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Little Girl: A Memoir

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LITTLE GIRL: A MEMOIR

By
Abygail Thorpe

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of creative pieces that fall under the genre Autobiographical Creative Nonfiction. This collection includes original pieces of poetry, short stories, and other prose pieces. It reflects four years of study and experiences with creative writing under the instruction of many illustrious professors and writers at the University of Mississippi. I was introduced to the genre of creative nonfiction in the first year of my undergraduate education, and since that point I have been experimenting with ways in which I can synthesize many different forms of writing with that specific genre. This thesis combines elements of creative writing with nonfiction in order to outline the workings of what will, in future publications, become a fully developed memoir.

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Introduction

“No pertenezco a nada.” I don’t belong to anything.

I have struggled to grasp a sense of identity or self. The following thesis is a collection of creative pieces that capture this grappling of identity, especially through its destruction in my childhood years due to dislocation and other trauma, and the effort I made to rebuild it from what seemed like scratch.

Identity, I have learned, is a carefully constructed thing that allows groups of people to come together and see themselves as a congruous entity. In most cases, identity is related to race, ethnicity, and/or place of birth. I was born in North Dakota. Before I turned two years old, I moved from North Dakota to Mississippi. At five, I moved to South Carolina, and at age eight, I moved back to North Dakota. I spent one more year in North Dakota before I visited my mom in Illinois, then we drove from Illinois to Mississippi again where I would stay for one more year before moving back to North

Dakota at the age of eleven. I stayed two more years there before moving to Mead, Washington where I spent eighth through eleventh grade. I moved back to Gulfport, MS for my senior year of high school. And then, one year later, to the town of Oxford which, compared to Gulfport, may as well have been on the other side of the world with respect to the differences in life and type of people you would meet there. In my case, I truly did get a taste of the rest of the world in Oxford, as most of my friends were from other countries. I became involved in the international community through cultural organizations and work with the Intensive English Program. Each semester a new group of exchange students came from countries like Uruguay, Oman, Bahrain, Thailand, South Korea, Germany, Australia--only to name a few. And at the end of each semester, these students left and a new group recycled itself for the next term. No one stayed, but each individual offered a different, small piece of their world to me.

Although I had travelled the continental United States, I had never left the country until I was in college. I went to Costa Rica, which inspired a thirst for travel, and the following years I would take a tour of Brazil and Canada, as well as small trips to Peru and Uruguay. I would continue travelling to major cities in the USA, funded by summers dedicated to multiple part time jobs and semesters that balanced classes with student worker positions in both the Honors College and the Intensive English Program.

Because I have been so dislocated in my childhood, and put through emotional and mental trauma, I was unable to solidify any form of cultural identity. I have met people from every way of life in the United States, and in college, every other way of life in the world. I found my values align mostly with those of the people I have met from

Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and Uruguay. I am by no means suggesting that their cultures are identical, but there are aspects that span across each country, as well as a certain vibrancy that exists in the Spanish and Portuguese languages, in the music, in the food, and in the other customs that flavor the countries throughout Latin America in a way that didn't touch upon any other continent in the world. I am connected to this certain vibrancy and these values in a way that I have never experienced, and for that I chose to travel to these different countries, as well as to acquire the Spanish language that I have fallen in love with. I am grateful that these cultures have allowed for my admiration and participation in their customs, and in this way I have been able to create a solid image of my 'self'.

Part I. Little Girl

Outlaw

There was a woman, my dad's second wife, that my older sister and I dubbed the Oven, because for every year of marriage with my father she would produce another child. In nine years, the walls became covered with fingerprints and family photos that replaced my own baby pictures and those of my three older brothers and sister. The summer before my fifth grade year, the summer of Courts and White-Haired-Men-Asking-Me-Where-I-Wanted-To-Live, the three older ones decided to stay with our biological mom; suddenly, I was the only person with mutt-blood, blood like drops of water in oil, unable to mix with the rest of the ten-person family.

From the time my parents had divorced to my fifth grade year, it was not often that I visited my real mother. During that time, she married a pilot with a drinking problem, and they had one child. When we did see mom, my two older brothers and one older sister always talked about how much they wanted to leave dad's house. They told mom that dad's wife treated them like "slaves"; I never carefully noticed that unfair treatment, but when my mom asked, I agreed because I didn't want to make her upset. As a little girl, I was self-concerned and highly unobservant. I personally recall only a few things that made me feel sorry for the older three. Among them, I noticed things to be particularly difficult for my oldest brother, Jeffrey. He was not allowed to leave his room in the basement, but, curiously, the lights in the basement were never installed. Would he sit there in the dark? What would he do? And I noticed that my older sister, Lizzy, was always crying. My dad's wife said she was just crazy, and so I believed her. Then, during one summer with my mom at the pilot's house in Illinois, we found ourselves in her blue

Suburban, having begun a fifteen-hour drive south to my grandma's house in Mississippi. My mom had had enough of the stories and took the initiative that the courts would never allow—we were running away, she was “kidnapping” us. I tagged along because I didn't want to be left out. My dad was already on his way to pick us up and drive us back to where he was stationed then in North Dakota, but when he showed up to the Illinois house, the only person home was my mom's then-husband; my dad banged angrily on the front door of the house and called the police, who issued a warrant for my mom's arrest. Mom's pilot called to persuade her to come back, to tell her that she was in a lot of trouble, but she kept driving. “Mom, we are outlaws!” I yelled happily without knowing the meaning of what my brother told me to say. Everyone laughed, and I smiled because I made them happy.

We stayed in a cabin in Mississippi for a few weeks to hide; at the time, I thought it was a vacation. I missed the first month of fifth grade, but my mom was never arrested. We waited until everything calmed down, and a court date was set for the summer after I finished that school year. The adults picked me up like a doll and moved me from one place to the next—from my grandma's crowded home, to a small house that my mom eventually could afford on her own snuggled between a Catholic School and a ghetto, and then to some elementary school on Anniston Avenue. No one asked. Why ask a nine-year-old? So when the court date came, and I told my mom I wanted to move back with my dad (as the unrelenting daddy's girl that I always had been), she felt absolutely betrayed. After she had gone through so much to keep us, I realize now how much I must have crushed her. From what I remember she had called me a “Benjamin Franklin” or a

“Thomas Jefferson,” and it wasn’t until I was in an eighth grade history class and I learned about “Benedict Arnold” that I realized what she actually had meant, considering that, to her, going back to my dad was a betrayal. But I did go back to my dad, who was still living in North Dakota; I was the only one who did.

I began my sixth grade year at the Air Force base in North Dakota. After only one month, I began to see why Jeffrey, Elizabeth, and Brandon had left. For seven years, the severity proliferated, especially after the move from North Dakota to Washington and into the beginning of my high school years.

Mt. Spokane

In Washington, I stayed on the bed with a faded comforter and unwashed sheets that cradled a single stubby pillow. My neck bent on the cold metal of the top bunk, my body sank into the mattress; the mattress welcomed my frequent return by loosening its creaky springs under my pressure. The closest relationship I had with anything inside of that house I shared with this bed. The top bunk kept me far enough away from the putrid green carpet of the rest of the house, at least when I was permitted to be alone. It was worth it, though, as long as I got to go outside.

Because, outside, I could breathe that fresh, clean, prodigious evergreen air of Washington State. Through a film of orange and yellow, the fall leaves decorating the

mountainside campus transformed my thoughts and made the school grounds a home. Mt. Spokane High School sat at the very base of Mt. Spokane itself, nestled into the vast Peone Prairie and her collection of tall, wheat-colored grasses. I used to imagine being the wind that swept among the tips of those waist-high plants; I used to imagine the privilege of sharing secrets with the folding stems and tickling the feathery peaks of sweet Peone grass. The sun was especially close to the earth that time of year, which turned the grass white like pure light.

Every window of Mt. Spokane High School offered a different view of the landscape. On the east wing, you could see a small church nestled in the prairie grass with the mountains on the horizon; the windows facing west included taller prairie grass and the main road, East Mt. Spokane Park Drive, narrowing in the distance. That road was intersected by a railroad that led directly to my dad's house, about a fifteen-minute walk. So close. Outside, my little prairie school stood up with brick the warm color of autumn, and inside the walls were smooth beige. The building surrounded a grassy courtyard with several pines providing shade. Here, at the onset of my freshman year, the tradition of "Courtyard Football" began. The CYFBL (Courtyard Football League) played nearly every lunch period until graduation.

In every thinkable way, this school offered a sense of belonging. For a high school, there existed a pretty solid harmony between its niches. Block days offered an hour of down-time before classes started for students to float around the hallways; this time was supposed to be used to visit teachers and catch up on school work, but rarely did any student take advantage of that. I would begin the hour by visiting the courtyard,

mingle with the “football” players and play a little keep-away. Then, I would venture inside and sit with some kids playing guitar in the Commons; it was actually not uncommon to see students with their full bands- drum kit, orchestral bass and all- set up in the cafeteria, playing, while others gathered to dance. One time, I remember a group of boys dressed in overalls blowing on big empty jugs while one played the banjo. Strangers started a swing dance. I laughed and walked on, visiting teachers and sneaking some sweets from their cupboards. I walked with my best friend, Kelsey, who has the brightest, most beautiful orange hair on any human. I danced. I smiled. I waved to strangers, and they waved back. This was home, this was what home is supposed to feel like. Did anybody else feel as happy here as I did? Did anybody else realize how special this place was? ¹

The curving hallway was dotted with the rooms of my favorite teachers. Because I had joined the yearbook staff my sophomore year, I knew exactly who taught what in each classroom—I could probably even tell you which kids were in that classroom during the sixth period. I developed very close relationships with a handful of teachers, but only one ever knew about my situation, and that wasn’t until the beginning of my junior year. So these relationships were not obligatory—they arose purely out of my connection with the school.

Madame Klingback, my French teacher for two and a half years, found out about my secret only a month before I moved to Mississippi. I remember her eyes, stinging red

¹ Years later, I found out that my high school had a severe drug problem. The serious stuff, cocaine and heroin and prescription pills. And I wonder if anyone was, you know, actually *happy*.

and painfully sympathetic. She took no initiative. Her response was only to listen; I only needed someone to listen. What else could she have possibly done, anyway? After nearly seven years of seclusion and wear, being alone was no longer an option for me. Before, I had been too logical to commit suicide; however, within that last year, my psyche began to slip. Morbid thoughts and two failed attempts brought me to her classroom.

The Neighbor's Mother

Flash forward three years and I was sixteen, living in Mead, Washington. Three more years of coming home from school and reading another note taped to the front of the door or on the island countertop. One or two pages of chores with these directions so meticulous and explicit that in the time it took her to make the list she probably could have done all the chores herself, twice. Directions like:

“Wash the edges of the bathtub with the white table cloth from the towel cabinet, the one with two holes in it. If you use the blue one you have to do it again. If you use the red cup to wash out the cleaner, you have to do it again with the blue cup.

Sweep the entire kitchen and don't put the dirt into piles. Sweep the dirt immediately into the dustpan as you sweep around the kitchen. Sweep each corner twice. If the dogs walk into the kitchen, sweep again.”

Three more years of my compliance and one day, at sixteen, it got to me, and I got to the medicine cabinet about half-way through the note and I pulled out a bottle of the same

medicine I had used the first time. Except that time I had taken only twenty or so at once, and I stayed awake in my bed waiting for midnight when my dad would come home from work, thinking that then I would tell him what I had done. But as soon as he did get home, his wife started on about one thing or another, and he punched a hole by the picture frames in the wall, and I promised myself that whatever would happen at that point couldn't be reversed. I waited out what I thought was suicide and went to school the next morning.

I put the bottle into my pants and planned to use more than twenty, when my brother Thomas's voice came around the corner.

“Aby, what are you going to do with that?”

“Nothing, I have a headache.” True.

I thought I saw a prick of red in his eyes, and then he left, privileged and silent, out the side door to his friend's house in the neighborhood. I transferred the medicine bottle to the front pocket of my backpack and put it in my room before I started the chores. Distracted by the tactile operation of dish washing and floor sweeping, I allowed myself to put off thinking about the daunting task that sat like lead in the bottom of my backpack. True to myself, as well, I didn't want to go out and give my dad's wife a reason to say I was lazy and disobedient for not vacuuming the living room before I decided to take myself.²

² Dad's wife, upon finding my dead body: “God, Larry, she didn't even think to vacuum the carpet first? Who will clean up that stain? I told you, Larry. Sneaky and lazy.”

