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Yes, Baby: Essays

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YES, BABY: ESSAYS

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Amy Gault

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English

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis includes thirteen flash nonfiction pieces and one fiction short story exploring emotions and experiences that have changed who I am today. These writings are personal experiences or are inspired by personal experience. These creative works interrogate deeply transformative events and situations, such as familial relationships, trauma, poverty, living in the Midwest, patriarchy, and the beauty in existing. In the thesis's critical introduction, I examine how my flash nonfiction pieces employ Milan Kundera's theory of the appeal of play and Charles Baxter's concept defamiliarization. I analyze how the succinct form of the flash essay allows my nonfiction writing to reflect the complexities and nature of trauma and memory. I analyze the way my short story employs the narrative mode of magical realism to complicate and deepen meaning through what Jacob Appel identifies as "the grand metaphor." I analyze these techniques and modes of writing through the published works of Milan Kundera, Charles Baxter, John Gardner, Lidia Yuknavitch, Claudia Rankine, and others.

KEYWORDS: creative writing, creative nonfiction, memoir, flash memoir, lyric essay, personal essay, magical realism, defamiliarization, literature of trauma, poverty, class

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THE FLASH ESSAY, DEFAMILIARIZATION, AND PROCESSING PAIN

My heart opened and opened again. The water pushed against my effort, then its glassy permission to step ahead touched my ankles. The sense of going forward to the source. I do not think I ever, in fact, returned home.

—Mary Oliver, *Upstream*

Yesterday, I found myself taking a walk in the night in the rain. I looked up and watched the drops fall. I looked up and saw the raindrops falling, like small pieces of glass speckled onto a black canvas. I opened my mouth. I walked over to a small tree and shook the tiny branches, letting the water fall onto me and into my mouth. This moment in the rain, in the dark, I was creating something artistic. I was letting my mind and body play. When I could have hurried inside, I stayed outside and let the water collect on my body. This experience was an artistic expression for me. My embodied experience is as much art for me as creating a piece of writing—or even more so. Mary Oliver, a writer of poetry and prose, addresses this concept of merging the self-embodied experience with art as the "intimate interrupter" (Popova). Oliver argues that "the artist's work cannot be separated from the artists whole life" (Popova). I am often most inspired to create art when I am experiencing an ethereal moment in my body. Thus, for me, when I discovered the form of the flash essay, I realized in it the structure of the writing can manifest how it feels to exist: an intimate interruption. A flash essay is concise, like a quick, short breath. My first experience of the artistic sublime was through painting, drawing, and ceramics. I consider myself to be an artist in several mediums. I always figured I would become a visual artist—I never saw myself becoming a writer.

My first exposure to writing was not romantic. After my dad passed away, and my sister, mom, and I were living in poverty. I began writing poetry. I would write poems about the mysterious way death looms. I wrote about pain I was just learning how to describe. I was raw and confused and hungry. My mom would make a casserole with a can cream of chicken, chicken chunks, and white rice. I would walk into the kitchen and see the white casserole dish with dewy rice caked into it. I remember the sound as we scooped the rice from the dish with our spoons. I remember taking just enough from the dish—not too much. I felt guilty eating all I really wanted to eat. The warm rice would move slowly down my throat. My mom, sister, and I didn't talk much. We would eat on that for many nights. Then, we would have it again the following week. I walked to my room. This was the first time in my life I began to feel in my body what depression and hopelessness felt like. It consumed me like a heavy weight. I pulled out my journal. I drew dark, melancholic pictures. I drew thick black swirls and skeletons, trees with many branches and birds. I wrote poems about existing and how heavy it felt to exist. Death and pain were my artistic muse. Milan Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* about darkness being like a "pleasure suffusing his body" which was "pure, perfect, thoughtless, visionless" (95). He writes, "Yes, if you're looking for infinity, just close your eyes!" (Kundera 95). During those years of my life, I don't remember many things except the darkness and heaviness. Now, being years distanced from that time, I can interpret that darkness as a taste of infinity.

I began to write alongside painting. The meaning held within color, language, and metaphor was deepening for me as I processed and grieved the death of Dad and being in poverty. I stepped into the world of expression as if I were stepping into a deep canyon: a feeling of endlessness consumed me, yet I wanted to paint the tiniest of details, or describe the most

minute things in word, like honey dripping down my fingers as I eat toast. Kundera writes about the writer Franz Kafka, describing the way Kafka wrote in a way that "[saw] what was 'behind [what was already in front of him]'", discovering the possibilities that are "[already] in him" (116). I discovered that there were already images and metaphors, strings of poetry and prose behind what I say day-to-day. Therefore, death, ironically, taught me to dance—or play—in my artistic expression. Because grief was difficult to capture in words or color or figure, I found that the artistic practice which most closely embodied death and its companion grief was dance-like, lyrical, hushed, rhythmic. It existed in movements. In the realm of the mysterious, surreal and verging on supernatural, I began to feel safe when writing or creating art. Writer Lidia Yuknavitch writes about art in a similar way. She writes about transforming perceptions of art from competition and privilege to "collaboration," safety, and compassion (Yuknavitch). She asks, "What if we wrote and made art in a room without a conclusion?" (Yuknavitch). As Yuknavitch describes, I attempt to create art and writing that *feels* like connecting—art that reflects the complex pieces of our human existence.

The Appeal of Play: Creating Meaning in Creative Nonfiction

In his book of essays, *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera writes about the four appeals of the novel. One of those appeals is the appeal of play. He describes this appeal as not focusing so much on a "realistic setting" or "chronological order" of events, but rather "[reaching] heights of playfulness, of lightness" (15). How I interpret his description of this appeal is reality is mystified and exaggerated to create meaning. As a kid, I remember myself getting caught up in the dreaminess of play, comfort, thrill, surprise, innovation, and spontaneity. I resonate with this appeal both artistically and intrinsically. I see Kundera's definition of the appeal of play as

experimental in form and voice; perhaps the writing dips into surprising territory or reminds the writer of a familiar experience. In my own use of play, I turn to writing techniques which help create both familiar and unfamiliar emotions. Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "Only the most naïve of questions are truly serious" (139). He discusses that questions with no answers "set the limits of human possibilities, describe the boundaries of human existence" (139). By creating art that is playful in form and content, I can liberate myself as an artist to touch those boundaries of human existence. I can write about grief through the perspective of cat litter in a bathtub full of dirty water, and this allows me to taste a boundary of existence in my own way. To me, the appeal of play allows me to reconstruct memories and emotions. The appeal of play allows me to write about people that have died and hear them speak again; it allows me to experience versions of myself that have died and see that it is all speaking to me in my present moment.

In the following passages, I use theories and research from Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, and Charles Baxter's chapter "On Defamiliarization" in *Burning the House Down* to contextualize by own writing process and, by extension, the original essays included in this thesis.

"Hijacked by Images, Feelings, and Sounds from the Past"

In *Burning Down the House,* Charles Baxter defines the narrative mode of defamiliarization as a way to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (31). Baxter discusses the way defamiliarization can make an image which "sticks in the memory as if glued there" strange or familiar (31). These images "[resist] the fitting. . .into a silhouette, that is, into a ready-made symbolism" (32). Thus, these details are unique and used to make atypical

metaphors or meaning. They stand out in the reader's mind and beg the reader to contemplate the deeper meaning. In my own writing, defamiliarization is a subconscious decision because I am attempting to capture emotions that are awkward, painful, and difficult to put words to. By using defamiliarization, I can write into these emotions in a way that *feels* safer to me. I can explore these complex memories and emotions without being overwhelmed. I would describe these emotions as what Baxter terms "misfit details" (31). These "misfit details" are details that are "unfulfilled in meaning, but. . .take up a lot of room in the memory" (Baxter 31). These details seem "both gratuitous and inexplicably necessary" (Baxter 31). These are the details that I love to weave into my writing. Scholar Bessel van der Kolk in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* discusses the way traumatic memories are stored as "fragments" (40). Van der Kolk says, "Rather than the entire story," traumatic experience is often remembered as "images, sounds, and feelings" (40). For example, in my own writing, when writing about my childhood, I repeat the smallest details and images to exaggerate more abstract meanings such as grief, pain, confusion, and feeling out of control. I repeat these images and dwell with them in my writing. Baxter notes that "sometimes an obsessive image is the product of trauma" (31). It makes sense I cannot get the emerald color of the carpet of the small, closet-sized room my dad lived in out of my head. It makes sense that I remember the way the waterbed he slept on dipped inward as I lay on it when he was gone to work. Pill bugs curling and the hum of cicadas fill my mind when I think back to my childhood. Flat bottles of diet Pepsi with vodka in them. A nail stuck in the center of my foot. A cat's face rotting from a copperhead bite. My dad's foot stuck in the fence with blood covering the lawn mower. The box filled with my dad's ashes. There's a small rock sitting on top of the box. I can't get these images out of my

mind. As Baxter suggests, these are images that I use to defamiliarize, to myself and also my reader, to create meaning.

