Fall 2009

The Works of Hands

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I pause from reading a book at my mother’s kitchen table when she tugs the wedding ring from her left hand and places it on the window sill. The half-moons of her fingernails mirror the nails’ shiny tips, rounded and glazed with clear polish. Cracks and nicks crisscross the pads and sides of her fingers. “It’s what happens when you pack boxes all day,” she says, and I imagine her on the line at the clothing distribution center, her arms heaving oversized boxes onto conveyor belts, hands maneuvering them into place. I felt these hands fly through sections of my thick blonde hair as she French-braided it every morning for years. When she begins reciting her mother’s recipe for pie crust, taking flour, vinegar, shortening, and salt from the cabinets, I close the book and join her. Chocolate, coconut, and pumpkin pies will be my mother’s contribution for tomorrow’s Thanksgiving dinner.

As a child I never saw her assemble the ingredients. Pie shells were browned when I got up, a miniature one sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar for me and my brother. Mom woke at four every morning to work on a project that needed her undivided attention. Most often, she sewed. For me the sound of darkness is the hum of a sewing machine, the hesitation of my mother’s heel poised above the pedal as she readjusts linen under the tiny silver foot. During high-school errands to the fabric store for outfit inspiration, whenever I needed a new Easter suit, school skirt, or Prom dress, I obsessed over the textures of organza, rayon, and tulle. But at home, poised to help, I couldn’t imagine the pattern’s geometry, the sloping curves of the cut. When I asked Mom to teach me she’d say, “Watch me like your brother does.”

A snapshot memory: morning before dawn, wind whipping snow drifts into piles of cotton batting. Mom bent over the machine’s light, her hands pressing red fabric under the needle, one-quarter inch seam—a perfect line. My brother, in choo-choo train pajamas, stands...
behind her on the chair’s support rod with his arms around her neck. He watches the muscles of her hands move from memory in ways she couldn’t explain. He understood.

My medium is words, not fabrics or food. Whereas my mother slides into the real—the material—when she moves from picture to tissue paper, I jump into my imagination with the soft tap of my fingertips typing lines onto a blank screen. In one sewing project I got as far as unfolding a crinkled pattern so it wouldn’t tear, but Mom pinned the fabric in three-inch intervals as she walked around the table, sneakers squeaking on the kitchen’s linoleum. By the time her sewing scissors began to slice in long, even strokes, I found myself bored. It looked so easy; what could I possibly learn by staring longer? Squeezing the forbidden sewing marker between my left thumb and ring finger, I practiced my signature over and over in my notebook.

The love of fabric itself, however, has never left me. At twenty-three and living in Turkey, I collected scarves, carpets, and swatches of material I knew my mother could transform. In Urfa, a town in eastern Turkey, I spent hours writing poems in a tea garden and shopping in the covered market, a maze of stalls with the oldest parts built from stone. Many Turks lauded Urfa for its textiles. One visit I spotted a blue gown embroidered in gold and stopped to admire the ways its velvet shifted as I brushed it along my arm. Cut like a coat, I thought. Could I describe it to Mom if I bought the material? As I left the stall with fabric in hand, a man held out a tray of pistachio baklava, beckoning me to sit down. Contrary to the sales pitch that usually followed such an invitation, we just chatted. Every once in a while he stopped to pull a pack of Marlboros out of his pressed white shirt and light one up, his hand cupping the initial flame until the cigarette tip glowed.

That evening I sat in a tea garden with my journal and described a man selling a geometric-patterned carpet. As the copper sun dipped between mountain peaks, lights flickered on over the park’s canopy of leaves. Women’s murmuring voices drifted over from nearby tables. At intervals they laughed, which brought their hands to their faces, teal and lapis-blue sleeves shifting to reveal hennaed hands. Headscarves tied at their shoulders before cascading to their waists in paisleys, rainbows, yellow stars and waves. Gold bangles slid down their wrists, chiming when the women sipped tea. As I stood to leave, I turned to see one bent down to kiss her yawning daughter.

