



## Stone

by Joe Baumann

[Home](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

The mysteries began in their garage. Walking in from the gravel drive, I would first pass a dust-covered work bench affixed to the left-hand wall, a lamp bathing the rough wood in a soft glow, illuminating the surface like a cozy office desktop. The bench was always covered in a musty veneer of dead skin, dirt, and sawdust swirling around, under, and among wood blocks, nuts, bolts, and metal polygons. I would try to imagine what my grandfather might do at this work bench with those rusted bits of metal and petrified chunks of wood, but I could never imagine anything but his hands, quivering as they reached down and hovered over the unorganized piles. I could see him picking up a small piece of metal and turning it in his hand inches from his thick glasses so he could see its grooves and curves. Ginger, his Border collie, would be standing at his feet, ears pricked. She would cock her head, look at him as he wondered aloud whether he had the right piece.

Behind both of their backs, bathed in the darkness of the garage, would sit a metallic gold car. I can no longer remember the make or model. I can only imagine that it, too, was swathed in a light covering of dust, its interior invisible through glass that, in the dim garage, reflected back only my own young face when I peered through the window. But I can recall with certainty that I saw it driven only once. I remember sitting in the back seat, my grandmother behind the wheel, her frame bent over the steering column, the bumps of her spine visible through her shirt. The interior smelt of untarnished leather and cigarette butts, and was filled with the sound of blurry, clicking radio stations that didn't come in quite clearly enough to enjoy. I do not know where she was taking me.

At the work bench, my grandfather might have set the twisted metal back in its place and moved empty-handed toward the door. The sun, still rising, would cast a gray veneer over the sky, everything hazy, the world projected through a grainy lens, a silent film. My grandfather would be standing just outside the door, staring toward the woods past his garden. He would stand and stare out at the trees, reach into his breast pocket for his pipe. Perhaps he would notice, not for the first time, the heavy lines on his knuckles, the web of wrinkles on his fingers. His nails might be yellower than he remembered.

But maybe he didn't notice those things. Maybe I project this image of my grandfather, eighteen years after his death, based on my misty remembrance of him. Perhaps the garage was not nearly as dusty as I remember it. What if there were no mysteries after all?

\*\*\*

My grandparents never had visitors who would need to ring a doorbell or knock on a door, so I never knew what to call the front door of their house. Along the left side stretched an oblong yard pinned between a large garden and the house itself. A small greenhouse with room for only two rows of plants against the walls and a single walking aisle was tacked onto that side of the house like an afterthought, and was followed by what might have

---

been the front door and foyer. Buffeting the greenhouse exterior was a path of circular stones, jagged circles of slate gray pushed into the ground every foot or so. These led to a door opening in on a small mudroom, no more than six-by-six feet, and another door into the house itself.

I went into this room only once. The room, barren except for an unused coat hanger, smelled of damp moss and ash. The walls were an off-putting cream color, and the carpet appeared permanently damp.

Past the front door and the lone tree in the yard, beyond the birdhouses and windows that cast light on the long dining room table, the ground slowly sloped upward. The hill and land around it sat on looked read to engulf my grandparents' house, which was lower in elevation than the road or land around it; the house's roof was at the same level as the road nearby, and the gravel drive sloped downward into the woods. A retaining wall of cinderblocks built against the house kept at bay the wall of earth that was cut out to allow for the building. An unsuspecting pedestrian could march into the woods directly from the road one hundred feet and find himself standing on my grandparents' roof.

But not even this strange architecture and geography held my attention very long. Beyond the house, past the respite of the indoors, sat a small mound of stones. Beige, like ostrich eggs, forming a circle like a bracelet: beneath these stones, somewhere under a layer of earth and roots lies a small box, and in it, the fading remains of Buster.

Buster was tiny, grayish white with thin furless legs like thick chopsticks. He hid whenever an unfamiliar voice echoed down the hall. When feet pounded against the thin carpet, he would dart into my grandfather's bedroom, hide beneath the bed, and refuse to reemerge.

My knowledge of that dog stops with the knowledge of where his remains are buried, and is just as shaky as his fretful haunches. I imagine that my grandfather tried to coax the dog out from under the bed when we would visit, but to no avail. The only picture I can paint of that animal is a pile of stones. I do not know when he died or how or why; I do not know if my grandfather cried as he laid the body to rest in a cavity in the earth, or where exactly he lays.

