The Candlemaker: Records from the Personal Archives of Morris St. Martins

Emily Jordan Parsley
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/3315

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.
THE CANDLEMAKER: RECORDS FROM THE PERSONAL ARCHIVES OF MORRIS ST. MARTINS

EMILY JORDAN PARSLEY

Master’s Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny, MH, MFA, Chair

Rosa Alcala, MFA

J.D. Pluecker, MFA

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
Dedication

For all those like the residents of Morris: I promise you are real
THE CANDLEMAKER: RECORDS FROM THE PERSONAL ARCHIVES OF MORRIS ST. MARTINS

by

EMILY JORDAN PARSLEY, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
May 2021
Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank my thesis director, Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny, for your unwavering support since day one of this project. You understood what I was trying to do before I could turn it into words, written or spoken. Your enthusiasm for my writing and your belief in me (especially when I felt so unsure of myself) has meant more than I am capable of conveying.

To my thesis committee, Rosa Alcala and J.D. Pluecker—my sincerest gratitude for your willingness to be involved in my strange little project, and for your kindness and patience with its development.

To those of my peers and professors in the UTEP Creative Writing Department who helped me along in these past three years, you also have my deepest thanks.

Lastly, to my dearest friend and creative partner, Sam: you were there at the start and at all the places in the middle and end. Thank you for letting me drag you around South Georgia cemeteries in the scorching July heat. I love you very much.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ i
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... ii
Preface ........................................................................................................................ iii
Works Cited ................................................................................................................... xxii
The Candlemaker: records from the personal archives of Morris St. Martins .......... 1
Vita ............................................................................................................................... 159
Origins

On July 15, 2019, I drove from Kentucky to visit the town of Morris, Georgia for the first time since I was a young teenager. Apart from the random assortment of homes that may be hidden within forested, swampy swaths of land near the railway, Morris consists of a single, main road with three homes, a long-abandoned general store, a long-abandoned doctor’s office, a Methodist church with a cemetery, and a barn. It used to have a mobile home, where my dad lived sometimes.

Despite spending several long weekends a year in Morris when I was a kid, I don’t have a lot of clear memories of it. What I have left, I’m not sure if I actually remember it or if I’ve just filled out memories around what photographs remain. There are pictures of me and my sisters in front of his mobile home in the winter with socks over our hands for gloves—I’m pretty sure we had gloves, but we must have lost them. There are pictures of us in front of the barn near his trailer in our jean short overalls, hands red with clay dust. There is a picture of me, orange hunting cap pulled over my eight year old forehead, concentrating on the BB gun in my hands. It’s clear that I know how to hold and shoot it. It’s a very Deep South photograph, wrought with casual white American violence.

Back in the Fall of 2018, during my first semester in grad school, I began thinking about Morris again. I had not thought about it in a long time. I called up my older sister in the airport on my flight home, and asked her what she remembered about it. She’s always had a better memory than me. There was plenty of overlap—we both remembered the cemeteries and family grave plots that you would stumble onto if you wandered for long enough. We both remembered
the warnings we were given by our father. Take private property signs seriously, wear an orange 
v vest if you go into the woods, stay away from the yellow jacket nests, you can only fish in Mr. 
Gary’s trout pond if you get permission first.

Over the next couple of months, Morris followed me around, gently haunting me as I 
went about my daily life, and eventually intersected with another obsession of mine: queer 
memory and archives. What started as a general interest in becoming more familiar with queer 
history developed into a fascination with the process of archiving and collective memory in a 
situation where the memories themselves are, at best, fragmented, and more often than not, 
vioently stamped out and erased from the records of history. As I began to dig through 
local/state archives for information on Morris (there is very little to be found), I thought about 
the various conditions through which memory is lost. In comparison to queer history, records of 
Morris are lost due to the town’s “insignificance” in the grand scheme of capital “H” History. 
For most of its history, it existed as Morris Station, and was barely anything more than a railway 
stop for getting to other places. For this reason, it has faded.

This is when the construction of *The Candlemaker* actually began to form in my head. 
Morris, Georgia has a fair amount of cemeteries surrounding it; there’s a manuscript, self-
published by Jacquelyn M. Shepard, that details the cemeteries of the area, including the names, 
dates, and epitaphs on the headstones, and vague, classically rural directions on how to get to 
each of them, like, “go South on the state road until you see the Johnson’s old blue farmhouse,” 
which endeared me to the book as a familiar and frustrating method of instructing.

These cemeteries were a fascination for me, and thus became one of the focal points 
through which I was looking at Morris. So much of queer history is about grief—or, at least, I 
find myself hit with grief over and over again when I comb through queer archives. I grieve the 
people we are able to know, their hardships and losses, and I grieve the people we will never
know, who fell through the cracks, were erased, or never got a chance to be known. My grief is not even always about deaths—though Lord knows there have been plenty of those—but the loss of what has never been shared. Cemeteries are a monument to lives that are certain to be forgotten in their whole, but the physical markers remain.

The Candlemaker

The Candlemaker follows two main threads. First, the reader interacts with the archivist themself, Morris St. Martins, an amnesiac living in our modern day who works for the Quitman County Historical Society to take down records of the local cemeteries. This task quickly turns into an obsession as they begin to have visions of the past residents of the town and turn to candlemaking as a way to commune with them. Morris St. Martins’ story comes in the form of three documents: their communions with townsfolk which recorded after the fact, their notebook of inventories, poetry, and sketches, and transcripts of their conversations with their friend Laurence Briar. The second thread is excerpts from the journal of Coriander Sloane, a seventeen year old trans girl in the 1940s who lives in Morris. Cory’s journal describes her struggles as a young trans person living in the rural South, as well as her relationship with her younger brother Ben, who is dying, the town doctor Aldous Birch and his partner Bartholomew Cree, her mother Deidra, and her partner, Nina. Cory’s journal acts as a window through which the reader looks into the same past that Morris interacts with, but perceives differently.

When I went back to Morris in 2019, dragging my friend Sam along with me for moral support, I was theoretically there to do some research that I couldn’t do remotely. I don’t know what I expected to find, really—perhaps some significant event from my childhood would reveal itself and clarify why I was obsessed with a nothing town that I had spent a small portion of my life in. We spent a good chunk of time in the records and genealogy sections of the two little
libraries within a thirty mile radius, and the rest of our time was spent hunting down the
cemeteries from the Shepard manuscript. As interesting and useful as the trip was, a fog sat in
my head the whole time I was there, and when we left I felt bits of it slipping away again. It was
as if the town itself resisted my remembering it.

This is why Morris, Georgia, a ghost town from my childhood, is the backdrop on which
I must talk about queer history. My own, personal queer history is full of empty spaces where
experiences “should” be. Rural queerness, perhaps particularly rural queerness with a healthy
sprinkling of Fundamentalist Christianity, is a recipe for loneliness. Even as a child, whenever I
was in Morris with my dad, it had such a permeating sense of loneliness. Of emptiness. I
remember three people who lived in Morris, all of whom were over the age of 60, and two of
whom have died since I last checked. In my extensive research of Morris, I never found any
documentation that hinted at something queer going on—no correspondences, no shared home
deeds between two people of the same gender, nothing. But I had not expected to find anything.
It seems natural to me that Morris, with no material, empirical connection with queerness besides
my own brushes with its landscape, should house these stories.

Imagination must occur where there are no memories. I feel uncomfortable claiming
Morris, Georgia, as it is not my home, and the way its history intertwines with my own is
tangential. But Morris and places like it already exist on the crumbling outskirts of time and
recollection, so if you go looking there for a recognition of self in the form of concrete
solidarity—in my case and the case of this novel, queer solidarity—there’s all likelihood that you
won’t find it, which is rather my point. Not finding these histories does not mean they’re not
there—they are. I strongly believe that there is no piece of history that queerness has not
touched, and that any silences or gaps in our collective memory should not be taken as proof that
queer folks weren’t there, but the opposite. The Candlemaker asks the reader to imagine the
certain but unrecorded past, and to participate in the construction of a postmodern narrative from fragmented knowledge and archives. It utilizes its fluid relationship with genre and character to create a dialogue about how form might influence the way the reader thinks about collectivity, intertextuality, and identity.

Trans Poetics: Genre and Gender Fluidity

When I was first beginning to consider what I would like my thesis to be, I was having a bit of a genre crisis. I had come into this program as a fiction writer, had never written a poem in my entire life, and had read very little poetry besides. I was dreading the task of taking a poetry course, but by the end of my second semester, I was completely in love with poetry, and by the end of my third semester, it felt much more natural than my fiction. I have a hunch that this naturalness has more to do with the fact that I was writing poetry completely on instinct, since I had very few “rules” of poetry in my head, whereas I have studied fiction for much longer, and had started to get bogged down by all the externally and internally imposed rules. When I discussed this genre crisis with Professor Aguilar, she suggested that I consider hybrid novels as a jumping off point for how to structure The Candlemaker. My tendencies seem to be to cling to structure as a safety net that requires less confidence in my ability to create coherency out of something more nebulous. This book has forced me to break down structure and genre, and rebuild it in a way that best fits not a collection of stories, but of imagined artifacts that coalesce into a semi-singular story.

A book that wishes to showcase the many forms of memory and preservation could never hope to stick to a single genre, and while I label The Candlemaker as a hybrid novel for the sake of ease, even this description does not fully encompass its relationship with genre. Static genre makes me restless—this is the collision of genre-and-gender-fluid. My personal trans poetics
engage with language and genre on the level of realness, in the sense that it is difficult for trans
language to take up the space of the real. Language and gender essentialism makes sure of this,
and there is no need for the way I use language to not reflect this. While I sometimes dislike the
term “queering” due to its overuse and subsequent misuse, the best way to explain it might be to
say that my writing is an attempt at queering genre.

During several of the “Communion” sections of the novel, Morris St. Martins slips from a
traditional prose narration style into verse without explanation. For example,

Laurie stood a couple feet away, holding his hands out in that same way he did when we
first met, like he was afraid of spooking me.

“Laurie—I’m—they—” I turned to gesture to the two men, to the cause of the
ache in my chest, but they were gone. “I—”

the ache, like a tide, washes
out, distant with a threat
of return.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I’m—” I looked back to the grave, the one I was sure wasn’t there before. It
looks old now, the fresh dirt replaced with grass and moss. (Parsley 35)

The break in Morris’ recounting of the dialogue between themself and Laurie to, “the
ache, like a tide, washes / out, distant with a threat / of return” serves as a way to queer the text
and showcase my trans poetics by breaking through an unnecessary barrier of genre.

In the anthology Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics, Trish
Salah’s poem about her own trans poetics contains these lines, “Enter the cliches, so as to be
entered / Into the real. Reach over the body, ok? / Recognize practice makes unconscious” (15).
In the same anthology, kari edwards writes,
“traditional chronological narratives create recognizable forms. time situates form within a past relative to the present, form has a category… recognizable forms are those events that take place in progress. recognizable is something repeatable enough to be seen as a noun and situated in a category” (8).

In Stephanie Burt’s poem, “So Let Am Not,” she writes, “This poem makes eyes at you, / eyes back at me. / It cannot be / whatever it wants to be.” Throughout trans poetics, there is a sense of straining for the real, within our own bodies, within our own writing. Queer theorist J. Halberstam writes, “The real [for transgender people] is that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being” (In A Queer Time and Place 30). I think I am hoping to find a small sliver of the space of the real with the creation of this book, but I do not wish to do this by creating an inauthentic recreation of more traditional forms of writing. Thus, the form of this book must constantly be shifting.

Another example of this shifting form is in the ink drawings that occasionally appear. When I first began to do art for this book, I tried pencil sketches and then watercolors, but I realized these are ways in which I would represent what I had seen, not how Morris would. Both methods required more detail than Morris would be willing to commit to. So, I switched to ink sketches, which relied less on exact replication of a scene and more on an impression, blacking out what didn’t matter to them as a character.

While I could make the claim that the large swaths of inked black symbolize relation to memory and lack thereof, this honestly didn’t occur to me until after I had completed several of them. My main concern was creating something that required ritual: I used a brush tip ink pen on white sketch paper for most of the larger portions of blackness, and my only focus while I was coloring this in was on the direction of the pen to make sure it all flowed in the correct direction. The repetition allowed time for thought or silence in my own head. If you are attempting to
create memory from visual triggers, but you struggle to hold onto those parts of your brain, repetition while working to hold on to that memory is a logical step.

I read John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* as a college freshman, and it was my foray into the critique of visual art. This section has remained with me:

Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked — and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people… When an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art… these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify. The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past. Consequently fear of the present leads to mystification of the past (10-11).

If the purpose of image is preservation, and in particular, preservation not only of what a thing looked like, but what a thing looked like to a specific person in a specific time, then it would be neglectful of me, I believe, to not include them in Morris’ archive. The images in this book are all either replications of or inspired by things I have seen in the town of Morris. The old window frame is a replication of one of the boarded-up windows of the doctor’s office on Morris Station Road, and the tree over the headstone is inspired by my time spent at Springvale Cemetery.

Morris St. Martins, situationally, is living in the past. Both in the sense that they constantly look to the past residents of the town for answers, and in the sense that the town itself, in its dying state, is very little more than a gradually decaying image of a past life. If we subscribe to John Berger’s way of seeing, and must attempt to see ourselves in art of the past
without the barrier of mystification, then surely the art created by a study of the past would also lead to demystification.

**The Archive**

As a brief introduction to the theoretical framework behind *The Candlemaker*, I will give an overview of my foundational understanding of the queer archive and how it functions. ONE Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles has been especially useful to me; its collections were the beginning of my attempts to pull narrative from disparate fragments. For example, there is a collection of letters received by Robert Rosenkrantz, a nineteen year old who was tried and convicted of the murder of the boy who gay bashed then outed him. The letters sent to Rosenkrantz in prison were from other young queer people who had read about his court case and were offering him words of solidarity (ONE Archives, Coll2008-062). It was while scanning through this collection and finding articles and accounts surrounding the court case that I realized the significance of the archive as collective narrative, and how documents and ephemera can act as solidarity or violence, dependent on their intent and impact. The influence of collections like that of Robert Rosenkrantz are clear in *The Candlemaker* with passages like the following, which is an excerpt from the diary of Cory Sloane:

Forgot to mention: Dr. Birch got a piano delivered. It’s the nicest thing I ever seen. It came just a week before Mr. Cree got here. It’s a billion times nicer than the piano in the church that Mrs. Johnson plays on Sundays, which sounds a little wonky no matter what they do to it. Dr. Birch says he’ll teach Ben how to play it. He offered to teach me too, but it’s so fine looking, I’m afraid to touch it. Never occurred to me that Dr. Birch is rich, but he gotta be, to be having something like that. (Parsley 23)
Most of what Cory writes about is her day-to-day life, her relationships with other people, her frustrations with those people. Cory’s diaries as a part of the archive of *The Candlemaker* are essential to how I want it to be understood: the good majority of any archive does not contain monumental information that will change the way we view the world; archives are the collections of incidental ephemera that make up history. In this way, Cory’s writing acts as a method through which I am able to dialogue about queer history and archives.

**Privacy and Characterization**

In regards to characterization in *The Candlemaker*, I tend to follow a postmodern construction. In Orhan Pamuk’s book *The Center: From The Naive and Sentimental Novelist*, he writes that, “...the aspect of the human being we call ‘character’ is a historical construct, and that, just like our own psychological and emotional makeup, the character of literary figures is an artifice we choose to believe in” (67). Similarly, when Hazel Smith writes about postmodern characterization, she writes that “...the concept of character has been largely replaced by the notion of postmodern identity, which centres on a fluid and multiple subjectivity. It plays down individuality… Postmodern conceptions of subjectivity stress *difference*” (140). This type of characterization is most obvious in characters like Laurie Briar, I believe, whom we only see through Morris’ eyes and the transcripts. In Morris’ inventory of Laurie, they consistently slip between their thoughts and Laurie’s dialogue without transition, like so:

To any old CD or cassette, any old song on the radio, a particularly bold bullfrog. This one’s my favorite. Listen, Morris. Isn’t that incredible? Fucking perfection. He tilts his head to the side, eyes closed, arms stretched upwards like he’s trying to reach into the trees and grab the cicada’s music with his bare hands. (Parsley 69)
Due to the nature of the archive, I also consider the overlap of characterization and privacy in relation to documentation. The various types of documents that appear in *The Candlemaker* are of course meant to showcase the ephemera of queerness, but I also want to examine the struggle of private versus public knowledge. The Grave Day Transcripts sections of my book are labeled as having an unknown origin, i.e., were not recorded by either Morris or Laurie, and are meant to have a bit of a voyeuristic quality to them. For example, in the section below, the reader eavesdrops on Morris and Laurie in the same way Morris does to the folks of historic Morris:

MORRIS Do you think they can hear me, when I talk to them?
LAURIE The folks you commune with? I don’t know. Do you?
MORRIS Sometimes. Maybe not consciously? It’s like. When a flame is snuffed, there’s still a trail of smoke echoing around where it was. Does that make sense?
LAURIE Well… not really.
MORRIS Mm.
LAURIE Sorry.
MORRIS Mm. I hope they can hear me. Or, just. Know I’m there? Will be there? I hope they know our future exists. (Parsley 17)

Morris acts from a desire to connect, but inevitably ends up acting, at least occasionally, as a voyeur. There is so little material evidence of historical queerness because of its suppression, yes, but due to the all-too-familiar queer anxiety of being known or discovered, it must be acknowledged that there are times when seeking out this information begins to feel—and in many cases, is—invasive and unwanted. While the subjects of these transcripts, Morris and Laurie, are both openly queer characters, these documents do feel a bit like an “outing,” due to there being, within the fiction, no intention for those conversations to be heard outside of those
two characters. I felt it was important to include this aspect of archives and private documents, given that confidentiality is a crucial aspect of what must be grappled with when studying these things, and it is often difficult to judge what should remain private if no explicit demands have been given. Lorena Hickock burned many of the letters between Eleanor Roosevelt and herself; Mary Mercer’s censorship of her own letters and therapy transcripts with Carson McCullers hid the truths of their relationship for decades after. While these people are long dead and the outing cannot hurt them, and while I do believe knowledge of their queerness has been vitally important to many people, myself included, I cannot write about archives and privacy without at least contemplating in what ways we might, in our thirst for knowing, violate privacies in a way that the subject in question never agreed to. I remain wary of truth at the cost of unwanted exposure.

Additionally, from a craft perspective, treading the line between privacy and exposure increases tension, as long as the ambiguities remain interesting. In Jerome Stern’s *Making Shapely Fiction*, he writes, “Significant ambiguities rise from not withholding information but from being richly informative” (85). It follows that if I give enough significant detail about Morris, there are aspects of them that may remain ambiguous. In the final poem of *The Candlemaker*, Morris writes, “I will never remember the thing that left me to mourn, / what split me open and excavated the artifacts of my / life, left me without a sense of gravity” (Parsley 153). These ambiguities regarding Morris’ past that are never discovered do not remain hidden for the sake of confusion, but to require the reader to consider the private nature of archival materials.

As I mentioned earlier, I wish my alternative mode of knowledge to come from imagination, and from the understanding that creation of reality is not a cop out, but a necessary gap to fill, especially when a recreation of reality is not possible. In *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* Jenn Shapland addresses the feeling that she was “going crazy” while reading Carson
McCuller’s letters to other women, that if McCullers was a lesbian, surely someone must have written about it by now, and that Shapland, as a lesbian herself, must be projecting onto it what she wanted to read. She writes, “I was suspicious of my own desire for ‘proof’” (41). This is a constant struggle for the queer researcher; the burden of proof is always on us. I wish to use the indisputable fact that queer people have existed throughout history to further my claim that more traditional forms of knowing are not inherently superior, especially in the face of archival silence, a concept that Carmen Maria Machado says results in the fact that, “Sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories” (4). With the knowledge that people have and will continue to erase queer identity by whatever means best fits the culture at the time, it is my intention to actively counteract not only this erasure, but to set into motion a text that does not rely on traditional forms of knowing. Whether or not my writing is dismissed by larger normative expectations matters less to me, as those expectations are formed within a much larger system that is out of my control.

