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Baby Fat – A Legacy

(TITLE)

BY

Brandi M. Gard

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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YEAR

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By

Brandi Marie Gard

Dedication

To my mother, who was strong enough, brave enough, and loved me enough to say, *enough is enough*, and kept me from living in a literal hell. Love you to pieces, Mom.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my thesis committee for taking a chance on not only me but my work, in agreeing to work with me on my thesis. Thank you Dr. Daiva Markelis for chairing my committee, and thank you Dr. Robin Murray for taking time out of your schedule to read my work and provide wonderful feedback. Finally, I must give a special thanks to Dr. Olga Abella for not only agreeing to be a reader for my thesis, but for being there for me as I navigated the often confusing maze of procedure and protocol that I had to go through in order to submit my thesis to the graduate school for approval. Dr. Abella went above and beyond for me during the trying and frustrating process of making my thesis not just a graduate capstone project, but a manuscript for a publishable memoir. She has met with me often in order to critique my work, provide valuable feedback, as well as listen to my fears and a fair bit of tears as I worked on this project. I am forever grateful to her, not only for her commitment to me and my work, but also her kindness, her willingness to tell me more than just what I wanted to hear, her dedication, and her unfailing and unwavering support of not only my writing, but me as a person who makes mistakes and fails at times. I truly would have never finished this thesis without Dr. Abella, and I sincerely hope that we can remain colleagues and (dare I say) friends after this.

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humor to make me smile. And lastly, my best friend Jenna Prater, for always, *always*, picking up her phone when things seemed too hopeless for me to continue not only this thesis, but graduate school, in general. She— more so than most— has been a soft place to fall, the logical half of my brain, and the steady and unwavering support I have needed in this process, but also outside of it.

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Critical Introduction for *Baby Fat: A Legacy*

Out of the many agencies that report findings about child sexual abuse—both privately and nationally funded—there is one statistic that is a constant. Ninety percent of children who will be sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday will be abused by someone that they know and are close to (“Darkness to Light”). Further, thirty percent of children who have been sexual abused have been abused by a family member (“Darkness to Light”). Yet in regards to adult survivors disclosing any information about any sexual incest they experienced under the age of eighteen, most never report to authorities nor do they seek help outside of their immediate families—often where the abuser is protected. As of 2014, the rate of children willing to report about the sexual incest that they are experiencing is five percent (Singh et al 243).

These statistics can often be staggering to those who read them. They can lead to outrage and suggestions for changes and legislation to somehow curb the shame and terror felt by children who experience them. But in the end, these statistics remain constants both in nonwestern countries, where they often are easily dismissed, as well as in western countries, such as the United States, where they are just as easily ignored and dismissed, despite frequent and often short-lived outcries for resolution. Numbers often mean little to those who read them, and mean even less when people are not compelled to confront what these numbers mean in regards to the women (and men) they represent.

At the beginning of my master’s program, I very much did not want to write about how my life, the life of my mother, and the lives of nearly all of the women in my family were just numbers to add to these statistics. Frankly, because I never saw us as merely numbers compiled by agencies with good intentions and bad follow-ups—Instead I saw our collective experience as the reason why my family is the way it is, and why I am the way I am. In short, I did not want

my life and the experiences of the women in my family whom I have watched and loved my entire life to be boiled down to percentages. So, I decided instead to attach flesh and blood to the skeletal frame of numbers and bar graphs, which resulted in my manuscript entitled *Baby Fat: A Legacy*. My manuscript is not only a means by which I can finally tell my story of sexual abuse and incest, but also the stories of my mother, my grandmother, and of all the women who have had their lives condensed into bite-sized figures easy to swallow, and easier to forget.

Often, as is the case with women in my family, it is not the abuse which keeps us silent, but those around the abuser who protect and diminished their accountability in abusing us. This practice of protection for the abuser is often seen in cases of sexual abuse, but it can further bleed into any instance of keeping those with power protected and those without it quiet. For the abuser, the silence of those who they have abused is only their second most powerful weapon—the first is the willingness of others to uphold, protect, and value their abusive actions because it is easier and creates less issues for them to have to sort out in the end. At its heart, *Baby Fat: A Legacy* is not only a tribute to myself and my family—all of whom have suffered from sexual violence in some irreversible way—but it is also a piece dedicated to exposing how silence keeps those in power alive and able to keep abusing others. In short, silence has equaled violence for many of us at the edges of society who have typical societal expectations imposed on us. *Baby Fat: A Legacy* is my way of combatting the silence and the silencers that have kept those statistics forgettable and stagnate.

Before writing *Baby Fat*, I read many memoirs written by women of color who have been brave enough to expose the sexual violence and incest that they experienced and that shaped their lives in often harmful ways by perpetuating a sense of shame and filthiness that grows from the seed of that abuse. Maya Angelou's classic memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

Sings, as well as more contemporary pieces, such as Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, helped shape my understanding of violence—both sexual and systematic—against the female body. But these women did not fully convey the experience of the women in my family, the culture that has kept our voices buried. Linda Yuknavich's *The Chronology of Water* provided some insight on the ways in which white women deal with sexual violence and incest, but she didn't quite convey the experience of white women trapped in familial cycles of sexual abuse and incest, the wheels of which are greased by poverty, shame, and the stigma of silence unique to small, rural towns in America. In fact, the only work I could find with a voice similar to mine was that of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, which is marketed as fiction even though Allison has described it as 'semi-autobiographical'.

The reason I struggled to find memoirs written about my experiences is simple: we don't have them. We don't have memoirs like mine, not for the lack of it occurring to us, but because we refuse to talk about our stories of sexual abuse, because of the stigma of shame and of "keeping family business in the family" (Amodeo et al). The stigma of shame and the need to keep familial abuse within a family appears in very few pieces of memoir, but is exposed by Dorothy Allison in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. While the entirety of the novel focuses on poverty and class, most of the novel focuses on the cycles of abuse inflicted on women at the hands of men, and the feelings of shame which keeps women like those in my family (as well as Bone's) silent while either being abused, or knowing of someone being abused.

These common instances of abuse going unreported and unacknowledged can best be surmised by Bone, when she simply states: "[Daddy Glen] never said 'Don't tell your mama.' He never had to say it. I did not know how to tell anyone what I felt, what scared me and shamed

me” (Allison 109). Similarly, the instances of those family members who know of the abuse, yet demand our silence in order to keep up the appearances of a happy family can be seen again when Bone’s mother, Anney, says to Bone after she moves back in with her and her husband, ”’Let’s be careful for a while, Bone. Be real careful, baby,’ she hesitated as if there were something more she would say, but instead gave [Bone’s] shoulders another squeeze and went to change out of her uniform” (Allison 207). At this point in the novel, Bone’s abuse at the hands of her stepfather is well-known by her mother, yet it is at Anney’s suggestion that Bone continues to stay silent later leading to her abuse escalating to horrendous lengths.

While I intended *Baby Fat* to be a tribute to myself, my mother, and all of the women who have experienced sexual violence and incest in silence and shame in the way that I did, I could have never created a narrative worth listening to if I had focused on statistics, race, poverty, or reporting rates. As I’ve mentioned, numbers lack faces and feelings that are tangible to anyone who might be reading them. The sexual abuse I endured at the ages of ten and eleven is more than a statistic. It is an experience with a face: my face.

I felt the easiest way to reach a reader (more specifically, allow them to feel something close to even a fraction of what I and others like me have felt) was to make them feel it by conveying my story in a specific way, from the same perspective used by Claudia Rankine in *Citizen*. Claudia Rankine does not write about child sexual abuse in *Citizen*, but she does write about a topic that can definitely make readers feel uncomfortable: Racial inequality. Rankine writes about her experiences with racism—both systemic, like that displayed by organizations such as police forces and the U.S. military, as well as societal, such as that she encounters from her colleagues. In order for Rankine to enable her readers to gain insight into what for them may be a foreign concept, she had to recount her stories, her message, in a way that would make them

identify with her, and that would make them feel what she felt. She did this by taking readers inside her head with the second person point of view. Rankine validated what I had been doing in my writing all along, using the “you” point of view to take readers into my world.

After reading *Citizen*, I understood the power inherent in writing a memoir in that way rather than from a first-person perspective. Readers are forced to read every line as if it is something that they are experiencing and with which they must content. The second person point of view helps to build an empathetic link between the writer and the reader. For me this perspective feels like the most natural way to immerse a reader in something that they may not want to think about, or acknowledge. By making readers feel implicated, along with the writer, in what the “you” experiences, readers gain insight into experiences too disparate from their own lives for them to have ever been able to feel any empathy or understanding. The second person point of view forces readers to live the experience with the writer.

For example, Rankine describes an incident where she sees a police car behind her while driving, and although she had not broken any laws, she relates the experience of being a black woman and seeing a police officer behind her in a way which starkly illustrates the feelings of terror she associates with that. She writes:

You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind. As usual, you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache-producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now

as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.
(Rankine 9)

In this short excerpt, Rankine takes an experience which might feel routine for many of us, but uses the second person point of view to thrust the reader into feeling it in the way that she does—the fright, the impulse to flee even without a need, as well as the feeling of resignation yet understanding that this is the reality which she will face every time she sees a police car in her rearview mirror.

Baby Fat also includes poems that separate the prose essays. These are written in the first-person point of view, which gives the reader a break from the total immersion of the second person point of view. By doing this, the poems give the reader a chance to gain some objectivity on the subject. They enable the reader to stand back and reflect on the experiences in the prose, as they too describe those experiences and others but with a degree of distance. Despite their different point of view, the poems are nevertheless deeply personal and convey my journey in accepting and understanding the violence I experienced. Each poem I write relies heavily on imagery, and many of them are extended metaphor pieces which speak to a larger theme within *Baby Fat*. As prose pieces built entirely on all images or an extended metaphor would make the prose clunky and less meaningful, the poems in my manuscript serves as vignettes of a moment, a feeling, an experience that helps give further depth to the experiences described in the prose.

Putting my experiences, my shame, and my rage into words has helped to diminish the pain I've felt in being trapped in the cycle of silence. I have broken that silence imposed on generations of women in my family. I have spoken for those who could never could—my grandmother, my great grandmother, and most importantly my mother—who never had the opportunity to make their pain heard. By telling my story I hope also to encourage other women

to speak their pain, to help women break the taboos that silence them and imprison them in a culture that favors the abuser. I want my story to empower women into being more than a statistic.

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Part I

Some folks are born silver spoon in hand

Lord, don't they help themselves, oh

But when the taxman comes to the door

Lord, the house looks like a rummage sale, yes

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no millionaire's son, no

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one

— *Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Fortunate Son," 1969*

Scream

Your mother has always said that you were a very quiet baby. You slept through most nights in the bassinet kept at the foot of your parents' bed because they couldn't afford a crib. You didn't squall or shriek until you were red-faced and tear streaked when you felt hungry or wet or colicky. Mom says you whimpered and squirmed—trying to escape an annoyance you could not speak—and if your eagle-eyed mother hadn't noticed by then, you chirped almost mournfully until you felt the safety of your mother's wings. Your mother always says your infantile silence was a blessing because as soon as you could talk you did so loudly and proudly, rarely ceasing until you fell asleep in a crib your mother had been gifted by some other mother who no longer needed it.

In school you asked questions—loudly and without raising your hand—and when you got home afterwards your mother and you would look up the answers to those never answered questions together. Her mother never let her ask questions either, let alone help her find the answers. She never had to tell you that she wanted you to have the things she couldn't—answers and a voice and the chance to be loud. To be heard in a crowd of people who would not listen to you or any other little girl. She wanted you to learn and to *know* and to never be silent when you needed someone or something.

Because of this, you have never quite understood how you stayed silent and still when you were raped. You—a child encouraged since your first garbled word to ask and wonder and demand to say what you wanted, you believed, you needed—could not muster a peep. You lay there. There was a burning in your core that was only rivaled by the rough slide of your back against rough carpet and the burning in your lungs as your grandfather's chest pressed yours flat, but still not flat enough. And you were silent. You were the same infant unable and unwilling to

cry. Unable to explain or push or understand anything at all beyond the white popcorn ceiling, an omnipotent presence above you—just as silent as it watched. You did not cry. You did not hiss as he jerked your face towards his. Thumbnail pressed into the corner of your mouth and index finger digging into the soft underside of your jaw as he huffed and puffed, *“Look at me. Look at me with those baby blues. Look at me.”* You did not scream as he lay next to you on the basement floor, tucking some of your greasy blonde hair behind your ear, whispering loud enough to be heard over the AC Unit kick on and the TV above blaring a program about gutting catfish, *“You’re so good honey. You did so well.”* You still don’t know why you didn’t scream.

But you have been screaming ever since. With fists and ink pens and swears and your voice cracking and breaking over words, words, words. Shrieks have poured out of you like water and bile and blood. They fill the spaces you still check before you sleep at night—spaces where things can grow if only under the warm blanket of silence and submission. You don’t fear your grandfather—not like you did, not anymore—but being sweet and silent while in the swaddling of obedience and feminine propriety—you fear this. You fear, perhaps more than anything, that silence will make you prey. So, you won’t stop screaming—with pens and swears and poetry and prose and words, words, words. Because what if you stop? What if you stop just long enough to end up back on the basement floor? Frozen and sticky and not strong enough to ever speak again.

Your mother still complains about your obsessive talking but you don’t think she really minds. Your mother taught you what all women learn sooner or later. We will all be met with violence, in some way or another. But the ones who die bloody and with only police reports and corner reports to talk for them were never really taught to scream.

Survival

My mother has pictures of me
still toddler chubby and blonde
curls chlorine fired where they
have dried enough to escape my
pigtails. I am in a pink swimsuit
standing tall against a bleached
white, cinderblock wall, without
a water wing in sight.

This is a series of Kodak snapshots
of where I was taught to swim.

But I don't remember how to swim.