Meanwhile, since I am often inspired by the questions I have about my own life, I wonder why we die and what ripples death has on individuals and community. I question why one bird sings a different than the next. I imagine a world where every emotion has space to be as messy and complicated as they are. I ask the emotions what made them complicated, the memories, the images, the people that made it what it is. Because of these artistic trends in my writing and thought patterns, I tend to write creative nonfiction. However, I write short stories and poetry, as well. My writing often employs the appeal of play through narrative modes of magical realism and the gothic uncanny, and structural techniques such as symmetrical composition. I enjoy using repetition of images, words, colors, yet I like to twist them or reverse them in some form. I see these elements of narrative all interconnected in my writing to embody a playful piece in form, voice, and content. Through my writing, I hope to let the reader have a unique experience in their own body. I hope to remind them *of* their body. I hope to connect the body to the emotions and to current experience. I like my writing to be mysterious and thought-provoking. Therefore, by employing the techniques of the appeal of play, the flash essay, and defamiliarization, I can write in a way that best honors these personal, painful experiences.

"Emotion, Beauty, and Discomfort Fit into the Tiniest of Frames"

When I write creative nonfiction, I often write in flash essays. A flash essay is a short essay in both content and form. In an interview, Dinty Moore, editor of *Brevity* magazine, describes the way the beauty of a flash essay is held in its "succinct" form. Moore says there is "a throughout line of emotion, beauty, and discomfort that can fit into the tiniest of frames."

Moore speaks about writing that pulls like a "magnetic force that won't let go until the final word." In the flash essays I include in this thesis, this sort of magnetic force that Moore discusses is exactly how I intended my pieces to be read by readers. For example, in the essay titled "Bird," I write in a way that the words at the beginning pull towards the words at the end. Through the concise sentences, I attempt to mimic the way traumatic experience *feels*; I want to write in a way that expresses through form and content how it *feels* to not be seen by societal standards. I begin the essay:

> *That's my cat*, she says.
> *How do you know,* my dad asks. He grabs the cat. He puts it in the back of the car.
> My mom tells the receptionist, *I'm having a baby*. The receptionist doesn't look up at her. She grabs a phone, calls someone. Two nurses come out and ask what is going on today, honey. They look at her and smirk. My mom says they aren't listening to her. They don't believe her.

The image of the dead cat on the side of the road begins the flash essay intentionally. The image is abrupt and uncomfortable. Because the flash essay is short, each sentence must carry weight and aid in constructing meaning for the story being told. Each piece of dialogue speaks. Each line speaks. I end the essay:

> She talks about the woodpecker a lot. *Do you hear the woodpecker,* she asks? Do you hear it. Do you hear the dull sounds? I hear it. I think it is following me. I walk to the backyard to stare at it. I watch as the tiny head pokes the tree bark. I close my eyes. The woodpecker spends a lot of time carving out the perfect hole. The woodpecker seems to care about this work.

Because the flash essay begins and ends quickly, I do not have the lines to explain why I choose to end the essay with the image of a woodpecker. The reader must interpret why I choose to end the essay with the image. I intentionally write the last lines to leave readers curious. I give the repeated themes in the last lines to emphasize the meaning I am constructing. The flash essay liberates my writing and lets the themes and memories carry weight with myself and the reader.

When I first began writing creative nonfiction, I found longform structure difficult; I struggled to enjoy the writing process with these pieces. I wrote these essays still very new to the genre of creative nonfiction, and I don't think my style or personal themes as a writer were quite developed. I was just getting used to writing about my trauma as a graduate student. At this point in my writing practice, I've discovered my flash nonfiction pieces seem to express the style and nature I *want* my writing to express. It may just be that the trauma and memories I wish to write about are best suited in flash form. I find flash playful and liberating. The few words, the "obsession" with "misfit details" (as Baxter would say), and the way minimal words carry deep meaning intrigues me (32). Laurie Halse Anderson discusses the connection between form and the subject of trauma:

> I think that there are two reasons that I wanted to do this in poetry. One is any kind of physical violence, that is a marrow experience. That is a trauma. Most people who experience any kind of physical violence develop PTSD and it's always there. So many people can identify with this.
> When you're putting together a narrative that's in prose, there are a lot of words that don't come with hammers attached. But in a poem, you've a lot of hammers and also, in between poems in a book, there's a space for the reader to breathe and to sit with what they've just experienced in the poem. That's what I really wanted to create (Anderson).

This is the effect which the flash essay can allow in my own writing. It can allow readers to breathe and linger with the lines.

Discussing the flash form reminds me of one of my favorite writers, Claudia Rankine, and her book, *Citizen*. The style could be seen as using the appeal of play, as the form is simplistic yet experimental. She mixes media and pop culture content with her own narrative to convey deep hurt and trauma across the nation from racism and white supremacy. Rankine's words sit with readers and linger, even haunt. In an interview with *PBS*, Rankine describes with her book *Citizen* she was attempting to "engage all of the senses in the book, from their sight, to

their reading skills, to their body. . .[so that] these moments really sat with them." This is what I hope for my writing to do.

Magical Realism and Defamiliarization in "HER"

In my most recent short story, "HER," I see many of these elements being woven into the piece. I write about a fourteen-year-old daughter, Jade, who lives with her mother. The story reads like literary realism until the shift in the narrative towards magical realism. Lindsay Moore defines magical realism as a "literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre. . .characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality." Magical realism is set in a "normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society" (Moore). Writing in this narrative mode, writers can present paradoxical questions about existence and society at large. In my short story, one element of the magical realism is found in the flowers which hum and sing. The mother talks to them and takes delicate care of them. Eventually, the mom tells Jade there are women inside the flowers, and that is her reason for taking care of them:

> "Jade, the flowers are women. They are women like you and me. They have voices and a body and that's why I care for them. I water them because they are real," she says.
> "You're saying the flowers are actual women?" I ask.
> "Yep. Just ask them. . ."

The story explores themes of pushing against patriarchy and misogyny; its subjects include death, poverty in the Midwest, loss, sadness. I intentionally make the world a multi-person world of two with Jade and the mother. By the end of the story, the mother, overcome by grief, wants to join the rest of the women:

> "Let me die," she says. "I want to join the rest of the women."
> I watch her. She pulls the remaining stems from the ground and starts digging faster. A hole begins to form. She pulls and pulls at the dirt. Her hands are red and scraped, and blood is dripping towards her elbow. She looks up at me. I begin to sob. I try to tell her to

stop. I try to look into her eyes and really look. She always wanted someone to really look at her. She stops digging and gasps. Suddenly, the hole doubles in size without her realizing. She shouts no and screams my name. Before I reach her, she falls into the hole. Dirt moves and covers the area where the hole was. The flowers, all heaped and destroyed in a nearby pile, begin to hum. Their collective song is soft. I grab their petals and clench them with my fists.

"Where did you put her?" I ask.

All I hear is a chorus of response: *Where did you put her? Where did you put her? Where did you put her?*

I was proud of that story. It reflected themes and narrative techniques I had been wanting to incorporate into my writing for some time. There was so much freedom in writing about the flowers that sang and held the souls of women. Why? Because of the appeal of play. It was not so focused on the "verisimilitude" as it was meaning. John Gardner defines verisimilitude in *The Art of Fiction* as "the realistic writer's way of making events convincing" so that the reader may "[suspend their] disbelief" (22). In my short story, I was liberated by not focusing on verisimilitude and instead writing in the narrative mode of magical realism. Through the narrative mode of magical realism, I was able to convey deeper meaning through metaphor, to let the reader play out in their own mind what actually happened to the mother, as well as ponder the meaning behind the mother joining the women in the flowers. Baxter suggests that in making our characters "more undecidable, more contradictory" we may find that "literature exists in [such] moments" (39). In my own writing, defamiliarization allows the object being described to be "stripped of its usual meanings" (Baxter 33). Baxter suggests that "art that is overcontrolled by its meanings may start to go a bit dead" (33). This helped me to write more authentically—to write in a way that expresses the mysterious and the contradictions of existence, to keep my writing breathing and alive.

