Mothers and Daughters: A Reflection on the Cyclical Nature of Life

Greta Rose Koshenina

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2533

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS: A REFLECTION ON THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF LIFE

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Center for the Study of Southern Culture
The University of Mississippi

by
GRETA R. KOSHENINA

May 2023
ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I use nontraditional documentary methods to explore the dynamic relationship between mothers and daughters. This work is an amalgamation of autobiography, memoir, autoethnography, oral history, and photography. While autoethnography inspires me, this is not a traditional sociological study, and I do not seek to come to any ubiquitous conclusions. Rather, I present an artistic approach to the field of documentary. I diverge from traditional oral histories, constructing a cohesive narrative using transcripts from recordings of my mom and me. I sequence experimental Van Dyke Brown prints and more traditional documentary photography with poetic musings on stories of women, mothers, and daughters from Greco-Roman mythology. This thesis serves as a specific story that speaks to larger, universal issues concerning motherhood, loss, and growth.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis my loving momma, Anna Koshenina, and the spirit of her mom, Opal Murchison. This would have never come to fruition had momma not been so understanding and accepting of my vision. Thank you, momma, for talking into a microphone for hours and sharing your stories.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge the guidance and encouragement I received from the late Dr. David Wharton. His insight is greatly missed, and I would not have embarked upon the journey that led to my thesis without his support.

In addition, I thank Dr. Andy Harper, my advisor, for encouraging the experimental nature of my work. Many thanks to the University of Mississippi Museum and Historic Houses—my time at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture was greatly enriched from my assistantship.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family who always offered emotional support, as well as my cohort who provided inspiration and invaluable feedback.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Literature and Media Review</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 PROCESSES</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 “Baggage” Process</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 “Hoard of Homes” Process</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ORAL HISTORIES WITH MOMMA, ANNA KOSHENINA</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The Bear and the Dream</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The Farm</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Opal’s Bible</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 The Funeral</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Ruminations on Momma’s Stories</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE MOTHER, THE MAIDEN, AND THE CRONE</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Figure 1, *Momma*, digital photograph, 2022........................................... 50
2. Figure 2, *The Maiden*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023....... 51
3. Figure 3, *The Crone: An Uncanny Resemblance*, digital photograph, 2022....................... 52
4. Figure 4, *Momma and Her Dad, Dan*, digital photograph, 2022................................. 53
5. Figure 5, *The Sisters*, digital photograph 2022................................................... 53
6. Figure 6, *Dan’s Overalls*, digital photograph, 2022............................................... 54
7. Figure 7, *Hello, Goodbye*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023…… 55
8. Figure 8, *Hoard of Memories*, digital photograph, 2022........................................... 56
9. Figure 9, *Momma’s Wedding Handkerchief*, digital photograph, 2022............................. 57
10. Figure 10, *March 1, 1997*, digital photograph, 2022.............................................. 57
11. Figure 11, *Why Daddy, Why*, digital photograph, 2022........................................... 58
12. Figure 12, *Faces and Places Forgotten*, digital photograph, 2022............................... 59
13. Figure 13, *Things I Can’t Remember, and Places I Won’t Forget*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023.................................................. 59
14. Figure 14, *Opal: Mama*, digital photograph, 2022.................................................. 60
15. Figure 15, *Momma’s Trunk*, digital photograph, 2022.............................................. 61
16. Figure 16, *The Gift of Knowledge*, digital photograph, 2022..................................... 62
17. Figure 17, *Favorite Newspaper Dress*, digital photograph, 2022................................. 63
18. Figure 18, *Great-Great-Great Grandma O’Malley*, digital photograph, 2022............... 64
19. Figure 19, *Fueled by Obsession*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023

20. Figure 20, *Let It Ride*, digital photograph, 2022

21. Figure 21, *Smilin’, Happy Clown*, digital photograph, 2022

22. Figure 22, *Reflections*, digital photograph, 2022

23. Figure 23, *Ghostly Remembrances*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023

24. Figure 24, *Help!* digital photograph, 2022
I am the family archivist. I have accepted this role, I have allowed it, yet I had no choice. Those around me assigned the role silently. I am the keeper of memories and stories; I am the listener. Documentarian is too harsh a word. Archivist as well. Too sanitary, too archaic. My obsession with memory comes naturally, perhaps intuitively. It has led me to anxiety and fears, but it has also led me to the field of museums, archaeology, and anthropology. This project is a memoir, autobiography, autoethnography, family archive, and oral history. This amalgamation of family mythologies is largely told through my mother’s stories about herself and her family as well as reflections on my own (short) life. I do not seek to come to any larger understandings of humanity, nor do I plan to examine myself or my family in a traditional, sociological framework. I use the term autoethnography loosely. My inspiration comes from Carolyn Ellis, a pioneer autoethnographer who uses traditional academic framework paired with emotional storytelling and reflections on stories and past occurrences.

Ultimately, this thesis is a snapshot of myself at a pivotal moment in life; I am at the cusp of adulthood yet still teetering on the brink of adolescence. This collection of photography and oral histories explores the ideas of identity, home, family, and place, specifically Water Valley, Mississippi. The ideas I am reckoning with are universal yet told through a specified, personal lens. I began this project as a way for my mom to process the grief of her mother’s death, and for myself to get to know her mother, my grandmother. I present a generational story of vulnerability and deep, yet sometimes destructive, love between mothers and daughters.
Whose stories are worth documenting? Why do we often feel that others’ stories are more interesting than our own families’? What generational knowledge are we losing by ignoring the difficult stories? Where does this ignorance of our own families leave us? Throughout the following chapters, I explore these questions and more.

In chapter one, I introduce the amalgamation of methods used, as well as the literature, films, and photographers from which I drew inspiration. This introductory chapter serves as an ideological framework which presents my intentions and methods. Chapter two presents the processes of the projects that ultimately led to the creation of the photographic collection presented in chapter four. Chapter two explains why I began the projects and provides a narrative background of the photographs as well as an explanation of how the projects have ebbed and flowed over the past year. Chapter two additionally serves as a literary companion to the photography in chapter four, which is presented as a standalone project.

Chapter three includes transcribed excerpts from oral histories with my mom. I use these stories to emphasize the themes present throughout the projects presented in chapters two and four, specifically gender and religion. I have curated my mom’s stories to create a cohesive story; while it is still verbatim, I have edited for conciseness and diverged from traditional oral history methods. Throughout the oral histories conducted with my mom, I learned more about her early life than both she and I expected. She uncovered memories hiding deep in the subconscious. These reflections on her childhood growing up on a pig farm in rural Mississippi are not only important for our family archive, but also to the history of women living in the rural south, helping on farms, and providing for their families. These stories speak to the gender expectations of women in the south, and they provide information about experiences in the 1970s and 1980s that are unlike the more mainstream, stereotypical stories of growth and freedom.
While my mom, at fourteen, was gardening enough food to feed her family, my dad was smoking weed and traipsing around Florida, unsupervised by his hippie parents. I hyper fixated on my dad’s mythologized and glorified stories of childhood in the ‘80s, while generalizing my mom’s childhood as a country girl. Momma’s stories turn out to be just as adventurous and rich as my dad’s. My dad was able to dissociate the bad memories from the good to create childhood fables of adventure for my brother and me; my mom’s stories, however, are tinged with the tragedy of her mom’s cancer diagnosis when my mom was fourteen and her mother’s death five years later.

Chapter four jumps between the ancient past and present, melding fragmentary mythological stories of forgotten and misremembered goddesses with photographs that form poetic sequences and represent my relationship with my mom and home. I interweave the mythological stories of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and her daughters, the Muses; Persephone, Queen of the Underworld and her mother Demeter, goddess of the harvest; and Hecate, companion of Persephone and the three faced goddess of life, death, and birth (the archetypal mother, maiden, crone). The mythological stories represent the ancient Greco-Roman culture. I use these myths because of my familiarity and background in Classics, and to highlight the ways Greco-Roman mythologies and hero stories have shaped modern Western culture. Men recorded these stories in written form, but they reflect myths and generational knowledge that stem from oral histories passed from mothers to children. The goddesses presented are personifications of universal ideas concerning nature and motherhood that are found throughout all cultures. In the poems and captions that accompany my photographs, I wipe away most of the specificities to make my own narrative shrouded in mystery and ephemerality. The myths lead the narrative, and the photographs parallel the archetypal stories.
The photographs presented in chapter four include more traditional, documentary photography as well as photographs created using experimental, alternative processes. I use the Van Dyke Brown printing process for a selection of photographic collages I digitally created in photoshop. The collages combine archival family photographs of myself with new images I made. In chapter two, I give a deeper explanation of the alternative process used to create the experimental prints. Chapter four serves as an experience rather than an explanation, and I expect the viewer to have an evocative experience, causing one to think about the timeless and universal truths that are often overlooked in patriarchal societies.

As I mature, my dad’s stories expand and become tragedies of their own. His mom’s sister, my Aunt Dudu, has filled in many of the gaps and I frequently ask my dad to retell stories, helping him remember details he has pushed away for decades. I still cherish and ask for my dad’s fables, but the novelty of my mom’s stories has grasped my attention. “In relation to the past, memory is a double agent: it mythologizes the past and, in turn, is mythologized by it.”¹ My dad has mythologized his own memories with the modifications he made when my brother Jackson and I were children; only now are my mom’s memories flowing from her, as if from an untapped well. Untreated and whole. Stories are the translation of the images and memories held in one’s mind. I believe that photographs are the best way to depict these poetic ideas of remembering memories, or in Toni Morrison’s words, rememory.² The photographs become ghostlike memories that are alive yet transient, holding a moment that allows one to dwell on the past as much as they like. Ironically, the more one recalls a memory, the more it changes. We are relentlessly rewriting our pasts, consciously or not.

1.1 Literature and Media Review

Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis explores the idea of self-revision in her book *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*. Ellis makes clear that her purpose is to “open hearts and minds, to continue the project of making heart and head go hand in hand.”¹³ Ellis and her colleagues spearheaded the branch from ethnography; frustrated with the sterility of traditional, sociological ethnographies, the scholars began writing in prose, telling anecdotal stories that emphasize the researcher’s subjectivity and place in the study rather than concealing it in an attempt to create an impossible objective study in which the researcher supposedly is unseen and unheard.⁴ Many social science academics look down on the branch of autoethnography as it can easily be mistaken as memoir or autobiography.