When I went outside to stomp down the overflow of garbage in the can, I saw the mother of Thomas' friends walking up our driveway. She was a kind Finnish woman with stringy blonde hair, and I often saw her outside playing soccer or street hockey with her two sons, Markus and Onas. She came by herself, and stopped in front of me as I stuck halfway out of the trashcan.

"Hi Mrs. Oden," I addressed her. "I think Thomas and Onas went to go play in the woods."

"I know where the boys are at," she told me.

I asked her if she wanted to talk to Thomas' mom, I would have to get her but she was probably sleeping or taking care of the baby. Then she said that she wanted to talk to me, and her voice cracked when she said it, which made me start to cry, too.

"Thomas told me that you had taken some medicine. He is very worried about you." She was free of judgement and equally helpless, I could see that in how my own pain found itself on her face, the reflection of a broken girl standing inside of a trashcan, contemplating her will to live. Mrs. Oden continued to explain how she couldn't tell me how I am supposed to feel and that the only thing she understood was that she couldn't understand, but that my brokenness bore a weight on her as if it had been that of one of her sons. And she was there, if I wanted to talk.

She helped me climb out of the trashcan and, with an arm around me, implored me to confide in her. Repeatedly I told her, "I'm fine. It's nothing. I promise," with a

smile that twitched at the edges the more I withheld the choke in my throat. Mrs. Oden promised me that I was welcome into her home for any reason and on any night that I might need it. She told me to come to her before I forced the handful of blue pills into my mouth. And so I thanked her and dipped back into the house.

Prompted by her insight and complete absence of judgement, I had slowly begun to develop a better understanding of the capacity of suicide, and it scared me. If a stranger could care so much, then I could wait and one day maybe someone closer to me could care even more. I missed already the affection like a Finnish woman's arm on my shoulders. I missed my real mom and I wanted more, so I went back to my room with the intention to rid myself of the pill bottle's burden, and when I looked up through the doorless threshold I saw my dad's wife pouring out the contents of my bag and my drawers, pulling the sheets off my bed.

"Where is it?" she'd asked. "Thomas told me what you're trying to do. Where are the pills, Aby?"

"I already put them back."

"You're a liar." She kept turning over blankets and pillows and drawers full of paper. "Where is it Aby? You know you can't be doing stuff like that. You're *crazy*. Who even thinks of doing something like that? In my house? What are you thinking?"

Every choke that I clenched in my throat in front of Mrs. Oden had relinquished, and I turned to the white wall of the bedroom and pounded my fists and hit my forehead

against it relentlessly, shouting, admitting, “Because you make me want to die! You make me want to kill myself, okay? *I want to kill myself*, don’t you understand? *You* are doing this to me, *you* are breaking me. Does it make you happy? Why do like like hurting me, Lisa, I am hurting so much and it is because of *you!* I want to kill myself. I want to die.” I maniacally repeated myself, the line, “I want to kill myself,” over and over like it was breath. I lost words in between maniac respirations and continued to beat my head against the wall until I became light-headed. Finally, I turned toward the threshold to see if she had anything to say, but she had already abandoned me with her mess. She had walked away while I admitted for the first time the darkness inside of me, and it felt like she’d cut me in half without bothering to look back on the work she had done, leaving the bloody mess for someone else to mop up.

That night, I begged my younger sister to let me borrow her iPod Touch so I could get on my school email. I needed someone to help me before I did something that I was afraid of. It wasn’t as if I didn’t trust Mrs. Oden with what was happening to me, but I did not want to make this an entire neighborhood affair. My dad’s wife had a tendency to go from door to door and tell the neighbors that I was on punishment, and that I was a bad kid who liked using swear words and wanted to hurt her in her sleep. If they saw me in the street (which they never would) they should call her immediately.

I couldn’t ask for help from my mom, either, because although she had filed multiple reports to DHS, no amount of mental or emotional abuse would be enough to take me out of that house. I wasn’t being hit or anything. Plus, it was in the court papers that my dad had full custody of me, an agreement that took many years of court and debt

to finally settle. So, my mom was essentially powerless. I needed someone from the school, someone who I had known for years and who knew me well enough that they wouldn't judge me for my situation, and that is when I thought of Madame Klingback. She had been my French teacher since Freshman year, and she was young and sweet and pregnant. She seemed genuinely interested in her students as well, and always spoke to us with respect. I didn't want to email her, though, because the situation necessitated something a little more urgent. I couldn't call her because I didn't have access to a cell phone (or her number, for that matter).

So I emailed my Aunt Angie, my father's sister who lived in Mississippi, and with whom I have always had a very close relationship. Angie is my aunt, my mother, my sister, all in one. I had not had the opportunity to contact her as often as I would have liked, but we shared a bond that withstood the months of time without talking. I emailed her and asked her to find my French teacher's phone number on the school website and to call her with a very specific message about how I needed someone to talk to and that I was scared that I would hurt myself. My aunt conceded without question, and to this day I feel very grateful to have had someone on my side at that time.

That next school day, during fourth block French class, Madame Klingback asked me to stay with her during her planning period, and I nodded my head in silent, knowing agreement.

Little Girl

My dad's wife wrote notes every day and hung them throughout the kitchen and hallways; they were scribbled on stained sheets of notebook paper, bending at the edges like a scroll, the blue and pink ink crosses smudging and spreading like watercolor. In her notes, she accused me of being "evil" or "sneaky" for any number of fabricated reasons, and justly included a list of chores that had to be completed before my bedtime at 7 o'clock. She called me dirty, hairy, gross, sloppy, and other things like pig, or devil, or *little girl*. But what could a little girl do when she wasn't allowed to shower or wash the dirt from her clothes, and every time her friends let her borrow a bottle of shampoo, she would find that its contents would be drained while she was at school, the empty bottle placed back in its spot at the bottom of her dirty underwear drawer? Makeup was taken and given back to her younger sisters for dress-up. Disposable razors and toothbrushes disappeared from where they were hidden beneath her little brother's play-pen.

Above all, though, her favorite thing to mention was abortion. According to my dad's wife, my mom didn't want to have another child after my older brother Brandon, so she would beat obsessively at her stomach, drink beer, and maniacally exercise herself to miscarriage. In this way, I was a burden that she had picked up and taken responsibility for from the kindness of her heart.

"Who is here for you when your own mother didn't want you?"

"You treat me this way when I'm the one who stepped in and took care of you?"

She never cursed, though. But her names stung as each letter was written with the whole word's intent: stupid girl, cry baby, trailer trash just like your mom. "A" was written at the top of the papers that she wrote to me, but never my actual name. "A", then a "dash", then scribbling instructions- as if these sheets were separate pieces to a How-To manuscript, a *How To Figure Out Why The Hell I Am Still Reading This* booklet. *How To Figure Out Why*. Oh, and "A" was a really awful person, too, it seemed. Verse one: disgusting, dirty, ugly, pig. Verse two: your mother did not want you. "A" awful accident, an already obvious account of abhorrent adolescence. "A" really needed to get her shit together. Amen.

The Mom Rule

"A" had rules. Rules that lasted for seven years and were written like scripture on the sheets dotting the walls of every bathroom and kitchen cupboard in the house. I remember the first time I was bombarded by that new wallpaper—I entered the foyer from the icy North Dakotan winter after a sixth grade school day, turning right into the hall that led to the kitchen. These were the first notes, and they would essentially set the precedent for every justification my dad's wife would come up with for every time I asked her why she was so horrible to me.

"You didn't call me mom today.

You didn't ask me before you took a bath.

When you asked to take a bath, you didn't address me as 'mom.'”

My favorite went something like: for every day you go without calling me “mom” at least three times, you will be punished. Nervous, confused, and intimidated, I failed most days to lunge over this hurdle, and the new rules and punishments developed accordingly. I started by writing lines for her, verses from the bible and things she had made up herself like: “My mom, Lisa, is the greatest mom in the world and I will never say anything mean about her”. I remember replacing “Lisa” with “Valarie” (my biological mother's name); the argument between my dad and his wife instigated by my rebellion lasted until four in the morning that night, and the next day I got new lines to write one thousand more times. It wasn't worth it.

Like the second hand of a clock, my sanity ticked methodically with every letter I scratched into paper. I wrote in a corner of the wood-floored room I shared with my younger sister. I hung Spongebob bed sheets from the ceiling to form a little rectangle of privacy and numbly wrote my lines, bobbing my head to “Pop Princess” as it hummed through the silver, 90's, boom box radio that my sister had covered with stickers from one of those 25 cent machines. I surrounded myself with posters of Edward Cullen, the main character from that vampire novel. As I wrote the monotonous lines, I suddenly became overwhelmed; I dropped the pen and notebook paper and ripped the posters from the wall. My fingers twitched violently. I pinched the edges of the posters and tore down the middle, over and over, Twilight confetti sprinkling my little oasis; then, I grabbed the book itself, *Twilight*, my favorite book, and proceeded to shred that into bits as well with

my little chainsaw fingers. Pieces littered the floor of my hidden cave, and I cried for my favorite book as I continued to write my lines.

Time passed, and rules, along with their punishments, became stricter. I gave up on finding opportunities to call her “mom” (truly it was irrelevant, whether I addressed her or not), so I faced repercussions in which the severity increased the more I withheld how much I was truly bothered by them.

“The food will from now on be marked with the names of the kids who are allowed to eat that certain food. If your name is not on the food, then you cannot eat it.”

My name was never on a piece of food; food I tried eating was taken and hidden in a safe in her room or in secret stashes around the house. Once by complete fluke while cleaning the kitchen, I found one of her hiding places in an old lunch box at the very back of a cabinet—filled with plastic bags of chips, cereal, and granola bars. At night I would sneak up the stairs, over creaking baby gates, and stuff a bag or two into my pants for later. Eventually, she caught on, and the lunch box disappeared.

“I will be the one to wash clothes; if I see you using the washing machine to wash your own clothes, I will throw the clothes away.”

I began washing everything in the bathroom sink, watching the clothes as they dripped dry in my room to make sure nobody took them. And for some unfathomable reason, every time I went to take a shower, she would turn the water heater off and unlock the bathroom door, without a word, leaving it wide open. I recall one specific

moment as a thirteen-year-old, when I braved the bathtub without consent. I jumped, water splashing onto the cover of my second copy of *Twilight* as I read it in the boiling water. She slammed the door open to reveal my naked humility to seven young and oblivious children.

“It is all your fault!” she screamed red-faced when she threw open the bathroom door. She had genuine, primal hatred in her eyes. So absurd was the situation that my mouth opened dumb, and I laughed.

“This is funny to you! Are you happy with what you have done! *You did this!*” And she charged forward into the long bathroom. I dropped *Twilight* into the water, and I cried for my dad and covered my body with shaking arms. I blinked, and he had grabbed her arms behind her back and began pulling her as she screamed like a child throwing a tantrum, kicking her short legs. “How dare you bring her into this!” he snarled, violently dragging her back into the hallway and up the flight of stairs. Pulling on a towel, I scurried to the stairs to watch the angry, primitive scene of a protective father plucking danger away from his young.

“Devil! Look at her, she is the child of the Devil, a Devil Child! She is *evil!*” This woman believed every word she croaked, and tears rolled down her face and mixed with the oil on her cheeks, reflecting the yellow light of the hallway in a way that looked like scales were growing on her cheeks. She convinced herself I was plotting to kill her and her children. I learned from the series of therapists she dragged me to (in an effort to diagnose my mental illness and have me put in some sort of home for disturbed young

minds) that she locked her doors while she slept to keep me from going into her room at night to murder her.

I chuckled.

The Eyes of My Mother

“Why didn’t you just write ‘Lisa’ instead of ‘Valarie’?” my dad would ask.

My younger brother would ask, “Why don’t you just call her mom? Why are you making things so hard for yourself? You could avoid all of this if you just did what she said.”