"'Just a Minute,' Said a Voice in the Weeds, So I Stood Still in the Exquisite Morning Light"

Today, I sat and watched a woodpecker. I saw it chip at bark. The small body of the bird poked at wood for about ten minutes. It didn't seem to be getting anything from the wood. The repetition seemed pointless. I wondered why I was so amused by the small bird. I watched it as though it was saying something profound. The image has stuck with me. I think about how images enthrall me. Today, it was the woodpecker. Yesterday, it was the rain. Often, the most simple images compel me to construct meaning or experience my present moment in a new way. Experiences like this are what inspire me to create meaning out of my pain and trauma through art or writing. It's simple and complex and shows me what it means to be human. Today, I say to myself, as a mantra, as a declaration:

You are taken back to the time when you used to dance freely. Remember when you played in the rain? Your feet were covered in mud. You were playful back then. You seemed more alive. You ran across the yard and let your wet hair slap the sides of your face. You took hold of the tree branch and shook the raindrops into your mouth. You weren't afraid of death yet. You just opened your arms and felt the rain.

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YES, BABY

When birds swarm in flocks, wings all parallel and flapping in union, this is called a murmuration. They fly in indistinct and unbound patterns. You see one, a murmuration. Their pack moves upward, and you imagine them settling there in an undetermined place, with their wings lulled, chilling in the air as besieged prey. But they don't stop as you imagine. Instead, their wings move as a silky black hedge back down and up again, as edges of the moving mass reshape. The blob moves as a shadow and nestles into spaces of the air you can't predict. So, you join the birds. You go into the field and take your shoes off. You let the deadened field grass poke your skin and surround each foot like a nest. As you bend onto your knees, you feel a small rock press against bone; you watch a squirrel's tail twitch as it waits to jump to the nearby tree; you hear the squirrel click and call towards a nearby companion. You lie back into your nest made by the field itself and curl your body into a small thing. You hear your mom yelling from the porch, "Do you see those birds? They are all talking to each other, saying, is it spring? Is it spring? Is it spring?"

You hear the birds. In 2021, mortality in songbirds has pressed researchers to scratch their heads at the mystery. The precise cause of the disease is undetermined, but birds dying across the nation begets a diagnosis. Before they die, the birds may become lethargic. You think about a robin walking on the ground with each leg wobbling. Maybe a quick flash of flopping feathers wrestles with air as the sick bird struggles to roll over, to stand up. You imagine their feathers falling from their small bodies. You go to the place where the birds were murmuring. You pretend their hums are swirling around you, as their pack of movement becomes like fluid and fills your ears with rhythmic calls. You want to think the group of birds is singing a farewell

to fellow bird bodies which were bound up in the disease. Maybe they are singing a eulogy for the feathers that fell from flight. Or awaiting the arrival of the new season with angst. Maybe they don't know that other birds are dying all around them. You want to ask the birds, "Are you looking for spring? Do you see the death? Isn't it all around you?" You tell this to the air where the birds were once flying. You lay lie down and look at the sky and pretend it is a blue vacuum. Maybe that's where the birds went as they sang. You pretend the sky swept them up, leaving the world unharmed. You see only baby blue. You get up and walk to the front porch.

You find the ghost kitty in your yard—the orange tabby you just buried six months ago. It's walking in your yard amidst dead grass with its tail floating in the air. The plump and fullness of its fur is just as it used to be before it began to grieve the death of its sibling. You remember the way the cat howled in the hallway, hollow and intense. But this kitty looks young. This kitty is not the one lying on the ground with eyes drooping as you try to give it water. This kitty is not the kitty you find in the flowerbed stuck to the ground like a thin piece of cheese. When you pick that kitty up, its neck and legs hang. One eye peels open. The ball of eye looks at you with a deathly draw.

You wish the ghost kitty would go away. You see it in flashes of orange. You see the kitty at night and during the day. You see it all the time. Its fluff sweeps by you, and you try to catch it with your eyes before it vanishes. You wish the grief didn't kill the kitty. You want to feel something soft like orange fur. You go to your room and curl around a blanket. You pretend to know what it felt feels like to die of grief. You imagine that orange fluff woven into your skin and watch it fall out in clumps. You imagine trying to drink water and not being able to stick out your tongue to lap. You realize grief kills everyone. Some just experience a sort of rebirth. Kitty got a rebirth. You wonder when yours will come. You wonder when you will see things anew.

For now, you stayed curled and close to the warmth of the blanket. You are safe here. Grief doesn't always feel safe. Sometimes it feels like an invasion, a parasite, that slowly eats away at you. Maybe kitty felt grief like a parasite chomping on its body until it gave out. You wait for your rebirth. You know it's coming. You hear about visiting grief in sips—drink it warm and slow. Visit grief only when you can handle the intensity. You will knock on the door to visit grief and have tea with it. You may even gaze out the window together. Don't let this overwhelm you. You may spot ghost kitty sunbathing in the yard. Maybe ghost kitty doesn't even feel safe. Maybe it wonders if another parasite will come and gnaw. You can't tell just by observing. Ghost kitty looks free. Ghost kitty runs up a tree and sticks its claws in the bark. You wonder what that liberation feels like. You sip your warm grief tea. You see ghost kitty digging in the flowers you planted on its grave.

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"Are we still on earth?"

"Yes. We are still close enough to see the clouds."

You fly on a plane with a four-year-old. He's old enough to understand the nuance of taking flight but not old enough to understand the plane is safe. You try to explain that the flight attendant is safe. The pilot is safe. You are safe. He starts screaming that all he can see is blue—he can't see the clouds. He screams to get off. The flight attendant looks at you with concern. Her eyes bend into a half moon shape and stare at you. You hold the four-year-old close to your body and his nails reach into your skin. He squeezes his lips together. You tell him everything will be just fine. You tell him the pilot is nice and will drive slow today. He loosens his grip around your arms and looks at you. His baby blue eyes leak concern. You cup your hands around his soft cheeks and feel goldfish crumbs poking at your skin. You give him a closed lip, half-

moon smile and bend close to kiss his forehead to say clear and slow, “Baby, we are still on earth.” He tells you he wants to go back home, to play in the backyard. Once the plane has landed, he tells you that you need to buy another orange kitten. He says he misses that good cat. You wonder what made him think about the cat. You wonder if he was thinking about dying.

You remember digging the hole for kitty. *Make it four feet deep. We don’t want some critter to come gnawing at his body.* Mom said to dig it when the dirt was moist from the rain. The rain came when kitty was ready. You begin to smell the fragrance of Missouri dirt. Its earthy, mineral-rich scent reminds you of home. You remember covering your entire body in wet dirt when you were younger. You remember watching goops of watery soil plop into a bucket filled with dirt for tadpoles. You remember the excitement over their baby-like bodies, ready to morph into a new being. They swam in clumps inside your bucket of murky dirt and water. You remember the time you dumped the bucket before reaching home. Each tadpole body began to convulse atop the dry Missouri soil. They flopped, and you cried. You tried to hold all their bodies in your hand and run to the house for water, but you only saved a handful. You ran with quick bare feet. Their slimy oval bodies wiggled between the cracks of your fingers. You told them to please just wait. You will put them into water soon and they will be safe. You filled a red plastic cereal bowl with water with one hand. Tadpoles dangle from the other, and you submerged your hand. Only some of the bodies continued to wiggle. The others floated to the surface, hanging

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You hear people talk about grief all the time. It’s like it is stuck to our bodies like a paste. *It takes time. Only with time can you heal. Do enough therapy and you will heal. Eat cauliflower tacos and drink herbal tea. Grief doesn’t last forever. You’ll get over it. What is it about grief?*

You can never figure grief out. Grief seems to last forever. You tell people you have been grieving lately. They don't ask anything else. Sometimes they agree that grief is hard. Sometimes they just look at you. Sometimes you notice the way you say the word *grief* as though its syllables are smothered in sticky syrup. It's hard to say. It's hard not to say it.