Ellis uses these critiques to deepen the personal and emotional stories she uses to study people.⁵

As an autoethnographer, I tell a situated story, constructed from my current position, one that is always partial, incomplete, and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience. I am well aware that all of us constantly reframe and restory our lives, attempting to arrive at a version that presents these lives as changing, yet continuous and coherent (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Buchner, 1997; Carr, 1986, MacIntyre, 1981; Smith and Sparks, 2006)…Thus, reexamining the events we have lived through and the stories we have told about them previously allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have led, the culture in which we have lived, and the work we have done.⁶

Ellis emphasizes the importance of revision throughout her work; she recognizes the partiality that is inherent to all ethnography. This recognition allows for a fuller, deeper story which validates the subjectivity of human experience rather than putting scholars and researchers on a

---

⁵ Ellis, *Revision*, 222.
pedestal of suspect objectivity. Ellis’s meta self-study explores the “complex, sometimes contradictory, components of my life and scholarship.”\textsuperscript{7} While I take much inspiration from Ellis and her research methods, I do not consider this thesis a sociological autoethnography. Her work has provided an example of scholarship that is both playful and informed, directly contrasting with academic writing that is far too often inaccessible and sterile.

In Susan Jackson’s essay titled “Ivory Towers and Guardians of the Word,” she explores the exclusion of woman writing in academia. Her essay is situated in the collection titled \textit{Exclusions in Feminist Thought}. Jackson argues that universities, founded by and for men, honor a language that is inaccessible to women wishing to enter the realm of academia.\textsuperscript{8} This is also evident in lower levels of learning as well as the fine arts; women and other minorities are forced into a homogenized, whitewashed and man-centric reality that ignores and shames alternative ways of learning and expressing oneself. Ancient misogynistic Greek and Roman standards directly influence Western academia and fine art. This, paired with Christianity, has glorified linear hero stories, and demonized the cyclical embodiment of the stories that existed in oral tradition before the land was conquered by warlords. In the following passage, Sophie Strand examines this transition toward hero stories.

When we look at Greek myths—chock-full of monsters, rape, pillage, and heroic valor—we have to remember that many of these myths are translations of older stories, or at least fusions of two competing mythologies: one focused on nature reverence and mother goddesses, and the other characterized by violent heroes and a “solarization” of gods and sacred symbols.\textsuperscript{9}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{7} Ellis, \textit{Revision}, 18.
\textsuperscript{9} Sophie Strand, \textit{The Flowering Wand: Rewilding the Masculine}, (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2022), 25.
\end{flushleft}
None of this is to say I am a misandrist; this serves only to acknowledge the one-sided histories reframed and reworked over thousands of years. This societal reverence of heroic valor glorifies the stories of the father while ignoring the stories of the mother which may shed light on her life before her husband, the patriarch.

This happens on a large, cultural scale as well as a familial level of mythologizing. “Myth functions not to cover things up, but instead to deform and condition them by naturalizing their decay and artificiality.”10 In the film *Look at Us Now, Mother!*, filmmaker Gayle Kirschenbaum examines the relationship between her and her mother.11 Their relationship is veiled in jealousy and resentment, but there is also love and joy. Throughout the process of filming, Gayle and her mother learn to reexamine their histories, reworking the mythology of their relationship. Gayle’s mom began to tell stories of her own psychological abuse from her mother. This journey portrays the generational trauma that is inflicted from mother to daughter in a largely unconscious cycle. Gayle’s film shows the possibilities that arise when we talk to our family members.

Similarly, in the documentary short film “No Crying at the Dinner Table,” filmmaker Carol Nguyen interviews her family about family secrets, grief, and trauma.12 She ends the film in a meta reexamination of the footage with her whole family sitting around the dinner table, listening to the recordings of the interviews. Life moves quickly and resentment grows even faster. These films are examples of evocative autoethnography, told through an artistic lens. These filmmakers are not social scientists, but their stories examine familial relationships that hold universal truths and themes.

---

10 Vecchi, “Mythology and Memory,” 2.
11 *Look at Us Now, Mother!*, directed by Gayle Kirschenbaum (2015; Los Angeles; Kirschenbaum Productions), Apple TV.
In the short film “Birth Control Your Own Adventure,” Sindha Agha creates visuals that evoke visceral reactions from anyone who has struggled with the horrors and trauma that birth control often brings. Agha reads an intimate essay about her journey, starting at the young age of eleven, on various types of birth control. The artist is never seen; she speaks of the depression and out-of-body experiences the pill, the IUD, the NuvaRing caused. Sound effects are overlayed with her voice and chaotic images that parallel her words flash across the screen. In the end, Agha’s voice is replaced with male journalists, describing the possibilities of birth control for men; they describe the minimal side effects. An instant later, the lists of side effects correlated with common female birth control are provided. Agha pairs her story with scientific facts to create an evocative narrative that emphasizes the widespread difficulties women face due to lack of research and care for women’s bodies.

These experimental forms of storytelling have inspired my work. My goal is to convey universal truths through image and stories. Objects play a metaphorical role, and they hold the ability to evoke memories and reactions. Together, my mom and I excavate the material objects of her past, digging up memories and stories long buried, attempting to decay. In Michael Haldrup’s article, “Souvenirs: Magical objects in everyday life,” objects are given agency equal to people. Haldrup uses an autoethnographic approach, allowing himself to become the “author and the focus of the story,” in the words of Carolyn Ellis. Haldrup’s excavation of his own souvenirs explores the sentimental and traumatic memories stored within objects. These things could mean something completely different to another viewer, but they contain a power to the

---

15 Ellis, Revision, 13.
owner. Momma went as far as to hide the bible belonging to her recently deceased mother; she forgot about this rash decision until decades later when we found it in buried beneath love letters and high school ephemera. Momma’s reasoning behind keeping these special objects in her possession stems from the fact that she is the youngest child, and therefore, was around the most in the last years of her mother’s life. Finding these objects bring about memories from that period of momma’s life, but she is simultaneously hyper aware of how much she has forgotten.

These objects serve as a window into the memories of my mother’s past. In the following excerpt, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenney Hockey explore the cultural idea of memory in Western societies.

‘Memory’ is commonly envisaged as both the facility to remember and as the mental representation or trace of that which is remembered, both of which are crucially mediated by a variety of cultural forms. In contemporary Western societies, ‘memories’ are often conceived as possessions: we ‘keep’ and ‘preserve’ our memories as if they are in a personal museum. We choose when to disclose or display our memories to others, either in the form of personal narratives or photographs. They are, therefore, associated with individual agency in the sense that we imagine ourselves to be responsible for, or ‘in control’ of, our memories…Memory practices and experiences shift over time as perceptions of the past are reworked into the context of the present and in anticipation of the future.16

The authors go on to describe the act of death itself as a strong memory maker. The ritualistic processes of burying the dead and the graveside visits help preserve memories.17 Memory is transient and ephemeral in nature. This ephemerality is the thread that ties each part of this project together. Photographs, even more than memories, are often believed to be an accurate depiction of reality. However, they are just as subjective and ephemeral as memories.

Throughout the book Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography, photographer and author Errol Morris explores the reality of photography. Morris addresses the

---

contradictory nature of the way we view documentary photography as a precise representation of reality. After several deep dives into the history of specific photographs and the exploration of the subjectivity of truth and reality, Morris ends with a brief epilogue:

Perhaps every culture leaves markers for the future, a means of connecting the dots, of linking the past to what is yet to come. The "frozen moment" of photography provides a possible answer to the problem of Heraclitus, that one cannot step into the same river twice. Perhaps one can look at the same photograph twice. Even though our thoughts and our memories change, we change, the perspective through which we look at the world changes, there is the thought that a photograph partially takes us outside of ourselves. That it gives us a glimpse—even though it may be only a two-dimensional representation—of something real.18

Morris’ idea of the reality depicted in photographs relies upon the fact that each photograph is staged and posed “because every photograph excludes something.”19 The photographs that I present in chapter four teeter on the edge of reality and fantasy; some are more traditional “documentary” photographs, showing the trunks as my mom explores their contents. However, I have chosen to include digitally manipulated photographs that, at first glance, look as if they could be accurate portrayals of the present. Instead, I lean into this idea of subjectivity. The photographs meld the past and the present in a metaphorical approach to an individual experience of reality. “Photographs provide evidence, but no shortcut to reality.”20

Photographer Kate Palmer Albers explores the inherent ephemerality of photographs in her book *The Night Album: Visibility and the Ephemeral Photograph*. In the introduction, Albers questions whether the inventors of photography truly saw the medium as a permanent record. Perhaps, she muses, they knew photographs were always meant to disappear.21 This

---

20 Morris, *Believing is Seeing*, 93.
contradiction of the medium creates more questions than answers and brings up new theories about photography’s origins. The experimental photographs that I have created parallel these ideas of ephemerality—all photographs will deteriorate over time. However, the images made using the Van Dyke Brown process will likely fade quicker than archival ink-jet prints of digital photographs. I intentionally used this process to serve as a metaphor, linking the ephemerality of photographs and life.

The photographic collages containing archival family photographs made by my mom, paired with photographs I’ve made recently, explore the relationship of childhood spaces in which I still dwell. I chose the family photos through the lengthy process of attempting to organize the thousands of images my parents made throughout my childhood. In a chapter written by essayist and novelist Susan Sontag, she evaluates the reasons for family photography.

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished…As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure. 22

Modern cameras create parents’ ability to incessantly document any moment of their child’s life. The insecurity Sontag points out is the parent’s response to the inevitable: children grow up and time manipulates memory. The archival photographs I chose to collage highlight this passing of time. To an outsider, the choice may seem random, but the images depict myself at various ages performing typical childhood activities. My parents chose to document these moments, creating relics that would remind them of the past, assisting their memory when they attempt to teach my brother and me moments we will likely never remember.

The idea of memories is held in objects and photographs as well as places. When momma remembers her childhood, she describes the landscape and flowers that would grow in specific areas. According to Roger C. Aden, childhood spaces, especially rural settings, tend to feature positive experiences. Aden examines the writing of people describing their childhood “safe” places that serve as foundational memory places.

