

A new month, a new set of motivation to write? Today has all been about thinking. Debating on the things I've always wanted to do, but I've pushed aside for a life that by definition should give me success. A degree. Good grades. Exceptional GPA. All for the acceptance of a company to work for to provide the bare necessities for yourself. Maybe I am visualizing this life all wrong, but I cannot wait to be free. Maybe I need some new people to change my perspective, ever evolving to whatever new objective comes by. Maybe having a company job will be wonderful and satisfying and all of the things I thought it would never be. One day at a time will get me to the place that I need to be, where I belong. I hope it is all worth it in the end. I have spent a part of my life asleep. I am ready to wake up and see the world.

So many paths and thoughts. Hopes and wishes. The world is so inspiring. I only wish to have the time and means to see it all. Thinking about all of the best places to visit is only the beginning of my conquest to search what is beyond. People talk about generational wealth and the importance of being able to have a stable job and make money, but what if that is not all I want to achieve in my life? I want to be able to provide for the people of my future, sure, but what about now? What about the people of the present?

For a long time, I thought I might be single forever. I had been single for so long in high school without any romantic prospects. I came into college with the same mindset that I've had my whole life: love would just have to come to me. I have a huge fear of failure and rejection, and I couldn't risk putting my love on the line. So, my crush on Bryson was painful. Chelsea maintained that I should make a move, and I maintained that watching movies together and sneaking quick glances was all the move I should've had to make.

One night I was at a Halloween party with Bryson, Chelsea, and her boyfriend, Jordan. We had already been out the night before, and Chelsea wasn't feeling great so she left about 45 minutes in. I asked her and Jordan if they cared if Bryson and I stayed, and knowing my intentions they didn't care at all. I had Bryson to myself, and I was going to make him mine.

We were running around that party like we owned the place, having a great time. We found a friend of ours and asked her to take a photo of us. He placed his hand gently on the small of my back and pulled me in close. *We look so much like a couple.* We thanked our friend and danced away.

I don't remember the exact words exchanged, but I remember the moment. All inhibitions left my body and I placed my right arm on Bryson's shoulder to emphasize whatever I was saying. I rested it there, not removing it after I had finished talking. I watched as Bryson scanned my face from my eyes, to my nose, to my lips letting his gaze linger. I started saying something completely random, my nerves going crazy. When I stopped talking, I realized I had a chance that I might not have gotten again. I took a deep breath and stared at Bryson, my eyes darting rapidly, analyzing each corner of his face. We were silent, each of us lost in each other's eyes, my arm remained on his shoulder. I waited in anticipation for him to lean in, but grew impatient and rushed in for a kiss. Following my lead he met me halfway placing his lips on mine.

I stayed over at his apartment that night. I didn't sleep at all. I just stayed awake cradled in his arms all night. When he woke up I laid on his chest, listening closely to his relaxed heartbeat, smelling his cologne.

"We should probably talk about this," he whispered.

"Yeah, probably," I said, knowing I wasn't good at talking about it.

"This feels right," he said. I felt a wave of relief, I didn't have to say anything. I just nodded and held him tighter.

Things moved incredibly quickly after that night. Slightly over a week later, he asked me to be his girlfriend, I said yes, and we spent most nights together. I had never been happier. For the first time in my life, I saw myself as someone worthy of love. Not only love but the kind of love that people write about.

After we had started dating I thought about telling him I loved him every moment we were together, but I was too scared. Besides, my friends told me he should be the one to say it. Our show at the time was *Gilmore Girls*, and we'd cuddle up most nights and watch an episode or two. As the show played I would trace the three words that I just couldn't get to escape my lips across his skin. I would delicately drag my pointer finger careful not to linger too long on any one letter, afraid he'd figure out what I was doing. He never did find out, I don't think, at least he never told me he did.

Winter break was rapidly approaching, and we had decided to celebrate our Christmas the day that he had left for home. I was terrified, worried that what I got him would be too much or not enough. That morning we decided to stop at Maple Street Biscuit Company for breakfast, a local biscuit joint that was just across the street from his apartment. I offered to drive, feeling too lazy to walk the short distance. We approached the singular intersection that I had to cross to get

us there. The cross traffic had no stop sign, whereas we did. The car on the left stopped to let me go.

“Oh they’re stopping for you,” Bryson alerted me. I am an anxious driver. After hearing that someone was waiting for me I began to drive, fearing that they’d get annoyed with me if I waited too long.

“Elie! ELIE!” I slammed on my brakes alarmed by Bryson’s screaming. I looked to my right before I heard the blaring horn of the car speeding at me.

I waved to them as if to say “I’m sorry,” and shamefully completed driving across the intersection. I pulled into a parking spot, still shaking, and began showering Bryson with kisses – I almost killed him after all. I looked at him, his eyes wide and his smile wiped from his face and my heart sank. I couldn’t believe I just did that.

Though he was clearly upset and rattled, he never yelled at me. Sitting in that parking spot I was ready for the screaming I had become so accustomed to. I felt myself grow small, ready for whatever he had coming my way. Instead, he took a deep breath and pulled himself together.

“Please don’t do that again,” he said calmly.

I was shocked to be met with such grace. I was fully in the wrong, there was no denying that, and yet he didn’t scream. Sure, the look on his face told me he wasn’t happy with me, and that he was probably fearing for his life, but he didn’t scream.

Despite my terrible driving, we enjoyed a delicious meal at Maple Street. I got a sausage egg and cheese biscuit, and he got something with steak and gravy. We walked out and decided to head back to my place to open Christmas gifts. I was terrified to get back in the car, and yet Bryson got in my passenger seat ready for me to drive him to my place.

When we got home I sat down on the bed and handed him his gift, he gave me mine. He opened my gift to him first, I got him two Life is Good t-shirts, and some hot chocolate. He had been using Keurig K-Cups despite not having a Keurig, so I got him some packets. Also enclosed was a picture frame that folded like a book, inside a picture of us hugging, and one of me placing a kiss on his cheek. He told me he loved it, and every day over break he slept with those photos by his side.

It was then my turn to open his gift to me. The first thing I pulled out was a pair of cat slippers. One slipper had a photo of a cat looking into a fishbowl, and on the other, the cat was grinning, the fish having disappeared.

“The cat just seems so happy with himself, he looks so sassy I thought you would like him,” Bryson justified his gift, though he didn’t have to, they were perfect.

Hiding along the side of the gift bag were two manilla folders labeled “My Elie”. As I reached for the first one he appeared flustered, grabbing it before I had the chance to, and opening it up. Inside, he had taped mementos from all of our dates, and other meaningful moments in our relationship. He nervously walked me through each one, I could tell he wasn’t used to the vulnerability, neither was I. At the end of the second folder was a journal entry he had written on September 11th, 2023 one of the first days we had hung out one on one. He told me I couldn’t read it in front of him.

“It’ll make me shy,” he insisted.

Tears began to well in my eyes, no one had ever done anything this nice for me before. I didn’t know how to thank him so I just pulled him in and kissed him. As our lips separated I looked him in the eyes.

“I love you, Elie,” he said softly, voice shaking.

“I love you too,” I whispered back. He pulled me in for another kiss then said,

“I’m so glad you didn’t pull a Rory Gilmore,” he chuckled. In an episode of *Gilmore Girls* we had watched a few days prior Rory refused to tell Dean she loved him.

I keep a picture of the journal entry on my phone and read it anytime I’m feeling insecure or anxious. It’s the perfect reminder that someone out there loves me, even if I forget.

The only time I've ever seen my mom dancing was when I was about six years old and we were at the Maltese Club in Queens. Maltese people in New York would meet there on the weekends and the club used to organize kids parties for Halloween or Christmas or Easter in the downstairs basement. I forgot what holiday it was but that only time I saw my mom dance, there was a kids' party in the basement.

The basement was dimly lit, there was a DJ on the platform and the disco ball was twirling, white light swirling around the room. An 80's song was on and a few adults started dancing - my mom was one of them.

She was wearing green wedge heels that had a golden buckle at the toe and I still remember those heels because I always wanted to wear them, used to tell myself I would someday when my feet grew into them.

I remember looking at my mom who was smiling brightly, her face stretched out. She didn't have wrinkles back then. Her eyes were lit and she looked young. I mean, she was young, maybe twenty-nine, but right there, she looked like she felt young for the first time in a long time.

I remember, as a kid, cringing at seeing my mom dance. Yet this image of her dancing, her kicking her feet and jumping in place, remained imprinted on my mind, about two decades later.

My mom doesn't go out so much anymore. We don't live in New York anymore, we moved to Malta about fifteen years ago. My mom is now obsessed with cleaning her house. She cleans over the clean. Her legs are full of spider veins popping out, black, blue, green and purple. She used to go to the town feasts and she'd dress up in pretty dresses, wear high heels, the hundreds of shoes

and dresses she owns, tucked in her wardobes, but she's now stopped going to the feasts. Her feet hurt her.

I went to my first party when I was seventeen. I wore a red wine skater dress and black open-toed heels - my first pair of heels. It was a student organized party that was full of stuck up kids.

Afterwards, my friends and I went to a bar known to attract divorced people. I had my first kiss there, that night, and the guy was thirty. I told him I was eighteen.

I drank alcohol for the first time when I was sixteen at my town's carnival street party. My mom had a strict curfew which started at midnight and extended, with time, to three in the morning. When I reached eighteen, my mom didn't like me wearing tight clothes so I'd walk out the house wearing a top she'd approve, with another top tucked in my skirt. I'd change tops downstairs and leave the original one in the mailbox. I'd wear four inch heels and since I'm short, they made a small impact. I used to drink fifteen drinks in one night. Vodka sprite or Vodka orange. Lots of shots. And I'd drag my friends to the dance floor to dance, falling a few times from being drunk and wearing heels, unbalanced.

I liked getting attention from men. I'd dance near someone I thought looked cute, eye him, wiggle my body against his body, until, eventually, we'd make out. Guys always wanted sex afterwards, but I never gave in. Once, I went to a birthday party at a club, 70's themed, and I wore bell bottom pants with silver platform heels. My friends and I were so drunk that we danced around the strip pole. I made out with a guy that night that wanted to take me to his car, which, I didn't. I ended up with a deep cut in my foot that night, my foot all bloody, and I had no idea until my mom pointed it out the next morning. I think it was this incident that made my mom realize I was promiscuous. I threw out those silver heels a while ago because of how scratched up they had gotten.

I was in Malta this summer visiting my parents. On a Saturday night, I was going through my old clothes at my parents' house. I left some stuff behind, but most of my clothes are at my apartment in Chicago. I found that first pair of black high heels, all worn out and scratched, one of the heels, bent. Looking through my mom's shoes felt like a time capsule to a time when fashion was cooler. All from the early 2000's, her shoes could easily be sold at a thrift store and get snatched up by Gen Z youths trying to bring the 2000's back even though most of them were born in 2008. My mom used to take care of her shoes well.

I drink socially nowadays, a glass of white wine or a beer on Saturday nights out with friends. My signature drink is a Long Island Iced Tea but I only drink that when I really want to get into the mood. I still like to party and there's a few Latino clubs in Chicago I like to visit. I prefer wearing my green Docs and a pair of jeans to dance, wiggle and twirl around my body in comfort, my feet have started hurting me and I'm only 25. I don't like going to clubs with guys I'm dating because I hate their eyes looking at my body, makes me feel like I have to perform for them, not that they themselves make me feel that way. When dancing, my body switches on and I'm high, just me and the music, my worries washed away, tomorrow's problem. I'm on my own, alone in the club, with even friends, I single myself out - electricity flows through my body - pure sober breathless dancing. But once it hits 2am, my body gets tired out from dancing and needs to leave.

Those green wedge heels were there too, in the back of the closet. I carefully took them out and put them on - they fit like Cinderella's glass slipper. My mom was sitting outside the room in the living room, quietly making Christmas stockings even though it's August. My dad was out getting us pizza we ordered for dinner. We planned to stay in and watch a movie. The heels looked used but still in

good condition, still wearable. I took them off and placed them back where I found them. No one would wear them again.

My door creaked open, illuminating the room with the light of the hallway coming in like a gust of wind. My mother comes into the room handing me a small puppy in her hand telling me to take care of her for the night since it was my last one here she gave me a hug and just as quickly as she had come in she was gone. As I laid in bed in the dark on my half inflated air mattress that I could not find the hole to patch up with a puppy biting me I felt as though I had lost all of the air in my lungs. I should be happy to be leaving for university, escaping the annoyances, the lack of a real bed, taking care of multiple dogs all of the time, the fact my car is no longer mine, but instead I'm feeling fear not knowing what will come tomorrow. As I close my eyes and breathe I remember the last time I felt this much fear and attempted to give myself confidence by saying to myself if I could survive through "that" then this should be fine.

"Now that sounds Phenomenal !! the day you jump out of a plane is the day I do it with you no questions asked" my grandfather laughs as he holds in his hands two tickets for skydiving at a local area only an hour away. People begin getting up from the red leather couch with their body prints fresh after having sat for hours at this family reunion at my grandfather's senior living apartment. Like birds in a flock they migrated to the doorway all squawking about the perfect birthday present. I did not care to listen to despite my loud announcement and my exaggeration I stayed put on the couch. As I walked to the front door after the rest migrated outside there was a hand on my shoulder and with that my grandfather was in front of me. With his salt and pepper hair and his white shirt with a chinese symbol on the back despite him not knowing any other languages and refusing to ever learn. He held up his phone and turned it towards my direction " Now it's up to you to choose a date or are you sure you want to go?" with him grinning I chose the earliest one that was on screen responding " now you don't have to wait any longer be ready

by the end of the month it shall be phenomenal". While I walked out into the darkness my stubbornness had gotten the better of me not wanting to back out now having to experience a mixture of excitement and fear.

Walking out of my girlfriends house saying goodbye to all of the family in colorful clothes first thing in the morning with everyone appearing to be zombies arising from the dead with hair everywhere took longer than expected. With tearful goodbyes as others became emotional I had a smile on my face sticking out like a small white cloud in the middle of a thunderstorm. I said my goodbyes along the lines of "I'm ready to move out, I am excited to finally be free of the loud house" I kept my remarks brief and we entered the car to finally start our journey. As we entered the car my smile faded and I stared out of the window with no sound except for the music in the background.

I watched as everything I had known was fading behind me getting smaller and smaller, watching as the car passed my old workplace, a newish green building with the inside still empty as it was still early. The gym that I went to with my friends was larger and purple with it being mostly glass and the apparently endless rows of machines only seeing a brief glimpse then it being gone. After being in the car for what seemed a brief moment we passed the name sign of the town that I had lived in for a significant portion of my life and with that it was gone.

Everything was Gone.

Thump. As me and my grandfather sat in the waiting area to be called onto board the mini plane I watched as one of the workers at the place threw the tangled parachute on the ground. As

he was rolling the parachute back into the backpack he was about half way when the receptionist at the front desk next to him told him he was doing it wrong and to start over. I closed my eyes as my body was becoming jittery with my leg bouncing up and down and my holding my hands together and moving my thumbs at that moment I could feel the goosebumps. As I'm trying to compose myself, I'm reasoning that it can't be that bad people do this all the time, these people do this for a living. There's no way they could make such mistakes, if I die they die everything will be fine and with that I hear a young man call my last name and it's time to go.

