Elegies for My Past and Future Selves

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ELEGIES FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE SELVES

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ELEGIES FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE SELVES

by

TORI HICKS, B.M.

THESIS

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To you, who took the time to read my words, wrung out from a lifetime of downpour—

Thank you. I am forever grateful.
Abstract

“Here I stand at the beginning
with more questions than
answers”

–George Ella Lyon, “Provenance” from A Many Storied House

This collection of poems and flash memoir tries to be memory in the flesh. Perhaps it’s the other way around – this book is composed of memories striving to be poems, pieces of music, flashes of memoir, and photographs, all for the purpose of exploring who I was, who I am, and who I could become. Whichever way one interprets it, *Elegies for My Past and Future Selves* is a hybrid collection that looks at the events of my past, my anxieties of the present, and my tentative hope for the future. The collection is experimental, both in the work itself or the means of generating it.

Told through memory and confession, *Elegies* largely explores matters of the heart and mind – mental illness, childhood trauma, the ghosts of who I used to be, what I thought the world would be, and the uncertainty of the future. With my experience as a singer framing the larger non-linear narrative, Elegies shows the transformation of a traumatized child to an artist reclaiming some of their power by using their voice. The narrator writes about Dallas-area locations such as Lake Tawakoni and Trinity Park, deep fears and boogeymen like serial killer Israel Keyes. In contrast, some poems are about love, fulfillment, and joy, which have marked even the darkest times. By employing visual elements – especially collage, charts, and photography – as part of my writing, and using various typographical structures on the page, I have found a new approach to telling the stories that I am compelled to share, some of which have never been told to anyone.
I have always been a writer in some form, but something shifted in my practice around October of 2020. Despite entering the MFA program in the fall of 2019 with the intention of focusing on fiction, my Advanced Creative Nonfiction and Advanced Poetry courses pushed me in a different direction, giving me the focus I had been looking for. Through exposure to new voices, structures, and approaches to writing, I became more comfortable talking about myself and others and experimenting with my writing. Many of these practices, writing as a response to my writing “ecosystem,” have become integral to my writing process.

A lot less formal than what books on craft tend to suggest a writer should have, my creative process is best described as “organized chaos.” I work within a hellish paradigm wherein it can be easiest to write when inspiration strikes but I still need to write – because I’m a writer. I meditate on ideas all the time – while I’m doing the dishes, when I can’t sleep at night, when I’m driving. I sometimes write obsessively for many hours, but I can also go multiple days without writing more than a few notes. This sporadic practice is hell for the organized Type-A side of me but a natural fit for my scatterbrained, flexible Type-B side. However, I tend to document the most important pieces when I need to with the Google Docs app on my phone, where I often jot things down. I have a section in my running “To-Do” list document for writing ideas and lines that pop into my head. When necessary, I will even make a voice note.

Poets Seema Reza and Ada Limon have both discussed the importance of taking time to think and the mental work that occurs when living with stories and poems. Limon says in an interview for her newest book, The Carrying, that “A lot of the time when I’m in a producing mode, it’s because I’ve been receptive to the world for a long time. Suddenly it’s like, ‘Okay. I’ve turned something inside me. It’s time to work” (Cole). In a workshop I attended, Reza expressed similar sentiments, saying that we often have time when we are (what I like to call)
idly busy – again, in traffic, doing household chores, chipping away at mindless work – and using those times to prep for the work of writing.

Just as important as mentally preparing to write is the active pursuit of inspiration. What triggers something in me to pick up the pen or type into my Google Doc? What is on my mind but hasn’t come out yet because I haven’t found a way to express it? For me, this often includes consuming any written, audio, or visual media I can find: poetry, news articles, old journal entries, fiction, podcasts, cheesy TV shows. I feel that if one looks for gold, they can find it in unexpected places, especially if they shift their mindset about what gold looks like. With the experimental techniques I learned in my poetry classes, such as C.A. Conrad’s “(Soma)tic Poetry Rituals,” and texts from mentors, I have multiple places that I can go when I need to jumpstart my writing.

As a passionate user of technology and presentation tools, my personal favorite generative strategy is to open Canva and look through the designs. The original draft of this book was mostly written in Canva due to the robust library of visual elements and fonts at my disposal. I have since moved to InDesign for the remainder of the book’s creation due to the 100 page limit in Canva. I first thought of moving toward a visual method of storytelling when the layered story in Thi Bui’s artwork for her graphic memoir The Best We Could Do emotionally impacted me, but I don’t particularly enjoy drawing. When I discovered how much I could do digitally, though, my work became more visual.

Many life experiences culminated in the creation of this book: my grief at the loss of my Pappaw to Covid and my Uncle Bruce in a motorcycle accident three years prior; mourning the child I used to be; the torment of loving another person; nostalgia for people, places, and times that I miss and often struggle to remember; family history; self-discovery; childhood trauma that
remains vivid in my mind; and my ongoing struggles with depression, anxiety, and a late diagnosis of ADHD and Bipolar II.

A major section of *Elegies* covers my time as a singer, guitarist, and pianist, especially my undergraduate degree in music, though I’ve been singing my entire life. I joined my first church choir when I was four years old, and through years of participating in both school and church choir, and competing in region and state competitions, I decided to be a professional singer. In high school, I decided to pursue music in a more practical way by directing high school choir, something that would allow me to share my passion with others and continue to sing. However, I suffered from debilitating anxiety that negatively impacted my ability to perform. I was in constant distress during performances — not at the prospect of people watching and listening or even that I wouldn’t sound my best, but being in auditoriums with such open space, tall ceilings, and being trapped in one spot, unable to move no matter how dizzy I became. Despite those issues, I pursued the degree in music and ultimately finished that degree, albeit without the teaching certification I had originally intended to receive. Instead, I minored in Creative Writing and completed enough hours of English credit to qualify for teaching public school English/Language Arts. My dream shifted, as dreams often do, and now I am exploring how to reconcile my many truths.

Going through the MFA program at UTEP fulfilled a dream and career goal of mine, and the courses have introduced me to literature that I may not have otherwise read, if for no other reason than not being aware of its existence. If one were to tally up the entries in my bibliography, there is notably less fiction on this list compared to the number of books containing poetry, prose, memoir, and creative nonfiction, and the fictional work on the list often takes
place in the form of poetry. Regardless of genre, however, all these works have in common that they have captured my attention and compelled me to begin self-exploration.

Over the past few years, I’ve become focused on a particular writing style, the voice and content characterized by sincerity, visual experimentation, and specific, concrete imagery. As well, the concept of a “writing ecosystem” – writing that directly influences one’s own – and convergence of many ideas at once has become a template for creating a rich narrative experience. In reaction to immersing myself in work that felt revolutionary in its openness and bravery, I began emulating some of the new writing styles that had come into my life through creative exercises in class, which became pieces in this project and have influenced the evolution of my writing practice.

The kernel of writing that became this project evolved from an assignment that forced me to face my musical past and the complicated emotions I still carry. As part of an assignment in a Spring 2021 class called “Writing in an Expanded Field,” I was going to spend time with objects that reminded me of my time as a musician. I wanted to hold my Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) Convention 2011 t-shirt to my body that I bought in my senior year of high school, wave my conducting baton, and sift through my library of sheet music. However, when I couldn’t find these items that I once treasured, I wrote a set of poems about their absence and their memory that opened a floodgate of creative process — in both the writing sense and in the mental/emotional sense.

At that time, I was reading Gabrielle Civil’s Swallow the Fish, a memoir, poetry collection, and compendium of performance art in one book. It was one of the first hybrid books I had ever read, and it clicked for me as a writer that writing is multidimensional and can be
visual, aural, physical, or minimal. Furthermore, writing can become performance and performance can become writing. The musician in me was intrigued.