I wonder, though, if my grandfather ever stood outside his garage door with Ginger at his feet, felt the pipe protruding from his lip, and looked toward that layer of stones more than a hundred yards away. Did something in the air cause him to pause, exhale, and remember Buster's spindly legs, his raspy bark, the barely audible clink of tags that tugged on his thin neck like faint jingle bells?

Perhaps when he finished smoking his pipe, he looked down at Ginger and walked back into the garage. Ginger would have followed without being beckoned. He might walk indoors, acknowledge my grandmother sitting by herself at the head of the long dining room table, cigarette butts piled up in her ashtray like tally marks, and sit down in his den. Ginger would leap up onto a small sleeper sofa across the room, lying down and staring at him. He would stare back for a moment, then turn on the small black and white television on the shelf opposite his desk. This I do remember: only three channels came in clearly.

---

\*\*\*

We're driving to Mecosta, Michigan, from our home in eastern New York, to visit my grandparents. I'm nine, maybe ten, years old, and I'm sitting in the front seat of our 1989 Dodge Caravan. We have already stopped for dinner, and my mother is asleep in the middle bench seat, head leaning against my sister's. She always sits in the middle when we eat on the road, in order to dole out French fries, grease-wrapped burgers, and ketchup packets that must be rationed because the kid working the drive thru window never gives us quite enough. When she moves, she offers me the front seat.

My father and I are the only two awake, and the moon is out, bright and clear like a pockmarked kickball. The highway drops off sharply on my right: we are racing around the outside of a mountain. The car is quiet, and my feet keep slipping off the plastic dash, my socks unable to grip the surface as I slouch low in my seat, but I keep putting them back up anyway.

"Say it again," my father says, eyes on the road.

He is trying to teach me the secret to remembering the order of his siblings' births. I look at the moon, which is slowly swiveling off to my right, like the hour-hand on a clock.

"Tom, Terry, Jim, Mary, John." I pause. "I can't remember."

"Peggy." He stops, waiting for me to finish.

"Peggy, Barb, Paul, Bill, Jean," I say. The list has a certain crescendo in its rhythm, picking up speed, like a bouncy ball on a hardwood floor as it loses height after each bounce: slow and loud at first, then gaining speed but losing volume.

"Now try it all together again," he tells me.

I rattle off all ten names. Maybe it takes me a few more tries—however long it takes, I spout the list off to my mother as soon as she wakes up. I remember it not because of the actual names but because of the way my mouth and vocal cords work to make the sounds, because of the physical sensation of the action that can only feel right if recited in the intended order.

My grandparents had ten children, an even split between boys and girls. In my youth, however, I only meet nine of them in person.

Terry, the oldest girl, I know only from a photograph.

It sits on the highest of three shelves in my grandfather's den that wrap around two walls, filled with old copies of Reader's Digest, crammed so tight that the shelves sag under their weight, and anyone trying to wrestle one out of its place will end up pulling several of its neighbors out with it. His desk, situated below an opening in the wall, a galley window looking out toward the hallway and dining room, is built into the wall itself, lit by a metal, oversized yellow lamp whose fluorescent bulb casts the white Formica surface in a harsh light. When he sits, the metal desk chair squeaks, the yellow cloth cushion squeezing out bits of white cotton from a hole in its

---

underside, like a slow-leaking tube of toothpaste. The chair itself is mismatched, the brown plastic arms wrapped in red duct tape to cover rips it has acquired from heavy use over the years clashing with the yellow corduroy of the back and seat. Nothing in the office matches, not the furniture or the wood paneling on the walls, the smell of water damage or the thin carpet that offers no cushion against the concrete foundation.

And then the photograph. It perches on its shelf above the snowy television set, sitting on the edge, Terry's face smiling toward the door and my grandfather's desk.

The black-and-white photo, the size of a piece of printer paper, is a head shot of a young woman in her late teens or early twenties: my aunt Terry. Her glasses are wide across her face, but thin up and down the height of her eyes. They end in points at the edges where they turn ninety degrees and dart back to lean against her ears. The frames are thick. Her nose points out slightly, not upturned, not button-style, just straight out. The eyes look black, of course, but I do not know what color they were in real life, nor how deeply red her lips were. My aunt's skin is smooth, white, pale. I see no birthmarks, no wrinkles or scars. Her face, picturesque, is almost too perfect, too blank a slate for any personality. This photograph is all I have of her, and it looks as though it comes from a magazine. I know this member of my family no better than a cover model I have never met.

