

FOUR WOMBS
Lucy Fleming

Prologue

A memory: The sand beneath my head is very, very hard. The weight of my skull rests in the scoop of my helmet. The abrupt stillness is giftlike, surreal. I am on my back and the sand is rock-solid beneath my neck and my shoulder-blades and the small of my back. From the saddle it had always looked soft, churned into powdery spumes by thousands of hooves as they circled the track. The sky stretches above me. Brego paces some distance away, snorting uneasily, the reins broken and trailing from his bridle. His hooves throw up damp sand-sprays. In trying to follow him with my eyes, I realize it is not the sand that is immovable but my own head. I register surprise, curiosity even, in the glassy intervening seconds before the pain.

The ceiling of the ambulance is white. The fluorescent lights seem to crackle in my ears till I realize the crackling is the sound of Velcro, with which the EMTs are securing my wrists to the backboard. How funny, I remember thinking. These full-grown men with medical degrees are strapping my splayed limbs to a plastic board with Velcro. They are giant children. I am a giant infant.

Further along in the blur of this memory: My father, an internist, comes past the gray curtain next to my bed and talks to the medical staff in his “we’re-all-doctors” voice, using words like *inferior abdomen* and *thoracic*. A baby screams somewhere nearby, behind one of the other gray curtains. A buff, bearded nurse asks me to stroke his palm, press harder, now follow his finger with my eyes. He offers me watered-down orange juice in a paper cup.

Memories; but whether they are my own memories, I can’t be sure. I don’t *remember* any of those things, just as I don’t *remember* the day my brother was born – rather, from every retelling of the story, I have stitched together my own memory. The day my brother was born is yellow, fuzzy, almost computer-animated, bright with the false lighting of a cavernous sound stage. Grandma Mimi rocks me in a green glider, and we go to see the baby, and there is a hospital. But for the entire memory, I am rocking, rocking – and it is more a memory of Grandma Mimi, and her soft hands, and her curling *r*’s, than it is about my brother at all.

This hospital, too, is blurred. My back hurts. I remember the watered-down orange juice and the short throat-clearing noise that signals that my father is about to mention sex. He makes the noise several times as he explains to me why, following their talk, the doctors have agreed not to X-ray my spine.

It would affect the region of my *inferior abdomen*. Or, as he finally put it, “the uterus.”

I was sixteen and had never considered the fact that I had a uterus. Other body parts, yes – I was a 34B at that point, a fact of which I was more than aware. But you couldn’t get measured for uterus size at Macy’s.

The doctors gave us a moment to decide about the radiology, during which they all retreated to other patients behind other curtains. Dad said it was up to me, that it was always a risk to do X-rays down there. My mother kept nodding. For the first time in my life, I imagined, inside my own body, rows and rows of blue eggs, hibernating in a dark, soft-walled cave. Why they were blue, I have no idea. I was barely conscious. I wanted, more than anything, to sleep.

I didn’t get the X-ray. I left the ER, leaning on my mother, with my uterus pristine and my ovaries unirradiated and my spine invisibly cracked in two places. The doctors didn’t know that, of course; they wouldn’t even suspect for several years, when the irregular bone scars, imperfectly aligned, began to ache.

A memory: The tiled bathroom of my high school, changing for first-period gym. As I wrestle into a T-shirt, the mirror catches the tawny brown blotches on my lower back, the way my vertebrae push up like a mountain range. The rest of the juniors titter and exclaim, unsure if they

should be concerned. I chuckle that I'm a dinosaur. Too many crunches on the hard gym floor. I pull my shirt down.

If I'd gotten the X-ray, what would it have shown? Shadows? Faint spidery fissures? Every few years the bare hands of some physical therapist trace over the scar tissue; some suggest minor fractures, bone abrasions. I've been told that I probably sustained two vertebral cracks, but I'll never know.

A memory: I lie in the hospital bed, under fluorescent lights. It seems like days since I lay in the sand. The minutes before the fall, as I watched Brego's ears twitch and smelled leather, grass, damp wood – those minutes are cavernously distant. Slowly, the numbness of shock fades from my body as I lie there on the white nubby sheets, brushing my thumbs back and forth across my belly, trying to feel my womb.

– I –
M O T H E R ' S W O M B

My mother first miscarried in 1992, at eight weeks. She miscarried again in 1993, in the third trimester, a week before my parents moved to Costa Rica. My father was working on his medical Spanish, and as a young, idealistic pregnant couple, they'd chosen Costa Rica for its excellent healthcare system and good neonatal support. After the fetus died, they went anyway. It was good to be away from the well-meaning friends who'd passed along dog-eared copies of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and inquired knowingly about names.

The fetus had had no name.

A memory: The basement of my childhood home. I am home from college on a break and searching for something amidst the piles and tote bags bulging with miscellany that cover every visible surface in my mother's signature chaos. I come across a flowery pink notebook, hardcover. On the first page is a letter to my mother.

August 5th, 1993

Dear Robin,

*You have always told me I should start a journal. Many times
I felt like doing so and never did.*

I recognize the handwriting. It's my grandmother's wobbly cursive.

*After speaking to you and Doug a few days ago about the
new addition you're both adding to our family in Feb., I
thought, This might be the time.*

I check the date. It is six months before my birth. She wrote it while I was in the womb.

I want to ask her: This might be the time for what?

A memory: Sitting in my kindergarten classroom, adding up the years to find out how old people were when they graduated from college: 22. There was no doubt that I would go to college, and no doubt that I would graduate, and no doubt – in my mind – that I would then be an adult. It was, I later learned, the age my mother, Robin Ann, had been when she met my father. It was the age at which my maternal grandmother, Mary Ann, had married my grandfather.

I have just turned 22. Grandma Mimi is now gone. I remember holding the notebook in my basement and studying the curls of her handwriting.

When my parents returned to Boston from Costa Rica, my mother signed up for a study at a Harvard lab that was “seeking women of childbearing age.” Its researchers wanted to study ovulation patterns. Every morning, my mother chewed a special gum and spat her saliva sample into a tube labeled ROBIN ANN BUCKINGHAM, AGE: 31. The lab team informed her that her cycles were charting 40 days, nearly two weeks longer than average, and her ovulations were late and inconsistent. It pointed to a hormonal imbalance in her ovarian system, and thus in her womb. It would be difficult to get pregnant, and even if she did, she would probably miscarry again.