Foundational memory places remain alive in...profound ways. As containers, foundational memory places “hold my most memorable childhood and teenage moments” and “held my childhood in it more than any other place.” Or, as one writer eloquently states, “This place is where I store my memories—memories of times when my family was young and happy, when things were less complicated, when Grandma and Aunt Peggy were still alive, when the smallest details of the natural world held magic for me.”

This magical essence is apparent throughout my photographs as well as my mom’s stories. Even though she is remembering traumatic events, a veil of positivity and beauty shrouds the tragic reality of her mom’s death and the responsibilities she had to pick up when her mom was diagnosed with cancer.

Throughout the following chapters, I meld my mom’s memories with mine to create a disjointed narrative of memories nearly forgotten and those that haunt us. My mom’s stories are specific, yet they hold thematic elements that are found throughout space and time. I’ve conducted these oral histories in an attempt to preserve stories that are already becoming mythological. Momma’s childhood memories of growing up on a farm in rural Mississippi only heighten the mythological components. I record and present these stories as a contribution to my family’s history and southern history in general.

---

24 Aden, *Childhood Memory Spaces*, 29.
Scholarly essays and books in the field of Southern studies are ripe with mentions of the mythology and origins of the stereotypes tied to the United States’ Southern region. In the field of New Southern Studies, scholars attempt to denounce the fallacy of Southern exceptionalism, setting it aside as a part of “Old” Southern Studies. Scholars discussing the specificities of the Southern region still turn, however, to the “myths” of the regional area. Southern literature and pop culture often exacerbate these misconceptions of “the South,” offering threads of generalizations that solidify stereotypes widely spread throughout the world. Over the last fifty years or so, Southern Studies scholars have worked to dispel these constructions while explaining the origins of the “myths,” often in a somewhat problematic manner. Nostalgia for the “old ways” are often at the forefront of these ideas, marking the imagined South as a place fraught with racism and discrimination at a much higher level than the rest of the United States. Documentaries focusing on the poor, disempowered people of the region further these misconceptions and are broadcasted throughout the world, disproportionately showing one region of the United States that represents the widespread difficulties of what can be referred to as the Global South.

Mythologies are present in nearly every society and culture, both temporally and spatially. In ancient cultures, myths were typically used to explain natural phenomena through metaphorical stories that were passed down orally from generation to generation for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. These myths often explain worldviews and humanity’s place in the natural world. Classical scholars question whether these mythological stories were held as truth or seen as anecdotal tales explaining natural phenomena. These higher forces were eventually anthropomorphized, gaining not only human form but also human emotions and gender. Ancient Greco-Roman mythology has seeped into the psyche of the Western world, appearing in art and
literature produced especially throughout the last few hundred years. This, paired with ideals of a predominantly Christian community, creates stereotypes that are easily mythologized as a homogenous reality. This thesis explores alternative narratives of a place that is so often denounced and written off as a lost cause. Myths are constantly evolving and inherently fluctuating entities of thought and oral tradition.

Momma’s stories fit into a larger narrative of women who were raised in the Southern Baptist church and decided to leave. Her mom’s death pushed momma into the abyss of the unknown. Without my grandmother’s death, would I be here? In the following chapter, I describe the processes behind the projects that led to the photographs displayed in chapter four. Chapter three provides excerpts from the oral histories conducted with my mom. Together, these chapters form an example of an artistic approach to storytelling that allows my mom and me to unburden ourselves of the baggage we carry, literally and metaphorically. This thesis serves as a supplement to New Southern Studies, using experimental documentary methods to explore themes of religion and gender-norms that are mutable rather than fixed and stereotypical.
2 PROCESSES

In the spring of 2022, I worked on a photography project titled “Baggage: A Story of Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters.” I began this project in late Dr. David Wharton’s class, Photographing the South. The project began as a way to help my mom sort through objects she had recently acquired from her childhood home upon the death of her father. The project resulted in a series of about thirty photos with most accompanied by essays that represent leading themes of place, home, and family. “Baggage,” focuses on objects stored in trunks belonging to my mom and her sister Linda. The trunks were given to them by their mother when they were children; they hadn’t seen the contents in decades and were dreading going through the emotional baggage. The objects held a wealth of stories and memories. The process of storytelling not only brought the three of us closer, but it also proved to be a healing journey for my mom and Linda. This project inspired the subsequent project and showed me the importance of this unburdening of stories. This chapter serves as an introduction and companion to the following chapters. Here, I examine and describe the process that led to the collection of photographs presented in chapter four.

The second project, “Hoard of Homes,” focuses on the themes of home and family. The photographs represent the inherent transitory phase of young adulthood. My childhood home, where my parents still live, is situated directly across the street from my boyfriend’s home, creating tangible evidence for more metaphorical and existential questions about belonging and moving into the next chapter of my life. This most recent project additionally includes a collection of collaged images that meld the past and present.
I digitally collage archival family photos and new photos to create surrealistic images that explore love, nostalgia, and home. “Hoard of Homes,” views childhood through archival photos and memories and emphasizes the idea of play that is so often left in the days of childhood. Many of the photos presented were manipulated through forms of experimentation, harkening back to childhood when fairytales and reality had blurred edges.

2.1 “Baggage” Process

I know my grandmother because I know momma. I am unsure what to call her both out loud and in my thoughts. Grandmother too sterile, Opal too distant, both too formal. Momma gives shape to her form through word; I find snippets of her through photographs and mementos. I am left to think of her as a stranger, gone tragically too early. Yet my mother, momma, carries her name through story. When I was 14, my then boyfriend convinced me I was spelling my mom’s name wrong. “It’s supposed to be momma, not mama,” he insisted. I acquiesced, and now Anna is momma to me and forever will be. It doesn’t feel right to switch now. Mommy becomes mama becomes momma becomes me. The Mother, Maiden, and Crone become The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

When I think of family, I think of my dad’s side. I do not know most of momma’s side of the family. Even though I grew up only fifteen minutes away from my mom’s childhood home in Denmark where her father still lived, we rarely visited. Dan, my grandfather, exemplified many of the most stereotypical traits of a Southern white man. My mom’s mother, Opal, passed away nearly a decade before I was born; this led to strife between my mom and Dan and ultimately caused him to not be a part of my life. On the weekends, my family would go to my dad’s mom and his stepdad David’s house. Their house is situated in the rural community of Senatobia.
Lakes, Mississippi and is ultimately unchanged since I was a child. Nana and David are open
minded, pot smoking hippies, the opposite of my mom’s family. I was immersed in this world
frequently; my dad told stories of growing up with his parents following the guru Maharaji and
his teenage years in Gainesville, Florida, but my mom rarely talked about her life. Recently, my
mom’s dad passed away, and her two sisters and brother were engulfed in a family feud to sell
their dad’s house and the farmland.

My mom is the youngest of four. She was born when her oldest sister Linda was already
in college and the other two siblings were nearly out of high school. She was raised almost as an
only child on a pig farm in Denmark (in Lafayette County, near Oxford, Mississippi). Denmark
is a very small, rural community that many Oxfordians don’t even know exists. I have only
visited Denmark a few times, and I recently began thinking a lot about the half of my family with
whom I am barely acquainted.

This project fulfills both documentary and personal aspirations. It is autobiographical in
nature, yet it explores universal themes of love, loss, familial relationships, motherhood, and
womanhood. For the sake of conciseness, I’ve decided to limit the scope of the project, including
photos and stories from my mom. Memories are fleeting, especially when they aren’t verbalized.
I have attempted to give my mom the space to remember her early memories. Her disdain for the
beliefs of her father and the trauma from losing her mother has created an inability to talk about
decades of her life. In the past few years since their father Dan’s death, I have seen my mom
attempt to break this cycle and tell stories of her dad and childhood.

The photographs I have made show my mom going through the childhood trunks that her
mother gifted the three daughters. Her brother’s ephemera is contained throughout the women’s
trunks, his photos and vacation bible school awards mixing with the rest. Momma picks out
things to send him, reminding him of his past, choosing what deserves to be remembered. She, the woman, filters out unsavory memories of their mother’s death: condolence cards and photographs from the funeral. These trunks are housed in my parents’ garage, but it took my mom over a year to open them. Their physical placement mirrors the metaphorical idea of the memories residing in the subconscious.

This project explores the ignorance and invisibility that far too often comes with motherhood. Mothers are often expected to give away their past life of freedom once their child is born or else, they are labeled unfit or selfish. Delving into such a personal project was difficult and still is on many levels; I have had to work around my mom’s schedule as a high school teacher, and the subject matter is emotional. Thankfully, my mom handled it better than I expected. Her memories began to course again, as if grief had dammed the flow. As she unpacked the literal, physical objects, she unpacked memories and stories that were always sitting just beneath the surface, waiting to emerge. I still feel a large distance from my maternal grandmother. I know little of her, but I feel as if my mom’s memories have brought me closer to her spirit.

This collection of photographs conveys deep emotions and, ultimately, speaks to the ubiquitous difficulties of family relationships, death, and the baggage everyone carries. My grandmother was a skilled seamstress and quiltmaker, two crafts that are often overlooked as women's work when they are truly works of art. Women throughout space and time have not been recognized for their artistic endeavors. “Baggage” can be seen as an excavation of women's lives, shedding light on the elements overlooked, repressed, and unspoken.

In ancient Greco-Roman mythology, Pandora’s box contained all the evils which she released into the world. Women have long been gifted vessels at their weddings and other
occasions. After a marriage, women carried trunks with them, containing dowries that proved their worth. Women are associated with containers, a metaphor for their lives as those who contain both material objects as well as family histories. The mother is often viewed as the one who holds the family together, taking care of the children and keeping the home.

Women are given baggage and guilt from an early age and are expected to carry this through their lives and all relationships while taking care of those around them. In the Christian religion, women are told that, like Pandora, Eve brought all evil into the world, and therefore, they must repent for their unforgivable sins. This collective baggage has weighed upon women for thousands of years, seeping deep into our psyches and flowing through the cracks.

