

· the most hateful words ·

The most hateful words I have ever said to another human being were to my mother. I was sixteen at the time. They rose from the storm in my chest and I let them fall in a fury of hailstones: "I hate you. I wish I were dead. . . ."

I waited for her to collapse, stricken by what I had just said. She was still standing upright, her chin tilted, her lips stretched in a crazy smile. "Okay, maybe I die too," she said between huffs. "Then I no longer be your mother!" We had many similar exchanges. Sometimes she actually tried to kill herself by running into the street, holding a knife to her throat. She too had storms in her chest. And what she aimed at me was as fast and deadly as a lightning bolt.

For days after our arguments, she would not speak to me. She tormented me, acted as if she had no feelings for me whatsoever. I was lost to her. And because of that, I lost, battle after battle, all of them: the times she criticized me, humiliated me in front of others, forbade me to do this or that without even listening to one good reason why it should be the other way. I swore to myself I would never forget these injustices. I would store them, harden my heart, make myself as impenetrable as she was.

I remember this now, because I am also remembering another time, just a few years ago. I was forty-seven, had become a different person by then, had become a fiction writer, someone who uses memory and imagination. In fact, I was writing a story about a girl and her mother, when the phone rang.

It was my mother, and this surprised me. Had someone helped her make the call? For a few years now, she had been losing her mind through Alzheimer's disease. Early on, she forgot to lock her door. Then she forgot where she lived. She forgot who many people were and what they had meant to her. Lately, she could no longer remember many of her worries and sorrows.

"Amy-ah," she said, and she began to speak quickly in Chinese. "Something is wrong with my mind. I think I'm going crazy."

I caught my breath. Usually she could barely speak more than two words at a time. "Don't worry," I started to say.

"It's true," she went on. "I feel like I can't remember many things. I can't remember what I did yesterday. I can't remember what happened a long time ago, what I did to you. . . ." She spoke as a drowning person might if she had bobbed to the surface with the force of will to live, only to see how far she had already drifted, how impossibly far she was from the shore.

She spoke frantically: "I know I did something to hurt you."

"You didn't," I said. "Don't worry."

"I did terrible things. But now I can't remember what. . . . And I just want to tell you. . . . I hope you can forget, just as I've forgotten."

I tried to laugh so she would not notice the cracks in my voice. "Really, don't worry."

"Okay, I just wanted you to know."

After we hung up, I cried, both happy and sad. I was again that sixteen-year-old, but the storm in my chest was gone.

My mother died six months later. By then she had bequeathed to me her most healing words, as open and eternal as a clear blue sky. Together we knew in our hearts what we should remember, what we can forget.

· my love affair
with vladimir nabokov ·

After years of being asked in public, “What’s your all-time favorite book?” I should have a definitive sound bite by now, you’d think. But for me, having to choose a best book conjures terrible visions of school days when I waited to be chosen as someone’s friend. Because my family moved almost yearly, books became my comfort, and I wanted to embrace them all.

Certainly *Jane Eyre* fits in there with the bests. Its setting of gloom and chill matched my emotional interior. I identified with Jane’s alienation, her meager hopes. Moreover, I loved her spunkiness; she was confined by circumstances, yet subtly rebellious and spiritually subversive. From *Jane Eyre*, I acquired a literary preference for gothic atmosphere and dark emotional resonance.

I also want to say the dictionary, any unabridged dictionary, is a best. I read lists of words as though they were stories. Within their nuances, I see possibilities. Like many writers, I am passionate about words. To this day, I love reading dictionaries, including lexicons of dead languages. I love the sounds and shapes