The womb is a dark place. Pear-shaped, it nestles against the soft tissue of the bladder in the lowermost curve of the spine. In anatomy diagrams it is often rosy-tinged, with elegant Fallopian tubes reaching up like a ballerina in second position. In my mind it is a deep cobalt and burgundy, with pale blue light far above, as if a cathedral window were open at dawn. *Womb*. In reality a womb is black; inside a human body, deep beneath skin and flesh, there is no cathedral, and no light.

There is no hollow inside the empty womb. Like an unworn glove, the innermost layer of flesh does not curve around nothing but rather presses into itself, flat and waiting.

Then a nugget: a dense, tiny bulb of cells. It grows until the soft flipped thing hangs in liquid space. The womb arches around it in a sphere of warm blood. I imagine a luminescence in the pulsing fetal curl, an eerie jellyfish glow of lucent meat encasing a tiny skeleton. Inside the wax-soft skull, webs of cells string themselves together across vast distances. They pulse in the rhythm of the mother’s heartbeat. The creature is blind, its eyelids still forming, but it hears the steady rush of fluid around its cave. It hears its mother’s voice.

Or does it see its mother’s voice? To the ripening globule, the fetus, even the human infant, sight and sound and taste are simply sense, or so neonatologists claim. The fetus smells wet and feels brightness. It hears the color green. The newborn sees sour and learns to love the taste of a lullaby. Its neural web drapes over every corner of the nascent brain. We know that the web, even in its most primitive form, can transmit light and dark. We do not know whether it can transmit thought, or pain – whether a fetus might be able to suffer if, inside the womb, it dies.

A memory, my own: My front yard in New Jersey, green grass, growling suburban car tires on summer asphalt. Daddy’s calling me for dinner. I remember the curb, and the big tree that used to stand in the circle of pachysandra by the driveway. I’m six and I’m talking to Heidi, the girl across the street. We have just buried her hamster. I led the ceremony. Now, as we loiter at the edge of my lawn, the halfway point between our territories, I’m telling her about my four older brothers, who are In College.

The whole scene has some of the gauzy tinge of a dream, not only because of the guilt and subsequent denial of the intervening years – was I a sociopathic kindergartner? – but because in that moment, or at least in my reconstruction of that moment, it is perfectly true to six-year-old Lucy Hannah that she has four older brothers. They have sandy hair and creamy skin like hers, and she is the baby, mischievous and giggly and fearless. At age six, she has blurry memories of having been carried on shoulders high above the ground, of helping besotted brothers woo their romantic interests, of giggling uproariously when she pulls pranks, which she naturally does often. The brothers – tall, handsome, faceless – chase her with brooms and pillows and let her pin on their corsages for prom.

I explain all this to Heidi, gleefully.

Sometimes, in the dreamy memories that linger from that time, there are three brothers, sometimes five. There are certainly more than two; in those memories – tree climbing, roller-blading, prom – the brothers are a unit. They are my circle of protection and my gentle giants. I am their princess. They tickle me and defend me in equal measure. They never have names, except maybe Ben. They all play soccer.

Even then, I was the only daughter of an only daughter, and proud of it. I had no need for a sister. I did fantasize about older female cousins, young aunts, and of course my imaginary brothers' girlfriends and future wives. All these young women were desperate to befriend me because naturally *I* was the key to my brothers' hearts, the spunky little sister who spun barefoot and shrieked with laughter. Heidi has two older sisters, and it's only reasonable to assume that her sisters, too, admire my brothers from afar. After we're finished burying her hamster, I tell her so.

Heidi demands to know why she's never seen my brothers. Because, I insist, they are In College. She's jealous. Before she can throw a tantrum, I run across the grass to the screen door, which bangs shut.

Slowly, as a baby develops outside the womb, the neural web is meant to disintegrate, to leave space for the infant to lace together its own axons and dendrites in decades to come, as they foam with hormones and shiver with sugar. The web learns language, social cues, music. It learns to name stars and liquids and nations. It follows, of course, that one day the web will learn how to name itself.

The first name I learned for the web in which I live: *synesthesia*. The blending of senses. It is a benign condition, in which treatment is not necessary. The babies that see music grow into children and adolescents and adults who see music – to whom C major is a white splash of milk, as it is to me. My neural ties did not sever themselves when I left my mother's womb, and letters and sounds have colors, textures, genders. But this is not a story about that.

Two months ago, I turned 22. It is a luscious, maternal red of a number, matte and soft. It is female. I see this in the number 22 as clearly as the parallel curves of each printed numeral. The neural connections that formed in utero are still active; they did not sever themselves. At some point in high school I realized that not everyone knows that Saturdays are a cloudy gray and that the numeral 7 is a purple tomboy. *Womb* is cobalt.

There are not many wombs in my line. We are the only daughters of only daughters. We come from fertile German stock – twelve, thirteen children, for generations – but for whatever reason, girls are rare. As the only daughter, my mother did the ironing for her dad and her two older brothers whenever my grandmother's back went out. Her dad didn't drive, so Robin couldn't go to ballet on the days when Mary Ann had to lie down with ice compresses on her lower spine.

Robin was tough. She went *en pointe* earlier than any other girl in her ballet class. Her feet inside the pointe shoes were bruised and bloody and strong. She did all her homework, even though it took her longer to learn to read. Her mind would wander in class. She never did as well as she wanted to, expected herself to. But she did okay. She was beautiful and got asked to prom by Norman Malinowski, the most popular boy on the track team.

By the time she was in high school, Mary Ann's back gave out more often. Robin gave up ballet. She broke up with Norman Malinowski and told him her mom was sick.

Grinnell gave her financial aid. She went for three semesters, made some friends, but struggled in her classes. Nothing came together; her notes were too messy; there were too many things to keep track of. Over winter break sophomore year, her parents sat her down. She said she didn't know what she wanted to do in college. They said, Decide or leave. She left.