My therapist told me that PTSD
has a fickle memory. It sweeps
up things it doesn't want lying
around. Cluttering the space my
new brain needs to make a home
again. PTSD cleans away those
dustbin memories, even if I'd like
to keep them.

I am annoyed at the things my
illness deems unclean. These memoires
are casualties, tainting in some way
I can't see. If I am ever cast into the
salt sweet tang of the sea, I won't
know how to swim back. The doggy
paddle captured in a four by six
frame is lost to me. I think—
when I watch people break the surface
of deep blue, panting, but smiling—
how my brain could see a more practical
survival skill in listening to the
cadence of an old man's sleep.
Knowing when it's fake enough
for me to be punished for
disturbing it. Knowing when it's
real enough to me to tread across
the ebb and flow of his shallow
snores, to arrive on land
unscathed.

Baby Fat

You grow up, blonde and big eyed. Living in a blue house nestled in the small town your mother and grandmother and great-grandmother grew up in. You grow up next to the Sommers, a couple in their eighties with their black and white wedding photo hanging next to an old clock that plays Amazing Grace every hour. You spend summers chattering away while Clarence picks tomatoes in his garden, which you are not allowed to enter—you must walk around the chicken wired boundary, squishing meticulously mowed grass in between your toes—and blowing bubbles on their concrete stoop while Anne snaps green beans into a stock pot she got as a wedding present in the forties.

Anne lets you sit under an oak tree that rests on the property line between your house and the Sommers', and pick out all the clovers that grow before Clarence revs up his riding lawn mower and rips their pinkish white heads from their tender green necks. You make a chain the way your mom taught you how to do when she wasn't busy with work. The first knot you learned how to tie was the tiny knot in a clover stem and now you make them from early spring until they wither in late summer or are consumed by the slight obsession of an old man with his lawn.

You make necklaces and bracelets. Make another chain to tie around your filthy ankle like your grandmother's gold ankle bracelet. You make crowns for anyone willing to wear one. Yourself, your stuffed animals, Anne, and your dad. You make ones for your mother when she gets home from work and another for some stray cats in the neighborhood who you hope to see soon.

When Anne stops watering her rhubarb long enough to look at you under the shade, she laughs a little.

“You look like your mom,” she says, adjusting her wide-brimmed hat, “Pretty with all those weeds... and a little chubby, too.”

You balk. You’re not chubby. *Baby fat* your mom calls it.

“Of course, honey. Just baby fat,” Anne soothes, turning her nose to the okra, leaving you wound in chains of clover.

You hold out hope that you’ll lose all your baby fat, even though you’re the first girl in your class to have to wear an itchy training bra. You *know* you’re supposed to look like the girls in your class. You cry when your best friend in third grade tells you that if you can’t fit into the clothes at a cute store in the mall wedged between Auntie Anne’s and Gloria Jean’s that all the other girls go to, then maybe you’re just too fat. Your mom smooths your hair back from your ruddy, tear-streaked cheeks, and tells you that you’ll always be her pretty girl. It doesn’t make you feel better, but the dinner of chicken nuggets and Kraft macaroni and cheese shaped like Pokémon makes you warm and you forget about the cute jean shorts all the girls in your class seem to have that you can’t find in your size.

You stop holding out hope of ever losing your baby fat when you turn twelve. That year you gain more things than you want; an estrangement from the grandmother you loved and then the better part of your mother’s family, your first stay in a psych ward, the way you flinch when people touch you, outbursts of volatile rage that scare you and your family, a pending court case against your grandfather, and a profound and suffocating hatred of your eyes, and your hair, and your very skin, because those are some of the things your grandfather liked about you.

But more than that, you gain a set of ever-changing pills that your mother delivers every morning along with a Dixie cup full of water, plus over one hundred pounds hanging off your frame like burlap sacks of rice. Now when your mother says you look nice, you tell her she's a liar. Now when you go to school and the boys all make dares to see who can unclasp your bra first, they call you fat and easy. Tell you you're not pretty, but you have big tits at least. They make jokes that if they could put your face on Sami Leasmen's body then you'd have a chance at having a boyfriend and Sami wouldn't have to be fourteen years old giving hand jobs to boys in order to keep them.

When you hit them, punch them below the belt and knock their pimply faces against lockers and desks, you're the one sent to the office. The principal of your junior high never lets you clasp your bra back on until he's given you a detention, or suspension. He even, at least once, asks you why you're bothered by it. "*You must like the attention somewhat,*" he says, his ankle across his thigh and his hands in his lap as he leans back in his office chair, "*They're doing it because you make this easy.*" When you tell him that's bullshit, they're doing it because they're assholes, you gain your first ten-day suspension for swearing at a school official.

You grow up fatter, but with an acceptable face at just the right angle. You do get a boyfriend who likes your face and body well enough, but he sometimes points out your flaws too often and when you get accepted to college two hours away he grabs your wrist a little too often, squeezes a little too hard and a couple times pushes you against walls when he's mad at you. When he throws a vacuum at you one Sunday, you call it quits and ignore the fact that now you have an okay face but no one to like your stomach and thighs. You grow up with women: neighbors and family members and friends of your mom, and even your own mother on a couple

of occasions telling you that, yes, you have a nice face but you could be so much *more* if you lost a hundred pounds. Fifty pounds, even.

Once, a few days after yet another hospitalization where you lose fifteen pounds from stress and simply not eating, a friend of your mom calls you over to her. She smooths her hands from the bottom of your ribcage to your prominent hips over your faded Nightmare Before Christmas shirt.

“You know,” she says, “You’d have an hourglass figure like your mom if you lost some weight.”

“I don’t want an hourglass figure,” you say, “And mom hasn’t had an hourglass figure since the early nineties.”

Your mom scoffs. Good naturedly and keeping up appearances around her friend, but you see the hurt in her hazel eyes. It makes you, if possible, more upset than yet another comment about what you could be if you were thin.

When you hit college, fatter than before, but knowing how to do makeup pretty well, the comments about your face don’t stop. Groups of boys still snicker when you walk by and when you walk past a row of frat houses one morning someone yells, “*Nice tits, Fatty!*” and then someone else yells, “*Yo man, look at this reverse butter face!*”

You think what changes are the people you meet. Your second college roommate is nearly silent all the time and vicious in her rebuttals to others. When you cry about something, she throws bottle caps at you until you stop and then she buys you ice cream. She’s your best friend now and the best thing that’s ever happened to you.

Another girl on your floor is bright and happy all the time, and makes it a point to tell you every day that she likes something about you when you pass her in the hallways to wash your face next to her at the rows of sinks. Your makeup, your sweater, how your hips look in the skinny jeans you now feel confident enough to wear. Yet another girl keeps knocking on you and your best friend's door with movies and candy and smiles. She tells you one time that she admires your confidence. How you wear red lipstick to eight am classes and walk around the dorm with tiny shorts and old t-shirts that are tight across your chest.

This, more than her kindness or the fact that she knows that you like any and all candy and your best friend only eats Sour Patch Kids, makes you pause. You never thought of yourself as confident. You think of yourself as always ready to fight, daring anyone to fight you. You think of yourself as fat, but try to make others think that you don't care about being fat. You think of using makeup as war paint. You think of how when you make a snide comment it looks better from someone with eyes rimmed in black and full lips painted red. You think of yourself as passing as confident because you're really just scared.

But you think as you look in the full-length mirror on your closet door, you *could* be truly confident. Your naked body looks white and spongy like uncooked dough. Your ears are uneven and you have wide shoulders and your nipples are bigger than they have any right to be. But you're funny and a good cook. You work hard at most things and you have a good memory. You're a decent writer and you made someone who claims to hate everyone share a tiny dorm room with you and even watch cartoons with you. You're organized and have nice handwriting. Stray animals in your neighborhood seem to come up to you more often than not. You're kind when no one is looking and can always make someone stop crying with jokes and goofy smiles and listening to them.

And you have a nice face. And your mother's kind smile and your dad's huge blue eyes and rolls and rolls of white flesh that isn't as tragic as you've grown up being told it is. So maybe that's enough.

Another Cat Poem

The summer you pick blackberries
Your fingertips stained purple
and blood-dotted in the brambles,
you find a cat.

Black, but faded. Like the May sun
has aged its matted fur. But yellow eyes,
wide and watching you come near
clear and eager. It lets you pet it,
and your sticky fingers feel its ribs underneath.

Your mother tells you no
When you cart it across the backyard,
up to the white front porch. She reaches
under it, as it purrs into your cheek
long enough to see if it has balls.

He does, but your mother still tells you no.
So you sneak him milk in the morning.
Watch him, sooty and small,
lap up Dixie cup after Dixie cup
of two percent. You give him a name
and then cans of salmon pâté
you buy with your small allowance,
and then some help from your dad.

He follows you, pays you back
in purrs and tucking his head
under your chin when you read
in the grass. He sits on your porch,
and your mother swears he waits
for you to come home from fourth grade
crying only a little because they called
you an ugly freak again. He meows
when he sees you. Sinks his claws
into your jeans, trying to climb
into your arms.

Fall turns cold quickly,
the pumpkin grins on your porch
frosting over before dawn,
your mother still can't be swayed.
But you are lucky, and so is the cat
that your father can.

Dead Heading

According to Merriam Webster:

***transitive verb:** to remove the faded flowers of (a plant) especially to keep a neat appearance and to promote reblooming by preventing seed production.*

For as long as you remember your mother has kept a rosebush. Always small and with tiny blooms the same silken shade as princess dresses and plastic tea cups. She tended it as if it was the rarest flower sold at the local Home Depot—it drank enough, but never too much and slept under a powdered sugar snow of nutrients and pesticides. And like any annual, it was dead headed often.

You asked your mother, as she pulled blooms just sucking in their last blush colored breaths off with her gloved hands, why. Why would she litter the ground with blooms still beautiful—still flushed with enough color to be breathing and alive, even for just a bit longer.

“You have to,” she’d say, adding another bloom to the pile growing by your bare, unwashed feet.

“If you don’t pull off the dead ones, the new ones will never come in right,” she paused long enough to hiss under her breathe, and deftly pluck a tiny thorn out of the thin skin of her wrist where her glove had ridden up—the last attempt for the newest blossom at your feet to bare its teeth and fight a fight that it never had a chance of winning to begin with.

“The whole plant will die if I keep these here,” she’d say.

“But they aren’t dead—not yet,” you would say because they weren’t. They were pale and maybe a little sick, but they still smelled faintly of something from in-between magazine pages and still had petals that felt like kitten fur as you touched them with the pads of your fingers. They were still beautiful and still alive. They could be saved. Your mother looked at

you once, tears in your eyes from something like mourning, from something like rage that you couldn't name at six, nor seven, nor even the last summer you watched your mother dead head the rose bush in the front corner of your big blue doll house of a home the summer before you left for college.

“No, not yet,” your mother said, looking up at you with an understanding you could never name and she refused to.

“We could dry them, if you want. Granny Hucklebee showed me—I'll show you.”

So, she did. You kept drying roses—too sick and too wrong to be kept attached to something bigger and better and with an opportunity for growth and beauty—until you entered middle school. You entered middle school eager to shed the skin of a girl tainted by murmurs and looks and an article in the Pekin, Peoria, and Bloomington Normal newspapers titled, “Mackinaw Man in Court Today for Sexual Misconduct with a Minor.” You were ready to add your own shameful blossoming to lie at your feet like all of the roses your mother had dead headed before you.

Your plan was to be small among the eight small towns that would congest the hallways of Olympia Middle School. It seemed possible in a way that you couldn't ever manage in your grade school of only two towns. But it wasn't. By Valentine's Day of your seventh-grade year, you were long familiar with the girl's bathrooms which weren't often frequented with Victoria Secret fogs of perfume and vicious chatter coming from girls with metal lined mouths. They decorated their brace brackets with different colored rubber bands for the seasons: orange and black for Halloween, green and red for Christmas, navy blue and sky blue for homecoming weekend. Getting written up for coming into class late to avoid the crowded hallways, you were also quite familiar with by February.

You were more familiar with a family friend's daughter in the same year as you. She lived close enough for you to be friends with her even if you had little in common, other than the distance and a pool which you both stayed in until your skin was chili flake red and your hair was brittle and yellow-green with chlorine. She wanted to be like her big sister—thin and tanned with a mixture of baby oil and lying on a trampoline until her body was boiled lobster shell red. She wanted to be a cheerleader too—just like her older, popular sister. This was something else you didn't have in common—she wanted to be fawned over by boys in your grade and wear the crown of a prom queen like her sister before her. You wanted to keep to the back of classrooms, only speaking long enough to tell boys who looked at you a little too long, a little too close to '*get fucked.*'

She wanted these things so badly it seemed she told other girls in your grade just as baby oil broiled like her sister, and already wearing the navy and sky uniforms of the Junior Cheer Team, that when they saw her brother give you a ride home after school he was just being nice to you. Your mom was close to her mom, and she knew all about the hospitalizations and the trial. Her brother gave you both a ride home after school because—*after all*—being raped meant you *should* be pitied. Should be given only the barest slip of kindness a ride in a beaten-up 2000 Pontiac could offer.

You always knew that gossip spread quickly in a small town, but you were too young to know how fast it could spread between *eight* small towns and seven hours trapped in a building among only lockers and other teenagers hoping that their suffering was not placed upon the alter for everyone to view and laugh at that day. In a way, the family friend who held your abuse up to the light allowed all of the other girls in your grade to grow—bright and

beautiful and liked—because at least they weren't like *you*. Already big chested and big hipped. Already wearing the scarlet rose marking you no longer a virgin.

By the time of that February morning, you were no longer getting rides from the family friend and her brother—you were taking the bus that always was later than it was supposed to be and that always arrived at your middle school late enough that the hallways swam in the scent of body odor bled into too strong cologne and industrial cleaner used to wipe down every surface of its sweat and preteen fug of irritation and cruelty. You kept your hood up that morning as you made your way to your locker—squeezed between the B. Fryman and K. Garvey and somehow, both oddly and cosmically cruel, across from J. Lemons, G. Kelson, and R. Jones.