Okay... I still struggle with this idea. Because I thought I was doing everything she asked me to do, I thought I was so obedient. I had tried calling her “mom,” but suddenly three times a day wasn’t enough anymore. “Mom” wasn’t enough anymore, it turned into “I love you” and “Goodbye” before I left to school every morning. It turned into my emotional-teenage-goth phase meaning that I was a devil-worshipper who wanted to kill my dad’s wife and her children in her sleep. It turned into regular trips to a psychiatrist. It turned into an idea that I was brainwashed by my biological mother into thinking that my dad and his wife were bad people, but I’m telling you by God I never thought that. When I moved back from my mom’s after that year-long stint, I was ecstatic to be back with his family, but from the very first day they kept telling me, “Aby, you are

different. What did your mom tell you?” And every other day for the rest of my time there.

“Aby, you used to be such a sweet girl. Aby, you are so different.”

What did I do to make you think that? Did I grow up? Did I finally develop a real relationship with my mother that reminded you I didn't belong just to you and this family?

When they looked into my eyes, I bet they saw my mother there, and that's why they hated me.

Chit-Chatting

Dad spent all day at the Air Force base or all day in his bed, and only on *very* rare occasions did we speak to each other. Any communication between us would be interrupted with:

“Why are you over there *chit-chattin'* when you should be in here helpin' me with *our* kids?” *Chit-chattin'*. She's a snake. *Chit-chat* spit off her tongue like a curse. The dumb word stung, always, and then they fought.

Some nights, I would stand on a chair and press my ear against a vent in the ceiling to listen to them fight. When dad gets angry, he screams and punches drywall holes. Because talking to me meant trouble with his wife, these holes were the only way I knew he tried to stick up for me.

Dad has an anger that is like no other and a temper that flares at the drop of a pen. Once, in Washington, I was rolling on the living room floor with one of the babies while he sat at the computer filing taxes. Kimberly, who was one year old at the time, was laughing while I played with her, and dad turned around to ask me to, please, “shut her the fuck up”. Shocked by his tone, Kimberly started crying that sharp, baby cry. Dad flipped the chair, hand raised to strike, as he turned around and yelled, “Would you shut the *fuck* up!” I tucked Kimberly into my arms and ran to my room.

The stress of constant fighting contributed to his myriad of health problems, and his diabetes worsened to the point where he had to have daily insulin injections. Despite his deteriorating health, I know he never quit smoking. Often, I would open the coat closet to smell his uniform—jet fuel and cigarettes.

What a weak man.

Writing to Myself

And so I was alone in growing, alone in finding myself, alone in understanding society, the differences around me. Armed with only the perspective of this tortured adolescence, I managed somehow to develop a sense of right and wrong and a strong sense of tolerance that didn't exist in the house I had lived in. Once, I made post on a secret Facebook account, some silly thing about homosexuality being “OH-KAY” written by a thirteen year old girl learning about the world; I heard about these new, different things for the first time and struggled to develop these opinions on my own. One day, my dad's wife had found out about the account that I made while I lived with my mom, and

she pressured the account information out of me with some threat I can't even remember now. She read this post as well as other messages I had sent to my own mom, and she punished me by making me write the infamous lines from the Bible:

Leviticus 20:13 "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads."

Leviticus 18:22 "You shall not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination."

To be written five hundred times, each. I scribbled away the scripture quickly and blindly- *Why?* To get it over with- *Why?* So bad things would not happen to me- *What else could happen to you, Abygail?* Frustratingly obedient, I kept my mouth shut and wrote everything- her scripture, this god's scripture, and my own scripture in the form of angry, psycho words and feelings that were overdeveloped, stuck in such an underdeveloped, little girl mind. I learned a lot about god while being forced to write his word. I learned that he doesn't exist. And the only hands bleeding, I learned, were mine.

I wrote things for myself in order to relieve the holy irony of my situation. I wrote poems about what anger smells like, short stories about young girls who get pregnant and kill themselves, and the beginning of a novel about a high-school couple with special powers like mind reading and weather control. Such a little girl, I knew only about loathing my circumstances and loathing myself. *Why* was I so idle? Simmer, simmer, everything inside would overheat and spill out of my little girl fingers in jumbles of

confusing words and shady illustrations. Nothing made sense, in reality or on paper. Living was a headache, obedience the pill to satiate the throbbing pain. School was a mask I wore seven hours a day, only five days a week; no one saw through me, and I got to pretend Mt. Spokane was the only thing that existed. My escape balanced the pain, and my sanity teetered for seven years until my dad finally let me go.

Confessional

I have a confession to make. I may not be entirely innocent here, although I will qualify that by saying that what I am about to tell you happened after six years of unrelenting obedience on my part. And if I want to be an entirely honest and credible story teller here, that includes me telling the bad parts as well. So here you have it:

I scrubbed the inside of her toilet with her toothbrush.

And I was caught red-handed. Back half of the brush in hand, the mouth part scraping up slime in that dirty toilet water.

I am not proud of what I did. The idea came to my head one day when I was texting my mom (the cellphone was a birthday present from my mom for my sixteenth birthday, and when I came back to my dad's, I hid that thing like treasure, like a slave would hide his last piece of bread from the rest of his mates; I hid the charger in my pants, day in and day out, and no one knew a thing for at least six months), telling her about the things that my dad's wife had written about me that day. My mom gave me two options:

1. Fill her pillow with dog poop from the backyard, so that she has a surprise to rest her head on at night.
2. If she doesn't want to clean her own bathroom, then use her god-damned toothbrush to do it. Make sure you get the ring in the toilet good.

The fact that I chose the milder option says something about my character (or at least, it should). But, as I said, I was caught, and when I was caught I thanked the good lord that she was too distracted by her god-damned toothbrush that she didn't catch me putting my phone back into my pocket with the picture open to send to my mom. When she saw what I was doing, the look of shock on her face lasted just a flash of a moment, before she ran out of the room and into mine downstairs. I came stumbling down the stairs to find her dumping out my plastic container drawers, finding my own toothbrush, and rubbing the sides of the downstairs toilet with it.

Perhaps this is a bit unfair of me, because I am not allowing my dad or his wife to include their two cents about what happened up there in their house as well. Their side. A chance to offer the good things that they have done in an effort to balance out the bad, as I have done here by balancing the weakness of my character with some rebelliousness. If I knew that they might read this one day, I would leave some pages blank at the end of this volume for them to fill in.

Why the fuck didn't I lock the door?

Climax

“What is it like for the other kids after school? What do they do?” Madame Klingback asked as she walked me to the advisor’s office.

“They do... I don’t know, they do what they want to do. It isn’t the same for them, if that’s what you are wondering.” She didn’t say anything else, so I walked into Dr. Renner’s room.

My case was special in that I did not suffer from any physical or sexual abuse—only a very severe mental and emotional neglect. This fact limited the extent to which Madame was able to help me, but she did insist that I tell my advisor everything. I found out that even Dr. Renner was helpless, although he did entertain a phone call with an agent from the Department of Homeland Security; the agent informed me that there was nothing they could do but call my dad and ask him to feed me.

My specific suffering had very little significance.

Leaving his office, I scratched at my wrist while my eyes slid across the beige wall, searching for a distraction. I had time before the next bell to amble through the hall and try not to cry. My mom’s voice kept reminding me: “Only you are responsible for your happiness. I can’t help you, nobody can help you but *you*. Most trouble in life you will have to solve by yourself.”

The next week was the start of winter break, and I was absolutely dreading the uninterrupted alone time with dad’s wife. Every year, a miserable Christmas featured

screaming adults and crying children under the dinner table. The dying pine in the corner of the living room bent under the weight of hundreds of distastefully hand-painted ornaments, and babies chewed on the dried needles that fell to the floor. On Christmas day, the little ones took turns opening their gifts, which usually lasted for two or three hours. My dad would ask his wife why there wasn't anything for me, and then they would fight. The usual pattern of things.

Nobody can help you but you. The Friday after Christmas, I stole a handful of clear blue pills from my dad's medicine cabinet, and I swallowed them, one by one. I went to sleep early that night and did not recover until Monday. My room rocked back and forth when I opened my eyes, and when I moved, small electric tingles ran through my nerves. For two days, I stayed in my bed; I was too sedated to capture whether there were people interacting with me or not. But when I went upstairs for the first time, there were pages of notes waiting for me on the kitchen counter and taped to the cupboards. Notes from Friday, Saturday, and Sunday—more notes for being lazy, for being rude and ignoring her. Pages printed from yahoo answers about how parents have their children sent away to juvenile halls for such negligent behavior.

“And do not take these down from the cabinets. Keep them here so you can be reminded every time you walk in to do chores. You have two more years left in this house. Is this really the way you want it to be?”

I went back to bed.

I knew it would only be a matter of time until she sent my dad to scold me. Meanwhile, I wrote him a letter. “I am hungry, I am dirty, and I am sad. Dad, please help me.” I let him know that I wanted to hurt myself, so badly I wanted to hurt myself. “Your wife is awful, dad, please let me go.” I was twelve the last time I begged him to let me move back with mom; he swore that he would disappear and no one would see him again if I left. Surely, if he knew exactly how miserable I was, he would let me go.

He didn't. Not yet.

It was four in the morning when he came down to punish me; without a word, I handed him my letter. In less than a minute, he sank to his knees and cried. “I am such a bad father,” he kept repeating, as if my letter was that one sentence written over and over. *You are a bad father.* Honestly, his behavior was making me very uncomfortable; I had never watched him cry, and our relationship had already dissipated to the point where I could not feel any sympathy for him.

When he ran upstairs to yell at his wife, I ran to the vent in the ceiling to listen. *This is the one I've been waiting for.* Finally, this awful woman was put on trial. Every word she ever called me spat back at her from her own husband's mouth. “Disgusting, immature, crazy.”

Because she wasn't responding to my dad's accusations, I imagined her face was dumb and gaping, for once speechless.

Here's what happened the next day:

Shawn, another little brother of mine, shook my leg to wake me up that same morning around 8 o'clock. The entire family was waiting in the car to run an errand and I need to go with them, except that Thomas would stay home to watch some of the younger kids. I told him I was feeling too nauseated to go anywhere in a car, so he ran upstairs to tell his mom. About five minutes later, he was back.

“Mom said to bring a plastic bag and lay down in the back seat.”

“Shawn, please, I really do not feel good. Tell her I'm not going.”

He went back upstairs, and this time it was she that came back to the room. She climbed up the latter of the bunk bed and started grabbing at my ankles.

“Come on, get up,” she said, plastic bag in one hand. “You can't stay here, I seriously don't trust you to stay at home by yourself.”

“Thomas is here, just please, I'm telling you I can't go.”

“Come on, little girl. Get out of this bed.” She started pulling the bed sheets off of me. “The baby is sitting in the car by herself. She could die in there; I'm going to have to call the cops if you don't get out of this bed right now.” Once she had the sheets pulled to the side, she started pulling on my ankles again, and with a final burst of energy I let go of everything inside of me for the last time and started kicking my legs, lifting them so that they touched the ceiling and pounding them back onto the mattress, shaking the entire bed with me.

“Leave me alone, leave me alone!” I screamed. “Just for once in your entire life, just leave me alone!” Over and over and over.

“You’re crazy!” She was laughing at me! “You’re so crazy, you’re a crazy suicidal little freak! This is why I can’t leave you alone, stop kicking, oh my *god* you belong in a hospital.” She kept grabbing at my ankles, and I kept thrashing until the rocking motion pushed me off the bed and I fell from the top bunk to the floor in a bundle of sheets and tears and kicks. My cell phone, the one my mom had given me for my sixteenth birthday, slid out from the sheets beneath me. I had kept it hidden since I came back to this house at the beginning of the school year, and now it just sat there revealing itself to the world. Lisa stared at it like I had been smuggling poison or something.³ I grabbed for it, and grabbed my head, which had hit the floor on impact.

“Get in the car, Aby, before I call the cops.”

“No. *I’m* calling the cops.” I said, and I dialed 911 into that poisonous phone. I told them to come to my house, my stepmom was hurting me, and I was afraid I was going to hurt myself again. When the call was over, she stood there for a second or two, and walked out of the room without saying a word.

I sat on the bed waiting for them, and when they came they asked me a bunch of questions. They asked where my dad was at, and if I knew his work information, and I told them they would have to ask his wife because I had no idea. My dad didn’t have a

³ My dad’s wife didn’t let me dad use a cellphone because the radio waves that they emitted caused brain cancer. She put the beds of my younger siblings in the middle of their rooms, as far away from the electrical outlets as possible, because they had the same effect.

cellphone. Eventually, a firefighter walked me upstairs and through the front door, passing dad's wife and three other police officers sitting at the kitchen table. They took me to the hospital in an ambulance.

