

Poems of Confabulation

by

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My dearest Antonio,
here it is:
the first of so many things—
along with my life—
that I dedicate to you.

사랑해요

And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was,
how much was mine to keep.

–Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Abstract

This creative project, consisting of ten poems, aims to illustrate the effects of confabulation on memory. In addition, each poem is accompanied by epigraphs, diary entries, and commentary sections inspired by Alexander Pope and his moral essays, also known as *Epistles to Several Persons*. In this way, the project attempts to make use of polyvocality, or rather, the mingling of multiple speakers surrounding each piece. This element relates to confabulated memory, as it often feels as though several versions of the past could be, or are, true all at once with no real way of discerning fact from misremembering.

Introduction

Throughout my life I have experienced large gaps in my memory. Entire years came and went, and I cannot remember them. When I started to attend university, I found myself surrounded by people who had a million stories to tell about high school, their family, and all the trouble they got into. I, on the other hand, felt like I was always starting stories I could never quite finish, or rather, I realized halfway through telling them that what I was saying never actually happened.

In August of 2017, I was sexually assaulted at a party in my best friend's bed. Most victims forget how it all happened; however, it is one of few events in my life I remember in excruciating detail. I'm not sure if I should feel grateful for that or not.

The assault, I believe, was the catalyst of my confabulation.

After going to therapy for a few years, I learned that people deal with grief, trauma, and rejection in a variety of ways. One of those methods is by, essentially, "editing" the past in order to cope. Mental illnesses like depersonalization disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, among many others can affect one's memory (Wiggins). However, people free of mental illness have been reported to do the same sort of editing and erasure of their memories. This is called *confabulation*: a type of memory error in which gaps in a person's memory are unconsciously filled with fabricated, misinterpreted, or distorted information (Triviño). When people confabulate, they are confusing what they have imagined with memories.

In a way, I suppose my experience with confabulation began as a trauma response—maybe it was easier to live in a false reality, or create a usable past for myself, rather than facing the real one head on (Olick). I think the brain, even a completely

healthy one, knows that sometimes this is a way to cope; it takes a big red pen and starts marking things out in our memory.

With that in mind, my intention behind this project was to create a poetic correlative for the parts of my memory that feel hazy, that in retrospect, I now know to be fabricated. The process of confabulation is unconscious; however, when one realizes one's memories do not line up with reality, one does not move from misremembering to remembering clearly, but instead moves from misremembering to an awareness that misremembering has occurred. These poems, then, are an attempt to approach the impact of that realization on my relationship to certain memories.

Because confabulation creates multiple narratives—the usable past and the actual past—for the academic portion of the project, I learned about polyvocality and how to weave multiple voices into a single story. The usable past is displayed in poetic format, while the commentary sections are an attempt to recover and describe past events as they actually occurred and how I understand them now.

Alexander Pope's *Epistles to Several Persons* include supplementary passages alongside the primary text, such as arguments, advertisements, commentary, glosses, notes, and epigraphs. These additional elements—specifically the commentary sections—help contextualize the primary work. By including the accompanying Pope-inspired sections into my thesis, not only am I striving to give necessary background to my poems, but also utilizing polyvocality and establishing multiple narratives throughout each poem, which intensifies the feelings of confabulation.

Closure Is a Myth

Why did I feel more myself while reaching for him, my hand midair, than I did
having touched him?

—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

When he messages me on Thanksgiving Day,
my mind races back to mid-September:
the air turning cool and sour like stale beer,
the photographs of another woman
turned face down,
the fight with my family
when they realize where I've been.

Love seemed then
like a vicious and roaming thing—
stalking me, driving me to paranoia.

When an old boyfriend is taking a break
from writing his suicide letters,
I am sitting in the grocery car lot wasting
gasoline on him again.
The clouds hang low while I listen
to him weep.

He feels *sorry*
for having loved someone else—
for reminiscing on their rendezvous
in the woods, their bodies hidden away
from the rest of the world,
while he was with me.

While he was hiding me too.

What does he believe I can give to him now
after he has left me with nothing?
What does he believe I gain from him admitting
that he *could have really loved me*?

When I see my rapist at the cinema,
he is pouring popcorn into a bucket,
using the same hands that slapped
my face when I was
Sixteen.