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I wash my hands at the sink before offering to help Mom make
the Thanksgiving pies. A few weeks ago I tried to make a pie with fresh pears from my parents’ neighbor’s tree, but I rolled out the dough three times. First my hands clenched the rolling pin handles as I fought the too-sticky dough; the disc stuck to the countertop. After cupping a handful of flour in my palms and dumping it with a sigh, I tried again. This time the dough broke apart. Finally I rolled it out and unrolled it in the pie tin without a problem. It was probably too tough to eat, but I don’t know. I gave it to a friend as I’d planned—a thank-you gift for helping me out. Mom taught me that home-made gifts are the best, and I didn’t have more time, extra money, or extra pears.

I’ve been back from Turkey for eight years, married and with a son, Holden. Now I can study my mother’s techniques. She cuts shortening with flour, forks the mixture until blended, and rolls out a disc with a wooden pin. One time. Her hands wield the pin so lightly it only skims the dough. Yet these hands scrub stains from grass-stained jeans. These hands anchored my baby’s curled fingers hours after he was born.

My son’s first table food was my mother’s homemade chicken and noodles. She makes the noodles from scratch, drying them overnight on the table. Friends and family who’ve become fans of her cooking request this dish often. When my father’s parents were alive, we planted a garden at their house; in August we canned green beans and sweet corn—vegetables that often accompanied chicken and noodles during the winter. My mother’s fingers could yank down corn leaves and pluck the silk faster than anyone I knew. It took me hours to snap beans; the plunk, plunk of beans falling into the container slowed as my mind drifted away from the task. Our supply lasted a year, sometimes two. I try to duplicate the sauce she’d make from canned tomatoes. Once I called from Turkey, waking her at midnight to ask how much oregano and basil to add. “Use your eyes,” she said. “Sprinkle it in the pot until it looks good. Add more to taste.”

My mother practices kitchen magic—indirect spells she casts with spices and textures of food to keep order in the house. When I was a child, she stayed my father’s drinking with home-cooked meals served right when he walked through the door. “He drank less that way,” she said. “And that’s how I grew up. Mom always had dinner on the table for Dad.” My mother braised roast beef and baked pork chops the size of small Bibles. Dad dipped the dinner rolls she made before her work—back then at my school’s cafeteria—in homemade gravy. I can still hear the sizzle of huge steaks on the outdoor grill. In the summer she’d unzip peas and serve them sautéed in butter, but sometimes the
protection charms didn’t work. Summer gave him more sunlight to drink by.

I trained to protect as well. One sunny and warm morning in Turkey, I gripped the iron bars of my school’s gate and stretched out, waiting for the security guard to unlock it so I could jog around the campus perimeter as I did almost every morning. Just as my body slid into the rhythm of the run, I heard the shuffle of someone else’s shoes and the snap of a twig. Along the main street to the north, shopkeepers were raising awnings and unlocking doors, fathers were walking to the bakery for breakfast bread. But I was approaching the school’s south side, a wooded area. I glanced behind me. A young man approached. I stopped and turned my back to the eight-foot stone wall, expecting him to run past, but he stopped and said something.

“Anlamadim.” I knew enough Turkish to say I didn’t understand.

He kept talking and walking, closing the gap between us. “Hayir.” I lifted my eyebrows to emphasize the “no.” He spoke more, an edge of anger in his voice. “Git,” I said, interrupting. I pointed to the road, pausing to be thankful that the meaning, similar in English, helped me remember how to say “go.”

He reached out. I stepped back against the wall. As he grabbed my arm, I grasped his neck with my free hand as my kickboxing coach had taught me. My thumb landed right between a muscle in his neck and his trachea, my pinky and ring fingers curling into his neck on the other side of the tube. My strongest fingers, however, missed; instead, I sunk my nails into the shaved skin of his jaw and cheek. I pressed his gaze away and squeezed as hard as I could, yelling a friend’s name into her open window across the street. No one responded, but no one needed to. He turned out of my grip and ran away.

