

Sonya Lea

## Creation Story

### *In the Beginning*

I remember. I was married to a smart and witty and fierce man. He turned forty and a doctor told him he had a rare cancer. It was not rare like steak; it was: “You might have ten years to live.” My husband got the cancer cut out and it came back, and he decided on a bigger cut. Surgeons removed all his organs and poured hot chemotherapy through the body cavity and scraped his entrails of disease and positioned most of them back in the correct vicinity and stitched him closed with fifty knots. Like new. He lost a lot of blood. He awoke without his memories. Eaten, whole—the apple and the snake, the transgression and the tree. He came home from the hospital without a navel, too (no use for it in someone carved this much), umbilicus-less, the first man, no longer tied to history, his or anyone else’s. What had begun as a cure for cancer became a cure for loneliness, a cure for anger, a cure for boredom. No story. Without a story there aren’t many desires. Food comes and you eat it. You feel tired and you sleep. People talk and you nod your head—*yes I see* and *of course* and *quel dommage!*—and they don’t even realize you aren’t able to speak to them. My husband lost his words along with his story. “He looks good,” people said, when they visited. They looked up at his six-foot-four frame, and though his left shoulder crooked toward his ear in postsurgical postural disregard, they pictured him as strong, reliable, mindful, competent. It was important to preserve the shell: Behold, after our likeness he shall be created.

I memorized his past, and I thought I knew what made him my lover, his children’s father, his family’s brother. When I looked in his eyes—bright, blue, and permanently wide with a stare the doctor called the “flat affect”—I witnessed the absence of forethought. Experience was writ upon his face the very second of its apprehension, as if he were newborn, as if some Demiurge had just fashioned him from clay. The first time I wheeled him from his room into a waiting area, he vomited from exposure to so many people at once. Months later he could walk

into a dark movie theater in the middle of the day as long as the film was kind. Forgetting came, or rather we began to notice what had already been forgotten—it streamed into yesterday and today, shadowed tomorrow as a flooded Lethe: Gone was any thought of how to make love, shop for groceries, form sentences, make a call, get places, get angry, use a computer, remember ideas and names and people and his children’s lives and his work and his patients and the muscles in his anatomy textbooks. Who he was, wasn’t.

Our daughter massaged his Flintstone feet and sang to him; our son called and told him school stories, and my husband listened and learned to say a few words in return: “What’s going on in your life?” I would write on a pad we kept bedside and hold it up, and my husband would recite it back to his child. He couldn’t remember what people cared about, why they opened their mouths to speak. Unless he did. He couldn’t remember having been with us, or hearing what we said. Unless he happened to. One day he bolted upright straight out of sleep and said: “*Sera sanguineous*. I like those words. It reminds me of the grassy steppes of the African plains.” And then he didn’t speak for another month. He had never been to Africa, though I recalled the steppes were the habitat of the woolly mammoth, and the first humans, about ten thousand generations ago. My husband hadn’t uttered either *sera* or *sanguineous* in the twenty-five years I had known him. I had no idea what he was talking about. I went running for the dictionary. The phrase means “the serum involving bloodshed.” I read the description to him, but he had already drifted back to sleep. It didn’t matter. He remembered he was married to a storyteller. I began to interpret his life.

### *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*

I’m making this up. I live in this life, and at the same time I assign meaning to it. I could say that’s the way it has always been, and then I would have to be sure who I am now, who I was then, and then I’d have to be sure of what happened, in what order things occurred, and then I’d have to be sure my perception was accurate, and then, because I’m unsure (I think) or want to be somewhat sure (perhaps), I’d have to check it with someone else, to verify (maybe). Unlike my husband, I amass masses of forethought, made available by the left hemisphere of my brain, which monitors all the other parts of the brain’s network and deciphers their actions in order to create an acceptable (to me) sense of a unified self. Brain researchers say there is a part of the left hemisphere whose job it is to make things appear logical,