From my response *Swallow the Fish*, rereading the quiet, agonizing visual epic *Antígona González* by Sara Uribe, and experiments from or based off CA Conrad’s “*(Soma)*tic Poetry Rituals,” I wrote the set of poems called “items that meant the world to me that i can no longer find.” The prompt was “Gather 9 small objects, which could include a sock, a scarf, a grocery receipt, a photo torn from a magazine, a spoon, or a pencil...Now walk alongside the 9 strewn objects, narrating your interpretation of this map aloud. Take notes for a poem.” (Conrad). The days when I wrote these poems were the first time I’d truly admitted to myself how much regret I had over “allowing” my anxiety and depression to keep me from something meaningful and fulfilling. Though I now believe that none of the struggles I had were my fault, it felt for several years that I simply failed myself by not “pushing through,” as classmates, family members, and mentors suggested I should. Looking at those years in which I experienced joy and anxiety in equal measure as a musician was tough but therapeutic, because for once, I could see and reexperience the pride and genuine excitement of singing again while also learning to love my younger self and relieve us both of the guilt and shame we had unnecessarily carried.

Part of the poetry in that assignment was performance directions for the piece, a reference to Civil’s many performance transcripts included in her book *Swallow the Fish*. I knew I’d likely never perform these poems because I’m not comfortable enough to perform my poetry yet, but I wanted to explore what it would be like to perform them, what conditions would be appropriate for telling this story, and how I could overlap performance of music and poetry. Civil may not have had formal music training, but the primal desire to scream, cry, sing, act out her emotions,
and take up space – literal and figurative – activated the same desire that I had to be open to expressing my own inner self.

My thesis works within many forms of narrative and poetry, but is mostly a work of memory, confession, fragmentation/noo-linear narrative, and visual poetry. In those ways, the main three influences are three female writers: Gabrielle Civil, George Ella Lyon, and Joan Didion. Gender is an underlying topic in many of my poems, but I don’t discuss it overtly in this current evolution of the book. However, the ecosystem in which my poetry lives is largely populated by women (as well as gender non-conforming, trans, and queer individuals), which speaks to the heart work that happens within the stories relayed here. The spaces I choose to live in acknowledge trauma, offer support, and encourage community. That’s not to say that feminism is always about “kindness and warmth, belonging and healing,” but I feel emotional support and security in the ecosystem where I live with my writing. This is intentional, given the violence that underlies trauma, especially in childhood, gender-based, and sexual trauma, which underline the stories of my life. However, as Civil, Lyon, and Didion before me, I chose to be vulnerable despite the discomfort it brings.

Memory and confession play a large part in the overall narrative of Elegies. Throughout, I attempt to remember difficult events to process them, to hold onto moments of joy, to walk the halls of the few places that have felt like home, and to solidify people whose voices I will never hear again. Tethered to the past and anxious about the future, always worried about what will come next, I write about themes that are so fundamental to the makeup of who I am. I have attempted to explore these questions:

- How accurate are my memories? Can my memories be fully trusted?
• If my memories reflect my personal history, what do they mean for the future – especially regarding who I become?

• Will I follow the path of my mom and push everyone away by clinging too tight?

• Will I ever overcome my anxiety and depression?

• Is it possible to stop being sad when the people that raised me exuded and taught me sadness?

• How does a memory become a poem or a song, and how can words heal the person who writes them? Others?

• What do I risk in confessing all of this to strangers?

• How much judgment will I face?

• What techniques can I learn and practice in my writing?

I have no concrete answers to these questions, but poetry and memoir are vehicles for exploring them. In 2020, Joan Didion’s writing fascinated me. In two classes, back to back, I read *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*. Both memoirs revolve around the death of Didion’s husband, then her daughter. I seek to emulate her ability to avoid overly emotional, saccharine depictions of events. Instead, she offers vivid imagery and concrete details that cause the reader to have an emotional reaction. That can admittedly be a fine line to walk at times when writing about the past, but I don’t sense that the reality she conveys doesn’t extend beyond her authentic version. In describing her relationships with her husband and daughter, both of whom died within a few years of each other, it’s clear that grief has many facets, explaining the truth of who someone was is messy. Didion’s brutal honesty about her life, marriage, and motherhood is an example I attempt to follow. With the help of my thesis director, I have
continued revising my poems to contain more concrete details and to move toward authentic emotion and less sentimentality.

Because I work with emotionally complex content, I only write non-linearly. My attempt to “write to the wound” leads me to break up the pieces of the story, because to look at something in one piece feels insurmountable. For example, to truly examine the reasons why I’m no longer a performing musician, one must see all these pieces, which are connected to others, like gum stuck to sidewalks around the city of Nacogdoches or the fishing docks at Lake Tawakoni or the Houston suburb of Cypress. Fragments of stories are more manageable to craft, and by the end of Elegies, I will have many more pieces, making it more coherent – but never all of them. I will discuss moment A, which naturally leads into B and C, but to skip to D is divine. The reader imagines and fills in details, and when B and C come up again later, events from before will make more sense given a new context.

One of the most impressive aspects of Blue Nights and The Year of Magical Thinking, the non-linear narrative structure, lays the scenes out in sequences of emotional arcs. One can read through the book and learn something about the couple’s lives, then later on, hear another way Didion or even another person remembers it. Didion would be in another part of the story, then recall a moment from earlier in the book; with the context she has shared in that moment, the scene from earlier takes on a different meaning. An example of this fragmentation that rings true for me is Joan Didion’s description of the night her husband died in The Year of Magical Thinking, which she comes back to multiple times throughout the book. As she frequently does in her books, Didion begins with the inciting incident and lines that set the rest of the narrative in motion: “Life changes fast. / Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. / The question of self-pity” (3). In the first several pages, she describes in stream-
of-consciousness detail the blur of the night of his death, then the events that led up to his death. Without explicitly saying he died or even using the word itself, she provides the details: a phone call and stream of emergency responders that she doesn’t remember – we will find this out later (11-13).

The lines from page 3 repeat frequently throughout the book, each instance accompanied by a new meaning; the reader’s understanding of the events builds over time. In chapter 6, Didion recalls a dream from a time when she still lived in California, where she sees what she understands to be the icy visage of death. She writes “there was in this dream no dread,” and goes on to admit that she found death’s image beautiful (76-77). However, in the face of her husband’s death, the lines from the beginning return, causing her to question her inability to accept his fate as something that happened to him instead of her: “Life changes fast / … The question of self-pity” (77). Didion’s question of self-pity has developed, and so has the reader’s understanding of why she asks this question to begin with. By page 198, the opening lines – and several others – have become voices echoing throughout the book, and Didion reveals that while reading Caitlin Thomas’ Leftover Life to Kill about the death of her husband, Dylan Thomas, she felt unmoved and uncomfortable. She remembers “being dismissive of, even censorious about, her ‘self-pity,’ … I was twenty-two years old. Time is the school in which we learn” (198). Self-pity, the reader now understands, is something indulgent and awkward in Didion’s eyes, but as a widow (though she doesn’t like to use that word) it’s something that she engages with.

In Janet Burroway’s essay “Embalming Mom,” she explores the loss of Burroway’s mother through the lens of multiple shifting memories. From reading it, I have a better sense of how to approach an important topic that fits into the family history of my book but is underrepresented: the relationship with my parents. Like Didion and Thi Bui in her graphic
memoir, *The Best We Could Do*, Burroway discusses the multiple facets of her mother and the life they shared but does so in a manner that verges on stream-of-consciousness. One memory flows from one into another seamlessly with the use of objects as joints from which to turn. It is non-linear chronologically but is a clear stream of ideas. In doing so, one moment explains and clarifies another, then another.

Seema Reza also offers emotional vulnerability and a non-linear structure in her book *When the World Breaks Open*, but within a three-part organization wherein the reader has more intimate access to her life, thoughts, and emotions with each new section. Currently, my thesis, divided into three sections, follows a similar pattern. However, as I continue generating new material, I find that the organization of my thesis begins to feel inorganic and forced, whereas Reza’s is akin to a three-course meal, the final portion the richest.

In my own work, there are a few different story arcs; my life as a musician; the childhood trauma that still affects me; love; mourning people in my life who have died; attempting to nurture my younger self from here in the present. In an effort to understand what happened to me and find perspective, the events that embody the core traumas of my life are explored multiple times from different angles. For example, the narrator’s attachment to music is evident from the fourth poem, “In The SFASU Music Building, 2011 (feat. Gabriel Fauré’s “Après Un Rêve”)” and subsequent poems build upon the initial understanding of the narrator’s regret and sadness surrounding the loss of their once-promising music endeavors (28). I ultimately chose to organize the creative manuscript into four sections instead of the original three: To the World, Holding Pattern, Transformation, and The Beginning.

