

NONFICTION CONTEST WINNER

My Mother's Story, Retold and Annotated

Joe Wilkins

It is May of 1970. She is twenty-nine and slender, red-blond hair hanging to her waist. She has graduated from college, worked, and traveled from Nome, Alaska, to New York City. Every time they rotate shows at the Yellowstone Art Museum, she's there opening night. She knows the janitors at the public library by name. She's still mourning Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King. She cried when she found out Nixon had troops in Cambodia. Just last year she bought a car, her first, a little white Chevelle. She only smokes when someone offers.

Each morning at St. Patrick's she lights three candles, one each for faith, hope, and love. In the evening she goes downtown with her friends, and they all drop their nickels in the jukebox for Buffy St. Marie and Dylan's early stuff, anything by Joan Baez. They talk for hours. They're intelligent, passionate. They're all students and teachers and social workers dedicated to the hard slog of change. They believe peace can happen, if they all work hard enough, if they all lose themselves in that greater good. Then my mother orders another drink and leans in conspiratorially, tells her friends about skinny dipping in the Bering Sea, white ice dazzling her white skin. They laugh out loud, brush their long hair from their eyes.

Yet even for it all – her job, that good café – she thinks about leaving. She's got friends in Minneapolis, New York state, loves Montreal; she misses seeing every day something wonderful and new. But then there are her parents, living still two hours north of Billings here, working that dusty ranch out on Montana's Big Dry. Though in her twenty-nine years she's never done what they expected, she's felt

bad about it every time. She has some odd, inborn sense of responsibility – not that the ranch would ever come to her. She's a woman and still single.

You're getting older, her mother tells her on the phone.

Yes, she says, and happily. She left the home place at just seventeen, had seen New York by twenty-four. Each year, she thinks, a little older, a little more myself.¹

1. *What I am trying for here is the sound of her voice. Earlier this evening, I called my mother – because she is my mother, because I enjoy talking to her, because she is old now and alone – and in the course of the conversation I asked her about my father. I don't know why. Maybe because I have never asked, maybe because it is 2004 now and all that was some time ago. Anyway, I asked, and I did not hear what I expected. I don't exactly know what I expected. I heard my father's name said in sudden wonder. I heard laughter, a lover's grace. Her voice softened and slowed, began to move with some glad rhythm, like a song on the radio you haven't heard in years but know you've loved before – that half-remembered first note, the wild refrain.*

It was her voice. It was her voice that set me down to writing. This essay is my mother's story. Or, more accurately, this essay is my annotated telling of my mother's story, the story of how she met my father, of how the two of them came to be my parents.

This essay is about the way even those you feel you know, you don't.

This essay is about the broken world, those the broken world breaks.

This essay is about itself, the way a story stoops and gathers up the pieces.

This is about the song-like, unbroken sound of a woman's voice. It was May, she said, of 1970. He wore a snap shirt, collar on his shoulders. And there were flowers and mountains and – hold on. I'm getting all mixed up. Let me start again.

Lawrence, her younger brother, calls from Missoula. He's in his last year at the University of Montana and getting married in July. He tells her he could use some help getting things ready for the wedding. So, over Labor Day, she jumps in her Chevelle and drives clear across the state. She picks up a bearded hitchhiker out of Belgrade. Together, they pray for the students killed the other day at Kent State, and for all the soldiers ordered to do the killing.

Lawrence, his hair longer than ever, meets her at his apartment door. He brushes beer cans and newspapers off the couch so she can sit. He rambles on about his wife-to-be, his slender hands moving through the air – but he stops, suddenly, and takes his glasses off. He leans forward, looks at her, tells her he knows someone she has to meet. His name's Walt. He's seen her picture. He's interested.

She's not interested. She's embarrassed, aggravated. Lawrence should know she's not looking. Her job just doesn't leave her any time; there are too many needy families out there. Besides, this Walt is nearly three years younger than she is; she only dates older men. They're more mature, she says, and considerate. But Lawrence insists.