It took me far too long to see my mother as a person, a woman with a convoluted life and story. Histories are too often told through a patriarchal lens; I embarked upon this documentary project with the intent of centering my grandmother Opal in a familial web including my mom, her sister Linda, and inevitably myself. However, it ended up centering my mom, instead. It was difficult to grasp these concepts through photos, but I believe the themes are evident in the photographs I made of the objects that both spark memory and hold a life of their own. One day, time will turn these trunks and that which they contain to piles of dirt and metal fragments. The only things that will remain are non-textile objects: very little. We do not know what will come of digital photographs and the internet, but perhaps they will survive, reminding our ancestors of what once was, of the baggage we all carry. These chests, these trunks, these vessels hold more than tangible things. They hold moments of time forgotten and discarded, memories that spark stories of grief and happiness that are stored in the vessel of the woman. These objects live in a liminal space; momma has not yet decided whether she will bring everything upstairs or not. For now, they will stay in the garage, safe from most elements but exposed to time.
2.2 “Hoard of Homes” Process

The photos from this project convey a transitory idea of home in an inherently transient period of life; I spend my time divided amongst three places which I call home. My parents’ house, my boyfriend’s house, and my apartment. The photographs depict the physical closeness of my parents’ and boyfriend’s house while representing the lack of boundaries present in the situation. Family is something that can hold many different feelings and emotions; family and home are both words that can mean something different to an individual, even within the same family. My home is Water Valley, and it always has been. My parents chose this home for me, and for a while, I fought it, but it is growing into a different sort of home: a place where I am imagining starting a family of my own and welcoming family members.

Decades ago, my great-aunt, Aunt Dudu, and her husband, Uncle Steven, made their home in Snow Camp, North Carolina; they started a vintage store and bought a house on a few dozen acres of land where they are now daunted by the thought of moving to us, to me, to Water Valley. The impending doom of old age, sickness, and, inevitably, death, weighs heavy on us all. Perhaps most pressing about this move is the prospect of taking the thousands of material objects with them. Aunt Dudu is a collector of all things: clothes, art, books, jewelry, salt and pepper shakers, purses, tea kettles, and any other knickknack imaginable. I have inherited this collecting gene from both sides of my family: Aunt Dudu, my nana (her sister, my father’s mother), as well as my mother. Aunt Dudu inherited furniture, art, clothes, and other items from her family members; one day, these items will be passed into my care.

My paternal grandmother, Nana, gifted me softness and quiet early mornings. She taught me which weeds are safe to eat and that there is no such thing as boredom. Nana raised me on fairy tales and flowers and speed walks. When my great-grandmother Beverly died, Nana bought
a condo in Oxford for her old age. Eventually, I decided to attend the University of Mississippi, so I moved in and have made it my home. Nana plans to move into the condo eventually; to her, there is no rush nor timetable. However, Nana’s roof is caving in and there isn’t enough money to fix it. Her inheritance went to the condo in Oxford, her eventual home. We all worry about Nana; is the floor going to fall in, will the roof cave in while she’s near the stove, along with other worst-case scenarios.

My family has reached a pivotal point in life. I am faced with the reality of taking care of these people who I love dearly while also deciding how to begin my adult life. I have always struggled with the question of whether to leave home or stay. Through this project, I explore the inextricable difficulties of coming of age and un-coming of age. The nature of life is cyclical, and these moments are linked; I am the glue of my family.

What is family, what is home? How does one choose whether to leave or stay, how does one choose what to leave and what to take? What objects matter, why do we collect them, hoard them, and protect them even though they may be better off forgotten? How do memories betray you and propel you to move forward? Does storytelling allow us to let go of a little bit of this weight? What baggage do we carry, and how do we decide when to let go?

Throughout this project, I explore the three houses, or places, I call home. The condo, my parents’ house, and Macon and Graham’s house (the boys’ house). I met my boyfriend Graham only a couple weeks before he moved in with Macon, who owns a house directly across the street from my parents, my childhood home. The three of us have become a tight knit trio, a chosen family who happens to meld and connect with my given family. When Macon first bought his house, my mom joked that we would fall in love and get married. Instead, I fell in love with his
best friend. I now spend more time at the boys’ house than my parents’ house. In the following essay, I reflect on a weekend at my parents’.

Momma and Daddy’s House. Water Valley, Mississippi. August 2022: I spent the weekend in the suffocating comfort of my parents’ place. In the safety of their womb-like abode, I lose all motivation to tend to my own responsibilities. Sitting on the worn couch in the living room, I attempt to get some homework and reading done. It is cool inside despite the late summer heat; I feel as if I may doze off. Our elderly dog Max is snoring on the floor in front of me when suddenly, unannounced, in walks my brother Jackson. He paces back and forth, telling me about his new classes and classmates at Delta State. I guess I won’t get any work done. We go to the den where the blackout curtains block any light from entering, making it a perfect place to watch TV any time of the day. We search through the various streaming platforms, attempting to find a movie or show to watch. We decide instead to go to the dining room to play cards. Momma and daddy’s house allows us to revert to our childhood selves—all responsibility is forgotten. We rummage through the stocked pantry hoping to find a snack and refuse to clean the kitchen because “it was already like that when we got here.”

I rarely get bored when I’m at my apartment in Oxford or across the street from my parents where my boyfriend, Graham, and our best friend, Macon, live. Momma and daddy’s place is different, especially when Graham and Macon aren’t around. A fortress of memory, and a womb that simultaneously cradles me and smothers me. In this place, I have little to no privacy, but neither do my parents when Jackson and I are around. Due to our cats’ hatred of closed doors, there is a newfound open-door policy that has taken away even that sense of my own space. My childhood room is nearly void of my present self; forgotten ephemera from years past remind me of how much I’ve grown yet how close I’ve stayed. When I am here it is easier
to forget who I have become; I neglect all my daily rituals and responsibilities. I ought to write in
my journal, read articles, make photographs. Instead, I am stuck, so comfortable sitting with my
parents that the days slide past without any warning.

Is it just the child that reverts to some former self when in this space of comfort, or does
something happen to the parent as well? I’m sure my presence affects them; since basically
moving into the boys’ house, I’ve developed the habit of coming in unannounced at any time of
the day (or night) to “borrow” food and see what they’re up to. This weekend is different because
I am staying at their place, not Graham and Macon’s, which is also becoming mine.

Momma and I sit on the front porch, watching the neighborhood cats stalk and play. She
smokes cigarettes, and I attempt to stop looking at my phone. Max’s legs are failing, and I help
him up and down the porch stairs. Our house sits atop a hill, so we’re forced to walk up many
stairs to get into any of the three entrances. We worry about Max and try to come up with a plan
to create a ramp at the back entrance. Momma says, “I guess Max is the first of the elderly we’ll
have to take care of.” We often sit on this porch and discuss the future of Aunt Linda, Nana, and
Aunt Dudu. Later, looking off the back deck into the hilly backyard, she and daddy and I wonder
if we can build some little houses for Nana and Aunt Dudu to make this inevitable future of
caretaking easier. I try to imagine these people living in the backyard, creating little places of
their own and shaping ours.

Finally, Graham gets home, and I remember there is life outside of my familial bubble. I
get my homework done and I take a shower. I go on a walk, leaving the house for the first time
in over 24 hours. Momma and daddy’s house (my house, our house), is a full and inviting place
that nourishes and protects parts of myself but neglects and triggers other parts; it houses photos
and mementoes that create a warped collage of memories. Boundaries are nonexistent, and I
meld into the fabric of space and time. I am bombarded with my family’s issues, and I shut down, leaning into mindless distractions such as TV and drinking too much beer. In a place of excess, I am rendered into a state of semi-consciousness. I am yet I am not.

“Hoard of Homes” process continued: I have spent the greater part of my life, like most teenagers and people in their early twenties, attempting to figure out who I am. I used to think that I had to leave my hometown, Water Valley, MS, to “find myself.” Before the Covid-19 pandemic, I had grandiose plans of moving to Italy, becoming an archaeologist, and starting over. I wanted to run away. However, when paranoia of the pandemic set in, my mom convinced Jackson, his girlfriend Brooklyn, and me to move back into their house. Boundaries blurred throughout the months I lived with my parents. Free will felt like a mythological creature; I had just returned from the most carefree and adventurous time of my life and here I was, trapped with my family who I loved but began to deeply resent. Fear of the unknown controlled our lives for nearly a year. I defended my thesis over zoom and had a virtual graduation. I did not move to Italy.

Finally, in October, my mom realized the government was not going to enforce Martial Law and block the county lines, so Jackson, Brooklyn, and I moved back into the condo. What was once a seemingly oppressive living arrangement became surprisingly pleasant. Before Jackson, Brooklyn, and I went through a pandemic together, our living arrangement was insufferable. We fought more than we talked and living together felt like cruel and unusual punishment. Jackson and Brooklyn were in high school, and I was a depressed college student with hardly any friends. The forced intimacy and isolation the pandemic created seeped into my relationship with my little brother and Brooklyn. We became a unit that cooked, played board games, and mused about life. Once this bond was forged, the space we cohabitated felt far
different than it had in the previous years. We still fought as siblings do, but a newfound trust and respect was there and stayed until Jackson and Brooklyn moved out last year (August 2022).

Now, I still call the condo home, but it isn’t the same without the familial presence. I have taken over the extra closets to house my collection of clothes, I’ve spread out my knickknacks and pieces of furniture that were cluttering my room, and I’ve moved the books that were piled on my floor onto proper bookshelves. It looks more like a home, yet something is missing. I escape to Water Valley for half of each week, neglecting my laundry and dirty dishes. I am pulled to my other homes, homes that are surviving and overflowing with the lives of friends, families, and pets. My relationship with Graham and Macon allows a new experience; I can visit my parents, but I am not stuck at their house where I struggle to find inspiration. When I start to feel myself relapsing into the monotony of adolescence, I can run across the street and feel the spark of creativity return. I have constant playmates who have adopted me into their own family. On the other hand, I have provided a new family for Graham and Macon. My parents have embraced them as their own; we share resources and care for each other.

When I was in fifth grade, a house across the street went up for rent. My little brother and I stood in the yard holding hands. With our eyes squeezed shut, we wished for a family with children our age to move in—a few months later, a single dad with a daughter my age and a son Jackson’s age rented the house. We quickly became best friends and spent the next few years roaming the streets of Water Valley and running back and forth between our houses. Now, I spend my time running back and forth between the boys’ house—these childhood memories parallel the present, and I find myself lapsing back into old habits while creating new ones.

