

Martha Polk

EULOGY FOR NONSENSE

I'm on my back on the hood of the Volkswagen Rabbit while my Dad zips up my snowsuit. It's freezing in the garage, and dim, the reluctant early morning light hanging around us. Our breath plumes in fleeting, white clouds. The Rabbit is the color of a banana popsicle and hums beneath me to warm before it's expected to go. I am probably three. Dad tugs at the zipper, but it's stuck. His hands are cold and stiff, and the gloves in his mouth make his nose-breath fog his glasses. He's hurrying, annoyed, but I'm feeling good staring at the world above; there's a compelling golden give to the garage's wooden rafters even in this cold.

The zipper releases, and Dad seals me up. He takes the gloves out of his mouth and starts to put them on as he disappears around the front of the car. I hear the Rabbit door open and then shut. I wait. I love the warmth and rattle of this car. But the hood is also slanted and slippery. It wouldn't take much to suddenly slide off, like a little avalanche. I crane to look edgewise over the sides of my hat. Maybe he won't come back. My nose starts its uncomfortable drip. Maybe he'll just start driving away with me on the hood. Maybe he forgot about me. Maybe he's just, simply, gone. I wriggle and crane, but I cannot see.

Sallywag, hooligan, ruffian, whippersnapper.

Rapscallion, flea-flicker, wet-willy, hogwash.

My dad was filled with this kind of jargon, these rough-and-tumble words that rolled forth from their strange corners of history or the annals of nonsense. Mix equal parts football terminology, Civil War-era argot, Pennsylvania regionalism, a healthy dose of 1950s middle-America mischief, a kind of '60s psych absurdism, and a world of unabashed irreverence—and you've pretty much got this *knee-slapping* side of my dad covered.

He was short, though he'd hate me saying so—five foot seven inches of fast-twitch muscles, tightly wound. Big ears and a big nose on a small head with a wispy brown side-part ever-combed—he could be mistaken for pure nerd if it weren't for his skin's lively olive tone and an intellectual fierceness

that burned out from his brown, spectacled eyes, made his fingers point sharply around the room mid-explanation, and set him to jittering head-to-toe in anticipation of a punchline. It was this wild physicality, coupled with his intellect, that made him such a lauded professor of religion, much beloved for ushering even the unlikeliest of candidates into the world of thought.

The belt he wore every day was known in our house as “The Kid Killer,” but affectionately so. It earned the moniker because when wrestling—or *rasslin’*—the steel horseshoe buckle would inevitably connect with one of our eyebrows, ending in tears (and occasionally blood), what would otherwise have been a heroic escape from a half-nelson.

On Sunday mornings, when we were still getting up before our parents were ready for us, my brother Sam and I would get in bed with my mom and take to giggling. There were nonsensical curses emanating from the bathroom where Dad stood shaving.

Awe, Shitbird! Geeez-Bum! he’d yell, and we’d lose it.

He made *Yaddayadda*, Kids, *Yaddayadda* somewhat of a mantra in our house. Pure nonsense, and thrown atchya in a low, croaky voice too. The insanity of this doting language, it wrapped you up and then boogied down in a twist.

Skirmish, skullduggery, ballyhoo.

Hanky-panky, fisticuffs, fumblerooskie.

There were also darker shades, of course.

When it was time to move him out of the house and into a memory-care unit, we decided to each tell “a fond memory of Dad in the house.” We wanted some sense of ceremony; we wanted to show him that it wasn’t easy for us, that it was big and sad and worthy of memorial. I was dismayed to find such fond memories initially hard to come by. For a while, all I could think of was the time Dad wrestled Ben out the back door, onto the deck, into the night, my big brother’s twelve-year-old body slammed down and pinned against the hard wood.

Hare-brained, bird-brain, shit-for-brains.

Who can help me make sense of this?

Bob Bulota was my Dad’s oldest friend. I remember him in a one-room shack on the edge of a Montana river. He tied a rope to an overhanging tree,

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and you'd hold onto it for dear life, the frigid current rushing alongside you, when it was time to bathe. He kept a gun under his pillow, often wore a Tahitian sarong instead of pants, and referred to his hammock like an old reliable friend. He shoed everyone's horses, and he'd drink with you all damn day if you wanted.