In the empty room the sounds of sniffing and crying echo. The first night alone is here and there is nobody to take care of things except yourself. As my girlfriend expressed her emotions, my outward optimism became non-existent and I joined her in crying, my stubbornness to admit that I also felt fear was gone and now we were alone with our thoughts.

I sat at the edge of the plane attached to the professional looking down into the abyss. Woosh, that was all I could hear as we descended, the wind was so strong I felt my face stretch and my eyes water against the wind pressure.

He pulled the parachute and it worked, I took a breath.

He told me he had to pull two latches to lower me so we could land properly and being half deaf from the loud wind I just nodded as half of my body went a foot lower than him and a foot closer to the abyss.

Grunting and huffing is what ensued as he tried pulling the second latch and told me he was having a problem. I held my breath.

After a few agonizing seconds of eternity he was able to get it to work and we landed safely. I finally took a breath once landing on solid ground again.

By the second day the fear was gone. As I looked out of the window looking at the sky my phone was buzzing and I picked it up seeing my mother calling. “How do you like it being on your own?” with a deep breath I responded “I think it's Phenomenal”.

## Fifty Cents

I can remember the brush of gravel that offset the sweet fifty cent push-pop, from the ice-cream shack, next to the Lutheran Church. The lavenders of my dress soaked through with blood, tinging the fabric to an unrecognizable visage of streams, and carnally made waterfalls. But, as though through the grace of Our Creator, no pain followed the rips of skin now filled with gravel and cement.

The push-pop, abandoned to the burning cement, rolled away on the downward slope of the long-outdated basketball court. Hands fully bracing myself, equally scrapped and scabbed compared to my knees, neither taking precedence over the sweet treat that my father had given me two quarters for. Tears prickling in my eyes because while shifting deeper into the gravel, centering my weight unto my knees to hold myself up more as I reached for the treat, welcomed more future hurt; I could not just waste what my father had given me.

A hollowness opened in my stomach as it melted and mixed with the gravel. Sherbert orange blending with the miniscule grey rocks that on any other day I would not deem a threat. But, with the Lord watching and peering over, I could not let my father's gift go to waste. So, I reached forwards. The lavenders now tearing and ripping, mimicking my skin; leaving room for it to soak into me. This while inadvertently staunching the flow of blood still coming from the thin skin of my knees, welcomed more trauma to interrupt the unified and congested blood vessels.

Kids, the fellow worshipers of the pew, loudly wondering what had happened. Captivated by scraped knees and bloody hands, as if they were not a common commodity in childhood. They corralled and we all mourned, for our biggest fear at this age was wastefulness. Wasting

what was given no matter the intention or personal authority over the actions. No penance was to be requested, I should not grieve this waste I brought upon my father, but to the misplaced worry that was made for Our Creator.

Standing and shaking the loose pebbles from my lavenders, I forget the true distance in-between the push-pop and I. Wiping the stray tears that lingered from the initial shock, smearing dust, debris, and blood over skin. I pick it up and mourn regretfully, for the last time, what my father gave up for me.

## Growing Pains

My bookcase is stuffed, spilling. It is papers and books and journals and cut-out newspaper articles, all holding their breath to stay on the shelf. I devour anything I can get my hands on just to throw it back up. Sonnets, stories, songs—I am a writer. I write.

My grandfather was an English teacher. My dad went to school for Creative Writing. It's in my blood, this obsession with language, with bending it like hot glass. It's a hand-me-down, and I accept it with greedy palms.

In the fourth grade, I read *A Wrinkle in Time*. Then I read it four more times, and then I read it until my copy was beaten to bits. It was fascinating, a world that existed between front and back covers. Reading made me feel smart, it made me feel hungry. And when I got through the titles in the library, I just picked up a pen and tried at my own.

I was terrible. My vocabulary was a mess. All my characters were just borrowed from my favorite movies. I didn't have a great grasp of tense. But it wasn't about being good, it was about having fun. It was about creating.

Writing was a game. Stories were pictures my parents could pin on the fridge. My little aspirations were genes. "Oh, she's just like her father," people would say, and I'd glow with it. It was a compliment farm, fishing for stickers shaped like stars.

In middle school, writing became about impressing my teachers. I'd shove big words into my homework assignments. Once, I told a teacher at a parent conference that I was "self-deprecating" like just knowing the word made me some sort of prodigy. I'd raise my hand in class just to prove I understood every lesson. I wasn't good at math, or science, or social studies,

but I was *great* at English. I read more than anyone else in class, I shoe-horned fancy punctuation into text messages. My vocabulary was syllable-heavy—the bigger the word, the better. I talked to show off, and I talked a lot, and I talked *everywhere*. I was very annoying.

High school was different. At some point, it clicked in my head that no one thought big words were cool except me, and instead of looking intelligent, I mostly looked like a huge dork. So, I dialed it back, I swallowed myself a bit. I'd still showboat in essays, but I did what you do when you're a freshman in high school. I assimilated.

But all that vocabulary was homeless, fallen from my mouth like baby teeth. It had to go somewhere. So, I wrote.

More than ever, I wrote.

I took my displaced words and scrawled them into journals. Every feeling that I had was for the page. And here's the thing: being a teenage girl is *all* feeling. It's turmoil. It's anger that comes from nowhere, expectation perching on your shoulder like a hawk. You have to stand up straight, you have to look pretty, you have to look *out*. Being a teenage girl is claws and skin and rage.

When I was fourteen, I was full of feelings and I was full of words. I always had something to say. Writing came easy then, because everything else came hard. I wasn't ever cool, I'm made of stomach aches and bug-eye glasses and Star Wars DVD box sets. I stumbled my way through making friends, rambling and hunching my shoulders.

I was a fountain of emotion. I was drowning it in, I was coughing it up, and I was writing it down.

I was born a writer. I've been practicing since I could pick up a pencil, and I've realized along the way that it only ever gets harder as you grow. My skills are honed, but I know enough to doubt them. I'm in my head about it, I overanalyze, I compare.

I find myself reaching more than I used to. Stuttering in my language, hanging on clumsy words. I used to plow ahead, now it's all too easy to get lost in the weeds.

There is a certain freedom that comes with the lack of any sort of formal training. There's no pressure to art when no one is looking at it. It's just release.

I know more about writing than I ever have. I know how to pronounce "iambic pentameter." I definitely couldn't do that before. I know the difference between the writer and the speaker. I know that that distinction matters. I know how to write a solid metaphor. I know how to dissect a poem like a scientist dissects an animal.

In that process, of aging and learning and climbing, there is a certain amount of flinching away from instinct, losing yourself to form and discipline. I'll spend twenty minutes on one sentence, reordering the words until they satisfy me. I used to write as fast as I could. I used to write like hell.

As a child, I was all instinct. In middle school it was ego. As a teenage girl, I was emotion in action. It's more difficult to place myself now. The idea of a writer is a complex one. There are connotations to the word, to the practice of being an artist. There's an image—eyebags and a type-writer and a cold cup of coffee. Warm lights and spiral notebooks and pen smudged palms.

Do you have to be tortured or vain or naïve? Are words born from tragedy? Are they born from love or passion or apathy? Why am I still a writer? What pushes me even as it gets harder to make my pen move the way I want it to?

I worry. Maybe that's what makes me a writer.

Maybe I write because I'm scared I'll lose it. Because I'm scared I'll forget all the big words I learned in middle school. If it's a candle in a thunderstorm, then I'm guarding the flame with my life. If it's luck, then I'm clinging to it with both hands.

My last year of high school, I wrote a poem about fear at three in the morning. Words strike when you don't expect them, that's the only way they strike.

*It's like this:*

The poem said.

*You're seventeen.*

*You're scared.*

I cried so hard when I wrote it that I woke up with a headache. I showed it to my English teacher, and she printed it out, underlined her favorite parts.

The poem won a contest. It hung in a gallery for a few weeks. They put my panic under an artsy spotlight. They framed the bile at the back of my throat. The terror was pretty, I guess. Maybe that's why I wrote it. To make the terror into something pretty.

I'm a writer. I always have been. But lately, I've been writing with my shoulders tense.

If I've learned anything from doing this for so long, it's that writing is cyclical. You grow, but you get stuck. You get better, but you still suck. It's all just walking forward and walking back, steps for the sake of moving, thinking you're good and forgetting all that to get *really* good. You write because you have to, because your mind demands it. You write because you have to, because you have an assignment due at 11:59 and you can only push it off for so long.

Reading used to make me feel brilliant. Writing made me feel like I was changing the world.

*You're seventeen.*

*You're scared.*

I'm not seventeen anymore. I don't fill journals when I weep. I'm not the kid with the threadbare book clutched to my chest. I'm not the girl with a mouth like a thesaurus. I'm not angry anymore: no claws, no teeth.

But I still use big words for the sake of it, sometimes. I still chuck a pencil across the room in a rage when I get stuck. I still have pencils and notebooks in all my coat pockets. I still have a copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* on my bookshelf.

Writing is cyclical. On a bad day, I want to tear my hair out about it, I want to throw my laptop in a river and change my major and burn all my pens. But on a good one, I want to make write something anyway.

## Growing Up Tomboy

I was eight years old the first summer my hair was short, and we moved from the Twin Cities area to a farming town two and a half hours into the middle of nowhere. Growing up in the middle of rural Wisconsin was picturesque. Generational farms surrounded our two block “downtown” area, which served as the 1,000 person town’s central hub. A town that small is nearly homogenous: families stay on the same land year after year, teachers instruct every relative, everyone’s clothing and school supplies come from the same four stores an hour away. Difference was palpable, and dangerous. I didn’t look like any of the children my age: my hair too short to be a girl, but too long to be a boy; my boy’s jeans and slip on Vans paired with brightly colored girl’s shirts; my knees scraped and nails cut short with a general refusal to adhere to what was *ladylike*. My hair stayed short until I was eighteen years old.

Before I knew what my gender was, or was not, it was the topic of conversation of my peers and their parents. I danced and took piano lessons like many of the girls in town; I played with the boys during recess. No one could figure out who I was; and I never gave it much thought. “I am *me*,” was the only answer I gave. I elaborated for no one and after enough time went by, they begrudgingly tolerated it. It came as no surprise when word got out that I had a crush on a girl in my grade. As they acknowledged my tomboyiness, the assumption of my sexual orientation was clear; another thing I refused to elaborate on, another aspect of myself which I simply enacted.

It wasn’t until I cut my long hair off, at twenty, that I began to unravel the knots I tied around my gender. Friends asked what my pronouns were, out of respect rather than the ridicule of my childhood. For the first time, I was considering what my gender presentation meant. How did I want to navigate our world? Gender became something to explore, and to play with.

Reimagining what my presentation could be, and considering how it would influence what and how I wrote, is an ongoing process. We are constantly reinventing ourselves, as is the nature of humanity, with the influence of tradition. We are a culmination of our influences; what our parents, our friends, our teachers, and the media teaches us about individuality becomes the step-by-step guide to constructing our identity. To construct a queer identity, however, is provided a different guide altogether - the guides bestowed onto normative identities are neglected for those who fall into non-normative identities. For Carmen Maria Machado, “this is the curse of the queer woman - eternal liminality.” (135) To be queer - that is, to be authentic to one’s self - is to remove yourself from the supported trajectories of growing up; it is to carve a space for yourself.

Historically, this is reflected in the erasure of queer possibilities until Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a German sexologist of the nineteenth century, published criteria for disorders outlining same-sex desire and gender performance. This vilification and pathologization survives to today, albeit to a lesser extent. *In the Dream House* explores the effects of this removal of representation, and Machado forges explorations of genre in entirely new ways. When individuals are not given the opportunity to explore many ways of being - the way that normative media and ways of living provide for aligned identities - it becomes exponentially more difficult to explore what a non-normative identity could be.

I was twenty years and nine months old when I shaved my head, and I had convinced myself that I was done coming out. We are surrounded by ideas about when we *should* know our identities, which entirely dismisses the possibility of fluidity, reinvention, and discovery as we age. I entered my second decade certain that I knew everything that I could know about myself: my sexuality and gender were, therefore, stagnant binaries which could not be understood to any

further degree. As I watched my hair fall away accompanied by the buzz of the clippers, the norms I had abided by lost their potency and I started to unravel the knots around my gender. I revisited the memories of my childhood: climbing trees, asserting that I could do anything that the boys in my grade could do, never letting my hair get long because I wouldn't recognize that reflection. I didn't want to be a boy, but I didn't feel like a girl. I didn't yet have the language to describe my gender, and had accepted that I would play pretend instead.

Exploring my identity as a child unmoored me. I was surrounded by queer adults who assured me that any sexuality I grew into would be loved and accepted; I was inundated by the limitations of the small town, who could only see that I was different. It was the friendships of my early twenties that provided a space to finally find the language for my gender.

It was the end of the semester, my head freshly shaved, and a girl I would only ever flirt with tilted her head. "What pronouns should I use for you?" our whisky glasses collected condensation as we watched the sunset against the city's skyline.

I hesitated, and remembered how girlhood never fit quite right. "No one's asked me that, but I've already come out so many times. I'm not sure it really even matters anymore."

The streetlights lit while she thought and wrapped her hand around mine. She had a habit of staring me down, of unraveling my rambling sentences and thoughts. There is a familiarity in the liminality of queerness. We have never had language that regarded us lovingly; queerness flourishes in the subtext.

"Of course it matters, but I'll be here while you think about it," she clinked our glasses together and took a sip.

That night, we would take a picture that memorialized the first time gender was something I could approach as malleable. It would take nearly two full years until I would allow

myself to finally relinquish my feigned womanhood. Existing in the inbetween of gender, occupying space that has historically been vilified, gave me an expansion of self.

I am twenty three years old, and the sides of my head are shaved by my friends and my lover. In the palms of their hands, my rambling thoughts become clear. We create our identities, frame them with our hair and the fit of our jeans. I have cut my hair more times than I can count in the last three years, each time finding a new facet to explore. It isn't reinvention each time; it is rediscovery.

Leaving my suburban Minnesota town to come to Tallahassee, FL is the scariest thing I've ever done. I always considered my parents "cool parents" letting me do whatever I wanted.

"It's better if you do it in the house," my mom would say.

However, the coolness limited itself to me leaving town without them. I don't think they didn't trust me to make a big journey by myself, but I was their first baby. I always wanted to take a trip with my friends after I turned 18, but they continuously said no. While I was disappointed, I always understood. It's hard to watch the first child grow up and leave the nest.

My parents always encouraged me to go. Since I was a preteen I had been talking about leaving Minnesota,

"I just hate the cold, I want to go somewhere warm, like Florida," 12-year-old me repeated.

I think this is part of the reason they never wanted me to leave as a teen. They knew that I'd be going away for good once I graduated. However, they never tried to convince me to stay. My parents never went to college. While they were fortunate enough to land good jobs that supported our family, I watched them struggle my entire life. Each setback in their career seemed to carry so much more gravity without a college degree backing them up.

"I want you to do what I wasn't able to," my dad would say.

I took that to heart. I knew the best thing I could do for my parents was let them live vicariously through me. My senior year I applied to 13 schools. Only 4 of them were in the Midwest and the other 11 were all in southern states. I told my parents where I was applying and they did nothing but encourage me.