Due to this intent, I must consider not only the effects of trauma and erasure on memory, but also what linguistic power the author might have within the system that the author and the writing itself resides in. In Talia Mae Bettcher’s writing about identity disclosure and violence against trans people, she notes that seeking justice or identity affirmation within the very same system that enacts violence upon the oppressed body is often a futile effort, and that working to become recognized by the system is not necessarily the solution, since the system, judiciary or otherwise, will always privilege those in power (48). However, it is, of course, in the Bulterian mode of thinking, nearly if not completely impossible to extricate oneself from the system that harms you and makes you complicit all at once. Bettcher writes, “Just as we do not always have
authority over how our bodies are understood, so too do we not always have authority over what our words mean” (54).

I have frequently been asked by readers and editors to “explain” my characters’ identity to the audience, either as a justification for their existence or to avoid “confusion” about their identity. I find this to be an interesting gap of trust in the narrator’s disclosure of information to the reader. There are many parts of a character’s identity that one could leave unexplained and have that decision go unquestioned, but gender identity in particular seems to become a point of contention with those who read in a normative fashion. I am once again reminded of Jenn Shapland, and her edict to herself to “read like a queer person” (22). The normative reader requires a performance of “coming out” to the audience, and thus limits the type of story that the queer creator can tell to only “coming out” stories, and by this model, the power dynamic of reader and writer becomes unbalanced. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls this the “epistemological privilege of unknowing,” which is to say, the privilege that occurs when the powerful ignorant get to define the terms of identity disclosure (7). While I ask the reader of *The Candlemaker* to read like a queer person, this is paralleled within the book itself, wherein Morris themself “reads,” or observes, the past residents of the town through a queer lens; it is a given for them.

**Collectivity, Queer Martyrization, and the Death of the Author**

In his book *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, J. Halberstam writes about the connection between queerness and temporality thus: “I try to use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and the notions of normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” (6). In my writing, I attempt to engage with temporality in two ways: first, in the balance between two separate eras of queerness, which could be read as a simple compare and contrast, but on a more complex level
acts as a method in which my characters can see and be seen by each other. The normative, white-picket fence, middle-class temporality that Halberstam pushes against manifests itself in *The Candlemaker* both in the evident poverty and subsequent issues that are so endemic to the rural South, but also in the character’s desires, in the idea that family and interpersonal connection can be centered without giving way to normative structures of family as the only and best path. In one of Morris’ notebook entries concerning Laurie’s childhood home, they write:

> As he talked I ran my fingers along the picture of the Andromeda constellation, the connection humanity created between disparate objects traceable yet so unreal to me. I tried to imagine the stars’ burning bodies, generating matter and self into a void. I tried to imagine Andromeda herself, as myth, as reality, as the go-between that most of history lives in.

> In theory, I knew of children’s connect-the-dots games. I don’t know if I ever played them, but I have to imagine I didn’t. The concept was so simple, but the travel between one dot and the next—my thumb traced along the line of Andromeda’s left arm—felt so foreign to me, such an impossible distance to span. (Parsley 86)

> In this way, the interruption of linear time in my writing is not only important to look back at our histories to see where we’ve been and what has been left by the wayside, but to look forward with a sense of futurity. This interruption is also why the archives are not always in order; Morris perpetually disrupts the linearity of their own experience as they record their communions out of order, and continue to harken back to the cemetery they woke up in, reliving that experience over and over until it solidifies on the page.

> One of my hopes with *The Candlemaker* is to give a sense of the realities of queer history and modernity without turning queer stories into martyr stories. In Halberstam’s study of the
rape and murder of Brandon Teena, in what he calls “The Brandon Archive,” he writes about martyrization of queerness thus,

The murder of this young transgender person sent shock waves through queer communities in the United States, and created fierce identitarian battles between transsexual activists and gay and lesbian activists, with each group trying to claim Brandon Teena as their own… It is easy to explain why homophobic violence might generate such a fierce activist response; it is harder to mobilize such responses for purposes that extend beyond demands for protection and recognition from the state (15). Martyrization does not only occur with the death of a queer person—any injustice towards a person is easy to turn into a righteous cause wherein that person’s body becomes nothing more than a vehicle for said cause, especially in the case of the martyrization of a transgender body, where the “controversial” component is, in fact, the nature of that person’s body in relation to their selfhood. Consider the case of Luna Younger, a transgender girl whose parents’ custody battle over her became a site of controversy in 2019 when her father claimed that her mother was making her present as a girl, despite Luna’s insistence that it was her decision. Her body has become a war ground between conservative people claiming concern for Luna’s ability to know herself at such a young age, and LGBTQ+ activists’ outrage over the idea that a court would allow an abuser access to a young girl for the sake of upholding traditional family structures. I don’t believe that these two group’s actions are equivalent, but I do think it’s important to be aware of whose bodies we are using for what purpose.

To push against this martyrization, Halberstam proposes (and I agree) that a shift away from individualized narrative would aid in destroying the myth that trauma and violence is individualized rather than collective. He concludes his discussion of The Brandon Archive by writing, “For Brandon’s story to be meaningful, it must be about more than Brandon” (20).
But how does martyrization and collectivity tie in with my writing of *The Candlemaker* in the practical, craft-oriented sense? It is my desire that these two concepts converge in the perspective of myself as the author of this book. Roland Barthes’ well-known concept of “Death of the Author” comes into play here, first in his idea of language and its relation to the author, of which he writes, “…it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a preliminary impersonality—which we can at no moment identify with the realistic novelist’s castrating “objectivity”—that point where not “I” but only language functions, “performs” (50). I believe this death, at least in *The Candlemaker*, also connects deeply to intertextuality. Barthes’ loss of author identity, “writing is the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” extends, for me, to a loss of singular identity (49). It expands to something collective and intertextual. Hazel Smith, in turn, writes on intertextuality as one of the cornerstones of postmodern literature, “The author’s personality and interests are not omniscient, and texts are partly made of other texts…” (135).

While, within the fiction, Morris St. Martins is the one to compile the archive, the archive itself is a collective, and requires varying perspectives to become something dynamic and whole. Morris as a researcher does not simply file through stagnant documents and ephemera; their efforts to commune with the people of the past through their candlemaking is a gesture of outreach and collaboration, even before they understand their need for it. In the communion that could best be pointed to for a sense of climax in a largely plotless novel, Morris’ narration slips from “I” to “they” when referring to themself:

*The lighter won’t catch; my hands shake too badly. I cup my palm around it, though there’s not even a faint breeze to snuff it. I try again, again. The lighter sparks for the briefest moment. There is dirt and wax underneath my fingernails—I see it just before I*
am plunged into darkness once more, this time, a familiar hollowness overtaking me—I am numb and empty and nothing and nothing and I am—they are—

they are—

the light catches. they can see. (Parsley 139)

This dissociation, while not healthy in the moment, eventually leads them as a character to be able to reconcile the “I” and “they” and form an idea of “us.” There is a meta death of the author in the sense that I, as the writer of the book, recede from singular identity, and Morris, a character who, in the beginning, does not really have their own identity, must fill themself up with the stories of others and themself in order to experience collective identity.

Towards Futurity
My struggles with the development of The Candlemaker have largely been of the exterior sort: attempting to write during the pandemic, dips in productivity due to chronic illness, et cetera. When I try to consider if I am finished with The Candlemaker, it is difficult for me to discern. There is more I have to say about queer history and archives, but I don’t think it’s meant for this book. I feel, on a technical level, it is not quite where I want it to be. I would like the timeline of the previous residents of Morris to shine through a little more while still retaining the fragmented feel. I want to make sure they tell a story that, while not complete, is satisfying and gives a sense of wholeness.

On a more technical scale, I would have liked the town to be more of a character in the story, have more of a presence outside of the cemeteries themselves. I am still contemplating how to enact this. In a way that I think may be connected to this, I would also like the ending to have a very “we” feeling. One of the first poems in the book goes, “We are all named after things that are dead, / or things that are dying, or things that never lived. / We must remember our
place” (Parsley 12). This sentiment is vital to something that claims to be an archive, and therefore, a collective narrative, and therefore needs to be more present at the end of the book—there needs to be a larger sense of plurality, and “we-ness,” but I’m not sure how to get there, yet. I have spent a lot of time alone with this project, and it is my hope that the more people I share it with, the more I will begin to piece together how to incorporate that plurality.
Work Cited


The Final Communion

Bragen Cemetery | April 2, 2019

Bragen Cemetery had been silent for far too long, with the graves standing stern and unbroken. I sat in front of the latest edition, still 60 years old, shoulders sloped inward, head bowed in a not-quite-prayer. Spotted around me, up the hill, threading through the headstones, are lit candles of variant shapes and sizes; some tall, thin, and listing; some squat and square; some barely anything more than a puddle of wax. My eyes were closed, but I saw the pattern of the flames around me, their constant flux.

It’s not that the candles hold inherent power. More like a conduit, right? I wanted to understand who the townspeople were, so I asked to see them, their struggles, their lives. Placed with purpose and care: on the hillside behind me, a sage candle and a pine candle, for Aldous and Cree respectively. Across from them, lavender and yarrow flower for Deidra and Nina. To my right was the rosemary, for Ben. To my left, a tall, dipped one imbued with honey, for her. There were other candles, scattered memories of people I couldn’t remember except for a phrase or a smell or a touch on the shoulder. Yes, a conduit must have intent: see a person, then love them.

When I opened my eyes, she was there, older than in any mirages I had seen previously, teenage gangliness replaced with broad shoulders and an assured stance. Long, wild hair. Cotton dress, apron with dried blood on the corner, sturdy boots. She appraised the cemetery before her, chin tilted up, as if the headstones were her field of crops.

This should work, right? I needed this to work. “Cory, are you with me?” I grabbed the honey candle, ignoring the hot wax that dripped onto my knuckles, stood, and held it up.
Her eyes roamed for a couple seconds longer before they snapped to the candle, then my face. She smiled and reached out. For a moment I thought she would disappear—or I would, or the cemetery, everyone who’d been buried there—but she took the candle from me, casual, as if our shared space was not a mountain range’s worth of eras to cross. Cory studied the candle, flicked a finger through the flame, touched the pooling wax and rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger.

“Morris St. Martins, yes?”

I nodded.

Her smile broadened. “Took us both a goddamn long time, huh?”
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories | July 17, 2017

[mourning I]
they wake with nothing
    in their head and a chrysalis
dew on their skin.
they are:
cold, they are:
scared, &
    they are:

empty.
[mourning II]
shapes around them take
form: knotted
  fingers
  correct into tree
branches and hair
  on a massive
scalp becomes
  grass. Moon was always and will always be moon.

they sit up, slow
and with a sharpness
  in their chest. they see
stones sprouting from the grass in even,
  orchard-like intervals.
  they are: cold.
    they are: confused.

      they are: empty.
[mourning III]
A second awakening.

The stone orchard is gone. Their chrysalis has been shed. A cacophony of voices beats around them like a flock of birds. The voices need attention. The voices need answers:

“When is your birthday?”

“When is the current president?”

“What is your name?”

A flicker, an instinct, sparks a memory: “Morris.”

“Morris what? What is your last name?”

they are: cold.

they are: empty.

they are:

“Just Morris.”
“You were found in St. Martins Cemetery. What were you doing there?”

Their body is stiff and unused. Their shoulders shrug out of sync, left, then right.

“Can you speak?”

Shoulders: left then right.

“Can you try?”

Left. Right.

“My name is Jennifer. You said your name is Morris. Can you repeat your name back to me?”

Left. Right. Then: “Morris.”

“Good,” Jennifer says.

“How are you feeling?”


“And?”

“I am.” They close their eyes. Press fingers to face, then chest. “Fogged?”

“Tired,” Jennifer suggests.

Right. Left.

“What else?”

How many things do they have to be?
“I am. Empty.”
From the Memory of Cory Sloane, Aged 16, Recorded as Well as She May Remember

7 July 1943
Mr. Cree gave me a biography of Walt Whitman, who’s a poet, I guess, but he said it’s not all that accurate. He also said that there’s a kinda book called an autobiography, where you write all the things that happen to yourself, which sounds much better to me. Ain’t no one getting it wrong, that way. I’m going to start writing down the things that happen to me, just in case anyone goes and tries to write a biography about me, they don’t go getting things wrong.

8 July 1943
I gotta wake up early enough to watch the daytime animals stretch and yawn. Early enough so that the nighttime animals are still crawling into bed. It’s gotta be between 4:30 and 5:00, where the bullfrogs are still going at it but the morning birds have begun their wakeup calls. They fight over this transition of days and I watch the chaos of it like it’s one of them cowboy films, not sure who I’m rooting for but enjoying the violence anyhow.

Mr. Cree says you should build up a morning routine that makes you feel like you can face the day with bravery. This is my routine. I have to see the bullfrogs and the morning birds every morning, otherwise the first thing in my morning happens when it’s already starting to get light, and I know that folks are out and about at that point, and then they say, “Morning, Cory, how’s your ma doin’?” and I gotta tell them “a bit better, I think. Thanks a million for the venison, we been eatin it every night,” even though I never seen Ma in any definition of “better” and the venison is real gamey.
But if I get up early enough, ain’t nobody asking after Ma or Ben. Ain’t nobody there to look at my body like they know a secret about it I don’t, like they understand why my scalp’s always crawling and my chest has this hole in it the size a Texas.

When the bullfrogs quit their yelling it’s time for me to move on with my day. Mr. Johnson’s horses don’t help themselves, and I sure as hell ain’t getting paid unless I help them. The horses don’t much care for mornings. They always take their time from barn to field, as if with each step their hooves were being pulled from sucking mud. Except for the paint, Mathilde—but she’s a contrarian.

I sit on the fence and watch them graze, even if I don’t really have the time to. Especially if I don’t. Maybe I’m a bit of a contrarian myself.

9 July 1943

I wanna finish writing my morning routine. Ran out of time yesterday.

When I get home it goes one of two ways. If Nina’s not there, I make breakfast and try to wake Ben up and do head calculations on whether or not trying to get Ma up is worth it. It usually ain’t. If Nina has stopped by, she’s already begun breakfast by the time I get there. She greets me all cheerful like, and Ben does too—I don’t understand how she gets him out of bed before eight o’clock, I really don’t—and then she’ll tell me go to say good morning to Ma, and I will, because Nina’s just trying to help.

I poke my head in Ma’s room, ask if she wants coffee. She looks at me with vague eyes and I try not to hate her. Most of the time I succeed, because I don’t hate her, promise I don’t. I ask her again if she wants coffee. She shrugs. I close the door and try not to sigh too loud as I convey this message to Nina, who then offers to go talk to her.
Nina’s just better with Ma than I am. She’s got patience that I can’t imagine having. She calls Ma “Sloane” and never stops smiling even when she’s being real firm. On good days she even gets Ma to come eat breakfast with us, and she’ll sit next to Ma and nudge her as she makes jokes with me and Ben and sometimes even gets her to smile a real, genuine smile. Not that distant, half-quirk lip she’s always giving me as she tells me I’m a “very good young man.”

After breakfast, Ben and I head off for school, which is a pretty new development. When I was real little, a bus would take me over to Cuthbert for school, but then the bus stopped coming and there was nothing much to be done about it. Then Mr. Cree came along, and he’s all fancy and wears suits which is how you know he’s got himself educated, and Nina convinced him to give us young folk some learning while he’s here.

Right as Ben and I are walking out the door, Nina hands me my lunch and cups my cheek. I’d be annoyed, but she’s got this steadiness about her that makes me not hate it. “Ready for today?”

I nod. I know what she’s gonna say next, cause it’s the same every time.

“Today’s just a day, alright? Same as yesterday. Ain’t nothing you can’t handle.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She tilts my chin up before letting me go. “You growin’ your hair out?”

I run my fingers through my roots. I like how nice and fluffy it feels. “I guess.”

“Looks lovely. You learn lots today, hear?”

I tell her I will, and Ben and I head out.
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | September 17, 2017

LAURIE Morris. Do you want to tell me what you saw?

[Morris sits with their back against the headstone, unmoving. They do not speak.]

LAURIE Please. I want to help but I need you to say something.

[Their fingers begin to tap an erratic pattern in the dirt.]

LAURIE Okay. I’ll wait.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories | September 18, 2017

We are all named after things that are dead, or things that are dying, or things that never lived. We must remember our place.
Communion with Bartholomew Cree

Chapel Hill | October 20, 2017

It was routine at this point: the spark and manic little flame contrasted with the lazy sway of the Spanish moss above my head. First I learned their names, walking up and down the rows of headstones, recording what was etched into them. That was technically my job, after all, but it was peripheral. After that I picked a grave that felt right, settle myself in front of it, and light a candle or three. Today I was hoping to talk to Cree, so I brought with me two pine candles. It was probably arbitrary, what type of candle I used, but I had decided it mattered, so it did. Plus, it gave me something to focus on, an association to have with each person.

Sometimes nothing happened: I’d sit there in meditative silence, eyes closed, waiting for voices that wouldn’t come. That was fine. On those days it was kind of like yoga. Or, that’s what Laurie said it looked like I was doing. “Like yoga if yoga were goth,” he’d said. I don’t think I’ve ever done yoga, and I don’t really understand what it is.

Other days I’d light a candle and it’d be immediate: I’d hear voices first, usually. Or sometimes they would be by themselves, so I’d listen for footsteps and breathing, then open my eyes. I didn’t notice, at first, that the landscape changes. Smaller trees and different grass is a subtle difference in comparison to seeing people who have been dead for half a century. The first time I noticed was a day when it was raining then but not now. Funny, to come back to everything in a sunny field to find myself completely drenched.

You’d think I’d see visions of the person whose grave I sat in front of, wouldn’t you? That feels right, follows some sort of dream-seance logic. Only my brain, this place, the past,
something wasn’t interested in that. I had a sort of repeat cast of folks rotating through my communions.

I didn’t usually see Bartholomew Cree without Aldous, and as he wandered in and out among the rows, I thought he seemed smaller without his frail counterpart. A bit lost, maybe. He still wore his long, imperious black coat, his sharp three piece suit. Still took long, slow steps like there could never be any reason why he’d be in a hurry.

When he sat down in front of me, gaze unfocused beyond my left shoulder, he started to cry, silent. No shaking or sobbing, just dead-faced tears.

“It had to happen,” he muttered.

“I know,” I told him, though I did not know and he couldn’t have heard me even if I did. It felt right, to respond. To ask questions. If I was going to peek in on their lives without their permission, I liked to imagine that I was giving something back.

“It was for Aldous. For him. I love him.”

Telling the truth this time: “I know.”

“No one’s going to care. No one’s going to notice. He was a piece of shit. There’s nothing to feel guilty about.”

That shifted something inside my chest. It’s hard, at times, for me to recognize my own emotions, my own internalities, especially when I have nothing in the past to compare them to, but then I’ll see them in someone else and think, oh, that’s the one. That’s my fear, that’s my anger. I see it now. I nod my head. “Exactly.”

We sat quietly for a minute. I watched his eyes shift from the birds in the groaning oaks to the spotted headstones to the threatening gray clouds. I wondered if it was stormy on my end too, or just his. “What happened?” I asked.

Cree took a deep inhale. “I killed my father.”
“Oh.” On instinct, I stretched my hand towards him, forgetting that it would go right through him. It does—through his knee, straight to the dirt below. And then, boldened by the assumption that he couldn’t hear me, and because I never did know how to comfort: “He probably deserved it.”

Overlapped with my consolation, “He deserved it.”

I almost laughed.

And then I was alone again. There was no indent in the grass where he sat. I stayed a minute, waiting until everything settled again. As the thunder started to rumble through, I heard Laurie call to me from the truck. I leaned over my candles, blew them out, and waited for the wax to cool while looking out across the sprawling cemetery. I didn’t know how to do much, but I knew how to do this.
Grave Day Transcript

*Source Unknown | October 21, 2017*

MORRIS  Do you think they can hear me, when I talk to them?

LAURIE  The folks you commune with? I don’t know. Do you?

MORRIS  Sometimes. Maybe not consciously? It’s like. When a flame is snuffed, there’s still a trail of smoke echoing around where it was. Does that make sense?

LAURIE  Well… not really.

MORRIS  Mm.

LAURIE  Sorry.