As a little boy, Dad dreamed of becoming a minister before falling in love with literature and history, while Bulota's focus remained more steadfastly set on things like fireworks and girls—subjects his friend Timmy could, with some urging, come around to as well. Dad's little *peanut-head* always only measured midway up Bulota's barrel chest, but Dad was sneaky, and *tough as nails*, eventually quarterbacking the high school football team at a cool 122 lbs. Meanwhile, Bulota was a lineman, his girth hailing from a people my mother describes as "large, squat Estonians—survivors of the steppes."

While Dad headed to Wesleyan and then Yale, Bulota would spend a semester at college in Montana before dropping out, unable to "abide the pinheads." He'd take to his own education, reading Conrad, Hemingway, and Sir Walter Scott. He'd become a blacksmith, a sailor, a rancher. Living all over the western half of the United States and Central America, he became an actual cowboy. Full-bellied and red-faced, my dad's first conspirator starred in otherworldly adventures, and, as such, Bulota took on the bearlike proportions of a jollier, more storied uncle. He loved us just like that too—not really knowing us, but loving us for being young and joyful pieces of my dad.

They exchanged postcards for nearly thirty years. Or, rather, Bulota wrote my dad postcards every couple of months—or sometimes every week—and my dad would respond every three to four years with what I gather was a long letter. Bulota would write three sentences about his day, about the call of the hammock and his current read, or about his next big move. Once he got bucked from a horse, and once he capsized the canoe. Once he had a lover in Texas, and once he moved to Nicaragua with no plan. It's all in there. And in the same earthy, good-humored voice that sang from my dad's best self.

Riff-raff, flim-flam, tomfoolery.

Balderdash, bunk, and hooley.

It's enough to leave a man

flabbergasted, baffled, cockeyed.

His postcards make note of my birth in the winter of 1985—“Got another one, do ya, Timmy’m’boy? A girl no less!”—and later, he’d put a little red heart at the bottom of the card, beneath his blue or black scrawl, with an arrow pointing to it and tiny print that said, “This is for Martha.”

Bulota visited us in Minnesota a few times, maybe only twice. He and Dad would head “up north” to canoe and *carry on*. Dad loved it but rarely made the time. He was a professor, after all, with all the ungraded papers, yet-to-be-published articles, early afternoon cocktails, and extended afternoon naps that academia can entail. Dad’s letters were so few and far between, at one point Bulota took to writing my brothers, asking if their father had indeed died, for he couldn’t imagine another reason why the esteemed Prof. Timothy Polk would go this long without writing.

An uptight academic and a foolhardy cowboy, they were an unlikely pair, but they came from the same place. I mean Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, but I also mean that the funniest, loveliest version of my dad—the one without the anger, or the cowardice, or alcoholism’s varied fender-benders—lives in the same log cabin as the mythic Bob Bulota. There, the old guys’ laughter is easy and lyrical instead of burdened. There, surrounded by poplars graciously bending in the wind, the slaphappy ghosts of my father and his oldest friend thrive on idioms:

Horsing around, goofing off, raising-hell.

It’s all shit-eating-grins and yadda yadda yaddas.

In 2011, nobody had heard from Bulota for a while. Weeks. An old girlfriend remembered him saying he’d be “coyote fodder by end of winter.” His brother went out to see about him, only to find all of his belongings laid out on the table in the middle of his empty wooden room, everything except a Taurus .45, his favorite gun.

The same weekend my dad got the call that Bulota had gone missing, he also got a call from Pennsylvania about his mother’s death, and a call from the doctor informing him he had early-onset Alzheimer’s.

Some days later, Dad spoke at my grandma’s funeral, describing how fondly his mother took to the beguiling force of Bob Bulota. He gave a eulogy for both of them in an unsteady voice not wholly his own. Where Dad’s language had been such a dutiful servant to his mind—playful, graceful,

poetic—it now cracked and splintered, tenses and pronouns jumbled. I couldn't quite understand what Dad was saying; his tenderness, set to stained-glass and mid-morning sun, was the clearest message coming down from the pulpit that day. It was the beginning of the meaning coming alongside the words instead of through them, and it was the first time I saw one of my elder brothers unable to stop from sobbing.

I've gone back and read "The Eulogy for Mother and Bob," and, in it, Dad tells a story from the high school football field about Bulota, who, as a linebacker, was charged with blocking for Dad, the quarterback. Bulota decides it's a swell time to get back at Dad for stealing a record and, thusly resolved, simply steps aside on the next play, allowing a 285-pound oncoming defensive tackle to nail Timmy to the dirt. Dad wakes up to Bulota's fat face, mouthing: "I told you not to take that record, Polk."

