

Incidental Trees

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Vincent Van Gogh's trees are knowable forms. They can be recognized and identified even if you don't know the painting is his. Monet's trees can be recognized as well, and they are different, personal, unmistakably not Van Gogh's. They carry the marks of his consciousness, his unique perspective. But language doesn't seem as flexible as painting when it comes to self-expression. Even though our experiences diverge and our interpretations vary, we must communicate, must simplify things, knowing that our language is imperfect and, at times, incomplete. Our words, our tangled and frayed means of expression, fail to convey the turmoil of our inner workings. Yet we try. Some of our greatest minds have devoted themselves to the task. I remember when it was my turn.

My sister and I are driving under the lacing shadows of trees. I've been trying to form words, weaving through the city, waiting for the traffic to subside. A brief flash of sun, and we're back under the leaves again, headed away from the industrial complexes of that old steel town and back up the mountain that leads home. I want—need—my sister to know. Before anyone else, I need her to know. The situation is complex, hard for me to grasp at first. Harder for Sonya at thirteen.

I turn the song down, but leave enough sound for scattered hints of rhythm to rise to me, bolstering my resolve. The physical distance between us is comforting. My sister sits in the back seat, face darkened by the shadows of late summer leaves and the increasing rain, headphones on. I can hear the muffled beat of her music. I have to tell her that the person I've been dating for two years is transitioning from a female to a male identity, have to speak to her his new name and pronouns. What I can't convey is the weight of this burden—the salty, sleepless nights and endless frustrations of hiding something so personal, a self so new and raw. I want to tell her first because I know that she loves him almost as much as she loves me, and without conditions. Soon after I start, we are both crying. I'm crying because I'm afraid she'll be scared of him, this person she has always teased and adored. Outside the car

it's getting hard for me to see; there's rain drumming on the windshield, and for a moment the noise is almost deafening.

I'm trying to explain months of someone else's self-hate and revelation and hidden desires to a thirteen-year-old who is still struggling to confirm and resist her own identity. This means, sometimes, that Sonya reacts simply to react. I, in turn, take things very seriously. Our relationship, hers and mine, is connected by a series of collisions, rather than by a steady stream of co-dependence. We fly together like atoms, sometimes converging, sometimes bouncing apart. I'm unsure of the response my pronouncement is going to provoke. She's busy writing her own future, and I'm introducing a character shift.

In her essay "Stone Soup," Barbara Kingsolver writes about expectations for the future that could never quite be fulfilled:

I set upon young womanhood believing in most of the doctrines of my generation. . . . I had that Barbie with her zebra-striped swimsuit and a figure unlike anything found in nature. And I understood the Prince Charming Theory of Marriage, a quest for Mr. Right that ends smack dab where you find him. I did not completely understand that another whole story *begins* there. And no fairy tale prepared me for the combination of bad luck and persistent hope that would interrupt my dream and lead me to other arrangements. (275)

Kingsolver's troubled marriage and decision to divorce drew her out of the charmed circle of the "American Family" and rendered her culturally unworthy and invisible—selfish, too, for not "sticking it out" or "making it work." But she did not rebel against some holy, unalterable law; she simply became disillusioned with the image of the family in our culture, an exclusive model she chose to be outside.

Kingsolver uses her divorce as a means to talk about the family as a linguistic construct. When she mentions her daughter, Kingsolver talks about how happy she is having two homes, three sets of grandparents, all the love that goes along with a large family. "The main problem," she says, "is that other people think we have a problem" and assume the worst. Her daughter always has to explain the positives; others never infer them (276). What she realizes is that families outside the normal conception—like mine—require ever more language to explain. We are not characters on television shows except as objects of derision or ridicule: the divorced sitcom mom ignoring her kids to chase after the much younger hunk; the *Oprah* special on the pregnant man. This lack of visibility means we always have to educate others, cre-

ate phrases and even words, to describe our loved ones, our relationships, and ourselves.

Within a family, it's easy to live and thrive without definition, "but it's harder somehow to shrug off the Family-of-Dolls Family Values crew when they judge (from their safe distance) that divorced people, blended families, gay families, and single parents are failures," Kingsolver writes (275). After her divorce, she finds that the family connections are still intact. There is still mother, daughter, father, love. They have just moved beyond the terms traditionally reserved for these relationships. Kingsolver reminds us that "a marriage that ends is not called 'finished,' it's called '*failed*,'" and that "the children of this family may have been born to a happy union, but now they are called *the children of divorce*" (275). The language we use for our relationships affects how we view *ourselves*, as well as how others assess our worth. While I'm not divorced, I know what it feels like to have a set of human connections that falls outside a cultural pattern. Longstanding categories of identity are bridged and ruptured; my tongue is forced to express subtle nuances. My sister is young. I am looking for the words; my brain is filled with jumbled images that I try to fit together into some coherent phrase. Eloquence, drowned out by endless streams of emotion, eludes me.