\*\*\*

During a visit to his siblings in Omaha, Nebraska, my father takes us to a cemetery. The grass surrounding the headstones is green, and a breeze rustles lush, full bushes and trees. Their limbs sway in unison, a choir singing a somber funeral dirge. I can almost hear their leaves slap against one another, keeping time as our procession moves forward.

But we are hardly a procession, just one van slinking along an asphalt road through an empty graveyard. When he parks the car in a small cul-de-sac cut deep in the cemetery and gets out of the van, my father does not tell us where he is going, and my mother makes no move to follow, so neither do my sisters and I. I try to see where he is going through the window, but my father disappears behind a wall of green, a tangle of stout bushes and stretching tree branches.

I have always wondered if my father parked strategically, gauged the location of his sister's grave and maneuvered the car so that our eyes could not follow his quiet march to her resting place. Years later, I still do not know where in that unnamed graveyard her headstone is. I do not know its color, its size, or the epitaph carved into the stone. I am not even sure of the year of her death.

We sit in silence, waiting for my father to return. I can see some of the headstones that are not hidden by the wall of lively brush: some are squares, others rectangular, some short and simple, some tall and ornate. No pattern determines which are covered with moss, which ones' names have weathered away and no longer identify the remains reposed there. Some are adorned with fresh floral arrangements, others with flowers in various states of decomposition.

My father is not gone long. He reappears from behind the trees, and when

---

---

he swings back into the car, there are no tears in his eyes, and his voice doesn't waver when he looks into the rearview mirror, points past the trees, and tells us that our aunt is buried over there. I look, but I cannot see it.

\*\*\*

At the back of his den, catty-corner from my grandfather's desk and straight back from the door, is a short hallway that empties into my grandparents' bedroom. It runs past the only bathroom in the house, a bathroom that has two doors, one at each end of the room. A long window, two feet tall and bordering the ceiling, runs the length of this secret passageway. Covered in grime, the window lets little light in, and that which does seep through the glass creates a mural of pinpoints and smudges of yellow on the opposite wall, a small galaxy of light that moves as the sun follows its course outside. If you were to peer out the window, you would have to look up to see the ground of the surrounding woods, a wall of earth in your direct line of sight. I feel as though I'm looking through the glass of a museum exhibit, but no placard tells me what I'm seeing.

The hall is lined with boxes that are topped with old blankets, and it has no doors; it simply connects the two rooms together, an architectural umbilical cord. My sisters and I are only brave enough to explore this hidden area of the house when my grandfather is outside; we never dare to rifle through the secrets packed away in boxes back here when he might hear us.

I wonder, looking back, why the designer of the house chose to build that hallway. The choice was conscious, a deliberate extra touch that most visitors would never notice.

But I suppose the purpose of that back hall is to create a hidden place, an area of the home not meant for public inspection, where a family could hide its little secrets, the memories and mementos that are tucked away but not quite forgotten.

\*\*\*

When I was twenty-two and home for Christmas, my father, in the middle of a conversation about my aunt Terry, said it: "When she took her own life, it wasn't really a surprise."

Then he asked someone to pass him a dinner roll.

I have never been bothered by my father's choice to keep this secret during my youth. How does one explain to a child that a person would take his or her life on purpose? But he spoke with brevity, nonchalance. Was not this the sort of secret that deserved to be explained? I wonder if he even realized that he hadn't ever explained.

My aunt, at a relatively young age, married a Middle Eastern man named Taddese, taking, as was his family's tradition, his first name for her last. The two had five children, all named after figures from the Bible: Sabbah, their eldest, after Sarah. Moges for Moses, Abrahah for Abraham. No one in my family had heard from any of them for some time, but the last anyone had heard, Sabbah was suffering some serious mental health problems.

---

---

“A lot like your aunt Terry,” my father had said. And that was that.

\*\*\*

At my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, their nine living children presented them with a book titled *Memories*, a compilation of stories from each child's youth.

The second page contains a black and white photograph taken in 1960. In the middle sit my grandparents, their youngest two children in their laps. Eight other children, of varying age and dress, sit in front, behind, and next to them. Underneath the photo, not in seating order, is a list whose rhythm I hear as I scan the words: Tom, Terry, Jim, Mary, John, Peggy, Barb, Paul, Bill, Jean.