A memory: Brown cabinets, brown-gold linoleum tiles. I sit cross-legged on the floor of our kitchen in New Jersey, looking up at my mother, who wears a pale green cotton dress as she washes dishes or fiddles with something on the stove. I must be around six, not yet seven; in the memory, her hair, chestnutty brown and swelling, nearly reaches her knees. I love the way it moves as it falls across the pale green cotton. I love my mother's shape inside the cotton. Her hips and the straight backs of her heels on the linoleum are as much a part of this house as the linoleum itself. But I never compliment her. Not out loud. Instead of saying I like her dress, or her sweater, I ask if I can take it to college with me.

“Sure, honey. You can take it to college.” She slides a finger behind her ear, tucking one of those chestnutty waves out of the way.

A memory: Sitting in my kindergarten classroom, adding up the years of elementary and middle and high school and college to find out how old people were when they graduated: 22. That was when, I decided, people became adults.

Years later I would learn that she dropped out of college. She never told me that when I asked.

At 22, Robin Ann was living in the back room of a house in Princeton, New Jersey, working as a waitress at the Green Line Diner. She was taking a dance therapy course in New York, learning American Sign Language, quilting. She volunteered at a women’s shelter. She was growing out her hair and going to weekly Meeting at the Religious Society of Friends. In pictures from 1983, she wears tank tops and long maroon skirts, smiling more with her eyes – blue, like mine – than with her lips. The faint golden-red tinge of the photographs always gives the impression that the universe’s color scheme was different in the ’80s: warmer, softer, fuzzier around the edges. Just before her 23rd birthday, she met my father.

When she met him, my father was a medical student. Her husband encouraged her, wheedled her, nagged her to complete her courses. She attended five different colleges but could never seem to organize herself enough to fulfill every last requirement. She dropped out of every one. There was too much to handle, too much to read, too much to sort through. She couldn’t manage to finish her theses. She would get distracted, and overwhelmed, and drop out. My father would begin his campaign again.

At age 40, my mother sat in the psychiatric office of Dr. Julia Temple and read a list.

- *Do you feel overwhelmed in stores, at the office, or at parties? Is it impossible for you to shut out sounds and distractions that don't bother others?*
- *Is time, money, paper, or "stuff" dominating your life and hampering your ability to achieve your goals?*
- *Have you stopped having people over to your house because of your shame at the mess?*

Beside each item on the list, my mother checked off a box. Dr. Temple sent her home with her first prescription for a stimulant and a copy of the book. My father, with all his medical knowledge, did not really believe in such a thing. They fought.

A memory: Freshman year of college, home on break, I decide to Clean the House before my father gets home. I stalk through the basement and hoist several tote bags up the stairs. I empty the first one onto our dining room table. It contains: a blue cotton turtleneck, rumpled; a CVS Pharmacy receipt; 3 pairs of socks (1 matched, 2 unmatched); a golf ball; 12 individually-wrapped mints; a red Pilates stretchband; one package of Tom's of Maine deodorant; 2 postcards; 3 pairs of swimming goggles; half a rubber band; the adapter to a 30-pin iPhone connector with a "Thank you <3" adhesive label printed from my mother's label-maker. She got the label-maker during the whirling opening phase of some recent campaign for organization and neatness; in the months since then, this tote bag and its contents have fermented.

Attention-deficit disorder – or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, to use its proper name – was for wiggly little boys, I always thought. It was a problem where you couldn’t concentrate properly, and fidgeted too much, and pelleted the girl in the row ahead of you with spitballs during Critical Reading class. I was that girl in elementary school, and I was not amused. The truth, as I learned slowly, emptying my mother’s tote bags over the years, is that ADD is not only for wiggly little boys but also for middle-aged women with long chestnutty hair and too many Pilates stretchbands and to-do lists scribbled in crayon on the backs of receipts when pen and paper are buried under accumulated debris. It isn’t simple disorganization – not exactly. A brain with ADD is

structured differently, with fewer dopamine reward pathways and – some studies suggest – slower connective speed due to the hyperactivity of sensory awareness functions.

At any given moment, a brain receives endless information: temperature, texture, plans, language, the feeling of breath entering the chest cavity. The brain filters what it needs to see. A brain with ADD receives the same neural input and filters it much less. Neurons remain active even when they should quiet down.

ADD is not a disease of forgetting. It is a disease of remembering – of remembering and processing and *noticing* so much, so minutely, that everything sprays together in a wild fountain of interest. Doing things last-minute, leaving situations chaotic.

And yet my mother was radiant. She made me a hand-sewn Greek chiton for my Hera Halloween costume, and a colonial gown complete with quilted bodice for the colonial fair. In first grade, a massive veil of navy chiffon and silver stars swaddled my seven-year-old body with the night sky when I insisted on dressing up as Mozart's Queen of the Night. It was a sensation at Riverside Elementary. My mother had stayed up till dawn. She didn't clean her sewing station for several months, and when she did get around to it, the sewing machine was already covered in finger puppets and extra salt shakers and tax documents. As a young child, I didn't care.

A memory: Wet salmon-colored porcelain, water seeping through the caulking at the crevice where the bathtub meets the tile. My mother lies naked in the water, holding me at the base of her belly, which rises out of the warm suds in a magnificent hill. She is smiling, her fingers resting lightly on the belly, trailing a little water across the smooth skin. I sit in the crux of her legs, my toes squished in the pose of a toddler whose legs are outgrowing her. Solemnly I lay my hands on the belly. I ask, very seriously, whether we can play Birthing even if the baby is in my spot.

Birth was never a mystery to me. It was everything I could talk about for over a year as my parents prepared me for the arrival of a sibling, and even after my brother's birth, I continued to insist that Birthing retain its position as chief bathtime game. As a physician's daughter, I learned *vagina* and *uterus* along with *arm* and *hand* and *ankle*, and I proudly narrated our birth reenactments in real-time as I pretended to curl up in my mother's womb, dramatically stretching my neck towards the "birth canal" to prepare for my grand entrance into the world.