Exploring grief and past selves, George Ella Lyon’s *A Many Storied House* is a deeply moving example of how to work with physical space and memory to tell a story. This example
creates another angle for me to explore in telling the story of my life: through the spaces that have made me who I am. These spaces hold many memories, many past selves are present, and many ghosts are watching.

When I first read visual poetry as an undergraduate student, I found it compelling but overwhelming. It became my goal to write with visual elements and push the boundaries of what writing could look like. It would be a long time before I felt comfortable taking risks with the visual components that I admired in others’ work. My concerns about my work appearing gimmicky and therefore not literary enough. Again, my anxieties impacted my art. However, through more exposure to visual poetry and some experimentation in this MFA program, I found visual poetry to be a medium that helped me express myself better. Douglas Kearney, for example, creates visual poems like “Of Agricultural Work” layering the multiple meanings of the poems — as well as the visual elements.

![Figure 0.1 “Of Agricultural Work” by visual poet Douglas Kearney](image)

This poem seems to be composed of various physical pieces of text glued to paper but doesn’t have a through-line that one could transcribe into a typical poem. However, as the reader moves across the page, they take note of lines like “bodies fertilize the fields / reddens,” “blood
collected in / a watering can, “POWER + / MONEY” (followed by what appears to be “GREED.”) This unique approach to the discussion of literal agriculture, the exploitation of workers, and the bloody history of the southern United States provokes numerous emotional responses in a reader: guilt, disgust, and anger, for example.

In describing his process in the postscript of a poem on futurefeed, Kearney writes:

The software/texture/performance connection is this: type-layout software like InDesign keeps the letters smooth as I, say, retype found text, making no visual differentiation between text sourced from distinct places…For me, using InDesign is ‘playing the bassline.’ With something like Photoshop, once I find the text I need, I can copy and collage away. The copy brings with it the texture from the source text. When these different textures—and, typically, typefaces—combine into a single poem, voicing becomes a question.

In my own work, I play with this artistic concept in various ways. For example, the poem “Tired” shows an image of a brain scan in the background of the words “I’m so damn tired of thinking about you” repeated multiple times with varying fonts, sizes, and colors.

![Figure 0.2 “Tired”](image)
The message blunt, readers find more through the different iterations of the line. Each version has its own personality and voice. The pink script text in the top left-hand corner mimics a young girl’s handwriting. The thick black text running down the middle of the page looks like an angry text message. The overall result of the layers of text is overwhelming. Before writing this poem, the line was running rampant in my head and it felt like I couldn’t ignore it. In my effort to ignore how I was feeling, my emotions only intensified, this repeated message a visual representation of that frustration.

Section headers, and several poems such as “An Israel Keyes Kill Cache Is In My Stomach,” “Vuelve a La Música,” and “Maestro Bernstein” employ visual elements. However, one area of my thesis where visuals become essential to the writing is in “The King of Lake Tawakoni,” a set of poems about my Pappaw. Beginning with a pie chart of the ways he spent his life, this section shows how I processed his loss. To cope with him being gone, I felt compelled to find every picture of him that I could, to write down memories of him, to grasp onto the memory of his voice, and to examine the two homes my grandparents lived in in my life.

The poem “Clearfield Dr vs. Ellis Rd: A Dissection” contains Google Street View images of the house on Clearfield Drive in Garland, Texas where we lived for the first few years of my life, and the trailer on Ellis Road in West Tawakoni my grandparents moved into when I was in elementary school. Both places feel like home in an inexplicable, enduring way, though neither were my permanent residence aside from the first few years of my life.

When I was four, my parents broke up. They were never married, and he’d met someone on the Internet, traveled from Garland to Kentucky to meet her, then traveled back about a month later and married her. We were devastated. Despite my dad’s insistence that we could continue
living in the two-bedroom apartment he would soon share with his new wife, my mom packed up my brother and I and moved us to Houston in a small Ford sedan to live with her brother, Bruce, and sister-in-law, Nannette. Eulogized in “After the Funeral,” Bruce was a father figure to me from that point on, though we only lived in their home for a few months.

We never lived in one place for more than a couple of years after that, mostly due to financial issues. My whole life, I longed for a home in the literal sense, and in the home on Clearfield Drive and the trailer in West Tawakoni, I found that. To grieve my Pappaw is to grieve my childhood, which I never truly had to begin with, and to grieve my childhood is to grieve for the girl that loved her parents and grandparents and saw none of these hardships on the horizon. Thus, interlocked in my brain are the discussions of family dynamics, my childhood, and traumas to provide the full picture, albeit in fragments.

Through this writing program, especially beginning in the fall of 2020, I’ve come to understand that I enjoy and need to experiment with poetry. When I came to understand, especially in my Advanced Poetry course, that poetry can take place within music and other visual elements, it changed everything about the way that I approach my writing. It’s a constant challenge to myself to push beyond what I have done and what I’m currently doing, but my work is all the better for it.

I don’t claim to be breaking new ground with anything I have done while writing this thesis, but while working with multiple traditions, I seek to build upon the work that has been such a big part of my life. This hybrid collection, most closely conceptually related to Swallow the Fish and A Visit From the Goon Squad, is something that I look forward to continuing to develop and deepen. I barely touch on many areas of my life: the relationship with my husband, the relationship with my parents, my passion for social justice, and the complicated nature of
being a teacher. I intend to do much more with Elegies, and in doing so, make both my past and future selves, both of whom I mourn, yet in them, experience a wealth of hope and pride.

The future of Elegies will also include more interactive elements, like QR codes to videos and playlists. For example, I didn’t include the sound poem version of “In The Music Building, 2011 / (feat. Gabriel Fauré’s ‘Après Un Rêve’). The original iteration of the poem in November 2020 was much shorter and was recorded with a single track on my phone. Eventually, I plan to layer in the different sounds – bassoon, piano, the ding of a phone, the awful sound of the Auralia program telling you that your answer is wrong, a student singing, the angry trumpet professor, and more to create a surround-sound experience, just as it was for me when I lived this experience as a voice student at SFASU.

Moving forward as a writer, I still have much to learn, but the joy of intentionally being a lifelong learner helps me to pick up pieces to add to my writing practice and develop my style, attending workshops when I can, and getting some publications along the way. As well, in a controversial move, I plan to pursue a doctorate in literature in the next few years. In the meantime, I have accepted an adjunct position with Lone Star College to teach Rhetoric and Composition starting in August. The last few years in this program have fulfilled many dreams and goals of mine – this one included. I worked with wonderful professors and talented writers, many of whom have become friends and colleagues. I graduate from this program extremely grateful for these priceless experiences and relationships, especially the way that writing has helped me see myself as an artist and whole person, finally.
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Movement I: To the World

Illustration 1.1 Collage, section header.
MEDICATION

I paid ahead for the medications:
three to clear my head,
four to clear my skin.

I’m in so deep that I need a pill organizer —
27 years old with a pillbox to match my 81-year-old grandmother’s.

I ingest them or wash my face with them
or smooth them into my skin on the “problem areas.”
Every day one step closer to the beauty of a “normal” disposition,
less anxiety, fewer nights lying awake wondering
what will snuff out my life.

Will I slip down the stairs at work and break my neck, or
have a heart attack lifting weights, or have a stroke, or
get hit by a school bus, or
give in to the urge to drive my car into a pine tree?

I paid ahead for the self I wish to become —
if I give her enough to work with,
perhaps she will bloom
out of my chest.

Illustration 1.2 List of medications mentioned in the poem.
My hands are scaly and raw at this point in the pandemic, the acidity of hand sanitizer 5.5. Acidity is more important than one would think. For instance, the stomach is full of corrosive bile with a pH of 2 to 3.

Gastrointestinal lining contains it, keeps most other organs from harm’s way, but heartburn or vomit puts the esophagus in a little more danger. That pain in your chest — rivaled only by your first breakup or the five-point exploding palm technique from *Kill Bill* — is fleeting, but can burn food, dissolve stainless steel.

Everyone has something both powerful and destructive inside. Better not to eat pennies off the floor of Target.