He sees both as a service performed
for me.
What else have those hands done since then?

When he looks up, he does not speak.
I doubt he even recognizes
me.
But we stare into each other's eyes, and
I try with one glance to force him
to remember.

When I wake up each morning, my head resting
in the crook of my husband's arm,
I do not feel affirmed.
I do not feel better.

Commentary

15 May 2020

I believe my life could have taken two very different paths this year—or even in high school. Maybe that's why I felt so awful then. I didn't allow myself to see how bad it all was on paper, how my life was changing in some impossible way. I could barely allow myself to think about what happened, let alone write it down. I was always reconsidering my feelings and saw everything I did as childish melodrama. In reality, deep pain and fear were consuming what little consciousness I had left.

I get flashes of memories. It all comes back so suddenly with little warning. How long will that happen? How long will I be afraid to remember?

A therapist told me once that the problems we cannot fix in one relationship, we carry into the next. We try so hard to play God and never learn that there's no such thing. The problem I had with my abuser was that he didn't respect me, he didn't love me. Nevertheless, I believed what he was doing was respectful and loving. Violation was my

model for love. And so, for years afterward, I sought out men who I knew couldn't give me those things either. I tried to convince them to love me anyway.

Last November, the three men discussed in this poem all either tried to contact me, or I ran into them in public. It felt like the world was testing me—making me face old demons I barely remembered, mistakes I wanted to forget, and said, “I dare you.” I can never be certain that what I'm doing is the right thing. It's so easy to second guess myself. This poem reflects on how, even though I am in a healthier place, I still doubt myself and wonder if I am making the right choices.

Closure is a myth because the past never really ends.

I cannot treat the past as if it is some far away thing, walking farther and farther off into the distance. But rather, it is a collection of the things I carry with me. Those past traumas and deep-seated doubts still affect me and my current relationships, especially the one I have with myself.

Drag Queens and I Aren't So Different

'Feminine' was a test like some witch trial she was preordained to fail.

—Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*

The drag queens *do* “woman” so much better than I can.
Their false lashes and fake nails came in goodie bags
from a party—
no—

a life

I wasn't invited to.

I do not feel like a woman but more so the men
lying
under all the makeup—
tall and soft and yearning

to be something different.

I watch my boyfriend watch them
lip syncing and voguing in six-inch stilettos,
drowning in fringe and sequins and dollar bills.
He is mesmerized by their deception—
a performance of femininity I could never
muster up the courage to act out.

Self-described woman crossdressing as a woman.

I watch my boyfriend watch them
throw Mardi Gras beads and sashay and
all the while I wonder if
they change into street clothes when they leave the club.
If the things that make them special
also turn them into targets.

Do we both crave to be cut up into little pieces?
And if so, I suppose

the drag queens and I aren't so different.
We are both pretending to be the women
we weren't born to be
and making up the dance as we go along.

Commentary

27 February 2022

...it feels gross to compare myself to people like her. But in a way it's hard for me to not see that confidence—whether it's real or fake—as something I wish I had.

Maybe I'm more beautiful and feminine than I realize. After dealing with this dysphoria for so long, it's hard for me to believe what I see in photographs and mirrors. My face is always changing. When women look at me, I'm afraid they don't see me as one of them—like I'm an imposter. I'm something they can't name or place.

After the drag show, I tell myself not to cry under the Hustler Hollywood sign, but I do it anyway. The red neon letters illuminate the entire parking lot, the black sky goes on infinitely behind it. It is so endless, and I am so small in comparison that I silently beg for it to swallow me up. I am barely twenty-one and for the first time I feel it.

My boyfriend is fixing the front bumper of his car. I am crying under the sign in the rain, overwhelmed because I don't remember what I look like. I'm overwhelmed because, through the window, I see pretzels with women's faces contorted into a million different shapes, and tabletops covered in objects I have never seen before. It is February. I pull my overcoat tightly around me.

I have no idea what any of this is or means or costs. And when I look back at my boyfriend, using packing tape to keep his car from falling apart, I have no idea what this relationship is or means or is costing me.

What will happen when he finds out I'm a fraud?

