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A SOLIPSISS'T'S COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

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THE VOICE OF A GIRL BECOMING:
A SOLIPSIIST'S COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

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Abstract:

The Voice of A Girl Becoming: A Solipsist's Collection of Creative Nonfiction is a collection of eleven creative nonfiction stories and essays. Written to show how the material I have engaged with as a graduate student has shaped my writing, the critical introduction establishes the influences and choices made in the different narratives, explaining key characteristics of creative nonfiction and proposing the theory that to write in the genre, one must become a solipsist. In the following narratives, I have evoked the solipsist within me to muse over the messiness of memory, to play gleefully with structure and truth, and to speak in the personal voice. The material dealt with in this collection considers the intersection of disability and feminism, critiquing feminism's ableism. Other notable themes are identity, religion, gender and gendered expectations, sexuality, and the presence of familial trauma. With a focus on specific images, the following stories and essays use the sharpness and nuance of language to speak on the aforementioned themes.

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| Creative Nonfiction: The Art of The Solipsist

I?
I walk alone;
The midnight street
Spins itself from under my feet;
When my eyes shut
These dreaming houses all snuff out;
Through a whim of mine
Over gables the moon's celestial onion
Hangs high.

- Sylvia Plath, *Soliloquy of the Solipsist*, Stanza 1 (1956)

A writer of creative nonfiction might be best described as a solipsist – in particular, the solipsist from Sylvia Plath’s poem, *Soliloquy of the Solipsist*. Solipsism, beginning in Latin where *solos* means “alone” and *ipse* is “self,” is a philosophical theory that the self can know nothing but its own modifications. While some say a solipsist believes the self is the only existent thing, I believe that the solipsist embodies more than the egocentrism applied to it today. Instead, a solipsist is a creator of a world where their knowledge has been modified and shaped to craft such a reality. Similarly, the world of the story is of the writer’s creation, the writer’s personal images, recollections, and authority. Patricia Hampl, a creative nonfiction

author, explains that the writing of creative nonfiction is “caught in a self which must become a world – and not, please, a narcissistic world” (Hampl 18). The purpose of creative nonfiction is not narcissism; the necessity of world creation is as necessary for the writer as the writing of the stories marking our lives.

The “I” used so often in creative nonfiction is what allows for the work to resonate out to the experiences of others. As championed by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, creative nonfiction writers and authors of *Tell It Slant*, creative nonfiction is the manifestation of the universal within the personal. As a writer of creative nonfiction, I am “a writer preserving... memory in language” and that preservation is about the universal tongue of experience (Miller 6). The verb “preservation” shows that art is a curated, shaped thing; it cannot sit without a frame. In order to do this framing, a writer must become a solipsist. Thus, in the following stories, I have evoked the solipsist within me to show how the material I have engaged as a graduate student has crafted *The Voice of A Girl Becoming*, which muses over memory and its messiness, plays gleefully with structure and truth, and speaks in the personal voice.

“Part I: Defining Dis-Ability” signals an entrance into what has defined me, hence the “defining” in the first part’s title. The first essay is an essay of ideas, using a meditative format to “approach [the] subjects tentatively, allow readers the luxury of seeing the author roll ideas around in his or her mind, *test* conclusions rather than presenting them” (Miller 99; emphasis original). “The ABCs of A Disabled Woman” questions the interactions between disability and the (perhaps unintentional) exclusivity of feminism/feminists. Similar to Nancy Mairs’ meditation on voice and body in *Carnal Acts*, where specific moments from her life feed the movement of her thoughts on voice and its embodiment in a disabled and/or female body, “The ABCs of A Disabled Woman” is filled with personal information that is unique to my body or at

least to my subjective experience. My personal experience of feeling torn between wishing my disability allowed me to visibly embody the female archetype and my identity as a feminist reflects a deliberation over what it means to be a woman, particularly a woman with a disabled body.

Tell It Slant's Miller and Paola discuss the borrowing between creative nonfiction forms and how this "borrowing" allows for new unexpected or nuanced meaning to be created. Some refer to this kind of creative nonfiction as the "borrowed form essay" or as the "hermit crab," where the borrowed form is considered a "shell." The second piece is a hermit crab essay called "The Definition of "Dis." The "shell" or form of the essay both reinflicts the pain of the "dis" definition and offers the freedom to reimagine "dis-ability" through my personal history. It is the juxtaposition of hard fact (definition) and emotional substance (memories/meditation) that allows the piece to speak of the broader struggle of being named by the "dis," the very lack, of ability and of normalcy. Similarly, in Part III, "Dear Muskogee" is a hermit crab written in the form of a letter to the town where my mom grew up. Talking directly to Muskogee is a misdirection, purposeful and necessary, because, underneath it all, the letter wishes to talk to Bob, my mom's father, and the source of the trauma revealed in "I Don't Remember (Because She Does)." By writing it as a letter to my mom's hometown, I am still able to delve into the subject and the material, unpack and examine the hurt of my relationship with this side of my family.

Our memories, especially those which surprise or shock us with their vividness, are the sources for so much of creative nonfiction. These memories are autobiographical images, which fiction writer and essayist David James Duncan defined through his term "river teeth." "Using the images of knots of dense wood that remain in a river years after a fallen tree disintegrates, Duncan creates a metaphor of how memory, too, retains vivid moments that stay in the mind

long after the events that spurred them have been forgotten” (Miller 5). In Part II, “Curing Bad Habits” contains the powerful memory of being choked by a childhood companion. As I began to write, “... the memory itself was there from the start. Waiting for me” (25). My job as a writer is to take these “self-contained moments of shock or of inordinate empathy,” like the image of my classmate’s eyes as he choked me, and make thematic sense of them (Miller 5). In order to make sense of this particular memory, I had to “resurrect the details to describe not only the surface appearance, but also to make intuitive connections, to articulate some truth” (Miller 6). In other words, the details reveal the meaning. The memory of being choked by Alessio is not a fully realized story about being a girl without the descriptions of the female role models in my life. Only when cultivated and shaped is “Curing Bad Habits” able to weave a narrative about the “bad habit” of chewing on my hair and the “bad habit” of female silence.

Poet-turned-creative-nonfiction-author Gabriel Scala writes that creative nonfiction “forces us to find only the truth the events reveal, rather than the truth we (sometimes) want to expose” (Scala 66). For example, setting out to write the essay in Part III, “The Bathroom on Flamingo Avenue,” I was interested in telling the narrative of a “demon” horror story that made me afraid of bathtubs as a child. I was inspired by the discussion of place and writing the physical world in *Tell It Slant* to focus on a particular space within the house (25-38). “The Bathroom on Flamingo Avenue” begins with a sketch of the bathroom in my childhood house. As the piece continues, the happenings within that bathroom allow for the subject to broaden until it’s clear: this is not a piece about this specific bathroom, but of the fears that were born there. As I wrote, I was surprised that my childhood Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) began to find its way into my meditation over the bathroom. Perhaps it is as Miller and Paola

suggest, that in drawing on a place from memory, “you will, by the highly selective and emotional process of memory, be drawing an emotional landscape of your childhood” (28).

The third hermit crab, “A List of When I Am Scared” in Part IV, is a piece also based on the emotion of fear. Originally inspired by Roxane Gay’s “How to Be Friends with Another Woman,” where the form of the list guides the delivery of her essay of ideas. My list, however, is more a collection of specific memories than rules. Miller and Paola state that, “As a writer, your challenge is to find a language and a form so personal that *only you* can give us” (42; emphasis original). The most powerful work, the work that resonates and continues past a reader’s interaction with the page in real-time, emerges from the personal. The use of first-person and the degree of privateness of the memories lends itself to the voice of revelation that comes to life near the end. “[T]he intimacy of this first-person voice, the deeply satisfying sense of being spoken to privately” is a key instrument in creative nonfiction (Hampl 19). The revelatory ending of “A List of When I am Scared” also serves as a comprehensive transition to the last essay of *The Voice of A Girl Becoming*: “Here’s My Secret.”

Sue William Silverman, in a review for *Tell It Slant*, defines creative nonfiction as “the literary tradition of turning your life into art.” This succinct definition shows the centrality of the writer’s experience to the genre. However, while subjectivity is still critical to my work, when I discovered creative nonfiction, it manifested as a way to turn my chosen artform of writing into my life. In other words, it allowed me to bring my personal life into the art I have been pursuing for the past two years. Even though the writer is the solipsistic creator, they are still at the mercy of the story’s whim, of the pieces of reality that, though the solipsist knows it is their remembered construction, is named by forces other than the writer’s direct consciousness. It is named by the world we live in, and, by extension, the world which our solipsistic selves inhabit.

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Part I | Defining Dis-Ability

1 | The ABCs of A Disabled Woman

High heels: attractive, beautiful, captivating, desirable, easy-on-the-eye, foxy, graceful, handsome, irresistible, jezebel, kittenish, lovely, magnificent, nubile, otherworldly, powerful, queen, resplendent, sensuous, tasty, unparalleled, vapid, wonderful, x-rated, youthful, zealous.

26 words, an adjective for each letter of the alphabet, and countless other synonyms for alluring and beautiful and well-favored are what slipping on a pair of pumps will do for a woman. These ABCs represent what a pair of heels can do for a woman. The ABCs that the patriarchy teaches us to embody. The Male-Dominated-Powers-That-Be want us, all women, in tiny wobbly shoes; some say it's so we can't run, while others think it's about having a beautiful trophy with great legs. These are the ABCs that the first-wave feminists won't sing, the ABCs that we can't sing – we, the disabled women who can't wear heels.



The Woman wiggles into a skirt, hose, and those heels the same way Clark Kent wiggles into the blue suit and becomes Superman. I've seen *Catwoman*, the one where Halle Berry gets her hair cut short and slaps on a pair of slick leather, 5-inch, open-toe, high-heeled boots. They

transform her, turn her into something stupefying and bewitching. Those boots turn her shuffle into a strut. They turn her into The Woman; they turn any girl into The Woman. At least, they do for a woman who can wear them.

My Achilles tendon is too tight, my peroneus too short. I can't point my toes and flex my foot into a sensual arch. It is as if someone has slipped a threaded needle through my arteries and veins, sewing my heel and my heart together. Whenever I try to squeeze my toes into the pointed end, mimicking the shape of Barbie's exaggerated arch, the movement of my heel pulls on the thread and yanks at my heart. It feels like my heart is being dragged through my chest with each flex.

The doctors didn't warn me. No one told me that I was never going to be The Woman, be that soft-spoken vixen with her heels clicking across the floor, sashaying to the other side of a room for the fun of it. For me, the walk has no purpose but to be functional, to get me from one place to another. I cannot swing my hips just to flirt; the only dip and rise of my hips comes from my limp. I am the Perpetual Girl, stuck in adolescent flats and unexciting sandals.

The White Women, with their picket fence signs and rage in their eyes, paved a footpath too narrow for our wheelchairs. They wanted to stand next to any man and have a spot in the ballot line, and they were willing to corrode their femininity to get there. Sure, it was more about the erosion of the patriarchy by getting streams of matriarchs and little girls onto the streets. And, yes, being that ideal feminine, being that Woman, shouldn't be a standard. But why did they have to take it off the ballot altogether?

Those First Suffragettes had a goal, and while they claimed their fight was for equality between the sexes, they did not address the equality among those women and men within their gendered categories; the result was hierarchy. It was a pyramid with a place for a specific type of

woman – white, heterosexual, cis-gender, able – near the top. It was a new ladder, all glossed and painted new, but still crafted with rungs that leave the ground-bound behind. Then, Second-Wave Feminism came along and turned that ladder into an escalator; all they seemed to do was make it easier for that Perfect Woman in her high heels. It still left the Undesirable, the Imperfect, the Oppressed Woman stuck at the bottom, wondering how the hell an escalator is better than stairs when the steps are too small.