Walt's dressed in pressed slacks and a collared shirt. His hair is deep black, not long but thick and wavy. He wears sideburns, his shoulders straight as boards, and his thick chest tapers to trim hips. They walk downtown in the sunset shadows of the Bitterroot Mountains, at this altitude the lilacs just in furious blossom. They wait in line at the movie house and see M*A*S*H. He laughs easy and often. They go for a drink afterwards. He knows the bartenders and orders beer for them both. He tells her he likes her name, Olive. It sounds Southern, reminds him of home. Home is North Carolina, a farm along the bottom lands. He tells her about mornings when fog moved in off the cypress swamp and mixed with the heady smell of curing tobacco, and you could drink dew from the magnolia leaves. But after his time in the Army, testing chemicals and all kinds of things down in Panama, he wanted to keep moving, go west and take it all in. A buddy in his unit said there was good fishing near Missoula, so he applied to the university. In December he'll graduate with a degree in forestry. He's fallen in love with Montana, the plains pouring east off the front, the rocky rumples of mountains – and especially Glacier Park. He's worked there the last three summers and is going to do it again. He invites her to visit him. He'll take her into the back country, they'll ride horses through the pines, he'll

show her the best streams to fish. He tells her he'll write her, says she is as pretty as her picture.

She likes the way he talks but doesn't believe a word he says.²

2. *My mother paused for the first time here.*

I heard her breathe, shift the phone a bit, and I suddenly remembered she was talking about herself. I had forgotten for a moment that this was not just another story but her story. I had even placed myself in the role of the hitchhiker, my wife as one of the women at the coffee shop; my wild-eyed friend from college was Lawrence. But they were both actors I couldn't place. The kind you think might have had a part in that indie film – but never the hero, never the romantic lead. Yet here they are, believable and surprisingly sure. I decided they could stay. But I cut my wife, my friend. This is her story, I thought. Not mine.

But that pause, I'll make that mine, that charged space of silence. For even now – hours later, in my office, splash of street-lights at my window – I can close my eyes and see her standing on the kitchen's cracked linoleum, her weight shifted over to her one good hip, the plains wind worrying the duct-taped window she stares out. As she begins again her story.

The first letter arrives three days after she gets back to Billings.

It's Thursday, nearly suppertime, and she's tired. She's thinking that the state is broke and takes it out on children, that too many of the families she works with are right at the edge – not enough money for rent and less for the doctor. All these places are so sad: just brick apartments, crying babies, the stink of smoke. She's upset as well about the conservative, book-banning ignorance all around, and now another headline from Cambodia. She wonders why she doesn't leave, go back to New York City, maybe down to California, travel again, just drive, take a look at things, curl up at night in the backseat of the Chevelle and read by starlight.

But this letter is something else – polite and charming, direct. He says he's coming over to the east side of the state next week with his friend, Jack Peters, to visit Jack's parents in Bridger before they both go to work up in Glacier for the summer. He'll take her dancing, if she doesn't mind, when he gets in on Tuesday. She feels dizzy, flushed. She can't seem to make it stop. He was rather handsome.

Billings is her town, the biggest and fastest growing in the state, and she wants to impress him, so she takes him to that place downtown where the house band plays jazz and the drinks come in crystal glasses. He fidgets with his napkin, looks around too much. She asks if he'd like to

go somewhere else. He stands right up, says, Yes, please.

She takes his hand, leads him out, and they walk down 1st Avenue, make their way past the sweet manure stench of the public auction yards and the sulphured belch of the sugar beet refineries. When they pass some ramshackle honky-tonk called Bar 17, he stops and smiles, swings wide the wooden doors.

They dance the Texas swing. They sweat and drink cold bottles of Rainier beer. She likes how he moves, takes the lead so easily. Over the whine of the fiddle, the lilting steel guitar, he leans in close and tells her she's beautiful. She blushes, and the band starts into an old Carter Family ballad, "When the Roses Bloom Again." She tells him she heard Johnny Cash sing this one at the state fair last summer. He says it's one of his favorites. They stay on the dance floor. They're close, very close, moving slow.

