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The Realm That I Am: An Interdisciplinary Memoir on Identity and Healing

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by

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To my former therapist, Spider, who asked me “You study this stuff, where are our stories?” Here is one, and it’s only mine, but it’s ours too. To the traumatized Mexicans who failed upward into rigidity, into goodness, into a justice orientation that got us into some spaces while we ran away from others, that made our worlds very very small. We were busy trying to course-correct all of our parents’ mistakes.

To my father, Juan, a complicated man who I loved very much. He wanted me to write, so I write about him. I continue to untangle your legacy in all its complicated gifts.

To my mother, Trudy, my sibling, KJ, and my partner, Thurman, who are my most loyal rocks and proofreaders.

To my advisor, Justin, who trusted my process in all its inherent ambiguity, with endless compassion.

Finally, to the people of Palestine whose struggles against colonial violence have been at the forefront of my mind during the making of this work, whose situation has inspired meaningful collective action in universities across the world, and whose genocide is ongoing. There are no universities left in Gaza. Free Palestine.

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Introduction

> *"That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide."*
>
> — Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

At times throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have been reluctant to remain interested in my own story. Mostly, for fear of vanity and navel-gazing. Rather than allowing myself the indulgence of self-concern, I relent to the comfort of dispassion, nihilism, and passivity, feeling like a nobody in a no-space. Then, I contend, arguing with myself, that stories and subjectivities are important. They are the closest thing we have to piecing together a truth, and while we can and should investigate the experiences of other people to gather a fuller perspective on the human condition, my own experience is the one I believe I can investigate the most effectively. Like Frida Kahlo said of her self-portraits, "I am the subject I know best." This is no less than a case-study, and no more than my own.

This project is divided into two parts. Together, they make up something like a collage of autoethnography, memoir, and self-portrait, which is reminiscent of the interdisciplinary trajectory of my undergraduate studies. Both sections explore themes of identity, social isolation, relationships, failure, mental illness, trauma, and addiction. The writing is supported by creative prose and works of visual art.

Part I is a discussion of how various external contexts (family, peers, culture) informed the process of my identity development. It's the story of myself and my family as we navigated complex cultural locations with principles that ultimately led me here. The first part utilizes various theoretical perspectives from critical gender and ethnic studies to analyze personal

stories toward the process of meaning-making. Part II is an attempt at healing and reconciling some of the painful internal experiences that resulted from these environments. This section borrows its structure from the narrative therapeutic tradition to guide memoir-style writing.

Part of my efforts have been to justify the connection between writing about C-PTSD through a therapeutic lens and writing about my identities as a queer, multi-ethnic individual through a critical theory lens. In simple terms, poststructuralist philosophies challenge the Western traditions of dichotomous logic (man/woman, human/nature, science/religion) and hierarchy, and engage with the subject as a maker of meaning. Michael White and David Epston, the fathers of the narrative therapeutic mode, dedicate the first chapter of their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* to a discussion of Foucault, a primary poststructuralist, and the contributions of his work on their practice. They consider the impacts of power and privilege as they are socially constructed on clients' conditions of life, as well as the dynamics of power that traditionally dictate the relationship between client and practitioner.

Narratives Across Disciplines

The second part of this project deals with narrative therapy. The sections are structured to reflect chapters of Michael White's book *Maps of Narrative Practice*, in which he describes some of its foundational practices. I fashion my writings based on his discussions of externalizing conversations, re-authoring conversations, and re-membering conversations. Central to all of these is the externalizing conversation. These conversations ask us to identify the problem narratives that are central to our lives. These problem narratives are a product of the internalization of certain negative characteristics, outcomes, or situations in a person's life. Carey and Russel explain externalization as "[locating] problems not within individuals, but as

products of culture and history," as "[p]roblems are understood to have been socially constructed and created over time," ("Externalizing"). By understanding that things are problematized by a culture that values and devalues on the basis of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers, Carey and Russel believe that "it becomes possible to enable new understandings of life that are influenced less by self-blame," and that externalizing conversations can be "small 'p' political action" ("Externalizing"). For this reason, discussions of power, identity, and social location are appropriate within or alongside a narrative therapeutic setting.

To begin externalizing conversations, White describes a process of inquiry that results in a "rich characterization" of the problem that is "particular and experience-near" (40). This inquiry requires specificity in the subject's description of their experience with the problem narrative throughout their lives, and then asks the subject to recount the ways in which the problem has influenced them throughout various domains of life (relationships, identity, school, work, family, etc.). Once the problem narrative and its influences have been identified, "re-authoring conversations" take place. These conversations require an exploration into counter-narratives in the subject's life which disprove the conclusions of the problem narrative and replace them with stories that honor the subject's own resiliency, capacity, and unique abilities. Lastly, "re-membering conversations" reflect the idea that healing happens in community. Re-membering conversations require the subject to consider relationships in their lives that have had a mutually positive impact, no matter how small.

It is important to acknowledge that narrative therapeutic tradition is historically skeptical of formal diagnosis and the tendency to pathologize, and a true rendition of the mode might, in a similar vein, omit discussions of the subject's diagnosis. But, because this is a creative interpretation and my own, I choose to include the diagnosis of C-PTSD as central to the

narrative of my own self-understanding and recovery. For me, a diagnosis of C-PTSD allowed me to extricate my experience of its symptoms from my understanding of my own personality and identity. It freed me from the self-blame that came from the internalization of certain symptoms, and allowed me to externalize them onto this newfound entity, one that I lived with but was not who I am. This externalization is a central tenet of narrative therapy, and for this reason, I choose to address C-PTSD and its symptoms in its diagnostic form (as well as in more abstract terms.)

The opportunities for the "rich characterization" of our stories in narrative therapy were an invitation to interpret my own narrative through a creative lens, hence the marriage of creative writing and this therapeutic modality. My literary inspirations for this project were Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water* and Carmen Maria Machado's *In The Dream House*. These memoirs explore abuse, sexuality, and memory in interesting and innovative forms and have influenced the style of my writing. Both authors experiment with the vignette form. From Yuknavitch, I model some of my vignettes after her chapter entitled "A Happy Childhood," which immerses the reader in the sensory joys and complexities of childhood, placing us within memories that we can experience from the inside out. I am attracted to her boundaryless style which eschews social convention through sheer authenticity and force of will. From Machado, I borrow a sense of the sinister which she imbued in *Dream House*, inspired by her fiction work in the gothic and horror genres. In addition, I am influenced by the non-linear organization of her vignettes, welding together previously unconnected moments from the past to create new types of continuity in our experience where linear memory would not normally allow.

Hybrid Forms: The Self As a Site of Knowledge, The Liminal Self as a Study of Identity, Navel-gazing as a Bridge From Me To You

The rest of this work is situated within the theoretical considerations of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* various works by philosopher María Lugones, and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure.* Anzaldúa is the originator of *autohistoria-teoría,* which she simply defines as "a personal essay which theorizes," (*This Bridge* 578), but which, in practice, encompasses her hybrid-genre works of theory that are developed from her own personal and cultural experiences, perspective, and epistemologies. Her writings travel between memoir, cultural critique, cultural history, poetry, and prose.

This amalgamation of traditionally disparate modes of meaning-making also reflect Anzaldúa's interest in *mestizaje,* or the racial mixture of Indigenous and European blood that makes up a majority of Latin American racial identity, as a conceptual framework. In *Borderlands,* her complex, mixed, boundary-transcending form is representative of her complex identity as a queer Chicana. Although not present in *Borderlands,* visual art accompanied some of Anzaldúa's theoretical work and was part and parcel to her theorizing process. With this in mind, I include works of my own visual art throughout this project, challenging traditional expressions of exposition and argumentation. She says, "Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite, nothing defined or definite…" (72).

Expanding upon Anzaldúa's ideas in her paper "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," María Lugones explores mestizaje as a framework for theorizing:

> *"Going back to mestizaje, in the middle of either/or, ambiguity, and thinking of acts that belong in lives lived in mestizo ways…*
>
> *thinking of breaching and abandoning dichotomies,*

> *thinking of being anomalous willfully or unwillfully in a world of precise, hard-edged schema,*
>
> *thinking of resistance, resistance to a world of purity, of domination, of control over our possibilities…*" (123).

Similar to Anzaldúa, Lugones theorizes from the "I." In the Western canon, subjectivities, particularly female ones, are not seen as legitimate tools or sites of knowledge production. These scholars' works, both in content and form, challenge the same dichotomous logics that uphold other types of hierarchy like patriarchy and white supremacy. Writing from the subjective has long been a part of feminist and feminist of color traditions. We must write our stories lest they be ignored, which historically, they have been. Memoirist Melissa Febos in her book *Bodywork: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*, argues for the significance of writing our personal stories to heal wounds which are so often inextricable from contexts of history and power. She asks "Should we not always tell stories so that their specificity reveals some larger truth?" (5). That is my goal here. I deeply believe in the powers of specificity and subjectivity. Writing ourselves and our wounds not only helps us to make sense of our own experiences, it also creates an emotional resonance that can be a powerful tool for building community and, hopefully, coalition.

Of writing her first memoir, Febos says "...it was an intellectual inquiry into these topics as much as it was a psychological and emotional reckoning. In hindsight, the compulsion to write it was an expression of my need to understand the connection between those things" (8). The need to write my own story is one that has been with me for many years, but its relevance has waxed and waned as other, more dire, intellectual and political issues moved to the front of the docket. Still, my interest in other people's self-work—personal essay, self-portrait, poetry—has

never left me, nor has the interest in the intellectual contexts that have made me up (Latin American political history, for instance). As we make sense of ourselves, we are also making sense of the world, and the resultant meaning-making that happens, personally and politically, are not mutually exclusive to each other.

Lugones and Anzaldúa understand this, too. Marivel T. Danielson says, "By positioning ['dense theoretical language and poetry'] at a moment of textual and existential intersection, with her words, body, and mind poised at the fulcrum, Anzaldúa presses her work against this externally perceived binary of high and low" (51). So what if a focus on the self makes the work gauche? Or navel-gazing? I am born of the low-brow and the low-brow influences my work. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, a Chicano scholar of art, developed his concept of *rasquachismo* in 1989. Originally meaning trashy, the rasquache sensibility is "brash and hybrid, sending shudders through the ranks of the elite who seek solace in less exuberant, more muted, and 'purer' traditions" (86). In a similar vein, Lugones argues for "practicing trickstery and foolery" and undermining arbiters of purity "whenever possible and with panache" (145). In these scholars' traditions, it only makes sense to imbue my writing with as much maximalism and panache as possible, pulling from as many disciplines as I can manage, and to do it in my own rasquache style.

Halberstam also deals in the "low-brow" and begins *The Queer Art of Failure* by proposing a "low theory" to contextualize his explorations of queer failure. Halberstam and Ybarra-Frausto both develop theories of the underdog. If I am a horse, Halberstam is the stick that allows me to wander towards my objective however I see fit. He argues, "[t]o begin an ethnographic project with a goal, with an object of research and a set of presumptions, is already to stymie the process of discovery; it blocks one's ability to learn something that exceeds the

frameworks with which one enters" (12). Here, Halberstam refers to the classical ethnography, in which an individual sets out to study social or cultural groups outside of their own. In my estimation, the same can be said for this project, which resembles, in some part, an autoethnography. The process of self-discovery and self-analysis can be as illuminating and surprising as encounters with other subjects. Everything that I have experienced is a real experience worth investigating. It is with this framework that I begin my exploration into personal history, identity, trauma, the subjective self, as an act of autopoiesis, untethered to traditional structures and hard-edged schemas which would require me to hypothesize about myself and come to well-developed conclusions.

Instead, I explore. I poke around. I overturn rocks. I form new narratives for myself. I have fun as the confluence of these ideas inform the process of my own meaning-making, the development of my self-knowledge, and the processing of personal trauma which has arisen from within complex social locations and family histories, not from within me.

Non-Artists Manifesto on Art, In No Particular Order

1. My art is autopoiesis. Because "I am the subject I know best." I use it to flesh out the parts of myself that have not yet been tended to. I draw self portraits for the same reason I write narrative nonfiction: for the pleasure of gazing at my own navel (deep and fascinating, what could be through there?)

2. My art is excavation. Who needs Freud when the armchair is at home? ("Google: what does it mean when every new drawing depicts bared teeth and maw hanging hungrily open?") Art is like one of those several liminal organs which gives passage between the internal and external (eyes, tongue, vulva).

3. My art is memory. It's purpose is to remember myself and to remember people who are no longer with us. Art to pay homage. Art to memorialize. Art as revenge.

4. I make art for pleasure, and to grease the cogs in my brain. Few things in this era have the capacity to truly and thoroughly capture our attention through all the noise and all life's flotsam like a project can. I use art to combat idleness while I struggle against Newton's first law.

