

PRISM BREAK

MAGGIE MAILER

This Keynote Address was delivered to the annual meeting of the Norman Mailer Society on Saturday, October 19, 2019 at Wilkes University

HELLO, MAILER SCHOLARS!

In good Mailer fashion, I will admit that I have in the past harbored a certain, mild antipathy towards most of you. I thought I would fess up right away about my discomfort and my animosity, and hope that my Mailerean honesty might help to forge a kind of friendship between us.

Thank you for inviting me to be here and part of me feels amazed that you trust me enough to be the Keynote Speaker. I wasn't clear on the exact meaning of Keynote, so I looked it up on Google, a habit Norman would definitely abhor. Having read Merriam Webster's list of synonyms, I do not feel that I qualify as any of the following: bottom line, bull's-eye, centerpiece, core, crux, essence, gist, heart, kernel, meat, meat and potatoes, net, nub, nubbin, pith, pivot, point, root, sum. I was surprised by "meat and potatoes," although of all those items, it resonates first, perhaps because Dad loved pot-roast and once tried to teach me how to make it. But I'm not going to tell that story. I'm keeping most of the "Norman As Family Man" stories to myself, for reasons which will unfold. And the talk may—or may not—feel like meat and potatoes, may or may not feel like the gist, heart, or essence. But I will do my best, and can probably manage a nub, nubbin, or pith.

This talk is dedicated to my Siblings. Here is a brief outline, two warnings, and a confession.

I will deliver the talk in two parts. The first part was difficult to write, personally revealing, and possibly solipsistic. The second part is all about me, so I can promise you a modicum of fun. I considered asking you to vote on which one to present. But working on this project has extracted the ego-

maniac in me, so I made the decision to give you both talks. Hopefully your attention won't be commandeered by the promise of fun in part 2, which, by the way, is also all about me.

PART 1. "THIRD PERSON FATHER"

It has been said that in families of two or more children, each child experiences a different version of the same parent. If that is true, in our case, there were at least nine Normans, in addition to all the experimental versions, and accents that he tested in public.

I am going to talk today about the different ways in which I have met my father, and the different stations in my own life, where these meetings took place: child, teenager, adult. I have met my father in dreams, and of course, in his writing. I have met Norman Mailer, the character, trying out for the role of Dad. I met Dad in the days before death, in the hospital, when he lost the ability to speak or properly hold a pen, but could still flirt heavily with the nursing staff, and communicate to us through a look. And I met him just after death, when his presence seemed to permeate everything. I had the sense that he had finally gained access to the whole cosmos. It couldn't be an accident that on the morning after he died I saw his last book in the window of a nearby bookstore, just released to the public: *Norman Mailer, On God*. His fame had always seemed to confer a kind of immortality, but this was the real thing. The simultaneity of his presence, in those three days after his death, was palpable. It felt like The Universe's Bookshelf now contained only Norman Mailer books—only all the pages had traded places. He was everywhere in an instant, there was no story, no continuity, only essence.

I also met my father long after his death: some two years ago, in the Jungle in Peru, while drinking the supernatural concoction Ayahuasca, and crossing the border between this world and the afterlife. I had heard that imbibing this purgative tea, known as the "Vine of the Dead," was a route to the other side, and I might meet my father there. I was looking for my father, but I met Norman Mailer. He showed up reluctantly, after several days, six cups of the tea, and a brief interlude with Norris, who showed up ahead of him, so that we could hash out a few things. When Dad appeared, he did not appear: I heard his voice, saying, "Listen Darlin, I know you've come a long way to talk, and you'll hear my voice, but you won't be able to see me. I'm working on a film, and it's difficult to get away. But we can talk." I said,

"I came all the way to Peru to track you down in the afterlife, and you better fucking show up." Some smoke descended, and there he was: But not my Dad. It was Mailer in 1969, with his turbulent curls, the man a couple of years before my birth in '71. I was looking for Dad, and I got Norman Mailer, running for Mayor: looking, oddly enough, exactly like the image of him printed on the front of this year's Mailer conference program.

He said to me: "you had a choice: you could have been one of my women, or come in as my daughter." I said, "why would I want to be one of your women? It was your Genius I was interested in. I was hoping to inherit some of that." He then gave me a talk about Work, with a capital W, the Work that you meet when taking on a creative life. He said: "Listen, Darlin. You've been approaching Work as if I'm the gate you need to pass through first, on the way to Work. That's your problem. Work is its own gate, you need to find your own way through. You can't get to Work through me. I am not the Way."

I do not know if that was a real conversation with his soul, or an animated character scripted by my subconscious. But I am not sure there's a difference. *The Novel as History, and History as a Novel*, is something I have lived.

I was quite resistant to giving this talk today and my main hesitation is that it occupies the spooky—yes, spooky—territory of rewriting history. There is a phenomenon that I have repeatedly encountered when reading most biographies, essays, or articles about my father, in which I begin to believe I am wrong about the man I knew. My version of him is tenuous, easily displaced. History may have known him better. It has been hard for me to hold both versions at the same time.

