Unexpected Intimacies: A Scrapbook of Critical Fictions

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in English

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2024

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To the women writers of the American South,

whose writing I have held in my hands, and so, their stories have shaped my life.

But especially for Miriam.

Because we belong to this tradition—a sacred burden—

and your blood is my blood. Isn't that a miracle?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Fred Arroyo for everything, especially your trust and guidance. This fleeting, ephemeral time of my life was full of vivid, urgent meaning. You gave me the tools to create this world of fiction. Each time I take out these writing tools I will think of your generosity. Dr. Marion Hollings, I am grateful for the armfuls of eagerness and excitement you have contributed to my projects. Our collaborations through the years serve as a treasured reminder of where I have been and where I will go. And all the flowers for Amie Whittemore, who planted the seed of my writing life, showed me how to water it, and stood by to watch it grow. I wake up in gardens because of you.

Huge thank yous to my incredible instructors—Dr. Eric Detweiler, Dr. Jennifer Wachtel Kates, and Dr. Kathleen Therrien. Of course, thank you to Deborah Bohn and Russ Turpin, my green lights and biggest cheerleaders since the beginning. I have deep respect for my mentor, Dr. Joe Mitchell, whose classroom leadership and openness to my pedagogical ideas have made me so hopeful for my future in academia. And to my mentor, Dr. Roberta Chevrette, I marvel at your thoughtfulness, intellect, and love for this world despite everything it has given us to grieve. I owe you the moon.

To my found family: Hannah Peterson and Jillian King, who continue to heal me. Thank you for it all. (One day, I will win a game of Egyptian Ratscrew.) Emiliya Mailyan, who understands me in every language, Спасибо. Many of my threads lead back to you. My love from A to Z: Amanda Dill and Žofie Wright, whom I tell all of my half-formed thoughts, dreams, and obsessions, and you treat them like poetry. I am overjoyed to share this project with you both; it is a long, happy hug I hurled through the desert to reach your doors. And, of course, thank you to Heather Parker and the most challenging years of our academic lives. Years we shared in a tiny apartment cooking meat and potatoes. Laughing, crying, and analyzing reality TV. I needed you. And these years. And that place.

To my family since forever—Sherry, Shane, Tyler, and Melody—who inspire so much of what I write and everything I am. I *love* you, and I hope you feel that in the words and images I have written here. And to Gail—my grandmother, my namesake, and a lifelong librarian. You had no idea that each time I crawled onto your lap, following along with the picture books, I was also falling in love with the language. Your legacy and love is my lifeline. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on works at the intersections of feminist theory, studies in writing process and craft, rhetoric, and contemporary literature, this thesis employs critical discourse analysis, close reading, and creative writing as methodologies to position creative writing as a rigorous academic pursuit that requires interdisciplinary knowledge to create compelling flash works. *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* by Guattari and Deleuze, *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing (Discussion in Contemporary Culture)* edited by Philomena Mariani, and *Workbook: Memos and Dispatches on Writing* by Steven Heighton are just a few titles that give this collection of multigenre-flash writings its theoretical backbone. In their own way, the flash works—flash fictions, prose poems, lyric essays, and hybrid writing—comprising this collection argue for the importance of minor literature's role in resisting existing master narratives by examining themes of grief, girlhood, community, queerness, loss, language, family, and desire. Rural American landscapes often serve as a backdrop, adding another critical lens through which these multigenre pieces can be interpreted, highlighting issues of religion, culture, and class struggle traditionally rooted in rural settings.

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> Fiction and theory can be merged, allowing readers to enjoy the fiction while consciously considering what the work is rhetorically, theoretically, and structurally trying to do. I will need to work on writing this way, which is my only concern. (Maybe I am already doing it and not realizing it?)
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> —Abigail Wells, Letter 1, May 2024

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My first attempt at a writing life began as a poet. I was drawn to the lyrical language, vivid imagery, and gut-wrenching voltas at work in the form. In such few words, the poet provides a glimpse into another world. Even the poem's structure was interesting to me; I enjoyed playing with enjambment, punctuation, and varying lengths of lines and stanzas. Every action taken in poetry had to be justified and meaningful. Making these choices felt almost instinctual, laying a giant jigsaw puzzle on the table and seeing where each piece fit. The trial and error was not tedious but gratifying and fun.

The gift poetry gave me was, and still is, how it creeps back into my memory without warning. Carrying on in my daily life, I suddenly feel struck by an image I have read about in the past. A wild goose will always remind me of Mary Oliver. Ada Límon, the wild horses. Lucille Clifton, starshine and clay. It is never an entire story that sticks with me, but instead, these commonplace objects, animals, and images. Poetry is like holding the language up to a mirror and seeing my own reflection. The power is found in its brevity and despite its brevity. Poetry seemed to say *There you are! Welcome, welcome, come sit and chat. But do not get too comfortable.* It kept me on my toes. Loving and warm, then in an instant, equally jarring and wounding.

In a different vein, I was drawn to reading fiction throughout my life but never saw myself writing it. In truth, I thought I was not talented at creating fully fleshed-out characters. It was difficult for me to picture them as real people walking in the world amongst us. They all felt flat. I know writers who essentially see character before any other aspect of the story, and these characters speak to them. But I hear no voice other than my own. Setting, interesting plot points, lyrical language, thematically interesting ideas—these elements were easier for me to grasp; however, placing the people in those spaces was the hardest bit. I felt that, despite my growing interest in prose writing, I was forced to stick with poetry because I lacked imagination. I feared I was untalented.

However, after working with Dr. Arroyo, I realized I was not untalented but unaware. The world of flash fiction was like a language I had spoken at birth but grew to forget. I felt a rush of remembrance. Flash fiction gave me the opportunity to lean into what I knew best while also challenging me to expand my idea of how a story could be shaped. Along my journey, I realized that intentionality and the attention to detail I learned through poetry were just as crucial in flash. And unlike longer prose forms like the novel, vignettes and images were the focal point of the work, rather than watching a character develop and change over time. Simply put, there is no hero's journey. The flash form is not meant to provide readers with all the answers, which grants me the opportunity not to have all of them. Instead, I can allow readers to experience the poetry and story of flash works while intuiting and glimpsing the subtext to guide their reading and understanding.

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All genres require exigence. Each form has a function. Flash works are essential today because of the increased demands of the workplace—where our responsibilities feel ever-increasing, our leisure time ever-decreasing and our attention is pulled in every direction. Despite being overwhelmed and busy, flash offers the working class—and the privileged class alike—opportunities to engage with

literature in a bite-sized, manageable way. Some may call this a degradation of literature, but to many writers, the brevity of a work creates a "unity of effect" (Poe). Flash affords people the opportunity to engage with works of art in small bursts, such as on their commute to work. Additionally, "The Great American Novel" has been mythologized and discussed at length, but it is widely debated whether such a novel exists. Especially for those of us on the margins—whose lives have been fragmented and rattled by capitalism, poverty, and unjust laws, having the time to write a novel of this magnitude is a hefty, likely impossible investment of time—time that, ultimately, must be spent working to stay afloat and alive.

Regardless of length, it is often small, powerful scenes in a work of literature that leave readers breathless; why not make the entire piece the best part, leaving out all of the fluff? Flash's fragmentation and vignette style allows artists, not just readers, to explore new writing styles and play with the audience's expectations on the page. By writing flash works, I have challenged myself to write short but impactful pieces while also being accessible to those who have little time to read in an increasingly demanding workplace and world.

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As a writer, the economy, efficiency, and elegance of the flash is what I'm drawn to, as it is an art form that helps to represent—with brief impact—lives shaped by object and place, girlhood and family, Otherness and isolation, creativity and knowledge. The memos that follow focus on a variety of craft elements I learned throughout my time working with Dr. Arroyo. These elements greatly influence my writing and remain present in the forefront of my mind as I work to complete a piece. By establishing this vocabulary, we now speak the same language, and this language will guide you through the reading and interpretation of my flash collection. This way, you can see the intentionality behind these works and what they aim to achieve.

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1. In *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man,* Marshall McLuhan argues that medium is the message. Flash is a space in which content and form meet to tell a larger story; flash pieces are read as stories yet savored like poetry. Each word and detail is carefully included in a work of flash. By focusing on the form it allows me to carefully consider its contents.

2. As the name describes, a flash is an intensity of light, like a bolt of lightning in the night sky. Like taking a photo with a flashbulb, the snapshot developed from film. Stories reveal themselves as flashes or bursts of images. A dog bolting quickly past an open window. The shattering of a wine glass against the hardwood floor. A silent, knowing glance shared between siblings at the dinner table. We have so little room to work on the page that vignettes, fragmentation, and compression—among other elements—work together to create the images in which we meet our characters and characters meet one another. These images are ephemeral yet distinct, quick yet full of yearning and dripping in feeling, succinct yet sticky in the reader's mind. It is by focusing on the specific that we can create universal stories.

3. A central element of my flash works is crafted through the lens of Stacey D'Erasmo's *The Art of Intimacy: The Space Between.* D'Erasmo writes that readers come to understand characters—and characters come to understand each other—in "the space between." The space between is often a tension, conflict, or misunderstanding rooted in what brings them together:

> I have come to wonder, What's in that critical space between in fiction? Of what is it composed? What makes it "work" or not? One way into this delicate matter might be

> to look not so much at individual characters and their motivations or the outcomes of their yearnings and relationships, or even at their interactions per se, but at exactly what is in that space between them, the linkage. Another way to put this might be to say: Where do they meet? How does the text bring them together? What electricity do we feel from the juxtaposition? (D'Erasmo 11)

4. Through crafting powerful images, readers learn what makes characters vulnerable, what obstacles they are up against, and how they feel about themselves or others. This image can be a telling place, a moment where readers see a character for who they truly are rather than the facade they present to others. A moment where a narrator or character is presented in full, vulnerable honesty. The space between characters can be a telling place. As writers and readers, we meet characters *and* ourselves in the image. The image is a vehicle.

> This use of the image is more a sort of benevolent tyrant, or maybe a guru—the image reveals almost a spiritual connectedness underneath known by the author, but not necessarily the characters, or all the characters. It's an aquifer, the air that surrounds them, a sea of connection and interconnection. (D'Erasmo 39-40)

5. We write through the image. We meet in the image. To create a powerful space between, writers must be adaptable and inventive, using elements such as "the subjunctive, shared perspective, image, off-the-page implication, [and] the deployment of white space" to effectively demonstrate conflict amongst characters or to bring them together. (D'Erasmo 122)

6. The utilization of white space is a critical tool when compiling works into a collection. Separating your paragraphs with large breaks, including small em-dashes to differentiate time and place, or leaving entire pages between stories blank causes the reader to pause and think. It slows down the narrative's sense of time, or it asks readers to stare into the blank page and contemplate what they have read. A shared silence for meaning-making.

7. Because flash is malleable, allowing for rich, complex experiences and contradictions, writers are given immense stylistic freedom. *Brevity, compression, elision, fragmentation, subtext*, and *poetic language* are all elements utilized in flash forms that allow this freedom.

8. Regardless of how much a reader may want to narrow down further a piece's specific genre—prose poem, flash fiction, lyric essay—flash forms share many craft elements, and the distinctions between them blur. In this way, flash is queer and hybrid in nature—defying and subverting expectations, playing by its own rules. It is ever-expansive and changing, encompassing so much in such little space.

9. Steven Heighton further demonstrates in *Workbook: Memos and Dispatches on Writing* that flash is innately a hybrid genre. The subtitle *Memos and Dispatches* is oxymoronic—the banal meets the urgent. Simplistic form creates a flash of pressing meaning. Memos and dispatches are ephemeral and fleeting. Ephemeral writing, such as a flash work, is intrinsically ironic. The memory persists despite its form. We can find ephemeral moments within life's constants, too, as Vincent van Gogh said in a letter to his brother Theo, "*Ce qui ne passe pas dans ce qui passe.*" To discover in what fades what endures (van Gogh).

10. Fragmentation pervades our written world, yet it is often seen as improper or incomplete. Postcards, letters, diaries, scrapbooks. Bits of overheard conversation, an author's biography on a book jacket, handmade signs stapled to a telephone pole. Fragmentation thrives in these forms. To discredit the fragment as incorrect grammatically would be to cut off language at the knees. As Kim Stafford writes in *The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft*, "the writing life is all about faith in a fragment" (34).

11. Every story must have tension. Tension in flash exists between what a character thinks and what they actually do. How their actions and thoughts fall into misalignment. In the same way a character's actions and thoughts are fragmented, so too is our language. Short, staccato sentences riddle flash and have a home here. Fragments help us to understand what we believe and what we value. Because flash relies on fragmentation, readers are required to slow down. Take in each sensual, vivid detail, which can be lost in writing that involves longer, more complicated, and winding sentences. Every single word is valuable; therefore, each word is calculated, carefully chosen, pruned, and must be justified.

12. Fragmentation and brevity come together to create subtext. Flash writers have so little room with so few words that these words must be carefully chosen in order to clue readers in on the *real* story happening off the page. This tends to be the most complex part of writing flash—for me, at least. Not giving the reader all the answers but gesturing towards possibility. For this reason, flash work is an iceberg. The reader knows the story's plot, characters, and dialogue, but they do not see what lies beneath the surface. The subtext of the images we create, and what those images could represent, are the story.

13. Flash fiction is not about overt motivations or in-depth understandings of the *how* and *why*. Flash fiction is about movement from scene to scene. A person moving through time or space, one particular action or thought. Yes, flash relies on creating emotional, powerful images, but the story's effectiveness hinges on the successful movement between them. Like the volta found in poetry, this shift between two (or more) images *is* the story. In flash, exposition is clunky. Unnecessary. We need to find another way to convey information to our readers. We learn about characters through their shifting thoughts, subtle movements, and actions—whether we see them played out on the page or not. Flash picks us up at point A, starts driving us to point B, and abandons us on the way there. It trusts we know our way to our destination.

14. In *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Flash Fiction,* Michael Martone argues, "For the prose writer, the title is as close as he or she will get to writing a poem" (47). Titles should be crafted and chosen thoughtfully. An illumination of an image or theme that cuts to the emotional center of the story. A double meaning, a play on words. It should offer an additional tidbit of information or a clue that leads to the story's telling place or subtext. Perhaps an emotional center for the writing.

15. Similar to these memos and dispatches before you, the flash is a brief work full of urgent meaning. The goal is to capture the universal and lasting in ephemeral, fleeting moments.

Dispatch on Genre, Minor Literature, and Critical Fiction

> W.B. Yeats believed that we turn our arguments with the world into essays, our arguments with ourselves into poetry. But is his idea—for all its neat symmetry, its epigrammatic authority—true for all writers who work in both forms? Giving the question some thought, I realized my own arguments with the world, and with myself, are more likely to gel into a form that's neither essay nor poetry.
>
> –Steven Heighton, *Workbook: Memos & Dispatches on Writing,* p. 9

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In the fall of 2022, I began my first semester in MTSU's English Master's Program full of questions about my future career, English language, and myself. I was wrestling with what I wanted from the world, unable to clearly make out, too, what it wanted from me. I entered graduate school hoping to keep myself busy with no set goals other than to complete the degree. My path proved difficult when I realized I had no particular research interest in mind, and I watched as my older, more experienced peers worked on 100+ page documents about their incredible niche interests. It felt like they all knew the same scholars, read the same articles, and had been to many conferences. Having always been confident in my scholarly pursuits, I suddenly felt like a sickly fish in a small pond, surrounded by smart fish better at catching prey than I was. They were better adapted to being fish. I had never written a paper over twelve pages, but I loved being in the classroom—which was seemingly enough to keep me around. By getting my master's degree, I was attempting to prolong making decisions about my career and life because I was not ready to choose; however, I quickly learned that, even in my attempts to ignore selecting a particular path, I would still have to take one.

Entering graduate school as a freshly twenty-one-year-old, I, of course, felt greatly out of my depth. Not just in terms of immaturely comparing myself to my peers but also counting myself out before I

even had a shot to try. A major question I immediately faced was choosing between studying literature, the path I knew best, or pursuing rhetoric and theory—uncharted, challenging waters. Learning the craft of creative writing, too, of course, was always in the back of my mind; however, it felt nearly impossible to conceptualize pursuing creative writing in a program without an MFA option. Over time, as the prospect of completing a thesis inched ever closer, I wondered if I could find a clearing where these paths converged—my love for reading literature, my interest in craft, my experiences as a woman and feminist, and my new passion for rhetorical theory. An intersection or four-way stop. I realized that my love of creative writing, as well as my academic interests, were *both/and* not *either/or*. I did not—and still do not—know where my academic life ends and my "real" life begins. My interests are interdisciplinary, multigenre. A tapestry made up of threads from different areas of the academy and of my identity outside of it. As I have moved throughout this program, I realized that my peers and colleagues can likely say the same. Regardless of what they are researching or writing, there are pieces of their personal identity sewn inside the fabric of all they do, too. The shape of our stories just look different.

