Fall 2012

Notes for a Eulogy, Undelivered

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Muggy, jet-puffed clouds, insects whining, etc. A chapel somewhere between Omaha and nowhere, a dirt road flanked by wildflowers, which someone picked and put in vases by the chapel doors. Fields all around, wooden fences here and there, a row of trees.

But you don’t care about the scenery. No one said anything bad, if that’s what you want to hear. No one said much at all. The minister, an impenetrably fat Lutheran, did the usual reading of verses, I couldn’t say which ones. Your brothers were there, David and Jon and Saul, in from the West Coast looking ancient and stunned. You were the youngest by ten years if I’m remembering right and I don’t think they knew what to make of your latest and last display. I hadn’t seen them since Grandma Ruthie’s funeral, which we recounted fondly a number of times. Everyone agreed it was good she was dead now. As Saul noted, she would’ve found some way to take the blame.

At the service none of us spoke but your wife did. It was mostly her friends anyway, from the university, and your Local Following of Young People, of course, who wore their best blacks for this bona fide tragic event. I was hoping Caroline would say something enlightened, but it was all crap like If Only He Could Have Lived To Finish His Greatest Work and The World Was Too Much For This Burdened Soul and—the worst one, because you made her believe it—He Was A Martyr For Those Who Suffer In The Service Of Their Craft. At this point the story actually gets interesting, because I stood on my pew and said something along the lines of Fuck, Caroline, I Must Have Walked Into The Wrong Chapel Because This Sounds Like A Funeral For Jesus Fucking Christ.
Statement of Purpose

When one's father dies, one goes to the funeral. Even if one has not seen one's father in five years or spoken to him in three. Even if one is in a certain place and one's father, his body, is in another, and even if the two places are 1,200 miles apart and one is very poor, one goes because one thought one's father could be dead already, but then one's father died for real, and one needs to feel the difference.

The Night You Jumped Off the Roof of the First National Bank Tower in Omaha, NE

I was standing at the window in a dark room. Even at that hour the streets weren't empty—a dog lifted a leg, a woman hailed a cab, carrying her shoes. I didn't know but I knew. The streetlamp was hard-bright so I turned away. I saw my shadow on the wall, black body on a white wall. My shaggy-haired head, my monkey limbs like yours.

I couldn't lie down that night, and at 5:30 your wife called and told me what you'd done, the precise way that you'd stopped yourself from living, and I said And Who, Exactly, Are You?

A Story I Might Have Made Up

I was born with hair. Not on my head but down my back, tufted and dark. Baby Bird, you said and you built me a swing under the birch tree. A few months later the fur fell away, and you were sad to see it go. Six years later you left for the city, and were you sad to go? Fifty-two years later you dropped away, and were you glad to go?

Old house, cold house, never-loud house. Winter-white light on wood. The oatmeal is hot in the bowl. Your stamping boots: the dull crunch of weight on snow. The deer came in Spring, sloughing snow off Mom's buds. You took me to the river where the ice was breaking and we saw how it fell away. Chalk on the back porch, us, drawing circles around each other like we could hold
each other in. Then popsicle summers, your damp napkin across my mouth. Into bed before light left the sky. Then stories you told from the floor by my bed, me under a sheet, still sticky from the day. Fall comes again, the house is cold again, and this is how it goes, on and on until.

In Reverse-Chronological Order, the Top 5 Things You Will Never Know About Marnie Baum, Who is Your Daughter, Who is Me:

1. I graduated from college and moved to New York, a city I'd only seen with you. You'd left for Nebraska by this point, but the city was still covered in you. In the diner window, the movie theater, a passing bus. I was sixteen again and I was twelve again and nine and six, and New York was still a weekend place. I wanted to call you and say, I Know You Think You Are In Omaha Right Now, Talking To Me On The Phone, But I Had To Let You Know That You Left Yourself Behind. Since you died it's less of a shock to see you on the park bench, the dark street. You could be anywhere now. I scattered the ashes myself.

2. When I was sixteen I asked if you were fucking Diana, the 21 year old, even though I knew you were, and you said no and I let you think that I believed your lie. When my mother asked me if you were fucking Diana, the 21 year old, I said no even though I knew you were, and she believed my lie. When you asked me if my mother thought you were fucking Diana, the 21 year old, I told you yes because I knew you were and I wanted you to say it. In other words, I am not a truthful person but neither are you.