5. I use collage to create new narratives. In archaeology, scientists use grids to precisely map the location of artifacts in relation to each other because their placement entirely changes our interpretation of their nature. A burial object at a mummy's feet or a string around her neck can implicate things as grand as origin stories and ancient human spirituality. Location and relations tell us about things and cultures unknown to us. You can watch those stories be born, shift, and transform as you move images from our culture around a page.

6. I use collage to heal the fragmentation that comes from all those little disparate parts in myself that have yet to be introduced. This is tangible and intangible. It means sourcing from different parts of your life, materials collected throughout multiple lifetimes and multiple geolocations. Spiritually, this heals the rifts. (Glue.)

7. I use pencil because it is delicate and mutable, because it is the great equalizer. Because I had no one to buy me art supplies and not yet the guts to steal it. There is safety in pencil and some proud proclamation of gentleness. It says "YOU MAY ERASE ME BUT MY SHADOW REMAINS."

8. My art is "the personal is political," and also "the personal is universal, and the political effects me, personally." I make art to be resonant. Because there is a *lot* of relationality

living in the crevices of hyperspecificity. As deeply and publicly as I am expressing my own uniqueness, I am making doppelgangers of a hundred thousand people.

9. I use stippling because it is the visual equivalent to static. It represents the little tickle in my brain. It represents density so seamlessly. It is texture. It is fun.

10. My art has NO rendering of technical acuity because I am a poor man's daughter. My interpretations of my work are ALL philosophical because I am nothing if not intangible, unruly, untrained. It's all intuition, for better or worse.

María Rowen Flores

Part I

Mestiza, Halved

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson says, “It’s easy to get juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity and start complimenting everything as such” (62). I listen to *The Argonauts*, a much lauded work of autotheory, on audiobook for the second time and nod my head enthusiastically in agreement, just walking around my house. “Juiced up” is right. In my freshman year of college, I was introduced to the idea of multiplicity in a feminist philosophy class and in its follow-up, The Philosophy of Race. At a particularly vulnerable time in my experience of identity, I ate it up, desperate to grasp on to any sense of who I was as I transitioned out of a painful and confusing childhood.

It began with a 2006 paper by philosopher María Lugones called “On Complex Communication.” In it, she describes the limen as a site of coalition. The limen is an ambiguous space, one outside of domination where subjects relieve themselves from the tension of oppressed and oppressor that necessarily exists within all multiplicitous subjects (thus, within *all* subjects) and which enables what she calls complex communication. Lugones recognizes that there is not simply *one* shared limen which all oppressed subjects inhabit, rather that each of us, as particular subjects in the infinite specificities of our own social locations, inhabit particular liminal spaces which, she hopes, enable us to translate our experience and then to coalesce in a unified resistance.

What, then, is the multiplicitous subject? We read on.

In “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” Lugones begins in the kitchen, trying and failing to separate a yolk from its white, resulting in something contaminated and impure. With the eggs,

she makes mayonnaise which, "[a]s all emulsions… is unstable" (122). The mayonnaise curdles, its dichotomous parts separating, but never in their purest form. It becomes fragmented. This process is Lugones' metaphor for *mestizaje*, which she uses "as an example of and a metaphor for both impurity and resistance" (122). She follows with a portrait of her mother as a *mestiza* subject who resists assimilation by refusing to translate her subjective experience, meanings, and locations.

A "mestizo/a" is an individual of mixed Indigenous and European descent throughout Latin America. "Mestizaje" refers to the process or experience of this "mixture."

In Mexico, *mestizo* is a (mostly) coherent national identity (one which does serve to elide the social and political disparities that do, in fact, exist on the basis of racial subjugation in Mexico). After the Mexican Revolution, philosopher José Vasconcelos was appointed Minister of Education for the new reconstruction-era government. In the 1920s, Vasconcelos was responsible for programs which helped to usher in Mexico's golden age, characterized in large part by the cultural syncretism which blended European ideals of progress with valiant notions of Mexico's Indigenous past. This became Mexico's new national mythology. Behind it was Vasconcelos' theory of *La Raza Cósmica*, or "the Cosmic Race." The Cosmic Race would be the result of the full blending of the European and Indigenous races: distinct racial categories would no longer be identifiable, and an era of spiritual progress and enlightenment would emerge. Although many now regard his ideas as racist and pseudoscientific, the proud mestizo has become a significant part of Mexican national identity.

Once a mestizo crosses into the United States, however, the coherence of the mestizo falls away. They become Hispanic/Latino. They become Black/White/Asian/Native

American/some-other-race. Only in recent years have some official documents begun to include a wider array of racial and ethnic markers, including the option of "two or more races."

The mestizo is complicated even more by the national ambivalence of Chicanos/Tejanos (Americans of Mexican descent whose communities are established within the American borders, and some of whose communities predate them), who live in the borderlands, whose citizenship is in conflict with generations of cultural affiliation. This complication is what Gloria Anzaldúa contends with in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* To Anzaldúa, the queer mestiza lives not only in a physical borderlands, but a psychic, spiritual, and cultural one. She is in between worlds, trapped between the multiple oppressive forces at work in her environments. The Anglo world derides her Mexicanness, the Mexican world derides her Chicanismo, her Chicano culture derides her womanhood, and her lesbianism is scorned by all. Yet, she belongs to all countries, all races, and all cultures (81). By necessity, the queer mestiza "operates in a pluralistic mode" (79).

Her ultimate claim is that in the borderlands, a new type of consciousness arises from the queer mestiza, one with a "tolerance for ambiguity" that has the potential to "[heal] the split" that comes from a destructive hegemony of dualistic thinking and could bring about a powerful type of collective consciousness that could, she hopes, "bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (80). She says, "The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (80).

My first encounter with *Borderlands* left me in shock. I had never read anything that had so resonantly described both the anguish and possibility of being hybrid, of being in-between, of being Mexican American. I latched on to theories of plurality and multiplicity to heal the wound

that festers in the gaps of cultural knowledge that come from being a half-breed. I theorized the links between the early unbelongingness of my ethnicity and the early unbelongingness of my gender. Nelson is right, it's easy to get juiced up about.

In some sense, we are all plural and multiplicitous and full of contradictions. Some contradictions are more easily reckoned with than others. Particularly difficult to navigate are the realms in which we have conflicting relationships with power. For a long-time, I considered myself "white-passing," suggesting that I must have been…something other than white, which I couldn't seem to articulate.

Eventually, I began to look outside of the US to make sense of my racial identity. In Latin America, it's relatively simple. Multitudes of studies show that skin-tone remains heavily correlated with institutional privilege and oppression, although racial identification is more ambiguous and people are more inclined to identify with being more than one race than in the United States. Warren and Sue argue that "race continues to be socially significant even though racial identifiers and locations are smooth gradations rather than entrenched positions" (36). These smooth gradations are generally on the basis of shade. They argue that the institutionalization of racial mixing has not solved the problems of racism in Latin America, and that, in fact, the emphasis on multiraciality and mestizaje have been used to undermine efforts to mobilize against discrimination on the basis of race, and to erase and/or assimilate Black and Indigenous cultures. It would, then, be irresponsible not to take seriously the implications of colorism and racial privilege in Latin American contexts as well as American contexts.

I consider my own family. Many could be considered white by Mexican standards, some less so. One could passably be considered white by American standards as well. This one would be my father. They called him *el güero*, meaning blond white boy.

Any mixed family knows, especially the large ones, that appearance is not necessarily indicative of a particular ethnic ratio. Multiracial babies are whatever random phenotypical amalgamation god or nature decided to render on a given day. In the US, this becomes complicated when our social stratification is based on the concept of distinct racial categories, loosely and arbitrarily defined by phenotype. In Latin America though, a particular color or racial identifier does not negate the presence of mestizaje in one's bloodline, despite having real social and political implications.

It took me several years and several classes to fully disentangle the notion that I had two white parents, and, therefore, I was white. It seems like a simple conclusion, but the salience of notions of race, ethnicity, and mixture/mestizaje across continents with vastly different racial histories complicated the project. My parents were white in two socially and historically different ways, and my dad's whiteness did not entirely protect him from racialized and xenophobic discrimination against Mexican immigrants. Nor did it entirely protect me. In some ways, it was further obscured by our class positioning. The majority of my Mexican family, both in Mexico and in the US, is solidly middle class. We were far from it. The joke, then, is that somehow the one who married into the whitest family still came out on the bottom.

Thankfully, the somewhat underwhelming realization did not undermine the ethnic identity that my dad tried so hard to instill in me. It did quell the anxiety that I wasn't enough of something. Without the compensatory anxiety, it's easier to recognize and internalize what my whiteness means. Cherríe Moraga is a mixed Anglo/Mexican scholar and playwright and close collaborator with Gloria Anzaldúa. In her 1979 essay "La Güera," she says,

> "I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave

> of that Southern California privilege as far as conscience would let me. Well, now…I feel angry about this — the years when I refused to recognize privilege…These are not settled issues. That is why this work feels so risky to me. It continues to be discovery." (74)

I consider this as I work with Anzaldúa and Lugones' texts. There will always be discovery, to be work that needs to be resettled and privilege that needs to be continuously revealed, acknowledged, and integrated. For now, I feel content in engaging with these ideas because they resonate, as other Anglo/Latino mixed scholars (i.e. Moraga, Linda Martín Alcoff) have done. It does, however, beg the question: When "mestizo" as an identifiable racial category continues to be blended, diluted, or added to, at what point does the Mestizo cease to belong to that specific racial and experiential category, and instead simply become mestizo as in mixed? Does the literature on mestizaje apply only to the capital M Mestizo, or can it be extrapolated onto phenomenological accounts of other mixtures? These are not questions with an answer that I intend to explore here, but it is a consideration that lives in the back of my mind as I engage with these scholars' work. After all, it would seem a disservice to try to assign firm boundaries to the application of theories of mestizaje that, in their essence, seek to continuously disrupt notions of purity and stasis.


2024

How My Parents' Failures Queered Me

It's the spring of 2016 and I'm a junior in high school. I've come back home from school and my older sibling, a sophomore at Portland State, is doing something in the kitchen. We are still getting used to having the house to ourselves in the afternoon because our dad has been dead for five months, and gone for ten. My sibling has already moved out of the house but they are starting to come over again. It's more comfortable for them now that dad is not around. The house is much quieter. We feel more like we belong there, and like the space belongs to us, too, not just him.

We have not always gotten along, largely because we were pitted against each other growing up in the chaos, but when we click, we are locked in. We get so excited about our discourse that we start to talk over each other, getting louder by the second. They are my intellectual north star. They are the smart one. Together in the kitchen, we listen to Democracy Now! on their phone. Berta Caceres, a Lenca Honduran environmental activist has just been assassinated. We listen to the host, Amy Goodman, discuss the role of Hillary Clinton, liberals' favorite presidential candidate, in Honduras' 2009 coup. The coup destabilized the country into one of the most violent places in the world. The coup opened the doors for foreign companies to displace Honduras' Indigenous people for projects like the Agua Zarca Dam, which was never built because of the organizing of Caceres and the community behind her.

In the living room, we have books and books about the United States' involvement in the degradation of Latin America and other parts of the global south. We have books on communism next to books on early settler race relations next to books on Mexican history next to books on first- and second-wave feminism and a handful of different books about Che Guevara. On the wall, there is an anti-apartheid poster from the '90s which has been there for my whole life. On

the fridge, there is a newspaper cut out of John and Yoko standing on either side of a stylized American flag. The fifty stars are now skull and crossbones and every red stripe is made of text. The first line says “U.S.A SURPASSES ALL THE GENOCIDE RECORDS!” The news of Berta Caceres assassination and its relationship to U.S. foreign policy fit well into our existing worldview. At sixteen, I am finally old enough to begin doing my own research and engaging with current events on an intellectual level.

We listen to the episode and discuss. I ask clarifying questions. They make me a snack. I wish my dad were there to help explain the intricacies of it all to me. Before he died, I was just beginning to develop the critical thinking skills to begin to engage with his politics on an intellectual level and it made him so excited.

When I enroll at PSU as a freshman a year and a half later, I do not know what I want to do. I go to college because a scholarship fell in my lap. When my high school classmates were doing college tours and sending out their applications, I was spending week nights watching hours of TV with my mom in a daze. Our nervous systems were stalling, frozen in time, after a sudden end to the years of trauma we endured while we, as a family, battled my dad’s addiction and terminal illness. On the weekends, I party. I drink my frozen nervous system into oblivion. I probably could have done just that for years.

Instead armed with a good scholarship, I have picked up the torch of my dad’s politics and culture and they have become my whole identity. I am a mixed kid who lost their connection to their culture and is overcompensating hard. I take classes on Latin American politics, on policing, on the philosophy of race and gender. Every term, I make myself a plate of courses I think will complement each other, based only on what sounds interesting to me. I do this until

my major has gone undeclared for almost three years and I am forced to declare Liberal Studies, the non-decider's degree, if I ever plan to graduate.