I am unsure what the future holds. Graham has plans to move to Starkville to pursue a Masters in Agribusiness. I do not know how much longer I’ll live at the condo; I crave time in
Water Valley so much that I’ll likely end up with a home back in my hometown. The things I was running from, I now run toward. Home is split into various places in my psyche; what I once thought of as my home is now my parents’, and the boys’ house is where I spend most of my time, yet I have my own home where I feel most comfortable. My clothes and other material objects are strewn about these three spaces.

Is home where you stay, where you eat, where you sleep, where your things are, or perhaps where you feel most yourself? In this inherently transitory period of young-adulthood, I am stretched thin, wondering where I will go, what is next. Do I stay? Can I call yet another place home, collecting another place to put into my hoard of homes.

During quarantine, I began the daunting project of going through thousands of family photos. On this quest, I found thousands of photos from my childhood. Recently, I have started using these childhood images my parents took to create photo collages. They are presented as scanned documents of the Van Dyke Brown prints that were created using digital negatives of images that I edited in Photoshop. The washed out, antiquated aesthetic creates a metaphorical representation of the blurriness of my childhood memories. Even though my mom’s past is more distant than my own, her memories and stories are new to me, so they are displayed as color images. The new photos in the collages are landscapes of my surroundings that are in the same physical space in which I dwelled in childhood. The photographs were made outside, representing the freedom of play that has been a constant throughout my life in the same spaces.

I began the Van Dyke Brown process in photographer Brooke White’s Alternative Photographic Processes class. The prompt for the Van Dyke Brown project was “Obsession and Intuition: Regarding Beauty.” I decided to focus on my obsession with memory that leads me to intuitively journal and write poetry. I represent these extreme obsessive emotions through the
inclusion of text layered into the photographic collages. The Van Dyke Brown process is hands on and allows a level of experimentation that is not present in newer forms of digital photography. The Van Dyke Brown process creates its “image as a result of the reaction and reduction of ferric (iron) salt to a ferrous state during exposure to UV light…a Sir John Herschel Argentotype observation from 1842.”

The process is viewed as impermanent and dysfunctional, but for my project, I view the ephemerality as an artistic choice which parallels the themes presented in this thesis. Coating the paper by hand creates a painterly edge that seamlessly blurs the photograph into nothingness. I used the light of the sun to expose my photographs; the process itself reminds me of childhood experiments that fed an artistic yearning.

These photographs represent the often borderless and boundaryless space in which I find myself in Water Valley. My childhood self is seen capering in ghostlike depictions that blur the lines of past and present. She is always there, an innocent fledgling, urging me to play. However, some images also parallel the trauma of my grandmother’s death. Our family dog, Max, recently died. His legs finally did give out, and his mind began to slip. In chapter four, a photo of my brother and me holding snowballs is cut out and superimposed to the left of Max’s grave which is adorned with the early spring daffodils (see figure 7). To the right, we sit with our first dog Zeus, representing the infinite loop of life. My memories are alive in Water Valley. They are held in street signs, daffodil patches, and faces of old friends. The photo collages are interspersed throughout the other images, serving as fragments of memories that traditional photographs cannot portray.

Initially, I saw each project as separate entities; I expected chapter three to include three parts of photography projects. However, I realized that this is much too forced and sterile. The photos speak to each other and work better when they are viewed as an interconnected piece rather than multiple parts. The mixture works as a metaphor of its own, representing the ephemerality of memories and objects. My childhood photos are nestled within photographs of the present and then followed by photographs depicting my mother as a child. Our lives merge into one, seeping into the collective consciousness of all women who have lived and will live. The scope of this thesis has continuously evolved to create a meaningful story that will inspire others to reach out to their mothers, grandmothers, sisters. I hope to present a timeless, universal, and thought-provoking story of mothers and daughters throughout space and time.
The following excerpts are transcriptions from two separate oral histories I recorded with my mom. I diverge from traditional oral history methods, purposely breaking apart and interweaving the stories to create a cohesive narrative that details important periods of my mom’s adolescence and early adulthood. The chosen stories contain mythological elements and universal themes often found in anecdotal stories and folklore passed down orally for thousands of years. Momma’s stories feature prophetic dreams, a fight between a boar and a bear, questionable parentage, the years leading up to her own mother’s untimely death, and the surreal happenings encompassing death itself. Momma grew up on a pig farm in Denmark, Mississippi where her family grew and raised nearly all the food they needed to survive. These oral histories are not only important to my own family, but also to the history of the region. It is becoming less common to have a small, familial plot of land. My ignorance of momma’s upbringing parallels the ignorance of many scholars and the public at large; the organic and natural fad was nothing new for many rural southerners. They had been farming and providing for their families for generations.

Throughout these interviews, I have learned an entirely new side of my mom’s life history. From a young age, she was expected to take care of her family; she learned sustainable farming techniques from her mom and grandfather, some of which she has passed on to me. These conversations have sparked new memories and placed my mom in a new perspective. Before she became momma, she was a daughter, a maiden. As I reach this new phase of life, she too continues to grow as a person. We walk this path together—I follow her, and she follows me.
3.1 The Bear and the Dream

Momma: I have three things to tell you. I'll tell you the story about the bear. And I'll tell you a story about two dreams that I've had about my mom that were significant to milestones in my life. And they're pretty good dreams, like vivid. I don't think that those dreams were concoctions. I think that was my mom visiting me, like a reaching out from the veil. I firmly know that that's the truth. I firmly know that those two dreams of my mom were a reach out from the veil. The first dream that I had about my mom was way after her death. And it was--I know the exact date-it was February 28, 1997, because that's the night before I married Paul and she said that I needed--okay, no, it wasn't the night before I married him. It was the night before that. It was the 27th of February 1997. And this is the dream.

We were in Neilson's department store in the pantyhose section, and I was going to get this particular color. I was really very excited that they had it and they had my size. I was debating whether I should get multiple pairs. They're expensive, especially for me. I was thinking, I'll just get one. I mean, what could go wrong with pantyhose? I wear them every day. This is the ‘90s. They'll be fine. And in the dream my mom said, “You have to get three. You have to get three because when you put the first pair on, you're going to run it and you're going put the second pair on and at first it's going to be fine. But you want to wear them with the dress after the wedding and you're going to run them during the wedding. So, you have to have three pairs.” I said, “That's so much money.” And she said, “You have to get them. You have to get three pairs.” So I did. And then next scene-change and I'm packing for the honeymoon. We were going to New Orleans, and then we were going to Florida. She’s telling me that it’s going to be extra warm. She says, “You're going to forget your bathing suit. It’s not going to make it there. But that's okay because Marie has some in the bottom drawer of her dresser in the spare
bedroom.” Like, okay, whatever. I'm not going to forget it. But this is crazy because she doesn’t know my sister-in-law, Marie. She died before I ever met Paul.

So, we have the wedding. I'm getting dressed. I'm really nervous. I run my hose, and I’m glad I got three pairs. I put on the second pair and everything's fine. Then, when we're doing our change, I snag my hose and just tear a huge hole in the second pair. So, I have the third pair.

Alright, we go to New Orleans. We have this great time. That third pair of pantyhose lasts the whole time. I wear them through multiple changes and multiple outfits. And then we get to Senter and Marie's beach house. I don't have a single swimsuit. I've left them at home. But Marie had some the bottom drawer of her dresser. Okay. So that's crazy.

The other dream I had was when I was pregnant with Greta, and we were living on Garfield Avenue in Oxford, and, I don't know, it was before I had you. I don't have any recollection of where I was in the pregnancy or anything, but I dreamed that my mom was in the house. There was a hallway that's not wide enough to put furniture in it, not even a thin table. It's just a standard hallway. But in my dream, the hallway was just a little wider. We didn't know if we were having a girl or boy, and there was the rocker that Paul and I had bought and a little footstool. They was set up in the hallway, outside the baby’s room. It was a perfect place for it because in my dream, the hallway was much wider. And my mom was sitting in the rocker, and she was looking as I was coming up the hall from the master bedroom. I had the baby in my arms, and she said, “Give her to me.” And I'm like, “Oh, I'm having a girl.” So, I give you to her and you have a whole ton of hair and she's rocking you. And she says, “This is going to be a great little girl. She's going to have so much joy and happiness with you and Paul,” and she's just kind of saying a little blessing. And then that was it. And I thought, oh, we’re having a little girl.
She's going to have a whole lot of hair. Well, okay, so then I have a little girl and you don't have any hair on your head. But you are furry, like a little monkey, everywhere else.

I think those were my mom coming across the veil. And I think the dates might be important, you know, February 27th, to have the pantyhose. Two days before my wedding. Maybe subconsciously I put my fingers through the pantyhose, I was nervous. But I think that dream where I didn't know that I was having a girl and then she said the little blessing. That would have been February or March of 1998, because you were born in April, and it was pretty soon before you were born, sometime in the last couple of months.

Greta: Tell me about how your mom found out she was pregnant with you.

Momma: It was 1970, and she was born in 1930, so what?

Greta: She was 40.

Momma: I guess she was 39 when she found out, which isn’t that old.

Greta: They call anything over 35 a geriatric pregnancy.

Momma: Jeez. Anyway. She goes to the doctor and he’s like, “Well, I think it might be ovarian cancer. We think you have a tumor.” Lo and behold, she’s pregnant.

Greta: Had she had cancer before?
Momma: She had not had cancer, but she had had a cyst. Probably because my mom didn’t breastfeed—she took medication from the time she had Linda (1951) to the time she had me (1971). There was a medication that they would give women. I don't know if it was a kind of birth control. I don't know what it was, but it would help dry out milk because they wanted women to formula feed. That was the thing. They thought formula was better—stupid. And then 16, 17 years later they were saying don't give drugs to woman. It's better for your breast health to breastfeed, it's better for your baby. So, the breast cancer that my mom had was probably caused by that drug that they would give you after you had.

Greta: That’s fucked up.