Your locker was always sort of sticky, and after knocking your jean covered knee into it, it clicked open—but not with the scent of stale cigarettes that you had a neighbor buy for you and the lavender perfume you used to cover it up— but with the smell of wet earth and a bland greenness of flower shops. In your locker, half-way smashed between your English textbook and one of your many notebooks, was a bouquet of roses. Curling up at the feathery edges of their petals with dehydration and wrapped in cheap cellophane decorated with obnoxious screen printings of fat, winged cherubs that didn't seem to dull their color: red. Like the splits in your bottom lip from chewing on it most of the day and like your nail beds for the same reason. Like blood—fresh and sluggish and beautiful in its brutality.

You felt your heart in your throat, near tears that someone thought of you enough to buy you a cheap bouquet. It didn't matter that roses were never your favorite or that these were clearly wilted and shoved into your locker without care—it didn't even matter that someone had broken into your locker. Someone remembered you long enough to buy you

flowers. Someone *liked you* enough to buy you flowers even though the boys in your grade called you '*grandpa fucker,*' and played a game to see who could unclasp your bra the most times during a period.

It never occurred to you between knocking boys who did manage to unclasp your bra into lockers and smudging your eyeliner raccoon messy to hide the fact that you spent nearly every lunch period crying in the handicap stall with your knees hugged to your chest, how lonely you had been. How desperate you were for someone to look at you and smile. To tell you that they thought you were more than a girl who lost her virginity to a family member. More than a girl with a huge chest and a habit of slamming locker doors and swearing at teachers.

It also never occurred to you that G. Kelson—a boy with kind chocolate colored eyes and who liked the way you doodled lilies and dahlias and your favorite peonies and daisies in the margins of your notebook—knew your locker combination from the time you let him borrow your notes on *The Lord of the Flies*. But it did occur to you sometime between your eyes brimming with happy tears of finally, *finally*, being noticed and the boys with the lockers across from seeing you smile just long enough, seeing the shine of something like brittle hope in your eyes when you turned your head to see if anyone was watching you see your first ever Valentine's Day gift. Their laughing—loud and joyous and like rose bush thorns gathered into your lungs and poking through all the capillaries in you whenever you took a gasping, tear filled, breathe—gave them away.

It occurred to you too, somewhere in the following hours—between you turning around and slamming J. Lemons' head into his locker repeatedly and kneeling R. Jones so hard in his groin that he doubled over in pain. The way your middle school principle who always

seemed to comment on your jean rips riding too high on your thighs pulling you off by your shoulder and screaming at you. Asking you if you were out of your mind before calling your dad to come get you. The way that G. Kelson looked at you with something so close to an apology in his caramel brown eyes while you screamed at him, *“fuck you! You fucking asshole, I hate you, fucking kill yourself, you stupid motherfucker!”* The three days spent at home, where your parents really didn’t have the heart to punish you, but they seemed to look harder at treatment places for mentally unstable teenagers, it occurred to you that you never got to save the roses.

Even if they hurt where they filled your locker with the smell of pain and water soaked green, you still would have dried them. They were still beautiful and deserved the time to be hung upside-down from your ceiling and in front of your window, where the sun could leech their life in dignity. They’d never have to end up in piles under the unclean soles of your feet. If you had taken them home before, their beauty could have been mummified in an eternal state withered but deep red. Dead, of course, but not before they left room for something beautiful in their place.

Scar Poem #1 – Chiggers

A series of pock marks on both of my shins.
I used to tell people who saw them,
girls in high school locker rooms
applying Coco-Butter Kisses
under their hairless arms and
between the thighs they were convinced
would rub together while they ran the mile,
the friction seeping into their pores to create
the cellulite they feared. The skin-deep ugliness
Seventeen and *Teen Vogue* warned them would
steal their happiness, their chances at love,
that bag of Sour Patch Kids they all hid in them
lunches. Under carrot sticks, no ranch and
chicken Caesar salad wrap, whole wheat
hold the dressing.

*“I got them from a disease. A flesh eating one.
You better not touch them.”*

I used to tell people who saw them,
boys stinking of chlorine and AXE Body spray
never soap, never Speed Stick or Old Spice,
who sat too close to where my bikini tie peeked
out of soggy tank top strap while I waited for
my friends to stop diving into the deep end.
Splashing and smoothing their hair back from
their foreheads caked in waterproof foundation.
Jumping and laughing, their siren calls
not too young to attract the gazes they wanted
or the gazes they couldn't see through sunshine
and water dyed blue.

*“Y’know the one from bananas? The doctor’s say
I’m not contagious, but you never know.
You better not touch me.”*

But I got them from chiggers
hidden in the grass of my backyard.
I itched them raw, picked at the scabs until
My bedsheets were spotted with blood,
like cities on a map of the far stretched Midwest.
My dad recommended a bleach bath
in time to stop more itching.
But not the marks.

To My Period

I knew you'd come—
like the flowers, undeterred
by ice and sleet
like the mailman in a beat-up red Jeep who
takes my car payment and more
and leaves me stretching bread
and eggs and cheese and meat.

I have to admit,
I dread your arrival
as I spend the week before cradling
the porcelain bowl of my toilet to my chest—
Rolls of nausea filling my mouth with spit.
My stomach feeling your wriggling,
a call to the ghost of a life you crave, yet I deny—
Your pseudo-steps against the cradle of my hips
eventually fills the bowl with bile.

You demand not only sickness
and bone-deep fatigue, but sugar.
The siren's song of deep-fried dough,
of sea salt caramels and of chocolate
ripped from rain forests still green,
wraps around me like a caress.
You demand from me in a way that only a child could.
And I pretend, among the growing field of candy wrappers
that this will soothe the pain pooling in my womb.

And I hate you—I do.

But your arrival, right before one month swallows the next,
means I am healthy. I am whole, even if I feel
I will be cleaved in two by the pain.
You are a promise that I am full of life,
capable of creation.
I am alive even though I am bleeding.

So, I look at the spreading stain,
like the smear of a kiss
on the heather gray of my sheets
on the perfect hourglass curve
of my underwear
and I am thankful.

Part II

All day long I think of things but nothing seems to satisfy

Think I'll lose my mind if I don't find something to pacify

Can you help me,

occupy my brain?

– Black Sabbath, “Paranoid,” 1970

Boys Don't Like It

“The boys feel uncomfortable with her in class.”

You are five years old, at your first parent-teacher conference. Your mom and dad took you out to the only restaurant in your small hometown earlier that evening for popcorn chicken and cheese balls, but even the salt and grease still clinging to your lips doesn't lessen the blow of not being allowed to take part in the discussion. Mrs. Coulter is loud. And even at the dollhouse on the other end of the classroom, with your mother setting up the wooden living room furniture with the same painstaking care that she set your own up with, you can hear your kindergarten teacher.

“How?”

Your dad's answer is flat. Bored and slightly frustrated. You don't know that tone yet, but you still know it's not a good tone. When Mrs. Coulter answers back her voice is hushed and edged. Like the way she talks to you when you're coloring when you shouldn't be, or writing your ABC's ahead of the class.

“Mom?”

Your mom hums to show she's listening, but she never takes her eyes off placing the wooden couch just so against the back window of the dollhouse—just like at your house across town.

“Why is Daddy talking to Mrs. Coulter by himself?”

“Because that's what daddies do,” your mom says, tilting her head to inspect her living room, “Did you finish the kitchen?”

“Aren't you supposed to be there too?” You don't finish setting up the stove or the table and chairs because you're confused and you *think* asking her is important.

“Then who would play with you?” she asks, as your dad’s loud and phlegm-filled snort echoes against the chalkboard and the baskets of flimsy books lined against the walls.

“Because she can *read*?”

You *definitely* haven’t heard this voice before. Not even when your mom and dad argue and she won’t let him kiss her before he goes to work.

“She’s also antisocial,” Mrs. Coulter sniffs and you can almost see her pale lips thin into nothing but coffee stained teeth.

“She won’t play with the other children. And her reading ahead of the class at this age already makes some of her male classmates feel uncomfortable. I had more than a few parents tell me about this tonight.”

Your mom has abandoned the dollhouse kitchen in favor of looking up too. Her lips are thin like Mrs. Coulter’s but a dusty pink color she sometimes lets you try on. You feel tears stinging your eyes because you’re confused. You’re supposed to read. You help mom read a Dr. Seuss book every night and you never miss a word.

Your dad laughs. It doesn’t sound like when he watches the Flintstones with you or when mom flicks dish soap suds at him from the sink. It sounds like nothing’s funny at all and you don’t know why.

“I don’t give a shit about how these kids feel. Is she meeting guidelines? Is she doing good with her work? Can she write fine?”

Your mom is deconstructing her dollhouse work, setting the pieces of a perfect living room and kitchen in a box. Her cheeks are red and you’re crying now because your dad is upset and you *thought* it was good you could read. That you can spell and do math and color in the lines every time. You don’t understand why the boys don’t like it. Why you’re in trouble.

Your mom shushes you, hugs you and takes you out to the car. And in a little while, your dad follows. He slams the car door and his jaw looks tight, like the stubbly skin that you like to rub will tear like the wet tissues in your lap.

“Un-fuckin’-believable,” your dad says. “Little Timmy’s feelings got hurt ‘cause the kid reads.”

Your dad then realizes you’re crying, and he stops swearing so much. He takes you back to the beer-free restaurant and buys you a sundae bigger than you can eat. You feel better but still feel like you did something wrong.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart,” your dad says when you ask him, mustache already flicked with the rest of your sundae.

You are thirteen and you’re floundering. You’re two hospitalizations down and a whole side of your family gone because they think you’re lying about being raped. You’re mad at everything and trying out different medicines so you won’t feel anything at all. Your mom shakes her head at you and your dad sometimes won’t look at you, like you really are as ugly and disgusting as you think you are.

You read more than ever and you *really* make boys uncomfortable because when you’re not flinching around them, you’re knocking them against lockers and telling them to fuck off. You listen to music that your mom hates, and your great-aunt who never knows when to shut up calls satanic. You rim your eyes in thick black because you hate them most out of all your other ugly body parts. Your great aunt snorts when she sees you at the now tiny gathering for Thanksgiving.

“Boys don’t like a girl who wears dark makeup like that,” she says, mashed potatoes spotting her shirt.

“I don’t give a shit what boys think,” you roll your eyes, pushing bits of flabby turkey skin around your plate. She scoffs, leaning into you mother and hoots about women who disrespect and women who have dignity and *women who lie*. You move from the table so fast that your cup spills. Your mother calls after you and your great-aunt crows like the huge lurking vulture that she is about women like *you*.

You spend the rest of dinner crying with your cat and ripping out pages of your journals because your fledgling poems and stories, and even your feelings, are ugly too. You fall asleep with the lights on and wake up in the gray light of dawn. Someone cleaned up the pages on your floor, covered you with a quilt and left you a dried-up brownie on a paper Thanksgiving napkin. Your mom isn’t speaking to you right now, and definitely wasn’t after dinner, so that leaves your dad. You cry as you eat it. Tears and black, black eyeliner clogging your pores and throat so thick you can’t even taste the chocolate you love so much.

You are twenty-two and sitting at a kitchen table. Your mom covers her gray now with Revlon Intense Burgundy and your dad’s once bushy black mustache is thin and gray. You haven’t been hospitalized since you were in high school. And you graduated from college, an actual university with dorms and weirdos in the quad and all that, in December. You think a June afternoon before you go out for a pizza buffet is probably not a great time, but you’re shit with timing anyway.

“Mom?” you start, “So, hypothetically, what if I dated a girl?”

The look your mom shoots you over her pink iPhone is not murderous, just annoyed as usual. Your dad doesn't even look up from changing the kitchen cabinet handles to the new ones your mom picked out for the house.

"Don't say that," she says, "Boys only like girls with other girls in porn, you know that."

"Are you starting a porn career that I should know about?" your dad asks lightly, never taking his eyes off the handles, "Extra income would be nice, y'know."

You ignore your dad so you don't laugh. Your timing is shit, but not *that* shit.

"Well, I'm not *technically* throwing boys off the market—" You are, but you're smart enough to know that you often have to ease your mother into things like this.

"So, what?" your mom asks, her cheeks turning a bit pink despite the AC, "You're into girls now?"

"Only part-time," your dad chimes in, "Like all the jobs she's ever had."

"*Shut up*, Robert," you throw a balled-up napkin at him before continuing, "I would say I'm more—not picky? I'm more into a person's personality than that said person's genitals."

You are picky. And you haven't been interested in boys probably ever in your life, despite the fact that you dated one and nearly married one before you hightailed it out of your hometown and to college. But your mom wants you married and filled with grandkids and under no circumstances kissing other women. *Baby steps*.

"How do you feel about this?" your mom demands of your dad. He squints at her... maybe because he doesn't have his glasses on, you're not sure.

"If she's happy and paying for her own shit, then I am too," he says, and then smirks at your mom, "At least she won't get pregnant."

Both you and your dad are looking down, trying not to laugh, while your mother grows steadily redder.

“This is ridiculous! I cannot believe you two,” she steams, face red but not as mad as she could be. Not as she has been with you.

“I and the dogs are going outside,” she declares. She exits the kitchen in a huff, the screen door and a scamper of excited toenails following her out. Your dad follows shortly after, the new kitchen drawer handles in place, but not before gently tugging on your ponytail on his way out.

You grow up learning a string of things that boys don't like. Your mom and aunts tell you most of them. *Boys don't like when you don't comb your hair. Boys don't like it when you throw a snowball farther than them. Boys don't like it when you knock their teeth out after they stole your mittens. Boys don't like when you tell them to shut up.* You notice that boys never get told the things that girls won't like. They never get told to dress a certain way, or not raise their hand in class, or not shout out answers. It's confusing why it would matter at all what boys like and what they don't. So, you ask the only boy you actually like.

