Om Mani Padme Hum
By Kelsey Hagarman

Look at the ring on your index finger. Tarnished silver, turning copper, it fills the space between the base of your finger and your knuckle. There are three segments of your ring:

1. The braided pattern etched in the silver along the top edge.
2. The grey center, made of some material that reminds you of silt. There are shards of blue stones stuck inside the silt, stones you call turquoise because that is the only blue stone you know.
3. The bottom, thicker than the braided top, etched with lines and unfamiliar symbols.

Look at the emerald green stain your ring leaves behind on your skin, the consequence of cheap metal and frequent wear.

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“Everybody wants a happy life and a peaceful mind, but we have to produce peace of mind through our own practice.” -@DalaiLama. May 17, 2013.

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After your dad remarries, your stepmom gives you a gift card to Moonstones for your birthday and for Christmas, which are only three days apart, so they are lumped together. This gift card is a thin, soft piece of bark with “Moonstones” written in pen over the peeling layers. When you go to Moonstones, you don’t go late at night, your dad walks you down the sidewalks of Pittsburgh to get you there safely.

The store is thick with the smell of incense and things you don’t understand: bumper stickers, statues of Hindu gods, African drum sets. You spend hours there to spend your gift card on jewelry and candles. George W. Bush’s big head looks funny on the stickers they sell here and you want to laugh, but you don’t understand the jokes. Your stepmom thinks this one wind-up toy is so funny: a plastic nun the size of your fist that moves slowly across flat surfaces and shoots little sparks out of her mouth.

“Nunzilla. I have to get it,” your stepmom tells you.

The lady who owns the store wears her blonde hair short and her black skirt all the way down to her ankles. You think she might be a witch. After you touch a stone or a candle, she tells you the qualities
it promotes. Here, smell Serenity, touch Wealth. You finally decide to buy a Happiness candle and a purple stone jewelry box.

Outside the store, your dad looks as tall as the streetlights, but he is all darkness. Except for the embers of the cigar at his mouth. Your hot breath mimics his smoke as it hits the cold air in puffs. Open the paper bag to show him what you bought. He nods in approval, but his eyes are hard to find. Under the brim of his Villanova hat, through the wrinkles of worry, above the dark circles. Even when he tells jokes, his eyes are sad.

You let him hold your cold fingers for a few moments on your way back to his apartment, but when some strangers walk past, you can feel your age like the blush on your cheeks. You’re ten years old, let go.

It takes years for you to notice the symbol on the lid of the jewelry box is a pentagram. Point up, the pentagram is a Wiccan star that symbolizes the union of the five basic elements. Point down, the pentagram is a Satanic star that symbolizes earthly gratification and the triumph of the individual over dissolution.

When the lid breaks clean off the box, you forget which way the star pointed when you bought it.

* It is estimated that somewhere between ten and twenty million people practice Tibetan Buddhism. The current Dalai Lama, who was exiled from Tibet in 1959, is called the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.

* When you try the ring on your finger, you think the base is filled with a random pattern of lines. Holly asks the cashier what they mean because she worries the symbols might summon the devil or something. After the jewelry box incident, you encourage her to ask. Holly buys the same ring as you in a cutesy best-friends-forever kind of demonstration. She is not from Pittsburgh, and you take her to Moonstones as a sort of tourist attraction.

Your stepmom stopped giving you Moonstones gift cards a few years ago, so your souvenir costs you nine dollars. There is a small number nine written on the inside of your ring, but it starts to wear off even that first day. Mostly because you aren’t used to the feeling of its constant presence, so you keep pulling it on and off. Your finger suffocates under this metal thing you will become attached to and then frequently misplace. No one gave you a receipt at the store, and
by the time you make the twenty minute trip back to your mom’s house, a section of the blue stones has cracked right off the front of your ring.

“You should get your money back for that,” your mom warns you when you show her. You explain that you want the ring fixed. She rolls her eyes and finds some super glue.

“Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.” -@DalaiLama. May 10, 2013.

