

Letters of Absolution
Ryan McAdams

I

Northern Wisconsin in the 1970s.

My childhood wardrobe should have been
punishment enough—turtlenecks
and plaid pants; a frenzy of earth brown,
burnt orange, avocado green, and baby
blue stripes. The cool weather threads
helped hide the bruises.

But letters told stories

U was for wooden spoon
N was for leather belt
I was for ruler
W was for bare hand
C was for soup can

Yellow ochre summer days were spent
at the country club pool. Our awkward,
head down walk past the lounge chair ladies
who sipped drinks as they dripped
in tanning lotion and glimmered
in gold jewelry. Maybe I missed a glance
behind their oversized sunglasses
or failed to hear their chitchat—
But somehow, they passed over the paragraph
of purple on my little sister's legs,
too gripped by other marked gossip.

II

Items in reach.

Her clenched jaw was a warning
to run and hide in the bathroom before
drawers opened and utensils clanged.
She had a great backhand
on and off the court.

When his leather belt whipped off

we scrambled barefoot up the stairs
pleading and cowering in the corner—
the spate of snaps and whacks
ended with a solitary door slam.

III

Bar soap.

Pinned and straddled, the forceful jaw shove,
the chew and choke, the bitter gag
as my head thrashed. Defeated, I spit
white clumps of Dial into the bathroom sink,
trembling as I plucked caked tallowate,
stuck to my sprouting teeth.

IV

Fall colors.

Shouts carved the crisp autumn air
as the ball bounced off the rim—
a shuffle to shut the front windows,
then rapid dribbling to muffle the screams.

Turmoil at the kitchen table
got me banished to the basement
for dinners in the dark, alone
crouching by the bottom step,
crying as I tried to swallow
the canned sliced beets, terrified
a demon would seize me before
I learned my lesson.

Cold days and sun rays, changed pigments of pain;
red revealed purple, which yielded yellow-
green that paled to brown and faded away,
but bruises of the heart often stayed.

V

In the rough.

My dad was not playing the day
we walked along the concealed back fairway
between walls of looming oaks and dark pines.

When he stopped and turned to us, tears filled his eyes and he trembled. "You know I love you." Then his voice wavered as he told us of the betrayals. My sister started to shake and sob as he hugged her. She looked at me, wounded, wide eyed, and worried.

On the car ride home, we drove past a dead deer lying on the road. Its curved neck and cloudy eyes peered toward me. *Were you hit as you entered or left the road?* My mind raced and fumbled through tangled memories, frayed threads that linked possible trysts. My gut knotted as I recalled the attentive next-door neighbor who smiled too much and how she dug her nails in my arm when I laughed too loud at his house.

The divorce separated us kids.

My sister to my dad's. My brother with me and my mom. Broken and apart, I learned bitter words stung more than a belt or wooden spoon.

VI

Winter break.

The giant city truck dropped its plow blade, grating the asphalt, driving a wave of snow and gravel against the curb, leaving a wall of jagged boulders and fractured ice sheets.

That bleak night I watched the truck drive away, leaving the sleek black street barren, as the engine rumble and warning beeps waned. A fierce wind threw dust off the drifts stinging my cheeks as my numb fingers grasped the shovel handle. I stared up at my sister's dark bedroom window, then up at the half moon. Half-truths, half-stories, halves needing to be whole. I peered down the long, uneven sidewalk and pushed a new path.

VII

Flowers still bloomed.

April winds and rain wore away the last
stubborn snowbanks, shedding the shame
of winter to the curbside. Sunbreaks
baked sludge into salt, sand, and soot,
which I swept down the rusted iron storm
drain on the lonely street corner.

Balmy Sundays brought marigold orange memories

My febrile head rests on my mother's lap.
She caresses my forehead, running her fingers
through my thick hair as I fall asleep
on the living room couch in my flannel pajamas.

My father sits on the linoleum kitchen floor.
He puts multicolored letter magnets
on the white refrigerator, smiling
as I repeat after him. Now I know my ABCs.

VIII

Grateful reflections.

They are both dead now.
Victims of cancer and medical mishap.

Some days I cry. A lost toddler again,
standing alone in a long empty
supermarket aisle, wondering
where and why they went.

How many of us remain broken like
river rocks, furrowed and stuck, bound
and shrouded in stagnant waters?
Tear bursts and time moved me forward,
the rapid shifts and turns, the shearing flow—
scraped, rubbed, and refined, a slow grind
to reshape rough edges until by grace
I settled onto a secure shore.

Downstream, I paused, scanning the pebbled bed

when a gleam of dappled green on gray
flickered beneath my rippled reflection.
I reached deep and grasped the smooth stone,
a cool dense weight in my palm that warmed
when held tight, a keepsake I clung to
as I stumbled along the humble path
of parenthood trying to avoid the letters
that colored my childhood.

Gazing back, I cherish beams of sunlight
resting on orange and red marigolds
blooming bright on the distant dark runoff
where I kneeled and released my river stone.

Now the windows are open—
sounds of my children laughing fill the air
as I place four letters on the fridge

LOVE