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Omaha's Stage

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Thirty hours a week—most of it hunched over yellowed toilets like a horse in its trough. Biology, ceramics, and thirty hours a week of janitorial in Helaman Halls men’s dorms capped off an equally monotonous year in Utah.

At the pottery wheel, I shaped the clay as it spun and slipped through my fingers in hypnotizing circles, almost convincing me that I could mold something. Yet once its hallowed circular appearance transformed into a toilet in my mind. I immediately pushed the clay off-center; it rotated once with the wheel and spun across the floor in a lump. The next morning I returned to the daily ritual: scrub the tile around the toilet, scrub the toilet outside, scrub the toilet inside, remove any hardened stains with XP150 . . . remove your metaphysical self even though your physical cannot leave. I was stuck in an endless hell, trapped in an asylum disguised believably as an ugly bathroom. Then one morning a summer monsoon pierced the stale heat, convincing me of saviors. I cracked the stiff bathroom window as far as I could, closed my eyes, and—imagining I was freed outside—felt the cool drops land on my face, running my mascara like thin streaks of black ritual paint.

I stood in two places, spoke with two voices. I was my two grandmothers, their fiery cultures of Irish Catholic and South African Mormon both kindling at my feet. Like their
language, their God was the same; like the sounds of their speech, their pronunciations of him were different. Yet I tried to ignore this dual state, for it would place me in a margin. I wanted to fit the part I thought I was cast to play, and liminality was not in my lines. I cut my long straight hair above my shoulders as a symbolic manifestation of my self-proclaimed liberation—liberation from being plagued with two cultures, like a storm cloud ruining a sunset. My hair fell to the barber’s cold tile floor. As each customer opened the door, the vengeful wind blew my strands further away, and with it, my delusion—dream of feeling—somehow—complete in my half-culture.

I was supposed to be born with birth defects. Doctors advised my mother to abort, yet it was my grandmothers who turned the first ear. They, too, birthed me. Life for my Catholic grandmother began at birth; life for my Mormon grandmother erased at birth. Through them, my body as a baby already had a dual form, for life was the absence of death, presence of birth.

A train ran through my nights; its sound filtered through my open window at precisely 2 a.m., nightly waking and reminding me of the monotony, the near-nonnecessity of my Utah life. I was a player cast for her role, reading her lines with the rest of the mainstream. Yet it was producing nothing for me; any form of creativity—thinking for myself, assisting God in constant creation, shaping my words, writing, and actions—was absent. It followed the pattern that those inside the margins of a culture rarely become the inventors, creators. Yet I had it inside me—the curiosity of one grandmother and the endurance of the other. One lived in Europe, worked in education, loved the big city, and married in her thirties. On her home’s walls hung paintings of European cathedrals, a gold-plated depiction of the Last Supper, a crucifix, and pictures of her Irish family’s farm in the Midwest. My other grandmother told me she had never travelled outside of Utah until her honeymoon at age seventeen. On her home’s walls hung pictures of family members, embroideries, and paintings of Christ. In them, I was two wildly differing women.

I left school and returned home with a Kent’s apple box full of books I had collected throughout the year. I replaced some childhood books on my room’s bookshelf with these new texts; back and forth the books went, splinters falling off the shelves’ edges. On and on this continued, the new and the old sliding back and forth, grating and resanding the shelf’s splintered edges. Finally, the box was empty
and beside it lay piles of outgrown books. The glossy blue one stuck out: *Under the Greenwood Tree*, subtitled *Shakespeare for Kids*. It was in this book that I first read the lines that plagued me:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.

One of my grandmothers died. The priest was called, final rites given, chapel space reserved, flowers and casket ordered. Sitting in the Catholic chapel, I watched the priest sprinkle water and swing a ball of incense like an unbalanced pendulum. He then read from the Bible, and after he set it down on the edge of the stand, it fumbled over the side, landing on the floor with a sudden thud. At her burial all I could see were the pink roses, plucked in their budding infancy just to brown and wither in the wind. A part of me felt dead, although I had been killing it slowly—a half of me that was sprinkled rather than submerged, a half of me that loved God as much as the other, a half of me that also assisted in creation.