The beginning of the end of your structured religious education is fourth grade, the year your parents officially divorce. You know your mom feels guilty, especially when you ask why your dad spends so many nights in the two-bedroom apartment above his office, the office that is only a few blocks away from Moonstones.

“He’s at work,” she tells you. That night you see her crying in the kitchen, just standing there with all the lights on, around the time the court tries to figure out your custody. You never go to court, you aren’t called to the witness stand, you don’t see your dad in black suits or your mom in sharp clicking heels. Just your mom crying that one time with a stack of white papers on a blue kitchen table.

And your dad telling you about the sleepovers you and your sister can have at his apartment every other weekend. He says you still can get ice cream and rent movies, if you still like to do that. Chocolate raspberry truffle and Night of the Living Dead.

You make your sister tell your mom that you don’t want to go to your bible study class anymore because your mom would have to listen. Tell your sister to complain that your dad never picks you up on time and your mom would feel it, that guilt.

And she does. Your mom lets you quit studying the bible just like she let you quit playing softball, but she still makes you go to church with her on Sunday. Church is thick with the smell of old lady perfume and things you don’t understand: tasteless wafers placed in open mouths, wooden pews filled with singing strangers.

During mass, you and your sister put your hands on your hearts and say the Pledge of Allegiance instead of the Our Father by accident, but the old lady next to you doesn’t notice. She congratulates your mom for your “good behavior.” You eat Cheerios and stare out the stained glass windows. Even tone deaf people sing along to the
hymns, but you move your lips along with the words every once in a while.

Near the end of mass, your mom slides across the waxy pew to whisper in your ear, “I’ll wait for you and your sister in the lobby.” She leaves you and your sister to shuffle in the line of strangers on your own because she is not allowed to receive communion anymore, now that she is divorced.

In fifth grade, you stop going to church after your mom remarries. Your stepdad doesn’t make you stop going, it’s more gradual than that, like you always knew there were better ways to spend your Sundays and he was just the first person in the house brave enough to do it.

They get married on Christmas, not in a church, in a court. You, your sister, and your soon-to-be stepsisters are playing Monopoly and eating apricot cookies when your mom tells you to put on some nice clothes because they are getting married. You scream, not because you’re scared, but because you’re happy. Now, they have gold rings they say they will never take off their fingers. You don’t tell them that you recognize their handwriting on the presents “from Santa” and you don’t ask what your mom’s ring means this time.

“Om Mani Padme Hum” is a famous Tibetan Buddhist mantra that is associated with the bodhisattva of compassion.

The cashier has thick black dread locks and skin even paler than yours and so many piercings on his face you worry that you stare too much, like he has a physical deformity. You force yourself to smile and act normal, but you smile too much. You wonder where the blonde witch is, the one who learned to recognize your face and name over the years.

This guy tells Holly that yes, the rings mean something. He says the words “Buddhist chant” and “serenity,” but you are too busy nodding your head, so all you know is that the chant starts with a word that starts with an “O.” He knocks over stacks of political cartoons and ironic greeting cards while he tries to explain all the things this ring can do. When his face flushes against all that metal, you wonder if the metal gets hot. He seems a little too excited, like the ring belongs to Frodo or something, but you buy it anyway.

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“We cannot change the past, but we can reshape the future. Young people have the opportunity to create a happier, better future.”- @DalaiLama. December 17, 2013.

It rains at your high school graduation. The ceremony is still held outside, even though anyone with eyes could see those big black clouds. Your white dress dampens, your straight hair expands in the humidity and frizzes just in time to take pictures you will see in photo albums for the rest of your life.

Sit in the same seat in the backs of classrooms, walk the same hallways made from white linoleum floors and white walls. Type at the same computer for four years. Remember alphabetical order, stand in a straight line, walk when you're told, sit down in your seat, listen to badly written speeches and you will get a diploma in the rain.

Then you can throw your cap in the air as high as you want.

Back at home, extended family members wish you congratulations with envelopes of money. While this is party is for you, it might as well be for your mother. These are her friends, and she will collect the money because she knows when to use it. When you are sick of smiling and thanking these people, you walk around your house until you find your mom sitting in the guest bedroom, holding your graduation cap and gown.