Illustration 1.3 Poem written on notebook paper, dissolving from water and hand sanitizer.
IN THE SFASU MUSIC BUILDING, 2011

(Feat. Gabriel Fauré’s “Après Un Rêve”)

ahh-AHH
ahh-ahh

ahh-ahh

ahh (cough)

brrrrrrrrr!

HHH

(a brass mouthpiece clanks onto a black steel music stand)

hh hh

hh hh

ahh

hnhnhnhnhnhnhnh

Good — AHHHHH — but lift the soft palette like

AHh AHh

AHh AHH?

Yes, better.

(phone dings)

Brr-

-brrrrrrrr!

br-

Okay, which one do you wanna start with? The French?

brr

Yes, ma’am

Okay, go ahead -- shoulder back, breath, up. And go

Dans un sommeil—

Come on girl

(snap, click, snap click)

(metronome click)

que charmait ton imaaaaaahhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnagge

No, stop, breathe.

(cell phone dings)

(practice room door opens)

Like this? que charmait

(scales play in four hands, slowly)  ton imaaaaaahhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnhnagge
(cough) que charmait ton imaaaaaaaaaaaaaage

Okay, better. Go on now.

(practice room door slams shut)

Je rêvais le bonheur, ardent miraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaage

Good.

Okay, go on now.

(file cabinet opens in the distance)

(practice room door slams shut)

Je rêvais le bonheur, ardent miraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaage

Good.

Brrrrrrrrrr- brr-

(brr-)

(brr-)

(file cabinet opens in the distance)

(phone dings) One second, darlin’. It’s my 3 o’clock lesson.

Hello?

(brr-, (sneezing, tissues crinkle)

You better drink some tea, girl. You been to the doctor yet?

(phone clacks on the desk)

Soon, I promise.

SEVERAL PAGES TURN AT ONCE

(auralia “correct” tone, distant) brr-

(brr-)

(brr-)

(file cabinet closes in the distance)

Okay, let’s pick up at measure 30.

Okay.

Hélas!

OOP, try again.

Hélas!

(auralia “incorrect” tone in the distance) AUGHH, brooooo

(triste réveil des songes)

Je t’appelle, ô nuit, rends-moi tes mensonges;

Keep going, keep it tight!

Reviens, reviens,

Yes, girl!
radieuse,

Reviens, ô nuit

LET THE MOOSE —

Brrrrrr (phone dings)

rr!

mystérieuse!

— LOOSE!
THE NIGHT I WAS AN OPERA SINGER

If I could start over and craft my ideal singing voice, I’d wish for the following:

- Julie Moore’s richness
- Josh Chavira’s light melismas
- Lindsay Lymer’s drama
- Abby Powell’s sincerity
- Susie Smith’s flirtiness
- Emily Milius’s power
- Page Martinez’s high notes
- Julia Teal’s impeccable diction
- Brady Weldon’s easy low notes

But I’m just me, who dreamed of becoming a singer/composer/conductor, emerging instead as someone more, wherein those dreams are just one layer,

who turns an ear inward to listen to their heart thumping low in its own time signature. Yet on occasion, I reach out my hand to the night I was an opera singer and watch from the stage door.

That night, I donned a long, crimson dress, my hair flowing past my exposed back. For one night I had no doubt:

there was a singer in my body hidden under black t-shirts, glasses, evasive glances, and a thick waist. I was loud. I was pretty. I was confident. I was funny.

I haven’t met that girl before one of the choir directors told me later. And another came to me afterward in tears and embraced me for getting the Czech to fit correctly in my mouth.

I’ve listened to the recording only twice before — once a few months after, then a few months ago when a friend sent it to me. I can hear my past self in that space:

Twenty-one years old, breath trembling, trying to fit years of dreams into thirty minutes,

filling the recital hall with Dvorák and Bernstein. She’s etched into that sound, she existed.

Today I know that when I shed my red dress that night, I slipped her off, too. And when she exited the stage door, brushing against her future self,

she crossed a threshold into a space with new and old dreams crashing against one another like tremulous cymbals.
But I believe that she is still singing somewhere echoing off the walls of my ribs.
FADE IN:

Lights come up on a row of scratched, chipped, brown metal doors spread out along a wall. In between them are bulletin boards with flyers advertising performances, including: "Wind Symphony, November 14th, 2014 at 7 PM. Turner Auditorium."

In front of the farthest door to the right, a short young woman, TORI, pulls a small roll of scotch tape out from her purse. She wears a black backpack, overstuffed and bulging, straining against her back. On a bench to the left of her, she has placed a piece of paper with her face on it -- an advertisement for her upcoming solo recital. She sticks it to the door with a strip of clear tape on the top, then on the bottom.

An older woman, DR. DALTON, a few inches taller than Tori, enters.

DR. DALTON: Hey, girl! That's a nice flyer — it looks professional.

TORI: Thank you — is it okay that I'm taping this to your door? I know everyone else does but I forgot to ask.

DR. DALTON: Of course, darlin'. But you know, you've been so skittish about it, telling me you hope no one comes. What makes you want to advertise it?

(Tori takes a deep breath) Yes. I've worked hard on this, and so have you, and so has Mrs. Watterson. I want people to see what we've done. I'm... proud of myself.

DR. DALTON: Yes! You keep that attitude, girl. Her smile spreads across her face, then she pats Tori on the back, opens the door, and enters her office. The door closes
behind her and Tori looks at the sign one more time, smooths out the tape with the thumb of her right hand, and walks away.

FADE OUT.
you have to understand — music saved my life, transformed my dna into something more than a white trash hick who wore the same cheap ripped jeans and worn-out shoes every day. music gave me a purpose, something i could do well. i faltered in math and science classes, was passable in history and passionate about english, fumbled around on the track in p.e., but dammit, i could sing. i could memorize music quickly, i had nearly perfect pitch, recognized the sacred in each note, even when i fucking hated the music the director gave us. reliably on time to rehearsal, i could sight-read most anything you put in front of me. for a few nights a year, i could get a standing ovation with roaring applause, the skin of my cheeks budding into blushing hermosa roses, my heart glowing neon pink. i’ve chased that high ever since, but speaking in front of people doesn’t do it for me — and the teaching in front of a classroom fills me with dread — but if i could express my feelings through song like some kitschy musical, perhaps people could understand. i could hand out pieces of my soul like a pearl into an upturned palm to show people that a whole universe exists in the synthesis of vibration and air.
A Haunting

Like Nell and her siblings in *The Haunting of Hill House*, I’ve always been attuned. I think of a moment in the kitchen at our old apartment, sipping on a bowl of canned soup, seeing my granny walking through to the bedroom while two miles away in her own apartment — ten years before her death. That was a slip of the veil.

So were the phantom breaths on my shoulder in the showers at Hall 10 and the footsteps behind me at Carol's house on Halloween. She drinks herself to sleep nightly to block out those ghosts, and I could do the same.

I fear death like a coming storm. A child of Katrina living on the gulf coast, all too familiar with the low growl of distant thunder, musky rain about to touch the earth, an inescapable threat of flooding. Knowing that running could be futile and staying could mean disaster, the only correct choice being the one that doesn't get you killed.

Will death be like that? — the bitter taste of mold on my tongue, my heart dropping into my hollow stomach, deathwatch beetles clicking around under my floorboards? Nowhere to run, melting into black. The tarot cards are silent and my crystal ball is cloudy, and I'm blind to all but the past and the present.

There's no wish to be made, just knowing — knowing the spectre in me is watching. And when I look into space, my Bent Neck Lady is there. All air.
AN ISRAEL KEYES KILL CACHE IS IN MY STOMACH

for far too long,
I listened to his voice

almost every second of FBI interview
droning on and laughing about his crimes.

do you know they bought him coffee and candy
and negotiated for bits of information?

he traveled around the country as a contractor,
stashing his kill kits in the woods for the future

and his prey, chosen sometimes years in advance
would never see him coming.

Samantha Koenig was only 18
when he stole her away in the frigid Alaska night

and he brutally took her life
just feet from where his daughter and girlfriend slept.