Gloria Steinem declared that “A woman reading Playboy feels a little like a Jew reading a Nazi manual.” The Angry Women, with their cigarette lighters and unshaved legs, told us that we should love our bodies no matter their shape. We should accept ourselves; we should only be ourselves. Deny conformity, they cried, unaware of the disabled bodies who lacked the choice to conform to standard models of beauty from the beginning. We should accept ourselves, but we shouldn’t want to be women. We shouldn’t be what we are told to be. Why, then, do we get told to be less womanly? Expectations are becoming double-edged, but it’s only the women stuck in-between the desired Nonperfect and the undesired Perfect who is cut.

These mainstream feminists came along and said that we shouldn’t wear heels. That we should forget the makeup and the dresses and the lacey underwear. That we should burn our bras in the streets and riot. White, Heterosexual, Ableist Feminism comes along and says to the Girl Without Choices that she shouldn’t wear heels. That she shouldn’t let patriarchy force her into femininity. That she shouldn’t try to be who she has always wanted to be. That she should just enjoy the body she was put in, but isn’t the whole point of feminism knowing that you don’t have to settle for anything less than what you want?

#YesAllWomen seems to dismiss the narratives of our gendered tragedies the moment our disabilities come into frame. We share our stories, include the pain that our disabled bodies add

to the shame of being female, and we are told to leave out the part where we were in a wheelchair, or when we were told that we're lucky someone would flirt with a disfigured face or an autistic mind, or when we keep getting turned back into helpless, naïve little girls just because we're disabled.

Feminists say that the way I look isn't for men. "The way we dress isn't for you," we've all said to the opposite sex, over and over, "it's for *us*." If my appearance is for me, why shouldn't I yearn to conform when my nonconformity is what has shackled me along the classical nonconformists. Is it only acceptable to conform to nonconformity? And, yes, I am tired of the male gaze but I am not tired of my own. I thought the goal was to become what the patriarchal world tells us we can't be – so why can't I be me?

* * *

I was told once that high heels were originally worn by butchers – who were always men, of course – to step over clots of blood without staining their shoes. It was made by men for men. The history of the high heel does not comfort me.

Am I supposed to forget the shape of this flesh that I struggle to love, this body that has already begun to fail me at twenty-one? Am I supposed to love the pain that makes it difficult to stand, to walk, to climb the steep steps barring entry to the world? Am I supposed to deny my inability to conform, choose to deny self-regulation or aesthetic surgery? Is the surgery meant to uncurl my misshapen toes, meant to make the foot (that I loved until the world taught me to hate it) normal so bad? Especially when my very physicality is often the source of contempt or supposed inferiority?

I've been told to burn the world, to break all the rules. I have claimed to be a feminist, over and over, even when feminism won't always claim me – won't always claim the

wheelchair. Why, then, when I try to break free from this dented shell, do they push me back inside? Why do I have to continue to be who I am now to participate in a fight that often forgets me in the barracks? Why do I have to find my own way to the battlefield when the non-disabled, the “natural” women, ride in on horses?



I am: abnormal, broken, crippled, disabled, envious, foolish, gimpy, handicapped, incomplete, jinxed, knurled, limping, mindless, naive, odd, pitiable, quirky, ruined, slow, taxing, undesirable, voiceless, weak, xeric, yielding, zealless.

These are the ABCs the world wants to smother, the ABCs for all the disabled women who can't wear heels. 26 words, an adjective for each letter of the alphabet, and countless other synonyms to describe my limited body – invited at first glance of femininity and forgotten at the second glance of disability.

2 | The Definition of “Dis”

dis verb

/ ‘dis /

variants: *or less commonly* **diss**

dissed; dissing

Definition of *dis* (Entry 1 of 5)

transitive verb

1 *slang* : to treat with disrespect or contempt: INSULT

// I can’t remember the first time I was told: You’re disabled. My head tries to picture it and my stomach lurches in protest.

// Nobody used to say that word when they talked to me. I was Gimpy like Grandpa Wade. Kind. Walking funny, but kind.

2 *slang* : to find fault with: CRITICIZE

// My friends look at me in awe as I rotate my ankle, point my foot backward, turn myself into an old-fashioned circus freak. We shrug and use my diagnosis as the headliner: THE GIRL HAS CLUBFOOT.

dis noun

variants: *or less commonly* **diss**

Definition of *dis* (Entry 2 of 5)

1 *slang* : a disparaging remark or act: INSULT

// I wasn't something Other, only had something strange. I do not really know what CLUBFOOT meant other than the pain in my ankle that feels like a little man is sitting in my bone and playing the drums. My tendons are his drums and his drumsticks are made of barbed wire.

// I am myself. My condition exists outside of me. I can morph into regularness well by hiding the hurt of too many steps or disguising my slow walk with a tantrum.

2 *slang* : DISRESPECT

// Then, I became the wheelchair. I don't know if I ever became a person again.

dis abbreviation

Definition of *dis* (Entry 3 of 5)

1 disabled

// No one called me "disabled" until I was fourteen and we had driven sixteen hours to the Shriners facility in Shreveport, Louisiana.

2 dispensed

// The nurse at the front desk checked the stack of forms my mother dispensed to her; she handed us back the diagnosis and doctor's notes detailing the medical statistic I had become.

3 distance

// No one said it to me directly and there was never an exact moment I knew I had been named, but, after that, the distance between "disabled" and "identity" shrank my vocabulary.

Dis noun (2)

/ 'dis /

Definition of *Dis* (Entry 4 of 5)

mythology: The Roman god of the underworld (see UNDERWORLD sense 1)

-- compare PLUTO

// In witchcraft, names are the most powerful kinds of spells. Names pull things out of the dark void and put them in your palm. You can roll it between your fingertips. Feel the texture of it against your skin. *What does it feel like?* Name it.

-- compare HADES

// His wife was called Kore before she was Persephone. Renamed as a symbol of Death. She embraced it. Why can't I? How do I know that I haven't?

// I have been plucked from the deep. Pinching fingers hold my spine and clipped nails graze the bone when I wiggle. I am passed from palm to palm. The muscles flex like a tilt-o-whirl under me. I stumble and slide on skin, feeling the wrinkles and lifelines as I am deciphered. The texture of me is decided. I have been named.

-- compare MISCONCEPTIONS

// Everyone thinks Hades is Death, but he is the God of the Underworld. God of Wealth. God who does not Judge. Hades is synonymous with his kingdom until we paint him as a reaper. We name him.

// Lacan calls everything which cannot be defined as the Real. Everything was once part of the Real, for the Real exists outside of language. It cannot be captured. Until it is. And, yet, once captured, once named, it can never truly be held. Because language isn't Real.

dis- prefix

Definition of *dis-* (Entry 5 of 5)

1 a : do the opposite of

// *disestablish*

EX. I used to think I was Gimpy, a name that meant kindness and mercy until it was spoiled by the rotten stink of dis-abled.

b : deprive of (a specified quality, rank, or object)

// *disfranchise*

EX. "Disabled" isn't a single word. "Dis" is a prefix, altering the definition of "abled" by taking its ableness away. Emily Dickenson knew the power of the hyphen – forcing her unknown reader to pause, take a breath, swim in the question of *Are you – Nobody – too?*

c : exclude or expel from

// *disbar*

EX. There are two parts of me, forged and split all at once. “Dis” is the knife and the dash is a poor excuse for a band-aid. If I were to stitch it together, it would hold the halves evenly, press them against one another: remake “disabled”. I still put the bandage on anyway, because I have come to like the open wound.

2 : opposite or absence of

// *disunion*

// *disaffection*

EX. Is there any part of me that is not misshaped? I look at myself in the mirror and see twisted flesh everywhere. “Dis” is written in scrawling letters across my face, my chest, my arms, even across the pale white scars on my toes. I transform into the absence of ableness.

3 : not

// *disagreeable*

EX. Dis-abled. Not-able. Not able. Knot able. Knotable. I am in knots, defined by what I cannot do. What I cannot be. I am twisting myself to try and find an unmarked place. *Dis, dis, dis*, the hiss of my name follows me everywhere.

4 : completely

// *disannul*

EX. I pretend I am unbothered. I ask people if they want to see a trick. I turn myself inside out and back again. I am a novelty. I remember there were always hands on the handlebars of my wheelchair and I wince.

5 [by folk etymology] : DYS-

// *disfunction*

EX. I am told the same story every time. I say, “I am dis-abled.” They hear, “I am disabled.” I do not know how to pronounce a hyphen other than with silence.

3 | I Hadn't Thought About the Wheelchair

No one had ever asked me what was wrong with me before I'd been in a wheelchair. It wasn't a permanent thing. The spell only lasted seven or eight months. But I was in the chair long enough for the freakish magic to settle in my bones, long enough for a charm to become a curse, long enough to metamorphose into the wheelchair. Before I was the wheelchair, I was an average third grader. I was, to the assumption of nearly everyone, normal.

Until I was eight, I had traveled through my everyday routine faking ablebodiedness and pretending to be as regular as every other kid at Harvest Hills Elementary. Several weeks before the surgery, I'd practiced walking around on crutches the way some girls practice walking around in heels. We had bought a pair of silver ones, which I had thought was perfect – I only wore silver jewelry; gold just wasn't the color that Mom and I liked to wear. The cushions were rubbery and wrinkled when I tucked them under my armpits, putting all my weight on the metal supports. I thought I would use the crutches.

Wheelchairs were for people like Grandpa Wade, who was cancer-sick with wrinkly, worn skin that sagged on his thin limbs. Wheelchairs were for people like my friend Alisha's grandmother who had legs of two different lengths and a three-inch lift on the shoe of her short leg. Our friend Dominic had a bone disease that made them too soft, too weak; he'd come to school in a wheelchair a few times and people would swarm him like he had the newest legendary *Yu-Gi-Oh* cards. In summary, wheelchairs were for the old, the sick, the abnormal.

The crutches were a marker of coolness. I had seen the other kids stumble around in them, chins tilted up with smugness, as everyone asked to sign their cast. I saw myself nearly unchanged except for the metal sticks and a lime-green cast and a hundred names scrawled across it. I wanted to be the new Britney Spears; I wanted to be popular.



When I woke from surgery, it felt like my body had been turned into gauze, but my bones were glass paperweights. Like the square chunk of glass you could get at the gas station with little pictures inside; I had one with a snow-white unicorn, her head tilted downwards and her horn spiraling in a milky twirl. My favorite movie was a coin toss between *The Last Unicorn* and *The Great Mouse Detective*, because one had unicorns and the other had crime and pretty dancing robots. I did not know that I would feel like the Last Unicorn after she is stuck in the body of a human girl – a transformation gone wrong.

“*What have you done,*” Molly asked, shaking the wizard, gesturing at the doe-like woman shining like the moon.

“*What have you done?*” echoed in my head as I glimpsed the IV needle in my hand. I’ve seen needles before; I have a bucket full of sewing needles at home. The plastic tube slowly dripping drugs into my system is thicker than embroidery thread, but I can picture the other end of the needle poking back out through the thin skin of my wrist, dotting a neat line of stitches up my arm. The thought of the sharp end being pressed inside me, where it doesn’t belong, where I can’t see it, makes my chest fall. The air falls out with my chest too, both collapsing onto the thin mattress of the hospital bed as I watch a bead of red gather at the base of the needle the way dew gathers on leaves. I think it’s the first time I regret consenting to the surgery.

I can't remember how it went exactly after my surgery, but I imagine it was like the time I had my tonsils removed: it felt like I couldn't stop puking, my stomach shivering and lurching and flexing uncontrollably. I imagine it is like the time I was thirteen and the nurse took me to the bathroom, and I caught a glimpse of the red droplets peeking out of the IV inserted in my arm and nearly collapsed – gagging under the influence of drugs and the sight of my blood.

The taste of vomit followed me for a while afterward. Once, after having oatmeal, I puked it all back into the bowl. It looked the same regurgitated. I had sobbed over the loss of Granny's cereal – my misguided understanding of what oatmeal was – in big, chunky tears. I can still feel them filling my eyes like a hose stuck down in a watering can. It's kind of like opening your eyes underwater, except there isn't the burn of chlorine. Everything felt sickening. My body had been so tired, still made of gauze and glass, slumped in the wheelchair in the middle of our living room, a bowl of vomit and oats in my hands. The plastic was still warm from the microwave under my fingers.