“Doesn't matter, Bran,” your dad says over the sound of his Sawzall. He's making you a birdhouse because you're determined to see a hummingbird. You're shaking a can of pink spray paint next to him, spitting out sawdust while he speaks.

“You like you. That's what matters.” he says. And you think you like that better than what any boy will think

Father

He comes home at seven,
when the stain of sunrise paints
skies in periwinkle and bird calls.
Boots toed off to sleep next to the shoe mat,
but never on it. He finds sleep when the sun peeks,
spreading violent light on
freshly mowed grass and mailbox flags pushed down.
I pad among his discarded jeans and white socks
sweat soaked to pull the bedroom curtains shut.

Between morning and the orange tinge of late afternoon
gummy eyed and pillow scars on unshaved cheeks
he wakes. He talks to me in between bites of last night's
leftovers, microwaved hot on paper plates.
He treats me, like he has since I was small,
like an adult. An equal. His eyelid droop
between conversations of politics and kindness.
Weighed down by enteral sleepiness.
By work and promises to provide.
Of the depression that seeped into me
like the dark blue of his eyes and his constant scowl
mirrored on my face.
Of homeless nights with only the blanket of a semi cab
and the silence of a junkyard to keep him warm.
Of memories of his own father. I think
he might share with me one day,
not today, not so soon before work.
But someday maybe.

He goes to work at ten,
among the blares of nightly news anchors
with pressed shirts and bright white smiles.
He fills a 44-ounce cup from Circle K
with unsweetened iced tea, clutches it
in his callused hands as he leans down
to kiss my mother good-bye.
"Love you Dad," I say as he leaves in
a sluggish blur of florescent yellow and a
rattling cough. His answering voice is soft, lost
among the cicada screams and the screen door
clatter. But I know
he loves me too.

Coming Out Poem # 1 – Prologue

Before I kiss a girl for the first time
we pass notes during eighth grade algebra.
Skulls and daisies born of black ink and
my boredom sleep like cats in the crumpled
corners. Her handwriting underneath—
bubblegum sweet and consonants curved
just like they're supposed to be, try to
imitate the sharpness of my letters
the way the tails of my g's and y's
hang like ripe fruit, as she asks for
my phone number. She then tries to shape
my handwriting into the formulas sipped
from the whiteboard. I make peonies,
roses I know to be pink sprout from the
line: $y = mx + b$.

Before I kiss a girl for the first time
I make Kool-Aid at her kitchen sink,
her parents asleep upstairs. Laughing,
because she is fourteen like me, and
has never made it herself. Her cheeks turn
watermelon cherry pink under the wide
net of her freckles, but she still
hands me a gallon pitcher from a Walmart
summer sale and a wooden spoon from
someone she calls Mimi. She scoffs when
I add two cups of sugar instead of one.

Before I kiss a girl for the first time,
we light candles in her room with the
lighter I stole from a gas station. We make
a homemade Ouija board with printer paper—
my sharp letters bleed in purple Sharpie.
Vanilla Bean smoke and her gray comforter
wrap us in their arms when we cannot commune
with the spirits we seek. Candles gutted and near
burned out, we search from ghosts and demons
in the stacks of DVD's by her bed. She turns to me—
we are waiting for the monster at the end—
her nose is cold as it bumps mine, too close
in the predawn light to be a mistake.

Her mom makes us pancakes when we
wake, noon heat making our bodies

warm where they press together.
I hug her without question
before I climb into my parents' car.
On Monday we don't pass notes about
the taste of fruit punch on each other's
lips. From behind each other's teeth—
two cups sweeter than before.

Manic

You don't feel manic. You haven't been diagnosed as manic, not since you were thirteen and screaming until you lost your voice and your knuckles were peeling patches of new flesh and purple-green-yellow-bile bruised. They asked you before you were admitted the first time for a suicide attempt and a fist fight with your dad and a day you skipped from sixth grade to stare at the TV while it played talk shows and infomercials and static:

“Do you feel upset? Do you feel out of control? Do you feel alone? Do you feel? Do you feel things strongly would you say? Do you feel so high you could jump off of the nearest building and coast along cumulus waves and bite the peach flesh of a sunset? Let the juice drip down your chin and pool in the dip of your collarbones sticky and wet until you can come down? Do you feel hurt? Do you feel you could hurt someone? Do you feel? Do you feel?”

Your dad's mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder before you were born and your dad bore the scars on his knuckles of fights and baling wires like teeth when he bailed enough hay to be able to build a bed should and when she called him a bloody bastard, a bloody bitch, bloody worthless, bloody useless, and she changed the locks on the trailer door while screaming at your dad to *go go go*. Your dad then bore the scars of the copper wire he stole for enough money to stay somewhere safe that night, and then the felony it landed him. Your dad was never manic while he slept in his truck and in junkyards and in semi cabs with door handles that could be jiggled just so. But you were close enough to your grandmother and your dad's depression so you were called manic.

Depression symptoms in teenagers result in rage and fear and screaming, screaming, screaming when you are touched and when you are cornered and even when you're not really cornered, but you can't tell the difference when you're upset or when you're asleep or when you

see a man with green eyes or buzzed cut hair or a man or a teenage boy or any man. PTSD was not diagnosed in teenagers in 2000 or 2005 or 2006 or 2009. PTSD is for men who are brave and men who paint their face with blood and red, red sand from under the feet of people who scream like you do sometimes. PTSD is not for you because you did not serve under a flag and under the promise of money and medicine and glory. And you did not train and you did not fall on an IED. You didn't fall anyway except on the hands and lips and dick of a man that held you as a baby and called you a slut and a whore and said that you wanted it because you wore shorts in June but in a house that had AC.

PTSD is not for you, but its symptoms are the ingredient label tattooed on your arms and typed on the hospital bracelet linked around your wrist and in the hum of *fear run scared help unsafe hurt help ow ow ow help me please* that knock around your teeth and fill any empty space in your skin. You don't feel manic.

You feel everything all at once and all too loud and all too upsetting to doctors and bosses and teachers and professors who say "*Calm down. You need to calm down. Calm down—you need to calm down.*"

You don't feel manic.

You feel everything else instead.

An Ode to Capability

My therapist says:

Your father loves you very much, but your relationship is borderline abusive.

I want to say no.

He's the man that took me to the scrap yard every summer
when I still was losing baby teeth
and woke up pressed to the warmth of his back
when I had a nightmare.

I watched the soda cans we collected all summer
be crushed and bent into money for chicken fingers,
Dilly Bars chocolate coated and fountain Coke
at the run-down Dairy Queen.

Never telling me little girls should be more at home
with baby dolls in the crooks of their scabby elbows,
than humming AC/DC from the seat of a rusted blue pick-up.

I want to say no.

He's the man who spoke through gritted teeth
and jaw an unmoving line of stubble and rage
at my mother in a hospital waiting room.

He had got me into a child psychologist.
But was two months too late, the slice on my wrist
bandaged by a blank-faced nurse and
used as evidence by my stone-faced mother.

I was too small on the floor of the adolescent psych ward,
Stripped down to a hospital gown and mismatched socks.
While my mother spoke of symptoms and stays,
insurance and her woes, he wrapped his windbreaker
around me. His eyes, dark blue and bloodshot,
like mine with salt-thick tears refused to meet mine.

I want to say no.

I want to sit at the feet of my father,
wash the heels of his feet where my self-esteem
has been caked since I was old enough to know
he wasn't always right and he wasn't always kind.
I want to let the water turn black as I scrub,
let the sludge shaped like

"You're so stupid.

Worthless.

Fat.

Ugly.

Pathetic."

Settle at basin bottom, away from him
Away from me. Leave him clean footed and new.
Instead I say:

"I know."

I let the cloud of therapeutic words and phrases
I've collected like raindrops from books and articles
and a college lecture taken at 8 AM for Gen. Ed. credit
fill my throat. They don't choke me like they used to
so, I let them fall:

"I know my dad is the reason I hate myself more than I love myself. I know that I deserve better than the way he treats me. But I also know that my dad is a man shaped by sadness. By fear. He has given me all the love he is capable of. He has given me everything he is capable of. And that's enough for me."

Psychotherapy: A Perennial

”Do you consider your experience with being a victim of sexual assault to be the worst thing that happened to you?”

You scoff, looking up only long enough to roll your eyes and examine the exposed quick of your index finger, you’ve been chewing on the nail on and off since this morning. Chewing still even when there’s nothing left but soft tissue and the richness of iron blood on your tongue. The man questioning you has a few impressionist paintings on his walls and a few more framed diplomas. He’s a doctor, sure. But to you he’s just another man paid to try and find the right cocktail of medication to keep you from scratching off your own skin.

“You’re laughing as if that’s funny. Why is that?” They like to do this sometimes. Poke at you for answers to questions they don’t really want an answer for. Usually you let it hang in the air until he tires again, but there’s only fifteen minutes left, so you bite.

“I think it’s funny that everyone thinks I’m a victim. That I like being one.”

“You’re not a victim? Or you think other people only see you as one? That it’s their fault?”

“I’m a victim, I guess. But I never felt that way when it happened. I didn’t know I was supposed to. I only felt like one when I spoke up and everyone told me I was acting like a victim.” You roll your eyes because you’ve said this before—it should be in the notes from some other man with paintings and PhD’s hanging on his walls too. He tilts his head, like you’re a very strange bug whose doing something he didn’t expect.

“Why is that?”

“Because no one listened to me. No one believed me. Rape is something that just happens, everything that happened afterwards made me feel like I did something wrong, that I

was wrong.” Rage is tight in your throat, but still loose enough to lace around your words. He scribbles frantically—your rage feeding into his notes and his assumptions and all the things he might have been right about when he wrote his dissertation on Freud.

“So, you don’t consider yourself a victim? You think other people are to blame for calling you a victim?”

“People seem to call me a victim more than I do. I was blaming him when it happened. I was blaming my mom when she didn’t know. I was blaming that asshole Corey when he called me ugly and disgusting and I cracked his head into the wall. I did all those things and I admitted it. But I never felt like a victim until people kept telling me I was acting like one when I tried to explain why I did the things I did afterward.”

“So, you think others call you a victim? That they define you as a victim, but you don’t define yourself as a victim?” He is ravenous now—sinking his teeth into the buttery flesh of your mistake. You spoke. You gave him an inch—a word too many. And now he picks the bones of your clipped response vulture clean.

“I think they see me as someone who says when I’m upset. When I feel hurt or scared,” you say, too deep now and trying too hard.

“They say I’m “playing a victim” by blaming someone else. But I’ve never felt like a victim until someone said I was playing one. I admit when I fuck up. I’m told I fuck up all the time and I know I do. But when they ask me why I did that or what happened to make me do this, and I try to explain, I’m being a victim. I’m blaming someone else because I can’t ever explain what happened or why I did it. I try to tell people what happened, why I did what or whatever, but I can never make sense to them. I don’t think they want to listen. I don’t know. I

don't feel like someone helpless and weak until I'm told that I'm acting like one. I don't know. Does that make sense?"

The doctor stares at you for a while nodding his head like he's listening, trying to understand you like your parents pay him to. His eyes are pale water gray and just as shallow as they regard you. He looks down finally to scribble something on the legal pad perched on his properly crossed knee. His suit pants aren't wrinkled even at five thirty in the afternoon.

"Tell me about school. You were suspended today for fighting a boy. Why do you think you struggle with your classmates so much?"

His questions are careful and precise. His perfectly plucked words seem to line up in front of you. They are the crystal vials and platters of custard swelled cakes and sweets glistening with sugar crystals spelling "*eat me, drink me.*" Tears are welling up in your eyes again without you knowing exactly why. There is no right answer you can give him—he made sure of it. But the door to the garden of an ended session and a hamburger from a drive-thru makes you bite. Your answers are wrong; he made sure they would be. Your antisocial behavior grows too large in his eyes and your impulse control too small. You're crying, tears gathering at your feet to sweep you along a current without a raft to cling to in his pristine corner office. You had to sink your teeth into a bait that wouldn't make you better, wouldn't help you explain. You sipped his loaded questions, let them slide down your throat to sit wrongly and heavily against your middle— but it was the only way to get this session over. You leave with a script for medications and a need to tell your parents that this physicist won't work either.

The Game

My therapist and I play a game
every time I see her. It goes like this:

She says:

“Have you been feeling suicidal lately?”

And I say:

“No. Not at all.”

But I don't say:

Feeling suicidal is the elevator music playing on loop in my head. I count the beats of its easy canned tune—another heartbeat. I trace the tempo, feel its grooves on my tongue I don't remember a time when I could listen and not hear the violin stings, the slow piano drip like honey as it tells me I would be better off dead.

Sometimes the games goes like this:

She says:

“You don't have any plans in place, right?”

And I say:

“No, I don't have any right now.”

But I don't say:

I have planned my death more than most girls my age have planned their weddings. Sometimes I want to be a screen star. 1930's black and white, my hair floating around me in a tub full of jasmine bubbles. The cotton candy foam pink with blood, then red like lipstick kisses, then deep and dark red wine to drink until I fall asleep. Sometimes I want to cash the cache of pills under my bed. Sometimes I want to learn how to shoot a gun. I wish I could say I was picky.

My therapist and I play a game
every time she sees me. It goes like this:

She says:

“How are you feeling? How have you been?”

And I say:

“I'm good. Things are fine.”

I don't say:

Every day I wake up breathing in the dust and sunshine of my room I feel sad. I know I would be missed if I gave in to everything telling me

I'd finally be happy and safe if I died. But I am so tired. I am so afraid of living it chokes me soot and smoke in my lungs. I planned a trip to San Francisco in case I finally have to clear them. I am not afraid of falling. My body free, my thoughts weightless as I cut my strings over a bridge taller than my fears. I wouldn't even flinch when I hit the water, I would just breathe.