On the next page is another, very different, photograph: thirty years have passed, the picture in color. My grandparents' hair has grayed and turned white; my grandfather is bald, as are several of his sons. But only nine children are present, all smiling. No one acknowledges that someone is missing, or why she is not there. The list of names, still in rhythmic order, is missing one name. When I try to recite it aloud without Terry's name, my voice falters, the words stumbling together like cars in a pile up.

In the black and white photograph, Terry sits next to her mother, looks five or six years younger than in the photograph framed in her father's den.

But she is wearing the same glasses.

My father stands in the back row in both photographs, wears glasses. I notice his large ears, the same smile showing his teeth. All of my aunts and uncles retain the same smile in both photos. Sure, their faces have stretched, changed, aged, but their eyes and the curvature of their lips remain remarkably static. Flipping between the two, the world appears to have changed around those smiles and eyes, the landscape melting and shifting, their skin loosening, sprouting hair and wrinkles. Their eyes betray three decades of experience, but the shapes of their smiles remain, like concrete.

\*\*\*

I am walking around my house and am in the back yard, staring at a tree and the small gully created by its large roots, when my mother appears from around the side of the house. Desperation emanates from her gait, her face, the tension in her shoulders.

“You need to come in and pack,” she tells me. “Dad is on his way home from work, and we need to be ready to go when he gets here.”

In the summer of 1999, my grandfather dies. He is surrounded by his loved ones at his death, in the small bedroom in his house in Mecosta, Michigan, with the dark yellow walls that match the threadbare afghan blanket draped over him.

My aunt Jean, his youngest daughter, is holding his hand, her body folded in on itself like a ventriloquist's dummy being packed away in a truck, weight

---

---

resting on the very edge of the bed. Until that day, I had not noticed how bony and skinny she is.

When his breathing stops, she feels for his pulse. I don't know how, but at some point she pronounces, "He's gone." None of my aunts or uncles is a doctor. My grandfather's body has no monitors or machines attached to it to announce when he passes away. I don't know how she knows. I don't even know what ailed him, and I never ask.

Three weeks later my grandmother, his wife of fifty-four years, passes away on a couch in their living room. I am present for both deaths. I attempt to cry on both occasions, but am too wrapped up in my fuzzy understanding of their lives and how, why, they ended, to produce any tears.

The furniture and keepsakes are all moved out, disbursed amongst nine living children. No one is quite sure where the photograph of Terry winds up. The Reader's Digest copies occupy several shelves in my parents' basement, taking up space that was once devoted to other books no one has touched in years. I'm not sure where those books end up.

After three years, my grandparents' house finally sells. No one wants such an oddly shaped house, one with more bathroom doors than actual bathrooms, an extra, unnecessary hallway to vacuum, and a tangled, unkempt garden to restore to full blossom. For a while someone rents the house, and I never see what it looks like after all of the furniture is gone.

I imagine the new owners wandering around the property, thinking about how to sculpt the landscape to their liking. They'll walk past the house, up the slight slope, and pass a ring of stones. Maybe they'll notice them, maybe their curiosity will be piqued: what are those doing there, laid out like that?

Or perhaps one of them will trip over the stones. Maybe rearrange them. Possibly remove them. Most likely they won't even notice them, and will walk back to the garage, flicking on a new light bulb that casts their shiny cars in a warm glow. They'll never hear the whimper that my grandfather must have heard sometimes when he glanced toward that small graveyard behind his house.

Now, more than a dozen years after their deaths, that house and the part of my life that resides there have become a bigger mystery. The details have rusted, the edges fuzzed. I can still see the photograph of my dead aunt, but I don't know if I remember her face quite correctly, and I wonder how large the television really was that rested on the shelf below. The small town of Mecosta itself twists and turns like a pretzel; could I even find my way there should I wish to return?

It frightens me to realize it, but while I can remember the church where both of my grandparents' funerals were held, I do not know its name or how to get there. I could ask my father, but mysteries laid to rest should be given their peace.

I do not know what is inscribed on their tombstones, nor where they stand to mark my grandparents' final resting places, just as I do not know the stories that have been laid to rest beside them.

---

---

**Joe Baumann**, a PhD candidate in English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, serves as editor-in-chief of the Southwestern Review and nonfiction editor for Rougarou: an Online Literary Journal. His work has appeared in flashquake, The Coachella Review, and several others, and is forthcoming in Hawai'i Review, Sheepshead Review, and Emerge Literary Journal.

---

**Copyright 2012, Joe Baumann.** © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

---