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**SKIN: STORIES, POEMS, AND ESSAYS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Amanda Hadlock

May 2020

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# **SKIN: POEMS, STORIES, AND ESSAYS**

English

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Arts

Amanda Hadlock

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis begins with a critical introduction which analyzes the use of objective correlative and varying points of view in creative writing in order to generate dialogue on cultural issues. I relate theories from Edward T. Hall, T.S. Eliot, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Lubomír Doležal to my own writing. Additionally, I situate my own multi-genre writing with work of contemporaries such as Maggie Nelson and Claudia Rankine. My hypothesis is that writers can use an objective correlative (Eliot) from the top of the cultural iceberg (Hall) as an entry point to representing deeper, more fraught cultural issues. Additionally, by experimenting with point of view, writers may create a greater sense of dialogism (Bakhtin) within their work and surrounding their work. These techniques can help make writing more accessible and create cultural conversations about a writer's body of work.

**KEYWORDS:** creative writing, creative nonfiction, short fiction, poetry, objective correlative, cultural iceberg, dialogism, point of view, class, gender

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Thank you to the literary journals that first published some of these pieces: *Wigleaf* for “Clean Break,” *The Esthetic Apostle* for “Skin,” *Hobart* for “Surviving Suburban Adolescence,” *New Limestone Review* for “Times You Taught Me About Violence,” *Moon City Review* for “Death Only Happens Once in a Lifetime,” and *The Florida Review* for “Self-Erasure for my Mother.”

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Emily, who taught me how to read and write. I hope this would make her proud.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Creating Cultural Conversations : Objective Correlative and Point of View	Page 1
Works Cited	Page 10
Fiction	Page 11
Clean Break	Page 11
Skin	Page 14
Emasculatome	Page 16
Poetry	Page 19
Self-Portrait as the Subject of My Foster Brother's College Admissions Essay	Page 19
Surviving Suburban Adolescence	Page 20
Clown Haibun	Page 21
Ode to Summer	Page 22
Ode to Working (after Kien Lam)	Page 23
Elegy with Flowers and Cow Patties	Page 24
Times You Taught Me About Violence	Page 25
Elegy for My Cavities	Page 26
Nonfiction	Page 27
Sidewalking	Page 27
Bra Shop Chronicles	Page 43
Death Only Happens Once in a Lifetime	Page 50
Self-Erasure for my Mother	Page 56

## CREATING CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS: OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE AND POINT OF VIEW

In this hybrid collection of creative writing, the narratives told mostly explore the perspectives of women or non-binary characters in various settings, though the nonfiction pieces particularly explore the culture of Missouri and what it was like in my own personal experience to come of age. This thesis project couples two main theories: Edward T. Hall's cultural iceberg model and T.S. Eliot's theory of objective correlative. In my writing, regardless of form or genre, I use cultural artifacts from the "top" of the cultural iceberg as objective correlatives for my characters to interact with in meaningful ways which expose motivation or emotional complexity. Three primary examples of this can be seen in my flash fiction piece "Clean Break," in my poem "Self-Portrait as the Subject of my Foster Brother's College Admissions Essay," and in my personal essay, "Sidewalking." I also use varying approaches to point of view, including first-person, first-person plural, second person, and stylized monologue. These varying approaches to point of view will enable the dialogism which Mikhail Bakhtin asserts is essential to literature.

In his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall analogizes culture as an iceberg. Hall explains:

The paradox of culture is that language, the system most frequently used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task. It is too linear, not comprehensive enough, too slow, too limited, too constrained, too unnatural, too much a product of its own evolution, and too artificial. This means the writer must constantly keep in mind the limitations language places upon him... Experience does that for us instead. (57)

Hall continues to describe a majority of culture as "hidden," while only "surface aspects" of culture are visible: cultural aspects such as food, dress, language, literature, art, and games.



These aspects at the top of the cultural iceberg subtly reveal “deeper” or “hidden” culture: familial authority relations, gendered expectations, attitudes toward beauty, illness, right and wrong, etc. These are the cultural aspects we want to explore in literature.

My idea, then, is that objects or cultural artifacts found at the top of Hall’s cultural iceberg can be used as what T.S. Eliot defines as the objective correlative: Eliot defines the objective correlative as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts... are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (100). The idea is that rather than outright stating a character’s emotional state or conflict using abstract words, the character’s emotional conflict is shown to readers through the character’s action and, particularly, interaction with symbolic objects. My goal with this technique is to create cultural *conversations*, in the vein of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. Bakhtinian dialogism can be briefly defined as the idea the writer’s “representation [of] voices that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice... [which] in prose, offers the possibility of doing justice to voices other than the author’s own” (xxii). Thus, in representing and exploring a particular culture in writing, my desired result is to create dialogue both within the work and surrounding the work.

This use of objective correlative and the cultural iceberg can be seen throughout my body of work. In my flash fiction piece “Clean Break,” the first-person, genderless protagonist explores their complicated relationship with sexuality and serial hook-ups by disclosing that they religiously shower after engaging in sex with someone, and they meticulously clean their hair from a partner’s shower drain before leaving. The objective correlative of the hair in the drain opens opportunity to write about not only the character’s sexual history and their conflicting feelings about that history, but also their grief over a lost love (who always complained about

their hair getting everywhere) and their deceased mother (who used to cut the narrator's hair for them). Characters interacting with the narrator's hair as the objective correlative provides the opportunity for verbal irony—the character can say they are careful to leave nothing behind in context with the hair in the drain, but readers can interpret this confession on the level of the lost love or the mother being mourned. Something so seemingly simple—hair—found on the surface level of the cultural iceberg provides a gateway to exploring hidden culture through the use of objective correlative—such as problems of gender and attitudes toward sex, monogamy, and familial relations.

In my poem “Self-Portrait as the Subject of my Foster Brother's College Admissions Essay,” I use the essay mentioned in the title as an objective correlative to show the speaker's feelings of loneliness and misplacement within her foster family. Through exploring my role as either subject or object in the essay, which was written in response to the prompt *Write about a time you did something charitable* and details my mother's opioid abuse, I am able to reflect upon my role of unwilling passivity in my guardianship situations growing up. At the end of the poem, I shred the draft of my foster brother's essay which I found in the trash in an act of catharsis. The discarded paper—a cultural artifact from the top of the cultural iceberg-- provides an effective objective correlative for showing my discomfort, resentment, and eventual healing in this situation which reflects deeper cultural attitudes toward family and charity.

My personal essay “Sidewalking” utilizes several objective correlatives. One example in particular is a braid of the essay in which I, as the then thirteen-year-old narrator, interact with a spider bite located on my stomach. In observing and interacting with the painful spider bite, verbal irony is invited and I am able to write sentences that can be read as having a double meaning about female coming-of-age, poverty, and my reconciliation of my mother's neglect. In

this piece, I again take a surface level, visible aspect of cultural and use it as an objective correlative to explore deeper cultural attitudes, expectations, and restraints.

Furthermore, I utilize various approaches to point of view throughout my body of work. The aforementioned pieces utilize first-person and first-person plural points of view. Traditional first-person point of view is defined by theorist Lubomír Doležel as the “ich-form,” a point of view which he describes as “the limited knowledge posture” (161). However, as a writer, it is my job to enable a multiplicity of point of view, showcase the knowledge of varying perspectives, and incite conversations among people with differing viewpoints. One way I strive toward this goal is by experimenting with point of view.

My personal essay “Sidewalking” takes a hybrid approach to point of view, using both first-person and first-person plural points of view within different braids of the essay. The people who comprise the “we” in the first-person plural sections change as my alliances with my friends and family members shift. Many of my pieces utilize second person point of view, such as my graphic essay “Surviving Suburban Adolescence” or my personal essay “Death Only Happens Once in a Lifetime.” I find myself more drawn to this point of view choice when I am writing nonfiction, which I don’t think is coincidental. To me, my authorial choice to refer to myself as “you” instead of “I” allows me (perhaps ironically) to better articulate and describe my personal experiences which (again perhaps ironically) I don’t often speak about. Writing through my experiences from this more distanced point of view in these two pieces helped me to process my past and come to terms with it.

I also utilize stylized monologue in my writing, such as my personal essay “How You Changed.” Stylized monologue (the memoirist or, in fiction, the character addressing or projecting thoughts onto another person, stylized as “you”) is often used to bridge psychological

(or physical) distance between the author and the other person or character being addressed. The style works similar to epistolary format in that an intimacy is established between the addresser and the addressee, regardless of if the addressee will actually hear or receive these thoughts. On the other hand, second person point of view—when the “you” is the author (or narrator, in fiction)—is a stylistic choice used to create psychological distance between the author’s different perceptions of themselves. Therefore, I also argue that the use of stylized monologue and second person—this divided, distanced ich-form—enables Bakhtinian dialogism, as “other” perceptions are incorporated into the narrative (with the use of stylized monologue, the perception of the addressee, and with the use of second person, the perception of different versions of ourselves as we have changed throughout time). Interestingly, like Doležel, Bakhtin is also a fiction theorist. However, his concept of dialogism is crucial to any nuanced, complex, and sophisticated memoir writing. The use of second person in all its forms is a good way to achieve this development of double voicing, as it forces the memoirist to look at themselves and their past experiences from an outside (hopefully more objective) lens.

A notoriously effective use of stylized monologue can be found in Maggie Nelson’s memoir *The Argonauts*. Throughout the memoir, Nelson projects her musings on gender, heteronormativity, and love onto her genderfluid romantic and sexual partner, Harry, who is represented in the line as “you.” Nelson’s *The Argonauts* begins, famously, “The first time you fucked me in the ass...” (1). I don’t think I have to explain how this exemplifies the intimacy that second person stylized monologues establish between the speaker/addresser and the imagined addressee.