I hadn't known how weak I was going to be, that I would have to be confined to a wheelchair like a prisoner confined to solitary. I hadn't known that my body wouldn't feel like mine anymore, now that I had been thrust so fully inside it.



When I was returning to school, it hadn't seemed necessary to consider my traveling throne. I was excited to see the new books in the library, go to music and art class with my friends, and toss pebbles at my brother on the playground. I hadn't spent time thinking about how my wheelchair would change my plans, how it would impact even my stroll down the hall, transforming simple tasks into a struggle. It never even occurred to me that I would feel odd, strange, foreign, as I rolled through the school hallways.

I can't remember my first day back – everything comes in flashes, little strips of memory, like an old black-and-white cartoon whirring across a projector screen. I don't think I can even remember a specific moment, one when the realization that I was no longer normal came rushing at me with the force of a soccer ball, flying across the playground from a fifth-grader's kick.

But I can remember the feeling – the hot, slick slide of everyone's eyes.

I was a talkative kid. I always had something to say, even if there wasn't anyone in particular I wanted to say it to. My teachers were constantly hushing my voice as I let my mouth fall open and the noise just fall out. I remember sitting in the corner of the gym, ruminating on how I let my tongue get away from me again, as Ms. Kobbs ordered about the rest of the kids. People watched me talk like I had something worthwhile to say.

Compared to the wheelchair, the stares I received for being loud were insignificant. My observation skills were stunted by my predilection for listening to the narrator in my head. But, when I did notice looks, I had liked the attention. I had liked the way it warmed my chest. I had liked the way my voice would raise, grow louder, bolder, like my Yorkie when we greet each other upon my arrival back at home.

But sitting in the wheelchair wasn't attention. Sitting in the wheelchair was awareness.



I can picture my mother wheeling me inside the white-and-maroon tiled halls before I'd figured out how to use my tiny hands to spin the wheels perched on either side of me. I see my body tensing, shriveling up with shame for what could have been the first time, as I catch the first pair of unblinking, shocked eyes gliding over the silver rail on the black rubber wheels. Other students eye the handles of my chair; their palms flexing, their hands twitching with eagerness as they imagine pushing the chair – and, by default, the me they would forget – as fast

as they could. I feel something leaping into my throat, perhaps a sound of surprise, as someone grabs the handles and pushes me, spinning the wheels under my frozen hands and causing blisters. I hear the squeak of rubber over tile as we roll down the hall, the whole chair jostling, throwing a mini-tantrum, as I am pushed too fast. My fingers are gripping the armrests, the black smooth foam indented with the impression of my fingernails.

These remnants of daily routine fossilized in my mind were before the chair was an extension of my body, before they'd *made* it an extension of my body.

The moment that the chair and I, together, became a body was at recess – the one place a kid gets the chance to be wild in the entirety of a weekday – and the lack of consideration for the inaccessibility of the playground. I hadn't thought about the way my stomach would squirm as we came to the edge of the sidewalk's curb and someone had to *help me* climb out of the wheelchair, someone had to *help me* sit on the concrete before they yanked the wheelchair over the curb, and someone had to *help me* crawl back into my seat. I hadn't thought about how the borrowed crutches – an attempt by the school nurse to let me roam the playground – would chafe my armpits, ends slipping on the woodchips until I ended up having to crawl, slivers of wood poking the flat of my palm, digging into my knees, until a lunch lady noticed, and the principal came out, lifted me back into the wheelchair. My teacher took the crutches away and told me to “*sit there*” like I could do anything else.

My body reacts reflexively to the memory, slouching like I'm still sitting in the wheelchair with the aftertaste of surgery. Of permanence marking my body, my image, my entire self. My shoulders still curl, buckling under the weight of my classmates' meerkat-like gazes. I had spent so long existing only for myself, only for those I deemed important enough to be conscious of, and, suddenly, the wheelchair forced existence upon the rest of the world. Forced

my existence to become realized and focused upon like I was one of the cells my anatomy teacher put under the microscope to teach us the different muscles. Being watched by cautious and curious eyes felt like waking from a surreal dream, visceral and instinctive. Something stinging in my gut with a whisper to hide – but it's too hot, too present, pressing at my chest. Like being given CPR by big, flat, invisible palms.

The wheelchair was a gaining of consciousness: It was the first time you open your eyes and realize that it's the dawn floating in the window. The first time you look down and realize that your hands are your own. The first time you recognize there's an expected unanimity. The first time you recognize that there are people who aren't normal, aren't like you, that exist outside of you. The first time you think that you aren't normal, aren't like others, that you exist outside of yourself. And that self was made wrong.

Have you ever cut yourself, looked at that wound opening wide and deep? Red sparks underneath another red. Inside you, underneath your skin, are so many shades of color – crimson, garnet, cherry, merlot, scarlet, mahogany, blush, ruby. It bubbles out of you, marks you with the red. I think that's what people saw when they looked at me, watching my Otherness become apparent as I was broken into halves.

Part II | Lessons On Sounds/On Speaking

1 | I Don't Play the Viola Anymore

I don't play the viola anymore.

I haven't played since my final night in the high school orchestra, but I kept the sheet music. It sits in a plastic turquoise box with hundreds of other sheets, entire folders of melodies – the music of my preteen *and* my teenage years. Black notes tremble on white paper, fresh and crisp and they *snap* when turned to the next page. Bits of electric blue and fuchsia highlighter are scattered over the sheets. Blue ink hangs over some notes, marking a fourth-finger *E* on the dreaded A-string or an *#* to remember to play *F-sharp* instead of *F-flat*. The dark imprint of my pen is raised like braille, marking the crescendos and decrescendos and the moments of waiting silence.

I like to close my eyes and drag my fingers over the musical notations. When my fingertips drift over the marked dynamics, the symbols, the *1 2 3 4* sketching out the rhythm, I go back to the night when Charlie Chaplin danced on the screen behind us – perfectly timed with the calculated draw of our bows across string. Our high school conductor, Ms. Baugh had decided to have our orchestra accompany one of Chaplin's short films. It was the original score for the video, written on our music sheets exactly as the recording dictated. In a silent film, the

music plays an instrumental (*ha-ha*) role in establishing the tone of the moment – just as much as Chaplin’s facial expressions and exaggerated movements. Each stroke, every pluck, even the rests had to be precisely on schedule. The slide of our fingers down a string, creating a funny *bbmmmaaa*, had to coincide with the hilarious slip-fall of Chaplin’s dancing feet.

So, there Ms. Baugh stood before us: her congregation of teenagers brandishing our instruments like that’d satisfy us forever. Her bony arms frantically waved in sheer black sleeves as she stared at us. Her auburn eyes hardened into amber with concentration, roaming over each instrument and student with eager judgment. I felt like she was an embodiment of Charlie Brown’s teacher, whose voice we only ever heard in a trumpeting *wah wah wah*, who Ms. Baugh joked that she felt like whenever rehearsal was nearing its end. The dark velvet of her skirt brushed her toes like willow branches hanging over a river. Her costume was a more elegant, mature version of the girls’ dresses, which might have been better suited for a nunnery than for teenagers.

The hem of my skirt got tangled between my crossed ankles when I spread my thighs, straightened my back, and rotated my body. I angled the scroll of my viola toward the creaking metal music stand, aligned my elbow so it was parallel to my hip. My fingers found their spaces instinctively, although I still had a stripe of blue tape to mark where my pinkie needed to land. I never took it off, worried about forgetting where my fingers went or what the notes were supposed to sound like.

The back of Waylon’s and Jace’s heads, the lead violists, bobbed dramatically as they played loud enough for the five of us. The two other girl violists, Karen and Allie, and I sat behind the boys in our own little bubble of soft plucks and reluctant twisting of wrists. Waylon and I were in the same grade, but the others were just a year younger – even so, in our little

group of instruments people never seem to know the name of, most of the authority rested with Jace, as an ambitious but pretentious violist, or Karen, a sarcastic but commanding leader. That night, there were no leaders. Just musicians. Just violists.

Our bows straddled the strings with vigor, horsehair ripping across the silver-wrapped string. I can still feel my elbow jerking back and forth to create the short, staccato notes. The cellos sat beside me, fingers flying better than most violinists, and the basses formed a wall of deep groans behind me. It was a careful cacophony that I had never heard fully, too overwhelmed by the sounds I was making to listen. My music had never been in response to the world around me, but a response to the notes I saw on the page.

For many of us in the orchestra, it was our last concert – a goodbye to the world that helped us through teenage angst, uncertainty for the future, the loneliness that can come with the beginnings of self-exploration. A wetness had been burning in my throat, in my eyes, the entire evening: as I got dressed, as my mother pulled back my hair, as I gathered my sheet music, as I carried my viola onto the stage, as I tuned and turned at the black pegs, as I brought the shoulder-rest underneath my chin and we collectively let out the first coherent note of the night.

It felt like something was about to break, to fall from the sky, like the Berlin Wall tumbling down, as Charlie Chaplin stumbled onto the screen. It was glorious, promising change, yet it was terrifying, promising change. It is one of my most favorite sounds that I have ever made. The swell of that first note rang in my ears, and I think it had been waiting to be played my whole life. Waiting for the freedom that would come after, waiting for the openness of an auditorium for it to dance around and resonate within.

Every sound I've ever created, ever brought to trembling life with my fingers and held breath, feels like a declaration of autonomy. Feels like a dynamite stick, charged and ready to change the shape of me.

* * *

The first time I drew the bow across the string, I was appalled by the screech that my violin made. I was eight and I was going to be the new Britney Spears. I had dreams that spilled out from my sleep and into the daytime. They kept me awake late at night, made it hard to stay put, stay present, during the day as my mind ran away, laughing, planning, knowing.

The first squawk that came from my violin sounded nothing like the CDs at Granny's house or the orchestras that played sweet hymns at church. It wasn't silky like the purr of flowing water. Instead, my bow jerked across the strings. The noises were choppy. Abrupt. And as coarse as the horsehair of which the bow was composed. The clatters came just as suddenly as they went, halting and starting as I dragged my bow over the silver strings.

During that period of struggling sounds, I learned to enjoy a gentler tune. One of my favorite sounds is the soft, *so utterly soft*, glide of rosin over horsehair. I always wanted my bow to be frosty white. I wanted it to shine under the stage's spotlights the same way that the snow glares underneath the sun on the Colorado mountain slopes.

I loved the bewitching movement of my left wrist, trembling beside the fingerboard. I was in middle school when my wrist finally cooperated and moved, shaking my hand and vibrating my fingers. The elicitation of a tantalizing vibrato is a little like ending a story on *just* the right word.

* * *

A decade later, my memory still returns to the shock of November 2007. I had only been playing the viola since August, but I was already a bit put off by the shrieking of violins. I had grown since school began, and Mom got me a bigger instrument – as requested by my teacher – and it was my first time practicing with it.

I knew something wasn't right when *Old McDonald had a Farm* came out in deeper tones, earthy and rich and low, like the satisfied groan that comes with a good meal on Thanksgiving instead of the shrill whine I make when spaghetti is on the menu. The notes sounded like the voices of Dad or Papa Charlie, liquefied and warm like the scent of tobacco, as they oozed around the room. They were sounds I had not come to associate with my screeching violin.

The next day, my voice was shaking in confusion at the mystery as I presented the instrument to my teacher. A sharp laugh fell from her mouth when she said the music store had given me a viola by mistake.

I didn't think they made a mistake. I fell in love with the sound. It was home, safety, a familiarity I had not encountered outside of the things I immediately knew were representative of my family. It was the croon of the trail in Checotah, rolling down the tracks near the highway by Grandma and Grandpa's house. It was our Shih-Tzu Bartley's snoring, his rare barks, and even the comfort of his silence, his long body lining my leg like a sock. I melted into the sound each time I could get that viola to sing under my ministrations.