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In the spring of 2023, my second semester, I took a risk. I approached Dr. Arroyo about taking a Master's directed reading course with him, where I would sit in on his Beyond Flash Fiction undergraduate class in the fall and complete some additional work for graduate credit. Having never seen my writing before nor having had much conversation with me before this request, he agreed. This class provided me with new insight and proved to me why *not* applying to MFA programs two years before was actually a blessing in disguise. I needed to learn from Dr. Arroyo in a space I felt comfortable in—MTSU's Peck Hall—not halfway across the country in a town I had never set foot in, with no professors or writers I knew, let alone trusted with my work. I needed a community that

would support my out-of-the-box ideas. Peers and mentors who recognized my varied interests and wanted to help me combine them in my scholarship.

Before taking beyond flash fiction, I had no idea what the *craft* of a story meant; yet today, I am often more excited about studying craft than writing a story itself. Participating in Dr. Arroyo's course introduced me to Steven Heighton's *Workbook: Memos and Dispatches on Writing,* along with a handful of other amazing collections of flash works. In addition to attempting to marry my academic interests, I realized I, much like writer Steven Heighton, wrestled with fitting into the guidelines that definitions of genre are supposed to provide. Assimilating to the conventions of genre felt counterintuitive and limiting to me. I felt drawn to Heighton's work because it blurs genre, calling readers to question what content they consider to be critical and what they consider to be creative. His use of memos and dispatches serve as little glimpses into his mind, which was highly engaging. These notes-to-self can also serve as notes to other selves (Heighton 10). Through his memos to self, I felt he was speaking directly to me, too.

Workbook: Memos & Dispatches on Writing spoke to me in a way no book had before, because I, too, wished to reimagine how literary criticism and evaluation of craft meet creative writing. I was validated by knowing that other writers struggled to choose between poetry and prose. They found ways to blend lyrical and informative writing, brief passages full of intensity. Through my Master's creative writing classes with Dr. Arroyo, we worked to follow in the footsteps of Heighton and a myriad of other writers who pushed the boundaries of what genre could be by combining and blurring forms. Alongside *Workbook,* the most invaluable help came from the many books Dr. Arroyo recommended to me. From there, I discovered other books that would supplement these readings. Each book felt like a small gift contributing towards this final thesis project.

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Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí. / When he woke, the dinosaur was still there.

–Augusto Monterroso, "El Dinosaurio," *Obras Completas (y Otros Cuentos)*

As part of my additional work for Beyond Flash Fiction, Dr. Arroyo required me to read three books of my choice on craft. One of these books was Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium.* In *Six Memos,* Calvino describes lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency as new literary virtues, key elements at play in flash works. This series of lectures was inspired by Calvino's foresight about how literature was changing over to brief flash forms; he recognized that six-word or one-sentence stories could contain as much meaning as an epic poem. An example of such a powerful, one-sentence story is Augusto Monterroso's *El Dinosaurio,* featured above. It felt clear to me in this work that Calvino wrote *Six Memos* to prepare writers for a world in which stories needed to be limited to a single page or the size of a computer screen.

This slim book struck me because it was packed with dense, compelling notes on craft while also giving me insight into the cultural and technological moment Calvino was living in and the next one he was preparing others for. These six elements describe what Calvino found essential in modern works of fiction: Language carries weight, so do not use it in such a way that bogs down the story. Be clear and agile, move swiftly. Speak from a unique point of view. Prioritize imagination and fantasy, alternative ideas. Dream of a different world. From this book, I learned that the rising popularity of flash works forces us to consider how our forms of knowledge and creativity are changing—especially with readers inhabiting an ever-changing world in mind. Calvino gave me these tools as a way to begin my writing journey.

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For a moment, I would like to return to the initial epigraph in this dispatch and how Heighton relates Yates' quote to his own writing, because it is essential to my understanding of flash fiction. In *Workbook: Memos & Dispatches on Writing,* Heighton states that his arguments with the world and his arguments with himself often gel and merge together to create a hybrid form (9). Hybrid forms occupy a space between, blurring lines between prose and poetry, asking them to meet and mingle. It made me think about boxes and binaries—not just the strict categorization writers face when trying to promote and publish their work, but long before that, as they sit down to write and confront which genre to pursue. In our daily lives, as well as our writing, people feel pressure to conform and fit into these same binaries and boxes. As our collective understanding of identities—and the intersections of identity we inhabit—evolves and grows, it seems that we become more clunky, more nuanced. Contradictory. I am too big and sprawling to fit into Yeats' dated binary. I am thankful it worked for him—but it will not for me. Often, the arguments I have with the world are arguments I should also be having with myself. My personal life is also a public, political life. And vice versa. Upon observation, it seems as if genre and form evolve and change as we—both as people *and* as writers—come to understand ourselves better, too, in more nuanced ways. For example, consider Walt Whitman's free verse poem, *Song of Myself:*

> The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them.
> And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.
>
> Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
> Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
> (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)
>
> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.) (Whitman 71)

What I find interesting to consider about Whitman specifically is that many—if not most—scholars believe Whitman to have been bisexual or homosexual. This context is essential to me, because it helps me make sense of his work and how it deviates from traditional genre conventions of poetry, because his life, too, deviated from traditional conventions. He, like so many of us today, contained multitudes and contradictions that go against the grain of social norms, and it is reflected in the art we produce. Additionally, Whitman was an American poet with a distinctly American voice, speaking into a tradition that was dominated by European writers and their influence. Therefore, Whitman is one such example of a person crafting his own *minor literature*, revealing a counterstory contradictory to the status quo. A life containing multitudes for future people to see themselves inhabiting. I look to writers like Walt Whitman, Torrey Peters, Kim Thúy, Toni Morrison, Lynne Tillman, and other marginalized people who wish to create stories from their own unique point of view, rather than perpetuate the status quo.

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> Genres, like grammar, have an agreed-upon set of rules or conventions. Similarly, societies also impose guidelines that their citizens are expected to follow…Genre, grammar, and literary form often mirror society's restrictions, and this is not a wholly bad thing. People do need a system of rules in order to communicate and live relatively peacefully…however, what happens when the "identity" of any given person resists the narrow societal container?
>
> –Jennifer Bartlett, *Family Resemblance,* p. 135

In the spring of 2024, as Dr. Arroyo and I entered into our second directed creative writing, I came across a variety of books on crafting hybrid works, such as *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and*

Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres, edited by Marcela Sulak and Jacqueline Kolosov. This book was very useful to my understanding of genre and craft, as it provided examples for such a vast array of hybrid works: the poetry of postcards, autobiography as a hybrid narrative, and fusing artifact and art in the epistolary form, to name just a few. *Family Resemblance* demonstrated to me just how expansive hybrid forms can be. Furthermore, Jennifer Bartlett's writing, featured in this anthology, really spoke to me.

What Bartlett is describing in the epigraph above is the foundation of the master narrative. The master narrative is the history of the world, societal expectations, minority cultures, and their conquering through the lens of the dominant culture. The master tells you who you are in *their* words, not your own. They have decided for you who you are and what you mean to them——that is, if you mean *anything* to them at all. Capitalism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and white supremacy are ideologies and institutions that impact our world; therefore, our writing is also shaped by these realities—both consciously and subconsciously. Genre fiction, too, like horror and sci-fi, often critique these systems through a thin veil of magic and surrealism. Such as in life, our subjectivities affect how we address these issues in our writing. I often find myself writing out of this reality, placing characters in situations where they must confront these institutions head-on, grapple with their place inside of them, or their relationship in proximity to them.

Family Resemblance also reiterated ideas I had heard expressed in other books recommended by Dr. Arroyo, such as *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze and *Stranger at the Door: Writers and the Acts of Writing* by Kristjana Gunnars. These two works deeply impacted my ideas about hybrid genre, post-colonial literary tradition, and where my own place is within minor literature. *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* challenged me in ways I had never thought possible. Not

only has it been translated multiple times over—so I can, thankfully, read it in my native English—but the writing was abstract and complex, describing in detail theoretical concepts I found hard to grasp; however, it was a much appreciated reading experience, as it demonstrated to me that my interest in crafting creative writing *is* worthy of serious contemplation and scholarship.

While Barlett helps define the master narrative, Guattari and Deleuze discuss and define its counterpart: the minor literature. When we write fiction from our own unique perspectives on the margins, we are contributing to a minor literature. Minor literatures tell history from the occupied, the colonized, the oppressed, and the silenced groups' points-of-views. They rewrite the history we have been taught by the master narrative. Because of this, minor literatures are innately political. It illuminates the counter-story. In order to deconstruct our subjectivities and redefine who we are, we must learn to describe ourselves using the language of the Other. Write our own minor literature.

While reading *Kafka,* I had been struggling to place myself in the world of minor literature because I speak the primary language of this country, which was not Kafka's experience; he was a Jewish Czech writing in German, living in Prague. To compare myself to him in this way, or try to emulate what he is doing, at first felt disingenuous. However, considering Gobard's tetralingustic model discussed in *Kafka*—which takes into account vernacular, maternal, cultural, territorial, commercial forms of language—I can now see myself writing in an Othered cultural language (23). I write in a language of the feminine, the queer, a particular Other, which forces me to reflect and reimagine how I interact with the English language, where so much of how and what I speak is ridiculed and dictated by those in power. They feel more entitled to the language. At times, when I talk to people, they do not understand what I am saying or referring to. It is as if I truly am of another tongue. In Parts 1 and 2 of this collection specifically, which focus on girlhood and the Other, readers may see

my own minor literature emerging. Likewise, in Part 5, on the politics of place and home, the geographical vernacular and cultural forms of language play a key role in my stories.

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I began my 2024 summer thesis hours by reading *Kafka,* which was slightly nerve wracking, since it was so difficult to grasp. However, after I picked up *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing (Discussion in Contemporary Culture)* edited by Philomena Mariani, upon Dr. Arroyo's recommendation, I felt utterly confident in my ability to make my project a success. It was as if the missing puzzle piece had been found, allowing the rest of the picture to fall into place.

From *Critical Fictions*, I learned that within the umbrella of minor literature is the critical fiction, which is a genre of writing that combines fiction with overt cultural criticism. Minor literatures and critical fictions exist because our minds and imaginations have been colonized by the dominant culture, and "a critical imagination is forged through struggle" (11). In Section II of this anthology, bell hooks writes that, due to its construction, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* cannot be reached by conventional ways of knowing, instead "[r]eaders must learn to see the world differently if they want to understand this work. This is the fundamental challenge of critical fictions. They require that the reader shift her paradigms and practice empathy as a conscious gesture of solidarity with the work" (hooks 57). Critical fiction resists traditional criticism. It builds a new, unexpected world. Requires different values of measurement. A primary goal of this project quickly became to write into this tradition of critical fiction. I felt, and still do, feel so inspired by *Critical Fictions,* as each contributor gives a unique perspective on blending rhetoric and criticism with fiction.

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Finally, *Stranger at the Door* by Kristjana Gunnars, read during my summer thesis hours, was yet another delightful, brief-yet-impactful read that challenged me to think about how I could blend

criticism and fiction in interesting ways. Similar to Mariani and Wilcomb's discussions in *Critical Fictions,* Gunnars describes the space between—and the combining of—art and rhetoric, and aesthetics and politics. In chapter five "Theory and Fiction," Gunnars argues, "it is unnecessary to see a discrepancy, or even a division, between what we know as academic and what we think of as creative writing…" (65). This binary division between academic and creative writing has greatly affected my time in graduate school, and I do not doubt it has affected countless other students. Art versus rhetorics, aesthetics versus politics, the academic versus the creative—these are binaries that I wish to blend and blur until they start to swirl together, becoming one. Inseparable from one another's influence.

As a graduate student in the English department, there are many opportunities to read literature from specific continents, time periods, and/or specific people. Their creative work speaks to us because it has a lasting impact on our society and our hearts. I could argue that the books and stories with the most lasting impact are, in fact, critical fictions. Think of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* or Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. It seems logical that our output—our responses to these works—should not be solely analytical or critical, but creative and aesthetically engaging, too. Educating students in this manner, compelling them to only write conference papers, journal articles, and book chapters, could feed into another form of Yeats' binary—a binary reality in which authors can be creative, but academics cannot be. Scholastic separate spheres (Heighton 9). To carry on this way would perpetuate a status quo that is counter to the goal of writing critical fiction, thereby elevating a master narrative by placing the academy above the lived experiences of the observer-writer. We must allow ourselves to move forward by blending and blurring form and content. This is an opportunity for play, as well as politics. Aesthetics *and* activism.

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I have created this thesis project with the goal of binary dissolution in mind. This thesis serves as a stepping stone, a snapshot of where I am as a writer both critically and creatively. It is an attempt to marry the worlds I have had each of my feet and halves of my heart in while in this Master's program. It is an attempt to enter critical conversations about flash with other writers and critics, not pretend to perfect or conclude such conversations. I understand throughout this process that the more we learn, the more questions and connections arise; these questions take shape as critical fictions.

Prior to reading *Unexpected Intimacies: A Scrapbook of Critical Fiction*s, I want to shed light on their arrangement and the thesis' organization as a whole. Each part of this story collection begins with a critical memo, which at times can feel like stories themselves, too. These critical memos include: "On the Language of a Girlhood," "On the Other," "On Yearning and Suffering," "On Mother Wounds," and "On the Landscape of Home." I wish to draw the reader's attention towards critical and rhetorical choices found within the fictions; therefore, this framework is crucial, arguing that criticism and fiction—the academic and the creative—converge and blend.

During the 2024 summer semester, Dr. Arroyo and I exchanged letters discussing my readings and evolving thoughts on craft. Two works, *Big Bad Love* and *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives: Stories,* by Mississippi writers Larry Brown and Brad Watson, respectively, spoke to me. The way they both described our shared home state's landscape and the men that live there felt like an inside joke. A secret they whispered to me from beyond the grave. Our people have not changed. In our correspondence, I asked Dr. Arroyo if Watson's book, published in 2010, contained many short stories and concluded with a novella as a way to pay homage to Brown's 1990 *Big Bad Love*. Or, was I

mistaken, and it was simply common in the publishing industry to follow this format. Dr. Arroyo informed me that this was common practice. I find it important to mention that I conclude this collection of flash works with a short story; however, I do not want readers to think of this choice as one dictated by industry or publishing tradition. Rather, I *do* think of this choice as homage to Brown, Watson, the moment I truly believed their works were speaking to one another in this way. Whether I was wrong about my interpretation of this formatting decision or not, it sparked my interest in craft greatly over the summer, and I wanted to visually represent that in this thesis' organization.

The name of this thesis, *Unexpected Intimacies: A Scrapbook of Critical Fictions* is inspired by multiple works of writing. "Unexpected Intimacies" comes from chapter five, "Theory and Fiction," in Kristjana Gunnar's previously mentioned book *Stranger at the Door.* Reference to a scrapbook comes from Robert Kroetsch's essay "D-Day and After: Remembering a Scrapbook I Cannot Find."
I was further inspired to include images in this collection, adding to its scrapbook feel, after reading Normal Elia Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera.* Its focus on Spanish language, girlhood, and family, spoke to me and my subjectivities. These images should serve as powerful tools that supplement the writings in this collection, not to speak for or detract from the stories' messages. And finally the mention of critical fiction, of course, refers to *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing (Discussion in Contemporary Culture),* edited by Philomena Mariani. These texts provided ample inspiration for this thesis, and I am honored to contribute a collection of works that pay homage and respect to the writers that came before me.

Dispatch on Thematic Threads

> *Em* was the first novel I've read, at least in my memory, that creates a collage of interwoven stories that come together to make a larger narrative. The same story told from both sides of the war. This feels like a more realistic way for me to tackle a novel of my own, which I will keep in mind for my writing in the future… [T]he gift I found in *Em* is the possibility that a novel does not have to be finished, or rather, have a sense of an ending. Maybe it's better for our novels not to end, so we can carry those final loose threads around with us.
>
> –Abigail Wells, Kim Thúy's *Em: A Novel:* Reading Response, 13 September 2023

This collection of writing is not about queerness or family or womanhood or place—but the politics *of* queerness, *of* family, *of* womanhood and *of* place. Politics of identity and the rhetoric that reflects and reiterates our identities back toward us. And there are pieces about love. Or something like love. And even so, they are still about politics.

