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FRACTURED SELF--A LIFE IN ONE HUNDRED SNAPSHOTS

by

Lonette Robertson Stayton

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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For Momma

Abstract

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Fractured Self--A Life in One Hundred Snapshots. Major Professor: Sonja Livingston.

Fractured Self--A Life in One Hundred Snapshots is a memoir of one hundred vignettes that begins with the writer's early childhood and ends right after she gets married. There are several questions that haunt the writer, but the question, "Does racism, one of life's major stressors, contribute to mental illness in African American women?" is the main question that is addressed throughout the memoir. The writer also addresses issues of identity as she attempts to find her place in the world.

To be alive at all is to have scars.

--John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My full name before I married was Lonette Nicole Robertson. My family called me Nikki, a nickname for my middle name, Nicole. Everyone outside of my family knew me as Lonette. It wasn't until I enrolled in college that my peers called me Nikki. Sewanee's college application for admission asked if I had a nickname and I was honest. I had no idea people in college would actually call me Nikki. After I entered the workforce, I was once again known as Lonette, only allowing those who knew me well to call me by my nickname. My husband claimed my different names were aliases, attempts to keep people at arm's length. I claimed ignorance, but secretly agreed there may be some truth to his statement.

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INTRODUCTION: THE BEST SHE COULD

Hattie B. wanted the freedom of the blues.

Still lovely in her early sixties, her dyed jet-black hair pressed and curled around her head, Hattie B. reclined in the plastic covered French Rococo chair she purchased on credit from Dillard's. Her unlined caramel skin still caused greying men to lower their voices in a sing-song when she visited the neighborhood grocery, their eyes becoming hooded, their fingers longing to slide below the waist onto Hattie's rounded buttocks. Hattie always smiled, slipped just out of reach of the grasping fingers, at once amused and grateful for the adoration.

Her beauty was the envy of her daughters: Alma Jean, Mary, Danette, and Vanessa. Of the four, Mary looked the most like Hattie, but lacked Hattie's easy, hip swaying confidence. Hattie glanced at her daughters, then looked at herself in the mirrored tiles that lined the south wall of her small living room on Fernwood Street. The mirrors reminded her of her beauty, reminded her of all it promised but failed to deliver.

The mirrors reflected the muted peach and beige of the rounded furniture, the thick shag carpeting, the fringed drapes masking the bars on the windows, the trappings that convinced Hattie B. that she moved far from the world of the projects of Memphis and became a woman of her own destiny. Her retirement from Methodist as a cafeteria worker and social security covered the payments to Sears, Dillard's, and Goldsmiths, and every time Hattie B. purchased furniture on credit, she moved further from the embarrassment of welfare and food stamps.

Hattie's daughters flickered in and out, like a bad channel on her old fashioned television set. One minute, they were grown women with houses of their own. The next, they were twelve, nine, seven, and four playing jacks with the neighborhood children in the LeMoyne Gardens Projects. All but Alma Jean were seated around sixty-three-year-old Hattie in a half circle in the living room. Mary rocked slightly back and forth in the chair in front of Hattie in the matching Rococo wingback, her arms crossed, her hands tucked out of sight. Danette reclined on the sofa to Hattie's right, her thin frame slouched, glasses settled on her small nose. Vanessa sprawled on a dining room chair to Hattie's left, her breasts and stomach stuffed into a vee neck blouse, her hands moving like birds about to take flight that must be anchored with a glass of gin. Hattie's daughters surrounded her, but she took no comfort in their proximity. She was wary, darting her eyes around the room, alighting only for a moment on a glass figurine or the swirling pattern of the marble end table across from her.

Hattie watched eighteen-year-old Nikki cross her right leg over her left. Hattie's grand baby looked so much like Mary it hurt. She had the same way of looking out at the world as if she expected for it to hurt her, all hunched shoulders and caved in torso. Hattie hoped that Nikki wouldn't lash out at the world like her momma had. Hattie watched the girl, her eyes down cast, the women's conversation sliding past her, their voices staccato and jagged, their laughter too loud, their smiles straining over bright teeth. Vanessa, her youngest and the one she hoped would eventually find her way back home, looked at Nikki when there was a lull in the conversation. She had trouble focusing her gaze on the

girl who was seated in a dining room chair next to Mary, close to her mother. When Vanessa finally focused, her smile shifted into a practiced leer.

"Have you got laid yet?" Vanessa asked Nikki. Nikki's right foot, which had been swinging in time to the blues song playing on WDIA, stopped. Nikki narrowed her eyes and said in an even tone, "Aunt Van."

Danette and Mary looked at Nikki, waiting for her reply. That child was always a little too reserved for her own good, Hattie thought.

"Your cherry's been popped?" Hattie asked.

"Who is it?" Danette asked.

Nikki shifted in her chair and frowned.

"Damn, it's about time! I was scared you was gay. You aren't, are you?" Vanessa asked.

Mary sighed and uncrossed her arms long enough to take a sip of her sweet tea. The spotlight wasn't on her.

"Honey, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You get you some while you're young." Hattie arched her right eyebrow.

Laughter erupted. Vanessa launched into one of her more vivid tales of sex and intrigue. It had been years since Vanessa sold her ass on Lamar, but fucking seemed to be the only thing she was good at. Hattie continued to watch Nikki during Vanessa's tale. She didn't get up and leave, which Hattie thought was a good sign, but Nikki never lifted her eyes from the carpet.

Hattie sighed. Nikki had none of the fire she had, or that her third born daughter Danette had. Danette took so much after Hattie that it scared her. Danette's easy way of letting men slip under her clothing and into her heart could ruin her.

Hattie wanted the love in blues. The moaning and lamenting of the blues suited her. She admired the lack of reserve of the blues artists, WC Handy's ability to drop his guard and declare before the world that that no good bitch done up and left him after sleeping with his best friend, or B.B.King begging his woman to come back after he slept with her best friend. Hattie knew that such freedom was only meant for men, that only men could cry out their needs and betrayals out into the night for anyone to listen. If a woman did that, she would be considered crazy. Touched in the head. The best she could do was stuff it, all her wants, all her desires, into the deepest part of her. Finding the words to share this with Danette was impossible. Articulating her thoughts was foreign. So much was left unsaid.

Vanessa ended her story and chuckled without warmth into her glass of gin. The women looked at each other as if from behind a gauze veil. As always during awkward silences, the conversation meandered into their childhood. Hattie could never remember who would start the reminiscing, Danette or Mary, but stories of the old LeMoyne Garden days would be dusted off, polished, displayed for everyone to see and examine. Hattie would shake her head in wonderment from side to side, declaring that her children must be confused, that those things never happened to them. When the stories would progress and the girls became more insistent, Hattie would declare that she did the best she could

and no one could have asked more than that. By the look on her daughters' faces, they did expect a hell of a lot more than that.

In the past, her grandchild was too young to understand what her daughters rehashed. Now her granddaughter was a grown woman, in college to make something of herself. Hattie clutched the arm rest with her left hand.

"Do you remember when Danette got burned with the candy?" Gales of laughter erupted.

Mary grimaced and rolled her eyes. She turned towards her daughter. "We were home by ourselves. Madea was at work, and your Aunt Danette decided she wanted some candy, then Alma Jean said she could make it."

"I told your bad assess to stay away from the stove. I told them," Hattie said, her eyes flat, her voice still. "You all liked to give me a heart attack. You all were always into something." Alma Jean, her oldest daughter, the one that escaped from Memphis and the responsibility of raising her younger sisters, escaped into a marriage with an alcoholic and poverty as bedfellows. But Hattie did the best she could. They couldn't ask anymore than that.

"Well," Mary continued, "there must have been a pound of sugar in the pot. Alma Jean filled the pot with water."

"Vanessa was the look out, remember?" Danette interrupted. Danette's lean frame was now leaning forward, her eyes bright.

"Vanessa was looking out the window," Mary continued. She rocked back and forth at a rapid pace, her bushy hair brushing her shoulders. "She was supposed to tell us

when Madea was coming. So Alma Jean put the sugar and the water in the pot and waited for it to boil. You kept tugging on her."

"I didn't tug on her," Danette protested. "She said she knew what she was doing."

"All at once Vanessa yelled that Madea was coming," Mary said.

"Madea was coming. Girl, everything went crazy. We tried to wipe counters," said Vanessa.

"Sweep floors, turn off the stove before Madea got home," Mary said.

Hattie glanced at Nikki. Now her grandchild was no longer studying the carpet, but was staring at her mother and aunts with fascination. Hattie felt her insides tremble and she looked at her daughters.

"We didn't notice Danette was pulling on the pot of boiling water until it was too late. The sugar water spilled all over her chest," Mary said.

"Her legs, her arms. She screamed bloody murder. We were trying to pull the candy off her legs before Madea came in, but her skin was peeling off with the candy," Vanessa said.

"Show Nikki your scars," Mary asked Danette.

Hattie glanced around the semi-circle of women that seemed to have grown closer, the room claustrophobic. The back of Hattie's thighs stuck to the plastic covering as she perspired, the squeal of her legs peeling from the surface loud in her ears.

Danette raised her left pants leg and showed the pale scar to Nikki.

Nikki reached out and traced the white mark. Hattie wished she could tell what Nikki was thinking, but her grand baby avoided her eyes.

"And on top of that, we got the shit beat out of us!" Peals of laughter. Danette's lips stretched over her teeth. "You came after us with that big leather strap, you remember, Madea? You called us every name in the book when you chased us around that apartment."

Hattie shook her head from side to side. "I did the best I could," she mumbled.

"Hell, I remember that beating," Mary said. "I couldn't wear a shirt for days."

"It's a wonder any of us made it out alive," Danette whispered.

There was a beat of silence. Vanessa laughed. "Why ya'll so damn serious? Nikki, go get me some ice."

"You've had enough, Vanessa. Take a break," Danette said.

"You take a fuckn' break."

Vanessa stumbled into the kitchen and Nikki stared after her. Hattie continued shaking her head, her immaculate curls only slightly waving above her head.

They didn't understand. Hattie didn't have the words to explain that she loved them, wanted the best for them, that her frustration and limitations escaped from her mouth as taunts, ridicule, and anger. She regurgitated all her dreams onto her children, wave after wave, until she doomed them to a life time of wading themselves from underneath her bile. She lacked the words to explain away the vileness, so she retreated to her bed, to the comfort of her mattress, and slept her helplessness away. Hattie looked around the room at her broken daughters, at her granddaughter whose expression Hattie was afraid to interpret. She would not apologize. She did the best she could. She would be forgiven by her daughters.

PART I

Hattie B.

I imagine Hattie B., my granny, smoothing the sheets of the queen-sized bed on the fifth floor of The Peabody Hotel, her dark hand startling against the crisp, white sheets. The radio plays Nat D. Williams's radio show *Brown America Speaks*, but Hattie isn't listening. Usually a fan of the new all black radio broadcast, this morning, while her hands follow the routine business of cleaning the room, her spirit travels back to Shaw, Mississippi, where her two girls, Alma Jean and Mary, are playing in her father's fields where she picked cotton until just three years ago. Three years ago she gave birth to Alma. After the birth of her daughter, she vowed never to stay in that small town, never to stay under the same roof as her father.

For years she will tell Alma Jean that a soldier who needed love before facing war was her father. For years Alma Jean believed it before Hattie B. changed her story, then confessed she didn't know who her father was. Mary recalled how her grandfather favored Alma, bringing her close when he kept others at a distance, and asked if he was Alma's father. Hattie B. shook her head, exclaiming "No!" to such an idea-- unconvincingly.

"Aren't you finished in here, girl?"

Hattie returns from her reverie and turns her body towards the white woman, her eyes searching the intricate pattern of the wall paper. "Yes, ma'am," Hattie answers. When her supervisor leaves, Hattie gives the room one last look. She would rather her daughters serve in Memphis than live in Shaw.

Dog Biscuit

She was a strict mother. Because, you know, as we gotten older we look back at her and realized that a lot of that stuff she didn't know how to handle. She didn't know how to handle us, the idea of not having a husband, not having food and money and stuff to care for us like she needed to and it bothered her and she took out her frustrations on us and stuff. One day we didn't have no food, so Madea made biscuits and sausage for us to take to school. And I was ashamed. You know, we're talking about, like, seven years old. I think that's why I baby Patrick [grand son] so much. I don't ever want him to be ashamed of something. And uh, I tried to ease my biscuit out of my bag, and a boy saw it. And they all gathered around me and saw what I had. From the second grade to the twelfth grade they called me dog biscuit.

And it started fading off in the twelfth grade because I met your Daddy when I was in the eleventh grade? Something like that. They had started tampering off. But he heard them call me dog biscuit. And I was ashamed. And that just changed my personality. I didn't know how to deal with it, and we didn't tell Madea nothing like that. Cause we always thought it was our fault. We never told anything like that.

Mary's First Day of School

She's five or maybe six years old. She's standing with her older sister, Alma Jean, in the hallway outside her classroom. Her dark brown eyes are wide, fingers tightening on the handle of her lunch pail. She peers around the corner at the children inside.

"Go inside! I have ta go!" Alma Jean whispers.

Mary shakes her head. Her dark afro puffs tremble. She rubs her eyes with the back of her right hand.

"I got to go to my room!" Jean hisses.

Mary is near tears. Jean leaves and Mary is left alone to enter the classroom of strangers. I go back in time and watch as she stands there, the hem of her dress fluttering from her slight movements. I want to take her hand, give her a reassuring smile, maybe smooth one of her puffs as I lead her into the class room. I want to tell her that school is an amazing place full of adventures like reading and arithmetic. But Ms. Jackson hits Mary because she can't recite her abcs in front of the class correctly. She's called dumb. Mary believes her. I want to embrace her, shelter her from the world, but I'm insubstantial, as the unborn usually are.

Funeral

He wasn't her Daddy, not for real, but he was the only Daddy Mary ever knew. He was her little sister's and brother's Daddy, but he took care of her like she was one of his own. He did her hair real nice in the mornings before sending her to school, and begged Madea not to whip her when she did something wrong. When Mr. Green was there, there was enough money for food, and Madea wasn't quite happy, but almost. Her shoulders eased and her voice wasn't as harsh. Momma loved him.

When Daddy died, everything changed.

He lay in the casket in the living room. People sat with him, all through the night. She dared her older sister, Alma Jean, to touch.

"Go ahead, do it!" she whispered into Alma Jean's ear. Alma Jean wouldn't do it. Alma Jean was scared of him. But Mary wasn't. He was still her Daddy, the man whose hair she combed when he came in from work everyday. She was six when they buried him. It was cold, one of the coldest January days ever in Memphis. She couldn't get warm. She kept moving, trying to generate some warmth, but Madea kept making her be still. They moved away from their rented, brick duplex on Merchant Street. Then they had to move to The Gardens. This time a neighbor, Ms. Mildred, pled on the children's behalf. "Oh Hattie B., don't whip them this time." And a lot of times Madea didn't.

But there was no one to fix her hair in the mornings and they often ran out of food towards the end of the month.

Mary

is an unbalanced scale that has always leaned towards evil. That's according to her sisters who enjoyed sharing childhood stories with me—the kind of stories Momma would rather her two daughters not hear. The sisters laughed and raised their voices over Momma's protestations, recalling the time when she terrorized a kid from the gardens. The LeMoyne Gardens, the place where my mom grew up, no longer exists. It was a housing project south of downtown between LeMoyne Owen College and Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee. Momma always said it was a dangerous place where children got beaten up and teased. According to my aunts, my mom did her fair share of teasing as well.

“Marilee, remember when you spit in that girl's mouth?”

I see my aunts as wayward children, thin from government rations, hair unkempt. Aunt Vanessa sits on the girl's right arm, Aunt Danette sits on the girl's left arm. Momma straddles the girl and pins her to the ground, her knees on her chest, her hands pushing down on the crooks of her arms. The girl attempts to flail her arms but can't, her legs kicking up her dress so that her panties flashes anyone who cares to look. Mary's face hovers over the girl's. She coughs as if to clear her throat, then purses her lips. A thin, long sliver of cloudy spit extends from Mary's mouth, lengthening, reaching towards the now screaming child beneath her. The spit continues to reach towards the girl who shrinks from the spittle and sinks deeper into the porch as if she's attempting to become embedded in the concrete. The sisters watch. The cloudy, slightly green chunk of spit lands on the girl's left chick, and a little gets into her mouth which is still open because of

her screams. Mary gets up and runs across the courtyard, her sisters right behind her.

I gaze after those children, and I'm trying to reconcile the mischievous troublemaker my aunts describe and the quiet, teased girl my mother proclaims herself to have been. I've heard different versions of the same story throughout my childhood.

Momma's childhood stories spilled from her during her sad days when she couldn't distinguish between the past and the present. She shared her stories with her young daughter in a voice flat with pain, the dark browns, navies, and greys of her memories washing over me. Her days at The Gardens were those of need and unhappiness, the struggle of a single parent household with five children and a paycheck that rarely made it to the end of the month. Momma walked four miles home from Booker T. Washington High School, shoulders hunched, eyes lowered. She helped her sisters clean the house and helped hide her youngest sister, Vanessa, since the caseworker thought there were only four children in the home. One child too many, and the benefits needed for the family to eat would be cut off. Momma recalled poverty so intimate that she never truly thought she could divorce from it, a time when toothbrushes were a luxury, getting sick was forbidden, and the crunchy peanut butter from the government was a delicacy. She rarely went outside to play, fearful of the rough boys and girls that prowled from rival projects, anxious to beat and scar.

Fear

As a child, she felt something cold on the back of her neck while lying in bed next to Alma Jean, her sister's warmth failing to prevent a shiver from dancing down her spine. The children kept playing around and Madea kept shouting for them to go to bed. Finally, she sounded like she meant it, so everyone settled down to go to sleep. As soon as Mary dozed off, she heard a chain rattle, then an ultra smooth hand rubbed the back of her neck. She tried to move her leg to nudge Jean, but she couldn't move. She heard pages turning. She always thought of those pages as the pages of the Bible. The next day she asked everyone in the house if they did it, and everyone denied it. She eventually got on Madea's nerves because she asked so much. To this day, no one admitted it. The memory still creeps her out.

One time she went upstairs. She ran up the stairs as fast as she could to get to the bathroom. She had to pee bad. She sat on the toilet and she heard a voice. "Mary..." It was a familiar voice. She shot off the toilet, peeing all over herself, and ran down stairs. The voice was otherworldly. Ever since she's been afraid of the dark. She checks the doors and makes sure they're locked. A constant fear is someone breaking into the home and murdering everyone. She wonders years later if the rattling chain signaled the devil.

The Gardens

I've never visited LeMoyne Gardens projects, at least not in reality, but through Momma's and Daddy's stories, I've walked through the barren courtyards and nodded to the mothers who sat on the porches and gossiped, their voices rising and falling, their eyes ever watchful for caseworkers.

Through my father I strutted around The Gardens with his three brothers forming basketball, football, and baseball games within the courtyards whose grass was replanted every year, but was stomped out by the running feet of boisterous children. Afternoons and evenings found the projects alive; children scurried, climbed and shouted their way into the evenings until the streetlights came on. Strong and fearless, he ran the four miles home from school, daring his brothers to beat him to the front door. The fastest of all brothers, no one could catch him in touch football, his feet skimming the earth.