I can still feel hear dead eyes watching me
through the screen, sewn open weeks after death

(just another trick)

he wanted you. he wanted me.
he wanted the Curriers and the Feldman woman.

they never found all the bodies
and what if I am one right now,

lying awake in bed my stomach filled
with zip ties, knives, guns, and

the rot

Illustration 1.4 Outline of a body with an Israel Keyes kill cache edited on top of the stomach.
**AFTER THE FUNERAL**

**FOR UNCLE BRUCE (1954-2018)**

I’ve tried to write about you since the accident, but the words won’t come. They’re shattered, scattered on the concrete down the street from your house glinting in the sun where your motorcycle hit the median.

They came to sweep it up, so all I could give was my song, “Amazing Grace” hanging in the air over your casket, and I clutch my hymnal despite knowing the words. Our family members stare at me with wide, bleary eyes as my voice rings out around them.

This is the last time I’ll see most of them on purpose.

Outside the funeral home, your daughter’s tears disgust me as she releases those Aggie-maroon balloons to the sky as a gift to you, yet we all know they’re probably going to get caught in a bird’s gullet.

Your wife wails, your absence permeating the air and I remember once again how death begets more death.
**Ode to My Husband’s Tie Hanger**

I see that you serve a purpose. You’re supposed to hold up the weight of my fiance’s numerous ties — some cornflower blue with navy stripes, some with grinning dinosaurs, one with an eye chart. You’re supposed to carry that weight — it’s your life’s purpose — but you don’t.

It’s not your fault. He left you in a box, then after six months of living here, took you out, only to hang you haphazardly on the edge of a shelf. And now you’re just hanging there among the books and plastic pumpkins and action figures, unable to serve the function you were meant for. Never given the chance.

Instead, I find his ties everywhere — on the coffee table, between the couch cushions, the kitchen counter, under the wine-night paintings stacked below our bedroom window that I haven’t hung up yet, under pillows.

I could probably tuck you away, out of sight, and he’d never even notice.
LEFTOVERS

The remains of our affair accumulate in my inbox:
one-off messages, one-word, sporadic exchanges

no more pictures of you on a walk or at the gym
or Keyboard Cat memes or morning selfies

no more ellipses softly floating on the bottom left-hand side
of our iMessage thread dancing as if to say:
“I can’t wait to tell you this.” “You matter to me.”
“I l— ”

No, the whole affair has gone stale and mushy,
like bread pudding in the back of my fridge.
TWELVE VARIATIONS ON “I LOVE YOU”

Picking up an extra hamantaschen in your favorite flavor (Raspberry or chocolate chip)
Scooping the litter so you don’t have to
Running the dishwasher
Offering to drive to HEB on Sunday mornings (My Sportage is bigger anyway)
Writing you a love note before I leave for work and sticking it to the fridge
Surprising you with pizza after a long day
Scratching your head to stave off a migraine
Relocating your clothes from floor to hamper
Holding you against my chest to comfort you after a long day
even when my own depression anchors me to the bed
Observing Passover with you in solidarity of your week without bread
Listening intently when you talk about Gundams (I understand zero of this, but you look so happy)
Watching American Dad videos on YouTube (insert vomit emoji here)

Sacrifice,
sacrifice,
sacrifice.
**She**

will always be fourteen  
swinging from branches  
with a loose grip  

over the water  

ears stuffed with mermaid songs  
and moss  

throat puss-coated and red as the feathers  
of a scarlet ibis, having swallowed  
too much water  

and it’s flowing even now  
in and around her,  

the silt and ants,  
cockroaches, and  
tadpoles
poetry as a theme song
poetry as sheet music
poetry as an instruction manual
poetry as a resignation letter
poetry as a cry for help
poetry as a confession
poetry as a life sentence
poetry as an elegy
poetry like a pat on the back
poetry as a memory of joy
poetry as an entryway to your childhood home
poetry as a bloodletting
poetry in the dark of a winter morning
poetry like a church
poetry as a cover-up
poetry as a substitute for Physics and Calculus
poetry as a prerequisite for all your misunderstanding
poetry as a final breath
poetry in my husband's eyes
poetry as a Starbucks mocha frappucino, no whip
poetry as a sentence that isn't a sentence
poetry over Zoom
poetry digitized
poetry scrawled on bathroom stalls at the local skating rink
poetry under the scales of a bearded dragon
poetry tucked into a library book
poetry on the back of my Target receipt
poetry as howling laughter
poetry stitched together with bone shards and hair
poetry assembled with wooden blocks in a child's playroom
poetry on a loop
poetry on a loop
loop on a poetry
on loop poetry a
poetry on a poetry
poetry on a loop
poetry on a
poetry on
poetry
MY GRANNY’S VOICE IS STILL SO LOUD

Shut up goddammit! I know you're fucking that boy when you stay after school. *I'm not, I'm staying late for Yearbook.* He doesn't care about you, you know.. You just wanna wear that two-piece to the pool so all the boys can see your big titties. Stop being rude. Stop drinking all that soda— it's making you fat! I just wanna die. I wish I'd just drop dead. Shit. Wipe that smile off your face. You're gonna be a fat slut just like your mama. Them pimples are lookin' real bad. I oughta pop those in your sleep. Do you need another piece of pizza? Why can't you just be sweet like your brother? Trevor’s a good boy. Who are you going to see? *No one. I'm getting some soda.* Who did you go see? Did he kiss you? Smooch, smooch, smooch! *No one. I bought soda. Here, you can have one.* That shirt is too tight on you. You're being a little bitch. You'll be happy when I'm dead and then you won't have to visit me anymore. Girl, I'ma smack you for runnin' your mouth! Your daddy married that other woman 'cause he couldn't deal with your mama anymore. She could've tried harder. Your mama needs to stop asking Uncle Bruce for money, you understand? I don't get much from social security, but I guess if y'all need it so badly, here. What are you cryin' for? That boy? That dress is so pretty, but why's it so short? It's a little slutty. Brush your hair. You look like a ragamuffin. Now, why're you playing board games by yourself? *I miss Mammaw.* They dropped you off a half hour ago and you already miss your favorite grandma, huh?! Boo-hoo-hoo! *She’s not my favorite. I love you both.* Bullshit, she isn’t. You wish I’d just hurry up and die so you can bring them little boys over to have nookie in the closet! Goddammit, Sandi! *I’m Tori.* Shut up.

I wish you'd come see me more.
ITEMS THAT MEANT THE WORLD TO ME THAT I CAN NO LONGER FIND (A PERFORMANCE PIECE)

Performance directions:
• poetry to be pre-recorded and read over PA system while vocalizing
• mime items as necessary
• dance into sound and emotion, no choreography
• long, black billowing dress a must

(conducting baton)

purpleheart   tapered   fiberglass

swim in time   with voice   and orchestra

flicking air,   extend the hand   o   u   t
(two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three—)

you’re   n o t   leonard bernstein

and   never   will   be.
**sheet music: requiem**

i’m sorry i put you in a recycling bin in the storage unit when i moved (you were always there)

when i moved storage unit bin in the recycling i put you in — i’m sorry (i gave up)

i’m in a recycling bin i’m sorry put you in when i moved the storage unit (fucking shameful)

a storage unit i’m sorry when i moved put you recycling bin in the i moved (hiding away)

moved unit a sorry i put storage in when you recycling i’m the bin in the (spiders crawl from ribs)

recycling i’m storage put in you bin sorry i moved a in the unit when i — (dies irae)
award

I know now what for so long I refused to believe: I deserved that slab of wood carved into a beveled rectangle, my name etched onto a sliver of gold. I earned it — a minimum of three hours a day practicing before school, after school, the shower, my room silently, in the cafeteria tapping my foot to the music in my head mouthing the rhythmic incantations in Latin and German. When the plaque arrived a few weeks after the performance, I hung it up in my room, where it would watch me try to live up to the title I’d won: *TMEA All-State Choir Member 2011*. The night before we performed for the Texas Music Educator Association Conference, I walked alone in downtown San Antonio, following the riverwalk in the cold and dark, passing patios with bistro lights and chips and salsa that I couldn’t afford to eat. “The chill is bad for the voice,” my roommate warned me, and duly noted, wrapped a scarf around my throat and tucked it under my hoodie. I’d worked so hard to sing better than hundreds of other altos in the state, competed against myself as much as I competed against all of them — and I made sixth place. I was just seventeen, a senior at Cy Creek High School, in over my head but not understanding: you’re not going to drown. That night, everything I’d worked for existed in those years stretching out ahead of me, and I could’ve never known how deep the water would get. So I kept going, listening to the music of rushing water and my sneakers slapping the ground.
t-shirt