I find myself carrying on this tradition of utilizing stylized monologue in order to project confessional thoughts onto a complicated or problematic person from my past. For example, the

piece I wrote for the advanced fiction workshop in my undergraduate career, entitled “How You Changed,” makes use of this approach to point of view. A synopsis of the piece is as follows: I recount memories from when I was ages five to twenty-one. I address each of the memories to a boy I grew up down the street from in elementary school named Jacob. Jacob, his little brother, my older brother and I found ourselves running around together as children, out of mutual neglect from our respective single mothers. The piece is written in present verb tense and is written in the form of chronological vignettes. I begin each paragraph with the refrain “I am \_\_\_\_ years old and you are \_\_\_\_,” replacing the ages as appropriate. Readers see our ragtag gang of trailer park neighbor kids grow from innocently playing in the tree line or reading scary stories to each other, to being exposed to drugs, violence, and sexual experimentation in middle school and high school (or, at least, becoming aware of these forces—we’d always been exposed to them, as happens to most kids in areas of concentrated population, especially those with absentee parents). The next-to-last vignette reveals that Jacob grew up to be sentenced to prison for possession of child pornography, a development that has made me reframe my childhood memories of him—at the time I viewed him as safe and his home as a place of solace and comfortable understanding.

My personal essay “Death Only Happens Once in a Lifetime” utilizes a second-person approach to point of view. The piece won the River Pretty scholarship for nonfiction in April 2018 and, interestingly, the writer who served as judge for the contest advised me to revise the piece out of second person and into first person. I have respectfully chosen to ignore his advice. I’m not sure the piece would have even been possible for me to write in first person, as the second person approach provided a necessary cognitive distance for me to address memories I had largely repressed of my mother’s abuse and neglect as I was growing up. The basis of the

narrative goes like this: I hadn't seen my meth/heroin addict mother in seven years until 2016, when her father passed away. She falsely reconciled with us for the last few months of her father's life, only to take the inheritance money he left her and go back to her old drug abusing ways after he passed. The details of the narrative don't matter so much as the stylistic form. The use of "you" as a stand-in for "I" allowed me enough psychological distance from these difficult memories to process them on paper. Take, for example, the following excerpt:

You have a slew of Crazy Mom Stories™, you casually tell people at parties sometimes. Like the time you were thirteen and Mom was going through opiate withdrawals and ran outside stark naked at 2:00 a.m. to throw rocks at the neighbor's window. The neighbor called the cops (duh) and you remember a police officer taking you and your brother to see her while she detoxed in the hospital. Her wrists and ankles were shackled to the bed, her limbs limply spread like she was a frog pinned down for dissection.

Understandably, these are memories I have repressed and tried my best not to think about as I've grown older. The use of second person, however, allows me to think about these things from a more objective point of view, whereas I find the traditional ich-form more emotionally demanding. Or perhaps I just don't have the confidence to proclaim my voice as capital-I authoritative in my own life story. I'm working on that.

I utilize the second person approach in many of my pieces. I also find myself playing with hybridity of genre, in the vein of Nelson. Nelson's *The Argonauts* exemplifies hybridity of both form and genre. For example, Nelson often moves out of the narrative at hand and incorporates literary criticism, and forays into more academic-essay-like vignettes on topics ranging from science to history to philosophy to linguistics. These transitions into the more analytical essay style works its way into my work as well: take, for example, my personal essay "Bra Shop Chronicles." This piece implements both the approach of traversing into literary and psychological criticism, and the distanced ich-form of second person "you," in which the "you"

is me. The narrative is told through different vignettes revolving around my experiences managing a bra shop. I take moments in the essay to foray into flashbacks from my childhood and unpack my own complex shaping of sexual identity, often using literary criticism or philosophy as a way into these memories. Take, for example, this snippet from a vignette about midway through the piece:

On the topic of families: Freud would have a heyday with yours. Your earliest memories, around four, five years old or so, you and your brother lived with your paternal grandmother while your mom and dad served possession charges. Lacan would relish all the instances your grandmother called your mother a “whore,” all the instances your mother called you a “bitch,” all the instances Mom called your brother a “pussy.” When you met your mother for the first time, you were six years old. You didn’t remember her. You thought her name—Brenda—was a bad word because you’d only ever heard your grandmother use it in a negative context.

Here, I utilize the technique of second person point of view to distance myself from the painful memories I am writing in a similar way to how I use philosophy as an objective correlative. The inclusion of Freud and Lacan also provides me a certain distance from the difficult-to-process material, and the philosophy functions almost as an objective correlative. In interacting with the theorists and writing about them, I can write about these difficult experiences without being too on-the-nose (and I can save myself some emotional labor in confronting my past too directly).

Many contemporaries use this approach of second person point of view in order to write about painful or traumatic experiences. Another example would be Claudia Rankine’s hybrid collection, *Citizen: an American Lyric*. Rankine uses second person to write about her experiences as a Black citizen in the current climate of racism in America, as well as utilizing second person to relay experiences other Black Americans have gone through. Rankine includes moments in which she writes about Black athletes such as Serena Williams and Zinedine Zidane

to write around her own experiences and better express her point. Additionally, any time she refers to herself in the work, she is represented as the distanced ich-form: second person “you.” Rankine uses this point of view as a way to objectively tell others’ stories without appropriating them. And, the point of view functions to put readers into the experience, particularly white readers who have never experienced racism. As I’ve previously exemplified, these techniques allow the author to access memories which they would likely prefer not to think about (but that is, after all, the point of art: shedding light on those things we bury). As Rankine writes in the collection, “Memory is a tough place. You were there” (157).

This multiplicity of point of view will, I hope, create a sense of Bakhtinian dialogism within my collection. Various points of view enable various voices to have authority over different stories; I am particularly interested in the dialogism created by second person point of view, in which the character (or author, in the case of memoir) refers to themselves as “you.” The concept of a character or writer being in conversation with themselves is fascinating to me, as I think this dialogic point of view choice is an interesting way in to exploring internal conflict or the divided self. My aim with my work is to create dialogue around the cultural issues that inform my creative writing, such as gender/sexuality, familial power dynamics, addiction, and class conflict. By using an objective correlative from the top of the cultural iceberg as a “way in” to these deeper cultural issues, my work will hopefully be more accessible. By varying point of view, my work will hopefully provide a variety of possible perspectives to readers, and to myself as I write.



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## FICTION

### Clean Break

My first Rule to Live By is always peel your clump of dead hair from a recent hookup's shower drain before fleeing the scene. It's the polite thing to do. After drying off and dressing, I put the hair wad in my pocket. I throw it in the grass outside, where it will decompose and feed worms or become part of a bird's nest.

When it's rooted in my head, my hair still forms a network of knots. It is dry and brown and frayed like discarded twine. It stops a few inches above my wide-ish butt, which I usually cover with black denim. I hate it.

It seems rude to carpet someone's drain with my gross hair after having sex with them. I feel bad leaving, anyway. I never stay the night (Rule two) and wouldn't want to remind anyone of their recent regrets upon their discovery of my forgotten hairball.

\*\*\*

I mostly find hook-ups on the Internet. It's easy: set preferences (dogs or cats? Smokers or non-smokers? Social drinkers or teetotalers?), pick the photo of yourself you hate the least, and let the messages arrive (stock openers: "hey beautiful/gorgeous/insert-empty-adjective-here," "nice pic," or some cheesy contrived pickup line conjured by Google). I do online marketing work from my apartment in Lower Manhattan, so it's easy for me to switch between my many profiles and check messages throughout the day. While it's great fun, it can be murky territory. I've had online dates show me up, slip me something, stalk me for a couple weeks. I've learned to always meet in public (Rule three) and to go back to *their* place (Rule four) so they

won't know your home address. Hence all the hairballs I've had to pick up. I have a date at least every other night, usually.

I do the same thing for every meetup. We go to a movie matinee, when the tickets are only three bucks. We pay for ourselves. We watch whatever they want. We go back to wherever they live and have sex however they ask for it. I shower and go home, where I sleep like I'm dead, without leaving a trace.

\*\*\*

I try not to see anyone more than once (Rule five). I broke this Rule one time. For a month last winter, I spent many nights at a young professor's apartment (despite Rule two). They decorated with their own paintings, dark, yawning landscapes, canyons and hellish chasms that swallowed you if you stared too hard. I like to paint, too, but mine turn out more abstract, amorphous clouds of color with no commitment to shape. I've never shown my paintings to anyone.

The professor taught communication studies at a big name University. I liked them because we could talk about language together. As a marketer, I find it fascinating how we use words to get what we want, how we code switch and morph into whoever we need to be to sell ourselves as at the moment. The professor and I had great conversations. We met at the craft store and I started spending nights with them soon after. They complained about my hair shedding everywhere, but I liked how they grabbed it when we made love.

We broke up when I forgot a comb there overnight once. They said it felt too serious, what with my stuff at their apartment. I agreed. I haven't broken a Rule since.

\*\*\*

I cut my own hair. It's easy. My mother taught me how. On my twelfth birthday, she separated my hair into layers and showed me how to trim it in a way that frames my chubby face and squarish chin. I've never paid for a haircut. My dad never paid child support and the court didn't care, so we tried to live as self-sufficiently as possible. It's a good habit I've carried into my adult life.

When my mother died a few years ago, I shaved my head. I wanted no reminders. But it grew back, and I seem to leave pieces of it everywhere now. I'm not sure why I keep it.

\*\*\*

Tonight, I will go to the movie matinee with Sam from OkCupid. Sam likes dogs and smoking and claims to drink only socially. I wonder what shampoo Sam will have waiting for me in the shower. I like getting to sample all different kinds.

