

Sharon Olds

My Parents' Ashes, October, 2001

Maybe they have touched, by now.
Maybe a grain of my mother's bone,
cast in the Pacific a month ago,
has glanced along a grain of my father's,
loose in the Bay for twenty years.
Maybe a molecule of her
has lain beside a molecule
of him, or interpenetrated
it, an element of her matter
bonding to an element of his,
sodium on potassium
calcium on magnesium,
Ossa on Pelion, Maybe they
have even shared an atom together,
Na, Ca, Mg, or Fe with its
2 electrons in the K-shell,
8 in the L-shell, 14 in the M,
2 in the N, as if they could circle one
nucleus, like parents a crib,
share an atomic weight, their cold
embers cojoining alkali metals
with earth metals on the periodic
table, as the currents carry them
back and forth under the Golden Gate.
Ashes are the solid residue left
when matter is burned at not too high
a temperature. A molecule
is the smallest particle into which
a substance can be divided and still have
the properties of the original substance,
my mother's dust, my father's dust,
ghost legs of the spider crab

picking its way along the rock sea floor. If the
substance were divided further, only atoms
would remain. They died, old, in my arms,
the gift of their last breath went into
my mouth. They chose for their bodies to be burned
at the heat to preserve their grit, they chose
the ocean, chose not the weather of the day
but the words said as the grey fur
blew from out hands into the cradle of salt—
an easy death, and in its way
an easy life, no one they loved
vaporized, the dream covenants kept.

Behavior Chart

There was one for each child, hand-ruled with the
ivory ruler, horizontal the
chores and sins, vertical
the days of the week. And my brother's and sister's
charts were spangled with gold stars,
as if those five-point fetlocks of brightness were the
moral fur they were curly with, young
Esau of the house, and my chart was a mess
of pottage marks, like the moles on my throat,
the spots I could not change. Some slots were filled
in so hard you could see where the No. 2
Mongol had broken—the rug under the grid
fierce with lead-thorns—my box-score
KO, KO, KO, KO, I was
Satan's wee knockout, yet today it makes me
laugh to remember it—it was a
chambered hatchery of minor
evils, spiny sea-stars, the small
furies of a child's green tidal heart.
Affection for my chart?! As if it is a hundred
years from now, already, and I am
looking back on the matter of the former
earth—paper gutted from the pulp of a tree,
and stars, armed figures of value,
glazed with the thin shine that had been
pressed to the bread of ginger on the planet of remembrance.

Berkeley Café, 1956

In one of those first hurtles of cream
in my first child's first gulps of my milk,
could there have been ham, and marble of ham, and
maple glaze from those hamwiches I
ate when I stole from my mother the money to go
out in tenth grade, with my new friends?
I had never known there was a sandwich like that, I had
thought a sandwich was a kind of legal
document, like a summons. But at the
café the cheese was not American
but Swiss, with those wasteful artful holes,
as if I had turned European,
gone east to New York City and then east
across the sea to the continent
of art and sex, and I could eat of it, on
Jewish rye, with free love Marxist
Russian dressing. I know less than nothing—
I not only knew nothing, I thought
I knew all that I thought I knew.
But now I was learning and storing—calcium,
protein, lactobacillus, and the skewed
seeds. And the actor waiting table
lavished teasing kindness on us, I had
never known a man reckless with
praise and adorable lies—and now
I know his spirit went into those first,
huge, frightened breastfulls of milk that came
through me, for my daughter, so that I could be what I'd
craved to be, would have fought for with a weapon
if that is how it was done—to become
a human being who spoke, and laughed,
and nursed, and raised the young on love and sandwiches.