

The Alpha

died 2008

Anyone who was at Camp Nawita in the late 1930s can tell you, she was queen of the baseball diamond. The tennis court, the hockey field, the horseshoe pitch and the lake. Too bad she beat Title IX by forty years. It wasn't exactly the heyday of female business majors, either, nor women in the workplace, and for a really bad idea, try sending a young woman on a business trip by herself, wedding ring or no. Enough already. She got pregnant, moved to the Shore, took up golf and gin. She won her first Club Championship in 1966, just as I began my poetry career. I raced into the dining room where she was drinking her martini, ode in hand. *She had a bad lie in the weeds of sixteen/ Ere she lofted and landed her ball on the green.* Now I haven't set eyes on that place in ten years and when they say everything is different, I believe them.

Everyone's mother is mythological: her body the origin of existence and consciousness, her house the pimped-out crib of Zeus, her mistakes the cause of everything. Holy her rose bushes, holy her blackjack system, her London broil holy. My mother, the godhead of 7 Dwight Drive, rose daily from her bed to quaff her Tropicana orange juice and to slay the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. She survived a difficult childhood, my father's high jinks, two heart attacks, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, surgery for diverticulosis, and the many poor decisions and inappropriate outfits of her daughters. She certainly did not believe a clot in her lung could bring her down, that smoking for sixty-five years would actually cause lung cancer, or that lung cancer was definitely fatal. The last thing she did before she took to her bed was win a golf tournament. Clearly the subprime crisis, the market crash, Hurricane Sandy, and even Donald Trump were biding their time until she was out of the way.

And then she was. Imagine Persephone coming up from hell and Demeter not there. Strange cars in the driveway, the rose bushes skeletons. You stand there at first, uncomprehending, your poem in your hand. Then you go somewhere, call it home. Call it spring.

The Belligerent Stream

buried 1962

Everyone who drives into Baltimore is shocked to discover that the interstate—a part of I-83 known as the JFX—stops dead and disappears in the middle of town. Whether you are coming from the north or the south, your route into the city will dump you off near the Inner Harbor and leave you to wend your way through downtown traffic. Before the JFX disappears, it wanders through town like a drunk, swerving drastically left, then right, for no apparent reason.

But there is a reason. This road is built right on top of the Jones Falls, which once burbled through town to the bay, a "belligerent stream" according to early twentieth-century historian Letitia Stockett, who taught at the high school my daughter now attends. Perhaps because it was always prone to flooding and filled with trash, few mourned in the 1960s when the tough little waterway was paved over, sacrificed to suburbanites' need for speed. The alternative was tearing down buildings and slicing through neighborhoods. On the other hand, if they had finished the road as planned, the Inner Harbor would now be covered with concrete ramps. A terrible thought indeed. Though it didn't look like much back then, the decaying port has since become the city's sparkly little Disneyland; all of Baltimore most tourists ever see.

Meanwhile, the belligerent stream has never submitted entirely, as I learned recently while reading a novel set in Baltimore with a secret waterfall. I immediately emailed the author: Where is this? In the abandoned industrial neighborhood beneath the elevated part of the highway, he wrote back, look for an overgrown trail. Once we found it, my daughter had to help me down the steep makeshift steps to the rickety deck. And there it was: the surprisingly emerald waters of the

Jones Falls, bursting out of the culvert, rushing to a rounded cliff, tumbling over and pounding noisily into a pool. Graffiti adds a caption to the postcard: PERSISTENCE IS KEY.

The Southern Gentleman

died 2012

I met him many years after he changed his whole life: he quit drinking, came out, and left his wife in a single day. Sitting in the audience at his book signing, I instantly loved him; he had a deep, luscious Georgia accent, a courtly manner, and a wicked sense of humor. I rushed right up to start telling him my life story, eager to begin our friendship without delay. Soon I was on the guest list for his many gatherings. Dinnah will be ready in one ow-ah and fawty-fahv minutes, he would say at the door. Finally at the table, he blessed the food and his guests and always, last of all, *The New York Times*.

