. At the end of this life,  
I want the stories to put themselves

back together like curtains closing at night  
to deny the darkness entry.

I want the stories to both make perfect  
sense and to be unfamiliar enough

to amaze me again.  
I tell my father about his childhood

like he is hearing it for the first time.  
I tell my father I am his child

wide-eyed, handing him his world.

## Sundowning

My father thinks	it is 6 am and
I am a child	though it is not
and I am not	really morning
though I am	a sunrise nowhere to be found
his child wanting	to be recognized as light
or waiting	to be recognized at all
I keep waiting	for it to be night
for him to dream	and not believe it
what he forgets	a curtain of stars
back into his head	a stage of sky
his brother asks	if there are symptoms
if he is on the mend	a play starring the moon
and believes	the object of hope
in belief	a rusted old coin
my father tells me	the hard truth
he wants to become	a constellation
a memory	behind cloud cover
and I am his child	shining bright as one can
who must remember	