My Brother

Casey Shearer Memorial Award for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction: 2nd Place

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That morning there was blood. It was in the crib, on his cheeks. Blood and heavy breathing and then a drive to the hospital. And then later, the moment when the nurses said, "Don't let the mother come in."

A woman came to take my sister and me to a waiting room with toys where I used a set of coloring stencils to draw outfits on slips of paper that felt like cash register receipts. My mother and father went to a different waiting room, and when I saw them again it was my father who told me.

My brother died and he kept on being dead; each time I remembered that he had died it was as if I had just remembered a whole other aspect of myself. My brother died and I hadn't appreciated the way we had been alive together, something so elemental that he was always my brother even when my back was turned away from him; so elemental it was my whole life itself. I was five and my parents and my sister were my life itself, but my brother was not like that anymore. We lost him and the sense of family we had made, the way my mother remembers when my grandparents brought Paul and me to the hospital when our sister was born, when she looked at us and thought, *this is our family*.

When my dad asked if I wanted to see him again I said yes, because he was my brother and I didn't realize that he wouldn't feel like my brother anymore. I saw him lying still on the stiff operating table and with plastic tubes coming out of his nose and mouth he felt gone, irretrievably gone. The coffin was white and gold and I watched as they lowered it into the December earth. Later I would dream of him waking up and worry what he would do without us. I worried about that more than what we would do without him.

The day after he died I went to school even though they told me I didn't have to. That same morning my mother woke up and she weighed herself, just like she did every other morning. "One hundred and nine pounds," she tells me later, when I am old enough to know what this means. "The day before I was 115."

My mother gave me a necklace with an oblong pearl pendant. Someone had given it to her during those days when people sent us cards and flowers, but it wasn't her style. I imagined that some of my brother was in it. His soul, maybe, and if I twirled the pendant the right way at the right time of the day, there was a possibility I could bring him back.

Later, I would look longingly at every little brother I saw with blonde hair thinking that he could be mine, misplaced. Those years there were other mothers on the playground where my mother brought my sister and me. "You're so lucky you have only have girls," they'd tell her sometimes. "Boys are such a nightmare."

"I never wanted you and your sister to think of me as a sad person," she tells me now. "I didn't want you to think, after Paul died, Mom could never be happy again. I didn't want you to think that you weren't enough for me."

I've heard people say that crying is decadent and these days I agree. Now I can recognize when my own crying is indulgent, a luxury. What worries me is what it might mean to lose a context for pain. I bought my mother *Blue Nights* without having read it. I bought it mostly because it was by Joan Didion, but also because I thought she might like to read

about someone else who has lost a child. But not just that. I also looked at the back cover, at the picture of Didion's daughter, Quintana, and thought that my mother might read it and think of me.

My mother doesn't read it. "It's too sad," she tells me simply. I am disappointed, but I don't push her. Instead, I take the book for myself and buy her something else.

Didion writes about spending time at an ICU. She writes about the patient, her daughter. She writes about pneumonia, insufficient oxygen, an hour, brain damage. That's the order.

I read this, after my mother refuses to, and I feel horribly inconsiderate. It is not too sad for me to read, and I realize that I have no understanding of my mother's pain. Months later, she tells me about not being able to sleep at night. Menopause, anxiety—but also the garbage disposal, in the sink. She's seen what it does to spoons and worries, what if a hand gets caught in there, one of ours? "You would never be the same," she says. The permanence concerns her.

The day before my brother died we had a party. It was his birthday and my mother made a cake that looked like a train, with four little cars. Back then my grandmother still sewed, and she'd made a family of frogs from old fabric scraps, stuffed them with dry beans. There was a toy tractor, cold metal that fit in your hand and a steering wheel you could spin with a finger. It was just us: mother, father, two sisters. He was only three and he was all ours.

We have the videos, from his birthday and other days. I've watched them, but the toys are what I remember the most: the tractor—the way I used to hold it, delicately. The drawer in my father's closet; sometimes I would sneak in and open it, running my hands over Paul's blanket and t-shirts.

There were things that I wouldn't learn until later. That the blood came from his mouth, or maybe somewhere deeper, in his lungs. That my mother waited outside the room he was in and it was the way the nurses looked at her—that was how she knew. That the doctors told her about the brain damage, before, when that was still a possibility, and they said, "Think about what you want to do."

I can imagine what it might have been like if it turned out differently, that day. A bed, tubes, apparatuses. Him, still, but growing larger.

They didn't think he was going to die. There was no reason to think that he might. He'd been sick the day before with a cough, maybe laryngitis, and it seemed just that. In the morning his breathing was rough, labored, and at the hospital they gave him a shot of epinephrine, to steady his breathing, or to get his heart rate back up—my parents have different understandings but neither is entirely clear. But both remember: less than a minute after the shot, my brother fainted.

"I didn't think he was going to die, I just thought they were going to figure out what was wrong with him," my mother says. "He fainted, but I've fainted before, too. I just thought it was going to be that kind of fainting, that he was going to wake up and be fine."

"They kept saying, 'Who else do you want to be here? Do you want someone to come and be with the girls?' And we kept saying, 'No, it's just us. It's just us.'"

She had gone to the bathroom, and when she came out my father was waiting in the hallway. "They want to talk to us," he said, and they went into a room with a few chairs and then the doctors told them.