to take the input we receive and form it into stories, stories composed for our hungry self-image, stories which rewrite themselves to become what we (now) believe. The things that have shaped me, the moments that have made me up, are not possible to authenticate, but my brain can do it—specifically, the part of my brain whose job it is to interpret. The “interpreter” can take information that doesn’t make sense, and the brain can order it, seeking patterns, finding relationships, making of the mysterious, irrational, and instinctive a kind of personal mythology. According to Michael Gazzaniga in *The Ethical Brain* (2005), scientists say the stories of Buddha and Muhammad and Joan of Arc and Moses all have evidence of epileptic seizures, perhaps providing an organic basis for their revelations. In addition, Gazzaniga explains, our brains can be stimulated to create religious experiences: When we receive information that doesn’t jibe with the brain structures that give rise to self-awareness and understanding, one of our possible reactions is to categorize it as a sensed presence, as God or Goddess. Those times you call magical, miracles, numinous: Any certainty comes from the effect they had on you, how they moved you toward some state you really couldn’t have anticipated. My husband, in the life we had before, called me his “spiritual scout.” I was responsible for being investigatory, grazing on the offerings, gorging at the godly feast, and then coming home and reporting on it. Vatic rogue to his vicarious aide-de-camp.

My job was to locate the truth: at 10,000 feet in the Canadian Rockies with a Zen teacher called the Wolfmaster and the toddlers tucked into day care and the spring-slanted sun buttering snow patches and early poppies at the edges of an icy stream and my feet a shocking blue cast from my having unstrung boots to thrust toes into glacial melt and a small Korean man in a straw hat walks the rocks across the river and calls my spirit-name, Sunyata, which is Sanskrit for “emptiness,” and I squint into the light, watching starbursts erupt from alpine snow, and he says, “If you like snow, don’t be afraid to freeze to death!” and I smile, scared to ask what it means, and he says, “Some day you will know this meaning. You will not forget.” I swear it happened just like that.

### *Self-Portrait*

When the brain loses oxygen, it is said to have experienced an anoxic insult: not an insult that demeans or offends, but rather a trauma, from *insilire*, to leap upon one. What leapt upon him, what leapt upon us who knew him, was the disintegration of his personality: the loss of traits, gestures, and expressions that layer the

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patina one grows to know. For most of the two years following his anoxic insult, when people asked how I felt I answered, “uncomfortable.” It was an itch under the skin, an unease that kept us traveling from place to place, a desire to find the correct answer when there wasn’t one. The lost part of him that we most missed was his enthusiastic ability to communicate. Without the craving to converse, there’s little self-reference, self-regard. No need to impress anyone. He had no wish to have his self reflected back in word or deed. The charm he had lived and wooed by was erased.

Around the time we’d gone to live in the cancer center we purchased a digital camera, our family’s first. When, following the second surgery, the doctors wouldn’t confirm he’d had a brain injury, I began taking pictures of my husband. I shot him frail, in his first shower after he could stand again; I took pictures of him famished for his first meal of weak broth, seventeen days after the surgery. There were close-ups of stitches and sunken eyes, long shots of being weighed and walking with IV lines, and pictures of him with Nurse Tim, who showed me how to clear clotted blood from chest tubes. My husband couldn’t remember the day before today, sometimes even the moment before this one, and I wanted these images to help him find his way back here, if he chose—his scout searching for a way to be of use. When we came home, our seventeen-year-old daughter continued the practice of taking pictures. She discovered the camera lens could swing three hundred sixty degrees, and she became enthralled with capturing herself, *sans* photographer. Arm extended, she snapped images of herself in wigs, togas, tights; dressed as a man, coifed for prom; putting on expressions from dainty to disgusting. And she created hundreds of photographs, posting them in a library on the laptop. Our daughter made albums on her photo Web site, with categories like Spring Break, Family, Friends, Yesteryears, Narcissus. She posted images to share with friends who had access to her “facebook.” She says she takes so many pictures of herself because she’s tracking who she is in these given moments and she wants to know how she’s perceived, she wants to know how people respond to the snapshots she’s placed for public view.