She is in his arms.³

3. *This happiness was too much. She jumbled time, told me they didn't talk about marriage that summer, or the next fall, but she thought about it a lot. I was only half-listening. Already my part in this story was beginning. With that embrace at Bar 17, that slow dance, those two young actors irrevocably changed. Even in the easy sway of their youth, their faces began to pall and weary; their faces became my parents faces, those tired faces I memorized on August nights, moonlight pooling through the windows. He would be always in the easy chair in the front room, laid back, his bony feet and ankles sticking out awkwardly from beneath a wool blanket. There was the rasping sound of her calloused hand over his stubbled jaw, then along the back of his bald and flaking head. It was so hot that summer. And each of his unintelligible cries pulled me from some cool dream of river water back into my twisted, sweat-damp sheets. Only her touch and the sibilance of her shushes calmed him, calmed me.*

How able she was then, how in control. Yet he took the lead. On the phone tonight the words spilled so quickly from her, as if of their own volition, as if story has some power over lips and minds and limbs: Dancing, she was saying, every night that week. He came in every night that week and took me dancing.

Oh, and this, this too: He's working at the park. He knows someone who flies a charter plane between Billings and Great Falls and gets her a seat sometime in late June. She flies into the Great Falls airport, just a tin hangar out on the plains, and he and Jack pick her up wearing cowboy hats, jeans, and boots. They've been riding trail, and she can smell the strong musk of horse on them. He reminds her, she thinks, of her cowboy father coming in from a day riding for strays back on the Big Dry – but then he smiles

and the thought dissolves in waves. That night they drink Kessler Beer and bourbon whiskey straight from the bottle at the Izaak Walton Inn, where the only other woman at the bar is an old blood Indian everyone calls Mother. They stay till the small hours of the morning, and the next day Jack wakes up to go back to bed. So the two of them ride through the mountains together, just the two of them, cool wind across their faces. They pick wild strawberries, cook brook trout in bacon grease over a pine fire, sleep in a wash of stars.

And each weekend after, they cannot help themselves. One of them gets a lift with a friend or hitchhikes to the other. She feels electric each Friday evening, in a stranger's car, music loud, the windows down, the sun falling red and wild, as they rush by Grass Range and Great Falls and on up past Dutton, and she sees the wheat fields, sees the green wheat pale, and turn gold, and finally deeper gold.

And summer's over. He has to study for his comprehensives; they write letter after letter, so many letters. After graduation, he drinks all night with Jack, and then flies back to Carolina. He's gone so long! She marks off the days with a stubby pencil.

Finally: January, 1971, snow on the streets of Billings, and she gets a call: he says he's got a full-time job with the Forest Service, in Seattle, and starts in two weeks. Will she come with him? Will she marry him?

And the world collapses, and it is only the two of them, and war and poverty and her friends and all the books she's read and all the places she meant to travel and the great distances of Montana no longer matter, because he is asking her to marry him.

The old priest at St. Patrick's has seen her there in the mornings, lighting candles. He figures she's close to thirty and ought to know by now what she's doing, so he goes ahead and marries them in the church, even though this grinning kid with the mustache and too thick sideburns is Baptist.

She wears her mother's dress. He's bought a secondhand suit that he can wear to work next week as well. Her parents are there, her father in hat and boots, and her brother Lawrence. No one from his family makes it up, but his mother sends her his favorite biscuit recipe. The priest says the greatest of these is love, and Jack Peters sneaks two dollar champagne into the church basement in soda bottles.

Walt and Olive, husband and wife, drive off after the reception in their white Chevelle; they're headed farther west: his foot is heavy on the gas, the wind is icy cold, but they are fast and warm. He sings some Gordon Lightfoot songs, some Johnny Cash songs. She claps and laughs. They drive on through moonlight and snow covered mountains and the wide and darkening sky.⁴

4. *The sky, too, is mine. It was evening – she told me that much, how they drove all through the night – but the darkening sky is mine. I was years ahead of her, you see. She was on her happy way to the rainy west, but I was watching her step through the dry stalks of a drought-killed field, my little brother crying on her hip. I was wondering how the world goes so wrong? How this wild mountain of joy ends up in acres of sun-blown dust?*

Theodicy, believers call it: the wondering and explaining, the wrestling with what one must understand as God’s justice, with the fact that a good and knowing God has chosen for some of us this, and for some of us that. Has said, I give you life. I give you life. And you, I give you pain.

Can we trust any God fickle and vicious as this? And what are we to do then with our parents, our first and mightiest gods?

