

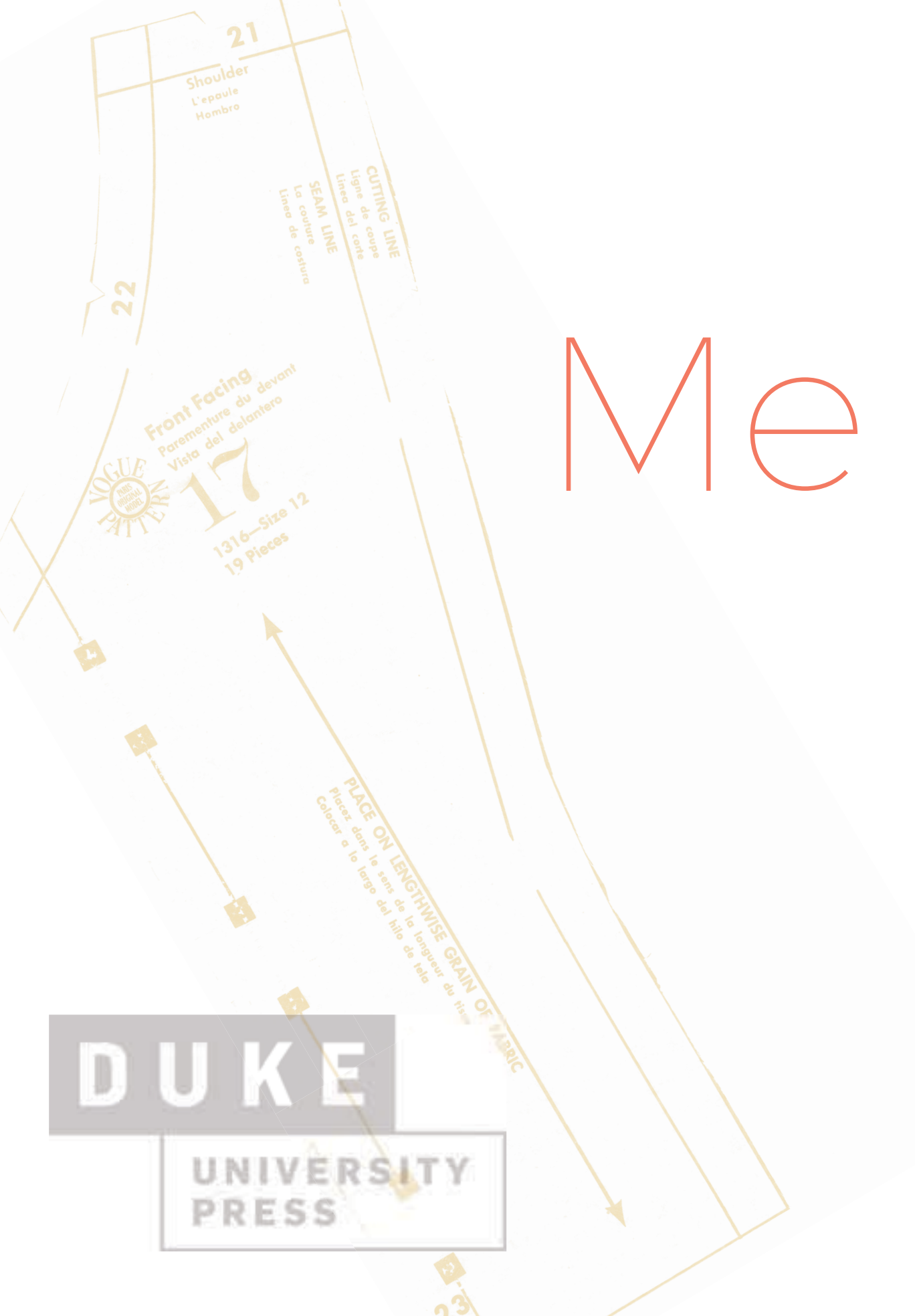
Mending S



Megan Sweeney

Mendings

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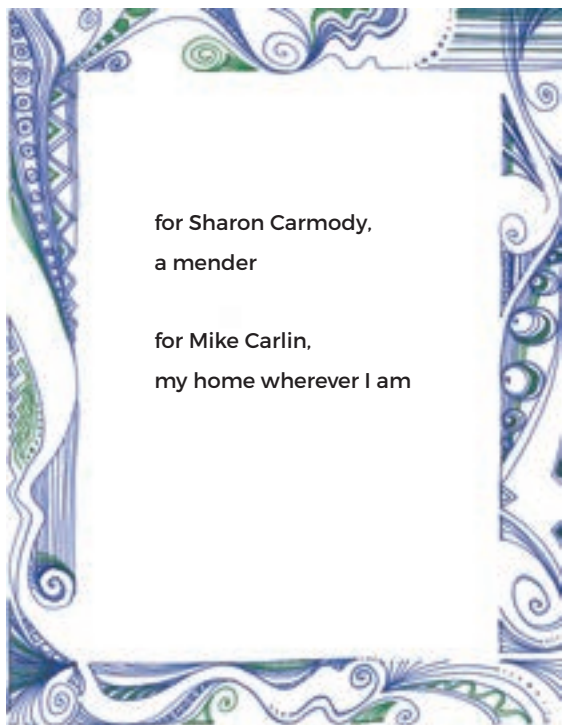
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for Sharon Carmody,
a mender

for Mike Carlin,
my home wherever I am

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Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
—Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" (1992)

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A Note on Ornaments

My niece Sophie Bauerschmidt Sweeney drew the buttons and ornaments that adorn these pages. Each button represents an actual button from my button box, and each line drawing was inspired by Sophie's reading of *Mendings*.



Piecing: A Prologue

There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things. And then comes a day when you realise that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are. —Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (2014)

“Piecing” as “peacing”: pieces that make peace between the living and the dead. —Peter Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds” (2012)

I’m sitting on the floor, using old plastic bags, scratch paper, and paper towels to wrap some figurines and vases that I want to donate to a thrift store. It’s Memorial Day weekend, and my siblings and I are clearing out our family lake house in southwestern New York now that both of our parents are dead. One of my sisters repeatedly zooms past me with a wheelbarrow. Each time, she loads the wheelbarrow with everything in her line of sight and empties it into the thirty-foot dumpster in the driveway.