Daddy never knew hunger; his father's name may have been well known to a few widowers and loose women, but he always took care of home. Saturday morning breakfast included warm rice with sugar and butter, homemade biscuits, sausage, bacon, eggs, and sometimes cucumber salad. A housewife, Momma always made sure food was abundant, the table was always set, and guests were always welcomed.

Whenever Daddy talked about The Gardens, he always did so with a smile, his voice wistful. His memories, vivid reds, oranges, and yellows, washed over me and created a yearning for the community, for the camaraderie of The Gardens. The Gardens was a festival, a constant celebration of friendship and people working together to succeed.

For Momma, The Gardens represented extreme lack and debilitating isolation. Her recovery from living in such an environment took decades. My father loved his childhood and remembers The Gardens as a community, a place where children and adults made it through the world because they leaned on one another and knew that they were not going through the struggles of living alone.

The LeMoyne Gardens are no longer standing, that 824 unit that housed both despair and hope, crime and opportunities, yet I visit often.

A Different Life

Lula B., Hattie's mother and Momma's grandmother, sent her the bus ticket. Momma took the two hour bus ride from Memphis to Mississippi Valley State in Itta Bena, Mississippi. Ella Lee, her aunt, picked Momma up from the bus station, and took her home. Momma attended classes the next day. She didn't know what the hell she was doing, or why she was there. Momma went back to Ella Lee's after school and decided college wasn't for her. Maybe it was too far from home, or too far from a city. Maybe she remembered the teasing and the failure of her high school career and figured it would be more of the same. Whatever the reason, Momma called a cab, scared to death that Ella Lee was going to come home. The cab took her to the bus station. I imagine Momma sitting alone in the bus station, looking anxiously up the road, first to the right, than to the left, waiting for Ella Lee's car to appear. She's rocking back and fourth on the bench just outside the station, clutching her bag to her knees. Momma left without leaving a note or saying goodbye. Momma and Ella Lee never talked again. Lula B. said Ella Lee had never done nothing for nobody, but she was going out of her way for her. Momma doesn't know why Ella Lee went out of her way.

“Cosmetology classes saved me,” Momma said. I don't remember what household task she worked on, perhaps folding clothes, but Momma talked more freely when her hands were engaged in a mundane household task. “I took Spanish with your Aunt Jean. I thought it would be an easy class, that I could copy from Jean, but she made it clear that wasn't gonna happen,” Momma said. One day, Momma saw a sign

advertising cosmetology classes and eight more students were needed to fill the class. *I can do that*, Momma thought. She was always changing her hair, imitating the hairstyles she saw in high fashion magazines. Momma dropped out of Spanish and enrolled in cosmetology during her tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade years. She took and passed her exam her senior year. "I was a shampoo girl before I did nails," Momma said. Cosmetology is all she's ever known.

Marrying Momma

I asked Daddy why he married Momma. "She was different," he said, shrugging his shoulders, never taking his eyes from the television.

There is a picture of Momma in Germany. She's sitting on the floor, a black welcome mat between her spread legs, a small campfire growing beneath her hands. Her head is bent forward, hair falling into her face. You can not see her eyes, but you know they are focused on the fire. In that photograph I can see why a man accustomed to turning heads when he walked into a room would be drawn to a woman who was unafraid of getting burned.

Ride to Nuremberg

I see myself in the ambulance with her. She's crying, screaming for Daddy as the ambulance races to the hospital, a two hour drive from the army base. She's hemorrhaging the entire way. In my mind's eye, I'm holding her hand and whispering in her ear, "It's going to be alright. You will have two daughters. I will be your first born."

She has the baby after much pushing and swearing, alone in the stark hospital room. The baby is so tiny, undeveloped.

"I thought you told me she was a girl," Momma says to the nurse.

"She is a girl," the nurse responds, but Momma can't tell. Angela spent only five months in her womb.

Daddy arrives home on *The Rock*, what the cadets call the army base where they are living in Germany. He opens the front door of their home to find a trail of blood leading to the bedroom.

They fly home to Memphis. Momma and Daddy have no money, nothing. The army pay for the airline tickets and the funeral. Daddy is released from the army to take care of Momma. He will return to the Army as a reservist. The jumbo plane stops in Iceland and because I travel back in time, we get out, stretching our legs. Momma's face is worn, pale. Daddy's stoic, his eyes flat. We get home and Wells funeral home has everything taken care of. Angela is already in her tiny casket. Momma doesn't view Angela. She sees the casket through the door and it's enough. Wells bury her. Years later Momma will find her death certificate and remember the exact location of Angela's

coffin. Momma drinks. She yells at Daddy. Drinks some more. She accuses him of not caring enough, of not grieving enough. I am here, but Momma can't hear my voice.

Lullaby

My birth story was a lullaby, given to me to soothe and reassure.

After losing a girl and twin boys, she still had the faith to try for me. Bed rest for six months, she inclined with her feet in the air, a cervical stitch tying her cervix shut. She ate rare meat and can't stand scrambled eggs to this day because Daddy burned them. He probably stood at the stove, fork in his right hand, eggs sticking to the bottom of the cast iron skillet. Did he weep then, where Momma couldn't see? Maybe his tears turned the eggs bitter, his sorrow creating black crust where there should have been yellow.

Momma talked about her checkups, how Dr. Abbott reassured her that this one was going to make it, everything was going to be okay. Momma stood at the entrance of the doctor's office, waiting for Daddy to bring the car around. She cried and cried, tired of the waiting, tired of the bed rest, just wanting me to be born. The doctor warned Momma she may not be at the delivery; Dr. Abbott was going into the hospital for a procedure, but Momma will be okay. Another doctor will deliver her baby. The next morning, while squatting over porcelain, Momma's water broke. Dr. Abbott pulled me from the womb and placed me in Momma's arms.

Momma finally had a baby girl-- a fat, round cheeked girl that passersby couldn't help but pinch and touch when Momma went to the stores. Momma wept, frustrated that so many people wanted to touch her baby. She took me back to the doctor to show her what they had accomplished, what they had brought into the world, but Dr. Abbott died of a heart attack shortly after delivering me. Momma wanted her to meet me. I imagine I wanted to meet her. I've heard my lullaby many times, my birth one of struggle and

sacrifice, but somehow I missed the love that such a struggle demanded. I wondered at the faith, the determination, the ability to push aside the fear and pain of another possible loss to get pregnant again. And again. Momma always told the story in a flat monotone, giving no indication that she understood the sacrifice she went through to have me.

“Why did you want children?” I asked.

“I always knew I was meant to be a mother,” she answered. “I couldn’t see myself without children.”

She wanted me, wanted me desperately. I tried to reconcile that knowledge with the reality of her silences, her constant anger.

Sibling

Momma was round with pregnancy, lying in bed with nothing covering her but the thin sheet on her bed. "I hope Nikki doesn't resent the baby," she told Daddy. I couldn't have been no more than three, but I recall placing my left hand on Momma's belly, reaching for my sister, thinking how happy I was she was coming.

When she was finally born, Momma crept towards the bassinet and watched Erika sleep. Sometimes she shook her, causing the baby to cry to reassure Momma that Erika was alive.

My sister and I were both only children. Three years apart, we were very comfortable playing alone. I played teacher with my stuffed animals lined up on my twin bed, a chalk board positioned in front of them, my right hand on my imaginary hip. My sister played quietly with her Barbies, creating a narrative for them only she knew and understood. Sometimes we played adventure games together, but usually she chose to be rocked by Momma on the living room sofa while I played by myself upstairs. Somehow, even then, I knew Erika belonged to Momma in a way that excluded me.

One night, I leaned towards my sister as she slept and licked her earlobe, her flesh soft, pliant. I chewed softly. She did not stir as I attempted to digest her right ear, perhaps looking for what joined Momma and Erika together in such a tight bond.

Erika is eleven-years-old, dressed in a royal blue dress of lace and silk, her hair divided into long, thick plaits. The collar is high so the lace caresses her cheek every time

she turns her head. Her soft smile reveals a deep dimple in her left cheek, one reserved for close family members.

For me, Erika is always eleven, flashing her closed, dimple smile.

Christmas At Goldsmith's

The memory is hazy, the edges indistinct and blurry, but I see Momma holding my hand in front of the department store window. Before Macy's there was Goldsmith's, "Memphis' Greatest Store." The location downtown sprawled on the corner of Main and Gayoso, before the luxury apartment buildings that stand there now. Every Christmas, the department store windows depicted elaborate winter and holiday scenes, the kind that stopped passersby in their tracks and compelled them to move forward, beaconing them towards the store and the careless joy of long forgotten childhoods.

Momma held my hand as I gazed at the winter white beauty, I'm sure entranced and delighted there could be so much goodness in the world. The windows were like overblown snow globes. There was snow, lots of snow that I itched to touch, light and feathery and not at all cold. There were houses and a railroad and tiny people with painted faces, smiling at the blessing of inhabiting such a home. I looked up at Momma, her head so close to the sky. Momma looked down at me. And I can still feel the warmth of her hand.

Nature

I asked Daddy if people were born with a clean slate or if our environment shaped who we are. Daddy laughed and said I was born independent and willful. He loves to tell the red tricycle story. Two archways connected our kitchen and living room. I rode my tricycle into the kitchen, around the pine table and yellow vinyl chairs, into the living room past Daddy stretched out on the sofa, around the coffee table, and back into the kitchen where Momma cooked dinner.

"Nikki, stop," Daddy said. I continued my journey into the kitchen and back into the living room, crossing in front of the floor model television and blocking Daddy's view.

"Nikki, stop," Daddy said again. I ignored him. The third time Daddy told me to stop, I parked my tricycle near his head and looked at him.

"I piss you off, don't I?" I asked. I was perplexed by the laughter that floated from the kitchen and my father's wide eyes and sudden rise from the sofa.

"Now, you can't say nothing!" Momma said, leaning against the archway closest to us. "She heard it from somebody in this house."

Momma didn't laugh on the first day of school when she parked the car and tried to walk me to my first class. "That's okay, Momma. I can do it," I said as I let go of her hand and walked through the door of the school building without looking back. Momma confessed later that she cried in the car, heartbroken that I didn't need her anymore.

CDC

We didn't attend school in Westwood, our neighborhood, a suburb of Memphis where hardworking, middle-class whites lived before the white flight of the early seventies. When I was born in '74, there were no whites in my neighborhood, just hardworking, barely middle-class blacks earning a living and proudly proclaiming a plot of earth as their own.

Despite my grandmother's disapproval, my parents bought their three bedrooms, one bath home on Lillian Drive in Westwood shortly after my birth. My grandmother, Big Momma, was sure that her daughter-in-law was going to mire her son in debt. Daddy's job as a warehouse worker with the VA Hospital and Momma's job as a manicurist was enough to keep their little family afloat.

There was no one to greet us when we came home on the three days out of the week Momma worked, so we attended a school in my grandmother's neighborhood. Momma listed Granny's address so we could attend the school, and we were forbidden from telling anyone where we really lived, which meant no sleepovers or play dates at our house.

The children from our neighborhood teased us. We were the strange, silent children who didn't go to school with them. One girl on a bicycle sped past our house, the multi-colored ribbons on her handlebars taunted me as I rode my bike along the fence line.

“Why don't you go to our school?” the girl yelled from her seat.

Momma prepped me on how to answer. “Your school doesn’t have classes for the gifted.”

“Classes for the gifted? You mean CDC?” Those were the classes for the slow kids, the ones who couldn’t keep up in school.

“No, the gifted classes. C.L.U.E. Creative Learning in a Unique Environment,” I said.

“She’s in CDC! She’s in CDC!” the girl yelled as she rode away. She joined a group of kids half way down the street and disappeared with them around the corner. I stood at the fence, angry and helpless, speechless at being so misunderstood.

Pussy

“Uh, what’s that smell?” I asked, Momma changing the sheets on the bed she shared with Daddy.

“Oh, I spelt perfume all over the sheets,” she answered, a smile tugging at the sides of her mouth.

Momma wandered into the small bedroom we used as a den, my toys scattered about the floor. “You wanna smell some perfume?” she asked.

I nodded and she placed her fingers underneath my nose. I recoiled from her hand and she laughed.

“That stinks!” I cried.

Even after I learned that Momma slipped her fingers beyond the seams of her panties for her perfume, I still fell for her trick. I leaned forward and sniffed, expecting a floral scent to waft from her fingers.

Hitting

Momma bathed while talking on the phone, her voice strident as she complained to Aunt Danette about Big Momma, Daddy's momma. Daddy paced in front of the locked bathroom door, back and forth, his hand moving from the top of his head to the nap of his neck.

"Go back to your room," he barked when I stepped into the hallway, wanting to see. I stepped back into the doorway of my bedroom and watched Daddy's pacing increase, Momma's voice droning on behind the closed door. Momma had to have known he was there. Didn't she hear his heavy footfalls? But she didn't stop. Daddy stopped his pacing, walked down the three steps and turned right into the kitchen. I heard one of the kitchen drawers open and the clanging of silverware. Daddy emerged from the kitchen with a knife and squatted before the bathroom door.

Many times either I or my sister pulled the bathroom door closed without unlocking it, and Daddy had to come to the rescue and pick the lock. This time, the lock gave beneath his hands as easily as it had numerous times in the past. Daddy opened the door, dropped the knife and rushed into the bathroom.

"Dee!" Momma cried Daddy's name. I ran to the bathroom door. Momma still clutched the phone with her right hand, soapy water spilling onto the bathroom floor and soaking the bath mat. Daddy grabbed Momma by her wrists and yelled over his right shoulder, "Go back to your room!" I don't know if I made a sound, but he knew I stood there, watching. He raised his right hand, and I ran back to my room, but not before I heard what sounded like a slap ringing from Momma's flesh.

Understanding

Momma is screaming. Erika and I are crying in our room. We are holding hands, sitting on the edge of my twin bed, both still dressed in long nightgowns. Daddy's voice is gentle. Momma's screams are threatening to engulf his crooning, but Daddy's audible as he attempts to calm her down. "Stay here," I whisper to my sister as I creep from our bedroom to Momma and Daddy's doorway. Momma is reaching for the top shelf of the closet. I'm not supposed to know this, but that's where Daddy keeps his pistol. His shotgun is propped in a corner of the closet where I sometimes keep it company during hide-n-seek. Daddy is standing in front of her, trying to block her.

"Stop, B. Stop! You're scaring the girls," Daddy says. He places her on the side of the bed and he kneels before her. Momma's hair falls in her face. I can't see the tears, but I hear her sobs, and I watch her shoulders rise and fall beneath her mass of hair.

I'm six.

You Saw Me

She walks out of the front door and I follow, a chipper, talkative six-year-old intent on telling Momma a story, maybe something about school. She gazes at her azaleas, brilliant pinks and mauves, and walks under the carport, into the backyard, and back into the house through the back door. I'm close on her heels, still talking, animated by the story I have to tell. I don't know Momma isn't listening. I think she's just as riveted as I am by my tale. She wanders through the kitchen, listlessly rearranging skillets laying on the stove, pushing a yellow vinyl chair underneath the kitchen table. She walks back into the living room and out the front door. I follow. She abruptly turns, strolls through the front door, and slams it shut behind her with me standing on the threshold, locked out.

"You saw me! You saw me!" I shout over and over again, my cheeks wet, my hands balled into fists.

Momma said she couldn't do anything but laugh because I was right, she did see me. Momma laughs every time she tells this story.

Closet

There was a gateway in my closet. Inside my closet, far to the left beneath my wire clothes hangers, school khakis and starched, button down shirts, was a child size door. Or at least that is what I imagined. I would spend hours searching for a way to open this door and enter the world I knew lay beyond--a world of lush greens, children playing, no rain, and all the chocolate a child could ever eat. Momma may have wondered why all of my toys were cast to the right side of the closet, why there was a clear space with only an old leather satchel that once belonged to Daddy and a blanket tossed onto it. I never told her it was my luggage for my get-a-way, the clothes and special toys I would need for the world that lay beyond the child-sized door. Even then I knew Momma would take it personally, that she would see this act as a condemnation of her parenting, and I should remain quiet about my vigil outside the gateway in my closet.

Momma caught me once. She opened the closet door and saw me sitting in the far right corner, cross-legged as if I was a Buddhist waiting for an awakening. I peered up at her, her head silhouetted by the bedroom light, my eyes squinted from sitting in the closet for so long.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked.

"Playing," I answered, clutching my blanket to my chest.

This is the only specific memory I have of the closet, but the feeling of expectation, the knowledge that something wondrous was near persisted.

Lie

I sprawled on the floor in front of the television, Faye Dunaway screaming, "No . . . more . . . wire . . . hangers!" The actress advanced on the girl, her red lips stark against the pasty white facial mask. Dunaway clutched a wire hanger in her right hand. The girl cowered at the foot of her brother's bed. A beating is eminent. Momma asked, "I don't treat you like that, do I?" She smiled, rocking back and forth on the sofa to a rhythm only she could hear. She only rocked at home where no one outside of the family could see. The constant movement comforted her.

I tilted my head to the right and considered her question. "Sometimes," I answered.

I turned back towards the television, but Momma's silence was different from the silence before. I turned around and Momma stared straight ahead, her arms folded, tears filling her eyes.

"Ah, B, she didn't mean it," Daddy said. He chuckled, but it trailed off, unfinished.

Like Momma

It's Sunday morning and Momma is getting me ready for Sunday school. I'm in one of the yellow vinyl kitchen chairs holding my right ear, praying to God that Momma doesn't burn me with the pressing comb. I flinch every time the hot comb comes too close to my scalp. I wanna perm so I can wear my hair down like the older girls in middle school, but Momma says an eight-year-old has no business with grown folks hair. I want hair like Momma's. Big and fluffy, it looks like one of the clouds that float across the sky. It takes up all the space around her head, all the space in the room.

"Dee, get ready to take Nikki up here to the church! She's gonna be ready in a minute!" Momma says, holding the pressing comb in her right hand.

I'm the only one attending church this morning. Erika, my little sister, sometimes goes to Sunday school with me. Momma's church is Rev. Al Green and Aretha Franklin blaring from the stereo. Sometimes she sings along, closing her eyes and swaying to the music. Daddy never has church even though Pop, his daddy, taught me how to pray. We kneel side by side, the bed step stool bringing me almost to Pop's eye level. We make a church steeple with our hands and we recite together, "Now I lay me down to sleep/I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake/I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Daddy strolls into the kitchen and smiles at me. "So you're going to church again this Sunday, huh?"

I beam and swing my legs back and forth under the chair. "Yep! I like Sunday school." I asked to go to Sunday school and learn about the Lord who will take care of

me if I died in my sleep. Even though Momma and Daddy didn't care to go, they made sure to take me whenever I asked.

"Ouch, Momma!" The pressing comb kisses my ear. Tears well and the smell of burnt hair fills the room.

"Baby, I'm sorry, but you got to keep still."

I try not to complain too much. Momma said her momma, Granny, never had time to press her hair or make her look good for school. She said they were too po' and Granny was too tired to do their hair. Kids made fun of her. All the time. Whenever Momma talks like that, I get this weird feeling in my stomach, like something is too tight and won't let go. I can't imagine my momma as anything but beautiful. If I was eight years old when she was eight years old, I would be her friend and fight those bullies who made fun of her. I would protect her. But that was a long time ago, and all I have is the funny feeling inside of me.

"O.K., go get dressed. And don't go to Big People's church. Your daddy will be out there to pick you up after Sunday school. O.K.?"