I've had hookups ask to shower with me before. That's always awkward. I tell them no, it's a ritual I have. It's hard to explain, but I like the time alone after. I like the warm water running down my back, the steam filling my lungs, the quiet so clear you can hear only the hum of the pipes.

Tonight, I'll wash up in Sam's shower, soothe my aching muscles, clean my body with whatever soap is there, run my fingers through my hair. I'll pick up my shed hair after, being careful not to leave anything behind. I won't break any Rules. I'll go home and fall asleep while my hair's still wet and wake up to a mess in the morning.

## Skin

Outside, Father ties rope around a dead deer's ankles. He and Uncle Rick sling the carcass over their shoulders and tie the body between two tree branches. Father pulls a big serrated knife from his boot and slits the buck's belly. Light from the bonfire flickers against the shine of the deer's entrails as they fall into the overgrown grass.

Sophie sits on a log by the fire and picks at a scab on her knee. Tomorrow is her first day of sixth grade at Mark Twain Middle School. It isn't deer season in Missouri, but when she brought this up to Father at breakfast, he gave her the mean side-eye he gives and reminded her around a mouthful of eggs that he's a man who does as he pleases. He reminded her this is how he puts food on the table for her and Mother, and shouldn't she be grateful? Besides, nobody can hear a bow and arrow being shot. It's only wrong if you get caught, he reminded her.

Uncle Rick eyes the dead deer's outstretched body and lets out a long, low whistle.

"Hoo-wee," he says. "Can't believe you bagged a ten-pointer, given your usual luck with rack size." Uncle Rick winks an exaggerated wink and his eye disappears beneath a bushy white eyebrow. He explodes into laughter and sloshes some of his Bud Light.

"Hey now," says Father before shaking his head and offering a wheezy laugh of his own.

Sophie doesn't quite get the joke, but she laughs along with the men since she feels like she's supposed to. Something tells her the joke is stupid, but she laughs anyway.

The men stop laughing. They give Sophie the side-eye.

"Hey, girl," says Father. "Why don't you go see if your mother needs help in the house?"

Sophie stops peeling her scab, chucks the chunk of it she's ripped off into the fire, and does as Father asks her.

Inside, Mother covers thick cuts of venison with saran wrap. Her apron cinches her scarecrow-thin waist. The fabric is stained with blood where she's wiped her bony fingers. She takes the time to slice off any excess fat before storing the meat. She stacks it in the freezer, angling and angling again to make it all fit.

"Looks fun," says Sophie from the spot in the doorway where she's been watching Mother.

Mother jumps and drops her knife to the counter. "Jesus," she says. "You scared me."

"Father told me to come help you."

"I don't need any help," says Mother. Then, after a pause, "Thank you." She turns her attention back to the raw meat, picks up her knife and starts trimming fat again.

Sophie walks back outside. The men grin at each other as they peel the deer's skin off. The sound is like shears running through wrapping paper, but with more resistance, Sophie thinks. The striation of the deer's muscles in the firelight looks oddly beautiful. Carnal. Sophie considers its body a moment, then sits on the log and peels at her scab some more. She picks and picks until she rips away a slice of her healthy skin, and says nothing to Father as she watches the blood run down her shin toward the dirt.

## Emasculatome

The other kids in the trailer park like to play in the empty lot on Saxton Street. They like tag, kickball, or digging up worms. I don't get invited often, unless it's by Bobby, but it doesn't bother me too much. Grandma says the other kids are just jealous 'cause I'm so smart.

Tomorrow is my fourteenth birthday. Grandma's picking up ice cream from the Dollar General. Mint chip, my favorite, and her least. She says it tastes too much like menthol cigarettes. I wouldn't know. I only ever smoked a nasty non-menthol with Bobby next door. Ew. Never again. I nearly hacked up a lung coughing. I dunno how Grandma smokes those things one after another. L&M are her favorite 'cause they're the cheapest. She always stinks like them, too. No wonder none of her dates ever come around a second time.

Grandma says Bobby is bad news and I shouldn't give him the time of day, but friends are few and far between when you're a scrawny girl with glasses and a dead mom and a daddy in jail. And Grandma says a lot of things. She says her body is screaming, but because she takes these little pills, her brain can't hear it. Fibromyalgia's a bitch, she says. But I'm cautious when she uses that word— *bitch*— 'cause she uses it to describe my dead mom, too. Mom and Dad met in a halfway house and I was born a year later. Grandma says she never liked my mom, sensed she was trouble from the start. But at least I came out it, she says, and then pinches my cheeks 'til it hurts.

Mom died when I was in fourth grade. She took too many muscle relaxers and choked on her own puke in her sleep. When I tell this story to other kids at school, they look at me funny, like I have a big booger on my face or something. I'm used to the funny looks by now.

\*\*\*

Grandma doesn't goof off much, but when she does, it usually involves Dolly Parton. Grandma loves Dolly. She loves putting on her blond wig and singing "Nine to Five" in her gravelly, off-key voice. She says it reminds her of when she worked as a secretary for that hot-shot doctor in Gainesville. But then the doctor got smart with her and when Grandma told the doctor's wife, she wasn't working there much longer. "Shoulda kept my damn mouth shut," she says. The doctor's wife hated her for that. The story doesn't make sense to me. Shouldn't she have been mad at her husband?

Men are weird. Like how in his last letter, my dad wrote how he'd hung up my school photo in his cell and the other inmates asked if I was his girlfriend. No, he said, that's my daughter, and they laughed. For some reason this made my dad feel proud, which I found odd. Oh well. At least someone thinks I'm pretty, even if it's a bunch of creepy criminals.

\*\*\*

Grandma got me a part-time job for the summer. I castrate cows. The big tool we use to crush their balls is called an emasculatome. It looks kinda like a big pair of pliers, but rounded at the end where their junk goes. We're humane cow castraters, according to my boss, Mr. Wayne. We don't snip the balls clean off. Just crush. It's bloodless. And Mr. Wayne pays me in cash, so I don't have to pay taxes, which is pretty humane if you ask me.

I show up at six a.m. every day and get to work. It's a four hour shift, so Grandma picks me up in time for us to go home so I can make her breakfast. She likes oatmeal and peanut butter; she says it's the only thing that doesn't flare up her acid reflux these days.

Last week, Grandma had to slather my hair with mayonnaise to kill the lice again. It's funny, mayonnaise tastes so good on sandwiches, but smells so awful when it's in my hair. She says I keep picking up lice from running around in all the tall grass while I'm at work. They hop



out and hitch a ride on my long brown locks. I'm not sure why she's so mad about it since she's the one who made me get the stupid job in the first place. But when I brought this up, she looked at me all angry like, so I shut up and never said anything about it again.

Grandma's getting impatient with me. I can feel it. This is the third time we've done the mayonnaise thing. "Waste of perfectly good mayonnaise," she says around her cigarette every time.

Since my dad got busted for possession again, I mainly talk to him through the letters we send. I like to draw on the envelopes. Last time I turned it into a crew of cows peering out over a barbed wire fence. I wrote all about my job emasculating cows, and when my dad wrote back he told me he was proud of me, his working girl, he called me. The letter made me so happy I hung it up on the wall by the bed I share with Grandma. I read it to myself every night before I fall asleep while Grandma mumbles her prayers beside me.

## POETRY

### Self-Portrait as the Subject of my Foster Brother's College Admissions Essay

I am fourteen when I find it resting in the trash can  
underneath his parents' computer desk,  
cast across too many receipts and coupons.

I see the prompt copy-pasted to the top of the page,  
below his Christian name and comfortable suburban address:  
*Write about a time you did something charitable.*

He wrote about how he and his parents  
let a friend of his from school  
and this friend's little sister stay with them  
after they found out this friend's mother  
was hospitalized by withdrawals.

And I am not really the subject here,  
not really—  
I am the object,  
acted upon:  
*They let us.*

And I remember living  
in his parents' laundry room  
until he left for the university where he sent this essay,  
when they let me move to his old room.

And I remember their dryer beeping in the afternoon,  
coaxing me awake that summer when I slept like death  
all day in the twin bed on wheels they let me use  
or I read by myself while his mom folded their laundry  
and I did my best to act as if I were alone.

And I remember rousing his rejected draft out of the trash  
and pushing it through their paper shredder,  
watching the fragments fall, and thinking  
*who the hell needs a paper shredder,*  
and wondering what, exactly,  
constitutes charity, and what calls for credit.

## Surviving Suburban Adolescence

1. Don't put the straw in your drink at QuikTrip and you can buy it with the food stamp card.
2. The school librarian won't notice if you slip a book in your bag without checking it out first, but the public librarians *will* notice and slap you with a fat fine.
3. Don't accept a ride from anyone you don't know, or some people you *do* know, like Mikey or Old Wayne down the street, 'cause Mom says they're bad guys looking for trouble, even though they're her friends.
4. X-Field bonfires always get busted, plus there's poison ivy out there, so don't pee in the bushes.
5. If you stumble across Mom's stash, never confront her about it again.

## Clown Haibun

My grandmother kept a huge oil painting of a frowning clown next to a portrait of a whitewashed Jesus above her television, the television where she watched *Fox News* and *Larry King Live*, the living room where her second husband died after the first left her in favor of drinking and gambling his life away, left her to raise their two kids by herself, and her daughter died and her son left two more kids for her to help raise when he was arrested (again and again) for check fraud, or possession, or petty theft. So I guess she had to find her own humor and faith somewhere. And just like Jesus, she gave my brother and me red wine which she kept in the medicine cabinet. For her, I guess, it was medicine, a numbing agent, a painkiller. *Red wine is good for the heart*, she would tell me as she poured some into my sippy cup, and I guess it did help me sleep—she and I shared a bed back in those days— and I remember in the bedroom there was one clown figurine which hung from the ceiling, suspended on a little swing made of wire, smiling garishly much unlike the one in the living room, and Grandma had a sweater with tiny clowns all over it, some happy, some sad. Did you know clowns live by Commandments? Clowns of America International lists eight of them on their official website, the first of which preaches *a good clown entertains others by making fun of himself or herself and not at the expense or embarrassment of others*, many of them punctuated with the refrain *I will conduct myself as a gentleman/lady*. Did you know traditional clown duos consist of the Joey/Auguste theatre archetype— the manipulator and the victim? I think then of my father's weekly letters and the money my grandmother sent him in return until it ran out, until the day she died, and I wonder if this dynamic is why she liked clowns.