In "Second Sonnet," Twanda Mulalu writes, "There is too much potential in this dying planet." You question if there is potential in grief. You think maybe there is. You go to the bathtub. You imagine the green and blue pebbles of cat litter that once peppered the bottom of the tub. They weren't bothersome, only until it was all you thought about. You lie in the dark in the water and remember at one time you saw potential in those small pebbles. You saw potential in the litterbox that was beside the bathtub. The smell of urine and synthetic minerals enchanted you. You thought a good poem would come of it. You thought the litter and stench was symbolic. You didn't write about the litter until it was gone because when it was there, it itched at you.

You are on the phone. The person on the other end tells you, "So, I had an insane dream. I was with a team of people going to fly to space for some mission. Once we are in space, we see earth at a distance, and a meteor smashes into the surface. We can see the mushroom cloud and everything. Then, the earth explodes. The entire planet." You nod your head and pretend the dream doesn't scare you. You tell the person on the other end that must have caused them a lot of grief. You imagine what the earth would look like if it exploded. You think it would be a terrifying, beautiful disaster. You think about what colors would shimmer and float. You think about what season it would happen in. You imagine it was spring across the entire earth. Then, the earth would spit out blossoms from the trees and hues of rose and cream and lilac would float

around the explosion. You feel most alive when spring comes. It must be spring. It must be. Spring reminds you that everything isn't dead forever.

You go into the grass and pull pieces out. You like the way the grass feels when spring first arrives. You pretend it's supple and fleshy even though it's not. You pretend to hear cries of arrival like a baby being born, like the blades of grass are speaking. *It's spring. We have arrived.* You don't hear a thing. It's quiet.

You like to think about time. You wonder if time is what grieves you. More than flesh lost or baby-like dreams that never came to be, you wonder, could time be it? Because if it was is time, then calculations of different mechanisms or words or touches don't matter—it's time. Yes, you think it's time.

It's time to go out into the backyard again.

You remember things better here. You go to stand by the window. Maybe you will remember what it was about the window. On the edges of the window black mold is growing. You never noticed it until it was all over. You noticed it when the faucet fell off the tub. A gap between the inner wall and tub revealed the growing mold. Someone told you it could kill you. Someone else said don't worry about it. The landlord found more mold in the closet in your room. He and his business partner sloshed a bucket of bleach on the fungus and said that will do. You never asked if he would pay to remove the mold. It would cost a lot of money. Now, you take a spray bottle of vinegar and water and drench the glass. You scrub the window. Mold gets stuck in the tiny cracks. You squish a paper towel into the small space and scrub. And scrub.

Remember the time when it was dark outside, but the plastic blinds were up in your room. And remember how your mom and older sister and two-year-old nephew wore crowns made of colored paper. This was an ethereal moment to look upon, an artistic place in time. You

took a picture with your phone. You were swooned by the light of the room and the light of their playing, their existing that you could not hear because you were outside. You saw the bags under your sister's eyes and your mom's shoulders curved down. Your sister's wine-stained lips squeezed a smile. She had moved in four months ago. You saw her cry at night. You saw her glass full of red wine again and again. And again, you wondered when they will move out. She Facetimed her husband and cried because the baby won't stop crying. She was drunk. Baby said he wanted to go home. In the window, you saw your nephew sitting on hand-me-down stuffed animals. Just yesterday, his mom had fallen into your arms, her chest warm and wet with tears. You embraced her. She said she must be a terrible person, a terrible mother. Your thumbs moved slow across her cold arms. You cried with her. You know what it is like to live together for a time in a small place because with no money. It's a small place in time, but it hurts.

You looked closer at them playing in a room of paper crowns. Money had no place in a time of blue and purple crowns. Paper was enough. You stayed for a minute just to stare.

***

"Is this dead?" Your nephew asks your mom.

"Yes, baby," she says.

You watch their two bodies bend over the crisp deadened plants. They curl their hands close to the root and dirt and heave their bodies backward. You see them pile the dead remains in a bucket and carry it over to the field to toss. You wonder what your nephew thinks about the dead plants. He approaches the task with excitement, saying, "I am pulling out the dead." Your mom reminds him you must pull out the dead so the new can grow. Then, they will be ready for spring. Your nephew waters the grass where the dead plants once were. "I gave it water," he says. "I am watering the new." A stick is in the ground, and he goes to water it. You remember

being on the floor with your nephew a year ago as he cried. Your backs were flat on the ground and the cold floor held you. He said he didn't want to die. He said he wanted to live for a long time. He turned and curled into your chest. You felt his chest rise and fall. You held his hand. His breath was quick and frustrated. You kissed his head. You didn't know what to say. You heard him whisper about blue whales being the biggest animal. You turned to him and saw the tears drip onto the floor. You nodded your head and curled the corners of your mouth and saw his eyes stare. You realized he was somewhere deep. He was with the blue whales. Swimming in waters of thought and submerged in blue watery mysteries.

Tenderness wells up inside you. You are all of them. It's a mystery inside the vast blue. You like to look at the sky and see them. All. You are all of the birds swarming and murmuring. You hear a voice. You wish it was him saying your name. His little voice in his little breath. Her breath of red wine and sorrow. His bleach-solved problem. Her inability to shower. You keep taking baths. The water isn't warm enough. You wonder when the kitty will return. You wonder if it will be wearing a paper crown. Maybe if you go back into bath, turn on the water, close your eyes. Don't see the earth exploded. It was all dream. You may hear a meow-meow, but it is just a dream. You curl your fingers around a warm cup of tea. You dip your fingers in the water and watch it swirl. Wiggle your toes. Wiggle your fingers. Feel the warmth all around you. Your body. You are all of them. You imagine the water is a cup of tea. You submerge your head and watch, feel the steam rise.

You are all of them. It was all a dream. You can't dream grief away. You are used to seeing tired, worn people. You are familiar with sadness. You hate money. You need money. Go to the store and get blueberry muffins and make them with your nephew. He will ask if he can stir. Tell him it is fine if he makes a mess. He looks out the window. You look out the window.

You see green and smile because it's spring. He asks you if it is spring. You say perhaps. He asks you how to know when spring has come. You say because everything comes out like a baby born—fleshy, new, full of color, loud, visible, but quiet because something new is coming. He looks at you. He asks if you were once a baby. You say, baby, yes.

THE DAUGHTER

Dad came home from a trip to China. Three weeks away and returns with a memorabilia. I collected anything: Pop-Tarts shoved behind my dresser, stacks of printed out google images of Dalmatians and Great Danes, small pebble-sized rubber bouncy balls—so when he gave me this, I would of course keep it forever.

"There's a couple bills and coins in there, anything I had from this trip to Chengdu," dad said.

"Can I keep it?" I asked.

He nodded his head and placed a small coin purse in my hand, the classic kind with nobs; they touched at the top, creating a sort of a resistance when opening. I rubbed the soft exterior of this hand-sized prize. The padding revealed an illustration inked along the edge. Women with long black hair dressed robes to the feet, carrying babies strapped to their back, hair braided and kept back. There was a little girl leaning into whom I supposed was a mother—the daughter's eyes on the ground, her nose and mouth drooping downward in unison. I peeled open the purse to see paper bills with men's faces on them and coins with little buildings of Chinese architecture engraved. I held it to my chest and hugged it, peering at my dad with the jolliest grin.

"I'll keep it forever," I said.

Now, I open the coin purse, peel back the tiny nobs, and close my eyes to see my dad: calls a cab, checking into the motel, sucking down a steamed vermicelli roll, stinky socks from a twelve-hour flight suffusing the small room with rank odor—wonder what that flight attendant is doing? I see him lying on my parent's old bed, carrying 140 pounds of feathery flesh and vodka, debilitated, near death; diarrhea stains stuck in patches of carpet, empty bottles, refrigerator full

of empty handles, hidden in the sheets, bottles, everywhere. I stir the coins around and feel their cold rims. On the dark day, his belly stuck out tall, loosing sensitivity in all parts, and organ by organ, his body said farewell. My fingertips run along the purse, following the hair of the young daughter on the outside. I search for her eyes and still can't find them, yet I can't seem to let her go.

BIRD

We are driving in an old white minivan. It's raining. There are trees bending over us as we drive toward the hospital. The trees are robust green and leafy. They are maples and oaks. It's dark so their color isn't visible, only their dark hues and oblong shapes. We drive fast. We are heading to the hospital. We see a furry figure dead on the side of the road. Can't tell if it is orange or blue or green. She sees the figure. She cries.

That's my cat, she says.

