The Wada Test

A large gray and white walnut blooms

onto the neurologist's computer screen, the mirrored halves of our

daughter's brain. Dr. P. glides her cursor to make the bright curves and dark folds

expand and morph, a kaleidoscope of shapes. In the center a moth-like darkness shrinks.

The corpus callosum, Dr. P explains, which helps the two halves talk to each other. A pair of parentheses appear on either side. The hippocampus, she says, memories. And then, a small, shy almond. The amygdala, emotion. Dr. P. points to the suspected villain of my daughter's

seizures: A rice sized

speck

nestled between

her left temporal lobe and her hippocampus

(words) (memories)

The surgeon* will excise the speck, Dr. P. says. I want to vomit at the prospect of a cold edge against the spongy tissue inside my daughter. Dr. P. warns us that when the surgeon removes that small seed, he might also take pieces of our daughter's speech and memory. Our daughter, seventeen, looks at the image of her brain and makes a small noise of

resignation. Perhaps, for her, this seems no more painful

than what is going on at home.

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(speck, actual size)

* A medical friend once said that every surgeon sees surgery as the answer.

“To a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

Words were the shiny coins of our daughter's childhood.

When she was three she asked what "alarmed" meant. She had seen the letters above a locked door in preschool. She read chapter books in kindergarten. When she was thirteen she pushed Scrabble tiles into combinations like "oxidize" and "chutzpah" and "quadric." Now I would add "dissever" "nullify" and "expunge."

She keeps her memories private, tucked away.

Which ones would she choose to keep or lose? I try to guess:

The crack of her metal bat against the leather baseball, her dad and I cheering her to first base, or her little brother burrowing against her, sobbing, at the word *divorce.* Her father scratching at the locked bedroom door, screaming that their mother was ruining the family. . . .or her mother sobbing into toilet paper, claiming that her father's mind was not working well. The sharp smell of oranges that warns her a seizure is coming, or her long black hair riddled with electrodes, cords roped and sheathed in cotton and attached to a portable EEG.

Will surgery relieve her of medications’ dead weight.

Can she form better memories?

A few years ago, my daughter and I traveled to an epilepsy conference in New York. In the cafeteria, between sessions, we met families whose lives had been shattered by a loved one's seizures: a child, a husband, an uncle, a parent. We listened to experts who said that epilepsy, migraines and bipolar disorder (the manias and depression which rack my husband) could be genetic cousins.

How fragile we are when imperfections, rice grain tiny, can explode our lives.

My husband has moved upstairs to the finished attic while we wait for the surgery, our divorce on hold. The floorboards crackle above my head at night as he circles the room upstairs. I imagine his coiled body, his mind churning. Five years ago, when our daughter collapsed on the gym floor, writhing, he stepped up in the moment of crisis, sped to the ER., took on command central—asking questions, coordinating data, confronting doctors. Crisis is his sweet spot, where his competence shines. But the line between competence and chaos gets thinner. He craves the rush of emergency like an amphetamine. When our daughter seizes he has trained our son to call him, and he races downstairs to videotape her. He treats our daughter like a research specimen. He sends video after video to Dr. P. and accuses her of never watching them, questions how she can know what she's doing if she hasn't witnessed the seizures. He ignores Dr. P's degrees and medical research publications. He sends her emails. *"I've worked with medical pros and Apple and leadership in local hospitals and DC and with healthcare providers. . . my team of volunteer advisors includes radiologists, two of whom are interventionists with kids, as well as an MRI savvy executive who created efficient process, sold her business and then saw the new owners create disutility in the name of new revenue streams."* His words dissemble into chaos.

The kids and I live in the bottom half of the house. I make appointments. Take our daughter to MRI's and EEG's. Count pills and log her seizures: time, duration. I track what she eats. How she sleeps. I treat our daughter like a research specimen. I search for patterns. I long to pack chaos into a FedEx box.

Sometimes, when our daughter seizes, she goes silent. We don't notice and keep talking to her, like when another person's phone goes down and you don't realize it. A disconnection.
Her right hand twitches, her thumb jerks repetitively. Her lips open and close, wet smacking noises as if she is trying to talk. This state can last for one or two minutes.

It feels like eternity.