These classes are all a desperate search for identity. I have a deep, colossal need to make sense of myself. I am obsessed with the idea. I am annoying about it. Chronic misfit syndrome.

In my life, I had never been able to relate to other people. I grew up as a poor kid with a white mom and a Mexican dad around rich white kids. I looked like them, more or less, but I acted different. I lived in a different world. I saw right through theirs, but they couldn't see into mine. I had problems they only saw in movies. My dad had an accent none of my friends could understand. My house smelled too ethnic, like foods they didn't like.

My mom had rejected traditional gender roles early on and gave me a gender neutral name and wouldn't let me watch the Power Puff Girls and discouraged me from playing with Barbies. I could never get in with the girls, especially when so much of developing a sense of girlhood had to do with dressing in girl's clothes, which we could not afford and which I did not feel comfortable in. In the 2000s, little girlhood meant pink in every shade and a flat little girl's belly that wouldn't pooch over your gauchos. It meant these specific black knee-high boots that I begged for for months without success. Instead, I wore my dad's old soccer jerseys and my mom's old sweaters. I wore my grandma's old pants and my grandpa's old button ups. I was doomed from the start. If gender was a performance, I was never supplied with the right costume. I was never even given a cohesive script.

Philosopher Judith Butler introduced her theory of gender performativity in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble.* Her theory posits that gender is neither natural, nor is it an expression of an inherent characteristic, but rather a performance enacted through the repetition of behaviors, discourses, and styles historically inscribed with gendered meaning. We understand, consciously

or not, that within culture, gender is communicated through clothing, speech, grooming habits, relationships, associations, hobbies, work, etc. Therefore, in order to appropriately perform gender, one must have internalized and then enact correct and cohesive gender norms. In related works on gender regulations and their enforcement via cultural norms, she says, "For gender to be a norm suggests that it is always and only tenuously embodied by any particular social actor" (*Undoing Gender* 42). In childhood, the already tenuous embodiment of gender that was being learned and enforced in exaggerated ways by my peers was complicated by its principled rejection by my mother, my primary source of womanness, and by a financial lack of access to (and general deprioritization of funds toward, due to the former) early material gender signifiers (clothing, toys, media), and the confusion/conflict between my parents' different cultural and personal orientations towards gender roles—and further, the confusion/conflict between the versions of gender in my home environment compared to my peer environment. If gender is constructed both by what gender is and what it isn't, and what it is must have a certain level of unification against difference, the differences that I experienced on multiple social levels from the girls around me communicated to me that a "girl" is something you "be" and I wasn't able to "be" a "girl" in the same ways.

Over the years, many well-intentioned friends took it upon themselves to try to help me be a girl. They trained me to exercise on the Wii Fit, clapping with glee when I finished a game. They taught me to shave. They straightened my hair. They put makeup on me and gave me their old girl clothes. They passed along eating disorders. It was ambiguous, though, whether they thought they were teaching me to look like a girl or whether they thought they were helping me look less poor. (What, in your opinion, does this communicate about the fungibility of class and

gender?) Some behaviors stuck for a short while, but over time it became clear that my differences were irretractable. The project failed.

I bring us to a politics of failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam sets out to explore "what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success" (92). He does not want us to simply reconfigure "failure" as "success" and applaud, but to explore failure in its implications and possibilities. When I consider my gender failure, I feel glad. Years of adolescent exclusion were difficult, but I am grateful for a social location and perspective with unique insight and the immense levels of freedom as an adult that a disinterest in gendered-role fulfillment provides. I am disinterested because I already failed out of womanhood and, for the most part, do not experience many of the interpersonal pressures that my cisgender peers face from each other. I am glad I am queer. I am glad I have a political conscience, which is both a cause and effect of my queerness, because the conscience didn't start with me.

In the late summer of 2020, I biked home with a roommate from a free showing of a documentary about the assassination of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's revolutionary president. For months, we had, as a household, been deeply engaged in cultural critique, self-critique, protest, and on the peripheries of local organizing amidst the Black Lives Matter movement. As we set off on our bikes at dusk, I posited my armchair theory for the failures of Marxism and why it had repeatedly turned sour when it had been (nominally) achieved on large political scales. To me, it was because patriarchy had never been effectively addressed on a systemic scale, leaving the political system still within the stranglehold of inherent hierarchies to which it would eventually succumb.

Sure, I was spitballing about Marxism, but really I was talking about my family. I was speaking from experience. Despite a revolutionary politic that scorned imperialism and class oppression, my father was a drunk and steeped in unexamined misogyny, complicated traumas, and simple unemployment. His refusal to work was a result of his declining health, a refusal to contend with his own violent experiences, and his notions about how to participate in an American capitalist system which both rejected and relied on him, an immigrant. It was also an attempt to exert control over my mother's financial freedom and access to education.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam uses the 1996 novel *Trainspotting* to explore "the implicit politics of failure" of "punk negativity" (90). Halberstam looks to the way in which the characters' rejection of the normative yet banal version of an aspirational life in twentieth century Scotland is also a conscious rejection of English colonialism in the country. To Halberstam though, this anti-colonial critique has limitations which are concerning at their best, and violent at their worst:

> "Trainspotting ultimately is far too hetero-masculine in its simple reversals of masculine authority, its antifemale fraternity, and its unpredictable bursts of violence. Without an elaborate vision of alternative modes, the novel collapses into the angry and seething language of the male punk from whom a legacy of patriarchal and racial privilege has been withheld. In this example of unqueer failure, failure is the rage of the excluded white male, a rage that promises and delivers punishments for women and people of color." (Halberstam 92)

In the end, my father became what could generously be called a stay-at-home-dad. Realistically, he was an unemployed dad. He struggled under the role of home-maker and thus resisted it. Despite overtly demonstrating his rejection of culturally gendered stereotypes by

idolizing his mother for her strength and independence and choosing non-traditional romantic partners (in Mexico one long-time girlfriend was a smart, athletic “tomboy”; another was a divorced, challenging, and educated mother of two; in the US, my mom), his rejection was fragile. Having neglected to unpack the misogyny inherent in his expectations in a way that would have intentionally produced a non-traditional, non-hierarchical family in line with an anti-capitalist agenda, he instead doubled-down on an internally contradictory politic which imploded his life and his family. In many ways, he was simply trying to cope. His attempts to exert masculine control were a failure in that they resulted in his own financial and internal disempowerment. For that, we were punished, as Halberstam may have predicted.

What I mean to write here is an argument for the ways that my parents’ failures queered me. My older sibling and I grew up as outsiders, in-betweeners, and interlocutors between cultures, social classes, and conflicting values in an environment that both encouraged and punished critical thought. What is most important to contextualize is that the conditions of failure —

- (both of my parents,’ as first generation college-graduates, failure to ascend the social ladder into the middle class
- my mother’s refusal [failure] to pass on gendered expectations of femininity to her female children
- my father’s refusal [failure] to participate in a capitalist workforce which both exploited and relied on him, an immigrant
- his subsequent failure to perform masculinity as it was expected of him
- the moral failing of their addictions
- my father’s failure to reconcile the contradictions between his radical politic and his machismo
- their joint refusal [failure] to adapt to the rules of “polite” society, which as a result kept us isolated from and critical of any messages of “normativity” from society writ large
- their joint refusal [failure] to conform to traditional monoracial family structures
- my father’s failure to survive)

— which resulted in two fundamentally strange, nonnormative, and "othered" multiethnic queer children. These same conditions produced, in large part, the traumatic environment with which I contend in later sections of this work. It's an argument I make for the sake of the reader, as if to say, "Do you believe me that this is all connected? Can you see the fulcrum?"

It's an argument to say that even unqueer failure can produce queer outcomes, who continue to fail in queerer and more radical ways. Also, it's a story about how the intentional politics of failure can be heritable. I'm certain that if my dad were around to discuss politics with me today that we would have potentially relationship-shattering disagreements about the state of leftism today. Indeed, my mother and I are not always on the same page, despite both of us having an orientation towards justice. But even in their potential rejection of today's mobilizing tactics and identity politics, the strength of their principles ensured offspring who would continue to push the political envelope and find new, more critical, less hetero-masculine ways of subverting those same old regimes.

“Susto”

In most parts of Latin America, *susto* is an illness that befalls people after a frightening or troubling event. Twentieth century ethnographic studies in Mexico by Rubel, et al., describe its symptoms as restlessness, nightmares, personality change, depression, lack of personal care, listlessness, and somatic symptoms like intestinal distress, pain, weakness, and trembling (Rubel, et al. 10). In several rural Indigenous communities of Mexico, victims of *susto* are recognized to have lost “a vital part of himself or herself” (Rubel, et al. 41). In the DSM, *susto* is recognized as a “cultural expression of distress” (American Psychiatric Association).

Anzaldúa calls *susto* “a sudden shock or fall that frightens the soul out of the body” (38). She cites it as part of the spiritual repertoire of mestizos, as part of the “*Coatlicue* state” which is a “prelude to crossing” between becoming and being born, between life and death, discovery and knowing (48). *Coatlicue* is a goddess of the Mexica (Aztecs). She is the mother of all deities, maker and destroyer of the universe. For Anzaldúa, *Coatlicue* represents “duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more” than the two (46). *Susto* allows or propels one to descend into the *Coatlicue* state, a state of psychic agony, reorientation, and rebirth where one faces the visceral processes of rendering and transformation. She says, “Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life” (46).

I think of my own *Coatlicue* state after years of living in intimate proximity to sickness and the decay that paralleled my development. Nightmares of reanimated corpses that never ceased their rotting. The disorientation of reorientation. The knotted and writhing sinews that

tear, collapse, and expand before settling. How many miles long can a way station be? How many years of crossing?

Susto as Inheritance

I consider my father's *Coatlicue* state as he resisted assimilation. Anzaldúa says that "as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves," mostly unconsciously, for the deep sense of inadequacy that comes from being a Mexican in the US (45). My father was not a Chicano. He was a Mexican and retained his citizenship, but passing for Anglo made him feel like an outsider among his countrymen. And after raising little white, English-speaking children in the US, he could no longer claim a sense of national or racial purity either, nor a firm sense of homeland. So, like Chicanos, he had "an excessive compensatory hubris" that "[overlaid] a deep sense of racial shame" and which could result in rage, contempt, and violence (83).

He embodied this paradox, one that feeds itself endlessly, like the snake and his tail. His duality, the one interrogated but never resolved in his never-ending *Coatlicue* state, was the tension between deep pride and deep shame. He would say, "Are you a Mexican or a Mexican't?" in the face of any and all troubles. At the same time, he would never fail to remind us that we were hated, demeaned, and reviled by Americans. Indignities became indignation, suspicion became self-defense.

His psychic agony wrought my own. His penchant for the bottle wrought my own. His never-settled-always-restless-always-contemptuousness wrought my own. Anzaldúa says the mestiza is paralyzed. "We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate" (21). This is the state which preempts my crossing. I know I am a mestiza for the way the shame/pride aggregate sits in the pit of my stomach and boils. For the listlessness, tremors,

and depression that befall me after a shock. I know, ultimately, that I am a Mexican because I cradled my father's pain like a mother and I have the scars to prove it.

My father's *Coatlicue* state was an unsustainable way of life. For me, it must only be a way station.

From Which Culture, the Cure?

"You know, we have rituals for this."