While putting this talk together I was repeatedly interrupted, and sometimes held hostage, by a six-year-old girl who kept showing up and demanding certain things. She said that she would not allow me to write the talk until I acknowledged her. She specifically wanted me to tell the story of my Dad's leaving, at Christmas time, in 1975. I thought that she was a pain in the ass, and kept telling her to leave me alone. I did not think that the Mailer Conference would have much interest in this particular six-year-old. What did she know about Norman Mailer? She was tedious, not intellectual in the least, and spoiled. At a certain point, her presence became so insistent that she began to invade my personality. I started throwing tantrums, refusing to take care of business, and so on—and this was just last week. Nothing could stand up to this girl. So I finally caved, and—Here I am—acknowledging her.

I could say that at age six, I met up with my father's absence. I have a cinematic memory of the moment and it is a bit melodramatic.

I remember one night, looking out the window facing the driveway of our enormous house at the top of Yale Hill in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. I was talking to the darkness on the other side of the glass, the black darkness that you get in the Berkshires, in winter, and I was saying, "I miss him." My mother Carol and I were still living in the house, which she describes to this day, in mantra-like fashion, as "the house with 28 rooms." Dad had left earlier that week. The house with 28 rooms had never seemed too large to me, and there had always been a stream of guests that included friends, writers, musicians, actors, siblings. When he left and took everyone with him, the house felt cavernous. That night, when I spoke out loud the words, "I miss him," I did not understand what I was saying. The words were someone else's words, and I had probably heard my mother saying them as well. The sensation of newness in that sentence offered a confusing, and sharply held experience. Somehow I viscerally decided that to know my father was to miss him. And, more to the point, that to Miss him was to Know him. I was staking my claim upon him, even if all I could get my hands on was his absence. Missing him was an action that I could take, it was a verb: "I miss him," but a verb that also revealed a vacuum and vulnerability that did not go with my six-year-old's idea of action. I did not know what a stative verb was. How confusing. To know you is to miss you, and to miss you is to know you. I had not been exposed to country music much—my mother Carol was a Jazz vocalist—but I seemed to know that I could milk this feeling like a line from a country song. And, small irony, Dad was leaving my mother for Norris, who was from Arkansas and loved country music. Maybe he had been playing country music for us all prior to his departure. I do know that he had been passing around photos of Norris to show the kids their new Stepmother, and according to my mother he was excited, like a little kid. But back to this other little kid. She was beginning to understand that any bond with her father would now be bracketed—would have to compete—with a distant network that included other people, strangers, the whole world it seemed, but did not necessarily include his children. He once said to me, "I am a writer first, and your father second, and I don't have a choice about this."

In his early years of fame, my father told me that he regarded the character Norman Mailer as the outer shell of a Sarcophagus, which he occupied during the day and at night he would venture out and scribble notes and revisions on

the outside. And even though I read this description in one of his books years after its telling, hearing it directly from him gave me a great deal of emotional ballast. He was telling me because he could relate to my shyness, which was the sarcophagus that I lived inside, and the telling felt full of love and attention. Later on, when I found that he had already written the idea and released it to the world, I could have felt duped, but I did not. The intensity of his attention was worth as much as what he said. But the place where I often did feel duped was in reading about him. Most anything written about my father had the effect of reducing him to the man described *on* the Sarcophagus, and left me with the sense that the other guy did not exist. In the same way that he constantly rewrote and adjusted his public image, texts about him seemed to rewrite my memory, and my sense of him would change with each reading.

For a long time, I did not want to come to the Mailer conferences. The ballast I was always seeking in our relationship could be further displaced by any version of Norman I might establish hearing—or especially speaking—about him. In the effort to connect with an audience who knew externally more about him than I did, I could lose track of my dad completely.

But now I am in it: I have agreed to take on the role of the one telling, adjusting, and revising the image. And perhaps I can say nothing. While preparing this talk, I had the fantasy of standing here on stage without uttering a single word, as if you, the audience, would be able to read me. After all, I am his flesh and blood. A living text. I could stand here as the Speechless Aftermath, to quote a friend, and accept your readerly attention so that, given the collective knowledge about Norman Mailer in this room, we might construct together a new idea of him without my ever speaking. This is the part of me that feels like the truth, and throughout this talk there is present a version of this self.

If I am not honest, this podium becomes an impossible insertion point, like an Escher drawing, where I transform in real time into a character in Dad's continuing novel, a character who will surprise the writer in the act of writing, who has things to say the writer cannot know until it is written. If my writing is off, I will not believe in the character, or in this moment of self invention. This impossible insertion point is half-first person, half-third person. Anything else would be a lie. Perhaps that is how Norman understood himself as a father—that his children were partly his creations, but that he had limited say in the matter. I once got angry at him for remarking that when you have kids, you have no idea who you're going to get—as if we

were volumes from the Book-of-the-Month-Club. I wanted him to write that text himself. And I wanted it to be the Great American Novel. I still believed he could transmit his brilliance to me, with his attention, as he was able to do on the page.