Robin Ann did graduate from college, years after she started. By the time she finished her thesis in Liberal Studies at Lesley College, she was 31. At the time she was already pregnant with me, but she didn't know it yet.

A memory: I am driving towards a strip mall near my hometown when there's a crunch and my Prius grinds abruptly to a stop. A woman leans out of the minivan that has sideswiped me and screams that I'll pay for this. In the memory, the air is very yellow – not the golden shadow of an old photograph, but a pale, eerie lemon. I'm a junior in college. After the state trooper has filed his report and the minivan has driven away, I slowly pull into a parking lot and sit in the car. The yellow overwhelms me and I surrender. Shots of beige and spiky green buzz around my skull as if the bone is grinding within itself. I sob uncontrollably. My body is shaking and it won't stop. After two hours, I lie limp in the driver's seat, breathing shallowly, as the yellow fog dissipates. Then I drive home.

I now recognize the grinding yellow as a panic attack. In a way, it was lucky that Ms. Astrid Dobondi, *plaintiff*, had been speeding that day; if she hadn't been, it's hard to tell how much longer I would've gone without seeing a psychiatrist.

Unbeknownst to me, Dr. Temple had been treating my mother for more than a decade. It was she who had assigned Robin Ann the books with titles like *You Mean I'm Not Stupid, Lazy or Crazy?* and *Understanding Women with ADD*. It was she who made my mother read the list of symptoms, and it was she who had prescribed Vyvanse, then Adderall, then Concerta.

In the first ten minutes after I walked into Dr. Temple's office, she confirmed that – as I'd been told before, by pediatricians, college clinicians, and the therapist my parents forced me to see in high school – I was suffering from advanced depression and anxiety. We talked about the panic attack, the synesthesia, the way my anxiety skyrocketed when I came home for breaks and had to wade through the piles and tote bags in my house. I confided my deep struggles with my mother's ADD, the way her messes drove me crazy, the simmering tension between my parents – over the laundry-piled furniture, the buried dining room table. She bowed her head and told me it was natural for a parent's psychology to affect a child. But had *my* ADD ever been treated?

"I don't have ADD," I said.

To which she replied, in the same calm tone with which she might order a latte: "Yes, you do."

She seemed eerily prepared for my strident denials.

"That can't be true. I'm smart," I kept repeating, after I'd stopped laughing.

At this point in time, the mess in the rest of the house has become physically painful. My mother piles laundry and board games and Christmas decorations in cardboard boxes and hurriedly shoves them out of sight the minute before visitors arrive; I spend hours reorganizing my bookshelves, cleaning my room, the only room that is neat, and therefore the only room in which I can truly relax.

Why is that? Dr. Temple wants to know.

A memory, that I share with Dr. Temple, forcefully: Robin walks agitatedly from room to room, flushed, trying to lift hampers and books out of my hands. All the while, she's combing her hair, which is hopelessly knotted. It's darker now, not the lighter chestnut of the yellow memories. It's thick and graying and ropey, running long fingers down her back. It's been two and a half years since my grandmother died, and in all that time, my mother has not cut her hair.

"I don't want anyone to see the house," she keeps repeating.

Without telling her, I call a hair salon and make an appointment.

I am the one who makes the appointment; I am the one who empties the tote bags; I am the one who labeled every highlighter with her name, who required her desk to be clear of all papers. My mother is the one who frets and procrastinates and improvises and comes up with brilliant recipes on the spot. My mother is the one with ADD.

I left Dr. Temple's office with a list of books to read and a lot of resentment.

One book asked me: *Are you spending most of your time coping, looking for things, catching up, or covering up? Do you avoid people because of this?* Yes, I said, frowning. *Are you clueless as to how others manage to lead consistent, regular lives?* Well, I said. Yes. Like my mother had, ten years before, I said yes to almost every question.

Like synesthesia, ADD develops in utero. For young girls whose symptoms manifest in daydreaming and struggles with reading, it may only be diagnosed decades later. By then, these girls have become passionate women, vibrant brainstormers, tremendous creators. They stay up all night and lose their keys every day. They often drop out of college. Only recently has ADD been regularly diagnosed in adults, and even then, more rarely in women than in men. The higher the IQ, the less likely to be diagnosed. Ever.

Is all your time and energy taken up with coping, staying organized, and holding it together, with no time for fun or relaxation? Yes.

Did my neural web resemble my mother's? Yes.

What finally convinced me that maybe Dr. Temple was right was not anything to do with ADD itself. It was the recognition of synesthesia: the crutch I'd been using for my entire life. I could organize myself by color. I could pretend to be ordered, but only if *everything* complied. I could function in my own space, where my clothes were sorted by color and I chose what to wear

based on the numerals in the day's date – July 3, blue and red; September 16, beige and pink; February 6, my birthday, blue and rose, the same colors as my own name on a page.

I spent the entire summer reading books that described me. I never told my father, the doctor.

My mother's water broke when my father was reading my mother German poetry in bed. "Get a towel!" she suggested in panic. He dropped the poetry book and ran and got a paper towel from the kitchen. "Not a paper towel!" she yelled from the bedroom. "A beach towel!"

The winter I was born, there were 100 inches of snow in Boston. I was delivered by a South African doctor, Alan Pinshaw, the only doctor on the staff that my mother didn't like. I know he wanted my mother to have an epidural, and she didn't want one. I know Dr. Alan Pinshaw told my father, "She should be reading the Times right now."

"What section?" my father asked testily. "Arts & Leisure?"

A memory: My mother combs her hair again and again in front of the mirror in her room as I ferry the ironing board and the dog beds and my grandfather's assisted-living bills out of the dining room so that it'll be clean when my dad gets home. I drive her to the appointment and enthusiastically take pictures of dark-chestnut hair falling in soft sheaves onto the black hairdressing poncho. My mother leaves the salon smiling, her hair in an elegant chin-length bob.

The party is a success, partially – or wholly – because there are no tote bags in sight. My mother flips her hair every which way. She clings to my father's arm. He's pleased with how neat the house is. Three months later he leaves my mother for another woman.