Unexpected Intimacies: A Scrapbook of Critical Fictions—aside from the politics that bind it—intentionally lacks one specific or narrow throughline, one key subject linking each individual work together. But rather, similarly to Kim Thúy's *Em*—and in many ways true to life—it attempts to find commonalities between specific works. We come in pieces. Some sides of ourselves can feel quite disconnected from other parts. Other times, the pieces of ourselves rub up against one another, and we define ourselves in the space between where those pieces touch. We meet ourselves in the space between (D'Erasmo). It is, more often than not, unexpected. We come to define, reject, understand, and love each other under similar circumstances. I wanted that to be reflected in this collection.

Each chapter contains pieces with similar subject matter, thereby connecting them. But you may find that a story towards the beginning and the end connect in some way, too, despite their physical

distance in the collection. Some pieces may feel like sisters to one another. Ultimately, these threads connect together to make a large, tangled, thematic ball that I wish for you to attempt to unravel. I hope these works are mulled over and reflected upon, and as time passes, more threads are found between stories. Find them in your own life. As soon as you think the thread has been unraveled, I hope you find more things that knot it back up and around itself. Ever-evolving and with no particular destination, like the lives of my queer elders and woman ancestors. Lives that were raw and real and deeply, profoundly political.

> I tried to interweave the threads, but they escaped, and remained unanchored, impermanent and free. They rearranged themselves on their own, given the speed of the wind, the news streaming by, the worries and smiles of my sons. The pages that follow constitute an imperfect ending, with scraps and figures drawn from life.
>
> —Kim Thúy, *Em: A Novel,* p. 129

Parachuting over Vietnam

Part 1

I Was No Threat

On the Language of a Girlhood

> ...the challenge was to make unfamiliar the lives of girls in a language that is often hostile to "girls," that has a history of being hostile to girls and women… [T]he project was to take seriously female narratives, which often aren't, from masturbation fantasies to female friendships to girls' reading philosophy to women writing…
>
> –Lynne Tillman, *Critical Fictions,* p. 100

Being a woman is a political part of my personal identity, whether I want it to be political or not. The ways in which I must navigate the world, and the knowledge I must make room in my mind to carry, are foreign to those that have never lived as a woman. *How will I defend myself at night? Am I allowed to speak? Should I just laugh along? Who will believe me? What if I'm the only woman there?* These intruding thoughts quickly replace our natural intuition. Girls start to second guess ourselves early, think and plan according to the master narrative. *Not all men. You're lying. Be quiet. Be submissive. Smile more. Pander.*

These thoughts do not start consciously, which makes them harder to stop. And paradoxically, I remember more clearly the *unconscious* ways I began to change, more than I can recall the beliefs I clung to early—thoughts that taught me I am lesser than men. So much of girlhood begins with the body before it reaches the brain. How one day, girls begin to fold themselves like origami. Spending much time contorting the body to be small, and in that smallness they believe they could become beautiful. I rearranged my limbs and tucked them under myself. Out of the way. Luggage in an overhead bin. This is difficult and embarrassing to admit—these thoughts that dictated my childhood and seeped over into my adult life. Many women know this truth, and many men try to rebut us by saying *Well my sister… Actually my mom… I knew a girl once… You're wrong You're wrong You're wrong.*

You will never know a woman fully if you are not one. We speak and think in a language impossible to learn, because it has never been written down. It cannot be translated. And there are many dialects. We are not a monolith; some of us speak the language more fluently than others. Some are distanced from this mother tongue, picking it up as we go along.

Through my writing, I try to find understanding and compassion for the girl I was—a girl who *always* resisted the world's messaging about who and what she was, and what she would become. Resistance is central to these fictions, as it has been throughout my life. I write for the women who *know*, not the men who find it *interesting* because the content of my work is Other to their own experience.

While reading *Critical Fictions,* I found bell hooks writing to be, like so much of her work, incredibly compelling. hooks expresses that marginalized writers are not always writing critical fiction, in fact, they often are not. She asks, "[h]ow will our fictions, our theory, name [our] solidarity?" (hooks 60). My position as Other, and my characters' Othered positions must be explicitly in opposition to a status quo. They must not exist to serve a master narrative, repeating the programmed, intruding thoughts of our childhoods. My writing must clearly mark where I stand. Effective critical fiction that establishes the author's solidarity, while also not coming across too heavy handed—thereby compromising the fiction itself—takes much practice. A delicate balance of intellect and artistry. I am learning.

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> [W]hen English speakers want to insult a woman, they compare her to one of a few things: a food (*tart*), an animal (*bitch),* or a sex worker *(slut)*... [W]e have systematically reduced women to edible, nonhuman, and sexual entities.

–Amanda Montell, *Wordslut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English Language,* p. 31

My womanhood is a minor literature. Cited by Lynne Tillman in *Critical Fictions*, Virginia Woolf writes about womanhood and language:

> One goes into the room—but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room (100).

There is no word to describe the sinking of the female heart when it is clear she has walked into the door of a room that was accidentally left unlocked. She knows the air has shifted when the door clicks behind her, her shoes clicking against the harsh, cold, tile. No one looks like her when she sits at the table—if there is even space to sit at it. In most cases, no matter her age, she will be forced to stand in the corner like a petulant child, which, even prior to "acting out," she will be deemed equal to. Arms crossed, clutching her belongings over her chest. Protecting her heart. They will perceive any quick movement from the woman as an oncoming tantrum rather than an act of self-defense.

At some point, the woman will attempt to leave the room, but she will find that the door has been locked behind her. Without her realizing it, the woman has forgotten what lies behind the door. She cannot escape. It is as if she has been born into the place, or life was always leading her here. It is only when a man comes up behind her, places his hand at the small of her back, and takes a key from around his belt loop. It is only when he unlocks the door that she can try to run. And yet, so often—in a moment of fear and confusion she says sheepishly—*I guess I wasn't strong enough.*

The room, the door, the table—and the language one uses to describe the room, the door, and the table—were not constructed by the woman. Merely taught and then asked to be repeated back. Like a good lap dog rolling over for treats. They will call her over to the table if she behaves. Let her lie down under it and eat their scraps off the floor. (The floor, another word she played no part in naming.) In rare instances, she can join (a chair of her own!) if she follows the rules they have laid out for her and she does not try to change them. When this happens, she will look at the other women in all of the other corners of the room. Their knees buckling and hands trembling. Sweat collecting on their necks. She will avert her eyes. But most times, she will remain below. Licking the floor.

The worst thing a woman can be called is an animal.

The worst thing a man can be called is a woman.

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> All the time, I was engaging with and writing to and against an invisible, implacable but indifferent enemy—I was no threat—and sometimes what it was I was against—up against—was beyond my comprehension, or so far inside me that I could never find it. In a way, too, I was just writing, and writing itself was sufficient for me.
>
> –Lynne Tillman, *Critical Fictions,* p. 100

I WAS NO THREAT

Baptized Anyway
a prose poem

That summer in Dallas everything was hot like oil shimmering in a pan. From the backseat of the car, my brother and I pointed and asked in awe what the waves rising off the pavement were. That was the summer I went to Caroline's birthday party and turned bright red like a boiled lobster. Mom laughed, rubbing aloe vera on the tops of my shoulders and backs of my thighs, making me promise to never let other little Irish girls put sunblock on me ever again. That was the summer the pastor told us men shouldn't marry each other, and for some reason I looked more upset than every adult in the sanctuary. That was the summer I was baptized anyway.

That was the summer Ali learned to drive, leaving me to play basketball alone in the driveway. The summer I let Dria teach me Spanish, because I loved watching the way her mouth moved. The summer Alexis' mouth was perpetually stained blue from the homemade popsicles, and my hair was fried green from the shock treatment.

That was the summer when, on the fourth of July, my life fizzled out and fell like ash into the swimming pool. The pool where I'd dive over and over and over again for the same rainbow-colored rings, just so mom would watch me. For her to correct my form. When what I was really asking her was to teach me how to be the right kind of girl. And everytime I came up for air, I couldn't tell which were chlorine water droplets and which were tears—regardless, my eyes were red and burning. Regardless, she would recognize my exhaustion, wrap me up in a towel, and lead me back inside the house. Before the sun dried me out and left me limp like a snake's abandoned skin in the yard. Beige and stiff with heat, so fragile, so close to catching ablaze. She knew all I needed was a spark.

Shifting Planets
a flash fiction

Amelia was over at my house when it happened. We were lying on our stomachs in the living room, the rough carpet digging into our elbows and knees and making us itch. We had bowls of ice cream sitting in front of us, and we bowed our heads to lap the melted remains up like dogs. We woofed at one another and laughed. I flipped through the channels, and we caught the end of a Channel 5 news report. Pedro Ortega was on the screen, standing in front of the planetarium. I remember it was him because I felt weird when I looked at him. Like I needed to pee. The headline said Pluto wasn't a planet anymore. I don't really remember the reasoning. I got real close to the television screen and stared at all the tiny pixels that came together to make Pedro whole. I felt like Moses on that mountain, and Pedro was God telling me a new, unwavering commandment of the universe I had to obey. It was the week before Amelia and I started fifth grade. The first year where we didn't share the same teacher. I remember crying that night when her mom's sedan pulled down the driveway, Amelia's arm poking out of the backseat window, waving goodbye.

Even though it was closed on Sundays, that weekend my mom drove Amelia and me down to the planetarium. We were the only car in the parking lot. She sat there with the AC on and listened to her book on tape, while we walked to the entrance, trying to stand in the very spot Pedro stood for his news report. Amelia held her fingers up to make a little picture window, like a camera, and we adjusted the angle until she said *Okay, I think we got it.* She kept one eye open, the other squeezed shut to remain in focus. I formed a fist and held it up to my chest, my makeshift microphone. Amelia said *action* and I thought about Pedro. How scary it must be to be on television. *Goooooood evening, Jackson Metrooooo! This is Maisy Smithson with Channel 5. Breaking News: Mrs. Clark at Watkins Elementary*—a loud crashing sound startled us. We ran to the side of the building. A moving truck sat

with the door rolled up. On a wooden flatbed, a few guys in sweatshirts were wheeling out two halves of a giant sphere the color of mud and red clay. They cussed at each other and maneuvered the halves into the truck. *Hey,* I called without thinking, *what the fuck are you putting into that truck?* The men turned to me, stunned. Then laughing, they told us it was Pluto. They were altering the display of the universe, the focal point of the planetarium, in order to be more "scientifically accurate." Amelia told me to never say *fuck* again or she would tell my mom. Then we went for snow cones. I ordered cherry, and Amelia got root beer. I sat there, my legs dangling off the edge of the high top stool, staring down at the red and brown ice and thinking about life in space. What it would be like to live on an exiled planet. Amelia ate her snow cone like she was in a rush, then asked if I was going to eat mine.

—

That September, I learned that halves of a sphere are called hemispheres. I wore a training bra and went to the bathroom to lift my shirt and scratch where the elastic itched me. I tried cantaloupe. In November, I learned that Pedro Ortega was getting married, because he announced it on the news. I stormed upstairs and screamed into my pillow, kicked my feet hard against the mattress. That January, Amelia stopped being fun. She made a new friend in her class named Bria, who didn't like me very much. One day I asked Bria if I could join them to do cartwheels at recess. She said no, and Amelia said nothing. Her head turned up towards the sky. Like she was somewhere else. I pictured her ice skating on the rings of Saturn. Storm chasing on Jupiter. Running around on Pluto, eating snow cones made of red, frozen methane. Filming each other on the *real* camcorder I got for Christmas. And I spent the rest of the year wondering what was wrong with me. Why I no longer belonged in her universe. Living in exile on my lonely, little planet we once called *ours*.

Ritual
a prose poem

When they hunt us down at the party, they'll think that they know us. That we're always this put together and carefree. This stupid. This anxious to be noticed and loved. To be chosen. They believe that's what we're looking for. Love. And despite—or in spite—of this, they are determined to discard us anyway. As the night drags on, their hands dragging across the small of our backs, they ask us why we look scared. We smile and grab silently for a familiar hand. They buy us drinks we do not drink from and expect us to go home with them. Like we owe them something—not knowing we owe so much more to each other. Before this crowded club, we crowd around the bathroom mirror.

Before the smell of smoke and strobe lights, music that runs through you like a heart palpitation, we are coughing up a cloud of perfume. Bathed in the yellow light of the vanity. We curate the playlist. "Heaven or Las Vegas." "People Have the Power." "Feeling Good." We sing these hymns at the top of our lungs and stomp the ground. Our own kind of gospel music. Mascara wands waving in our hands, as if we hold some sort of magic. And we do. We order fast food to the front door, eat burgers and fries and pass around foam cups. Sharing everything. Between bites, we talk half-heartedly about what they've done to our bodies. How they're repulsed by our blood, our politics, our femininity. Dissecting the same breakup over and over again. We must make ourselves laugh so as not to cry.

They'll never know how sweet the smell of burnt hair can be. Hot metal, for a moment, scalding and burning off our fingerprints. Like in *Fight Club*, Tyler's kiss mark burnt onto the back of their hands with lye. We giggle at the thought. Our own little Project Mayhem. No need for knives, no need to

swap blood. *They didn't even read the damn book,* one of us says. *They didn't even know it was a book to begin with,* the rest of us roar.

One girl perched on the edge of the bathtub, shaving her legs. Contemplating and complaining about how we feel the need to. We invent new ways to fix a broken nail. Polish tipped over, dripping off the countertop. Aquamarine Dream. Purple People Eater. Pool Party. Black Licorice. Blush. Sex on the Beach. Digging through a pile of earrings, we find one and search for its missing friend. Light bounces off the jewels, and everything shimmers like sequins. A disco ball spins on a string thinner than a spaghetti strap. Clothes are secrets and promises, traded whispers in a crowded room. Mini skirts and strappy tops and opaque tights cover every surface. Our choice and agency ever at risk, but at least we can decide what pants to wear tonight. What blouse matches best. Glitter and eyeshadow streak and stain the tile, confetti on the floor after a party. Black kohl rims our eyes, the fallout lands on our cheeks. We try so desperately to look mysterious but can't help but let it all lay bare. So vulnerable to be so young. To want so badly and so much, but not know what for. We only know that we love each other, and somehow that's enough to keep this ritual alive.

On the way out the door, a high heel strap breaks. We repair it swiftly like engineers. The pit crew changing tires on a race car. *Look at us. Women in STEM,* someone says laughing. And on the way home the very same girl will be laid across the back seat crying, head buried in another's lap. Drunk. Murmuring something like a prayer. Begging for her life to change. False nails, sharp as thrones, running through strands of hair. Soothing and gentle like a mother comforts an infant. Walk up the driveway holding her hand, shoes in the other. Make sure the rest of us brush our teeth and wash our faces. Tuck each other into bed. In the morning we'll retell last night's events as if we didn't all live through it as one body. And that is what they'll never understand—why we really go out. We get to go home and be girls together.

Statues - a Diptych
a prose poem

1

Out on the piazza, the Florentines are concerned for David. The world is too scary and dangerous a place for a boy that beautiful to live in. *God forbid he gets hurt! He must be protected!* They rally and plead: *We must get him inside!* The great symbol of their city, of youthful beauty, the ideal man.

Up on his pedestal, David looms over onlookers and tourists. A dome of natural light illuminating his body, his manhood, chiseled from stone. His form is protected by plexiglass barricades and a security team. They cannot risk potential desecration. They're worried about Italy's seismic activity. *What would they do then? How they would mourn.*

2

In Verona, tourists wait to witness Juliet. The queue zigzags and loops. Out in the courtyard, exposed to the elements, thirteen-year-old Juliet is such a brave, lucky girl. Overtime, as she becomes worn and scarred, they will consider replacing her. It'd be quite simple, really. They've done it before.

The line moves slowly, taking longer than one would think. It's not just a photo these tourists are after, but to experience the tradition of rubbing her for luck in their future love lives. Fondling her. Holding her prepubescent breast in their sweaty, nervous hands. They love Juliet for the small thrill she provides. The memory of her body working for their good fortune. Her head and shoulders are dark like an aged bruise. But her body—her breast—shines. A gift only they could give her. How lucky she, too, must feel, to be made into something more. Turned into gold.

Does she wonder why they never caress her face? Hold her chin in their cupped hands, reeking of apology? Or why they do not grasp for her hand, working towards understanding?

Chili Peppers Dancing
an autofiction

On top of my dresser sits a ceramic canister. Hecho en México, the same shade as salsa de aji amarillo. Tri-colored chili peppers cover the canister in a haphazard pattern. Green, orange, red. Green, orange, red. Green, orange, red. I keep things inside that remind me of C.