Momma: Yeah. It's really fucked up. It's stupid, but there's no way to know it. But I do know this. The cancer that my mom had is one of the more easily treated cancers today. Like, if you're diagnosed with that cancer, that sort of breast cancer tumor, they're like, “Oh, well, this is what we do.” And its recovery rate is high. Maybe she didn’t want to admit that she may be pregnant. Maybe she had been having that affair with the red-headed preacher. I know he left soon after my mom knew she was pregnant. I know my mom had bad postpartum depression.

Greta: Wait, what? You haven’t told me about that.

Momma: Really? Well, my uncle Ken felt compelled to tell my best friend April’s parents. Her mom thought it was unfair that I didn’t know so she told April and April told me and I told my
mom. She got mad and called Ken and fussed at him, but she never said if it was true or not. I was born with bright red hair, a telling sign. Then it was orange and it just turned darker as I got older. I told Linda in 2015 when she moved here, around the time daddy died. I felt like daddy hasn’t exactly been responsible for me, he didn’t check in on me. I never felt like we had any kind of bond really.

Greta: That’s crazy. You need to do a DNA test or something. I can’t believe you never told me this.

Greta: I swear you told me a story about a bear and a boar fighting. And Opal was supposed to go to your dad's mom's house, and she didn't go to the house, right?

Momma: Oh, I forgot. A bear and a boar fighting, and nobody believed her. Alright, alright. I remember now. I haven't thought about that story in a long time, I’ve got to remember to write things down. My parents Opal and Dan lived in that old cabin in Denmark (Mississippi) across from my grandparents, from daddy's parents. And mama was going to go and see Malley, my grandmother, but she couldn’t because there was a bear outside the house. Well, she couldn’t tell if it was a boar or a bear. She just stayed in the house and didn’t go. This happened a few times, so it began to be, well, Opal doesn’t want to go to Malley’s house. Maybe she doesn't want to work, maybe she does want to garden, maybe she doesn't want to help can. Maybe she doesn't want to do anything. Maybe she doesn’t like Malley. It got to be a problem. And then Danny, my granddaddy, would go over there and he'd walk mama over. Granddaddy did that, and she would go. Then they thought it was pretty prissy that she wouldn't walk across without Danny to escort
her. And then another day her excuse was that the bear and the boar were fighting. This was going to be a good thing because now she could show my dad where they fought, because there’d be a mess in the yard. But they still didn’t believe her. So, you know, they’re newlyweds and the in-laws are thinking what kind of prissy piece of work is Opal? They just thought it was excuses.

One day, my dad came home and mama’s waving at him to tell him the bear is out there, and daddy ends up getting chased into the tree. There's no telephone. This is the ‘40s. They’re way out in the country and mama's hollering and yelling and daddy’s hollering and yelling. And Malley and Danny think they're just having a fuss. And they thought, “Yeah, yeah, well, we know because she's so prissy.” And then granddaddy comes over and witnesses it, but daddy’s been yelling to mama, “Opal, get a gun!” or whatever. She doesn't know what to do. I think maybe she does bring the shotgun out or maybe granddaddy does. I don't know. I don't remember the story. But anyway, the bear and the boar were there, and that was finally proof that she wasn't shirking out on being a good daughter in law.

3.2 The Farm

Momma: My dad’s dad, also named Dan Murchison, was super tall, super thin, and grandma Malley was super short and super thin. She already had Alzheimer’s cause I was born late to mama and daddy. But she was lots of fun. She had some days where she was like a little child, and we would play on the swings and all sorts of things. I had no idea that she had Alzheimer's. Everyone just treated her like anyone else. After granddaddy died when I was 13, she lived with us. A couple days before my granddad died, we plowed the fields under for the winter—where he planted the corn and the peas. The yard had an embankment that was covered with daffodils
and big oak trees and then the field was right down the hill. Granddaddy had a stroke and died two or three nights later. He was in his mid-nineties. I think 93 or 94.

But he worked happily until the day that he died. That was the first death that I had to go through. And that was that was pretty hard. I missed granddaddy quite a lot. If you think about everything I know about gardening, it probably came from him because he was always there when we planted our vegetable garden, and he was there to talk about if there was anything wrong with the plant. He knew that I loved cucumbers more than anything out of the garden, but, you know, cucumbers get pretty large. I liked them when they were about two inches long. So, every day he would bring two or three little cucumbers to me at the house. I can remember riding the tractor with granddaddy, plowing the fields, and doing all sorts of things with him.

I was responsible for the first two rows of the garden when I was little, I guess because mama needed to keep me busy, but those were the grass rows. They were atrocious, they were awful. But I was a little kid so that’s what I did on the backside of the garden. There was a little stream back there, too. Mama would freeze the peas and butterbeans, and we had corn. She canned the tomatoes, and she made vegetable soups. We grew cabbage and we'd make sauerkraut with the cabbage, which was always delicious. Mama and my grandmother, her mother, would chop the sauerkraut outside on a table with a cutting board and a knife into just perfect slivers, tiny, tiny, thin slivers and they’d put up the sauerkraut.

We had a mean rooster that mama complained about because it would chase me and try to flog me. One day, the rooster got me. It jumped on my face and flogged me. I have a scar on my cheek from that. So, mama got the rooster this time and wrung its neck. We had Coq au Vin for dinner that night. As she was chasing the rooster, she would tell it, “I’m going to catch you and I’m going to make Coq au Vin of you tonight.” And so that’s what happened—we ate that
rooster that flogged me. Strange, but it wasn't traumatic. It was just, you know, that was just mama and that was just life. And I still have the scar to remember it.

I was maybe 14 when mama was diagnosed with breast cancer. There were always herbs in the garden right outside the kitchen. Somehow, she had herbs year-round. I don’t know what she did. She had a field of daylilies right in the backyard. Even after granddaddy died, we kept the garden spot at his house. Up until my mom died, we planted that garden, and it fell on me to do all of that as a young kid under my mom’s direction. Anyway, my brother had come back to Mississippi with his wife who’s also named Anna, but her childhood nickname is Dodie, so that’s what we call her. So, Dodie and I took care of that garden. Dodie was from a wealthy family in Alexandria, Louisiana. Her mother made jewelry, but also dealt with vintage and estate jewelry. She had absolutely no idea about gardening. Zero, zero. She didn't know how to pick a green bean from a vine. But she embraced it. What else are you going to do? She's here. And this was just instantly life. So instead of mama going and working in the garden, Dodie and I did every bit of it. This huge vegetable garden. This is from the time I’m 14 until I’m 18. And Dodie’s right there with me. It’s just the two of us. Granddaddy is not here to help.

I’d actually forgotten about this. I mean, it was a huge part of my life. Dodie and I would ride our bikes a couple miles down to the garden. When the vegetables started producing, we would drive the farm truck and haul heavy buckets. It was a huge undertaking. And to realize that’s how hard my mom worked. We’d take it to the house and mama would help us prep it all. But Dodie and I had to can it, freeze it, shuck the corn off the cob. I mean, it was the most work you can imagine doing. It was a full-time job. And Dodie’s question always was, “Why do we do it? It’s not like we have a hundred people to feed. What the hell are we doing?” But then once winter came and she realized we spent almost no money at the grocery store, she loved it.
By the time I was a senior in high school, mama was in and out of the hospital in Tupelo. I ran the house. I did all the shopping, all the cleaning, all the cooking. I skipped a lot of school and would go to Tupelo just to hang out with her. She’d had a double mastectomy by now. She had gone through radiation. She had gone through chemotherapy. Her body was ravaged. She was insistent that I go to Mississippi State because I needed to experience time on my own. Mama insisted that Mark get a job and get settled in Houston, Texas, because she knew she was dying. She didn’t tell us that she had bone cancer and an inoperable brain tumor.

Mark and Dodie moved back to Texas within a week of me going to Mississippi State. I remember coming home for Thanksgiving and mama couldn't get up off the couch or out of the chair by herself anymore. That was the first Thanksgiving meal that I cooked all on my own. Mark and Linda came home. I cooked the entire Thanksgiving meal, and they knew how sick she was. I knew how sick she was, but I had to take my finals and they had to go back to work. There were some things that mama wanted to make sure that we had recipes for—that I knew how to make. Between that Thanksgiving and Christmas, she went through every single cake recipe. She would lay on the couch, and it was a low back couch, so she'd prop up on pillows. I would stand at the big island bar and cook, and the only thing I could see of mama would be her hand and she would tell me how to do things with her hand.

She’d say, “Whip it more. Don't use the mixer, use a whisk,” and then she'd fall asleep and then she'd wake up, “You’re not doing it right. You're not doing it right.” I’d say, “I'm not even doing anything. I'm just sitting here.” So that was like super great. Good memories. Then my mom died January 7th of 1990. The only cake I remembered how to make, though, was a coconut cake. That's an Italian cream coconut cake. That was my dad's favorite. It's still the only cake I ever make. So, by default, it has to be everyone's favorite. But my mom, she baked all
sorts of cakes. She'd make carrot cake, German chocolate cake, all of these amazing desserts. She just had a handheld mixer. She would always start the egg whites by hand with the whisk because she said that was therapy. She would whisk the hell out of the egg whites and get them to a frothy point and then finish them with the hand mixer. She used a whisk for cream, butter, and sugar. She didn’t use the hand mixer until it was light and fluffy. I guess working out her angst.

3.3 Opal’s Bible

Momma: After mama died, I had her bible to look at because she took notes in her bible. I wanted to find some verses she had underlined to read at her funeral. I was a big worrier and nail biter as a kid. I’ve got these extra sweaty hands and, you know, I was just kind of anxious, to the point that my neck would get so tense and sore that I wouldn’t be able to turn it. My whole body would just seize up. And of course, in the eighties, you didn’t know that you were anxious. You just kept on keeping on. Anyway, I had mama’s bible, and it had her little bookmark that her friend had tatted for her. Mama always kept it stiffly starched, but after she died, I decided I was gonna keep the bible and store it, so I washed the bookmark really well because I was afraid that the starch in the bookmark would draw bugs to the bible, and I knew I was going to hide it.