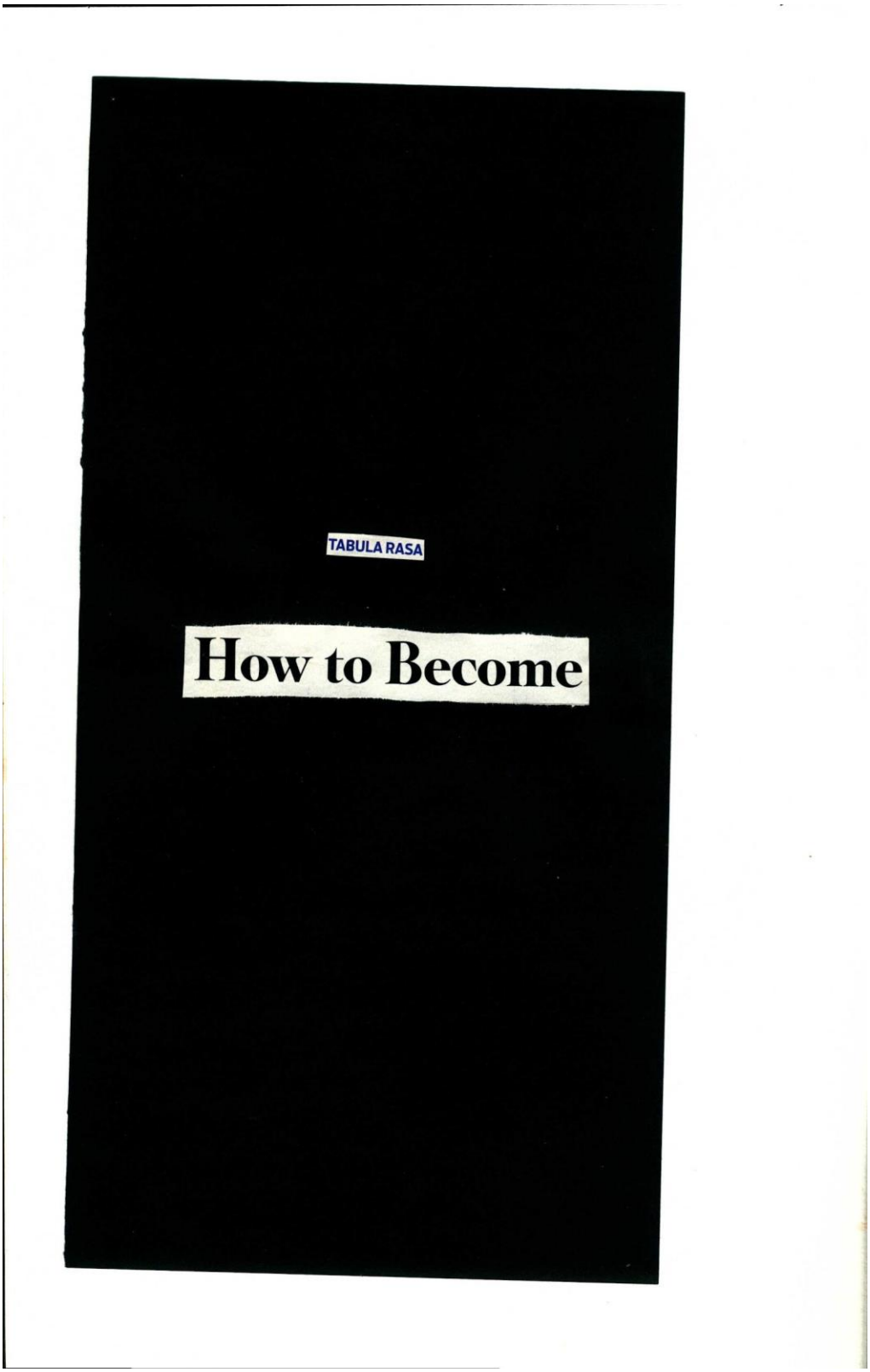
My last therapist, a Mexican, a *curanderx*, of sorts, a spiritual healer, offered me a ritual to cure my *susto* after xe diagnosed me with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. A recent study by Martínez-Radl, Hinton, and Stangier link three distinct subtypes of *susto* characterized in the DSM-5 with depression, PTSD, and somatic disorder. A 2020 dissertation by Michelle Leon explores *susto*'s relationship with PTSD and major depressive disorder.

Only in recent years has the International Classification of Diseases recognized C-PTSD as a distinct diagnosis from classical PTSD, despite the fact that the need for a differential diagnosis to the historically narrow definition of PTSD has been known since the '90s (Herman 1992). The primary distinction between the two is that PTSD develops after exposure to a particular traumatic event, while C-PTSD develops during or after exposure to prolonged, repeated, or ongoing traumatic events, as in the case of abuse, poverty, or war. Classical PTSD includes three symptom groups: "re-experience [of the traumatic event] in the present, avoidance of traumatic reminders, and a sense of current threat," (Ratcliffe, et al. 3). Complex PTSD includes these and three additional symptom groups, which can generally be summarized as "disturbances in self-organization: Emotion regulation difficulties," "relationship difficulties," and "negative self-concept," (Ratcliffe et al, 3).

"Susto" literally translates to fright or scare, similar to the proto-PTSD diagnosis of "shell shock." In the West, if repeated exposure to frights, shocks, or traumas adds complexity, where symptoms become layered into the formation of a person's self-concept, what, I wonder, is the culture-bound analog in Latin American culture to a *susto* that is prolonged, repeated, and reinjured. What does it do to us to be frightened and refrightened? Rubel, et al., find that it is not uncommon for the symptoms of *susto* to be somewhat latent. For some of its victims, *susto*'s effects may appear weeks, months, or years later, often being triggered by a more recent fright, at which point, the *sustos* seem to compound.

The Realm That I Am

IT'S HARD TO BE EMPTY IT'S HARDER TO ENGAGE. MY THERAPIST THINKS I AM DEPRESSED AND I SAY "THIS IS HOW I'VE ALWAYS BEEN. HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW? HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW?" WE WERE BORN LIKE THIS. I SWALLOW COTTON I SWALLOW SALT. I SWALLOW EVERY LUMP THAT HAS EVER RISEN IN MY LITTLE THROAT. SO MUCH THAT A HARD ROCK LIES WITHIN ME WHERE A SOUL WAS MEANT TO BE BORN. IT'S A HOLLOW ROCK AND A MIGHTY ONE. ONE THAT I AM. ONE THAT I AM. TAKE ME TO THE BOTTOM WHERE I USED TO LIVE AND I WILL SAY HELLO TO THE FISHES I STILL RECOGNIZE FROM THIS PLACE AND I WILL SAY "THAT WAS A LONG TIME TO BE ABSENT." BUT FROM WHERE? TO WHICH REALM DO I BELONG? THE ONE THAT I AM. I AM A REALM THROUGH WHICH THE HOLLOW THINGS PASS. I AM A REALM THROUGH WHICH THE HOLLOW THINGS PASS. OR COME TO SOW. OR COME TO GRIEVE. WE DO NOT FRUIT IN HERE. WE DISSIPATE. WE PRAY TO REMEMBER. MY LIFE RUNS FAST THROUGH SLICKNESS OF TIME. WHO WAS GOING TO TEACH ME TO LEARN? WHO WAS GOING TO TEACH ME STRENGTH? LIFE LIKE A WHISTLING ARROW SHOT THROUGH THE SKY AND I AM THE WIND AROUND IT, THROUGH WHICH IT PASSES. LIFE, LIKE A TREE WHOSE ROOTS GROW THINLY UNDERWATER. LIFE, LIKE I AM ONE DAY HOPING TO MEET. THE UNRAVELING OF TAPE THAT JUST KEEPS SPLITTING. THE SEX THAT DIES IN UTERO, ALL SOULS WITH NEITHER ENTRANCE NOR EXIT. THE SALT FLUNG, SPILT, AND HOMOGENIZED, THE FAT, COMPLETELY RENDERED. THERE IS ONLY ONE OPENNESS THAT I HAVE NOT DIGESTED, AND IT IS THE MOUTH THROUGH WHICH I DO NOT SPEAK. AND WHEN I REACH THAT HOLY LAND, I WILL SAY "THAT WAS A LONG TIME TO BE ABSENT."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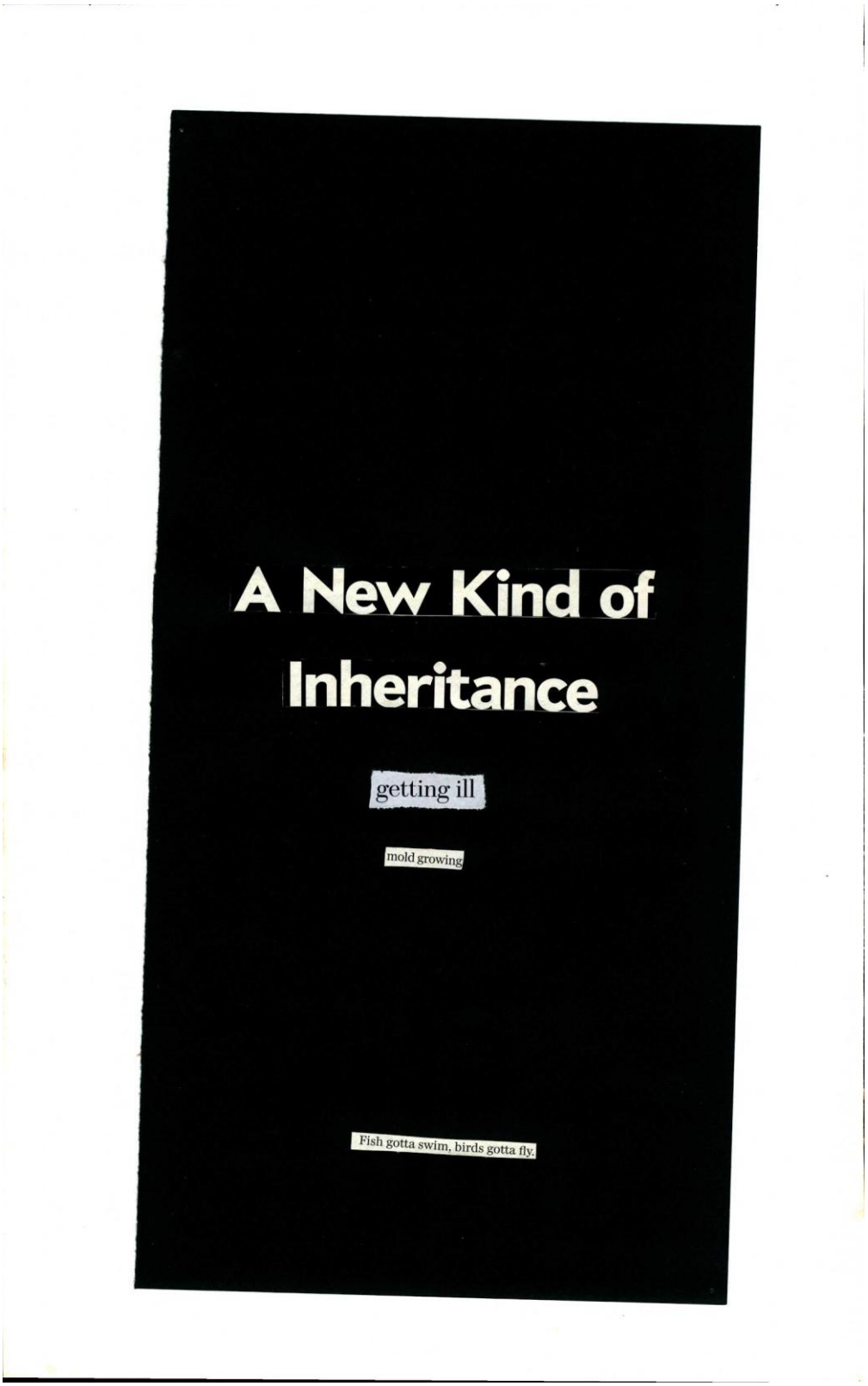
A New Kind of Inheritance
getting ill
mold growing
Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly.


How to Become
A New Kind of
Inheritance

World-Traveling

In public she is tough, assured, commanding. I know that she's fooling people with her airs of confidence. What she fooled me with was her fragility.

I remember the first or second morning we spent together. When I opened my eyes, she was already awake next to me, trembling. Her breathing was uneasy. I went in to lay my head on her chest as it tensely moved up and down. After a few minutes she went into the bathroom to vomit, and then out to the couch to go smoke some weed and try to calm her nerves.

When she came back into the room, she laid on top of me, breast to breast, the weight of her body pressing into mine. I wrapped my arms around her and stroked her hair while she shook. She apologized to me for her random burst of anxiety, of vulnerability, so early on in our relationship. "How are you so calm right now?" she asked me. "I'm like freaking out."

"I feel fine right now, I'm just here for you." She was not the first person to tell me that my neutrality was reassuring. The year before, a school administrator told me I was "cool as a cucumber" when a fight had broken out in the classroom I was tutoring for. Really, I think my freeze response is easily activated. I often decline to react to other people's heightened emotions because I simply can't, or else mine will threaten to emerge, unwelcome. I'm glad, though, that it comes across as a calm demeanor. As soothing.

As a kid, I had to learn to disengage from other people's strong feelings. There were simply too many in my household to engage with. Too much anger and too much sadness and too much aggression for my little psyche to handle. My more emotional older sibling identified my distance as coldness, but teachers called me a "peace-keeper." I helped the other kids negotiate experiences that seemed to conflict.

A few days after her morning anxiety attack, she told me, “I like that you like my girl parts. Usually, I feel like I have to be the boy. I don’t normally get to be a girl. I like your boy parts, too.” When she got her period that week, she again curled into me, whining like a cartoon baby while cramps ached in her belly. She was showing me her girl parts.

Normally when I have talked to people about the experience of being queer, it gets deep and philosophical and we pick apart the societal implications of queerness and the way that it’s totally relational and totally complex. I was charmed by the simplicity of her view of gender nonconformity. We both have girl parts and boy parts.

When we first met, she thought I was a masc lesbian like her. Interesting that the therapist I started seeing that same fall, another masc, thought the same thing. They identified me as one of their own before I had ever begun to conceptualize myself that way. It’s interesting, too, upon learning that my long term partner was assigned male at birth, that they both talked about it like a straight relationship. They even began referring to my partner as “he” despite me never referring to them as such, and despite the fact that they each had some understanding of what it means to be complex. It’s really never been that simple. For my partner, I have at times been a female exception to their otherwise homoerotic orientation. For her, I was a masculine exception to her orientation toward femmes.