The day I got into Florida State I knew that that's where I was going to end up. I had little to no shot of getting into UF, and FSU seemed way cooler. When I visited campus, I was truly

set though. It was early April, and my mom, dad, sister, and I had just driven up to Tallahassee from vacation in Tampa to visit campus. The day I toured it seemed like the most beautiful place ever. Big brick buildings, magnolias, and azaleas dotting every sidewalk, I knew that this was where I wanted to be living in 5 months.

My parents both seemed to love the campus as well.

“Everyone just seems so chill here,” my mom kept repeating.

With my parent’s approval and my love for the campus, it seemed like an absolute no-brainer. I committed to FSU about two weeks later on April 13th, 2022.

The months between April and August seemed to fly by and on August 15th, my dad and I embarked on a cross-country road trip from Lakeville, MN to Tallahassee, FL. It was a 21-hour drive, and I was terrified. My dad isn’t known to be the best driver. Just a few months prior he got into an accident the day of my grad photos and completely wrecked his car. Besides this, he has terrible road rage. He’s always confident that someone is racing him.

However, despite my concerns the drive was an absolute blast. I had seen parts of the country I hadn’t ever seen before. We saw the St. Louis Arch, several state parks, and monuments. However, my personal favorite stop was at a fireworks shop in Missouri called Boomland. It was so weird, but it had lots of old-fashioned candies and trinkets. It was nothing glamorous, but my dad and I found a way to make fun of every dull moment on that trip.

We got to Tallahassee on the 18th, and my mom and sister flew into Tallahassee to help me move into my dorm. My dorm was a dump. It was small, the toilet didn’t work, and it was covered in black mold. It may have been terrible, but it was mine. Once it was all set up it even began to feel a little bit like a second home.

My parents stayed for two more days while I got settled, and they helped me put the finishing touches in my dorm room. When it came to August 20th, it was time for them to go. Just before they had to take off to catch their flight, we all sat in my dorm room on the verge of tears. We tried to make normal conversation but there was a heavy air in the room. I was going to be alone 1,200 miles from home.

Just before the Uber arrived to take them to the airport, we all walked outside together to say our goodbyes. My mom gave me a big hug. I wouldn't have been able to break from that hug even if I tried. She was grabbing me so tight I wasn't sure she would ever let go. Next, my sister, she didn't hug me quite so tight, afraid of seeming lame as many 16-year-olds are. However, we both knew that it would be hard to be without each other. We were so close for so long and now we had to be apart. Lastly, my dad came in for a hug. He always said that 'Elie hugs' were the best, and much like my mom I was afraid he would never let go. When he broke from me he said,

"I'm gonna miss you, Elie Belle," tears welled in his eyes. That was the first time I had ever seen him cry.

When I looked at my family, I realized they were all crying. At that moment, despite holding in my tears for so long, I broke. I couldn't believe I was going to be alone here.

Someone else who was moving in yelled out at us,

"Oh my God y'all are just so cute I cannot!"

Normally, I would've been completely mortified. I can't stand people perceiving my emotions. However, at that moment I didn't care. I was just glad that my family loved me so much that saying goodbye was this hard.

When their Uber pulled away I sprinted back to my dorm room. My roommate hadn't moved in yet, so I was able to sob in peace. I didn't leave my room for over 24 hours, as I was distraught at my sudden loneliness. However, when I forced myself to go meet some people, I ended up meeting my best friends. Within a week I was hanging out with Bryson and Chelsea non-stop.

A few days after my parents left, I discovered a letter board that I had brought that my family had left a message on. It read simply,

“Do great things. Love, Mom, Dad, and Erin,” that sign hung up in my dorm the rest of the year, unchanged.

## I Didn't Think

When your cousins come to live with you for the foreseeable future, all you think about is the never ending sleep over you always dreamed of. You think of playing house, kicking the soccer ball, climbing the avocado tree in the back, and splashing in the bathtub with your two favorite people in the world. You think about having dinner with them and watching Tom and Jerry on Saturday morning while eating french toast and strawberries. You think about how much you always wished they were your sisters, that you all lived together all the time, and that the fun would never end.

What you don't think about is where you're going to sleep. You don't think about how crowded your Grandmother's bed is with four people sleeping on it. You don't think about your single mother providing food for three kids, working long hours to come home to a busy house. You don't think about how little sleep she gets with one kid between her legs, one wrapped around her side and the smallest sitting on her chest. You don't think about the stress of bills going up or if there is going to be enough food for dinner. You don't think about her small Ford Focus that could only fit four people. You don't think about how worried she is for her sister, the mother of your two cousins, who is sleeping in a hospital bed instead of her own. That she had a brain tumor that burst during surgery, almost killing her while her two daughters were watching cartoons on beige tile floors. That after they brought her back and into recovery, she had an aneurysm and flat lined again, for five minutes. Five minutes she was dead. That she left the world with her two children in it. With her mother and husband in it. With her siblings waiting for her.

And when your cousins have to leave 6 months later, you just feel sad because you don't think about the miracle of their mother still being alive. All you can think about is how much you miss them, not how much their parents miss them. You think about all the good times with them being over, and now it's back to playdates after school and Sunday breakfast at Abuela's house next door. You don't think about how good it must have felt for their mom to hold her year old baby in her arms again, or to see her kids smiling at her. You just don't think about that stuff.

## Is God Real? A Story of Goats, Farms, and Faith

A few weeks ago, while watching *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* with my two older brothers, I had a subtle realization. As I watched the peanuts gallery riding off to Thanksgiving dinner in the way back of their gray station wagon, harmonizing the lyrics of “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go,” I turned to my two siblings as the notion dawned on me.

“We’ve never gone to our Grandma’s house.” I stared at them, slightly stunned.

“What are you talking about?” my oldest brother responded, noticeably unbothered.

“I dunno, I feel like that’s a big part of the American experience, y’know? ‘Going to Grandma’s house,’ we’ve never really gotten to do that.” I shrugged, pondering over anecdotes of the houses of American grandmothers I had heard growing up, wondering what potential memories we had lost.

“Does Abuelita even have a house?” my other brother asked, pointing out the obvious.

I thought about it, noticing he was right. When we were little, our grandparents were missionaries who traveled across Latin America, sharing their strong Christian faith. As we got older, they spent a few years in Nicaragua taking care of our Abuelita’s parents, and eventually, once they had made it back to the U.S., they delegated their days between the houses of my Tios, enjoying time spent with each of their grandchildren.

“Honestly,” our oldest brother chimed in, “I think any house with Abuelita in it is Abuelita’s house.” I laughed in response, reminiscing on her commanding presence and persuasive demeanor, how, even with broken English, she could win any argument.

The three of us began sharing stories of all of her visits growing up, often lasting weeks or months at a time, sometimes without our parents there to act as a buffer. One particular memory stayed at the forefront of my mind, as it often did creep back into my head time and time again; however, this time, I realized I had never shared it with the rest of my family.



As a young elementary-aged girl, my highlight in life was the farm camp I would go to for one week each summer. While my family never had any pets (my Mother was afraid of dogs, and my Father hated cats), at farm camp, I had many animals -goats, horses, chickens, and more- to nurture as my own. Each day, I would arrive at the farm on a rickety old school bus with peeling yellow paint, and windows sheathed with bullet holes from years of boys practicing on it at the shooting range. I, alongside twenty other kids, would tumble off of the bus with brown-sacked lunches and acres of land at our disposal. Farm camp was fairly unstructured, and we had full autonomy to spend our time however we wanted; the only event ingrained in our heads was popsicles every day at 3:00 pm by the lake. With this freedom, I aptly developed my own routine and had three activities to which I would devote most of my hours: feeding my favorite baby goats, shooting bow and arrow at the archery range, and asking “older kids” to push me on the giant rope swing hanging from the camp’s oldest oak tree.

One summer, when I was eight years old, my parents relayed the unfortunate news that they would be going on vacation the week I had farm camp and that my Abuelita would be coming to watch my older brothers and myself. While I loved my Abuelita and always looked forward to her visits, nothing demanded my punctuality like the yellow school bus that escorted

me to my rural paradise, and I feared that an amateur would not be able to get me to it each morning. Unlike the true school bus that picked me up each day for 2nd grade, this one did not attend to my neighborhood specifically, and it certainly didn't drive to my house each day. Instead, every day, I would wake up at 6:00 am, strap into my sneakers (they were velcro), and drive to the Kangaroo gas station with my parents, the halfway point between us and the farm, where the bus would promptly pick me up at 7 o'clock.

Upon my Abuelita's arrival, I did not even let her unpack before rushing her with a handwritten schedule, an entire page torn out of my pink Barbie notebook, breaking down each minute we would be spending together. While she may have been there to look after me, at eight years old, I felt responsible for both of us, and surely I was not going to drop the ball on my obligations. All weekend, I filled her in on the demands of farm life: sunscreen, green grapes in my lunch instead of purple, extra ponytail holders, and, of course, two water bottles so I wouldn't have to refill mine with the nasty lake-flavored well. Constantly, my Abuelita reassured me that everything would go according to plan; after all, she had raised four children before me, navigating the cross-cultural dilemmas afforded by immigrating between countries.

The Sunday night before my first day of farm camp, I brought her upstairs to my bedroom to tuck me in; while I may have been responsible, I knew better than to try and go to sleep without a proper goodnight hug from my grownup. Sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at me, snuggled up under all three of my blankets, she asked me,

"What time do we need to be up in the morning?"

"6:00 am," I answered swiftly. "I already set my alarm," I gestured with my shoulder toward the alarm clock sitting on my nightstand, for my arms were locked stiff below my comforter.

My Abuelita shook her head with disappointment, “No, no, no,” she said. “You do not need to wake up to an alarm clock; it is not good for your morning.” She reached over and turned my clock off. “We will simply pray, and God will wake us up when we need him.” She spoke without a hint of doubt behind her expression.

At that moment, all my careful preparation went out the window, and my panic rapidly set in. While I loved reading my Bible and praying to the Lord for things like dinner, my faith was tested in this bleak moment of utmost adherence; it was life or death. Nonetheless, I folded my palms together as my Abuelita stared down at me confidently. Together, we prayed that God would wake us both up at 6:00 am, me silently struggling to push away every dubious thought that crept into my mind. Unlike my Abuelita, I did not have 60 years' worth of blessings to serve as evidence of the Lord's miracles; my farm camp experience was doomed.

Hours later, my eyes shot open with ease as I heard the voice of my Abuelita looming over me, telling me to wake up. Looking around my room, I noticed not only her and her endearing smile but also the clock on my nightstand, which read 6:00 am. I was stunned. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that we would be up on time. I got out of bed with a grin on my face, preparing for farm camp like any other summer day, yet in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly had happened that morning.

This year, on the farm, Ms. Molly (the old woman who owned the camp) informed us that there would be four new baby goats, two of whom were humorously named Taco and Bell. All four of the baby goats, but especially Taco and Bell, had instantly captivated my affections. That week, I spent every available second in the goat pen, petting the new kids, grooming their bristled fur, and feeding them a sticky mixture of grass and beans that left an unwelcome residue on my palm. When I wasn't playing with the goats, I usually ate my lunch on the very top of the

camp's monkey bars. Most kids avoided them because of the rust, but I didn't mind; sitting up there, I always felt like I was on top of the world, somewhere high enough to enjoy my food in solidarity and collect my thoughts. Looking down at all of the other children, running around, playing tag, and picking fights over their different snacks, I wondered if this is how God feels up in heaven, watching over the chaos of the world in peace. As I ate, my mind wandered to earlier that morning, still ruminating with awe over the miracle that the Lord performed through my Abuelita. While I wanted it to be real, a more cynical part of me hoped this morning was a fluke, and again, I waited fearfully for the next morning to come and my questions to be answered.

Evidently, my Abuelita's faith proved strong, and each day that week, she appeared at my bedside at exactly 6:00 am. To say my belief in God grew from those mornings would be an understatement. I felt reborn, walking around farm camp like I possessed all of the world's wisdom, feeding each of the animals as though food from my hands would grant them insurmountable health. That Thursday, however, this notion appeared false as Ms. Molly gathered the entire camp to inform us that Taco, at only eight months old, had a horrible infection and wasn't expected to make it through the week. I was devastated with sadness; mostly, I felt bad for Bell and the fact that she was losing her brother. Compared to my eight years, eight months hardly seemed like a life, and I was pained to know Taco would never grow up and get his horns.

That night, just like the four nights prior, I sat in bed with my Abuelita, folding my hands and bowing my head. Together, we thanked God for an incredible week and asked him to wake us bright and early the next morning so we could enjoy another beautiful day. That night, however, after my Abuelita left the room and went to check on my brothers, I folded my hands even tighter and sent another prayer up to God. The longest prayer I had ever uttered at my young age, I begged the Lord to save the baby goat. I reminded him that I had discovered a

newfound stage in my faith and told him I needed my own private miracle to know he was watching over me.

The next morning, my eyes flew open, propelled by the speed of my own racing thoughts. Immediately, I noticed that my Abuelita wasn't there to wake me, and I feared we had overslept. Throwing back my covers and preparing to jump out of bed, I suddenly caught a glimpse of the alarm clock on my nightstand; I let out a sigh of relief as I noticed it said 6:00 am, and surely enough, my Abuelita then came strolling into my room, smiling at me proudly.

"Ah! You're up," she exclaimed before turning around and walking right back out.

I stared at my clock once more, almost wishing it would stay 6:00 am forever, a permanent piece of evidence of God's love for me. Hours later, as the yellow school bus pulled onto the rocky dirt road that signified our arrival, I ran to the front of the bus, impatiently waiting for the double doors to squeak open. Once off, I sprinted to the goat pen, not even bothering to drop my lunch or bookbag off in our clubhouse. As I approached the frail wire fence surrounding the pen, I squeaked to a halt, the sound of my sneakers in the mud attracting multiple stares from all of the adults circling the enclosure. Why were there adults circling the enclosure? I panicked.

Willing my eyes to focus, I gradually discerned Ms. Mollie sitting on her knees in the center of the pen, a dark object lying across her lap. The camp staff had covered Taco with a black blanket, probably to shield the horrors of his open wound from the young campers; I, however, viewed it as a way for them to pay their respects. Staring at the baby goat, no longer a living member of this world, I, too, fell to my knees, overtaken with silent sobs, for my tears were too confused to fall. My pain was difficult to comprehend and challenging to place, but no matter where it was coming from, I despised the way it caused my head to ache.

For what seemed like hours, I sat solemnly on the ground, the mud forming a layer of crusted dirt on my tattered jeans. Grieving the loss of my beloved animal friend and unsure of what I was feeling, I folded my hands and bowed my head, preparing once again to speak to God. As I went to speak my first few words, a wave of anger washed over me; laying in the dirt on a random Friday in July, I uncovered a new emotion, a deep sense of betrayal I had never felt before.

Was I mad at God? The question pierced my heart, adding a layer of guilt to my uncomfortable mixture of sensations. Well, I decided, he had neglected my prayer and manipulated my emotions after days of showing he was there for me. I thought back to every morning that week, waking up to my Abuelita's smiling face and a warmth of protection filling my heart. No, I thought, those emotions were real. If my God was up there looking down on me, and I wholeheartedly believed he was, he would not deliberately harm me or punish me when my faith was strongest.

I sifted my fingers through the moistened ground, staring at the spot of earth where Taco had previously laid, his hooves dragging through the mud as they picked him up, probably soon to be buried in another heaping pile of dirt.

*Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.*

I remembered the prayer verse I had heard before, often under similar circumstances, reminding us that we all shared an inevitable fate. Death, I realized, was a natural consequence afforded by a life. It was inescapable and involuntary. It was the facet of life most opposite to betrayal.

Therefore, the betrayal I was experiencing, the aching sensation plaguing my heart, must have stemmed from somewhere else. Another less high yet still superior being, one whose duty was also to love and protect me.

Each morning that week, my Abuelita had woken me up under an oath from God, turning prayer into a plaything. Despite being an act of kindness, she had disrupted my peace and instilled the terror of doubt in my mind.

Had she been setting an alarm each day? I gasped, my voice and tears finally coming back to me. No, I rationalized; she would never do that to me.

But why? I questioned. Why did she take it upon herself that week to test me?

For the first time in my life, I had my loyalty weaponized and used against me. In a household of sincere faith, I had never realized my beliefs were something to be manipulated. Where I could have forged my own path, my Abuelita decided it would be better to interfere, leaving me surrounded by doubts and too afraid to ask any of my role models for clarity.

When I finally made it to lunch that afternoon, unpacking my food at the top of the monkey bars, I decided to take a stride of bravery. Using my hands, I pushed myself up onto two straight legs, and with each of my feet resting on a metal bar, I stood tall and defiantly, looking around at the world from the highest point I could reach. Peering all around me, I hoped to see a burial procession, or at the very least, a gathering of people far off in a field sending a baby goat away into its next life. Unfortunately, even at my highest point, I could not see everything, and some things, terrifying as they may be, would forever remain a mystery.



TW: Mexican slur

Joaquin was not thinking of the United States Constitution during his chicken-coop days, while he was holed up with hatched eggs and bothering the cow's calf. He was not looking into the logistics of law while aiding in his grandfather's beekeeping endeavors or helping to herd their hogs. Given up to his grandparents as the fourth son and precursor to an Irish twin, he knew himself as their child while his estranged family made the trek to a better life up north. And when they came back to collect him ten years later from that cherished childhood in Guadalajara, where he was in previous belief that his abuelos' home had been his own and was then tossed into the mix of siblings he'd never known, he was not envisioning the rich potential futures promised to his peers to come in America. He had been tasked with adjustment and adjust he must. There was little else on his mind.

Joaquin entered the American school system with broken English and a broken sense of self. He did not always understand when his teachers called him "wetback," but its prescription prevailed in resonance. And when his given name became a nuisance, and the term turned into "Wetback Jack," he could only let it. He'd been assigned his sanctioned role and he abided. It was his father's way- in the few years he'd come to know him, the same singular lesson was always instilled: to "remember humility", to stay in one's lane and never stray. Joaquin kept his head down and prayed for the day he'd be perceived in different ways.

Joaquin's spirit had always searched for expansion; he was the only one of his brothers and sisters to pick up the piled encyclopedias they'd received as modest Christmas gifts. He'd memorize everything in those books, turning the covers back to start again upon completion and becoming "obsessed with amphibians" in the absence of anything else to absorb. There was no

absence, however, of work to be done. Earning a living was a family affair that demanded half of his school days and left learning for the little time in between. And equipped with a mind meant for more, for immersion into material and subsequent concluding, Joaquin was left lacking. An education of impaired investment would not easily result in the manifestation of his wildest dreams, and it would be quite some time before such would come into fruition. It would be some time before they would find the will to form at all. Joaquin was not reading up on legal history and fantasizing about his law school application while farming in the migrant fields.

Sidetracked by his humbled habits and premature perspective on success, Joaquin lent many years to loitering. He was graciously allowed to graduate high school with a 1.9 grade-point-average, and in the years following, wasted time on women and wine, causing car wrecks and cashing out on the consequences. He flew through insurance checks from being flung from the front windshield and tossed pizzas for a living once he could no longer. He resided with three roommates and realized little responsibility. It was enough for him then, and would have continued to be so, if it weren't for the people passing by on the street- strolling with purpose in contrast and carrying briefcases. Joaquin "wanted to carry a briefcase" and stroll with purpose. He wanted to ignore his father's voice in his head whispering remnants of modest means and averted gaze; he felt he deserved to assert. He'd been led to a dog-eat-dog realm and adjust he must.

The foundation of this feeling had been formed and grew with each passing purposeful person. It propelled Joaquin into the office job where he'd meet his first wife, but it was only after his divorce a decade later, assimilation into professional interaction, and gradual acquisition of his bachelor's degree that he would purchase his first LSAT preparation book. As a logical thinker, enough was enough, and the push had come to shove. He was no longer confined to the culturally insensitive and forced to fulfill their imposed perception. He was free to peruse the LSAT books

as he pleased, and he did, defying his past insecurities in preparing to become a purposeful person. Joaquin took the tests and submitted his scores, and, after admission, went out to celebrate his success. He told his children and new girlfriend, and they were happy for him, but knew that he alone could comprehend the magnitude of his achievement. He shared the news with his father, who promptly informed the entire family back home in Guadalajara that his son was to be an attorney.

Joaquin carries a briefcase to the firm every day. He argues litigation against companies perpetuating working conditions under which his clients have suffered and endures lengthy daily sessions in attempts to solidify testimonies. He contemplates legal concepts in conversation with ease and approaches his newfound ability to navigate such with gratitude. In matching his mind to meaning, Joaquin has assumed the American dream, finding a source to foster what otherwise might not have been, and what almost was not. From his perspective, mindset makes the difference. He is an American; he has adjusted.

## Otherworld

### Literary Personal Essay

A stagnant mirror reflected the otherworld in undisturbed perfection, until the green canoe, a blade, rippled the parallel illusion of the swamp's vanity.

The Okefenokee swamp pulsed with ubiquitous sounds--chirping, rustling, cawing. I stepped in the canoe to prepare for the eight-mile trip to the southern Georgia border into gator-infested waters. A mile into the swamp and no cars could be heard. Our phones we kept tucked away; we drew them only for a chance to snap a picture. We seldom spoke. The swamp chattered. We listened.

The swelling sounds whispered a multi-octave chorus, unaware of our invasion. Our canoe limited us to the narrow path, but I imagined--what if we grew up and up--looking down as giants--the swamp shallow at our ankles--how quiet that chorus would become--cowering in all terror.

~ ~ ~

I was warned we shouldn't go-- the two of us women with an itch for adventure, Ellie and I, she pursuing her Chemistry Ph.D and I, a writer. I was warned of the bugs, the gators, and my own lack of experience. We made the plans anyway, and no doubts or distractions kept us from that five-hour drive with nothing but my beat-up old Honda, radio country music, and the necessities.

As we passed into other counties, I untethered myself from my hometown. I'd grown tired of the same places, the same people, and the songs that played on repeat at my nine-to-five job. Before my high school graduation, I felt like I'd run wild with my friends at every corner of town, and that every streetlight had shined on some unforgettable memory. They were the types of friends that made you feel immortal, timeless, and when they finally trickle away, you become much more aware of each minute and each hour and each day.

Growing up snuck in as a mundane thing. No longer episodes of tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade, but now blurred episodes with no plot. Friends left in no particular order or rather, became distant. I met Ellie at my fourth attempt at finding a meaningful community and had known her for only two months. I'd spent every Sunday at her house planning out the trip, making pizza, learning how to set up a tent. It only seemed natural that we now embark on this temporary escape.

Temporary. I hated that word.

My harbored apathy subsided. Two hours into the trip and the sun gleamed over the one-stop-light street of some rural town. We took to the deep South. My perpetual loneliness began to fade at the beauty of the trees and the fields despite my stark realization: I didn't know if I was really Ellie's friend. No. Honestly, I didn't know if I had yet considered her mine.

The GPS took us back-roads through cattle, corn, and cotton fields (the three C's guaranteed on any Georgia road trip). Ellie strained for a picture of the sunrise through my window, and our dialogue consisted most of nature-compliments and country lyrics (which I pretended to know). There were a fair amount of historic towns with their wood-chipped signs, and grand columned courthouses which attempted to draw eyes away from those run-down gas stations and cluttered antique stores.

The noise was always there. The shifting, sputtering radio as we crossed into the next town. Car ignitions. Trash littered on the side of the road. Billboards with nondescript advertisements, some peeling, others blinking digital. And I thought to myself--a noise for the ears, a noise for the eyes---because all of this corporate mess wanted my attention and then some.

The buildings became sparse, and then, a strip of road next to the wilderness, leading us down a dirt road to the swamp. We settled on canoe; the shuttle took us to the edge. For a night the swamp would be our home--and that noise--(when you're so accustomed to it) persists as a multi-echo, a near craving. Until we hit the four-mile mark and only blue sky, hot sun, and cypress trees dressed in coiled Spanish moss.

Swamp does not usually call a pleasant image. I think of the ones I remember: *Lord of the Rings*, the Dead Marshes, where ghosts decompose in murky depths. *The Neverending Story*, the Swamp of Sadness, where Artrax the horse is overcome by his despair and consumed in thick mud. Those dreadful images of stench and death with treacherous paths leading to greater evils that test both friendship and faithfulness.

The Okefenokee could bear a resemblance, more cousin than kin; from a bird's-eye view, might all you see are patches of water and mud and bushes--a dangerous overgrown maze of bugs and reptiles, hiding somewhere within: the Loch Ness Monster and self-aggrandized imaginations. But when you step in close. The sun is hot. The air is clear. Bugs nowhere to be found this time of day. Spears of green arrow root warn of unknown depths and lily pads bloom in clusters near the edge. The prospective lily pads grow in small green and purple dots like the segmented strokes of a Van-Gogh and our canoe draws a slow laceration through its hopeful expansion.

I look at my sun-burned nose in the reflection of clear water. I perceive myself as some adventurer who dared undertake a dangerous question. So different from my reflection when I turn off my phone and catch a glimpse of myself on the black screen. Another person caught in the endless trap of doomscrolling, another victim to the easy access of dopamine. Looking into the black swamp is even different from approaching a mirror.

A mirror is much too shallow in comparison to the otherworld. When I touch the water, I am reminded of the illusion. The deception. I am no different today than yesterday. A normal person in an extraordinary environment. And perhaps, if I dive into this otherworld, I could be drowned in that blackness, amidst ravenous gators and tangled moss, but then become extraordinary too.

A cluster of yellow-eyed bushes rustles beside us.

We struggle at first to pause the canoe when we catch a glimpse of a knotted monster wading in the pale mud behind stalks of half-bowed grass. A glimpse and I urge to grab my camera or phone otherwise, but it passes too quickly for us to turn around, and now that faceless sunken gator remains branded into memory instead of burned on black digital screens. Part of me huffs in frustration, and another in awe to know the monster, its perspective, its moment of history, is now forever my own and its romanticized existence belonging only to me. If printed words were enough...but they never are and sometimes only excessive striving.

I look up.

The sound of catbirds singing, and the wings of that white heron gracing the sky, and the dragonflies buzzing around the sedges, are all saying: *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.* Not a validation for existence. Rather a humming comfort, drawing us further to the center of the world, even as the steady waters conceal their depths.

The smooth path expels us onto an azure lake, our faithful trail now broken, and the water ripples in deep blues and blacks. That lake is an ocean for a moment, and I wonder if we'll find the other side or be lost paddling the perimeter until we find the opening. We occupy our anxieties by remaining in the pocket of ocean and I reach the tips of my fingers to skim the water. Another knotted monster appears in the distance amongst lily pads and sinks into the black. I imagine hundreds of them swarming in lethargic winding movements under our canoe amidst green algae, waiting for the vicious bites of their teeth to be spurred by hungry curiosity or territorial fear.

We take pictures.

I wonder what for.

We discover an opening in the brush and spot a man-made platform hovering over the water, the other half connected to the land and resembling a wooden pavilion. For the night it will become our home. After we tie our canoe to the dock, set up camp, and eat our meal, I grasp for my phone, now a cinder block in my hand, heavy. I loath to look down upon it, texting my parents that I arrived safe, then letting the phone droop from my wrist as I swing in a hammock while I fade into the background of the world. The phone in my hand is an alien device and I wish to turn it off.

I don't.

I distance myself from it. The screen turns black, trying to reflect a murky imitation of the swamp. I return to the hammock. The fatigue of canoeing eight miles finally settles, the whole world is buzzing. Not buzzing like in the old historic towns, or the way you might feel in the midst of a football game, or in the center of Time Square. It's a hum, not a vibration; a song, not a seism.

My phone buzzes. The tremor.

An answer, perhaps.

We decide to canoe to the middle of the lake before twilight so we can catch an image of the sinking sunset behind tupelo and cypress. We bring them. Our phones. Our cameras. We wait in our boat. We might as well be some misshapen lily pad, or speck in the iris of this vast lake. We keep our eyes up until one is closed, the open's observation wedged by a lens and obscured by the snap of a picture. The moonrise competes with the sunset by rousing soft pastels, purple and pink into navy, while the dying sun melts a golden yellow behind silhouetted trees--*Giant's abandoned spears*, I think, and the Spanish moss their ancient ruined banners.

The cold sets in. We return to camp. The bugs emerge.

From the waters and the trees and the sky, wherever they wish. That stinging pricks the flesh of my arms and no amount of repellant can expel the mass. My phone buzzes on the table, all demanding now, frantic, all crying with notifications and alarms like some unfed child. The earthquake. I grasp it and do imagine how beautiful it might be tossed into the swamp, its buzzing silenced by the ecosystem. I walk to the edge of the dock.

If I were a heroine, maybe I would have dropped it.

Instead, I look at the pictures I took earlier that night, tempted to let my feet sink into the water, but my imagination conjures images of a news article: **Idiot college girl loses foot to gator bite**. I decide not to take my chances. My hand trembles over the water now with my phone like some self-destructive dare.

*Drop it.*

I don't.

My self-reflection within the black screen smears as I toss it from my hands onto the dock. It is replaced by my reflection in the swamp. I sit by the canoe and watch the rest of the sunset. That sun gleams on me like the light of a microscope and I, the bug, in awe, and fearful to move at its examination of me. Again, so small, looking up. Looking up. Looking up.

There is no reflection of my own now. Only darkness and the full moon, our spotlight, the stars in vain rivalry. The white moonlight river ripples toward the dock and I think I could drink it. I take my phone and throw it into the tent, zip the plastic dome, and return for a final glimpse of beauty without dragging my own artificial world behind me. Those final moments of untethering result in the aftermath. The string snaps a final tremor that radiates into stillness.

Ellie walks across the dock to sit next to me.

My friend and I sit and listen to the world.

This world is all there is, the swamp stretching out until eternity, flooding cement corporations and devouring advertisements and choking pumping assembly lines and erasing dark clouds of smoke. The aftermath leaves me in lingering as the world begins its expansion beyond the inky blackness.

All the world is breathing with buzzing insects and the hairs on my arm raise at a repetitive calling of birds, the shaking of bushes at the wind, and the croaking frogs. There is a collective presence within nature, a kind of hospitality, where the sky is our feast and we've consumed the last of it. It is different from the collective isolation of the city, a kind of contract, where the media is our drunken revelry, and we gorge ourselves in the gluttony of it.

We return to the tent to sleep. Ellie attempts to wake me at midnight so I can see the stars. I reject any idea of rising from my comfort. My exhaustion becomes a ferryman leading me into stygian, dreamless slumber--across depths--into nothingness.