He was rarely on time for anything, spent money as if he had a trust fund, wrote slowly, lusted randily, and could always be counted on for special requests in restaurants. Ah'd lahk it *molten* he'd tell the waiter, sending a piece of chocolate cake back to be microwaved. At his regular spots, his ice water arrived at the table with eight slices of lemon. They know me heah, he explained. As at the apartment, dinner took hours. Then he drove me home in his old boat of a car, airily bouncing, then noisily crunching over every bump.

At the time he learned he had Lou Gehrig's disease, I was pretty sick myself, about to finally start the year-long treatment that cured me of hepatitis C. At first, it was fun to complain together, but that wore off. Soon nobody could understand him but his daughter. The last time I saw him leave the house, he had invited me to go to a production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. He sat stoically in his neck brace as half-naked cast members shimmied and shook inches from his face. Some people should really keep their clothes on in public, he remarked as we left.

Even that night, making our interminable way back to the parking garage, there was something magical about him, a rare combination of chivalry, joie de vivre and ease. Being his friend was like some kind of painless cosmetic surgery, leaving you just a little prettier and more interesting than you were before.

The Squash Player

died 2016

I met her because she was madly in love with her upstairs neighbor in the apartment building, the dashing, handsome, totally gay Southern Gentleman. The first mention of her in my inbox is him telling me—typos galore, he’s already failing—that she’s brought red roses for the party he’s having that night, the last big one. The two of them with their sprightly gatherings! What with that creaky old elevator and its upholstered bench, you felt you were going to a cocktail party in the 1940s. Her “salon” involved a pot-luck hors d’oeuvre spread on her mahogany table, deviled eggs, smoked salmon on brown bread, with a generous open bar alongside. She drank martinis, but you have whatever you want, dear. The walls were crimson, covered with paintings.

She had once been the top-seeded women’s squash player in Maryland but now she was the skinny lady with bad hips and a fluffy dog, whom she took everywhere, as if Baltimore were Paris, and several months a year they would go to the real Paris, where I assume she met with less resistance when taking him to restaurants and theaters. Fucking A! she would say, if they wouldn’t admit the dog, and throw her tickets in the trash and go home.

Despite her jaunty air and festive urges, there was something desperate about her, something isolated and secretive, deeply miserable about growing old. I did not fully grasp this until the night I arrived in her lobby with a plate of tuna canapes and no one answered the buzzer. Then I saw the note taped to the door: our hostess had been hospitalized. A few months later, she failed

at suicide for the third time, destroying her liver and kidneys. A committee went to the hospital to beg the doctors to let her go.

I had many questions, but most of them would never be answered. I did learn, at the cocktail party held in her apartment instead of a funeral, that she had appointed guardians and left a bequest for the care of her dog. Which led to the realization that, despite certain worrisome similarities, I am far luckier than she. I was never an athlete, I have no secrets, and I would not in a million years leave the dog.

Her Son

died 2017

One day my neighbor took me with her to something called a shooting response. It was just a couple of miles from our house, on a corner in East Baltimore. Right there, a few days earlier, a high school senior had been shot in the face, though there was nothing in the backpack the killers took but a change of clothes. Now there were sixty people assembled, friends, family, neighbors, teachers, and members of an organization called MOMS, Mothers of Murdered Sons and Daughters. This Baltimore-based association is open to all: whether your child is killed by the cops, the dealers, the gangs, or the racists, you can join.

People brought boxes of white candles and Mylar balloons. They taped photos to a brick wall and placed tea lights on the sidewalk. Then his mother, a young woman with a turned-up nose and gold highlights in her long, loopy waves, arrived, and they handed her a microphone. Last Thursday started out like any other day, she said, telling her boy to do his chores, trying not to be late for work, missing a call from him on her phone, and by the end of it, finding herself in a hospital emergency room, realizing by how people were treating her that her son must be dead.

At seventeen, she told us, she had walked across the stage at her own graduation pregnant with her boy. They grew up together. He had quit school for a while himself, overwhelmed by deaths among his peers and the general negativity about his future, but he went back and would have graduated this June. The two of them planned to go together to community college. Lord, are you serious? she said. All these years I fought for my son? All the times I told him stay off these

streets? All these people who loved him? My neighbor and I were the only two white people at this gathering, but when tears started pouring down my face, a tall young man put his arm around me.