MORRIS  Mm. I hope they can hear me. Or, just. Know I’m there? Will be there? I hope they know our future exists.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Inventory of candlemaking | September 30, 2017

Cory’s Candle
→ Honey, no less than 2 tbsp., more depending on size
→ Stir into melted wax before pouring

Ben’s Candle
→ Thyme? Basil? Rosemary
→ Dried, flowers whole and leaves chopped

Cree’s Candle
→ Pine sprigs, place away from wick or the needles will catch fire!!
→ Place after you’ve already poured the wax so it doesn’t shift

Aldous’ Candle
→ Sage, dried to prevent mildew.
→ Use whole leaves, place after you’ve poured

Deidra’s Candle
→ Lavender, flowers and leaves dried.

Nina’s Candle
→ Yarrow, flowers and leaves, dried
→ Chop leaves finely, flowers should stay whole
From the Memory of Cory Sloane, Aged 16, recorded as well as she may remember

17 July 1943
I try to talk quiet, these days. Ma likes it, also my voice sounds better like this. Not so deep.
Never did like my voice, since it started changing.

18 July 1943
Dr. Birch (that’s Mr. Cree’s brother, biographer) had his check up with Ben today. Ben loves Dr. Birch, which is kinda funny cause he always hated the doctors in Eufaula and Cuthbert. It’s not that I dislike him, right. He seems real nice. Too nice, I think might be the problem. Ain’t never met a less intimidating person.

Anyways, him and Mr. Cree seem like great friends. Never seen two grown up siblings get along so good. I hope me and Ben are like that when we’re all grown up.

6 August 1943
Weather’s fucking scalding today. I like that. Makes my chest feel better. Fuller. Bad for Ben’s legs, though. Probably have to take him to Dr. Birch today or tomorrow.

10 August 1943
Had to take away the baseball bat I made for Ben awhile back. Dr. Birch saw him playing with it and explained to me how easy it’d be to hurt himself with it. Ben was real disappointed. I just felt dumb. Of course it’s dangerous for him to play with a goddamn bat. Dr. Birch shouldn’t of had to tell me that.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

*Grounding Exercise | August 22, 2017*

1. Morris Station, Georgia
2. Morris, Georgia
3. Morris (?) (that one from St. Martin’s Cemetery)
4. Morris from St. Martins
5. Morris St. Martins
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | September 23, 2017

MORRIS You said you believe me.

LAURIE I do. Can’t quite figure out why, but I really do. It’s just—why candles?

[Morris stares at the block of wax melting in the empty soup can, prodding it with a throwaway chopstick.]

MORRIS I don’t know.

LAURIE What d’you mean?

MORRIS I don’t—I don’t know. It just feels right. Feels. Warm.

LAURIE Warm?

MORRIS Like holding someone’s hand.

LAURIE Making candles for them feels like holding someone’s hand?

MORRIS ...Yes.

LAURIE Right. Okay… Do you want help?

MORRIS No.

LAURIE Okay. Let me know if you want help.

MORRIS I won’t.
From the Memory of Coriander Sloane, Aged 16, Recorded as well As She May Remember

2 August 1943

Forgot to mention: Dr. Birch got a piano delivered. It’s the nicest thing I ever seen. It came just a week before Mr. Cree got here. It’s a billion times nicer than the piano in the church that Mrs. Johnson plays on Sundays, which sounds a little wonky no matter what they do to it. Dr. Birch says he’ll teach Ben how to play it. He offered to teach me too, but it’s so fine looking, I’m afraid to touch it. Never occurred to me that Dr. Birch is rich, but he gotta be, to be having something like that.

5 August 1943

I read some of Dr. Birch’s doctor books while he taught Ben how to play scales, he called them. Dr. Birch’s books don’t make a lick a sense, but they’re interesting. I’m gonna get him to explain them to me.

He also played us a pretty song called “You Go to My Head,” and sang too. He’s got a real nice voice. Ben asked him how come he’s only just now got his piano when he’s been here a whole year. Dr. Birch said it was a gift from someone very dear to him. He got this wistful looking smile on his face when he said that, like when kids at school have crushes. I guess Dr. Birch might have a girl back in Atlanta, but he ain’t never mentioned one before. And I don’t know why he wouldn’t just marry her and bring her here if he did. Maybe they’s star-crossed lovers, or something. I read books about those.
From the memory of Cory Sloane, Aged 16, recorded as well as she may remember

12 September 1943

I copied this from Dr. Birch’s Bible:

**Herein is Recorded The Family of Aldous Birch & Bartholomew Cree, United**

*Jebediah Brownson, b. 1927. Currently residing in Athens, Georgia. Partner of Mateo Olvera.*

*Mateo Olvera, b. 1925. Currently residing in Athens, Georgia. Partner of Jebediah Brownson.*


*Liliana Beaufort, b. 1922. Currently residing in Macon, Georgia.*

*Hannah Hadil Al-Amin, b. 1930. Currently residing in New York, New York.*

*James Donaghue, b. 1923, d. 1941. Buried in Spring Hill Graveyard, Mobile, Alabama under the name Marie Donaghue. He was infinitely loved.*


*Amelia Palmer, b. 1910. Currently residing in Macon, Georgia. Partner of Gertrude Palmer.*

*Gertrude Palmer, b. 1905. Currently residing in Macon, Georgia. Partner of Amelia Palmer.*

*Avery Yuan b. 1912. Currently residing in Houston, TX.*
Dr. Birch says they keep a family book of everyone who might get crossed out of their own family Bibles. Goes out one Bible, got to be put in another one. Otherwise that name’s just floating around, Bible-less, and that ain’t no good. Best way to get a lost soul, I’d imagine.

He was real sweet when he was explaining it to me, giving me a look that I didn’t quite understand. “Everyone deserves a place in a family,” He said, like it meant something big.

Funny little man, Dr. Birch is. Some mix of too much in his head and not quite enough.
Morris from St. Martin’s

for

Morris, Georgia
“I can’t stay today to help.” Laurie sounded apologetic, but that was kind of his natural state when it came to anything that involved Miles.

I pushed the rusted entrance gate on its single hinge just to hear it screech. “That’s alright.”

We both stood in the entrance to Bragen Cemetery, Laurie’s truck idling behind us. It was one of the older sites, even for this area, and I could tell at a glance that some of the graves were too worn to get much information from.

“Are you sure? You’ll be alone all day.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“I could blow him off. I’ve done it before. I’m sure he doesn’t need my help that badly.”

I shook my head. “You should go. I think I can write down names without your help.” I aimed for sarcastic and ended up somewhere around caustic.

Laurie bit his lip. “Alright. I could be back around 4:00, if Miles doesn’t hold me captive.”

Bragen Cemetery’s big, old oak trees hang low with Spanish moss and the grass is damp, soft, and verdant. The whole clearing is chilled, due to lack of sunlight and a constant breeze shuffling through the trees.

As I began to inspect, I realized there were very few visibly marked graves here. There were a couple with headstones so eroded by time that only every other letter is decipherable and
a couple that didn’t seem to ever have any sort of engravings. I decided to make a note on those later and start with the easy ones.

*L.J. McCannon. February 3, 1787 - September 15, 1856. Upon the Covenant the Christian may rely, when called upon to die.*

“Covenant.” I rolled the word around my tongue and let it sit, dissolve, be absorbed. I had a vague idea of what a covenant would entail. A marriage is a covenant, I thought. Medical bills are definitely a covenant. It’s an old word, I knew. Could tell by the way it tasted, like unattainable ideals and holiness.

The only other truly legible stone read, *James Morris. April 21, 1806 - August 2, 1856.*

*Behold the awful tomb of death, how solemn, silent, and how still and on it there looks one whose breath shall leave him at his maker’s will.*

I squatted in front of the stone, brushed some pollen off the top. “Hello, fellow Morris. How’s it going?”

James did not reply.

“Were you more chatty than me? Your epitaph is really goddamn long.”

A chipmunk skittered behind Smiley’s headstone a couple feet away, and I briefly glanced at it before continuing. “Someone called the place they buried you an ‘awful tomb.’ That seems rude. Did you ask them to put that?”

I shifted from squatting to sitting criss-cross. “How did you die? Fifty’s not too old for it to have been old people problems, not too young for it to have necessarily been something more interesting. Did you have an interesting death? I hope you did. Laurie would think that’s morbid, but I don’t think it matters that much, you know? Like, you’re dead, and your final contribution is nothing more than a well-carved rock. The least you can do is make that final date an interesting one, yeah?”
“I bet you died slowly, from an infected wound. From where a piece of lead pipe skewered you through the stomach.” I paused, glance back at the road behind them. “This is why Laurie didn’t want to leave me by myself.”

“I guess you left a family behind, huh? Everyone had families back then. Did they name this place after you? Your dad? Your son? Did you know why your name was Morris? People have asked me that before, you know. ‘Why is that your name?’ ‘If you could be anyone, why Morris?’ They could be anyone, too. But they’re fine just being Tiffany or whoever. Why shouldn’t I just be Morris?”

“It’s not that I really want to be Morris, you know. But I don’t not want to. It’s just who I am. I didn’t choose it, I don’t think. If I could choose… I don’t know. I guess some people choose their names. Maybe I will too, someday. I have a hard time deciding how to dress or when to talk or what to do from day to day, so I don’t think I’m ready for that right now.”

I sighed, lied back, stared up at the canopy. A sliver of light made its way through and rested on my chest, filling me with warmth. “I hope you chose to be who you were, James Morris. I hope your breath left you at whoever’s will you willed.”
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories | August 31, 2017

[mourning V]
they wake. damp weight
    settled
    in their spine. cold
    pulling
    them down.
they lie for one minute, two, listen
    to a shuffle. all
they can do is listen, body
    sapped,
cannot remember what it’s like
    to twitch even
    a finger.
their eyes close again.

Quiet: “This wasn’t you, Aldous.”
their name is not Aldous—
    they think—yes.
    Morris.
    Just Morris.
Slow, and with the weight still clinging to my spine, I sat up to find two men standing in front of a headstone that I had missed before. It looked new, the dirt in front of it freshly turned. I couldn’t read the inscription from where I was sitting.

One of the men was tall and broad, clean-shaven with dark skin and short dark hair. The man next to him was smaller, pale, rail-thin, with a couple days stubble and blonde curly hair. He looked tired and sallow, leaning into the taller man as if he could barely stand up on his own. They were both dressed in black suits, the tall one with a black shirt and a deep red tie, and the smaller one with a white shirt and a black tie crumpled and dangling from his hand.

I didn’t want to interrupt, but also didn't want them to think they were alone when they weren’t. They looked so intimate, so quiet.

“I didn’t cause it, but I didn’t stop it, either,” The smaller one said.

Tall fumbled through their tangle of limbs to grab his companion’s hand and squeeze it.

“You gave him more time than they ever thought he’d have.”

“He was a child. More time isn’t enough.”

“Still wasn’t you, love.”

A part of me just wanted to watch this pair forever in their undisturbed portrait of grief, but it was too voyeuristic. I stood up heavily, trying to alert the men of my presence without startling them, but they didn't react. I brushed myself off, hoping the rustling would catch their attention. Nothing.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me, I’m so sorry…”
No reaction.

My voice was whispery and rough. Maybe I wasn’t close enough. I took a couple steps forward and tried again. “Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt…”

The smaller man was crying now, his head buried in Tall’s shoulder.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories | August 31, 2017

[mourning VI]
Morris St. Martins (yes? yes)—
growing inside their chest

is something like—

something like—

they don’t know what it is, but it hurts.
“I’m sorry,” I repeated, reaching out to place a hand on Tall’s shoulder.

“Morris?”

Laurie stood a couple feet away, holding his hands out in that same way he did when we first met, like he was afraid of spooking me.

“Laurie—I’m—they—” I turned to gesture to the two men, to the cause of the ache in my chest, but they were gone. “I—”

the ache, like a tide, washes

out, distant with a threat

of return.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I’m—” I looked back to the grave, the one I was sure wasn’t there before. It looks old now, the fresh dirt replaced with grass and moss.

“Morris.” Laurie placed a hand on my arm, and I turned to look at him again. “Bud, you’re scaring me a little.” He pressed his other hand against my forehead. “You feeling okay?”

There was a moment where I thought I could stand there for hours, let myself go Dcatatonic, let the ebbing emotions flood back over me. It would be easy. Laurie squeezed my arm, insistent. I shook my head. “I’m fine, Cree.”

“My name’s Laurie. Hey,” He ducked into my line of vision. “Hey, I’m Laurie. Laurence Briar. Do you remember me?”
Yes, Laurie. Laurence Briar. I remembered it all in a brief flash: waking up in this town sans memory and money, Laurie helping me find a job at the Historical Society, this is Nancy. She works in archiving. You can help her with records. Then Laurie befriend me, Laurie insisting I live in his trailer, because it’s just sitting there, really. It’s not a big deal, Morris.

Of course, yes. Laurie. Why would he ask that? Stupid question. “‘Course I remember you. Don’t be stupid. That’s not how amnesia works.”

“Forgetting is—that’s exactly how amnesia works.”

“I don’t just have random holes in my head,” I huffed. “I’m missing everything from before. That’s it. I’m fine.” I bit the words off sharp and short to keep down the breathless confusion growing in my chest.

Laurie frowned. “Who’s Cree?”

“What?”

“Who were you talking to?”

“Wasn’t talking to anyone.”

“You were.”

“Wasn’t.” The word came out as a gasp.

“Morris—’

“Thought I saw a deer, Laurie. That’s it. Really.”

“You were crying over a deer?”

I touched my cheek, surprised to find it damp. “I’m emotional,” I monotoned. “Cry over anything.”

“Right.” Laurie removed his hand from my arm. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah. Let me just. I’ve got this one to write down, then I’ll be done.” I stepped around to the front of the new-old grave.

I scribbled this down, then turned back to Laurie, who’s still staring at me warily. “Let’s go.” I pushed past him and headed towards his truck, not waiting to see if he followed.
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | November 13, 2017

LAURIE What’s that?
MORRIS Notebook.

[Laurie rolls his eyes.]

LAURIE Yeah, okay. What’re you doing?
MORRIS (shrugs) Drawing.

LAURIE That’s a lot of ink.
MORRIS Mm.

[There is the rhythmic sound of Morris’ marker across the paper, filling in a void]

MORRIS It’s soothing.
LAURIE Alright, yeah.
22 November 1943

Reverend Gray’s sermon today was scary. You know that feeling when someone’s saying words to you, but you think they might actually be talking to someone else, in their head? It was like that. He started with some pretty standard preachin, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and all that, but it took a turn.

He’s talked about the day of reckoning before, you know? Lakes of fire and all will be judged, which seems about right to me, but it was real specific today. Started with the non-believers, then the Catholics, goes after them just for fun, I think. Then them who would see that which should be naturally separated come together. He looks at me and Ben and Ma as if we don’t know what that’s about.

Then it was on about the sexually impure. Sexual deviants, he called them. Said our nation’s good government is working hard to stamp out any such perversions, and if we should be seeing or hearing anything of the sort in our good town, that it’s our Christian duty to report it. Made my stomach do all sorts of tricks. Some of the things he was talking about sounded like what Mr. Cree’s been explaining to me. With him and Aldous and their Bible and their friends. But some of it didn’t make no sense, cause it was all about men whose minds are warped who only want to pray on little boys, Rev said. I’m going to have to ask Mr. Cree and Dr. Birch if they know of any sexual deviants. We got to keep them away from Ben.
“The man who found you would like to meet you. Is that alright?” Jennifer asks.

They frown. “Found me?”

“In St. Martins Cemetery. Remember?”

“Yes,” they lie.

“His name is Laurence. Would you like to have a chat with him? He’s been worried.”

“Chat?”

“I’m sure he’ll do most of the talking if you’re not up for it.”

“Sure.”

“Great! I’ll bring him right in.”

“Name?”

“Laurence, his name is Laurence.”

“No, mine.”

“Your name is Morris.”

“No, the other.”
“Your last name? We’re not sure what your last name is.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Morris. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh.”

“Shall I go get Laurence now?”

“Hm.”

“Wonderful.”
The first of the very few times I saw Reverend Ephraim Gray, the connection to my communion almost severed itself on instinct. When I opened my eyes, I wasn’t sure who I was going to see. I had lit a pine and a sage and a rosemary, trying to feel it out rather than have a specific goal in mind.

I was a little disappointed to see Cree there by himself—watching him and Aldous together always gave me some sort of peace, with their comfortable, often silent, companionship. Today he walked up and down the brick wall that enclosed the cemetery, wringing his hands. His pacing gave off waves of anxiety that set me on edge right away. I clenched my fists and kept my eyes open, didn’t let the connection fade.

I didn’t notice when Reverend Gray showed up; one moment Cree was pacing along the wall, and the next he stood in front of a tall, broad man who looked far too pleased to be there. Cree’s anxious posture had disappeared and given way to stony indifference.

“Reverend,” Cree nodded.

“Bartholomew, thank you for agreeing to meet with me, I know you must be busy with your students.” Gray held out his hand.

Cree glanced at it, then smiled without extending his own. “Well. It was quite the note, Ephraim. If I didn’t know you were the good Christian sort, I’d say it was a bit threatening.”

“Threatening? Of course not. I do apologize if I gave you that impression. I just think it’s best to have these kinds of conversations before things go too far, you understand. I take the spiritual health of the members of my church seriously.”
“I’m afraid I don’t know what ‘these kinds of conversations’ are.”

“Lying, for instance, is never good for the spirit.”

“It does often lead to more harm than good,” Cree conceded.

“I’m so glad we agree. In the interest of truth, then, I was wondering—why did you come to Morris, of all places? Surely a man as educated as yourself could do better than teaching school children their letters.”

“Oh. Well, my father passed away recently, and—and it’s really best to grieve with family, you know, so I thought I’d come stay with Aldous for awhile.”

“You and Aldous share a mother, though, correct?”

Cree’s hands folded behind his back, and he twisted a silver ring on his left middle finger.

“Yes. But—my father was always very kind to Aldous, treated him like his own. Our grief is shared.”

“Of course. I’m very sorry for your loss. How did he die, if I may ask?”

“He…” Cree shifted from one foot to the other, eyes flicking to the sycamore above their heads. “He took his own life. He was never the same after my step mother’s passing.”

“That sort of thing is always a tragedy. All the wasted potential.”

“Yes. Yes, and then—Aldous convinced me to teach, mostly to keep my mind off things, I think. But I’m glad to be helping the children.”

“Mm. Thankless job, being a teacher. And it doesn’t come with the yearly sum you’re used to, I bet.” Gray eyed Cree’s long, sharp coat and tailored suit.

Cree gave a permissive smile. “No. But we don’t do everything for profit, do we?”

“Of course.” Gray took a step past him, towards the nearest headstone, and began to study it. “It’s difficult at times, ministering to such a small population. You feel there’s so much more you could do if you only had the means. Resources are hard to come by.”
“I’m sure.”

“And they often have so little to give, living in such poverty.”

Cree’s smile dropped off. “Yes, I know.”

Gray turned around, searched Cree’s face for something. “I’d like to share a scripture with you.”

“Alright.”

“It’s from the Book of Psalms. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy. No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.”

Cree’s face was stone. “A wonderful scripture, Reverend. If only I could get my students to do their recitations with such eloquence.”

Gray shifted, suddenly, sighing deeply up at the sky and then refocused with a look of irritation. “I am trying to be delicate about this, Bartholomew, but this equivocation is making me lose patience.”

“Then perhaps you should speak with more clarity, Reverend.”

“You have to understand. It’s not that I believe men who have done what you have done are irremediable in the eyes of God. I truly believe you can repent, turn away from this wickedness.”

Cree was utterly still now except for his hands behind his back, which wrung and twisted with increasing anxiety. “I apologize, Reverend. I truly don’t know what you’re speaking of.”

“Have you heard from Bridget lately?”

“I’m sorry?”

43
“Bridget. Bridget Thomas. Surely you haven’t forgotten your sweet little housemaid so quickly.”

A crow cawed above. “What—how do you know Bridget?”

Gray craned his neck to the bird. “You know, it’s funny. People think us reverends never have any fun.” He chuckled. “But even us holy folk have to have a little gossip, now and again. Do you remember Reverend Francis? He’s a preacher back in Athens. I graduated from seminary with him. Lovely man, if a bit loose-lipped. We exchange letters, occasionally.”