My mother's feet knead deep globes into the soles of her shoes. Each hip-like toe nestles into its neighbor, gripping the earth with the weight and care of a dancer. Her pointe shoes were size F—the widest. She keeps her last pair in a drawer in her bedroom, tangled with faded pink ribbons and tucked inside a Ziploc bag I wasn't supposed to find.

Did I come across the ballet shoes the same day I found Grandma Mimi's flowered notebook? I don't remember. I never know what I'll find when I go through a pile or a tote bag. They pile around my house in a way that makes me sick and makes me feel home at the same time. My mother isn't the only one who makes piles and tote bags. There are tote bags under my bed in my dorm room. I simply choose to forget about them.

A fact: The hamster funeral did take place. There's a photo, which sticks to the thick plastic sleeve of the photo album – so 20th century! a physical album! We're all smirking at the camera, holding our noses; Heidi holds the narrow box that contains the rapidly-decomposing puff of fur. One brother is there – my younger brother, the second baby who lived.

Six months after my father left, I was ready to admit that my brain was more like my mother's than I'd guessed. My mother sat with me as I took my first Vyvanse pill. She told me the stimulant was like glasses for the brain.

I lost track of Heidi when she moved away. But I've never forgotten the thrill of lying to her. And there was a new thrill in knowing those lies, those memories, were laced with truth – my older brothers, so vivid in my childhood brain, had once been alive. They, too, had bobbed and revolved in their own dark orbits, nestled in the deep vermilion of curving flesh. We shared the sound of our mother's voice and the steady thrum of her arteries as they pumped ovals around us. And then, in some minute, for some reason, each of my older brothers shifted in our womb, bowed his globular translucent skull, and became still.

I've never asked my mother what she did with the bodies of the fetuses who died. The third-trimester fetus would have been a small baby. In the third trimester, a miscarriage is reported to the coroner as a death. I don't want to know if my older brother received a burial.

The raisin bundle floated and pulsed and enlarged itself till it could bite its own slender fingers with fleshy gums. Its spine stretched and curled. Unlike the other fetuses, it didn't die. Unlike the other fetuses, it was a girl. *She* was a girl; I was a girl. I, the raisin, grew eyes and a tongue and two tiny nipples, floating there in the dark warmth. My neurons fired slower than average and formed more connections. One day my neural web would be said to have ADD. It did not bother me in the womb.

I began to weigh down Robin's belly. She took baths and I bathed inside her, swimming inside my own island that breached out of the water in an orb of skin. I listened to her voice. At 20 weeks, all of my oocytes had formed. They would one day become eggs. Inside my mother's womb, I was growing my own.

A memory: Summer, my basement, home from college. I'm wearing my brain glasses and they help me remember why I'm here, faced with the towering mess that would normally fill me with fear at the chaos. The brain glasses help me see: I need to find a board game. I'm rummaging around among the laundry hampers and stacked cardboard boxes when I come across a yellow envelope marked Confidential. Inside, papers. I slide them out. On the top of the stack lies a State of New Jersey Certificate of Death.

Name: Mary Ann Buckingham.

Age: 80.

Cause of death: pulmonary embolism.

Secondary cause of death: colon infarct.

Underlying condition leading to cause
of death: bipolar disorder.

I read the entire certificate and flip to the next page. It is a second copy.

The entire envelope is filled with copies of the same Certificate of Death. They pronounce my grandmother dead seventeen times.

- II -

GRANDMOTHER'S WOMB

Her name was Mary Ann, but we called her Mimi.

A memory: My grandmother lies in the intensive-care unit, in a bed with white sheets. The headboard was industrial glass, patterned with small flowers. I stand to the side and look down at her face. Her eyes are swollen and barely open. Without lipstick, her lips are pale and dry. I have traveled home to New Jersey at short notice. It is the first week of my college classes. Mimi has been sick for a little while – some kind of chemical reaction, and stress. She had surgery on her colon before I arrived.

I hold her hand. It is soft. I tell her about my classes, about college.

Mimi sometimes told stories about her childhood in Nebraska, the shenanigans her four brothers would get up to. She was, of course, the only girl. As her daughter Robin would, decades later, Mary Ann did the ironing for all the boys, cooked the meals, helped raise her younger brother. The brothers joined the army, fought in the war, went to college, in varying sequences. Mary Ann didn't go to college, nor did anyone expect her to.

I tell her I am going to graduate from college. I tell her I want her to come to my graduation. I'll be 22. Her hand is limp in mine, but she brushes her fingers against mine. Her mouth tilts open.

At 22, Mary Ann was living with her parents, caring for her diabetic mother. She ironed and cooked and cleaned and darned, but she also injected insulin, propped up pillows, iced the legs that turned purple and then green and, just before their amputation, pale grey and dead. Just before her 23rd birthday, she married my grandfather. He was a University of Nebraska ROTC student who

graduated from college, married my grandmother, and registered with the Navy all on the same day. It made the papers. Their wedding album is thick and heavy, with soft black-and-white prints of Mary Ann in her white lace wedding dress, her dark hair brushed back like a housewife on a faux-1950s paper napkin that reads, “I child-proofed the house, but they still get in!” or “I made my favorite thing for dinner: A reservation!”

Mary Ann got pregnant right away. She delivered two boys, healthy and kicking. My grandparents moved out of Nebraska and bought a prefabricated ranch house in New Jersey. Mary Ann wore house-dresses and baked cakes. She wanted a girl. Her womb, like those of her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, seemed to nourish boys. But this time, it was a girl. My mother was an easy baby. She looked like a prune when she was born, Mimi always joked. But it was not an easy birth. Her womb had prolapsed, fallen downwards to press on the cervix. Six months after my mother was born, my grandmother’s uterus was surgically removed. My mother would be her only daughter.

Grandma Mimi’s house was a midwestern colony on the east coast. Her cabinets were filled with cut-glass fruit cups she would serve before meals, the buttocks-swallowing armchairs, the way she made things like meatloaf without a recipe. Hers was the kind of house where you’d keep your hands clean enough to scoop ice out of the freezer. The plush brown wall-to-wall carpeting always looked newly vacuumed, as rich and fresh as a newly folded dishtowel or a Pyrex dish in which dough has risen under a wet cloth.