Thank you for lasting for ten years so far. Depression stole my songs but you are proof that my voice mattered.
See? My named is listed there, right there between Shelby Havard (a future classmate) and Jordan Jenkins (who I never saw again). My body has swelled and I can’t wear you anymore, not with your faded print and the hole in the left armpit.
But I still want to thank you for what you mean(t) to me, even though a decade separates us from the future conductor pulsing away in my bones.
From the little corner of myself where I’ve folded and tucked you away, you still warm my heart.
aftermath

Performance directions:
• lie on the ground
• stare at the ceiling
• stop singing at a half-step in the scale (don’t resolve the chord — let it hang)
• speak above a whisper into the mic

don’t ask me why i mourn my music
like a friend born from my own heart
or why i can’t look at those piano keys
it’s as clear as the day i began

and water spilling from banita creek
i can’t meet your eyes when i tell you this story
just sit here with me in this quiet
where music can find us instead

i can’t remember the words to “Mesicku na nebi hlubokém”
or the pattern of fingers across the keys in my piano IV final
but i tried all my life to learn to sing just right

and for one night i did and i continue to try
the truth is that i miss her and the power she had
before it became too hard to perform
and i miss these objects that belonged to her

if i was still her i’d know where they are
Movement II: Holding Pattern

Illustration 2.1 Collage, section header.
AN OPEN LETTER

This is my letter to the world,
That never wrote to me,—

Emily Dickinson

This is my letter to the world — to all the people I’ve loved and whose final memory in my mind is their figure disappearing into the distance, or the message that was never returned. This is to the ones in the ground or ground to dust or frozen until their transformation can commence. This is to the mother I never had, with gentle smiles and laughs bubbling from her throat, never raising her voice to remind me of my faults. This is to the child I never was, whose most monumental task of the day was deciding which crayon to use for the sun and which pail to use for her sandcastle. This is to the people I love who will never know, because when I think about telling them, I get a little shaky and nauseous and keep it to my damn self. This is to the bottle of wine in the fridge I need to finish. This is to the child I’ll never carry in my imperfect womb, on whom I wish every kindness when at last your soul finds the soil from which it can grow. This is to single parents. This is to my students (former and future), who can hopefully love me for my calm moments and forgive me for my crazed ones. This is to the man who gave me my first tattoo, an outline of my dead brother's footprint. This is to the person I hope to be tomorrow, next week, next year, on my very last day — hopefully better each time. This is to you, the person holding this poem in your palm, searching for meaning in a world that sells you a god that will save your soul but won’t provide you food and shelter — for whom I wish only good things that you will then give as a gift to the next person you meet. That you can find your peace somewhere, somewhere, somewhere.
THE KING OF LAKE TAWAKONI

for Pappaw

I. Life

Illustration 2.2 Pie chart breaking down the life of the writer’s grandfather, “Pappaw.”
II. Memories

_I am living. I remember you._
- *Marie Howe, "What the Living Do"

In the landscape of everything I can't recall, I somehow hold onto these things, the color washed out:

- The summer day we shared my very first ice cream sandwich, sweet and melting in my hand, in the backyard in Garland.
- Trying grits at Pearson's Cafe at your insistence before spitting the slimy, bland concoction into a napkin.
- Playing dominoes at my dad's post-stroke nursing home, in the RV in Rabbit Cove, at Terri and John's house, at the trailer facing the lake.
- Singing “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” and playing guitar in the living room of the trailer, getting to show off for your neighbors.
- On the barge as a small child, fishing on Lake Tawakoni, my life jacket holding me tight. Catching my first catfish, then the mercy of throwing it back into the deep green water. Avoiding the marina because of the water moccasin. Then, sitting on your knee and driving the boat back to the dock. The leap of my stomach up to my throat when I saw a brown recluse spider.
- How you'd answer the phone simply and with not even a bit of irony, as loud as you felt like: "Dick Burns."
- The last hug you gave me before bed or driving home, saying "I love you, girl"— I always knew, but you always wanted to make sure.
III. Gone

It wasn't fair for you to make your exit the day before Valentine's Day, the day before the state of Texas froze in place in your absence. And it's fucked up that I can't remember your birthday but I can remember your last day on earth, the chill creeping into my apartment while receiving the phone call from my dad. No words, just thick tears.

As a child, I used to be afraid of your false teeth when you took them out of your mouth and snapped them at me. Now I fear that I'll forget your voice, or that you didn't know how much I loved you, because they put you on the ventilator before I could call again.

I know that you're gone, but I usually forget. When I'd call, you always answered first, then passed me to Mammaw. Now, when I call, I'm taken aback when you don’t answer. And that's the worst part:

forgetting, then the truth.
IV. Clearfield Dr. vs Ellis Rd.: A Dissection

Mammaw and Pappaw's former house, where my Mom, Dad, and I lived with them from the time I was six months old until my brother's birth in 1996. This is the first home of theirs that I visited and their last permanent residence until moving to the trailer in West Tawakoni. In the interim, they lived in the RV and were on the road in the truck.

434 Clearfield Dr,
Garland, TX 75043

Illustration 2.3 Google Street view of the house on Clearfield Dr. labeled with numbers to corresponding entries on the following page.
1. Location for Easter egg hunts, taking photos in our costumes on Halloween, questioning the bare tree branches in December.

2. The Garage, connected to the master suite.

3. The living room. As a child, I thought it had the tallest ceilings in the world.

4. The backyard where I was covered in sunburns and savored ice cream sandwiches. My grandparents’ dog, Jake, would run around with me chasing moths.

5. Dining room where:
   a. I covered myself (and the beige carpet) in scented markers.
   b. "The Claw" lived, terrifying me daily*
   c. Dad would blow up balloons for his magician/clown/balloon artist job
      i. *Dad holding "the claw:" a wooden rod with broken pieces of hanger to form the claws, covered in spray foam, then painted green. It once had black fingernails. Mid-90s, prior to his stroke in 2006.

6. Former RV spot.

7. A good place to run around with a stuffed Barney the Dinosaur toy. See: 2nd birthday video, VHS, 1995
The trailer where Mammaw and Pappaw have lived for around 15 years. The last home Pappaw ever knew. My salvation for a couple weeks each summer; I'd visit My Sister's Closet Thrift Store with Mammaw, throw fish fries at the dock with Pappaw, cuddle up with the dogs for movies in Mammaw's king-size bed. Many nights, Mammaw and I would grab chips and dip from the kitchen after Pappaw went to bed, watch TV, and gossip about my life back home or her childhood.

My dad and his fiancée moved in after Pappaw died and they will be the last to live there. It is almost unlivable now and will need to be torn down. So will go these memories.