Growing up, I had a neighbor friend who I was close with. In middle school, a rumor had spread that he liked boys. We sat on the hill of the park that lived right between our houses, his head on my lap. I think I was trying to coax him into telling me that he was gay, since I had never heard it from the source. I don’t think he ever said it to me directly. Instead, by way of admission, he looked up at me from where his head lay and said, “You’re the exception. To girls. You’re the only girl I like.”

You see, it’s been many years of this. The queers have gravitated toward me in my ambiguity since long before I could understand why. Little by little, I began to piece together my identity through theirs. Some kids who collect stray animals grow up to be adults who collect stray adults. I was a little queer kid who unwittingly collected the other queers, at least the ones who hadn’t yet found a place to be seen. I think it’s because I had the advantage of being a world-traveler.

In "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," Lugones challenges the ways we interact with other people's subjectivities, especially women's, and with our own. She evades a concrete definition of a "world" except to suggest that it is a place with people and something between them is shared. "Worlds" include cultures, power relations, expectations, environments, behaviors, and are often part of a dominant culture whose norms prevent comfort or safety for the outsider. Thus, the outsider must "world"-travel. As a necessity for the outsider, world-travel may be conscious or unconscious. We inhabit some worlds differently than we inhabit other worlds, all with various levels of ease and authenticity.

World-travel is necessary to engage in a loving perception of others, which contends with the arrogant perception that we are generally taught to have towards others. These concepts Lugones borrows from feminist Marilyn Frye. Arrogant perception is essentially the presupposition that what we believe to be true about other people is true. These assumptions are often informed by dominant cultures, stereotypes, and a bias towards our own accuracy. Loving perception, on the other hand, requires entering the "world" of the other subject in order to understand their experience from their own perspective, as well as being able to see yourself from within their world. Loving perception requires some level of openness, playfulness, and humility.

"The shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call 'travel'... Even though the shift can be done willfully, it is not a matter of acting…One does not *experience* an underlying 'I'" (12). What Lugones calls travel, I relate to the more mainstream idea of code-switching. Originally a linguistic term, it can also be used to refer to switching between cultural codes. Code-switching especially refers to the ways that marginalized populations are forced to take on a revised persona when they enter spaces regulated by dominant social norms. Elkins and Hanke say code-switching "occurs when individuals choose their styles of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, and identity performance based on the situation and who is involved," accounting for the influence of social factors like race, religion, and social class (35).

All mixed kids learn to code-switch between their cultures, although it's not a phenomenon exclusive to mixedness. I also code-switched between the working-class cultures of my family and the middle-classness of my peers. I code switched between normieness and nerdness. I code switched between boyness and girlness. The traveling was not inauthentic. It was a natural consequence of having no firm affiliation to any groups — no sense of underlying "I." I was a floater — one of those kids who floats between friend groups, never finding complete belonging nor complete rejection. Normally, I just found varying levels of discomfort. Lugones discusses the idea of "being at ease in a 'world,'" and says that there are multiple ways of being at ease — by being a fluent speaker in that world, by being happy with its norms, by sharing history with others in that world, or by being "humanly bonded" in it (12). She argues, though, that being too at ease in worlds is "somewhat dangerous because it tends to produce people who have no inclination to travel across 'worlds' or have no experience of 'world' travelling" (12). The conclusion that one might draw from this is that world travelers, or code-switchers, who experience chronic or repeated unease in their worlds are generally more inclined

to travel between them, and perhaps more inclined to engage in a loving perception which allows for a close understanding of subjects in other worlds.

I was adept at finding something to relate to in people from completely disparate groups. It was never disingenuous, it was just an instinct towards adaptation. In addition to the salience of my identities, I think this is also related to parentification. The Encyclopedia of Adolescence distinguishes between two types of parentification: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental parentification involves the overburdening delegation of adult responsibilities, "whereas adolescents who experience emotional parentification respond to the emotional needs of the parent or siblings…or act as the confidante and peacemaker for the family," (2697). This is what I was — the peacemaker, the confidante.

My family dynamic was reminiscent of common dynamics of dysfunction: my dad was the aggressor, my mom was the enabler, my sibling was the scapegoat, and I was the mediator. Because my sibling's emotional and outspoken nature was met with such harsh ridicule, I learned that I would be rewarded for suppressing my needs and acquiescing to the needs of the family and especially the needs of my father. For reasons of cultural difference and emotional immaturity, my dad felt perpetually misunderstood and vilified in the family unit. My role became to make him feel understood. This is not unusual for children in situations like mine.

There are lots of ways to describe the heightened sensitivity to other people's needs and emotional states that come from troublesome family dynamics — emotional parentification, codependency, anxious attachment. What I know is that I like to make people feel seen. I hold it close to my identity. This, I think, in combination with a slippery set of social identifiers, is what has allowed me to bounce around to different worlds with some level of ease. It's why people tend to feel closer to me than I feel to them. Again, I think this is not unusual for people like me.

What makes it isolating is that people like me tend not to have a “home” in the world. We live in between cultures and identities and expressions. So I seek to create small homes for people. Homes where they are seen and I am the architect and the building is our relationship. I love to be the exception. I get off on it, I loathe to admit. It’s my whole thing. It’s the only leverage I feel like I have when I otherwise feel powerless in relationships. It’s the way I sink my claws in. “I am the only one who understands you.” I want the refrain to stay with them, to linger. (By the way, this is a confession.)

I think about control a lot in relationships. I think about power. I think about projection. When you are so far deep in the victim mentality you forget that you, too, can perpetrate. You don’t realize the ways you tend to overpower people with your insistence that you know them better than they know themselves. Arrogant perception. Sometimes it’s innocuous, sometimes it’s overt. I’m not so much like this anymore, but I unleash doses of it when I am feeling insecure or dysregulated.

It was really bad when I was young and still in the throes of grief without a paddle. Two summers in a row, I got involved with alcoholic men with daughters. The summer I turned eighteen, I worked in a restaurant as a busser and flirted with a coworker who was 38 with an eight year old daughter, as one does at eighteen. He was a mess. One night, he invited me out. By the time the evening was over, he was incoherent and pathetic. I had to sit this drunken man on the curb and tell him he shouldn’t have been out with me. I was too young. I was closer to his daughter’s age than his, and he was going to die and it was going to fuck her up and I knew because my dad did the same thing to me. By the time our flirting ended, I almost had to report him for harassment. He got fired for being a drunk first. Last I heard, he had gotten sober.

The next summer, I turned nineteen. I started seeing a guy who told his friends we were dating before he told me. He was 22 and had a four year old daughter in Woodburn that he was not allowed to see for reasons that he would not articulate. While we were together, he became profoundly unemployed. During the day, he would drink and play video games. At night, he would party and do drugs. He couldn't pay rent. Eventually, he disappeared for a week only to reappear with a new partner. I saw him at a party a few months later and dragged him outside to talk to me. "You'll regret dumping me for the rest of your life," I said, because I understood him. "You're making shitty decisions and you aren't taking responsibility for yourself and your new bitch is a piece of shit, too." The new one was blowing up his phone, wondering where he had gone. "You know you're going to fuck up your daughter's life." I knew because my dad had fucked up mine. I got up, stood on my tippy toes and poured the rest of my beer on his head.

A few years later, a friend texted me that she ran into him at a bar in LA where he now lives in violation of whatever legal issues prevented him from seeing his daughter. They talked about me. He messaged me later that night and told me he did still think about me, and I was right, the new one had been a piece of shit after all. Last I heard, he's still a drunk.

Upon reflection, it wasn't hard to see I didn't really desire, respect, or even like these men. I just had issues I needed to work out with someone's dad, since mine wasn't around to square up with. Still, I had sized them up accurately. The trajectories of alcoholism and paternal incompetence are limited. Either you sober up or you don't.

It's illuminating to think about these relationships in this context when I think about the trajectory of my queerness. I spent several years out of high school looking for men to answer for the crimes of my father and to validate the pieces of me that felt scorned by society. The same gender ambiguity that has been appealing for some was met over and over again with

condescension by the arbiters of normative society, who were sometimes my friends, or fetishization by people who did not respect me. I spent a long time allowing that belittlement to shape the way that I navigated my gender and my gendered experience in relationships. Now that that urge is a few years out of my system, I think about my identity in different ways.

I look in the mirror after my shower. My hair is long and coarsely wavy. I used to keep my hair short in an attempt to keep myself looking queer in a twinkish way. With my hair long, I feel uncharacteristically masc. Like a woman, but in a butch way. It's that short pendulum swing between the gay twink and the butch lesbian that represents a part of my journey of embodying the synthesis of the masculine and feminine. Twinks are powerful, to be sure, but I'm not sure that represents all of what I am anymore, and leaning into that has been empowering. Now that I have begun to resolve some of my deeper issues with femininity, I feel more drawn to the idea of being in communion with other women-loving-women, at least (and especially) the ones who also have a complicated relationship to womanhood. Boy parts and girl parts.

I'll probably never be able to confidently apply well-defined or permanent identifiers to myself, but I think that ambiguity, and the flexibility of transgression, is part of what I have to offer to other people. If most of my relationships have been built on the projection that I can see the hidden parts of people, which I recognize is at least in part an issue of ego, I want to allow people to project onto me what they need to, too. I don't want to be a blank slate, necessarily, but an adaptable one and a perceptive one. A palimpsest, maybe. That's my whole thing.

I like that part of my draw for people is that I cause a little bit of confusion. I like that I push against their normal patterns of behavior. I like that I understand those complexities, can articulate them and help others articulate them. I like to create resonance and to make room for the contradictions inside people that maybe haven't been historically welcomed by others.

Sometimes, I take it too far and forget to let the other person take the lead in deciding what they want to reveal to me. I jump to conclusions. My goal though, especially now that I've matured a bit, is to be a companion to other people in their own internal journey, as opposed to the guide. I keep practicing. I project less. I keep listening. I keep one foot in my world and one foot in yours.

It was never about You

In the grand web of things, I look to make people feel understood. I hold your heart up to the light. Examine it. I take your guts in my palm, delicate, and squeeze. This is what it feels like to love, I say. Gut wrenching. Do you understand what I mean? To love you.

It's a challenge. A mental exercise. I massage the nodes in my brain that hurt wildly and are scared. I keep my secrets. They hurt. I suggest yours. I make up stories about your mind, I tell them to you, we throw them at the wall and see what sticks. Is this making sense?

I exercise patience like I have it on back-order. I don't. I offer grace like a karmic exchange. Will it come back to me? Does empathy generate in the space between two black holes? Does me seeing you make you see me? For what I am?

Do you know what I am? A tight knot. Tension embodied. I unfurl, slap you around with my tongue a little, you get whiplash, surprised. You thought I was so meek. You think I am so desperate. I am. But I'm also moving forward. Offering up my offerings to myself this time. To myself.

I was impressed by your vanity and now I take it with me. To bait you. To bait myself. Into becoming. It's a valuable tool. Our lessons learned. From each other.

I try to make us both feel understood.

I take your secrets in one hand and I cradle them. I take my guts in the other hand, I squeeze. Gut wrenching. No more of that.

Part II

The Story

> "A life story therefore seems complete, cut short by something that the person continues to confront but cannot negotiate.
>
> Hence a sense of foreshortened future is not a judgment to the effect that the remainder of one's life will be short and that one has little or nothing to look forward to. It is a change in how time is experienced: an orientation toward the future that is inseparable from one's experience of past and present, and also from the short- and long-term 'passage' of time, is altered… One confronts a world that is incompatible with the possibility of an open and progressive life story. And so traumatized people sometimes describe themselves as having died or say that a part of them has died: 'when trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living.'"
>
> —Ratcliffe, et al., "What is a 'Sense of Foreshortened Future?' A Phenomenological Study of Trauma, Trust, and Time"

On Saturdays, You Go Yard-Saling

On Saturdays You go yard-saling with your friends in the morning, get lunch, sit in a park in the cool autumn breeze in the afternoon, crunch on the leaves, go for drinks in the evening, hang out on the couch and watch a movie or sit on the porch and smoke, watching the dusk grow and wrapping a dirty porch blanket around yourself as you sit on your dirty porch couch because you are in your twenties and some things aren't meant to be clean.

On Saturdays I sit in my mother's dark house excavating the rot and dust that built itself up the last fifteen years while our family was preoccupied with death and none the wiser, I pick

up mail stuck to the sticky floor and dig out old clothes damp with mildew and sprinkled with tiny caterpillar shells, watching the giveaway boxes pile up and begin to collect dust, again, because no one in the family ever learned how to drive and there is no one to take them away. On Saturdays I wait in the dark while mother lays down for an afternoon rest, hoping this is the weekend that she has the energy to take out the trash because she is turning 60 and some things are meant to be clean.