"I can't believe he missed your graduation," she says. You never know how to react when someone cries, let alone your mom. She makes sure that her tears are gone moments later, like they never happened.

Make a joke that your dad probably couldn't find your high school. Don't say that you would rather he celebrate your graduation drunk at a bar with your stepmom than see him in the stands of your high school football field. Let your mom hug you even though she's the one that is upset, and then you can leave to brush your teeth, like every other night.

He texts you the next day to say that he had been there, that he saw you graduate, but couldn't find you in the crowd afterward. So he left. Your mom doesn't believe him.

For your graduation present, your mom gives you an expensive amethyst necklace, earrings, and a ring, not from Moonstones, from a department store, maybe.

“You need some nice jewelry now that you're old,” she tells you.
Since the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan government have been located in McLeodGanj, a village within the Dharamshala municipality in India. “Dharamshala” loosely translates to “spiritual dwelling” or “sanctuary.”

You learn to ask your dad to stop cooking dinner. Ask him to order take-out instead to avoid angry whistles, banging pots. Your mom’s food is on the table by six o’clock, usually earlier, home cooked, with dessert after. Quiet. Share something about your day and fold your napkin on your lap, that kind of dinner. With your dad, you taste whole countries out of Styrofoam boxes. Vietnamese, Chinese, Mexican, and Thai.

A few weeks after you graduate high school, your dad takes you to your first Indian restaurant to celebrate. With him, dinners are loud, sometimes the happy kind of loud. He struggles with the pronunciation of the dishes, but recommends that you try “the green stuff with the bread” and “that orangey chicken one.”

Your dad doesn’t pay child support now that you’re eighteen and he doesn’t intend to pay for your college education either. Your mom has complained, cried, and yelled about that. At him in person, at him on the phone, at him through you. She has written texts, emails, and letters because she and your stepdad cannot afford the college educations of four girls at the same time without any help.

You only see them together now when you are handed off from one parent to the other. Your mom, shorter than you by a few inches and your dad, taller by almost a foot. You feel irreconcilable differences in that space between. You are the cause of fights, the topic of discussions, and yet they do all of the talking.

At the restaurant, your dad orders a Stoli on the rocks even though he said he gave those up for good over Christmas. Your stepmom lied to you for weeks, not to your face, but through texts, saying that your dad had the flu while he detoxed in his apartment. All the lights in his kitchen were off the night he finally told you what he had given up. It was the first time he had admitted to you that he had a drinking problem in the first place.

The waitress brings the drink he shouldn’t need anymore. His glass sweats beads of water that form a ring on the napkin below it. You anticipate the effects of the drink and wonder what brought him back to it. His eyes are shiny when he tells you that he is in so much
debt his cable might be turned off this week and his power might go next.

You remember that your stepmom bought a 3D television and ordered a quesadilla-maker online the other day. You listen because you don’t know what to believe anymore.

He tells you how much he spent on groceries this week, on your older sister’s college loans years ago, on his beat-up gray Ford that always needs something fixed and veterinary exams for cats that keep getting older.

Not on your groceries. Not on your clothes. Not on your college education. Tell him you don’t need to know the details of his debts. You haven’t talked back to him since you decided to stop abiding by the “every other Wednesday, every other weekend” custody arrangement settled by the court. You are eighteen and too tired to spend your school nights driving back and forth.

“But you do need to know this,” he says like it explains everything and your heart pumps with the anger you can’t release. He makes you think you should feel this guilt.

His face is red and his voice is loud against the sticky booth and the green walls. The waitress tries to smile but your dad complains about little things to make her more uncomfortable, another basket of naan, another Stoli on the rocks, the television changed from that Bollywood stuff to a basketball game.

All you want is to feel comfortable in a restaurant with your dad. No more blurry eyed looks around the room to make sure strangers can’t hear how much everything has cost him. The numbers on receipts he wants you to read.

Your mom fought with your dad and now they don’t live together anymore. You don’t live with him either. You wonder if they regret having you, this tie that keeps them together.

It always comes back to you.