“Thank you for your service,” another sister says to each item as she carries it to the dumpster. She learned this mantra from her professional decluttering coach but repeats it in jest since she is having little trouble parting with things. I join in the joke, thanking useless and garish

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objects, such as a knee-high white bear statue that served as an ashtray, then plant stand, then junk collector. But as a saver born with a “pre-sentiment of loss,” I find myself whispering the mantra seriously several times as I add to our mountain of trash.¹

I don’t hesitate, however, to discard the engraved clocks, paperweights, and sculptures that commemorate my dad’s philanthropy; all those wood, metal, and glass objects fuel my fear that my dad viewed his wealth—not his children—as his progeny. Also destined for the dumpster are the eight-inch cardboard cutouts of my dad, photographs that have stood watch over the bookshelves for decades. I keep just one of these statues, its features so faded that only my dad’s outline is recognizable.



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PIECING

We don't talk about it, but all of us seem to welcome this purging process. The lake house feels haunted with loss, having witnessed our deepest conflicts, diminished gatherings, and parents' deaths. For me, its state of disrepair evokes my mother and father, whose increasingly self-destructive tendencies came to fruition under its sagging roof. Yet, while some of my siblings seem eager to haul out the detritus and bolt the door for good, I don't work that way. I need time to listen for the stories that objects tell, to dwell with my memories, to contemplate the pain next to equally powerful experiences of joy and bone-deep belonging.