In the cool morning, I wake.

We pack our things to return--but to where? Right. The otherworld. That loud cement maze eight miles on the edge of the world. We paddle against a soft zephyr that wishes to push us back to the center of the world. Something warns us not to return. The two of us women, Ellie and I, who have traveled across oceans and battled monsters and seen bloodshed wash the skies and...Who am I kidding? We make the plans anyway. Doubts and distractions pull us from a swift eight-mile return to those ancient shores. But we return. We pull our canoe to the verge and the susurrations of the shuttle reminds me we're waking from our sleep. Returning and rising, yes. Only smaller.

## Proverbs of Hell

### The Divorce of Heaven and Hell

All there is in the summer is sweat, and in the fall are cracked leaves, the winter brings chapped lips. Once you wear a red bell pepper around your neck you can't wish death on people anymore. When you know nothing, you have the power to behold everything. I see purple shorts across an ocean and think of the purple shorts that once rubbed against my sheets. Staying quiet feels easy in a big group of people. I stay quiet if there are people. Being who you are and expecting to be loved takes so much security. You have two responsibilities, to write and to be loved. Remember everything your eyes have gazed upon. If only you should know on what your last look rested. The ceiling of a hospital room is not what one's heart ever desires. But to twitch your fingers and wave to a small child, that should suffice. This world lets no one leave unloved despite what you may have tricked yourself into believing. Your soul's departure from the sand and into dust will seep into sidewalks on which your feet will never lay. You must shine or you shall never be bright. Babies and dogs won't laugh when you're brought into their sight. Keep yourself maintained, for it is harder to remember your pain. Things that hold no valor lay in the time of folly. In wisdom, your time will never be measured. What you will accomplish in life that is wholesome will not come to you by entrapment or capture, you will attract it if it becomes you. Your wings shall never melt if they are truly your own. Icarus was carrying out a loan. Boasting on what you did not achieve alone, that will cost you the throne. The most merciless you can be is to let before you others see. William Blake said Shame is Prides cloke. Pride has given me nothing, and I'm generationally shameless.

## **Radar**

My alarm startled me out of my slumber. It is quite rare that it beats me to the punch. I typically win the race on waking up. Most days I am awake an hour before it is set to ring. I tell myself that my body does this because it fears the noise it makes; however, I do not know why I react that way. It's the generic Apple one. You know, the default one that sounds like a mix between a bomb warning and an amber alert? I googled it once out of curiosity, and apparently, its name is "Radar." I honestly don't know what a radar is, so I couldn't tell you if it's a fitting name, or not. I always tell myself I will change it to one of those relaxing tropical ones, but I never do it.

My dorm smells like last night's dinner. A mediocre grocery store Cesar salad kit. Half of said Caesar is currently sitting inside of the bin I haphazardly threw it in the night before. It has developed a putrid odor, like spoiled milk. I wish I could say the smell bothered me more, but I lack the mental capacity to be troubled by the hindrance. I can't find the energy inside of me to get out of bed. I am lying under a pile of three blankets and they feel like a warm embrace. Why is it that beds feel extra cozy in the morning? This cannot be the same mattress and bed frame I struggled to fall asleep on the night before. Perhaps someone snuck into my room while I slept and switched my mattress for a softer one, and my frame for one that does not squeak if you breathe too close to it. Or perhaps I'm letting an inanimate object gaslight me.

I like to get ready an hour before class. On a typical day, I take my first shower, do my make-up, brush my hair, and coordinate an outfit. Today is not a typical day. I reward myself for surviving the shock of my alarm by lying in bed for an extra thirty minutes. I'm not snoozing off or resting. I lie there thinking. That's all I seem capable of doing these days. Enough is enough, and I unenthusiastically roll out of bed and onto my step stool. My ears are met by a frustrating

SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK. I was in fact in the same mattress and bed, so much for the illusion.

I don't know if it is in my bones or the air, but I can feel it. Today is going to be a day. All signs point towards it being as exhausting as all the others, but I'm still gripping at the hope of it turning out to be a good one. It's been a while, and I need one of those.

I rush through my routine and put on a random mix of clothes. Nothing I wear matches, but I do not care. My headphones are on, but they play nothing. I have gotten into the habit of using them as a barrier between me and the real world. Skipping every other step down the stairs, I finally make my way out of my dormitory. The sun hasn't fully come yet, so the heat is bearable. The dimmed rays feel warm against my face, and I remember how much I miss my mother's embrace. On one of our most recent calls I told her I had not received a hug since I moved in, and she told me to hug a tree. I laughed through my tears when I hung up because I knew she wasn't being sarcastic. I don't think she remembers, but she gave me the same response when I was 7 and told her I missed her when I had to wait at the after-school program.

My walk to the Williams building feels dewy and empty. The road lacks the same traffic it usually has. I wonder if everyone else is as tired as me. I'm distracted by my surroundings as I walk, and perhaps this causes me to slow down my pace. I noticed the two girls walking behind me sped up their pace and made a show out of passing me. They walk into the Williams building, and I don't get their rush. There are seven minutes left until it is eight, and we are at the building's entrance.

I walk up the short set of stairs and find my classroom. Only a couple of my peers are present. I take off the security of my headphones and listen to my environment with bare ears.

The room is equally silent with crisp air, and my classmates look exhausted. I wonder if they also woke up this morning and hated their alarm?

I can't recall the last time I looked up at the sky for no reason at all. There was a spring once, when the days stretched into forever. I remember lying on the grass, feeling the earth spin slowly beneath me. Back then, time moved differently—slower, softer. Now, each morning the sun rises, the coffee drips, and I exist in a blur. Another day starts, though I can hardly tell it apart from the one before. I walk the same route to school, passing familiar faces—people I never really meet, people who like me, move in practiced steps.

I drift through the apartment I call home, with its worn wooden floors and sun-dappled corners, with a sort of mechanical grace, rehearsing for a role I never quite learned. In the kitchen, my hands reach for the kettle, fill it with water, and set it to boil. I can almost see the outline of a stranger's face in the steam as it rises—someone who makes tea in this very spot. The living room becomes a distant memory, a space I know I inhabit but rarely truly occupy. The couch, which has faithfully borne the weight of countless conversations and quiet moments, seems almost too patient, too forgiving. The walls, painted in their shade of muted green, are filled with framed photographs, capturing moments that should be familiar but feel like they belong to someone else.

I sit with friends over dinner, nodding, laughing at the right moments, but the words fade into the background. I wonder, when did I stop truly listening? When did the world become something I watched from a distance? I long to feel time as I once did, as something soft and slow. To live in the moments, not just pass through them. To wake up, to breathe, to feel the pulse of the world in sync with my own.

There was a rare moment the other day. I was acutely aware of the sensation of the fabric of my chair against my skin, the way my fingers traced the rim of my teacup, and the serene

stillness of the room. I sat by the window, watching the sky bleed into dawn. I took a breath and, for once, I felt it—these moments, this time, this life. And maybe that's enough.

Since then, each afternoon I watch the sunlight crawl across the floor, slow and deliberate, like it's tracing a path only it knows. I pause, letting it fill the room, my gaze lingering as it softens the edges of the world around me. For a brief second, I forget about everything else. I stop. It's nothing, really. Just light. But it makes me pause. My eyes drift to the window. A cardinal perches on the ledge, its feathers catching the sunlight in a way that seems impossibly delicate. I hadn't noticed them before—the birds, the light, the quiet.

I walk the same route to school, but now I am beginning to notice the rhythm of my footsteps on the pavement. There's a small patch of wildflowers by the curb, always there, but now vibrant and alive. I crouch down and really look at them—the purple petals, the way they lean into the breeze. I touch one, just lightly. It feels smooth, alive, and it surprises me how much I like it, how much I want to stay here, crouched on the sidewalk, holding a flower in my hand. Their existence feels like a small secret, shared only with me.

It doesn't happen all at once. Yet, there are moments now, quiet and brief, where I feel a kind of stillness that wasn't there before. In the kitchen, I notice the way the steam from my tea curls in the air, like it's drawing invisible patterns. My hands, once acting out of habit, begin to move with intention. I pour tea and watch the way the liquid curls and swirls in the cup, something so mundane, yet mesmerizing in its own right. I take a breath, long and deep, and the steam feels warm against my face.

In the evenings, I sit on the couch and run my fingers over its worn fabric, noticing how it gives under my hand. It's not just a piece of furniture anymore, but a witness to the quiet moments I've missed. The photographs on the walls—images I once felt disconnected from—

start to feel familiar again, like they belong to me after all. I catch myself lingering on them, remembering where I was, who I was, in each image.

Later, I sit at dinner with friends, I still nod and laugh at the right moments, but now I catch myself leaning in, hearing more than just their words. The way one friend's nose scrunches when she laughs too hard, or how another always pauses before speaking, like he's choosing his words carefully. I listen—not just to their words, but to the silences in between, to the way their voices rise and fall, to the way their presence fills the space. I realize I've missed these things, not just in them, but in myself.

It's strange. The days still unfold in their usual way—the sun lifts itself over the horizon, the coffee drips slowly into the pot, and I walk the same route to school. Yet, inside me, something stirs, something subtle but undeniable, shifting the way I see it all. There's beauty in these small things, these quiet moments that once seemed insignificant. The way the light bends through the window. The way the kettle boils. The wildflowers by the curb. They aren't grand or extraordinary, but maybe they don't need to be. There is beauty in ordinance.

It's not that my life has changed. The apartment still has its worn floors and sun-dappled corners. The world outside still moves with the same familiar rhythm. But now, I move with it. I don't rush past it. I linger. I breathe. I feel present, tethered to this moment in a way that makes everything seem a little sharper, a little brighter. I'm still me, but there's a softness now, a curiosity about these routines, about this life I once thought was formulaic. Maybe I'm not just passing through anymore. Maybe I'm starting to wake up.



I was born in a hurricane, summer of '05. I like to think that the winds stopped, for just a second, to hear my newborn cry that never came. I was born sleeping. If there is a storm inside me, it must be an afternoon thunderstorm; warm, rumbling, and half awake. These thunderstorms are family. I greet them every summer around four, and when I was younger I would try to hold them in my hands, soaking wet. I find the water in other ways too. Standing out on the warm road at night, I can hear the thrum rush of the waves on the sand, a mile away. I swim in the bloodstream of the earth; it's exhilarating when it squeezes the air out of my lungs, dashes me against the jagged shells saying, look at your blood! feel your life in your body, how glorious it is to live! And so I do. I eat mango, strawberry, salmon, cherries until I feel sick. The way the knife slides through the ripe orange flesh and the juice dripping onto my chin and hands feels murderous. A lychee pit like a pool-drowned junebug between my teeth. The summer changes me. I can feel the soles of my feet hardening from the burning hot asphalt, the whorls on my skin like sandpaper. My shoulders go pink, red, tan, pink, red, tan, and I try not to think about cancer. All I smell is chlorine, woodsmoke, and sweat in my hair. When the golden sun comes through my window, it tells me to come watch it die. The sunset tells me to live another day, so I do.

## The Happier Family

Sitting on my fireplace, the ragged cameraman played Mario Kart on his Nintendo 3DS. His dark beard tickled the teal console. I squished against his right shoulder, his black zip-up hoodie clawing at my arm, while Levi stood on the stoop, looking over his left shoulder. Vaughn sat in my lap, too small to see the screen.

The cameraman crushed the race. Swerving between cars and throwing obstacles, he reached first place. He passed Luigi on the track, hitting him with a banana peel. Luigi let me down. How could he let this camera-holding hobo beat him?

The interviewer and his assistant sat on the couch with my parents, talking about the film plan. Last time, the photographers made us wear nice clothes, this time we could wear jeans and flip-flops.

The head interviewer looked like a Q-tip with glasses. His skeletal body sat compact on the couch next to his platinum blonde assistant who hid behind her blunt bangs. Her coarse hair mimicked the pea gravel road that lined our front lawn. I cut my hair the same length as Mom a few weeks before, but I still tugged at the ends of my hair, praying that they would extend to my lower back.

They sat with my parents and discussed what would be spoken in my mom's segment. She would begin with her diagnosis, then her treatment, and finish with her remission. The interviewers never interrogated us. They didn't know about the creepy golf ball webcam or our Caretaker Calendars. Our first Christmas with Mom home, when Santa brought me my light blue DSi would stay between us.

The head interrogator called over the homeless man with the 3DS. He slipped it into his pocket and followed the Q-tip with legs to our kitchen table. The game music played from his

jacket, but it cut as he sat down. Mom sat in Dad's spot at the table as she repeated the line she had recited to reporters for years. The walls shuttered when "-seven weeks pregnant with my third child when I was diagnosed with Leukemia," left her lips. The floorboards creaked and whined from the memory. My dad tried to keep us quiet while they filmed. Whispers were shushed and requests for toys were denied. The interviewer did not let us sit on the floor.

I picked away at the brick, rubbing each pebble between my fingertips until they were raw before tossing them into the polyester carpet. Sully began scratching the basement door that confined him while the film crew was there. Dad sat Vaughn in my lap while he calmed the dog. Levi balled up Vaughn's baby blanket and shoved it into his chest. His little hands crept into the knit holes and pulled the garment to his face. I squeezed him tight, comforting him from memories he couldn't remember as Mom's voice echoed through the house.

After Mom's clip, the interviewer told us it was playtime. He slid open the back door and said he would meet us at the bottom. We raced down to the play set at the bottom of our backyard and sat on the swings while the film crew trotted to the bottom of our backyard, our parents not far behind. We waited for the Q-tip man to play with us.

The assistant picked dirt and dog hair off of our clothes. The cotton swab told us how to play. He wanted us to swing while making sure to smile at the camera.

"No talking, and no squealing. Remember to smile!"

The camera eyed us moving back and forth. I hung upside down from the moving bar, thrashing my head back and forth. The sun caressed my face as the blood rushed to my head. I tightened my grip on the plastic and entangled my legs on the chain above. The cold metal coated by warm rubber grabbed my calves, making sure I didn't slip.

They didn't like how we played.

I dismounted from the bar and approached the assistant. She peered through her bangs to the top of my head and raked her fingers through my scalp.

“Again!”

I rushed back to the play set, ripping the warm grass with each stride. I picked up Vaughn and put him on a swing. After his hands were secure on the rubber chain, I pushed him back and forth while Levi was on the other. Their toing and froing opposite each other entranced me like a hypnotist’s watch. We flew back and forth, back and forth. He stopped us, then told us to swing some more. I climbed the bar once more and hung how he wanted, the smile never leaving my face.

“Cut.”

I hopped off the bar into the soft grass. My palms coated in blisters from the school monkey bars reopened from the plastic swing set. I walked over to Vaughn and grabbed his little hand and the three of us walked to our parents. The interviewer grabbed two sticks and dropped one next to the makeshift merry-go-round. He walked towards our neighbor’s trees and tossed the stick to his black tennis shoes. He slunk back to us and told us to run as fast as we could to reach the stick. Levi and I grabbed little Vaughn’s hands, and we ran with him.

They didn’t like that.

We walked back to the stick and tried again. No holding hands this time. Levi and I ran, leaving Vaughn behind. He was three. He couldn’t keep up.

Not good enough.

Again.

The denim caged my thighs, preventing me from reaching top speeds.

The warm illuminated grass turned into pale paths with each footprint. The oval tracks imitated the hospital floors that the Q-tip man wanted us so desperately to remember.