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Wine won't always work.  
We have to laugh to survive.  
Why not at ourselves?

## Ode to Summer

Summer, 2004-ish, post-second grade graduation:  
Goose shit plasters the sidewalk  
outside the community swimming pool in the trailer park,  
or *mobile home* park, as Mom corrects you when she's around.  
Goosey green globs of it dot the length of the concrete,  
so watch your barefoot step.  
The air is thick and dripping with Missouri heat,  
dense, sticky fingers of sweat run down your sunburned skin,  
glue your swimsuit to your small body,  
your body that's maybe sixty pounds soaking wet.  
Other children's screams  
and the *fwoosh* of their cannonballs echo like an anthem.  
At home, your cat catches mice from the air ducts in the floor.  
She stabs her paw down the vent and fishes up her next victim,  
dozens of them, poor little things just trying to keep cool.

Sometimes your mom leaves loose change on the kitchen counter  
and you walk the half mile or so to the gas station and back for Fudgesicles,  
sweating in the syrupy heat, chocolate congealing in the cracks of your palms.  
You walk with your brother and the neighbor boys, Jacob who's  
in jail now for downloading child porn, or PJ who used to yank  
your ponytail or melt your stuffed animals' eyes in the summer sun  
using a ninety-nine cent magnifying glass,  
or take you into the treeline and show you his pocket knife,  
of which your memory has dulled the details.

Sometimes your mom takes you to the bowling alley with her friends,  
Old Wayne and Mikey and Country and the rest, they're all scuffed boots  
and holey band tees and oil-stained jeans. You remember the one with the spider  
web tattoos along his forearms, to hide his track marks, you'd later figure out.  
You and the other children run around the chain link fence that guards  
the minigolf course while the adults down cheap beer and score gutters inside.

She yells your names from her lane and you run back with flushed faces.  
Mom tells you to watch for speed traps as she drives you home.  
She drops you off and tells you to go to bed before she leaves again.  
You and your brother stay up late playing with the cat most nights,  
watching her scoop up mice for hours, each one as bewildered as the last.  
They struggle in her claws. They never escape.  
You throw the bodies in the empty lot next door,  
and wonder if the skeletons are still there.

## Ode to Working (after Kien Lam)

at Papa John's  
with your friend  
who has slept  
with half your coworkers  
so you wonder  
if you should tell her  
you worry about her  
since you do,  
since you're both  
sixteen years old,  
and these Papa John's guys  
are like Matthew McConaughey  
as Wooderson  
in *Dazed and Confused*:  
*"That's what I love  
about these high school girls,  
man. I get older,  
they stay the same age."*  
Local legends say  
the Papa Johns is haunted;  
nobody who works there  
can ever leave,  
they're trapped,  
they've sold their soul  
to Papa John Schnatter himself.  
They'll work there forever;  
many of them still do,  
seven years later,  
those Wooderson types.  
Our bodies  
rose from yeast,  
our veins pump  
robust tomato sauce,  
in spite of regulations.  
And the meat! We always  
reek of it, of hamburger  
and Canadian bacon,  
of onions and peppers  
and anchovies on a bad day.  
We wear the perfume  
of working-class poverty,  
and the men toss us around  
like the pizza dough  
they slap for a living.

## **Elegy with Flowers and Cow Patties**

He wants to go back to school, my brother says,  
but the financial aid gods are unforgiving.  
And he has a steady job at Kum 'n Go,  
so why try. He can make a living selling cigarettes.

His least favorite job had him  
fabricating fake flowers as one cog in an assembly line.  
He was there at the ass crack of dawn each day,  
Teters Floral Products, Inc, where he worked when he lived with Grandpa.  
They made those dummy bouquets to put on peoples' graves—  
(Does one possess their own grave?)  
He wrapped polyester petals around plastic stems  
and looked forward to the end of his shift so he could leave and  
listen to Grandpa bitch about how he should join the Air Force,  
like a real man would.

When Grandpa was alive, my brother says,  
living together was mostly peaceful.  
Grandpa built his house off T Highway,  
complete with 70s wood paneling  
and acres dotted with cattle.  
More cows than human neighbors.

When my brother dropped out of college,  
he had nowhere else to go but the farm.

Grandpa's farm once held a family  
and so many future steak dinners in the pasture.  
Now the field holds only parched cow patties.  
The back porch is rotting and  
my foot almost falls through.  
The back porch where we played  
truth or dare as little kids  
and my brother got me to eat a locust's shell.  
I can still taste that dry, brittle substance  
in the back of my mouth.

## Times You Taught Me about Violence

The times I drove 103 miles to attend your dad's poker tournaments  
—hosted in his garage—where a Confederate flag hung by the cardboard Playboy girls

The time you shot the raccoon couple digging through the dumpster,  
the *bang! bang!* of your shotgun, the red explosion of their brains

The time the headboard hit the wall so hard the paint chipped

The time we drank too much whiskey and you dropped  
your fishing rod in the river  
and you went stone silent for the rest of the night

The time you fucked me on the gravel bar  
and the rocks rubbed raw grooves into my back

The time you bit my breast so deep my skin broke like an apple,  
bled, and left a dark purple bruise for a week

The time you told me you'd slept with a teenage coworker,  
*but she was coming on to you*

The times you yelled so hard the house shook

The time the neighbor asked us to quiet down

The time the other neighbor asked if I was safe, and I said  
*well, yes, technically*

The time you snapped a wooden coatrack over your knee  
and your hats and coats went flying

The times you never laid a hand on me

The times you made me sweep up the glass

The times you scraped me dry with your fingernails  
and refused to fill me again



## **Elegy for my Cavities**

I hadn't been to the dentist in ten years when,  
at age fifteen, my foster parents made me go.

I hated the rubber-gloved fingers digging in my mouth,  
the buzz of drills and the sharp smell of antiseptic.

The white-haired dentist clicked his tongue,  
told me I had a mouthful of cavities which would need filled.

I felt the deep hollowing of my mouth bones when he drilled.  
I shook with such violence an assistant was called in

to hold down my trembling legs  
so they could finish up the filling job.

They carved out my cavities and stuffed them with cheap dental amalgam—  
mercury, copper, tin, and silver. Fool's silver.

Now I look at the gaudy metal in all my back molars  
and think how I have only been to the dentist once since,

last Valentine's day when a bit of food stuck behind a wisdom tooth  
became an infection and I woke up with a swollen jaw and a fever.

I vomited for a day before forcing myself to visit the sliding-scale clinic.  
They tore it out for seventy bucks, gave me antibiotics and sent me on my way.

My cotton-clogged jaw ached all night and I dreamt I yanked my teeth out  
with pliers; I uprooted them one by one, a long, slow, bloody pull

'til I was satisfyingly empty.

## NONFICTION

### Sidewalking

58 Highway cut through the heart of my Missouri hometown like a coronary artery clogged with cheap shopping centers and seedy smokers' outlets. A couple miles down the highway from where I lived in a slope-ceilinged duplex on the older part of town, the Cass County Public Library sat squat and dull, my personal oasis. A sidewalk spanned each side of 58 Highway, which gave me access to all the library's books and even one allotted hour of daily Internet time. I could cross four lanes of traffic after picking out my books and use the food stamp card to buy a bottled lemonade from HyVee. This became my almost daily routine the summer before my eighth-grade year: Sleep 'til noon. Walk to the library. Get snacks at the grocery store. Walk two miles back the way I had come from. Sit and read at an empty pavilion in Belton Memorial Park. Avoid going home as long as possible. This was how I lived the summer I was thirteen years old.

I walked about two miles both ways down 58 Highway to the library out of boredom, out of not wanting to be home. I remember once, a middle-aged man pulled his SUV over as I was walking and got louder and more aggressive as he screamed at me to hop in. I walked forward, my mind set on my quest of returning my library books. I can't remember what I was reading at the time, but I remember I relied on stories as a form of escapism. My chest was still flat as my back, but that didn't stop the frequent catcallers who hissed innuendos as they passed me by, my eyes glued to the concrete, my face burning with shame.

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We—my mother, my older brother, and I—moved to Belton after my mother and her second husband got divorced. We were living with him in a nearby suburb before he found some pills he didn't approve of in my mom's purse and they split. He was a nice enough guy—a commercial trucker my mom had met through an old job—but I don't really miss him. He's not important to this story, anyway. Neither is my own father, who was perennially absent during my adolescent years I spent in Belton. So I'll waste no more time on these footnotes to my growing-up. What matters to this story is everything that happened after we moved to the duplex.

We lived in a development a couple miles down the highway from the library I liked to walk to. The duplex stands on a dead end in a neighborhood my mother had distastefully dubbed “Little Mexico,” an offensive joke at the expense of the majority of our neighbors' ethnicity. She wasn't very... culturally sensitive. She grew up on a cattle farm in Southwest Missouri. The story goes, she moved to Kansas City after meeting my dad in a halfway house there. It was a whole new world to her, and she didn't adapt with much grace. Shortly before her father—my grandfather—died, I remember him expressing surprise at a dinner, in the fall of 2016, that a Black boy had made the local high school football team in the rural town where my mother had grown up. This line of thinking was her normal.