I don't remember ever feeling like a woman, and yet I wake up every morning and dress like one anyway. The naked women on the DVD covers do not remind me of

myself. I see myself more in the men—lock-jawed, focused, angry. But even so, I have no idea what they must be thinking. They probably aren't.

Looking into the women's eyes, it is easy to tell what they want.

When I stare down at my hands, they look like someone else's.

Don't we all just want to feel desired?

Ely, Minnesota

It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory... But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The water looks like crude oil
this time of night.
The deer come out and
overturn lily pads with the tips of their noses.
Dew clings to cattails then drips
onto my flowing skirt
when I brush against the overgrown plants.

I run barefoot across the endless lawn,
the fireflies like fallen stars,
floating around on earth.
They are tired of the darkness, the distance
between themselves and us.

But I am tired of Ely—
the empty swimming pools
and mosquitos the size of vultures.
Sweaters in summer and the blinding reflection
of the sun bouncing off the water.
Blueberry lemonade
that keeps me wanting more.

From my kayak—
bright red like a sunburn—
I watch bald eagles feed their children.
I wonder how long it would take
for me to sink to the bottom.

The water looks like crude oil
this time of night.
I sit on the bank and strike a match.
I watch it burn up in my hands.

Commentary

20 July 2020

After moving around so much, it's hard to know what "home" is supposed to feel like. I always catch myself saying the word but not understanding what it means—the weight of it. Maybe home isn't the place that feels most familiar, but the place that feels the safest. The safest place to be is where you feel like yourself.

If that's the case, I think Minnesota is home. It is so unfamiliar to me yet somehow second nature. I feel at peace.

Every town in northern Minnesota is tucked between endless trees in the exact same way, indistinguishable from one another. Ely, Tower, Virginia. It makes no difference what you call them. They're all comprised of one long stretch of road. Antique tourist traps and tiny, torn-up houses are scattered on either side of the street in equal measure. Kabetogama is so small, they have "town" in quotation marks on their city hall.

The itinerary is the same, too. Every day, tourists go canoeing and fishing. In the early morning, they pick berries in a thick sweater, collecting blood-and-wine-colored stains on the cuffs of their sleeves. By two o'clock they strip down to nearly nothing, paddle across water so blue they swear it's made of sky. They wear wool socks to bed.

This can't be how real Minnesotans live, can it? They go to offices and fill out spreadsheets. They wear suits and sleep in beds that are theirs. Maybe, like them, I love Ely but I get restless and burnt out. And maybe, just like me, their home is somewhere far away from where they live.

I See God

When my friends leave, when I have to let go, when this entire town is wiped off the map, I want it to hurt. Bad. I want to lose. I want to get beaten up. I want to hold on until I'm thrown off and everything ends. And you know what? Until that happens, I want to hope again.

—Mae Borowski, *Night in the Woods*

At the end of summer,
turmeric turns into mustard stains snailing down your shirt,
tangerine peels are composted into pumpkin seeds, and
strawberry jam tastes like merlot in our mouths.

I feel baptized
by the stone path behind my grandfather's workshop,
by the handprints made with brown paint on dinner plates,
by the grass stains on your new shoes.

At the end of summer
I have hope,
that you savor my name as it leaves
your mouth, that we both fight sleep to stay on the line—
that the present is mine to keep.

The Catholic church is open twenty-four hours
but so is the diner
and so is your door.

You know which one I choose every time.

At the end of autumn,
I am holding on
to smoke and the bruise-colored bags
under my eyes. Food is rotting in the fridge
while the laundry spins, and I feel nauseous—
dizzy with apology.

But I still have hope
in the nutmeg trails along the countertop,
in the crunching of the leaves when I kick them
and the clouds rolling by,
folding over themselves—
in the way I throw salt over my shoulder.

I see God
in the moonlight passing through the stained-glass windows,
in the chocolate shake and sweet potato fries
just for me—

in the way I don't go there anymore.

Commentary

23 May 2020

This friendship is getting exhausting, as I'm always mitigating and downplaying my emotions. I'm not allowed to feel anything unless she says I'm allowed to. I can't be upset around her—or at her—because she spins it back around on me. I'm miserable and yet I follow her with blind loyalty. This is worse than any romantic relationship I've ever been in—the power a person can have on you even when it's platonic. You put all your trust into someone... what good does it ever do?