I was behind, stuck in treble clef when violas weren't expected to read it until high school. I had to learn all the notes and their sounds and their strings, the placement of fingers, a second time. I even had to learn how to hold my bow again, the curl of my fingers, and the

position of my thumb all wrong for the heavier stick of a violist. Mrs. Mathison offered me private lessons so I could become a conquistador of the continent of Alto Clef.

* * *

Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* was the piece assigned to teach me the fingerboard of my viola. I already knew how to move my fingers, already knew how to place them to play sharps and flats, but there's a difference between knowing the notes and knowing what they sound like. What they *feel* like. When I sat on the footstool in Mrs. Mathison's living room and played *Ode to Joy* in its entirety, the notes finally flowing in one gorgeous rush after hours of practice, and enjoyed the sound erupting from underneath my fingertips, I was hearing things for the first time.

I had never felt so graceful, so powerful. I don't know if I'd ever loved a creation of my own before. I had not yet fallen in love with any of the words I'd written, the things I'd drawn, the noises that tumbled from my high-pitched violin or my squeaky throat. A swell of euphoria overtook me as my fingers sang the words, "*joy to the world...*", and I realized that my hands could speak.

I felt like an angel conducting the strings of David's lute to play those famous chords, like I was giving birth to new rumors of what it meant to sing *hallelujah*. And I understood, at that moment, that I was meant for creation. I was meant to invent, to design, to bring forth something into the world that wasn't there before.

* * *

In middle school, I discovered that words give me the power to invent, to design, to bring forth something into the world that wasn't there before in a way that felt more natural. Maybe it's that I didn't register the first few lines of poetry I had ever written were composed of clichés I had heard on the radio and read in books. I was blinded by the lyricism of language, coaxed in

by the fact that, most of the time, it is a silent kind of music. You cannot hear it screech until you speak it out loud. With the viola, every sound has to be right or nothing will be beautiful.

With the viola, playing from sheet music was too distracting. I thought about the notes, personified them, made up little stories about D-sharp, which, if you're curious, was the baby E-flat's, teenage F-sharp's, and the adult G-string's father. I did not know the irony of calling the G-string an adult in my little musicals, but my interest in sound faded as I learned about the sounds that words make – the sounds that only our eyes can really hear.

I stopped practicing my viola outside of class once seventh grade rolls around. I only started practicing again my sophomore year of high school because it had been embarrassing to stay in the freshman orchestra and I wanted to go on the field trip that the advanced orchestra would be taking my senior year. In all honesty, it was Charlie Chaplin who made me love playing the viola again: it's funny, really, that it took a silent movie to make me remember my love for audible sound.

* * *

My viola sits in a closet in the back of my parents' house. Sometimes I can hear, floating through the air, bow fluxing across string. My fingers twitch. I think about picking it up again.



2 | Curing Bad Habits

Scene 1: Hair

When I was nine, I wanted to be a pretty woman. Such womanhood is defined by long, luxurious hair. It was a hazard for me to wear it so long because it was *just* long enough to bring the dry strawberry-blonde ends to my pink mouth and cherry red tongue. The reflexive grind of my teeth cut the strands and curled them around my tongue, a noose. My hair was always getting everywhere, came out in tiny clumps alongside the lint in the dryer, and it would get stuck between my teeth. The chewing soothed me, even if I was constantly pulling hair from my gums. The slow movement of my jaw masticating aggravated Mom, so she gave me a warning in the hot of July.

We were visiting Granny's house for the Fourth. I'd been gnawing at my hair since the sparks of fireworks had slowly started to fill the day. There were tiny freckle-sized burns on my hands from standing too close to a crowing rooster, my favorite firework. The quick prick of heat was always followed by my high squeal as I spit out the clump of hair I'd been chomping. My hair tasted like smoke that July, the flavor coating my tongue even as we sat down for dinner.

"All those slivers of hair," Mom said, taking the ends out of my mouth, her index finger pointed at my chest, "are gathering in your heart."

“Mmhm, it’ll clot your lungs,” Granny Rosemary hummed in agreement. She pushed at the fresh green beans and new red-skinned potatoes on my plate. The fork scraped across her white porcelain and I winced, chewed at nothing.

“Eat your dinner.”

Scene 2: Hands

Late fall came quickly. August had already moved away. My favorite holidays were traveling to Granny’s dining room with pumpkins, a turkey, and presents. Thanksgiving and Christmas would bring their usual baggage, and I could not wait to unpack their suitcases. The thing is, despite all my anticipation, I don’t remember the holidays.

I remember the soft hands, the irritated hands, the tired hands, the hopeful hands pulling the end of my braid from my mouth. I remember hearing my mother’s words. Each one was so carefully chosen, so carefully sacrificed, to clear the way for my own words. I remember Granny’s serious tenor trying to teach me that there were better uses for my lips and teeth. They wanted to teach me to speak.

There was silence in every part of my body but my hands back then. I used to eat with my left hand clenched in a fist. Sometimes words were too difficult to utter so I would bang my open palm against the wall or the door or even my brother’s shoulder if he had irritated me enough. I used to lament that I didn’t know sign language; it seemed so much easier than having to clear my throat and send out my voice. It felt like I was interrupting everyone whenever I spoke.

Scene 3: Words

It was October – or maybe it was early November – the first time I learned why they were so worried, so insistent, that I learn to speak instead of silently grinding my teeth. After July, Mom had spent the rest of the summer training me to stop chewing on my hair. By the time school came back around, I wasn't so nervous. I liked to talk. I could've talked off any ear that was willing to listen. I don't know how Mom taught my shyness to be brave.

All I remember from one cold evening in the elementary cafeteria is the tight noose of a playmate's hands around my throat. I remember the way my voice was silenced as each finger carelessly closed around my windpipe. I remember that I'd been talking, of course. I remember that my words hadn't seemed like good enough provocation; they weren't even meant for him. I remember staring up at his eyes, watching them turn red, and being afraid.

Scene 4: Justice

The last school bell had released the crowds an hour before my trial. Children raced to the buses, to the line of cars, to wherever they were supposed to be. My brother and I, along with other kids whose parents worked late, were corralled into the cafeteria. We were watched by parent volunteers. That afternoon the volunteer was his mother. Her name was Simone, and she sat at one of the tables and surveyed the children making a mess of the floors that had already been cleaned.

Simone had long black hair. It was never pulled into the ever-fashionable ponytail or split in twin braids. Her hair always hung from the crown of her head like heavy curtains, the kind that a funeral home might hang over the windows for a sense of dismal elegance. She reminded me of Morticia Addams, but her son was nothing like Pugsley. I'd say he was a masculine version of Wednesday, with a hint of Gomez's lackadaisical charm that hid the boy's quick-

witted temper. Her son had her same coal-colored hair. It was longer than the other boys' hair. He was proud of it, petting his own fingers through the luxurious dark strands. The ends curled over his ears and brushed the back of his neck in a delicate sweep, mimicking the rise of ash thrown into the air.

At first, all I felt was the rough cling of his fingers. A sudden pressure clipping around my bare neck. Wrapping, fingers settling again on my skin like they were trying to get comfortable. Then his thumb dug into the ribbed trunk of my trachea, flipping a light switch that didn't illuminate the growing darkness of the room. Shadowy dots swarmed my vision, swimming across his pale scowling look. All I could see was him. His black hair curled about his ivory face like little snakes, reaching to kiss his cheeks. Medusa glared from within his gaze, transformed my body into stone – it is a slow metamorphosis as the air is enthusiastically drawn from of my throat. The static, buzzing between my ears like a dead TV channel, threatened to overtake the fluorescent cafeteria light. A high squeak was the only sound I could make before my cry was eclipsed by the burn. My lungs were scorching, my mouth hanging open, but nothing would come out.

After ripping her savage off me, his mother focused her furrowed eyes on my mother trying to soothe air back into my chest. Simone's expression was gutted of sentiment. She looked at my mother like she should be ashamed for raising me. But Simone had raised a hangman – an executioner, a reaper, a scalper. They're all the same and I saw them, like ancestors grinning, in his red eyes.

His predecessors were lined up behind his snarling grin, puffing out their chests with pride, as Simone offered one useless excuse after another. Her defense was based on love, and

I'd never known how much our feelings could blind us until I stood and watched her strut into the principal's office. She rested her delicate manicured hands on the shoulders of a boy who would one day be a man, never realizing she'd given him the right to oppress. That she was teaching him it was all right to strangle the life right out of a girl if she was being mouthy.

Scene 5: Hair

Whenever the air starts to get cold, I think of their hair getting stuck between my teeth. The inky strands are long black worms wriggling across my tongue. They slither between the gaps in my teeth, curling against my pink gums. They are restless. My throat convulses around their thin bodies as they crawl down my esophagus. I gag, choking, and stick my fingers past my teeth to grasp the gossamer of their hair.

Sometimes, I can never quite clasp them. I will miss one in the scraping of nail over the roof of my mouth. I pull my hands away from my lips only to feel the thin thread laying across my tongue, wrapping around the pink muscle. The black strand gets caught in the gap of my incisors, too thin for floss. I pull at an end and it breaks, stuck in my mouth. Stuck between my teeth.

Sometimes, I swallow, swallow, swallow. Sometimes, I let it clot my heart. Sometimes, I let it kill me. But, sometimes, I don't.

1 | I Don't Remember (Because She Does)

It is Friday, 11 o'clock and the air is only growing warmer. The middle of 2019 is an unbearably hot summer. Mom and I are sitting in one corner of the garage, guarding the door to our house, although, we don't appear very intimidating. We are slouched in our worn-out lawn chairs, just two women melting in the Oklahoma heat. Sweat leaks from every crevice of my body. The wetness congregates on the undersides of my thighs, behind my knees, in the rolls of my stomach. It's July and the heat would be unwelcome, except that the rain had created a bitter chill only weeks before. The heavy flooding had swallowed houses on the outskirts of Muskogee, turned parts of Tulsa into swimming pools, and the juxtaposition makes the warmth now seem like a blessing.

I am keeping track of things bought and sold by marking the money gained from each sale. Mom is in charge of everything else, which is just how things are done in our home.

Strangers walk among the three crowded rows of the odd and mismatched tables; their tops are filled with our family relics, the pieces of us that we don't need anymore. Even the décor

from my childhood bathroom is up for grabs. The colorful bull terrier who held our toothbrushes doesn't look too mournful, though. His invisible smile is the same as always.

I've waited all winter to unload the clothes I don't wear, the games we haven't played in years, the horse figurines that don't strangle my heart to let go, even though later I will hover over the table where the herd of discarded horses graze, struggling to keep from snatching a miniature Clydesdale from a toddler's sticky hands.

It makes perfect sense to Mom that, as we purge the house, we try to clean our bodies too. *You eat where you live and you live where you eat.* Mom has decided that she and I are going to start a diet, together, the following week. It will be the first time I have ever tried a diet. I'm apprehensive about the restrictions, but Mom reassures me that it's not too bad. She just wants me to understand what I'm putting inside my body. She thinks I'm ready to learn about the unhealthy habits I've gathered since starting college.

* * *

When I began my freshman year, I let the stress cajole me into fast food and microwave mac-and-cheese. I had no idea how to manage my life, least of all my diet, and the independence nearly backfired. I've always been dependent on my parents, mostly on Mom – she takes care of everything.

You're so naïve, Mom is always smiling. It's true, but only because she made it so.

You raised me this way, I always reply.

* * *

People have abandoned the charming ideal of snooping through our things as the afternoon heat has grown unbearable. No one has wandered about our garage for the past hour and I can't hear any cars purring down the street. Even our dogs have settled, an achievement for

high-strung Yorkies, lying inside the house to nap through the scorching warmth of the sun. The gigantic ball of gas perches at the highest point in the sky. It feels like the right time to clean our bodies, our souls, in the middle of the hot summer day. Mom thinks I'm ready to learn.

"I have a secret to tell you," Mom says. The curve of her mouth is subtle. Mom's smile wants to be sly; it wants to offer mystery but it doesn't reach her eyes. There's sorrow pinched in the corners, wrinkles sagging where dimples should be, and they promise grief.