Like most of my siblings, I did not see a lot of my dad growing up, so I tended to feel that the way I knew him was always warring with the third person version he wrote about. If Mailer's third person self was to become an habitual feature in his writing—Mailer's Mailer—it was also an habitual feature in his parenting. My father, when at home, was often still playing the character Norman Mailer with us. It seemed that he maintained an eye on himself as NM while attempting to inhabit the other character, called Dad. Perhaps the sarcophagus was a permanent fixture. It allowed him to speak to us, his children, with a forthrightness that was good for Norman the writer, but perhaps not so good for the kids. I thought that he regarded us with a cooler eye than most parents, and was comfortable dispensing comments about our appearance and aptitudes that could easily be taken for insults, but given as they were with a writerly eye, could also be tossed off as attempts at sentences that did not quite work. He might announce to me and my sisters, something like: "Maggie always had a purchase on Beauty, but now she really owns it." Such insults/compliments were a matter of course for him. He did not believe in compliments. He wanted us to be on our toes and he was always looking for a sparring partner. I was probably the world's worst sparring partner. I would meet his glancing barbs, his attempts to wake me out of a dreamy inwardness, with greater shyness. I was almost mute around him. I loved my father fiercely, perhaps in the way that only a daughter can love her father, but around him I was so terrified of getting hurt that I could not think.

He once told me that most of what he said to me should not be taken seriously. I heard this around college-age and I felt shocked at the revelation that every word he uttered TO ME, was not meant for consumption, unlike his writing. I was confused, as was he, between the writer and the Father. It is a confusion that I have continually grappled with in a kind of reflexive inner merry-go-round, wherein I seek the private father and hope to find him in the public one. I want the first-person, and I want to chase the third-person.

I see myself planted upon a carousel creature, spinning round a central axis with vertical mirrored sections that catch your reflection as you pass by. The outer rings of the carousel are also adorned with small mirrors, as well as the ceiling, each placed at a different angle and offering multiple views of one's po-

sition astride an absurdly painted animal. The central axis may or may not be my father, and the outer spokes my siblings, but the mirrored fragments feel like a third person version of me, the only one possible in a family of nine children and six stepmothers. At times it was difficult if not impossible to hold onto a sense of self amidst the family, but I became an expert at surveying the arena and observing my role in it, even if the only reflective surfaces appeared willy nilly, at oddly punctuating moments, in my field of vision.

From our teenage years until adulthood, Dad used to take each of his kids out individually for dinner, with the idea that because he knew we were not getting enough of him during the year, he would at least try to deliver an intense injection of one-on-one time with him. During these dinners, he would often lay down incisive commentary on my being, and I would listen like a sponge to everything that he had to say, and then spend the next several months trying to digest it. “Oh, I’m like this. Maggie calls a spade a spade. Maggie’s silence projects her intelligence. Maggie has the ambition of a Napoleon, but the worldliness of a house-wife.” These dinners, which happened one or two times a year, were like those oddly placed carousel mirrors, flashing back a quick reflection. In his absence I would outgrow the image that he had offered, but try to hold on to it anyway, because it was delineated with such power—and it was all that I had of him. Or, let me switch metaphors: our dinners felt like short stories, in which the character Maggie came into being for a brief time. For me there was a quasi-religious quality to them, as if I were being invented anew. In Dad’s absence his ideas about me became relics and, to keep them alive, I traded my developing idea of myself for his, thereby casting myself into the third person. I thought on some level I could meet him, if not in daily life, then on the page, his page, in some nether region where we were both enigmas. I wanted this maneuver to be liberating for me, as I knew that it was for Mailer the writer. Handing over my first-personhood was, of course, a form of captivity. It was not a creative act. If I really wanted to meet him, I would have to join in the creative process, or else live in a kind of perpetual denial, a prison without walls. “You can’t cheat life,” he would say.

So I am meeting him right now, at the Norman Mailer Conference. Maybe now he is equally present—and absent—for all of us. Maybe we all Miss him, and try to Know him, or bring him to life, with our missing. He would find this notion sentimental. But we need him. We need to know what he would say about Trump. He might write an imaginary conversation, in

which the character Mailer says to the character DT, “Pal, we have this in common: I could spit in the mythological eye of the Media, and they would still love me.” DT would respond, “That’s terrific, you understand me. I could stand in the middle of 5th avenue and shoot someone and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” Perhaps right now Mailer’s words and energy would restore some balance in the great match between God and The Devil. Perhaps he could rev up the artist in the collective us.

I think that something about being an artist is to admit that liberation is found within the prison. For me, liberation has come in part from trying to answer the question: What did he mean when he said he was a writer first, and a parent second? For much of my life I have entertained obvious, boring answers: He knew he was not able to give us the right kind of attention. Children were not his priority. He did once say he was not really interested in his kids until he could have a decent conversation with them. But his form of apology was to tell the truth. And one of the most helpful and corrective comments he ever passed on was the notion that *Feeling Sorry for Oneself is a Great Sin*. So entertaining those answers has never been interesting enough, on top of being Sinful!