I stayed in a white room on one of those white beds. At first a nurse came in, and I mistook him for someone who could do something about my situation. I started telling him everything that happened and how I needed to leave that house. He saw the scabbed lines on my wrist from where I would scratch myself at night, and he asked me about them. Later, an older fat man with white hair and a clipboard walked in. He asked me if I understood that calling the cops and being in the hospital meant that it had to be pretty severe. I couldn't just call the cops because of one fight. I explained to him the situation about my stepmom, and this old man didn't even try to hide the skepticism in his eyes.

“So, you called the police because of a fight? Because you didn't want to go to the store?” Could this guy be any more transparent? Wasn't he supposed to be helping me?

Hours later, my dad finally showed up in the hospital room. I was eating chicken nuggets and pudding that the nurse had brought in to me. My dad was crying again. He was followed by the old man with the clipboard, who actually asked my dad if he could *verify* the situation at home. My dad assured him that everything I had said was true, and that his wife had some sort of mental problems, and that he had called my mom on the way to the hospital to let her know that I was going to move in with her as soon as possible. When we left the hospital, he took me back to his work with him. He never

actually apologized, he just asked what happened and told me that I wouldn't have to stay anymore, as much as it would hurt him.

He meant it.

That night he took me to the house to pack my bags, and I called my friend Kelsey to come pick me up. Her family had always told me that I could stay with them if I needed to. That night, I would be at her house. I would wake up the next morning and I wouldn't have to worry about Lisa. And I would not have to read her note, telling me how pathetic I was for crying to my daddy every time someone hurt my feelings. I will never hear again:

“Little Girl, you hate it when I call you that, don't you? *Little Girl*, but that is what you are, a dumb little girl.”

Kelsey's parents took me into their home for the last month of the semester. When I moved in just before the New Year, their Christmas tree was still standing in the dining room. The first thing I saw when I entered the front door—deep green pine needles, seven feet high, glittering with silver and gold ornaments. There was one gift left underneath; it was for me.

Resolution

I am angry with myself, to the core so angry, because as a young woman I would have done so many things differently. Often, I imagine circumstances that would instigate a raw confrontation between the two of us, where I am in her face describing to her every injustice she put me through as an adolescent. *Do you know how wrong you are, do you have any idea how miserable of a person you are? Did you know that I never knew what you were doing was wrong; did you know I thought I deserved it?* I know you are bad... but were you ever *wrong*? I still don't understand. All I know is that I am pretty messed up for it. As stubborn as I was then about remaining quiet and alone, I can imagine now with my stubborn young adult mind that I would not have let this woman get away with anything she had ever done. As a little girl, though, I knew obedience was the only way to prove to myself that I was nothing like her bitter scripture regarding me. If I know inside that I am good, if I can act on my goodness, then that woman can never be right about me.

Part II.

The Funeral

I Didn't Hear You Say It

Mom, I remember you
standing in the threshold of the forest-home in Vancleave,
the threshold where my older brother sat
beside your suitcases,
his mouth open, crying for you to stay.

Was he asking you to stay?
Was I asking for you to boil Ramen Noodles?
Or spraying my sandals with hair spray?
Was I doing any of the things from the stories
you told me of this time when I was only three,
like staring intently, alone at a board of Monopoly,
not playing but peering into the board's open face
until hours later I looked up and screamed,
"I won! I won!?"?

I saw you
with one hand on the doorknob,
first son at your feet,
and the wild blond curls you kept in your twenties.

He cried not for us, instead, after you,
and perhaps I was watching *Bear and the Big Blue House*
from a fat black box of a television,
or perhaps I was watching you, like an omniscient fish-eye,
semi-remembering the moment
so that I could try to write about it in my twenties.

I don't remember, but
everyone else seems to remember
(I wonder if you remember, mom, tell me the truth, do you remember?)
how when dad asked you
What about the kids?
you replied:
I do have other eggs.

Mrs.

She was young, in her late twenties, but had the face of a stern, middle-aged woman. Like the face of the woman my dad married a decade ago, but with a smaller mouth and nicer eyes. She was at least a foot taller, though, even without her clacking heels. She was tall like a mountain, or a statue that you build into the face of a mountain, so when she put her hands on your shoulders you shrank like she was pushing you into the ground. When she put her hands on your shoulders, you were reminded of being pushed off the top bunk and kicked around until you got up to take out the garbage or mow the lawn. You were reminded of the time when you glued yourself to a corner in your room to read *This Lullaby*, and your dad's wife came to pour the dirty water of her daughter's bath over your head. You seeped into the corner, under your pale blue comforter, like an ant rushing back into the sand of its home after the terror of a child's kick. Disappeared.

At the surface, this woman's eyes relayed an idea that she wanted to help you, but her sincerity was superficial and you could see beneath it. She was young, and she was new. Several times students had called her a bitch behind her back, but she heard them and had become harder for it. You could see in her eyes that she wanted to establish a reputation, in a way; she wanted to be seen as a kind authority, the type which students go to when they are having problems at home with the expectation that she could make a difference. The truth was that she couldn't do shit for you, so she was basing her authority on your fear and vulnerability, and the arms which she opened for you didn't actually have substance. She may as well just have been air, or a ghost, or some other

immaterial thing because as soon as you let go of yourself for the trust that this other person would have a stern, loving hold on you, you had already started falling.

Snow's Still Breath

Snow's still breath
against a girl's small hands.

She stands on top of months of winter settled
into a frozen hill

pressed into the edge of grove,
too cold for cows to graze, now.

The air, hollow and slow,
like snow's still breath.

As she cracks a shovel into the pile of old ice,
breaking it into pieces so it can melt faster,
she slips and her head bounces.

A loose piece of gravelly ice is dislodged.
Death of autumn left an ink of dead leaves
beneath its surface--
an apparition of the fall.

On a Railroad at Midnight

“Dad.” She speaks, mild and monotonous, but with a desperate explosion in her chest. *Please listen to me.*

He changes the television channel.

“Dad.” Sincere, scared cracking of her throat. *Dad.*

Iron Chef America murmurs something about chili peppers and chocolate.

“Dad.”

...

“Fuck *OFF.*” Like a thunderstorm.

He throws the remote, and it crashes like a punch against the wall. Her feet peel off the sticky floor and quickly pad down the stairs, passing a hole in the wall freshly spackled with paste. Her cold, metal bunk-bed creaks like an old fence when she climbs to the top. She clutches the wet pillow and rocks back and forth against the crunch of her plastic bed sheets.

There is a room in the basement of a house somewhere in eastern Washington State, forty-five minutes south from the border of Canada and west from the border of Idaho. This room is where our girl slept on her crickety bunk-bed, and she shared the space with three sisters. She is the fourth oldest of twelve—five girls and seven boys. Jennifer, Felicia, and Kimberly are the youngest three girls whom she affectionately referred to as her “little peaches”, on account of their round cheeks that turned an orangey-pink whenever they cried too hard or laugh too much.

The girl who lives in this room with her three sisters is thin like a starved child, and with her large black curls, she becomes a perfect treetop silhouette. Often she loses herself in clouds moving like lines of poetry across the sky and through the prodigious evergreens. Outside—she breathes the fresh, clean air of Washington State. Nestled into the vast Peone Prairie and its collection of tall, wheat-collared grasses, she imagines being the wind that sweeps among the tips of those waist-high plants. She imagines the privilege of sharing secrets with their folding stems and tickling the feathery peaks of sweet Peone grass. Crystal clear beneath the sun, the grass becomes as white as pure light. The clouds, the grass, the air, though, stand in dark contrast to the exhaustive gloom lingering inside of her house. When she's inside, she stays on her bed with a faded comforter and unwashed sheets. Bending her neck on the cold metal of the top bunk, her body sinks into the mattress. She lies, she thinks, and every so often she's animated by self-defense against an abusive father and stepmother.

She is afraid.

It is midnight, and she lies alone in her bed. Closed, tangled in her un-brushed curls. She treats her mind as a companion, and converses silently with herself.

Can you sleep?

No. Can you?

Nah.

I'm sorry.

Shut up. Tell me about school.

I held Miguel's hand today. He makes me crazy.

Tell me about the future.

Miguel wants to marry me. I see him standing next to a rocking chair where I am sitting, holding our brown baby. Do you think we will be happy?

I think.

Kimberly begins to cry, and the girl returns to reality. There is a baby monitor in the corner of the room, and if ever a noise is made the Dad comes storming into the bedroom with a belt as angry as his bright red eyes.

“Baby,” she whispers as quietly as she possibly can, “you stop now. Come up here to me.”

Kimberly wobbles with her short limbs up the ladder and presses herself into the girl's side. Wet curls are pressed against Kimberly's cheeks like flowers in a book, and her tears seep through the girl's shirt when she leans her ear into her chest, searching for a heartbeat. The two drift to sleep alone in the bed.

The girl has her nose pressed against the net of the playpen in the living room, and Felicia's hand pushes on the other side. Felicia tries to grab her nose but her fingers are left scratching at the mesh between them. The net leaves a honeycomb-patterned print against her face and the baby's palm. She feigns an “Ow-eee!” and Felicia giggles her delightful baby laugh. The dad sits at the computer, adjacent to the playpen, filing taxes and grunting loudly. She brings the baby out of her cage and places her on the carpet where she begins to practice with her how to walk. Felicia steps one-two-three wobbly

steps and is rewarded with an Eskimo-kiss on her dumpling cheeks—she giggles again sweet, delicious laughter. The dad turns around and orders the girl, “Shut her the hell up”. Shocked by his tone, Felicia turns down her eyes and bubbles her lips and cries that sharp, baby cry that wakes parents up in the middle of the night. The dad flips the chair, hand raised to strike, as he turns around and yells, “Would you shut the fuck up!” She tucks Felicia into her arms and fiercely slits her eyes at the dad before racing toward the stairs and tripping down the first step. Halfway down the staircase, she lands backwards on her shoulders and slides the rest of the way down. She is silent as a light going out.

On a normal day, the dad punches with hurricane strength and rages like a tornado through the halls, ripping picture frames from their hangers and smashing through drywall. One time, his fist hit a stud behind the wall and three of his knuckles crunched on impact—he did not cry out in pain. Although unable to make a fist now, his fat fingers still burn across the cheeks of his children, leaving a mark as red as the blood stain he keeps on the wall.

His anger is a handicap. A violent childhood hindered the development of his mental capacity, and the combination of ignorance and permanent scarring leads the dad to express his inherited violence onto the children. Simply put, he is a dumb and haunted man. The wife shares his malignance, as well as severe depression and a bipolar disorder. Having children is the wife’s way of distracting herself—it is no coincidence that as soon as the baby begins to grow teeth, she is pregnant again. She lies on the couch for eighteen

hours of the day watching reality television and breast-feeding, a sedentary baby machine.

Although they have no business reproducing, together they raise these twelve children in their eleven years of twisted marriage.

During the night after the dad's tantrum, the girl sits up in the corner of her bed, back and shoulders tender as a bruised peach. Her mind is restless as prairie wind before a storm, but she is trapped in this container of a room. She thinks to herself:

Think of love.

That is not love.

Think of university.

I'd have to leave here first.

Think of having babies...

I don't want to see another baby cry.

She does not have the patience to dream tonight, she is entirely too confined. She isn't thinking about the dad or her sisters when she jumps from the creaking bed and snatches the monitor from the wall, ripping its wire like a broken string. The ceiling of the basement extends about a foot above ground, and in this space above her bureau rests a small, one-frame window; she stands on the bureau and pushes the screen out, not without trouble. Because she is so small, she fits easily through the window, but her thin elbows are buckling under the weight of her tiny body. From the outside, it looks as if she is crawling out from under the house itself, like some sort of bug or small animal. The

wet grass welcomes her when she frees herself from the window—she smells the earth, the air, drinks the open night like water. The moon is absent from between the stars. She heads left down the empty street, padding down the cold black asphalt.

A fence separates the end of the cul-de-sac and small, dirt pasture of cows—she lifts herself over it. As her bare toes sink into the wet earth on the other side, she is reminded of when she was a toddler playing in the dirt with a garden hose, how she would dig a hole and fill it with mud and stand on top until her legs disappeared halfway into the mixture. She breathes deeply the sky—rich, thick, dark. Her tread into the pasture at first is slow, but her pace quickens with each sip of honey air until suddenly she is sprinting into a forest on the edge of the pasture. She knows she will find a railroad splitting through the thick pine trees of the Washington forest.