"Yes, ma'am."

My prayer today will be that I'll grow up to look just like Momma.

Unrest

Momma started in the kitchen, talking really fast and loud, then she moved outside and paced. I stood at the kitchen window, watching Momma appear from behind the grey Rambler that squatted under our carport, then disappear, only her fluffy hair visible above the roof of the car.

Momma and Daddy fought often, loud voices raised, tidbits of information flung towards each other to hurt and sting. Sometimes listening intently would cause my stomach to ache and my migraines to begin. That's what the doctors called my bad headaches that started right before long division and during fights at home. Mrs. Stalwart, nicer than my strict third grade teacher, had a meeting with my parents and told them about my headaches. Other times Momma and Daddy fought, I gathered the bits of information so I could attempt to piece them all together later.

“What about Johnny!” Daddy yelled during one of their arguments.

“What about Johnny? You know damn well I went to your bed a virgin!”

I wasn't quite sure what a virgin was, but I knew it had something to do with the banging of their bed late at night and the way Momma called my Daddy's name. It sounded nothing like the way she called it during the day. One morning while I ate my cereal and my sister picked at her Cheerios from her high chair, Momma asked, “If your daddy and I got a divorce, who would you want to live me. Me or your Daddy?” I knew this question contained pit falls and traps, so I had to tiptoe and test the ground before treading any further. So I grew accustomed to the arguing, to the loud voices. But the

hitting was different. Daddy was always the provider, the one who fixed broken toys and made the monsters under the bed go away.

The day I stood at the kitchen window and saw Momma pace back and forth under the carport, I heard the front door bang shut. Shortly thereafter I saw Daddy, back rigid, arms held stiffly at his sides. By the time Momma saw him, it was too late. Her fluffy hair disappeared behind the car as she fell to the ground, Daddy's arm raising and falling. I ran from the window to the front door, not sure what to do, but knowing I had to be with Momma. By the time I rounded the corner Daddy was walking towards me, Momma lying on the ground shouting. Later, Granny told me I'm not supposed to stand around when Daddy hit Momma. I was supposed to help Momma. Exactly how to help her daughter, she didn't say, but I considered Daddy's height and strength compared to my own and decided I did all I could do.

Dark Days

Momma laid in bed with the phone pressed to her ear. With the curtains drawn closed, the room was mostly dark. Slivers of light highlighted a table at the foot of the bed, a spot on the dresser, Daddy's crumbled pillow.

"Ungrateful, they are all ungrateful. He doesn't give a damn about all I do around here," Momma said. I heard her sobs through the thin wall that separated our bedrooms. Her unhappiness was too much for me to ignore.

I walked down the hall past her bedroom, down the three stairs to the kitchen. I poured Momma a tall glass of lemonade, careful not to spill anything. Spills made her unhappy. I gingerly held the glass away from my body as I slowly walked to her bedroom. Even though she shared it with Daddy, we always thought of it as her bedroom. I knocked on the door. When there wasn't a response, I opened the door and looked at Momma. Even distressed, her honey complexion and thick hair caused my stomach to clench with longing. Relatives said I looked just like her, but I never saw her reflection when I looked in the mirror. I set the tall glass of lemonade on the table at the foot of her bed.

"No, Nikki too. She's just as ungrateful as he is," I heard before leaving the room. The pain in my stomach changed, became more pronounced. Pain spread through my chest and unshed tears stung my eyes. I wondered what it would be like to bring my open palm across Momma's face, to stop the constant nagging, the constant reminder that I had

fallen short in every way. I imagined taking her by the shoulders and yelling, "I'm not here to constantly make you feel better, to hold you up when you stumble!" Instead, I returned to my room and cried silently.

Red

Erika and I rushed to the bathroom, elbows knocking into one another in the quest to be first. Older and stronger, I darted towards the toilet and managed to pull my pants down before the sweet release of my bladder. Erika danced around me, her left hand cupping her crotch.

“Hurry up, Nikki!” she pleaded.

I laughed, lingering on the seat to watch my sister squirm, then I reached for the toilet paper. Instead of the usual clear or twinge of yellow, scarlet greeted me. Erika stopped moving.

“Red?” she asked, perplexed.

I sat stunned. Then smug. “Nevermind,” I said as I pulled up my pants. I walked downstairs and stood beside Daddy where he lounged on the sofa.

“Can I call Momma?” I asked, suddenly timid and unsure. Erika and I were not encouraged to bother Momma at work.

Daddy didn’t glance from the kung fu action on the television. “Why?” he asked.

“I think I started my period,” I answered. Daddy’s eyes snapped from the television to my face. There was a long moment, an eternity, before he spoke.

“Yeah. You know the number?” he asked.

“Yes, Daddy,” I said.

While I waited for the receptionist to bring Momma to the phone, I watched Daddy move from the sofa to stand in front of the living room window, hands on his hips, gazing out into the driveway. He glanced over his shoulder once at me, perhaps searching

for the little girl he tucked in at night, that image now superimposed by the girl standing before him. His eyes searched, and I wanted to shout, "I'm here!", but I tugged on the phone cord, remaining silent, waiting to hear Momma's voice.

Mob

The students pressed around us. I could no longer see the walls of the gymnasium or the volleyball net. Someone held my arms behind my back while I strained against their grip. Corey, overweight and effeminate, hurled curse words at me while someone, a boy I didn't recognize, held him back from striking my face. The faces of my classmates were contorted into grimaces and half smiles, eagerness shining from their brown and black faces. This would be the first fight of the day, the first thrilling bit of news to share with others during lunch.

Corey often hung out with the girls and often got into spats with us. I tended to avoid arguments altogether and did not participate in the sport of checking or teasing my girlfriends. Never quick or witty with my barbs, I failed miserably the few times I tried. Smile and deflect were my defensive weapons. I don't remember exactly what happened this particular day, but during a volleyball match in gym class Corey said something that made me so mad I retaliated. This wasn't uncommon at Longview Middle, a middle school in South Memphis known then for its gun shootings rather than for the academic prowess of its students. The elementary school I attended was a feeder school for Longview, schools miles away from where I lived. The students who spoke with their fists and had sex on the railroad tracks behind school both fascinated and repelled me.

"What happens to the girls when they leave Alton," Momma asked one day as we drove from the middle school to the elementary school to pick up Erika. "They were so cute when they left Alton."

We became rougher, courser, quick with our eye rolling and tongue clicking.

That day I struck with my right fist. I became one of the fighters, one of the young people to strike out instead of remaining silent.

Substitute Teacher

I asked Momma once what she would have done if she wasn't a manicurist. She paused for a moment.

“Teacher,” she said.

Momma once served as a substitute for my seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Kirby. Mrs. Kirby asked for parent volunteers, and I raised my hand.

“My momma will do it,” I said, not at all sure if she would.

Dressed in red, Momma reigned from the teacher's desk, keeping the students in line with humor and snapping fingers. A boy who rarely gave me the time of day but was smitten with Momma, pointed to a number on the desk calendar.

“What's that?” he asked.

“Your IQ,” she answered. The class laughed and the boy smiled, delighted to have garnered Momma's attention. Proud, I watched the classroom grow brighter under Momma's touch.

Momma tried to go back to school once. She enrolled in a history class because she said she always liked history. Daddy paid for the class and she brought home a thick, brand new history book. She asked me to help her study. I sighed heavily and dragged myself over to where she was sitting, still thinking about the book I was reading when I was interrupted. Momma said, “Never mind,” and left the room. She didn't go back to class after that. I told her I would help her with her homework, but she just shook her head. I wondered if she thought about middle school and high school, the stinging knuckles and taunts ringing in her ears.

Christmas

Uncles and aunts from Daddy's side of the family perch on sofas or stand and sway in the living room, Linda belting the words "Five Golden Rings," until the notes touch then pass through the ceiling of our home. Musicians and singers, their voices and bodies are uninhibited, laughter a little too loud, their bulk or height taking up space in the room. Half empty plates are strewn about, the remnants of pizza bites, fruit salad, and turkey left here and there, discarded wrapping paper is crumbled beneath the tree. The games and toys left for us last night, from Santa according to Erika, wait upstairs. Santa, as he does every Christmas, designates the sofa for me and the love seat for Erika. The furniture is draped with new clothing, games, dolls, and toys--everything we may have casually stated we wanted or admired. Momma is singing with the family, head swaying, lips smiling.

This is the sweet center of happiness.

Weeks before, Momma cleaned the floor boards with bleach, searched cookbooks for appetizers and entrees, divided chores and set Erika and I to our tasks. Momma struggled with the Christmas tree. She started decorating the tree at ten one morning. She stopped only to pick me and Erika up from school and finished the tree around four. She refused to allow the tree to beat her. The Christmas festivities had to be perfect. She complained of backaches, but she continued with the Christmas celebration. She didn't want to disappoint.

After the last guest leaves, Momma spills across the sofa, her face grimacing in pain. As in years past, after the Christmas celebrations have drawn to a close, her eyes

grow dull as the new year approaches. Her voice is tighter, her words sharper. She retires to bed and leaves it only to pee. This year she's diagnosed with shingles. Angry welts appear on her back and she cries, from pain or sadness I'm not sure. Daddy stares into the television set. Erika plays with her Barbies in her room; I listen to Momma's sobs through the bedroom wall.

Other Universes

My mother's customers gave Momma advice, old National Geographic Magazines, and World Book Encyclopedias.

"Yes, Mary, you should let her babysit. Nikki can babysit my girls..."

"Why yes, Mary, you should give her a chance to bring up that conduct grade.

After all, its her first low grade..."

"Here, why don't you take these. We just got a new set and don't need these any more."

Momma manicured the nails of some of the wealthiest women in Memphis--old money.

"Jewish money," she whispered with slightly widened eyes. I imagined bejeweled fingers and fur coats. She described how the women let her take the money out of their purses, their nails wet, fingers fluttering in the air.

I slouched in the living room chair, lower lip stuck out in a pout. *Are you my mother or are they* flitted through my mind when Momma opened her mouth and their advice spilt out.

Erika and I counted her tips, thick rolls of ones and fives Momma piled onto the coffee table. "Momma, you have over one hundred dollars!" I cried, staring at the money. I thought we were rich. I told my sixth grade classmates Momma owned the salon where she rented space.

On Saturdays I sprawled across the living room floor and traveled around the globe through the National Geographics, repelling into an undiscovered cave, scuba

diving among the coral reef, living among people even darker than me. The names of foreign cities tasted sweet; I savored them and the photographs of impossible colors and otherworldly landscapes.

Foreign Body

I watched the runway models on CNN during Fashion Week, all impossibly thin, all impossibly tall, most impossibly white. I stared into the full length mirror in my bedroom at my pudgy belly and thick thighs. Looking at the runway models hurt. I practiced walking around my bedroom, swaying my hips, thrusting my pelvis forward.

Later that evening, I lounged on the love seat reading the latest Sweet Valley High book. Momma and Daddy shared the sofa while Erika sprawled on the floor in front of the television. "Dee, look at your daughter!" Momma cried. "Nikki, stand up!" Every one looked at me. I spent the majority of the summer reading instead of playing outside. The children in my neighborhood suddenly seemed babyish and I no longer cared if anyone came over to our yard to play.

"Look at her hips and thick thighs," Momma said. "The boys are going to be after her!"

I stood, feeling awkward and on display. Daddy glanced at me.

"Sit down, girl," he barked. Relieved, I obeyed.

Those boys Momma mentioned didn't materialize. I stopped eating breakfast. Momma never liked cooking breakfast anyway, so it was easy to go without. I often forgot my lunch money and played jacks with the girls behind the school until the bell rang for the next class. Seventh grade year a male teacher held up a pencil. "Look," he said to the students that cluttered the hallway, " she disappears behind this pencil!" I giggled, elated, until someone started my nickname--giraffe.

Bangs

It's my hair, I rationalized. I can do whatever I want with it.

I sat in the waiting area of the beauty salon, the one on Elvis Presley Blvd. I equated with grown women and flowing, long hair. After months of begging, Momma finally relented and instructed the stylist to permanently straiten out my cottony locks so they stretched to my shoulders and brushed along my collarbone. I was one step closer to beautiful when I felt the weight of my hair swinging back and forth. The girls in class envied me, the boys begin to notice.

Now I wanted to hide my high, wide forehead behind Chinese bangs cut from ear to ear. The hair cut would transform me from frumpy girl to beautiful young woman. Momma didn't approve. "Don't let them cut your hair," she instructed as I followed Daddy out of the front door. I sat with the creamy relaxer mixture on my scalp and hair ignoring the fiery pain spreading, anticipating numerous blisters along my hairline. I was ready with my plan when the beautician called me to the shampoo bowl.

"I think I would look so much better with bangs," I sighed after my shampoo. As the beautician combed my hair out, the teeth of the comb scrapped across a few of the blisters. I flinched. The beautician paused before continuing her combing.

"My forehead is so high. Bangs would hide it."

"Do you want me to cut bangs?" she asked.

I hid a smile and pretended to think it over. "Yeah, I think so," I answered.

The added bangs gave me an air of mystery. Long enough to cover my brows, the bangs accentuated my slanted eyes. I felt leaner, sexy, more grown up.

When Daddy picked me up after my appointment and drove me home, I lingered outside under the carport. Momma came outside when I didn't come in right away. She held a comb in her hand.

"Did they cut your hair?" she asked. I shook my head no. She brought the comb to my hair and combed out my bangs. Once she saw the even cut she brought the comb down on my bare arms. "I told you not to let them cut your hair!" she screamed. I cried, but reasoned there was nothing she could do about it.

The next day she brushed my hair into a high ponytail. No bangs. I didn't wear my hair down for months. The boys stopped noticing.

First Baptist Church

I sing with the choir, pitching my voice low, clapping my hands and enjoying the long white sleeves of the choir robe fanning before me. Momma sits in one of the pews. She announced she was coming to church with me this morning while I slipped on one of the dresses reserved for church. Usually Daddy just dropped me off, but this morning Momma parked and came in. She sits to herself, apart from the other worshippers who share the pew. She keeps her eyes closed during most of the service, swaying back and forth when the choir sings a hymn.

"Your voice is high." Someone nudges me and I pitch my voice even lower. My best friend, Jennifer, is a member of the church and a good influence, or so Momma seems to think. I get to stay over at Jennifer's house and attend church on Sundays. I even got to stay at the church lock-in where I learned how to give myself facials and talked about Jesus. No one knows Momma well, so I keep an eye on her, missing most of the pastor's sermon. Towards the end of the service, the pastor lifts his arm and calls for sinners to give their lives to Christ, to cast their cares upon Him and be unburdened. Momma rises from the pew and stumbles forward, gripping onto the pews as she makes her way down the aisle towards the alter. I stop singing and stare. The pastor envelops her and her face is hidden from me. Hope and fear battle within me. Maybe this will help her. But where will my sanctuary be now?

First Slow Dance

We compared hairstyles and clothing ideas and guessed who was invited. Jennifer didn't share the guest list, but we knew boys were invited to her birthday party. The Friday morning of the party, Momma flat-ironed my hair, slightly curving the ends. I chose a gold, thin sweater that emphasized my curved, high backside and black stirrup pants that elongated my legs.

"Girl, the party ain't 'til tonight!" a girlfriend exclaimed. Girls appraised me with side long glances. Boys found excuses to brush up against me. They *saw* me.

Later that night during dinner, I spilled spaghetti sauce on my sweater. "Well, you can't wear that to the party now," Momma sighed. "And what did you do today? Your hair is all sweated back." Momma braided my hair into one braid down the middle of my head. The white, bulky sweater I wore hid all curves from sight, the white stirrup pants adding bulk to my thighs and calves.

"Why did you change?" a girl asked, her arms crossed, her weight resting on her right foot, hip thrusting outward. I shrugged, and she rolled her eyes and strutted to the tight knot of girls standing on the wall. Even so, I danced. I shook, popped, and snaked my way across Jennifer's living room floor. Even so, during one of the slow songs, a tall, slender boy from class asked me to dance and pressed his pelvis against mine. His hard warmth pressed against me, my panties suddenly moist, our fingers entwined as we rocked and swayed.

Competition

Girls were either pretty or smart. Latina and I chose smart. At first Tiffany competed for greatest number of books read or highest grade on a book report, but when the boys stopped teasing her because of her flat backside and called her house instead, she whispering over the phone under bedcovers so that her momma couldn't hear, she dropped out and it was just Latina and me. Our book reports were large, sprawling affairs of construction paper and wire. Mrs. Gleaton, our eighth grade language arts teacher, bragged on her 'A' students, admonishing me only to read something other than Stephen King.

I visited Latina's church, Mississippi Blvd., and I convinced Momma to let her visit our house. Once. This in no way lessened the competition between us.

"Hey, who is uglier?" the boy asked, pointing towards Latina and me. We sat in our desks, waiting for Mrs. Gleaton to begin the next lesson. I held my breath as a classmate stared at first me, then at Latina, his eyes narrowing and head cocked to the side.

"I say they 'bout the same," the boy said. We both exhaled.

Birthday

The age never mattered, but the way Momma smiled and widened my universe did.

Our family celebrated the entire week of your birthday. The week of your birthday, you shared your favorite meals with the family, your Aunt Danette dropped by with the very toy or doll you've pined for for weeks, and everyone sang "Happy Birthday" while standing around a cake with candles. One year, Daddy gave me a black and white silk blouse. I stood in front of the blouse hanging on the doorknob of the tiny den, afraid to touch the silky material. It was magic the way it flowed from the hanger. I was astonished that Daddy picked out such a garment and cried when I outgrew it.

In the polaroid Erika and I kneel before a chocolate cake. The number of candles is unclear, but chocolate was and still is my favorite, so it could have been my birthday. We are each holding two Cabbage Patch dolls, Tallulah, Camille, Eddie, and Louis, we're wearing matching headbands, hers pink, mine blue, and we're smiling into the camera.

Future

"Well, my customer said if you want to transfer, I should encourage you," Momma said. It was after work, and Momma wasn't ranting about the dishes in the sink or the fact that Daddy hadn't started dinner. She placed an application for transfer on the kitchen table where I sat. "You know you're not going to know anybody, right?"

I knew. But Longview Middle ended in the eighth grade, and I didn't want to continue in the same neighborhood schools where fights and not academics were the focus. My C.L.U.E. teacher emphasized college. College was the ticket to having my own house, my own job.

Momma stood in line at The Board of Education to receive an application for optional transfer. If accepted into Bellevue Junior High, an optional school that focused on challenging, college preparatory classes, I could fill one of the coveted spots in the ninth grade class and then transfer to one of the best high schools in Memphis, Central High. I looked forward to meeting new students and resented the four or five students who were also seeking transfers from Longview. I sought a new beginning.

PART II

Ninth Grade Dance

I once wished her dead.

When I was in the ninth grade, Momma rented a beautiful black and white dress for my ninth grade dance. The black and white lace top was strapless, but when Momma doubted aloud if the dress was appropriate for a fourteen-year-old, the saleswoman added satin strips to the bodice to preserve my modesty. The skirt was a billowing cascade of ruffles that descended to the floor, and for the first time, I felt undeniably beautiful.

The day of the dance Momma was furious, I'm sure about an imagined wrong, and Daddy tiptoed around her to prevent additional outbursts of anger. I was too excited about the dance to be cowered by Momma's anger, and I imagined my classmates' surprise at my newfound beauty. Momma, my sister, and I went to Granny's to get dressed, and Granny, who wasn't one to be generous with her compliments, also agreed that the dress was beautiful.