The five of them stood in a row and watched us run back and forth. The sun on the Q-tip man's glasses hid his eyes

“Cut!”

The film crew dragged us to a nearby prairie for the finishing touches. “Smile!” they would say. My face hurt from all the smiling and playing.

After the final, “Cut!” they left. They zoomed away in their pearly white van. My brothers and I raced into our Suburban begging Mom and Dad to get us ice cream before we went home. The chocolate vanilla twist cones were devoured before we pulled into the driveway.

When Dad opened the garage door, Sully greeted us with his pink and blue tongue wagging from his mouth. The house still reeked of the film crew. Sweat and setting spray filled the kitchen burning my nostrils. We went inside and shed our characters for the day. We all ripped our clothes off and threw them immediately into the washing machine. Mom was in her reindeer pajama pants, Dad in his green striped ones. Levi and I wore ours, and Vaughn was in his Monster Jam pajamas, with chocolate ice cream still in the corners of his mouth.

My mom curled up on her corner of the couch, while my dad lounged on the loveseat. The three of us curled up on the floor next to our dog, our legs still aching from playing. Dad turned on the TV while he and Mom laughed at the show. I snatched my DSi from the coffee table and began racing. I tucked my hair behind my ear and pulled the console close to my face. Luigi needed to get to first place.

## The Smell of Rain

*My hair swings wildly around my face, as my feet dance a complicated arrangement of steps in the warm and dark embrace of the night. The stars watch me move about the open air, twinkling down upon me, kissing my face with the light of their touch. Laughter rings from my lips, singing back up to the starlight. Harmonizing with the cries of lone howls in the night. The moon watches me with her loving gaze, dancing with me as the night grows long. I am just another piece of this beautiful night. One with the desert beneath my feet that twirl in dizzying circles. My sister moves about me in a similar fashion, her shining eyes looking up at me, just as bright as the stars above.*

*We dance for rain, for it's been weeks since monsoon season has come, and yet no sign of water has graced our desert. This dance was a secret of our own, a connection to the Earth, and a prayer to a power greater than us. A prayer answered.*

*Lightning surges across the skies, returning our dance with a message of his own. Fast and bright, lighting up the dark. Thunder breaks instantly with deafening booms, bouncing off rolling mountains that peer down on us.*

*"Told ya it would work." I smugly call out to Caitlyn, a smirk working its way up my lips. I felt my chest puff out, arms crossing, looking up at the coming storm as if I really was the one that brought it. Pride seeping out of my gloating smile. I was a very imaginative child if that wasn't clear.*

*The thick smell of petrichor hangs in the air, coating every substance. It is the smell associated with the coming of rain, and it is significantly strong in the Sonoran Desert because of the constant dry ground and overabundance of the Creosote bush. It is my favorite smell. And I relish in it now, standing under the twinkling lights, breathing in the smoky, earthy smell. It is*

*the promise of a gift, an absolute truth of a coming storm. I wish to be in this moment forever, dancing under a sea of stars, twirling in the rain. In the peace of a quiet night, save for the song of the lone wolves.*

-

My eyes jump to the sky in annoyance. Lips pulling down into an unforgiving grimace, as I watch the torrential downpour in front of me. You have got to be kidding me I furiously lament as anger bubbles within my chest. I aggressively push the door open and step out into the thick torrent. My feet push forward towards my next class. Curses rolling around my skull as I ruminate on the idea of turning back, but my feet begrudgingly push me forward. Attendance is mandatory, you have to be there, even if you're soaking wet. God how I hate the rain.

It has been nearly seven years since I said goodbye to the desert I lived in for my entire childhood. Seven years. And yet a part of my soul remains. Always dancing among the cacti and golden sands.

Our first stop after my family packed our lives into cardboard boxes was Memphis, Tennessee. A bustling city, bursting with activity, and crawling with danger. The air always smelled of weed, though my naive childish self believed it to be the work of skunks. Yells of profanity, cries of despair, and gunshots every hour played throughout every night. Shining glimmers from broken glass covering the floors, and an ungodly amount of street lights made even the dark of night bright. Though this light was not welcoming, and always held the chill of disdain in its touch.

I didn't much care for Tennessee. I could feel myself closing off to everything around me, wrapping in on myself, with the warmth of joy all but gone to me. I was falling into a pit of agony, arms flailing out to find solid ground, but I could only choke on despair. I felt like I was

lost, even when out in plain sight. Loathing had become my new dancing partner, and he was a nasty lead.

It took many years before I was able to crawl out of this hole. I pulled myself out and ran as far as I could. Though sometimes I find myself walking along its edge like a tightrope, always afraid of falling back in and never resurfacing. Slowly my childlike fascination started slipping, my dreams running away from me like the roadrunners of my home. Was this what is supposed to happen as we get older? Are we to just say goodbye to the wonders of naivety?

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*“What do you think it will taste like?” I ponder aloud as I stare at the plum colored fruit sitting atop the prickly pear cactus. I had contemplated doing this for a while, and only grew the courage once my parents were out of sight sitting in a chilly room for sermon. The sun beat down upon my shoulders, kissing my skin in rays of golden waves.*

*“I don’t think you should eat that! It could be poisonous.” Caitlyn cries out to me as she sees me reach for the kiwi sized fruit. She was always like this. Cautious. Tiptoeing along the border between safety and adventure. I on the other hand always like to meander across this line, leaping headlong into the adventure, even if fear flutters in my stomach as I do so. I’m indestructible, capable of anything.*

*I shrug as I grab it and carefully pull away the needle like thorns. Checking it for signs of rot. Noticing none, and 99% sure I won’t die I take a big bite from the side of the fruit. Caitlyn’s mouth drops open in shock of either my bravery or stupidity. I couldn’t tell, but I chose to believe it was the former. The fruit was tangy, slightly bitter. Different from the candy flavor I imagined. Juices rolled down my face and dripped onto the pink bedazzled shirt I was wearing.*

*I lifted my eyes to the view in front of me while haphazardly grabbing another fruit and picking off the thorns. It was June, a hot month even for Tucson. Yet me and my siblings would spend hours in the heat, and even longer in the warm nights. We were explorers, experts of the desert. And I was the captain of our voyages, leading the way.*

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My shoes squeak on the tile floors, water dripping a trail behind me, marking my footsteps. I beeline towards the bathroom immediately as I enter the building. In the mirror I gaze at my now soaked reflection. My hair is plastered to my face in stringy curls, my makeup leaking down my cheeks in patchy black lines, and my clothes drip puddles at my feet. This is the second time since starting college that I have been rained on like this. I didn't know the rain was coming. An hour ago it was bright and sunny, so the thought of taking my rusty umbrella hadn't even occurred to me. Of course it didn't smell like it was going to rain, it never does in Florida.

The storms here sneak up on you like a thief trying to catch you off guard. I can't even remember the smell of rain anymore. Something I loved so deeply. Though, to love something like that must seem silly. But I did. I loved the cries of the lost wolves, the sea of a thousand stars that marked every night, the great mountains that loomed in the distance, and the never ending sea of golden sands and spiny cacti. I loved Arizona. I *love* Arizona.

But my memories are hazy, shimmering in and out of focus. Even as I write this, I strain to remember all the ways the sun painted the sky with rays of orange and red. The way the moon loomed over me like a guardian angel. The moon and sun in Florida are different. Or maybe it is I who is different. Childhood. Adulthood. The rose tinted glasses have come off, but I find myself chasing after them, begging for more time.

After realizing that Tennessee didn't hold the prosperous life we imagined, my family once again packed our lives into those boxes. Whisking them away to a town in the northwest of Mississippi. In Memphis I had found a way out of the hole, fought to cling onto my childhood self, to be an unmovable rock in the face of the storm of fear and adventure. But slowly I was weathered away. I'm not invincible.

In Mississippi you either fit into the "norm" or you don't. There is no chance for redemption. It's a click so close knit that even after a year of trying I never found a way to be a part of it. Fear of standing out, of being too much, kept me from doing so much. It wrapped me up like a vicious snake tightening at the mere thoughts of individuality. I couldn't possibly be my own person. That's too much to ask for. So I didn't. I became someone else entirely, someone who could fit into the click. But the sacrifices were too great and I began to walk the edge of the pit again.

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*I sit under a great oak, one of the few trees the desert allows. The wind plays with my short blonde hair, as I close my eyes lightly. "You know, nobody tucks their shirts in like that anymore. It looks strange." Mrs. A points out as she sits next to me leaning her back against the tree. My eyebrow quirks up as my mouth pulls into a slight frown. I stand up and quickly turn to face her, giving her the full effect of my outfit.*

*"But I like it, I don't care if other people don't. I'm going to bring it back into style!" I boast triumphantly. And from that day I made sure to make it a point to wear my shirt tucked in at all times. A couple years after this when I noticed small trends of tucked in shirts resurfacing I won't lie, I did feel somewhat like I had contributed.*

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In my childhood I felt like a superhero, capable of anything. My dreams soured so high I felt as though I could rule the world. Sitting on the patio with my father debating over whether or not I could be a president, or a pastor, or any sort of leader position over men, and getting told over and over again that “women aren’t meant to be in positions of power over men. That’s not what God intended.” However, no amount of being told what I could and couldn’t do could make my resolve waver.

This isn’t to say that now I don’t feel as though I can’t do any of these things, but to say that in my childhood I pushed forward without the fear of failure. Failure didn’t exist for me, yet now she creeps behind me, holding me tight in her clutches, as she whispers in my ear. She reminds me that no matter how hard I try, it may just fall short. Again I long for those rose tinted glasses.

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After sitting in the lecture hall soaking wet for an hour and a half I was ready to just toss in the towel and give up for the rest of the day. But the reminder of what is to come of this evening is the only thing that draws my tired body from my bed. I stare at myself quizzically in the body length mirror. Clothes littering the floor around me, thrown about in every direction. Glitter is smeared all over my face, wings drawn onto my eyes. I paint lipstick across my lips until I’m satisfied with the result. I glitter like stars, my hair waving like the rolling clouds, my smile as deep as night. I am still a part of the beautiful night.

My family only stayed in Mississippi for a little over a year before we voyaged away. Hope of a better home brought us to Florida where I started my sophomore year of high school. It was here where I started to reconsider who I was. Who I wanted to be. Amongst the unfamiliar

swamps and springs I discovered what it means to grow up. I recognized the loss of who I was, and the understanding that I may never be that person again. But recognition doesn't equate to healing, and the grief of time lost is painful. Your happiest moments are never fully grasped, they slip from present, to past, to faded. Seeping through your clasp like sand in an hourglass. This too will come to pass.

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*Me and Caitlyn run around human sized dry brush, running as fast as child legs can take you. My arms outstretched wide like a soaring eagle. Giggles bursting from my lips as I dodge numerous sharp cacti. One misstep and I would be in for a world of pain, but I am masterful at maneuvering over twisting sand. I know every inch of my desert. I am a maven. I know the sounds of the rattlesnakes hidden in the brush, the croaks of river toads jumping amongst, the calls of the great bats that soar overhead, the smiles of the moon, the smell of rain. This is my home.*

The uber drops me off a block from the house, though the music plays so loudly that it can be heard many blocks away. I step into the night, looking up at the starless sky. Many years have passed since I last saw the star-filled sea of my childhood.

*Me and Caitlyn continue to play until our shadows grow long. The sun dipping low behind the tops of the mountains, before waving goodnight and falling to rest. I stop suddenly to jump across large paths of rock, while caitlyn runs inside to escape the numerous mosquitoes that hang nearby.*

I make my way through crowds of drunken teens as I trip over uneven ground, and tangled roots. My head bobbing to the booming base and swaying to the enchanting melody. I

peer into the faces of strangers, but I don't feel lost. Tightly clutching a red solo cup in one hand my other outstretches like a soaring eagle, weaving through the air.

*I gaze into the sea of dirt and rocks, a barren desert that shines like gold. With waves of rolling hills and mountains. My feet begin to twirl in slow uneven circles. Shimmering green and red strobe lights shine overhead following the everchanging beat. My heart gives way to the tide of bodies, and I start to dance in the dark of the night, all sense of anxiety of being seen abandoned. The stars make their appearance and shine above me in their gracious smiles. Giving an audience to my prayerful dance. The moon hangs high in the air, a stranger to me now, but she looks at me with a face of love. My eyes rise to the sky, a sea of glimmering light, and my lips turn up into a subtle smile. I breathe in deep and fierce, recognizing the earthy smell. A smell like an old friend found.*

The smell of rain.

There is no such thing as a straight line. Zoom in close enough to anything and you'll spot irregularities. Even a laser light beam is slightly curved.

My mother always told me to walk a straight line. Do not waver. Do not miss a step. She feared I would fall from great heights and stumble upon who I could be if I had no pressure. No pressure to be who she wanted me to be. No pressure to measure up to who everyone else wanted to see.

*There is no such thing.* I would have displeased the world if I had been born into any other skin. There could never be a universe into which I could have fit myself in. I would have always toed the line. One, two, three toes out of line. I would have never remained in a pleasurable sight. I would have fallen short every time.

*A straight line.* What is that? What have you convinced yourself that is? Certainly not crying yourself to bed before you've turned 10. And most ardently nothing adjacent to wishing you were dead before you got your driver's license. My mother reminded me always, this was not a straight line.

*Zoom in close enough to anything— everything.* Maybe everyone else is just better at it than me. And whatever 'it' is has not dawned on me. But I lack any prestige and any skill I could achieve; my mind remains empty and clean. I cannot even attempt to pretend that I know what I'm doing. And perhaps that is this infamous 'it.'

*Spotting irregularities.* You can see mine with no magnifying glass in sight. I'm constantly under a microscope. Am I the only person in the world that cannot keep it straight? Does anyone else teeter across the line? Like a seesaw, I'm never laid in the middle. Always doing too much of one or the other. And you will spot my flaws like stars in the sky. They glisten and gleam ever so bright, and the canvas on which they are laid is in plain sight.

*Even a laser light beam is slightly curved.* So why before I could speak my first words was, I compelled to become what no one else has earned? A title of perfection and no hesitation bestowed upon them. This has been gifted to no one.

And yet, my mother is completely unaware. She could do nothing less than care that there is no such thing as a straight line. She will zoom in close enough to everything I could be. Spot each and every one of my irregularities. And completely disagree that there could be a curved laser light beam.

## Things Lost, Things Found

### Chapter One: Hometown Legend

Your hometown was a year and two months. If you find it [*on a map*], it's tucked away and filed in place, a straight shot north on the tollway. Its remaining landmarks are the dead Crepe Myrtle trees and rusting mailbox post, and that's about all you can see nowadays. But if you do a quick search through the archives, you'll find a little diving board [*as seen pictured*] that the town's newlyweds took on one November, after working for the keys to the city; in the final days of summer, they brought the last resident up the front lawn and settled together on the living room floor, touching ground for the first time.

[*On video*], you can preview some of the town's events, not exclusive to attempts at feeding and naptime. Within the first month, they dressed up the star resident as a pea in a pod—witnessing the first of many protests thrown by one unfortunate legume—and when summer came back around, the pool reopened and new residents could get their first sips of chlorinated water, which more or less remains a local secret to date.