Sitting with Sonya, speaking slowly, I'm still unsteady and unused to the burden of educating, constantly educating, coming out as his lover again and again. Explaining his life to others so that we won't have to put up with their phobic shit about our lives together, to avoid more hurt for him and take it into myself. It's surreal, in a way. Nothing has changed between the two of us—only the way we're seen, how we're experienced and expressed by the rest of the world. It is this new discrepancy, this unsettling, that I have to explain—a shift in the tilt of the earth while my step has remained unchanged. Kingsolver and her daughter still love each other after the divorce, but now that love is redefined by others as broken and incomplete rather than forged and finished. She is the "child of a broken home."

I am the child of a relationship that usually results in responses like "that must be so hard" and "wow, I couldn't handle that." That's why part of my job, the fresh mantle I've taken on, is to minimize the rough edges between the love we've constructed for ourselves and the world that barely bothers to acknowledge his existence. I'm the buffer, the intermediary, the mouth and ears, between him and the *other*. I know enough not to expect disgust or pity from my sister. She's the one who suggested taping "No H8" posters to the stalls of her rural Pennsylvania middle school bathroom after I came out as a lesbian; the one who's eager to tell me about her friends, the only two out gay

boys in her grade; the one who's more than eager to learn and speak and participate. Still, she asks: "She's a boy now?"

I respond by asking if that's ok with her, and she says yes, of course, but she's crying, and it's raining harder than ever, and I'm wondering whether I should pull over and wait it out or just keep driving. I keep going because I'm afraid of the edges of the road, of the rain, of facing her instead of the soaking mess of gravel in front of me. I'm afraid at that moment that we're going to slide over the edge, and that we'll die still trying to pull together these loose strings of human connection. In a moment of morbid panic, I worry that if we fall, I won't be able to reach her, hold her before it's over.

I tell her that he's my boyfriend now, and I can tell by her sobs that she doesn't know what to make of things. In the brief silence, I turn up the radio to cloak the still atmosphere. She takes a choked breath. I lower the volume, feeling the heat radiating to my fingertips from the dash. Punctuated by sobs, she asks me, "Do you, do you still love each other?" And I know how to answer. "Of course we do." I realize that what she's worried about are the connections—between him and me, her and us. Over the next few weeks, she has eager questions at the ready: what she should call him, what life will be like, what we'll look like five years from now.

How can you convey an image of experience through language? The painter is restricted to brushstrokes, as I am to words. William F. Reese, in his essay, "Working Towards the Essential," critiques the modern obsession with technical perfection and "tight painting." A modern impressionistic painter, Reese contends that it "[centers] more on absolute reality than on the poetic essential." The real challenge, he says, is to create "a painting or sculpture that rings like a bell or sings like a song," adding, subtracting, and blending the details of the piece to create something that is true to an experience or feeling rather than the concrete details of an object. In his words, "The forest is essential, the trees incidental." Depictive precision is not as important as the way that the strokes and shadows and shapes move together to create a larger being, less exact but more emotionally resonant. While he applies this notion to art, it can also be applied to language. Speech is an impressionist painting. Smears of light and color are thrown together in a way that conveys an idea or experience, even though the thing itself is impossible to fully capture. But realism is not the aim. Our words, like paintings, will always be artificial if we are seeking only to mirror reality. We must realize that details are not everything.

Reese says that "no matter to what degree you carry the detail it should always be secondary to the pattern." The pattern, in my case, is the emotion

that my words carry. The words themselves do not matter in the long run; they are the slim but sole means I have to convey something inexpressible. I cannot give my sister a complete picture of my experience, nor can I give one to the world. But I can give her patches of feeling. I can give her enough dots that when she stands back, she can see the image of our love and grief and longing.

Long afterwards, when we're all together, my sister begs us—as she did before, over and over—to tell her how we met. We drive her out for ice cream on July nights. I watch her struggle and succeed at maneuvering pronouns. She is, as always, prone to outbursts in the middle of others' conversations. Now it's October. We're all at dinner, and I hear her say something I can't make out while someone else is trying to tell a story. When no one takes notice, she yells, "Didn't you hear me? I see him as a boy now!" The boy who takes her for ice cream and with whom I am in love. The language is changed but our experience persists. Kingsolver asks, "Why are our names for home so slow to catch up to the truth of where we live?" (274) If language is an imperfect medium, it is also an impressionistic one, filled with brilliant shadows and opaque glimmers. My sister's excitement, her desire to know, encourages me. Now, I am trying to fill the silences with swatches of our beautiful, inexpressible lives.

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