KEEPSAKES

When we discover the Bud Light boxes with the word *Keepsakes* scrawled in my mother's handwriting, my siblings are ready to toss them into the dumpster. Just in the nick of time, I rescue the moldy, mouse-nibbled boxes and lock them in my car.



I didn't set out to write *Mendings*. My initial plan was to write about harm and redress in twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American, Native American, and South African literary texts. My attention shifted, though, to a more immediate story of repair: soldiers' efforts to reckon with their war-related experiences through writing and art-making. When I discovered Combat Paper, a project that involves veterans transforming military uniforms into handmade paper, I was riveted by the connection between texts and textiles and by possibilities for weaving together storytelling, making, and individual and collective efforts to reckon with violence and grief.

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A PROLOGUE

But in casting about for the specific focus of my project, I found myself captivated by my own sewing projects. After attending a weeklong “sewing camp” that involved refashioning clothes with prior histories, I set up a sewing room with a cutting table, a rack of thread spools arranged by color, bins for in-progress projects, and a wooden box of carefully categorized buttons. “I should be working on my scholarship,” I’d think while cutting out patterns, mending and repurposing vintage garments, or hand-beading a dress.

Around this time, I also discovered a range of women artists who engage in various practices of mending and unraveling. Fascinated by the central role that women have played in the daily, domestic, affective labor of mending, and eager to understand how these artists think about their work, I asked several if they’d be willing to talk. I interviewed Celia Pym about her practice of visible mending, Nina Katchadourian about her *Mended Spiderweb* series, and Brooks Harris Stevens about her practice of using gold thread to “repair” buildings, landscapes, and worn textiles. I talked with Elana Herzog, who unravels carpets and bedspreads, and Sonya Clark, who hosts collective unravelings of the Confederate flag. Paula Stebbins Becker told me about the tapestries she creates from unraveled and rewoven fibers, and mg shapiro shared with me an array of stunning artworks created from adhesive bandages and surgical tape. I was enthralled by these artists. Curiously, however, I had little to say about their gorgeous work. Circling and circling, I finally realized that what captivated me was each artist’s process and the ways in which her material practices of mending led me to think about aspects of my own experiences. My sewing was both handiwork and intellectual labor, preparation for the next round of mending that I needed to do with my parents and myself. Slowly, wary of self-indulgence and my inexperience with narrative writing, I began to piece together the fragments that have coalesced into this book.



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The trunk and back seat of my car are already filled to capacity. I arrived at the house two days before my less sentimental family members, and alongside one of my sisters and her daughter, I've been squirreling away my spoils: my mom's sketchbook; the collages of family photos I made for my dad and the quilt I made for his seventieth birthday, with swatches of clothing from every member of my family; sterling silverware that belonged to my mother's aunt; a hideous pig statue (one of the ugliest of my family's collection of hideous pigs); and our balding Christmas angel with nicotine-stained wings.

Inside the Keepsakes boxes, I discover a multigenerational paper trail. Sixty years' worth of programs from First Communion, confirmations, commencements, Red Masses, weddings, and funerals. Photos of grandchildren, Chinese executives, school chums, and my nineteen-year-old mother learning how to fish. A newspaper announcement of my maternal grandmother's 1924 piano recital and a program from my mother and aunt's 1948 piano recital. Certificates of achievement for horseback riding, cheerleading, swimming, tennis, cessation of smoking, and completion of a course on "Contemporary Moral Problems." The notice of the eighth-grade garage sale and the funeral booklet for my maternal grandmother, who died at age thirty-seven. The report cards, standardized tests, schoolwork, and artwork of six children and four foster children. Every letter and postcard that my siblings and I sent from summer camp and subsequent travels. My mom's kindergarten progress report and the newspaper clipping about my maternal uncle, who drowned at age thirty-nine while rescuing two of his children. Christmas lists from 1995 and my sister's eighth-grade term paper on alcoholism, titled "Like Father, Like Son." Envelopes filled with half-century-old locks of children's once-vibrant red hair. The annual reports from my dad's firm and the family portrait that I drew at age five, which includes a naked, anatomically correct picture of my abusive foster brother with both his name and the word *STREEKER* written in capital letters.