3. When I was fourteen and hated my mother, hated our tiny, cold house in our tiny, cold town, I wanted to move to New York with you. I told people that my father was a novelist, which was nominally true. I'd seen your book on my mother's shelf after all, your name in caps down the spine. My father, the writer. I thought if I could act cosmopolitan enough, you would see that I belonged with you, eating steak dinners and
going to Broadway shows, which I was sure you did every night when I wasn’t there. When I saw you that winter, I wore red lipstick, and I was starving. You told me I looked beautiful, do you remember? But when I thought about asking you the words sounded absurd. So we ordered chicken from Teriyaki Boy and watched the Knicks on TV.

4. I liked your first girlfriend, the one with the big hair and the cigarette chuckle, but the rest I thought were lunatics, especially Harriet, who called you Baby and called me That Girl (e.g., Why Can’t That Girl’s Mother Come Get Her Herself? and Why You Got To Bring That Girl Halfway To Vermont, To The Goddamn Middle Of Nowhere? and That Girl’s Always Giving Me Sulky Eyes Across The Room Like I Went And Killed Her Cat.) Our monthly visits turned into three times a year when Harriet moved in, on account of our feelings toward one another.

5. The summer I turned six, I swung on my swing under the birch tree nearly every day like a pendulum passing time. At the top of each arc I could see the road over Long Grass Hill, and that was how I watched for you. It was fall when you left. Do you remember? The road is a photograph when I think of it now, blinking in and out of view. Swing up, swing down, and this was the rhythm of the season. This was the fall I dove into a pile of leaves, straight down into them, because I thought they would hold me like a pillow but instead they crumbled like old things do and my nose broke from the ground, which froze early that year.

Father, n. [fah-ther]

1.a. One by whom a child is or has been begotten, a male parent, the nearest male ancestor. Infrequently applied to animals.

E.g.: You, a certain sort of animal, pursued a woman, blonde and claimed by a man of a different breed, and one thing begot another, which begot another, until

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finally a child, me, Marnie, was begotten, and, thus, you were a father.

1.b. Applied to Christ. (Obs. rare.)
E.g.: You believed you were being persecuted because you said that in the supermarket the cashier would not bag your groceries and at the restaurant the waiter did not say thank you as we left and when you said to me, I, Your Father, Am Being Slowly Crucified, I knew you weren’t doing well.
(See also: Antisocial Personality Disorder, Delusional Disorder, Malignant Narcissism, Megalomania, Messiah Complex, Paranoid Personality Disorder)

1.c. One who institutes, originates, calls into being; a constructor, contriver, designer, framer, originator.
E.g.: Who is the father now, Father?

The Miracle of Air Travel

When the plane took off I was surprised. I’m always surprised by flight; how it’s nothing more than an act of will. I accepted the force against my body, the pushing down that meant This Is Where You Are. I had the feeling that everyone on the plane was someone I’d seen before, even the flight attendants in their make-up masks. The woman next to me had an infant and they were in awe of each other, shocked by their need for each other. Her Daddy’s Waiting For Us In Omaha, the woman said, and I said, So’s Mine.

On the ground the world is a tyranny of details. Go high enough and it eases into geometry: squares and circles, arcs and rays. Shades of brown and green and gray. I took comfort in this view, in how well we’ve ordered our lives. Then came disruptions, rumples across pressed earth. That’s the Missouri River On Our Right, Folks, said the co-pilot, helpfully. Passengers on airplanes are always Folks. The descent was mildly spiritual, a series of drops in which my body fell but something stayed up for a second longer.
A Presumably Incomplete List of Things You Never Told Me (Your Daughter, Marnie Baum) but That I Found Out When I Went to Bury You in Omaha, NE.

1. You were taking eight distinct prescription medications, or at least you should have been, except the eight distinct prescription medication bottles I found were all full and stashed under the sink.

2. You hadn't filed taxes since 1988 when you sold your book, and your debts at present equal $32,6043, which is $10,166 more than the value of your estate, which you bequeathed to Caroline (See Item 3 below). None of that includes the roughly eleven years of child support you never paid, according to my mother's count.

3. You had a wife, another wife, that is, not your ex-wife, who is my mother, and not a girlfriend or a young protégé whom you fucked. Caroline was not pretty. She introduced herself as a Writer Like Your Father and I said So You're A Writer Who Doesn't Write. She said I Teach Undergrads and I said You're A Professor. She looked at me with eyes that said You Are Not Your Father's Daughter, and I thought Oh, But Lady, I Am.

4. You had what the Omaha Daily Record called a Local Following of Young People who referred to you as a Mentor, a Father Figure, no less. I imagine some zit-faced kid, your neighbor, found your novel on the library shelf labeled Old and Out of Print, and he took it home, read it at night and beat off with shame to the parts—you know the ones. And next thing you know they're at your door, those kids, and they want you to tell them about The Way Things Are because they're Angry At Adults but not at you because you Get It, you Get Them. These kids were at the funeral, as I mentioned. They smoked cigarettes outside the chapel and the girls shook out their hair to indicate distress and the boys looked stricken, each wondering whether he too would smash his body into pavement some day.