I have come to understand, or perhaps decide, on another meaning: Namely, a writer first, and a parent second, means that the writer begat the father. If he were a writer first, that idea of himself permeated every part of his existence. In some ways, I did not have a Father. I had a Writer. I was raised by the same mind that investigates the nature of existence, raised by a magician. No pun intended—just a different set of rules. The sense of possibility, the magical possibilities this engenders, partly sustain the loss of missing the other man. There is a transmission of freedom in the understanding. As the daughter of a writer first, my sense of self, when I meet it—becomes fluid, a creative action. If growing up, I had clung to that carousel horse and waited for the flash of deliverance offered by his attention, as an artist I learn everyday how to enliven that plastic horse, take it where I want to go. If I felt that I lived as a character who shared ranks with his other protagonists, I am now part author. The question of authorship now becomes a philosophical stance, a living, existential question: who is doing the writing? Who is creating the life? While this may be the underlying question for all of us, not everyone is encouraged to attempt an answer. In telling me that he was a writer first, and a father second- in admitting a truth exquisitely painful for a child to hear, he was also handing me the mantle of the artist’s

life. Did this mean I would become an artist first and a mother second? No. But the idea of being an artist was built in. And as an artist, I would need to use all those reflections and versions of myself-first, second, third person, reflected in the crazy prism of our family.

PART 2: THE PRISM, OR, THE DREAM LIFE OF MY SIBLINGS

I would like to show you some diagrams featuring the nine children, six wives, and Norman in various formations and relationships that seem to resonate with some hefty cosmic references. They also help me locate myself within the family.

Here is Dad and the children as the Sun and nine planets. John Buffalo, the youngest, saw the most of Dad, and Sue, the oldest, probably saw him the least, so it made sense to go in this order. My nine-year-old son, Nicholas, pointed out that I made myself the Earth, and questioned my integrity in making such a self-serving map, but I assured him it was a lucky accident, and also, that if this were so I would be taking on a lot of responsibility!



Figure 1 - Planetary Siblings

I make up for it in the next one: Here we have Dad and the nine children as the ten layers of the earth, from core to exosphere.

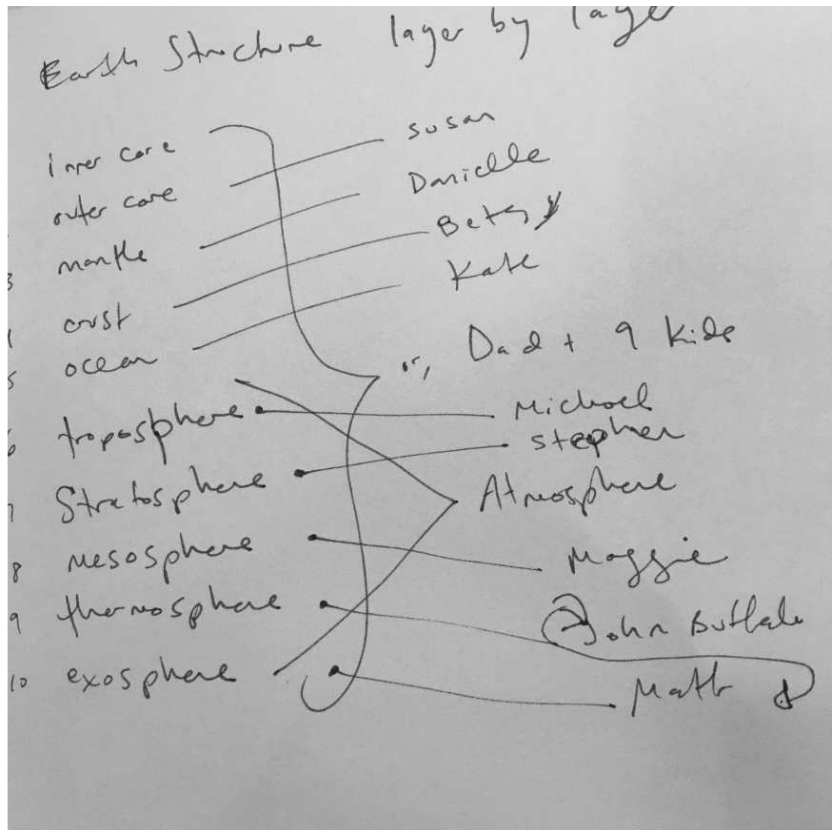


Figure 2 - Earth Layers

The children as nine cosmic phases of CREATION, PRESERVATION, AND DISSOLUTION in Yantra, or sacred mandala construction.