My therapist nods anyway.
She smiles at the things I am not saying. She asks me what's been going well since I was last here. She makes me count them on the tips of my fingers and before I leave, she makes me tell her something good about myself. About the world. She knows, it's harder for me to cheat with this game.

Part III

I recall that deep, dark basement

And I recall how bad it smelled

And I hated everybody around me

I even hated myself

Which I still do, on my bad days

You punched my mother in the mouth

We fled to shelter safe and pure

But now I never feel at home

And I will never be secure

Oh, to be secure

– Andrew Jackson Jihad, “Deep Dark Basement,” 2012.

The Apple Tree

She stands in a patterned dress
under an apple tree, branches heavy
with rotten fruit and skeletal leaves.
And she loves me.

Her hands are sure around a broom handle
as she bats branches with yellow bristles.
A wind of leaves and backyard dirt
stirs around her fat ankles.
Dusting her white socks and buckled sandals.
Sweating in the Indian Summer sun,
she swings to knock down a rubber ball,
rescued from a string cage in a center aisle.
And she loves me.

Her dress ripples. Blue and orchid paisley
dancing around her bulky frame.
Red faced and swearing at everything.
The damn apple tree. The son of a bitch ball.
But never me. Because she loves me
now. My arms open and raised towards
the tree. But I will grow like ripening fruit.
Be able to knock down balls and talk back.

Her husband, sitting on a plastic patio chair,
screaming suggestions between puffs of
Marlboro smoke, will target me. And away from
this early fall and apple tree, he will leave me
small and scared. Dirty and bruised on a basement floor.

And I will cry childish tears while she
will call me *bitch* and *whore*.
And I will ignore the shade of an apple tree
and the feel of thin pattered cotton in my sticky fists
Trying to forget a time
when she loved me.

Memories

You remember reading something about children who have suffered trauma repressing most of their memories. You might have read it because some soft-eyed therapist recommended it, or maybe it was something you read during one of your stints in the local adolescent behavioral ward one of the three times you tried to overdose. You remember the mural of prairie animals on the walls, painted by a practiced and idealistic hand, as if they thought squirrels and groundhogs and sparrows would inspire the host of troubled kids living in their lands to want a cleaner, fresher life. Like the green of the grass and the sweet doe-eyed animals made of paint strokes and good intentions.

You remember being hungry for reading material to will away the long stretches between one mandated group therapy session and the next. And pickings were slim between one of your parents' weekly visits and the next, so the pile of worksheets given mindlessly and uncaringly during those group therapy sessions became a sort of desperate reading material and sometimes blank pages to scribble down fledgling poems and doodles made with a contraband golf pencil you hid in the folds of a pair of socks. Memories like this are foggy around the edges, a child made of maybe dreams and stark details which stick into the flesh of your brain like thumbtacks.

Memories of your grandparents—the real china tea set they gave you for Christmas one year, the recipes for beef and noodles and puppy chow your grandmother made, and their basement rumpus room where your grandfather raped you—are pricks in the softness of your mind, too. But unlike the sharp-nailed, unstill children you're sure repress their trauma—keep them snug and safe in memories chests, never to be looked at again – you didn't.

You wallowed in it like roadkill. Let the stink of your grandfather's breath and the carpet burns on the flat of your back play over and over in your head. This macabre video was rewound

and replayed until the tape wore thin in places and the picture became fuzzy. Before you read the article given in the psych ward by one of the nameless therapists you carded through like clearance sweaters, your mother told her, that you should do what she did when she was raped as a child by your grandmother's first husband—forgive and forget. That phrase, echoed in kitchen tables and hanging from the rafters of every one of the eight churches in your hometown, created in you a defiance more potent than the hurt.

You let the memories, the trauma, well inside you. You thought, like the girl your dad raised you to be—the one who pushed boys back and who told teachers you *would* be reading that 'advanced' book – that you could make a childish shield from the corpse of your memories. Their brutality would protect you, prepare you for all the evils that could knock on your door and slither into your brain like parasites feeding on a host.

And it worked. You are strong and wear your fear in bouts of rebelliousness and confidence. Your terror is a jacket against the world, the fabric scrapes you skin raw, but you wear it well. But in soaking yourself in the bile, the nightmares of that summer you spent living with your rapist and your willfully ignorant grandmother, you ignored the sparks of brightness, or kindness, which your grandmother had for you. These memories float like glass in your veins, brushing the insides of your body and leaving a pain so powerful and sudden in their wake that it blinds you.

You look for tinfoil in the paper goods aisle in your local supermarket and see snack-sized plastic baggies and remember how your grandmother would put potato chips and cookies in them for you when you were small. You join your friends for a binge-session at the dingey all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet in your town and the fried donuts, glinting in the heat lamps coated in sugar crystals like bits of glass, make you remember how she would always buy them for you in

greasy paper bags when you spent the night at her house. You're driving on the interstate, edging eighty-five as the four-cylinder motor in your tiny Hyundai whines in protest, and Sonny and Cher comes on oddly and intrusively onto the classic rock station you're listening to.

You're hit by the memory of your grandmother, singing to you in her brown station wagon after you leave the supermarket back-end full of supplies to make cookies and grilled cheese sandwiches. She sings off-key, grinning with her gray tinged incisor and the crow's feet at the corners of her hazel eyes playfully crinkled. *I got you babe. I got you babe.* She leans over in the driver's seat to kiss the top of your curly blonde head and does her best to impersonate a Las Vegas cabaret singer. Just to make you giggle. *I've got flowers in the spring, I've got you to wear my ring.*

You like to remember your grandmother as weak and needy and selfish. You revel in the memory of her telling you that you broke up the family with your false claims that her husband raped, that you destroyed everything. You cling childish and vindictive to the last words she spoke to you across her room in the nursing home. The small TV playing and the coal-mouthed snowman watching from inside his perfect snow-globe home as she said, *"You're nothing but a whore."*

These memories soothe you with their pain, like the relief and excitement you get from peeling off a scab whole. But the memories of Chinese fried donuts, Sonny and Cher concerts in a station wagon shell, and her smile when she told you *"I love you so much honey. Don't you ever forget"* cut across your chest. Their sweetness leaves you cleaved and gasping. They hurt you in a way that the coolness of a basement floor could never.

Scar Poem #2 – For Lying

A jagged line across the curve of my arm
and then around to my shoulder blade.
I forget I have this one until I stand topless
in front of the bathroom mirror.
Lifting up my mane of hair to observe the
first tender sunburn of summer on the back
of my neck. The mark is nearly invisible unless
I have the exact light of a bathroom not filled yet
with steam a shower provides and turn just so.

It is a product of a fly-swatter broken
and then another one for good measure,
when I told my grandmother her husband
raped me on the basement floor.
It is a product of her washing the blood
From my welted skin and rubbing
dollar store anti-biotic cream into it
hard enough to burn. She did this until
it healed into the flash of silver white I see
only sometimes. She always sent me out of
the bathroom shirtless so it could breath.
My preteen breasts
only hidden by how quickly I could run
and already how little my hands could hide.
“Don’t make no difference,” she said.
“He’s seen them before
and it’ll teach you not to lie.”

My Grandmother's Funeral

When your dad calls to tell you that your grandmother is dying, he tells you nothing more than when he'll pick you up, and to bring funeral clothes. When he does finally pick you up at exactly ten o'clock, he leaves the truck idling and doesn't help you with your laundry hamper. There's a never-used pencil skirt and nice sweater neatly folded in between your laptop and your journal inside your backpack. He buys you a chocolate cake doughnut and a thirty-two-ounce cup filled with Coke at Casey's, and then you're off. The cab is warm and filled with Led Zeppelin and CCR and the occasional AC/DC song all the way up fifty-seven.

You talk. Both of you about random things. You bring up how much you're beginning to hate one of your friends, he brings up work. He talks about school, and you avoid that, bringing up that bitch of a friend again. You discuss an article you read about Japanese POW experiments during World War II, and he tells a story about his buddy who had a dad who was a Japanese POW. You both seem to enjoy the disgusting things, the amount of death and destruction in the article, while the death you'll both have to deal with in thirty miles sits in the backseat. Next to your laptop. Next to the spare Carhart coat he keeps in his truck during winter.

"You wanna head up to the hospital?" he asks, "Or do you wanna head home first?"

"Where's mom? Hospital?" you ask, to which he nods, "Take me there, I guess."

"Thank you for doing this," he says, turning onto the exit ramp, "I know this is hard, but you have to be there for your mom."

You shrug, turning up the radio. You love *Immigrant Song*. You know she needs you. And for now, you can pretend you don't need anyone, anyway.

You meet your mom in the hospital cafeteria, along with Penny, a family friend who's also a pastor. Everyone knows she's soon to go, even if everyone's wiping it away like crumbs off of linoleum tabletops.

“Do you want to see her?” your mom asks, and you've had time to think about that. The answer is yes. You want to give your grandmother a way out, even if she never gave you one. She's dying, a blood infection turned into septic shock, which makes you all wear paper gowns and latex gloves when you enter her room. You can offer her a kindness, tell her you forgive her for your mom, even if she doesn't deserve it. Even if she isn't even well enough to understand. You are an excellent liar.

You approach her bed right away, and her hazel eyes are distant and foggy. They move back and forth sluggishly as you tell her you forgive her. You love her. Honestly, you're really only sorry that this might happen to your mom one day, right down to the same hazel eyes. You're also sorry that Penny's eyes won't leave you. You don't want your lies to be on display. You don't want people to think you're kind, because you're not. Not to her.

“Thank you for forgiving her,” Penny says, “It'll allow her soul some peace. It means a lot to her.”

“I don't forgive her,” you answer, picking up the half-filled book of word searches dad bought mom at the giftshop to keep her occupied, “And she's wouldn't care even if she was coherent, nor would any soul she might have. I'm lying.”

You finish your mom's half-finished word search, and then three untouched ones before visiting hours are over.

You visit every morning with your mom, mostly keeping her company and coloring pictures with her. You begin to learn that a man, any man, in a sweater-vest, meandering into the

room with his hand folded and looking earnest means you better go get coffee. Your mother and uncle laugh at this.

“You’re not gonna catch on fire,” Jeff, your uncle, laughs at you, “Praying won’t kill you.”

“It might kill her unholy ass,” your mother remarks, coloring a daisy bright red, “She’s gonna be blessed for life after this.”

You roll your eyes, happy to see your mother smile just a little. The truth is, while you’re good at lying, you actually hate it. You glance at the bed and your grandmother, gray and papery, looking like the ghost cutouts you decorated your room with when you were seven. The truth is, she’s been a ghost to you since you were thirteen. When she took a man, a rapist, over you. Likewise, religion—particularly the Catholicism practiced at St. Francis’—leaves a bad taste in your mouth. It tastes like children being hurt like you were, and adults allowing it. It tastes like control and subjugation. It tastes like the cross which hung from your grandfather’s neck and clicked against your front teeth as he moved on top of you.

You start a game of tic-tac-toe with Jeff on a coffee stained napkin, still watching the door. You don’t know when, but that rapist, her husband and your grandfather, will walk through the door. And it reminds you so much of the waiting you did as a child, the nervousness of looking into doorways and into rooms to see if he was asleep so you could cross, not pinched, nor prodded. Not forced to sit in his lap or anything else that eleven-year olds didn’t do with their grandfathers. It makes you terrified and angry all over again. Small and unprotected. Young and being told that you were the wrong one, not him.

He comes like you knew he would. But you weren't prepared and when he sits his tray down in the cafeteria at the same table as you, your parents, and your hateful and opinionated great aunt, you freeze. You planned this moment for so long. The things you would say, the things you would do. The places you'd make him bleed. The way you'd be confident and not scared anymore. The way you would be powerful. The way you'd be better, stronger than a man who held you down when you were too small to fight back.

But you're not even breathing. You're staring at a blank message to your best friend and feeling every nerve, every hair follicle on your skin prickle with fear and nausea. You remember the way he talked. The way he narrated the entire rape into your ear as you were frozen and caught. A mouse's middle, nearly cut in half by a trap. When he speaks now, you're the same. Frozen. Scared. Fight and flight thrashing in your head, as you try not to scream. Your aunt is asking him how he is. No one asked you how you were. You came into this knowing he would appear, and you tried to relive it all. All of it, so it couldn't hurt you again. So you could be numb. You weren't expecting this, and now you're glass. Your dad smacks your arm, laughing good-naturedly at something. His laugh is forced and you know it, but your eyes still water because you're breaking.

"Bathroom," your dad says, and then he tugs your stiff elbow, "Let's go, Brandi."

You run to follow him, scampering the way you did when you were younger still and he invited you for ice cream or the zoo. He doesn't talk to you, just leads you toward the bathroom as your vision blurs and your whole body shakes, like a stilted house in a tornado.

You think maybe all the praying you've been subjected to recently has made *someone* favor you just a little, because the bathroom is empty. You stumble to the first stall and empty the cheese fries and chocolate cake sitting unaware in your stomach into the bowl. You're crying

now, but you're shaking a little less. You dial your best friend, ignoring that she hates phone calls, and sometimes teases you by hanging up when you tire of texting and call her.

"Holly?" you're crying, wiping your dad's borrowed flannel sleeve across your mouth and wishing for anything to help. His death, your death, or maybe even a cup of Listerine.

"Hi," Holly says, her voice soft in a way it usually isn't with you, "Can you talk?"

"No," you say, sitting cross legged on a bathroom floor, your back to a frozen tile wall, "I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

"For what?"

"I'm bothering you, and I'm such a fucking wreck I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry."

"I'm not," Holly says, softly like you're still glass and your cracks are growing, "You're being really brave. And I know you don't see it, but you're doing so well right now."

Someone walks into the bathroom, and you stop as if a curtain dropped. The end to a show.

"I have to go," you say and then, "I'm sorry. Thank you."

"I love you," she answers, "Text me later, okay? So, I don't have to worry about you."

You promise her you will and fix your makeup in the mirror as best you can. You expect to head back to your grandmother's hospital room, but leaning against the wall is your dad. He gives you a small little smile.