Regardless, my mother wasn't around enough for her racist jokes to transfer to me and poison my view of the world. Often, our mother wasn't home, or otherwise we weren't. She would leave for a week or two at a time, out the door with a vague promise about returning, a wave of her bony hand and a wish to us to take care of ourselves. When she was there, we wanted to be gone even worse. She would bring along her creepy friends sometimes, greasy old guys with sleeves of spider web tattoos to hide their track marks, people who made me feel genuinely afraid. Once, one of them—a guy who went by “Country,” but concealed his first

name—asked my then-seventeen-year-old brother to rob a Rent-A-Center with him. My brother had the common sense to say no, but I realize in a different life he could have felt hopeless enough to say yes. I try to maintain gratitude in cases like this.

At the time, I shared a bedroom with my mother and my brother took the second bedroom. The fact there was only one mattress for my mother and I to share didn't bother me much, since she was usually running around with her friends. My brother likes to tell a story sometimes about how he and two of his friends once got locked inside his room in the duplex and they had to scale out his second story bedroom window using a bedsheet. The lock was on the wrong side of the door handle to his room, which nobody ever cared enough to get fixed, and his friend unknowingly shut it and locked them in. They knew the pay-per-minute flip phone we shared with our mother was out of minutes, so calling for help would have been fruitless. They said I was at the youth group building down the street at the time, doing who knows what, probably flirting with too-old-for-me Tim Wright. So they tied my brother's bedsheets together and repelled down the side of the building. Looking back on this story now, the danger of it mildly horrifies me, though I can't help but laugh at how well they adapted to the situation.

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When we lived in the duplex off North Scott, my mother and I shared the upstairs bathroom. The room was not much bigger than a walk-in closet, with yellowed paint and one dull light bulb which dangled its chain in front of the mirror. The cabinet underneath the sink was stuffed with sanitary pads I didn't need to use yet, which Mom regularly snagged from the free clinic. I kept the tub as clean as I could—I usually scrubbed it with Clorox every few days—because it was the only one, and we had to share it, and standing wasn't an option sometimes

when the utilities were shut off and we had to boil water from the neighbor's garden hose hook-up to wash ourselves.

Once, when I was thirteen, a spider who shared the duplex with us rent free bit me on the stomach while I slept. The spider wasn't venomous, but the bite became infected. I woke up one morning with a lump of flesh on my lower abdomen inflamed to the size of a grape, hard as rock and emanating heat. I pissed blood. It felt as if razor blades were being dragged down my urethra whenever I urinated (which was frequently). My pee was an off-putting shade of salmon. Surely this couldn't be my elusive period, I thought. Surely it wasn't supposed to hurt like *this*. And what the hell was that bump on my stomach?

I filled a pot with water from the spigot outside the neighbor's half of the building, boiled it and filled the tub. I stripped and sat in the bath while I wallowed in lukewarm water and scalding misery. It burned. I felt like dying.

I wouldn't see my mother for a couple more days, so in the meantime I peed every five to ten minutes, chugged water, and ignored my pain. When she showed back up, I told her I thought something was wrong with me. I told her about the bloody pee, the burning, the tiny razor blades. She told me I probably had a UTI. She had a neighbor drive us to a walk-in clinic, and as it turned out, she was right. I got an antibiotic prescription and we were on our way.

That should have been the end of that insufferable situation, but life rarely stops its shit when we need it to. When we got back to the duplex, she accused me of having sex and not telling her. This was a ridiculous notion, as I had hardly ever talked to boys other than my brother and his goofy friends, and I had never been anywhere near kissing another person. I told her this, and she called me a liar. She said I must have had sex with someone if I had a UTI. She yelled. She called me a slut. I pulled up my shirt and showed her the spider bite. I told her the

infection had likely spread from the bite to my urinary tract. She narrowed her eyes, as if to evaluate if I'd drawn it on. She didn't say anything after that, and I wouldn't see her for a few more days. At least I got the antibiotics, right?

Except I was allergic to them. Sulfa allergies are rare, according to *Medical News Today*, but I've never had excellent luck. I broke out in hives all over my face, hands, and inner thighs. After a trip to the ER, I was given steroids for the rash and a new batch of antibiotics (sans Sulfa). It was easily the most uncomfortable week or so of my life.

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A post on Quora.com by a tattoo artist from Tempe, Arizona, explains that spiderweb tattoos are common prison tattoos. The author writes that the spiderweb tattoo has "a lot of variable meanings, but it is most associated with doing time in prison - being trapped, tangled in the system, or just being idle and letting the cobwebs form."

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My brother and I became stir crazy in the duplex, so when we were left to our own devices, we sometimes liked to roam around. There was a small playground a couple blocks away outside an apartment complex, and it was fun to go there and swing or read the graffiti people had Sharpied or carved into the slide. *SHELBY SUX. CTHULU IS COMING. JANE AND JACK 4EVER*. Stuff like that. We had to be careful at that park, though, because we'd often find dirty needles thrown among the woodchips. We had to be careful when we took the trash to the dumpster outside the duplex, too, because used needles often wound up there. We learned pretty quickly to watch our step.

Once, we decided to explore a thicket of trees behind the duplex. It was summer and we were bored, so we swatted mosquitoes, parted the weeds and checked it out. We found what we

assumed to be a homeless person's campsite. There was a mildewed mattress collecting leaves on the ground, syringes littering the surrounding area, and an overturned bucket which I don't want to imagine the use of. We didn't walk in the tree line after that.

We walked other places. Mom gave me five dollars one time and told us to walk to Main Street as she dashed out the door with a hurried explanation that she had plans to hang out with one of the neighbors she brought around sometimes, a gray-haired man who went by "Old Wayne." Sometimes Wayne and his wife, Dee, would pay me in pizza to babysit their two young granddaughters. Dee was the girls' paternal grandmother, and she had custody of them while their father served a prison sentence for possession of child pornography. I thought they were nice people.

We did as we were told and started walking. Five dollars would buy a lot of candy.

It was the typical "Historic Main Street" every suburb seems to have. We'd get those wax bottle soda candies at the drugstore and stop for a free water on our walk back at this mom-and-pop malt shop. But the day she gave me the five dollars was a Sunday, so everything on Main Street was closed. We walked back to "Old Wayne's" duplex a couple blocks away from ours to give her the five dollars back. She cracked the door but wouldn't let us in. The smell of cat piss seeped out. I remember Wayne asking "Who's there?" in the background, but nobody else seemed to be home. She was mad at us for "following" her there. She snatched away the five dollars and told us to leave before shutting and bolting the door. So we walked to the library, but it was closed, too.

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According to the United States Census Bureau, 12.3% of the population of Belton, Missouri, qualified as "persons in poverty" as of July 1, 2018. This is a 2.3% increase from the

estimated 10% reported in the April 1, 2010 Census. The national poverty rate, as reported in 2017, was 12.3%.

I always wanted to be average.

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Toward the end of our first summer in the duplex, our mother had an episode with opioid withdrawals. We woke up around 3:00 a.m. one day because she was screaming outside. We walked out to find her stark naked, throwing rocks at the neighbor's house and yelling for someone named Linda. To this day, neither my brother nor I know who Linda is.

Of course, the neighbor called the cops. They showed up, got her clothed and restrained, and called an ambulance to take her to the hospital so she could detox. We were alone for a few days while she recovered, but we were used to being left by ourselves. The cops showed up the second day and drove us to the Belton Regional Medical Center so we could visit our mother. I remember she was shackled to the bedposts by her wrists and ankles. The nurse explained they did that because she put up such a fight. She was basically catatonic; her eyes were glazed over and she slurred when she tried to speak. She didn't look quite human. With the cuffs tying her down, she looked more like a cadaver or an insect pinned for dissection. I've never seen a person so powerless since then. But she was back at it the next week, and life continued as normal, whatever "normal" was.

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That summer was a long and lonely one, but I made a few friends when school started. I joined the eighth grade choir. Singing was something I had always liked to do—it helped me relax and focus—and I participated in choir at my old school, before my mom and her second



husband divorced. Belton's choir program was much smaller than the one at my old school, but I was still excited.

I was an alto. Sopranos got all the show-offy trills and fun solos, but as an alto, it was my job to listen, to be precise and consistent. We had to find the harmonies to enrich the sopranos' sweet, easy melodies. We had the real work—or so we liked to think, at least.

I met Kayla in the alto section. Kayla was short and had mousy brown hair, like me. She was quiet and other kids thought she was weird. We instantly got along. She introduced me to two other girls she was friends with, Brandi and Jewell. The four of us started hanging around each other a lot out of a lack of anything better to do.

Kayla lived with her mom and her two younger half siblings. Kayla's mother was sixteen when she found out she was pregnant, and her relationship with Kayla's father didn't last long after that. Kayla's dad was in his mid-twenties at the time and didn't feel ready for a family. Kayla didn't like being at home with the two littler kids running around, so she was always running around with us.

Brandi lived with her twin sister and their grandparents in a trailer park on the other side of town. Their mother had died from epilepsy when they were infants, and their father had never been in the picture. So their maternal grandparents took them in. They didn't keep too close of tabs on them.

Jewell lived with her mother and her elderly grandmother in a duplex behind Hy-Vee. Her mother struggled with depression and spent much of her time shut in her bedroom. Her grandmother had trouble getting around on her own, so she too could often be found in bed. Her place became our sort of headquarters, where we would meet to hang out. Then we would walk from there wherever we wanted to go.

I now had friends, real friends of my own, to walk with me to the library or HyVee or Memorial Park. We would talk about boys who would never like us, bands, books, movies, how much we hated our home lives. We once snuck a dozen eggs from Jewell's refrigerator, walked a couple miles down 58, and threw them at the house of a girl who insulted my pale legs in gym class. We were glad we could ignore our problems together, and perhaps at the time, this was enough.