I went through blindly, uncontrollably crying, and wrote down some of the verses that my mom had often quoted to me. I just remember one about lilies of the field—they don’t worry. God takes care of them. So why should you worry? Consider the lilies of the field. Do they nod and weep and worry? Now I’m curious, I want to look at those notecards that are in the bible. I’m so surprised that they’re there. I really blocked out that I had put the bible in my trunk until the day we found it, because when we went to clean out my mom and dad’s house, Linda really
looked for that bible. And I honestly had no idea where it was. I figured Tina had it or maybe
daddy had misplaced it somewhere. I completely blanked out that I put it in the bottom of my
trunk underneath all my senior high school memorabilia. I figured no one would go through all
that personal stuff. Then I forgot about it. It’s been 33 years.

At that time, I was very into Christianity because Nicky was very into Christianity.
Breaking up with Nicky was like breaking up with God. Not that he was God—it was like I
broke up with him and the Southern Baptist Church at the same time. And I said, “Both of you,
you’ve got to get back and let me figure this out,” because grew up in Denmark, Mississippi,
with the Baptist church always in the background. That was something that I had break away
from—that indoctrination. But even so, that Bible was important to me. And that was something
that Mama and I shared because she was very religious and going to church and prayer and the
belief in God and all the things of Christianity were very, very important to my mom. I
understand why that Bible would be important to someone else. But I do not understand how it
could be more important than it is to me, to anyone else. So, I hid it and I still have it and I'm
going to always have it. There are certain things that I have from my mom—like that salt urn and
I have that Bible and I have the cornbread skillet. And I finally had to tell Linda that whenever
you eat at my house, you eat salt from that salt urn—everything that you put into your mouth.
And that's just how you'll have to enjoy it because I'm not sharing it. And the cast iron skillet. I
don’t know that Linda even knows how to make cornbread. Daddy taught me how to make
cornbread in that skillet and he gave me that skillet.
3.4 The Funeral

Momma: Did we find that story downstairs about my mom and the funeral and the empty two-liter bottles and her elbows?

Greta: No, I don’t remember that one.

Momma: I thought we did. That’s a dang good short story. That was when my mom died in January of ‘90. And the surreal things that you have to do for the dead to prep their body to be viewed. The American way of burying the dead is completely commercialized and strange. And I certainly felt like that as a freshman in college. Certainly felt like that about my mom's death. Like, all the things that had to be done that I had ignored doing and just subconsciously ignored doing them, knowing that my mom was very sick, knowing that my mom was going to die, knowing what was expected of me to wear, knowing it was expected of me to have an outfit for my mom together and all that sort of thing. And I mean, we all knew she was dying. The one thing that I had neglected doing was getting myself together a couple of black outfits. I've just come out of the eighties, and everything has paint splatter, or half is one color, half is another, or it has sequins on it. I just didn't have a top to wear. But Dodie, my brother Mark's wife had plenty of black things. And my sister Linda insisted that we couldn't wear the same thing.

But the most interesting part about prepping for the dead was my mom's prep for death because she knew that she would be in an open casket, and she knew that she'd have to have something to put on her body and something to put on her feet and a wig because she was bald from chemotherapy. She had said which wig she wanted. And she sent me to Neilson's department store to pick out a couple of dresses, which was odd because my mom made
everything for herself and everything for me. And second of all, she said, “You can only get from the sales rack because I'm going to be buried in it. I'm never going to wear it, but I want to know how it feels.” She wanted it to be comfortable. Like it mattered. And she knew it didn't matter, but it mattered. So, I pick out a few things. One had a shirt with a zipper down the back, and the other was a smart Kelly Green knit skirt suit with a shirt that just pulled over. I don’t remember the third. The zipper hurts, it’s terrible, so that’s a no. Then the second one I picked out, my mom said, “Okay, let me try the top on.” And so, we do the Kelly Green and she’s like, “Hey, I really like this. It’s pretty comfortable. I’m just going to kind of wear it so y’all can see me in it.” She gets back in bed. It’s this big struggle because she’s very weak and very sick but it’s very funny. She’s like, “How do you like my burial outfit?” And we're like, “This is weird.” But she wants it to be something new, but also something that we get used to seeing her in.

Then she insisted, “Get the wig that I'm going to wear for whenever I die and style it up and make sure that it looks the way I want it to look because I'm going to do this viewing and I want to look the way I should look. I want this color lipstick.” It was nice. It was not any different than helping someone get ready for something they had a dress up for. It didn't make me sad. It made me annoyed. It was a bother. I wasn’t thinking about this being something I'm going to cry about or whatever. Mama’s bossing me, she’s being my mother. I’m 18. Oh, and every time I went to Neilson’s I was supposed to buy myself something to wear to the funeral because I had daddy’s checkbook. Mama told me to buy something black. But instead, I bought this gorgeous pink alpaca sweater that was a turtleneck. But for punishment it was so bad itchy I couldn't wear it. After she died, I threw it away. It was very expensive, and I shouldn’t have bought it. But I was lashing out.
Here's the funny thing, though, about that green Kelly Green and navy suit. She's all laid out in her casket. It's stressful. It's sad. My best friend Heather Sneed is standing beside me. She stood beside me the entire day of the funeral and she literally held me up. She stood with her arm around my waist. At one point she said, I have to trade sides because my arm is breaking. If Heather Sneed hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been there. But the funniest thing that happened is somewhere in the midst of all of that, this sweet little lady came in that was in my mother's Sunday school group. She had on that dress from the Neilson’s sales rack, that Kelly Green dress with navy blue, and she walked up to the casket. She’s like, “Oh, oh, dear Lord, oh, dear Lord.” And she left. But a little while later she came back, and she had a different dress. That was the funniest thing that could have happened.

Even funnier is the production that went behind getting my mother’s body ready for that casket in January of 1990. First of all, Linda wasn't there when we went through this whole thing with my mom. It was just me, my mom, and Dodie kind of flitting in and out. She had decided on what to wear. And then she decided that the top was so comfortable that it became something that she wore often, the top of her burial outfit. And Linda didn't want her to be buried in it because she thought it was, I don't know, just her old sweater or something. I'm like, “You don't understand.” I made Linda finally understand that. And then the wig, my mom's favorite wig, Linda didn't like that. Linda and I had this big fuss about the wig. I can remember standing at the top of the stairs and flinging wigs down at Linda yelling, “This is not the one.” And I'd fling another down to the bottom, “And this is not the one either, dammit!” and I’d go in her bedroom, tear it up, and throw it down. And then my brother Mark walks in and he’s watching this barrage of wigs falling. He doesn’t say anything. Finally, I told Linda, “This is the only wig that is left.
This is the wig that mama styled herself. This is the wig that she is going to wear.” Mark came up the stairs and he’s like, “Okay, then give me the wig.” And the way he said it, it was hilarious.

Anyway, Mark takes the wig and her outfit and everything to the funeral home—he does all of that. Then later on, we all went to make sure mama looked right in her casket. It's all so stupid—we show up and it's like her arms are way down in the casket, like, way down in the casket. And her fingers are—it looks uncomfortable. It looks strangely awkward. No one would just lay down and have your arms sunk so far down. It was just oddly strange to us. And the guy at the funeral home said that usually there's this U-shaped thing that goes in the casket that they use to hold up the arms. But for some reason, the casket that we bought just didn't have that. We're like, “Well, put one in it.” He's like, “Well, it's $500.” And I'm thinking, like, that's ridiculous. It's already ridiculous. Just go get some pillows from the Wal-Mart. He’s like, “You can't, there's regulations,” or whatever. He says, “But what we can do is, we can put these empty two-liter Coke bottles, if we peel everything off, there's no regulation about using those, and we'll put it under the satin and that will lift her arms up like these pillows.” We’re like, “Okay, do it. Put those two-liter Coke bottles under my mother's elbows so that she looks right. And then you can take them out, right? I mean, she's not going to be buried with two-liter Coke bottles under the satin, right?” He's like, “Once it's in, it can't come out because FDA rules.” Okay, whatever. So, he gets the two-liters in there. It's not quite right. Then he puts a one-liter coke bottle under the two-liter Coke bottle and then it's right. So, my mother is buried with that Kelly Green with navy trim sweater outfit, the right wig, the right shoes, the right pantyhose, and some damn two-liter and one-liter coke bottles under her elbows, because that's the American way of death. Got to look right when you die.
Greta: The story we found down there was the one about the day you found out your mom died and going to the hospital.

Momma: So that was the one about the cows.

Greta: No, you don’t say anything about cows.

Momma: The day that mama died, the cows got out. We had this neighbor that was a real son of a bitch. I was walking out the back door of mama and daddy’s house to get in the truck with Nicky Brewer, my current boyfriend. No, my fiancé, I’m 18. So, I’m getting in the truck to go to Tupelo to see my mom at the hospital. Then, the neighbor comes over and says, “The cows are out.” So, I took off whatever cute shoes I had on, and I put my boots on and I said, “Come on, Nicky, we’re getting the tractor.” It takes like an hour, and then we’re cold, we’re wet, and we’re muddy. Now, what happened earlier in the day, because this was Sunday, I’d been to church with Nicky and his family. While we were there, Nicky’s mother got the call that my mom was dead. Nobody tells me. He lets me go home, get the cows, all that. There was no controlling me. Then we’re driving and we’re in my dad’s truck and I have a full on fit that I’m not the one driving. That delays us even more because I make him pull over. We finally get there and I’m wearing that itchy pink frickin’ sweater, and I’ve brought some fudge because my dad has a terrible sweet tooth and doesn’t like the vending machine desserts. I walk in with this fudge and my mom is dead and daddy wouldn’t let them take her to the morgue until I got there. So, through all of that—church, the cows, changing clothes, having an argument about driving—all of that, my mom was dead, and daddy was waiting on me to get there. Why wouldn’t they have told me?
Greta: I’m glad you didn’t marry him. Didn’t your mom tell you not to marry him before she died?

Momma: He didn’t want me to go back to college after mama died. He was like, “You’re just gonna be at home with children, why do you need to go to school?” But that was not doable for me because I had to go to college. I had to. I had to. I had to do that. There were no questions about that. That was the only worldliness I could imagine being exposed to. And he was going to take that away from me. So, I promptly broke up with him. That was crazy. Daddy was not happy about that. I had broken up with Nicky before long I started dating someone else, but his mom came out and called me a whore. I’m pretty sure I said, “Oh, my mama didn’t want me to marry him.” That happened on the back steps of daddy’s house. She got out, just like that neighbor telling me about the cows, and she stood in the exact spot and told me I was a whore. Whatever, bless her heart. I really liked her.