She likes Seattle, works in a library, reads, listens to lectures. She thinks she could live here – but he doesn’t. He hates the traffic, the freeways, the gray rag of cloud where the blue sky should be. After just six months, he requests a transfer to the mountains of Durango, Colorado, where she finds work at a hospital and finds out she’s pregnant. It’s a girl. He’s excited, boyish in his enthusiasm – hammering together a playpen and packing his little daughter all over the mountain trails of the four corners. She learns to cook and sew. She makes biscuits and potato pancakes and all his favorites. She spends hours on intricate pink dresses, nurses their daughter as the nights get hot, the soap smell of cactus flowers lifting in the wind. She even starts a garden, though she never harvests.

They’re eating enchiladas and drinking cold beer at a ramshackle place just out of town, when he takes a long swig and tells her he can’t stand it any longer. With the promotion, he sits at a desk all day long and looks at maps. He’s lucky if he gets two days in the mountains all month. He pauses, then looks her in the eye and tells her he’s been talking with her father – struck a deal in fact. Found a way to be out on the land every day: Her father’s agreed to split his place back in Montana. He’s going to give them a good price for the irrigated farm along the river, and then they’ll have the first crack at the pasture up north when her father retires.

She is surprised. She loves Colorado. She doesn’t know what to say. She finishes her enchiladas.

So they’re going back to Montana, to the sagebrush and dust of the Big Dry, to the place where she was born, the place she left so long ago. They drive out of Durango as the leaves of the aspen trees along the Rocky Mountain front begin to yellow, Wyoming takes forever, and then they finally meet the Musselshell River out of Roundup. They turn off Highway 12 and down the gravel road. Her parents

greet them from the porch. Her father tells them that they get the main house, winks—says they’ll need it for all the kids, that he’ll build a smaller grandpa and grandma house just down the road.

Walt’s ecstatic, rough and joyful in his new work, waking at dawn, hauling lumber for the new corrals he’s planned. And Olive, her hair cut newly short, their colicky, crying daughter held in her thin arms, paces all day along the white and yellow linoleum, the cracks just beginning to show here and there. They are living now far north even of Billings and her old friends, in a county with only a single paved road laid right through its heart, out in the great and perfect isolation of the Big Dry.⁵

5. *Here, my mother’s voice broke for the first time.*

She was close to the end of all this – there in place and soon to be in time. She used to lecture my brother and me, telling us, after one of our frequent fights – our eyes red and wet, our jeans dirty and torn – that we had to save our strength, that together we had to fight this hard world. She told us no one would give us anything, that we had to work hard for everything, that we had to get good grades at school and save our summer wages – because then someday we could get out of there and go off to college. We couldn’t mess around, she told us, with nonsense like fistfights or rodeo riding or the smooth glass of whiskey bottles, as all of that would only hold a body here, would only chain us to this place.

And, for the most part, I believed her. I read all the time. I’d lie down for hours under the cottonwoods with the pages of a book my sky; I’d find a corner of the house and disappear into some other world for days. In the fifth grade, they moved me up to high school math and English. In high school they invented classes for me to take after I’d gone through everything else they offered. I studied hard and wrote essays and even won trips to conferences and competitions. By sixteen I had traveled, in my patched jeans and dusty tennis shoes, from San Francisco to D.C. My brother, a year behind me, did just as well in school, and by that time my sister was already off at college.

Yet it was anything but easy. Truly, my quickest, first memories of growing up out on the Big Dry are of walking each day to the dry river, walking back through our sun-bitten fields, the dust rising in them – and my mother, down on a knee, her hands in that dust. Though she kept the worst of it all from us, we couldn’t help but notice the patches in our hand-me-down jeans, her arguing with the mechanic about the bill. Two reporters came from Boston, the Globe. I don’t know how they found us. It was as if she had permission. She spilled our story. She was crying and the lady reporter – a woman with skin black as coffee – was crying and the photographer took a picture: my mother, slender, her long hair lifting in the plains wind. The dry, cracked soil of what was supposed to be a field of oats

beneath her feet. And in the far corner, in her long shadow, I sat sifting dust.