We call them auras. "She's having an aura again," our younger son shouts from the living room. My husband scrambles downstairs.

More and more, the idea of surgery appeals to me. How simple. Remove the seed, the irritant, the destabilizing force that provokes discord, outbursts, paralysis, the electric storms which shake through our house and our daughter's body. I picture the surgical process as immaculate. I no longer consider the violence of the incision. The slow recovery. The trauma of removal.

I imagine a surgical removal of my husband. If I could just extract him from our house we would be fine. We could function again. Heal.

Dr. P. recommends that, before surgery, our daughter take a Wada test. The outcome will guide the surgeon, tell him where our daughter's memories and language are stored. To perform the test, they will insert a catheter into her groin and snake it up her artery until it pops out at the base of her brain. They will alternate pooling the anesthesia into each half.

While our daughter is awake, they
will put the left side of her brain to sleep.
"Inhibit it."
They will show her pictures to
name and words to read.
They will ask her to raise her
arms and perform other simple tasks.

They will bring the left half or her
brain back to consciousness,
And ask what she remembers.

Then, while she is still awake, they
will put the right side of her brain to sleep.
"Inhibit it."
They will show her pictures to
name and words to read.
They will ask her to raise her
arms and perform other simple tasks.

They will bring the right half or her
brain back to consciousness,
And ask what she remembers.

Dr. P. explains that this will reveal how independently each half of her brain functions, and whether the sides compensate for each other. For example, if the left temporal lobe loses language, will the right temporal lobe step up and help? How well do the two halves of her brain communicate with each other?

The day of the test, we follow the nurse into a small room, basically a hallway between two doors. The nurse takes our daughter through the door for the Wada test. I sit on a plastic chair with my backpack leaning against the chair legs, laptop on my thighs. My husband paces. Hate for me radiates off him. After a few minutes he pulls on his jacket. “Let me know when she comes out or they give an update.” He doesn’t turn to look at me. I say nothing. I can no longer communicate with him. I feel like the inhibited side, numb and without language.

If I had words, I might ask him which of our shared memories he would choose to keep after our marriage is severed:

When we made love on the counter of the grimy kitchen in Key West, the sun slicing through the blinds, or when I found him crumpled at the bottom of the phone booth the night his mom died. My hands slipping off my knees when he said to breathe, breathe and push and I told him to shut the fuck up, the only time I’ve said that to him, or the curled newborn, his first child, warm against his chest. The red maple tree we planted out front, with leaves like feathers, in honor of his mom who loved fashion, or when he took our daughter to batting practice and, later, the crack of her metal bat against the leather of the baseball, us cheering her to first base.

Memories used to nestle in the small, humid space between us, face to face, our cheeks cradled by pillows. I can still see his eyes searching mine. Who he was.

The psychologist who administered the Wada test comes out after two hours. “Your daughter did great,” she says, her hands still holding the flash cards with pictures of dogs and bunnies, as if she were teaching kindergarten.

“Great” is what they always tell you when the patient doesn’t die during the procedure.