5. You'd been writing something. I saw the pages stacked in a cardboard box on the floor near your desk, and I tried to look
closer but Caroline was there and she stood in front of the box
and pointedly offered me lunch. I could see the type, black and
blotted, which means you must have been using your typewriter,
the Powder-Blue Beast. When I was eight I thought it was
beautiful, and I was nervous when you put the paper in and
told me to type. I wanted only beautiful things to come from
it, not my labored words, my child scratch. When you left the
room I started transcribing your book, filched from the shelf,
fingers jabbing slowly, type bars whipping in response, until
you came back and I hid it, the book, under my butt. But of
course your words were there, typed, and you saw and we both
felt the strangeness of that.

Signs Indicating That I, Marnie Baum, Am My Father's Daughter

1. Bears the unmistakable Baum nose.
2. Can be summed up by the equation: Delusions of grandeur
   + Defeatist outlook = Lousy work ethic and very few friends.
3. Is apparently incapable of biting one's tongue in situations that
   most require it.
4. Believes that a mixing bowl is appropriate for preparing any
   food worth eating, and all foods can be eaten in mixing-bowl-
   sized portions.
5. Has an unreasonable attachment to schedules, routines, cal-
   endars, lists, and plans, but must overthrow entire established
   system regularly to reassert one's autonomy.
6. Is a liar.
7. Is susceptible to chronic and paralyzing indecision in grocery
   stores, department stores, restaurants, shampoo aisles, and re-
   lationships.
8. Should not be allowed to have children.

The Last Time I Saw You

We walked through Central Park together. I wanted to put my
hand in your mess of hair but I stopped myself from reaching out.
My hair is like your hair, not like my mother's at all. When we walked, the sky was gray and there was wind like a reminder. You told me there were people who hated you, but they loved you, but they wanted you to leave. You wanted to go with them. Where, I said. You looked at me as if to say, Irrelevant. Sixteen years old and I listened to you, Daddy. You pulled me from a nonsense dream into a sad knowledge, and I loved you differently after that.

I lay down on the floor of the apartment where you'd arranged your life for a while. It belonged to Diana, the 21 year old you were fucking. We're Not Fucking, you said and I snorted to show I didn't care. When I woke up it was late in the day, the sun had come out for a moment, and dust columns hung in the light. She was lying on the couch, and you were sitting with her. Her hands were folded behind your neck, pulling. I watched you whisper and then kiss her from under my hair.

You put me on a train that night and heavy rain fell on the metal roof the whole way home. I wanted to tell you about that, the sound of the sky rejecting its water. It was like wind through a grove, a big rustle that never stopped.

I Like to Pretend That I Am an Original

Welcome to the Museum of Contemporary Sadness. Along with our Permanent Collection, which spans the last 30 years of grief, we are pleased to invite you to view a special exhibition, Marnie Baum's Father Is Dead, here for its first and only engagement in the Baum Family Room of Mental Disturbances. Located on Level 4, between the Rock n' Roll Suicides Collection and the Grieving Mothers' Retrospective, The Baum Family Room of Mental Disturbances houses exhibits generously donated to the Museum by the Baums over the course of many productive years. This provocative exhibition features over fifty entries including objects ("Baby Hair," "Birch Tree," "Typewriter: Powder Blue"), sounds ("Boots on Snow," "Hard Rain," "Insect Wail"), and short performance pieces ("Loops," "The Miracle of Air Travel"). Visitors are asked to keep to the pathways marked in red. Please do not touch, talk to,
or disrupt the exhibition in any way. All items, including words, moods, and times of day, are the sole emotional property of Marnie Baum. No photographs please.

Facts & Figures

1. In Nebraska, suicide is the leading cause of death due to injury for adults ages 25-64. Males are 5.1 times more likely to kill themselves than females, although females are 1.7 times more likely to try and fail.
2. Successful suicides are caused by firearms 55 percent of the time. Unsuccessful suicide attempts are caused by drug overdoses 80 percent of the time. There is no data on jumpers.
3. The first reported suicide in Omaha happened in 1897. Henry Thomas, a Pacific Express Company watchman, stole 6,000 dollars, then, after three guilt-ridden years, went insane and hung himself. In a suicide letter, he wrote, The First Timber In My Barn Has The Money.
4. The First National Bank Power stands at 634 feet, making it not only the tallest building in Nebraska, but the tallest building between Minneapolis and Denver. It's the 176th tallest skyscraper in the United States and the 467th tallest in the world.
5. Built in 2002, The First National Bank Tower has 45 stories, all of which are commercial offices. An observation deck is currently under construction on the roof.
6. Your footprints were found on some wooden scaffolding that hung over the edge. There were other marks too on the end of the dusty planks. We're Not Sure, said the attractive blond officer, But It Looks Like He Might Have Hung On. I did not believe him. How could I believe him.