Cree didn’t even look like he was breathing.

“You and her, the only two who knew the truth. And then you left! And she had no one to share that burden with. What a dreadful secret to bear alone. Watching a man’s head get bashed in like that, and by his own son, no less. It became too much. She had to tell someone.”

The crow took off with a sudden, loud flapping, and Cree started, then stilled himself. “What do you want?”

“I don’t mean to be cruel, Mr. Cree. I really don’t. But there must be consequences for sins such as these.”

“Consequences.”

“Yes. I—I really don’t like to get the authorities involved, it all seems very counterproductive. But—” The Reverend’s face lit up as if God himself had inspired him. “Oh, how about this. You pay a forty percent tithe, every Sunday, as penance to the Lord. Just between you and Him. And while you do that, you can think about these sins, and be cleansing yourself of them.”

Cree huffed in disbelief. “You’re blackmailing me?”

“That’s such an ugly word,” Gray protested.

“Well, it’s an ugly thing.”
“Think of it as incentive. A reminder, to contemplate the blood you spilled, all while praising Him for the blood of his son.”

Cree twisted his ring behind his back one last time before he held out his hand, and Gray took it and gripped it firmly.

Most of the time, the shift back was almost unnoticeable: a transitioning shallow little sigh, and I’d be in the present once again, but this one left me feeling like a piece of my chest had been ripped from my body.

“Morris? You good? Take a breath.”

I shook my head and gasped, “All I ever do is watch.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s just—watching. They’re all suffering, always, and I just sit there and watch them suffer, and there’s nothing I can do.”

Laurie looked at me in a way I couldn’t even begin to parse. “That… must be frustrating.”

I stared at the space where Cree was, unable to find an answer before Laurie pressed on.

“You don’t gotta watch them, if you don’t want. You know that, right?”

“I do, though. Otherwise who will know?”

“Know what?”

“That they were real.”

“Oh. Morris, they—they’re real. You don’t have to put yourself through this just to prove that.”

I thought about the twisting ring and shaking hands. “Someone should remember them.”

“You’re really invested in this, huh?”
I shrugged.

“Just. Don’t forget about yourself, okay?”

“Sure. Yeah.”
From the Memory of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Recorded as well as she may remember

7 February 1944

Asked Mr. Cree about them sexual deviants that Reverend Gray was going on about. We had a real interesting conversation about it. I’m not sure if I want to write it down yet, I’m still trying to think about it in my head, and writing it down would make it something more than a thought experiment.

That’s what Mr. Cree calls it when you entertain an idea just for the sake of entertaining it. He says sometimes you can have a little idea dancing around in your head, just for fun. No harm in seeing where it leads.

February 8, 1944

Here’s what don’t make sense: Reverend Gray talked about the sexual deviants as folk who do bad things to little boys, right? But I ain’t stupid. I know what it feels like to have an adult look at you like that, and I ain’t never seen Dr. Birch or Mr. Cree look at Ben like that, or me, for that matter. I would know, that’s all I’m saying. If they are deviant they not the same kind Reverend Gray was on about.

February 11, 1944

Talked to Dr. Birch about it today—knew he’d be a worse liar than Mr. Cree. Man’s got too much guilt to lie good.

He was nice about it, the kind of nice that’s almost irritating because it’s so obviously sincere. He also takes damn near million years to get to the meat of any conversation.
The point: he explained to me some things about people’s “preconceived notions,” his words, not mine. And then, and I really don’t know how we got on the topic, but he ended up saying, real casual, “You know, some people are born with a different soul than body. Sometimes people are born boys but have a girl’s soul, or the other way around.”

I said that sounded interesting, a good thought experiment. I wasn’t sure what else to say. My heart was doing all sorts of funny things.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Yarrow, last of the season | December 18, 2017
Communion with Nina Carson & Deidra Sloane

Springvale Cemetery | January 15, 2018

I have yet to figure out a way to place myself within the nest of others’ privacy and not feel like a voyeur, good intentions aside. I told Laurie this once, and he diagnosed me with queer paranoia—the aversion to being acknowledged, born from the fear of being exposed. It goes the other way, too: I catch a private glance between two people in the grocery store and my chest starts pounding with guilt, how dare I intrude on their life, they deserve to keep their private glances private.

Whenever I had a communion with Nina and Deidra, my sense of intrusion increased tenfold. They were never sweet to the point of saccharine like Aldous and Cree often were, but their steps were steady, their presence in each other so comfortable, that I always found myself stuck between my want to give them privacy and my hunger for understanding and connection.

Today was one of Deidra’s better days by default, given she could not make herself get out of bed on a bad day. They walked in silence for a while and I didn’t so much watch them as exist in parallel to them. I kept my head bowed, as if the sound of their footfalls and Deidra’s occasional sigh was something I could pray to. Nearby, a mockingbird sang. I plucked and braided some chive shoots near my feet.

I had almost begun to get bored when Nina advised, as a polite order, “Let’s sit.”

Chewing absently on my now braided chives, I glanced up to watch them settle under the only tree within the main part of the cemetery, an Australian pine that reached out with hungry, tired limbs.

“I’m glad you were able to get up today,” Nina started. “It’s nice to walk with you.”

Deidra hummed, head tilted back against the trunk, staring vacantly up into the branches.
“You should tell me what’s on your mind,” Nina said.

Deidra shrugged. “Nothing much.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.”

Deidra sighed.

“Sloane.”

Deidra’s head lolled to the side to meet Nina’s gaze. “I’m tired, Nina.”

“I know. Tell me more.”

Deidra sighed. “I’m just… It’s not going to go away. Tomorrow it’ll be the same. And the day after. And the day after. And, and…” Her voice sunk into a monotone, droning forward as if to the beat of a dismal drum. “And maybe the day after I’ll be able to make dinner, and I’ll smile at Cory and read to Benjamin, but the day after that, right back to this. It’s just—and, and, and.”

“And, and.”

“Exactly. And—” Deidra’s chin dipped to her chest and she closed her eyes. “And—do you know why I’m staying alive?”

Nina’s stalwart demeanor dropped for a moment before she picked it back up. She grabbed Nina’s hand. “Why?”

“Because I know, if I were gone, that Reverend Gray would stop paying his share for Ben.”

Nina nodded. “That’s as good a reason as any.”

“Is it? Shouldn’t I stay alive for Cory and Ben? Or you?”

“Sloane, I don’t care why you’re alive as long as you are, and I’m pretty sure Cory and Ben would say the same thing.”
“He’s paid a dollar less every month these past couple months,” Deidra commented offhandedly.

“Right. Want me to go threaten him?”

“I’d like you to—politely remind him—that I could not care less about my own reputation, and don’t mind exposing his ‘sinful behavior’ one bit,” She managed half a smile. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course, my dear.”

Deidra snorted and shook her head.

“So,” Nina sat up from the tree and leaned in like she had a secret to share. “Our newest teacher. Dr. Birch’s brother.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“You noticed, too?”

“They’re so bad at hiding. Almost embarrassing, honest.”

“We might want to warn them.”

“I’ll leave that to you. Maybe approach Cree about it, though. He seems level-headed. I think Aldous might just panic if you brought it up with him.”

“Could be amusing…”

Deidra smacked Nina’s shoulder. “Don’t be cruel.”

“Fine, fine.” Nina stood and held out her hand.

Deidra took it, allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, and then swayed forward for a kiss. “Thank you, Nina.”

Nina brushed the flyaways from Deidra’s forehead. “Anytime, Sloane.”
Laurie was waiting for me, sat in the bed of his truck, legs dangling, humming to himself. When he saw me walking towards him, he hopped off the back and slammed the bed shut. “How were your ghosts today?” He asked cheerfully.

“Not ghosts.” I made my way around to the passenger’s side.

“Whatever. Get any juicy gossip?” Laurie slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Music blasted from the speakers, and he sent me an apologetic grimace when I flinched, and turned it down.

I waited for a moment before answering his rhetorical question. “Actually, yeah, kinda.”

Laurie grinned. “Aw, hell yeah. Seventy year old gossip. Knew this gig would pay off eventually. Tell me about it.”
1. vines. either growing up or down. hard to tell. and
2. white paint. chipped. and
3. ants. marching. and
4. broken vase. blue? and
5. jon boat. green. and
6. hand. Laurie’s?
7. Yes, Laurie’s.
8. two crows.
9. three, now.
10. hand: palm. creases. Laurie’s.
GRAVE DAY TRANSCRIPT

Source Unknown | February 22, 2018

MORRIS I’ve got one before-memory. Of—it’s—there’s a gutted rabbit, and. Um. Blood on my hands. A knife. And I’m taking out its intestines, and there’s a voice. Tells me not to cut its stomach open. And then…. And then I can smell it cooking? I think? And that’s it.

LAURIE Do you recognize the voice?

MORRIS Maybe? I don’t—I can’t—

[Morris hugs themself.]

LAURIE Are you trying to remember more?

[Morris shakes their head.]

LAURIE Can I ask why not?

[Morris shakes their head.]

LAURIE Okay. Okay. We can leave it for now.

[Morris shakes their head.]
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Recorded as well as she may remember

3 March 1944
My body’s got fire ants crawling all over it, swear to Jesus. If I got a different soul than body, it won’t matter for much longer. At this rate both’ll be all burned up before I can reconcile the two.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Window from boarded up doctor’s office | March 17, 2018
I opened my eyes when I heard a muffled thump, and saw her a couple rows down, leaning against a headstone, head tilted back and glaring at the sky. I stood, walked over, and sat across from her.

“Hey, Cory,” I mumbled.

She continued to glare up at the clouds, leg bouncing up and down, hands clenched at her sides.

“Your hair is growing out nicely.”

As if in response, she dragged a hand through her frizzy, shoulder-length hair and sighed. “Stupid fuckin’...” She let out a frustrated groan.

“Mm,” I agreed, quiet.

“He could just, for a moment—” Cory drove her fist into the grass once, twice. “It’s not like...”

I reached out and put a hand on her boot. She couldn’t feel it, I knew, but I didn’t have anything else I could do.

“Cory?”

I knew that voice, too. High, anxious. I looked up and saw Benjamin Sloane making his way diagonally across the cemetery in an effort to shorten his trip, but the weaving and stepping around he ended up lengthening it. He was a self-serious looking child, face locked into a studious frown as he hefted his stubby, six-year-old legs over some of the smaller headstones.
I scooted over when he arrived to make room, but he just stood in front of her for a moment, out of breath, hands on hips. “I don’t like it when you do that.”

“Do what? Tell him the truth?”

“Get all—all mad at him when he’s trying his best,” Ben panted.

“His best is shit, Ben.”

“That’s not—” Another gasp. “It’s not—”

“Sit down before you pass out, Lord.”

Ben took my place in front of Cory, shaking hands folded neatly in his lap. “He wants to help.”

“Yeah, me too. But out of all of us, he’s the only one who’s a goddamn doctor, so.”

“Just—I don’t like it.” He reached out, clawing at her trousers. “I—”

“Take a breath, Benjamin.” Her voice was deadened, but she placed a hand over his and brushed her thumb along his wrist. She waited until he had taken a few steadying gasps before continuing, “I don’t hate him. It just upsets me when he can’t help you.”

I felt the tug, a stretching ache on the back of my skull, and their faces flickered.

“Cory. He can’t—No one can—” Painful, to watch his mouth work around a tactful way to say this. “You know I’m—”

Ben disappeared first, and Cory sat alone again, still glaring at where he was. “Shut the fuck up. Just, shut up.”
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Inventory on Candlemaking | February 28, 2018

Preparation
→ Materials needed: wax (beeswax?) (paraffin is cheapest), yarn, various flowers/scents
→ Best done early morning or after midnight. Quiet helps.

Melting
→ You can see the old church from the window in the kitchen door. The church has caused Laurie and others pain, but in the sunrise, the stained glass looks as warm as the flickering gas stove underneath my pot of melting wax. I can’t help but mourn the building’s emptiness.
→ Don’t be in a hurry to make the wax melt. It cannot burn, only dissipate.

Shape Into Newness
→ Jars are good, but sometimes they don’t need containers. Take each one individually.
→ Dipped candles are gentle on the after-midnight mind. Methodically shifting the wick between the wax and cold water, building layers.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories from a dream | January 3, 2018

[mourning VII]

once, there was a headstone,
a name,
(what name was it?)
and a grief.
(grief is not necessary for love, but here they collide)

after, there was no one left who loved them. this is fact.
headstone,
name,
(which name?)
and grief:

for morris:
a gutted rabbit. seasoned with parsley.
“ain’t that a funny thing. watch for the knife nicking the stomach, now. can’t be

cutting it open.”

clean the poor creature’s spilled guts,
warm and frantic

divination in the form of forgetting.
[mourning VIII]

what was her name what was her name what was her name what was her name
[mourning IX]

they do not exist

without someone else to make them tangible. Laurie, teasing: “Morris,

where do you go when I’m not here?”

_I am not an I_

_when you're not here, they do not say._

instead, as close to truth as they can get without

fracture: “it’s foggy, where I go.”
[mourning X]

I am sure I only exist in the presence of others.
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Transexual in the Making

29 March 1944

I swear there’s something everyone knows that I don’t. It’s little things, but I just got a feeling in my gut. I keep catching Ma and Nina talking all hushed in the kitchen, and when they see me they stop real abruptly.

Mr. Cree and Dr. Birch been on edge or something, I don’t know. Dr. Birch looks real tired, and I see the way Mr. Cree watches him, like he’s waiting for a hawk to swoop in and carry him away.

My first idea was that Dr. Birch was sick. Ben-sick. I ain’t always been so nice and cheery with Dr. Birch, but I sure as shit don’t want him dead, so I asked Mr. Cree, direct-like, what was wrong with Dr. Birch. He looked confused, then he got all gentle on me, saying something like, “Aldous works himself very hard. He’s just tired, I promise.” Then he told me it was kind of me to ask, and gave me another book to read.

Funny thing is, I believe him. People try to pull the wool over my eyes all the time cause they think I don’t know shit, but Mr. Cree’s not like that, don’t think. He’s always treated me smart, and never placates my feelings. Which means there’s something else going on. I’m thinking about the page, the Bible page, and how angry Mr. Cree was about that. Could be something there, but it seems so insignificant.

I hate not knowing. Hate it even more when I know there’s something people ain’t telling me. It gets the embers in my belly all stoked up. Maybe I should just ask Mr. Cree to tell it to me straight. Or Nina. They tell it to me like it is, or don’t tell me nothing at all. None of this talk-
around sugarcoating bullshit Dr. Birch is always pulling, or the vague half-answers I get from Ma.

If it’s something about Ben that they’re keeping from me, I’ll be furious, tell you that. They should know better than to keep something like that from me.

2 April 1944

Keep thinking about those embers. Yesterday Ben said he didn’t think dying would be that bad—just casual, out of nowhere. Same as if he’d said he thought it was gonna rain this afternoon. I felt a white-hot spark in my chest, and it fell down to my stomach, and festered there. I tried not to be mad at him, he don’t mean to do nothing. I’ll be keeping it all in my belly until I’ve got a bonfire going in there that feels like it’ll burn my whole body down. I don’t know how long I’ll keep going before I just combust.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Inventory of Laurence Briar, to be added to | March 3, 2018

Fingers
He’s missing the very end of his pinky finger on his right hand. Saw blade accident, he said. Most of the time they can sew that shit back on, but we’re far from any hospitals.

Sheet music
There’s stacks of it, just sitting by the piano, gathering dust. Mostly hymns. I looked through them once when I couldn’t sleep. Some of the chords have been transposed to different keys, scribbled above the lines in Laurie’s loopy script. At the bottom of the stack there’s some pixelated photocopies of sheet music for Misfits songs. My rebellious phase, Laurie tells me with a wink.

Empty bottles
You never know when you’re going to need one, he says, freshly rinsed out beer bottle or preserve jar placed on the window cill. Can store all sorts of stuff in here. He’s got a box in the hall closet that’s filled with jars of all shapes and sizes. After Miles dies, he paints them all a rainbow of colors and hangs them about the kitchen. They make lovely patterns in the morning sunlight.
This one’s my favorite

To any old CD or cassette, any old song on the radio, a particularly bold bullfrog. This one’s my favorite. Listen, Morris. Isn’t that incredible? Fucking perfection. He tilts his head to the side, eyes closed, arms stretched upwards like he’s trying to reach into the trees and grab the cicada’s music with his bare hands.

Three hours

Is how long it takes him to make a loaf of bread when I’m “helping.” Two when I’m not. He always asks if I’d like to help, anyways.

HRT

Never really wanted it, but now I do, he says one morning, studying his chipped, blue nails. It’s cold out. Really, I just want a beard. Beards are cool. Alright, I nod. I think the closest doctor who will approve that has to be in Savannah, but we’ll work it out. I hate needles, though, he warns. That’s fine, I say. I can do it for you. I was probably a doctor before I lost my memory. How convenient. Yeah, convenient.

Which one’s your favorite?

Not a question of prioritizing, I realize after a while, but purpose. Intent. Look at a thing, then love it.
Communion with Nina Carson and Deidra Sloane

Bragen Cemetery | January 14, 2018

Sitting in front of my candles—a yarrow, a honey, a lavender—I kept my eyes closed for a long time. I thought maybe nothing would come today. Sometimes that happens. Then I smelled cigarette smoke. Laurie didn’t smoke, that I knew of. I opened my eyes, and saw across from me Deidra and Nina sitting in the dirt, the former nearly lying down and leaning against the latter chest. They passed a cigarette between the two of them.

They had been quiet for a long time, and continued to sit in silence. Nina ran her fingers through Deidra’s long, red hair, working through the knots absent-mindedly. A beetle crawled onto Deidra’s skirt hem, and she watched it, seemingly without either the energy or care to remove it.

“Do you remember me talking about Maggie?” Nina asked eventually.

Deidra tilted her chin up enough to give Nina a sly look. “Your girl back in New York? Sure do. Why, you ain’t having second thoughts, are you?”

“Oh, shut it, Sloane. You know I’m not.”

The fog that sat around Deidra’s eyes cleared enough for her to look smug. “Then why’re you bringing her up?”

“Do you—” Nina took a drag of the cigarette. “That is, I think Cory might be like her.”

“Oh? Oh. You think?”

Nina shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

“Your hunches are usually worth their weight,” Deidra said.

“That’ll be because I’m a goddamn genius.”

Deidra scoffed. “Sure you are, hon.”
They sat in the quiet for a minute. Nina crushed the cigarette bud into the dry clay. The beetle took flight, and Deidra observed its departure.

“Do you think Cory knows?” Deidra asked.

“I don’t think Cory has the words for it, but yes. In a way, I think so.”

“We should… have a talk, then.”

Nina frowned. “You think so?”

“You don’t?”

“Cory’s not so good at hiding what’s going on in that head. Give it time, I say.”


“Wisest wife this side of the Mason-Dixon line,” Nina nodded sagely.

“Wife?” Deidra questioned. “Far as I been known, we’re living in sin, Carson.”

“Oh, you know,” Nina waved her hand about. “Soul wives.”

Deidra smiled, amused. “Soul wives.”

“That sound alright to you?”

“Sounds just fine, hon.”
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | December 22, 2017

LAURIE —And it’s like, dunno, like, what? Oh, so you’ve got a pure dick, a dick that only
God and that pretty lil redhead in seventh grade ever touched. Good for you. Want a fucking
prize?

MORRIS A prize! We should make him a prize. Certificate awarded to Reverend Miles
Warren, for his Very Pure Dick.

[both start to giggle]

LAURIE Pure dick.

MORRIS Pure dick.

LAURIE We don’t even have a single dick between the two of us, and still his dick is purer
than ours.

MORRIS Do you think—

[Laurie starts giggling again]

MORRIS No, hey. Shut up. Listen—is consecration God fucking you?

LAURIE Morris. Holy shit.

MORRIS What?

LAURIE Miles fucked God.

MORRIS That’s gay. Someone should tell him he’s gay.

LAURIE Miles!

The name echoes around the cemetery, landing on the tombstone above their heads.

MORRIS Miles, you’re gay! You fucked God and now you’re gay!
LAURIE  Miles, God took your dick!