She stomps through the pine needles and dirt trying to slow herself down. She knows that in front of her rests the railroad, but she is nearly blind in the pitch of night. Slowly progressing, her bare toe bumps the cold metal of the rail on the ground. Bending her knees, she reaches for the top of the cold metal—familiar. *From which direction will this train come to take me away?* She steps over the rail and begins walking along the gravel and wooden strips. She is wandering as if she has never been outside before, never seen the night or its screaming stars, never touched the ground with her feet.

Hours pass like this, and the brisk air makes bright red her nose and cheeks. She waits for the carrier to come. Lying down across the beams, she listens for the rumbling. She wonders whether she will jump up when she hears it coming, readying herself to grab a ladder and be pulled into anywhere by the train. *I am not strong enough.* She wonders if

she will stay on her bruised back between the tracks, readying herself to be grabbed by the train and pulled into nowhere. Eventually, the sun breaks and spills its yellow between mist and trees. She opens her eyes.

She stands up and walks back home.

The Funeral

“Abygail.” The thumping of my heart behind my ears stopped immediately when I heard my name. I had taken only one step through the church doors.

Rimmed with the red and wet of mourning, the eyes of an unrecognizable man caught onto mine and held me still, an already wary bird, pre-flight. Although cautious, I wrapped my right hand around his and pressed my left sorrowfully against the stiff, black fabric on his shoulder. My own eyes turned down, *I'm so sorry for your loss*, and my head made a slight tilt, *But who are you, again?*

“I recognize you from the pictures hanging in Marian’s new house! I’m Nathan.”

Nathan, the son of the deceased. “Of course, I remember you, it has been so many years!”

“I appreciate the time you have spent to come all the way over here.” The sweet crease of his eyes swore that he was being genuine, and my heart synched from the mourning stranger’s acceptance. It had been years, and I did not know I would be welcome here after everything that had happened. “Your brother and sister are over there.”

The thumping returned to my ears. I squeezed his shoulder one last time and turned, stepping hesitantly into a church of strangers. I sifted through fake plants and shades of black for two familiar faces that I had not seen in years. Dotted throughout the large room, unfamiliar men and women stood in their mourning suits and old chunky jewelry, whispering stories to each other. Dark walls loomed over mahogany wood floors, and the people on the inside shuffled past untouched trays of sweets. The entire

back of the foyer was a window; it was noon, and the sun pressed itself against the glass, searching for a crack to slip through, but the room pressed back with dreary strength and won.

I became fixed on a table in the corner of the room beneath the window where two straight-faced teenagers, mourning the death of their grandfather, sat staring at their laps.

Megan's hair grew thick and stringy, at least five inches since last I had seen her. With arms and legs as thin as bone, she seemed swallowed under her black wool dress. Her face was a defeated shadow of what she was four years ago when I left, but in it I still saw that she looked exactly like her mother—that same wide-set mouth. Thomas, one year older than Megan and a year younger than I, looked to have the same height that I remembered, as well as the same amount of acne on his olive cheeks. But his face had thinned, the one sure sign that he was turning into a man, and his hair-line receded slightly on either side of his familiar cowlick. Physically, yes, they had aged; but it was the set of their face and the shadow cast from their pursed eyebrows that revealed to me their newfound maturity and awareness. Before I could think not to smile, I did. I paced toward the oblivious pair, excited, nervous, eyes pricking at the edges, a balloon inflating beneath my chest, the thumping behind my ears turning to ringing and the muffling of depressed conversation turning to silence--

“Aby!” the widow's fragile hands grasped my elbows, and I caught myself before tripping over my long black skirt.

“Marian! I am so, so sorry. I can’t believe how long it’s been since I’ve seen you,” I whispered as I hugged her, the soft midnight velvet of her sweater rubbing against my cheek.

“Thank you so much for coming. Megan told me she sent you a message. I’m so glad you could make it all the way from Gulfport.” She kept her eyes wide, drying tears before anymore dared to slip. I saw one fall into the crease around her wide mouth.

“Of course, I would come.” To see my brother and sister.

She scanned the length of my body, from the black bows at the tips of my flats to the black fabric that lined up beneath the sharps of my collar bone. “This dress is so pretty. You are such a beautiful young woman.” She fluffed my hair and hugged me once more as I thanked her. Her compliment was genuine, yet it came from somewhere far away, as if she was someone else, somewhere else, looking at a different version of me who deserved to hear that from her a long time ago.

With one last cautious hug from the grandmother of my younger siblings, I continued my nervous trek to the corner of the room, feet becoming number with each step. Thomas saw me first and gestured with his hand under Megan’s face, urging her to look up from her lap. By this time, I had reached the table. With a gasp, she shot up and threw her arms around me, and I rocked her back and forth.

“You have no idea how much I missed you, you have absolutely no idea,” I promised them. “How are you guys?”

“Well.” She looked at me like I was missing something. “Not good.”

Right. But she did not let go.

I sat rigidly in the first row, the “family” row, of chairs directly across from the closed coffin and preacher. I was here to support my sister at her grandfather’s funeral.

As the middle-aged children of the lost father stood behind the podium, grasping hands and tearing through their individual speeches, I lost my eyes in the changing photographs on the projection screen to the left. I saw older pictures documenting the progression of the young couple, the growth of their family, their children. Then a newer picture: Thomas as a two year-old, standing on the shoulders of his recently deceased grandfather. I was surprised to see myself, next. I saw my dad’s new family, sitting oldest to youngest on the couch of a temporary living facility on the air force base in North Dakota, the same air force base in which I was born. I was first on the edge of the couch, purple backpack at my feet in anticipation of my first day of middle school. A few pictures passed featuring children, families, cousins and the like. And soon there’s me again, thirteen years old, in the backyard of Nene’s and Poppop’s new-at-the-time house, sitting between the old couple and trying to cover my face with the sleeves of my sweater. Hair in a tight ponytail, tangling, unbrushed curls caught in the wind like tufts of dark cobweb. The next picture, versions of my dad and me over a decade in the past. In the background, his soon-to-be wife and her parents, Marian and Van, preparing a meal.

I stiffened.

My dad’s face was young and long and turned up in laughter while my arms were spread wide in front of him. My small fingers squeezed his thumbs—*Daddy, I love*

you thiiiis much! We share the same thin-lipped grin. Like looking into a mirror, we smile and the right side of our top lips pulls up, our eyes crease into slits. I remember how he used to hold me like a treasure, his little clone with button eyes and bouncy curls. His last baby girl for a very long time, and the only one that I used to think that he ever really wanted. I was four and didn't know what divorce meant and didn't have the capacity to understand that a few months earlier when mom had slammed the door in my older brother's face late that one night I would not see her again for a very long time.

Before I could recover, the screen changed.

The next transition revealed a recent family portrait—Dad, Wife, Thomas, Megan, Shawn, Brian, Alex, Kimberly, Felicia, Jennifer. Dad's eyes glossed and his mouth thinned like a flat-line across his face. His hair grayed severely and he had gained at least a hundred pounds. The family I thought had abandoned me now sat directly across from me with a transparent façade of pleasantries. For three years, I had not heard from or seen even a single picture of my dad, his wife, or their children.

At this point in the funeral, as I sat in the stiff chair next to my crying sister, the past unraveled like relentless chimney smoke. I choked on repressed memories of abuse, neglect, starvation, and the bottles of blue and white pills I choked on to end it all. Ten feet ahead sat a coffin, and I imagined first myself on the inside. I thought, *Well isn't that morbid and more than a little cliché. More than a little overdue.*

Then, I imagined my father. *Who would go to Dad's funeral?* I imagined myself like the children standing right now behind the church's podium, except my hands were alone at my sides, open and gaping like an unhealed wound. Frantically: *Where is my*

older brother? Where are my sisters, my mom, my dead grandparents, where are they?

The first row was empty, no one in the back. I cried for my father to these empty rows of funeral pews, and swore through wasted tears that he was a *good* man when I remembered him; the dark reality reciprocated my choking convictions. My head was hollow except for questions and pleadings bouncing from one side to the other. *The dark is guilty, my dad is guilty, his wife is guilty. Someone help me, where is god?* I opened my wet eyes now to see the rows of family members being released first to go back into the recession hall.

“Come on,” Megan whispered. “That means you, too.”

Part III.

La casa amarilla

Identity and the Soul

In my experience, when a writer is sad, she is too busy writing to be happy. When the writer is happy, she is too busy being happy to write. So when I would write, I would write about stale clothes and dirty bed sheets. How the smell was hard on the nose, like breathing dust, the layers of old perfume smelling like an old, abandoned church. You smell old, wearing these clothes. Old in the way that marked me used up yet somehow inexperienced.

But I have my own house now, just off the main road toward downtown. It's cute in the way that handmade things are cute, the way a birdhouse made by a five-year-old is cute and with the same uneven structure. I have my own own laundry room. I don't smell like stale clothes, among other drastic improvements, but I do not know how to write about that. The process of finding words for the things that I have is lengthy and difficult after offering pages on what I didn't have. How incredibly annoying is that.

After I moved to Mississippi, I was busy writing again, and the writing kept me occupied for the next two years until my first semester of college made me forget about it and I can say that at that point I was in fact happy. For every normal reason a fresh college student should be happy: my roommate, a Russian exchange student, became my best friend; I went to football games and tailgated under the Brazilian tent; I joined a Salsa club, a cooking club, I went to a bar for the first time in my life. I saw a sign that advertised a two-week trip to Costa Rica for credit in a Nature Writing Course at the university, and, knowing that I had no idea how I would pay for it, I emailed the professor and ordered my passport within the month. In this class, I learned that nature is

a mandala of different life forms, and writing about anything in life is like writing about nature itself, especially the way in which that environment shapes who I became. And it did. I am what I was raised to be: cautious, nervous, hopeful. A real dreamer. I had to squeeze all that sad writing out of me before I could talk about the things that I have now.

Still, there are times when I feel as though my recovery began only yesterday, and other times when it feels like I can move on from everything. In this way, the entire process proves to be a tricky one. One that overwhelms in periodic waves, often without warning, often without control. It is powerfully destructive and ticks at every foundation I have spent the last five years constructing. It's worn down important relationships in my life, and threatens the vitality of new ones. Lately, I've been so stuck in my own poisonous head that I convince myself that I don't love anyone. And it breaks my heart.

Recovery is in the head, and not the heart, and sometimes decisions about love need to be made with the head, and this is how you progress. When I moved to my mom's house in Mississippi in January of 2013, I immediately started at a new high school to complete my junior year. For a month I was shy, I tiptoed around my stepdad, and I struggled making friends, but for the most part I felt calm. When I walked into my new room, my mom asked me how I felt to be home, and I told her: "Relaxed, for the first time."

My mom saw it in me, after this first month, in my sensitive temper and self-harming behaviors. I would get mad at anything, and when my mom told me she saw a lot of my dad in me, I would scream at her and call her "Lisa". I would run up to my room and punch my thighs and pound my fists on the metal posts of my bed. I didn't

sleep at night. In place of friends, I got a boyfriend who, after eight months, told me he didn't love me anymore because my depression turned me into someone he didn't want to be with. For the year after that, he kept reminding me that he didn't care about me while I would keep coming back and telling myself he really did. My temper, which would tick off at any minor thing in the first several months I spent in Mississippi, levelled out and in place of fits of anger I experienced panic and anxiety attacks on a weekly basis.

But it all came in waves. Freshman year of college was fine; I made great friends and created my own wonderful experiences. The beginning of sophomore year was better. And then it came: the wave. Every day I had one or two anxiety attacks. My breath would become short from the simplest things, and I was entirely overwhelmed. Then it disappeared for a few months and came again, and that pattern followed.

The only reason I know I am making progress is because the time in between the fits has become longer and longer, the waves farther apart. My workload has become larger and the amount of pressure I can take has increased, and I no longer experience anxiety attacks on a daily basis during school times. Once or twice a month, maybe, and that's how I know I am making progress.