Mom approaches the second mound of pie crust dough. A slight swelling stiffens her fingers as she tries to wrap them around the rolling pin. Years ago her hands could still compress, demonstrated best by her unmatched cake decorating skills. The night before my seventh birthday, she sifted sugar and flour, whisked egg and oil for the cake. By the time I woke up the next morning, she’d already whipped up cups of white icing, hand-dying portions robin’s egg, goldenrod, and aquamarine. She squeezed hundreds of frosting stars, one tiny dot after another until Holly Hobby’s patched dress and calico bonnet emerged.

Eventually her hands rebelled. First it was only a tingling, and
then an electric stab of nerves from her ring finger to thumb. I noticed
the day she dropped a jar of olives, spheres rolling across the floor.
“Carpal tunnel syndrome,” she said. “Simple, outpatient surgery.” I
couldn’t imagine the hands that conducted conversations and uphol­
stered davenports immobilized by bandages. When I received a Dairy
Queen ice cream cake on my nineteenth birthday—even months after
the surgery on her wrists—I had to hold back tears. These hands once
cross-stitched enough Christmas ornaments to decorate an entire tree.

Not all the tasks of her hands have been as methodical and
practiced as the way she trims or tucks the excess pie crust dough,
fluting the edges with her fingertips. On a November morning in 1984,
Mom found my sister, Theresa, unconscious in her garage-parked car.
The coroner ruled Theresa’s death “accidental carbon monoxide
poisoning” because of her elevated blood-alcohol content. Mom must
have slid her fingers across Theresa’s neck and pressed ever-so-slightly
to check for a pulse. That same hand cradled an eleven-year-old fist as
we approached Theresa’s casket. Once there, our shoulders leaned into
each other as we clenched hands.

In Turkey, I craved comfort and the sweet predictability of
American desserts. Except for baklava, Turkish desserts often left me
wondering what ingredient helped an item earn its place in the dessert
category. I tried to satisfy my homesickness with easy favorites, but
baking cocoa was difficult to come by; ingredients for fruit pies,
however, abounded. At the corner fruit stand I’d request a kilo of
apples, careful not to inspect them too much and thereby offend the
clerk who selected my order. At home I marveled at how their “imper­
fections”—asymmetrical shape and green patchy skin—contrasted with
their sweet-tangy taste and crunchy texture.

After obsessing over the golden-brown quality of the crust
every minute it baked in the gas oven, I made one excellent apple pie.
How I mastered rolling out the dough alone is still beyond me since
eight years after leaving Turkey I couldn’t remember how. Perhaps the
air’s humidity—it had just stormed—added just enough moisture, or
perhaps the marble countertops kept the dough from sticking. Maybe I
even remembered my mother’s advice to apply just the right amount of
pressure. Regardless, I took the successful pie over to my boyfriend’s
parents’ home as my contribution to dinner that evening.

As his father and step-mother reclined against the sofa, I cut
and served the pie, hands shaking. By Mehmet’s own admission, his
family was traditional, and I knew their opinions of me would be linked
to my cooking talent—food a language common among us. They
praised the pie immediately after their hands brought their first bites to their lips. Twice during dessert they burst into laughter, but after they rested their forks on their plates with a clink, his parents seemed pleased. Proud, I asked Mehmet to translate: “I am happy to introduce you to this American staple and a family recipe.” As we said goodbye, I realized how much I missed my mother and thought about her as Mehmet walked me home.

Several times on the way Mehmet started giggling.

“What is it?” I begged. “Just tell me. Out with it.”

“My parents thought it funny.”

“What? What was so funny?”

“My ex-girlfriend baked them an apple pie, too.”

I stopped and looked him in the eye. “What kind of Turkish woman makes apple pie?”

I could have asked: What kind of American woman can only successfully bake a pie in Turkey? Sometimes when stakes are high our hands remember.