Mimi took me to get my haircuts at her salon, where Donna, her hairdresser, would douse my curls in warm water and let me read *People* magazine. Mimi would get a perm. Everything about her was soft: her skin, the glossy nails, the light-beige leather of her purse, her pointed loafers. Sometimes she let me smear on a nub of her lipstick. I’d pout my lips for hours before wiping it off on a tissue during the drive home. My mother didn’t wear lipstick.

Grandma Mimi had been overjoyed to get the first call that her daughter was pregnant. It wasn’t her first grandchild – she had four already, from her son who lived abroad – but it was special, and different, to be the mother, not the mother-in-law. She’d already decided what Robin’s children would call her: Mimi, a family nickname for her given name, Mary Ann. She was Oma to her Swiss grandchildren, but she would be Grandma Mimi to her daughter’s children. She started knitting immediately. When the call came that Robin had lost the baby, my grandmother wound up the yarn and returned to quilting. The next time the call came, she was a little more ready.

A memory, entirely imagined: My grandmother prunes the bushes outside her postwar prefab on a Thursday in early August 1993. Her pansies are blooming. A cloud rolls overhead. The living room television can be faintly heard from inside: President Clinton authorizes air strikes in Bosnia, a federal judge grants a lenient sentence to the police officers indicted for beating Rodney King. A commercial advertises nine brand-new stuffed toys called Beanie Babies. On the patio, Mary Ann steps back to look at her hydrangeas. Her hair is dark gray, permed; her gold-rimmed glasses are large; her white pleated trousers sit high and snug at her waist. The hydrangeas are all set, and it’s time to make tuna sandwiches for lunch, so she sets down her pruning shears, wipes her hands on her blouse, and heads into the air-conditioned house.

Was the flowered notebook on a shelf? In a drawer? Had it been a gift to Mary Ann for her birthday the previous month? Did she take it out before she made the tuna sandwiches, or after? Were there tuna sandwiches at all? The pansies, the pleated trousers, the squat cans of tuna lined up in the pantry – all of these are memory, not fact.

A fact: On that Thursday, Grandma Mimi had in her possession a hardcover notebook patterned with pink flowers. I know this because I have the notebook, and I’ve read what she wrote inside in wavering blue ballpoint. It’s the letter to my mother.

August 5th, 1993

Dear Robin,

You have always told me I should start a journal. Many times I felt like doing so and never did.

After speaking to you and Doug a few days ago about the new addition you're both adding to our family in Feb., I thought, This might be the time.

I wish she had kept a journal before.

When Robin was in the third grade, Mary Ann arrived at the school to pick her up early. The boys were already in the car. She'd told the school receptionist that they wouldn't be coming back for a while.

They drove to a bank, where Mary Ann withdrew the entirety of her personal bank account. It was the first time Robin had seen a hundred-dollar-bill. The bank teller gave her mother two of them. "Thank you," said Mary Ann. She slipped the bills into her pocketbook.

She drove to Newark Airport, where the four of them boarded a plane to Nebraska. When her father came home from work that night, the house was dark. The only clues were scribbled notes tucked into drawers and behind curtains. *Mother is taking us to Lincoln*, they read, in the hasty chicken-scratch of a fourteen-year-old boy. *We're safe*. In the ten minutes before Mary Ann hurried them into the car with their hastily-packed suitcases, my mother's oldest brother had hidden the notes for his father to find. *Mother is having one of her times again*, he wrote. *We're safe. We're with Mother. She's taking us to Lincoln*.

They stayed in Lincoln for several months, and then they went home.

Robin learned to expect the cycles. Every two years or so, Mary Ann would stop sleeping for days at a time. "Your mother's not doing so well," her dad would say on the phone.

"Mm-hmm."

"Your mother's not doing so well" sometimes meant "Your mother spent eight hundred dollars at Macy's." It sometimes meant "Your mother won't be home for a while – she's driven to Pennsylvania and doesn't remember how to get home." (My grandfather hired a man to bring her back.) It sometimes meant, "Your mother is already at Princeton House," the psychiatric department of the local hospital. It sometimes meant Robin would come home to find a giant antique vanity with three mirrors and a dozen drawers in the corner of her bedroom. "I just *had* to get it for you," Mary Ann would say, rubbing the oak wood. Her eyes would be unusually bright.

"Mm-hmm," said Robin. She told no one.

There were days in junior high when she looked up from the back of the classroom towards the blackboard and wished she could walk over through the rows of desks and tell her English teacher, "My mom's in the hospital. My mom wants to die." But it was family business. You didn't talk about things like that. And she had to squeeze her eyes to make herself concentrate.

Mary Ann would stay in the ward for a month or two, until the insurance ran out, and then she'd come home. Once, the insurance ran out before she was ready to come home, and she was sent to the state hospital. For some reason, they housed her in the eating disorders unit. When Robin came to visit, every few weeks, she'd see her mother sitting in the cafeteria amongst the young anorexic and bulimic women, encouraging them to eat in the same way she always told Bruce and Dan to finish their vegetables at supper.

It was decades before Mimi was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, or manic depression, as it was then known. When she talked about growing up, about ironing shirts, about breaking up with Norman Malinowski, my mom spoke about Mimi's back, how it would go out every so often, and

Mimi would be in the hospital. She never told me about the other hospitals. Not until I asked, anyway. Mimi had been on lithium treatment for the entirety of my lifetime. She was lucky that her body responded beautifully to the metal treatment. It stabilized her moods for decades, and when I knew her, she showed no symptoms.

A memory: Robin comes home from junior high to find a shrine in the middle of the living room. A chair is draped with her father's suits, his model trains and model airplanes, bottles of the historic whisky he collected in the back room but never drank. Atop the armchair-turned-altar squats a metal figurine of a Teutonic knight in black-and-white armor, a family heirloom, his legs splayed and his pike sticking upwards. From another room, Robin can hear the slow drawl of Mary Ann's voice. Her mother eventually wanders into the room, still speaking to no one in particular, a little glass of wine balanced elegantly between her fingers. Robin calls her father.

It is not my memory, yet it feels real. It doesn't feel real because the story has been told many times; it feels real because the story has been told to me only once, in a quiet voice, over the phone.