"Good?" he asks, and you know he heard you.

"Peachy," you say and follow him up. Your grandfather is there when you enter her room, and your uncle pulls a chair next to his, the arms touching.

“Here, weenie,” he says, all the while pointedly not looking at your grandfather. When you sit down, Jeff puts his arm around the back of the chair, and asks you to fix his phone. Like nothing’s happening.

Visiting hours are over for family, and you’re the last to leave. Your grandfather has been sitting across from your grandmother’s bed and you’ll have to pass him as you leave. You don’t expect him to grab your wrist, tug it lightly over the blue latex.

“Brandi—” he’s soft. Maybe sorry, but definitely trying not to alert anyone. And in the moment, you don’t remember this afternoon. You don’t remember crying and staining the first stall on the first-floor orange with vomit. You don’t feel weak. You feel outraged. You feel thirteen, mad at the woman lying in the hospital bed because she beat you with a flyswatter until you bled because ‘you were lyin’ on her husband.’ You feel twelve, sitting in a cigarette stained kitchen as your great aunt tells you that you’re broken now, used up and you’d better say it didn’t happen if you wanted to be okay. You feel eleven, body strung tight with nerves and your hands balled up in tiny fists as your back stings with carpet burns from his weight and his rocking movement.

“*You* don’t get to address me,” you say, your voice strong and quiet. Something dark and venomous held forever tightly in your lungs. You rip your hand away.

“*You* don’t get to fucking touch me, *ever again.*”

You feel shaken, as you leave. You feel strong, sort of. But as you curl around the fluffy body of your black cat that night, you still don’t feel safe. You don’t really know if you ever will.

Your grandmother dies as a priest sings ‘Amazing Grace’ over her body. You watch the heart monitor steadily tick down, as your mother’s hand grips yours. She chants, *No no no*,

mama no' and stands up as if she might try to lie on her. Maybe to keep what nasty black thing of a soul she has from slipping out of her chapped, open mouth. Your grandfather isn't in the room, and you later find out he's actually at a bar. With one of your grandmother's high school friends. Your mother cries as Jeff holds her, and when you see the nurse, hovering outside the door with a clipboard you leave to tell her where your grandmother wanted the funeral. You're the only one not crying. Your dad is at your childhood home, painting, so the house will look nice for the wake.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the nurse says, after she writes down the number for the funeral home in your hometown. She's nice, and she sounds like she means it. You feel bad, because you're not sorry at all.

You have to find an iron in your basement to iron out your dad's dress shirt. You can't find one, so you and your dad manage with the flat iron you used for your curly bangs. Your mother requests that you don't wear red lipstick for the funeral, and you consider the tube of bright coral red you bought last month. The last time you spoke to your grandmother, she told you that you were nothing but a whore. That you ruined her marriage. You know it isn't right to be vindictive. But you can't help it. You do your eyeliner respectfully small and make sure your heavy chest is covered, but you cannot help but line your lips in a dusty rose, a bit darker than you'd normal do. When you meet your mom at the funeral home, she rolls her eyes at your makeup. But you didn't technically break the rules.

It's heavy in the air, the small-town gossip hanging on everyone and everything like a wet coat, that the man that raped you is at the head of the mourning line, wearing the suit he was married in. Some people pass his outstretched hand entirely, hugging your tearful mother instead.

A family friend crosses the mourning line, pressing you into her baby powder scented liver-spotted chest.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and then a little louder, “I’m sorry you have to be around him.”

And although you’ve never really liked her, she’s the first person to tell you that she’s sorry for you. Not your loss that was mourned long before. But you.

“I’m here for mom,” you say truthfully, “I’m not here for anyone else, especially not that bastard.”

Your great aunt, in a nice pair of black jeans and a floral shirt, leans over. She looks you right in the eye, being a little louder than the murmured conversation of the mourners.

“*You* be nice.”

Your laugh is sharp and short. Ripping out of your chest like a steak knife through a lace tablecloth. You wish you could say you can’t believe her, but the sad fact is, you can.

“I don’t have to be *fucking* nice,” you bite out. Pulling away from the family friend, you exit the funeral home through a cozy wooden door. You find yourself outside, with a handful of butter mints stolen out of the candy dish in the funeral home lobby, naked legs freezing in the cold. Your dad comes out a little later. His lavender dress shirt is wrinkled and the nick he got while shaving is still pink. He doesn’t talk to you. He doesn’t have to. He was next you in the mourning line. A wall of muscle and gruff. The same way he’s been throughout this whole shitty family reunion.

“You want a mint?” you ask, holding out your handful to him.

“Well, hell yeah,” he answers, making you snort a little. You both eat mints in the wind and the white November sunlight, until your mother tells you the service is starting.

Scar Poem #3 – Cigarettes

A few, perfectly circular spots on my arms.
They are not so faded to be unfound, but
they are small, rare. A treasure hunt on
the pale expanse of my forearms
when it's too warm for an overshirt.

It is easy to tell the handful who have asked
that they are cigarette burns from a grandfather
already thought to be a monster.
Therapists, well-meaning adults, doctors
accept this so readily. Easy as holding a ninety-nine
cent Bic to a Newport one-hundred
and inhaling, inhaling.

I have never had to tell them that my grandfather
stopped smoking sometime between sunsets and
bedtime stories when I was very small. Small enough
to cough, open mouthed, when he would hold me in
his lap. Small enough to have no reason to hide
while he shaved at the sink and my grandmother poured
water from a plastic cup over my head in the bathtub.

Truthfully, the scars that dot my arms,
small, unassuming things you trace with your fingertip
in order to find the way, are cigarette burns.
Born still of rage, but the rage of a teenager knowing
better than to believe in monsters. Sneaking out,
when my house was asleep felt like rebellion.

Rebellion of buying, lighting, sucking
minty smoke through my chapped lips to
nestle sweetly in my lungs until I released it
to swirl free and lovely into the night air.
I should have felt better, but after half a pack,
butts lying at my feet like prayers and rosary beads,
the cherry, still and orange, felt good against my skin.

I found a reason to blame for the tears
wetting my lashes. For the thrum of frustration
buzzing under my skin. I could always control
these marks upon my skin, even if
I could not control the others.

Part IV

If there's a bustle in your hedgerow

Don't be alarmed now

It's just a spring clean for the May queen

Yes, there are two paths you can go by

But in the long run

There's still time to change the road you're on.

– Led Zeppelin, “Stairway to Heaven,” 1971

Christmas Eve, 2016

Brown teeth and a bottom lip tobacco bulged
greet me at six am, before birds and my first
round of coffees. He speaks with a slur
Christmas Eve eggnog spiked too much or
Illinois twang, I can't tell.
He slams his paper cup on the counter when I
tell him we don't sell milk cheaper
than four twenty-five.

Christmas dinner is a bag of dollar chips.
Cheese and sour cream tang washed down with
free lemonade mixed with sweet tea, from
the fountain I've never seen cleaned.
A woman with snowflakes peppered in
her carefully styled hair, sneers at me when
I tell her we're out of scratch-offs—
We've been running out since Thanksgiving.
She tells me I'm worthless when I give her
the nickel and dimes of her change. She tells me
her kids will miss not having their stocking's stuffed
this year.

I'm eyeing the flickering islands
of gasoline, detachable hosing, and
electronic screens. Looking—Hoping
for a break in the snow to shelter my drive home.
When a man with grease slicked hair yells at his wife
at my register. She forgot batteries in Santa's last toy.
He tells her she's a shitty mom and throws crumpled
bills at me when I tell him he can't use EBT. As I count
their change, there are tears in her eyes.
Have a great holiday, I tell her—not him.
It's the first time I've meant it in twelve hours.

The Definition of Pretty

According to Merriam Webster:

Pretty (*adjective*)

- 1.) *pleasing by delicacy or grace*
- 2.) *having conventionally accepted elements of beauty*
- 3.) *appearing or sounding pleasant or nice but lacking strength, force, manliness, purpose, or intensity*

Pretty is what men call you at work. They're sometimes drunk or sometimes long-haul truckers who haven't had any human interaction in a few days and you're just there. Pretty is enough to make some men linger by your register. They flirt and are vulgar. They beg you to come back to their trucks and mistake your flush of anger for giddy pleasure and say, "*I love your pretty blush.*" Pretty is when these men shuffle outside after asking you what time you get off. And wait around until you do. When you hide inside the bathroom and call your father to come get you, you feel childish and terrified and helpless. You do not feel pretty.

Pretty is on the scornful tongues of women in the small town you grew up in. It's a mock and sometimes a pity when they talk about you. "*Pretty girls should expect nothing less,*" or "*She won't be so pretty anymore when no man will have here. Not after that.*" Pretty is the same words that echoed around the post office and during church potlucks after your mother's rape. Pretty is a cup size, no matter if it's on the body of an eleven-year-old. Pretty is the reason. Pretty is the blame.

Pretty is sometimes a threat. "*Boys won't think you're pretty if you wear that.*" If you're smarter than them. If you eat that last cupcake. If you swear like that. Pretty is when you wash

your hair and it falls in shiny and wild tangles around your shoulders. It's something your mother says will get you a boyfriend. You don't want a boyfriend; you don't even want men to touch you. Pretty is a privilege you're not sure you want.

Pretty is when you met your grandmother in the nursing home after not seeing her for over seven years. It's the catch in her voice when your mother introduces you again. It's the tears in her eyes and the senile lilt in her voice when she says, "*You're so pretty. Can I hug you?*" You remember when she didn't think you were so pretty, she thought you were just a whore.

Pretty is when she dies that winter and your makeup never smears because you can't cry for a woman who never loved you. Pretty is when people you haven't seen since you were small approach you in the mourning line. "*You grew up so pretty,*" "*You look just like she did at this age, pretty as a picture.*" That morning, you struggled with your skirt and your eyeliner and tried to *not* be pretty, as the man that raped you because you were a pretty child stood at the head of the mourning line.

Pretty is a title that you have somehow gained, but you can never see in the mirror. Pretty is a vase of silken white lilies. Pretty is a handful of cat's eye marbles. Pretty is a decoration, a fleeting glimpse of something just nice enough to mention but not nice enough to think about again. Pretty is small and dainty. A china cup on a china saucer with a hint of pink lipstick around the rim. Pretty describes you in portrait. Pretty is never opening your mouth. Pretty is fragile and delicate and soft. Pretty comes off every night with a damp washcloth and an acne cleanser. Pretty is nothing like you. And people are disappointed when they find out.

Safety in Numbers

A girl I went to high school with
shared a news article on Facebook.
It says: Women have reported as
they jog, or bike, or walk their dogs
in the humid fog of July, down
a well-traveled trail, they have
been assaulted. The article paints
the knife held to the women's
throats and the way the man
behind it told them not to scream
with the care of an artist. The pretty
brush strokes color these attacks—
women pressed into the chest of a man,
unknown, but slightly shorter than
five-five and *probably* of mixed race—
in soothing hues. Not of 'Attempted Rape,'
but of 'Aggregated Assault.'

The girl who shared this article wrote
above it, anchored by smiley face
and red heart emoji:
"Walk in groups guys!"

My fat thumbs
typing with a fury, settled into my
chest like an old wound left to
fester, never quite healed,
I want to tell her.

Women in poodle skirts and with
saddle shoes, hanging from the
tips of their fingers as they left
the local sock hop, pink cheeked
with exertion and joy, chatting about
boys and cars and milkshakes
were still raped.
Women who bound their ribs
Between whale bone and laces,
who were not allowed to leave their
home without a fashionable hat
and an escort's hand
were still raped.

I know she doesn't mean it,

but I want to ask her, when we
stop relying on keys laced
like lover's hands between
our fingers. Pocket knives
and advice spoken by our
parents, as we apply sticky
sweet lip gloss and strawberry
perfume before our first boy/
girl parties. I want to ask her
when we stop
relying on safety in numbers,
rather than, there is safety
for us—just us—
in this world.

Thankful

You spend Thanksgiving Day with your dogs. Your parents left home right as the blue lights of dawn were peeking over the factory next to your house, your mom carrying a casserole of sweet potatoes. They make the two- and half-hour drive back to your hometown to spend the holiday with your extended family before the afternoon.

You've never gotten along with your extended family. Never with your uncle who unabashedly spews racial slurs over his turkey legs and never with your cousin who lets her chubby two-year old throw toy trucks at people, ignoring her child's wails in favor of talking about those 'faggots' who sometimes come in while she tends bar. You always seem to make eye contact with your other little cousin at this point, you both being some of those faggots. Your cousin's face screws up in annoyance and you roll your eyes while lifting your second (or maybe third) Jack and Coke to your lips. But you both never say anything. It's too much of a hassle, really.

It was only with a little resistance, pleas from your mother of coming together despite the fact that the majority of your extended family are disgusting bigots, that you're allowed to stay home. Your mother conceded that she doesn't want your two small spoiled dogs to go all day without being let out and your dad could scarcely keep from laughing at your 'selflessness.'

You spend the day catching up on the trashy talk shows in your DVR and lounging in the creaky recliner with two dogs jousting for space on your lap. You scroll through Pinterest and add washi tape and a five-pound bag of wholesale candy to your Amazon Wishlist. Your body bundled up in your dad's Carhart hoodie, you take your dogs out and let them run around and pee until their little hearts are content and your pug is wheezing more than usual. You heat up a DiGiorno pizza for your Thanksgiving dinner and feed bits of pepperoni to your dogs. The

knowledge that your mother will cook for you and your dad tomorrow keeps the pizza from feeling too much like a disappointment.

You wake on Friday, white light from your window blaring down at you and your cat half covering your face. Your mother is yelling, her shrieks and swears spilling into your room from the kitchen. Your dad answers in a voice filled with restrained annoyance, but never at the decibel of your mother's. Half asleep, you listen for the sounds of things being thrown. Your mom likes to throw things when she gets mad. Shoes and plastic cups full of diet Coke and packets of fast food honey mustard.