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We—Jewell, Brandi, Kayla, and I—would also walk to church every Wednesday night. Looking back, I think we mostly did this because it was somewhere to be other than home, though at the time we all felt something like faith. We said we believed in God, anyway, and we prayed about our problems. Is faith the same as this blind trust, misplaced desire, and desperate need for hope?

We attended Belton Assembly of God Youth Ministries, or BAGYM—pronounced like Bag-Um—as it was known to local adolescents. The building was only a couple blocks from the duplex where my family lived. It was a long, unsightly yellow structure with a giant cross on top. It was a pretty popular church program and there were always at least three dozen kids from seventh through twelfth grade in attendance. They spoke in tongues during the worship music and claimed the gibberish was “God talking.” I never did speak in tongues, which I now suppose is affirmation I never should have gone to this place.

Assembly of God churches were born in Topeka, Kansas, in the early 1900s. A man named Charles Parham opened a Bible school, where he and his students concluded that full immersion—or Baptism—in God's spirit manifests as speaking in tongues. Assembly of God churches soon began cropping up in Missouri, Arkansas, all the way down to Texas, and then

throughout the United States. According to the official Assemblies of God website—ag.org—there are over 69 million adherents to Assemblies of God faith worldwide, and more than 370,000 Assemblies of God churches stand today.

If I could talk to Charles Parham, I would tell him my father would go to jail in Topeka, Kansas, about eighty years after the foundation of the first Assembly of God. I would tell him I think there is so much more he could have tried to change in Topeka—didn't he know Topeka was home to the case of Brown v. Board of education? I would tell him to look around him at the poverty-stricken farmers, the schools fighting for integration, the landscape ravaged by dust and tornadoes, and I would ask him if he truly thought speaking in tongues would save these people.

And yet. I still went to BAGYM for years, and I longed to speak in tongues one day. It was a display of being a *true* Christian, back then, but when I think about it now I honestly think it's total bullshit. There's no way the youth pastors weren't just making noises and acting as if it were God's own voice coming from their mortal mouths. I'm glad I at least never pretended.

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There was only one other person besides Jewell, Brandi, or Kayla who I really socialized with at BAGYM. His name was Tim Wright, and he was four years older than me. He should have been in my brother's grade, but he'd been held back. He wore glasses framed with blue plastic and shorts no matter how cold it was outside.

Tim's mother, Pauline, was one of the staff members at BAGYM. She stood behind a counter and sold little bags of chips or giant dill pickles for 50 cents apiece. Sometimes she'd sneak me a pickle for free. She brought their Rock Band game and hooked it up for us. She didn't care if we played songs with cuss words in them, but the other youth pastors disapproved. Tim was *cool*.

But more than that, Tim was nice to us. We weren't exactly "popular" girls, with our well-worn Wal-Mart clothes and unkempt hair, but Tim talked to us, even flirted with us. All of us had a big crush on him, but he gravitated toward me a bit more than the others.

BAGYM used to host these events called "lock-ins," where everyone would come in pajamas and they'd lock the doors and we'd spend the whole night watching movies and playing dodgeball and eating pizza and stuff like that. At the last lock-in I ever went to, the summer after my eighth grade year, Tim Wright pulled me aside after a game of kickball and asked if he could kiss me. My heart started pounding. I had never kissed anyone, not on the lips, not anywhere. My hands were clammy.

I said no. I wasn't ready. Tim scoffed. "Uh, okay," he said, and walked away. I wouldn't see him for three years after that. I wish I'd never seen him again.

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By the beginning of my freshman year, we had been evicted from the duplex off North Scott and I moved in with Kayla. My mom had fallen too far behind on the rent payments, so Kayla's mom set up a mattress for me on the floor of her daughter's bedroom. My brother moved in with a friend of his whose parents were empathetic.

A year later, I'd unwisely move back in with my mother until Social Services took me away from her for good and stuck me with foster parents. She contacted me one day and told me she had gotten an apartment right across the street from the high school. I reluctantly met her there, and she gave me the grand tour. There was one bedroom with a door in the back corner, an open living room/kitchen area where her and her boyfriend, Donnie, planned to sleep, and one tiny bathroom with a stall shower you had to stoop in if you wanted to get your hair wet. I was anxious about giving her another chance, but I missed my mom, and it was within walking

distance of the high school. I was in the school play at the time, and I had to stay after class and practice until 5:30 every day, so this would be a convenient arrangement for me.

This worked for about two months. I walked home from play practice one day to find Mom and Donnie tweaking on something, wailing and throwing any object within reach at each other. When I walked in the front door, she turned on me. She twisted my hair up in her hand and dragged me outside, where she told me to stay.

I obeyed. I walked to the neighboring apartment and asked to borrow the confused resident's phone. This was the second time I'd asked to borrow this particular neighbor's phone to call the police when my mother had begun being violent. The neighbor leaned against his doorframe in awkward silence while I cried to 9-1-1.

The police were skeptical when they first showed up. "You can't keep calling us out here every time you and your mom get in a tiff," one of the officers said as they walked up to where I sat on the concrete steps. "Teenage daughters and their mothers fight all the time," he continued. "It's not illegal."

I ran my fingers through my hair, and chunks my mother had ripped loose kept coming out. I told them to go inside and talk to her themselves if they didn't believe me.

So they did, and as soon as Officer Eye-Roll opened the front door, a sizzling hot skillet of Hamburger Helper my mother had thrown whizzed by his head. He let out some stupid exclamation, and his eyes widened with recognition that something serious was going on here. I remember so clearly the wad of mucus my mother spat at me as they handcuffed her and dragged her to the back of their car. "Some fucking daughter you are," she rasped.

I sat there in silence. They hauled Donnie out next, and he glared at me with that narrow, steel-eyed look men use when they want to be intimidating. It worked.

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When I first moved in with my foster parents my freshman year of high school, I had to see a therapist. She was a middle-aged lady named Carol, and she was sent by Social Services. We met on two occasions in my foster parents' living room, where we sat catty-corner on the couches as she asked me questions and I gave non-committal answers.

"How are you adjusting to your new home?" was the first thing she asked me.

"Fine," I said. "I'm fine." And I was fine, besides the panic attacks that wracked my body. I didn't tell her about the previous night when I vomited up all the Lo Mein my new legal guardians had bought for me. Or all the other times I stress-barfed. Or Jewell and Brandi mocking me at school, saying I'd socially withdrawn myself since my mom went to jail. She checked whatever boxes said my case was closed and I never saw her again after that.

\*\*\*

By the time we were sophomores in high school, we had stopped walking to church. Tim had stopped going—he'd taken to spending his free time smoking pot with his friends—and we had begun to question the religious institution of it all. Kayla and I had dropped out of choir, too. I stopped singing and doing plays. We had little faith in anything anymore.

\*\*\*

The summer after my junior year of high school, I had a part time job at a pizza place. My foster dad let me borrow his car to drive to my shifts on the weekends. Once, after work, I stopped at a grocery store on my way home to get something to eat. Who should I see in the checkout line other than Tim Wright, now in his early twenties, looking as carelessly cool as he always had. We chatted for a while and he invited me to a party at his house the next weekend. I nervously agreed. I could no longer say I'd never been kissed at this point—I had gotten the first one out of the way the previous year with a boy I knew from theater—but I was completely

virginal and unexperienced otherwise, and the thought of hanging out with Tim at his house made me at once excited and terrified.

I told my foster parents I was going to spend the night at Kayla's and walked to Tim's house that night. I don't know why I didn't expect there to be alcohol, but of course there was plenty—Tim was twenty-one, after all. I took too many Jell-O shots to count and swigged down several cans of shitty Bud Light Lime. The last thing I remember before I passed out was puking—hard—into Tim's dirty toilet.

I woke up what must have been a few hours later in Tim's bed. My denim shorts and cotton panties had been pulled down around my ankles, but my shirt, bra, and shoes were still on. Tim's heavy body was on top of mine, thrusting and grunting, and suddenly I couldn't breathe.

I pushed him off and asked what the hell he thought he was doing. He said I had consented, but I don't remember that—had I? I couldn't have. If I can't remember, I couldn't have.

Tim's mom, Pauline, watched a true crime show and sipped the shitty Bud Light in the living room, while three of Tim's friends played video games and drank on the adjacent couch. I ran out, flustered, blood leaking through my pants, and I ran to Kayla's house. She spent the night holding me while I cried, and I never saw Tim Wright again.

Jell-O shots make me sick now. I hate the slimy feeling of them in my mouth.

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According to the Guttmacher Institute:

“Adolescent sexual intercourse is increasingly likely to be described as wanted. First sex was described as wanted by 34% of women aged 18–24 in 2002 who had had sex before

age 20, and by 41% in 2006–2010. Men in the same age-group report first sex before age 20 as ‘wanted’ as having increased from 43% to 62%.”

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Now, six years later, I drive to school and work and parties. I drive to my job and teach students, many of whom are only a few years younger than me, how to tell their life stories. I drive myself to the emergency room when I have a panic attack so bad my heart rate doubles and I can’t breathe and I’m dry heaving but nothing comes out. I choke.

I check in and they tag my wrist with my name and sex and birthday. They reduce me to numbers, blood pressure and BPM and the date of my last menstrual cycle. I overhear the staff debate behind the counter whether they believe me. As I wait near the check-in desk, a cop walks in with a visibly intoxicated old man in handcuffs. I remember my mother shackled to the hospital bed when she was going through withdrawals, and my heartbeat hammers.