———

At the end of May, everything is already starting to stick—I can feel sweat collecting at the underwire of my bra. I crave the chance to change my socks halfway through the day. Even inside the art gallery, I pinch the fabric of my dress around the chest, fanning myself desperately. We come across a white 8.5 x 11. The only thing marking the paper is a squiggly blue line, like a paperclip that's been unraveled from around itself. We guess anyone can be an artist.

We see a painting of a woman sitting in a brown, wooden chair. Her hair is pinned up, greasy scalp concealed under a handkerchief. Her son, whom she's trying to hold in her lap, is attempting to wiggle free from her grasp. The chair is positioned on a cobblestone walkway, flanked on either side by lilacs and white chrysanthemums. A man—presumably her husband—stands off in the background, back toward us. Leaned up against a tree, smoking a cigarette. He is nothing but a silhouette. I look back at the mother and struggle to make out the expression on her face. C thinks he understands what it all means, and I let him keep believing it. Let him walk ahead of me. Wipe the sweat off my forehead and the tear from my eye.

———

We then walk through the botanical gardens, snapping photos of one another in the bamboo. Our legs are ridden with mosquito bites, our eyes are strained from the persistent sunshine. He turns his face up to that giant star and smiles, soaking it all up. My short, blond hairs cover his shirt like little

secrets only we know. Blending into the stark white cotton. Resting on a bench at the pond's edge, I lean into the soft side of his torso, his arm resting on the back of the bench. A baby turtle burrows in the mud. On the way out of the gardens, there are thousands of crayons scattered at the base of a tree. I take a purple one to match my dress. C tells me it was a perfect day, and I believe him. Until he leans against the tree, wraps his arm around it, and smiles at me. Sizing me up and down. Like I'm just another painting he's trying to take in. To figure out. A pit grows in my stomach. I know one day I will love him, but for now, I convince myself that I don't. Love will always mean a lack of freedom. My personhood dependent on if it aligns with or offends his masculinity. Loving someone who—although he may not mean to—will try to teach me a different way of being. Mold me into a different kind of woman.

———

When I get home, I put the purple crayon in the canister. It hits the bottom of the ceramic base, and I imagine for a moment that those chili peppers grow legs and smiles and start dancing with excitement for my budding love and my life. Like they've been fed. I pray that C will never become like that man in the painting. Just an outline of a person that once felt close and current. And as my thoughts race, the peppers carry on dancing. Green, orange, red. Green, orange, red. Green, orange…

El Coyote
a flash fiction

In the back of the kitchen, Valéria and I sit at a stainless steel table, a magnetic rack of knives hanging above our heads. The thermostat is broken. Year round, we wet the hotel's old washcloths in cold water and wrap them around our necks. We take milk crates into the walk-in freezer and sit for a while, the door cracked so we can still hear the receipt paper come through the printer. Our manager is never here. On slow mornings, like today, we pass the time by cooking for one another and reading books. Poach eggs, sprinkle chorizo on top, and slather them in salsa verde. Roll them up into tortillas toasted over the stove's open flame. The runny, yellow yolks dripping onto my apron. She giggles and teases me, chanting *cochina*. Sometimes I bring a small whiteboard and quiz Valéria on her vocabulary words. She takes an English class on Wednesday afternoons—the one day each week she ever has off. Last week, her teacher taught her how to say *take it easy*.

Today, after we wash the dishes, Valé takes her diary from her backpack. Yellow slips of paper resembling brochures stick out between the pages. She piles them up and files through them, organizing them by date. In my elementary Spanish, I ask *¿Qué son esos?* Valé sends money back to Guatemala. *Ah, envías dinero a tu familia?* She has told me before about her family—seven sisters and two brothers, each a year apart. Only five years older than me, she could be my sister. Valé doesn't talk about her family often, even with the other housekeepers and cooks from México, Perú, and Nicaragua. She looks at me all confused and shakes her head. *Mi familia? No, no.* She wants to explain further but struggles to find the words, even in her mother tongue. Uneasy at first, then suddenly goes into a long-winded spiel. I try my best to follow, but I get lost halfway through. Staring at her mouth and the way it forms each syllable. The soft p that sounds so different in our respective languages. Her tongue hitting the space between the roof of her mouth and the back of her teeth.

Double Ls and Rs and eñes hang in the air between us, their meanings largely lost on me. *El hombre que*— and suddenly I understand, placing my hand on her knee. *Claro.* She sighs and hands me the slips. Some transactions seem reasonable. Inconspicuous. Others are worth thousands of dollars.

¿Cuántos pesos más?

I lost count, she whispers in English.

—

Girlhood has looked so different for both of us. If I knew how to ask her, Valé would likely tell me she never had one. We each have one life between us, but she has known two different worlds. Spends each day attempting to navigate a country that will never claim her. Even if she was allowed to move about freely, I doubt she would feel safe to. And I fear that this uncertainty of safety is what makes us women. I run my hand over her black, waist-length braid and hug her. *Eres muy fuerte, Valé.* She squeezes me tight. An order comes through the printer, and we work in silence as we always do. So in tune with each other's bodies and where we're moving, as if we've known one another forever. As if we can read each other's minds. Eggs placed beside me in a small bowl before I have to ask. Sun-dried tomatoes on the side. Green onion chopped and ready to garnish. I lean over the stove and make a list in my head of all the things that make us women:

Fear, lodged deep in our chest.

Rage, held somewhere we cannot place.

Compassion, our arms outstretched. Grasping. Holding tight.

Strength, often in silence. Gasping. Holding fast.

Part 2

Anything Else Under Heaven

On the Other

> If something inside of you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you're a writer you must have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive.
>
> –Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, p. 226

—

To be Othered is to be queered. To be queer is to reimagine over and over again your life on this shifting American soil. To build a different kind of life. When I say *queer,* I want readers to think of the label in its broadest sense. Anyone who strays from the fenced-in borders of gender and sexuality. Anyone who picks the lock to their cage: the cage of femininity and what womanhood is "supposed to" look like. Anyone who rips off the steel bars of masculinity's cage—a prison that uses violence as its primary form of communication. Whether we reconfigure masculinity in a new age or throw it to the wolves is not for me to decide. How we define *the woman* is not my job, either.

I also use *queer* to include anyone who has looked at the roadmap for how to live in America, and decided they wanted to go in another direction. The childless by choice. The unwed. The religious minority. The immigrant. Anyone who questions power. When I say *queer* I mean it first and foremost as a political alignment in relationship to the Outsider and Other. How the myriad of ways we deviate from the status quo can affect our lives politically. Some may not identify as such, or see themselves reflected in this word—which is understandable, as the word is a product of the LGBTQ+ movement and their reclamation efforts—however, these people do live a *queered* life, existing outside the master narrative and oftentimes fighting against it.

This section on the Other covers a variety of queered identities: The girl who feels disinterested and disconnected from childbirth and motherhood. The religious minority—the doubtful, attempting to find faith elsewhere. The erased, camouflaging and hiding within a family that is not entirely safe. Remembering the victims of the AIDS crisis. Remembering the victims of the Holocaust. Remembering Alix. And harkening back to the final story in Part 1, "El Coyote," readers come across a protagonist wrestling with how to help an immigrant woman she has come to love. Comparing her friend's life to her own. The stories within this chapter are intended to demonstrate difference and juxtaposition. How we may live the same experiences yet process these experiences very differently depending on our subjectivities.

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> All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them… all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more…
>
> –Margaret Atwood, *Negotiation with the Dead,* p. 178

I am not the first queer person to be born into my family line. Subconsciously, I am sure most queer people know this to be true, but it is easy to forget those we have never met. Have never heard their names uttered. When I think about my family, I imagine how they struggled—all of them, of course, but particularly the silent ones. Those who believed in anything Otherwise. Who strayed from what they were taught. My queer ancestors harbored a yearning and suffering I cannot

comprehend—only pieces of it. The images I create might be ones they, too, have seen before. *I am the product of their forbidden hope.* May they live and speak through me. May I honor them by transgressing. Treading a new trail.

Gutted
a flash fiction

Down in the basement, Carol comes out of the bathroom clutching her abdomen with one hand. The knuckles of her other turn white, gripping the door frame. Behind her, a canary yellow swimsuit hangs from a hook on the wall. Blonde hair limp like soggy asparagus. Stringy from sweat and lake water. From under gray cotton shorts, blood trails down her leg. She has left a trail of half-formed footprints. It coats the front of her t-shirt, too, as if she were trying to dry her hands. Carol lies down on the carpet, her head halfway under the bed. Legs sprawled like a snow angel. Giving herself over. One arm over her face. She whispers *it won't stop,* and I stay cross-legged on my bed across the room. She licks sweat off her upper lip, struggling to breathe. I don't move.

She keeps losing babies. Sometimes they are the size of lentils or snow peas or grapes. This time, it's a pomegranate—all red seeds, white core, and pulpy center falling out of her and onto the floor. I watch the water drip out of her swimsuit and make a puddle on the bathroom tile. She groans. I say her name, eyes still focused in the direction of the dripping water, and she cuts me off, lifting up her hand to silence me. *Don't say anything, please.*

Carol, you're covered in blood. I have to—

Dear God.

We both know she isn't talking to me. Her pain is just as much spiritual as it is physical.

She lies there in silence for a long time, then starts talking nonsense—the generational cycle of shame each of my female family members have learned to repeat like scripture. Saying she shouldn't have paddled so hard during the canoe trip. Shouldn't have jumped from the rock cliff into the lake. Shouldn't have driven all the way through Wisconsin without stopping. She wriggles on the floor and

bites her hand. Curled up like a fetus. *Okay okay okay okay okay. Go get Aunt Erin and my mom and uh—and Patty, I guess.* She's panting, straining herself to go back to the toilet. Crawling with her legs limp behind her, like someone has shot her kneecaps off. Dragging herself back through the bloody footprint trail she left behind. I watch them blur. I hear her throw up. A faint sob. I walk to the top of the stairs and freeze. Feel the old, matted carpet underfoot. Look through the wooden balusters. My eyes dart between the dim, cold basement from which I ascended and the wood-paneled kitchen—bright yellow bulbs glaring overhead, the warmth of the oven floating towards me. All the men of our family sitting around the table gutting fish. Laughing. Breathing slowly, I wait there a second longer. Caught in between. Welcome nowhere.

Roll the Stone Away
a flash fiction

Out in the yard, our grandmother is telling our cousin about the resurrection. How Jesus rose from the dead after three days, dying on the cross for our sins. She touches the center of each palm, smiling. An imaginary sword stabs through her side. We cannot make out her words, but we know. She has told us this story before. Passed it down. It is easy for a four-year-old to cheer excitedly about Jesus' fate when they have no idea what death means. *Death. Three. Cross.* Their mouths still struggle to form the phonemes.

You and I have both moved out of Mississippi—evident by our inability to control our frizzy hair, our perspiration, and our mouths. We have grown more into ourselves, and by doing so, we have forgotten how to maintain the image of who we once were. Just as we see the new generation of children in our family being introduced to The Bible, we, too, were raised to fear death and God and Satan. Just as our parents were.

Everyone is hunting for eggs, which grandmother tells our nieces represent the tomb in which Jesus was buried. You and I, the book lovers of our family, sit with our backs leaning against the birdbath Our long, floral dresses riding up around our legs, grass tickling the soft backs of our sweaty knees. We pull grass out by the root and whisper. Eat fun-sized candy out of our plastic eggs. You ponder how our grandmother can understand metaphors in her mystery novels,but not literary illusions, foreshadowing, or metaphors in the Bible. The greatest hero's journey ever told. I think about Saint Peter, crucified upside down. I was once ten years old, worried about one day meeting the same fate. Catching leprosy. Discovering a demon lodged inside my chest that *must* be exorcized

—

I remember I stayed the night at your house once, and we slept on a trundle bed. You threw your arm over the edge of the mattress, and I reached up to clasp your hand. Palms sweating. You prayed for Satan to leave you alone, to stop making you think bad thoughts. You never told me what they were. But you said you doubted God's love. You said you were going to suffer in Hell but never explained why. How I probably wouldn't even understand.

We laid there in the dark for a long time, staring up at the ceiling, your hand in mine. Fingers still chubby and soft, growing into ourselves. The blood drained out of my raised hand and my fingers grew numb. Tried to track with our eyes the blades of the ceiling fan buzzing overhead. I wanted to tell you then. How I *did* understand you. How I saw the emptiness our faith had left in us, even then. Grasping for answers no one could give us. We asked too much of God, and of the people who were supposed to reassure us. We were different somehow.

I let go of your hand and rolled over. Hung off the edge of the trundle, the crown of my head almost kissed the ground. Blood rushing in, like Saint Peter—the man I had thought about every day since I'd learned of his death. My ears filled with blood, so I could barely make out your final prayer, hushed and breathy. Then you grew quiet. You did not command me to pray. You must have known I asked God for nothing.

Repenting
a flash fiction

After the movie, we sit on the curb and draw out time. Neither of us wanting to go our separate ways. Our legs outstretched, we knock our shoes playfully against one another. Talking in circles about the movie. Everything makes sense to her on the first watch, but I sleep in short bursts and pretend to understand. The June air is stagnant, the heat of summer rising from the pavement. Reddening our shoulder blades and kneecaps, arched toward the sky. Beads of sweat forming in our hairlines. I wipe my hand across the back of my neck and press it on the curb, clear as a handprint trapped in cement. We watch it evaporate. I wonder—when I return home for the summer—if my family will be able to tell. If they will call me *changed* rather than *broken*.

A family of wild geese waddle across the parking lot. A sight most unnatural. Like when the highway is covered in dead deer, and so I try to imagine the countryside without the highway running through it. The forest without a linear break in the trees. Everything asphalt and automatic. As they carry along, looking lost, I wonder if the ground burns their feet. If this man-made biome of pavement and hedge maze of parked cars disorients them.

You don't have to be good! she shouts to the geese. *You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert!* She is laughing at herself, leaning back, face up to the light. And I suddenly feel brave.

Alix
a creative nonfiction

Alix is normally so cheerful. The first to crack a self-deprecating joke. The first to help me with math homework. The first to take note of the trees or the river as we walk home. How the water ripples across the top when we throw stones across its surface. How the ripples fade. We're seventeen. The idea of our lives ending abruptly is still novel to us, and therefore funny. So distant and unthinkable we cannot conceptualize it. But today we're squeezing one another's hands and holding space for the silence. We stare at a pile of hair as tall as we are. So many shoes. Pots and pans and suitcases thrown into a pit. We conduct a quiet vigil. What is there to say when the only thing separating you from death is a pane of glass? How are you supposed to feel when you catch a glimpse of your reflection in it?

The tour guide reminds us that Jewish people weren't the only ones corralled and caged here. Among other marginalized groups, homsexuals were tortured and killed here too—anyone even rumored to be. Alix and I look at each other, not needing a reminder. They whisper *and you think the bullying at school is bad!* And I find myself letting out a sigh. Releasing a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Smiling and looping my arm through theirs. Along the walls, we see the scraps of fabric marked with upside down pink triangles. Cut from cloth worn by the imprisoned. A symbol our community has reclaimed. But it feels too raw for us, barely babies ourselves. So young we can't navigate our own lives. So young and unaware of our own ancestry. The weight our bodies carry, the legacy they have entrusted us to live out.

Out in the field, everything looks too uniform. The long train tracks leading to nowhere. The black rectangles of rock marking the ground. I imagine ashes sprinkled across Polish soil, carried by the

same summer wind that whips and stings our faces now. Chimneys pointing towards Heaven. Alix asks me if I believe there is one, but I cannot answer. I wish I knew.

And what I wish I knew then—back in the summer of 2019 surrounded by the barbed wire and iron gates and guard towers—was that Alix was wanting an answer. Needing one. And on my twenty-first birthday, as I sat down for dinner and drinks, I would think to myself how life was just starting. How loved I was. How the world would bend to me if I asked it to. Among the birthday messages and well wishes was notification of Alix's obituary. The few photographs and text chains we shared, their only remains I could cling to.

So when I think of Auschwitz, I hate to say it, but I briefly forget about the million people who died there. The millions who died during the war and Holocaust. I just remember Alix. How two queer kids clung to one another in the middle of a field, so far away from home. A place so foreign, yet housing a deep, familiar pain. How we cried into each other's shoulders, my arms wrapped around their thin waist. The heaving of the breath in their lungs. How lucky we were, yet how heavy our history. We dried up our tears and rejoined the group. No signs of an embrace that lasted all of fifteen seconds. All my love for Alix concentrated in this brief exchange.