I kept looking out of the windows, waiting for a carriage, or at the least, a limousine to pull up to the curb in front of Granny's house, because surely on this day when I felt the most beautiful, all of my dreams would come true. Momma asked me to turn around as she fluffed the skirt of the dress, attempting to make it look fuller, and in my eyes, more princess like. We were waiting for Daddy to arrive before we left for the school's gymnasium, but he was running late. Once my appearance was pleasing to Momma, I sat near the window and waited.

Eventually, Daddy pulled up to the curb. When he got out, he held in his arms a huge bouquet of red roses with baby's breath clinging to some of the stems.

"Daddy's here!" I cried.

No, he wasn't driving a carriage or a limousine, but roses would be my first gift of flowers ever, a perfect first rite for this night when I was everything I've always wanted to be. I glided onto the porch as Daddy ran up the stairs. When I greeted him, Daddy said a quick hey and ran inside, still carrying the roses. Perplexed, I followed him. Standing in the living room, Momma stood staring at the floor, arms crossed while Daddy apologized to her. The roses, the baby's breath, was for her, not me. An ache thrummed in my chest and spread outward. Thwarted, again, by her. She always had to be the center of attention. Even on this perfect day, the day when all of my dreams were to come true, she had to have Daddy's complete attention and devotion. I rehearsed past slights and wrongs, the pretty bedroom set I pleaded for and Daddy saying that a girl needs nice bedroom furniture, and Momma kissing him full on the mouth and dragging him from the room, saying that I didn't need anything. Momma running to Daddy each and every time I had an attitude with her, gleefully reporting the many ways I failed to live up to her expectations. She was the willful girl determined to get her way whereas I was the one who sighed, rolled my eyes, and whispered to myself that she needed this, that she was angry and tired, and sad all the time, and maybe this will help. She had sex and her anger. I had nothing.

I willed her heart to stop.

Boyfriend?

We met under the stairwell near the side entrance to the school. His father was white, mother black. Throughout high school he claimed white as his race and declared his right to choose. I silently disagreed and pitied him. No matter what he chose for himself, the world would look at his bushy black brows, thick black hair, and slightly tanned skin and think *black*. Attracted to his defiance and his 5'10 bulky frame, I met with him often, allowing him to explore beyond the elastic of my panties and enduring his searching, thick tongue. Beyond the stairwell, we did not meet at my locker or sit together in the cafeteria. But in the stairwell, he saw me.

"Ooh look! They courtn'," the woman exclaimed. We didn't hear her and her companion open the door to the stairwell. They peered around the corner, two middle aged women who may have worked in the office as secretaries, their heads cocked to the side, their eyes peering into the darkness. They must have heard my imitation of the moans I heard on *Cinemax After Dark*, the obligatory sounds of feminine pleasure.

I slid behind his bulk, trying to shield myself from their stares. "Come on," one of the women finally said after an eternity. When the door banged shut behind them, he took off around the corner and up the stairs.

"Wait, which way did they go!" I yelled after his retreating frame.

"That way!" he pointed towards the door and fled.

I wanted to know which way, left or right, did they go once they went through the door, but he had no way of knowing that. I cracked open the door and peered out. No one. I eased through the door way and towards the front of the school. I sat on the steps of the

school watching the cars zip by. Two hours after the last school bell, the cars no longer crept cautiously down the school road. I waited for someone to remember to pick me up from school, my books stacked neatly beside me.

My Own Dark Days

I sit at the table in front of the room to the right of the science teacher's desk. An imagined spotlight illuminates the desk and its occupant, showing every flaw and weakness. I'm in class after a week's absence. The doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me, so after the fatigue, the listlessness, the migraines and the constipation, Momma shrugged her shoulders and sent me to school.

"Where is your science project?" the teacher asks. I shrug without lifting my eyes from the desk. At Longview, the students were never expected to complete science projects. I couldn't concentrate on the lessons at Bellevue. The world grew hazy, undefined. Assigned books went unread, homework uncompleted. My pre-algebra teacher, absent three days out of every week, neglects to leave work for the substitute. I never grasp the meaning behind the hieroglyphics, yet I receive a passing grade at the end of the year.

I crouch in my desk, not speaking, terrified of the teacher addressing me. She doesn't, and I dart out of class the minute the bell rings.

In English, I marvel at a classmate, Mikki, who sleeps during class yet always answers the teacher's questions correctly and earns straight 'A's'. The teacher looks at me. "We've received word on the writing contest at Central High. Lonette, you placed first for the ninth grade submissions."

The migraines and body aches occur less frequently. My transfer to Central High is approved.

Holding My Breath

I inhale, my chest rising, nostrils flaring, as the city bus pulls up to the curb, hissing and spewing smoke. I wait in line with other Central High students to climb onto the bus and drop my change into the box. "Hey, you should be a model," the bus driver says with a wink. I smile and find a window seat towards the back doors, my black dress billowing behind me. I've taken to wearing all black and asked the hair dresser to dye my hair a black the sun turns blue. I cradle my books to my chest and watch the streets of downtown Memphis roll by.

Earlier during one of my afternoon classes the intercom crackled my name and asked me to stop by the office before leaving school. "Your mom left a message for you to take the bus today," the secretary intoned while handing me the message. I sighed. A message meant Momma wasn't having a good day. She would probably pick up Erika, who attended middle school across town, but she wasn't up to picking up her eldest.

Downtown I step from the bus into court square to wait for my transfer. I think about the lunch money I saved by not eating in the cafeteria. I could slip into one of the joints off the court for a cheeseburger, but I decide to wait on a bench and watch the pigeons pillage bread crumbs from the sidewalk. I exhale. Twenty minutes later, my bus arrives. I inhale and climb aboard. I again search for a seat towards the back near the rear doors. It will be a long ride, almost to the end of the line. I sit near a window and feign reading. I'm really dreaming of alternative universes. Fictional characters. Chinese dragons and worm holes. The book is to keep interested men at bay.

"Hey, slim," a man in a green army jacket says with a nod upward, what I think of as the universal black man hello. When I don't respond he hurrumphs and shifts his weight in his seat. He's sitting to my left, across the aisle, one seat back. I'm very aware of his presence without looking over my shoulder.

"Fuck you, bitch," he says. The other passengers say nothing. I say nothing. I stare at my book. The bus stops, then continues. People climb aboard and get off. I try to remain still, not attract attention. Eventually the man gets off. He doesn't say anything as he leaves. When the bus pulls away, I look up from my book and out the window. Memphis slides by.

When the bus finally arrives at my stop, I step from the bus and stand in manicured grass on Levi. I exhale. I look both ways and cross the street. Across from Levi and around the corner stretches my street, Lillian. Momma will be waiting. I prepare to inhale.

Necklace

"Hey Daddy, what's this?" I asked, holding up the gold necklace left twisted on the dashboard of his red Chevrolet. It looked like the 14k gold herringbone necklaces that were popular with my middle school classmates. Girls displayed their boyfriends' gold, their leashes prominently draped across delicate collar bones.

"I found it in the parking lot," Daddy said while navigating school traffic. Now a high school student, I wouldn't dare wear the necklace to school. My fashionably dressed peers would be merciless with their teasing if I dared to wear something so out-of-date. I placed it back on the dashboard and forgot about it 'til that afternoon.

Daddy dropped me off at school in the mornings, but Momma picked me up some afternoons. That afternoon, I mentioned the gold necklace and laughed about how outdated it was now. Momma glanced at me in surprise. "So he found the necklace," she said slowly.

"Yeah. He said he found it in the parking lot at work," I said. Momma continued driving, I thought listening to my babble.

The next morning, Erika and I awoke to screaming and shouting. We dressed for school, trying to ignore the rage that swirled around the home, landing haphazardly onto whomever was in its path. Momma thought a woman, maybe a girlfriend of Daddy's, gave him the necklace. And I'm the one who told her about it.

Right before Daddy and I left for school, Momma stood at the top of the stairs and pointed at me. "Well, since you tell her everything, go fuck her!" I stumbled to the car, Daddy following after me.

"Why does Momma hate me?" I asked, tears spilling onto my chenille sweater.

"She doesn't hate you," he answered. He kept his eyes on the road. Nothing else was said.

I thought about the times Daddy hit Momma, and I understood. I understood the built up anger exploding into violence, and I could imagine the sweet release that came with each blow.

Chillicothe

Momma stood at the sink, crying. Daddy usually figured out these things, but now there was just Momma, the clogged sink, and no one to turn to. I watched her shoulders tremble, her sobs quieting into whimpers, and I longed to wrap my arms around her, but I was unsure of her reaction. Would she respond by hugging me, or withdrawing? I leaned against the kitchen archway and watched.

Daddy decided to train in Chillicothe, Ohio, so he could become more eligible for promotions within the V.A. Hospital. He commuted between Chillicothe and Memphis for six months, if not every weekend, every other weekend. I dreaded his move to Ohio, and couldn't imagine living under the same roof as Momma for six months without his protection. We visited Daddy one weekend as a family. We resided in a half-way home for the mentally disabled, Daddy sleeping in a chair in front of the front door so we would feel safe and protected.

Those six months were fraught with arguments, frequent crying spells, and anger. Now I understand that both Momma and Erika felt abandoned, and reacted to their plight in different ways. Momma riled and raged against the world and lashed out at me as a suitable substitute for Daddy. Erika turned inward, refusing to speak to Daddy during his visits, not speaking of him during his absences. I tried to hide. I spent as much time as possible at school or at the main city library. When I was at home, I napped or read--two activities Momma didn't interrupt.

I dared not interrupt her. I slipped from the kitchen and returned to my room, leaving Momma leaning against the kitchen sink.

Senior Year

I laid in the bed Aunt Danette bought for me and listened to the quiet. She left for work hours ago. True to her word, she left and didn't attempt to wake me. "If you're up and standing by the car, I'll take you to school. Otherwise, you're on your own".

Such freedom was heady.

Her husband, whose heavy footfalls pounded throughout the home, left a few hours after she did. I was alone in the house. I stretched, my knuckles touching the cherry wood headboard, my toes peeking from underneath the floral comforter. The absence of fights, of sharp words and disappointing glances loosened the muscles in my back. My migraines lessened, my stomach settled without Pepto-Bismol.

After Chillicothe, Daddy received a promotion and moved the family to Vinton, VA. I stayed in Memphis with Danette, my aunt who settled for me as a consolation prize, the daughter she never had. Daddy agreed to let me stay in Memphis so I could graduate from Central. He sent Danette money for ACT tests and a prom dress. I sent the family my love, but from afar.

I relished the quiet.

When Momma and Daddy packed the car after graduation, I waved at Danette from the car, tears streaming down my face. Danette stood on the porch, arms folded across her chest, her blue tee shirt clinging to her small frame. Later, she asked Momma why I cried.

Transition

I was recommended for AP English Literature. My girlfriends told me ACT and SAT dates. When I scored a 25 the first time I took the ACT, a guidance counselor summoned me into her office and talked about college choices and application deadlines. With application fee waivers and her help, I applied to eleven colleges and universities. The list was heavy with liberal arts colleges, schools that didn't demand early career choices, places that craved African American students to feature in their brochures and were willing to give substantial financial aid packages towards diversity. I was wait listed for a few of my long shots, accepted to quite a few maybes, and I accepted The University of the South's offer of admission.

During minority weekend, a weekend set aside for minority students to explore the predominately white campus, I raised my hand during a Shakespeare lecture, giggled with college girls in an ivy-clad dorm, petitioned for an angel of protection as I rode through the gates of Sewanee. I returned to Memphis elated, a hickey prominent on the left side of my neck. I called Daddy and told him I'd chosen Sewanee over Boston University.

"Sewanee? Where's that?" he asked. Even though Boston U offered more financial aid, my parents agreed to enroll me in Sewanee, I suspect, because the school was in the South.

"If Nikki goes up North, she will never come back," Aunt Danette told Momma.

I was on my way.

Marys, Elizabeths, and Johns

I stumble along the walkway to my 8:00 AM class. I head banged and shouted, dodged spilling beer cups, and rode the Bacchus mobile until 2:00 AM. This morning I sat silent during breakfast, watching students eat and drink coffee after partying on a Thursday night, many of them refilling their cups with the amber liquid while moving herd-like from one fraternity house to another. I did not drink; the taste of beer seemed a punishment and not a reward for working hard during the week, but it was still slow going. Functioning on less than four hours of sleep was yet in my repertoire of skills learned from The University of the South.

Last night, the crowd moved as one. We grinned, gave each other high-fives, sung lyrics in unison. This morning, everyone slides back into anonymity. The blonde girls with wet hair, guys with tousled brown hair peeking from beneath baseball caps, are indistinguishable. As I stumble along the sidewalk, a blonde girl clutching her backpack walks towards me.

"Hi, Nikki," she says, her lips spreading into a smile.

"Hey," I respond, barely audible. I see a brief look of puzzlement flash across her face before we pass one another. It wasn't until I was seated in class when I remembered her name.

Big Boned

"Look, she doesn't have a stomach," the lithe runner says, staring at Michelle's equally lithe figure.

I'm sitting on Michelle's bed in her dorm room. I can see my thick thighs and thick waist reflected back to me in her full length mirror. Michelle smiles and waves her delicate hand as if to wave the compliment and the girl's envy away, but I see she's pleased. My smile stretches my lips without showing teeth.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, understanding that even though Michelle and I were both black girls from the same high school, Michelle's pale skin, blue-grey eyes and runner's build gives her access in Sewanee I do not have. I make an excuse to leave the room, conscious of my thighs rubbing together as I walk.

Vinton

Momma hated Vinton, Virginia.

"That redneck bitch accused me of stealing her purse!" Momma recounted to me when I visited the family during one of my college breaks. "She said she had five hundred dollars in her purse. Hell, it looked like she ain't never seen five hundred dollars in her life! My purse is worth more than that!"

Momma stood in line to use a pay phone. A white woman told a cop she left her purse on top of the pay phone and accused Momma of stealing it. It was already difficult for Momma. In Memphis, the emphasis in salons were on nail health and simple manicures. In Vinton, Momma learned how to apply acrylic nails, locking herself in the bathroom for hours until she perfected her application. The customers did not tip as well, and the Asian shop owners frightened Momma with ghosts stories and hauntings. The purse incident didn't make it any easier.

Erika seemed to adapt a little better to Vinton. She made friends at her predominately white school, friends with names like Carrie, Torie, Josh, and Amy. She no longer called me white girl.

Stranger

Daddy found a large home with a basement to rent in Roanoke. Roanoke, more diverse than Vinton, appeared to be more to Momma's liking. Erika disappeared in Roanoke. The dimpled smile was replaced by dark circles under her sad eyes. She seemed fragile and distant, unreachable.

Sophomore year I failed statistics, endured a boyfriend I didn't know how to break up with, and spent most days in bed. Michelle and I were no longer roommates and I shared a room with Camille, a girl from Georgia with long, silky brown hair she plaited every night and covered with a kerchief. From her I learned the words to "American Pie" by Don McLean, and seriously considered joining her all-white sorority. Unpretentious and kind, Camille never complained about Momma's late night, marathon phone calls. Sometimes sober, Momma talked about Erika, and how she didn't know what to do.

"I hit her," Momma confessed one night while I held the phone to my ear, hoping the covers muffled my voice so Camille could sleep.

"What happened?" I asked. Hanging up the phone never occurred to me.

"I don't know. She was so disrespectful--I hit her in the chest." Momma wept quietly. I glanced at the clock. After midnight. I adjusted the phone and listened to her crying.

Wishes for Erika

I wish I left Sewanee for a week or two to hold your hand, tell you I love you and everything will be alright. I wish you told me about skipping school, the mean girls, the boys and men slipping inside of the home so they can slip inside of you. I wish we talked about birth control and the weight we women are expected to bear. I wish I held you during your morning sickness and faced Momma and Daddy with you. I wish Daddy didn't take on the burden of the decision alone. I wish Momma didn't cry so much and held you more often. I wish I waited for you in the clinic and rode in the backseat with you, cradling your head and whispering reassurances in your ear. I wish I curled up in bed with you, my arm wrapped around your waist, and listened to our sobs invade the quiet that filled that house. I wish I witnessed you grow stronger every day, transfer schools, and start over. I wish Momma and Daddy healed and moved on, letting go of what could have been and what shouldn't have happened, and embracing the possibility of tomorrow. I wish you and I became closer, shared more secrets, entwined our lives like the vines that wrapped around Sewanee's buildings. I wish you knew how much I loved you.

Drama

"I feel like I'm playing a game I don't know the rules to," I said, slouching in a chair in Dan Backlund's office. Dan taught scenic design and lighting design within the theatre department and was sympathetic to the outcast and the other. Attracted to his brilliance and manic-like drive for perfection, I sought his advice and the use of his office when he wasn't around.

"Is there someone you can talk to that can teach you the rules?" he asked.

Disappointed, I sighed. I hoped he could give me the secrets to navigating the campus.

"Well, there's Mr. Benjamin," I began. "but I don't really agree with him. He fosters an us vs. them atmosphere. Anyway, he caters more to the boys than the girls."

"I don't agree with the way he does things either," Dan confessed and he launched into his grievances about Mr. Benjamin, the Director of Minority Affairs. Eric Benjamin's goal was to help students of color transition to the predominately white, predominately wealthy college campus. Sewanee students and staff harbored varying ideas of how Mr. Benjamin was to accomplish his goal.

I glanced around Dan's eclectic office--decorative lights lit the window, Asian masks hung from the ceiling, an overflowing bookcase sagged to the left of his desk. Wardrobe mistress for many of the productions, I was entrusted with keys to workrooms and offices. I used my keys to gain entrance into Dan's office late at night or in the early hours of the morning to read or to listen to his Santana CDs. Here I felt safe, protected. *I can survive college, I thought, if I'm not alone.*

I wondered if Dan suffered from massive lows as well as his creative highs.

Gulf

"So anthropology so far is my favorite class," I gushed. Daddy and I were alone in the living room. He faced the television with the volume turned low. I perched on the sofa next to him. My hands danced around my head, my eyes wide.

"The professor assigned *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and I never thought of literature as a study of humankind! But yea, of course it would be, but I never thought of it that way. Gender equality and sexual liberation are themes that can be studied not only through nonfiction, but through the relationships of the characters. Or cultural anthropology. I had no idea there were so many different branches like linguistic anthropology and--"

"What are you talking about!" Daddy interrupted. He frowned and turned towards me. "Speak English!"

My hands stopped midair, then fluttered to my lap. "I--I like this class because it's about people," I finished, my voice low.

I became mindful of my words, dropping the crispness I'd acquired from Sewanee's classrooms and the academic language I adopted. Full and round, I loosened my tongue and allowed the words to languidly fall from my lips, and watched Daddy heave a sigh of relief whenever I did so.

Association

"The key is to associate, not assimilate," I said loud enough for Daddy to hear. He laughed and slapped his thigh.

"I guess it's worth it to hear you talk about assimilation vs. association," he said. This from the man who bought cowboy boots and went out drinking with his co-workers to country bars. I imagine his dark face beneath a cowboy hat, line dancing with Wrangler clad men, sharing pitchers of beer and listening to the live band.