The grin is trying to be contagious, but I know she is aware of her failure because my responding smile is too wide to be genuine. It's discomfort that makes my lips peel back to show my teeth and pink gums, because this woman practicing softness isn't the same woman whose glance used to make my brother and me stop in the middle of a fierce wrestling match, my nails scratching down his back and my hair tangled in his fist.

Mom has never been overly delicate, despite the abundance of love, of fondness, of soft meaningful gestures that filled my childhood. My brother and I used to joke that Mom was the man of the house; Dad does the grocery shopping while Mom puts in the new wood floor. When we were young and wild, pairing together to ensure the most chaos possible, it was Mom that made us pause in our ruckus when Dad failed to cajole us into surrender. That smile, slowly shifting into a frown, is the best way that Mom knows how to be gentle.

"What? Was I kidnapped once?" I joke, even though the way it bounces out of my mouth with a laugh sounds unnatural. I can't take the tension that has suddenly stretched between us in a way it never has before. My laughter fails to relieve the strain that is tightening my lungs, making Mom straighten her back as she shifts, uncomfortable, in her lawn chair.

I was only teasing, but at the suggestion, Mom's face flashes with something I had seen nearly every day of my childhood and yet I don't remember it. My joke isn't the truth, but it's

close. It's close but so far off the mark. It just strikes the same chord that the truth does, evokes the reoccurring nightmare that she's had since my brother and I were born.

* * *

I don't remember thinking it strange that Mom would never let us sleep over at other people's houses. I don't remember thinking about anything other than the anger that lit up in my chest every time she said *no*.

I don't remember the tightness of Mom's hand clutching mine as we walked through the grocery store or how taunt she would pull the black buckle of the stroller around my waist.

I don't remember her panicked voice rising through the crowded zoo as I confused the straight back of another woman for Mom. Hot embarrassment and tears choke out the memory of how the red on Mom's face didn't quite match the tint of my own.

I don't remember watching Mom hover, seeing her micromanage my brother's and my every movement, and feeling imprisoned. I don't remember thinking that Mom's constant attention was what it must feel like to be loved, but I also don't remember feeling anything other than cherished by her.

* * *

When she tells me about her secret, the smile never reaches her eyes. Terror has made its home in her wide green irises. Mom has lived so many moments afraid. There has been a constant apprehension in the background of my childhood, living center-stage in her life for ten years before it started running the show from behind the curtains. Paranoia and distrust pulse in her veins with red-hot intentions to keep me protected, to keep me out of harm's way, even from the people who've never shown me anything but love.

Her words have been cold even about Dad. The silent softie who has loved her since sixth grade and begged for a single date for three months before she agreed. The delighted Dad who had worn the biggest grin the first time the nurses placed a baby in each crook of his elbow when my brother and I were born. The patient protector who had let me stand on his toes at my first father-daughter dance in second grade.

I realized the limitless stretch of her distrust when I was twenty, a year and a few months before she told me about her secret. I sat in the passenger seat of her car as we drove to the Chili's on the NW Expressway, the one that shares a parking lot with Target. It was growing dark, and the sky was a cold grey as it hovered over the honks and beeps of traffic. My stomach was in knots and I had let other opportunities slip by, to tell Mom my own secret. In that moment, I couldn't really think; my mouth just opened as I felt my guts tighten and writhe in my belly. In an unintentional spillage of words, I admitted that I thought I might be bisexual.

Her first instinct, her first response was *"I'll always love you even if your father stops."*

* * *

She's since explained that Dad will never stop loving me. She hadn't meant to suggest that he ever could stop loving me. I could ditch my long hair for a buzzcut and my A-line skirts for cargo shorts. I am always going to be his daughter, his little girl, his princess. But those first instinctual words still ring around my head.

Mom's distrust has leached into me and, when she speaks of her past and my future, the regret pours out of her mouth. During late nights and long car rides, we've talked about the way she's shaped me. I learned my habit of caution, of being wary of meeting strangers, of keeping to myself from Mom. I walk to my car with my keys poking between my knuckles and am quick to

press the trigger, lock the doors, once I am seated – sometimes even in our driveway. I have inherited her sleepless nights and the paranoia, though their origins aren't the same as hers.

Her guilt is mixed with pride and determination, unable to truly feel apologetic about the way she's kept me alive. It isn't until she claims the reality of what happened to her that I understand that she has no apology to give for the only way she knew how to keep my brother and me safe. The only way she could be certain we did not relive her trauma was to stand behind us, a looming, living shadow.

I don't remember because she does. This is enough for us.

* * *

When she told me the truth, I don't remember exactly how she said it. I *can't* remember how she said it, the same way a pack-a-day smoker *can't* put the cigarette down.

Suddenly, I can't remember when she talked about her father or called him anything other than Bob. I can't remember how the truth came out, not from her because she was not the only one, but from other tiny mouths who had finally grown to speak. I didn't see the hard anger in her mother's eyes as divorce papers were carved out, how she wanted them to be his headstone. I never witnessed the fights that surfaced between siblings, brother siding with father until the son couldn't deny the disgust that bubbled in his throat every time he met the other's eyes. I wasn't there to watch how his dirt-ridden mouth and all its proclivities made the gaping home in their family tree – separating my brother and I from the Roberts family tree.

They can call me a Roberts all they like. Yes, I like corn on my mashed potatoes. Yes, I laugh with a wide-open mouth. Yes, I have the same drooping eyelids as my aunts, as my great-aunts, as my great-grandmothers. But, in the end, I am not a Roberts. Because I did not feel the

shame, the guilt, the hot and intangible distrust emanating from the woman whose younger self shared a face so strikingly similar to mine.

I think not being able to remember is worth not being a Roberts.

2 | The Bathroom on Flamingo Avenue

The bathroom on Flamingo Avenue was fairly standard for most middle-class Oklahoma families with kids. A sink, a tub, a toilet, all the necessities in milky porcelain. The cabinets were a tawny brown, like the hides of the deer heads my uncles keep on their walls. One of the cabinets shared its space with the hall closet, and if you were willing to crawl through towels into blankets, you could use it as a door to and from the bathroom; it was a wonderful hiding place, a little spot that made our ordinary house seem enchanted and mysterious.

The bathroom décor was, in my opinion, a missed opportunity. Instead of pink and feathery and lovely, like the birds for which our street was named, it was overtly dog-themed – although, I always forget, there were cats too. The shower curtains were an off-white, almost cream cotton with black and brown outline drawings of dogs and the occasional feline. Some of the dogs would have a red stripe of a collar or a green circle around their right eye. I think some of the cats had orange stripes. The matching toothbrush holder was in the shape of one of the dogs from the curtains; he was white, a red collar, and a green circle around one eye. He looked like a Bull Terrier with his long snout that ended in a blue nose. He's long been sold at a garage sale, but his old friend, a black-and-white stuffed Dalmatian, still sits on the back of my toilet like he did in the bathroom on Flamingo.

The towel rack hung opposite the door, right next to the toilet. It always had two towels on it; there was one for me and one for my brother. Dad would brush my hair in front of the

mirror, which almost spanned the entire length of the wall opposite the bathtub. The lights looked like they belonged on a Hollywood starlet's vanity hung above the mirror; they illuminated my grimace as Dad dragged the brush from my scalp like he was pulling laffy taffy. He tried, but my hair was so thin it tangled and knotted. It required a firm hand to get my strawberry blonde locks into place, even if they would return to their frizzy state once I'd left the bathroom.

It was in the narrow, seven- or eight-foot-long bathroom in a house more fitting for Crow Street than Flamingo Avenue that I learned how to brush my hair, how to use a toilet, and how to be afraid.

Sometimes I worry that people will get the wrong impression when I mention the fear. I did not have a bad childhood. It was a buttery-warm era of my life that I reminisce on with fondness. The house was as quaint and welcoming as it could be. It was within the walls of my own head that I found things to fear.



Mom would hold my hands under the faucet. The water was lukewarm, and the sink would inevitably have a blue glob of toothpaste in it. It probably wouldn't be mine. I hated the taste of toothpaste and would instead brush my gums as hard as I could with water-wet bristles.

“Hold your hands under the water for 60 seconds and you'll be clean,” she had instructed, trying to take away the fear, to offer a solution to the itch in my palms that felt unclean. It worked for a while, until it didn't. I had to try different things, add two squirts of soap, do two separate washes, turn the water as hot as it will go and count. *1, 2, 3, 4, 5*, start over because I was afraid I'd skipped numbers, *1, 2, 3, 4*. My hands would get so red – Clifford red, redder than the apples Granny would chop up for fruit salad.

When I sat on the toilet, or even passing the bathroom's open door, I would hold my breath, afraid of the air I was breathing. I would let out great exhales, billowing all the air out of my lungs, once I was out of the bathroom. The dizziness of holding my breath felt justified by the thought I wasn't taking in germs.

This germaphobia, and all my other OCD tendencies, was the consequence of a bad gene mixed with the wrong ADHD medication. They called it PANDAS or something like that, a neat little acronym to contain all the mixed emotions and complex terrors I had invented for myself. And I was an inventor back then, crafting myths to feel clean, creating rules like the germs were going to read the handbook, making new superstitions to justify having to spit into my hands just to stop wanting to crawl out of my skin.



You would think the bathtub – the place where you can scrub away all the dirt and grimy little germs – would be a sanctuary. But a different phantom plagued me there. She's come back to me this year, just as COVID-19 seemed to reawaken that fear of parasitic secrets, with the realization that Grandma died in the bath. It was at the hospital, and the fact she was surrounded by nurses and doctors isn't what stirred awake my terror.

The thing is: it was in the bathtub.

I can't explain this fear of tubs without explaining its origin, or at least the narrative I think is its origin. My cousin Marlania is two years older than my brother and I, and, thus, had a voice of authority when we were children. She would tell us horror stories sometimes; the vampire one made me terrified of windows and of shutting my bedroom door when I was alone. My imagination liked to run away with these stories. They made me sleep with my head covered. My parents used to worry that I would suffocate myself with a sheet over my head, and my hair

used to always look like a sweaty bird's nest when I woke. Even now, I still can't sleep with those phantom imaginings staring at me.

I don't know how old we were when Marlania told us about the girl, but I know it was at the house on Flamingo Avenue. The girl either died in a forest, on train tracks, or maybe in some other tragic, ghostly ending that I can't quite remember. The details are blurry, but she walks in my memory in the shape of Bloody Mary, because you had to say her name three times to call her forth. But, instead of materializing in the mirror, her ghostly hands would reach out from the floor of the tub.

Every time I would get into the bath, her name would slip into my mind, like a skeleton key fitting into the old lock on Granny's armoire. The tumblers would click open and the shelf full of scenarios would sit, neatly labeled like the jars of dreams and nightmares from Roald Dahl's *The BFG* – except they are *all* nightmares. I was terrified that just thinking her name counted. It was always a cough in my throat, whispering in my trachea, an itchy feather balled up in my esophagus. The fog-like appearance of her hands would reach through the floor. Sometimes she was slow and patient; other times she was fast, hands plunging up like a drowning man's open fist, snatching my ankles. Her grip was always cold, always freezing, and always unrelenting.

I used to picture how I would fight her off. My mind would rush through possibilities, consider how hard it would be to yank the curtain and the pole down to wield the metal as a weapon. My twin and I were always wrestling, squishing each other on the couches, so I knew I could fight her. Most times our conflict ended with my scramble out of the tub. The commotion would bring Mom or Dad into the bathroom. The towel would be rough as it is settled over my

shoulders. And I would be sobbing, crying, but unable to say a word, for, as the myth said, I would die.

And, sometimes, I would lose.

I would imagine her hands, tearing into my throat, opening it up layer by layer, like how I skinned petals off flowers as a child, the way I learned to peel oranges - so interested in what was inside. Her touch lacks curiosity. She knows exactly where to dig her nails, to pry her claws into my larynx, to open my throat until the skin is stripped back, pink muscle imitating the vulva, the most intimate parts of me exposed from my throat.