MORRIS  *(laughing)* He what?

LAURIE  He took Miles’ dick, and now it’s all fucking moot, ain’t it?

MORRIS  It’s—hm—*moot*.

LAURIE  *(scandalized)* What? You’re so bad at saying that word. Oh my god. Say it again. It’s—

MORRIS  Moot.

LAURIE  It’s—heh—no. Moot. Moot like a dead cow. Moo-t.

MORRIS  *(sagely, still unable to pronounce it)* Moot.

LAURIE  Mmm that’s okay. Don’t mean shit anyways.

MORRIS  That’s true.

LAURIE  Like, no Laurie, don’t hang out with them, they’re a bad influence. Laurie, why don’t you learn to play the piano? Think of what a civilized young lady you’ll be. Laurie, don’t dress like that, Laurie, don’t be gay, God doesn’t like that. Laurie, God hates trans people. Laurie, God hates you. Of course he does. Not even cause you’re a queer. Not even that. You’re just… so easy to hate.

*[The pines rustle in the wind. They sound like a final whisper through an oxygen mask.]*

LAURIE  But now, now he’s gay cause he sucked God’s dick, so like. Whatever.

*[Morris sits up. The fabric of their jacket brushes against the pine needles atop the stone.]*

MORRIS  Laurie.

LAURIE  And then! Laurie, don’t do drugs, why would you do that? You’re stronger than that, you’re better than that. And then I am, for five fucking years I am, no thanks to him, right?
[Morris stares at the blunt in Laurie's hand, gently illuminating the bloody hangnail on his thumb.]

MORRIS Laurie, I didn’t…

[They start to reach for the blunt, hesitant.]

LAURIE Oh, this? No, this is fine. It’s nothing. Promise. I forget—forget that you don’t know things. This isn’t the problem.

[They both go quiet for a bit.]

MORRIS I wish...

LAURIE What?

MORRIS I know so little, and even then, most of the time I wish I didn’t know the things I do.

LAURIE That’s—if you don’t like knowing things, then why do you keep searching?

MORRIS Dunno… What else would I do?

LAURIE What do you want to do?

MORRIS I—I’ve never thought about it before. ’M bad at thinking. My brain goes all—

[They wave their hand around their head vaguely.]

MORRIS —and shuts down.

LAURIE Well. I’ll help you.

MORRIS Help me—think?

LAURIE Yeah. It’s like, we can tag team it. Sometimes I think, sometimes you think.

MORRIS That doesn’t make sense, Laurie.

LAURIE Shut up, you’re high.

MORRIS You’re high.
From the notebook of Morris St. Martins

An Inventoried Dinner with Reverend Miles Warren | October 11, 2017

Names
“Call him Revered, he’ll like that.”

They nod.

“If you’re uncomfortable at any point, let me know and we’ll leave.”

They nod again.

“And if—”

“It’s fine, Laurie.”

Greetings
“Nice to meet ya, Morris.”

Firm, testing handshake.

“Reverend Warren,” they mumble.

Unlike Laurie’s endless supply of smiles, the Reverend’s tight-lipped grin costs.

Language
“So, Morris, where you from?”

“Um. I’m not sure. Amnesia.”

“Really? You don’t remember anything?”

They shake their head.
“No friends? Family?”

They shake their head.

“Family’s important,

you know. Are you trying to find yours?”

Laurie: “Miles, c’mon. Don’t interrogate them.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Laurence. She

and I are just having a conversation, aren’t we, Morris?”

They shrug.

“See, she’s reasonable.”

Laurie: “They.”

“They?” The Reverend repeats.

“Fuck you.”

“Language, Laurence.”

“No, really. Fuck you. Christ. Can’t believe I thought—Morris, let’s go.”

They trail after Laurie with one last glance at the Reverend, who smiles that costly smile and shrugs his shoulders like what can you do?

Inheritance

Reverend Miles Warren dies,

unceremonious. With no one
to replace his position,

the church next to his home hosts his funeral, then lies
quiet.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

*Springvale Cemetery | May 5, 2018*
Grave Days Transcript

Source Unknown | May 17, 2018

MORRIS What if there’s nothing I’m supposed to remember?

LAURIE What do you mean?

MORRIS I—People always act like there’s something I’m meant to remember. Like there’s something about my past that is inherently important.

LAURIE You don’t think you’ve forgotten anything important?

MORRIS I think this—

[They gesture to their papers, to a drying candle.]

MORRIS —is what’s important.

LAURIE Why? They’re long dead, and this town doesn’t have to mean anything to you.

Why do you care?

MORRIS I don’t think I’m ever going to remember me, and I’m fine with that, but if I can remember them, then that’s useful, right?

LAURIE (sighs deeply) Okay—their lives are important, and you know I’m happy to help you pursue this, but something doesn’t have to be useful to be important.

MORRIS ...I know.

[A long pause. Morris works their mouth for an explanation.]

MORRIS It’s like, if I remember them, then they existed, and if they existed, then I do too.

LAURIE You exist, Morris. Morris—Morris, we exist. When we die, we will still exist. If every memory and every record of our being is burned, we will still exist. No one can take that, alright? They can’t. You are a testament to the fact that memory is not a marker for existence.
MORRIS  But I’m—I’m not—I don’t feel like a person. I don’t feel like anything.

LAURIE  You are. You’re a person, Morris. You’re here, you—

MORRIS  I’m not. You said if they burned us, we still exist, right? So it’s like—I’m just ashes, yeah? And Aldous and Cree and Deidra and Nina and Cory, they’re like us. And the fire, it takes our love and takes our pain and burns it. That’s all it does. It burns our bodies while we’re still in them and burns our hearts while we’re still using them and it just burns until we’re the ashy remains of anyone we were or could have been.

LAURIE  Alright. So we’re ashes. Then what about this, Morris?

[He gestures between the two of them.]

MORRIS  What?

[Laurie reaches out, pauses, gives time for Morris to pull away, and then takes their hand in his.]

LAURIE  If it’s all pointless, if we all just burn up and turn to ash, then what are we doing?

[Morris stares down at their joined hands.]

MORRIS  I… I don’t—

LAURIE  What do you want, Morris?

MORRIS  (choked) I don’t know.

LAURIE  Do you mind if I tell you what I want?

[They shake their head, then press their forehead to the tabletop and go limp there.]

LAURIE  I want to help you, but not at the expense of my own good health. I want you to get what you need to get out of this endeavor, but not burn yourself up in the process. I want you to believe that existence, long or short term, matters.

[He begins running his fingers through their hair.]

I want—I would like your permission to love you, and exist with you.
MORRIS  

(muffled) I don’t think I know how.

LAURIE  

For someone with decades of your life missing, you rely a lot on knowing things.

[Morris laughs wetly and pushes themself off the table, wiping their eyes.]

MORRIS  

‘S what makes me so cool and mysterious.

[Laurie chuckles, then sighs.]

LAURIE  

Listen. Maybe—maybe they will burn us to ash. But we can’t only live in response to the world’s destruction of us, so maybe—just this once—we get a say in whether or not we burn, right? Just this once. Wouldn’t that be something?

MORRIS  

(smiling) That would be something.
From the memory of Cory Sloane, Aged 17, Transexual in the making

1 May 1944

Mr. Cree got real fucking mad at me and Dr. Birch today. Honest to God, don’t know what it was all about. Felt like one of those grown-up things again, where there’s a fight about one thing happening but really it ain’t about that at all.

Mr. Cree mentioned that Bible, the one with all the names of folks like us in it, and I said that I was glad I was able to copy it down. I like to look through the names, sometimes, and I think of the questions I’ll ask them if I ever meet them, about how they knew they were a boy, or a girl, and how they convinced people that’s what they were.

As soon as I said this, though, he got all huffy and loud and started demanding to know why I had copied it down. Real rude of him, I thought, since it wasn’t even my idea, which I told him right off. Dr. Birch’s the one who said I could, blame him.

Mr. Cree rounded on Dr. Birch and went off yelling at him, why would you let her do that, that’s important information, she's a child, Aldous. You can’t just be handing people’s names out, how could you be so careless?

I took offense to that. I’m not a child, and I can be trusted with important information. I’m not stupid and I’m not gonna show no one. Mr. Cree kept yelling anyway, mostly at Dr. Birch, but I still didn’t like it.

I told him I’d burn the page, but I don’t think I’m gonna. Really, no one’s gonna see. Not even Ben. Maybe my biographer, one day, but by that time everyone in that Bible will be long dead and it won’t matter none.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

*Inventory of the Warren-Briar family home, located off Old Morris Station Road | January 25, 2018*

_Eridanus - “River”_

Reverend Miles Warren died unexpectedly of a heart attack, seven months after I met Laurie. I had only met the man the one time, at our disaster dinner. Laurie and I took several weeks off from the historical society to go through everything in that old house. He was dealing in his own way, ricocheting between silence and high-speed jabbering. I didn’t understand his cleaning method, or what he wanted to keep—he spent a hour staring at the May 1989 issue of Southern Living Magazine before carefully packing it up, but threw some homemade and very personal-looking Christmas tree ornaments into a “get rid of” box without a second glance.

_Andromeda - “The Chained Lady”_

We spent an evening in his childhood bedroom, going through high school paraphernalia, stuffed animals, old books. There was a book of constellations and star-watching that looked well-loved, with pages falling out where the binding was coming apart. Laurie’s face went bright when he saw it, and he held it like a sacred thing as he flipped through its pages. His enthusiastic commentary meandered between astrophysical explanations and Greek mythologies, both of which were far too in-depth for me, but I let the words wash over me and didn’t worry too much about their meaning.

As he talked I ran my fingers along the picture of the Andromeda constellation, the connection humanity created between disparate objects traceable yet so unreal to me. I tried to
imagine the stars’ burning bodies, generating matter and self into a void. I tried to imagine
Andromeda herself, as myth, as reality, as the go-between that most of history lives in.

In theory, I knew of children’s connect-the-dots games. I don’t know if I ever played
them, but I have to imagine I didn’t. The concept was so simple, but the travel between one dot
and the next—my thumb traced along the line of Andromeda’s left arm—felt so foreign to me,
such an impossible distance to span.

I leaned back to look out the window, eyes roving over the paper stars’ counterparts. A
shiver ran down my spine.

“You cold?” Laurie paused his spiel to reach back to the twin size bed we leaned against,
pulled the quilt off, and wrapped it around my shoulders.

Carina - “The Keel”
Laurie had said early on he wanted to sell the place. And then we cleaned it out, all of Miles’
things, all the things from relatives that Laurie had never talked about but had clearly left a bad
mark. And as we stood in the house, wiped of its previous personality, he got a funny look on his
face.

“This house is bigger than my trailer.”

“Sure is,” I said, trying to remain neutral but supportive.

“It’s all paid off.”

“Uh huh.”

“Got a whole acre out back. I’ve always wanted a garden.”

I nodded.

He continued, “It doesn’t—have to be what it was.”

“Nothing ever has to be what it was. It’s yours to—to—shape into newness.”
“Very poetic.”

“Thanks.”

He turned to me, memories swimming behind his eyes. “What if I wanted to paint the walls lime green?”

I shrugged. “Just know who’s at fault if your ancestors come back to haunt you.”
Memories of Coriander Sloane, aged 17, Transexual in the making

19 June 1944

Caught Ben playing with this baseball bat I made him. I panicked, I know, and I was too hard on him, but really, he should know better than to play with something like that. Just one bruise ain’t the same on him as someone else. He don’t get it, I swear. I know he just wants to be like other kids, but honestly. Neither of us have ever had that chance. No need to be sour about it now. I just have to take better care of him, keep better eyes on him.
I was on a constant search for warmth, in those days. Not that I knew that. How could I, when the chill that spread from my chest and gut felt as natural as any other part of me? Which is to say, it did not feel very natural at all, but there was a uniformity of uncanniness, of my body feeling wrong, that allowed the cold to go largely unnoticed.

Georgia air in August was beyond warm, boiling you in a pool of your own sweat and stagnancy, teasing you with a hint of a breeze only to snatch it away and replace it with a shifting cloud that leaves you choking under the beating sun. I hated the way the heat grabbed at my limbs and dragged me down, down, extracting what little energy I had and feeding it to the hungry earth that produced wilted corn and breathless cotton in exchange for my discomfort. It was, in all ways, the wrong kind of heat, thus hindering my search for warmth further.

Laurie was a source of warmth, of course. But there was so much I was looking for in Laurie that it was hard to identify from moment to moment which need he was fulfilling for me. I used to place a couple fingers on his arm, his neck, his ankle, whatever was accessible, just to be reassured by his steady pulse and radiating skin, but the heat never transferred.

It wasn’t until winter set in as a more-or-less constant that I became aware of how my chest held this bit of ice inside it, how no quantity or quality of jacket could fix it, no roaring fireplace, not even those heat packets that Laurie began buying and shoving in my pockets, in-between layers of socks, rubber-banding to my gloves. I tried to explain that it had nothing to do with the weather. It was internal and, I was sure, incurable. But Laurie didn’t like that, would get
this frown and press his palm to my sternum as if he was trying to cast a spell that would create a rumbling little furnace inside my soul.

Candlemaking didn’t fix it, not in any sustainable way, but there would be moments, when I would pour the wax from pot to jar, or the exact millisecond where I would hold a match to the wick and watch it light up, where spark would be reflected in my chest and I’d take a single breath without that brittle chill.

Sometime in early January, out in an old family plot the name of which I don’t remember, the cold hit something of a zenith. It was one of those winter days that settled inside me from the moment my feet hit the floor, despite the several layers of socks I was sporting.

I had slept on the couch the night before. Where I chose to sleep was always a guessing game; I was welcome in Laurie’s bed, and some nights I would curl up next to him so tight that I was sure our clothes would fuse into one mass of thread-bare t-shirt as we slept. Other nights the idea being within ten feet of anyone else made my skin crawl, and I’d lie on the couch on my back, a sheet underneath and atop me, imagining that I was not touching anything at all.

The previous night had been of the latter sort, and so I awoke frozen to the thin sheets, body in a trembling state of disarray, but my mind was clear and clean. Laurie sat cross-legged on the coffee table in front of me, coffee in his hands, and a cup of tea next to his knee. He jerked his head towards the tea as a question, and I responded with a nod. I could feel the relief in his sigh as he handed me the mug, careful to not let our hands touch. Often I couldn’t bring myself to drink the tea he made me, too afraid it would fog up the space in my head I spent all night clearing in the cold. I reached out and tapped his thumb with mine—a brief, efficient gesture that said you can touch me—and he let out another sigh of relief.
As we got ready to leave the trailer that morning, I grabbed a candle I had made the night before and shoved a lighter in my pocket. Laurie took a moment, opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, “Not for too long, alright? It’s cold today.”

I nodded. “Just wanna see if I can get Cory.”

“I know.” He pulled a blue knit cap over my ears, indiscreetly pressing his hand against my forehead to check for a fever. “I just want you to be careful.”

I’m not sure when Cory started glowing. It was gradual, I guess. There was a literal orange-y hallow around—above?—her skin, the kind that backlights arm hairs and baby hairs around the forehead. I swear her eyes flickered, too.

She walked by herself through the rows of headstones, one fist clenching and unclenching by her side, the other held a jar of something light and golden—honey, I realized—head tilted up to the gray January sky. I watched her create heavy, winding footprints in the snow until the imprints made a tangled, webbed path around the field.

Eventually she ended up in front of Ben’s grave. She knelt down and placed the jar of honey at the headstone, then stood. Froze. Turned towards me. And for the first time, one of my mirages looked, and saw. She squinted at me, chin tilted up in concentration like I was a horse whose broken status was unknown.

It was an opportunity, the only one I had for all I knew, and yet I couldn’t say anything, just clutch the candle in both my hands and choke on still air. Cory opened her mouth to speak. To yell at me to get out, if her expression was anything to go by. I knew the precise moment I disappeared from her sight, when her eyes went unfocused and she blinked a couple times.
My hands burned. I looked down, expected to find that the candle had somehow melted in my grip, but there was only a little pool of wax around the flame. I looked back up at her, as if she knew and could tell me why my hand felt like they were on fire.

She was gone. The jar of honey remained.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

*Grounding Exercise | November 14, 2018*

morris st. martins

honey jar

coriander sloane, transsexual in the making
morris st. martins

honey jar

coriander sloane, transsexual in the making
Memories of Cory Sloane, Aged 17, transexual in the making

3 October 1944

Told Aldous he’s a shit doctor. Not sure if I meant it or not. I could be a better doctor than him, I know it. I’m sharp. I could help Ben, if someone would let me have the fucking know-how.

Don’t even matter. I think by the time I get all the schooling I need it’ll be too late. Useless.

Doctor Aldous Fucking Birch, indeed.

4 October 1944

Should write a little of what happened, just for the biographer’s sake. Hey, biographer? You better be getting it right, after all this work I do for you. Here’s a story for the book:

Ben’s in a lot of pain. I didn’t know what to do, never know what to do. Ma wasn’t even home, for once. Over with Nina. I borrowed Sugar, didn’t have time to ask, Mr. Johnson wasn’t home neither. Left a note. Ben cried while I was getting him up on Shug, but he was very good the whole way over. “Count every firefly we pass,” I told him. “I will too and we’ll see who gets more.”

I didn’t do any counting, too focused on making sure we were riding nice and smooth. By the time we got there, Ben was almost calm again, and I was starting to think maybe I got him up and out for nothing.

Carried him inside anyways, course. He’s so small, is what I kept thinking. He’s so small, he’s so small, God, he’s gonna just disappear, right here and now. Lord please don’t let him disappear.
Cree brought us in, took Ben from me, and told me to go and fetch Aldous. He was in the bedroom, just woken up from the noise, I think. I didn’t even realize they must have already been in bed until right then.

I told him what was going on, asked him to please come look at Ben. I noticed his legs wobble a bit as he got out of bed, but he propped himself up right quick and followed me out. That man looks worse every day. No wonder he can’t take care of nobody if he can’t even look after himself.

Aldous looked Ben over, careful like always. He touches people like he’s afraid he’ll hurt them. Funny thing for a doctor to be afraid of.

He was shaking, right from the start. Cree pulled up a chair for him to sit on, discrete-like, as if I ain’t noticed, but nothing could hide his hands. He managed to get through most of it alright, talking to Ben about the Drummond’s new pups, which one did Ben like the best? What d’you think they should name them? Stuff like that. Ben was smiling by the end, and that awful knot in my chest began to unfold.

Then he told me about a new technique for wrapping Ben’s legs that would keep the blood flowing nice. Said he’d like to show me, and I agreed. After that it gets confusing, honestly.

Dr. Birch went to stand, I think, to get the wraps. But his legs just up and gave up, and he hit Ben’s legs hard on the way down.

Ben screamed. Screamed like Dr. Birch was sawing his God-damned leg off.

Mr. Cree was already leaping forward to help, but it was like those ember in me had gotten a gasping breath of oxygen, and I just started yelling at Dr. Birch. Something about what kind of doctor is he, why can’t he get shit right. I wasn’t too nice about it, that’s for sure.

Ben kept screaming. Sobbing and curled over on himself like I’ve never seen him.
Cree tried to ask Dr. Birch how he could help while I kept yelling at him, demanding he fix it, but he ignored both of us, stumbling over to his cabinet and pulling out a vial and a syringe, then stumbling back over to Ben, kneeling in front of him.

I remember this bit: “Ben, love,” Always calls him love. If he loved Ben he’d be able to fix him, I bet. “Ben, I’m so sorry. Here, it’ll feel better in no time, I promise. Hold still, we’re gonna get some medicine in you and it’ll stop hurting real soon, pinky promise.”

I was trying to get at them—to yell at Dr. Birch more or to comfort Ben, don’t really know—but Mr. Cree pulled me away, shaking me until I shut up. Don’t recall what all he said, but it amounted to, “Either leave or make yourself useful.”

I looked over to the table, where Dr. Birch was still kneeling, muttering to Ben while his trembling hands fumbled with the vial. Ben’s screams quieted to moans.

I took a breath. Nodded at Cree. Crossed the room and took the vial and syringe from Aldous’s hands before he could go and break them. I asked that he tell me what to do.

He walked me through it, slumped into Cree, reaching out once or twice to guide my hands.