A few months later, the boy's mother attended his graduation, where he was awarded an honorary diploma. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, he was the fourth of five students from his high school to be killed during this school year. Look beyond the boundaries of Baltimore, one of the teachers urged the graduates. Their mothers must be thinking, where?

His Brother

died 1998

There's just one degree of separation between me and Freddie Gray, who was called "Pepper" and sometimes "Freddie Black" by his friends. So I heard from one of my memoir students who knew him slightly—their connection was a hood-hopper named Gorgeous. A hood-hopper, you know, a clown who claims to be from every block in town. Anything I know about hood-hopping, or about the life of black boys in Baltimore, comes through this young writer, now the author of several published books. His career took off the week of the uprising in 2015, when he published an op-ed in *The New York Times* explaining that being beaten up by cops, as Freddie Gray was on the day of his death, was a routine part of his childhood. During basketball games. Walking to school. Anytime.

This boy was mostly raised by his older brother, a powerful and popular drug dealer who was fiercely protective of his younger sibling. He'd moved him out of their father's house when the younger boy was fifteen, desperate to keep him off the streets and in school. He hadn't finished himself, but he was a passionate reader. Their house was full of books. And basketballs, and boxes of sneakers. Three years later, the slam dunk: little brother accepted to Georgetown University! He took the letter over to their mother's place to celebrate. Left a message for his brother. Then there was knock on the door. A breathless messenger. He ran downstairs, pushed his way through the crowd on the sidewalk.

The first thing he saw were his brother's Charles Barkleys. Still perfect, still gleaming white. His legs went limp, he flung himself onto the body. Moments later, the police arrived. They dragged

him away, cuffed him, threw him in the squad car, questioned him for hours. Grief counseling, East Baltimore style.

Seventeen years later, the Baltimore police killed a man named Freddie Gray. I often wonder what Pepper would think if he could see who has become, the strange destiny he was posthumously chosen for. His death was senseless, and it could have been meaningless, but instead it is history. So, by way of my student and his brother, by way of Gorgeous the hood-hopper, I send something I can only call a prayer.

The Talent

died 2015

Dear Ella, Leslie died last night, after a sudden, sad decline, which began about a week ago when I was cleaning her bowl and she jumped out of the strainer. How I wish I had been more careful! She injured her fin, and I think it got infected. Over the next few days she bloated up, her sleek golden body covered with an ugly red rash. When we got home from dinner last night, we found her floating upside down, stock still and drained of color. Yet as soon as she saw me, she tried to pull herself up and wave.

The goldfish Leslie Knope began life as Pretzel, and had already been through an unsuccessful adoption when a college-bound neighbor left her in our care. We changed her name and her presumptive gender, bought her an Eiffel Tower, and came to realize what a very special fish she was. As soon as she spied a visitor approaching her bowl, she would swim up, stand on her tail, and do a charming little can-can, her diaphanous, peach-colored caudal and dorsal fins sashaying as she twisted from side to side, fixing her guest with a frank and friendly gaze. She never seemed to tire of this routine, nor did I.

When I learned that under the right conditions, a goldfish can live up to fifty years, I had visions of carting her with me into assisted living. I knew that little bowl was terrible for her, and I was planning to move her into a proper tank, with a water filter and a special light, when unbelievably, accidentally, I killed her. There is no other way to say this. I could tell that night would be the end; I held the bowl in my arms and murmured soothingly. Twice I thought she

was gone and took her out, only to have her wriggle back to life in my hand. I had to turn off the lights and go up to bed before she would let herself go. What a shame. But what a fish!

The French Horn Player

died 2014

Perhaps you don't think of Baltimore as a world capital of classical music, but it is home to a fine symphony and many smaller ensembles and orchestras, fed by a conservatory of some renown. For one hundred and fifty years, the Peabody Institute has drawn young musicians to a city they've barely heard of, which turns out to be an easy place to stick around. This is how two curly-headed brothers, French horn players from South Carolina, ended up here, sharing an apartment with a view of the skateboard park. The younger one, a radiant free spirit, became friends with my son, and their love of music was not the only thing they had in common. Both were little brothers, but my son was one year older, so he considered himself the big brother in this pair. He took the young French horn player under his wing. Many long nights turned to dawn as they rocked on the porch of the apartment, like old farmers with tall tales and big schemes.