The friendship discussed in this poem was entirely a confabulation. To survive it, I rewrote history seconds after it was made. I made constant excuses for someone who didn't care about my agency and the harm she was causing, the control she had over me. She believed I lived for her.

A big part of the manipulation I was subjected to was that I wasn't allowed to feel my emotions. Every negative thing she said, I couldn't react to, or she would flip everything around and blame it on me. I wanted to hurt, I wanted to get beat up, because that meant I was truly living, feeling every emotion for what it truly was. But instead, I kept convincing myself things were okay, lying to myself and drowning out the truth.

Things ended because one day I just stopped reaching out, stopped feeding into the game. And in return she stopped trying to talk to me, too. She became a distant memory almost overnight, a nightmare I was lucid enough to wake myself from. Unlike the rest of the volatile relationship, the end was almost too easy; there was no huge falling out, no argument that replays in my mind every day. The most draining friendship of my life simply stopped because I disappeared into thin air.

But the memories don't. There were good times, I know, but those parts never really stay. It's the painful ones that are burned into our memories.

I cannot recall a single time I walked into her door, but I do remember every time she convinced me to stay. I don't remember how I got through the pain of missing her, of finally letting go, but I do remember one day waking up and not thinking about her as soon as I opened my eyes. There's hope in that.

My Mother's Voice

There is a gaping hole perhaps for all of us, where our mother does not match up with "mother" as we believe it's meant to mean and all it's meant to give us.

—Michele Filgate, *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About*

When it's lunchtime in Warsaw,
and so, I cannot call Her,
I try to remember the sound of my Mother's voice.

She is short-haired and long-winded—
Like a chihuahua. Like a drunk poet.
Like me.

When the market stalls close in Kraków,
and everyone retires to bed—
when my feet throb from the cobblestone,
and every Polish word She taught me
turns to sawdust—

I have this image of Her in my mind.
It hangs like a mobile over my head:

She is standing in the kitchen,
Her mouth hanging perpetually open,
but when She begins to speak
there is nothing.
She is silently spitting up blonde hair
like fur balls stuck to Her tongue.

There are no words. Only the sound
of the thrushes outside my window, and ceramic
plates being stacked in the cabinet
while I long for sleep.
Melted snow clinging, climbing
up my jeans. Radio static.
A hot iron pressed against my palm.
A hymn hummed in a tune I've never heard,
so I convince myself it's fake.

I cannot remember the sound of my Mother's voice.

Pushing the image out of my mind,
I approach the bridge and imagine instead
my Mother drowning in the Vistula.
But I know She is home—
fast asleep—
so far away from where I am, and
so quiet is Her breathing
that She looks dead.
 I can almost swear
 She is dead.

I want to ask Her if this is all my fault.
But I wouldn't be able to hear Her answer.

Commentary

12 June 2019

Mom isn't answering the phone when I call. I know the time is right, it's the middle of the day in America. When Dylan came home from Spain, he found out his dad was dead. No one called to tell him. I'm scared of things like that—of people deciding *for me* what I should or shouldn't know...

I sometimes wonder what she was like at my age. She tells me so little about herself that she feels like a stranger. I can't imagine being married so young. Did she ever want to travel to Europe? She's never said so. I'm not sure if she's ever had dreams like that...

Did her life stop when she brought home new ones?

The summer before college, I traveled across central Europe for two weeks.

In Berlin, I watched an unlit candle melt, scalded by sunlight pouring in through an open window. My legs chafed so badly they looked like strawberry fields. Rain flooded into my unzipped backpack, my copy of *Call Me by Your Name* ruined.

In Dresden I did cartwheels on the cobblestone. I ate tapas and got sick by the Elbe when I thought about all the people buried underneath me.

In Kraków, I pretended to pray in St. Mary's Basilica. On my knees, hands folded, I peeked out of the corner of my eye to catch a glance at the turquoise ceiling sprinkled in stars.

In Budapest, my roommate and I sat on a balcony ledge, my legs dangling off the side, and thought about how much I missed my mother. The sky was gray, and we watched an elderly couple dance in the street. I stole a rosary from a gift shop to give my mom as a souvenir. Nothing felt sacred.