In the archive's [*last clips*], the town opened its doors on the first anniversary since its ruler arrived. You'll see the makeshift beer cooler in the bathtub, as enduringly praised by tourists; relatives jumping into the pool who exclusively appear on-screen; anecdotes and banter exchanging between families, and you, from your throne on the living room floor, arms spread wide to the ceiling—light spilled out into the hallway, and from the kitchen, you took a deep breath, candles extinguishing to cheers. A [*picture frame*] with your crown and blue-frosted grin now sits in a [*box*], stacked on the floor.

On the town's last day, little white squares the size of your hand remained, scattered in the carpet—traces of a world you knew in pictures, will only know in leaving. Lifted from

the ground, the living room floor wanes, fades from view.

At the city limits, a small family gathers in front of a one-story brick house, watching as leaves on worn pavement rise, then fall behind a van—they turn to walk in, and one stares after the sun—dark blue sky spinning, spinning, your first memory [*closes with the scene*].

## **Chapter Two: Birthday, Post-Mortem**

The day after my eighteenth birthday, I wake up in my dorm room at four A.M. with a sore throat and a chill. I'm wide-awake, the most I've been in a while, and as I shiver in the mild heat of the last days of summer, I almost believe that it's winter just outside my window—I can almost see the frosted arches of roofs stretching over the hill, little puffs of smoke rising from the chimneys. The tulip-patterned down comforter I'd had for many an ailment pulled up to my chin, the sound of the heat stuttering to life in the pitch-black silence, freshly brewed coffee rising faithfully with the sun from downstairs—and just like that, I'm twelve years old again, sick in bed with an unfortunate case of mono from a foul middle-school water fountain.

There was nothing remarkable about that winter—in middle school, when you weren't cycling from worksheet to worksheet, odds are you were probably just sitting around, waiting. That was still when I'd speed through all the assigned reading to get back to my own while waiting between classes, during class, and I became so good at tuning out the world that somewhere down the line, I forgot to let it back in.

And yet, I remember that time in my life most vividly for its mundanities—all the moments that I couldn't escape from. Like the quiet afternoons when the sun was already sitting low in the horizon from my assigned seat on the bus. Or watching the lights that decorated the houses on my piano teacher's street get brighter in the twilight, and the children who'd sail paper

boats on the pond across the way even in the bitter cold. I can still remember the winding road home that went through the bare woods and over the bluff, where the sun set in the valley below—and I remember doing it all over again the next week without a second thought.

Those were some of the most ordinary days of my life, but I've never known peace quite like I did then—how foolish and fortunate I was to let it go.

But even now, I wonder—was any of it true? Do we ever know peace when it's with us, or do we only know it by its absence? I cling to it more now than I ever did then; are we lucky to only realize it in the end?

I wanted so much at so young; there was so much to say, so much to do, and always so little time. And I've never had so much doubt before as I do now—I used to be so sure of myself, speaking with hardly a second thought and even less of a conscience, nothing but pure instinct. I think so much now. I dwell, I flounder, go back and forth, paralyzed by what-ifs. I've never felt like such a child before, and time has never moved so fast—or maybe I simply can't keep up like I used to, but when that hadn't been enough, I ran ahead only to fall behind, missing everything as it happened, realizing it all only once it was over.

I've waited my whole life for the rest of it to begin, but now when I look to the future—I come to a blank. How could I bring myself to care when every moment comes at the cost of the one I still have?

And these days, I miss things as they're happening, sometimes even before. Like I already miss the way the light looks in the early morning, the cold stinging my fingertips. I miss the grey skies that we grumble about stretching on for weeks, and in the spring when we'll sit outside again and realize the air feels a little bit lighter.

I miss mundanity. I miss trivial matters that we'll always bicker about, these momentary

routines, running around in circles that lead to and from each other for now, tracing and retracing our steps the next day and the next until it's over. Until it's the last time we'll come back from the break and sit on the floor of someone's room all together, until it's the last test we'll have to gripe about, until it's the last day we'll all sit here together and not even realize it until it's over.

I miss waiting most of all. I miss having to find ways to fill the time, of not knowing the next moment before it happens—like how less than twenty-four hours ago on my birthday, I knew I'd call my parents and open the box I'd received in the mail a week earlier. I knew we'd wave with distant smiles like all the times before and hang up to put gifts away in the silence that followed, like I knew I will one, four years from then. Like I knew I'd sit quietly in the backseat and search for parking and I knew we'd greet each other and find a table and think about what to eat and what to order and I never know what to say, and I knew we'd retrace our steps and go our separate ways and I knew I'd watch the sunset and say how it doesn't feel the same and I knew I'd wake up the next morning with a sore throat and a chill.

I lie awake in bed, watching as the sun begins to rise through the blinds and the day's demands roll in with the notifications. I close my eyes, knowing I'll get up right after.

I was twelve the last time I was fearless.

### **Chapter Three: Split Ends**

You know, I've never known someone for my entire life—not by blood, anyway, but by simply wandering into each other's lives and sticking around since then. It's strange—that with a single look, you'd know all of my greatest hopes and failures at eight and eighteen, you'd know me at seven and my most arrogant, at thirteen and my most insecure. That I could stand in my room and still be there when we made a blanket fort in sixth grade that we practically lived in for

forty-eight hours straight, and you were there when we watched the sunset from my window on my fourteenth birthday, and we were there when we lay on my floor on the morning before I moved away.

I only know myself in pieces—that's all anyone has ever known me by, and I've never been good at putting it into words. Sometimes, selfishly, I think if I'd known you my whole life, maybe you could look at me, point and say, here is the scar from when you tripped and fell chasing after me at recess, and your tooth went through your lip, and you cried and cried and then went around showing it off the very next week. And here is the freckle you got on your nose when you were thirteen and still trying to pinch it to make it smaller. And here is where you used to wear one half of a friendship bracelet that you didn't keep because it reminded you of me—but you still think about it, even now.

If I'd known you for my entire life, would I still be close to you? In every lifetime, would we always grow apart? I still think about the girl I once called my best friend and lost over the course of three years—and I always know these things before they happen, but I never know what to say until it's over, too late, and we leave off like split ends, unannounced and irreversible.

Do we ever remember people for the way they were? Did I ever know you? I still know your laugh, your family's birthdays, the way you got quiet when you thought no one was looking, how you put the first gift I made for you where you'd see it every day. You still know my pet peeves, my pride, the time I slid halfway down the stairs in front of the entire class and you were the only one who laughed and helped me up, when I couldn't even get the words out that night you called me, and how you could still make me laugh for the next couple of hours without fail—and we don't talk anymore.

Was I only meant to be a passing moment in your life? Without you, half of my life is missing. I can't explain why I link the "r" and "e" together in my name, why I'll always hear the wrong words to the song on the radio six years later. Without you, every joke and anecdote falls flat whenever someone asks, and I've never been good with words.

I've never been good at telling the truth—not like you, anyway, raising things from the ground, making them seem beautiful always for what they were, not what they could've been. You put names to so many parts of myself that I always knew but could never explain if I tried. I'd always fumble, dance around, trying to catch it all in time and hold it together to keep it from falling apart, to hide behind—did you see through me before I ever got through to you? And did you knowingly choose to walk beside me for a while, until one of us lost sight of the path we shared, none the wiser?

And every time we pick up from where we left off, how long will it take for one of us to let go? Until "How was your day?" turns to "How have you been?" before it fades to weeks and then months apart, to only reaching out on birthdays and not expecting a response any other time of year, to "Was going through some old stuff and found this" one day—and each time I lose you a little more all over again.

If we ever meet again, can you tell me that we'll speak in honesty? Or will I look at you, see how we don't really meet each other's eyes—time the only thing left between us—and we won't say anything about it, only smile, wave for a little too long. You know I've never been good with endings.

Maybe it was foolish, selfish to think I'd always have you by my side. No matter how it ends—should our paths never intertwine once more, if you let go one day without realizing and it happens slowly—I'll always think of you when the days get longer and the cicadas return. In

crowds and the silence between songs, on leap years and the flight home. And when there's another empty square on my calendar, a missing frame on my wall, a faint scar on my chin—I'll still think of you, always.

#### **Chapter Four: The Only Child as a Living Fossil at the End of the World**

It ends as it began. There will be a child who's gotten lost in a grocery store the moment before it all ends, and a well-meaning customer will calmly take them aside and ask, "What do your parents look like?" The child will try to describe them, but their half-formed words will collapse on themselves before they ever get out, held out farther than they can reach, and the customer starts to get confused, so they gently take the child's hand and go search for anyone who looks like them—and they wander down the aisles and through the frozen section and past the cash registers, and the customer will apologize, say that it's getting late and, well, the world's about to end. They reluctantly leave the child at the doors, hoping they would find their parents as they go on searching the faces in the crowd for their own until the end of time.

Now picture this: a dim sum table at a wedding reception twenty-four years ago in which one half of the table is ink-black hair fading into the shadows, the other a crescent of yamakas; an atheistic Jew and Chinese Baptist sit together at the center, their smiles washed out in the light.

Now, you see this picture everywhere for your entire life—it's on display at every family gathering you get dragged into, handed out in every new neighborhood, every classroom—and some people will take time to examine it, turning it over in their hands, holding it up to your face.

It'll be her family who called him the white devil and his who didn't think she'd last, all

pointing and always saying with such certainty—see? You have your mother’s looks, I can read what you’re thinking on your face like hers, the way you step back in trepidation—why, you’re practically a copy! No, no—don’t you see? You look *so much* like your father—the way he watches the room with silent eyes, calm and collected from years of practiced smiles—you wouldn’t know that she’s your mother who burned her hands holding the sun for you. You wouldn’t know that he’s your father who spent his days away, moving mountains just for you.

And you feel stupid because you couldn’t even begin to explain why it’s all wrong if you tried, why you don’t have your mother’s courage or your father’s poise, how you’ve never had faith in the dawn like her, never been able to speak louder with your silence like him. How your smile will always be at the cost of your mother’s, your eyes always at the cost of your father’s.

But who are you to say you know better? Who are you to know anything when in a single blink, in one breath, an entire lifetime of memories dies, washed away to time.

Was I too selfish in the backseat to notice as they named places like old friends in a picture, driving back through the city they can still trace like the lines in their hands—the home she knew better than the homeland she left, the one he was uprooted to at sixteen. Their first apartments, the road they took every day to work, the last time their families were all together under one roof—my first home.

How selfish it is to forget.

How selfish I was to cover my ears, cringing at my mother’s harsh syllables when she’d speak on the phone in a language I didn’t bother to know. How I cowered at the way she’d speak her mind, uninhibited and unashamed, choosing her words as she saw fit. Because my mother’s tongue was split in two, cut off at the very beginning and bent to fit a broken language, always in the wrong tune, taught to recite that children were never meant to be heard, watching her Ba hold

his tongue after the customers licked their plates clean and demanded a refund.

Because I could always know what she'd say next and how she'd always begin with the end of a story, I learned to trace her words and pretend not to hear, until one night a relative calls and asks, "Did you remember to tell her about our culture?" And she apologizes to me for being a bad mother for not being able to remember what her parents could afford to pass on, until the only words that could explain aren't there.

How many times did the words die on her tongue because I wouldn't meet her eyes? Had I bothered to ask, to listen all that time ago, would I know myself differently? Would I know her?

Have I ever known my father's true smile? From crowded rooms I'd leave and come back to find sent into laughter, catching it always at the last moment, as it faded. When he wasn't working the ground that'd been left to him in neglect—turning it over for solid ground to take root in—how much life did I dig up and toss aside? Did I ever listen closely enough to his silences and everything he wanted to say in them?

And my father always says I'm better with words than him, but I hardly ever say what I mean. I wasn't born with the words—I went searching for them on the longest nights on the bathroom floor, picking up the pieces to fill in the footsteps I'd treaded over. I've never had that certainty, of a line drawn down the middle that I can follow, of putting words to a hollow in the silence, to a face fading in a portrait that may have once been a part of mine. I crave that certainty—of knowing who you are and where you are from, of putting a finger on the page it all began on, in a single word, in a single name, of one being enough.

And in the end, what will I say? Where do I begin? Without you, I'm at a loss; how do you keep memory alive when there's no one else who will remember?

But in the moment, I see it all so clearly—I always see it, I promise I do—the way our eyes don’t meet, the distance in your voice, how the thing I said was unfair, not what I meant, and I know I’ll never understand but I do understand that it’ll never be enough—it’s too much. It’s too much.

And it began as it ends—years from now, when you’ll get lost in a grocery store trying to remember how to look for plums and which ones were her favorites and which brand did they swear by and what was the word for home? What was that thing he’d say that could make you smile even at goodbye? And in the moments that pass, all the colors and songs of a lifetime, the hope and violence of a bloodline—the last of your kind, the end of a line and the world as you never knew it—dies with me.

## **Chapter Five: Where You Are From**

My life is split between the borders of four walls—time and time again I’ve watched as it’s been put into boxes and driven away, as a house that became a home becomes a house.

I’ve never been good with change—I’ve only gotten good at pretending. But you get used to turning a blind eye for so long that sometimes the only thing you can remember is what you tried to forget. I’m too old for it now.

And yet, I knew so much when I was eight—I knew the blue sky like I knew the kids running down the street after calling my mother a name I didn’t know, never knew I could put to a face like mine. I knew her loneliness when I was three like I knew it wasn’t true when she told me the green Georgia hills were a jungle.

I knew the silence on the drive home like I knew forgiveness. I knew home for where I took my first steps and first learned to run from. I knew it for where the years weren’t kind like I

knew I'd miss it all, even now. I knew it for where I heard the birdsong again before I knew how to explain it.

I knew peace like how you never know a place until you leave it, like the hometown I never got to know, the homelands I'll never call my own. Like at eight years old, running through a door that you didn't know you can never walk back through again—but what a rush.

I knew it then as I know it now.

### **End Credits: An Interlude**

Less than a month after my eighteenth birthday, I go home for a few days unexpectedly—it's funny how only a year ago, I wouldn't know to say where I left or returned to. The morning before I leave, I sit on the floor, hunched over my computer, waiting with bated breath for the videos from the retired camcorder to convert into MP4 files. And I watch the blue line inching along like a hawk, keeping one eye on the time and my flight that kept getting delayed later and later, hoping and praying that it wouldn't be all for nothing—

And for a moment, I think to look up, pausing long enough from watching the time.

From above, my parents are gathered around the computer screen, pointing out the wallpaper, the old tube TV, the furniture they sold and should've charged more for, bickering about my mother's shaky footage, my father smiling faintly, getting lost in a chorus of "Happy Birthday"—and in those four walls, I wonder, foolishly, when did I forget?

The way we used to be—younger, softer around the edges. I haven't seen you smile like that since I can't remember, or maybe I've just forgotten. Were we ever that way?

After all things said and done, the years worse for wear, can you still see me for the child I used to be? When you held me for the first time, can you still look at me the same

now? You ask me how my day was and I say “fine,” and just as easily, we go years without saying anything to each other.

Is home just a place to return to? I don’t feel attached to the floors, the walls. Do we only miss places when we’re young, and only people now?

If this moment is all we have, please don’t let the distance take root in the silence again—I’m not so worried about finding the words anymore. I want us to know each other as we are now.

I still think about what you said. Only you could remind me of my best and worst. I don’t know that I’ve forgiven it. I know you’ll always be there for me. I wouldn’t blame you if you haven’t forgiven me. I wish I could know you for the rest of my life.