When I think of Auschwitz, I don't remember much but that moment. And I feel guilty about that. I can't comprehend the smokestacks, imagine the smell of burning fat. Can't imagine the screaming. The communal graves. Part of me just can't take it. I can only manage to think about one friend in one casket. And, selfishly, about my place in all of it. I think about one long rope. Or one car heading towards another. Or whatever the end looks like when we face it. If the end of our lives looks like our reflections, staring back at us, in a pane of glass.

Reichstag Building, Berlin, Germany

June 2019

Alix and I pictured in center

What I Think about when Ronald & Nancy Reagan Watch Me Eat Ribs
a flash fiction

I think it's weird that my husband's grandfather, Wayne, has a bumper sticker on his car that reads GOD BLESS RONALD REAGAN. White letters bold against a faded blue background. When we run errands to the auto parts store or supermarket, I try my best to duck down and keep clear of the windows.

It's weird that a bobblehead of Reagan sits on his desk. A poster with his face and false teeth pinned up with thumb tacks in the garage. Welcoming Wayne home. It's weird that Wayne claims to be a member of the "silent majority" when old, white, conservative men can never let anyone else speak. Dinner conversation is determined by their moods. Their opinions dictate the laws everyone else abides and dies by.

Most of all, it's weird that Wayne has a framed photo of the Reagans hung up in his dining room. 24x18. Nancy and Ronald are sitting on the top of a convertible, empty smiles plastered on their faces. Sprinkling evangelical giddy around more widely than a welfare check. It feels alien somehow. From the angle in which the photo was taken, you're looking up to them. The convertible they're cruising in so close to chasing you down and running you over. Nancy's red dress matches his tie, their arms high above their heads, hands cupped like royalty. At family gatherings, out of the corner of my eye, I can see them staring at me and waving. Almost out of spite. Wayne greets them often.

Everyone at the table rolls their eyes and grins. *That's just Grandpa!* Like it's endearing. I think it's weird. Actually, no, I think it's fucked up. I think it's fucked up that I'm supposed to play along. I can't say anything. Just like Reagan didn't say anything about AIDS until 1987. Meanwhile, my ancestors and elders were dying in hospital beds. Their meal trays left outside the door, nurses scared of being punished by God. Like they were lepers. Less than human. I want to tell Wayne that those

less fortunate suffered in exile, in alleyways and one-bedroom apartments, survived by partners and friends and the few blood relatives who were brave enough to love them. Doesn't he see? How fucked up it is that the *majority* of my elders have been *silenced* forever? Nancy and Ronny wave at me, but they might as well be pointing. Screaming. Because I'm one of them. But born too late to kill. Outraged that I hide in plain sight—slipped through their fingers. And aren't I so lucky?

In the dining room, Wayne sits around the table with his family. Nancy and Ronny watch over them like guardian angels. Their red outfits like AIDS ribbons pinned to people's lapels. All that blood on the Reagans' hands. I see it when I close my eyes. I try to shove down these feelings by stuffing my face with ribs and mashed potatoes and green beans. Mouth full, I can avoid answering questions from these people—I guess—I'm related to now.

But as I eat, I ask myself: Where is my family? Where is our table? I like to imagine that they pooled their money together, took that table, and carved it up. With the wood, they built coffins for queens who died all alone. All ash now, all smoke. Like the fire and brimstone bigots try to scare us with. Like the queer clubs they lit up and burned down with Molotov cocktails. A message in a bottle written in flames that reads *fuck you, faggot.*

My frantic chewing fills my ears. I can barely hear their conversation. Wayne directs a question at me, likely about Arizona and immigrants. Something borderline racist. I grew up just outside of Paradise; that's all he knows about me. And I'm about to ignore him altogether, get up, and pull the photo off the wall. About to jump on top of the glass, bleeding out, my socks soaked. Laughing. As if that would make us even. But I know all he wants is more bloodshed. I'm about to say something, but when I open my mouth all that comes out is exactly what he wants to hear. *God bless Ronald Reagan.*

Part 3

La Ansia, La Pérdida

On Yearning and Suffering

La Ansia: desire or longing. yearning. thirst. pain or fatigue, causing restless or violent agitation of the body. anxious with want.

La Pérdida: loss

> We yearn. We are the yearning creatures of this planet. There are superficial yearnings, and there are truly deep ones always pulsing beneath, but every second we yearn for *something*. And fiction, inescapably, is the art form of human yearning.
>
> –Robert Olen Butler, *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*

Desire makes a home at the emotional center of our work. Because characters *must* make choices in fiction, characters must also *desire* to make those choices. This yearning may be presented in the traditional sense, to want or gain something. But characters, just like real people, may also yearn to be released from something. To let go. To escape. This desire, the emotional center, works to create the telling place. A moment in the story where a character is illuminated to the audience. At their most vulnerable and honest.

The stories I have chosen to include in this section, "Part 3: La Ansia, La Pérdida," could have fit in other places; however, I felt it was important to highlight the role desire and loss play in fiction. How central it is to characters and our own lives. Part 3 focuses on fraught, confusing relationships. Narrators in the throws of confusion and grief: one's love interest is engaged to be married to another. A friend is playing music on stage, and while the music makes sense to the narrator, the friend herself is seemingly unrecognizable. A girl recounts the last meals she shared with her lover and their families during the holiday season. *La ansia.* Desire and loss indeed pervade this entire

collection of works; However, the characters in Part 3, specifically, are exploring what their lives look like without someone else in them. They must explore a fragmented, fractured new world. Navigate that world alone. *La pérdida.*

> Compelling, dramatic, literature often arises from a burning question, some deep quest or need to explore, recognize, accept, deny, or honor something. A character struggles with some desire, want, demand—what my teacher and mentor Patricia Henly calls *a deep yearning*.
>
> –Dr. Fred Arroyo

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> By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. *Testimonio* may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or "factographic literature."
>
> –John Beverly, "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio"*

Fiction and nonfiction alike allow readers to bear witness to suffering, yearning, loss, and love. Like an actor who knows they are playing a part in a movie, but must force their physical body to cry, the body cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is conjured out of imagination. The child actor must often be carried off set, reminded that everything is okay. It is just pretend. So too do our fictitious worlds on the page conjure up real, palpable emotion. Readers laugh and cry and

root for people they have never met—because all fiction is rooted in an essential truth. There is still truth in what is fabricated. These works are *testimonios* and serve as an opportunity for readers to bear witness to yearning and suffering. They engage with the lives of an Other. An Outsider.

On the Way to the Bridal Shower
a lyric essay

We stopped the car in the middle of the back road to watch two wild boars through the barbed wire. Their short, stumpy legs trotted along through the tallgrass of early May. Their heavy breathing and grunts so loud, we could hear them through the windows. Their noses pressed against the earth, hungry and searching. From the driver's seat, I watched you watch. The back of your peroxide head cocked to one side, cooing over them like babies. We sat there for a long time until eventually one tuckered out and laid down. Caked in dirt. The other clawed madly against the ground. Ripping up plants by their roots.

A car came speeding past, honking, scaring us and the boars alike. They ran as fast as their plump bodies could manage, tripping over one another in the rush. Past the white tufts and yellow manes into the darkness of the treeline, dense with new growth and promise. We carried on. Your hair swayed against the movement of the road like a dandelion blown. A wish that, if I spoke it out loud, would never come to be. A ray of sunlight kept catching the diamond on your finger, its reflection blinded me repeatedly. Its violent white glare reminded me of where we were, where we were going, and what I did not mean to you.

Long Distance
a flash fiction

Just before we reached the bridge, Aoife and I pulled into the parking lot of a 99¢ store. Bracing ourselves, we jumped out of the car and opened the trunk. Like a match being lit, the streetlamps clicked on and set her red hair ablaze. Boots scuffling on snow and teeth chattering madly. I grabbed a jar full of coins out of the back, and Aoife kept count as I handed them to her. *I can't believe we forgot about the toll,* I said, feeling my way around the dark opening of the jar. My fingers grew numb and slippery, like a claw machine at the arcade. I placed silver coins into her palm as it slowly turned pink. *How much is this one worth again?* We laughed, our breath a cloud filling the space between us. I taught her the names of the men who once ruled my country.

We made it across the bridge and drove the rest of the way to Philadelphia in silence. Aoife's hand stroked the back of my neck, as Christmas music played so faintly on the radio I couldn't make out the words. The heat was cranked up all the way, turning our cheeks rosy. My nose ran. *Call me when you get to Galway, yeah?* And she just smiled. I watched her go through the big double doors, then drove off. Wiping my tears, I smelt my hands. The oily, aging, change metal left behind the ferrous scent of iron and blood. It permeated the air.

New Song
a flash fiction

When I walk up to the door, a girl I've met only once, tells me *hello* and that there's a five-dollar cover charge. She's a new friend of yours. When you told me she was a music teacher at a Christian elementary school, I determined we were not compatible. I wordlessly file through my bag and drop a wad of ones into a jar. From my seat, I see her count them. She's not proving me wrong tonight. Staring at the ground, I wait for this to be over.

You play some new songs about an old life I was so intimately a part of. With a band of boys I've never met. The bassist is married to your new friend. Wearing a suit, tall and lanky like a wannabe member of The Beatles. Whipping his head around like a dog shaking its body after rolling in a puddle of mud. He makes funny faces, and I stifle my laughter, wondering if that's what he looks like during sex. I suddenly feel bad for your friend.

I don't know what's happening between you and the drummer. But I know he doesn't smile when you say *This song is about how I fell in love with the drummer*. And I know you saw his family at Thanksgiving. You sent out Christmas cards wearing matching sweaters, holding matching cats, and I didn't receive one. You sleep at his place most nights, two streets down from my house.

And I know all of these lyrics. The details and demons in each line—because I lived them, too. I remember the paperwork and packed boxes and empty picture frames strewn about your apartment. The sheets pulled up over your head, crying. In Richmond, your hand wrapped in mine as we slept on the hardwood. How, on the drive home, we talked about God. And you got cagey. Said I was being combative.

Still staring at the floor. Arms crossed. Foot tapping to the beat against my desire. As if I'm sitting in a church pew, my throat incredibly dry. I wonder if I will be villainized one day, too. Our friendship trapped in a tune less than three minutes long. Crystalized like rock sugar I'm breaking my teeth against. I never loved you like that—at least, I don't think I did. But if not, why am I so overwhelmed with sadness when—after the set—you run up and wrap your arms around him? Your eyes failing to search for me? One day soon you will make more music. And I will not understand a word. Only the clearing of your throat, the quick intake of breath before you break out into song.

Last Suppers
an autofiction

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1 - Mississippi

Two days before Christmas, my family always comes down to the reservoir. The restaurant is all wood paneling and windows. From our table, we watch headlights move across the bridge; the little waves crash against a rocky, man-made shore.

We drink sweet tea from tin cups and eat catfish off tin plates. My uncle teaches you to soak up collard greens with your cornbread. They flip the cornbread in a little cast iron skillet tableside, and we all clap. My aunt tells you this is the best coleslaw you'll ever have. My cousins think you're so funny—how happy my grandfather would be to know I love someone so tall. He would measure us against the door frame every time we visited. Never letting on that all five feet and five inches of him was internally beaming with pride.

At the end of the meal, we wrap the uneaten cornbread up into paper napkins and go outside to feed the geese. This is one of my fondest memories, a family ritual. We watch as the geese fight for crumbs, then waddle back into the water, filling their mouths with fresh water and diving deep below the choppy surface. Neither of us knows what is to come. Neither of us knows you will never set foot in this state again.

2 - Pennsylvania

If they're behind the counter, it's certain your gram knows them. You grew up in the corner booth of this restaurant, eating pizza and twirling Alfredo sloppily around a fork. Red sauce found its way onto every piece of clothing, and your mother would make you scrub out all the stains yourself. You wrote your name on the wall, right under the table, so no one would find it. But you're showing it to

me right now, your head craned 180 degrees, practically crawling on the floor. Your handwriting is as bad as it's always been. And my heart is swelling.

Your gram orders caprese—something light, she says. At eighty years old, she still goes on long walks around the neighborhood and offers to sit small dogs for neighbors. She asks me about my family and school, if I've been to the tristate area before. She gifts me a candle for Christmas. I feel shy around her in a way I can't explain. Maybe it's because I've never met a woman who looks so at home everywhere she goes. People do not question if she belongs.

You order a large calzone, and I get mussels. This is the best seafood I've ever had, and unknowingly, the last time I will eat it. The last time I will set foot in Morrisville. I tear through the mussels' tendons, ripping the meat from its shell. Close my eyes, savor it. I use a shell like a ladle, spooning the white wine sauce into my mouth until my bowl is empty. Losing control. Like an animal. Like a girl who is hungry for some part of herself she knows she is going to lose.

Part 4

A Wound the Length of a Kiss

On Mother Wounds

> A small globe rolled out, not much larger than a tennis ball. It rattled onto the sidewalk. I picked up—I hadn't realized you'd taken it with you. And I also didn't remember that we'd marked the globe with a pen. I'd asked you where Romania was, and you told me. I'd asked you where Africa was, and you told me. I'd asked you where America was, and the North Pole. And then I'd asked you where Via Colombo, our street, was, and you said, Here, and made a cross on the globe. But your hand must have slipped because seeing it now, that cross was below the bottom of Italy and above the top of Africa, in the middle of the sea.
>
> –Andrea Bajani, *If You Kept a Record of Sins*

Andrea Bajani's *If You Kept a Record of Sins* follows Lorenzo, a man who has traveled from his home in Italy to his mother's Romania upon her passing. The novel is composed of short, flash-like chapters. Vignettes and bite-sized scenes. Each chapter could be a story within itself, and yet, they all come together to create a larger narrative about a son coming to grips with the death of his estranged mother. A woman who did not stop working because she gave birth to a son. This novel is about maternal loss over a lifetime, grief, and uncovering the lives of the women we call *mom* after they have passed. Reading their stories and putting them next to ours. *If You Kept a Record of Sins* spoke to me in a way a novel has not in a long time, and it inspired much of this thesis project.

Sacrifice is necessary for women who become mothers. But what if I do not want to sacrifice anything?

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From a very young age, my mother knew she wanted children. Whether she would get married or not, she wasn't sure. She didn't really think about it. The white dress and wedding cake, selecting the

perfect first dance song. From stories I've heard—and from knowing my mother for 23 years—these things did not interest her much. And though she loves my father—before she met him, it seemed the idea of her finding a singular great love was an afterthought. I could ask her if this is true or an exaggeration. An attempt to find, create, or project pieces of myself into her. But I trust what I have heard and observed by listening and learning to see. My understanding of her myths is, too, the understanding of my own. Finding my voice.

I suppose I tend to project onto my mother my ideas of independence and solitude, because I do not relate to my mother much at all. We are very different planets—the Moon and Saturn. Cancer and Capricorn. She, all nurturing and caregiving, emotion. I, constantly questioning and serious in the pursuit of my goals. Angry. Relentless. Oftentimes my kindness is hidden behind layers of faux cold-heartedness. I have learned to protect myself in this manner. Meanwhile, my mother carries her heart on her sleeve. She is open to the world, finds a friend everywhere. All of this to say: most mothers are believed to live vicariously through their daughters, but I often find myself wanting to go back in time and befriend my mother before she was known as such. When she was just Sherry. A girl who chewed on ice to fall asleep. Loved to go with friends to the roller rink. Was so afraid of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* she asked her baby sister to sleep in her attic bedroom with her.

—

I love my mother. But I do not want her life. In my memory, she has never once, even as a child, asked me if I wanted to have children. *It just never seemed to interest you.* I loved playing with dolls because I could role-play. The idea that one day I would be like Barbie, wearing heeled shoes, fancy updos and long, stylish dresses. Not because I thought she was my child. My baby dolls—even family pets—were sooner the imaginary little brothers and sisters I never had, far before they were my children. The idea of being a mother was intrinsically foreign to me. She has never pressured me

into being a mother. Neither has my father. And in all the ways we have misunderstood or hurt each other in my lifetime, they know this about me and do not question it. That is, in its own way, a gift.

—

"Part 4: A Wound the Length of a Kiss," explores the fraught, complicated relationships between daughters and their mothers. How confusing parental relationships can trickle down and affect siblings, too. How some women become mothers because it is expected of them, not because they love it or have a choice in becoming one. It is an exploration of other possibilities a girl could have. Mother wounds affect all of us at various degrees of intensity and at different intervals. I yearn to know everything about Sherry. Who was she before she became my mother? And how does the unfolding of her story predict or foreshadow my own? In what ways do our paths diverge? In what ways will I find myself coming back to her? I think this is where my mother wound festers most. Despite our stable, loving relationship, I do not want to see her as *just* my mother anymore. I want to know *her*. This chapter is a manifestation of these mental wrestlings, concerns, and inquiries.