<i>First phase: CREATION</i>		
1 The square	creation-creation	
2 The circle of 16 lotus petals	creation-preservation	unity
3 The circle of 8 lotus petals	creation-dissolution	duality
<i>Second phase: PRESERVATION</i>		
4 The 14-angled chakra	preservation-creation	duality
5 The 10-angled chakra	preservation-preservation	unity
6 The 10-angled chakra	preservation-dissolution	duality
<i>Third phase: DISSOLUTION</i>		
7 The 8-angled chakra	dissolution-creation	duality
8 The primary triangle	dissolution-preservation	duality
9 The bindu	dissolution-dissolution	unity

on the
n the cosmic cycle no phase is absolute in itself but each is a synthesis of opposit
principles, with the apparent disequilibrium neutralized by the principle of unity. In
the first phase, for example, creation is seen as a synthesis of the two opposite
terms of life

Figure 3 - Creation Stage Yantra

Here is the family arrayed like a Benzene Ring; which has the chemical formula C_6H_6 . If Dad had only had six children, we would have a perfect match. Thankfully, it is not a perfect match. Benzene is notable for its sweet smell. It is also terribly toxic. Benzene is used to make plastics, that most totalitarian of materials! How would Dad feel to know that he almost constructed such a metaphorical compound around himself? A Benzene ring is formed of six carbons, which are usually bonded four ways. The one unbonded electron from each carbon forms something called a conjugated ring, meaning the electrons have free movement among all six carbons. A bit like Mailer and his women. This also bears quite a resemblance to the Merry Go Round described earlier.

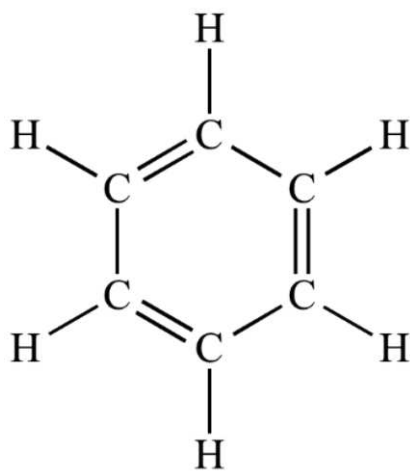


Figure 4 - Benzene Ring

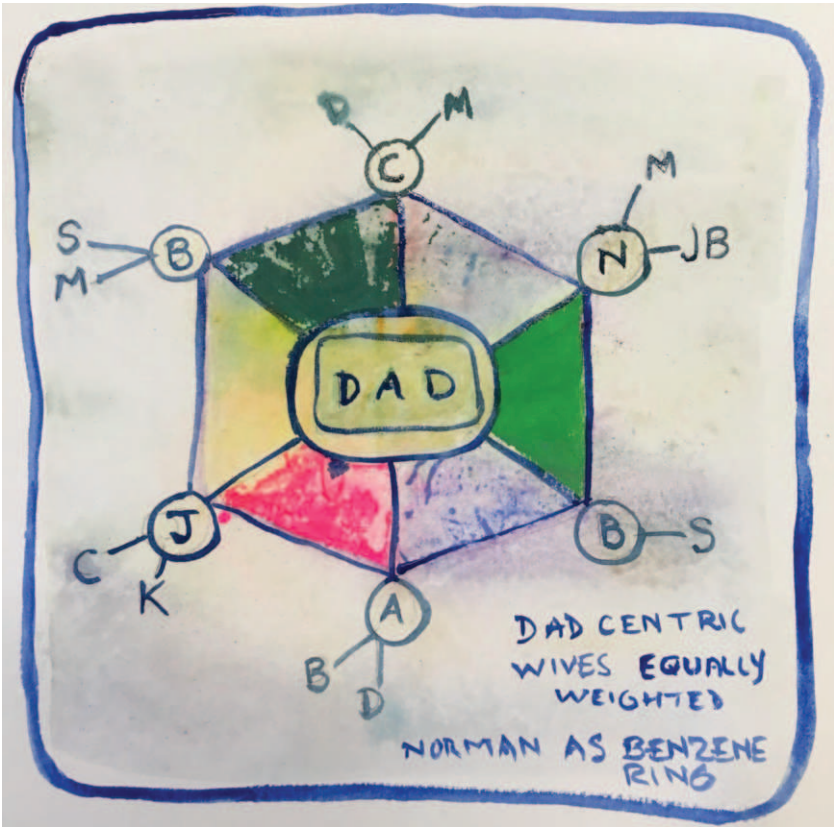


Figure 5 - Dad & Siblings Benzene Ring

Next we have Norman as Pianist: the wives are the black keys and the children, the white, and fit within an Octave until his marriage to Norris, which starts a new Octave.