You hear her yell a dismissal and her bare feet slap hurriedly against the hardwood until she reaches the washer and dryer outside of your room. She slams the washer lid up as the side door to the garage opens and shuts. Nothing was thrown and your mom seems to be in the stage of her rage where she gives everyone the cold shoulder. The dryer door opens with a harsh click and slight metallic crash as it hits the washer. You roll back over, your cat making a small and annoyed chirp at being moved, and go back to sleep.

When you wake up an hour later you go through the motions of getting up on a weekend. You check your phone and then stumble to the bathroom next door. Flush, wash your hands and then your face. Make a note that you're running out of your face cleanser and then rub down your cheeks, eyes, and nose with moisturizer. Back in your room, you put on leggings, a loathed sports bra, and an old T-shirt. You feed the cats on your way out of your room and only startle a little at the state of your living room. Tubs from the storage unit in your hometown on the rug

and sitting on the couch. Wreath holders stacked on the floor and your dad's coat hanging on the back of the loveseat.

In your tiny kitchen, the card table is set up. Planks of freshly painted trim dry on the kitchen table where your mother sits. She looks up when you enter, her glasses a little bit spotted in the light coming in from the big bay window.

“Would it be too much to ask for you to help with the fucking dressing?” she asks, cutting a potato and throwing it into the stock pot she's had since you were a child. You think, if you were still living on your own and were merely visiting for the holidays, you'd ask her what's got her knickers in a twist and go hide in your room again. But you've been living with your parents, the way you did in high school, for almost a year now and you're getting used to this again. The way your mom is sometimes uncaring in her anger, and the way your dad is uncaring about everything when his untreated mental illness peeks out. You have to admit that you hate it, and often you want to snark back and hide in your room until dinner is ready like you did when you were a teenager.

But you shrug. Open the fridge for the celery and stop along the way for the onion and the plastic cutting board because the two small sections that were passed as countertops in this new rental house are filled. A crock-pot filled with shredded turkey and butter. A mixing bowl and cans of French style green beans and Campbell's soup. A coffee maker with your mom's sugar and creamer sticky mug. A sink full of bowls and rubber spatulas and forks.

You move some of the newspapers that your dad seems to hoard out of your way and set to work opposite your mother. Cutting onions in a small dice and celery the same. Your mother sighs as you sniff yet again, tears from what has to be the most powerful onion you've ever cut streaming down your cheeks and spotting your glasses.

“I need music,” she says, filling the stock pot of potato chunks with water, “Go find me some Christmas music.”

“You hate Christmas music,” you say, already pushing back your chair.

“Just get me some Christmas music, goddamn it.”

When you return from your room with a Bluetooth speaker and the holiday’s station pulled up on Pandora, all the onions are cut and your space is taken up with a huge metal mixing bowl filled with bread cubes and browned sausage, the whole kitchen smelling earthy and slightly perfumed with sage.

“Chicken stock,” your mother commands, stirring.

You’re in the middle of shifting flour and cocoa powder together when your mother cracks. She goes on and on about your dad and their argument, her tone ranging from annoyed at your father and his need to decorate the house, making it ‘messy’, to wishful for the house you left behind when your dad was fired from his job with almost no warning and you all had to move to stay together. Its large kitchen and its many windows. How it’s where she’s lived since she was small and *that’s* her home. Not this rental in a town she and you hate.

You let her vent, she needs it. You don’t mention that you grew up in your old house too, and you concede that Dad is sometimes careless and cold and messy, but you never say anything bad about him. You find that you can’t most of the time. By the time the green bean casserole is in the oven, your mom is swaying, off beat and childlike to ‘Jingle Bell Rock.’ She pulls you out of your chair and you’re both dancing in your too small kitchen. You spin her, but never dip her because of her bad back. Your father comes in, raising a bushy eyebrow and wiping his mouth, smelling like the cinnamon candies he hides and eats by the pound in his garage.

“Dance with me,” she commands of your dad. Your dad’s smile spreads slowly and he unbuttons the top button of his shirt with a wink which makes you gag loudly and your mom shoves him.

“I thought you didn’t like me today.”

“I don’t,” she says, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down to meet her small stature, “I just need a dance partner other than Brandi.”

You scoff loudly, and manage a loud “*Gross, you fucks*” when your dad grabs your mom’s butt and sways them around the narrow dancefloor you’ve made between the food- filled counter and the newspaper- covered kitchen table. When ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ fades into Elvis’ warbling voice and sad guitar, your mom kisses his stubble- coated cheek.

“I *do* love you,” she says, “Even though you’re an ass.”

Your dad rolls his eyes, the same way that you do, and kisses the top of her freshly dyed head.

“I gotta go fix the lights,” he says, and then to you, “Make yourself useful and bring me a slice of pie.”

You yell at his retreated back. “It’s not pie time asshole!”

Dinner is ready before five, but after three. It’s a weird time to be eating Thanksgiving dinner, but you remind your mom that everything you guys do is weird, as she sets out plates. You’re sent to get your dad from the garage and when you get back your dogs are eating fancy turkey wet food that your mom found at Meijer’s and a spoonful of garlic mashed potatoes on paper plates which slip along the kitchen floor. Both of them snorting happily.

You and your parents fill up the rarely used china with more food than any of you can eat and seat yourself in the living room. You start a rerun of *Chopped* and bat away your cat's wondering paw as you eat. The potatoes are a little starchier than you'd like and the turkey is a little dry, but it's warm and it's good and your mom is asking what *exactly* a rutabaga is and your dad is scoffing at a contestant on the show, "How the hell does this dumb shit not know what a rutabaga is?"

It's not home, and you don't think this rental with not enough windows and a draft in every room will ever feel like it. But your dogs are at your feet, looking up at you with their huge brown eyes for scraps and your parents hold hands on the couch and eat pie with one hand. You're not thankful for the mess in the kitchen or the one bathroom that you all share or the way your mom screams and your dad condescends. But you're thankful for this. You're thankful for them.

The Dog

We drive out of the factories and wire
that surround our cul-de-sac,
in a truck we bought with settlement cash.
My dad cranks the heat, left arm balanced
on window's edge and scarred hand on the wheel.
I fiddle with the radio. Turing up CCR and wishing
I'd worn shoes without holes.

He rounds the corner and we're laughing.
He's funny, when he's not mean.
He swerves, breaths too soft from a man built
of sour sweat and sun-toughened skin—
Oh no. Oh no, Brandi.

A rat terrier lies near the sidewalk,
but not near enough.
A cloud of red, poppy-bright and just as sick
spreading from its mouth like a field
on the grey slush road. And dad is cursing
under his breath. Tears pooling
in the crow's feet of his eyes.

And I never knew blood could be that bright.
And I never knew someone so cold to leave
a dog to soak—too hurt to be sleeping
in January slush.

Part V

Alone, listless

Breakfast table in an otherwise empty room

Young girl, violence

Center of her own attention

The mother reads aloud, child tries to understand it

Tries to make her proud

The shades go down, it's in her head

Painted room, can't deny there's something wrong

Don't call me daughter, not fit to

The picture kept will remind me.

– Pearl Jam, “*Daughter*,” 1993

My Mom and I Watch “Mama June: From Not to Hot.”

On Wednesday nights
my mother and I feast upon
the remains of chicken Alfredo
and a family made famous for being fat.

On the season finale Mama June appears
at her ex-husband’s wedding. She is
made *hot* through weeks of sweating
through shirts light enough to see her pores
weep their exhaustion into Rorschach tests
spelling *I hate myself. I hate myself.*

She is made *hot* by letting a surgeon
settle a noose around her stomach
and pulling tighter, tighter
until the organ which holds her shameful
hunger could fit snugly in her palm and
will never truly feed her well again.

My mother looks at her now,
a single rose in a tight red dress,
rather than a whole and unruly rose
bush body. “Wow. She looks
great,” mom says, eyes
pinned to June’s new shell like all
the wedding guests at a wedding
she was not welcomed to.
“Doesn’t she look great?”

She looks thin. Her eyes still laze
sideways and her teeth still look too
perfect to be anything but porcelain
veneers. Her hair is bleached white,
curled with just enough body
viewers can look past how brittle it really is.
When she smiles it is not for herself,
it is not under the Siren’s Song of health.

She doesn’t look great, she looks
sad. But she’s thin and that’s what
matters.

Finches

From “Evolution of Darwin’s Finches and Their Beaks:”

Darwin's finches, inhabiting the Galapagos archipelago and Cocos island, constitute an iconic model for studies of speciation and adaptive evolution. A team of scientists has now shed light on the evolutionary history of these birds and identified a gene that explains variation in beak shape within and among species. (Uppsala University, 2015).

Your mother always told you that her grandmother—your great grandmother—had two finches. A male and a female, both powder blue and yellow like *real* butter—named Pete and Repeat. As a child, your mother found this hilarious—her grandmother, short and with a mess of long, curling, who smoked Prince Albert cigars, and ran a tavern frequented by bikers, and drunks, and men on parole from the prison in Pekin—had two small song birds with silly names. You’ve been told, ever since you could remember, how much you looked like your mother, like your grandmother.

According to everyone who knew your great grandmother, Tracy Marie McC Carson, you don’t look much like her—if you don’t count the mess of curly hair on your head which would be honeyed blonde if you didn’t dye it new penny red—but you have her ‘spirit.’ This is a nice way—you think—of people telling you that you are mean and nasty and ready to fight any and every person you come into contact with who upsets you. You are “*A bitch—just like mom,*” your grandmother told you once. Your mother says that Tracy wasn’t always like that. When she was a child during the Great Depression in Arkansas, she was hard-working and sweet and pretty. But by the time she married your great grandfather at seventeen and left her home in the rear-view mirror of an old Studebaker pickup truck—she was good at taking care of herself and

the tent she and your great grandfather pitched outside of your hometown until they could work towards something with walls and a real floor. She was strong with the way she pumped well water and carried it back full-bellied with your grandmother, then your great uncle, while your great grandfather spent weeks on the road as a long-haul trucker. Tracy was independent, often taking care of herself and her two children without any help from anyone—aside from the envelopes full of bills your great grandfather sent her after he had bought cigarettes and the company of women hanging around the diesel pumps. Tracy’s independence as a woman made her a ‘bitch’—just like you.

It was never said—never by her and never by anyone else—what made Tracy mean. What made her tough enough to throw men twice her size out of her bar, and stub cigars out on the hands of men who slapped her ass when she served them Jim Beam, and swear like a sailor, and buy two song birds from a friend who was going to kill them if he didn’t find a home for them. What made her marry a man she dated and cared about, but didn’t really love too much, in order to move across state lines and live among canvas and poles until she had saved enough to buy a house. But in families like yours—where girls are taught quickly to cover their legs and chests and keep their hair as short as they can for as long as they can—it was never needed to be said what made your great grandmother, a woman who men twice her size never wanted to cross, like she was. She was all fight, no flight held in her tiny frame, not until she got cancer and withered in a nursing home until she took her last breath. It fluttering from her chapped lips like bird wings—climbing to higher ground, safety and maybe peace, somewhere above the hands of men.

Your grandmother was born into the same family as Tracy and you and your mother. She never talked about it either—but a sense of survival, of adapting quickly if only to be able to

peck her beak into the spaces that she could drain for life and safety—was still there. Ever her mother's daughter, your grandmother wasn't just all temper and rage—she was cruel and selfishly clung to anyone who she thought could keep her safe. She hid under the fronds of men—just like those who abused her and her mother—hoping that when she ran out of fight and malice, at least the refuge of her husbands and their unkindness kept her fed and housed away from all those who would make her prey. She adapted to keep herself safe—anyone else, even her own, weren't her concern.

Your mother, for the first time, spoke. She named her mother's husband as the one who had been in her room and in her bed and in all the places she had never allowed him to be, but he took anyway. Her song bird voice never wavered in court rooms or social workers' offices, or even at her mother, who clung to her husband even despite your mother's screams. Something about the way your mother sang her survival—even if it was soft and cut short after she married and put her stepfather in prison—made her kind.

Even though your great grandmother and grandmother had worn brutality and fight along their shoulders like chainmail, your mother seemed to shed all armor, letting it pile at her feet and leaving her bare in the battlefield she was raised in. She survived by clothing herself in the most terrifying cloth she could find. Your mother became vulnerable and compassionate to every person around her—even those who never quite deserved it—she never let herself become prey again by becoming the things that she was taught and you were taught and all of the women before you were taught, would make her the best prey of all.

While Tracy became tough after her abuse and your grandmother became cruel after hers and your mother empathetic and open after her repeated rapes—you think your mother was hoping you'd never quite have to adapt. You would remain the one independent variable. The

one constant, unchanging factor in any experiment that proved what all those before you could have been if not—if only it never happened at all. When you asked your mother once what she regretted most about your childhood, you expected her to say a lot. You expected her to say that she regretted beating you the way she did, or the way she hospitalized you even though you begged and pleaded and your dad had uncharacteristic tears streaming down his stubbled cheeks, or even the way she screamed at you sometimes when she had just had too much of *everything*, not just you.

But she didn't say any of that. She told you, cradling a mug of peppermint hot chocolate in her hands, her wedding ring glinting faintly in the low light cast by a single lamp throwing your living room into varying shades of warmth—yellows and browns and reds all soft and low—that she was so sorry that you learned to hide from everyone and everything, both the good and the bad. At that moment, you remember snorting into your own mug, hot chocolate long gone, half-melted pieces of smashed candy canes staining the bottom in sticky streaks of red. You didn't hide.

In fact, you were *annoying* with how much you were visible. You were loud and brash and swore without regard for anyone who might have heard—and if someone reprimanded you, you were just as quick to tell them all of the reasons they were wrong, all backed by the formal education paid for by you and your father's blue collar jobs and the informal education taught to you by being brought up quick and strong and knowing that you were the only person in the world who you could count on to protect yourself. You never hid. You were just *too much* to be able to hide anywhere or any time.