Loops

Sometimes I make five, sometimes three. Sometimes I get to the end of my block, turn around, and walk home. Once around is a mile I've decided somewhat arbitrarily. On the first morning you
were not alive, I didn’t count. Quiet streets, dead leaves underfoot. A flock of geese erupted from dark ground. We’d startled each other. I ran faster as they rose into the almost-light, and I forgot the sound of my shoes. I didn’t feel the fabric of my shirt on my skin. I looked down at myself, patterned by new light through trees. Maybe there was no fabric anymore or feet on leaves. Maybe now there were feathers on my chest and back, maybe my face was animal dark. Did I touch my cheeks and feel the tips of wings?

The honk of geese is a language I know, a pain-noise that says Where Is Our Home. On the ground, I was racing, too winded to cry out.

*What We Did With You*

I left the chapel after my outburst, and I lay in a cornfield while my anger reduced to a simmer, and I stayed there simmering in the corn, the clouds low, the world wavering in the heat. After a long time, I heard car doors then engines then tires going slowly past, and then Caroline was standing above me with you in her arms—the wooden urn I mean—and she said I Could Really Use A Hand, Marnie.

I didn’t realize she wanted us to scatter you, your ashes, until we had walked half a mile past the church to what one could generously call a hill, a bald patch where no crops were planted but a few yellow wildflowers had managed to grow. This Is Where He Wanted To Be, she said, and I thought Are You Joking? But I figured I’d said enough for the day.

The Three Kings had an early flight out so it was just the two of us, Caroline sniffling while I tried to wrestle the top from the urn. They’re like bear cans, those urns. No one warns you about how heavy the ashes are going to be either, or that they’re vacuum-sealed in plastic. There’s no respectful way to rip into a ten-pound bag of ash, I don’t care who’s inside.

You’re probably imagining your remains drifting away as the sun set long and hot across the prairie. In real life, drifting ashes require wind, of which there was none in Nebraska that day. We thought about picking you up in handfuls and tossing you into

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the air but frankly neither of us wanted to touch you that way. So in the end we just heaved the bag up between us and dumped you here and there, and that's how we left you, in piles of various sizes along the mound.

When the bag was about empty, Caroline stuffed it back in the urn and gave it to me. His Orders, she said. It's Made Of Birch And It Stays With You.

*Interjection From the Cabbie Who Drove Me Home*

You fly in from Nebraska, I don't know Nebraska. I'm single you know but I have one daughter. Alexandra. Want to see? She's on my phone. See? See? She's a cat! You didn't guess right? We live here twenty years. Sometimes I hate it, do you? You are so beautiful, you must have a rich husband and no job. See my name on sign back there? Raman Pavlin they write but it is Pavlin Raman. At first I think this is not good but then you know I switch my mind. Raman Pavlin Pavlin Raman is all the same right? Who needs one name? Call me whatever you like! I hope you stay away from park here. Six years before girl is killed under tree. How? Why? I don't know but picture on TV you don't forget. Oh, oh! You should see her, blue dress under big tree and flowers fall on her and all around. Decorated by God. I don't care how this bad thing happens but don't go through park okay. I say this like father. I drive you to your house door because it's late and you see there is the park besides us. You have someone to watch out for you okay? She was beautiful, a little child. Sometimes I find this tree and kiss ground. You should see picture. Oh the flowers.

*Body Building*

Fall again and I'm losing my summer skin. In the morning, under hot water, I rub my arms and the flakes wash away. I pluck my eyebrows, run a razor up my legs. Black flecks collect on the white sink. Shaving, smoothing, buffing the surface and my hand never slips. Never a slice, a nick, too close to the quick. The hair on my
head comes out on it's own. I get up from the bed and it stays on the sheets. Strands collect in the corners of my apartment, trapping dust and debris. Next to me a pile of fingernails, bitten. I'm running and I'm walking. I'm in a train, a bus, the back seat of a cab, an airplane to Nebraska and back again. I like to sit on grand steps at certain times of day. Museums, cathedrals, the post office on 34th. I sit where the last light hits them, where stone steps bloom yellow until the shadow slices black. In bed I still wrap the quilt like you showed me once, over my head and tucked under my feet. I press my arms against my chest and try to hold myself together. The skin, the nails, the hair, the gunk from my pores. They all fall away, blown to some unswept corner of the world where whole other beings are born, sweet and misshapen, built from the stuff we've let go.