3.5 Ruminations on Momma’s Stories

Momma flits from tragedy to comedy; her stories contain elements of both, but she tells them in a matter-of-fact manner. She did not become a mother when I was born but when her mom was diagnosed with cancer. Without fully realizing it, momma adamantly refused to succumb to societal standards after her mother’s death. Her fiancé at the time, fueled by religion and his upbringing, expected momma to sacrifice her education for their relationship. Momma’s stories situate her in a specific culture, one that is steeped in religion and gender expectations,
and her actions distanced her from her upbringing. Finding her mom’s bible reminds her of the years spent believing a truth that was not her own.

I watch her remember, and I watch her forget. Sometimes, her imagination takes hold, and she creates mythologies on the spot. She has begun telling more stories at random. For years, I would gab away, telling my mom about my day at school or work, never giving her the space to do the same. This process has reversed the storytelling. As I mature, I become a better listener. Momma is fatigued after each oral history session, but she never complains. Instead, she seems excited that she can still remember, and she muses that she ought to write things down. Momma is a writer, a poet, art artist. I hope my attention inspires her to return to her passions and dreams. Children take, and mothers give. I want to return the favor and listening is the first step. Momma tells me anecdotal stories about her mom, but never gives an absolute description. I take these fragments, quilting a story in my mind, stitching it together with my own ideas and mythologies.
Last year, I began documenting the objects held in the trunks my mom’s mother gifted her daughters when they were girls. My maternal grandmother died before I met her when my mom was only 19. As my mom excavated the physical objects that she hadn’t seen in over thirty years, she uncovered memories and stories as well. Through this process, I have gotten to know my mom as a maiden, a woman who has suffered losses, a woman who has loved, a woman before me. I parallel these images depicting familial mythologies with excerpts from Greco-Roman mythologies as well as poetry inspired by the contradictory and vague histories of these goddesses, written by ancient men. These writings stem from oral storytelling traditions passed through women.

The myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, often combined into one goddess, represents the havoc which occurs when a mother and daughter are separated. Persephone is stolen by Hades, the god of the underworld. Demeter, the goddess of the harvest falls into a great depression, causing an unrelenting winter. Persephone becomes the Queen of the Underworld but is granted permission to return to her mother for two thirds of the year, bringing Demeter joy and gifting mortals the relief of spring. Goddesses such as Hecate, Mnemosyne, the Muses, and the Fates harken to stories told before written history. I use their fragmented mythologies to exemplify the erasure of ancient women worship.

Through image, I bring to life the mundane and tragic moments of my mother’s youth paired with photos of my own past and present. These photographs serve as a poetic device to
depict the cyclical nature of motherhood. My mother, no longer a daughter, seeks for recognition. I ignored her for years, shying away from the untold stories of joy and grief she holds deep inside. I gather and preserve these stories; I pick the narcissus and delve into the underworld.
Figure 1, *Momma*, digital photograph, 2022

Hecate,

the three faced goddess of life, birth, and death

the Mother, the Maiden, the Crone

Companion and protector of Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld
Figure 2, *The Maiden*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023

Hecate,

the mystic goddess

mother, virgin, sister, daughter

a woman

unknown

amalgamated
Momma
holds the photo of her
mother
close to her face,
“Oh God, I’m old.
I look just like her.”
Figure 4, *Momma and Her Dad, Dan*, digital photograph, 2022

Figure 5, *The Sisters*, digital photograph 2022

“Where’s mama? I look frail, she had to have died before this.”
Figure 6, *Dan’s Overalls*, digital photograph, 2022
When Demeter saw Persephone, she rushed like a maenad along the mountain shaded in forest. Beautiful Persephone addressed her (mother): “I will tell you everything truthfully… We were playing, all of us, in the lovely meadow… we were gathering lovely flowers in our arms, soft crocuses mingled with irises and hyacinths and rose blossoms and lilies, wondrous to see; and the narcissus which the broad earth made grow like a crocus. This I picked in my joy and the earth parted beneath me, and there the strong lord, Host of Many, sprang forth and in his golden chariot he bore me away, all unwilling, beneath the earth.”

Figure 8, *Hoard of Memories*, digital photograph, 2022

Mnemosyne: goddess of memory and time,

the Titanine daughter of

Gaia and Uranus: earth and sky

Memory, Mnemosyne
Figure 9, *Momma’s Wedding Handkerchief*, digital photograph, 2022

Figure 10, *March 1, 1997*, digital photograph, 2022
Figure 11, *Why Daddy, Why*, digital photograph, 2022.
Figure 12, *Faces and Places Forgotten*, digital photograph, 2022

Figure 13, *Things I Can’t Remember, and Places I Won’t Forget*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023
The Morai: The Fates

Born of Themis, goddess of Justice and Wisdom

Born of Nyx, the mysterious darkness of night

Born of Ananke, the primodial goddess of inevitability and compulsion

Born of Chaos, god of the void

Born of the sea

The Morai crones spin the fabric of life

Three harbingers of fate

Old, wrinkled women

Blamed and feared

Weavers of death
Momma’s book of memories

is empty,

she holds them

in her heart, her womb, her soul

waiting

to release their burden
Figure 16, *The Gift of Knowledge*, digital photograph, 2022

I warn her that she may cry

(she doesn’t)

“Maybe it’ll help me remember the other stories,” she says,

smiling
Figure 17, Favorite Newspaper Dress, digital photograph, 2022

Mnemosyne,

mother of the nine Muses

Almighty thunder god Zeus, father,

is praised for the daughters who bring poetry and song to mortal men

Mnemosyne

a memory

forgotten
Figure 18, *Great-Great-Great Grandma O’Malley*, digital photograph, 2022

Momma knows I’m gullible

and she knows how to mythologize

a story

She tells me this trunk

was passed from generation to generation

of women

a stock photo

a grandmother

forgotten
Figure 19, *Fueled by Obsession*, Van Dyke Brown print of a digital collage, 8” x 10”, 2023
Figure 22, *Reflections*, digital photograph, 2022

Memory is a mirror

into the past
Hecate with her bright crown came near them, and embraced many times the daughter of holy Demeter; since then she has been her (Persephone’s) guardian and attendant queen. Zeus agreed that her daughter should spend the third part of the circling year beneath the murky darkness, but two parts with her mother and other immortals…As spring grew strong, she (Demeter) began to adorn the field with long stalks of grain…and the goddesses were happy to see one another and rejoiced in their hearts.²⁸

²⁸ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome, 360-361.
one does not bury the mother’s body

in the ground but in the chest, or—like you—

you carry her corpse on your back

Natasha Trethewey29

---

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis does not serve to gain emphatic results or conclusions. I began this project hoping to grow closer to my mom and explore her relationship with her mother. I found there is still much to investigate; my mom and I will get to know each other for the rest of our lives together. Memories and storytelling provide insight and deeper understanding of a past that is still shrouded in mystery and frustration. My own ignorance of my mom’s past produced the consternation that inspired this work. The photographs presented explore the memories that are held in objects and places, and my mom’s oral histories provide context to my process as well as the photographic collection. This project is constantly adapting and evolving; I plan to continue making photographic collages and documenting my mom’s stories. Additionally, I plan to record oral histories with my other family members. Perhaps one day, these photographs and stories will take shape as a book.

This June on the Summer Solstice, I will host a public exhibit of the media presented in this thesis as a multidimensional installation at Graham and Macon’s house in Water Valley, Mississippi. I plan to display many of the objects contained in the trunks belonging to my mom and her sisters alongside the Van Dyke brown photographs and a selection of prints of the digital photographs. The installation will be accompanied by audio excerpts from the oral histories conducted with my mom. The audio of oral histories will play in various rooms from different speakers, creating a cacophony of sounds and serving as a metaphor of existence and the chaos of life. Each room will feature objects belonging to Graham, Macon, myself, my mom, and my grandmother, constructing an amalgamation of lives and stories.
Additionally, I will create zines featuring the photography and poetry presented in chapter four, so that the visitors can see the entire collection of photographs. This thesis serves as the beginning of my journey as the family historian and as a photographer. My goal is to present these stories in a timeless, artistic manner that honors the individual, yet speaks to the collective. In Penny Murray’s essay, “Reclaiming the Muse”, she begins with a critique of the ways men have invoked the Muses throughout thousands of years. “Man creates, woman inspires; man is the maker, woman the vehicle of male fantasy, an object created by the male imagination, incapable of any kind of agency herself.”30 The story of the motherline is, consciously or not, buried beneath that of the patriarch.

When stories are forgotten, they become ghostlike, unnamable. The act of forgetting tells a difficult story, leaving one to read those that are available like negative exposures from a photograph, not only for the reverse of the images but for what is simply not there. It requires us to read what the stories did not say, to piece together the context which created the silence.31

Momma’s childhood stories teeter on the brink of memory. I record these stories, hoping to pass them down to the next generation. I will continue listening to momma and urging her to document and remember the stories she holds. I embrace these stories along with momma, helping her upkeep the memory of her mom.

The future of this project is vast; I plan to make more photographs of family members’ objects and record their stories of growing up and living in the south. I will make collaborative photographs with my mom, creating a deeper level of intimacy that will allow a new story to blossom. I find myself following a similar path of my mother—my yearning to escape is still strong, but I am rooted in my home and family.

Ancestry

I am such a long way from my ancestors now
in my extreme old age that I feel more one of them
than their descendant. Time comes round
in a bodily way I do not understand. Age undoes itself
and plays the Ouroboros. I the only daughter
have always been one of the tiny grandmothers,
laughing at everything, uncomprehending,
incomprehensible.

Ursula K. Le Guin³²

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Kirschenbaum, Gayle, dir. *Look at Us Now, Mother!*. 2015; Los Angeles: Kirschenbaum Productions. Apple TV.


VITA

Undergraduate Intern at the University of Mississippi Museum, 2018-2020

Bachelor of Arts in Classics and Minors in Mathematics and Italian from the University of Mississippi, 2020

Full-time position as Recent Graduate Assistant in the Collections at the University of Mississippi Museum, 2020-2021