I think she’s made these self-portraits from the same place Frida Kahlo painted images of herself, for emotional catharsis, to track the self in its ongoing mission to hide and to reveal. She didn’t want to lose the father she’d barely begun to know, and she cried, always away from him, usually about his new demeanor: “Mama, why is he so much like a child?” When people from his past heard that her father had lost his memory of his former life, they began sending photographs from his

boyhood: inevitably, pictures of the theatrical, gregarious person he used to be, portraits of him mugging, striking a pose, evoking guarded machoshadow in his gaze. She's placed these old ones in the album next to the photo of our family with the Tibetan monk who made a visit two weeks after we came home from the hospital. In it, her father is lean, calm; his eyes are gaping, exposed. When you look closely, though, you can see the part never lost was his urge to love.

### *Boy-Regrets*

When I lean over to pick up my bag, I realize it's not the men in the airport I'm smelling but myself, the aroma of aftershave, the scent of musk and longing, of sweat covered over with flowers, a perfume I can't place until I track it back to the parking lot at Madison and 16th, where I'd handed him the packages and he'd placed them on the gravel lot and grabbed me up, transferred his fragrance onto my sweater, my son lifting me into the air as I'd once swung him, my feet flying out in back, arms bigger than his father's clasping so hard I'd exhaled fast, tried to make myself lighter. He'd laughed and said something then, but I couldn't recall it because I'd been thinking of coming to live in this city, which was his and not yet mine. I'd been thinking of what it is to find yourself a stranger in your own life, to live years and years with satire and biting wit and then to suddenly notice the complete absence of that bite. I was thinking of how it might feel to be the son of a man who'd gone through a brain injury: the loss of stories from your own childhood, the disappearance of your father's past. I'd been thinking of his father's anger, how it had taken a toll on this child, and wondering if it was a relief or a restraint to have the anger taken with the cut of a surgeon's knife.

Where do the boy-regrets go? Do you speak of the wrongdoing of your father when he's not the same man who raised you? What reconciliation is possible, necessary? My son was smiling down at me and I was thinking of the night before, when he'd had to stop talking a long time while he held his tears, how I'd reached over and asked him to cry. And when he could speak, how I was surprised at the source of his sadness, though I ought not to have been. "It's like being cut off from your history," he'd said, "when there's no way back to your father's people." How I told my son the story I could recollect then, of discovering I was pregnant with him, our first, the first grandchild on both sides, that we'd found out two weeks after his grandmother died, how she'd been driven over on the street while giving directions to a stranger. I told him I was awakened one night a year later while he

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slept in the bassinet next to me, startled by his grandmother's shimmer at the foot of the bed, how she'd walked over and placed her hand on our baby boy, offering a sign of protection, a signal that she'd be there for this one, how when my fear grew stronger, his grandmother had disappeared. "That happened?" he asked, and I couldn't imagine that I hadn't told him. Maybe these stories had been told only to the boy-child, the one who used to believe in magic. Maybe I'd forgotten that the man needed the stories, too, needed them as much as the food we'd send him when the demands of school and work intensified. Maybe this young man was calling us back to recover the portal of ancestors and remembrance.

Or maybe the lost ought not be reimagined. Perhaps the gift to this one would be the mutation of the mind that occurs when there is insight without the shadow of the past, enabling him to live in truth, what Krishnamurti called "a pathless land." "I thought it happened," I said to my son, the ground under me shifting still, one radical brain change causing another, pushing me to reconsider, relinquish what I knew, once, to be true.