Meat Loaf

I walk into the kitchen, confused and concerned by the smell, like food and burning plastic curling acrid into my nostrils. My mother is sitting at the kitchen table, sobbing, elbows on the table and hands firmly planted in a bowl of ground meat, fresh sage, thyme, and oregano, undoubtedly gathered from her garden. Howling and inconsolable, my poor mother, with her eyes cinched and her long dark hair in a braid over her shoulder, raw meat on her hands, says to me, “I’m so fucking stupid! I fucked it all up! I can’t do a fucking thing right!”

Silently, I pry open the oven to find melted strings of styrofoam takeout boxes spilling over the wires of the oven rack and onto its hot floor, noodles of pad thai and pad see ew fusing themselves to the grates, burning to a crisp. “I couldn’t even afford this fucking food! I just wanted to do something special but I can’t do anything fucking right!”

We were at our brokest. My dad was ill and unemployed. Most of the time, mom cooked cheap but elaborate meals in her precious little time after work as a legal assistant to bumbling lawyers. Take-out was a rare and celebrated occasion. Overworked and on autopilot, she preheated the oven, forgetting our precious Thai food was already inside.

I go and wrap my arms around her shoulders. “It’s okay, mom.” She heaves into my chest.

Lamb Kebabs

My family barbecued like it was our job every year from the months between April and August. Incessantly. My father would drink his beers while he prepared the meats, vegetables, and snacks, then prop open the front door so he could hear the blast of his surround sound from the yard while he grilled for hours in the heat. We were called the “music house” because summer air carried his songs down the block and over the basketball court across the park where the boys from the neighborhood would play past sundown. Inside, my mom would make the salsa, guacamole, and beans de la olla.

Usually, it was beer butt chicken or cheap cuts of meat that my parents dressed up with herbs and marinades to slow-braise the toughness out of them. But we ate well, and tonight he made lamb kebabs, chunks of good meat he had marinated in adobo and layered tediously onto skewers with onions and green peppers. On his way to the grill, head held high from the satisfaction of good food and belly full of beer, he tripped over the uneven terrain of our dingy front yard and dropped the tray of kebabs, coating them in a layer of broken glass, to taste.

I had seen him enraged plenty of times but had never felt so sorry for him as I watched him indignantly gather the meat from the ground, fuming as he cut his hands trying to dust the glass off his dinner. “I’m still going to fucking eat it, just let me eat it.”

“Just fucking leave it Juan, you can’t fucking eat that.” He sucked his teeth, went inside, and drank until the coals went out.

Cottage Cheese in a demitasse

They were fighting, as was typical. The four of us in the living room, my father in his spot on the couch in the corner of the room, my mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen, my older sibling standing in front of the television. I was sitting, silently, on the thin foam padding of our captain's bench, across the room from my father.

Yelling, from all corners of the room, then, and explosion next to my head as a little plastic cup, one with an image of Santa in his sleigh flying across a bright purple sky, delivering his gifts to the world, shatters five inches from my face and little curds of cottage cheese attach themselves to my hair, my cheek, and the wall.

He swore he wasn't aiming at me, not for the first or last time.

***SPARKS* orange**

I came home from school to my dad in the front yard where he spent his time absorbing the pittance of sunlight Portland gave us in the spring. *"Cómo estás, mija?"*

"I'm fine."

"How was *eschool*?"

"It was ok." I went into the house where it was dark and laid down on my bed. Outside of my bedroom window was the side of the house and an entrance to the crawl space underneath where my dad stashed his hoard of junk over the years. He was often digging around in there, looking through his old computer parts or various collections of junk.

As I laid on my bed scrolling on my iPod, I could hear him rustling around outside of my open window. Then, the sharp crack of an aluminum can and a thick, heavy, gulp and guzzle. Suddenly alert, I went outside and found my dad chugging a tallboy, one of several that he had poorly hidden behind the latched door of the crawlspace. Pushing past him, I grabbed the cans,

snatched the one from his hand and went inside to the bathroom, face stony. He followed me in and pleaded as I poured them, one by putrid-smelling one, down the sink. “Please, *mija,* come on, my girl, stop. Come on, girl, don’t do that, it’s just this one. Just let me drink those and no more. Come on, María, please.” He was rejected for a spot on the transplant list the next month.

White Trash Gothic

Every weekend in the summer my mother is delivered pounds and pounds of fresh fruit to process. Today it was three boxes full of delicate transparent apples with which she will make many quarts of applesauce, and maybe some apple butter. Transparent apples are special because despite their skin which, like the name suggests, is ultra thin and makes them prone to bruising and quick spoilage, they are super tart and have excellent, almost floral flavor. Plus, they are incredibly hard to find due to their fragility. These particular ones came from a huge tree in the backyard of my aunt’s family home, which she bought from my grandparents in the late 1980s. My grandparents raised my mom, my aunt, and their two other siblings there after moving from Denver, Colorado, when my mom was in elementary school. The apples from this tree have fed at least four generations of my family. None of us have ever touched store-bought applesauce.

To process these apples, my mom will use the pointy aluminum colander and its heavy wooden pestle that has also been in my family for at least four generations. She will work on the corners of her kitchen table, too cluttered with groceries (that will never make it into her pantry shelves, they will live and die on that table) to take full advantage of, washing the apples, inspecting them for worms, then tossing them in a huge kettle of boiling water, skin and all. She will, toiling over the hot stove on a 95 degree day in July, stir the apples, being sure to add sufficient water as they cook and break down and begin to turn to pulpy mush. When they are

cooked through and cool enough to strain, she will laboriously push them through the old sieve and pestle, which separates the seeds, cores, and skin from the pulp of the apple. Some of the sauce will go straight into jars and into the canner to be sealed, and the rest she will continue to cook down, adding cinnamon, sugar, and vinegar, until it turns to apple butter. That will be canned, too. The batch will inevitably be salted with her sweat. All in all, it will take her the full two days and she will end up with probably two dozen jars of goods which she will distribute to our family, friends, and neighbors.

Two weekends ago, it was cherries. Last weekend, she made lasagna from scratch, pasta and all.

She does this all while her house is buried in grief and clutter. There are boxes of canning jars and boxes of beautiful, shattered ceramics, fabrics now spotted with brown mildew, at least two hundred pounds of CDs and records that haven't been touched for seven years, her and my dad’s old clothes from the 1980s, also spotted with mildew, mail spanning ten years back, tissue paper for wrapping her gifts, amazon boxes, old books, bad books, a yoga ball, two shredded cat trees, other delivery detritus, and lots and lots of cat hair. Stage three of hoarding disorder is characterized by difficulty moving around the house.

I go crazier and crazier every time a new delivery of more things shows up on our doorstep. I become disturbed.

Externalizing the Problem

> "Why does she have to go and try to make 'sense' of it all? Every time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under and over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her"
>
> —Gloria Anzáldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

From the beginning of my life, my problem has had many names and many faces. Laziness. Depression. ADHD (self-diagnosed). Brokenness. Executive dysfunction. Uselessness. Worthlessness. Depersonalization/derealization disorder (self-diagnosed). Being a waste of space. Being dead inside. Then, CPTSD, professionally diagnosed at age 22, eight years after the source of my trauma died alone, was incinerated, and buried as ash in the desert ground of rural Jalisco.

Suddenly, the problem isn't me anymore. The problem is the problem. It's a circular thing that lives the life of a day. The problem is a mayfly. At the end of every day I die, having left no mark on this world except to reproduce myself again from nothing. Blank as an egg every morning.

Evening approaches. I look at the mayfly with compassion as I see it start to shrivel away. How do I extend your life tomorrow?

2015

The summer of 2015, I was in my transition between my sophomore and junior years of high school.

The summer of 2015, you were in the transition between your sophomore and junior years of high school. You had a boyfriend who rarely spoke to you. You had friends, one or two, but their lives unfolded happily without you. Besides, you had no cell phone for them to contact you. You had the house to yourself for the first time ever, during the days. Normally, this would excite a teenager. Not you. Not you. Nothing excited you. Not a thing.

You spent the hot summer days silently moving from one room of your small apartment to another like a ghost, tracing and retracing the steps of your past life, thoughtless, unfeeling, heavy. A ghost with a leaden body. (You wore a dress to stave off the heat of early July, thirty five cents from the bargain basement thrift shop, flowing and ill-fitting, not for fashion but because there was no money. This made you feel even more waifish, even more haunting.)

The heat of the afternoon sun fought to shine through the thickness of the curtains, to penetrate the dark, to sanitize the stuffiness and the sickness that lingered in your home's fabrics. The place was begging to be aired out.

You couldn't imagine what had been building up in that place.

I had the house to myself because my father, chronically ill and before that, chronically unemployed, had been kicked out, after all this time, for becoming increasingly belligerent, unhinged, irrational, and violent. My older sibling and their boyfriend, with whom I had shared a room for several years, had been forced to move out by my father's constant threats of violence and picking of fights. My mother, the household's sole earner, was losing it. She was threadbare and we were watching the last desperate fibers snap, one by one.

At this point, my father was almost completely incapacitated, first by alcohol, then by illness, then by alcohol again. He was losing it. In a complicated web of immigration issues,

precarious health, and the looming threat of domestic escalation, my mom had no choice but to banish him, first to live with his nephew in California, and then to live with his elderly mother and two younger brothers in his family home in Mexico. He died there, just a few months later.

The resounding conclusion of every day, waking up at the thick of noon and staring at the wall until the sun went down, repeat, was that you were useless, soul-dead, brain-dead, broken. Your mind was blank for things to occupy yourself with. What are your interests? Do you have hobbies? Do you have any capacity for life? You could only think, as you wandered the suddenly empty apartment, for weeks at a time, for days without leaving, "Am I broken? Or am I dead?"

That summer, when you had been so deeply accustomed to chaos, the silence of the house washed over you like a riptide, pulling you completely under. The stillness filled your ears like water, you could hear nothing but the hum of its pressure as you drowned in it, as it crushed you. A ghost, killed by the silence. Or: a deepwater creature, obliterated by the rapid depressurization of its environment. You choose.

I wasn't dead, technically. As far as I knew. But this sense of brokeness, this total incapacity, had eclipsed every living grain of my being. I was only fifteen.

Spring 2021

I lived in the upstairs of a big college house with seven rooms. At the time, there were six of us living there. Most of us had gone to the same high school, and three of us had moved in there as friends in 2019, taking the spots of a few recent Lewis & Clark graduates who had made their way back home to the East Coast. The house was charming but decrepit. It had dark wood with beautiful built-ins, a brick fireplace, a sinking floor, mice, and a flea infestation in the

basement. It was going on a year-and-a-half since the onset of COVID-19, and I was approaching what was supposed to be the spring of my graduation. All of my roommates, most of whom had been part-timers, had dropped out of school to wait out a better shot at success in the face of waxing and waning lockdowns. I was beholden to a scholarship I was lucky to have and could not afford to give up, despite wanting to.

As a household, we were uber-cautious about exposing ourselves and each other to the virus, so going back to campus was neither a desire nor an option. I spent over a year taking classes online, scooping ice cream fifteen hours a week, and not doing very much else at all. Every day was the same. We all experienced it, especially those of us who remained strident in our convictions of community care. We limited ourselves to our bubbles and our protected private spaces, where flimsy public legislation could quickly strip us of safety. Days bled into weeks bled into months. Time was irrelevant. It was a year without inputs from the outside world.

This liminal space felt familiar to me. It was one where you had very little to hold on to, where time felt liquid and so did your brain and your body as you became a fixture of your environment. Unmoving. Like a liquid, I felt like I had sunk, boneless, gripless, into a looser plane of reality, one where the academic cogs of my brain slowed and rusted and my capacity for focus, which had always been limited, turned to soup.

I didn't read a single academic paper to completion for two terms. Completing a simple assignment was a highly concentrated process of agony, and I had three or four or five at a time stacking up against each other, each one adding a boulder’s weight to my back.

It broke me down. In my life, academic prowess had been my biggest lifeboat. I was a teacher’s pet. I looked for validation from my teachers and professors when I felt too isolated

from my peers to step into their world. I was good at school. I knew I was smart. My teachers knew I was smart. That was enough to keep me going. But burnout caught up to me. Soon I was taking incompletes I would never finish, writing pleading emails to my professors to please give me an extension, to please take pity, to please give me a fucking break.

I would lay in bed and cry at least a few days out of the week. If I couldn't do this, what could I do? I did not pursue my interests, I did not have hobbies, I had nothing else of substance to me but being a good student. I did nothing. For days at a time. My failures in school catapulted me into a prolonged period of grief and depression.

I felt broken, like all I was was a viscous substance creeping into the dark corners of my house. I was hiding away from everyone, resentful and angry. I was now some four years away from my dad's death and I knew that somehow, he was to blame for all of this. He was the architect of my misery. My childhood had been characterized by his illness, his alcoholism, the resulting poverty, and a glaring lack of attentiveness to my individual needs. I was overshadowed by it all. I was given no tools to thrive. Now, I was completely empty.