200 Ellis Rd
West Tawakoni, TX, 75474

Illustration 2.4 Google Street view of the house on Ellis Rd. labeled with numbers to corresponding entries on the following page.
1. Mammaw's garden, now long gone. She grew whatever flowers were in season at Walmart, best of all the hibiscus that opened wide as a saucer one June day.
2. The new wheelchair ramp, big enough to accommodate Mammaw’s Hoveround.
3. The little nook in the kitchen area where Mammaw and I would watch *Back to the Future* and *Selena* on the 10-inch RCA TV, sitting atop a brown cabinet where we stored some of our favorite VHS tapes. And on the 4th of July, we'd enjoy the fireworks shooting out from the shore across the lake — eruptions of light fizzling and falling mirrored on the water.
4. One summer morning when I was 12, after not being able to sleep that night. I watched the sun come up through the old glass of these front windows.
5. The kitchen where I made ice cream sundaes. They were too rich, covered in chocolate and caramel syrup, whipped cream, and a cherry, but Mammaw and Pappaw ate them anyway.
6. Dottie's trailer. She was a teacher when she was younger, and she was going blind the last time I saw her before she died. Her voice always sounded a little far off, a little sad, the wide, slow vibrato of a voicebox on the decline, like a aging boat motor. But she was kind, welcoming us onto her porch to swing alongside her, swatting mosquitos and clustered gnats.
7. A fake wishing well, but only in the sense that it had no water. Mammaw and I both believe wishes can be made anywhere.
V. By Water

I’ve gazed out at the lake in front of my grandparents’ trailer more times than I can count — mornings as an adolescent snapping open a can of fizzy grape soda and curling up with Nancy Drew in front of the bay window, watching the fishermen break small waves of sun with the tips of their boats. The days watching a storm roll in sitting criss-cross-apple-sauce on the itchy brown rug, trying to distract myself with a movie on the 10-inch TV. Hearing Pappaw’s truck bob down the pitted dirt road and come to a stop outside the window, then the stomp of his feet coming up the plywood ramp, his voice calling out for help storing the fish he just caught. Fried catfish sizzling in the pan while Mammaw sings to herself May the bird of paradise fly up your nose and Pappaw helping me set the table. Rocking in floor rockers with Mammaw after dinner, holding her hand and seeing the splendor of a pretend-moon reflected in the water under the light pole, sprinkled all around with stars.
VI. Portrait of My Grandparents, Mid-90s

You would never guess their ages exactly, but the deep lines on their faces intimate some truth of the lives they’ve lived. The black garden dirt tucked under her fingernails, her skinny, bony feet and limping gait. His bulging belly.

On the left he smiles wide. His dentures look natural, familiar to his gums since he was sixteen His skin ruddy-pink from years on the road in an eighteen-wheeler and fishing on Lake Tawakoni, the future skin cancer lying in wait, on his biceps, the diabetic blood in his veins, age spots covered by blue-checkered long sleeves.

To the right, she places a hand on his shoulder, holds her stroke-shrunk arm close to her side — but she lived, we must remember. Those glasses are so narrow, you can barely see the pale brown eyes hiding behind cloudy cataracts, squinting against her closed-mouth smile, just like mine. The drawn-on eyebrows, the black shapeless pattern across her butter-yellow shirt.

I’m psychic, painfully aware of the future once the frame-unfreezes and time keeps on. If only I could warn them: Don’t let your neighbors come over. Don’t go out without your mask. Don’t leave Mammaw without a 50th anniversary with you.

But life doesn’t work that way, and ghosts in picture frames cannot hear you.
VII. **A Prayer from Someone Who Doesn’t Pray**

If Heaven is real, god, I really hope you let him in. He could be a jerk sometimes but he was loving and generous. And I hope you'll let Mammaw stay around a little while longer.

Please don't let me forget his voice, especially the phone call that we didn't know was the last I need to hear him say one more time: "I love you, girl. You take care now. I can't wait to see you again."

Ask him to say that the end wasn't scary or painful. Ask him to lie to me and say that shifting from this life into the next was just as simple as moving from one room into another,

then another,

then another.

Illustration 2.5 View of Lake Tawakoni from the trailer.
Illustration 2.6 Collage, images of the writer’s grandfather, Pappaw.
A Nice Young Lady

Lemme tell ya ‘bout how my son was born and how happy it made me to see those big blue eyes looking up past my face into the sky. His daddy was a mean ‘ol man, with angry fists and words that stung. I’d have to stay in bed the day after an argument, watching sickly aubergine-colored bruises appear on any place he touched. One day we walked out and drove away, moving from Dallas to Wills Point to live with my mama and daddy.

And then I met Dick Burns — an insurance salesman back in the early 70s when we met. He was a real big guy, but I loved his big smile and the way he put his arm around me and make me feel safe. We'd go out on the town and have a drink... We got married 50 years ago.

Oh — they’re pullin’ up now, my son, Mike, and his wife, Heather. Real sweet couple, always holding hands, lookin' in eachother's eyes. It's real neat.

My husband just died.

I miss ‘im bad, but he’s in heaven now and he’s gonna be okay. We’re all gonna be okay.

You know, I have a granddaughter: Tori. She’s getting married this year to the nicest man, this tall Jewish man. His name is Kevin. Kevin? Evan? He works with glasses and he loves her so much. They have three cats and watch movies together and bake together. He’s a real sweetheart. I know I can’t be there at the wedding in November, but she knows I love ‘er more than anything, knows I think they’re a real nice couple, and we’re all gonna be okay. All gonna be okay.

You know, you’re a nice young lady.

I’m sure your family’s real prouda you.
INTERMISSION

Take a breath.
   In slow… 5 seconds.
   Hold… 5 seconds.

        Out slow… 5 seconds.

            Repeat until you feel like you can
            move forward.

The music that can save your life will be waiting for you

when you’re ready.
Movement III: Transformation

Illustration 3.1 Collage, section header.
**TO THE GIRL IN TRINITY PARK, 1998:**

Savor that PB&J and the cool air. Don't forget the dream of buying a picnic basket just like that one. Know that it's okay if you don't love your dad's wife -- the redhead from Kentucky -- like a mom; she isn't your mom and never will be. Be nicer to your brother, for the love of god. Maybe it will change his life. The burn of rubbing alcohol on an ant bite hurts for a second, but when the pain fades, you're on the path to feeling better. Avoid strawberries — trust me. You're a little bit allergic. Find moments of joy, even when you're oscillating between being both child and adult at home. Savor these, too: mild days at the park, singing Shania Twain songs out the car window into the rushing wind, braiding your hair for the first time, baking the perfect peanut butter cookie.

And don't blame yourself for your mom's outbursts or your Granny's pessimism, nor the absence of your dad; their problems are beyond your reach, and you did nothing wrong. If ever these creep into your life, seek help. Look for the people with gentle smiles who wish to embrace you.

You're beautiful. You're smart. You're a kind person. Don't forget those things. Life is about to get real hard, real fast, but you're made of stronger stuff. I won't always be there to tell you these things, so you have to hold them in the pocket of your little blue jacket. And when you outgrow it, put it in the next one and the next. Pull it out daily like a morning prayer or bedtime story, hold onto the love infused in my words.

Speaking of pain: heartbreak is as temporary as an ant bite. It will sting for a time but fade, soothed by each passing second.

And know this: I will always remember you.

Illustration 3.2 Image of the writer in Dallas-area Trinity Park in 1998, taken by her father.
HOW TO SURVIVE THE FAMILY CURSE

**Intel**
- Interview your mother, first of all, whose mind is still sharp
- Obtain medical records (re: hospital stays, medication and dosages)
  - Anecdotes will suffice in a pinch -- "I used to take Paxil at one point and when I would get anxious, things would just... calm down." — Mom
- Cross-reference your strain against theirs; note the similarities and differences
  - Great-grandmother on my mother's side: depressive disorder, died by suicide
  - Granny (mom's mother): bouts of depression, anger, and confusion
  - Uncle Bruce: depression, addictive personality (ie. alcoholism)
- Use or lose their survival strategies; what works for one may not work for another
  - Mom: "If I get anxious while I'm driving, I pull my seatbelt off my chest and shift in my seat. I just feel more in control."

**Action Plan**
- On your fridge, list the important numbers:
  - Suicide hotline
  - Best friend(s)
  - Weed dealer (if different than the individual above)
  - Hide notes for yourself in boxes, in the inside of cabinet doors, or your car.
  - Suggested phrases include, but are not limited to:
    - Smile. :)
    - Take your meds.
    - Your cat would miss you.
    - Have you called your friends lately?
    - Find a therapist in your city\(^1\) or online\(^2\).

**Note:** not effective if you:
- Don’t attend
- Tune out their advice
- Don’t move on if their help isn’t helping

~ Hint: If you leave a session with your shoulders slumped lower than before, it's likely not helping.

**Execution**
- Hug your cat.
- Open the window for as long as you can manage.
- Take a shower.
- Eat, even if it’s frozen eggplant parm or takeout.
- Remember that you are worth keeping alive.

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\(^1\) [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists)
\(^2\) [https://www.betterhelp.com](https://www.betterhelp.com)
LOVE IN FAST FORWARD

Eggos fresh from a toaster, warm and soft in your palms. A delicacy. Curled up in soft, oversized sweatpants and a ratty green t-shirt under the stairs. You lie awake, staring past the ceiling and into the uncertain future.