—

In less than a year’s time, you’ll sort through the things in your room that you never got around to unpacking. They’re mostly miscellaneous things—calendars of counting days past, things you wrote down so you wouldn’t forget and no longer remember why.

It’s what you have to show on paper for the years given over to bitterness, of an anger you harbored, thinking it would help you to remember—but you wouldn’t know the days from the years had you not let some of it go. And somewhere, slowly, you start to remember what you’ve forgotten about the person you used to be.

You’re not the person you thought you’d be by now—but somewhere, you’re still the same child you were on the floor all those years ago. You’re twelve and eight and thirteen and eighteen. You know you still kept the other half of a heart from a friendship necklace after all these years. You’ll always have your mother’s stories, your father’s smile and sense of humor. It’s a line in a journal with the word “home” crossed out—you can never really be sure if you left

or returned. But you still have the keys to your old house—your old home.

And in the fall, you'll put your life into boxes once again, picking up the pieces of things you've lost and found over the years—until then, you take it in, return to the floor, for now—for now.

## To My Dedushka

I don't know if walking in through the garage door and turning the corner to see the left side of the couch empty will ever feel *normal*. It's been years at this point, yet still, I look for your indent there and know the spot is reserved for you. One of the recurring constants of my childhood was seeing you sat on the far edge of the couch with a pillow behind your back, an unnecessary cushioned pad under your butt, and a Russian mystery novel in your hand. I'd enter your house and run to sit on your lap and engulf you in a hug, which always gave rise to the same sigh that I knew signified both your adoration for me and that you felt a pain *somewhere* in your body.

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With parents who chronically worked the night shifts, my little sister Gabriella and I spent most of our weekends at our grandparents' house. In the afternoons, after finally peeling myself out of bed around 11 a.m., I would make my way down the stairs, making sure to stay on the right side of the staircase to avoid touching the stairlift on the left-hand side that would *BEEP* at the slightest touch. In the kitchen, I'd find Baba, my grandmother, refilling the cats' food and water bowls. The smell of slightly, almost burnt bacon emitting from the stove. I'd make my way to the living room, where I ate my breakfast and drank my tea, and there you would be, on the couch taking your 10 daily morning pills under the giant painting of Dalmatians.

Days always felt long at your house. We'd eat food, watch TV, change the program, eat food again, get up only to go to the bathroom, put on a movie, eat food again, and then go to sleep. But it really didn't matter what we were doing or how

repetitive it felt, because we were together. Time together is something that I *knew* to value.

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My recurring nightmares and daymares for most of my life all involved receiving bad news about your state and health.

I am in class leaning my elbows on my desk, propping my chin up in my hands. I don't know what the teacher is talking about, maybe long division, maybe a new reading skill. I am not really there. I am on a different timeline and I am being called to the principal's office. I push my chair back to leave my classroom and enter the long hallway of my elementary school. In front of me, Gabriella has also been summoned to the principal's office and we are walking steadily down the hallway toward the office, 10 paces apart. We are told upon our arrival that our parents called—they are picking us up immediately because something has happened to our Deda.

My teacher puts her hand on my shoulder, jolting me out of my dream state. She has noticed that I am not paying attention, she has seen that I am elsewhere and that my eyes are welling. She asks if I'm okay...I say yes, I'm fine, and she sends me to the nurse.

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When we were little girls, you would pick us up from school at the end of the day in your silver Toyota Highlander to bring us back to your house, always playing the same CD mix that you made consisting of Russian pop music from the 90s to the early 2000s. I knew those songs forward and backward. I even knew the order that they would play in. Most of them I could not understand, but I would sing them loud and

proud to ensure that you could hear me singing along from the back seat. Speaking your language, embracing your culture, and sharing in some of your favorite songs, I thought, would bring us even closer.

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You didn't speak much. You were always the quietest person at the dinner table, only spoke when spoken to, and were never one to share your opinion about a movie we had just watched.

"What did you think of the movie?", we'd ask. "Eh", was always your response delivered with a shrug.

While some may have read this typical reaction as disinterest or rudeness, I knew this not to be true. While you may have had trouble verbalizing your emotions and thoughts to others, through your touch and slight movements I could always get a sense of what you were feeling. The smallest pause at the top of your breath, which I could see clearly through the dramatic rise and fall of your belly, or a tight squeeze of your hand suggested that you were present and attentive.

I sometimes think about meeting you now as a younger man. Becoming your friend and peeling back your layers to understand the inner workings of your mind. Did you have walls up? Were you hiding something? Or was this just the way you were? A silent observer.

One of my burning unanswered questions to this day is why you never cut your left-hand pinky fingernail. To keep up a bad boy image? For good luck? Coke addiction? I may never know.

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As I sit on your couch waiting for the Rabbi to arrive and meet with all of us to learn more about you for your eulogy, I look around the living room. Baba is staring out the window breathing heavily; Mama is scrolling on her phone, knee bouncing, and Daddy is looking at her with his hand rested on her thigh; Gabriella is petting Masha, as if the cat requires more comfort than any of us. My mind raced with thoughts as I observed my family members: *How can I tell the Rabbi about you? How much do I even know? How can I put our bond into words?*

The Rabbi finally walks up to the front door after what feels like an eternity of waiting, kissing the Mezuzah on his way into the house, and offers his condolences. He feeds us the standard script and religious mumbo-jumbo that we knew to expect before asking us about you. You were never a particularly religious man, so bringing in this Rabbi who never knew you makes me feel a bit uneasy, but I tell myself that you and your dedication to tradition would have wanted it.

I learned more about your life that day than I had while you were alive. The details about how you, as a baby, escaped the Nazis with your family, nearly starving to death in the process. The story of how you and Baba met at a mutual friend's wedding, and then got married to each other 5 months later. How you managed to move your family from the Soviet Union to the U.S. with no plan and barely any money to give them a better home. How you saved lives as a doctor yet endured 19 surgeries of your own throughout your life. The Rabbi called you a "Tzadik", a righteous Jewish man.

I scanned my brain for moments to share. Glimpses of memories projected across my mind like a motion picture captured on film stock. I became overwhelmed by the fact that no one moment could possibly capture you and the love you gave.

Just then, memories of our last few months together stirred. An overwhelming feeling of guilt flushed over me.

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On an average, nothing-special day in mid-June, I am resting on the couch next to you as usual. I feel you struggling to get up, using the armrest to propel you to a standing position. This is not out of the normal — for as long as I can remember, you have carried a cane, and it takes you at least three seconds to take one singular step. Once you turn the corner, out of my line of sight, I hear your slow steady walk receding toward the bathroom. I continue mindlessly scrolling on social media. After a few minutes I can hear your steps advancing back toward the living room, until, in a moment's instant, I detect a misstep before witnessing you flying across the room. Time begins to feel like it is moving in slow motion. *You are falling. You are plummeting toward the floor, without the strength or mobility to catch yourself. You hit the floor hard.* Before I can even process any of these thoughts, I am lunging out of my seat. There you are, lying on the ground, powerless to pick yourself back up. You begin to tear up and lay on your side. You won't let me move you. I can do nothing.

Before my mind has even caught up to my body, I have already hung up on the phone with the police and called Daddy. He gets there first, like a superhero swooping in to save the day — only for once, he cannot. You won't let him lift you to a seated position, so I know something must be seriously wrong. You groan and point to your right hip.

When the paramedics finally come bursting through the door, they ask you how bad the pain hurts on a scale from 1-10. “8,” you respond, a high number for a man who doesn’t say much and never complains. They take you away on a stretcher.

The car ride to the hospital is tense. No words are exchanged and I am sitting in the back seat, looking out the window and choking on my emotions. *Is my nightmare, at this moment, coming to fruition?* I cannot break down in this car ride, not in front of Baba and Daddy.

I glance down at my phone to check the time: 4:44 pm. *Isn’t that considered an angel number?* I open my phone to search “444 meaning” on Google, hoping that the universe is somehow offering me guidance through these numbers.

*“444 comes to you as a sign that your angels are with you, guiding you step by step.” Its appearance should act as reassurance that you’re not alone and positive energy surrounds you every step of the way.*” I begin to silently weep.

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At the hospital, the diagnosis was a broken hip. You spent a couple of weeks in the hospital after your surgery before moving to a rehabilitation center. I had to leave to start my summer job working at a sleepaway camp in the mountains. While I was away, 444 began appearing everywhere I turned, and I began to take it as a sign of you being with me. I visited you on one of my days off from work.

You didn’t look or act like yourself. You were skinny, and somehow even quieter than usual. You wouldn’t eat and could barely stay awake. When I looked into your eyes, I couldn’t tell if you were processing and understanding anything around you.

When you would talk, it would only be in Russian. Had I been gone so long that you had forgotten all that you know?

Before leaving you that day, I sat on the side of your hospital bed and reclined back to lay next to you. My mom told me to get off in fear that I may hurt you, but when I tilted forward to get up, you stopped me and signaled me to lie back down. I rested next to you, head on your shoulder, hand in hand, for the next 30 minutes. It was one of my last memories with you.

I had to go back to work after that visit, distract myself, and pretend like nothing was wrong while taking care of the kids.

Your state worsened over the next couple of months. You moved back home, and my bedroom was converted to become your hospital room. I came back to Tallahassee, 922 miles away from you. Baba hired a young lady to be your home care nurse. She had curly hair just like me, Mama, and Gabriella. I like to think that that was part of the reason why you loved her; Why she could get through to you.

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On October 3, 2022, the long-anticipated call came. Daddy warned me that you were probably not going to live past the day and that he'd keep me updated. The call came from my old bedroom in your house, where you lay awaiting your fate. I hung up the phone and let out a wail from the depths of my stomach. It was not fair, could not be real. I couldn't even say goodbye.

I bought my ticket back to Maryland that night for your funeral the next day. Baba and my parents asked me if I wanted to prepare anything for the ceremony... Instead, we had the Rabbi.

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I could have delivered a eulogy at your funeral myself. I could have spoken about how you taught me to play pool in the basement. I could have spoken about how, despite your constant physical pain, you never failed to lift weights at least once a day while sitting in your spot on the couch. How you were a Slavic that ironically preferred Tequila to Vodka, and how your face would become bright red and your demeanor would become so much more relaxed and cheerful after just a few sips. How you burned at least 40 family-friendly movies onto CDs one by one so that Gabriella and I had multiple options for when we stayed over. How, even now, I could identify the exact sound of your footsteps coming towards me with my eyes closed. How much I adore you. How you were and still are my favorite person, my amazing grandfather. But I did not. I could not. So now I write this.

I've always had an innate need for people to like me. I've always been in awe of people who don't care what people think about them. Not necessarily rude people, but those who are able to prioritize their own needs over others. I read into every little action and word someone says to me. I feel like every pause means something, every crossed arm, and every breath. This need seemed to manifest itself heavily in academic settings. I needed my teachers to like me. I have ADHD and quickly learned that teachers don't tend to enjoy having students like me in class. Despite achieving good grades, I was unbelievably talkative. It took me a while to coach myself into behaving how teachers wanted me to. During my senior year of high school there was one teacher I felt comfortable being myself around. Her name was Mrs. Newton, but everyone called her Newt. Newt was my Advanced Placement psychology teacher, and that psych degree allowed her to read me like a book. She was as close to a friend to me as a teacher could be. She was young for a teacher, about 30 years old. She was often sarcastic but not demeaning. She was funny and charismatic.

I often goofed around in that class. Newt didn't care, as long as I wasn't disrupting the lesson. One day she was giving a presentation full of memes. One half of the class was supposed to smile, and the other sat with a straight face. The point of it all was that the smilers were supposed to laugh more easily at the memes than the straight-facers. However, there wasn't much laughter in the room at all because in true millennial fashion, Newt compiled memes that weren't at all funny to the younger generation. I knew she meant well, no one wants to admit they're getting old and out of touch, but she was.

"Notice how the people smiling laughed more than the people who weren't?" she inquired, as teachers do.

“I just didn’t laugh because they weren’t funny,” I said jokingly. I immediately regretted saying it. I didn’t want her to feel bad. I’ve never had a filter, I speak before my brain can even process what I’m saying.

“If you don’t like my PowerPoint, I wanna see you make a better one,” she said back in a sarcastic voice.

“Ok I will,” I said with finality. I didn’t want her to know I really took that to heart. I sat for the short remainder of class with tears welling in my eyes. I wouldn’t dare cry in front of anyone, especially over something so stupid. I knew she was just matching my energy with her comment, but I couldn’t help but feel like I made her feel small. I decided then she hated me. My favorite teacher hated me, and it ate away at me each time I stepped back into her classroom.

My sister also had Newt as a teacher at the time, and as my best friend, I had to tell her.

“Newt hates me,” I said matter of factly.

“Why?” she asked

“I made fun of her PowerPoint,” I replied. It was such a stupid reason to think she hated me, but I believed it to be true.

A few weeks later I was sitting in class and the bell rang its three distinct chimes dismissing us.

“Elie, can you stay after class?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I responded. I had no idea what she wanted me to stay there for. I didn’t think I had done anything wrong, or anything worth praise. I was left in utter confusion. I walked up to her desk and waited for everyone to slowly file out.

“A little birdie told me you think I hate you,” she said.

“What, who?” I was too focused on someone telling on me than her actually acknowledging my feelings.

“Think about it,” she responded. Immediately I knew it was Erin. “Why do you think I hate you?” she asked sincerely. Before I could respond to her I started crying. I tried to hold my tears back, but nothing stopped them from welling in my eyes, then running down my cheeks. I felt my cheeks getting red, and my palms began to sweat. Sensing my embarrassment, Newt pulled me out into the hallway.

“Why are you crying?” she asked softly.

“You’re just my favorite teacher,” I responded, a sob punctuating each word.

“I don’t hate you, do you need a hug?” She pulled me in and hugged me until the tears subsided. I had never had a teacher hug me before. At that moment I knew there was nothing I could do to make Newt hate me. I knew that her classroom was a safe space to joke, rant, and cry, though I never cried in that classroom again.

I stay in contact with Newt to this day. Erin has her as a teacher once again this year and they talk about me while I’m away at college. When I returned home for winter break 2023, I ran into her with Erin at my school’s production of Mean Girls. She had the smell of wine on her breath, and a faint smile on her face. When she saw me she seemed to be genuinely excited. Not that fake excitement teachers feign when students they barely recognize say hi to them, but an actual real excitement. I told her all about my life in Tallahassee, my friends, boyfriend, and my plans for the future. I was excited to be able to talk to her like an adult. To prove I wasn’t the teenager crying in class anymore.

“I don’t really know what I want to do,” I said, half-expecting her to tell me to get my life together.

“Good. You don’t want to settle now, not knowing what you want to do is the best place you could be,” even though she was no longer my teacher, here she was calming me down just like she did that day. She made me give my sister some advice, I told her to focus on school which she has a hard time with. Newt nodded in agreement, and me and Erin both laughed uncomfortably, as Erin’s performance academically has always been a touchy subject.

“You two are exactly the same,” Newt said accusingly. “You both have the same coping mechanisms.

“I feel like you’re always psychoanalyzing us,” I said.

“Oh I am,” she responded in a joking tone. I knew it was true despite the uptick in her voice. Newt is one of the only people who knows me inside and out, what makes me tick and what doesn’t. What a wonderful thing it was to be understood so well.