How do you know, my dad asks. He stops the car. He gets out. He grabs the cat. He puts it in the back of the car.

At the hospital, my mom tells the receptionist, *I'm having a baby*. The receptionist doesn't look up at her. She grabs a phone, calls someone. Two nurses come out and ask what is going on today, honey. They look at her and smirk. My mom says they aren't listening to her. They don't believe her. They shake their heads. They turn around and talk to one another. One woman rolls her eyes. In unison, they turn back around. They reach their palms upward. The tips of their fingers wiggle. Follow me, one says.

I am born that night, in that storm.

It isn't fair. Mom says this to me. You don't have health insurance? They ask. They will roll their eyes. The nurses will turn their backs again. They will turn back around. In a squeaky voice they will say we will let the doctor know. The doctor walks in. The nurses turn to him. She doesn't have health insurance, they say. Their treatment of the patient will be different from this moment. Forget to put the epidural in? Oh well, she doesn't have health insurance. See the start of skin tearing? Oh well, she doesn't have health insurance. Get her in and out.

The amount of time they will spend on her will be different. The touch their hands give her will be different. I will wonder if she even wanted a different amount of time, a different touch. I want different treatment for her. But that can't change. I can't change the doctor's privilege. I can't convince healthcare that care shouldn't be measured by income, by insurance. I wonder what care really is. What is real care. They won't care. She will be mad. She will be dozing in and out of consciousness, pain stretching from her pelvis to her legs, her hips, her arms. The nurse in training will walk in. They will all be standing over her. They look fuzzy. She will see their mouths moving. She will hear one talking about grabbing food. Her eyes squeeze and you moan. The nurse in training will jump forward and say oh. I will be born, and they won't care, anyway.

Her name is Beth. She works as a cleaning lady, so she calls herself one. She has her own business, I guess. Is she a businesswoman? She's a businesswoman. Her business is only hers. Keep out of her business. She reads a book called *I'll Love You Forever* to me when I am five years old. She uses a squeaky, sweet voice as she tells me she will love me forever and ever and ever. I hold her hand with my small gummy worm-like fingers. She squeezes them. I squeeze back. She tells me that birds love to come to our backyard and eat because we have so many trees around us. Says we have enough seed to feed a whole bird family. Says we are lucky to see them come around. My favorite are the blue birds. They remind me of myself. She tucks me under her arm. I fall asleep.

She talks about the woodpecker a lot. *Do you hear the woodpecker,* she asks? *Do you hear it. Do you hear the dull sounds?* I hear it. I think it is following me. I walk to the backyard to stare at it. I watch as the tiny head pokes the tree bark. I lose your eyes. The woodpecker spends a lot of time carving out the perfect hole. The woodpecker seems to care about this work.

MANUAL LABOR

What is manual labor? What is labor that you do for money? What do you say when you clean as your job? What is your job if you go into homes and clean up their trash, unbox the twelve boxes from Amazon, make macaroni for their kids; *watch them while I go get an oil change, would you?* What is your job when you pick up Cheerios off the floor because the vacuum squishes them even more? What is labor you say you do but don't do? You end up talking about that affair, that death, dementia, the dog, those children, whatever. What are you as a cleaning lady?

What do you call a job? The human presence who you pay money. The human person that comes into your home and does your laundry, cleans the blinds with a wet washcloth just like you want, scrubs the inside of the toilet, the outside, finding your sex toys in the drawer, and the pile of prescription drugs you keep in the closet. You don't know what to tell this person or not tell them. They'll tell you that the drugs were kept in there and one time they put their wife in there and told her not to leave. They'll say she scratched on the door, screaming. You saw those scratches, too, when you walked into that walk-in closet and counted twenty-two pairs of shoes for work and five pairs of tennis shoes. Dozens of unused and used bras draped and hung around. You rubbed your hand across the bag of prescription drugs and wondered why the affair happened. The wife told you the husband must be cheating, that he must be seeing someone else.

And she was right. You were told he committed suicide the following week.

What is this labor? The kind that you try to calculate into a timesheet, into an invoice, into something that makes a person with money want to pay you. *I'll scrub your toilets and vacuum the house. I'll make the kid's bed just right. I'll figure out that the twelve blankets they*

won't take off their bed is a coping mechanism—I won't touch those. I'll figure out that you skip work once a week to drink all day and stay in your pajamas following me around the house as I clean. I'll do your dishes. I'll pick your kids up from the principal's office. You won't know I'm even there. Then, with a good long thought, they write the check and tell you to have a blessed day. They walk into their house. It smells of vinegar. They will turn on their TV and sit all evening. They will drink beer and wine together and say it's a good day. You'll see the $60 check and go to the grocery store to get bread. You'll get gas on the way home.

PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY

She tells me if she was stranded on an island for the rest of her life, she would only need peanut butter and jelly and she would be happy. She's happy. She's happy with the creaminess, the simplicity, the sweet sugary satisfaction. She's happy, she says, as she cries and stuffs a peanut butter and jelly sandwich into her pocket and says she has to go to work—she's already late. They forgot to pay her last week. They don't care. They don't give a damn about her peanut butter and jelly week because they are enjoying salmon and driving to Kansas City that weekend in their Tesla. I remember she used to pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in my lunch every day during elementary school. She would write a little note saying *I love you baby! Have a good day. Xoxo Mom.* She always put more jelly on the sandwich than I wanted. I watched the overflowing purple jelly goop from the sides of the bread. It got on my hands and made them sticky for the rest of lunch.

And she will walk into the bathroom at the accounting firm and clean shit off the walls because the men think it's funny to draw loops with their own excretions. They think it's funny to fill the toilet brush holder with pee week after week, despite her dumping the urine out into the toilet, infuriated. She told me engineers are the dirtiest and most unorganized people. She says their desks are full of trash and old food. Their trash cans full of soda bottles filled with chew.

And she fills the washer with her dirty rags. They smell of vinegar and mop soap. She turns the dial to Quick Wash. She picks me up from school and has cheese and rice casserole made for dinner. She makes this most nights. I pretend to not notice the bland flavor of the rice and cheese. I smile and stay quiet.

I learn here, as I eat scoops of cheesy rice, that this is her trying. She will salt and pepper her pile of rice. Her hair will stick out from all sides of her bun on top of her head. There are deep bags under her eyes. She smiles a careful, tired smile. She is tired. She eats peanut butter and jelly that morning for breakfast and hasn't eaten since. She's eaten that for breakfast for the past six months. I feel guilty in my stomach. I feel an odd pain in there. As though I should do something about her financial situation but can't. I can't. I just scoop the rice and soothe the emotions in my stomach with its warmth.

Is there such a thing as poverty food? Should there be labels on food as "good" and "bad"? As "privileged" and "unprivileged"? Isn't everyone just trying to fill the aches in their stomach with some substance? There is privileged food. I don't see rich businessmen walking down the street eating peanut butter and jelly on white bread as they walk to work. I don't see jelly gooping from their hands, sticking to their shirts, then falling to the sideway in purple plops. I don't see them walking into the workplace with jelly-stained shirts.

DIRT

One of the smells I will always remember most is Missouri dirt. I will remember it in my hair as I tossed in a mud puddle and got my swimsuit stained with brown muck. You're not living, she would say, until you're covered in dirt, are you? She would smile wide. I smiled back. Dirt in my hair, in my ears, in my armpits. There's something dirty about being a cleaning lady, isn't there? You must be always tired of looking at dirt, they say. You wear gloves, don't you? You don't? Oh, wow. That's gross. Dirty, messy houses. I would never want to do that for my job. Is it worth the money? Can't be worth that money.