I would free this side of me and study in London for four months. Walking through Hyde Park during my first week there, I observed a group of five- or six-year-old Indian kids wrapped in colorful traditional clothes. Three teachers stood in front of them, simulating an Islamic prayer's words and bowing movements like directors to their cast. The children then followed them, bowing in sync with each other—their colors flapping as loose flags in the wind. One child popped up at the wrong time and was scolded. Half-concealed by a tree nearby, I continued to watch him struggle; I too, unable to comply with one culture's movements.

It was fear which kept me from reconciling my two engrained cultures, for I feared marginality. To me, being in a margin implied negative, detrimental action—invisible mold on the bread of life. Descending the stone steps from Tooley Street to Southwark Cathedral, a drunk man in front of me wobbled to the right, grabbing a rail so he wouldn't stumble down. I caught sight of a black tattoo on his right fist that pictured a swastika and the title *Skinhead*. He pulled himself to a bench, joining a man dressed in black staring at pigeons. I walked past him, finding a traveling Anne Frank exhibit temporarily housed inside the cathedral. Entering, I encountered a picture of Anne standing on a balcony in the rain, her face glowing as her shoes soaked in a muddy puddle. Suddenly I felt the praise of life and the horror of life simultaneously. The skinhead had entered the cathedral with a hat to cover his shaved head and crossed arms covering his tattooed hand. His eyes darted toward mine, catching my eyes as they peered at him. His two eyes multiplied into hundreds. Surrounding me at eye level, gargoyle faces glared from their sculpted
positions on the wall's frieze. One was sticking his tongue out, his hands stretching his mouth back as his eyes squinted with laughter. My Utah grandmother saw the deceit. Like the winter, she was completely honest; like land under snow, she could see his title of hate though the hand was covered.

I bought £3 tickets to the Royal Opera House—my other grandmother’s love of the arts urging me there, my cheapness nudging me to the upper rafters of the theatre. I would have to enter through the side alley door and up bare cement stairs to my seat—an extreme left or right rafter that nearly touched the ceiling. I sat in my jeans, my Docs dangling over the taffeta dresses and black bow ties below. Before the curtain rose, I recalled playing dress-up with grandma’s jewels, gloves, and satin black dresses, trying to merge—even then—with her. Yet when the curtain rose, I realized that I was in an extreme margin—a quarter of the stage was blocked from my rafter seat. After the disappointment settled, I found that this marginality opened up a whole new perspective. Each ballet dancer multiplied from one to five as her angled shadows mimicked her on the side wall—hidden from the traditional audience yet within my awkward view. My eye fell to the orchestra pit below; the bows slid through notes together, score pages fell off stands, the director wiped sweat from his forehead, and I found joy in my marginal seat.

The four months ended, and I walked down my favorite streets one last time: past the Chinese section with hanging pigs dripping blood from the market doorsteps, along Portobello Road with Pakistani rugs and Mid-eastern embroideries, through Queensway with its Arab immigrants selling miniature Big Bens and Union Jack t-shirts. Ironically, my favorite streets were those that led further from my own cultures. I was intrigued by the unfamiliar; I was no longer threatened by it. These cultures merged with the city yet retained their identity, their beauty. It was at these moments—as my collective culture stood with theirs—that I felt most human.

Twilight was night and day simultaneously. This was my favorite time to observe the cities and towns I found myself and my backpack in during the next seven weeks. Almost magically, this new sky brought the young and old together in Madrid’s parks, just as light and dark merged. Parque de Realto’s sidewalks were cluttered with children massed in front of each traveling puppet show; twentiesomethings gathered near the Latin bands; the aged watched the last shafts of evening’s lights as they sat near the lago’s edge. On Sunday,
newly confirmed girls roamed through the park in white dresses with their families, often carrying bouquets of dappled flowers.