### *Dreams of Other Lands*

Soon after his mother was run over by a drunk driver, we discovered we were going to have a child. We held hands as we lay on the bed in the two-room college apartment, blue moon mottling the wedding quilt, quiet. In the days that followed we'd sometimes wander across to the corner store for potato chips and bread and cans of spaghetti, piling food and books and blue-ruled paper on the bed, surrounding our prone bodies. I was in and out of dreams those months, dreaming of lives my husband and I never had. Unless we did. In every dream we were leaving childhood and entering wartime. In Ireland's Great Famine we could not shield our sisters from eviction or hunger, and we fought the land barons who had come to take our home. Early 1900s and I'd left him at the violent miners' strike in Wales while I went off to teach. Still another, the black night of early last century was lit with the fires of the hillforts, and he, dressed as a Fianna, a warrior-hunter, leaned across to warn me, a young mediator, about going into the duns alone. If we had been born into a culture with a shaman, *curandera*, or medicine woman, we might have made meaning from those night visitations. Instead, we tried to forget we were bringing a child into a country constantly at war.

We didn't speak about Operation El Dorado Canyon, Operation Earnest Will, Operation Prime Chance, Operation Praying Mantis, Operation Golden Pheasant,

Operation Just Cause, Granada, Panama, the Phillipines, Liberia, Saudi Arabia, the First Gulf War, Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia / Yugoslavia / Kosovo, Rwanda, Operation Uphold Democracy, Operation Infinite Reach, East Timor, or Yemen. When thirty million people around the world protested the invasion of Iraq, we went onto the solid streets of London, where we were chaperoning our child's highschool trip, and we raised our voices, too. Despite our chosen forgetting, we could conceive of a history without conflict. Months later, about the same time American soldiers started coming home from Operation Iraqi Freedom with traumatic brain injury (TBI), my husband stopped remembering.

The Agent Orange of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, TBI comes instantly or months after encounters with bombs, grenades, land mines, or artillery shells. Two thousand soldiers have thus far been found to have it. It's a new affliction. With advances in helmets, armor, and battlefield medicine, these contemporary soldiers survive trauma they wouldn't have lived through in the First Gulf War. They're experiencing symptoms we are familiar with: impaired memory, loss of problem-solving abilities, behavioral changes, anger or loss of it, irritability, lack of focus, depression. And if the soldier's heads aren't already blasted into forgetting, they are often overwhelmed upon return with harrowing recollections, in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder. War leaps upon one, and memories are driven underground; memories are entrapped. This is, as Anne Galloway presents in "Collective remembering and the importance of forgetting: A critical design challenge," what is called "forced forgetfulness." It is neither the same as nostalgia, a voluntary forgetfulness, or hope, a necessary forgetfulness.

### *Unlikely Vigils*

To forget is not to fail. Forgetting is memory's *raison d'être*. "My dreams are like your vigils," says the man who has acquired the gift and burden of never forgetting, in Jorge Luis Borges's "Funes, the Memorious." The man dies of congestion from holding on to useless details. To know what is worth keeping, we have to be willing to let go of what is irrelevant: For our family, it was the myth that memory is merely personal.

A year after his surgery my husband's memories began to return. Not whole or instantly, as in some Hollywood version, but slowly, through the stories we told him over and over, woven back into consciousness. Even with the help of what seemed like a hundred therapists, some memories held, while others dropped like

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useless stitches. Our family accepted what he dropped: the ability to multitask, much of the past, the desire to communicate. And we adored what returned: the man who could fulfill his work as a healer. And in our reconstruction of his life we learned about remembrance: It is communal and powerful.

Our family stories do not include prognosis; we stay rooted in hope, we feel more than report. It is because our lives are rich in folklore and secrets. We refuse stories that don't include the hot of tears on the cheek, the song of a street protest, the scream of a child's nightmare, the slick of saliva on skin, the smell of jasmine and sex and apples and sickness, the plain diaphanousness of ghosts, the jolt of a question harkened. We have not kept genealogies, archives, first editions; our stories were passed down in festivals and barbecues, in ordinary objects like blankets, Bibles, ice-cream buckets. There are no memorials to birthing, grieving, getting by. There are no markers to dreams or inspiration or forgiveness, for unlike battles they occur in the most unlikely places. Still, we're hopeful. We awake. We forget. We begin.

*Sonya Lea is at work on a collection of essays about her family's transformation during her husband's brain injury. She received an Artist Trust Award to complete this essay collection.*