The story's funny, and Dad writes with color, calling Bulota a "wild man" with "glittering eyes" and a "wicked smile." His love for the old *scoundrel* shines through bright as ever. But for me, knowing what I do now, the story ends on something of a sinister note. Bulota steps aside. There's a horrendous crunch. The wind struck from Timmy's lungs, neck snapped back, his helmet hits the earth. My dad is knocked out. I can't help but hear this tale under the weight of these men's darker histories, and as a concussion story proleptically echoing off the terrible truth of my father's eroded brain.

I tell my brothers I am writing this essay, and Sam says, "Yes! There's so much there—how repulsed Dad was by him, Bulota's grotesqueness."

I tell them how I read through all the postcards and how amazing that correspondence was. "Nearly thirty years!" I say.

"And to think how cruel Bulota had been to him when they were kids," Ben says, "but then writing these painfully lonely little notes from afar . . . and Dad just not responding. I mean, God, what is that?"

Nothing, of course, is pure. Bulota's best iteration is as myth. My dad's sister and cousins paint a picture of best friends, sure, but "Timmy was a mascot for Bulota and those bigger boys," a source of wild entertainment. "He'd do anything!" his cousin exclaims. Tiny Tim tagged along at Bulota's heels for years in a Sisyphean struggle to be big enough, strong enough, fearless, and worthy. If Dad was always destined to be addled with insecurities, the foolishness and fierceness with which he attempted to prove himself certainly

bear Bulota's footprint. It was, indeed, Bulota who bet Dad he couldn't dismount from his speeding bicycle onto a swinging trapeze. Little Timmy shattered his arm, and, I assume, did everything he could not to cry. Ten years later, it was again Bulota who goaded Dad into driving the Dodge Dart blindfolded down a hill.

Thirty years later, I'm standing in the kitchen and see my dad look suddenly sick. He's grinding a banana peel down the disposal, staring at it through a pale grimace. "Dad, what?" He tells me something about Bulota putting a live bird down a disposal, the feathers coming up through the drain, its screech.

He must've come back around. He must've come back and picked me up, bundled and squirming, off the hood of the Rabbit. I must've been relieved, once in the car, headed perhaps to preschool. But I don't remember this part. In fact—though I do think I have a memory of the snowsuit, the Rabbit's hood, my Dad's hovering image—the anxiety of being left up there may be bleeding out from history, before and since, to permeate this otherwise unremarkable memory.

Perhaps what I really mean to say is, my dad left when my eldest brother Ben was fifteen months old. Mom was the sole income earner, putting Dad through Yale Divinity School while he labored in his office, paralyzed by dissertation writing. He distanced himself from Mom and Ben, sought refuge in what everyone seems to agree was purely an "emotional connection" with another woman from Yale, and moved out. He came over to make breakfast for Ben every morning, but he was essentially gone for six months. It is no small claim when my mom calls this period the hardest time of her life. She eventually told him to cut the shit, to go ahead and choose because she wasn't going to take it anymore.

So Dad takes a toddling Ben to the park. They are playing catch. At one point, Dad throws him the ball, but little Ben is staring off into space and the ball hits him in the chest. Ben then says, to no one in particular, "Daddy's here." Dad comes back.

But he left again when I was two and my brothers were six and ten. He was on a sabbatical from the university and moved up north to a kind of scholar's retreat—all gentleman's happy hours and professorial banter; no kids, no mortgage. He was supposed to come home every other week, but he

never did. It was supposed to be about legitimizing his sabbatical work, but ended up being about him questioning if he ever wanted to come back to us at all. At the end of the semester, we bought flowers and cake for his return. He left for another inexplicable week before deciding to come home.

And then, years later, when I was twelve, I got very sick. There was a decade of doctors' appointments, full-day IV treatments, open wounds, hair loss, and sleepless nights. He cowered. He came to the hospital only once; he never read up on the drugs' risks and side effects; he was not there when the doctors snipped my muscle and I felt something unfurl and give slack in my bicep; he was not there when my last few remaining locks fell to the ground; he never dared to fully see what I was going through; he was too afraid, of my pain but also of his own futility. Really, though, I just wanted my dad there so I could love him for being there.

I know he prayed for my hardship's end, but what did he think when trauma mounted on trauma? When my best friend died at fifteen, why didn't he see that the devastation, fear, and grief he felt were also mine? I was in the same pit, and I could've used the company. But for all my pain, he grieved alone and overwhelmed, with a Gin Gibson, instead of standing with me, instead of facing the trauma with a fierce love the way my mother did.

