

Not

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My mother taught me to write letters about flowers and frost, about vegetables and siblings, and not about Christian Brothers brandy or scars, about my father's dark angry eyes or stitches above her eyebrow in a shovel-shaped crescent. My mother taught me how to make the world what I wanted it to be, or what she wanted it to be, or what someone somewhere imagined it to be. My mother taught me not to talk about myself. The world was too full of beauty and loveliness, too full of promise and hope, she taught me, to look always inward. *Look out your window*, my mother said to me, when I wrote her from England my junior year of college. *Tell me what you see*. And so I did. I wrote to her of rainy streets and used bookstores, of falling leaves and trains. I didn't tell her that I missed her, or that I'd had a dream about her falling into a fire, purposefully, and burning alive. I didn't tell her that I was experimenting with alcohol, following my father's example. I didn't tell her that I loved her, that I'd bled on a boy's sheets, that I was confused about almost everything, most of all why she stayed with my father when she could have left, and how that shaped me, still. My mother taught me to write, yes, but also how not to write, and I'm still unlearning that, still trying to say what's not pretty, to look within even as I look out my window, to speak the many truths that compete for the page. My mother taught me to read her letters about rows of lettuce and pounds of apples and see what she wasn't saying, there between the lines, about arguments and terror. My mother taught me to glance at her letters and put them away, not believing them because they were too nice. My mother taught me this niceness. She taught me to value the curve of handwriting and the feel of stationery, but she also taught me to be suspicious of her, of myself, of writing that doesn't, sometimes, tear up its own page and throw itself into the flames.