Watching them, I recalled a white dress that I once wore. My mom sewed a white dress for my baptism and weaved white ribbons through the lace eyelets. After the baptism, she replaced the white ribbons with colorful ones so I could use the dress for church. Later as I attended mass with my grandmother and aunt, I knew my white dress conflicted with the cross-symbol my grandmother wore around her neck. We entered a building of whitewashed walls and slabs of dark windows with spiderweb designs. From the inside view, the stained glass windows suddenly transformed into intense spectrums of color, and its rays would accompany the pastor’s incomprehensible words. I remained sitting when my grandmother and aunt rose to receive the Eucharist to the pastor’s repetition, “body of Christ,” “body of Christ,” “body of Christ.” I watched the kneeling believers, noting the worn soles of their shoes and the dusty hems of their pants.

Reaching upwards towards the bread chips, their hands joined together at a cross at the palms while mine remained motionless in my lap. This was, to my memory, the first sharp conflict between my Catholic and Mormon heritages.

I couldn’t sleep one night in Venice, so I walked to the balcony of the youth hostel. Along the city’s skyline were eclectic domes and cathedral spires, their lights reflecting in the watery canals below. Truth was found there, I thought, just as in the small places I encountered, each making art on its small stage. I remembered the rice still on the Spanish cathedral floor from a previous day’s wedding, the old man who shared his hymn book with me in France, the arguments that would develop in a Florence LDS Sunday school, the vivid intricate patterns painted over the towering holy walls of a Budapest cathedral. This was my idea of living, of encountering not only one rosy color, but a spectrum of grays, blues, reds. One Sunday a chapel couldn’t be found; instead, I hiked to an overhang of the massive cliffs on England’s southern Dorset edge. Its concave shape made me feel as if I were suspended in air, with no land below the edge in sight. The water’s crashing waves against the cliff were all that could be seen, and all I could think was that this was my place, in between crashing waves and a tranquil sky, belonging to neither yet finding a place in the discomfort of both.

Before returning to school, I stopped in Omaha to visit relatives I had not seen since I was a child. I told my great-aunt I had always
wanted to see a firefly, and that night—while my relatives fanatically argued baseball—she called me outside.

"The flickerin' ones in the trees are the females," she informed me. "The males stay near the ground. They can't fly," she added with a snicker.

We sat in the front steps, watching for their twinkling orangish-red light as she puffed her cigarette, creating her own orange light-flicker in the darkness.

"You goin' back to Utah for school?"
"Yeah. In September."
"You Utah folks are reenactin' your trek across America right now, at least that's what Katie said on *Today.*"
"They are."
"Just down the street is a Mormon cemetery. It's always been on Mormon Street, but I never connected the two 'til your family became Mormons."

The following evening I walked to the cemetery. *Winter Quarters* was etched in the bronze marker. I ascended the stone steps to a hill of weathered graves. Alone, I walked to different stone slabs, finding that most names had withered away through time, disintegrated from the stone's surface. As I walked over the sidewalk, a hole less than a yard long was cut out from the concrete where an unknown baby's bones had been found, a grave unmarked through the decades. Where I stood, once stood a grieving mother, her child almost ripped from her live body and buried in the dead earth. It was here where birth and death met, here where God had been present in both. I kneeled and touched the grave's inverted outlines with my hands, and for once, felt at one with my cultures—my grandmother's own buried here, my other grandmother's own buried just outside city lines near their Nebraskan homestead. Here my ancestors were connected in location and time; my Catholic ancestors fleeing a devastated Ireland during the potato famine, and my Mormon ancestors escaping a persecuting British colony of South Africa. My blood farmed the Nebraskan land as my other blood crossed this land toward their own. And in their plights, both merged in aching devotion to a single God. That day, in me, they merged again in location and time as I stood where they once stood. The dark storm clouds draped the sky like a theater of God: the hills cast a dim scene; the drooping clouds, a curtain; and the sliver of a sunset filtered between cloud and hill like light seeping under a closed skirt lining the stage.