Still, I missed him *profundamente*. It was so very profound. My grief for him was like a vacuum that swallowed me whole. My grief was threefold. It was for him, for the part of me that died with him, and for the personhood he robbed me of, the flame he put out. I would writhe around my bed, gulping back sobs so my roommates could go about their lives while I fixated on how mine was over before it ever began.

I am so traumatized.

I am so dead inside.

I am so broken.

They were phrases that rang violently inside my brain, somewhere between an intrusive thought and a prayer.

March 2022

I had lived in Chicago for maybe three and a half weeks, in my new apartment for a week and a half. On our fridge hung a magnet that said “I would be unstoppable, if I could just get started,” overlaying a mug of coffee.

I laid on my mattress on the floor and, nestled in between the broken boards of my bed frame (which would remain broken and in the way for several months, until the day that my partner would decide to clean and organize the mess of my bedroom, while I lay, as I often did, hopeless and immovable on the couch). The room itself was dark at all hours, despite the light of the Midwestern winter sun, because now I was in Chicago, a city where the buildings, tall and densely packed, scarcely got breathing room between one another, their height leaving no space for the daylight to enter.

It was usual for me in those days, when the daylight was scarce, to sit in the center of my bed for the better part of ten hours, watching miniseries after miniseries, order myself delivery ramen, and fall asleep amongst empty cans or bottles or boxes of wine, surrounding my body like the chalk outline of a crime scene.

My first week, I walked the three blocks from my apartment to the Mariano’s supermarket down Chicago Avenue and bought myself two 12-packs of holiday clearance hard seltzers. I grimaced at the flavors - eggnog, peppermint - but bargained with myself that the discount was a steal and I would stock myself up for a couple weeks. Maybe after I finished them, I would even stop drinking for a week or two. Lugging the boxes up my apartment stairs, I

stashed them in my closet, avoiding the opportunity for my new roommate to get the wrong impression so early on.

The drinks lasted me a matter of days. I spent every night making myself sick off cherry cordial flavored alcohol after spending the day mute, unable to move, questioning why I had exiled myself to a city with so much verve when to my core I was apathetic at best and, at worst, harbored a looming deathwish. I had nothing. I felt nothing. I was exiled. Around me, people were living, people had passions and hobbies and relationships and the motivation to do simple tasks and complex ones. Me? I stayed inside. I woke up every morning nauseous and hating myself. I would stare at my phone an entire day, letting myself rot from the inside out.

Present

I hold this concept of inefficacy in my hands, roll it around like a hot wad of sugar wax. First it burns to touch, then cools enough to become malleable. If you do not act quickly enough to stretch, reshape, and mold the substance into its desired form, it hardens, becomes useless, and you are left bereft, again.

This, so far, has been my experience of toying with narrative means to therapeutic ends, as Epston and White put it, in an artistic sense. The central problem narrative of my life, that I am merely a broken brain inside a weak and stumbling body, leads me to a blank page. I spend each noontime tossing it around in my hands, waiting for the pain of facing it to subside, only for the idea to cool off and die. And again on Monday, and again on Wednesday, Thursday, and next Tuesday.

A Diagnosis

In January of 2023, my new therapist and I prepared ourselves for my formal evaluation. We had spent several weeks going through all the stops of a trauma timeline I had written about my life, pausing to stop at the big events, at the development of new symptoms over my adolescence. I described the chronic depression, low-self esteem, episodes of anxiety, 'OCD-lite', years-long periods of depersonalization, and substance abuse as it mapped onto my experiences. They asked me the questions and I answered them, we tallied up my scores, and they looked me dead in the eye of the webcam and said, "Congratulations, you have PTSD."

I tried not to grin. It felt big. It felt monumental in a corny way. For years, I had lamented the fact that all the people close to me grew up with adequate and consistent mental health care when, in my view, the circumstances of their lives hardly necessitated it. It got them access, it got them accommodations and sympathy and clarity, and most importantly, medication. It felt like they were handed their diagnoses like candy, and, finally, at my big age of 23, I was getting my turn. It was my proof.

A diagnosis of complex-PTSD confirmed to me that I wasn't just useless by way of my own corruption and laziness, but that I had, by definition, experienced trauma significant enough to chemically alter my mind and body. It meant that the chronic emptiness, the reactivity, the penchant for small acts of aggression, the random episodes of mental paralysis, the scope of my executive dysfunction, the grief that grew hot like an abscess in my identity — these were experiences I shared with other survivors. They were experiences that were not my fault.

My constricted, often harrowing, experience of living in the world didn't have to isolate me from other people anymore. Instead, I could begin to seek resonance in other people. I could

begin to seek stories of recovery and rejuvenation from people who resisted being trapped in the patterns of a damaged nervous system. Like a lamp, we can be rewired.

Re-Authoring Conversations

Mid October, New Seasons

"So you're a writer."

"Sort of," I said. I was looking at my first ever college writing professor, bagging his groceries into the type of canvas tote that especially writers and artists collect. It had been over six years since I took his class, when I was still a senior in high school. This was my second service industry job where he came in as a customer. The first time, I was serving him ice cream and I told him, only at the end of our transaction, that he had been my teacher and that his class had been very meaningful to me, but I was spluttering and embarrassed.

This time again, he came through my line, both of us masked, and both looking older. After a moment of hesitation, he looked at my name tag and asked me, "Do we know each other…Rowen?"

"Yeah, I think we do. Professor Schaumberg. How have you been?"

He told me he's no longer teaching, but that he misses it. He couldn't afford it. These days, he writes for Nike. "Now I can afford to shop at New Seasons, at least." We laughed. I told him I'm writing my thesis at Portland State, that it's a memoir, sort of.

I was grateful for our interaction, but I was embarrassed that his impression of me was who I was at seventeen. At the time, I was so raw and angry and sure that I knew more about life than anyone else in the room. My dad had died only a year before and I was in the habit of telling people the grisly details of his illness, whether it was invited or not.

And, our conversation confirmed some of the internal tensions I had been having about whether or not to let myself indulge in the dream of being a writer, a dream that I only recently rediscovered.

The last time I saw him was my last day of work at the grocery store before I left for Missoula. I was pleased that I had been able to see him again, and say a quick thank you and a goodbye. He came through my line, smiling through his mask and asking me how I had been. I lied and told him that I had been good, but from the most truthful part of my gut I said I was glad to see him one more time. We chatted about Montana. He told me he had been in Bozeman for some years, and that the writing scene there is tight. When I told him I planned on attending UM for grad school, he asked "Are you getting an MFA?" It only sank my heart a little bit to tell him no, I was going for an MSW, to be a therapist. More practical, like leaving teaching to work at Nike, I guess. I finished bagging his groceries (loose vegetables, rolls, la croix). As we said our goodbyes he said, "Say hello to the mountains for me."

I can see the mountains now, looking in from every direction.

2015

In the wide open void of that summer, in the space left behind by total collapse, I accomplished only one thing. An afternoon, probably in July, I gathered some musty scraps of fabric left behind from an old project of my mom's and spent an hour or two constructing a miniature tank top and a pair of shorts. They were beige with stripes of green and tan and tiny yellow flowers, and just big enough to put on a doll or to make my fingers dance like thick little legs when I stuck them through the holes of the shorts.

Once I finished, I put the needle down and inspected my work. They were purposeless, uneven, and the seams were loose, but I had made them with my two leaden hands. I had pried an idea out of myself and made it real. I started to cry. I had forgotten I was in the world at all,

but now I had the proof in front of me, something I could touch. The tiny clothes were roughly hewn and fragile at the same time. So was I.

For the last six years, those shorts have had a place at every altar I have constructed. Normally, an altar honors the dead, but these tiny shorts (the little tank top has long since disappeared) are there to remind me of the single shred of me that lived through that summer. They remind me that I survived.

November 2021

I had moved out of the large house in Sellwood and into a two-story apartment off 82nd with two other friends, both boys, both raised in a chaos similar to my own. It had been doomed from the start. There was bickering and disagreements and then there was fighting and insults. We were all traumatized by our childhoods and came out with different and frictive flavors of conflict.

The problem started with me. I had a jealousy I just couldn't regulate. It felt like a parasite that took over my body, hijacked my amygdala, and was driving my limbs to be that much more forceful with every move – to put the cup of coffee down on the the table that much harder, to drop my feet more heavily with every step, to close my bedroom door with more violence than was strictly necessary. I tried to explain that I didn't want to feel this way. I knew, logically, that my reaction was to feelings much deeper and further back than this situation. But explaining away my overreaction didn't do much to mitigate the ways in which I continued to overreact.

As they tend to, the conflict spiraled and became a web of negative interactions, and this, the autumn of my discontent, followed a spring of failures and dissolutions. I had decided to drop

out of school after two terms of incompletes that I knew I would never finish. My self-belief that I was smart if I was anything at all fled along with my cognition. Other long-term friendships had ended. I had turned outside in, and I was wearing all the weakest, angriest, and ugliest parts of myself, exposed to the public like a suit of raw meat.

The tiny, confining life that I had been living in had cracked open. My foundations had crumbled and I felt like I was sinking fast. But I had a liferaft living some two thousand miles away in Chicago, a city I had never been to and didn't really know anything about. The raft was my on and off partner of two years, with whom I talked daily. Our relationship at the time was emotionally entwined but ambiguous, and my musings about moving to Chicago, where they had been living for six or so months, made them antsy. I had never lived outside of Portland and both of us knew that the subtext was that we would be together again and that I would resume my place of emotional dependence on them.

I was able to admit to myself, at least in part, that I needed to separate myself from fantasy. I also knew I needed somewhere to go. My living situation was too tense to maintain for nine more months without pause. So I willed an idea into existence. Behind the idea was a sense of agency I had never imagined for myself. I, who had scarcely traveled and never been farther east than Montana, planned a trip that I never would have believed I could plan. I would go to Chicago for a month, rent my own place to stay, plan my own schedule, and fasten it all on the notion that I may or may not see my partner at all. This trip was for me. I had my own agenda, maybe for the first time ever.

By the end of the trip, I had solidified my plans to move to Chicago in the coming months. I wasn't suddenly the exciting, productive person I had hoped might spring forth in a new environment, in a bustling city, but I had successfully proved to myself, and to my partner,

that I could navigate life on terms that I developed. Suddenly, I had expanded myself into a physical world I had never been able to break into before. I was finally, maybe, materializing. I needed to see how far I could take it.

January 2023

It was midway through the school year and I was working my first big-boy job as a math tutor at a public high school on Chicago's west side. The school, whose population had dropped from over two thousand students to less than two hundred in the last ten years, was a poster child for the failures of American infrastructure and a crumbling education system. When I first arrived as part of a pilot program designed to "bridge the gap" that COVID had left in math and reading proficiency, no one at the school knew who I was, what my job was, or had even heard of the program.

For a week they put me up in the office of the vacationing IT specialist/health teacher while I did six hours of online training a day, spinning around in his chair while the ladies in the office watched me suspiciously through the half open blinds. The next week, the vice principal decided my tutoring hub would be the counseling suite which housed the offices of the school's two guidance counselors and a small computer lab. The counselors, of course, were unaware of this, but they welcomed me anyway and said they would make it work, like they always do.

For the next five months, until the special education teacher left in ruins midyear and I took over her old classroom as my own, I shared a space with the two counselors and watched them work. I listened to them talk to the students about their lives, their families, their futures, and grew wistful. That was the kind of relationship I wanted with the students, not one where I was relegated to explaining exponents and quadratics. Many of these students were not having

their basic needs met, and their teachers were not equipped to attend to them on an emotional level. One of the students was functionally mute and the teacher I worked with acted as if she was just weird, shy, or obstinate. Another spent the first month of the year in the psych ward. Two of the quickest learners, cousins who were asylees from Ecuador, stopped coming to school because they needed to work full time. One freshman was non-fatally shot in the head in November and lost the rest of the school year. Two juniors, a couple, got in a fight that ended in the boy pinning the girl up to the wall by her neck in front of me.

I, too, was a troubled teen. Not in the same ways, by any means, nor in a similar environment. But I was familiar with what it felt like to have problems outside of school that felt too adult for other kids to understand and too serious to talk to your teachers about without risking a call from a social worker. I had experiences with mental health that almost took me out of school, and crippling shyness that was the result of trauma and not weirdness. I was familiar with poverty and interpersonal violence. The only thing I ever wanted at that point in my life was to feel understood.

Maybe I was projecting, but I saw those things in the students I worked with and started to wonder what it would take for me to be the person for them that I wish I had in school. I so admired the work of the guidance counselors at the school and the connections they had with the students. I started to ask them questions about their role and education. In my spare time at work, which there was plenty of, I began looking up programs for becoming a school counselor. Then I looked into school social work. Then I looked into clinical social work, and then into counseling. Something at this point fell into place for me. Over the years, the genre of compliment I most received had to do with being a good listener, being insightful, and making people feel understood. It had been suggested to me before that I fit the profile for a good teacher or a

therapist. The ball began to roll in an area of my life that had never seen motion. I was comparing graduate programs, licensure processes, and scouring Reddit for guidance. The word "career" entered my line of sight.