Just sorta sat in silence after that, save for Dr. Birch’s occasional mumbled apologies to Ben. Then Ben fell asleep, and those stopped too.

I think I need to finish this later. I feel a bit sick, honestly.
I know you were loved.
Red Truck

Do I look like a real man? He asks with a grin, striking a casual pose with one hand on the wheel and the other hanging out the open window. Sometimes, he says, when I get looks, I think the truck is the only thing that saves me. They’ll get all squinty, look me up and down, and then back at the truck, and relax. He puts on an even heavier drawl than he already has: c’mon down to Briar’s depot, get yer’self a fiiiine 1979 F150, already rustin’, already rarin’, ain’t no one gonna question yer masculinity ever again.

The joke continues throughout the day as we go about the cemeteries collecting data—we’ll be driving in silence and he’ll turn into his used car salesman persona, and I always laugh, or at least smile—laughing’s hard, sometimes, even when I think something’s funny—and when I do Laurie’s face gets so bright I can hardly look him in the eye.

What’s that piece of junk? A Ford Fiesta? Fuck off! I’m a real, genu-ine cis-gender-ed man and I only drive man trucks.

Voice

I love the way he sounds before, during, and after T. I loved his soprano harmony with John Denver and I love his tenor bluegrass yelling. I love how frustrated he is that he’ll never be bassy enough to properly sing “I’ve Got Friends in Low Places.”

For what, Morris? He asks. What was the point of all these fucking needles if I can’t sound like Garth Brooks? Useless.
I was once an artiste, he says in a bad French accent. I hold up a drawing of a vaguely human shape that’s been robbed of dimension and raise an eyebrow. Alright, yeah. Never said I was any good.

The black pens of various widths and purposes lie untouched at the bottom of the cardboard box full of art supplies. They look nice. I scratch one of the brush tip ones against the flap of the box, and am happy to see that it doesn’t have the blue-ish tint like the pens I had been using.

Do you want to try them out?

What if I’m as bad as you? I joke.

Impossible.

He’s only got one coat: a tan barn jacket with a dark brown collar, fraying at the cuffs. Found it at a yardsale when I was fifteen, he tells me. Three dollars. One day as he’s slipping into it, he leans in and whispers, this is the jacket that made me trans, don’t tell anyone.

I nod, faux-serious, and promise not to.

Later that day: do you want a genderqueer jacket?

I do, it turns out. We spend way too much money on gas to go to the four thrift stores within a fifty mile radius, until I find a big green hoodie with sleeves that go past my fingertips and a hem that ends halfway down my thigh.

He tells me I look very cute and utterly void of gender.
Silence

Right after Miles dies, he’s quiet in a way he’s never been before, which makes the house an echoing, empty place. You’d think, with all the grieving I do, I’d know how to help, but it takes me nearly a month to work up the courage to ask what I can do for him, to which he replies, soft, can you talk to me?

Of all the requests. But I manage. While I heat us up some soup, I talk about what I’ve been watching the townsfolk do during our communions. I describe the deer that come and eat the crab apples from our tree every morning, how I don’t have the heart to either scare them away or put some chicken wire up around the damn thing even though they’re killing it. When I can tell he’s having a real bad day, I sing.

It’s on one of those days that he looks up from the couch and speaks for the first time in a couple days: you got a sweet voice. Can’t believe you been holding out on me. And he smiles. And I feel like I’ve done something good, something real, maybe for the first time ever.
From the Memory of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Transexual in the making

6 October 1944

Going to finish this now, while I have the time and while I still remember what happened.

After Ben fell asleep, me and Dr. Birch and Mr. Cree all sat there, calming down. After awhile, Mr. Cree helped Dr. Birch from where he was sitting on the floor, still trembling something awful, up onto a chair.

I was still angry, but a funny sort of calm had come over me. Once I was sure my voice would be steady, I told Dr. Birch that there had to be some better treatment that he wasn’t doing. “Surely you ain’t as useless as all that,” I told him, pointing to where Ben slept.

Dr. Birch didn’t defend himself, just sat there looking like he was about to cry, which made me even angrier. I didn’t have time for that. Ben didn’t have time for that.

Mr. Cree gave me a real severe look, said something like, “Coriander, please. Aldous is trying his best, you have to know that.”

His best clearly ain’t shit, but I didn’t say that, cause Mr. Cree was looking at me like I’d disappointed him, and I’d had enough of that.

We sat for a long while in silence before a nasty realization hit me, and I couldn’t stop myself from saying it out loud, “Ain’t neither of us gonna get to grow up, are we? Ben and me both.”

One time while working on a barn raising for Mr. Johnson, I watched a man get skewered right through his gut on a foundation post, and the noise he made as it went through him was this near-nothing whimper. The same sound escaped Dr. Birch’s lips when I said that. He slumped against Mr. Cree like he could not keep his body upright any longer.
Mr. Cree asked me what I meant by that while he ran his hand up and down Dr. Birch’s arm.

Seemed pretty obvious to me. Ben ain’t gonna get the medical attention he needs, not here, because there’s no resources, and not in the city, because even if we could get him there, we could never afford any of the fancy shit they might give us.

Mr. Cree listened, and I appreciated that he didn’t try to tell me that it’s not like that. It is, and no use pretending it ain’t. Dr. Birch sat up enough to catch my eye, and said, “What about you? Why would you think that about yourself?”

Silly. Stupid. Even Dr. Birch, with all his experience with folks like us, didn’t get it. I can’t live like this, and I won’t survive as a girl, so where does that leave me? The most I could manage was a vague gesture to myself. My body. I ran my fingers through my hair—it’s all the way down to my shoulders, these days.

At this point, Dr. Birch leaned forward and began talking about how I could survive, how lots of people like me survived and were happy and led fulfilling lives, but I was barely listening. I nodded when he looked too distressed by my lack of response for me to deal with it. I don’t know what he wants from me. I don’t know what I want from me, but I don’t think I’m going to get it.
Communion with Bartholomew Cree and Aldous Birch

Springvale Cemetery | November 25, 2018

Today’s candles: pine and sage, several of each. I had been having a hard time reaching out to Aldous and Cree lately, and had put a lot of care into these candles. I dried the sage slow in the sun and spent a whole afternoon sitting under the pine behind the house, eyes closed, listening to the breeze slip between the needles like eddies in the stream. As I made the wicks, dipping yarn into melted wax, I imagined a flame, not mild and flickering, as is endemic to the candle’s natural state, but a tall, steady flame streaked with blue. I decided these candles would be in jars, because Laurie spent so much time cleaning out every jar we used in case I needed one, that it seemed the only correct thing to do was acknowledge his care.

It was a mild day in early spring, and daffodil shoots peered out from the dirt with reluctance, waiting to see if there were going to be any last-minute cold snaps before revealing their full blooms. A tension sat in the air—I wasn’t sure if it was from my recent inability to commune with Aldous and Cree or if it had something to do with Laurie, who trailed behind me at a dragging pace.

I couldn’t find the words to ask what was wrong, but I took a moment to glance over him and cock my head to the side. He shook his head, pulled his big tan coat tighter around his chest, and clenched his jaw. A bit of stubble had begun to appear on his jawline and chin.

As I set up, I felt Laurie’s presence, several feet behind me but watchful, wary. I didn’t know of what—not of me, certainly, and it didn’t make sense for him to develop a sudden aversion to the ritual as a whole, not when he’d shown no sign of dislike for almost a year, now. I pushed it aside for now, lighting the candles in a scattered pattern around me, then settling in
front of the headstone. I stayed with my eyes open for a minute, neck craned to the massive old oak above me, the Spanish moss swaying in the breeze. A crow perched on one of the branches, peering down at me like it knew something I didn’t. I had no doubt this was true.

I almost fell asleep. The grass was soft, Laurie’s presence lulled me, but my head jerked up and my eyes snapped open as I heard Aldous’ unmistakable, reedy voice echoing loudly.

“Cree, tell me what Cory meant.”

I looked to my left, and saw Aldous and Cree, the former with his chin pushed up and arms folded over his chest, the latter with hunched shoulders and a hanging head breaking his towering frame.

“I don’t know how Cory found out, Aldous, I really don’t.”

“I’m not asking how Cory knows, I’m asking what I don’t know.”

Cree stood still, and even from several feet away I noticed the measured, shallow breaths of someone trying very hard not to panic.

“Bartholomew.” Aldous’ tone was the coldest I’d ever heard from him, and Cree flinched.

“Don’t call me that.”

Aldous seemed to take a moment to collect himself, and some of the anger melted from his face. “I—okay. I’m sorry. Please, though. Tell me what’s going on.”

Cree sighed. Somehow his shoulders curled further inward. “Honestly, it just seemed easiest. I’m—I’m so tired, and I didn’t want to fight, I didn’t want to have to leave again, so I just… let it happen.”

“What seemed easiest? What happened?”

“Gray, he—found something. And.” Cree swallowed, clenching his fists by his sides. He shook his head, unable to continue.
Aldous grabbed one of his hands, unfurled it, and rubbed his thumb along his palm and up his fingers. “Does he know about us?”

Cree laughed wetly. “No. Um. I don’t think, anyways. Funny, that’s what I thought at first, too. No, he uh…” He cleared his throat and went to start over. “I was able to come live here because my father died, right? I didn’t need to take care of him anymore.”

Aldous frowned and continued to hold Cree’s hand. “Yes, I remember.”

“There’s more to it that I didn’t tell you.”

“Alright.”

Cree took a steadying breath. “He found the Bible, Aldous. He had all those names and he was going to… I don’t actually know what he was planning on doing, but he knew, and not just about us, right? I think he already suspected that.” Cree was panicking again. “He knew all of them. All their names. Their—they trusted us with that. The Bible was supposed to be—safe. It needed to be safe. So I—”

Understanding spread across Aldous’ face. “You killed him.”

“Yes.” I could barely hear Cree’s whisper above the breeze through the pines.

“And—Gray knows.”

“Mm.”

“He’s—what? Blackmailing you?”

Cree nodded. “Not just me. I think he has dirt on Deidra, Nina, maybe even Cory? I’m not…”

“He knows about Nina and Deidra,” Aldous confirmed.

“How do you know?”

“Nina told me. She figured he had something on you, too. She was worried about you.”
“I see.” All at once the tension in his shoulders bled out. Cree’s gaze went over Aldous’ head, at the space that would be me if he could see me. I imagined he could, and I nodded at him like that would bring comfort.

“Cree, darling,” Aldous called, pulling his attention back. “You should have told me.”

“I know.” Cree was listing to the side now as if he could barely stand.

“We’ll figure something out.”

“I know.”

As the two men faded, I felt a tug on my chest like they were dragging me with them, and when they disappeared the pull replaced itself with a yawning void. I knew this feeling, was used to it, but suddenly I couldn’t stand the thought of being this empty and cold for another moment. I stood, grabbed one of the jars, and hurled it at the ground. I felt hot wax splatter against my ankle. It must have hurt, but I found that I didn’t give a shit. I should give a shit, I thought, shouldn’t I? It mattered that I didn’t. I threw another jar, and a third, and when that one didn’t shatter to its fullest ability, I picked it up and threw it again, ignoring the shard of glass that pierced my hand.

Laurie pulled at my arm. “Stop it, Morris. Just stop.”


“You’re hurting yourself. Stop.”

I wiped the blood trickling down my palm onto my shirt. “So what?”

“What do you mean so what? I—” Laurie took a step back, put his hands behind his head, and breathed deep. Then his arms dropped, and he looked tired. “Please, put the candle down.”

That voidish clenching still grabbed at my chest, but his weariness made me drop the jar.

“Something’s been wrong,” I muttered. “What is it?”

“What’s wrong?” Laurie echoed. “Seriously?”
I nodded.

“Put memory issues aside for a second, if you could have even an ounce of an idea of what’s happening right now, in the present, or a bit of self-awareness, maybe—”

“I’m self-aware—”

“You’re not! Lord, you’re really not. You’re so fucking scared of your past that you won’t even touch the idea of knowing this—this—this—this one.” He reached out and tapped my sternum with his index finger.

I stepped back. “What, and you know me so well?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

The grief still lingering in my chest collided with a trembling fury, and I spat out, “Tell me, then. Tell me about me if I don’t know shit—”

Laurie threw his hands up. “Yeah, sure. Why the hell not. Let’s start here: You get so lost in your own head, thinking about—them—” he gestured to the cemetery, the candles, “—or avoiding thinking about them, or really, sometimes, not thinking about nothing at all, that it’s like I’m alone in that shitty old house.”

I opened my mouth—to protest? Defend myself? I’m not sure, but Laurie held out a hand to stop me. “I’m scared to leave you alone half the time. You can be chopping vegetables and I can tell you’re not all there, so I take the knife from you and you don’t even notice, just keep staring off into nothing.”

I didn’t know I did that. It was often hard to keep track of time, sure. But that was rather the nature of living in this half-abandoned town—days and moments become malleable, untouched by nine-to-fives and city lights. Staying present is an afterthought.
“And—and despite all your distance, everything affects you so damn much. You think you’re—I don’t know, some cold bitch—but then you see the lives of some long-dead folks that have nothing to do with you and you go and have a breakdown cause you can’t help them.”

I stared at him now, too struck by these illustrations of myself to respond.

“You don’t know how to take care of yourself—” He must have seen the look on my face, because he immediately clarified, “—And it’s not a burden to take care of you, Morris. But you need to start caring about yourself enough to make changes if you’re not well.”

I thought he might be done, and I didn’t want to stop hearing who I was, so I prompted, “What else?”

He frowned. “You always leave the stove on. I just know you’re gonna burn down the house one day.”

“Okay. What else?”

“You won’t let anyone cut your hair but you’re so bad at cutting it yourself. It’s infuriating.”

I smiled. “You’ll never cut my hair.”

“Your freckles fade in the winter.”

“Yeah?”

“I wish they didn’t.”

“Oh. Why?”

Laurie chuckled. “Cause I like them, Morris.”

“Oh.”

“I like loads of things about you, in case that wasn’t clear.”

I squinted at him.
“Please don’t ask me why. You look like you’re about to ask me why and that’ll make me sad.”

“I wasn’t.” I was. “I’m sorry I’m—not very present.”

“It’s okay—” He stopped himself, “Well, it’s… we’ll work on it. Let me see your hand.”

I obeyed the request, palm up, and watched him inspect the leaking, ragged gash. “I like loads of things about you, too.”

Laurie’s expression froze for a moment before he gestured to his face with a grin.

“Obviously. What’s not to like?”
Reverend Gray knows something, and it’s my fault. Nina volunteered me to help clean out the back garden of the church after the fall crops, and it didn’t take all that long, wasn’t even hard. I think the Reverend could have done it himself, he ain’t all that old. But people doing things to make the church look pretty helps the community, Reverend says. So I don’t fuss about it, go on over there, get it done quick, and sit and write in my journal for a couple minutes. The sun was nice.

Just as I’m getting ready to head out, Reverend comes out of the sanctuary, tells me it’s looking perfect, thank you for being such a dear boy and cleaning it up, all that. He then asks me if I’ll put the shovel and hoe back in the shed for him, and I oblige, of course. When I come back he’s holding my journal, flipping through it.

Every part of my body gets all frozen up. Too paralyzed to even be afraid.

“For your homework?” He asks, handing me the book.

I’m way too scared to do anything but nod and take it.

He looks at me real good, real analytic-like, and asks me how I’ve been enjoying Mr. Cree’s instruction. I say he’s a good teacher. Smart. And then I made some excuse about getting back to Ben before my hands can start shaking.

Not everything in here would be horrible if he saw it. But I have an awful, awful feeling I ain’t that lucky.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

*Grounding Exercise | January 16, 2019*

Morris, Georgia ——————————— here below lies

and the loss of ———————— Morris St. Martins

lineage
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | December 27, 2018

MORRIS I think it’s grief.

LAURIE What?

MORRIS There’s been this thing. Like—emptiness. But colder. I think it’s grief.

LAURIE What—who?—are you grieving?

MORRIS I don’t know. But I think I’ve always been grieving it.

[Silence.]

MORRIS It’s not going to stop.

LAURIE No, I’d think not.
10:00 p.m.
Laurie, tired: Don’t you think it’s a little late to be getting started on this?
I won’t stay up too long, I reassure.

11:00 p.m.
Sage goes gray when dried, curled around its center like a sick animal that’s pulled itself away from the pack to protect the others. Crushing it feels like a mercy, but I know it doesn’t care.

12:00 a.m.
I’m going to bed, Morris.
Okay.
Please try to sleep.
Okay.

1:00 a.m.
The gentle humidity of the steam rising from the water that surrounds the pot of wax is a comfort, but the moment I pull my face away the sensation turns to damp discomfort.

2:00 a.m.
The center of the candle always experiences a little collapse when the wax dries. It may be a very easy fix, I’ve never bothered to look it up, but I don’t mind the imperfection.

3:00 a.m.

Feathery yarrow spiders across the back of my hand, still needs to be dried out. I don’t know if I register the sensation, or if I’ve just pulled from the memory of touch to trick my brain into thinking I can feel it.

4:00 a.m.

I envision, briefly, a spiraling, tangled tower of wax, how it would look to run a wick through it and watch the flame drag it into atrophy and dissipation.

5:00 a.m.

For consistency’s sake, I will record this period of time. I’m sure something happened during this hour—birds began to sing their early song, somewhere sometime a woman sits at her kitchen table with a long-cold coffee and contemplates divorce—but if anything happened to me, I don’t recall.

6:00 a.m.

Wax melts on the stovetop, is added to a spaghetti sauce jar, pine is arranged along the outskirts. I don’t realize until I reach for the wick that I’m out, so I watch the wax harden with no wick in place. In a fit of something besides numbness, there is a spike of guilt for my mistake. How horrible, to be created to be something warm and bright, only to be made wrong, doomed to sit in cold petrification.
7:00 a.m.

When Laurie finds me sitting at the kitchen table staring at my useless little mutant, eyes rimmed red, he sighs, says nothing, and holds out his hand. He waits for me to take it before he begins rubbing warmth into my fingers, up my palm, ending with a loose grip on my wrist.

Sleep, please. Just for an hour.

I nod, extricate my hand from his, and stumble off to bed.
Communion with Benjamin Sloane

Bragen Cemetery | January 2, 2019

The deeper we got into the winter months, the less I slept. I sat up on the couch several nights a week, either writing scraps of phrases in my journal, or planning out who I would do a communion with next, or just staring into the dark, eyes occasionally drifting to where the smallest amount of light slipped through the crack under Laurie’s door. The light looked warm.

It didn’t ever get frigid in Morris, we were too far South for that, but there was a damp cold that came over the air, especially at night, that seemed inescapable. By early February, when Spring was right around the corner and the cold is at its most brutal, Laurie had become convinced that there was something genuinely wrong with me, and that I needed to go to the doctor. I kept insisting it was fine, I had low blood pressure (I didn’t know this for a fact, but my fingers and toes were always a bit numb so it seemed likely), I just ran cold, really, it’s fine.

When those excuses didn’t fly, when Laurie found me knees pulled to chest, shaking to pieces at three in the morning, I began saying something that felt closer to the truth. It couldn’t be fixed, there was nothing physical to fix. There was an immovable bit of ice in my chest that might melt on its own, one day, but doctor’s weren’t going to find anything.

He took that better than he probably should have—he was used to my bullshit explanations of the world by now, but he wanted me to take fewer hours cataloguing for the Quitman County Historical Society, or spend less time in my communions and candlemaking. Both seemed like a total impossibility—I wasn’t working overly much for the Historical Society to begin with, and the second I couldn’t have quit if I wanted to.
“Please, Morris. Just—a day. Just spend one day not doing this,” Laurie begged, arms folded over his chest, eyes glued on my shaking hands, which he had been monitoring on the drive over to the cemetery, occasionally and irritatingly asking me if I was sure I was alright to do a communion today.

I was getting fed up. “You said you supported it. When I first started. You said you’d help me.”

“Yeah, exactly. Help you. This isn’t helping. This is taking you over.”

“I have to. I can’t not.”

“You’ve said. But you don’t have to do it like this. We keep circling back around to this, over and over—you say you have to, and then I tell you to take care of yourself, and then you agree, and then you don’t do it, so I try to take care of you, but—that’s not fair to me.”