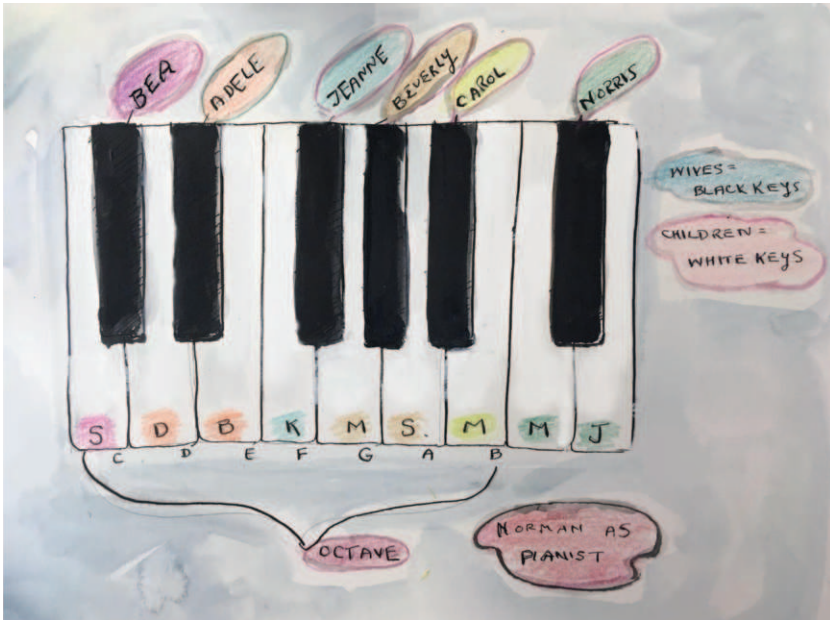


Figure 6 - Piano Keys

Here we have the Family as a cell membrane and here, Mother (my Mother), as catalytic converter. She was extremely protective, and one could say she reduced any toxic emissions coming my way with the force of her love, both for me, and for Norman, even after they split. So we have the father-centric model, the child-centric model, and the wife-centric model.