Sometimes I type words simply for the comfort of their colors. *Mimi*, like 22, is a warm red. The *i*'s add a gleam of white. My grandmother's name is a round peppermint in a bowl. Those paragraphs sat on my computer screen for a few days. The letters pulsed in their familiar patterns, veils of invisible green and violet and taupe.

After I finished writing those paragraphs, I went to New Jersey for a few days. I was excited to talk to Dr. Temple on my break about how *well* school was going, how my ADD meds were finally kicking in, how I was learning to be proud of my diagnosis and was even thinking of writing an article about why it's silly to call it a *disorder* when really, it's a different way of thinking. I am no longer depressed, I was going to tell her. I am about to graduate from college and I am no longer depressed. I wanted to thank her.

The appointment didn't go as I planned.

How are you feeling? she asked, as always.

I feel like ginger ale, I said.

The way it feels is: Gnarl ginger ale husbandry drudge gravity hundred band fedora dun grange wayfarer egg-yolk golden freight wave. Bubbling and yellow, a dunnish gold, brass. Inside, churns of raspberry iron expanding in the shape of Saturn's rings. It feels bouncy in the way you feel the bounce when a ballet dancer leaps and lands on a sprung wooden floor, even if you are just watching. But you are the dancer and you are watching.

This is what it feels like when a person with synesthesia is in a hypomanic phase, Dr. Temple told me. Her voice was low and calm. As always, she sat with her hands clasped on the desk.

It is little known that bipolar disorder, already a dual disease, comes in two forms. My grandmother had Type I, with full-blown manic and depressive episodes. The shrine, the flight to Lincoln, the antique vanity – all of these demonstrated mania, an elevated high that prompts impulsive and reckless behaviors. Her suicidal thoughts, her inability to get out of bed; depression. It is Type I that we think of when we picture Virginia Woolf wading into her river, or Robert Schumann composing in a frenzy, or Kurt Cobain spinning onstage. Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear during an episode. Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernest Hemingway splattered ink as their eyes glowed. It is not a shabby club to join.

Yet there also exists Type II. Its cycles of hormones through the neural web are faster, and its highs and lows are consequently less extreme. Depressive episodes are more common than the Type II manic expression, known as hypomania.

"I have ADD," I told Dr. Temple. "You told me I have ADD."

She looked sad for a second. Very gently, she told me that it was possible to have both. In fact, she added, it was not uncommon, particularly if a close relative had one or the other.

I have close relatives with both and she knows this, having treated my mother. I sat in her office and wondered if my body was mine, after all.

The news almost made me *happy*, or would have if I hadn't been in a hypomanic phase, bubbling like ginger ale; a coincidence, that I had my appointment that day. If I'd started bubbling at any other time, I would've left with my usual prescriptions for Prozac and Vyvanse and Xanax "as needed."

I left her office with a new prescription. I got into the car and didn't say much. Later my mother asked if I wanted to get a second opinion. "I don't know," I said.

I told no one.

We drove home and I began to press and squeeze and pound memories into sense, like kneading dough. There are times when I don't sleep for days. I lie in bed with my eyes closed but I don't really sleep, I ride rockets around my own mind until I'm woozy. I get up having thought that I slept. I talk at twice my normal speed, formulate elaborate plans, write page after page in a matter of minutes. After a few days I crash and sleep for twelve or more hours. My brain feels like lead, and my body feels empty. I cry for no reason and then become numb. I go to the student health center and fill out questionnaires on depression. The next day, I am happier than I have ever been.

It's been four years now since Mimi died. I remember holding her hand in the hospital room. She could barely open her eyes.

How did it feel? I want to ask her now. How did it feel?

Did it feel like this?

You have always told me I should start a journal, she wrote, twenty-two years ago, as I floated in her daughter's womb. My mother always told my grandmother she should start a journal. My mother, too, wanted to understand.

Many times I felt like doing so and never did, Mimi wrote. Why? Was she ashamed?

On the next page, in the same wavering blue ballpoint, an entry from October: *I'm sorry I haven't been back to this journal for 2 months*. Mimi describes visits, maternity shopping; she lists the birthdays in the family. Two pages later, the cursive writing ends mid-sentence. The rest of the notebook is blank. I flipped through the lined pages, looking for a scribble, anything. The pages were empty.

But Mimi, I want to ask her, how did it feel?

How did it feel?

Did it feel like this?

In the weeks before I entered college, Mimi didn't drink enough water. Decades of lithium had built up in her body, and her colon began to die. When I stood by her bed in the hospital and held her hand, and told her about my graduation, it was the first time in my life I was talking to her unmedicated brain. She could not speak. Neither of us could ask the other: How does it feel?

There are no brain glasses for bipolar disorder. Treatment stabilizes moods, prevents extreme swings. Lamotrigine, the leading drug aside from lithium, can cause toxic epidermal necrolysis, a near-fatal skin condition in which the outer layer of skin separates and blisters away from the body. Mucous membranes flay themselves. If I were to contract it, my mouth and my throat and my womb would peel apart.

There are now two orange bottles in my armoire: one for Vyvanse, one for Lamotrigine. Both are white; the Vyvanse is larger, a capsule, while the Lamotrigine is circular and powdery, with a pre-stamped crease dividing it in two. I took my first Vyvanse eagerly, curiously. The only side effects were a possible loss of appetite, and I wanted to see what brain glasses would feel like. It took me a week to gather the courage to open the bottle of Lamotrigine that Dr. Temple had

prescribed. I was afraid. My mother wasn't with me this time. I want to believe Mimi was there instead. Every day in the shower, I run my fingers over my skin, searching for unusual bumps and rashes, staring down at the body that every day looks a little more like hers.

The flowered notebook sits on a shelf in my dorm room. I sit typing at my computer and my eyes rest every so often on its colorful hardcover spine. I've read the blue cursive so many times that I know it by heart.