And yet, to write my dad off as some kind of absent father would be a disservice to the dark spell he cast on our home. His depression made our house cold.

It becomes difficult to think of something interesting to say at the dinner table when there is such heaviness to the air, when the kitchen floor seems paved with landmines. It becomes transgressive to laugh when it's often breaking someone else's concentration. It becomes impossible to take sentiment seriously when it usually comes after a stiff drink. And it is crushing to pin your self-worth on making the saddest of men laugh.

He went to AA and therapy and took an absurd combination of anti-anxieties and anti-depressives, but there he remained: angry, in the day's dwindling light, folded arms on the couch with nothing but a cocktail onion left in his glass, until he inevitably fell asleep.

For a while, I couldn't think of "a fond memory of Dad in the house." I kept seeing him only on that couch. I wondered if we'd all end up lying, just so we'd have something kind to say amidst the inevitable pain of the memory-

care moving day. It took a long while to dive deep enough, to dare to hold my breath long enough.

Eyes closed, a mute plunge into the thick of it, and then, another history catches me:

My dad sang me to sleep every night, and he changed all the lyrics so they were about a little girl instead of a little boy, or a soldier, or a college co-ed. A song I especially loved devolved into *bunka bunka bunka bunka . . .* and he'd do that just as long as I pleased. He'd tousle my stuffed animals and say, "So many bears in here—there's hardly room for a little girl!" If my toe snuck out from under the covers, he'd pinch it and laugh and bite his lower lip. When we prayed, I studied the fluttering of his closed eyelids.

And when I rode in the backseat of his bicycle, we'd go fast, wind filling our lungs. Once, we fell going around a sandy corner. Fell hard. My dad's head whipped around, eyes wide, cheeks hollowed, breathless: "Martha!" It was the look of a man wildly open to the terrors of love and loss.

And once, when I cried and melted to the floor because I couldn't take any more illness and I couldn't be any stronger, he was there. Sometimes he was there. And he told me—not that I was strong enough—but something much more important: that he understood my weakness, that he felt it as his own, that his love was unending, that he would sit with me.

I want to tell the story of his goodness.

I can see his bear paws now, and they are clapping on the soccer field sidelines as he yells 'Attagirl! 'Attababel, and they are gathering the bloody sheets one morning after my nose let loose, and they are snapping to the beat as he twists in the kitchen, and they are cupped around my back's ribs because, for me, no hug could be tight enough.

I want to remember his laugh, unburdened. Because my brothers and I *could* make this man laugh. We could make him howl! I knew exactly what buttons to push. He was dazzled by my antics.

And so proud of me. He found me powerful, courageous, pretty, perfectly strange. And to this day I feel his love—at times obstructed—but ultimately unconditional.

My dad sleeps above us unaware as we clean out his office. We pick the books that will go with him and throw out the old calendars, grading ledgers,

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Hebrew and Greek flashcards. I put all of Bulota's postcards in an envelope in my suitcase. We pack up the diplomas on the wall, a picture of the dog, his radio. What are the things that constitute a man? These are the belongings that will be with him when he dies. For some reason we all keep making sure we'd packed his red ballpoint .5-tipped pens.

As I go book by book through his shelves, I am reminded how Inuits, in the old days, days filled with hunger and hardship, would put their elderly—who would need to be fed but could no longer contribute to the survival of the community—on an iceberg. The old people would drift away into the Arctic Ocean, to freeze or starve or get eaten. There is no easy way to do this. Near the end of the night, when my brothers and I can't tell if it's dust, exhaustion, or the deep betrayal of it all that is so nauseating, we find an old teaching binder of his entitled *The Apocalypse: Why We Need It*.

We had tried to tell him, we did. We tried to let him have a voice in the decision to leave the house. And when we had to make that decision for him, we tried to prepare him. And as we "broke the news" over and over again, he did have a kind of orbital accumulation around the idea, so that with every "new" telling, his temper tantrums were shorter, his switch to weeping quicker. But I still watched my Dad learn over and over again that his life as he knew it was over, that he would be even more alone, that I had to give him up to whatever would come.