By junior year I declared English and Theatre as majors, worked late nights at Tiger Bay Pub and in the costume shop for work-study, and threw shot-put and discus for Sewanee's track team. As a member of the Outing Program, I went camping in the Smokey Mountains and biked an eleven-mile trail. I discovered I loved hiking, a physical activity I could endure without injuring myself or others. I danced modern and hip hop in an annual dance recital, acted in plays, fell in love, fell out of love, and quoted Toni Morrison.

What I didn't do was date. There were 1,200 students on campus and approximately 80 minority students, including foreign students. During my freshman and sophomore years I seriously dated one black student, but, except for very few exceptions, white guys didn't date black girls. I couldn't assimilate if I wanted to.

Peace Corps

My boyfriend travelled to Guinea-Bissau to promote world peace and friendship. I navigated the college campus, my own foreign land, as someone other than his girlfriend. I'd forgotten what it was like to be considered a single entity, what it was like to make decisions without first considering his thoughts and needs. Without my demanding expectations.

With him gone I no longer attempted to live up to the girlfriend standard I created and lived by. I no longer behaved as a spokesperson for his ideas, and concentrated on my own.

I blamed him for years for my lost two years of college, for the haze that obscured my life and caused me to stumble. It took years for me to admit to myself that I was the one who chose him, an echo of my mother.

Limited

Only eighty minority students, maybe half young men, maybe half black, you feel the pressure, the limits of selection. Your inner compass no longer reaches for true North. Instead of truth, your yearning is for squeezed thighs, deep soul kisses, fingertips resting in the hollow of your neck, shins sliding upon shins. You ignore promises, lie to girlfriends, grab your moments of pleasure where you can. You forget there is a world beyond this one, and eternity beyond now, and live by touch, taste, and smell, his musk wrapped around you like fog during dawn. We all grope about in the dim light, searching for one another.

Score

"Josh says his friends ask him what's it like to date a black girl," Michelle says. I wonder how he answered. Josh, a football player, and Michelle, a star track and cross country runner, seem an enviable pair. I see Michelle less and less while she spends more time with Josh and his friends, she almost indistinguishable from the throng.

Michelle suddenly appears in Stirling's Coffeehouse where I am Bean Master, a managerial position that includes opening and closing the shop for business. Never a lover of the drink, I nevertheless love the smell of the coffee beans in the morning and love the responsibility entrusted to me.

Michelle approaches the counter where I am serving mocha lattes and espressos. "I am so sorry I haven't been around," she says. She smiles and she radiates happiness. I pout in response.

"Yea, it's been a while. But I forgive you," I say as I push a mocha latte across the counter and wave away her payment. I don't tell her I've been so busy, I hadn't missed her absence. I've accepted my place.

Champagne Taste

Momma liked small bottles of Korbel California Champagne. She bought them by the case and hid them in the garage so Daddy wouldn't see them. The small bottles gave her the illusion she wasn't drinking that much. The fact it was champagne gave her self-medication class, dignity.

Almost

I stood on a table at a cast party. I'm told I slowly peeled off all of my clothing, undulating, my hips snaking to a beat only I could hear. I woke up throughout the night with either Annalise or Patrick sitting by my bed.

"I don't wanna die," I whispered, a trash can near my head.

One of them whispered back, "You're not gonna die. You're gonna be alright." I vowed never to drink so much again. Until the next time.

I stumbled into the gas station searching for the bathroom, squeezing my thighs together to keep the urine at bay. Annalise was behind me giggling. We fell into the bathroom and I rushed for the stall. I managed to yank my black, opaque stockings down before hovering over the toilet seat, door open for anyone to see. After achieving a mostly dressed state, Annalise and I made it back to the car, pressing ourselves into bodies warm with bourbon. I smiled at the guy next to me, his semen still coating my tongue. When drunk, I'm invincible. I'm free. It didn't matter I was the first and only black Theatre major at Sewanee. I belonged.

Graduation

Carillon bells chime and the sun's light is filtered through the trees. It's my turn. I face the rows of professors that line the walkway leading from the chapel. They are clapping and my eyes fill with tears. My right hand clutches my black gown, willing myself not to cry in front of everyone. As I walk, I see to my left Professor Reishman who taught Victorian Prose and Poetry and who once said I was captivating. There is Dan to my right, theatre professor and my guide to Santana. Professor Bonds stands without her husband who was my advisor Freshman year. She has tears in her eyes when we gaze at one another, exchanging bittersweet smiles. He passed during my Junior year and is now buried in Sewanee's cemetery. Dixon Myers, Outreach Coordinator, reaches out to pat my back and visions of children in Kingston where we volunteered together flash through my mind. One by one, the people who have carried me, inspired me, prodded me to graduation, their gowns flowing about them, their smiles mirroring my excitement, usher me into the sunlight, and my heart constricts from the pain of joy mingled with loss.

PART III

Plantation Living

After two and half months in Chatham, New York, as a wardrobe mistress for summer stock, I returned to Sewanee as Assistant Director of Admissions and Minority Coordinator. My friends were gone, enrolled in graduate school, law school, or serving in the Peace Corps. I remained in Sewanee.

My first year, I lived with a roommate, Nicole, a devoted Christian who wore too much make-up, hung the confederate flag in her bedroom, and was scheduled to be the first black woman married in Sewanee's All Saints' Chapel. Intensely jealous of her parents adoration, fiancée, and her God, I stayed in my bedroom whenever she was home. Lost and unmoored, I watched the thirteen-inch screen T.V. which perched on my dresser. I woke up, drove the five minutes to the office, worked eight hours, then drove back home.

The University of the South's 10,000 acres campus included the town of Sewanee, which sported one traffic light, an elementary school, a gas station and a few stores and restaurants. Closer to the center of campus, beautiful homes covered in ivy and constructed of stone sprang fully realized from fertile soul. These homes were owned by professors and professionals. The students lived in gothic style dormitories, most within walking distance to classes, and the blacks lived in a section unvisited by students and their parents. The blacks who lived in Sewanee supported the school as cooks, clerics, housekeepers, and servers. As a student, I sought their blackness like balm, exchanging hellos, witty banter, and the occasional nod. A couple of students dared to break the unspoken rule of fraternizing among social classes and attended their homes and shared

meals. Mr. Benjamin, the Minority Director and Admission Coordinator, was the only black professional. Before me.

"You sent an email in all caps. You know what that means," Eric Benjamin asked from behind his desk. I sat in the seat reserved for students. I feigned ignorance.

"I'm sure you didn't know, but you don't send emails to professionals in that manner."

"I didn't mean any disrespect, Eric..." I began.

"Mr. Benjamin," he corrected. All of my colleagues called him Eric.

I was relegated to an ambiguous, lonely state. I regret adhering to the unspoken rule. I woke up, drove the five minutes it took to get to the office, worked eight hours, then drove back home.

Dublin, Georgia

The young man seemed eager. He leaned forward in his chair and listened to the speech I gave students during their interviews at the University of the South. His eyes grew wide, and he asked questions about student life, parties, and majors. Erika sat next to him, looking back and forth between us, seemingly pleased at bringing us together. A classmate of Erika's, she bragged that her sister worked for the university and offered to arrange a meeting with us. I eagerly agreed. As the minority coordinator, I felt pressured to encourage as many minorities as possible to apply and eventually enroll.

We were nearing the end of our talk when Daddy walked through the front door. He took us in with one glance and strolled into the kitchen where I met him after the prospective student left.

"Don't you ever have another boy in my house," Daddy said. Daddy rarely scolded. A space opened wide in my chest.

"He had questions about Sewanee. All I was doing was telling him about the school. Don't take your anger about Erika on me!" I said, leaving him alone in the kitchen.

Marriage

When Erika met Ben, Momma and Daddy heaved a sigh of relief and figured everything was going to work out. After all, marriage settled women, made them pliable, made them respectable in the eyes of society.

Momma gave her the kitchen table and yellow vinyl chairs from our childhood, Daddy gave her his blessings, and the young couple began their journey towards wedded bliss in Macon, GA.

"The only thing I knew about marriage was that you had sex with only one person," Erika confided after a year of marriage, after Ben's phone calls looking for her, after he tried to break down a door to retrieve his wife from an orgy, after he discovered she ran off with Calvin.

"I don't care what anyone thinks. Calvin and I are on the same level. I don't care what anyone thinks," she repeated.

Erika and Calvin's love, fierce and violent, demanded absolute devotion and loyalty. Any perceived negligence was met with suicide threats and shouting matches. They lived outside of time and conventions, demanding what they needed from one another while neglecting the world.

I both envied and pitied them.

It's Not About You

"You can't have the kittens in the bedroom!" Momma yelled.

"Momma, the litter box won't hurt her none. Leave it alone," I yelled back.

I stood in the kitchen of the small two bedroom apartment in Nashville, Tennessee. My parents moved once again to a new city for Daddy's promotion. After her failed marriage, Erika decided to join them. I was thankful I settled in Sewanee.

Momma's view of family was the man as head of household taking care of all expenses and protecting the family. The roles of wife were cheerleader and confidant. Momma was weary.

"I said no!" Momma said. I hear, *You do not matter. You are nothing.*

Erika bit her lower lip. Always thin, she seemed withered. Empty. Her excitement over my kittens and her request for them to share her room were the first indication that something reached her. I didn't know another way to her. She lived so much harder than me.

"Momma, she just wants the kittens to sleep with her." It was two days before Christmas and I knew not to push it, but Erika looked near tears. My fear of failing Erika was far greater than my fear of Momma's anger.

"What the hell did I say?" she yelled from Erika's bedroom and I followed her voice. I stood before her and my fear, my anger, my helplessness, exploded.

"I hate you! Everything is about you, you always yell about how no one respects you, you don't know the meaning of respect you don't care about anything or anyone but yourself you selfish bitch . . ."

I heard Daddy calling, his voice muted as if it's traveling light years from a distant star, "Come on, it's Christmas! Girls, please stop . . . "

Erika cried and Momma, her mouth open, her eyes wide, frozen, stared at me. Her eyes quickly darted from my left eye to the right. My hands clenched into fists and I walked towards her. I wanted, needed to inflict pain when I heard a clear and calm voice, "It's not about you." Intimate like a whisper but resounding through me, the voice was balm.

I stopped inches from my mother. I frowned and looked around me, searching for the origin of that voice. My hands slowly unfurled and I spun on my right heel and stalked out of Erika's bedroom, down the hall, and out the front door of the small apartment.

Reprisal

The voice led to God and the Episcopal church. I bent my knees in worship, searching for the reason why I bore the burden of Momma's unhappiness. The routines of the service and the dark coolness of the small chapel reserved for daily worship comforted me. For a month, I attended service, went to work, went home, and did not contact my mother.

"Call Momma," Erika pleaded in a phone call after the thirtieth day. "She misses you."

"I regret nothing. I refuse to apologize for anything I said," she began, and I realized that warmth and an apology was not forthcoming. I hung up the phone in tears, leaving work in the middle of the day because I couldn't think about applications and interviews when I could feel the heat of my mother's rage from one hundred miles away.

Months later, after Momma's threatening and belittling phone calls, after she shredded my Christmas gifts and pushed them down the garbage disposal, when I asked Erika about the voice, she said she never heard anything besides my screaming and Daddy's pleading.

Gifts

The moments after a brief spring shower, verdant greens, the smell of damp earth, the air heavy and moist, lull me into a mild euphoria where I believe in reconciliation, forgiveness, and new beginnings. Every window is open in my two bedroom apartment and I'm cleaning, scolding my kittens Elizabeth and Jessica whenever they are underfoot. Once and a while I'm beset by the need to clean, and I'm determined to chase every dust bunny from dark corners and put away every dish. While I'm standing at the sink which overlooks my backyard, I see deer grazing on plants a neighbor planted just the week before. I smile to myself as I imagine her reaction to yet another robbery by the local wildlife. I'm not a gardener, so I don't mind the deer coming and going as they please.

This is one of the many reasons why I love Sewanee. I never encountered nature on a grand scale while living in inner city Memphis. One Saturday, Elizabeth, Jessica, and I were staring out the window of their bedroom, Lizzie to my left and Jessica to my right. A brilliant hummingbird flew to our window, its long snout pointing at each of us, curious of the strange beings staring out at it. The kittens and I looked at one another astonished, then looked out the window. It was still there. She hovered and flew off in a streak of reds and blues. I couldn't have been more astonished if an eagle had perched on my windowsill.

I open the front door to take out the trash and before me is a box. No name, no adornment, just a 4 x 6 white box. I set the trash down and pick up the box, looking around to see if I saw anyone leaving the area. No one. I open the box and nestled within folds of newspaper and cotton is a hollowed egg. There's a tiny hole at the top and bottom

and on one side rendered in water color is a mixed bouquet of pink and red hibiscus, purple hydrangeas, and blue wildflowers tied together with a yellow ribbon. On the other side penned in green ink:

Strengthen, O Lord
your servant Nikki with
your holy spirit; empower
her for your service; and
sustain her all the days
of her life. Amen.

April 3, 1999

It was dated two Sundays ago, Easter Sunday, the day I was confirmed in All Saints' Chapel, my parents in attendance. I tuck the egg back into the nest of cotton and close the screen door, my living room swimming before my eyes.

Lost Faith

It was time to go.

Judas I heard every time I attended a college fair, smiled at black students and encouraged them to fill out the information card. *Judas* I heard when I called them. Seduced them. Got the application in. *Judas* I heard when I paid for their plane tickets to campus so they could visit and fall in love the way I did. I emphasized the academic rigor, the high percentage of students accepted into graduate schools, the 1:10 student to teacher ratio. Never did I admit to isolation so complete I stuffed my body to make sure I could be seen. I ate until stuffed, ate until sick, ate until my clothes grew too tight and my strut became a wobble.

It was time to go.

First Year

I never apologized. The newspaper article, tucked into *The Commercial Appeal*, on the third page in the upper left hand column, said I apologized. The principal told me to apologize. But I didn't.

They gave me a literature book, a schedule, and told me to teach. I taught. Believing in the power of personal stories, I introduced the white, brown, and black students to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and a selection from Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Wasn't Enough*.

I wanted to break open their hearts.

Instead, parents complained.

"Are you trying to get fired?" the principal yelled from across his desk, me cringing in my chair.

Racist the local talk show host screamed over the airwaves, denouncing me as a teacher. Students laughed and pointed. Fellow teachers lowered their eyes when I walked by. I slinked from one classroom to another. I considered quitting. Leaving. Once again, I stood on the outside, fingers intertwined in the fence, baffled by how I could be so misconstrued.

The Price

It became a game--how early can I get there? Others began to play. After all, Dr. Toarmina recruited the best teachers from the district for the brand new middle school. I won most days, even beating dawn. My copies already copied, my classroom tided and inviting, I stood at the door waiting for yet another opportunity to prove myself.

I belonged.

Teach four classes, never sit down (lazy teachers sit), eat through lunch, teach an additional two classes, stay after school to grade papers and coach cheerleader/ track/ cross country sponsor Wordsmith/Anime Club then drive to campus for night classes for my education degree and arrive home at 9:00 PM. The next morning, repeat and add essays and papers to write, and of course lesson plans and syllabi. This was the price of belonging, for being a fixture in the community, for the accolades, the awards, the reputation of a good teacher that could reach even the lowest kids.

I gladly paid it.

The Two Years I Taught Gifted (Jewish Curls)

They bounced and shone deep chestnut brown, cinnamon brown, pancake brown, camel brown, caramel brown, bear brown, pretzel brown, cardboard brown, freckle brown, peanut brown, kangaroo brown, root beer brown, chocolate brown, deer brown, mud brown curls and waves that bounced and shone even beneath the florescent school lights, curls possessed by boys and girls on top of high IQs and lofty aspirations, curls grazing upon the pages of textbooks and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, pencils entwined in curls and resting sedately at synagogues and bar mitzvahs and cascading across shoulders bent toward purpose, rigid with determination. I longed for my coils to mingle. I considered their God, attended their ceremonies, imagined myself a member of their tribe.

Lost

The stench of stale cigarette smoke, spoiled food, and sweat caused the yogurt and orange juice I had for breakfast to come to the top of my throat. I swallowed and walked through the kitchen, setting my bags on the carpeted living room floor. On the drive from Memphis to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where my parents had settled, I listened to an actor read the latest novel by Steven King, hoping that if I got lost in King's fears, I wouldn't have time to get lost in my own.

Daddy came downstairs from the sanctuary he created in the attic. "All he need is a refrigerator and I would never see him," Momma said often when I called to check in. Daddy and I hugged and he said, raising his voice as if Momma wasn't sitting on the sofa less than three feet from him, "Look 'B', Nikki's here." Momma's remaining hair, the hair that hadn't fallen out because of her allergic reaction to nickel in black hair dye, hung in dry tendrils around her face, the silver roots brilliant against the black. Her eyes were opaque screens, hiding the fiery woman who hurled insults as well as compliments at her daughters. She had gained at least thirty pounds, the meds ballooning her tight physique to the corpulent figure dressed in grey pajamas. "Hey, Momma." No response. "Why didn't you tell me she was in the hospital for a week?" I asked Daddy.

Daddy shrugged, staring at the floor. "There was nothing you could do."

"Is she okay?"

"She'll be okay. The doctors say it will take a while for them to find the right cocktail for her. She doesn't respond to much around her, but she'll be okay." Daddy was trained as a nurse in the army reserves. His training combined with his unhurried,

balanced personality made him the perfect caretaker for Momma. *But what about his role as a husband?* I thought. I wondered who was helping Momma to the bathroom.

"Where's Erika?"

"She's at work. She's due to deliver any day now," he said, his voice weighed with concern.

I walked toward Momma and embraced her. I held my breath and tried to remember her scent from childhood, sweet like home-made frosting on a wedding cake. I knew about the fights. Erika spat insults at Momma or spent days locked in her room, refusing to speak. Momma talked about the girl, Angela, and twins she had lost, Sean and Shane, whenever Erika talked about her own pregnancy. Momma's emotional upheavals and Erika's changing hormones created a charged space within their home. A careless comment ignited an explosion. I could have driven to Murfreesboro before now, but I chose to focus on my career as a teacher instead. Four hundred miles away I felt distant from their fights. Relieved and grateful, I reduced my involvement to one phone call a week. Even when Erika called and told me Momma was at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, I didn't drive immediately to Nashville. My first thought was that maybe she would finally find the peace she's been looking for all her life. Looking at her vacant eyes and bloated figure, I was torn. No longer aware of the demons that plagued her, she may be happier, content even. But I missed the controlling hell raising woman I grew up with during my adolescence.

I stroked Momma's hair. "You okay, Momma? You want me to do your hair?" I retrieved a paddle brush from my luggage. I parted Momma's hair straight down the

center with my fingers. Then I sectioned each half and brushed her hair, beginning with the ends and working my way up to her roots. "It's about time for a retouch, isn't it Momma?" I asked.

My Tits

For a while I couldn't stand to look at them, the mounds that once sat proudly on my twenty-something chest, nipples like hershey kisses and bounced under thin tee shirts and strained against exercise bras. The left I cupped whenever I needed soothing, my right hand snaking into the neckline and holding the fullness of my warmth, my bra discarded the moment I walked into the house, releasing my breasts with a sigh. For a while, I averted my eyes from them when I dressed.

I have lumpy breasts, breasts I've inherited from Momma, breasts that cause your fingers to back track and circle, a slight hesitation as you try to figure out if this one is new or an old friend.