I knew he was right. Every time we talked about this, he was right. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.”

“I—I don’t think I have a choice, to stop all this.”

“You do. You’re making a choice, Morris. Every time you don’t sleep, every time you ignore your health to fuck off to a cemetery for hours at a time on cold day, you’re making that choice.”

“Well, it doesn’t feel like a choice,” I defended. “It feels out of my control. I can’t—I don’t know if I’m capable of making choices.”

Laurie groaned. “Of course you’re capable of making choices. It might be difficult, to make the right one, and I’m not asking you to be perfect about it—just—just try, Morris.”

“I don’t know how to—What’s the ‘right choice?’” The bitterness rose up in my throat and I choked on it. “I spend every day just trying to get my thoughts to—settle into something
coherent, and remember what I’m supposed to do, and who I’m supposed to be, and how I’m meant to behave.”

“Then ask me, and we can talk about it.”

“Why do you get to decide what the right choice is for me?”

“I didn’t say that! I didn’t.”

I bit my bottom lip and stayed quiet. I had run out of proper arguments, and wanted to be left to glower.

“Nothing?”

I shook my head.


I glared harder.

“Right. Well. I’m going home. Are you staying here?”

I nodded.

“Cool. Awesome. See you later, I guess. Don’t freeze to death.”

Benjamin Sloane featured in the communions on occasion, usually trailing after Cory or Aldous, sometimes Nina. I got the impression he was not often alone. The elders in his life tended to treat him with a combination of over-caution and feigned casualness, no doubt to offset howstrangled he must have felt.

Today, he was completely alone, a broken-off tree branch in his hand, which must have represented a sword, if his play-pretend was anything to go by.

He made a very convincing one-person-play of the whole thing, kneeling to be knighted, then jumping up to tap the stick-sword to his own, invisible shoulder, then scrambling to kneel again, head bowed, thanking the queen for her trust in him. He found a branch that had broken
off an oak in a storm and trimmed it up until it had two branches that could resemble arms and an untouched bundle of leafy twigs at the top that could pass for a head of hair if you had a good imagination, which Ben clearly did. When he drove the bottom of the branch into the ground and packed some clay up around the base to stabilize it, it swayed precariously, but did not topple. Satisfied, Ben ran several feet back, turned about-face to the branch, posture rigid, sword pointed towards his opponent. He took ten deliberate, stiff steps forward, counting the strides under his breath, and lowered the sword to hang at his side. Then, serious as anything, he leaned forward and placed an airy kiss on the cheek of the other knight.

The motion took me by surprise, and I chuckled at it, covering my mouth before remembering that he couldn’t hear me, anyway. I wondered where he had learned that, what story he had heard to give him the idea that this was standard procedure in every knight’s duel. Perhaps this was a dueling tradition formed entirely from his own ideas.

The duel largely consisted of Ben waving his stick in wild arcs near the branch while avoiding actually hitting it, so as to not knock it over. This didn’t go on long before Ben began to pant and go a bit pale. I watched with mounting concern.

As a final move, Ben hopped to the left as if he was dodging a blow, then to the right, then turned his stick-sword around on himself, thrusting it through the air between his arm and his side. He curled around the mortal wound with a dramatic groan and dropped to the ground, limbs splayed in the grass.

Gasping offset by his giddy smile, Ben scrambled to his feet, eyes on the spot where he had just lay. He pulled his face into something solemn, and said, “You fought good, Sir Ben.”

He then dropped back down, taking a moment to arrange himself how he was before, and made a far-too-realistic gurgling sound, as if he was choking on blood. “Goodbye, Sir Knight.”
He stood again, this time stumbling. “With a kiss,” Ben leaned over and kissed the air above the grass indented by his own body, “I release you.”

He stared off into space for a minute, swept up in the tragedy of his own make-believe before nodding a self-satisfied nod. When he bent to grab the stick, he hissed in pain, then inspected his knee where a grass burn had formed, looking much bloodier than the average scrape should.

“Shit,” he mumbled, then slapped his hand over his mouth as if there was anyone to hear him swear. “Cory’s gonna kill me.”

As Ben faded, I turned around to face Laurie. I wanted to tell him about Ben’s little game of knights—he’d think that it was very cute, I was sure—before I remembered that he’d left. I stared at the three candles that I’d set up, two honey and one rosemary, absently watching the wax dribble down and harden in a puddle on the dirt.

After a bit, I leaned forward and blew them out. Three thin columns of smoke rose and vanished. I wondered where the smoke went. I wondered if Laurie knew. I wondered if I was allowed to ask Laurie. Probably not. Whatever the rules of a fight were, I doubted cease-fires for the sake of scientific inquiry were allowed.
From the notebook of Morris St. Martins

future memories of the imagination | January 11, 2019

every correspondence in their head begins
    my beloved friend, and ends
forever below lies your own,
    Morris St. Martins

they have never written a letter, of course—
    who would receive it, and where
does one get stamps? they can’t
    remember, but the body

would be
short and wide, if they did write
    one. it would fill
half a page side-to-side,
dense and intentional, no straying
    fragments, no
corpse floating down the broad,
slow river as
    bits of its skin flake
    away. no, everything with
    purpose.
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Transsexual in the making

23 November 1944

I tried to tell Dr. Birch today that Reverend might know. It seemed only fair to give warning. But he trusted me, and I was so righteous about it when Mr. Cree said he shouldn’t have let a child copy down their family Bible. I know it’s a real serious matter, but it also just feels embarrassing. To have to go to someone and admit you really did mess it up, you really were a child about it, all along.

    I’ll tell him soon. I will.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Grounding Exercise | January 13, 2019

My Beloved Friend,

I am writing to inform you of what you already know, but I find it difficult. I keep thinking the first few sentences over and over before I commit them to paper in the hope that there is a better way to begin. I suppose there is always a better way to begin, but beginning is hard when it bleeds over from an ending you can’t recall. Do you know which way my feet are pointed? Will you please tell me? I don’t know where to go from here, so I will say what I do know: where I am now, this is my home. I’m not sure what “this” refers to—this town of Morris; your house; the cemeteries; the paper I’m writing on; you, of course.

I can already feel myself unmooring the longer I go on like this and I’m worried that I’ll suffocate the page, and it won’t have space—

—for breath—

—it needs to

    sigh—

—does that

—make sense?—

I did try to stay concrete.

I do always try.

Forever below lies your own,
Morris St. Martins
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 17, Transexual in the making

I December 1944

Ma managed to get out of bed today. Nina wasn’t even here to coax her, so I was impressed. I made her a cup of coffee, she drank about half while staring at nothing. Nina would try to bring her out of her head, but I ain’t any good at that. Then she seemed to remember something. She sat up a bit, and asked after Ben. I told her he was with Dr. Birch, and that I was going to go pick him up soon.

“I’ll come with you,” She said. The offer surprised me so much that I don’t think I said nothing for a couple seconds. She added, “If that’s alright.”

I shrugged and told her it was fine.

I can’t remember the last time Ma was at one of Ben’s appointments. Not since Nina’s been around more, that’s for sure. Even when Dr. Birch comes to us, she stays in her room most of the time. These days, I’m so busy I often drop him off. He’s comfortable with Dr. Birch—they get along great, matter of fact. Way better than Dr. Birch and I do.

Dr. Birch was just finishing up by the time we got there. Ma didn’t say much. Looked a bit horrified, honestly. I think seeing Ben sitting on the table, shins swollen and mottled with bruises, face obviously pinched in pain, did something to her. Ben and I share that gritted-teeth outlook on life, and so despite all the doctor’s appointments and experimental medicine and days that he has to stay still in bed, I can see how it’d be easy to forget just how fragile he is. How close to death he is at any given moment.

Dr. Birch seems to really like Ma, or at least has a bunch of sympathy for her, or something. Actually, Dr. Birch likes most everyone, even me, and I’m not all that nice to him.
Anyway, when he was done with Ben, he asked me and Ben to go help Mr. Cree with cleaning the piano while he talked with her.

When they both joined us a little while later, Ma looked like she had been crying. Ben immediately migrated from helping Mr. Cree dust the keys to clinging to Ma’s skirts like he was very little again. I watched Ma swallow hard, then pet his hair gentle-like, never taking her eyes off Dr. Birch.

I don’t know what’s happening. I should tell Dr. Birch and Mr. Cree about what I think the Reverend seen, I know I should. I will, as soon as things calm down a little with Ben.
It wasn’t my intention to get into a fight with Laurie—I’d never really been in a fight before, not one of these long, drawn out ones, at least not within my memory, and I didn’t know how to go about ending it. All I knew is that I couldn’t quit this yet, and I understood why Laurie wanted me to, and these two facts made things tense, and weird, and I had no idea how to untense a situation once it got to that state. I was, shamefully, used to Laurie taking care of any sort of conflict resolution, guiding me through how to communicate like a person. Turns out, if he didn’t want to talk, I had exactly zero idea how to start a conversation.

So now I was standing in a cemetery by myself, honey candle cupped in my palms, annoyed at how bereft I felt. It was a bit like when I had first woken up from my coma, but this time, I had a reference for how it felt to not be utterly clueless. Stupid, I thought, that I wanted him here for this. It’s not like he did anything during the ritual—I’d never asked him to, so it shouldn’t make a difference.

I sat down on the grass, focused on the task ahead of me. Set the candle down. This was fine. I patted my pocket for a lighter, only to realize I didn’t have one. Laurie usually did.

With a groan, I flopped onto the grass and stared up at the sky. It was early yet; there were still a couple streaks of morning-pink sunlight across the clouds. Laurie hadn’t been awake when I left, so there was a chance he wouldn’t be awake now. Not that I needed to avoid him, I reasoned. Unless he wanted space. Then getting in his way would come across like I didn’t respect his boundaries.
I sat up again, let out a long breath, pulled my knees to my chin. What if I continued to avoid him and he’d think I just didn’t care to mend things? That I was too wrapped up in my own bullshit to worry about it? What if he did want to talk, and I got up the courage to talk as well, and then I ruined it? There were too many variables that I didn’t understand, and Laurie was the only person who I knew to ask about it.

I didn’t notice the wick catching. I closed my eyes for a moment to pull myself out of this spiral, and when I opened them again the candle was alight. I blinked a couple times, just to be sure I hadn’t imagined it, but it continued to flicker cheerfully, almost cockily. I was so focused on the flame that the sound of leaves rustling to my left startled me, and I flinched and fell back. Propped up by my elbows, I turned my attention to the noise to see Reverend Gray, hands folded behind his back, eyes intently forward. I followed his gaze to see Cory, arms folded across her chest with her shoulders hunched to her ears.

“Now, Cory,” He began. “I can’t help but get the feeling that you’re upset with me—”

“Oh, really? What gave you that impression?”

“I can assure you, nothing bad is going to happen. I’m just worried.”

“Is that right? What exactly are you worried about? The wellbeing of the people in the town you claim to minister to, or the fact that you can’t control those people?”

Reverend Gray sighed. “I can see you’re worked up. Why don’t I just cut to the chase, hm? You’ve always been an… impatient young man, so I’ll try to be quick about it. I just wanted to know why your name would be on that page along with all those awful people. Did Mr. Cree explain to you who those people are? Who he and Dr. Birch are?”

“Mr. Cree’s my teacher, Reverend. He’s explained lots of things to me.”

“Don’t try to be sly, boy. It doesn’t suit you.”
“In that case: I think Mr. Cree and Dr. Birch are two of the most moral folk I’ve ever had the pleasure a’ knowing, and anything you’re implying about their character I imagine you better keep to yerself.”

“This is what I was afraid of.”

I took my eyes off Cory for just long enough to see Gray truly mournful,

“I’m so sorry I haven’t protected you up to this point. You are a part of my flock, Coriander, and I’ve failed you in this regard.”

“Honest, Reverend, I think you failed me when you started threatening the livelihood of every person I cared about.”

Gray tensed.

“What, you thought I didn’t know about all that, huh? Y’all thought I wouldn’t notice four of the most important people in my life tripping over themselves to protect each other?”

“I think,” Gray took a step forward, “that there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m not sure what you’ve heard…”

“Oh! Then let me make it real clear for ya. You’re blackmailing my Ma, a woman who might as well be my Ma, my teacher, and the doctor currently responsible for making sure my little brother doesn’t up and die.”

“Cory—”

“You gonna tell me that ain’t what’s happening?”

“It’s no wonder, really, with the influences you have, that you would think this way. I really don’t blame you. I just want to help set you straight. You’re a smart young man, you could be capable of so much, if you applied yourself.”

Cory clenched her fists. “You’re such a fucking hypocrite. You really are. I hope when you get to the gates of heaven that Saint Peter takes one look at your horrible old face and—”
“Cory?” That quiet, serious, familiar voice sliced through her rant. Ben limped out of the trees, dragging his baseball bat behind him, with Aldous by his side. “Why you yelling?” Ben frowned. “What’s going on?”

Aldous looked back and forth between Gray and Cory, then maintained eye contact with Cory. “Coriander, dear, everything alright?”

Gray stared at Aldous, all concern he might have harbored gone from his expression. “We’re fine here, Dr. Birch. Cory and I just happened to run into each other on our respective walks, and we were having a conversation, that’s all.”

Aldous didn’t take his eyes off Cory. “Cory? That true?”

Cory strode over to the two of them and scooped up Ben. “That’s true. Nothin’ much going on.” She turned her attention to the child in her arms. “What are you doing out? I’m sure Dr. Birch shouldn’t be approving of you running around right now.”

“You was acting funny. I went and got Dr. Birch. You said to always go to Dr. Birch if something was wrong and you weren’t there to help.” Ben wriggled to be put down, tapping his bat lightly on her thigh.

“I did say that, bud.” She kissed the top of his head before placing him back in the grass. “Good job. Thanks for checking on me.”

“Great.” Aldous smiled and wrapped his arm around Cory’s shoulder. He was trembling, whether out of fear or his standard exhaustion, it was hard to tell. “I think we should be going, then.”

Gray’s eyes tracked Aldous’ hands. “Actually, I’m still talking to Cory, if you don’t mind. You and little Ben here can go now, since you know everything’s all peachy.” He winked at Ben.
“Oh, surely you can finish up your conversation anytime,” Aldous smiled. “Right now I need Cory’s help taking care of Ben. I’m going to show her some new techniques for compression. Can’t wait, I’m afraid.” It was the firmest he was capable of sounding, I think. His hand went from Cory’s shoulder to gripping her hand, and he did the same for Ben, gently tugging both of them away.

Gray’s hand struck out at Aldous, violent and unforgiving, and grabbed a fistful of Aldous’ shirt. “Get your hands off the children, you filthy—” He shoved Aldous backwards, and the man crumbled.

Cory leapt towards Aldous to try to catch him before he could hit the ground, momentarily distracted enough to be unable to keep Ben from his ineffectual beating of the bat against the Reverend’s leg, accompanied by a wordless shriek.

Gray looked down at Ben with a look of vicious annoyance, then plucked the bat from his hands. “Dr. Birch,” He hissed, hand clenched tight around his new possession. “I have been so patient with my intentions for you and Mr. Cree. Everyone in this town seems to think you two are goddamn saints, and while I can imagine that deception is a natural state of the deviant, I can also no longer tolerate sin that infects the whole flock. You,” He extended the bat to point at Aldous, who stumbled upright with Cory’s aid, “Need to leave.”

“Mr. Gray—” Cory started.

Without taking his eyes off wide-eyed, silent Aldous, Gray corrected, calmly, “That’s Reverend Gray, Coriander.”

“Reverend,” Aldous spoke in a near-whisper. “This has gotten very out of hand. You and I can talk, if you wish, but not with children present, don’t you agree?”
“I think the children need to understand what you are. Clearly, my initial soft-handed approach was the wrong one, and I’ll take the blame for that. But there comes a time when the judgment of God must be dealt. Both Cory and Benjamin are old enough to understand this.”

“Alright,” Aldous conceded. “As long as we’re making sure they understand what’s going on, I think they should understand that their Reverend, a community leader, someone they should be able to look up to and respect, is so power-hungry that he has forgotten the meaning of what God has called him to do.”

It happened almost too quick to track. Gray took a step towards Aldous, bat raised. Cory leapt to wrestle the weapon out of his hand, swearing under her breath. They tugged back and forth for a moment before Ben, shrieking and crying for it all to stop, stepped in between them. Cory immediately let go to reach for her brother and steer him away, and the sudden loss of resistance sent the bat in Gray’s grasp swinging through the air. It hit the base of Ben’s head with a sickening crack.

Ben collapsed to the ground without a sound. Gray dropped the bat, and it hit the grass with a dull thud. The following stillness choked the air out of the cemetery, and lasted only until Aldous dropped to his knees beside Ben, mumbling something indiscernible under his breath. For just a moment, Cory looked torn between burying a knife in Gray’s heart and checking on Ben before she joined Aldous on the ground and began shaking Ben’s arm. “Ben, hey, buddy. You’re alright. It’s okay.”

Ben did not move. The horror on Aldous’ face was a clear enough signal. While Cory continued to shake Ben and talk to him, Aldous looked up at Gray, who stood, stunned, until Aldous turned his attention back to the motionless figure on the ground. Gray turned and walked away in blank shock.
“Cory, love,” Aldous sighed, interrupting her increasingly desperate stream of comforts.

“Cory, he’s—God, I’m so sorry, love.”

Cory’s head snapped up. “Shut up,” She growled. “God, just shut up and do your fucking job for once.”

“I—I can’t. There’s nothing...” Aldous reached out to her.

Cory flinched and pushed him away. “There is. There’s something, you just don’t know how because you’re so useless—”

Cory’s eyes suddenly fixated past Aldous, and landed directly on me. The shock of being seen sent me back to myself with a rush of nausea, and I staggered a couple feet away before vomiting in the grass. When I looked up, she was gone. They all were. The spot where Ben’s body had lain was clean of blood, had been for many years.

I dry-heaved a couple more times with no air in my lungs left to heave and no bile in my stomach left to expel. The grass a couple inches from my face had the beginnings of a morning frost on it. I wondered if bones frosted, underground, in their coffins. How long did it take for Ben to become bones? How long after that did it take for him to turn to frost?

He had a body, I thought. He was a child with a body and then he was just a body and—

he was one casualty of so, so many. I saw them all at once.

I knew. I wanted to stop knowing. my hands felt numb.
I must have picked myself up and left the cemetery eventually, after I stopped seeing his bleeding brain and frosted bones. I don’t remember the hour long walk back home.
Grave Day Transcript

Source Unknown | January 15, 2019

[The front door clicks shut. There is silence, then footsteps.]

MORRIS Laurie?

[The footsteps continue down a corridor.]

MORRIS (voice breaking) Laurie.

LAURIE What? What do you want? I told you—

[Morris' breath hitches unsteadily.]

LAURIE Are you—okay? I mean...

[Silence takes over as Laurie remembers that he is not supposed to care right now.]

MORRIS Um. Yes, yeah. Sorry, I—I’ll—

[Footsteps recede back down the corridor.]
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 18, Transexual

3 January 1945

It’s been three weeks and everyone’s acting like it didn’t happen the way it did. I guess I understand that. I don’t think my brain gets it yet. I still wake up in the morning thinking about what I should make him for breakfast, or trying to remember if he has an appointment with Dr. Birch that day. I don’t want it to hit me. I know it will.

I sit next to Nina in church every Sunday and spend the whole time praying to God to show me a sign if Reverend Gray ain’t one of his Chosen. I know they’re saying it was an accident, but I can’t stand the idea that he’s still there, still preaching about love and forgiveness and kindness. I’ll never forgive him. I hope God don’t neither.

It’s not that they don’t act like Ben’s dead, right. We had a funeral. Mr. Cree presided over it and said lots of nice things. It couldn’t have been Reverend Gray. I think I would have killed him if he had even shown up, so thank Jesus he didn’t.

I can see how it’s affecting everyone. I’ve only seen Ma get out of bed once since it happened. Nina is more efficient than ever, running about to take care of Ma and check in on Dr. Birch and Mr. Cree, bringing them soup, a book she’s sure Mr. Cree would be interested in. She can’t fool me. I know simmering when I see it. She’s furious.