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I pore over the evidence for hours at a time, wondering how my siblings could throw away the Keepsakes and why my mother would have saved them with no apparent attempts to sort or grapple with their disparate contents. When I was in my early twenties, my mischievous roommates would put fabric scraps in our kitchen trash can just to see if I'd retrieve them; I invariably did, firm in my belief that meaning, possibility, and beauty inhere in all-too-easily-discarded bits and pieces.

The music of the woolgatherers performing their task. Bending, extending, shaking out the air. Gathering what needs to be gathered. The discarded. The adored. Bits of human spirit that somehow got away. Caught up in an apron. Plucked by a gloved hand. —PATTI SMITH, *Woolgathering* (1992)

Mending—efforts to repair what's torn, to create something like a whole from fragments—has been my work for decades: as a social worker, as a seamstress in a king-size men's clothing factory, as a quilter in an African American cultural arts center in rural Mississippi, as a teacher in bilingual elementary schools on the border of Mexico and in New York City, and as a researcher in women's prisons, where consummate menders create meaning from the frayed edges and remnants of their experiences. And now, the task I face as a daughter is to assemble something like a whole from the stories summoned by the Keepsakes: stories of fierce love, of beseeching and bereavement, of impassioned, imperfect efforts to piece together meaningful lives.



These days, amid centuries-old struggles for racial justice, global-scale loss from COVID-19, and mounting evidence of irreparable environmental devastation, the whole world seems to be grieving, searching for ways to attend to disavowed histories, to salvage what may still be of use, to participate in meaningful forms of mending.

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As participants in *Combat Paper* well know, cloth and clothing offer an embodied archive for exploring mending. Cloth “endures, but it is mortal,” writes Peter Stallybrass, reminding us that textiles are alive, saturated with the smells, sweat, and epidermal residues of their makers and users, shaped by the “memory” embedded in the elbow or knee of a garment, in patterns of wear or fading.² Imbued with histories and identities, with kinship ties and social relations, clothing and cloth preserve both wanted and unwanted stories, enabling us to gather what needs to be gathered, to retrieve—and to hold—the bits of human spirit that somehow got away.

As records of daily life, clothes foster understanding of both intimate personal experiences and broader histories and social systems. Clothing is a tool for internal reckoning and for external engagement. It signals individuality and social legibility. It’s a necessity and a privilege, protective and decorative, utilitarian and the stuff of consuming passion. Clothes enable entangling and disentangling, manage anxieties and create them, serve as armor and sometimes as sword. They hide and render visible. They preserve and defy conventions. They reconcile and ramify our various selves. Clothing is a domain of the deadly serious and a domain of the lighthearted. It’s a site of oppression and liberation, of forced labor and free expression, of violence and healing. It’s consumption and creativity, a tourist trap and an entry point for genuine cross-cultural engagement. It’s a means to live in the present and a repository of the past. Clothing is an environmental disaster and a resource for surviving—through meaning-making, merry-making, and community building—as the world burns around us.

Mendings tells an intimate story about family, selfhood, and the love and loss lodged in garments. The essays address my complex entanglement with my mother, my grief-filled relationship with my father, and my reliance on clothing as a lifeline and tool for mending. In dialogue with clothing lovers, fiber artists, evolutionary biologists, historians, and environmentalists, *Mendings* also tells a broader story: a story about how clothing both perpetuates and counters historical and ongoing harms of systemic racism, incarceration, and environmental devastation and a story about textiles as sources of creativity, artistry, and self-fashioning.

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The essays generate insights about the difference between mending and fixing, the relationship between dress and redress, and the never-ending ways in which mending alters our relationships with ourselves and others, both living and deceased. *Mendings* also addresses an array of pressing questions: How do we make sense of fragments that will never add up to a whole? What is the alchemy for converting scarcity and need into artistry and passion? What roles does beauty play amid violence, damage, and constraint? And how might individual efforts to mend compete with or complement collective forms of mending?