"Let's use the analogy of a pizza pie," the doctor intoned when explaining to me why the procedure was necessary.

"We could merely biopsy the lump, but it would be like taking a slice of pizza. That slice may not have any cancer cells, but what about the other slices? It would be best to take the entire lump."

Momma didn't know who I was, and I didn't want to burden Daddy with my need, so I agreed. The sound, the sucking sound from the needle, I described to my counselor, frightened me the most. I gripped the nurse's hand, mine slick, and tried to listen as she whispered encouragements in my left ear. I averted my eyes from the ultrasound, positioned so I could follow the needle sliding into the mass, and instead left. I floated through the ceiling, through the roof, and floated in the great blue of the sky, bobbing like a kite until all was done.

During my six month check-up, another lump was found and yet another guided biopsy was endured. After another six months, another lump was spotted, but this time I slipped under with the help of anesthesia and gladly offered my breast to the knife.

Students carried my books for me. I missed school only when necessary, craving the familiarity of the classroom over the solitude of home. I graded papers, assigned reading, and ignored the dull ache from my mound of flesh.

Dance

My sister started her calls, just like Momma had during my college career and a few years after. The phone rang late at night, and the sobbing, distraught voice bemoaned her life, accused everyone of letting her down, dark confessions and the admittance of weakness. It didn't surprise me when the voice changed over time, and the voice became my sister's voice instead of Momma's.

"I asked Daddy to take me to a dance. He said he would think about it. He got up, got dressed, and took me to the school. He had taken a shower and was all dressed up and smelling good. When he parked the car and started to get out, I said no, no, I meant drop me off, not take me in." Sobbing, then quiet.

I could clearly see Daddy slapping aftershave onto his cheeks, a towel draped around his midsection, determined to take his youngest daughter to a school dance to begin making up for her sense of abandonment when he left for Chillicothe. I can imagine his disappointment, his pain when she preferred to walk into the gymnasium on her own. For months after his return, Erika wouldn't talk to Daddy, refused to acknowledge him in case he chose to leave again.

"I think about that all the time," she said softly, regret heavy in her voice.

I see Daddy sitting on the living room sofa, dressed up for a dance he wasn't invited to, feet propped up on the living room table and slowly moving back and forth. He's waiting, still waiting for his little girl to come back to him.

What Daddy Taught Me

You can stay up at night, create lesson plans, grade papers, update your classroom web site, you can get up early, be the first to school, and greet students with a grin, you can teach student-centered lessons, research contests for young writers to enter, stay after school for clubs, activities, and sports. You can attend classes at night, write papers, complete projects, attend conferences, present at conferences, seek additional certifications, you can create original syllabi, encourage young writers, demand to hear their 'voices', you can fraternize with colleagues, get a drink or two, call them friends, you can exercise too much, forget to eat meals, forget to date and masturbate to keep your urges at bay, forget you have family, forget the outside world, and pour yourself into your job. You can tell yourself it's for your family, it's for your community, it's for your mother who wanted to be a teacher. You tell yourself it's to defy expectations and you're representing all those you share your skin color. You tell yourself anything except it's for your pride.

Expectations

Helen sat at the last table in the back of the library, reading a novel. I caught her gaze reaching over the pages and scanning the ninth graders at the computers, typing and tapping their feet, elbows colliding with ribs, lip glossed smiles reflected into handheld mirrors.

"My people, focus!" I said, pacing the length of the library, touching a shoulder, raising an eyebrow, narrowing my eyes. Slowly, the students settled, their fanatic energy dulling, their fingers creating PowerPoints and works cited pages.

When the end of class bell rang and students poured through the double doors, I followed in their wake, weary and slow. Helen, still seated, leaned towards me as I passed her table.

"You have to teach them how to cite their work," she said with an arched brow, her dirty blonde hair resting on broad shoulders.

I didn't respond, but continued through the double doors, frowning at her assumption.

Circle of Friends from School

"My husband tells me I'm black," Melissa said, grinning, her idea of black being loud talking, ghetto dropping from her thin lips, knowing the latest rap songs or slang. "Me and Amy would pass the black test before you would," she said, grinning, elbowing an equally pale Amy, her eyes cast down, not meeting our gazes.

I imagine telling her no, dear, you are not black. Black is not a garment you can slip on when you walk into Central High like a convenient skin that doesn't quite conceal your large fangs and too wide paws. Black is not an affectation, a device to garner you friendship with real blacks, actual blacks who live and work in chocolate, peanut brittle, and earth colored skin. Black is an endurance, a gift, a way of testing the soul's resilience. Black is more than the sway of hips, the intentional rounding on the endings of our words, as if reluctant to let them fall from our lips, the soulful music, the music of our souls, the way we grow broad and thick to handle the shit of this world. Black is a shared history, an understanding, "we have to work twice as long and twice as hard to get half of what they got". It's a constant reach forward while looking over your shoulder, afraid of sliding backward, not knowing what lies ahead. It's a learned paranoia, a constant inspection of every word, every gesture, a constant refrain of, "Is she racist or just doesn't like me". You, are not black. Black is not yours, and if you keep referring to yourself as black, then we have nothing more to say.

I imagine myself saying these words, imagine the weight falling from me in a tremendous rush, spine elongating, neck lengthening, shoulders easing downward. I imagine myself saying this instead of my lips stretching into an uncertain smile, my eyes casting about for purchase.

Insomnia

It's waking up at 2:30 AM and glancing at the clock. It's *I have to get to sleep, I have school in the morning* and the closing of your eyes until 3:45 AM. You fluff your pillow and stare at the nightstand and will yourself to sleep. It's getting up at 4:00 AM and rearranging your sofa cushions and vacuuming the carpet. It's getting dressed and sitting in the parking lot of the school, waiting for the doors to open.

Or it's lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. *Bills need to get paid there's not enough for groceries maybe I can get a second job that second job can be grocery money I shouldn't have bought the house what made me think I could afford a house on my own what if my students don't excel how will everyone look at me.* You get out of bed and pull on black yoga pants and a black jacket over a tee shirt. You forgo the bra. No one can tell under the jacket anyway. You slide into the passenger seat of your car and turn the music up, allowing the music to pound through you. You pull into the parking lot of the Super Walmart. You don't buy anything, you don't support low wages and the underinsured, but you wander up and down the cereal aisle, marveling at the different kinds that exist. You remember the sweetness of childhood, sugar on lips and milk sweetened with artificial flavoring, and red swirls chased by your spoon.

Isolation

It's becoming comfortable with the silence, with never expressing what you truly feel, becoming two distinct personalities, smiling and laughing when you'd rather cry, imagining that your pain makes you different instead of just a part of the human condition, chuckling at jokes that you don't get, unaware of the rules that everyone else seems to have internalized since birth, shunning social gatherings, lying awake at 3:00 AM tallying the failures, ignoring the imagined and real barbs that are shot your way, saying yes when you really mean no, guilt for expressing real joy, finding value only when working, rehearsing past wrongs and injustices, ignoring your successes, guarding family secrets, fulfilling the needs of loved ones, ignoring your own needs and desires, striving towards perfection, falling miserably short, knowing your pain isn't the pain of homelessness or starvation, seeing the soft bits in those around you and wondering if they can see yours, wondering if they can sense your wanting to break free of your prison, wondering if you do, what then?

§

I resented the space next to me in bed when I hungered for sex and my account yawned wide for cash. Every payday came too late, and the only time I didn't meditate on the absence of money was when I stood before my class and preached rhetorical devices and Emerson with fervor. Always against working a second job, such things were for the truly desperate, I resigned myself to the realization that if I wanted to eat at the end of the month, I needed to find extra work.

After eight hours at school, I worked at Ann Taylor Loft, four to six hour shifts, standing on concrete, folding clothing from the ubiquitous pile in dressing room number three. I never bought clothing but used every check for gas and groceries. Local television replaced the cable bill, the line land was cancelled because why pay two phone bills? The mortgage was never over a month late, but the payment sometimes went through on the thirtieth instead of the fifteenth of the month. An expert in balancing payments and due dates, obligations and debts rotated and twisted about me, creating a large black funnel I could barely see past.

Exercise kept me sane. Focused. The receptionist at the YWCA greeted me every day after school. The elliptical machine tamed me, prevented my tunnels from touching the earth and causing damage. I stepped onto the machine and gripped the handle bars as if gripping the brass altar railing in church. After punching in the time, thirty minutes, I began the rhythmic climbing to nowhere.

I ignored the first pain, the stab that began at my right shoulder and ended in my shoulder blade. I continued moving, no pain no gain right?, until the second flare

widened my eyes, caused my to gasp, and I immediately stopped moving. Slowly, I climbed from the machine and shuffled towards my jacket.

My doctor gave my pain a name--fibromyalgia. I learned that it wasn't normal to place my body under as much physical and emotional stress as I'd endured. A person of extremes, when the doctor ordered me to not exercise as much, I collapsed on the sofa. The funnel touched earth and my careful balance collapsed. Bills went unopened. Phone calls unanswered. The first month I told myself I'll pay later. The second month I said I'd catch up. After the third month I admitted that I declared defeat. For six months I avoided the collectors, finally settling my credit cards for less than I owed. Only then, did I begin to see a clearing.

Her

"I'm invisible," she said often. Not only was she a woman, she was a black woman, a fat black woman who used baby power to prevent chafed thighs when she walked. I loved her roundedness, her extra. If she let me I would have buried my face in her bosom, content, but she didn't crave for her softness to be caressed. She craved me, my submission beneath her touch. My thighs opened willingly for her, my arms spread wide, but she wanted a wife.

I needed a mother.

Cocktail

Gabapentin 600 mg, Risperidone 1 mg, Trazodone 100 mg, Bupropion hclxl 300 mg. The drugs created a bridge for Momma to step onto and travel back to us. She looked at me and saw me, no longer needed help to the bathroom, and watched *Young and the Restless* from the living room sofa. Drugs gave me the opportunity to meet my mother, this woman who is but isn't the woman who raised me.

You're Black?

"I don't see color," Paul said when I asked why he preferred black girls. After months of dating, my question seemed to confuse him.

He unfolded his 6'4 slender frame from my Scion and greeted his friends. He planned for us to attend the Renaissance Faire in Todd Mission, Texas, which claimed to be the "nation's largest renaissance theme park". Him, me, and his friend's family, cozy in an RV for six hours from a small town in Louisiana to Texas.

"Did you tell your friends I'm black?" I asked minutes before we pulled into the drive way.

"No, I didn't," he responded, indignant that I asked such a question. "It shouldn't matter."

"It shouldn't but it does," I said. "I'm staying in these people's house."

"Everything will be fine," he said.

When I slid from the passenger seat, his friend looked momentarily stunned, then baffled. I sighed and stretched my lips into a tight smile.

First Contact

"Tell me about Sewanee," Jeff asked and listened. Really listened. "How did that make you feel?" he asked.

We met through Chemistry.com, a last ditch effort to find love before giving up. I'd decided to travel and collect degrees if marriage wasn't going to be in my future. Six months after breaking up with Paul, I saw a picture of him and his new girlfriend on Facebook. Six months after breaking up with Paul, I was watching TV while eating dinner, alone.

After one month on the dating website, Jeff sent me a message. Later he said the picture of me in a swimsuit caught his eye. In hindsight, maybe a picture of me in a two piece wasn't the best way to solicit serious responses. The guarded messages sent back and forth progressed to intimate phone calls. The phone calls lasted for hours, me curled on my side on the sofa in the dark, and opening, opening and turning to the promised sun in his voice.

First Date

Jeff drove from Oxford, Mississippi, on a Saturday. After my shift at Banana Republic, my manager helped me choose a maroon sweater dress that followed the flare of my hips, a thick gold chain, and knee high-heeled boots. "He's a professor," I squealed to co-workers. "He works for Ole Miss." My first date in six months, my heels slightly wobbled as I strutted to the car. This was my birthday present to myself, a challenge to get out and date without expectations.

Flashes of that night: driving into Old Venice's parking lot and seeing Jeff in the flesh for the first time. *He is not 6'0"*, I thought as I looked for a parking space behind the Italian restaurant. Watching him as he spoke, his well articulated speech devoid of a Southern lilt or Texas twang. *Beard*, I sang, already picturing my cheeks rubbing against the roughness of his. Jeff attempting to walk past me in the dark movie theatre and stumbling, stopping his fall with his left hand on my left knee, my hand around his wrist.

"Hmm, you smell so good," he said, his eyes wide, his face inches from mine.

"What is that?"

"Vanilla," I said, amused that he liked for his women to smell like fresh baked cookies.

Standing in the coffee house looking at the menu, trying to decide what I wanted to order, Jeff slipping behind me, pressing his warmth into mine. *What is he--ooh*, I realize, the left side of my mouth tugging upward. Standing in the parking lot, he clearly not wanting to say goodbye, he retrieves from the trunk of his car Ron Rash's *Serena*. He hands me the book and I smile, how could I not? I am, after all, an English teacher and

lover of books, and matched his lean when he came towards me, his lips seeking mine.

The kiss lasted for only a half a minute, a minute at most, but something unfurled within my stomach.

"Goodnight," we both whispered before driving into the night.

Books

They leaned in precarious piles on the floor by his sofa and teetered on the coffee table in stacks. They were jammed into stuffed bookcases and lay opened on chairs and the sofa. Marion Zimmer Bradley's retelling of the King Arthur legend, *Mists of Avalon*, called from the bottom shelf of an overwhelmed bookcase. Above the front door, a gilded volume of Shakespeare's plays lounged on a shelf along side Keats and Byron. Jeff showed me a published essay, an experimental short story, but it was when he handed me a copy of his dissertation, thick with promise and years of work and patience, I slid my panties down my thighs.

Love Can Be Had

He's eccentric I tell myself. The absent minded professor. An artist. A writer. His wavy hair slightly too long, beard slightly unkept. Hundreds of books in shelves, in stacks on the floor. More books than furniture. I crave his knowledge of Faulkner. His dissertation. His published fiction. I welcome his probing fingers, his tongue. I feel brighter. More artistic. More alive. He visits me and sees my house. Just me. Three bedrooms and I never go upstairs. I apologize for having too much. I'm embarrassed by my small library. I cook, buy groceries. Enjoy feeding him. Enjoy not eating alone. We go to movies. Experience fine dining. Ball games. We make love and laugh, often at the same time. I ask if this is love. I'm told that only I can know. He rents, not owes. But he's a professor applying for tenure track jobs. Dust lingers on the books, mold spores fill the air. He's a bachelor, he doesn't define cleanliness the same way I do. We paint together while drinking gin, my afro appearing beneath his brush, my abstract likeness appearing on the canvas. I'm his muse he says. I'm in love I think. He loves music. Rock and roll, Rolling Stones. He downloads music, dozens of titles at a time. I'm there, but I'm not there. He talks, tells the history of the music, why its so important. But I'm not sure he's talking to me. I listen, then I just watch him, his body curled around his lap top, his eyes darting across the screen. I get dressed and tiptoe out the front door, brow furrowed. You couldn't wait to get out of there he says. You were obsessed I say. I get like that sometimes he says. Obsessed I ask. Yeah, he says and smiles. I smile. Don't all artists I say. We watch Beyonce strut across the screen, her full hips painted with dark denim. He says come here. He ignores my clit, fucks me from behind, grunting with his pleasure. I

rock back and forth, wondering what image plays behind his closed lids, wondering if he remembers he's inside me. He returns to the movie. I remain in bed. He visits me, tells me his therapist thinks he's bipolar. I cry. But I'm relieved. So that's what's going on. It's not him. I leave for a night out with friends. Our dresses are deep veed and curve hugging, our eyes darting around the club. We leave empty. I return to him, straddle him, and claim him. There's nothing out there, is it he asks. No I say. He is mine and I am his. Bipolar can be managed. He can be managed. With my help moods can become stable. Life can be lived. Love can be had.

He Saw Me

I didn't tell Aunt Danette, Momma, or Daddy what I dreamed. To speak my dreams aloud invited puncture, a slow leak that would leave me diminished. Less. I carried the hope close to my chest until I one day mentioned the idea to Jeff.

"Yeah, you should do it. You're talented."

Discouragement, I knew what to do with, but the off-handed way he buoyed my ambition left me confused. "But I would be putting my job in danger. I may have to quit. I have a mortgage. I can't lose my job."

"You want both security and freedom," Jeff began, his words becoming clipped, his teacher voice emerging. "You must choose. You can't have both."

He didn't think going back to school was crazy, a mistake that was sure to lead me to financial ruin. I had a job with benefits when so many were looking for work, health insurance and a pension. I imagine my family telling me not to be foolish, but I dreamed of writing, and after burn out and disillusionment with the city school system, going to school beckoned me.

"Maybe I can have both," I said. "I can work part-time, keep my benefits, and write."

Jeff laughed and shook his head, his blue eyes gazing directly into my own. "You can't have both. You can never have both."

I laughed softly and shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe you're right," I said, but he could tell I was unconvinced.

First Meeting

The summer before Jeff and I became engaged, his mother sat on the bed in her hotel room at The Peabody, her hands folded in her lap.

"I don't know what you expect of me," she sighed. "I came here, Jeffrey, because you asked me to. You have never asked me to meet one of your friends before, so I wanted to come here and meet her. But you are putting me in an impossible position."

Linda looked at me, and I felt a shadow of a headache beginning behind my left eye.

"I never knew who Jeff would end up with. I knew it would have to be someone special because Jeff is such a special man. I know it's hard to get to know someone over a few days, but you seem to be everything Jeff says you are. But Sam, my husband, will never understand this. He was a manager for years for a plant. He's very old fashioned. He just doesn't understand."

Doesn't understand what? Black people? Love? How a good, white boy could possibly love me?

Linda looked at Jeff. "I spoke to your Aunt about this. I needed someone to talk to and I didn't want to talk to your father or your brother and change their thinking. But I needed someone to talk to and your Aunt can't understand why you would make a choice like this after everything you've done for yourself. Sam has done so much for me." I glanced at Jeff. Jeff stared at his mother without speaking, his eyes large and unblinking.

Linda looked at me again. The headache behind my left eye became more insistent and throbbing. I'm surprised my eye didn't twitch with each throb."Sam has a

stepdaughter, Pam. She was always asking for money. It killed me that he was supporting her. He stopped giving her money. For me. How can I go to him with this? I've had such a good time here, but I don't think I could ever return your hospitality. I can't promise you holidays or family gatherings. Jeff, you have put me in an impossible situation. What do you expect of me?"

I attempted to make eye contact with Jeff. His eyes never left Linda. A slow crimson crept from beneath the collar of his shirt and flushed his Adam's apple and disappeared into his beard, only to again appear as splotches on his cheeks. "Mom, I love her. She is the best thing that has happened to me in a long time."

"But you have so much to lose. What about your Aunt?"

"If my family can't accept me and my choices, then the only thing they will lose is my respect," Jeff responded in a low, calm voice.

In the elevator, after the goodbyes, after the door closed and we were alone, we laughed until tears streamed down our faces. "You have so much to lose," I mimicked, my laughter dying by the time the elevator reached the lobby.

Workshop

"Racism isn't that important anymore," she said, her blonde ponytail shaking as her hands stabbed the air. "The story is insulting. Not all older white women are racist."

"Racism is important," he said, his corpulent figure stuffed into his desk, his pale fingers playing with his pen. "Just not as important as other topics."