I live down South, far away from Minnesota, and so I've gone to visit him only a handful of times since we moved him in eight months ago. This time, when Sam and I arrive, he's sitting unshaven and mute in a chair in the common room with all the other withered old people. His skin is gray, but there's also something yellow and sour about him. Above his chair, there is a whiteboard with a frowning brontosaurus drawn on it. This, like the texture of the banana pudding they serve, is inexplicable. When I kneel in front of my dad and put my hand on his knee, he smiles. But it's flat, some vestige of politeness playing out on my dad's face. I could be an old student, or a new nurse, or a passing butterfly.

"Hi, Dad, it's Martha!"

"Okay! Hello!"

Sam puts his hand on Dad's shoulder. "And Sam," he says. "You wanna go to your room and show us around?"

“Well . . . okay.” But nothing happens.

I say, “Great! Let’s do it!”

“Well, okay,” says Dad, and finally rises.

But we have to show him where his room is, and when we get there, my Dad just stares out from his arthritic, tense little stance. The weekly barber has made a horrible mistake: my Dad has never had sideburns, nor should he now. We putter around for a second because what else do we do? I can’t find the picture from the time he and Bulota got the canoe stuck in rapids. He kept taking it down in the night, and now it’s nowhere to be found. I see his unmade single bed. I see a package of adult diapers. His room smells bad, bad like the rest of the old people. There is something on his blue chair; I realize it’s shit.

We go out to the tiny courtyard to walk a few claustrophobic laps around a dried-out patch of grass. Sam and I prattle about the weather and our travel plans. We use all sorts of animated voices, roll our eyes, swear, laugh too heartily because Dad latches on to our big faces, to these caricatures of ourselves, to our *buffoonery*.

His words are gone, though. All his words are gone, and I want to give them back to him. I tell him I’ve been brainstorming all my favorite sayings and curses of his for a project I’m working on.

“Sometimes I just gotta yell out, *Geeez-Bum!* for ya, Dad!” His grin breaks into a mischievous laugh, and he looks edgewise at Sam while pointing at me with a crooked finger, as if to say, *Get a loada this one!*

I say, “Here’s a string of ’em I came up with, Dad, like a real dastardly little poem: *Hare-brained, bird-brain, shit-for-brains!*”

He’s really cracking up now, showing us his back yellow teeth and silver fillings in a guffaw, “That’s a . . . that’s a good one!” he stutters.

And in this, I think he knows me. Maybe he doesn’t know my name is Martha; or that I am his one and only daughter; or that that was me, long ago, rising and falling on his sweater chest as we napped through the heaviness of a winter’s five o’clock hour; but in these words, these wide-eyed nonsensical hysterics, I think he communes with something essential and historical about me, about himself, about us.

When we say good-bye, I give him a hug and say just outside his hairy ear, “Awe, I love ya so much, Dad. So much. Hang in there, old man.”

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And without missing a beat he says, "Buh-bye, Sweetie!"

And that's me. And that's mine. And that's what I want to remember.

Now I like to think of Bulota laying out his rifle, his letters, his money, his land lease and his will, the keys to his little cabin, perhaps a meticulously kept leather address book, three weathered and underlined paperbacks, his boots. A life lived now splayed out on the old oak table. Maybe he scrawls a short prayer on a scrap of paper and slips it in his flannel chest pocket before he goes into the canyon lands with his whiskey and his .45. He will not be found.

We all have bones to pick. We all want another fight. What was Dad doing those long, ill years of mine? Our anger is unresolved. And we will honor that, speak it aloud, and write it down instead of having these, his final years, play out in the trite pastels of a Hallmark card. But a nagging heartache persists. *A real humdinger*. I am told that after I left for college, Dad would often stand at the doorway and stare into my empty room. For years after I graduated, and before it got too confusing for him and too difficult for me, we talked on the phone an hour almost every day about my big plans, about his fears. Although he recognizes almost no one these dark days, I am told that he lights up when he sees my picture.

I was his daughter, and he showed me a sweetness I fear he showed no one else. What if it's my job to bear witness to that? What if there's a way to allow all his cowardice and truancy, all his crimes, all our justified outrage, but then find something more graceful, perhaps even peace? Maybe I could swim up through these troubled waters and emerge gasping something cold and pure. Maybe there's a way to remember what's down there, but instead of having it bog me down, use it to keep me afloat.

I think of the old Inuit on the iceberg and wonder if he's scared. I wonder if, in the time when he's still feeling the cold, he considers rolling his frigid bones into the icy depths. But if he can just keep his eyes on the textured grays squalling before him, perhaps the hunger pangs will slow, cold's tomb will come quicker than he feared, and he can feel the mercy in this death.