While writing *Mendings*, I have gathered discarded and adored bits of family texts and textiles, revisited childhood letters and journals, and filled my apron with offerings from friends: a poem about greeting oneself and a poem about shoes; beautiful passages from Virginia Woolf; essays about clothing, parent/child relationships, family photographs, wounds, prodigal daughters, and peacocks. I have wrestled with friends' crucial questions ("Is everything mending?" "When is mending a form of discarding?") and accompanied my students as they wrestle with their own pressing questions about dress and redress. Through my woolgathering—bending, extending, shaking out the air—I have come to understand why a young girl's nightgown, an enslaved woman's homemade buttons, an incarcerated woman's burnt uniform, and a faded dress bedecked with visible mending deserve to be gathered, and honored, in a single apron.



Bits of beauty created by artists in my own family adorn the pages of *Mendings*: my mother's paintings, my niece's ornaments and sketches, my husband's photographs, my sister's pencil drawing, and my own knitting, quilting, sewing, and artwork. One weekend in 2018, our house was transformed into an artist colony as my husband, niece, and a family friend took photos, doodled, stitched, sketched, and made rubbings of textured clothing to include in *Mendings*. Occasionally pausing to share homemade sour cherry pie and butter pecan ice cream, we'd peruse our family keepsakes, recount funny stories, and reminisce about times of blossoming and times of brokenness, cherishing the chance to be just where we wanted to be: in it, mending with people we love, finding beauty and connection through our sifting and sorting. The weekend reminded me of the labor, time, and material commitment that mending requires, the multigenerational, roll-up-your-sleeves work necessary for addressing the presence of the past. It reminded me, too, that my own keepsakes are communal: the offspring of many hands, minds, and hearts, part of a collective effort to tend to, and mend, the brokenness that surrounds us.

You're given just so much to work with in a life and you have to do the best you can with what you got. That's what piecing is. The materials is passed on to you or is all you can afford to buy . . . that's just what's given to you. Your fate. But the way you put them together is your business. You can put them in any order you like. —ANONYMOUS TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN QUILTER, quoted in Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing" (1986)



Searching for what's necessary and what can be discarded, I gather bits of text and textile. Themes begin to take shape: my fusion with my mother, my lifelong efforts to connect with my father, my ongoing attempts to grow around and between the gaps, absences, and holes. Piece by piece, I start stitching fragments together. A place for everything and everything in its place.

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Notes

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- 1 Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook,” 133.
- 2 Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds,” 69.

SELVEDGE I

An earlier version of “Selvedge” appeared in a much different form in *Entropy Magazine* (September 2018).

- 1 “Selvedge.” *Merriam-Webster.com*, accessed April 22, 2014, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/selvage>.
- 2 Paul Simon’s “Mrs Robinson” is part of the soundtrack for the 1967 film *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, dir.).
- 3 M. Friedman, “Experiencing a Knitting Disaster?”
- 4 Warwick and Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame*, 116.
- 5 Butler, “Joy of Flying,” 11.
- 6 Katchadourian, *Mended Spiderweb* series.
- 7 Warwick and Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame*, 119, 206.
- 8 Kober, “Two Sisters Married,” 18.
- 9 In the spirit of mending, I want to note that my foster brother—whom I last saw almost fifty years ago—was a child who had sustained severe abuse and neglect prior to entering the foster care system. He was a hurt child who hurt another child in an effort to satisfy his many emotional and psychological needs. Our intertwined stories illustrate the ripple effects of both harm and mending: how harm can engender harm and how everyone involved in circles of harm shares a need for mending.
- 10 Sarah Ensor alerted me to the history of the ginkgo tree, which appears in fossils from 270 million years ago. Thanks to their resistance to disease

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