Even with all the blessings in the world, that place was hard and desperate. It was a place of such tremendous ruin. I saw it all around me. There was the day Justin came to school after his uncle beat him with a logging chain, and I remember the night Bryan got t-boned by a trucker making time down Highway 12; they held the funeral in the school gymnasium, and Bill Calvin, the toughest kid in school, ran out crying. Though my friend Adam won a college scholarship, he never went. Instead, he robbed a liquor store two towns over and did time. I see him now and again when I come home; he's so kind and broken. Like Barry, who would buy beer for us, if we brought out some high school girls. My brother's old girlfriend works now at a strip club. Mine, whose long, strawberry hair fell in waves down her back, took up with some cowboy from Oklahoma when she was nineteen. A few years later, when she tried to leave him, he drove her out onto the prairie and shot her dead.

This is the Big Dry – the railroads gone, the oil gone, the rain just never falling – a place full of alcoholic cattle ranchers who never bothered with high school and fundamentalist farmers' wives whispering about the science teacher. And beyond the iniquity of wind and want, like any place of deep poverty and unsustainable ways of life, there is the slow erosion of imagination, of any hope for something better. So, if you are, say, a boy who lives inside your head or girl who dreams of peace and other silly possibilities – you better knock it off, you better step into this: the only world you'll ever know.

But she said no. She had us, my brother and me, by the dirty collars of our shirts, and she knelt down. She said no. This isn't the way it ought to be, the way it's going to be. She said there's something better. She said keep dreaming. So we did. And, like our older sister, we made it out, we left her there.

And that's what I thought we had to do. But in her story, in her voice, I hear now what possibilities she had. I hear, like us, she left. But why come back? If this was all there was, that's one thing – but she came back. She chose this. Or, she chose him, he chose this, and then, I guess, some god said, Suffer. What if she'd said no? What if she'd said anything?

She grew up here, too. She must have known. Though she pushed us hard as hell to get out, she followed him back in. She followed him.

She says they're happy, farming their land, making a go of it, their faces chapped of prairie wind. He gets along well with her father, works hard all week, drinks at the Sportsman Bar on Friday night. She puts in another garden, nearly two acres. The tomatoes grow like weeds, cucumbers dazzling quartered and splashed with salt. In the heat

of August they curl up together on the foldout couch in the cool basement and listen to Lightfoot records on their new HiFi. The years are wet and good. The wheat sells, the barley sells, the sheep get fat. He's elected to the school board and the Musselshell County Irrigation Association. She runs the Altar Society at Our Lady of Mercy. They are respected all down the valley. They try for another child. They want a boy. The years go by with nothing – but still they try, because they have faith, and they have faith,⁶ and in the late fall of '77 she finds out she's pregnant again.

6. *The stubborn faith that says wet years on a land everyone calls the Big Dry will stay, that says the world is good and so is God and they are young and strong and blessed. They want a son, and I want her to stop this story: No, I want this story for myself. I'll tell it the way I want to tell it, the way it should have been. I'll tell them to get out of there, go back to Seattle, Durango, anywhere. Tell her to take him to a VA hospital because there is a poison in his veins. Those chemicals they washed across the land, down in Panama and on their very fields, are in him now, they're attacking his cells right now, and those idiot country doctors in Roundup are wrong: It's not ulcers. It's cancer. I know all this, know there are years of hardscrabble, dry-river poverty to come, know what they should have done – but he's the one. Even if this story's mine, it's not. Tonight, on the phone, my mother told me the story of my birth, which is always his story, the birth of his son: He is dead, and I am his son.*

The sun spills into their room, and she wakes to pain. They drop their daughter off at her parents place and drive to Billings, singing all the way. The Chevelle runs strong. It is early May, and the rains have come down all spring, the grass already tall and thick, the Musselshell River running deep and full and dark brown.

At the hospital she watches him: he won't take no for an answer; he scrubs up, puts on a white coat, and follows the nervous young doctor into the delivery room. She is so happy he is there. She takes no pain-killers. She sweats and screams. He is there. She holds on to him. She holds on to him. There is a gush of blood, and he is there. The doctor hands me to him. He holds me first. He is covered in blood, her blood and my blood, and he leans down to her and whispers, "We got our boy."⁷

7. *The last words, too, are always his.*

And my mother's voice then was the voice I am used to, that of a woman near seventy, a widow longer than a wife. She complained about the president, asked about the weather in Idaho, told me that it finally rained last week and her garden needed it.