But if you forget the money and tell him what you want to study in college, he will tell you that he used to write poetry, too. His poems are in a box in the attic of the house he no longer shares with you. He is the only person that smiles when you say that you like philosophy. And he will pay for this warm naan and chicken as though it is all he can offer, delicious and unfamiliar dishes that taste the way love should feel.

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“Love and compassion are qualities humans beings require just to live together.” @DalaiLama. October 21, 2013.

*You have to go back to school. Your mom usually drives you there, especially on the first move of the fall. But move-in is on a Wednesday and your mom can’t call off this early in the school year, at the same job at Baker Elementary she’s worked all these years.

Sometimes you forget that she was a single mom for a little while. Her paycheck was enough for four people to live on, plus the child support. Without your stepdad, you probably wouldn’t be going to this college or have so many pairs of boots now.

Your dad will drive you back then. Your mom will visit over the weekend to make sure you did it right, even though you know how to cram your stuff into a dorm room by now. Before you leave, your stepdad and your dad shake hands and talk like they don’t hate each other.

Look at the car that barely has enough room for all of your stuff. When you were in fifth grade, your mom told you “we” couldn’t afford a new skirt. You didn’t cry because your parents divorced. You cried because you wanted this blue skirt, a turquoise one from TJ Maxx. The worst part was that you eventually got it.

Your dad seems like he hasn’t talked to anyone in a while. Not just to you, but to anyone who will listen. When you realize you forgot your phone and your school ID back at your mom’s house, he isn’t even mad that he has to turn the car around.

The car ride feels like a two and a half hour conversation. Your dad admits that your stepmom is the one who drinks too much now and gets too angry. You find out that she left him over the summer. Only for a day, but it could have been forever. You don’t know if you should feel bad that he is so alone, or happy that he knows how it feels.

When you get to Granville, he decides to stop at the bank before he drops you off.

“I can’t take out any more than this at a time,” he apologizes. Without making eye contact, he reaches a hand behind him to shove some bills at you and your sister. You didn’t expect anything and you tell him you don’t want it, but you count the money anyway. A hundred dollars each. Keep it.

When you get to Shepardson Hall, he says he will do his best to help you carry your things inside. All the things you thought you
couldn’t live without, mostly clothes. He has bad knees. Instead of joints, he says it just feels like bone on bone.

Look at your dad. Whatever hair he has left is pulled back in this little ugly pony tail. He says he donates his hair to Locks of Love. Imagine a sick person wearing a wig made from his dull gray hairs. Your friends have never met him because you are ashamed of him sometimes. This is one of those times. You wonder if he knows.

Tell him not to worry, that you can do it yourself. Move all of your belongings, bags, and boxes from the car to the elevator down the hall and into your room. Make your dad wait outside, and when you’re finished, he will drive the two and a half hours back home alone.

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His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama frequently states that his life is guided by three major commitments: the promotion of basic human values or secular ethics in the interest of human happiness, the fostering of inter-religious harmony and the preservation of Tibet’s Buddhist culture, a culture of peace and non-violence.

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Your freshmen year of high school, you have this necklace that is only one third of a necklace, really. It’s one of those best-friend-heart-puzzle kind of things, where your necklace makes one third of the heart. Hannah has one third, your sister has the other.

Hannah tells you this about her boyfriend: “Ethan almost asked you out at the beginning of the year. It was between you and me.”

Apparently you didn’t make the cut. You thought you could be friends with both him and Hannah, but Ethan still likes you enough to make Hannah suspicious. By sophomore year, you’re not friends with either of them. You stop wearing that necklace and you have this problem where you make guys pay for mistakes they haven’t made yet.

Brian, your junior year. A soccer player with a reputation, not a good one. He wants you to come over to his house. You tell him to take you ice-skating. Your sister texts you later that your mom thought he was cute. He always wears gray sweatpants and black hoodies, which are not cute, but he is so much taller and louder than you, which you like at first.