I don't know why my brother died.

It says pneumonia on the death certificate, but later, the doctors told my parents that it couldn't have been pneumonia, that they did chest compressions and if it had been pneumonia his lungs would have been rigid.

There was some sort of investigation, which is apparently standard procedure after the death of a child, but it dragged on and on until my parents finally asked why it was taking so long. After that, my mother said it was wrapped up within 48 hours. They said they were done but the report was sparse. There was no new information.

People always ask why, and they seem skeptical when I say that I don't know. But it doesn't matter; the fact that is it irreversible suggests as much.

"I've always felt like when you have a baby there's no guarantee of anything," my mother says, in retrospect. "A life is just that. And he had a life. If I knew I was only going to have him for three years, I'd still want him. Everything about him I liked."

I am not jealous of her pain but there are times when I wish I could know what it is like to feel it. It is easy to feel sorry for myself (in the days after, looking over the banister and seeing a strange woman showing the adults an empty coffin, and returning to play with my cousins; my aunt struggling to explain to me why I shouldn't wear my favorite poinsettia-print Christmas dress to the funeral) but most of the times now I feel worse for my parents (the dreams my mother had, of dropping babies over the banister; of my brother alive, but missing an arm; of my brother buried alive, and she, going with my grandfather to dig him up).

There was a time not long ago when it was hard to write about anything but my brother, when it was impossible to write about my family without coming back to it. It felt always there, at the core, the root: what defined everything that came next.

It happened first with my college essay. I had not planned to write about my brother but once I started I found I could not stop. I could, at the time, recognize the pitfalls, the risks, the sensationalism. My parents told me how my English teacher had said to them that it seemed like a story that needed to come out. I resented the dismissal that the topic was simply therapeutic, indulgent—a nice project to keep to myself.

I wanted an audience.

When I say that my parents are private people, I do not want to give the sense that we don't talk about my brother. They want to talk. They've never refused. Often I am surprised to realize that I am the one who starts to pull away when things are too hard. I am overwhelmed imagining my parents' grief, terrified by this aspect of their experience that I cannot access.

"We gave our kids a hug today," people told them at the funeral.

My mother had to call the babysitter to tell her. She said to my mother, "Debbie, you keep saying Paul. You mean *Karl*." She heard my mother say heart attack and assumed she was talking about my father. "No," my mother said. "I mean *Paul*." The babysitter screamed.

That day at the hospital, my parents sat together, waiting. When they still thought it might be brain damage, my mother kept saying, "We have to decide, we have to decide what we are going to do." And my father kept saying, "No, we should just wait and see what happens."

There are ways that I enjoy the sadness, relieved to discover that I am still capable of crying fully over my brother, that the story still seems a part of me. Most of the time, I cry alone. I hear girls, my friends, describe themselves as "criers," as in, "I'm a crier," and I take a certain pride in recognizing that I am not this. When someone catches me, my instinct is always to say, "I'm fine," and I am. I am, for the most part, in control of my own weeping, which is a nice luxury.

My parents surprise me. They remind me that their grief is not, perhaps, more poignant than mine but it is more articulate—which is to say, they remember more. I am scared of what I cannot remember. Mostly, I remember standing outside the car that morning and whispering to my imaginary friend, "If Paul dies, I know that I'll be really sad," calculating that now I was insured against the worst. Mostly, I remember crying, screaming, as my father took my hand and led me through the hospital hallways. Mostly, I remember seeing my brother lying there in a dark room. I'd never seen a dead person before but I knew that's what he was.

I cannot remember seeing the diamond-shaped hole they cut in his throat to insert a tube, to help with the breathing, to restart the breathing. I can remember seeing him that last time but I cannot remember the hole, and I'm fairly certain that if I can't remember this detail, a bloody hole cut in my three-year-old brother's throat, I cannot be relied upon to remember much else.

We used to go to the cemetery in December: the month that Paul was born and the month that he died. Also, the month of Christmas. We would drive sitting quietly and park our minivan on the road beside the grave. The hill where his stone was wasn't as crowded as the others—I suppose this is usually the case in the years that follow. It felt right because he was mine and he didn't belong with anyone else, but also I worried that he might be cold and he might be lonely.

Once we brought shovels and planted holly bushes, which gave us something to do. Once, when we got out, slammed the car doors, my sister started crying, inconsolable. She was so young, we thought, only two or three. Did we teach you to do this? That this is what you are supposed to do here?

She was a baby, just turned one, with the chicken pox when he died. I had it first, gave it to her, the itchiness and oatmeal baths, and my mother wonders sometimes still whether this was the cause—a strain of virus in our house that he wasn't able to fend off. My sister doesn't talk about him often but once I heard her say, "No one knows that I had a brother who died. It isn't fair."

There is an invisibility; he is gone and still we look complete. Father, mother, two sisters, a new brother. My mother says to me, about my sister, "It's not like she remembers." But I know what it is like to watch those videos of a brother you were alive with but now can barely remember. To wonder if he is less yours because of it; if he belonged more to other people, if the pain belongs more to other people. To wonder what you should do now, now that the sadness no longer flows freely but has to be sought. I was not old enough to remember clearly but in the years that followed I watched a new brother grow, saw his hair turn from infant brown to blonde. When he was young he would sometimes ask when Paul would come back. Back then we were all wondering that, but there was no one else around to say it.