Relegated to silence and note taking, I sat stunned as my classmates discussed my short story. In the story, a black protagonist meets her white future mother-in-law for the first time. Heavily borrowed from reality, I didn't think for a moment that the events would be debated, analyzed for their veracity, then discarded. This was truth.

"Racism does exist," a brunette rumored to be of Jewish heritage said while leaning over her desk. She pointed towards the blonde with her pen as she spoke. "I see it everyday in Mississippi. Racism exists."

"My grandmother isn't racist," the blonde said, her hand held over her heart as if to ward off such a sin.

I furrowed my brow and looked around the circle of writers. All of them young, all of them white. I took solace in the fact that half of the class defended the events of my story--not the writing, but the very existence of racism. A student with wavy hair and the quiet disposition of a wise sprite leaned forward and caught my eye. She discussed the story's structure, the need to hear more from the protagonist, and I latched onto her critique and her direct gaze, sorry when she finally looked away.

Breath

We walk in tandem, arms swinging in rhythm, footfalls striking the gravel in tempo. Our breaths join the harmony of our movements, in and out, his slightly rugged, mine labored. It's not unlike at night when we first slip into bed, my body curled around his, his back rising and falling with each breath. I slow my breathing and match my inhalation with his, my chest rising, exhalation, his back moving slightly away from my breasts. We continue to follow the path side by side.

There is a 'snoring museum' in Hildesheim, Germany, where there are more than 400 so-called snoring remedies on display. Items include an anti-snoring mask, ear suppositories, pins for the nose and electric shock machines. I imagine a leather mask with straps retraining the mouth, silencing the breath.

The first drawer in the bathroom cabinet contains nasal sprays, throat lozenges, lubricating sprays, and nasal strips. His breath cannot be contained. I no longer ask if he has his Breathe Right strip. Instead, I pray that I fall asleep first.

It's estimated that approximately 30% to 50% of the US population snore at one time or another, some significantly. It gives me small comfort that I'm not laying awake alone, fearful of the sounds that disrupt my sleep.

It's 2:30 AM and his breath fills the room. It is close and warm. I kick the blankets from me and turn onto my back. He's on his side facing me, mouth slightly open, left hand tucked under his head. The sound surprises me still: loud, guttural, coarse, it once entered my nightmares as the voice of a possessed Linda Blair asking me how I was doing. Not well, thank you very much. Once awake, the sound does not allow me to

sleep. I press my right hand onto his cheek. He quiets and his breath becomes a whisper. I remove my hand and wait. A few moments later the noise resumes. The sounds rise and fall, his uvula and soft palate an orchestra, I, the unwilling listener. I shake him.

"Hmm, what? Was I snoring, baby?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Will you please turn around?"

"Okay. I'm sorry."

He turns and faces the opposite direction. I burrow beneath the covers and turn towards the opposite wall. I tense and release my arms, my forehead, my jaw. I wait for sleep to pull my eyelids close. I wait for his next breath.

New research reveals partners of snores aren't just kept awake for two hours a night, but over the average course of a marriage lose an incredible two years of sleep.

Each of us is but a breath, a moment.

We whisper to one another, curled on our sides, our words landing on one another's cheeks, eyebrows, the tops of our lips. We catch up on our day: which students did not turn in work, the long drive from Tupelo, the latest wedding expense. I trace his wiry right eyebrow with my index finger. I kiss his lips. His taste is still on my lips when I'm lying awake at 3:00 AM. My right foot darts out and finds one of his shins. There's a moment of silence. Three heartbeats later the reprieve is over and the maestro is back at work. I imagine twin beds, two master bedrooms, silence. Loneliness. The absence of breath. I sigh, my exhalation matching his.

In 1993, the Guinness Book of Records recorded one snore of 93 decibels-almost two thirds the noise level of a Boeing 747 taking off.

It's 4:30 and I can't go back. There is no rhythm, just jagged bits of sound that pierces my ears and rattles my soul. There's a long stretch of silence. My shoulders sink into the mattress. My brow smooths. I began to drift. Then the sound stabs through the air. I tense and my stomach churns. *I have to sleep I must get to sleep I'm going to be worthless if I don't get enough sleep I'm going to be sick oh no I feel it now he sleeps late every morning but I don't I have to get up it's not fair it's not going to work he has to go this is a deal breaker I'm going to smother him in his sleep.* The frustration carries me further and further away from sleep. I lie there powerless. I broker deals with Morpheus. I fight the urge to cry.

"Did you sleep out here all night?" he asks. He's in his blue pajamas, my favorite. He's barely awake, yawning and looking brand new. I'm curled on the sofa beneath a blanket, a knot forming on my right shoulder blade, my right arm asleep.

"No, I woke up at 6:00 AM and decided to finish up my essay," I lie. Despite the cramped sofa, I didn't float along the surface of sleep, threatening to break the surface into the full day of wakefulness. I sank into the darkness and depths of a peaceful slumber, a hard sleep, for an entire hour. The last time I stayed under that long was over a year ago.

"Oh, baby," he croons, his brows drawing together.

"That's okay. I'm writing about it for class," I say.

"Well...you're welcome?" he says, turning his palms up, shrugging his shoulders. I throw a cushion at his head. He dodges the missile and laughs.

Napoleon Bonaparte--political leader, strategist, snorer. Was believed to have had a nasal blockage. He was known to fall asleep anywhere, including amongst a group of people.

I throw my arm across the bed and find his side empty. I'm relieved, abandoned. I lie still. I hear him, his snores knocking against walls, colliding with furniture, bounding into the bedroom, wrapping around me. I gather them around me and sprawl across the bed, smiling because I'm not alone, smiling because I'm alone in bed.

President Glover Cleveland--second heaviest American president and infamous snorer. Cleveland was thought to have weighed about two hundred and eighty pounds. Lover of beer and good food.

It's morning and I find him curled on the sofa, his blanket pulled over his head. I pat his bottom and whisper in his ear, "Get up and move back to bed."

"Okay," he says, mostly asleep. He climbs from the depths of the sofa, envelops me in a hug, and kisses the side of my neck. I rub his back. Later, I will rub out the sore places and pound out the kinks. I will ask why he spent the night on the sofa. He will avoid answering until I straddle him and force him to look into my eyes.

"I woke up at four this morning and couldn't go back to sleep. Your gentle snores aren't loud, but they're loud enough to keep me awake," he confesses. My eyes widen and I suppress a rueful grin. Perhaps one night we'll be able to sleep in tandem, exhaling in rhythm, creating a musical duet. I pity the listeners of that particular movement.

A 37-year-old Frenchman shattered the world record for holding one's breath under water when he stayed submerged for 11 minutes and 35 seconds. The previous record was 10 minutes and 12 seconds.

Perhaps I can contain my own breath. I'm ten pounds heavier than I was a year ago. I catch myself. I hear the soft snores and my eyes open. Or I feel his hand on my back, gently shaking me.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"That's okay," he whispers.

"I'll turn around so I won't bother you," I say. I turn away from him and wade in the shallow pool of sleep, trying to catch myself. Ladies do not snore.

Queen Victoria--monarch of the United Kingdom and Great Britain and Ireland. Well known to have insomnia. During carriage rides her ladies in waiting were instructed to keep her awake by gently moving around her pillows, as she was known to fall asleep in the middle of the day and snore.

At least I'm in good company.

Marriage means sharing a life, sharing a bed, our separate daily adventures merging in whispers, our holy space. Our breath mingles in the darkness, trying to find our movement, attempting to become a duet. Hopefully, in time, the cacophony will become a symphony.

Wedding

The weekend unfolded with the dream-like haze of a subtitled art film. Cousins shuffled the electric slide, couples slow-danced, uncles laughed with their heads thrown back, right hands cupping the soft bulges of their crotches. I held hands with Jeff as we stood by the Mississippi River, gazing over the river and into our future together.

PART IV

Need

It's the sour sweet smell of unwashed flesh with undertones of musk and mold that signals a mood change.

Aunt Danette is Aromatics Elixir, the scent catapulting me to Saturday afternoons with my sister in Danette's apartment, dancing to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Hall and Oats *H2O* in her empty guest bedroom, the hardwood floor providing the perfect platform for moon walking. Daddy is Kool cigarettes, the smoke curling through the air and settling within my lungs, lulling me into an apathetic stupor, eyes red, nostrils inflamed. I ignored the smoke until I left for college and tried to return. They say you can't go back. Now I have to take several Benadryls just to stay a few hours in my parents' home. My home smells like warmth--jasmine rice cooked the night before, the scented tab placed in the vacuum cleaner to give the living room that just-cleaned smell, the lingering fragrance of gardenias from the scented candle I purchased during the honeymoon. Tonight, I'm alerted to a chemistry change in my husband. His usually inviting, musky scent my nose finds when I bury it within the crook of his neck during an embrace is now . . .

"Is it different bad?" he asks. His eyes are at half-mast, a look that ignites a fierce nurturing instinct. His long, curly hair is disheveled, his clothing rumbled from the night before. He has forgotten to bathe. I say no, but encourage him to bathe for the second time that day. That night, we slip into bed together for our nightly ritual. The nightlight is

left on, and we either lie on our sides facing one another, my left foot caressing his shins, or we cuddle, his head laying on my bosom, my arms wrapped around his shoulders.

“I feel restless and uneasy,” he confesses. I hum and rub between his shoulder blades with my right hand. I massage his scalp with my left, making circles above his right ear and occasionally running my fingers down the length of his graying, light brown waves. We remain that way until he asks if I want to turn out the light.

“Was I snoring?” I ask. I’d fallen asleep without realizing it.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” I say as I turn away to turn off the light on the nightstand.

“That’s okay, baby,” he says. We settle into our corresponding indentations in our thick mattress and fall asleep.

It’s noon the next day and a familiar dread greets me. I’ve completed my teaching duties for the day, so I’m free to go home. My husband is off this week, so he is home, possibly watching the news about the Republican primary (keeping an eye on the misguided and lost) while eating a triple layer peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an applesauce fruit cup, and a bag of chips from the variety pack that he buys every week when we grocery shop together. Instead of going home, I stop by the post office to mail New Year’s cards to our relatives and close friends. I linger in Office Depot and spend thirty minutes selecting a chair for my home office. I drive through the streets of Memphis instead of taking the interstate, careful to obey the speed limit. For a moment I flash back to interminable bus rides from high school to my home on the other side of

town, hoping that my mother would somehow be missing. Perhaps caught in a traffic accident. Pronounced dead at the scene.

I arrive home to a resounding “Hey Baby!” and my husband kisses and embraces me. I hold him tight against me, my left hand entwined within his hair, my need for him rendering me silent for a few beats before answering his greeting.

Never Too Late

He's once again telling me about how everything changed, how his dad leaving his job destroyed the family. I don't stop him, but listen. His voice is calm, steady, his blue eyes searching my face for closure I can't give him. I listen because he needs to tell me again, tell anyone about his father quitting his job and his mom's building resentment after his father stopped providing, about how her kitchen supply business all at once become the provider for the family instead of her mad money. How his father's inability to be the provider destroyed the marriage and left the children first bereft, then angry. His teen years are a blur of failed grades, drugs, and alcohol. His family narrative names him the troublemaker, the hell raiser, the one who needs military school. No one acknowledges the loss of an eleven-year-old boy facing the destruction of his home, the lost of stability, the loss of dreams. Despite it all, he is now a lecturer teaching twentieth century literature to nontraditional students. His family still sees the fuck up. I see a man trying to wade through the disillusionment of childhood to find his own way. So I listen. I listen, I nod, and I wish I can hold that eleven-year-old boy and tell him that everything is going to be okay, that the world isn't always going to be this scary and that one day he will meet a woman who will love him no matter what. I'm thirty years too late, but I hold him anyway and whisper, "I love you."

Bits and Pieces

Almost two weeks after the wedding, Momma calls.

"You love your Momma?" she sings into the phone.

"I love my momma," I respond, smiling to myself. I'm holding the phone with my left hand as I navigate my car through the streets of Memphis with my right.

"I was going through my file cabinet and came across a bunch of stuff. Old report cards, certificates, writing awards."

"Really?" I say. I mull over any evidence that she cares, the memory handled until its frayed and worn. "I didn't know you kept all that stuff."

Because of a week stay in the Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital, drugs, and a distorted memory, conversations are transitory, bits and pieces of memory skipping from one point in time to another. She can't remember the shouting, her suicide attempts, but I can. My anger is still there, even if the woman she once was doesn't exist anymore.

Oughta

There oughta be unconditional love, mommas that take you to Girl Scouts on Saturdays, tell you you're pretty, and organize sleepovers with your friends. There oughta be smiles and kisses and hugs with no reason, understanding nods and help with homework. There oughta be daddies who take you to lunches and playgrounds, listen to your stories about mean girls, and take you fishing because it isn't just for boys. There oughta be memories of scrapped knees, torn clothing, maybe a broken bone or two because of your many adventures and your desire for thrill. There oughta be orange trees in school yards to teach children how sweet life can be. There oughta be girls you've been friends with since childhood, familiar laughter, their hugs imprinted upon your soul, your children growing up with their children. There oughta be telepathic souls, immediate understanding, unrelenting trust. There oughta be soft voices, quiet joys, contentment. There oughta be happy ever afters, and peace within. There oughta be a way to move from the oughtas, from what you know was meant to be, and embrace what's in front of you. There oughta be a guide that let's you know when to let go, when the oughtas are preventing you from living in the here and now. There oughta be a way of letting go of the oughtas.

Knowing

We are no longer in our early twenties with our lives stretched before us. We no longer believe that anything is possible. I know what an episiotomy is and I'm bitchy when I lose an hour of sleep to tend a sick puppy.

"We know too much," Jeff says. We've been married for almost two years and the ache in my breast grows stronger every day. Its a mixture of fear and longing and causes me to squeeze our poodle too tight.

My favorite word is mine.

Jeff and the puppy are allowed in my bathroom only when I am at home. This is the last place I have left. I've permitted a bottle of Scope on my vanity for when I ask him to gargle before coming to bed, but only the bottle reminds me that I no longer belong just to myself.

We schedule sex, promise one another a Sunday afternoon (we're afternoon people) when we can play and take our time. The afternoon come and go. I continue to read, he continues to watch TV. We allow the time to slip by without comment.

Sex has consequences.

I smile at babies and ask more questions about my girlfriends' children. I fantasize about cradling our baby, experiencing what its like to be completely responsible for another soul. The familiar pang in my side is a reminder, and I stop at CVS for Always maxi pads. I glance at the Clearblue Digital Ovulation kit.

Maybe I'll buy one from Amazon.

Tomorrow.

On Motherhood (Interview with Momma March 2012)

I wanted to be a good mother, not like the mother I had. That's the principal you went on. To do better than what your mother did. Then you look back on it and realize she did the best she could. She's preparing dinner for her grandson and husband, opening and closing the microwave, opening and closing cupboards.

"You try to do the things you think your mother should have done. So you take that and you pass it on to your children. Like we didn't have clothes when we was growing up. She couldn't help it, she couldn't help it, it wasn't her fault. So I was determined that my children would wear nice clothes. Cause sometimes I would dress y'all up like y'all was going to Sunday school when you was going to school. We never heard Madea say I love you. We never heard that. I guess she was incapable of saying it. I guess because her family never said it to her. Just mentally and physically you want to treat 'em different than the way you were treated. You want to protect them more than you feel like you were protected. Just provide for them. I got this picture in my mind. I was real active when y'all was little--young. And I was always on the go. And I used to pick you up from school after I picked Erika up, drop you off, then I think you started going to Central and you took the bus and ended up at the library. And I'll come by the library and pick you up. And I was sitting at an angle where--you know, we used to share clothes. You had this long black dress on and you had pearls with it. And I looked up and saw you, and you had your head down in a book, you were standing up looking at a book or

something, and I thought you were the most elegant person I had seen in a long time.

*Cause it was the way you were standing and the way you were looking at that book. I still
picture that now.*

Momma's Good and Bad Days

Hormones are a bitch.

Good days come in pairs. She sleeps a lot, deep sleep she is able to completely surrender to. She feels at peace, like there isn't a care in the world. It's almost like dying and going to heaven. She's content. Nothing's wrong. The pills help a bit, but she's usually down. It is sunny and pretty, but she also looks forward to the rainy days. It's like she's on a high, a good high. She has more energy.

Bad days are isolated days. The mind wanders and she worries about things that have happened, what's going to happen, what didn't happen. She worries about her grandson. If her daughter moves, who is going to tuck him in a night, who is going to ask if he is warm or cold. It's not a good feeling. She does the housework, lie down, go to sleep. For years she wasn't able to sleep during the day. She thought maybe she had an illness or something. But now, she can be reading and all at once a feeling will come over her and she falls asleep. She has no desire to go anywhere. She gets dizzy and sick in Walmart. She has to hold onto the basket to keep from falling. She can't be in crowds. She stops going out because she goes into crowds and fizzles out. She walked through the doors of Burlington one day and she had to turn around and go back home. It was too much, too many people.

Rocking

Jeff's never seen me do it.

I wait until he's teaching at night, the twenty-five minute commute to the University of Mississippi's Desoto campus or the one hour and thirty minute commute to the Tupelo campus assuring me he will never surprise me in the midst of my act. Once when he was running errands, I rocked and stopped when I heard his key in the front door, but the stale air and the scent from the friction of my thighs and curly triangle gave me away. Sometimes I place a towel beneath me so the triangle of wetness is on the towel, preserving my sofa.

The music and the contraption that plays it has changed over the years. When I was nine or ten, Momma had a large stereo I inherited when she upgraded. I took great pleasure in turning the large dial and listening to the music alternate with static as the needle moved back and forth under the glass. Today I have my iPhone and Pandora, hours of music frequently interrupted by annoying commercials. I wear ear buds, sit on the sofa, the back cushion concave, and rock back and forth as I listen to the music and daydream. In my favorite daydreams, I'm a renown engineer with money and power, friends to the stars and avid cocaine connoisseur. Sometimes I'm an amazon warrior, riding and fighting with women during the day, enjoying my nomadic lifestyle, and sleeping with men of my choosing at night. Once I asked Momma what she thought about when she rocked. She once said she daydreamed about being a secretary for a large corporation, but denied it years later when I reminded her of what she said. Momma has always rocked, but I somehow knew it wasn't something you talked about or shared with

others. Momma didn't just rock when she was listening to music though. She rocked all of the time.

Momma never felt like she really belonged. She tried, but she never felt like she was a part of things. She felt great comfort in rocking, and she rocked from the day she was born. She remembers a big, purple chair. And she was little, so her head hit the back of the chair. She left the biggest grease ball on the cushion. Danette told her, "You have got to stop bumping. Cause look at what you've done! You have a grease spot all along this chair!" Momma agreed, but when no one was around, she bumped with her head tilted forward so her head would not touch.

Momma wonders if she rocks because she was held and rocked and she found comfort in that, so when she was bigger she continued to rock on her own. When she came home from school, she listened to Howling Wolf from Nashville, WDIA, and WLOK. She rocked and listened to her favorite singers in the dark. She didn't want to associate with anyone else. Her siblings played outside, but she stayed in the house, rocking back and forth, listening to her favorite music. She couldn't wait until night time came because it got really dark and it would just be her, the darkness, and her music. When someone interrupted her, like her youngest sister Vanessa, she cussed them out, "Get your asses outta here! Get out!"