Then the boy got sick, a nasty throat infection that led to the removal of his tonsils. These days, a tonsillectomy is an outpatient procedure, forty-five minutes under anesthesia, a few hours for observation, then off you go with your antibiotics and pain medication. I was surprised to hear this, having spent days in the hospital eating lime Jello back in 1965, and I will not be able to tell you what happened next because all we know is that when the older brother got home from work, the boy lay dead in his room. How can that be? Every person who loved this boy, among them my son, wondered why they hadn't been with him that day. It would have been so easy. It would have been their pleasure.

The boy was buried in the foothills of Mount Catoctin, in Frederick, Maryland. A quartet of young French horn players in their concert suits played Mahler's requiem, then his brother played an arrangement of "You Are My Sunshine" on a single horn. The notes leapt into the sky. The sun, that oldest patron of the arts, came out from behind the clouds to hear.

The Big Man

died 2016

Destiny loves to play games. Like making my son's unhappy and very short-lived employment at Guitar Center the secret doorway to the future. One afternoon, a shy giant appears in the store, 6'10" in his Phillies cap, to trade in some microphones. My son races out of hiding to nab this customer—and poof, our lives are changed. He entered our world like an undiscovered planet, pulling my son, his band, his friends, his mother, into his orbit. *My hands are so high, my hands are so big, just hand me that mic, I'll rock this whole crib.* A rapper is both a memoirist and a poet: I didn't get it until then, but fifteen-year-old boys all over the world were already annotating the lyrics pages on the internet.

He had a titanic work ethic and an olympic play ethic, he was an artistic madman with a medicine chest from hell, he had a broken biological clock that ran on breakfast sandwiches from the gas station. He had rhymes for days and stories for weeks and charms against despair: the reset button, the gray scale, the two-tone rebel, the mysterious black paisley. *Mr. Sunshine, Mr. Rainstorm, meet me in the conference room, we got to brainstorm.* After he was dead, I asked my son if he understood these metaphors. He was quiet a moment, thinking. Then we decided it wasn't the kind of thing that needs to be explained.

Right before he went to the emergency room to see what was up, he posted a picture of his swollen hand on Twitter. That turned out to be goodbye. Like a giant in a fairy tale, he was felled by the tiniest of foes, a microorganism, a rogue in the bloodstream. We sent flowers but only his parents and sisters, tumbling through space like lost astronauts, ever saw them. *Still a Wallace in*

the afterlife. Music lives on, never gone, no half-life. Why are so many of the songs about this?

Even his beloved golden mutt—part retriever, part greyhound, part muse—listens to his voice over and over, wanting to believe.

The Assistant Superintendent

died 2012

My boss at the university is a woman about my age, a slender, ukulele-playing poet with curly blond hair, a woman who governs with an unusual combination of whimsy and steel. When we met ten years ago, we both still had mothers walking the earth, and when she told me her mother had lung cancer, my mother was four years gone the same way. She had hesitated to tell me and she was right: I burst into tears. Not because our mothers were so alike, but because they were our mothers, and they were gone. Gradually, then suddenly, then completely.

A few years after her mother's death, my boss came out of her office to receive a young woman who had an appointment to discuss our program. Then stopped in her tracks. This young woman looked as if she were already very disappointed about something, and the little girl she'd brought with her seemed no happier. Uh oh. My boss continued straight down the hall to the ladies room to collect herself. When she looked in the wide mirror over the sinks, her mother was there. If you have lost a parent, you probably know: that physical sense of their presence, not as a separate entity or a ghost, but as a sort of layer under your own skin. In your facial muscles, or your shoulders, or your hands. Something you would never imagine in the anguished days of your early grief; such a comfort as time goes on.

My boss's mother had worked all her life in the Baltimore schools, first teaching kindergarten and first grade and later, after earning a PhD in her spare time, as a champion of early childhood education. Before she was done, kindergarten—the true basis of social justice!—was mandatory in Baltimore. Another part of her job was to meet with various disgruntled people: parents,

principals, teachers, all taken aback to see the lady with the big smile coming down the hall in her bright red suit, so happy to see them and hear their concerns.

And so my boss left the bathroom that day, accompanied by her mother. They made a beeline for the visitors. What did she say to them? She doesn't even know. Sometimes, you just have to let them take over.