I recall the story about the girl who lurks in the concrete, in the tile, in the ceramic bowels of the bath, every time I step into the shower now. She has grown with me, body and shape changing as my own has. The adolescent smoothness of her chest has shifted and matured like my own. I think even her hair mirrored mine, being short or long or whatever shape my frizzy locks are. She has become a mirror, reflecting my own shortcomings, my own imagination, my own fear back at me, as we stand on opposite sides of the boundary between life and death.

And perhaps she was just another compulsion that overtook me as a child. The spaghetti that spurred my famous meltdowns may have been too. But there was no shame in these moments of instinct. When I unceremoniously dropped, flailing, to the kitchen floor or when I let the spit gather in the back of my mouth and vigorously rubbed my hands together like my saliva was *Germ-X* or when I lunged out of the bath, bringing the waters hot stream with me and drenching the bathroom floor –

I remember the scramble to get out of the shower when the tension was too much, when my mind told me she was about to leap, about to pounce. I wouldn't even wring out my hair, still

full of water. My knees or shins would sometimes hit the edge, but I don't remember the bruises or the ache. The rug would be like stepping in a puddle, squishing under my warm, red feet. My legs would be covered in splashes of red like Rorschach had used me as a canvas. It looked as if I'd run through a field of poison ivy and gotten a rash for my troubles.



How do you reassure yourself when touching a doorknob didn't feel safe? When just taking a breath felt toxic, every surface and molecule unsanitary? I made rules for myself. The 60 seconds of running water. The squirt of lotion. The drag of my nails against my palms, like I could scratch the sensation of invisible grime away.

The panic when nothing worked, when there wasn't a sink to wash at, until I gave in and spat in my hands because it was as close to water as I could get. The spit was always warm and the shame would make my face feel too hot, disgust twisting in the empty, dry space of my mouth. The relief wasn't always instantaneous; sometimes I'd wash, spit, wash, spit. The germs would feel like they were gone, but I'd wash them again. Had to wash away embarrassment.

The panic when nothing worked, when I couldn't convince myself that she wasn't waiting under my feet, until I gave in and brought the stream of the shower with me as I threw the curtain back. The little dogs and the forgettable cats stared at me with unblinking eyes. The heat of the water was always too much, but the cold would make my body feel like a shell, like she had somehow pulled the life out of me without any effort at all. Just an invisible phantom reaching into the pads of my feet and coaxing out my soul.

The bathroom on Flamingo Avenue was the place where I brought my imagination to life in the worst of ways.

3 | Dear Muskogee

Dear Muskogee,

I grew up as your visitor, though you used to feel like home back then. Granny lived on South York Street, where it forks into East 43rd. Up the street, maybe a mile or two, sat the border of your inner city. Or, at least, the only city-like landscape I knew of you. The tall buildings, though most couldn't be more than three or six stories, always felt out-of-place with the image I kept of you. I had never thought of you as a city, Muskogee.

I know you best at the intersection of Chandler road, where Walgreens and McDonalds guard their respective corners, and, if you're coming from Granny's, you turn right to get to Charlie's Chicken. I know that if we turned left instead, we were going to St Joseph's Catholic church. Or maybe we would go on Chandler until it became East Okmulgee and find our way up South Main Street until we arrived at Arrowhead Mall. I remember the shock of realizing the mall has no elevators; it is one floor, sprawled across what was an empty field.

But, mainly, you existed for me on the acre of land that Granny lived on.

Granny's house was the heart of you. The cows, the crab apple tree, the garden with more flowers than I could name – it was the landscape of home. I feel mud wiggling between my toes when I think of that backyard, feel the scrape of bark on my palms as my cousins and I climbed trees, the whoosh of the air underneath me as I swung on the swing set, trying to reach for your always-blue sky. I looked at you with a fondness born out of the hours I spent roaming the

grounds of you like I would someday let my fingers roam over skin. You were my safe place, Muskogee, and I loved you.

* * *

It was one of my early Robert Family Christmas parties when many of us granddaughters received pink toolkit-like plastic boxes and a letter with money taped to its lid. I don't know if it really was from him, but I have always thought of that pink box as a gift from the grandfather I felt was hidden from me. Putting my own treasures, my own pictures and special things inside felt like a way of sharing who I was with him.

Now I think about moving my keepsakes to another box and leaving that pink plastic to sit empty under my bed. Now I feel sick when I think of him learning about me, of him speaking to me, of him giving me the hug that I had once longed for.

But I've filled that pink box with nostalgia, with my youth, with my naivety and innocence. Muskogee, I put my childhood home and all those memories in that keepsake box long ago. And the house where I transitioned from teen to adult hasn't felt like home since the intruder broke in. I was the only one home and I didn't see them, only heard the alarm and found the open door, but now all I feel there is alone. You were my last place of solace, the one space where I truly felt that elusive security of home.

How can I trust you now, with all the secrets you kept behind floral walls and deep in the woods where I was not allowed to go? You're a hoarder like him. I bet you keep your lies, your sins right alongside his collection of scrap metal, of dead tractors, of rusted playsets. I wanted to explore that barn in Granny's backyard, housing his treasures, just as badly as I wanted you, Muskogee, to be mine. He was absent and you were there, full of maps to show me who he was.

You were *there*, always sitting and waiting with those mysterious shadows filling the barn. Mom said the barn was dangerous. I think, now, that she was telling me how dangerous he was.

Was she talking about you too, Muskogee?

You are a scar on my mother and though she tried to keep the blades of your rotary tiller from digging into me, from unsettling your soil and revealing your rotting roots, I felt their sting in the sweaty June when she told me his and your secret. I am scared to belong to you now, Muskogee. You've become unfamiliar, and, as the years continue, you only seem to change more.

I used to think of that crabapple tree as a friend overlooking my youthful adventures. I knew it was a gatekeeper, marking the spot where Granny's land turned into his, for the divorce caused them to take separate sides of the property Mom had grown up on. I considered that tree more like the Faun from the *Chronicles of Narnia* than any sort of authority. I didn't know it marked the boundary between safety and danger, where to cross it was to trespass. I didn't know that you could be anything more than the summer fun that you once were.

You were my definition of home for a long time. Your blue sky was safe, welcoming. It never occurred to me that, with all the good you held, the bad would be comfortable with you too. But behind the folds of your buildings, in the dark spots where the ticks nested and the coyotes stalked, was a darkness. Your old warehouses, businesses long vacant, have been reconverted into some modern pristine façade. It's strange, watching you clean up as I learn about your dirty spots.

It feels like I'm watching you try to forget what happened in the red-bricked house on York Street, where seven Roberts lived in terror of your son. And he is your son, Muskogee, a product of you in ways that I will never know.

* * *

You used to be yellow, Muskogee. Now you're a strange, violent shade of red. Maybe it's just the nostalgia bleeding away, but I feel a sickness clogging my throat when I think of what happened in that house. Of who lived in that house – of who lived in you, Muskogee, undisturbed while my entire sense of home burns under the summer bonfire.

There is only loss contained within that pink box now. I have dumped my childhood, my memories, the trinkets of what I thought I knew, onto the floor. I exhume them with the same need as the ladies at JoAnn's who excavate the discount fabric bins – looking for the right pieces to sew together, make something new.

I've tried to create a new you, Muskogee. I've tried to sew up your sides, turn you inside-out, to forget about the mess of raw edges and knotted thread, tie a knot to keep it closed. But no matter how I place the pieces, I can't forget looking over the barbwire fence in Granny's backyard, longing to cross the field and see him. To have him see me.

Goodbye,

Lauren

1 | I Liked Sundays

On the whole, I liked Sundays. Sunday was the one day of the week I got to dress up, and, as much as I liked many things, I *loved* to look fancy. Some Saturday nights, Mom and I would sit on the living room floor, the TV playing *Supernanny* as she put curlers in my hair. In the morning, Dad would tickle me awake. His fingers were soft, and they knew all the best spots to make me squirm awake with laughter. He'd pull me to my feet and, together, we'd go to my brother Braden's room and wake him up too.

Mom would help me wiggle into a dress and slip on my shiny black flats while Dad dressed Braden. Sometimes it was the other way around, especially when Braden grumpily or I crankily refused to get out of bed. I had a pair of Mary Janes that were reserved for special occasions, which included three main events: Easter, Christmas, and Sundays. All three were times when we had to go to church – all three were times when we had to look our best for Jesus. I loved my Mary Janes and the way they made me feel fancy. They had block heels and a thick black strap that crossed the top of my foot, kind've like my foot brace, but I never thought my Mary Janes were ugly. They reminded me of my tap shoes for dance, and I loved to make that music with my feet. I liked the way the clack-clunk sounded when I hit my heel against the

marble floor in the lounge right outside the chapel. Besides my shoes, I also got to wear a dress or a skirt; I've never been a fan of wearing pants, other than the cotton or jersey shorts I had to wear under my skirts for modesty. My favorite dress was the Snow White costume that has been memorialized in a photo that my parents consistently pair with a story about *loving you thisssssss much*, arms spread as far apart as they could get, but that's a story that doesn't really involve Sundays. I couldn't wear my Snow White dress on Sundays. Costumes aren't for church.

So, I'd wear my Mary Janes and some other dress that I can't remember. I can't remember what Braden would wear, but Mom never wore a dress or a skirt. She is strictly a pants woman. She'd spend a few final minutes getting ready while Dad sat Braden and me on the navy-blue recliner together; this is how he used to put on our shoes. One time, our shih tzu Bartley brought him one shoe. He wasn't trained or anything, and he never did it again. But I remember that one time with the same excitement now that I had then, when I watched the small white dog carry a child-sized shoe over to where Braden and I were huddled together on the recliner, Dad crouching in front of us, reprimanding whoever kept making the leg-rest pop out and hit him in the chest. It was a moment that made me think magic was real, as real as God was to me back then. When everyone was dressed, Dad would usher us to the car. He'd wave from behind the slowly closing garage door as Mom backed out of our driveway. The red-bricked house always looked so picturesque as we pulled away.

Dad didn't go to church usually, because he wasn't Catholic like us. He was a Baptist, although he'd agreed to raise us like the little lambs Granny had tried to shepherd within her own children. When I was younger, I didn't really understand the difference between Catholic and Baptist – I thought it was the same God for both. My great-grandma Terry took me to a Baptist church in Checotah once, though if I asked around the family, I'd probably learn it was a funeral,

and I remember staring at her Bible's cover during the service. It was the most fabulous purse I had ever seen – Noah's ark, all the animals in pairs, the rainbow, it was all embroidered across the front in brilliant colors. It's never made sense to me that two religions could share the same stories but couldn't stand in the same chapel for prayer. I couldn't figure out why it mattered which church you went to as long as you were doing right by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

* * *

Maybe I liked Sundays because the gathering at Epiphany in OKC or the Mass at Saint Joseph in Muskogee were both so large. It felt like everyone in the world was at church on Sundays. And, while I hated when we'd have to shake hands and greet people, I liked seeing so many faces. It felt a little like what I pictured the masses must have looked like when Jesus passed out the never-ending bread and fish. There were lots of things that I liked about Sundays.

I liked singing the gospels, mainly because I thought I had the voice of Britney Spears, but I also liked the hymns because a nun from Bishop John Carroll told me that God liked singing better than any other form of prayer. It was very creative of Him to like that best; it made church much less boring for the little kids who eyed the revered and off-limits altar every chance they got. My eyes doggedly followed Mom's finger as it dragged across the translucent page, leading my brother and me verse-by-verse, chorus-by-chorus, in harmony with the choir.

I *really* liked the doughnuts that we'd get after Mass in the large conference room. There were always what seemed like hundreds of glazed doughnuts and two boxes with chocolate-sprinkled doughnuts. Braden and I would gallop out of the church and into the hallway the moment Mass was over, hurrying towards the long line of mouth-watering doughnuts. Despite our eagerness, we only ever got the chocolate-sprinkled doughnuts a handful of times.