The thing that has contributed most to my growth is travel. When I left my dad's house, I didn't know who I was as an individual, so I had an entirely open foundation on which to grow. Because of this, though, I have a conflicted sense of identity. I have been displaced more times than I can count, and it has left me without a home. Culture is largely connected to location, and because I have been exposed to so many different locations, it is fair for me to say that my identity has been influenced by many different

cultures. My sense of self is malleable, incredibly sensitive to those around me because it has never been given the time to solidify. To grow roots. Identity is the thing within the soul that responds to the culture around it; beyond cultural influence, I would argue that the foundation of one's cultural identity adapts around that person's personal inherent values to create a mixture that results in the "self". I am me, a being adapting my surroundings to my soul. My personal reflections and feelings, my reactions to the things around me, those are the constructions of the soul. I choose to represent my soul through my writing, which sharpens its definition. Here for the world is my soul on paper.

The Bone Forest

The signs for the bathroom designated Woman/Mujer—this was the first thing I noticed, and I could have still been in that god-forsaken Houston Airport. Restaurants, baggage, souvenir stores were all the same, as if I had been knocked out on a plane, woken up, and herded again into the same maze of merchandise to wait another fourteen hours. Leaving there in a white tourist van, my eyes toured the city of San José the same way they would in any North American city: Memphis, Oxford, Shreveport. Because I had been expecting copious greenery and dirt roads with wooden carts or tiny houses where vendors sold handmade products (I had read this in a book once about how Mexico looked just beyond the border in Tijuana), I was surprised to see the same asphalt roads and concrete bridges as in any developed city in the US. Sleep-deprived and groggy, I could not comprehend the idea that I had left the USA. However, my tired eyes found discrepancies that made me wonder whether I was dreaming, and in my dream I had altered the genuine architecture of each detail. For instance, the yellow lines dotting the road were crooked, as if they had been painted by hand. The graffiti on the bridges were painted in Spanish.

I fell asleep—for how long, I do not know. The ride was supposed to last three or four hours.

But when the staggered jumping of the van woke me up, I saw through the window the landscape of an angry bone forest—finally foreign, entirely unexpected. The star lighting of San José that once decorated the horizon disappeared completely and a

rich darkness took its place. Driving up the gravel mountain, it was as if only the van existed and made real the things that its headlights uncovered in the darkness. On one side of our path was a white rock wall, the top of which I could not see. On the other side was a precipice giving way to a bottomless fall. The trees—the only objects between the van and the edge of the mountains—looked like hands reaching from the cliff's edge. The angry wind whipped at the trees and the trees whipped at the van as it jumped over rocks and through potholes. God, it was beautiful—this ominous trek into the bone forest. The angry wind and dust did not inspire fear—only incredible, genuine awe.

I did not let myself fall back to sleep.

La casa amarilla de Costa Rica

Yellow dances in the house of a woman
plump like the dough we fold in our hands.

A setting sun bends over the mountains
and reaches for us through her window.

A mahogany table is warm beneath the air
that's stained by yellow,
dusted with corn flour,
sweetened like honey,
altogether catching the red in the curls
worn loose on my shoulders,
bent over the table.

The arepas dough absorbs sun rays
and in them I taste la dulzura de la luz.

The dough woman smiles at me,
sun shining through her teeth.

Her Spanish sounds like the wind between autumn leaves,
like a natural blend with the birds

that silences my own coarse tongue.

Instead, we share laughter in this small yellow kitchen
and speak only with this delicious sound.

Vignettes from Costa Rica

The First Time I Danced Merengue

“Que buenas colochas,” remarked the crooked-toothed man in his Tican español. His breath sat on my ear, which was not yet trained for Spanish, as he pulled me closer into the Merengue. You, señor dientes, should have saved the sensuality for Bachata, because I was not entertaining the heat of your leg between my thighs. I was, however, entertaining the friendly bartender and the alcoholic jugo de limón he kept in cans behind the bar. So maybe that’s why I allowed your clever turns to trap me, press me into your chest, and allow you close enough for the compliment into my curls, still full of the forest brush from your beautiful Monteverde.

This First Time I Drank a Beer

“Pilsner” was my first beer. I was eighteen years old at the time, but that was enough life experience for the Ticos. If I remember correctly, the beer cost one bill of 5400 colones and a 50 cent piece, and I had the money but I absolutely did not have the courage to go order my first beer for myself, especially if I had to order in Spanish--the first and only language of our gracious hosts--which I had not yet learned. At this time, as well, I did not have the social capacity to ask someone to buy it for me using my money; at this point in my life, I was still very, very shy and anxious whenever it came to asking anyone for a personal favor.

A meal was being prepared for us by a local restaurant whose venue was a tropical outdoor space beneath a rustic awning made out of hand-cut trees and forest

greenery. Little yellow lights sparkled on at dusk. I waited while everyone took their first shot of traditional home-brewed Costa Rican liquor, which our hosts poured from a used 2-liter bottle with the label ripped off. The liquid was yellow and murky like lemonade, but I never did taste it because of one particularly horrible experience with vodka two years before (in fact, my only experience with any alcohol up to that point) that had me sick, lying in a bathtub by myself all night. Our group sat around a table roughly carved from a tree, on benches built like an extension to the wide, rough trunk that protruded from the center of the dining space and through the leafy ceiling of the rainforest cabana. So I watched everyone else take their shot, including one girl who was actually a few months younger than me. We were the only two people on this trip who were under twenty-one, but this girl really took advantage of the fact that sixteen is the legal drinking age in Costa Rica. She never denied a shot when one was offered to her on nights like these, whether anyone else was taking one or not, and she certainly had no qualm ordering her beers in sloppy Spanish.

I, however, could not handle my alcohol so well. For this, I continued waiting, until we reached a point in the night where my professor herself had accepted one shot of Tican moon-shine and consequently asked me if I wanted her to get me a beer. Although I had wanted to say no out of politeness, I decided that I did not want to be the only sober person under this handmade, wooden veranda, especially when the music turned up. So I accepted her offer. The girl from earlier, the one a few months younger than me, had brought her polaroid camera and offered to take a picture of me with the beer. Now that

little blurry picture has its own little property tacked on my wall next to the postcards of Rio and a painted, wooden cross from Lima.

El baile de falda y fuego (A Woman Dances Her Skirt around a Fire in Peru)

La señorita Esperanza tosses the petals of her dress
 in slow circles around her curving body
 next to a fire in the new Peruvian evening
 that tastes familiar, like celebration.

In one hand, she slips a white tissue streamer
 into the waist of her skirt at her back.

The white mesh shakes with her hips,
 waving, flirting at the man dancing steps behind her.

Her partner holds a long, white candle,
 which he waves proudly, playfully at the fabric
 with enough careful attention to mind the wind
 and a hushed promise not to blow out their flame.

The beat of her fire dance, hummed by congas y maracas,
 moves in a rhythmic high and low: daka-daka-duka, daka-daka-duka.

Every pause after the bass shapes a hush in the wind,
 and the onlooking crowd stops their breath before treble picks up again.

In the moment the rhythm pauses with the bass,
 the dancer and hunter stop their sacred engagement,
 lulled with hip and candle turned into the air.

La Esperanza with a full, red-lipped smirk curved toward her pursuer
 marks another successful turn around the fire
 that the man dancing behind her hadn't laid the flame
 onto the tissue in her skirt, which began shaking con la conga again.

Their play is a lighthearted touch and go, the contest
 of red and yellow leaves whispering passed the breath of the fire,
 and when the man brushes the candle near her back,
 daring the song to end at the bass,

the woman's hips keep a steady shake.
Then, she turns up the hot air in the cup of her skirt
and the rich daka-daka is fresh again.

Batucada de Paraty

Loose samba bands invite groups of foreign natives

onto the crowded, cobblestone streets of Paraty, Brasil.

Natives of the praia lead us with their tamborins and agoga bells

interpreting Brazilian Samba classics.

The women, half sober off caipirinha de maracujá,

lure men in with a roll of their hips through the instrumentals,

and as I shimmy through I join them with a roll of my own.

Street carts packed with brigadeiro and coconut cornbread

treat the crowd and myself as we saunter toward the core of the festival,

and the closer we get to the loosely mapped square,

the fuller is the snare of the drums and eager rattle of chocalho,

making the blue-green beads rattle between our breasts

as we come face to colorful face with the batucada rhythm.

I step into the yolk of this carnival merriment

to join the dark-skinned sisters of ancient Brasil.

At once, our samba is a wave of the hips on an ocean,

a quick race between our feet on the ground.

Our hips resound the sacred Afro-Brazilian soul

and origins of ancient dance drama

as we let the batucada energy flow naturally

into our feet, into our rolling shoulders,

out in the form of laughter between full red lips

and toward the darkened sky, exploding into clear stars

in the undiluted island night of Paraty, Brasil.

Closure

I was sitting against a wall on the second story of a bus station in Rio de Janeiro, under signs that only spoke Portuguese. I paid 4 reais more for an Uber driver that could speak English, but I know that the only words he knew were “Hello” and “Thank you,” because when I commented on how close we were to Espiritu Santo, his response was to crank the volume dial on the radio. Classic Carioca hustle, I assumed, to register for the service that paid more money. Who checks to see if they actually speak the language? I would have probably done the same thing if I was a taxi driver in Rio. I had spent two weeks here and I already caught on to the clever ways in which the Cariocas made their living: selling shrimp skewers on the beach, selling 25 reais bikinis with little pineapples on them to eager American women wanting to show as much skin as possible.

I had walked blindly through the station, lingering longer than needed in the food court, searching for two words I would recognize like a landmark: the name of the bus ticket kiosk the Brazilian boy told me we would meet at. When I found it, I plopped onto the dusty ground under the signs with my backpack pressed into my stomach to calm the anxiety brewing deep. I couldn't breathe for the heartbeat that reached all the way into my throat.

And then he was there, looking up, and he was just as nervous as I was, and I knew because we made eye contact before he looked up at the signs pretending like he couldn't see me. He stopped in the middle of the station, between the travelers rushing on either side with their stumbling suitcases, and stared up at the sign as if he knew as little Portuguese as I did. So I got up and walked over to him.

And we smiled at each other and our voices shook when we tried to speak, so we stopped trying. When he hugged me, his hand on the back of my head made a fist with my thick curls between his knuckles. We stood in the middle of that station and laughed nervously, and he looked down and pinched in his fingers the face of his rosario hanging between my breasts (which were only half-hidden by my loose tank top, something I considered while I was picking out an outfit for our reunion). We didn't kiss, at first, but every reservation he had before we met had popped like a balloon between us and the shock of it left us light headed, staring at each other like straight fools. He took me to the food court and asked me,

“Have you tried pão de queijo?” Yes, Tiago, the first day I was here. “Have you had coxinha? Or tried aguas frescas? What about tapioca?” Yes, Tiago, of course. “But you haven't had my mother's, so you actually haven't tried any of these things. Have you heard of the fruit cajou?”

And he continued asking me about the foods I had tried, and assuring me that his mother's would be much better than anything I have eaten, while we snacked on pão de queijo and orange juice and waited for our bus to arrive to take us to his aunt's house in Tres Rios. It would be a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride, which would pass quickly after he kissed me for the first time and lost his breath in remembering the smell of my hair. As quickly as the year it had been since we'd seen each other last.

The Brazilian love story was short-lived, although heavily anticipated. The Brazilian boy had lived in the small college town of Oxford, Mississippi for a year and a

half before having to go back to Espiritu Santo to complete his degree in Chemical Engineering. He stayed in Oxford to complete courses at the Intensive English program, and for the semester that we knew each other we spent a lot of time practicing the language together. He left Oxford on December 13th, 2015, without saying goodbye, and I should have anticipated that two nights before when he cried drunkenly into my shoulder behind the bar. I said some stubborn thing about how our lives were going to change apart from each other, and he took the rosario from around his neck (for the first time in that year and a half) and placed it around my own.

A year later, when I was twenty and decided to visit Brazil for the first time, he messaged me while I was staying in Sao Paulo and asked me to stay with him at his parents' house. I waited a day or two to respond, but eventually and unsurprisingly told him I would leave Rio early to see him in Espiritu Santo before I had to make my way back to my girlfriend in Sao Paulo. I spent four days at his parents' house in the small, sweltering town of Castelo. The only room in the house with air condition was his parents', so we all slept on individual mattresses on the floor by their bed during the 100 degree nights.