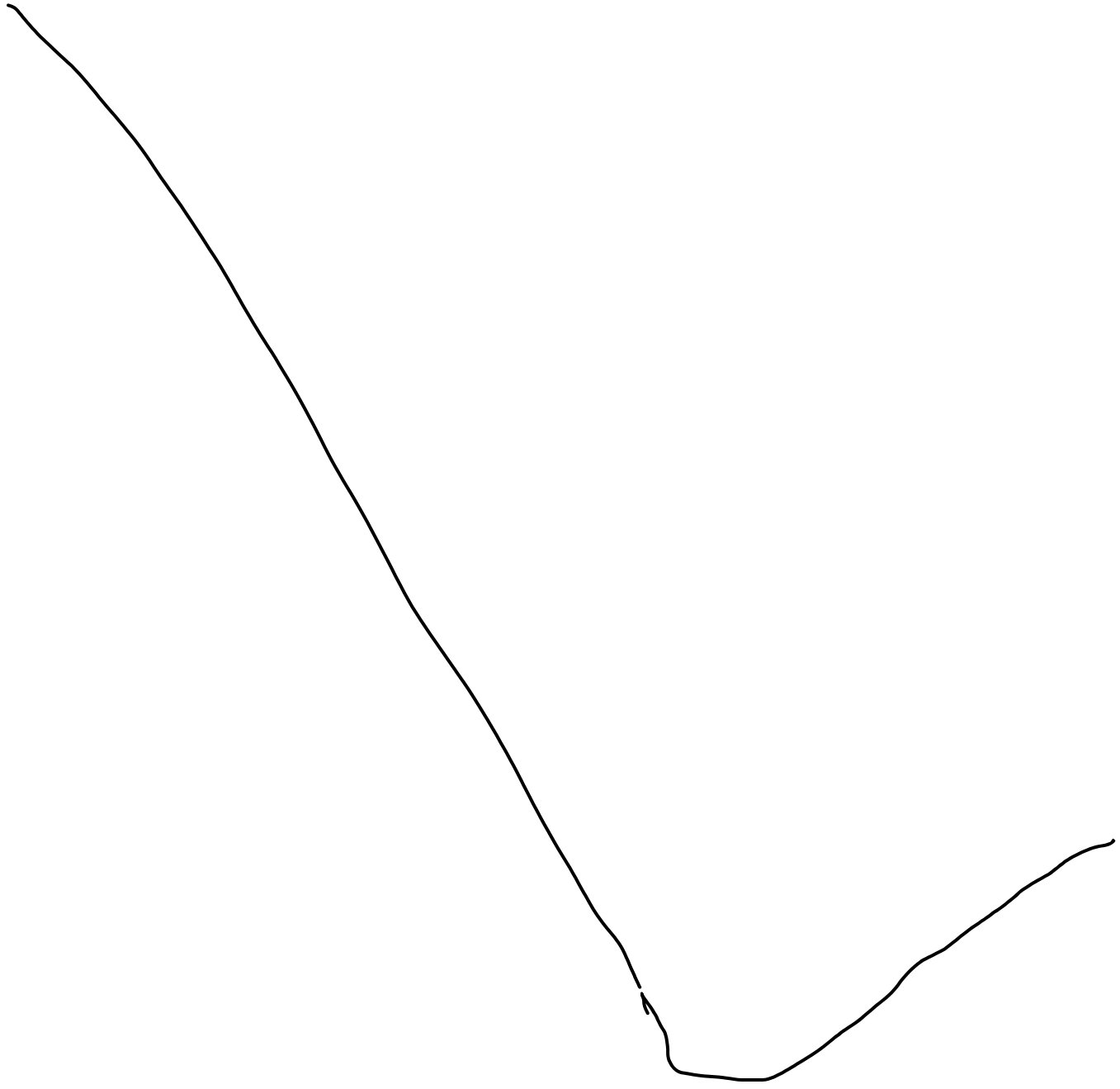
A few hours later our daughter emerges, groggy and limp, followed by the nurse. My husband is there, but I have no recollection of him returning. He helps our daughter walk to the parking garage. I carry my bags and his, as I always do.

We drive back to the house without speaking.

Weeks pass. They feel like eternity.

We gather in Dr. P.'s office to hear the results of the Wada test. She stands and puts her marker on the white board above her desk, to show us where our daughter's cognitive abilities are at that moment. She draws a high, straight line.

Then, Dr. P. continues the line to show what will happen to our daughter's language and memories if the surgeon removes the speck. The right side of our daughter's brain could not even remember her own name.



Dr. P recommends against surgery. No shit, I think.

I digest the repercussions slowly. I had longed for an easy answer. An immaculate solution: Remove the seed causing chaos and throw it away. But one side is not competent. One side is incapable of functioning without the other. And the two halves do not communicate.

My daughter's face offers no sign of her feelings. I can't tell if she is heartbroken or relieved. She will have to go on as before, navigating the gauze of medications, submitting to my litany of questions, struggling to wake up in the morning, sitting silently on the sofa, her lips smacking.

I sense my husband's body grow tense, as if he has been robbed of a potential crisis. Or maybe he is bracing himself for the landslide of grief.

We no longer must wait for surgery or divorce. I can put the house up for sale. Extract my husband from my life. Will that save our family or cause more damage? I don't yet consider the violence of the removal. The aftermath. I don't know if my husband can function without us. What memories will be lost.

Silence fills the space between us.

My husband reaches across, searching for my hand.