I’ve been helping Dr. Birch, funny enough. Keeps me busy, and he needs the help. On house call days I go into people’s homes with him to help with the easy stuff: take temperatures and pulses, administer medicine, give the occasional shot. Some days his hands shake too bad to do any of the physical work, but he sits and talks to each patient slow and easy, like they’re the
only thing he’s got happening today. Sometimes he loops his arm in mine while we walk, and at
first I thought it was just him being him, but he puts just enough of his weight on me to make me
think he’s covering that weakness he got in his limbs. Honest to God, looking at him I don’t
know if he sleeps a wink at night.

Ain’t seen Mr. Cree barely at all, except the couple of times I walked Dr. Birch home
cause I was worried he wouldn’t make it by himself.

I feel like I’m watching black clouds fill up the sky, and the air’s full of electricity, and
the heavens been promising a storm for so long but it keeps holding off. Things can’t last like
this, I know. I just wish I knew what I was waiting for.
There’s piles of candles in the back of Laurie’s truck, rattling and rolling around with every sharp, unpracticed turn I make. I hit a pothole in the clay road, my elbow hits the metal door, I keep driving. I do not consciously know the way to Bragen Cemetery, despite the number of times I’ve been there. Laurie always drives, and I never pay enough attention, but I seem to be making my way there, regardless.

The uncompromising darkness of country roads at night, of seeing nothing but the space illuminated by headlights, the way that space shifts as I barrel through a rumbling void, gives me an unexpected rush of adrenaline, and I press harder on the pedal.

It’s a cold night. The still air chokes. I’m wearing nothing but a t-shirt and a pair of Laurie’s plaid pajama bottoms. They’re too short. The chill bites at my ankles. I find a lighter in the glove box and set myself to work.

Every milky-white cylinder of wax gets pulled from the truck. I trip over stones and fallen tree branches as I stumble around in the dark, placing the candles in clusters centered around Ben’s grave: honey next to pine next to sage next to rosemary. Yarrow sits with lavender sits with rosemary sits with honey. Then, in batches of two: sage and pine. Yarrow and lavender. Rosemary and honey. I dig the dipped candles into the ground so they stay upright, and the dirt that gets under my nails feels as if it's burrowing into my fingers.

The lighter won’t catch; my hands shake too badly. I cup my palm around it, though there’s not even a faint breeze to snuff it. I try again, again. The lighter sparks for the briefest
moment. There is dirt and wax underneath my fingernails—I see it just before I am plunged into
darkness once more, this time, a familiar hollowness overtaking me—I am numb and empty and
nothing and nothing and I am—they are—

they are—

the light catches. they can see.

Nina and Cory stand side-by-side in front of Ben’s grave. They say nothing. Cory stands
rigid, every muscle taunt, jaw clenched. Nina’s eyes dart over to Cory.

“I hate him,” Cory grits out.

“I know,” Nina mumbles. “Me too.”

Cory cries. Nearly-silent tears interrupted by hiccuping sobs.

a candle flickers, goes

out. they—they? yes, surely.

they scramble to relight it.

Dr. Aldous Birch and Deidra Sloane. Deidra sits in front of the grave, Aldous stands several feet
behind her. He fears what happens if he gets too close.

“Miss Sloane…”

Deidra makes a noise almost like laughter. “Fucking hell, Aldous. Surely you can call me
Deidra at this point.”

“Deidra,” Aldous whispers.

“If you dare apologize right now, pray to Jesus—”
“No, I just.” He hesitates, then moves forward and places a hand on her shoulder. “He was wonderful.”
Deidra sighs. “Yes. Yes, he was.”

there are no answers
here. grief cannot provide. they are terrified
to know this.

On a cold and gray morning, with wilting flowers propped on the headstone, Nina holds Cree like he is a child, his towering frame collapsed to her sturdy body. It is a near-holy sight and

wax slips
down the blade of grass, forms
a hardened teardrop and at the brink
the candle loses itself
in its own
puddling flesh.

Nina is alone, but she often feels this is the case no matter how many people surround her. She says a prayer for Ben, quiet and comfortable, on the edge of irreverent. And then Deidra is beside her, and their hands are clasped together like bracers on a suit of armor.

“He can’t be allowed to hurt our own anymore,” Nina says.
Deidra squeezes her hand. “I’ll help you.”
it is here that their sternum dismantles
reality, a slow unraveling spool of
thread that trips
down their ribcage—cracks at
every turn.
nothing is more important than this.

Benjamin Sloane sits cross-legged with his back against the stone, humming off-key, content to arrange the flowers left for him in a circle, and then by color, and then size, and then he throws them all up in the air and giggles to himself as they fall around him.

a sharp breeze breaks
the static calm, catches every
flame at once and snatches
their oxygen. acrid smoke rises.

In the end there is no conversation, no confrontation.

There is nothing left to say.

Gray’s prayers echo off the canopy, and he may have heard the footsteps behind him if his own voice, his own need to reflect in his righteousness, had not drowned out the sound. He barely has time to feel the cold barrel of the rifle touch the back of his head before he is no more.

Nina and Deidra drag his corpse deep into the woods.
They do not bury it.
—they cannot remember
their place. perhaps they
do not have one—

Coriander Sloane, aged 19, transsexual, scans the cemetery with intent. She has her signature
scowl, hands clasped behind her back. Her eyes pass over her brother’s grave, and she gives it a
quick nod. “Mornin’, Ben.” She continues scanning until she finds what she’s looking for, and
holds their gaze with steely confidence.

“Who are you?”

They look down at the body beneath them, but they’re pretty sure it doesn’t belong to
them. Titles are even more abstract. They shrug.

“I keep seeing you.”

If they could feel their lips, they would tell her they see her every day, and in their
dreams.

“What’s wrong with you?” She demands. “Do you need help?”

They point back at her. Do you need help?

Cory huffs. “I reckon so, but I’m not sure there’s much you can do.”

Their arm drops back down to their side and hangs limp. They stare at her, muddy boots
and flushed cheeks, fingertips purple from cold.

“At first I thought you was a ghost,” She admits, a little rueful. “But you’re not, are
you?”

They frown. Aren’t they?
The longer they stand here, the more they unspool from themself, the trail of fraying thread needing only a little tension to break and untether.

“Well, you shouldn’t be, anyways. Not yet.”

If a ghost is what they are, they do not know how to be anything else. Why shouldn’t they be a ghost?

“Ghosts are lingerers. You—you’re still you. You just are.”

They feel—and isn’t that something?—the thread go taut.

“We can talk later, if you want. But right now, I think you gotta go.”

You’ll go, too?

“I’ll come back. Promise. So you will. But you can’t linger.” Cory moves towards them. Her boots leave lasting indents in the mud. She wraps her sturdy, calloused hand around their wrist, and her next words are softer. “I am me, even when I am surrounded by people who don’t know me. And—and you are you, even when you’re alone.” She steps away. “Who are you?”

With her lingering warmth on their skin, they begin to spool back together. “Morris. Um.” The name shudders through my body, and it takes a moment to remember its relevance to me. “Morris St. Martins.”

She smiles. “Of course you are.”

“I am Morris St. Martins.” Funny, it’s only a name. I have more than that, now. “I live. On Old Morris Station Road. With Laurence Briar. I have. A green sweatshirt. I make candles. I sing when Laurie’s sad. I know three songs by the Misfits, I make sketches, I—I—” How many things am I? It’s overwhelming.

“That’s real good, Morris. That’s you.”

I nod. “Yes. That’s me.”

“I’ll see you soon.”
Awakening, for a second time:

A damp chrysalis, a morning dew,

   sloughs off my skin. I

   shiver, sigh. Grass scrapes

   against my spine. It is uncomfortable.

   The sun reaches through

   the treetops and soaks me right

   to my marrow.

   I am warm, and

   I am full, and

   I am here.

Laurence Briar opens the front door to our home, expression shifting from wary to baffled as he takes me in.

   “It is six in the goddamn morning.” He drags his hands down his face. “Morris...”

   I shiver at hearing someone else say my name, like it’s the first time I’ve heard it. “That’s me,” I confirm, giddy. “You’re Laurie. I’m Morris.”

   Laurie stares. “Yes. Are—are you having memory issues? Where were you? Where’s your coat?”

   I giggle, running my hands over my damp t-shirt. “I have a green sweatshirt.”

   “Uh—you sure do. Okay. Um,” He steps aside, making room in the doorway. “Are you okay?”
Without hesitation, “Yes! Yes. I—well, I’m all soggy. And that’s gross. But I feel—yeah.”

“Right. Uh—I think I’m still mad at you.”

I deflate a little, remembering our last real conversation. “Okay.”

“But I’m glad you’re safe.” He brushes stringy hair out of my eyes. “Come inside?”

“Okay.”
Memories of Coriander Sloane, Aged 18, Transexual

5 March 1945

Today Mr. Cree told me he’s sorry that he made me burn the page where I had copied down all them names. He said he was scared. I already knew that, of course. Why do adults always think we don’t know when they’re scared?

I didn’t tell him that I had never burned the page to begin with, because I didn’t need to risk him getting upset all over again. He then said I could copy it down again, if I wanted, and that I could even make some additions. So here’s how it reads, now.

Herein is Recorded The Family of Aldous Birch & Bartholomew Cree, United

Jebediah Brownson, b. 1927. Currently residing in Athens, Georgia. Partner of Mateo Olvera.

Mateo Olvera, b. 1925. Currently residing in Athens, Georgia. Partner of Jebediah Brownson.


Liliana Beaufort, b. 1922. Currently residing in Macon, Georgia.


James Donaghue, b. 1923, d. 1941. Buried in Spring Hill Graveyard, Mobile, Alabama under the name Marie Donaghue. He was infinitely loved.


Gertrude Palmer, b. 1905. Currently residing in Macon, Georgia. Partner of Amelia Palmer.
Avery Yuan b. 1912. Currently residing in Houston, TX.

Theo Briar, b. 1933. Currently residing in Morris, Georgia.

Nina Carson, b. 1909. Currently residing in Morris, Georgia. Partner of Deidra Sloane.

Deidra Sloane, b. 1915. Currently residing in Morris, Georgia. Partner of Nina Carson.

Coriander Sloane, b. 1931. Currently residing in Morris, Georgia.

Benjamin Sloane, b. 1938, d. 1945. Buried in Bragen Cemetery, Morris, Georgia. He was the brightest light.

It’s a nice gesture on Mr. Cree’s and Dr. Birch’s part, really. I like that it makes me feel permanent, being there on the page.

I do miss him, though. I’m not sure there’s much else to say.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

The Briar Household | February 13, 2019
Laurie made me promise to not go near the cemeteries for a little while, just to breathe. Makes it hard to walk anywhere, given that a large majority of the surrounding land is cemetery land, but I agreed. Seemed a fair trade after the amount of anxiety I had clearly caused him. Eventually, though, we both got stir crazy to walk beyond the single, empty strip of clay road our house occupied, and Laurie and I found ourselves taking a walk among the familiar meandering headstones. I always liked how non-uniform the graves were in older parts of the cemetery, scattered up and down a hillside, blending in with the blooming wildflowers, declaring their part in the cycle of seasons.

I kept glancing over at Laurie, a strange sort of paranoia telling me that without the confines of four walls that he would disappear and I would be alone. I knew he could feel my gaze, and he looked back at me a couple times, smiled, and then went back to studying something in the oak canopy above. Despite my breakthrough, I still had plenty of moments of this unreality—days or weeks where a fog would creep over my mind and I would be plagued with a distant certainty that I wasn’t real, or Laurie wasn’t, or my hands would feel numb and detached from my body and I would float on that feeling, too far away to feel a sharp fear, but just close enough to know I was afraid that I would never come back to my body. And then it would pass, as things tend to do.

I wasn’t expecting to see any of them—I hadn’t brought my candles, hadn’t been in that mindset, so I startled when I saw Aldous and Cree fifteen or so feet ahead of me.
They walked hand-in-hand at a gentle pace. Aldous had a light sway to his step, as if gravity wasn’t much of a concern for him. Cree’s full height was obvious, shoulders unburdened, and his stride had a surety to it. And they were smiling broad, infatuated smiles.

This was before everything, I realized. This was them, happy.

Cree stopped, looking around before turning his attention to Aldous. “Dr. Birch, I believe I have been here in your wonderful town of Morris for at least an hour, and have yet to receive a proper greeting from you.”

“Mr. Cree.” Aldous glances around too, and then kisses the other man on the cheek. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Cree adjusts so the kiss on the cheek turns into one on the lips, and his smile is as warm as his hands. “Good to see you too, dear. Would have been even better if I didn’t have to wait at the station for an hour.”

Aldous studies Cree’s hand, thumb brushing across knuckles “I… had a patient.”

“Oh, did you now?” Cree pulls back just enough to see Aldous’s face. “What was the problem?”

“...Stomach ache?”

Cree laughs, raises their intertwined fingers to press his lips to Aldous’s hand. “You’re a truly atrocious liar, Dr. Birch.”

“I’m sorry,” Aldous sighs. “I was just nervous. This isn’t Atlanta, you know. A little harder to hide in the crowds.”

“I know.” Cree steps away. “We’ll be careful.”

Aldous nods. Frowns. Then with glee in his voice, bouncing on the balls of his feet and stepping back into Cree’s space, whispers, “I got your present.”
“Present? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m sure I would have remembered sending a present.”

Aldous waved him off, still bouncing. “Don’t do that. It’s a wonderful gift. I love it.”

“I hope I can convince you to give me a bit of a performance, later.”

Aldous shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Oh? Is there something wrong with your hands that would keep you from playing? Your mouth that would keep you from singing?”

Aldous’ eyes trailed down to Cree’s lips. “Might be.”

Cree huffs a laugh, plays along. “I see. And as a doctor, doctor, what would you recommend?”


“Did that do the trick?” Cree asks.

Aldous kisses him again. “Not yet.”

“Shame.”

Again. “I missed you.”

“I’m glad you like your gift, dear.”

“Morris? Whatcha thinkin’ about?”

I blinked, shook my head. Aldous and Cree were gone. I knew, with mourning certainty, that I would not see them again.

“Morris?”

I tilted towards Laurie, ran my thumb from his shoulder to elbow to pinky, and then clasped his hand in mine and squeezed it. It was a bit sweat-damp, and the texture of his calloused palms was precise and grounding.
I stared at the space Aldous and Cree had been, still were, in some past moment. “Is this memory?” I asked.

“Lord,” Laurie mumbled. “The existentialism never ends with you, does it?”

“You asked.” I waited, expectant, for an answer.

“I don’t know,” He said eventually. “I think that’s probably up to you.”

I nodded and quietly took a little inventory of the moment.
From the Notebook of Morris St. Martins

Memories from the imagination | March 10, 2019

I will never remember the thing that left me to mourn, what split me open and excavated the artifacts of my life, left me without a sense of gravity.

When I’m feeling brave, I create my past from nothing: the long dining room table, for when we have guests. The bottle of amber whisky upon the drink cart, glinting like a gem. The dusty study smells of cigars. A wrinkled hand slides me a glass of milk. Yes, here I am now: I am small. I have scraped knuckles and dirt under my nails from ill-advised adventures. I have been scolded, sternly, lovingly. While I finish my milk I listen to Debussy drift from a record player three rooms over.

The same wrinkled hands guide mine on the knobs of a telescope. The hands tell me about constellations and the void of space. I am not scared of it. I am not scared of anything.

But this is only a sometimes-reality. Other times I am a too-large presence in a cookie-cutter suburban home. My footsteps up and down the stairs are a racket, if I talk on the landline they can’t hear the TV. Keep your voice down. I practice something—a speech for graduation? A soliloquy from a play?—and a frustrated voice rings from the staircase, Please, please just be quiet. They don’t even mean to be cruel. They’re just tired.

Suburbia decays into the apartment above the hardware store in the town whose relevant days are numbered. There used to be a logging company here. Now there aren’t any trees to log. The apartment is cramped. I eat cereal for dinner several times a week, and the shadow that comes home later every night sees me asleep on the couch and kisses my forehead. Sometimes the shadow cries.

Prayers are for remembrance and begging is for forgetting. I have never prayed to remember nor begged to forget.
Cory sits across from me in the grass. Her hair goes down to her waist, marking the passing of several years since I’ve seen her last. It’s braided neatly and hanging over her shoulder and a bit of blood stains the corner of her apron.

Once we’re both sitting in silence long enough for things to be getting awkward, she shakes her head in exasperation at both of us, then holds out her hand. “Coriander Sloane, nice to finally meet you.”

I shake her hand. It’s as warm as I assumed it would be. “Morris St. Martins.”

“I recall. So, I gotta ask, what’s—” Cory gestures to the candles spotting the hillside, “—All this about, anyway?”

I’m about to tell her about the flames, impermanence, ash—you still exist, we still exist—et cetera. And then I shrug, reach to my left, and hand her a honey candle.

She takes it in both her hands.

“Made it for you,” I mumble, suddenly shy. I tap the rosemary candle to my right.

“That’s for Ben.” Point to the lavender, yarrow, sage, pine. “Deidra, Nina, Aldous, Cree.”

“Oh—” She looks over my work, eyes settling on the rosemary. “Why?”

I sigh. “The connection made me feel... real. I guess. And—I was hoping to keep your stories for memory, in return.”

Cory nods. “I’ll keep you for memory, too, then.”

“I’d appreciate that. Just—don’t get stuck in it, yeah?”

“What d’you mean?”
“It’s easy,” I tell her. “It’s so easy, to stay in the past. Out of grief, fear, obligation.” I place Ben’s candle in front of her. “There’s remembering, and then there’s—well, what I did, when I got too obsessed. When you saw me last.”

She passes her finger through the flame of Ben’s candle, fixated on its swaying response to her interruption. “It’s so fucking unfair.”

The hint of that old, childish tone hits me in the chest. “Yeah, it is.”

“I wish it was anyone but him. Even if it’d mean someone else would be hurting. Probably makes me selfish, huh?”

“Maybe,” I concede. “But I think you’re allowed.”

Cory’s focus migrates from the flame to where the wax puddles around the wick. She touches it, watches it harden around her finger tip. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Morris St. Martins. Maker of candles, owner of green sweatshirt, so on. What are your plans? I reckon we should make spiraling out of selfhood a one-time thing.”

I laugh a little. “I’ve still got all this wax, and I can’t be wasting it, you know? Figure I could try out the whole ‘I’ve got to keep a record of history’ thing, minus the loss of self, this time.”

Cory smiles. “Sure. You think you got a lot of folks who need seeing?”

“You can’t be the only one worth remembering.”

“Well,” She leans back on her hands, looks at me with a grin that distinctly reminds me of Laurie. “I might be.”

“Guess I’ll have to find out.”

She goes sober again, and pushes Ben’s candle back to me. “Guess you will.”

“No, you keep that.”
“Right,” She reaches into her apron pocket and pulls out a small journal. “How about you have this, then?”

I take it and clutch it to my chest. “Okay.”

She gives a short, sharp nod. “Take care of it, hear?”

“Of course. I—”

“Cory?”

We both look up and see a person who looks so much like Laurie that my breath leaves me for a second. For a moment I think they see me, but their gaze drifts just past me and to the two candles in front of me. “Who you talkin’ to?” They ask.

Cory shakes her head. “Just Ben.”

“Oh, ‘course.” They step up right close to us, and I can’t help but hold my breath and watch them with fascination—this stranger with a forehead crinkle and smile I knew. I watch them watch Cory, who has their undivided attention. “Dr. Birch sent me looking for you, says you’re late for work.”

“How dare I.”

“How dare you,” They agree.

“This’ll only take a moment.” Cory places her honey candle in front of Ben’s grave, blows it out, then stands with the rosemary candle in hand and spares me one last time before blowing it out, too.

I sit in the empty field for a minute, then begin to go about blowing out the rest of the candles, slow and methodical.

Laurie walks up behind me and puts a hand on my arm. “Ya alright?”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

“Get what you needed?”
“I think so.”

“More to do?”

“Course.”
Vita

Em J Parsley lives in Versailles, Kentucky. They graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Kentucky. They are the Assistant Editor for *Juke Joint Magazine*, and their work has appeared in *Birdcoat Quarterly, After the Pause, Vagabond City Lit, Rio Grande Review, Saint Ann’s Review, Every Day Fiction*, and various other publications.