She told me her work clothes need to be washed every night because they are dirty. She threw the basketball shorts and bleach-stained St. Louis Cardinals shirt into the wash and told me it was a long day. She said the kids were home all day because it was a snow day. She said those are the worst days because the parents are home, then, too. She said a lady followed her from room to room, picking out which piece of dirt she was missing with her rag, her broom, her vacuum. *It's not that I even think they are particularly dirty*, she told me, tossing the day's clothes into the washer. I stared at her naked body. *It's that I like to feel like I am starting fresh that morning,* she told me. *I'll put on the same outfit, yes. But there's something new about them being clean, you know?*

I was sixteen. She was in the tub. I came to sit on the toilet to talk to her. The lid of the toilet bent inward with the weight of my body. I leaned toward her naked body. Her skin folded and water settled in the space between the small tub and her body. I couldn't tell which was taking up more space: her or the water. She told me it's not fair that poor people's teeth have to rot. She was crying. I leaned closer. I began to cry, too. She curved her wet hands across the top

of her head, rubbing them down her face. *It's not damn fair*, she told me, *that poor people have to lose their teeth. Poor people can't afford care,* she said. *They don't care that poor people can't afford care.*

I went a long time without seeing the dentist. I remember the first time I went back. I was twenty. I remember feeling like I was a kid again—it had been about twelve years since walking into an office. There was a boy sitting next to me that looked nine. His mom was talking with the dental hygienist about cavity prevention. I swirled my tongue around my mouth. My chest got tight. I walked back to the room and sat in the cushioned dental chair. I opened my mouth—I felt exposed. The dental hygienist leaned over my mouth, peering in. I felt like my teeth were dirty. She shook her head. She sighed. *I haven't been to the dentist in like two years,* I said; I lied. She said it looks like I have early signs of gingivitis and asked when the last time I flossed. After x-rays, they said I had twelve cavities. I left angry.

I remember being seven years old and going to the pile of dirt on a construction site right behind our home. When it had just rained, the pile of dirt would seem to melt like chocolate. The once-hard dirt turned milky and soft. My sister and I would put on our swimsuits and run to the dirt. I would try to run up the pile, slipping and falling as I tried. We stood on the top of the pile and watched each other's bodies roll down. The mud would stick to our entire body—it clumped in our ears. We laughed and laughed. Our hair would turn stiff. We would walk home covered in completely in mud. This dirt was familiar and safe. It was soft for now.

WHAT IS GOOD?

Goodnight Gorilla was my favorite book she would read to me. I loved the way the animals would follow the zookeeper around as he thought the locked the zoo up, but in reality, they were following him home. Did work follow him home? What does it look like for work to follow you home when you are a cleaning lady? What follows you? Is it dirt? The flu? Is it rags stained with bleach and grape juice? She tells me that it's not all about money. Life isn't all about money. Money sure isn't what follows her home. Money doesn't bring meaning. What does money even mean? She doesn't bring it home. She's home. She's my home, and I follow her around, two years old, laughing. I giggle at the gorilla as it holds the keys and sneaks behind the zookeeper to let the lion out of the cage, the monkey's smirk matches mine. I look up to her. She tells me to tell the animals goodnight. I tell them that momma didn't make any money this week. I pretend to go around to different the cages, unlocking them all, letting those wild animals run wild.

My mom says, *just like her,* my mouth will get me in trouble when it comes to toxic men. We just can't seem to not tell them off. I am not afraid to tell you no. I am not afraid to say I will not. She will not. You will not. Why? Why do you ask? I will look you in the eye and tell you. I've found that men can creep around a space, wearing masculinity like it deserves more space, more voice, like it's the right that will always right a women's wrong. Go home, I'll say. I don't want that energy in my space. Or rather, I won't be around that energy. I will defend myself. *You must stand up for yourself*, I hear her say. I do every time. The men will get angry (as they normally do). You'll take up the space you deserve. I take up the space I deserve. I am my own

advocate, my own safety. They will look at you with those masculine eyes and I will pounce back. I am a lioness. I sure am wild.

I will tell the moon *goodnight*. I will look at its glossy glow and feel as though it reveals a part of myself. I connect with its raw appearance. It seems to be exactly what it is supposed to be. It is bright and mysterious. It dips and draws and has an internal clock but still appears spontaneous. Again, I will say *goodnight* and wish the moon a good night, whatever good is, whatever happens at night as the dark blanket night sweeps lower. Good. Good. I'll repeat good over and over. What is good? What is good? Is it fleeting? Is it pleasure? Is it daytime? Is it night? Is it you? Are you good? They are good. They seem good. Is it what it seems or what it is? They aren't good to her. They aren't good to you. *Not everything is good in this world. Most things are hard.* I'll hear her say this all the time. I wonder what good it does to want goodness. Is goodness good? Does it have a taste? I think it does. I think it has a taste and smell and it makes sounds. I listen close. All I hear is animals. They squeak and whistle. They groan.

SAFETY

I am sitting in a coffee shop in New York City writing while I watch people spot a place to sit, sipping on frothy lattes, cappuccino foam stuck to lips, discussing being the only female in the company. They feel outnumbered. They ask each other: *Is it different living in New York than San Diego*? *Is any city any different? Is there stability? Are we tired? Are we free? Are we crazy? Well, we will just sip our green juice. It will all be all right.*

I pretend I am not listening and instead just writing. I am inspired by the multitude of voices and faces, while simultaneously I take them all in like a vacuum: like they are all here and not here, as though I see them and don't. It's how it goes here. I am here to visit a love of mine. To curl my hands around their hands and pull my body close to theirs to feel safe, to feel at home, to remember what it feels like to be remembered and found and seen.

I hear the woman next to me say that animals are sensitive to your state of mind. My mom says the same thing. She says they can sense when you are sad, and they will come and snuggle close, knowing. Before I came here, I held my cat and it purred, and I cried.

Am I safe in my body? I am safe here. In my body, I feel the warmth. I feel where the tension holds in my shoulders, my jaw, my hips, the balls of my feet. It's safe here. It will all be all right here. *There are things that aren't right.* I will feel ripples well up from my gut to my throat. It won't feel safe. My body won't feel safe. I am safe when I am held. I am safe when I am held by compassion, by kindness, by being seen.

I wonder why people talk about New York City not being safe. To me, I feel safe here. Am I romanticizing safety? What is safety outside your body? How is safety outside your body

any different from safety inside your body?

“THE WORLD IS FULL OF OTHER PEOPLE’S WORDS”

Bakhtin knew the prose artist would have trouble finding and discovering and making new what was already said, that the prose artist would fall short of original words. That they must be keep a keen eye on what they see. Don’t you see that I only have a third of my life left, she asks me. I stare at her. I see the pain in her blue eyes. I see it and it feels like rocks rubbing against one another deep in my gut. I try to materialize her pain into something tangible, something that I can bring a form to, that I can rub against my cheek, or stroke and talk to. I am in pain. She is in pain. I imagine her pain as skyscrapers reaching up, covering vision, creating an alternate view of the blue sky. It doesn’t look blue anymore. It’s all grey. And she holds my hand, and I tell her I don’t want her to die. Don’t die, I say. I don’t want to, she says. I’m scared to die. I spot the way her eyes look into me. They seem to travel down into some deep place of knowingness, as though she knows her pain will be held in that spot in my body. Because it is. I hold it. I cry. I’m full of it. Blue feelings which blooms into foamy tears dripping from my eyes like hot water. I try to rub them away, but they don’t go away. The world is full of these tears.

CLEAN

I see them walking past me like their cleanliness is a prize. Like their clean, sharp hair and nice shoes and nice clothes are a trophy. Because they are. What does clean mean? Is clean kind? Is it kind to forget to pay the person who cleans for you but dress yourself up so clean? Clean isn't kind. It's never been kind. She says that she hasn't washed her hair in a week. It doesn't even look dirty, I tell her. It looks clean enough. And they lean out their windows and tell her come again a different day—they are taking a day at home to rest. Did they forget her income is coming to clean their house? I need you to clean the blinds one by one, they say. Don't forget to wet the rag in between each blind. I need it done today. Clean it up. The mess. It's all a mess and it always will be a mess. You just figure out how to step on top of the mess instead of get swallowed in it. Or sometimes, when you want to have fun, you let yourself be swallowed in the messiness. It's not clean here. Let it be this way. It's how it is supposed to be, really.

ALL WE CAN

We do all we can, she says, and that's all you can really do. It's not fair. It's never been fair. It's never been fair for single poor working women with children. It's never been. All we can do is speak the words of all we have inside us to defend and define our beauty, our existence in a world dominated by men and money and power, and all we can do is be all we are. She says this. I say this. We say it together. It's like she's woven in into the corners of me that I cannot help but look at that man with disgust or that nice car like they don't really need that, because they don't really need that. Or do they? Maybe they need it to satisfy that longing in them for identity, and it gives someone power to own a nice car. Our cars have never been nice, she tells me. I'm not a car person, she says. I know this about her. She is more and better and richer than a car person. All I can do is look at her and cry and tell her that she did enough and is enough. She doesn't think she's enough. An impoverished woman doesn't matter to society, does it? Why doesn't it? It takes all I can not to scream. All we can do is all we can.