But she did not tell me who held who in the night, or how tired he was, or how, when he could no longer dance, his bones too fragile, Eddie Grebe, in his charitable stupidity, kept asking her to dance, dancing with her, holding her, while on the jukebox at the Sportsman Waylon sang “Amanda” and Cash sang “Without Love,” and he was angry, and tired, and angry – and there was nothing he could do about it. She did not tell me that his skin flaked off in sheets; that his thick chest and shoulders hollowed and shrunk; that he wept when, as if he was a child, she had to hitch his pants up with bailing twine. How he weighed even less than her when he died.

She did not tell me these things. I’ve heard them before, from my older sister, who saw it all and was old enough to remember; my Uncle Lawrence, his hair still long; Jack Peters, now ten-years sober; and the old men at the Sportsman Bar who clap me on the shoulder and say again and again that they are sorry, that my father was a good man and a fine farmer and what a damn shame, if there’s anything they can ever do.

But this night I wanted something more, something anecdote and witness and drunken commiseration cannot give. Elegy aspires only to beauty. I wanted truth. I wanted to know if it was worth it. For her. For us. If the suffering we shared and shouldered was too much. So I asked: I asked my mother if she thinks they made the right decisions, if maybe they should have stayed in Durango with the steady paycheck and good healthcare and hospitals, if the hand-to-mouth and day-to-day way of life we endured in the years after his death could have been otherwise, if maybe her hard and reckless push to get us out of that place and into college could have been easier, if she herself wouldn’t rather grow old somewhere else, if maybe she would like to look through a window not cracked and patched with duct tape, if maybe beyond she would like to see a world mostly whole as well – not those corrals her young husband built falling every day further down. If she doesn’t wish, sometimes, for a moment, to grow old with someone else.

No, she told me. No. Haven’t you been listening? She told me that one day when he was sick – and you must remember this? – all the farmers down the valley loaded their trucks with good lumber and nails and drove out to our place and framed out a massive machine shed, and their wives fixed fried chicken and mixed up potato salad for lunch, and everyone worked all day and finished that barn right up to the tin roof – and they left us then that evening bowls of food and prayers and this barn that still stands. She told me, “Anyway, I loved him. I love him.”

She was quiet a moment. She said goodbye, then hung up.

So. So, though she still lives in the old farmhouse near the dry banks of the Musselshell River, years ago my mother leased out the farm. She reads now and tends her garden. She walks and prays and rests in the heat of the afternoon on the couch. She retired not long ago from thirty years of teaching school, and this spring the senior class asked her to give the commencement speech. She takes care of her mother, who is still just down the road, though near blind and ninety-three. She is always, it seems, taking care of someone.

But when Doig or Kittredge or one of Montana’s other literary lights comes through Billings to read, my mother drives the two hours south through the Bull Mountains to listen. She tried her first avocado last year and loved it. Every other summer she travels to Minneapolis to visit an old friend from college. And each Sunday she calls in turn her three children, now grown up and gone so far away.

So. So outside my window I can’t see the stars. Everything is a wash of streetlight and shadow. It doesn’t matter, I think.

I think, No, it all matters. The life I lead is the one she wanted for me. The only gods must be mothers in love with fathers.

I think, Yes, what we must call gods are good days, and the stories of those fleeting, too-few days. Oh God, I think, for those good days must we bite every sorrow and some more?

He is dead, I think. But she is alive. And so am I. I can finish our story.

It is lambing season, and she must stay in the hospital for three more days. He can’t take that much time off. He drives home by moonlight, a Lightfoot tune on his lips.

I see him in the lambing shed, on his knees in the warm straw and afterbirth. The sweet smell of manure is everywhere, the snorts of the herd, the steely ring of a sheepbell. He’s pulling a lamb. He’s strong and gentle. Slowly it slips into the world, into his hands, and he pulls the caul from its small, wet face and sets it by its mother. And now he rises, holding his bloody hands out from him, and steps out of the shed. The moon is nearly a second sun, white and pale, but so bright the blood on his arms is red, brilliantly red. He is thinking, Joe, just Joe, like that quarterback from Notre Dame with the crackerjack of an arm, and Robert like my father. He is thinking about washing up, watching the blood mix and swirl in the water. He is thinking about days spent fixing machinery, plowing land with his son beside him. He is thinking about faith, hope, and love, and how it is hope that swallows him whole. Hope and moonlight all around.