She's sixty-three and still rocking. It's a great comfort to her. She says she will rock until she conks.

Momma Going Back in Time

If she could go back in time, she would tell herself it won't always be this way. You will find happiness. You will find someone who loves you. Trust in yourself. Have more confidence in yourself. Don't let shame and shyness overcome you. Be more outgoing. Have faith in yourself. Everything she didn't feel then that she knows now.

Birds

“I asked your Daddy years ago why there were no birds. Where did the birds go?”

Daddy shopped around for the best deal for a hearing aid for Momma’s right ear. Health insurance would only cover five hundred dollars, so Momma had to wait while Daddy saved money. The family was tired of shouting at her, and they were getting tired of her shouting throughout the home and blasting the television as high as it would go. Phone calls were frustrating. Talking to Momma was a combination of repeated dialogue with increasing volume, long pauses as I breathed deeply to still my frustration, frequent ‘huhs’ or ‘what’s’ from Momma. Now, equipped with a hearing aid, the world came back to life for her.

“I heard birds today, girl! I asked your Daddy, are those birds? And he said yes!”

My heart constricted, and I longed to wrap my arms around her generous midsection and squeeze, my face obscured by her bosom.

“So, Momma can hear, huh?” I asked Daddy when he picked up the phone. “She said she could hear birds for the first time in years.”

“Yeah,” Daddy said, a slight pause. “To hear her say that makes everything worth it.”

Spooning

It's my favorite time of the day. I've taken my shower, an extended ritual that involves two rotations clockwise towards the shower head and several minutes of the water beating on my neck to alleviate sinus pressure. I've slipped on my favorite cotton pajamas if its winter, nothing if its the spring or summer. I leave the bedside lamp on while he turns off the overhead light. His shadow dances across the wall opposite me, and slips into bed right after he does. He groans, much like I did when I first glided into bed. He shifts comfortably onto his left side, right hand tucked beneath his pillow, knees drawn up and resting against mine.

“Hi,” I whisper. I watch the right side of his lips lift.

“Hi,” he whispers back.

We can't talk about money or anything unpleasant once we're here. This is our time, the whole world disappearing, the needs and demands of others nonexistent. It's a lot like the game my younger sister and I used to play. We pushed our twin beds together, and became shipwrecked, adrift on a huge ocean with no one to help us. Surrounded by our stuffed bears and Barbie dolls, we struggled to survive the savage sea and save the lives of our toys. My sister and I depended only on one another.

This time, it's my husband and I, clinging to one another. I watch the slight flutter of his eyelashes and marvel at the parade of freckles that sprinkle across the bridge of his nose. I pucker my lips and blow. His eyes flutter open. I close mine. “You get so silly at night,” he says, a smile in his voice.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I whisper, dragging my words as if I’d been asleep.

I peek through a half closed lid and see that he has closed his eyes. Again, I blow his eyelashes and quickly close my eyes. He chuckles and turns onto his back, his left arm draped across his eyes. I entwine my fingers in his chest hair, pulling, caressing, twirling the hair around my fingers. I sniff his underarm and pull back when he peeks from under his arm.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I answer.

“Where you sniffing my arm pit?” he asks.

“Nope,” I lie.

“Freak.”

I place my nose closer to his arm pit hair and close my eyes, inhaling the scent of him. I often bury my face in his chest hair and move my face back and forth, searching for his musk. I rub his chest clockwise, careful not to scratch his chin with my nails.

“That feels good,” he groans. I move to his tummy. Buddha is round and protrudent, his best feature. I lean across his tummy and embrace Buddha and kiss his belly button. He laughs and his belly shakes. I feel his belly move slightly up and down, as comforting as a heartbeat.

I stretch, then return to my side of the bed. “Are you ready for me to turn out the light?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

EPILOGUE

He embraced me for two beats longer than usual. He's not a hugging man, not one to show affection, but he held me, then kissed me on the cheek. He drew back and asked, "Are you okay?" I don't remember Daddy ever looking at me so intently, seeing me.

"I'm okay," I whispered back. I didn't tell him I felt like a sarcophagus. But I told my sister who nodded, tightened her lips, and looked briefly away. A recovering sex and cocaine addict, she understood struggle and loss. Nothing shocked her.

Momma called everyday. She talked about the weather, about my nephew, then asked how I was doing. She was kind, gentle, loving. She lost three babies, born too soon, so she knew disappointment and loss. I'm comforted that she experienced greater loss and continued to try for children. My best friend, Michelle, gave birth to a still born at six months. Two months later she was pregnant again. These woman spurred me on.

By the time I have the suction D&C (dilation and curettage), the common outpatient procedure that removes tissue from the endometrium (lining of the uterus), I was eleven weeks pregnant. Little Ziggy stopped growing at six weeks. His heart stopped at seven.

Jeff and I called him Ziggy because for the first four weeks of his life, he was a zygote. I couldn't believe someone so small could cause such havoc in my body. I didn't experience nausea or vomiting, but dizziness greeted me every morning. Amy, my go to friend who recently had two boys, confessed that she was plagued with migraines everyday. I proudly complained of the dizziness, content to allow the world to spin if it meant everything was cooking just right. That's how Amy put it. "When you're

miserable, it means everything is still cooking”. When the doctor told me the news about Ziggy, I texted Amy three words. “No longer cooking”.

Jeff and I chose initially to allow my body to pass Ziggy naturally. The D&C was too similar to an abortion. Ziggy wasn’t medical waste. He was our baby. His ultrasound photo was still on the refrigerator. We first heard his heartbeat on November 4, 2013. The following Monday, November 7, 2013, during our second ultrasound, Jeff and I could still see the tiny form curled on its side, but there was no heartbeat. For the rest of that week and the weeks after, I checked my panties to search for blood, monitored every cramp and ache, waited for my body to acknowledge the embryo was no longer viable. That’s how I started to think of Ziggy. As the nonviable embryo. That’s how I got through the weeks of school, of Christmas planning, of thinking about my thesis. I also retreated into sleep whenever I could, slipping into the darkness away from my swollen breasts and thick thighs.

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving I awoke from a long nap with the decision to have the D&C and to stop the waiting. I relied on my subconscious to make the decision for me while I slept. Almost a month after Jeff and I heard Ziggy’s heartbeat, my uterus was sucked clean.

Late at night, I thought about lying on the operating table, waiting for the general anesthesia to take effect. I remembered waking up and the nurse watching over me, telling me to continue trying, that she had five miscarriages and ended up with four children. I thought about the missing weight in my lower abdomen and the blood staining

the back of my gown. I told Jeff I was much better. I had closure. I reassured him in the hopes I would be comforted.

The writing, the confessing was for my baby, an explanation for future generations so they will know their history, so that they will be able to conquer their futures. Who was I making sense of my life for now?

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Three years ago, I attended a Race and Reconciliation class offered by The Memphis School of Servant Leadership began in 1997 by an ecumenical group of lay and clergy leaders. The school offers eight classes each semester free to the Memphis community. The school's mission is to help Memphians discern their gifts and calls while combatting injustice through Bible Study and the disciplines of silence, prayer, care of the earth and our bodies, community, study stewardship, and the Sabbath. Race and Reconciliation gathered citizens from different races, socio-economic groups, and Memphis neighborhoods to recognize, expose, and dismantle racism.

I don't remember why I ultimately decided to join the ministry, but it may have been because of a family who was associated with the group, a family I greatly respected and admired because they, a father, mother, and four children, all seemed to live their values and ideals. This white family, in racially segregated Memphis, chose to live in Binghampton, a predominately minority area with high crime that's transitioning from home ownership to renter occupied housing. The mother taught at a nearby high school, the sons played soccer with children who lived in the neighborhood, the mother took those same children to school most mornings, the father ministered to their families. This

is a family who ‘got it.’ They lived the values of love, equality, and charity. So perhaps it was because of this family’s involvement that I agreed to show up the first Thursday evening of class, tired after teaching high school English all day. And nervous.

The topic was racism. During my childhood and adolescent, I never considered my race to be my primary identity. I grew up in Memphis where I lived for months without seeing a person of a different race; my youth was shaped by the absence of other races. Since my world was so mono-racial, I was fascinated by other races, esp. the white race. Even though I didn’t know a white person until my high school years, I saw them all over television. They seemed to live fascinating, extravagant lives that were so different from what I experienced. All whites were popular, all whites were smart, all whites were rich. I wanted to know every thing about them. What was life like for them? Were there any major similarities? Any glaring differences? *Sweet Valley High* was my window into their world, a world I believed reflected their reality. I coveted their lives of emotional and financial security.

My family watched *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and before Shari Belafonte joined the show in 1994, the show was overwhelmingly white, leading me to believe that whiteness and wealth were inseparable. I often tested my father’s tolerance with my fascination. Once while seated in front of our large, floor model television, me clad in my thin, cotton, flower print night gown, I turned to Daddy who sat behind me on the plastic covered sofa.

“Daddy, what if I married a white man?”

Daddy was silent for a few beats before he answered, “As long as you love him, I wouldn’t care.”

White people were not threats in my black world, so there was never a need to assert my race as my identity. A few times during my childhood, my parents alluded to ‘they’ as in, “ ‘They’ passed him over again for promotion” or “ ‘They’ leave great tips” at Momma’s job as a manicurist, but my parents never clearly defined who ‘they’ were.

I knew to be associated with whites wasn’t always good. Momma called me ‘white girl’. Sometimes my younger sister would join her and chanted the taunt even when Momma couldn’t hear her. In hindsight, I see that Momma was trying to identify my otherness, my insistence on speaking correct English without an accent, my love of school, my willingness to complete extra credit for an ‘A’. At the time, the taunt stung. It was an insult, a reminder that I wasn’t like the rest of the family, but for the same reason I embraced the name, taking the insult as verification that I was on the road to becoming educated and wealthy like the whites on TV. I didn’t realize until college how isolated and sheltered I was when dealing with race.

I wanted to attend a racially diverse college outside of Memphis. Bored with my all black experience, I wanted the opportunity to meet people of different backgrounds and races. Ironically, I choose Sewanee, one of the whitest campuses in the South. For me, the campus was completely foreign and unlike anything I had ever experienced. During my years at Sewanee, there were never more than eighty minority students enrolled--including foreign students. The 1,200 student body were mostly white, mostly affluent, mostly Episcopalian. I navigated a foreign land whose language and culture was

unknown to me. Everyone was named Elizabeth or John and I had a hard time telling students apart. I was too large, too loud, too black. I had no clue about racism from personal experience. Of course I heard stories from my relatives, I read about slavery from history books, and I listened in on conversations between Momma and Daddy, but I was sheltered from the pain of exclusion and ridicule by strangers because of my race.

“Do you know why blacks are unattractive? Their hair grow up and not down.” I sat very still in the computer lab at Sewanee, silent while the young man of Indian descent who made the remark and his white friend laughed. The Afrocentric hip hop group *Arrested Development* blasted through my earphones, but the black is beautiful sentiments didn’t protect me from the sting of his words.

In Sewanee, I didn’t get to flirt with the cute boys and get asked out on numerous dates. Not quite a member of the community, I was invisible--discounted. My great adventure into the unknown was painful, insightful, and revealing.

Would I change my experiences? I sometimes wonder what life would have been like if I attended an historically black college or Boston University instead. The wounds of my college experiences are now keloids, but that’s only because I have learned the lesson of code switching. With few exceptions, I reserve my ‘blackness’ for my parents, best friends, and husband, people with whom I can be loud, freely use malapropisms and slang, and drop the endings from my words. Out in the world, I lace my blackness into a tight corset, restraining my movements and my voice, careful not to offend or alienate. It wasn’t enough to emulate the whites on tv, as I discovered as a child, but I had to hide myself as well.

In February 2010, my college experience was the only racial experience I could share with the class, but it seemed so trite, so pedestrian. I wasn't attacked by a hose or denied service in a restaurant. What did I really have to contribute? After all, black was not my single or even most important identity. I embraced poet, teacher, friend, daughter, idealist, dreamer, fighter, crier, giver, taker, loner, lover--the list extended. Black didn't stand out any more than my other identities.

I was far more concerned about my mental health, and considered craziness to be the barrier I would have to fight against for the rest of my life.

Bipolar, not blackness, was my obstacle to overcome. My mother, sister, various aunts and cousins, are diagnosed as either bipolar I or II. Bipolar has been described as a mood disorder with incredible highs and depressive lows. This is true of both Bipolar I and II, but a person with Bipolar II don't experience full manic episodes and can seem normal, especially if the person feels happy, has lots of energy and avoids getting into trouble. My mother was diagnosed with Bipolar I and a rapid cyler who experienced at least four full manic episodes that ended in depressions per year. The risk of inheriting Bipolar Disorder: one parent 27%, one sibling 12%, both parents 74%, identical twin 74%. There is no test for diagnosis, just a checklist of symptoms (WHIM 06.05).

There are other mental illnesses such as depression and obsessive compulsive disorder that run through my mother's family tree, but Bipolar Disorder is what kept me awake at night and terrified of my own emotions. Until the age of thirty-five, I waited for the symptoms of the disorder to show. If I cried for no reason, I panicked. I was careful to

monitor my speech and actions for any sign that I was becoming like the women in my family.

When the facilitators of the Race and Reconciliation class announced our next assignment, a racial autobiography, I panicked. Each member of the diverse class was charged with writing about the first time he or she encountered racism. I listened to a few racial autobiographies and despaired. Institutional racism, colored help in the Bopsey twin novels, racial fights under the stadium, I didn't want to be associated with such violence and hatred. I was not a victim. These stories were not our (blacks) only stories. This is when I had an epiphany. What if my racial autobiography was intertwined by another awakening, an acknowledgment of the impact mental illness has had on my family. The class participants were told that our autobiography could take any form, so I choose spoken word:

My history

Black History

isn't just Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington,
Jim Crow South and KKK.

My history

Black (darkness) History is
crying spells
shouting matches
motherfuckers and *fuck yous*
dark spells and
long silences.

My history

(the absence of light)

Five Generations of abuse and madness

Nikki

daughter of Mary

daughter of Hattie B

daughter of Georgia Lee

daughter of Caroline Hays Moore

Georgia

who fought her brothers (who were full of anger and rage)

who fought her father (who was full of lust and rage)

who fought cancer (which was embraced as a savior that delivered her from a life
of turmoil and pain)

Hattie

who beat her children (all 5 of em) because that was all she knew

a cafeteria worker who spent all afternoons and evenings in bed

she didn't have the strength to confront the life she chose/was chosen for her

trapped by her emotions

ensnared by her decisions

enslaved by a society who just saw another nigger staying in her place.

Mary

my mother/momma

(absorption of light)

struggling to blossom under the shadow of abuse

stepped off a bus in Mississippi with a full ride but took one look at the college

in Mississippi

in the middle of nowhere

(remember this was back then)

and got back on the bus
when asked what she would have become she answered English teacher
damn
she was a manicurist serving wealthy Jewish women
who let her dig her payment from the bottom of their purses so they wouldn't
mess up their nails
who was given old National Geographic magazines and World Book
encyclopedias
so that her children would have something.

Frustrated dreams
three premature babies
then me.

Daddy followed a trail of blood from the front door
A neighbor telling him his wife was taken to the hospital
Coffins that small should not exist.

Then me
The answer to so many dreams and frustrated hopes.

You see
This is my history
Black (shame) History
A legacy of Black women finding their way
through darkness
through abuse
through mental illness
through Blackness

then there's me.

I'm shaped by my (race) history

by my momma's *white girl* taunts

by manic shopping sprees

and weeks of silence.

I was shaped by the nameless ever present specter that colored

everything I did, everything I am, everything I was.

Until my 30th birthday

haunted by the fear of becoming like my mother

I searched for signs of erratic behavior

panicked if I cried and couldn't explain why.

Racism?

Just another mental illness

one more thing to fight against

hide from

attempt to understand

during my journey of becoming me.

Who am I?

daughter of Mary, a daughter of abuse, bi-polar, schizophrenia, OCD,

and black.

I am strength, but probably not from the experiences you expect.

I am water

I am secrecy

I am the comfort and tranquility of night.

I am Black

a black woman

and I am sane.

For the first time I acknowledged out loud what I've been told for years to conceal--the toll mental illness has taken on my family. It was also the first time I began to see the affect racism has always had on my life, how my race has dictated my family's economic and social status, but also how race has affected the mental health of my family members, and possibly myself. Did my mother's race and poverty exacerbate her mental issues? Can racism drive you insane?

After the completion of the Race and Reconciliation class, I shared the poem at the community open house and class banquet where participants from all four classes gathered for a potluck dinner and shared their work. I was astounded by the reaction the poem received. After the banquet, numerous people confided in me-- they had an aunt, mother, or cousin who was also mentally ill. The majority of the confessors were black. Is there a connection?

This poem became my urtext, my source for material and my motivation to complete a MFA in the Creative Writing Program at The University of Memphis. I didn't know then that I would focus on Creative Nonfiction--I thought I would hide behind the anonymity of fiction and perhaps write an anthology based on my family history, but I quickly discovered the power of telling my truth after years of concealing it from extended family and friends.

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There are different theories as to what causes mental illness: abnormalities in genes, malfunctioning biochemicals, or life stressors. From years of watching my family attempt to build a life for themselves and struggling myself to create a life of my own, I tend to agree with all three models, finding overlaps in causes and methods to treat Bipolar and other mental illnesses. The fact that so many of my family members and at least three generations of my family have struggled with mental abnormalities suggests there is a genetic component to the disorder. My mother confessed that she knew from my sister's birth that she was different. She didn't recognize the Bipolar Disorder, but she knew my sister was different. I was convinced for years that I had a genetic predisposition for the disorder and thought I was destined for drug cocktails and visits in and out of mental hospitals. My mother is taking a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, Celexa, and feels better than she has in years. Usually used for patients who suffer from depression, Celexa has given her hope and allows her to enjoy daily activities with the family. She also sees a therapist, not as frequently as I would like, but the visits seem to help as well. There were also a number of stressors that occurred in my mother's life, events that may have lead to mental breakdowns because of her inability to respond. The memoir focuses on the numerous stressors my grandmother, my mother, and I encountered which tested our capacity to adapt to stressors in our lives.

This brings to mind the racist individuals and racist institutions and structures that exist in American society. Would racism be considered a trigger or stressor? In addition to the numerous stressors one may endure such as death of a spouse, divorce, pregnancy, job

change, or trouble with in-laws, dealing with racism or facing the racial structures of society can be additionally stressful for African Americans.

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So who am I writing this for? For years I've been telling myself that I'm writing this for future generations, chronicling my journey and my mother's so they will know the roots from which they grow. Now, after the loss of Ziggy, I find that I'm marveling at my capacity for resiliency. I've often marveled at women who suffered the loss of a baby whether it's through miscarriage, stillbirth, or death, and wondered at their capacity to move on and try again. I now understand those woman, because I have suffered a loss yet my world has not crumbled. I am moving forward, finding enjoyment in the middle school students I teach, grieving yet finding joy with my husband, and yes, looking forward to trying for a second pregnancy. I continue on, like so women before me. I write for them, for my mother, but I write for myself.

I know that my experiences are not unique and there are others who have experienced the same. That means our perceptions of the world are in sync, I am not crazy, and we are women who know who we are--regardless if the world is engaged in confusion and craziness.

We are sane.

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