HOLD ME FOR SEVEN SECONDS

She wakes up and drinks three glasses of water. Getting her water in for the day is important. Water is like magic to me. I remember sitting by the creek water and watching the tadpoles wiggle their tiny tails. Touching them made them swim away fast but their bodies were smooth, so I kept trying to catch them in my palm. Cupping my hands, I would wait for them under the water until they swam into my palms just to feel their soft exterior. Water is strong. I think water is strong. It can be contained and not contained and held and not held and measured and not measured. It's strong. She's strong, I tell her. She gulps her water. Tears begin to fall from her blue eyes. I tell her again. Strong. She gulps more water. I hold her hand. It's soft. I rub her palm with my thumb. I tell her it's not fair. I tell her I hurt, too. I grab a cup of water and fill it up in the sink. We both gulp. We drink the water in silence. I used to pretend I was a fish. I would curl my legs in simultaneous motion, as though it was one large fin. I would stretch my arms before me. My whole body was united. I would pretend my gills could breathe in the water and sustain me. There was nothing wild about it. I was soft and gentle in that water, and to me, the world was water. I look at her eyes. Her blue blue eyes. They carry pain and glitter. It's like looking on the street of New York and seeing so much pain and glitter all at once—it's always pain with glitter. They co-exist and madden one another. It's always both. She finished her cup of water. She sighs. I sigh. We breathe. I imagine myself as that zookeeper, letting out all the wild things. They go bother the people too ignorant to notice the people in pain, the people trying. All wild and messy. I think it's beautiful. I am not sure how we make a difference in this hierarchy. I set down my cup of water. She gives me a hug, holding me for at least seven seconds.

SAVE THE WATER FOR ME

When you reach the exit, turn left, and you'll see it. The pond will look small. Take five coins and throw them in the pond. There will be turtles. Turtles that bite. Bumps and dips. Don't bump shoulders with strangers. Eat your breakfast. You will brush your teeth twice a day, or you get cavities. Cavities are gummy. They are sticky when you touch them. Slimy. Little slugs come up through the vent. Momma will scream. When your dad and I first dated, I didn't know he was crazy. You will flush the slugs down the toilet. You don't know what else do to. Get rid of them quick. She screams when dad starts using the scissors on the plastic chairs. Again. His stare is blank. He just chops. You are scared. You don't know what to say. The plastic chairs fall to the ground in pieces. You imagine mom is tired. In her head, slugs are roaming and scaring her. The slugs don't climb in bed, but I imagine them there. You got your dad's teeth. Teeth that sink deep and turn bad quick. Brush them. Your dad always had cavities. Turn around if you make the wrong turn. The house will be by the big hole in the ground. You won't know why it's there.

There, there, baby. Yes, I see you are tired. There are bags under your eyes. They are deep. Mom will get so tired she will cry. You have holes in your teeth. There's a dip right there. I met a stranger that told me to read a book. I am tired of it. It's not crazy but it is sad. They wrote down the title and I threw it away. They said it was heavy. Let me vent a little. Momma taught me how to bathe fast enough to keep the water warm for two more people to bathe in it. Saves water. By the last person in, the water had soap flakes floating. And it wasn't that warm. *Keep the water in,* she would say. She said I was like him one time. She told me I am bipolar. This hurt me. I've been hurt for so long. She's been hurt for so long. He died. He drank himself to death. He was bipolar. No, he had a learning disorder. No, his father didn't ever tell him he loved

him. No, he was mentally ill. No, he was just sad. No, he was lonely. Didn't have anyone to talk to. Isolated. Crazy. Sad. Floating. Bathing in sadness. Not here.

You wonder if slugs bite. Someone told me that I was wrong. I said that I am not. I am not. I said it again. I said I will stand up for myself. You will fill the cup with just a little water. Stand here beside me. Don't let the men look at you. Give them a dirty look. She gave dad that look. The water will get dirty but keep washing. I gave them a dirty look. I do every time. I am not wrong. *I remember when you were born. You were born in a storm. We saw a dead cat on the side of the road, and your mother told us to stop. I think that is my cat. She said we need to throw it in the back of the car. We did. We went to the hospital with a dead cat in the back*. Its paws were wet. The roads were slippery. In her head, she knew she had to keep alive. Keep alive. Look, you do your best and that's all you can do sometimes. You'll wind up grieving, anyway. It's slimy. Life. But if you find a pond at the right time of night, the sunset will reflect in it. You'll see pink and orange. It'll be warm. Get out when the water is cold and don't forget to pull the plug.

HER

We live on East Elmwood Street. Our house is the one-story house that looks like a trailer home but without wheels. It has blue shutters and a blue door. It left side leans sideways when you look at it close enough. Grandma says it was due to wind. Momma says it was due to an old maple that fell down during a tornado, and when Uncle Mar tried to fix it, he forgot a few pieces. I always climb up the ladder that always leans on the house in that spot of the house, to hide. I take my old notebook and sketch. I find my usual spot on the roof and draw. I draw a big forest and color it pink. I draw a lion, and a pigeon, and a man on the coast of Connecticut sailing on his boat, retired, fat, and happy. I draw two cherries that have legs and five eyes. I draw snakes that come up through the toilets. Momma says to always turn on the lights when we use the bathroom. One day we could look in the pot and see a snake peeping. I draw three purple snakes that curl their heads around each other. They all could be coming out of the same body—it could be a three-headed snake. That is up for interpretation by the viewer. I decide to draw them each with one wing, so that if they want to take flight, the collection of the three of them could soar effortlessly.

We have lived in Missouri my entire life. I'm fourteen, and I don't know anything different. I dream of Connecticut waters, where Momma says I have rich family who lives there. She says they don't associate with us because we are poor. She says they spend their weekends on yachts, eating those gooey oysters and clams, sipping their high-dollar wine. She says there isn't enough oysters in the sea to fill the greed they have deep in their bellies. She says just because you don't attend Yale and own a million-dollar home, doesn't mean you don't have significance in this life. *It don't mean you don't mean something to somebody.* I look at her when

she says these things, yet I don't really see her. I am aware that she is speaking to some version of me that isn't really me. She isn't really speaking to me at all but to herself. After she has said all she needs to say about them, she moves on. She says it's time to clean the microwave or go pick the weeds out of the flowers in the front yard. My house is enough for me, I think. I know my Momma's flowers mean a lot to her. They seem to be a sort of obsessive impulse. She is always reminding herself come spring that she has to tend to them. The weeds. The bugs. The rabbits. It all has to be managed so that the beauty of the flowers can be seen. She says the flowers sing to her a song that nobody can hear but her. She says rich people don't hear the flowers sing cause they don't tend to anything. They don't get in the dirt. They don't touch a weed, she says. They don't hear their song.

Momma is making spaghetti in the kitchen. She laps at the boiling red sauce in the pan with the silicone spatula. She pulls the spatula out as she begins speaking and splatters the wall with sauce.

"Did you hear about that second breast screening you can get if you got extra dense breasts?" Momma asks me.

"No, Momma. That's incredible," I say.

"I'm gonna tell my doctor that I need that second scan. We got dense breasts, Jade," she says.

"How will you know what to call it?" I ask.

"I'll just say I need the dense breast scan. I'm tired of the medical system acting like they don't see something when it's there. Don't tell me your scans can't find cancer in dense breasts. Change your damn scans," Momma says.

I watch as she grabs both her breasts. She holds the large lumps like they are each a newborn baby, deserving of gentleness. As she turns back to the sauce on the stove, I look down at my budding breasts. I take hold of them and wonder if they are dense. I don't say anything to Momma because I don't want to scare her, but my breasts sure do feel dense. Once the sauce is ready she dumps it onto the pile of noodles. Time to eat, she says. I grab a bowl full of spaghetti and head to my corner on the roof. I begin to draw my bowl of spaghetti. The noodles loop around and swirl on my page. I enjoy the freedom I have drawing figures like food. It's simple and ordinary and doesn't seem to carry much weight. I shade the sauce onto the page with a red-colored pencil. I squint my eyes. I imagine the bowl as a large pool. There are little noodle people swimming in it. The noodles begin to swirl around on my page. There is blood in the bowl. The image stops moving. I open my eyes.