I liked Father Knipe, the priest at Granny's church in Muskogee, because his salty-pepper hair made him look like Santa on vacation. His voice was smooth, almost like whip cream, and when he spoke, his voice echoed in the church as if we were in a cave. If I listened hard enough, I could feel his words vibrating in my palms. It made me feel good to listen; it made me feel like I was listening to God instead of a man.

I didn't like Father Byrd, the priest at our church in Oklahoma City, the Epiphany of the Lord. He was bare-faced and his jokes were *never* any good. When I think of him, I think of a baby bird with a gaping mouth, screaming at the world; his nose was pointy, and it did look like a beak, so my imagination can't be too far off. Despite looking like a crow, Father Byrd didn't sing very prettily. I must have complained about it once, because I can remember one of my aunts telling me that God doesn't mind a lousy voice as long as it's lifted up in the prayer of song. I never told her but I think God is just *really* polite.

I liked God, and I liked reading His favorite books. I liked going to church. I would sit in the pew and look at the stained-glass windows to try and remember the stories. I liked going to church until I was told I couldn't even try to be God's best friend, like the Pope, or even one of the Vatican's best friends, a deacon or an archbishop or a priest in some small town nobody ever visited. I wanted to be God's friend – I wanted to be a priest so badly, because I'd been told that priests had a special ability to talk to God one-on-one. Kind of like the Long-Island Medium on *TLC*, except she could talk to dead people and she had to be born like that. I hadn't thought you had to be born with anything special to be a priest, or that the appendage they were told not to use for its intended "pro-creational" purposes would be the ticket in.

I'd been a little sad to learn priests couldn't get married. But I figured I'd be okay without a husband; if I needed company, I would have God and I could always make friends with the

nuns. I liked the few Sisters I'd met, although I'd also endured a few scoldings from the ones at Bishop John Carroll for trying to explain Pokémon during Mass. Nuns were hallowed beings in my eyes, as powerful as the Virgin Mother herself, but I guess I had never really thought of myself as belonging in that space. I had always just wanted to be God's friend, and priesthood had seemed like the best way to go.

We went to priests to ask God for forgiveness and to confess our sins, and the priests were the ones who told us what God wanted us to do to earn His (already-given) forgiveness. Sometimes they'd tell us to pray to Mary, and the rosary used to be my favorite piece of jewelry. The smooth glide of beads under my fingers felt easier than going to confession, easier than talking to man that I didn't really know outside of the church's walls. I believed that Mary was like a telephone, the curls of her hair spiraling like a phone cord. Her voice is honey-sweet as it answers, greets me by name even though I haven't spoken yet. She just knows. I found it so hard to believe that God wasn't standing by the telephone too, waiting for his parishioner's calls. As a priest, I knew my calls wouldn't go to voicemail or be transferred to the Madonna. No matter how much I liked to talk to her, I wanted to talk to God.

* * *

It was after Mass one Sunday when I wiggled my way in-between legs to find Father Byrd. I was excited to tell him that, someday, we would work together. My assumption was that he'd be as excited as I was. I had been relieved when we stood from our kneeling position to enter the line for communion. I had been delighted when Father Byrd raised his arms and wished us all a good week, releasing us from our seats. I'd gotten my doughnut and I set out to hunt down the priest.

When I found him, the father was donning long black robes and a white collar – it was such a pretty outfit and I loved wearing dresses – but his smile didn’t flow, didn’t move, the way the hem did around his feet as he walked. His smile was tight, like someone had pinched the corners, as the father crooked his head to look down at me.

“I’m going to be a priest!” I declared. I smiled wide enough to show-off my new missing tooth before bringing the doughnut back to my mouth. I was going to be a priest just like him and be best friends with God. I was going to wear the purple and gold at Lent and lift my hands up to the colored-glass Mary looking down from the ceiling and sing with the same power that Britney does in *Oops, I did it Again!* Chewing, I gave Father Byrd another smile, although it was a little hindered by all the deliciousness puffing up my cheeks.

“Women can’t be priests,” Father Byrd said. I think his voice was smug, almost delighted, as I dropped my doughnut in surprise. The white glaze left a trail on the skirt of my blue denim dress. “You can be a nun or you can become a wife and a mother.” He laid out my options with efficiency and coolness, like the hurried tone that the anchorman used when he was talking about tornados – except Father Byrd’s voice wasn’t a warning. It was a decree.

“Why not?” I asked; the words were muffled by the last bite of my vanilla doughnut. I felt the tears in the back of my throat, but I swallowed my mouthful of cold dough in order to push them away. Even after I had swallowed, it still felt like a chunk was stuck in my throat.

Father Byrd’s face wrinkled up. His mouth somehow grew tighter, scrunching into an accordion under his pointed nose. He sighed and the sound was heavy, like he was tired. Like this was something I should have already known.

“Because only men are fit to be teachers of God’s word. We know this to be true because, remember: all of Jesus’ Apostles, his students, were *men!*” Father Byrd’s voice was rushed, clipped, as he turned away. He left in a whooshing whirl of black fabric.

And I don’t know – I guess I had thought Mary Magdalene was His student too. My image of her was of the woman who crawled at His feet, begging to only touch the hem of His robe, to be blessed despite her sins. Didn’t Jesus stop and bend down, touch her instead? Didn’t she become His student? Did she never reply when He spoke – was she only a listener? Didn’t Jesus think of Mary Magdalene as a friend? Didn’t He trust her?

I had never worried about God liking me before. But Father Byrd tells me that girls cannot be priests. The Bible sighs and shakes its head at Eve. Mary Magdalene is reduced to a prostitute when she was a benefactor of the Lord’s Son. The Virgin Mary is mistaken as white purity and relegated to a Madonna, which my Religious Education instructor defined as an *object* that holds the infant Christ. I have always pictured a Grandfather Clock, with its swinging door opening up its belly.

* * *

Father Byrd tells me that girls cannot be priests. All I hear is that we, women, are not holy enough. We are not holy enough to be more than receptacles, more than facilitators, more than a companion at the sides of husbands (as wives) and priests (as nuns). Even priests are called Father, replicas of the Father *who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name*, while the nuns are called Sisters. And I learn there is no power in being a woman.

* * *

On the whole, I don’t notice Sundays anymore. I don’t dress in my best for church, mainly because we don’t go anymore. It’s been two years since I’ve been to the Christmas

Service, and maybe four since I had been to the Easter one. We now get donuts from 7-Eleven or, on special occasions, Daylight Donuts instead of the lobby at Epiphany. I don't think I've seen Father Byrd since he poured the oil on my head for Confirmation; it was supposed to be the day I promised to remain faithful to Him. I promised to remain a Catholic for the rest of my life, took the name of Saint Joan of Arc like Mom had for her Confirmation, and even said I'd raise my kids in the church. But I don't think God and I are friends anymore.

We were supposed to be asked questions by a Bishop from a bigger church before Confirmation. I had been so nervous, because I knew that I was as familiar with the Bible as I was with Father Byrd. I thought it was going to be a test, but instead he just asked what saint I had picked and whether I was certain about dedicating myself to the Catholic church. It never really occurred to me that I could say no.

I think I miss being friends with God.

2 | A List of When I Am Scared

1. I am scared of this unfamiliar place. Preschool is everything I didn't want, even with my twin brother at my side. Dad sits us in the recliner like it is a special treat and puts on our shoes; his fingers dig in under my toes and I laugh. We have to say goodbye to Mom. I cry although I will be smiling for the picture she takes of us in the backseat of the car, sitting in my school uniform. The shirt is crisp and white.

2. I am scared I won't make friends. I have had two friends: my brother Braden and Levi, the boy who lives next door. My cousins don't count. Bishop John Carroll is full of people and I am certain I will like none of them. But she is as pale as the marshmallows Mom uses to make rice-crispy treats. Her hands aren't sticky when they link with mine. Grace is a fitting name as she sits next to me on the church pew; she is the singular charm of Catholic school, other than, perhaps, the colors of the stained-glass windows.

3. I am scared that I will not be loved. When summer comes after our second year in preschool, I know I won't see Grace again. Catholic uniforms are traded for the freedom of the public school system and the much closer distance to-and-from our house. First grade begins with my decision to like a boy. Gary Richardson is tall, fast, and has the same blue eyes as Grace. He does not like me back.

4. I am scared of death. It starts with a turkey feather, plucked from the ground. Mom tells me that it carries all kinds of diseases; I am instructed not to pick up feathers or I

could get sick and die. Death starts following me everywhere - sitting on feathers, perched on doorknobs, riding the dust in the air, even burrowing into the marrow of my bones. I cannot get it to stop following me. Mom takes me to a nice lady who has rows of Polly Pocket houses and board games for us to play with. She makes death retreat. I will learn later that she was a therapist and that I was suffering from OCD. I already knew that I was suffering.

5. I am scared to take the words out of my head and put them on the page for others to read. Mrs. Wolfe is our sixth grade English teacher, and she is as scary as her name. I think she is Virginia Woolf for years until I learn the famous author died in 1941 and never even visited Oklahoma. I write my poem about war. We are asked to use similes. I write: *War is feeling like being stabbed in the heart.* I think I am a literary genius. I take my own breath away. I learn that words have power.

6. I am scared that I will forget how to love writing. High school has wrung the energy from my body and I am limping across the building from one class to the next.

Sophomore English, I meet Walt Whitman and his spider on the promontory. I fall in love. I learn that he was gay, and it is the first time I have encountered the word spread in bold text, standing static on the Wikipedia page. I fall harder.

7. I am scared when I realize that everyone around me is filtering in and out of relationships. My head is stuck in books and fanfiction. I discovered the Avengers in eighth grade and forgot about the rest of the world. My bookcase is filling with random books I pull from the FREE BOOKS cart in the library after school. Sylvia Plath is at the front of my mind almost constantly – I am the Solipsist, soliloquizing to myself in front of my bathroom mirror about Niall Horan falling in love with me and a new character

into the Marvel Universe that I don't yet know is a self-insert fanfic. I probably would have remained oblivious to it all. But Popular Courtney McEvers is dating the plastic charm of Timothy Something. With envy, I watch her soft blonde hair and blue eyes meet his; I do not know that I am envious of him.

8. I am scared of driving, of graduating, and of never having been on a date. It is senior year and there is a cute boy in my English class. There is opportunity. I don't know if it's what I want, but I ask anyway.

9. I am scared he will ask me to be his girlfriend. It is our first date. He leans over at a stoplight and asks. I say yes anyway.

10. I am scared because I am not in love. My brother is in love. His girlfriend does my make-up for Prom; we even do a trial, and she makes me look like a hot, angry rocker-chick. My best friend is in love. On Prom night, when everyone else will be dancing, they will spend the evening sharing a set of headphones and listening to the soundtrack of their own little world. I will not like to dance. I am dressed in a black, sparkling top and a black and white polka-dot skirt. It is full and long, like a retro princess from the 40s. I tell people I want to be a writer, a mother, and a wife. I don't say whose wife I want to be.

The GPS took him to the wrong address, but he arrives at my house before all the dancing begins, dolled up in a black suit. Like a groom.

11. I am scared that he will want to hold my hand. It is hot at the Medieval Fair and we get matching seashell rings. They are white mollusks, once perfectly good homes. He buys me a rose with petals of yellow-stained leather; I will keep it next to my hairbrush on the bathroom counter. He holds my hand and I do not like how clammy my skin feels.

12. I am scared I will never fall in love. I write a poem and name it after the butterflies that I wish for. I write *her* instead of *he* for the first time. It becomes a poem that turns away from wishing and into mourning – *I am not made to love her*. I am shocked at how well it takes my breath away, strikes the chord of perfection that my first cliched simile about war once did. Wistfulness is churning in my stomach and I will tell everyone that I am learning new voices, to play different narrators. The truth: I am learning to write in my own voice for the first time. I am becoming the spider on the promontory. I am ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect. I still tell people *she* was never real.