I leave her weeping in her barred little bed,
her warm hand clutching at my hand,
but she doesn't want a kiss, or to hug the dog goodnight—
she keeps crying mommy, uhhh, mommy,
with her lovely crumpled face
like a golden piece of paper I am throwing away.
We have been playing for hours,
and now we need to stop, and she does not want
to. She is counting on me to lower the boom
that is her heavy body, and settle her down.
I rub her ribcage, I arrange the blankets around her hips.
Downstairs are lethal phonecalls I have to answer.
Friends

dying, I need to call.
My daughter may be weeping all my tears,
I only know
that even this young
and lying on her side,
her head uplifted like a cupped tulip,
sometimes she needs to cry.

–Liz Rosenberg, "I Leave Her Weeping"

My Mother

Me

Sidelined
a flash fiction

We are sitting and watching the trucks dump trash out into a big pile. He is kicking his legs—they're dangling off the edge of the bench. Shoes so small, even my balled up fist can't fit inside one. And our coats pulled tightly around us, protecting our bodies from the blistering Wyoming wind. I'm sure if my mother was here, she would call me a bad mother. But my baby loves it. His feet are kicking around in circles, pulling on my coat sleeve and pointing. Across the street, hundreds of pounds of trash are being piled high. Plugging his nose, he laughs wildly as toilet paper falls in. I pick at my cuticles. Wipe my nose as it runs. Think about a woman I saw yesterday, arm in arm with her daughter. Pointing at the dresses in the shop windows and looking so happy to be alive. The mother ran her fingers through her daughter's hair, and she did not pull away. I watched them and wondered if he would ever feel like mine.

After a while, he becomes distracted by the clouds moving above his head. Exhales deeply, focusing then on the cloud of air he is forming right in front of his own, new eyes. He does it again and again. Everything is so exciting. He asks me what letter comes after H, and I answer. Then he goes back to laughing and pointing and kicking and tugging on me. I am not a person, but rather, a big stuffed animal being pulled off of a high shelf. My elbows rest on my knees, my head rests in my hands. I watch more trash fall into the Earth.

Soon it will be time to go home and make a meal he won't even eat. Inevitably crouch in front of him and peel a banana. Take a knife and slice the fruit between my thumb and forefinger. Hold it to his mouth while he watches the television. Not even looking at me. Rather, craning his entire, tiny body to look past my wide hips he once called home. We don't belong to each other anymore.

I stare at the knife. All nerves. Then, leaned over the sink, set down the blade. The TV blaring in the other room, the wind picking up hard outside. Through the kitchen window, the stars stare back. I press my finger against the glass pane and trace constellations. Look for a lunar valley to squeeze myself into. Watch the glass fog up again, and the maps I charted disappear. Silently wish for a different ending. If she were here, my mother would act offended by my coldness. My distance. She would ask—not really wanting an answer—if she ever seemed *this* miserable. I would ask her if she'd ever felt this lonely. Both of us would lie.

Onions & Hyacinth

a lyric essay

> People are mostly layers of violence and tenderness wrapped like bulbs, and it is difficult to say what makes them onions or hyacinths.
>
> –Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding*

My mother cuts my hair in the backyard with a pair of kitchen shears. She stands on the porch step, and I'm barefoot in the grass. I have always hated my height, and maybe this is why. My mother finds ways to be taller. To manage me. I make myself small to her benefit. Otherwise, my hair looks lopsided, or when dying it, a mousy brown still appears at the root. She has to get level. Get a good look at me—a face that looks so unlike her own. In the winter, she cuts my hair in the bathroom. I boost her up on the countertop and she sits. When it is time to trim my bangs, I turn around, her knees resting against my hip bones. The closest we have been since I passed between her legs and into this world. Screaming. Bleeding. Too much to carry even then. We have done it this way my entire life.

And we stood like this the day after the fight—her on the counter like this. The only fight that ever went this far. The corner of her eye blossomed into a purple hyacinth. Our proximity, our pseudo-tenderness, made me self-conscious. Like my limbs were sprawling and growing despite themselves, with so little of me actually taking up room in the vessel that was my body. Getting away from myself. Ahead of myself. My girlhood rage, fighting for agency over a life and a body I never asked for. But I know my mom didn't ask for hers either, and with my hands resting on the top of her knees, balancing myself, I told her I was sorry. Averted my eyes. She smiled and told me it was

okay. I said, *I wish I could fit in the palm of your hand*. It was not lost on me that scissors are just two knives bolted together at the center.

The vanity lights shone behind her mop of red unruly hair like a halo. Her discolored eye, a reminder that there was not a single inch of my mother's body I had not assaulted, marked, bruised, clung to, loved, or inherited by being alive. I closed my eyes, and all the little blonde hairs stuck to my wet face as they fell—like something invisible and unspoken disappearing as I shed them. The feeling made me itch. Restless. She kept cutting, shushing me gently like her tired baby. Because I still was.

Sharp as Silence
a flash fiction

From the minute she walked through the doorway, Jessie could tell if her mom, Rita, was home. Before any other sense flooded in, she smelt her mom. Floating down the hall, the scent of garlic and onion caramelizing in a pot, spices being toasted in a pan. Oil burning. Herbs in little, terracotta planters along the windowsill. Bathed in light. Rosemary. Thyme. Basil. Fresh citrus being squeezed, the rinds sitting in a pile on the counter. Then Jessie heard her. The sound of her knife slicing rhythmically through ribs of celery and leeks against the acacia cutting board. The oven beeping. The whirl of the vent fan or the sink filling with hot, soapy water. Cleaning as she went. The *click click click* of the gas turning over. The rhythms of the kitchen hid Jessie's footsteps. She crept upstairs to her room, replaying the school day over and over again in her mind until she slipped into sleep before dinner. Pots and pans clanging against the cast iron cooktop, a familiar lullaby. Jessie felt it was best that she and Rita maintained their distance. She avoided scolding by staying silent, out of her mother's way.

Sometimes, too restless to nap, she'd walk into the kitchen wordlessly, and wash her hands. She'd throw an apron over her neck and fashion her thick, coarse hair up into a long braid down her back. These were the rules. Jessie knew if she didn't obey them, she would be rejected. She would lose all of this. Standing at the counter, watching her mother out of the corner of her eye, dicing vegetables with swift grace—speaking a language of the body Jessie was still learning. The relationship between her and a chef's knife still new and flirting with danger. Rita kept one hand on her hip, the other stirring a wooden spoon in a deep, silver pot. She used to get spanked with that spoon. Jessie often thought Rita took her as an apparition of a stranger. The ghost of the daughter she once had. Something between them had snapped—cooking together, their only harmony.

Usually, Jessie would just stand and stir. Scrap caramelized fond off the bottom of the pot, her brain still buzzing from school—irregular Spanish conjugations of *estar,* what *X* was last solved for before the bell rang. The overlapping venn diagrams of friend groups she juggled. She'd pack minced meat into wonton wrappers like a birthday gift. Stab a toothpick into muffins, quickly pulling it out to inspect if the center was still liquid. Determine how much longer they needed. She'd peel potatoes or grate aged cheese over a plate. Wash rice over the sink, massaging it in her hands and pouring the excess starch down the drain. Jessie wished one day she could be more involved rather than delegated to the more menial tasks. But harmony required compromise.

There were a couple of tasks that, regardless of whether Jessie napped after school or joined her mother in the kitchen, Rita would leave for her to complete. She didn't mind getting messy, but there were some things Rita felt were beneath her. Didn't have the patience for. It was Jessie's job to scoop the soft boiled eggs out of the hot water and treat them to an ice bath. Seven minutes in, no more or less. She'd peel bits of shell off each gelatinous egg, working slowly to get under the filmy membrane, while also being careful to not blemish the smooth, white surface underneath. Jessie sat at the table during this tedious process. She could check over her work better this way. After dinner, she'd sprinkle them into the garden with the rest of the compost. Soggy bay leaves, citrus rinds, corncobs, onion skins. She'd hold the shell scraps flat in her palm and make a wish on them, like dandelion seeds. They caught the breeze and fell to the earth like pieces of confetti.

And on Tuesdays, when Rita made her own stock, Jessie was in charge of taking the carcasses outside. The night before garbage day, so the flesh didn't have time to decompose and leave the smell of rot lingering in the house. Rita handed her a bowl full of fatty tissue, tendons, and bones. Standing over the bin, Jessie would brace herself and dig into the bird's remains. Excess liquid oozed

out onto her hand and down her forearm, making the carcass hard to hold on to. She'd unearth the wishbone, rip it out, and close her eyes. Knowing that when it snapped she'd win either way.

Shards of eggshells and jagged, broken bones felt like hope somehow. Something to cling to. She'd take a deep breath in before she called upon what she hungered for most. Presented it to the world. This emptiness space where her love should roam. How she dreaded coming home. Sometimes she wished to heal whatever pain made her mother ignore her. Other times, Jessie wished their food could keep them together.

At the End of the Driveway
a prose poem

Standing there. My feet and arms bare, wrapping myself up in a half-hearted bear hug. Dew coated the dying grass. Gravel cut into the soft pads of my feet. Gray clouds hung low like an omen we could almost decipher. Sleeping gown grazing bony knee caps. It was too early to be up and out. Even for you. Especially for me. You had the window rolled down, staring at me from the red truck. So little I still looked up to you. A tear in your eye? No, I can't say for sure. If I wasn't so dog tired, I could've seen you through the grog more clearly. The air thick with humidity and future rain, and we said nothing. Only the sound of the engine running. Little puffs of smoke escaping the exhaust.

I gave a pitiful smile and barely lifted my hand off my goosebumped-arm. Sending you off with some semblance of a farewell. You pulled away, waving back. Repeating *I love you I'm sorry I love you I'm sorry* until I could no longer hear your voice, but instead, heard the memory of you saying it. Repeating like the chorus of a sticky song. Over and over. As real as could be.

I like to believe it was real—that you were still saying that all the way to Pelahatchie. Stuff we both knew it took you years of loving me from afar to spit out. Learning to love me as your daughter. I heard your voice as I walked back up, gravel cutting into me. Pulling pine needles and pebbles off the bottoms of my feet. Wiping them off on the mat. And I heard you when I rolled myself up back into bed. Drifted off, and you were halfway to Meridian. Rain hitting our tin roof, rocking me to sleep like you should've been. Nestling into a dream where there was no sound and neither of us were scared to be a family.

Fault Lines
a lyric essay

Every morning is the same. The shades drawn tight, we cannot tell if the sun has risen yet. A blanket wrapped around my knobby knees and bare shoulders. Your medicine sitting on the counter. Our dog in the backyard, chasing shadows. Our father on a flight to a place you cannot pronounce and I cannot read. Our mother in another room, keeping it all in order. The sound of our chewing rings in our ears and cuts the silence like a pounding meat mallet. We think all families function like this.

You dissociate at the breakfast table, your expression blank and jaw moving mindlessly, as if you are automated—we have done this routine so many times maybe we are. I whine, pleading with our mother to make you stop staring at me while I eat. She doesn't hear me. She is filling the washer with everyone's clothes. Separating lights from darks. Maybe this primary school scene is a microcosm of our worlds: me, fighting to be seen. You, smart enough to know being seen is never worth it. She then comes to the table and tells us to open the Bible. We shove our cereal bowls aside and listen to her read.

I am an infantile insomniac. I sneak into your room, slowly lower myself onto the bed, and hug the edge of the mattress. Terrified to be alone. There is no doubt you hear me. Feel my body heat radiating from under the sheets as new kindling reinvigorates a fire. As I grew up—my fear of the dark becoming babyish to everyone but me—this proves more difficult. Our bedrooms are side by side, a thin wall dividing us. So I press my ear against the wall and listen closely, sifting through the sheetrock like a metal detector through sand. Trying to uncover your breath. Like it is some precious thing. You sound like our mother in your sleep, soft and rhythmic like a wave, while I take after our father. Mouth wide open and gasping for air. To imagine your stomach rising and falling feels

impossible. You lie stationary like a corpse. I count each breath on my fingers until I realize that I am unsure what number comes next.

For as long as I can remember, this is the closest I feel to you, for I have lived with you all my life yet I have never known you. The pictures of you that exist in my mind never come together to tell a story. Memories of you throwing a baseball. A wooden spoon snapping against the back of your thigh. A perpetually unmoving mouth. If you spoke to me, would your lips form *I love you*? And if so, could you promise me that you meant it?

Suddenly I am seventeen, and you are soon graduating college. Moving away. You amble into my bedroom, an age-inappropriate night light projecting your silhouette against the lavender walls. And lie right on top of me. We do not speak, but I feel the rise and fall of your stomach as you breathe. The crushing weight of you is a feeling I know well. Often pinned to the floor, elbows in my ribs, I kick like a human sacrifice. We played like two brothers. We fought like them too. *I am sorry,* you say after elongated silence. *I should have been a better brother.* You kiss my cheek, and I cannot move my arms to wipe away the tears. The weight of you, now a physical representation of my love and the absence of expressing it. But the weight of you just as much reminds me of how much bigger you are. How much better. Crushed by your shadow alone. As kids, I would feel instant relief when you finally set me free—the air entering my lungs again, every part of me expanding. But this time, when you roll off the bed and return to your room, I long to feel small again.

We don't say sorry in our house. This is not your fault. When we grow up and we learn to love one another—not as siblings but as people—we will see that the thin wall has created a void. A space between us we will spend the rest of our lives trying to fill. We will sift through the memories, asking

one another what we remember and what we wish we couldn't. And when we have unpacked all the boxes time has stored away—when I put my story next to yours—I hope we decode the secret language we never invented as children. The truths of our house were whispered like a secret. We will make up our own. And our parents will hear us, but they won't make out the words.

Part 5

Where Story Becomes Myth

On the Landscape of Home

> She loved most being in the woods with the diffused light and the quiet there. Such a stillness, with just the pecking of ground birds and forest animals, the fluttering of wings, and the occasional skittering of squirrels playing up and down a tree. The silent, imperceptible unfurling of spring buds into blossom. She felt comfortable there. As if nothing could be unnatural in that place, within but apart from the world.
>
> –Brad Watson, *Miss Jane: A Novel*

The Mississippi I know is one I can taste. Catfish, boiled shrimp, chicken and dumplings. Ripe fruit. I can hear the silence. Feel the cool, lush grass between my toes and the humidity curl the ends of my hair. Mosquitoes' tiny legs tickling my own. Dirty lap dogs barking ceaselessly. Husks of corn tossed in a heaping pile on the front porch. Rows and rows of cotton. The Mississippi I know works hard and puts it away when they get home. This system was not built for us, but neither was the economic system of our past. Our communities must refuse to abandon one another because so many others did. Including our own government. Which they still do.

I am fascinated by the countryside. Rural ways of being and seeing. The backroads we find ourselves driving down, our headlights fighting against an encroaching darkness. The sun fading quickly behind the hills, and we are late for supper. Driving through those thick funnels of trees, your vision strained. So dark it is almost bright. Does this make sense to you? Do we share this memory?

When we come from quiet, private families—particularly those in the South—we cling tightly to what we remember and try desperately to fill in the gaps of what goes unspoken. I remember best the *places* that shaped me, and I work hard to imagine Otherwise—the stories that permeate the air

of those places and breathe life into an otherwise haunted landscape that is still in the throes of reckoning with its colonial past. As we, the people who settled there, reckon with the harm we have inflicted upon others and, unknowingly, ourselves. The unspoken stories of our families, the horrors they endured while pursuing an American Dream and falling short of it, is its own minor literature.

It is important to mention that the ways in which we try to uphold these outdated ideals is a source of the Southern Gothic tradition in the first place. The genre is a mirror that reflects the dark underbelly of our lived experiences. And so, there is no denying that the Mississippi I know is, too, one that praises masculinity and justifies its violence, while "pure" femininity is an impossible prize. The Mississippi I know is one that lacks. The food we *could* put on the table if the money never ran out and the gas wasn't cut off. Many Mississippians come from broken homes and dilapidated houses, few dignifying jobs to keep them around. Students in my class share with me that their grandfathers, still alive today, left the Delta because sharecropping was their only option. *Sharecropping was their only option*. Let that word sink into your skin like silt at the bottom of the River. Sharecropping.