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Mom picks up another round of dough and offers it to me: “Do you want to try?” I nod. She moves to the other side of the counter—more of a peninsula than an island—where she can watch but where her hands are less likely to interrupt. Sunlight streams in from the floor-to-ceiling windows in back of a round table, now at my mother’s back. My parents moved to this house when I was twenty-one; it isn’t the memory-filled kitchen of my childhood. As I tour that kitchen in my imagination, full scenes spin out from every object, multiple memories competing for my attention. Here, however, only a few key moments summon me. Right now Mom stands in the exact spot where I told her I’d been offered a teaching job in Turkey.

“The director gave me a couple days to think about it,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t need them.

She stayed silent.

“They’ll pay for her apartment, insurance, and taxes. Think of how much money she’ll be able to save,” my father offered, for once on my side.

“I don’t want you to go, but I’ll support your decision,” she said eventually. I don’t remember where she placed her hands as she got up from the table and walked out because I was rubbing my sweaty palms on the back of a chair, my knuckles appearing and disappearing as they gripped the white vinyl.

Several years after I moved back to the States, I dreamed up a
vacation for my mother and me. She loved to travel, but my father
didn’t, and I sensed she needed an adventure. Italy became our desti­
nation. My responsibilities included researching the trip, preparing a shoe­
string budget, and handling logistics. I discovered inexpensive convents
to stay in and found cheap roundtrip tickets to Rome. Two days before
we left, a complication arose: pregnant, I spent most of my time
nauseated on the couch or vomiting in the bathroom. I didn’t plan to tell
her about the pregnancy so early, but I did, hoping she’d suggest we
postpone or cancel our trip. She didn’t.

My favorite memories of Italy are not of me slamming down
my water glass next to a plate of seafood risotto and dashing to the
bathroom, or making a bee-line from Michelangelo’s David to the
women’s restroom, using my hands to cut through a line of women
twenty deep, but watching my mother finish a cross-stitch project she
made as a thank-you gift for a convent, her fingertips pinching a needle
as it appeared and disappeared over the horizon of stretched fabric.
Sometimes after a long day touring museums and cathedrals, we sat in
our room, Mom cross-stitching and me reading, and listened to church
bells or the nuns’ choir practicing for mass.

I often look at a photo of Mom sampling cappuccino at our
favorite café in Siena. Time has been folded in the creases of her hands:
dry, slightly swollen with a smattering of new liver spots. Her chin rests
in one hand as she watches wedding attendees stream out onto Siena’s
piazza, the bride and groom smiling amid bursts of spontaneous
applause. Her other hand, not in the photo, is poised next to mine.
Walking arm-in-arm down the streets of Italy, we skipped pastry shops
in favor of gelato. Even if Italian pastries differed in style and flavor
from the ones we knew, the dense texture of cream and tangy fruit on
our tongues delighted us. Myriad new, intense flavors—pistachio,
raspberry, lemon—enticed us back into stores almost every time we
passed.

Now she stirs in coconut flakes for the pie filling as I pinch off
excess dough from the crust I just patted down in the dish. My fluted
edges are not as evenly spaced and equally pressed as hers, but I know
it takes practice. She hands me the dish of dark chocolate custard to
pour on top. Soon it is ready to go into the oven.

“Holden’s ten months. Is he ready for cinnamon and sugar
crust?”

“Absolutely,” I answer, placing the extra strip of dough in a tin
she offers. I prick it with a fork, brush it with butter, and sprinkle the
sweet mixture on top.
She turns open her tools—her hands—and the rulers of her index fingers curve. They become shallow bowls. As a child I saw only the products of these hands—birthday cakes, skirts, and Sunday meals—not what they could teach me, even by their limitations. Now I imagine recipes written between the lines on her palm, grocery lists penciled down her fingers. The muscles of my hands contract and expand as I type, as I search for order and meaning. Always my mother’s hands are there in mine.

I hand the tin of crust back to her, our fingertips touching briefly.