Up until this point, the most significant long-term decisions I had made were getting tattoos and moving to Chicago, neither of which had an end goal. I had always been vaguely listless and somewhere deep in my gut, I had a sense that I wouldn't make it very long in life, be it by illness, accident, or my own hand. In my teens, I developed a lingering anxiety that the next car ride I took or the next street I crossed would be the last, or that I was developing a cancer that I would only detect in its last stage. The idea of a future in which I had to make some sort of organized, sequential decisions and investments of time and energy into building foundations for myself had never dawned on me.

Then it did. The desire I developed to be the person of comfort I never had was the catalyst that I needed to light up parts of my prefrontal cortex that had never been used. Here I was, authoring a future that honored my existing skills and relied on an innate assumption that I would be able to learn, expand, and engage with life outside of my purview.

Re-Membering Conversations

Maurice

In the months following his death, I have thought about him almost daily. As I settle into my new apartment, I remember the apartment we had together as roommates. I remember the way we talked about chores, the way we divided up the space in the fridge, the way we would dance together in the kitchen while we made dinner from a recipe he found on TikTok, and how he always played his music a little loud for my taste.

I remember how he was invariably the first one to show up to a party and the last one to leave. He set the tone of the night that way and you were always glad for it. He eased his way into conversations with just about anyone, so that the first sparse hour of an event was never awkward. If he wasn't already passed out on the couch, he would be the one helping you clean up at the end.

I remember when I was eighteen and I got too drunk at a hangout at his house, maybe six months after we had broken up. I had gone out to sit by myself on the porch and cry. That was my M.O. at every party, kickback, and basement hang for almost two years. He followed me out to the porch to see how I was doing and let me heave onto his shoulder, sobbing about how much I missed my dad. I threw up, and then he took me back inside.

I remember when he turned 23 and our group of friends traipsed around the parks of inner southeast, drinking and blasting music like hooligans, just a little too old to be doing what we were doing in public. He got so drunk that he started crying about his own family and their problems, which were much more serious than most of us understood. This was also his M.O. in those years. We gathered around him and told him how strong he is. How much we all loved him. After a while, the others left the two of us alone. I reached out for his hand as he sat curled

on the wet cement stairs of some school park. I don't remember what was said, but I remember the way he smiled at me, like he appreciated how sincerely we all were trying to comfort him, but like maybe he knew the words of comfort were more for us than for him.

I remember how he and I were known to be two of the sloppiest drunks in our friend group. If someone was going to end the night crying, throwing up, or in crisis, it was one of us. We were also the two with perhaps the most questionable reactions to other people. The two who were the most likely to start a useless fight to protect our pride. The two with the most familiarity with violence, both enacting and being a victim to it. The two with a little bit of ethnicity. We knew, at least, that we understood each other, even if no one else did.

While we lived together, we were both struggling with our drinking. It didn't help that the tension between me and our third roommate made the habit that much more attractive. I was a bad friend and was even worse at trying to resolve conflict. I hid behind the fact that they were men and played the victim to absolve me of responsibility for my biting and constant passive aggression. I knew I was handling it wrong but I didn't know how to stop it, and so were they, so I didn't bother to try. When I finally moved out, I left them a letter taped to the wall. At the end it said "don't ever contact me again." I finally got my deposit back from them last September, almost two years later. A Cashapp transaction with no description.

The week I learned of his death, I was busy falling in love with my supervisor. She was four years younger than me and pursued me hard, knowing that I was nonmonogamously partnered and intrigued by the idea. As we got to know each other, I learned that she, too, had lost most of her highschool friends all at once. Without elaborating she told me, "I was not a good person." She, too, was a little rough around the edges. She said things she maybe shouldn't have but tried hard to self-correct. She, too, was struggling with her drinking, joking about it in

the way where I knew she knew it was a real problem. She had had her own experiences with addiction from an absurdly early age. She was left to raise herself. Similar to me, but different. She was more tenacious. More confident. Cocky, to a certain extent. She knew what she wanted and what she wanted was me.

She told me about her ex-girlfriends and how, before the last one, she hadn't honestly seen them as full people. The first girls were more like objects. She didn't really treat them well but she was trying hard to be better. When we were still just coworkers, she talked about a recent ex, who was my age. She told me, "I was just tired of being forced to be at a place I wasn't at yet. I have a lot of learning I still need to do." To me, that insight was so admirable, and I knew how that felt.

At twenty, I was making a lot of mistakes. I had just inadvertently broken a girl's heart because I was wrapped up in my own avoidance and desires. I was scared of being with a girl, but I cared about her deeply as a friend. I was poorly masking resentment towards my roommates for their easy lives and lack of trauma. They had nice white families who paid the bills and it angered me to no end. When I got drunk I got mean. I made the people around me feel bad. Like always, I knew I was fucking up but I didn't know a better way to be. All I wanted was some grace. I wanted people's patience. I wanted them to see how badly I was hurting but how hard I was trying to be better despite it all.

My coworker was twenty. She was fucking up and she knew it and she was just trying to figure out a better way to be. I wanted to be that person for her, the one who could see her heart as she fumbled her way through interpersonal mistakes and political incorrectness, the one who could see where she was trying to be better and help guide her toward it. She reminded me so much of me that it made me feel guilty. Is it wrong to be attracted to someone who reminds you

of a younger version of yourself? Is it narcissistic? Is it predatory? It's definitely projection, even if the shoe fits.

In the end, we didn't last long past my move from Portland to Missoula. Her learning process didn't involve being beholden to a long-distance relationship and I could see that clearly, but I don't think we left each other empty-handed. She expressed gratitude toward me for my patience and understanding, and I was appreciative of the opportunity to come to a better understanding of my own journey of personal development, and the way I leaned on the patience of my friends. Even if I didn't recognize it at the time, I had people looking out for me back then, giving me space to fumble my own way towards a better way to be. Sometimes, you need other people to begin to see yourself more clearly. I think we gave each other that.

Autumn. I met her in the fall.

I AM FIVE

running through the crazy daisy sprinkler in the ¼ acre of my grandma's yard, barefeet through soft grass barefeet through thistles, itchy and sweaty and wet and running around and tiring myself out. my sibling and i pushing each other around, them much stronger and me much weaker, these are some of the last times i will have fun with my body. we tucker ourselves out, go inside to eat a snack.

I AM SIX

It is the summer and I am in the kitchen of my grandmother's house wearing a little apron over my bathing suit standing on a stool to reach the double sink where we are processing peaches to can. To my left are the mason jars on a paper bag sterilized with boiling water and the double boiler that has been used by the women in my family for this process every summer for the last forty years, minimum. My great grandmother stirs the sugar syrup in a pot over the stove, my grandmother oversees the blanching of the peaches – slit an "x" just through the skin, boiling water plunge, ice water plunge, slip the skin. Shock the peaches into baldness. It works something like an assembly line. Over the sink, my grandmother tells stories of processing chickens after wringing their necks, the weight of their swinging bodies breaking their spines, plucking feathers, blanching them, shocking them bald. They worked much like an assembly

line. Farm women, unassuming but tougher than nails. Stories like this come out during this type of group effort, this type of preserving. It is oral tradition, one that goes hand in hand with our food traditions. I am a little girl and I feel that I am a part of something. A part of a family. There are not many pictures of my childhood but there is a picture of this, this tradition memorialized.

I AM EIGHT

It is the summertime and my mom is watching the neighbor kids during the day for a little extra money. For lunch she makes us a plate full of tuna sandwiches on whole wheat bread, the cheap kind, cut up into triangles and stacked like a great mountain smelling of fish. My mom makes tuna salad with grated carrots and cilantro. The neighbor kids will not eat them, but I know this is how she cares for us, she does not hide our vegetables, she acquaints us with them, introducing them to us as friends who nourish. On the side, there is milk with a touch of chocolate Nesquik.

I AM TEN

My father does not work. I am in the fifth grade and have been making the short walk home from school by myself for a year now. My father is home when I arrive. We spend time together after school. Maybe he is reading the daily *La Jornada* on the computer he built which sits in the living room, or watching soccer, or listening to much too loud music. He asks me how my day was. I ask him how was his. I will go into my parents' bedroom, choose a movie from one of the spindles, the hundreds of DVDs he burned, pop it in the disc drive of his computer, and watch my movie after school. He will come in, ask me if I am hungry. I will say yes, of course, for I am never sated. He will make me *molletes.* Two thick slices of french bread, heavy with butter, the way I like it, laden with cinnamon sugar that my mother mixes into a shaker painted with little flowers, thrown in the oven till the bread becomes soggy with fat and the sugar has crusted over. It is decadence. Far too decadent for an after school snack. But he makes it that way because it makes me sooo happy to eat it, and I am his little girl. "My girl," he calls me, which would be a strange endearment if his first language was English. In papí's voice, it makes perfect sense. He brings the *molletes* to me, warm and fragrant from the oven, while I watch a movie in his bedroom. He takes care of me. He is my friend. I am his girl.

I AM TWELVE

my sibling says they will buy me a five dollar bucket of Voodoo Donuts if i do a cartwheel. i have never done one before. i barely know how to move my body. i am overweight and clumsy at this age. but i want the donuts and at this point, food is part of the bit. i play into it. really, i want my sibling to be proud of me. over and over, oafishly kicking my feet into the air and slamming my palms into the thistly grass. again. Ouch. again. I'm sweaty. again. I'm tired. again. swing my arms to my right, kick my legs up, allow gravity to guide me. i flip over. i succeed just before dusk settles into dark.

Dishes

It's 8pm and the sun begins to pull dusk in my kitchen.

My hands are under the warm water, feeling the scraps of food floating around the sink from the night before. The sensation is the only thing that draws me away from the urge to cry as I watch the sun start to set on another day, where the only thing I managed to accomplish was taping a big scrap of paper to my wall with the giant words "THESIS DEADLINE: MAY 24TH" written in sharpie.

These days, washing dishes is a handy way for me to self-regulate. It's a sensory activity that calms my reactivity and allows me to focus on understanding how I'm feeling, as opposed to writhing in the chaos of it. It balances, it draws me in and out of myself. Some people have shower thoughts, I guess, and I have dishes thoughts.

The day had turned more and more sour every time I tried unsuccessfully to recalibrate my unfocused brain, and every attempt became more punishing. By the time the sun was setting I was ready to give myself a left hook to the head.

But at least I did the dishes. I swish around the watery grit and slime of the refried beans from last night's dinner. I've come a long long way. I did the dishes, and I exercised this morning. Only in recent years have I been able to adopt habits like these into my routine. I engaged with my body, and I engaged with my environment. As a child, being asked to do the dishes would send me into a tantrum. I couldn't come out of myself. Nothing outside of my brain was safe to contact, not even my own body.

Now, kitchen activities that engage my senses are a go-to for adding meaning to my life when everything else feels hopeless. I especially like to cook. Gandhi thought, for whatever it’s worth, that manual types of labor like this are a spiritual experience and I think about this often. I

like the way it feels to feel a knife go through a crisp onion, to peel back its layers and hold the slimy part of the membrane to the light to peer at its cells, almost visible to the human eye. I like how badly it burns my sensitive eyes, how patient I have to be while chopping the onion to avoid the danger of trying to wield a knife while blinded by tears. It reminds me of being a child and helping my dad make pico de gallo. I would inevitably off-load the task of onion-chopping to him. It was too painful for me. Now, there is no one to do it for me, and I do it happily. Finally, there are things I do for myself, happily.

Sure, I'm still frustrated with myself that the only writing that has come from the last 48 hours are ruminations on frustration and dirty dishes, that these topics are not the subheadings of my work that I wanted to finish this week. But this, the frustration, the dishes, the inefficacy, are all part of this story. This writing doesn't derail me from my goal, it expands the narrative, it connects the past to my very real present, the one where I very really struggle, for all the same reasons as ever, to accomplish even the things that are most important to me, the things that are the most cathartic, the ones closest to my goals.

I scrub the burnt milk from the bottom of a saucepan (I tried to make yogurt today, that's another thing I accomplished), and I remind myself that these days happen sometimes still, and they likely always will. But they are fewer and farther between. These days of feeling hopeless in my apartment while I watch my neighbors enjoy the warmth of the spring light in their gardens, just being in the world, as if it were easy, are rarer than ever. And they are more full and more productive. Every day I expand my repertoire of the activities of the living. I did the dishes, I exercised, I made yogurt. Every day I come more alive. I add one more thing to my routine that reminds me that, with my own two hands, I can pull back the curtains, I can dig myself out, I can touch, I can open the door, I can be in the world like other people.

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