Once the sun gets close enough to the horizon, I try to write down all the colors I see. Blush. Burgundy. Orange. Purple. Red. Baby blue streaks. I begin to draw the sunset next to the bowl of spaghetti I drew. The colors of the sunset parallel the warm colors in the spaghetti bowl. They speak to each other. I lie down on my back and set my notebook on my stomach. Looking at the sky is always a comfort for me. I am happily alone when I am with the sky. I close my eyes and breathe. I begin to hear a hum. Typically, I hear all sorts of noises this time of night in our neighborhood: motorcycles, dogs barking to come inside for an evening snack, or kids squealing as they fall off the trampoline. This time, though, I hear something different. The sound is more subtle and soothing. It doesn't sound anything like the mechanical sounds of the industrial, suburban world. It is like a group of women are humming and cooing a baby to sleep. That's the sound I hear.

I crawl down the ladder, hoping to be able to hear the sound better. By the time I reach the bottom, the sound is gone. In the window, I see Momma stretched out on the couch asleep. It's dusk now and everything is being coated in evening silk. Since there are no streetlights in our neighborhood, I turn on the flashlight on my phone. I walk the perimeter of the house, searching for the sound. I walk over to the side of the house where the chicken coop is. The coop is a small square wire fence with a wood door. It's about three feet tall and entirely pointless, but I am always afraid to disturb the space. I imagine chickens in the space with me as I open the door and step into the coop. I imagine them pecking at the ground and poking their heads forward as they walk away from me. I imagine orange chickens with white spots and black chickens with streaks of blue feathers. I imagine their bodies as tiny balls of furry feathers growing into bodies of moving meat awaiting slaughter. Scanning my phone around the coop, I don't see or hear anything. I walk to the backyard. There isn't much in our yard besides the chicken coop. I scan the grass, hoping to see some movement. With no luck, I head back inside. The sound must have been a neighbor.

The next morning, I wake up and ask Momma about the sound.

"Have you ever been outside around sunset and heard the sound of cool, rushing water mixed with the sound of beautiful voices?"

"Yes," she says. "All the time."

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's the flowers out front. I'm telling you. They sing, Jade," she says.

"There is no way a flower can sing, Momma," I tell her.

“I tell you once, or I’ll tell you again. There are things we don’t know about this world we live in till we listen to what people are too ignorant to hear,” she says.

“What do you mean there’s more out there?” I ask.

“Jade, the flowers are women. They are women like you and me. They have voices and a body and that’s why I care for them. I water them because they are real,” she says.

“You’re saying the flowers are *actual women*?” I ask.

“Yep. Just ask them. Women trapped. Women raped. Women accused. Women lost. Women murdered. They are from everywhere, all over. And they are powerful, mighty women in those little flowers,” she says.

“What the hell?” I say.

“Jade, you don’t got to understand everything. Just go out there and to talk to them one day,” Momma says.

I begin to feel sick. I curl into my knees into the hair I’m sitting in and rock. I stare at the ground. I begin to wonder if I hear them now, chatting away about which bug will come and settle on their petals next. I wonder if they are able to reach and kill the bugs. Can the women defend themselves? No wonder Momma spends so much time out there with those flowers. I decide the only way to have any real peace of mind is to go talk to them for myself. I go and grab my notebook to carry with me as comfort. Before stepping outside, I look at the flowers through the window. I notice their colors: orange, pink, and soft rose. Their warm colors are comforting to look at. The daylilies stretch their petals out and up, seeming to be reaching toward the air for something. I wonder what they are thinking right now—do they think? They are mysterious to me. I grab the handle and open the door.

“Hello?” I say, stepping in front of the lilies.

“Are you guys real?” I ask.

I don’t hear anything. I sit down in front of the flowers and begin to look at them closely, trying to spot movement. I see one of the flowers with a stem that is damaged, causing it to lean to one side. I open up my notebook and begin to draw the flower. I begin to journal around my drawing. I hear a humming sound and look around me. Nothing is there. I continue to draw and hear more of the sound. This time, it sounds like several different voices all humming a variety of melodies, but it’s quiet enough it sounds like a whisper.

“We appreciate you taking time for us,” a voice says.

“What are you guys?” I ask.

“We are just women in flowers,” another voice says.

“Well, obviously. How did you get here?” I ask.

“We all lived and we all died. Don’t we all die, anyway? Some of us just come back, right? That’s what some people used to say. Maybe this is our form of paradise, yeah?” the voice says.

“Doesn’t look like paradise. You’re surrounded by weeds and my mother is constantly drenching the soil in water. You’re stuck where you are and you have nowhere to move around to. Seems terrible,” I say.

“We exist to sing, now,” the voice says.

Momma walks out of the house in her nightgown. The wind blows the thin material and rests upon her body like a sheet. She sits on the concrete step outside the door. She begins to hum.

“Momma, I heard them speak,” I say.

She winks at me and continues to hum, slowly swaying back and forth. She tells me she's anxious. I tell her I am, too. She says the electric bill is due this week and there isn't enough in her account to cover it. She says there's always something to be worrying about. I sit beside her and hold her knee. She looks at the daylilies and takes a deep breath.

"They are beautiful little creatures, aren't they?" she says.

"I just wonder who they were before," I say.

"You know, they could have been many different people. Perhaps they are all of us and none of us, containing a little bit about women that makes us stir and go crazy for life," she says. "Now you know why I spend so much time picking the weeds." I nod my head.

"Do you think we will turn to flowers one day?" I ask her.

"I don't know, Jade. Cause the system of society these days stirs around money and money has men written all over it. Just look at the faces on all our coins and dollar bills," she says.

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The following morning, Momma wakes up from bed with half a boob hanging from her nightgown and heavy bags under her eyes. She's obviously been crying.

"Daddy died," she says. "Time is hell," she says.

I run to her and wrap my arms around her. I cry into the dip between her head and her shoulder, and she weeps in mine. I know she knew he wouldn't last much longer at his age, but I think she figured he would hold on a few more years. I grab her hands in mine and squeeze them.

I look her in the eyes, as her face droops and her mouth bends, letting out more sobs.
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“I’m sorry you have to see me like this, baby,” she says. I hold her again in my arms.

Taking my notebook, I go outside and climb to the roof. This is the kind of day where sketching and journaling are soothing to me. I don’t have to think or speak or do anything. I don’t know why grief looks like people numbing themselves. Momma’s in her room sleeping. I’m on the roof. We aren’t grieving right, are we? How do you grieve? I draw the daylilies under me. I start talking to them. I tell them the stupid thing about death is that you feel like the person is still alive, but they aren’t. I tell the flowers you feel like they are alive, but their body doesn’t get to move around or float in the air we call existence, so they must not be alive. I ask the flowers if they are alive, if they can sing and talk. They don’t answer me. I tell the flowers they are selfish because they get to live. I shout at the flowers they aren’t real. I tell them they aren’t real women. I throw my notebook on the heap of orange and rose. I begin to sob. I’m lonely. Momma’s lonely. I didn’t know her dad—my grandpa—too well. We never saw him that much, but I am sad. I am sad Momma is sad. I tell myself sadness is the strongest emotion a human can feel. I tell myself and pretend the emotion envelops me in a gulp. I fold my head and arms over my legs and close my eyes. I begin to hear the hum.

Momma’s outside the next morning. I see her body bent over the flowers, pulling them from the ground. I see her eyes glazed over. I watch her arms move in repetitive motions as she scrapes the flowers from the dirt. I run outside.

“Momma, what are you doing? They are going to die!” I say. She looks at me. Her eyes are dark and deep, and I can’t find their familiar shine. Her skin sags and seems to sink into her cheeks. She digs her nails into the dirt again and bends her fingers into the soil, pulling dirt backward and forcing it under her nails. She screams and I run toward her.

“Let me die,” she says. “I want to join them.”

I watch her. She pulls the remaining stems from the ground and starts digging faster. A hole begins to form. She pulls and pulls at the dirt. Her hands are red and scraped, and blood is dripping towards her elbow. She looks up at me. I begin to sob. I try to tell her to stop. I try to look into her eyes and really look. She always wanted someone to really look at her. She stops digging and gasps. Suddenly, the hole has doubled in size without her realizing. She shouts, "No!" and screams my name. Before I can reach her, she falls into the hole. Dirt moves and covers the area where the hole was. The flowers, all heaped and destroyed in a nearby pile, begin to hum. Their song is soft. I grab their petals and clench them in my fists.

"Where did you put her?" I ask.

All I hear is a chorus of response: *Where did you put her? Where did you put her? Where did you put her?*