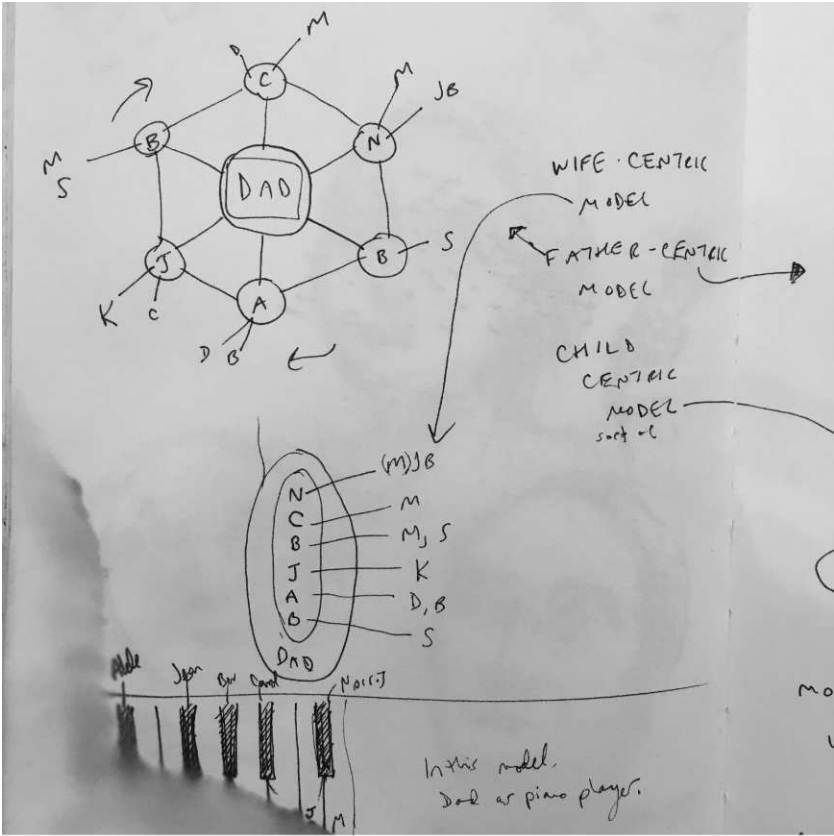


Figure 7 - Notebook Diagrams of Sibling Models

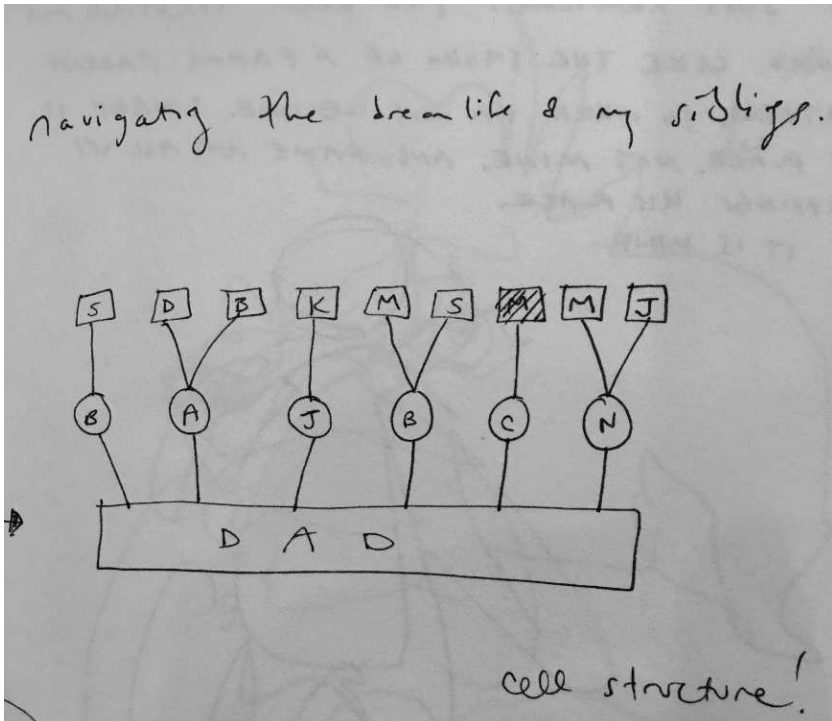


Figure 8 - Cell Structure Siblings

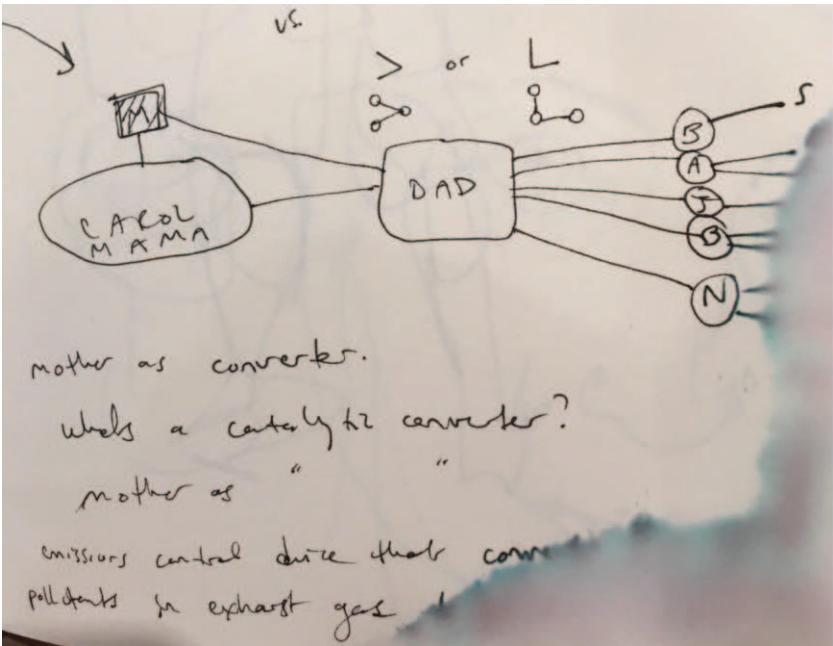


Figure 9 - Mother as Catalytic Converter

As a painter, I have spent some time investigating this family structure, and mining it for clues about my creative habits. But, for a long time, I unwittingly carried these structures, and projected them onto my paintings.

The numbers eight and nine come up a lot in my work. Without knowing why, I once spent a year researching eight random topics to fuel a body of work, in the hopes that my subconscious might forge some interesting paintings from the overload. My references were far ranging: comic books, rebuses, yantras, the genres of floating world and cliffhangers, and the palettes of Gauguin, Goya, and Hiroshige. The title of the show was Floating World and, at the time, the structure of the project made perfect sense to me, without once consciously attaching it to my family. I just assumed that the conceptual overload would induce the sensation of floating in the viewer. I was trying to locate myself as a painter, and I thought that the number eight resonated with the eight cardinal directions. It never occurred to me that I was making portraits of my eight siblings. I see now that I was trying to accommodate eight or nine possible viewpoints, and anything less felt wrong.

Here is a subsequent series of nine landscapes that I later understood as portraits of the nine of us in our varied terrain and palettes. I like connect-

ing things that are not sure that they want to be connected: Arranged marriages of colors, materials, and ideas. The conversations are wide ranging and at times chaotic: palettes argue with one another; ideas overlap and interlope. The revolving personalities in my family template have become standard bearers for all my decisions about color, composition, and number. In this way, landscapes become psychological terrain, siblings and stepmothers become open fields and barren hillsides, and our family tree emerges as a guiding spirit in my creative processes.



Figure 10 - Scissor Language 2



Figure 11 - The Dream Life of My Siblings

I will close with the piece I read at Carnegie Hall at Dad's memorial. (show of hands: who heard it there?) I think it offers what the rest of the speech may have missed: My Father. We could say, this was one time I met him. It is called, *Fellow Geniuses*:

I am going to share with you a seminal work of non-fiction by my father: until now a hidden literary gem, and one that helped me get started as an artist. I was fifteen and was spending the summer in Provincetown with Dad, Norris, and my eight siblings. Privacy was scarce but, somehow, a two-week stretch emerged in which I had my own room.