Two hours later, I’m taken to a room in the behavioral health ward. They make me strip and put on papery green scrubs. They make me put all of my belongings—everything, my phone and a book and my shoes and clothes—in a paper bag, which they whisk away to some mysterious hiding place. There’s a lady named Amy whose job it is to sit in the room with me. The first thing she tells me is she’s not a doctor, nor a nurse. She’s here to keep me company. Her badge says she’s a “Patient Wellness Observer,” or something to that effect. She has big brown eyes and she mentions she’s a mother. She says, “This is Vegas, baby. You can trust me with anything.” The dull white room with the steel crucifix next to the TV doesn’t feel quite like Vegas, but I appreciate her positivity nonetheless. She turns on a singing competition show to fill the uncomfortable silence. I remember how much I hate singing competition shows.



I ask her if I can have my cell phone. She looks sad when she tells me, “No, sweetie, that’s one thing they won’t let me give you. If you need a drink or a snack or a blanket or anything else, let me know.” I don’t know why, but this makes me feel so powerless I begin crying.

“Oh, honey,” she says. “You’re only human. Let yourself be.”

Ten or so minutes later, they walk me to a wing named “Behavioral Health Overflow” for the remainder of the night. I never see Amy again.

But I take her advice. I sleep like I’m dead that night. I wake up and sing in the car the next morning. I drive myself to the local library, and I start to work this all out on paper.

## **Bra Shop Chronicles**

### **I.**

They taught you above all to be kind, help women feel confident, comfortable, “so much more than sexy.” But also, they taught you to upsell the panties and the laundry soap and the variety of colors, from a practical beige or black to lacy hot pinks, “for fun.” They taught you all bodies are beautiful, from 32A to 44G, anyway, we could grab the bigger ones from the back, smaller ones from the bins, anything on either far end of the spectrum stashed away, hidden.

### **II.**

You saw a slew of bodies mirrored at different angles. Breastfeeders and teeny-boppers, implants and post-reductions, cancer survivors with one or none, widows with arthritic hands who’d compliment your patience as their shaky fingers, gnarled like tree roots, could no longer close the clasp alone. A woman with meth sores gaping from her chest like a hundred crusty eyes, unblinking, who flashed you an empty smile comprised of a handful of teeth as she waited for you to measure her bust. It was your job, you had to.

### **III.**

Your manager’s name was Mrs. Divine; she’s a big, blond, beautiful lady of right around forty who welcomed you to the team with enthusiasm. When you were hired at twenty years old, you were the youngest to work there; nonetheless, you were offered a management position after three months. Mrs. Divine was nice; she praised your reliability, except on days no one met their sales quota and the countless times she criticized you for not wearing jewelry or makeup. The assistant manager was Ms. Shostak, a Russian immigrant with a frazzled pouf of platinum curls

and a thick accent. She'd come here for college in her twenties, ended up getting married and divorced and having a son somewhere in between, so here she stayed. Her degree is in International Business Administration, and she speaks three languages, but she's resigned to finding bra sizes to pay the bills. She'd withdrawn her son from school at fourteen due to his debilitating anxiety and tendency toward violence. His dad's no longer in the picture. You used to tutor him in English; that's how you ended up at this gig. He's not a dumb kid—he speaks two languages and offered you an impressive neo-Marxist reading of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," once—but his position in life has convinced him otherwise. His low self-esteem has caused him to lash out. He used to write "my ass" all over the worksheets you'd give him, and he once threw a book across the room and broke a lamp because he was having trouble grasping verb tense conjugation. (Masculinity run awry?) You quit tutoring him after that. You still feel regrets about not trying harder to break through to him. Ms. Shostak sometimes showed up to work with makeup halfway concealing her bruises, and you knew without asking what they were from. You felt powerless to help her; you still do. Whenever a customer rudely inquired Ms. Shostak's origins after hearing her accent, she claimed she was from "Flipping, Arkansas." She'd make the girls green tea if you complained of a headache. You pretend you miss her less than you do.

#### IV.

You'd see a handful of kids each week who'd been dumped at the mall as a babysitting service. One lady, Helga, would bring in her four screaming brats damn near every day. Constantly buying and exchanging, always dissatisfied enough to drag her zoo of a family back within forty-eight hours. "My husband didn't like this one either," she'd explain as her kids ran rampant,

ripping up the displays you meticulously arranged for three hours, their father nowhere to be found. You couldn't help but think dear Helga seemed eerily unconscious of his absence.

V.

On the topic of families: Freud would have a heyday with yours. Your earliest memories, around four, five years old or so, you and your brother lived with your paternal grandmother while your mom and dad served possession charges. Lacan would relish all the instances your grandmother called your mother a “whore,” all the instances your mother called you a “bitch,” all the instances she called your brother a “pussy.” When you met your mother for the first time, you were six years old. You didn't remember her. You thought her name—Brenda—was a bad word because you'd only ever heard your grandmother use it in a negative context. You moved to a nearby suburb with your mother and brother in the year to come and spent the next six years after that in a trailer park with them. Your mother was mostly absent during these formative years, opting to leave a note on the kitchen counter with a stack of canned food on top: “Don't forget to eat, xoxo.” She'd often neglect the utility bills and leave you and your brother filling a pot with water from the neighbor's hose and boiling it to take a bath. Your dad opted to a life of recidivism and neglect. Freud and Jung would say you have a father complex. Lacan says the mother is the individual's biggest, most looming and imminent “Other,” that children reconcile their mothers with their own identities for their whole lives, especially children with absent mothers. You'd probably agree with all of them.

## VI.

A lady once approached you at work, about mid-forties, thin as a rail. Her head was shaved and ashamedly hidden away by a purple scarf. “Hi,” she said without smiling. “I just want something comfortable.” You helped her into a bandage-colored wireless get-up that hugged her awkwardly, your eyes politely averting mastectomy scars the whole time. She bought two for fifty-nine dollars; you made five percent commission.

## VII.

You remember a time as a little girl of five or six, after your mother got out of prison for the first time; you previously only knew her through chicken-scratch letters and raspy telephone calls. You were reading in your grandmother’s spare room, and in walks your mother with an orange in each hand. “Care for a snack, sis?” she asked, but hesitated before peeling the fruit. “When I was a kid,” she continued, “I’d put thee down my shirt and pretend I had big boobs.” She opened the top of your t-shirt with a yellowed fingernail and dropped in the oranges, instructed you to hold them; you offered an unsteady laugh. She had a girlish fit for the next hour as she smeared lipstick on you and made you parade around in her heels. They just made you feel dizzy; the lipstick felt thick and heavy on your mouth.

## VIII.

You remember being sixteen and living in foster care. At this point, your mother had gone back off the deep end with addiction and social services had finally caught on and intervened. You remember sneaking out of your foster home to party with the older guys who worked at the local video game/movie/music store. You remember getting drunk off Strawberritas on Nick’s

couch—twenty-eight-year-old Nick, who was buddies with the nineteen-year-old co-worker of his you were dating. You remember Creepy Nick telling you to stop talking in your drunken adolescent state; you don't remember what you were talking about, but that doesn't matter. You remember him saying, "Shhh, calm down. Your job is to just lie there and look pretty."

IX.

In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine reminds us of this nugget of Judith Butler wisdom: it is our addressability which gives language the potential to hurt us. "We suffer from the condition of being addressable," Butler says. "Our emotional openness... is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this." You think of all the times you've been called a "bitch," "slut," et cetera: by boyfriends, by crotchety customers, by your own mother. You'd probably agree with Butler, too.

X.

You remember being told, under no circumstances, to accept a ride from anyone you don't know, or some people you did know, like Mikey or Old Wayne down the street, 'cause Mom said they're bad guys looking for trouble, even though they were her friends. You remember being told, under no circumstances, to question her friends who came in the middle of the night, that familiar cat-piss smell emanating from her bedroom, the slapping screen door and hushed arguments, in and out, in and out, losing count of all her Bobs or Toms or Jacks. But Mom said they're her friends. And you were taught not to question it.

XI.

You remember the college art professor telling you to “smile more, sweetheart.” You remember him defending (dismissing?) it as a joke.

XII.

Another day of mindlessly unboxing bras and panties; lacy push-up bustières, binders and nursing bras and inserts; silky thongs to high-rise “miracle vanishing tummy” briefs. Hang up the sexy ones, stash away the practical ones, darting to the back when customers need them. But always do so with a smile. You can’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending, Rankine says, and you believe her. All you could do was grin and bear it and hope one day to have the credentials deemed important enough by the upper class to escape this patriarchal capitalist machine and teach about its tendency to trap young women. Until then, you’ll be stuck as a smiley saleslady.

XIII.

You’re twenty-one now, haven’t worked at the bra shop in six months or so. That doesn’t mean you don’t still bear constant witness to sexism. Take, for example, the creative writing conference you attended in April: your creative nonfiction piece won the scholarship contest. You got to read your winning piece aloud to all the faculty and attendees. It’s a long story, but it revolved around your absent mother and growing up poor and female. Afterward, an older man comes up to you: “Did you use the phrase ‘socioeconomic stratification’ in your piece?” he asked. “Yes,” you responded, “why?” He replied with a condescending grin: “Evidently, you weren’t so poor you don’t know what ‘socioeconomic stratification’ means.” The next half hour

was a fuzzy, loaded conversation; all you can remember now is, after accusing him of belittling you, the man claimed he was “joking” and said he “actually likes you—you’re precocious.” You smirked at the backhanded compliment; you understand the childish, little-girl connotation of “precocious.” But according to this guy, poor people are stupid and can’t know big words. So you acquiesced, joked back and forth with him. You wonder how people can possibly think oppression is a joking matter. Some people, you think, are simply not worth trying to teach. Sometimes, you think, all you can do is laugh at the idiocy and let it slide for your own sake. Just swallow your pain and move on. Just grin and bear it.