When my grandmother died, my mother began to wear her shoes. They're loafers, leather and practical, with a rubber heel that is modest to the point of invisibility. Grandma Mimi owned two pairs – one navy, one brown – and had bought them half a size too big, to avoid rubbing. She called them her "Audrey Hepburn" shoes. Despite the extra space, the balls of Mimi's feet protruded slightly and stretched the inside curve of the shoe, just where the sole met the upper. When my mother slides them on, her foot fills the cavity of wrinkled leather as if she, and not her mother, had worn down the lining with a fleshy bulb of skin that pushes gently into the earth. I know that shape by heart, the faint lines and contours that this particular wide metatarsal head massages into a shoe after thousands of steps. My shoes have it. I imagine slippers and buttoned boots and leather clogs with that shape, pressed into the mold of every foot that has borne the weight of every womb in my line.

The wombs came to Nebraska from Ostfriesland in the late 1800s. Rows of little boys frown their way through the photographs we have, with one – maybe two – pale pleated dresses breaking up the long stretches of buttoned knee-britches. For whatever reason, girls have always been rare. I know their names, back ten generations, no further – Mana, Dina, Reinstena, Alertjedine, ReEinstina, Elisabeth, Rehnste, Ette, Hille, Anna. Their surnames dart from *Yelken* to *Röben* to *Gerdes* to *Stapelfeld*, as fathers write names on birth certificates and sign the inside covers of Bibles, but within their Christian names the sounds echo, generation after generation. *Ana, ina, dina, rehna, anna, mana, rehna, Mary Ann, Robin Ann, Lucy Hannah.*

Who was the first?

A memory: Ette Wiebes at the edge of the forest. She has walked seven miles at a breakneck pace and her skirt is stained with mud up to her knees. Her eyes are red-rimmed, bright. She begins to embrace an oak tree, pressing her face against it until its bark is patterned across her cheeks. Then she falls, heaving. She does not remember where she is, or why. It is there, huddled around the tree's roots, that her daughter Rehnste finds her hours later. Mama, it is time to come home, she says.

Memories: Elisabeth Stapelfeld, "Litjen," the great beauty of Niedersachsen, whose house is filled with piles of clothes, whose daughter forgives her for misplacing their Bible for the hundredth time. Alertjedine Röben, who never told her daughter that she is named after a grandmother who walked into a river with horseshoes tied to her arms, her mind roiling with dark clouds. Dina DeBuhr, who crossed the Atlantic in a ship holding her baby, thinking she was leaving it all behind, that she would be the last of the women in Varel, in Oldenburg, in the heart of Ostfriesland, who sometimes walked to the mountains without remembering where they were going or why, who cried at nothing, who sometimes claimed they were the children of God. All memories, all untrue, all as true as I believe them to be.

Each womb brought the next into the world, and here I am, with my orange plastic pill bottles lined up on a shelf in my armoire, my name – our name – printed in capital letters on white labels. I have inherited the feet, the hips, the womb of these women, and I have inherited sequences of neurons that danced through the skulls of Anna and her daughters. I feel like the smallest of a set of Russian nesting dolls. And yet, I am not the smallest.

My mothers and I have the same feet. One day, you will have them too. For a second as I write this I imagine you sliding down my body and splashing into the bathwater, swimming for a moment by the faucet before begging to be born again.

– III –

M Y W O M B

At 22, your mother stood in a shower on the fifth floor of a college dorm and watched water glide down her body. It soaked her long russet hair until it was heavy and bulging with water and nearly black. It slid over each shoulder and pooled for a split-second in the concavity at the base of her spine, where nut-colored pockets of scar tissue will always protrude ever so slightly, the last reminder of a fall from a horse long ago. The water flattened like glass down each thigh. It split into rivulets at each knee and ran silently over the bulb of the ankle bone, to the base of the foot, to the tile beneath. It washed over the soft black lines of ink that will forever trace a humpback whale into your mother's skin. The whale rolls its flukes towards the ball of her foot, towards the knob that fits into your grandmother's shoes and the calluses from the ballet slippers that your mother will seldom wear again.

It's a memory, mine – and now, as the stringy web in your visual cortex conjures that hot shower, yours.

I cupped my hips and felt the solidity of this body, the familiar outward hill of fat just beneath my hips, the physical feature that, when I first caught it in my reflection, first shocked me in its similarity to my mother's body. Since then, I've noticed my mother's legs, hips, half-appraising; her body will be mine one day. Her face is worn now, but no less beautiful. She's kept the haircut from that day I drove her to the hair salon; it flips towards her chin. Her skin is pinker and freckled from years of sun. The lines around her mouth have deepened.

My mother's baby fell from a horse, onto flat sand, and stared at the sky in utter silence. Her spine cracked. She saw blue eggs. The image of the eggs joined me on runs through my neighborhood in the following years, as it slowly became clear that something – something – was not right. My back ached, pulsed, twinged as I ran or twisted or spun. I packed away my ballet shoes, stopped dancing; I stopped riding. The barn sold Brego within six months. He'd bolted at a bird, nearly killed a rider; I was lucky I could walk. He was deemed unstable. To this day, patches of skin on my coccyx are numb from residual nerve damage. I told no one.

Under the warm water, it was easy to believe that I had stood here forever, my feet pressed into the warm tile, my head tilted up to receive this warm artificial rain. The water encased me in a clear cocoon. My hands rested on my belly. Deep under my skin, you are already here, somehow – half of you, sleeping in the warm ocean within your blue egg, waiting. Your eyes do not exist but I imagine them closed. You do not look at me. Not yet. Instead you look inward, towards the curls of DNA that describe the web you will one day build.

I ask you: Will your brain dart frantically within itself? Will your mind swing in waves from buoyant flight to leaden stillness? Will your orange pill bottles read *Lamotrigine*, *Vyvanse*? Will your eggs be blue?

You ask me: How does it feel?

I don't know.

I did not get the X-ray. You, too, will turn 22 one day, and I will tell you: We are the only daughters of only daughters. We have the same shoe size, and fragile spines, and strong brains – perhaps chestnut hair and skin that burns easily. Someday perhaps you will have orange pill bottles in your armoire, lined up in a row, but you have your own name. You are the next womb. And I will tell you: I have carried you with me for my entire life, and for as long as you live, you will carry me too.