On the way home, passing through Brussels, I had a panic attack in the airport bathroom. What will happen when she dies? How quickly will she fade from my memory?

Everything on the trip made me think of my mother, and yet, as the days went by I quickly started to forget what she looked and sounded like. I spent eighteen years living down the hall from her, and still, she felt more foreign to me than the ornate cemeteries we drove past in Slovakia. It's hard to explain.

She seems more like a mirage than my mother—something so close and nourishing, and yet, I can never quite reach her.

Stray

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening...
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

A swarm of faces—
whose names I can't remember—
countdown backward from ten.
Some of them kiss each other.
Others run outside to cough up smoke.

I take a shot of something—
its name I can't remember either—
and spend the night half asleep
among a pile of bodies.

This tangle of hands and hearts:
they wonder what is to come.
they wonder what is just outside of their reach.

A pair of arms throw a stray cat into the house.
People touch her like she belongs.

Happy new year.

Commentary

31 December 2019

I don't know much of anyone here tonight. Mike doesn't either, but he's letting them in anyway.

This is the first real New Year's Eve party I've ever been to, and here I am, hiding in the bathroom. This is so embarrassing. I'm too shy for this type of stuff... as soon as I got here my eyes started getting heavy.

There is so much *wanting*, at a college party. People want attention and alcohol and other people to hold on to. They want to get high and force everyone to listen to their favorite song. I just want to go to bed. I want to be wrapped up, warm, in thick blankets. And I want the uncertainty in these friendships to end. I am eighteen, and everything is so fleeting.

I don't know the friends who threw this party anymore—maybe I never really did. My memories of them are formed solely by neon moments laced with acid I never took and late nights I was forced to stay awake through. On New Year's Eve that year, as well as the one that followed, I didn't even drink, and yet I remember almost nothing. In big groups of people, I black out from pretending to be someone I'm not. Everyone is just shapes moving around that I'm trying to keep happy.

For the most part, these parties felt nice at the moment. I felt interesting and alive and like I had people in my life who truly cared for me. But neon moments, too, grow dim from far away. They are corrupted by the aftermath, the realization that my friends and I didn't know each other at all.

Summertime Unspooling

Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

—Pablo Neruda

The sun is hanging low—
like a ripe lemon bending on the branch
almost kissing the ground—
like a peach being sliced on the veranda,
juice dripping from your lips,
flesh falling from in between your fingers
and onto the cool cement.

The summer seems to always slip away like this.

The sun is hanging low.
While we paddle downstream,
the warm breeze blows your hair about
your face, so I brush it from your eyes.
Afternoon light envelopes your skin.
 Not a single cloud.
 Not a single tree.
Head back, eyes closed, mouth wide open—
 laughing—
so placid I no longer question if *this is it*.

If *this* is what laughing in the face of death is like.

The sun is hanging low,
 but we unspool time
and ride our bicycles into town,
collect quarters from the parking lots,
then hop into sauna-like phone booths
and dial long distance calls in which
 I beg my mother to let me stay,

 and you beg your parents
 to stay married.

Lying on an old duvet, we
eat raspberries off each other's fingertips
and shield our eyes from the sun—
hanging low.

I make promises into the nape of your neck.
Your face is wet. I do not ask why.

The summer always slips away like this.

Commentary

25 June 2021

I regret not keeping a more detailed journal of our first months together. It has been a whirlwind of excitement and curiosity and for the first time in—forever, actually—I feel seen and heard and known. It’s best to not get too invested, but I can’t help it. Going to his parents’ house feels real, normal. I am shy and nervous around them because I want to impress them so badly, but I feel more comfortable there than anywhere else.

...in hushed whispers he told me I was beautiful and that he would miss me so much. He said my name, and I felt tears form in my eyes because I knew that he meant it, and because I refused to tell him I love him.

If I’m not ready to say it, no one’s ready to hear it. It’s not my story to tell anyway.

What I will say, though, is when a love I admired so much started to unravel—or rather, had been undone for a long time—it was difficult to remember that my own love was still something worth fighting for. In the car on the way home, the sky felt as though it was caving in, and the only sound was the tires rolling along the highway. Intrusively I asked myself, “What are we doing here? What is the point of all this?”

Why can’t it always be summer?

The Mugshot

We don't remember what we want to remember. We remember what we can't forget.