At the ice-skating rink, he wears those skates for people who play hockey and they look like natural extensions of his feet. He makes circles around the rink while he waits for you to catch up. You are not
as good at ice-skating as you remember and you fall on your ass once. He picks you up off the ground, not in a sweet way. He laughs at the wet spots of snow on your jeans.

“You don’t talk very much, do you?” he says when the Zamboni clears the rink of your tracks. You shrug your shoulders. You thought he wouldn’t notice if you asked enough questions and he had talked about the Penguins and his dog for so long. You do not have a lot in common. He offers to buy you a drink but you don’t want him to think you owe him something.

During another hour of circles, he tells you that he doesn’t drink and you try to believe him. You remember the freshman he dated for a while and wonder whose fault it was that they broke up. Later, there is this bridge you have to cross to get to the parking lot. Just because he can, he scoops you up into his arms and jumps onto the edge of the bridge. You scream, not because it’s funny, but because you’re scared. He holds you in his arms like a baby as he dangles you over the creek below.

Tell him to put you down, your body icy stiff in his arms like it’s already hit that water. You can’t see his face when you’re in his arms, only his black sweatshirt and silence. He waits a while before he lets your feet drop back to the ground.

As he drives you home, he takes his hands off the wheel.

“You’re in control now. You have to drive,” he laughs, hands raised up like his eyebrows. The car weaves back and forth across the yellow lines.

When you were little, your dad used to drive with his knees to make you laugh.

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Compassion is a feeling of wanting to help someone who is sick, hungry, or in trouble. Compassion is selfless concern for people beyond yourself.

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You stand in the kitchen of that apartment where your dad spent all those nights, back when you thought that if you went months without seeing your dad, he wasn’t yours anymore. The two stupid cats that live in the apartment twist through your legs, and when you run a hand down their backs, clumps of their shedding fur stick to your sweaty palms. Your mom is allergic to cats, so she will make you change your clothes when you return home, like you can peel away all remnants of your father from your skin.
A picture is held in front of your face, sepia and faded, of a thin, blonde boy, standing, staring, smug.

“Would you buy a car from this guy?” your dad asks you. You are twelve so all you can think is that you aren’t old enough to buy a car even if you wanted to. After a while you answer: “No.” That makes him laugh. Your stepmom asks you later if your dad showed you “that picture of him as a kid.” You never thought he could be that young or blonde.

Now, she has something in a brown paper bag to show you: a silver chain with a pendant of rainbow stones hanging from it. Your dad bought it for her, probably as an apology for something since it isn’t her birthday and there is always a reason for presents. A dinner with your dad is a gift after you haven’t seen him in weeks. A gift card to a department store is a present that means he doesn’t know you well enough to pick out specific gifts anymore.

Your stepmom doesn’t tell you what he did, but you don’t ask either. The apology has already been accepted, like it always has been, like it always will be.

Maybe all the jewelry, the dinners, maybe they were just apologies, spent and ingested deep so you never have to think about all the things you owe each other.

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While the “Om Mani Padme Hum” mantra is often chanted aloud, it said that the written form of the mantra has the same effect on the viewer, so it is often carved into stones and other visible objects. The goal of the mantra is to reduce fixation on the personal self, and instead look toward others.

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You wear your ring every day. When you see Holly at school, sometimes she sticks out her pointer finger, waiting for you to stick yours out too, to show that you still wear yours. You always wear it, except for the times when you leave it on cold wet sinks in public bathrooms or the arms of wooden chairs in the library. One time, you forgot to put it on in the morning and you walked all the way back to your room during class just to get it.

You twist your ring around in circles when you are anxious, and when you take it off at night, in your dorm room in Ohio, sometimes you worry the stain on your finger is permanent, that you have some sort of metallic poisoning. You search “green ring finger stain” on Google and think about how different your ring looks now
that you have worn it for a few weeks. Nice rings, they don’t tarnish. This one looks kind of ugly now, and you tell people you only wear it out of habit.

When you went back to your room to get your ring, what you were really thinking was that it was bad luck not to wear it. Maybe it isn’t about luck.

Look at your ring while you write this, look at it again as you read this. Go back through your memories and ask the blonde witch to find a candle for Forgiveness.