The morning that I met his (extremely Catholic) mother, she pulled him aside while I was unpacking my backpack. It must have been based on the way his body moved while he was around me, the way his hand stayed low on my back when he introduced me, that she felt the need to ask him if we had ever had sex. And he told her, yes, but just the once, and he cried when she told him how disappointed she was that her twenty-five-year-old son had had sex once in his life with a girl he met in college.

Because of this conversation, every time we kissed for too long or his hand lingered too high on my thigh, he would sigh and express the difficulty of the temptation that was me sitting in my pajama bottoms on his childhood bed. I wasn't trying to test him, but he made the whole situation harder for himself than it had to be. He was entirely conflicted between his devotion to his religion and his uncontrollable hormones. He touched me, then told me it was a mistake; he asked me to be his girlfriend, and within the same hour told me the distance would be too much. I just wanted to spend my time well with him, spend it well exploring as much as I could of the Brazilian countryside.

On the day before I left him for the last time, he urged me to sit down with his mother to talk about his religion and why it was so important to his family. After much pleading on his part, I finally agreed, and he translated a very, very long conversation about the procreative purposes of post-marital sex and the marriage between a woman's sexual purity and god himself. I listened patiently and respectfully.

On the two-hour plane ride back to Sao Paulo, I reflected on how this had been the strangest, most effective delivery method for closure I had ever experienced.

Time Lapse of an Autumn Day at Piedmont Park

Midafternoon

An awning of peach trees half-naked
 spreads across both sides of the road and reaches
 into an upside down cradle of branches,
 a collage of autumn reds that hides the electric lines.
 We drive passed Blake's and Zapato's Taqueria,
 over the rainbow crosswalk and into the square of Piedmont Park.
 My fingers, held against the heater of the car,
 vibrate with the Arctic Monkey's *Suck it and See*:

*"Your love is like a studded leather headlock
 Your kiss, it could put creases in the rain."*

My ear against the window cools the air in my curls,
 but the sun is warm asleep on my face.
 Javier replays the track, his never-worn favorite,
 and then grabs my hand to replace the life of the heater.
 From the back seat, Adam:

"This is my favorite of their albums."

*Did you know they wanted to name it
'Thunder Sucker Fuzz Canyon' at first?"*

Evening

The Atlanta city skyline is Piedmont's evening backdrop
to the boys' loosely-committed Sunday Soccer League,
and I, somehow less committed, find my seat at the edge of the field.
To watch and to write. To listen to the crunch of gravel
under the feet of runners and walkers and to the boys:

"Golazo!"

Isaac lunges into the air, body curved like a fish out of water
for a ball still ten feet above his head.

"I got it!"

Dives onto his ribs. Grabs his knee like it's broken.

"Oyé, Pépe, I'm open!"

"Qué webón."

The turn-your-fingers-white-and-your-shoes-into-iceboxes kind of day
becomes bearable enough in the reach of Atlanta sunset.

My white fingers and a loose leaf notebook poke out underneath the anomalous lump
that is me and a jacket on my head like a teepee. Or a turtle shell.

And at the crunch of the walking path, I glance up at the passerby.

A father and his son:

“I want to play soccer with them, please, daddy.”

From the field, Javier:

“Put a madre, Isaj! Wake the fuck up!”

Just before twilight

Piedmont park is mostly empty tonight, except every so often
when I keep a step behind a couple as fresh in love as the night air.

First, I find them on a swing set.

Next, on a royal-white gazebo situated above the water.

“Ma’am, can you take our picture?”

Gladly.

“Just like this, from this angle.”

For sure. Is this fine?

“Yes, it’s great. Thank you!”

I find them last on a dock over the lake
where I go to watch the same mallards that watched us, once.
And I see us, less than a year ago and similarly oblivious
to the crisp cold, only that time it was early spring.
We sat with our legs suspended over that lake,
and my legs would pass slowly between yours
like two pendulums rocking in the chill air.
The breeze rested on us as if it was our skin,
then fell asleep against our exposed arms and necks.
The day I later saw you mark in your calendar:

“The day I asked her to be mine.”

Panic Attack

After coming back to the States from my tour of Brazil, and after the termination of the on-again-off-again love affair with Tiago, six days sat between me and the beginning of the Spring semester. I had spent this entire break bouncing between states (Oxford, Mississippi to New Orleans, Louisiana to a week at Disney in Orlando, Florida) and finally between countries (USA to Lima, Peru to Espiritu Santo, Rio, and Sao Paulo, Brazil), and I didn't want to be stationary for those next six long days, sitting on a bed with enough empty energy to settle back into a routine of stress, pressure, and negative thoughts about the upcoming semester. I needed somewhere else to go.

I had a friend who lived in Atlanta, a friend that I had known since high school. The kind of friend you talk to once or twice a year to say, "Happy Birthday," or laugh at the video of his dog on snapchat. We made a brief connection the summer before I went to college, based on our love for the obscure television show "Flight of the Conchords" and the band Gorillaz. When I moved to Oxford, we maintained sporadic contact throughout the fall. I wrote his essays for his community college Shakespeare class, and he told me jokes.

For the next two years, we hadn't spoken to each other, but in November before I went to Brazil, he reached out to me.

"What do you call a bear without teeth?" he asked in a video message.

"A gummy bear!"

This was the type of conversation we were used to. Naturally, it picked up where we left off two years ago in an effortless and silly manner, and we kept talking

throughout my winter break and my travels. While I was in Brazil, he opted for the European tour with his brother, visiting friends in Romania and Italy and an aunt in Barcelona, and we updated each other on our experiences. I sent him pictures of myself clad in a pineapple-printed bikini, lying on a towel on the smooth sand of Copacabana, and he sent me videos of him taking shots at the bars in Italy. So when I came back to the States, and he was already back in Atlanta waiting tables, he had known and consequently asked what my next plans were. Without a second thought, I told him I was coming to Atlanta, as I had never been, and he happily welcomed me.

The next several months passed very quickly and very happily, despite the distance. Javier's family treated me as if he and I were married. I had to become comfortable with a lot of his Peruvian family traditions, customs that contrasted so heavily with those that I had grown up with. For example, every time you walk into a room, you have to address every single person (whether you know them or not) with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. My own mother hugged once, maybe twice a year, and suddenly I was accepting kisses from Miss Estela's brother's cousin's neighbor who had just flown in from Peru. His mom, the aforementioned Miss Estela, spoke to me like a daughter. Hugging her was like hugging a child standing on their toes due to how short she was, but she controlled the house like a strict school teacher manages a well-behaved classroom. She would do anything for anyone, even a stranger, and had been known to offer her hospitality to a few unknowns loosely related to her, mostly through marriage (as long as they left in time and helped take care of the home).

When she found out I was writing, she became excited and insisted that I record some of the many stories of her life. The stories of her childhood and her eleven brothers and sisters, the story about how she grew up and became pregnant at an early age, stories about the way of life in Peru and the political unrest that led to extreme inflation, causing a family to wait in line for hours for a loaf of bread. Stories about Javier when he was young, how he would cry for almost anything. One time, the whole family had each gotten bags of candy for Christmas from the company their father worked for, and Javier and Renzo, his older brother, ate all of theirs in a day, forcing them to steal some from Miss Estela's stash under the bed. When she found out, she screamed at them, and the boys, being the type of boys that they still are, bit the insides of their cheeks trying not to laugh.

That's how the whole family is. Their entire dynamic is structured on laughing and poking fun at the other, never letting anyone forget about some embarrassing thing they had done five years ago because the nickname still sticks with them to this day. I was not at all accustomed to this lax manner. At first, I expected everyone to take their games very personally. When someone called another person a name, I became still, waiting for a fight to start, until everyone around started laughing. I would not describe myself as a serious person, but absolutely sensitive for sure, so when he would mock me for getting angry over some trivial thing (for instance, if I hadn't eaten that day or if I couldn't find my keys), it took me a while to begin to take myself less seriously, at least in that aspect.

In the same spirit, Javier has found his own way to be supportive of my episodes of panic and anxiety. One day I told him, “Javier, I don’t know why you want to be with someone who has a mental disorder.”

“Mental disorder? You mean your superpower?” he asked. “Anxiety... *attack!*”

Years ago, I would have reacted poorly to that joke. But when he said that, I stared for a beat (maybe trying to find something wrong with what he had said), and then a burst of laughter escaped my pursed lips, and, in front of my eyes, he changed into something greater than I had ever expected for myself.

He calls my anxiety a *superpower*. Not to be condescending, instead, in an effort to mitigate the negative thoughts that can often overwhelm. When the occasion truly does command genuine concern (like financial or family matters), he does take me seriously, but when he sees that look on my face like a computer screen scrolling through every possible malfunction, he steps in. He describes this anxiety as a hyper-capacity to think many, many things at once, and in the middle of an oncoming wave of negative thoughts, he says, “Uh oh. Watch out everyone! Panic... *attack!*”

And in an instant, I can breathe again. I am laughing again.

Part IV. Reunion

The Reunion

The gravel of their skinny driveway popped up beneath those old tires and nicked the underside of my late great grandmother's car, the one I borrow when I visit my mom during breaks from school. The palpitations of my heart were as sporadic as that crunching sound, and my face was flush with heat despite the air condition. It was a heavy January day outside of their property, the kind of day where the air is biting cold while the noon sun burns your skin without you noticing. I stopped in the space in front of the closed wire gate that separated the drive from their fifteen-acre property, stepped out of the still running car, and pushed it open. I didn't know if I should turn around and turn off the car to walk up to their new house, still within view of the front gate, or if I should drive up through the grass and park behind that familiar twelve-seat white van, the one they used to drive the twenty-six hours from Spokane, Washington to Gulfport, Mississippi.

I had only driven fifteen minutes to get here from my mom's house. They had chosen this property because of the potential of the land and the number of rooms in the house, but they had struggled with the fact that it was so close to my mom's. In fact, Orange Grove, their neighborhood, was right next to Sam's Club, my mom's favorite grocery store and the feeding ground for mothers with more than five children. My dad wanted to move in the area because his family—what was left of his family—lived one town over, and although his wife didn't want to move back to the South for a list of reasons, my dad had put his foot down for the first time in their marriage and gave her the

ultimatum that drove most decision-making in their marriage: divorce or Mississippi. Besides, both of them had grown up there, and Lisa's parents lived in Diamondhead.

Ultimately, I decided to drive through the open gate, leaving the car a second time to close it behind me, putting as many steps as possible between the moment I arrived and the moment that I would see my dad and that family for the first time in four years. They had had one child since I left, and I didn't even know about her until she was seven months old, but I was anxious to meet her. I also hadn't seen Felicia since before she turned one. My invitation had been a whim on my dad's part. I didn't know they were moving to Mississippi until a month earlier when I saw Megan and Thomas at their Poppop's funeral, and my dad was only going to be at the house for three days before he had to return to Spokane to finish out the next six months at Fairchild Air Force Base before he could retire. He was staying to help them move in, and I took advantage of the time, knowing that I wouldn't get another invitation in those next six months while my dad was gone.

My dad came out of the U-Haul and gave me a side hug like I was coming over for some regular weekly family barbecue. For me, it was extremely uncomfortable. His wife, unflinchingly, ignored me. Not a single sniff of the air in my direction, for which, I assumed, would mark a pleasant understanding of pretending the other didn't exist for the sake of peace. I was okay with that--ecstatic, actually, that I didn't have to pretend like nothing had ever happened. An unspoken acknowledgement on her part that, ideally, went a little like, "Alright, I fucked up. I fucked up, okay? Let's not bring it up and move on."

Dad let me go and asked me how I was doing as nonchalantly as if he had been asking me every weekend for the last four years, and I escaped when I saw Felicia run out of the house like a little peanut with long skinny legs. I grabbed that girl into my arms, and then Kimberly, who followed after her. Jennifer, the youngest whom I had not met yet, pulled up in the grass on a small pink Jeep built for toddlers, and she timidly stepped out to follow the lead of her older sisters. I shook her sweet hand and introduced myself before the rest of the kids came out from behind the house and from inside of the truck, as if they had been waiting for me. Alex, who was ten at that time, was the only one who did not address me. When he saw me, he ran away playfully, giggling, maybe as nervous as I was, hiding behind boxes and in closets whenever I walked into the room he was in. At first, it was playful, until it wasn't anymore.