—Lisa Taddeo, *Three Women*

Do you remember me?
the photograph asks as I stare at it.
Hair sandy and parted across the forehead.
Smile soft and timid as if
nothing is wrong.

Nothing is ever wrong.

Transfixed, I sift through the smoke
of a past life I built out of missed calls and excuses—
a past life you built out of empty bottles.
Liquor on your breath,
it unfurls in the air like a red flag.

Do you remember me?

I remember
when you parked your car in the left turn lane
at a four-way intersection.
You walked through the traffic, craving
bread to soak up all the wine in your stomach.
Surviving by some miracle.

I remember
when your hair smelled like rosemary.
when you vowed to kill me and kicked in the headlights.
when you traded us for ecstasy and never came back.

Do you remember me?
the photograph asks as I stare at it.

And when everyone asks, I tell them
I remember you as an addict.
I never pictured you as a rapist.

Commentary

11 December 2020

I haven't heard from him in a month now. Every text goes unanswered. He seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. I feel in my heart that I will get closure in the future, but I need to be patient. Unless he got himself killed, which I don't doubt. But I don't want to think about that. If circumstances were different, I could've done more.

I'll always keep saying that though, won't I?

I found my ex-boyfriend's mugshot at four in the morning. It was sent to me by a friend. If anything, I believed the reason for arrest would be DUI. I'd be disappointed but not surprised and go back to sleep. But, of course, that wasn't the case.

I was spending the night at my apartment alone while my roommate was out of town. He doesn't know where I currently live, and yet, I became so paranoid and afraid that he would find me, I locked every door and hid in the bathroom. I stared at my face in the mirror until I started to look like a stranger.

In the same way I made excuses for my friends, I also excused my ex-boyfriend's behavior. He wouldn't text me back for days. He would miss every call. Similarly to my confabulated friendships, I also had to confront the fact that I didn't know my partner like I thought I did. As much as I blamed his alcoholism and substance abuse issues on myself—that I wasn't doing enough to help him—I can't blame myself for his arrest. I was never capable of fixing or saving anyone other than myself.

The Rusted Bed Frame

What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves—our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies.

—Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

Your mother laughs from the stove when I tell her
she looks pretty
in a silk, purple dress and wedges. I ask
Where are you going? And she says *to sleep—
this is my nightgown!*

My mother and I shared clothes once—
before I grew into something she couldn't recognize.
She gets angry when I lie. I call her *spineless* and give her
a black eye.
She keeps loving me anyway.

Your mother cooks crab rangoon and reads my fortune.
She gossips like a teenage girl and takes photographs
of everything.
She works too hard to ever keep the house clean.
I never want to see her cry.

My mother bakes cake and gets mad at herself for eating
it. She sings along with the radio and messages me
every morning.
She works too hard keeping the house clean.
I hate when I make her cry.

The rusted bed frame half-buried in your parents' backyard
reminds me that this is all you've ever known—
that you will always have a place to sleep
next to a mother you have always loved.

I can still remember the addresses
of all the houses I have lived in
but never could quite call *Home*.
I tell myself to forget everything
but her.

Commentary

7 August 2021

Women are defined more so by their ability to be good mothers than to be good people. If women don't have kids, they are seen as selfish and have wasted their life. They must have commitment issues. They must be cold and unaffectionate, tainted in some way by their own parents and pasts.

Motherhood is a trap. It is a maze with no exit.

A game I don't want to participate in.

When my relationship with my own parents felt too broken to piece back together, I projected my idea of the perfect family onto another. I convinced myself that everything in their lives was fine, overlooking details and pretending the issues I saw didn't exist. They never kept secrets like my family. They confronted their problems, unlike mine. They talked at the dinner table, telling old stories and laughing. Happy, whole families do that stuff.

But it's so easy to get lost in my own expectations—to lose sight of the truth right in front of me. I misremembered my own family as monsters, yet again forgetting the happy moments we shared. This poem tries to demonstrate that the mother I idealized is, at the end of the day, just a person in the same way my own mother is. It is easier for me to ridicule someone I have known for twenty-one years. I know her biggest flaws and the nuances of her every feeling.

Everything is prettier from far away.

What Is and What Could've Been

And I sit here without identity: faceless. My head aches.

—Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

In preschool
we are lined up
tallest to shortest.
I am always in the back
surrounded by boys who look
and speak and dress and play more like me
than the girls do.

In primary school
my friend and I play House.
*You're bigger and taller, so you're the husband,
okay?*
And yet, I find myself sitting on her lap,
her arms wrapped around my waist as I kiss her cheek.
*Can boys be soft too?
Can they be gentle and tender too?*
But I never ask.

In junior high
I watch my mother stand in front of the pantry,
her hand on the knob frozen.
*I don't need anything, she says to the air, to the tile floor—
and by extension to me.*
This is how I learn control,
how I learn to think small
as *real* women do.

In high school
a boy tells me he will date me if I lose weight.
He is the same boy who assaults me
before I drop a single pound.
Yet I am proud of myself for it—
for having done nothing to deserve attention.
My journal reads: *25 August 2017*
I am so beautiful; he wants me even in my sleep.

In college
I see miniskirts and plunging necklines,
averted eyes, and strawberry tendrils

as trophies I worked hard to compete for.
How they serve to remind everyone that
I am a woman.
I see them as trophies until I realize
the only person who needs reminder of my womanhood
is me.

When you are young
and stuck somewhere between *what is*
and *what could've been*,
you are haunted by questions you do not
have the vocabulary to answer.

You are left to men and women—
who feel as though they are men and women—
and to question yourself makes them feel
as if you are questioning them too.

Commentary

15 April 2021

As a child, the world is so binary it's almost ironic. We put children in these invisible cages, and as long as their toys and clothes and bedrooms are pink or blue—depending on their anatomy—they will turn out alright. But so many of us grew up occupying this “in between” place. I was too scared to talk about that because I never knew it could exist. I have so many questions from my youth left unanswered, things I should've felt safe to ask but didn't. I can't remember them now.

The drag show I talked about earlier in this project is just a microcosm of the body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria I have wrestled with my entire life, the impossible beauty standards placed on women and how out of place I felt, as though I didn't measure up. This poem takes a step back and tries to capture vignettes from my entire life thus far.

Identity is so closely linked to memory. It's important to know who I was in the past and be able to see the ways in which I have grown through difficult times. But because of confabulation and my lack of self-image, it is oftentimes hard to see the growth and progress I have made, as I forget who I once was.

Nevertheless, I'm starting, slowly and surely, to piece the past back together.

Coda

At the beginning of April, when I finished this project, I felt so emotionally drained by the weight and depth of the work that I had to take a step back and push it out of my mind. Pretend it never existed. Looking through old diaries brought back a rush of memories, so many things I had forgotten and rewritten over the last few foggy years. I felt as though I could never write again, and in a way, I was fine with that.

But a couple weeks later, I attended the Southern Literary Festival at the Mississippi University for Women and had the privilege of speaking to Alabama's poet laureate, Ashely M. Jones. I asked her how to reconcile and move on, how to write through guilt and shame—not only about being from the South, but in general. She told me the best place to start was to face shame head on, stare it down in the mirror. Sometimes that's all we can do. In that moment, I realize that's exactly what I had done by completing this poetry collection. I think that's what this project's purpose has always been: an attempt to reflect on the guilt and shame I feel about my past and my identity, learning to confront it in the mirror.

I've mentioned several times throughout this project, such as in "Drag Queens and I Aren't So Different," that I have a difficult time making sense of what I really look like, especially in mirrors. Just like my reflection, my relationship to guilt and shame has shape-shifted, taking on many different appearances throughout this project—many things about myself I am still learning to recognize.

I am wrestling a bear and I think I am winning.

Although this thesis focuses on confabulation, the hardest part has been to lie. Filing through my journals, I read so many things I wanted to include, but that made the narratives too long, detailed, and at times boring. Some information I wanted to share was just too painful. I believe poets are truth-tellers, and therefore, I have the desire to be as honest as possible—but not everyone deserves to know all the details, especially if I'm not ready to tell them. I don't owe anyone honesty if it comes at my own expense.

Throughout this process, I've uncovered truths about the past and myself that I want to keep for myself. I think I deserve this small but cathartic victory.

Maybe it isn't about beating the bear, but instead making peace with it.

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