As an only child living with my mother the rest of the year, I was well equipped psychologically to spread out. I decided that I would tackle a sculpture that I had been thinking about for some time. As any serious contem-

plative will do, I began by collecting large pieces of driftwood. Buckets of sand and seaweed piled up on the floor, which also happened to be covered in wall to wall carpeting that my stepmother had chosen. I think, at one point in a moment of annoyance with her, and imagining the deepening bond with my father over our shared aversion to carpeted floors, I may have dumped some of the sand onto the wall to wall and formed a Carl Andre-like floor piece.

From the Army Navy store in town I collected buckets full of brass buttons, and rusted machine gun bullets, which I thought were strangely beautiful, and they looked to me like beads for a necklace. I think, subconsciously, I was recreating scenes from *The Naked and the Dead*, even though I had not read it.

Meanwhile, deep in artistic fervor, clothes and wet bathing suits and towels were landing in various locations around the room. I will say, and my husband can attest, that our house today does perhaps bear a resemblance at times to events described here.

At fifteen, I was still too shy to speak easily with my father. Days might pass without conversing, but we would always exchange meaningful looks. We were both absorbed in our work and I felt that we shared the unspoken understanding of artists. I was sure, too, that he recognized in me a fellow genius. So I was not surprised on the day when, returning to my room, I found a note from Dad, placed at the entrance, so as not to disturb me. "He must be really impressed to put it in writing" I thought, and eagerly read his assessment of my work. (See Figure 12)

When I read this note at the Carnegie Hall tribute, I wasn't sure about saying "Asshole" out loud, and perhaps I did not want to make him look bad during his Memorial, so I substituted the word, "Twit." But here it is in its original wording.

My father was always superstitious about giving anyone compliments. And I knew this—but after reading his note I was devastated. Only partially devastated, though. After all, Norman did teach the art of parsing emotional states into percentages. Perhaps I was 80% devastated. The other 20% was hopeful. The other 20% realized, with something like happiness, that my habits mattered to my father. And on some level, he had stopped being Norman Mailer and become, simply, my father. I cleaned up my room.

Dad had a great generosity whereby, if he felt that you were serious or excited about something, he would forget his anger, and give you his full at-

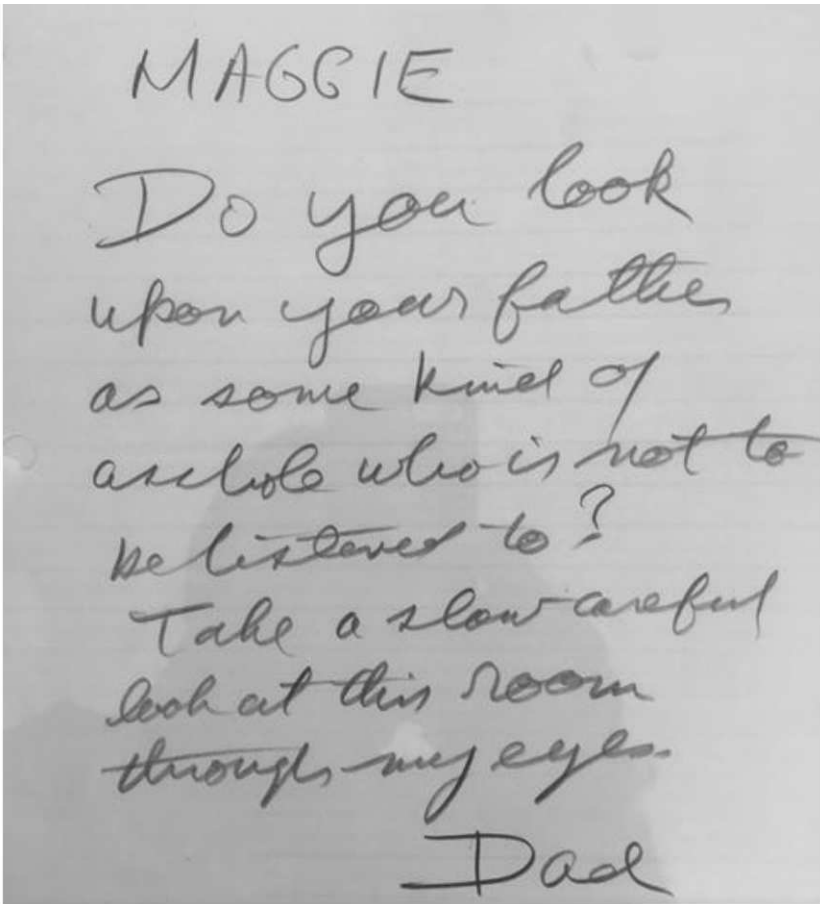


Figure 12 - Young Maggie's Note from Dad

tention. He found me a little later and said, "Listen, I didn't realize you were up to something in there. I took another look, and I'm pleased. I think you may be an artist. Finish the sculpture, I'd like to live with it a while. Maybe we'll put it in the Living Room."

To which I now say: Thanks, Dad.

I miss you.