13. I am scared he will try to kiss me. We stand at the entrance of my house. He is squeezing past the door, careful to not let my dog escape onto the street. The big black door feels like a curtain, hiding us from the light in the entryway. I am leaning against the doorjamb. He leans in. I whisper, “no thank you.” He doesn’t try again. Months later, we sit at Braums and I buy my own ice cream – it is orange sherbet and it doesn’t taste as good as I want it to. He takes it well when I say I don’t want a romantic relationship. I know this is a lie. We talk about Marvel and superheroes and say goodbye. He still has hope. I know there isn’t any.

14. I am scared as I sit with myself, alone at last. My dorm room is full of my things from home, but I am not at home. The sensation is strange. My roommate is somewhere; I don’t know where. But I am alone.

15. I am scared to be alone. I write a poem about loving a girl. I write a second poem about loving a girl. I write a third, a fourth, a fifth, until I find myself drowning in sin-soaked words. I ask God why the hell he would do this to me.

16. I am scared of each word I write.

17. I am scared when my best friend asks if I am bisexual. She is curious and supportive even as she asks the question. I have not said anything out-loud before. But I say yes. It is closer to the truth.

18. I am scared. My grandma is dead and I never got to tell her the truth. I am asked to write the obituary for the newspaper, for the back of the funeral's itinerary. I sit at my computer and stare at the blank screen. I ask myself: What do I know about her?

19. I am scared when I can think only of strawberry milkshakes and weeds that I mistook for flowers. My aunt tells me that Grandma was a teacher, she went to college and taught Special Education. A student recognized her at the grocery store once and hugged her. I realize I know nothing about Grandma.

20. I am scared I will die without being known for who I am.

21. I am scared that I am the noiseless patient spider, stood isolated, launching filament, filament, filament, out of myself, ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

22. I am scared the gossamer thread I fling will not catch.

23. I am scared when I realize this list is not finished. Then, I laugh.

3 | Here's My Secret



My secret was born on an August morning as I stood in one of the two long lines of grumpy five and six-year-olds. The women who had shuffled us into the lines weren't nuns, not exactly, but they might as well have been in their long black dresses and hushed prayers. I can't remember their names; in fact, I can't remember any names, other than the ones of the friends I made.

It was our first year at Bishop John Carroll. My brother, Braden, and I started pre-K that year, and we'd stay at the school for another year before Mom deemed the drive too far from our house. It's a private Catholic school hell-bent on shaping young girls and boys into every day perfect sinners. That August morning, I was wearing a plaid skirt – the traditional red, black, and blue uniform of the school – that swallowed my thighs; its string teeth bit into my knees. My crisp white shirt was ironed to the skin of my back, and the hem had been tucked into my waistband, hiding the sticky tan stain from the morning's pancake fight. My shoes were black and shiny, and they were my favorite pair because I thought they were fancy. Whenever I looked down at them, clonking my heels together, I wanted to tap dance. I kept expecting them to *click-clack* on the hard tile floor as we walked down the school corridor, but I couldn't hear the individual song of my shoes. Their music was lost in the marching band of tiny feet.

Braden walked beside me with an irritated frown. Half of his crisp white shirt was untucked, rucked around his hip, as he tried to scratch away a mosquito bite on his stomach. I could almost feel the itchiness prickling along my thigh as I watched him from the corner of my eye. The reason I wasn't fully invested in watching him make a fool of himself was because I stood behind another girl, and my discovery of her required most my attention.

She looked like the white sands of Honolulu, Hawaii. Her hair was pale – so blonde that it could not even be described as a soft yellow. It was the same shade of the moon, the simple glow of a marshmallow, the Colorado mountain snow that shines so brightly you have to wear sunglasses to protect your eyes.

She turned, casting eyes the color of water towards me, and I heard the heel of my left shiny black shoe *crack* against the hard tile floor. Having her eyes roam over me until they met my own felt like my brother was sitting on my chest, his knees digging into my ribs. I felt his weight crushing my lungs, even though he was walking, completely unaware of the riot inside my head, beside me.

In that moment, my secret was born. It spilled from somewhere deep inside me, like I was an underground natural spring that had only just been exposed to the surface, spurting water from an unseen place. As it poured, pooling beneath my skin, the feelings welling up constructed a truth that I couldn't yet understand. And, so, I kneaded it, pushed my knuckles against its firmness until it had become soft and pliable, and I could hide it. I don't know where or how I pushed it down, stopped an unstoppable geyser, but I did. I hid my secret from everyone, including myself.

Everything was unfamiliar – the hallway, the classroom, the women ushering us, the pledge of allegiance, Dad waking us up before the sun had even gotten up, the goodbye from

Mom at the church's arching doorway, the way the teacher separated me from my twin brother. Everything was unfamiliar, except for the one thing that should have felt extraterrestrial: her, the girl with hair like sand.

* * *

When we went to Mass instead of class on Wednesdays, I looked at the soft God hanging at the front of the church, staring at us from his altar, and I twisted at all the parts of me that wouldn't fit into the palm of her hand. Even then, as young birds with our beaks gaping open, I felt like singing at her heavenly sight – I was sure that she was divine. God had to have meant for us to meet, even if I couldn't name the weight of my secret just yet.

When we stood in the pews, the girl weaved her little fingers between mine. She gestured for me to *sing louder, louder*. She wanted God to hear us.

I never figured out how to tell her that he already could. The priest at Epiphany said that we should pray to the saints and Mary, the mother of God. But I never thought he was right. I thought that God liked us to pray to him too, and that he listened carefully to every word.



God didn't listen to me in high school. When things felt too hard, I'd mutter "*this too shall pass*," and prayed to God that it would. Like the time my childhood Yorkie fell into our pool only two months after we'd move from my childhood home. He drowned in that pool and I think the person I had been drowned too. It was as if everything had started to crumble around me in big chunks of brick and insulation and stained-glass – the chapel was falling. But I muttered "*this too shall pass*" and eventually God made the grief quiet down until it simmered away.

I muttered “*this too shall pass*” when I finally allowed myself the to think of how cute Brooke’s chubby cheeks were, so round and shiny, before regretting the self-admission. When I learned that gay marriage was a thing, that *being gay* was a real thing and not some made-up idea by the druggies and alcoholics Mom, Granny, the Aunts, seemed to be warning me about, I choked on the hope that tried to crawl out of my mouth. I tried to wait out the fear of not falling in love. I muttered “this too shall pass” but it never did.

A part of me wants to think that it’s God’s fault that I decided to like a boy and that I said yes when he asked me to be his girlfriend. If God had just helped these feelings to pass, then the summer after my high school senior year, I wouldn’t have broken up with my first boyfriend. If God would have made the awkward clench in my stomach pass when my boyfriend held my hand, I could have learned to be satisfied with the sensation of his fingers tangled with mine. If God would have made the lack of any attraction beyond *we both like Marvel superheroes* pass, I could have wanted to be kissed by my boyfriend. I could have fallen in love if God had just held up his end of the deal: I pray and he answers. I mutter “*this too shall pass*” and God makes sure it does.

I muttered “*this too shall pass*” but it never did. I guess you can’t ask for something to end when you can’t even name it.



When I started college, I started wrestling with the heaviness in my chest. I couldn’t stand the weight of what was hidden from me. I was an urn with myself buried inside me. So, I cracked myself open. I dug into the slick glass pieces I hadn’t thought about, the jagged ceramic halves that I had always turned away from when it came to looking inside. But I broke myself. I

let the ashes escape, the odd tooth and splinter of bone fall back to the ground – they were the pieces of me that hadn't burned in the cremation.

Like the poem I'd hidden in the back of a purple journal.

At nineteen, I started thumbing through the ashes and I found my secret. I had a name for it now. The handwriting was a careful scrawl, etched deeply and darkly onto the lined page, written two years before. Written when I was nameless. Each letter had been scrutinized as it was penciled in, strung together with careful consideration the way a fine jeweler slides beads onto wire. I had taken the act of writing something in my journal as a sacred ritual; it's probably why so many pages are empty.

The sacredness is broken as I defiled the page in my college dorm room, scratched new words and lines in-between the four stanzas.

She is a cruel sin
beating within my ribcage
with wings made of fire.

When they told me about the butterflies,
I imagined the gentle giggles and soft flutters;
the sweet desire pattering inside
and crooning some love song written by legends
of long, long ago.

Not this
burning torment
as she
- my beautiful butterfly made of flame -
fights to escape from the prison
my heart
encloses her in.

For I gasp and clutch my chest;
wish it hollow
so she had more room to fly,
as I
was not made
to love her.

I've rewritten the poem at least fifteen times since then. My black-and-white composition notebook has a cracked spine from the evenings I've spent with it bent over my lap. But back when it had just been written, *Butterfly Fire* had been the first time I had ever written about loving a girl. I can even recall myself telling my boyfriend that I was just practicing writing from different perspectives. That it wasn't how I really felt. That it was just a fun exercise. That using "she" just felt right, with the tone of the poem.

Not that using "she" had just felt right, because it had felt right.

But the words, the feelings, of that poem seemed to live within me. I return to it again and again – perhaps I'm lured in by the fire lighting her wings. Reading it, editing it, pulling the words apart until it is something new, something true to who I was at that moment – at nineteen years old, sitting on my bed and realizing I wasn't straight. I didn't know who I was, but I had found who I wasn't.



Hardly an adult, I had my first and only date in the span of four years with another boy, despite his earnest attempts to gain my affection and a second date. He had tried to kiss me after our date, polite and sweet. We stood outside Buchanan Hall on the University of Oklahoma's campus, ten minutes before I had Hispanic Literature. It was the last class I needed to get my Spanish minor.

We had walked with our hands tangled in his coat pocket, because it was cold, and I wanted to try. I wanted the date to end in a promise of more. I wanted to be ready for a relationship, a companion. I wanted the closeness that I had longed for since the day I had met Grace.

Standing in the small entryway to my class's building, I watched him get closer. I felt the same kind of panic I had felt when I was six and refused to get on an escalator. Mom unknowingly left me behind as I stood there, afraid, knowing that I was supposed to follow, supposed to *go*, but petrified at the thought of taking that single step.

I pulled away.

He was still eager and simply kissed my cheek instead. He had been content to cater to my comfort with a smile and a promise to text me later. I can't remember the sensation of his chapped lips on my flushed skin, although I remember the tight flare of embarrassment and discomfort as he hugged me goodbye. I don't know if his mouth was warm or chilled, soft or rough, light or heavy. To be honest, he isn't what I remember about that day.

I remember rushing into my Hispanic Literature class and flailing into my seat without an ounce of grace. There were three minutes before class would begin and our professor was still trudging up the steps outside the classroom door. I spilled the events of the day to the girl who sat in front of me, prompted to speak when she turned to ask me how the date had gone.

There was a gleam in her eyes as she smiled, her pink mouth curling open with delight as I told the story. It was a cupid's bow mouth like my own, dipping satisfactorily in the middle, casting love spells. A flash of fascinatingly gold lightning shot across the brown sky of her eyes when I fidgeted nervously and confessed that I hadn't kissed him. She reached out and rested a polite touch on my forearm.

What I remember about that day is the gentle pressure of her hand. It smoothed over my frayed thoughts, letting me ignore the sudden questions that would not stop ringing for attention, and brought me into the moment. Her fingertips lit an electrifying excitement in my muscles, and every nerve in my body had seemed to be fixated on those five points of sensation.



I don't know when I realized that liking the same sex was a sin. I don't know when I realized that I was a sinner. But these are the two truths that I know of my church, even if everything else about Catholicism and God feels so uncertain now.

It's strange to think the world I grew up in isn't the one I live in now. It's strange to think that the place where I found a face to adore is the same place that would condemn me for it. It's strange to think that the sanctuary that taught me the definition of love wouldn't want to practice it with me anymore.

And I don't know if I really care about what someone has in their pants, or under their shirt for that matter. I think girls look nicer, feel softer, and I've always preferred pastels. I think I just like hair the color of sand and eyes the color of the sea.

* * *

So, here's my secret: Sure, it's forbidden, but, like Eve, with that red apple perched on her palm, there's something hopeful, something honest about it too.

So, here's my secret: I am going to take my first bite.

So, here's my secret: I will walk out of Eden with my head held high.