I miss my upbringing, my girlhood-against-all-odds and the things it taught me, but I am not nostalgic for the American South. I was a kid growing up in the early aughts—a time of shifting planets and power we could not comprehend—just like every other child in a big city. The rural and urban children both were finding ways to play video games before finishing their homework. They were both distracted by the television during dinnertime. They both had parents who were absent, struggling to feed them and attend their basketball games and theater productions. Brief phone calls wishing their fathers goodnight from a place they had never been. And we all shopped at the mall, it was just a matter of distance and time.

It was not a slower life, as many people who romanticize rural settings describe it. However, everything does feel amplified in the rural space. The ideological differences and markers of identity we carry with us are more likely to be questioned, misunderstood, ousted in the rural landscape. The tension between a girlhood and the place in which it is carried out. Place is a character of its own for this reason and pivotal to my craft. Place prods the characters in my work to think in accordance with the land and their culture, but also forces them to choose between following the ideologies of the past, or to carve out their own, new understandings. New and old ways of being converge in the rural space, like the confluence of a river.

It is patriarchal, racial, and generational tensions that introduce critical elements to my fiction, partially in this section, Part 5, on place and home. For example, **i**n works like "A Fragile Place," the utilization of autofiction creates distance between the lived experiences of my past and the imagined realities I impose upon characters. Tony, who I name Anthony in this work, is a real man. So are my grandparents. So are my childhood summers in Jackson. But my grandfather is gone now, and so are the blueberry bushes that straddled their shared fence line. In works "Red Dogs" and "Gateways," the Wyoming-Montana landscape I describe is one I have witnessed and lived in, but the content of the stories were born out of images and imagination rather than experience rooted in reality. Wyoming and Mississippi feel interwoven in my stories, and they often speak to one another. So far apart geographically, yet they speak a similar language.

The natural world and the images it produces—all on its own, without even trying, and with no help from me—rest at the core of these works. The milieu we have imposed upon these landscapes builds the tension our characters must wrestle with, and the images they meet in.

(from left to right) Willie, Sheridan, Tyler, Abigail, and Douglas

Four generations

A Fragile Place
an autofiction

Along the fence line, the blueberry bushes grow heavy. Branches bend like spines. Kneeling. Almost begging. We set out when the sky is periwinkle dust—mirroring the unwashed skin of the tiny fruit. It is a ritual that crowds my memory. Since before I was balancing buckets full of berries on my shoulders; back when it was *I* being carried on someone else's. It is barely summer, and barely dawn, and yet sweat collects every place cloth touches my skin. Long-sleeve shirts and wide-brimmed hats, sheltering ourselves from the brutal sun, rising fast. Thick gloves made of leather and rubber. We are without handheld rakes or combs. It is not about making the job easier—although, later on, as the sun beats down, our buckets and metal soup pots scalding, sweat dripping into our eyes—I wish it were. Using our hands, we have taught one another to move gingerly. To think intentionally. To not force the berries off their stems, crushing them between our fingers. The fruit will come free when it is ready. But when I was young—unknowing and unconcerned—I would pierce the berries' fragile skin, their sweet, dark juice staining the tips of my gloves a vibrant indigo.

From across the fence line, Anthony often comes outside and sits on his porch, overlooking my grandfather's yard. He can't move around like he once did, so while we work, he tells us stories about my grandparents and himself. How, before their kids came along, they'd host poker nights and throw parties. They'd drive down to Biloxi and listen to jazz in deserted clubs. The sound of trumpets and saxophone solos backdropped by the crashing waves. After my mom was born, Anthony would push her on the swingset in the backyard, help her with math homework. He never forgot a birthday. He had a spare key to the house. He knew how to disarm the security system.

But no matter their closeness, my mother knew their relationship was dangerous. She couldn't understand *why* this was so, but she felt it. From the subtle shiftiness in her parents' eyes. The way they whispered on the phone. The way Anthony would not greet her as the school bus rounded the corner onto their street. Despite everything our families shared, my mother was still white. Still woman. Still Southern. So she knew better than most how to keep secrets.

I have plenty of memories with Anthony, too—but there's one story he never shares. I was seven. Always the ruffian, ready to brawl with my older brothers, I had earned the nickname *Grace*. From a young age, I was forcing the blueberries off their stems. Running for my life, skinning my knees on the pavement. One day, I stole fistfuls of berries from my brother's bucket. Crushing them in my hands. I hid behind a large tree in Anthony's front yard. Anthony had just gotten home from work, motor oil covering the thighs of his jumpsuit. White cloth hanging from his pocket. He walked up the driveway and found me lapping up the juice, sucking it off my fingers. Darkly-colored drool dripping down my baby-fat face. My face, my hands, and my shirt stained an unnatural color. I remember Anthony gasping when he saw me, slowly backstepping like I was a wild animal. Many years later, I still wonder what he thought he had witnessed. What did I reflect back to him? A child covered in blood? Or eating soil? What violence could he see in me?

—

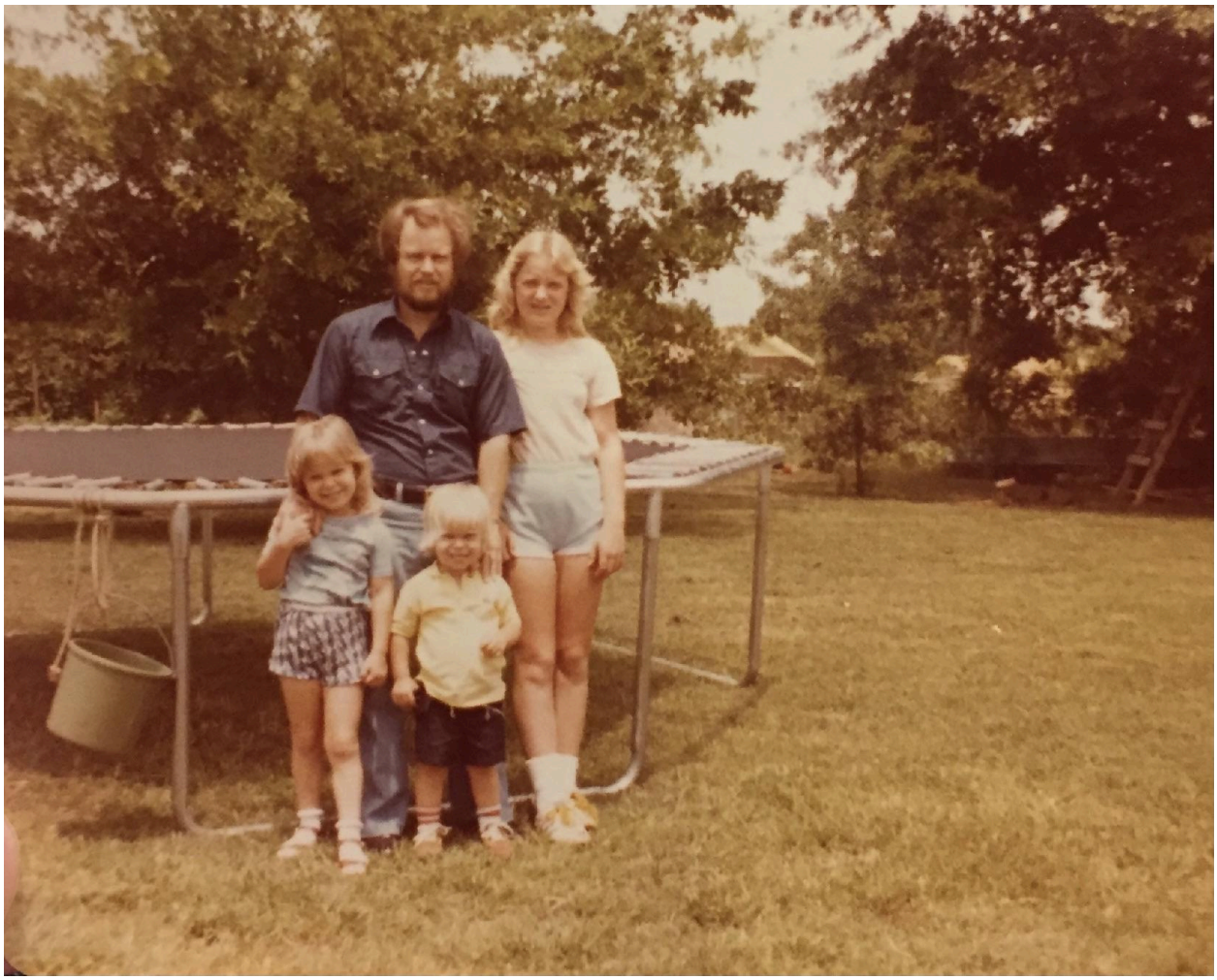
I look beyond the fence line and see the flag flying high between the mailboxes. My grandfather died under an old flag. My grandmother and Anthony raised the new one together, and everyone stood around clapping and kissing cheeks, taking pictures. A car drove past and honked cheerfully. Out of the open windows, white fists pumped the air. On the flag, a bright, a white magnolia blossom front and center. In this country, the flower symbolizes luck and stability. Few here have tasted these. In the east, the magnolia stands for purity and nobility—two things we strive hard for with little

resolve. This land we walk on is haunted, and many of us try to forget that. To act like the soil isn't still damp with blood. How the children play with ghosts. How with each step, we crush bone underfoot.

Our new flag reads *In God We Trust* but I'm honestly not sure what for. For clean water? Do we trust God to vote for after-school reading programs? Or to end generational poverty? What if He hand delivered reparations? Do we trust him to end sharecropping? I try to imagine God living here. Would He know how to drive down the Delta backroads? Could He handle this humidity? Would He appreciate the hot soil between his toes like us? Would He, too, swat at the mosquitoes—eventually growing tired, and with irritated skin—would he eradicate them for good?

Would God suffer with adoration for this land, just as we do? Would he understand the weight of what he allowed to happen here? Can God admit he makes mistakes?

Anthony looks into our eyes when he speaks. I fetch him water. I ask myself why this is a miracle. Why Anthony has to thank God and the government for allowing him to do what he was always meant to. To speak, shoulders held back, standing tall. To embrace another body. To rest his own. Before we go inside to wash off the afternoon's sweat and dirt, Anthony comes up to the fence and puts his hand on my shoulder. On his face, a smile. Behind his head, I see the flag waving in the hot Mississippi wind, red and yellow stripes along the edges. In the center—a rich, vibrant background. The inside of a blueberry.



The Tramels

a summer in the 80s

South Jackson, Mississippi

Red Dogs
a flash fiction

It is summertime in Yellowstone. The air is saturated with the smell of Douglas fir and sulfur. My dad and I sit silently in the front bench of the truck, heading back to his caravan. The road ahead of us is winding. Our headlights are of little help against the black sky set on swallowing the landscape. My dad is speeding, rushing to nowhere. And I feel like I'm in the tunnel at the beginning of Space Mountain, except if we take a sharp turn here, nobody's screaming with glee. Vomit creeps up my throat, the rotten-egg-scent of the fumaroles makes my stomach turn. I roll up the windows, but it creeps its way through the car's air conditioning. Passing an abandoned ranger's station, my dad starts telling me a story. We head farther into the darkness.

My knuckles are white from clutching the assist bar. My dad races on. To distract myself, I think about the plants and animals. How fragile life is here, how strong you have to be to survive. I tell him everything back home is already dead, shriveled up in the unforgiving sunlight. He's telling me everything here should be, too. But the rain just keeps coming, and so the grass is a deep, rich green uncharacteristic of August. The heavy rainfall will make, hopefully, for a longer summer.

As we enter Lamar Valley, he slows the truck. Sleeping bison dapple the landscape, their ghostly bodies illuminated by the moon. Following alongside the tributary, mothers and babies wrap around one another. Some are keeping watch by the road's edge—like karns marking a hiking trail—their eyes wide open, breath labored. The truck inches past a red dog, its legs twitching, trapped in a nightmare. I wonder what it's running from. I wonder how old it is. During a normal year, any calf born after late May is likely to die from starvation. Wyoming winter picks favorites and it all depends

on birth order. Silently I pray for the Gemini dogs, the late bloomers. Babies aborted from brucellosis. I ask what the winter is looking like. He says warmer than usual. Above-average rain.

My dad lives here. He will probably die here. And so I trust his judgment when it comes to matters of life and death in a way that I once didn't. As I walked on eggshells around him, he would warn me of how dangerous the world was. He was disconnected from my life and had no excuse as to why—it's easier for him now that he's far away and has one. It's easier for me now that I have manageable expectations, prepared for disappointment. But this trip has been easy. Even fun. He smiles more often. Gentle when he closes the car door. He pays for my meals and holds up peace signs for photos. Time moves slowly here, and I find myself savoring it.

My dad loves the red dogs. They remind him of my brothers. We drive for a while longer, laughing about things we saw earlier in the day. Bison walking along the boardwalks, the wooden planks bending under their weight. A child grimacing as he smells Mud Volcano for the first time. A German woman jumping out of the car to take a photograph, her family leaving her abandoned on the shoulder. A lull. *Gosh, River. I hate to bring this up, but you really need to figure out what you're doing with your mom's house. And all the paperwork. Because I can't be the one to deal with it. You know that. I just… needed to say something before you left.* And there it is: my father refusing to let me escape the realities I must inevitably face. The ones he ran away from. I choose not to answer. Just nod. The air in the car grows stuffy and humid. Thick with unspoken insults and misunderstanding.

In an attempt to move on, he asks me to grab him a snack from the cooler. So I spin around, elbow-deep in half-melted ice and packs of cold cuts and cheese. Suddenly, he slams on the brakes and braces me from falling back into the dashboard. I collect myself quickly, start to ask if he's insane. But when I look over, he's staring straight ahead. Eyes transfixed.

In the middle of the road there's a red dog split open. Its tiny ribs cracked and reaching up towards the sky—from where so much rain had poured down to keep it safe in the coming months. Its open torso looks like it could catch that rain and hold it, like a makeshift rain barrel. Its hooves are caked in dirt from running. The dirt around it is painted red with blood. The smell of rotten eggs has been exchanged for fresh carrion. And the wolves are still eating, tearing through its flesh with ease like a piece of bread. They start growling at each other, fighting over pieces of a life that is not theirs. They all feel as though they've earned a cut. Soon the vultures will come. Its eyes will be pecked out, pulled away from its skull. And then its mother. She will look down at her baby, whose eyes have been thrown back and swallowed in one swift inhale. She will lick what's left of its fur, grooming it in vain. She will lap water from its open chest. Both of them now marked with a wound. I reach over to honk the horn, my arm still numb from the ice. And then the wolves run off, and my dad is crying, and I'm holding myself back from loving him.

Red Dog

Lamar Valley, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

A Preemptive Grieving
a lyric essay

My grandpa and I headed down Grants Ferry Road, driving to the grocery store. This was before they built the interstate and before they paved the driveways but after he started letting me drive his truck in big, slow loops around the front yard. Bobbing and weaving through the magnolia trees. Me in the driver spot, him at the other end of the bench. It was early into a summer like all the others that came before it—sticky, and thick like curdled milk. We could part curtains of air with our palms outstretched. Our shoes, often muddy and left outside to dry, could've melted on the blacktop. I only ever visited my grandparents during the summer, and so it seemed to me that Mississippi was stuck in an eternal state of it.

We were on our way to buy vinegar. I had opened a bottle of grape soda earlier that afternoon, and it had exploded unexpectedly. Spotting and staining the kitchen wallpaper with little lavender polka dots. I ate my chicken and dumplings, feeling shy and clumsy in my new, teenage body. A foot-too-tall. Shoulders broadening like an Olympic swimmer's. My grandma made a plate and sat with me, squeezing my hand in silent prayer. Metal forks scraped against blue willow, the kitchen's ceiling fan whirred overhead, stirring up dust. Later in the truck, riding alongside my grandpa, I could still feel where the sweet, sticky soda had dripped down my front and clung between my thighs. My shorts felt too small and made me self-conscious as I began to sweat. The truck had no A/C. I felt sorry for my grandpa, driving me to the store in the midday heat. Just to salvage wallpaper he never even liked.

He turned on the radio. Talked over it. Telling me the same stories about my father I had heard a million times before. Grants Ferry, unlike when my father was raised there, was now a long and

winding road that connected Brandon to Flowood. But just as it had always been, the houses dotting the road were modest and dated. With sprawling yards and accidental ponds when thunderstorms hit. All around me was green and speckled in sunshine. It was humid and heady. When I closed my eyes, I could feel the sun's heat absorbing into my eyelids. The sound of gospel music, my grandpa's low voice, and gusts of wind flapping through the open windows blended together, harmonizing. It was interrupted by a news report. The radio DJ said Maya Angelou was dead. I turned up the volume, and the DJ read a section from "Caged Bird." I don't remember what parts were recited. But I do remember the DJ didn't sound like he was from anywhere near Here. I couldn't recognize my family in his voice, the song I had grown so accustomed to hearing during the burgeoning summer. They attempted a moment of silence, but I could still hear the static.