Your mother shrugged at that, smiling a smile that always felt sadder than it looked. The conversation shifted, moved like sunlight and shadows over soybean fields in late summer before

their harvests. But you could never quite ignore what she said—how you adapted just like all the women before you—even if it wasn't in the same way. You thought about during the summer you lived with your grandmother who looked the other way and worked all the time and your grandfather who got better and better at cornering you. He never had to hide how his hands crept over your thighs and ass and breasts, so you started to spend more and more time out of the house. You found yourself more and more at the public library—tucked behind the stacks with piles of books—only leaving when one of the librarians asked, *“How long have you been here? Aren't you supposed to be home?”*

You thought about all the places you had around your high school and middle school—the locker room used only by the swim team that swelled with chlorine-tinged humidity but was always blessedly empty, the 'pit' in the auditorium where the band played during plays and musicals just out of audience sight and that you learned how to jump down into and climb back out of when you needed to, a bathroom in nearly every wing of the building that was too far out of the way to use during three minute passing periods.

The basement room in your home, cool and scented with incense smoke. With a full-sized bed littered with blankets and pillows and always a fluffy black cat hidden among them, who would crack open a sleepy yellow eye when you opened the door. He would stretch, bearing his soft gray underbelly for you to pet as you soaked in the peace of not having to laugh loudly or talk out of turn in class or tell a classmate to *“Eat shit,”* after they had called you fat or maybe ugly or maybe a slut.

Sometimes you think your mother might be right. You are tough like Tracy and violently mean like your grandmother and always willing to smile at strangers and ask someone if they need to talk like your mother. But you also adapted just like they did. You tuck yourself along

library stacks and in shouting matches with boys and in being the funniest person in the room and under the porch of your grandparent's house with a flashlight and a book because your grandfather couldn't ever climb under there with you. Adaptation keeps you alive—breathing and vibrant and never prey. All the women in your family seem to have mastered it. All of you have different shaped beaks and different colored feathers and a legacy born of survival and fed by fear to keep it going—forever.

Mother

Wine lipstick, a hint of gold shimmer.
Hazel eyes that I've always wanted. Even though
your license says green. Straight teeth,
tinged gray from medicine you took when
you were young. You got married the second
time in braces and smiled glinting and happy
next to my dad's rented tux. Red haired styled
carefully. Clouds of hairspray
leave the sink sticky. Perfume follows you
around rooms.

We grocery shop on Friday's,
with the tea leaf dregs of your check,
swirling around with loose cash.
You talk always. Not just your coworkers
and friends. But the woman with
grape tomatoes in her cart.
"I prefer cherry," you say, smiling
like produce is a secret told at slumber parties.
"The only sweets that don't go to my middle."
You say and the woman laughs.
And when you pay for our groceries,
you sign your check in perfect second-grade
cursive. Your eyes darting nervously at the till.
Afraid that this one will bounce, too.

Baby Fat – A Legacy

In the few years after your rape, you are morbidly obsessed with learning all you can about sexual abuse. Logging away stolen hours at the family desktop in what your family lovingly refers to as the ‘junk room,’ you devour facts, statistics, and survivors’ stories as the office supplies and canned goods in the built-in pantry watch silently. There is so much you feel and understand. There is so much you wonder about. There are so many questions you still have. What makes people do this. What happens to them all and why is it not as bad as it should be. What will happen to you? You don’t know what you’re looking for as you slough through message boards and websites you have no right to be on as a middle schooler. But you know you don’t find it. Not there.

Your mother talked to you about her own sexual abuse at the hands of your grandmother’s first husband only when you needed to know. She spoon-fed you bits here and there like any mother would. A bite of candy here, a mention of how much she hated her stepfather, Finney. A piece of hot dog cut bite-sized only to be thrown in stove-top mac ‘n cheese, along with a comment about how your grandmother, Glenda, loaded everyone into her car after your mother told her what Finney was doing. They drove around—a stock photo of a family, little brother and family dog included, on a drive through corn fields and farmland—and talked and talked, only coming home to a house, riddled with fist-shape holes and doors which couldn’t be locked, when Finney promised it wouldn’t happen again. A chunk of Christmas ham pilfered while it cools on the gas-range and a story, short and choppy. She tells you she was desperate when it started to happen the next day after the car ride and continued and continued. She was sixteen when she asked a guidance counselor at school to help her.

“She wasn’t going to help me, so I didn’t even bother telling her,” your mom said, not talking about the guidance counselor at all. At thirteen, you were too old to be spoon-fed now, but still young enough to need your mother. You needed her story, her understanding more than anything now, it grew in you so suddenly and in a way you never expected. Growing up as an only child, your DNA became altered as you grew. Loneliness became a gateway to imagination: the very best playmate. You learned to entertain yourself easy as breathing, and you were never aware that you should feel lonely. But there was no beautiful way to describe the loneliness you felt in middle school, after the rape. There is no beautiful way to describe how desperately you needed your mother.

When you asked your mother to tell you, tell you anything she could remember, anything she could give you about the childhood she spent like you did, terrified all the time, with breaks only to be so numb enough as not to feel the things happening to the body.

“I don’t remember, Brandi. I don’t want to remember most of it,” your mother said, not looking at you. Sometimes you think she might have been driving, or cutting onions, or painting her nails ruby-slipper red.

“I’m sorry honey, it’s not as fresh for me as it is you. You’ll learn to forget about it, too. Give it time.”

Audrey calls this compartmentalizing. She says this is something people who suffer from PTSD do often because they need to in order to go to work and ride buses and shop for bread. They need to pack their trauma into boxes, tape them shut and neatly stack them in order to function. For as much as you seem to hate it, Audrey says you’re very good at this. She also says (and has been saying this to you for the ten years you’ve been taking space up on her couch, sneakered feet tucked under you, joking your way through things which hurt too much to be

taken seriously) that everyone will have to open these compartments someday, when they are healthy—“well-adjusted”—enough to not be swallowed by those Pandora’s box calamities they have sealed away.

“Somethings you won’t remember because your brain won’t let you,” she said making enough eye contact with you that still makes you want to hide, *“That’s okay, though. Your brain has a vested interested in keeping you safe, I’m sure you understand.”*

You do.

Truthfully, the things you remember about your rapist fill the smallest and emptiest spaces in your head like a junk drawer. They are odd bits that don’t belong together, or anywhere at all. They are birthday candles half-burned, nine-volt batteries, a battered weather radio with an antenna, a tiny lightbulb that doesn’t fit any of the lights in your house anymore. They fill a space in the back corner of your mind that you know how to find if you need to, when you might need something from its depths. You don’t look for them often, and your mother was right as she is about most things, you have forgotten more about them at twenty-five than you remembered at thirteen.

Your rapist’s name is Floyd. He was your step-grandfather before Glenda died. He was your step-grandfather when he raped you in the basement of their home and you had carpet burns on your back from the green indoor-outdoor carpet that went all throughout the space, except in the room where the washer and dryer were. He walked with a cane after he had a series of heart attacks which they fixed with a handful of stints.

He wore a blue robe which he never tied and you still have odd and jarring nightmares about. He was the fourth person to hold you in the hospital after you were born. While your mother was in labor, he fought with a nurse about smoking outside the birthing room, but he did

go outside to finish his Camel before he held you. His middle name started with an 'E' and he had a Pisces tattoo he got when he was serving in Korea, but you don't remember where. His license said his eyes were green, and you think you should remember this but you don't. He insisted that you look him in the eye while he raped you and Audrey says this is repressed because your brain does its best to keep you alive even when you don't want to be. He used Zest soap only sometimes. The rest of the time he smelt strongly of body odor, so when you got a whiff of it from some man at the university job which funded your Masters, you were thrust into your first flashback in about ten years. He never taught you to play chess properly because when he beat you, queen crossing checkered tiles to look up at you, he got a prize. He got a lot of prizes.

After you told your parents you begged them not to call the cops. Your mother told you enough for you to understand that it would go to court and it would be in the local papers. Your father made sure to tell you it wouldn't include your name as a minor, but you knew even then that the town your grandparents lived in was small, and your hometown was smaller. You knew how small-town gossip worked—the hailstone damage it could leave in the windows of your life—better than how to do long division. Your dad told you he loved you, he did, but he called the police anyway. You pleaded with your mother to stop him, but she shook her head and told you that it needed to be done.

You were not allowed to go to court. You were only allowed to go to a tiny home in Pekin that looked so much like the cozy homes in fairytales that you loved that you didn't know it was the Tazewell county Child Advocacy center until you talked to a woman in a room with a mirror and a red couch. She wrote the things you said on a whiteboard in a pattern you still don't understand with green marker. Her penmanship was beautiful and she was kind, but you still

didn't tell her everything. You knew the price of letting her write everything that happened to you, and you couldn't pay it.

Most of what happened with Floyd came out in a rush of tears and screams when you were fifteen and gave your first boyfriend a hickey and your dad called you a whore. He didn't mean it, like most of the things he's prone to saying when he's upset, but it didn't matter in the end. Even a kind smile and letters which belonged embossed on book covers did not make you tell her the whole truth. You even wrote a letter asking for the mythical creature of a judge not to put Floyd in jail. The judge listened when he shouldn't have, because he thought what a twelve-year-old wanted should be taken into account. He told your mother at trial that you wrote so eloquently for your age. He didn't comment on Floyd's public defender, who said that the whisper-thin list of accusations was because Floyd had hoped to "*prepare her for boys*" and that you had breasts and hips that your mother had been calling baby fat for longer than you can remember, so he thought it was okay. You were developed in areas most children weren't, the line between childhood and womanhood skewed just enough.

In the end, Floyd received weekends in jail for six months and an order to pay for the medications you were going through like shoes because none of them fit right. His money was sent to your parents with an enveloped marked 'restitution.'

People have asked you, like the question is foam peeking white and thick at the edges of their lips: *Why?* Why didn't you tell everything? Why didn't you put him in jail?

The answer is floral patterned origami paper that you are able to fold, again and again, into shapes that all make sense. Sometime you fold it into a shape of a kid, who was terrified by many things. The terry cloth shorts spotted with blood that you tried desperately to wash out in the bathroom sink and the beating you received when you told Glenda what her husband did.

Small towns with nothing but secrets which would never really believe that secret. Sometimes you fold it into your great aunt, Lou Ellen, who told you at her cigarette yellowed kitchen table to *“Plea the fifth if they bring you on that stand. You owe your grandma that. You owe us all that for this lyin’.”*

Sometimes, when you’re feeling vindictive with the need to be well-read and intelligent, you fold it into words you harvested like spring onions and okra from internet pages and years spent under a psychiatric sun. You feed people with statistics that thirty percent of children sexually abused were abused by a family member and that the average perpetrator only spends about three years in prison anyway, so why did it matter? You wait until their bellies swell with realities and horrors dressed as numbers and then you give them one more bite, *“There’s also familial cycles of abuse. If you have a family history of rapes and incest, the cycle will repeat itself, again and again. Sometimes it won’t ever stop.”*

Sometimes you are tired. Your hands hurt from creasing well-marked lines and remembering exactly the ways in which you bend and pull in order to make the paper what you want it to be. You smooth the paper flat and you look at it for what it is. A legacy that bloomed in your blood the day you were born like it did in your mother’s. In Glenda’s. In your great grandmother’s, if the well which small-town gossip springs from can be trusted. In your aunts and cousins. Even a trace in your dad, so small that it only can be pressed from his bloodstream with a tourniquet so tight it will cut off any living flesh if it held too long.

This legacy can be folded again and again, the *‘why’s’* following crease after crease. But the crease that you can feel in the dark and in your sleep is the crease that your mother knows too. It’s a crease that you can’t be sure of, but pictures yellowed with age and spotted with water tell you Glenda and your great grandmother could finger this crease as well as you can.

The women in your family are born chubby and blonde, but they are not like that for long. Baby fat shifts, becomes breast and hips and something shaped like a woman. Baby fat makes you all shaped like something you are not yet, something which can and will be used by men. Baby fat is the blame placed on the women in your family. Baby fat is the name given to the legacy written in the blue-thin veins that crisscross the back of your hands and across the pale skin on your wrist. The answer you scoured for, screamed at the sky for, begged from your mother, your grandmother, anyone willing to listen for, was written for you in the swell of hips and breasts. It was written by women too scared, too used to the wondering hands of uncles, fathers, grandfathers. No one needed to tell you at all, you just had to look at yourself in the mirror and see the sins of your shape, like the women before you.

A Proposal to the Loch Ness Monster

The first time I was caught by my
would-be rapist's spider thread trap
I was playing hide 'n seek.
The basement laundry room seemed
enough. Behind a Rubbermaid tub filled
with handmade quilts and with the faux fur
trim of stored winter coats tickling my
crown, I felt safe enough. But something
went wrong. A hanger sang too shrill
when it scrapped a metal bar. My elbow
bumped the washer's side with a resounding
metallic hum. And my reveal was a debt—
I owed my first kiss with tongue and the
first touch of many that I didn't want
to the victor. I have been trying to hide
better since then.

When I see your pictures, all taken with
cameras too far, too old—you are dark
enough to be a trick of light on a lake.
You are shapeless enough for the men behind
those lenses to wonder if you're there at all.
I don't mean to pry your story—old legend,
old myth— but I know you're like me.
Women who are skittish and shy,
who hide even when the world demands
our appearances, our smiles, our good graces
to those who made monsters of our lives.
I know you are keeping yourself safe,
but you must be lonely like me.

But if you allow me to toe into your waters
let the gentle waves lap over my thighs
and over still like a lover's kiss
I would be the humblest student.
Following along flat-smoothed stones and
grit-rough sand as you teach me how to hide
while everyone is looking. I would weave chains
of heather to hang around your neck.
I would prick wrinkled fingertip pads on
nettles and blue thistle. Wail a Banshee's
scream if any man came too close to us.
You would never be alone again and I
would learn how to hide well enough

to never be found again.