The first day was bright and glaring. Noon blinded me through the windows of my car as it wobbled up their drive and left the air in my head light and the path through the house seemed blurry through my stunted vision. I showed up the second day as well, but I had to leave after twenty minutes because suddenly there were some errands to run that required the entire family to leave. Not enough time to rub off the scintillating light in the corners of my eyes. The third day was clear.

I arrived at the house at four o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun was early to set behind the trees on the fifteen-acre plot. I came with a King Cake in order to teach these kids a bit about Southern culture, and I set it on the kitchen island upon entering through the garage. The dining area, kitchen, and living room made up the open floor plan of the first floor when you walk in through the back doors. Felicia had asked me to

paint her fingernails, so I sat on the freshly shampooed carpet of the living room with her while the other two girls laid beside us waiting for their turn. Before I had finished painting her second hand with the bright pink, the girls were called.

“Felicia, Kimberly, come eat dinner!”

Jennifer, still shy and nonverbal, sat across from me and wiped a few strands of hair from her sticky cheek before presenting her small hands for me to paint. I began but before I could finish even one hand, she was called to dinner.

“Jennifer! Come eat dinner!”

I put the bottle of polish back in my purse and looked around the living room, still empty except for piles of blankets in front of the mounted television. Brian was perched on the brick stoop of the fire place reading the *Guinness Book of World Records: 2013*, so I crossed the room, feet damp from the almost dry carpet, and sat next to him. He would soon be diagnosed with high-functioning autism. From a young age, Brian had behavioral problems, especially when it came to impulse control and anger management. He had a concentrated interest in these big *World Record* and *World's Most Interesting* books with the brightly colored, reflective covers, and he could listen to a commercial once and would be repeating the script of it for the rest of the week. When he was a toddler, he would tell his mom that I was “looking at him funny,” and I would get in trouble for it. But I knew that he needed special care, and handling him and his interests proved to be a delicate thing. It was important to engage with Brian about the books he read, extremely important to be patient with him and validate his feelings. I sat next to him and asked him what he was reading.

Brian looked up at me, adjusted his glasses under his thick bangs, closed the book, and began explaining to me exactly what I could find on page sixty-four without having to refer to the page at all. Before he could finish, he was called into the kitchen.

“Brian! This isn’t talking time, this isn’t *play* time, this is helping time. Go unpack your room.”

Alex was still running away from me when I entered the rooms. Megan, who is two and a half years younger than me, approached me. “Hey do you want to come help me pick out my outfit for my first day of school tomorrow?”

Attached to the large media room that would act as Brian’s and Alex’s bedroom, Megan’s room was like a very large closet or storage room, but she preferred it. She liked having her small, private space. Against one wall was the computer desk that we used to have in the basement in North Dakota, and my dad’s old dresser was across from it against the other wall. There was a mattress tucked into a corner on the floor which I sat on while she undressed to her underwear and began pulling her drawers open. The door was locked because the younger boys were on the other side in their room.

“Aby. Please don’t say anything,” Megan begged me immediately as she closed the door behind her. “Please don’t say anything to her.”

“Megan, I know, I’m not stupid.”

“I’m serious, Aby. She is pushing you, she wants you to say something. But if you say anything, she will never let you come back, and I will never see you again for a long time, please.”

“Megan, I promise I won’t talk to her. I don’t understand her at all. Why is she such a bitch?”

“She hasn’t changed since you left,” Megan filled me in. “She’s so controlling. But we can’t talk about it right now because I bet Kimberly is listening through the door right now.” She opened the door and, sure enough, the little girl stumbled to her feet and across the room back to the kitchen.

Megan began telling me how nervous she was to start school, and I was giving her a lesson on South Mississippi culture, when her door knob shook once and banging on the door immediately followed. “Megan!” She yelled as frantically as the hitting on the door. “Why is this door locked? What are y’all doing in there? You know you can’t have this door locked!”

Still in her bra and shorts, Megan pulled the door open and stated, “I’m deciding what to wear for school, *mom*.” Her mom looked at her blankly.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, this isn’t time for hanging out. We are not on vacation right now, you need to help with the house or with the kids.” The door remained wide open when she walked away. My temples and cheeks enkindled with red anger, embarrassment, and guilt; although I knew that we weren’t doing anything wrong, I felt that in some way I was taking away from the time they needed to establish their new lives. However, Megan’s behavior and the role of her eyes hinted to me that this lady was having one of her bloodthirsty days. The tension of her hunt thickened the air.

“Aby, *please* don’t say anything.”

“I won’t,” I breathed, annoyed.

At this time it was around five o'clock, and Megan and I walked back into the living area where Brian had found his way back into a corner to read his book, and the younger girls were eating their dinner on the picnic-bench of a dining table. When I sat next to Kimberly, I brushed the back of her hair with my fingers. She looked up at me with a soft, dimpled smile and squinty eyes, crumbs from her taco sticking to her cheeks. I told her how much I had missed her, and she started moving her head back and forth, dancing to some song in her head while she took another bite of her taco.

“Kimberly, stop talking! It’s time to eat!”

I looked up but continued stroking her head. We were silent for a while until I told her again how I couldn’t wait to see her again.

“Kimberly, you need to be eating, not talking!”

The frustration of the moment lumped in my throat, so I couldn’t open my mouth to say “She *isn’t* talking” or “What is wrong with you?” I sat there wordlessly while Kimberly obliviously smacked on her tortilla and cheddar cheese. I kept my hand on the back of her head and continued to smooth her wavy brown hair.

“Kimberly! We need to go to bed soon, you can’t be playing!”

Let me explain something. Lisa has a way of finding the things that bother the people close to her; she finds their kinks, the pieces of them just barely being held together by exhausted willpower and broken strings, and she plucks at them until they split open onto the floor, and I had a lot of practice keeping my mouth shut but something in the four years I spent away from her still had not prepared me for the inevitable storm that was whispering its way into this house. Although I had kept all of my pieces together

for the last three days, she had finally managed to pick me apart, and I when I raised my voice to ask:

“Can you tell me what is your problem with me?”

She responded with an anticipated:

“You are in *my* house and you have been disrespectful all day! If you don’t leave out from under my roof, I am going to call the cops.” Like a snake, she was biting and immediate with her words, as if she had been repeating it like a mantra in her head all day in anticipation of this outcome, waiting for me to address her before letting it go like a slingshot shooting a rock across the room.

“Are you serious? I was invited here.”

“Come on you guys,” my dad submitted. “Why can’t you both just get along?”

His wife turned to him and stormed into their bedroom, which was attached to the back wall of the living room, and my dad followed. They hadn’t closed the door all the way so I came in as well and shut the door, and, with a swell in my throat, told them, “It is time to get this out of the way!” My dad and his wife argued on the bed while I continued. “Can’t we just talk like adults? Just tell me what is your problem?”

Lisa said, “You are so disrespectful.” My hands had balled into fists out of frustration but I kept them at my sides. “What,” she provoked, “Are you going to punch me? Go ahead, and I will call the cops and get you out of here.” I had never gotten into a physical fight in my life, and I had hardly ever so much as raised my voice at her in the years that I spent with her, so the fact that she jumped to that conclusion so quickly seems

enough proof to me that, if I had intended to hit her, she would have known that she deserved it. I told her I wasn't going to hit her, but she still continued to taunt me.

“Dude, I'm not going to touch you, you're just pissing me off!”

“Oh! Look at you with your *Mississippi trash mouth*. You have been living in Mississippi with your trash mom so now you speak like them.”

“Don't you talk about me mom,” I urged hysterically, in tears. “You're a hypocrite. You have no room to talk!”

She reserves a disgusting, high-pitched laugh for moments like these. “What do you mean? She tried to abort you, do you know how many abortions she has had?”

“What does it matter! At least my mom's kids know who their *father* is!”

For a moment, she became guarded. “What?” she spit.

“If my mom is trash then how bad are you?” I lowered my voice. “I know more than you think I do.”⁴

“You tried to kill me,” she stumbled into a subject change. “You tried to kill all of my kids and I told them. Jennifer isn't old enough to understand, but you just wait until she gets older, then she will know how you tried to kill her.”

“*What?*” I gasped and squinted at her, wondering if she believed the words that came so confidently out of her mouth. Her eyes were clear and accusing, the reality that she created evident as truth in them. How had she reached that conclusion? When Jennifer had not even been born yet when I left, and no one had known she was pregnant?

⁴ To this point, I was referring to the fact that Lisa and my dad had gotten married while Lisa was six months pregnant with another man's child, a child to whom they have yet to disclose that information. I was also referring to the fact that the father of Megan and Thomas had died in a fatal motorcycle accident before Megan was born, and Lisa had never told them anything about him.

“Don’t you see how delusional you are? Don’t you get it?”

“Get *what*?”

“How incredibly unhappy you make everyone around you. Haven’t you noticed?”

Although I still coughed over these frustrating tears, my desperate, angry tone transitioned into one of pleading and slight sympathy. “Don’t you see how miserable you make every single person around you? Dad has been miserable for years. You took away my childhood for no good reason, you made Thomas leave and now he isn’t talking to any of us. And you know who he blames, right? He told everyone that it was because of *you*. And you continue putting Megan through this, who next Lisa? Don’t you see how miserable everyone is just because they *know* you?” I threw my hands desperately into the air and let go of my tears.

She didn’t have anything to say, but behind the look of belligerence and arrogance, I think we both realized that I had her pegged. I would like to think that she did realize how miserable everyone was, that when she looked in the mirror in the mornings she could see the misery worn well on her face like a warm, damp towel; these things, however, I highly doubt. I don’t know if she will ever take responsibility for the misery she brings into her life or not. In some way, I think she does realize the impact she has had on Jeffrey, Lizzy, Brandon, Thomas, Megan, and myself, and perhaps it’s that the burden of that responsibility carries with it a massive shame that she is afraid to own. Because if she is anything other than mentally ill or sociopathic, it is impossible that a human can be so blind to their actions when the pattern has been repeated through the lives of six young adults. That is, the pattern of being driven away by emotional neglect

and suffering. And it is painfully human to accept a shame like hers. Her shame exists somewhere outside of the film around her head that blocks reality, and I don't think she will remove that film until her youngest turns eighteen and she is forced to look up at her empty nest and notice the blood left behind from every chickling that voluntarily pushed themselves off from its spikey foundation before they were ready to fly. She kept having children in order to replenish the well of dependence that attached itself to her breast, she literally thrived off of the life that depended on her for survival, and when there is no one left who needs the milk from her breast, I imagine that her world will no longer make sense.

“Don't you see how unhappy your life is?”

My dad chose this moment to interject. “Why can't you two get along?”

It wasn't for want of trying on my end, but at that point I had determined that my breath, stale and shaky from being pent inside of me for so many years, had been entirely wasted. My dad would never understand what I am just now beginning to realize: it was never me. The estrangement did not begin because of something I did, and it did not last this long because I wanted it to. No one, except for myself, will ever understand that, and it just has to be enough for me.

So, with the door left open behind me, I walked into the living room to leave my dad and Lisa to do what they do best. Megan, with red eyes and a thin expression, leaned against the counter in the kitchen. Her voice cracked when she said, “They're never going to let me see you again.”

“Yes they will, Megan.” I wouldn’t see her for close to a year, at which point she would have dropped out of high school and been displaced from several different mental health treatment centers along the coast until she turned nineteen and moved out of the house and into an apartment with two unreliable characters who paid for their rent with a disability check. Next I would see her would be when she drove into my mother’s front yard, giving me a side hug with her breakable arm, thin and lithe like ballet ribbon. Her head would roll around like a bobble on the throbbing vein of her neck, and her left foot would never stop tapping the floor.

“Yes, they will,” I promised her. I came up to Brian, who had followed me to the kitchen, crouched to his level, and put my hands on his shoulders as I said, “You know I would never do anything to hurt you, right? You know that?” He nodded his head yes and gave me a hug. I looked to my left, and as soon as I met Alex’s angry eyes between the wooden rails of the staircase, he turned up and ran on all fours like an animal back to his room. Later that year, when I came back for Thanksgiving, he would ask me why I hated his mom and why I wanted to make his parents fight.

Grabbing my keys from beside the unopened King Cake, I followed my trail back to my grandmother’s car parked on the grass in front of their house. I had to stop at the end of the drive to open the wire gate, maneuver the car back onto the gravel driveway, and turn around to lock it behind me so the yapping dogs wouldn’t escape before I could.