## **Death Only Happens Once in a Lifetime**

December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

You were working at a lingerie boutique in a southwest Missouri mall when your step-grandmother called to mention the hospice nurse pronounced Grandpa dead that morning. His lung cancer had finally gotten the best of him. You weren't surprised; you'd been bracing for it since the bleak diagnosis in June. But knowing doesn't ease the blow when it hits.

You'd been there for going on nine hours. You'd been helping an old woman with chronic arthritis in her fingers put on a bra. She complimented your patience and called you sweet. She stroked your smooth twenty-year-old hand with her horribly disfigured ones as you handed her the receipt.

You made six percent commission on her one-hundred-and-fourteen-dollar purchase after upselling the exclusive delicate laundry soap. Paraben and dye free, with the refreshing scent of lavender. You added on a pair of control top panties, too, at the modest price of twenty-seven bucks a pop. She only bought one bra, a binding, Band-Aid colored elastic thing which awkwardly hugged her sloped shoulders and sunken chest. It didn't look comfortable, but it was the only one she could manage to wrestle on without help. She said she had no one at home who would be able to help her hook a different one. "Don't get old," she said. "Stay young forever. These are the happiest days of your life." You offered a kind of half-laugh; these "happiest days" felt more exhausting than anything.

She said, "God bless you" as she walked away. She waved goodbye with warped fingers, her knuckles knotted like tree roots, warped wood, her hands painfully gnarled and tangled. You smiled and waved back, a flippant toss of your fingers in the air. In retrospect, your fingers

wiggling freely like that must have seemed taunting to her. Condescending. Inconsiderate. You never saw her again.

Then Grandma called the store phone and said Grandpa's dead, and could you let your brother and mother know, please?

Oh. Okay. Yes.

*Click.*

December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

It was raining on your way to Grandpa's funeral. The cliché made you laugh to yourself. Your mother sparked a cigarette in the car (Kools Menthol, if it matters). You hadn't seen her in six years until the diagnosis. No one had. Then suddenly, one day in late October, she showed up on a Greyhound bus and started staying on your brother's couch. Talk about a role reversal. She'd been god-knows-where, living her life riding around on bicycles with her boyfriend in Kansas City, she claims. Most likely still on a mix of meth and opiates, like she was the last time you saw her, when you were fourteen and watched her being hauled away in handcuffs. You came home from school that day to find her and the aforementioned boyfriend high, screaming, and throwing furniture at each other (again). So you called 911 from the neighbor's landline. You were finally fed up. The neighbor offered a half-hearted "sorry" for the fact he was going to just let it slide, though he inevitably had overhead for quite some time. Your mom and the boyfriend were arrested (again). You and your brother then moved in with a friend's parents to finish out high school in the suburban Kansas City town you lived in before you both moved to Springfield for college. But now you were stuck hauling dear old Mom to her father's funeral. She couldn't legally drive there, and that's a damn long way to bike. You figured death only

happens once in a lifetime and you shouldn't keep her away from her own father's funeral, no matter how absent she'd chosen to be from your lives. No matter how negligent she was of her father's illness until she heard there might be some inheritance money involved once his farmhouse was sold if she showed up and offered him a goodbye before he died.

The truck in front of you on the highway boasted a bright orange bumper sticker: "HEY OBAMA: REDISTRIBUTE THIS" and a hand flipping the bird to everyone in the world. You hate this part of the country sometimes. The buckle of the Bible Belt. You see red everywhere you look. This was a little less than a month before Trump's inauguration, and the climate was especially bad. Of course, having grown up poor, you are especially attuned to the extreme socioeconomic stratification in America. Your suburban hometown was especially bad, with the drugs and poverty masked by dominant middle-class standards. You wish you could've pulled the bumper sticker guy over, told him you're one of 44 million Americans who don't have health insurance, you haven't been to a dentist since you were sixteen since you can't afford it, your wisdom teeth sit in the back of your jaws constantly scraping your gums, too expensive to remove, you work two jobs fifty hours a week to meet basic survival needs. You want to tell him you work for everything you have, you feel entitled to nothing. You want to tell him about the times as a kid when your mom would neglect the utility bills (again) and you'd be left filling the big soup pot with water from the neighbor's hose and boiling it to take a bath.

But that was all another story for another time. The truck disappeared as you exited the highway. You took a deep breath and rolled down your window to clear the cigarette smoke. You finally arrived at the funeral home.

"Here goes nothing," you said as you parked, finally breaking the silence.

At the funeral, everyone cried. It was well-attended. Your grandfather was a respected cattle farmer out in Bolivar. You passed the time counting all the cowboy boots that passed you by. Turquoise and snakeskin and scuffed brown leather. You lost track at forty-one. (Can that be right?) There was a framed picture on the casket of Grandpa shaking hands with Harry Truman. You smirked at it, knowing how big of a “pansy” Grandpa thought Truman was. The President had recognized Grandpa’s advocacy work for Missouri farmers’ rights. “I may be the poorest man whose bootheels ever hit the White House floor,” Grandpa said with a mostly toothless grin when he’d told you the story years ago. Or something like that.

Your aunt and uncle mostly ignored their sister, your mother. Your step-grandmother cried into a Kleenex next to you, hugging everyone who passed. Your brother held Grandma’s hand the whole time. Your mother hammed it up, cried loudly, snot oozing, tried to appear normal, as if she’d had any semblance of a relationship with her father the last six years of his life. A farmer friend of your grandfather’s approached her at one point, offered his condolences. “You’re his youngest?” the man asked. “Yes,” she said, tears still dripping. He narrowed his eyes, had a knowing look, just walked away after that.

You could feel the room’s eyes on you. “Everyone knows me as the Crazy One’s kid,” you thought.

At the end, a song played. “There’s Nothing I Can Do About it Now” by Willie Nelson. Grandpa had requested it. He had a dark sense of humor. The last lines stick with you: *I’m forgiving everything that forgiveness will allow / And there’s nothing I can do about it now ...*

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

You and your brother spent Christmas Eve at your step-grandmother's house. Your mother wasn't invited. You have no clue what she did that day, probably don't want to imagine it. Your step-grandmother's family is huge; you vaguely remembered having met some of them at some point before in your childhood, a distant, hazy Thanksgiving memory, or perhaps a birthday or Christmas Eve past. But their faces blend together, they all look the same. All attractive brunettes with a gaggle of kids, her daughters with well-to-do husbands, her sons with beauty queen wives. Little kids chased each other in new shoes and clothes, their parents gently scolding them not to ruin their holiday outfits. Everything your family never was and never will be.

You and your brother watched for a while, not making much conversation, before you made your way to Grandpa's old room. You perused his bookshelf, mostly old Western paperbacks. You flipped through some photo albums, lots of black-and-white snapshots of him in his old Air Force fatigues. Lots of pictures of your uncle, your aunt, and your mom when they were kids. They all had crooked 70s bowl cuts and overalls. In one photo, your grandfather smiles next to his first wife— your mom's mom, your grandma— on a paisley couch. Grandma Juanita passed away before you were born, the story goes; she had debilitating Type 2 Diabetes and died in a diabetic coma. Maybe that's where so much of your mother's pain stems from, you think. As you flipped through your grandfather's memories, you and your brother both tried not to think of your mother, of how you'd have to deal with her through all the legal bullshit that follows someone's death. How she'd probably take her dead dad's money and run, go back to her boyfriend and KC and squander it all on drugs. You tried not to think of how some people are simply beyond saving despite everyone's best efforts, how people have to save themselves.

You tried not to think of it. You tried.

You came across Grandpa's record collection. You found a title you recognized, pulled it out and blew the dust off. *A Horse Called Music*, by Willie Nelson. You put it on, dropped the needle to the vinyl. A song started, slow and scratchy at first, albeit beautiful, nostalgic. Those last lines still stick in your head: *I'm forgiving everything that forgiveness will allow / And there's nothing I can do about it now ...*

## Self-Erasure for my Mother

~~The first time I called the cops on you, after years of thinking about calling them, they didn't do anything. They told me it wasn't illegal for you to get drunk in your own home and left me with you, left me at your whim. They told me fourteen-year-old girls often argue with their mothers, and that I shouldn't be dramatic. The second time I called the cops on you, they decided to come out to the duplex, probably to get me to shut up. They interrogated me as I tried to keep some composure in the front yard while you and your boyfriend raged on inside. I sat on a cinder block and ran my fingers through my hair. It fell out in chunks where you yanked me back by it earlier. I remember watching my uprooted wisps of hair scatter in the wind. I told the policemen what I suspected—you and your boyfriend got your hands on some meth again—and invited them to go inside and talk to you. When the fat, mustachioed one opened the front door, a skillet full of sizzling hot Hamburger Helper whizzed in front of his face. This, I think, is when they started to believe me. I remember them taking you and the boyfriend away in handcuffs, and I sat on the cinder block and cried, and you spit at me, a thick yellowish glob of mucus, and you yelled, "Some fucking daughter you are." And I kept quiet. They took me to the police station, gave me a can of Coca-Cola, and asked me more questions I can't quite remember as they filled out a report. When they asked me if I had anyone who could come and pick me up for the night, I told them my grandpa lived two and a half hours away, but I had a seventeen-year-old brother who knew well enough to stop forgiving our mother.~~

~~He had moved in with a friend's family the year before. The officer called my brother, and he came and picked me up from the station in his friend's dad's car. We didn't talk much, but there was a quiet understanding between us. This had been long overdue. At his friend's house, a group of strangers were crowded in their living room watching a Royals game. I don't remember~~

~~who won, or what anyone even said to me. I remember sleeping on a couch in the basement and trying to keep my crying quiet. I remember the fear of someone waking up and walking in the room and the fear of having to act like I was fine to another person's face.~~