Wow, I said, staring at the empty road before us. *I can't believe she's dead…* My grandfather sat unspeaking, a rare occurrence. Angelou's words hung in the air between us. Alive and breathing. *You know, I ain't ever heard that poem. Not once in my life. Heard the title, I guess, but that's 'bout all.* My eyes grew wide with surprise—*No way? Poppy, it's probably one of the most popular poems in the world!* He smiled. *I don't remember learnin' anything about poetry. Felt like I was raised to fight a war.* I leaned up against the side of the truck, closed my eyes again, thinking about how wildly different our lives were. Who my grandpa imagined I truly was, and what I would become at his expense. The glow of the sun melted everything behind my eyelids into the shade of Sunkist. I felt blood rushing through my head.

We bought vinegar and came back home. My grandpa went straight to his wood-paneled office, glasses resting at the end of his nose. Worked on a puzzle with kittens all over it. Bows tied around their necks like Christmas gifts in an old movie. My grandma was laid out on the screened-in porch,

rocked to sleep by the cicadas' song. And I was scrubbing soda off the walls, tears in my eyes, mourning how little I had left of these oppressive Mississippi summers I once thought infinite.

H. Tyrone Wells

Off Exit 30

a lyric essay

Slow down or you'll miss it. Look for that big, circling exit. That red barn sitting on the cliff's edge, towering over the highway. That Spanish-language church. That pasture full of white, white horses. That therapist's office that looks like someone's grandma's house. There's a shower stall in the bathroom. Turn left and drive down that road covered in a canopy of emerald ash trees, burning bright yellow in autumn. It's the only place around here that feels worthy to be on screen. Watch for deer and fallen limbs and hickory nuts. Remember there are no shoulders. Eventually you'll come to a stoplight surrounded by orange construction signs. Men in orange vests smoking cigarettes and staring into potholes. Like if they chip away at them just a little more, they'll give way to the center of the Earth—where there are affordable houses and better paying jobs. To get to the residential part of town, you'll take that new road. Planted right in the middle of that massive field. It used to sprawl, untouched, for miles. It used to roll on and on, those golden stalks of wheat would radiate in the sunshine. Cows would roam, soaking up those sunbeams and resting in the dry, yellowing grass.

The old road—the one I know from childhood—ran alongside the edge of that field, separated by a dilapidated wooden fence. I remember, during my senior year of highschool, when a sophomore girl on the soccer team drove through it. She was drunk, walked away unscathed, but the fence was never fixed. And so eventually, all the cows found that hole and got loose, wandering out in every direction. Residents had to call animal control to retrieve them. The cows were grazing in their lawns, right in front of their McMansions. And kids at school thought it was funny. But after animal control caught every last one, we never saw the cows return to that field, and we all wondered for a long time what came of them. We thought about how sad it was to see things change.

Anyway, at some point the field ends and the high school property begins. I remember how my best friend would roll down the glass and fly. I'd sit on the frame of the window, letting the wind sweep me up. I'd stick my head out like a dog, or like I was going to prom in a big, pink limousine. My hands straight up above my head, choking on mouthfuls of polluted air. When I drive past it now, I think about that sophomore girl. About how everyone I knew back then likely never thinks about me. And thank God.

A few miles down from the school, you'll come across a public swimming pool. It will likely be closed. Kids never stop puking up their guts into it. Take a right hand turn, and drive down the winding neighborhood streets—barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other. Turn left out of the roundabout. My childhood home is on the left. That one made of white brick and brown woodwork. The driveway is steep. Blue and white hydrangea bushes spill over the flowerbeds onto the concrete walkway, which leads to a little porch with Adirondack chairs we never sat in.

Three streets down, at the public library, a classmate and I would study for our psych exams. You could walk there if you wanted to. We sat in a little, private room with one rectangular desk and a fluorescent light, flickering overhead. The room smelled of mothballs, and I would daydream about him kissing me. He once told me how the wrestling team led freshmen out into that big field blindfolded at the start of each new season. He heard from a friend that they would make those boys strip nude, taking video on an old camcorder. We didn't think that was true, though.

When I asked him what he thought animal control did to all the cows, he asked me what I meant. Don't I remember? We never talked above a whisper. Never kissed.

At some point, the contractors filled in the pond, leveled the ground, and built more houses on top of it. But before that, across from the library, was a public park. I remember how the sun used to set over the tree line. How an opossum would roam through the big bluestem, her babies clinging to her back. My family would play cornhole there, laughing wildly at my mother for never letting go of the bag at the right time, and it would soar. Sky high. Right above her head.

Anyway, to leave town, just retrace your steps until you get back to that new road. That new road leads to the highway. But if you want, you can take the long way out. I do. I take it slow around that big, circling exit. I wave goodbye to that red barn sitting on the cliff's edge, watching over me as my car shrinks into the skyline. I think about how I still look the same, but the landscape is always changing. That new, hot pavement—the old soil underneath. I don't think about anyone I once knew. Because I know none of us think about each other anymore. We think about all those dead cows. And all those green, green lawns we saved by slaughtering them. And thank God.

Gateways
a short story

Among the concrete beams and rebar, I would listen to static on the radio, mimicking your voice. The drivers beside me bathed in red light. Stepping suddenly on their breaks and honking. Arms thrown in the air. I was always jumpy then. Eyes darting frantically.

There is something so vulnerable about searching for someone in a crowded room, a party, an airport arrival line. The moment I would see you before you saw me, the longing in your eyes. That felt like love to me. The way you'd light up when you recognized my car, a symbol that had become so intertwined with who I am, it might as well have been my own face inching towards you. That little routine made everything else seem worth it. You, out of town. Me, making myself busy until Friday evenings. Weaving our way in and out of traffic, the conversation dying before reaching the highway. But for those thirty seconds, your eager surveillance for my attention kept me alive. Whether you were truly longing for me or to simply leave the airport, I didn't consider. Looking out through the small, glass doors as my parents careen their necks, looking for *me*, I can imagine it was probably the latter.

—

We'd been separated for six months. I waited until last week to tell them. As few details as possible, of course. Because honestly, I wasn't quite sure what happened either. All I knew is that once I popped the festering blister of our broken marriage—my parents forced to bear witness, too late to intervene—I knew I would only end up more raw and sensitive than when I arrived. I flew home to Montana with no interest in coming back changed. Or at the very least, I wanted to come back with all my threads still tangled up. Go back in time before we had ever met. Play house with my parents instead of you. Feel held again. Allow myself to be delusional. In denial for just a bit longer.

The air was considerably colder in Bozeman than back in Tupelo, thin and crisp despite the intense sunshine. My skin felt prickly and exposed. A tourist now. Unaware of how cool it stays in the summer months. I think back to last Christmas, bundled up in wool scarves and down jackets. Socks tucked into our jeans. We walked along Stone Street, ice crystalizing in your hairline. You wanted children. I hadn't known. It hurt me to consider—the life I enjoyed was lacking for you in some major way. Although juvenile, I went to bed most nights praying I'd be enough to sustain you. It felt like it was working until it wasn't.

The mountains were visible from the floor-to-ceiling windows inside the airport. Surrounded by them, I felt small in a way that reassured me. My father held out a sweatshirt for me to pop over my t-shirt. He flung my suitcase into the bed of the truck. Heading towards the highway, mama pointed out the window, showing me new restaurants and deserted buildings. In the last ten years, it felt like everywhere I'd loved had met its end. The bounce house party palace where I had my seventh birthday. The Italian restaurant Molly and I went to before prom. The stationary store I got thank you cards from after our wedding.

It is an hour drive to Gardiner, our tiny town on the outskirts of Yellowstone. The Roosevelt Arch is visible from outside my bedroom window. After being here my entire life, the arch stopped feeling like an entrance to some magical landscape, and instead a gate I was locked behind. I didn't want to be mistaken as a tourist in my own town anymore. I moved to Mississippi because no one is a tourist there. It was earthy and working class; so similar to the place I was raised despite being hundreds of miles away. I'm not sure why I'm explaining all of this to you. Surely you remember these things. The parts of my story that led me to finding yours. The striped, yellow wallpaper that radiated light. Rays bouncing and blinding us each morning as the sun peaked up behind the mountain ridge. The old,

beige carpet pilling underfoot. Stains hidden under area rugs. A framed photo of Molly and I on the nightstand you would turn over during intimacy. Dried flowers from her funeral in a vase. The snow globe collection on my dresser, portals into family vacations I longed to return to. Vacations I didn't have to plan alone, but could rely on my parents to choose for me. Sante Fe. Boston. Cancún. *Does it even snow in Cancún?* You asked me this one day, the first time we visited my parents. Legs sprawled out, sitting on the floor as I got dressed. Your Itawamba sweatshirt gathering around my hips. You cupped the snow globe in your hands. And that's how I choose to see you now: gentle, curious. Recognizing a life in me that preexisted you. *All this anger was once love.*

—

My parents let me be for the first day or two, allowing me to settle in while they ran errands to prepare for the elaborate meals they'd promised me. Flank steak with chimichurri. Roasted carrots in a honey garlic glaze, topped with pumpkin seeds and feta. Broiled seafood stuffed mushrooms and pecan-smoked salmon. Potatoes every which way. But after a long, disorienting nap, I threw on some sweats, grabbed my bear spray, and walked down 5th Street to Flying Pig. Ate a slice of meat lovers pizza off a white paper plate, greasy-stained napkins crumpled up in my hands. I wasn't sure if I wanted someone to recognize me or not. I still don't know what it is I want sometimes, since I'd been asking you to decide for me for so long.

Garcia. McIntire. Palmer. White. I played this game on Peters Street growing up. I'd list the surname of every person I remembered going to school with as I passed their house. How easily everything came flooding back to me. The same cars lined up in the driveway. Their initials painted on the mailbox. Once something is in your bones, it's hard to shake it. Do you feel the same?

Reuben. Schwartzman. Dion. Straus. I dragged my sneakers against the pavement, idle. A group of elk walked into the cemetery. The sun had set, and the world felt filtered through a cool, blue screen. The moon was high. The elk ate silently, like circled wagons, pulling grass up from around the tombstones. As if to clean them. Pulled petals off flowers left behind by family. I sat on the curb and watched them. Their tails swished with pleasure, taking small, thoughtful bites from the earth. A fawn drank from her mother. Two males playfully clashed their antlers. I wondered how such powerful animals remembered to be gentle. How, without words, they made it clear they didn't mean to cause each other harm. I wiped my eyes. Molly was buried in that cemetery. Most of our families were. And for a moment I wondered if there was a chance I could be too, now. I went home then.

—

I woke up to the sound of pans and plates clanking against each other in the cupboards. The only semblance of music that carried through our quiet house. It was six. Pale rays of light began to peek through the wooden slats of my bedroom window, illuminating the pollen-yellow walls I had chosen for myself in childhood. The tallgrass and log houses layered in fog. The sky was periwinkle, and white cotton-ball clouds marked it like brush strokes. But I threw up in my sleep again. Meat lovers pizza coating my pajamas. And I woke up without you next to me. And so everything I looked at, regardless of its beauty, felt tinged with the smell of bile and the pain of a missing limb. The sticky, nauseating ache of regrettable indulgence and what happens when you go too far.

The kitchen door was open, and when Mama saw me, she shook her head. The acidic aroma of bacon frying in the pan, matched with the puke-covered sheets I'd stripped from my bed, made my stomach turn. I raised my arms above my head, and she stripped me nude. I was too beneath it all to be embarrassed now. Mama washed her hands and shoved a pill down my throat. *I feel infantile,* I whispered. *Well, you're not. You're just sick… but I'm not putting those sheets back on again,* she said smiling. I

nodded, stumbling back to my room to put on fresh clothes. This is the most we ever spoke in the mornings. When I walked back into the kitchen, she had a hairbrush Spun me around and combed the crusty knots of vomit out of my hair. It was falling out in clumps into the skin. She didn't say anything, but I could feel it.

We went back to my bedroom together and she helped me put new sheets on. Idle threats were how she showed her affection. She kissed my forehead and I fell asleep for a long time. I was feverish yet freezing. Exhausted, yet the racing of my heart kept me in fitful sleep. The first week passed like a blur. I was unstuck and lost, suspended in time, like waking up from an after-school-nap unsure if it is day or night.

—

The second week, my father called off work at the warehouse and reminded me of where I came from. He took me fishing. Rode horses. We went on long hikes near Beaver Ponds and Fairy Falls, lying in the grass, our heads propped up on giant logs. We took a tour on Lake Yellowstone, both of us falling asleep in the back of the boat. Rocked to sleep by the movement of our bodies against the small, choppy waves. We watched moose wade in the water, antlers covered in soggy vegetation. In Lamar Valley, my father pointed to the top of a mountain and I spotted a lone, black wolf who had been deserted by her pack. Just before I came, she killed a baby moose and ate it all by herself. *Wolves aren't meant to live alone,* my father said, talking around the subject. *You're corny,* I said, shoving him with my elbow. But I was deeply afraid of admitting that I *was* truly alone. I wasn't sure what was mine to hold on to anymore.

—

The night before I was to leave, I brought a small bouquet of baby's breath to Molly's grave, my shoes muddy from where the elk had ripped up grass, leaving dry, bare patches of soil exposed. I

had not visited the grave since her funeral, and it weighed on me heavier than it ever had before: how you knew of her through anecdote alone. How you could forget her with ease now that you didn't *need* to remember. I sat there confessing to her for a while. A deep sigh and a run-on sentence. How the conversation got around to you, I don't remember. I couldn't even remember the sound of her voice. But she made me laugh.

She would've hated you—this I always knew. Your distant, objective view of the world. Repeating a joke two or three times before you got the punchline. How you played music too loud in the car. Afraid of silence, which was music enough to us. Had never ridden a horse or white water rafted—the greatest joys of our youth. *He's just… so posh,* I hear her saying. I tell her you moved to Mississippi to "see how the other half lived," and I feel a gust of wind slap my face. Knocking sense into me. I felt her and the mountains whispering something. The words were unclear, but I felt them deep in my chest—as real as language. Calling me. You think I'm crazy, surely. But you've never lived somewhere like this. Where you relied so deeply on the weather and the landscape. Never shaped by it. We moved to Tupelo and you left me there. Stayed inside all weekend. Gone again by Monday. The point is, by the end of the conversation, I felt Molly's voice was clearer to me than yours. Louder in my head. Rattling around and telling me to run. Why was it easier to talk to a ghost than it is to you?

—

A warmth expanded in my chest as I zipped up my suitcase and headed to the airport. Earlier that afternoon I asked dad to drive us by the North entrance. We stood under the Roosevelt Arch and took a photo. Arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. Before I hopped into the security line, I hugged my parents tight and told them when to expect me. The three TSA agents it took to operate

our little airport pretended not to watch. Smiling so big I tasted tears on my tongue. I sat down at my gate and waited to be called.

And I don't mind admitting it—I was relieved to not message you when I landed. Wait around for you because you hadn't left the house yet. Your hands stuck on ten and two. No help. What I mean is: I was excited to not look around for you, as I sat atop my suitcase on the curb. Searching in the sea of incoming traffic, to find a face looking back that was unsmiling and unmoved by the sight of me.

NOTES

The title for Part 1, "I was no threat" is a statement from Lynne Tillman's piece "Critical Fiction/Critical Self" in *Critical Fictions*.

The title for Part 2, "Anything Else Under Heaven," is a fragment of James Baldwin's writing in his masterclass of queer literature, *Giovanni's Room.*

Thank you to Ria Cook for allowing me to quote her in *On the Other,* "I am the product of their forbidden hope." This line comes from an Instagram comment of Ria's that I came across, and it deeply touched me.

Lines from Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" are quoted in the flash work "Repenting."

In Part 4, "On Mother Wounds," I write, "but I trust what I have heard and observed by *listening* and *learning to see*. My understanding of her myths is, too, the understanding of my own. *Finding my voice*" (Wells 71). The italicized words in this passage correspond with section titles from Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings.* Each section is named after a lecture she presented at Harvard University in April of 1983. The birth month Welty and I share.

The title "Onions and Hyacinth" comes from Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*.

"*All this anger was once love,*" mentioned in the short story "Gateways," is a quote of unknown attribution. However, in 2024, it became a popular quote used in online meme formats, the title of an instrumental song by damnwillidont, and many poems published independently online.

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