Bubble gum pop on the transistor; you bob along, twirl, shake your hips, but you aim to balance on those hot pink roller skates. Hold on tight to the boy racing through the afternoon glow on his bicycle, lean in and place your head on his back, musk mingling with Old Spice. Your hair twists around your head in the wind, without a helmet. You’ve never felt more alive.

You bloom that summer, let the girl with fiery red hair give you a makeover, discover the teenage version of your beauty. But it’s hard to trust, and the boy on the bike disappoints. Only time can change the hurt in your heart, baby girl, so you make him wait. He stays up many nights listening to the silence of his radio, almost begging you to crackle through and say something.

Summer ends; one last look, a final kiss, and you know you’ll forgive him.
SUNDAY MORNING

I choose to focus on the mundane:
the coffeemaker's squelch and spit, bits of your beard
in the bathroom sink. My lazy roll from one side of the bed to the other
fighting the sun

And when I get out of bed and scoot out
into the living room wearing the bare minimum
of clothing that is acceptable if a neighbor sees me
through our open windows

You sit comfortably in both our spots on the couch
with Lucy cradled in your left arm, purring loudly
your coffee cold and forgotten on the table
and your feigned surprise at my late arrival to the day

And so I recite, as always:
"I'm tired."
"I'm hungry."
"I need to pee."
"It's hot in here."
"I love you."
wedding reception
for my husband

like the middle-school dance
except everyone wants to dance with you
especially the one you most wish to dance with
all eyes are on you as a slow love song plays
and your dress glitters in the DJ’s twirling purple-and-blue lights
and his smile turns to forehead kisses
and you feel like the once fanciful dream
finally came true

Illustration 3.3 Photograph of the writer and her husband after their wedding with the poem written above in the blank space.
MOLDY CARPET

once understated office-floor teal
stained charcoal gray by time
the revolving seasons of drought,
harsh dry summers stealing the lake,
january nights turning mud to glassy ice,
relentless downpours from low-hanging clouds
stubbornly clinging now to my grandparents' porch
with twenty-year-old Elmer’s wood glue
PLYWOOD WINDOW PANE

1.) Forget your keys on the bed, shut the door behind you, lead me, your 11-year-old granddaughter, to the car.

2.) Take me down to Kat's thrift shop to look around for treasures among the crap. Perhaps a gold-plated necklace or a floral-print shirt. Avoid the wasp nests inside the un-air-conditioned building, taking breaks to step outside and cool off. Assure me that the bugs won't hurt me.

3.) Drive into town to browse through Walmart, pick up some ground beef for our spaghetti dinner and a Pepsi to drink in the car. When I ask to buy the latest Teen Beat Magazine, get it for me.

4.) Collect the grocery bags from the car, walk up the ramp, through the screen door and — the front door won't open. Break into your own home by busting through the door’s skinny fiberglass window with a rock from your flower garden.

5.) Ask Pappaw to install a piece of plywood into the door with glue, a temporary solution that becomes a permanent annoyance when the arid heat of summer or forbidding bite of winter seeps in through the uncaulked cracks.
Illustration 3.4 Image of the writer’s grandparents’ kitchen with the words “Click to add your grandfather back to his seat at the table” next to a plus sign and word processing cursor.
My grandparents always had a bottle of pancake syrup on the kitchen table, even when we weren't eating pancakes. The first time I visit after Pappaw's death, it's still there. Before I leave in the morning, I heat up a couple of frozen pancakes, eat alone at the table where once upon a time, there weren't enough chairs for us all to sit. Clacking dominoes and laughter, late-night stories and contented silence are gone, and I'm stuck to moments years in the past, one foot in the future, the other under this table.
COWS

Of all the idiosyncrasies about Mammaw and Pappaw's house, the weirdest is the bathroom door, which has never closed correctly. If you leaned against the thin particleboard door, it would sometimes stay put with the faintest little click into the strike plate.

But usually, I relied on the cows to keep the door shut.

A hefty iron doorstop, painted to look like a cow lying in grass and another standing next to its friend, allowed me privacy on many nights where all I wanted was to shower alone — without a dog or accidental visitor. Their blank faces kept me company as I handled anxieties that I kept to myself: was I gay? Was this feeling of empty rage depression or insanity? How could I be less fat and ugly?

The cows didn't care. They offered no help nor judgment one way or another — just kept the door shut.

In October 2021, the bathroom floor is bare plywood, the tile peeled off, the door replaced with a curtain. The cows live on a table just inside the trailer’s entrance. No room has a door that closes, and the cows simply sit, staring at nothing, remembering all the gone years that have been sucked into the vacuum.
The summer I was 12, I became obsessed with Parcheesi. Mammaw taught me how to play with an old, incomplete set she'd bought at My Sister's Closet thrift store.

At the end of the summer, I took the game home with me in its ripped, flimsy box. I had no one who wanted to play with me, so I pulled the game out and played alone within an hour of Mammaw and Pappaw dropping me off at home in Houston, back to my Granny’s care while Mom worked.

Granny walked in from my mom's room and in a shrill, mocking voice, said "What are you playing that for?"

"I wanted to play. I miss Mammaw."

"Well. I guess I know who your favorite grandmother is!" She huffed and stomped to the couch, pretending to read but keeping her eyes on me to observe my next move. We endured ten still, silent minutes, then she went outside for a cigarette.

I packed up the game and never touched it again.
ASHES

In the living room Mammaw displays
the two loves of her life:

Jake, my protector, my first best friend — a sheltie
whose mane puffed out around his face,
and Pappaw — the grumpy, gruff man who raised my dad
and loved my Mammaw endlessly.

I can hold them both in my arms at the same time.

And I can't help thinking of how, when I was born,
he'd parade me around to all the neighbors' houses in his arms and say
with equal parts pride and awe: "This is my grand baby!"
ROOSTER

As I held it out inches from my face, the refrigerator magnet glowed fire-engine red in the morning sunlight coming through the bay window — the coming day brightly igniting the bird that would have woken us up, had they lived near a farm.

"Roo-ra-oo!" Mammaw called out across the pillbox kitchen. "You ready for some breakfast, baby doll?"

I clacked the rooster back on the fridge and took my seat at the little kitchen table in the sun.
Once the hat had been on Pappaw’s head long enough, his sweat was indefinitely woven into the fibers. The stink has lived on past his death. Even the box that contains the bag which contains what remains of Pappaw teems with must and funk, like the clothes in Mammaw's closet that she won't part with. The ashes are infused, just as Pappaw was, with the sweat of a long day of work or fishing and breathing in lake mist or scraping down America’s highways through day, night, dusk, and day again.
Being visited by a hummingbird is good luck, Mammaw would said. But she'd say that about a lot of things, like cardinals and monarch butterflies.

The view of Lake Tawakoni through the bay windows was magical to me as a preteen, who still wanted to believe in mermaids. The windows were caked with a film of dust and dirt from the gravel road, sealed with droplets of water on the wind coming in from the lake.

Squirrels visited the bird feeders as I sat watching the foamy waves, though Mammaw would shoo them off if she caught them there — they ate birdseed and destroyed her elaborate garden on a frequent basis. But the hummingbirds were always welcome.

As a child, they looked like floating beans, their wings nearly invisible. But Mammaw revealed their secret: their wings moved so fast that they just looked invisible. I was too scared to refill the hummingbird feeders hanging from the eaves at the front of the trailer because of the wasp nests, but I'd watch Mammaw go out on the step ladder and refill them, coaxing the birds over to us for just a fleeting second.

In the living room, no matter what time of day, a hummingbird hung from the ceiling fan’s chain. My first visit to the trailer after Pappaw’s death was nearly sleepless, staring into the open space where my life once took place and wishing sleep would take me. The AC broken, it was too hot in the living room where I lay on the rock-hard bed, the closest window unit all the way in the kitchen.

In the moments before falling into a restless sleep, I watched their hummingbird, lowered now for someone reaching up from their wheelchair, swinging in a tight circle — dancing, like a mobile.
Movement IV: The Beginning

Illustration 4.1 Collage, section header.
ELEGIES FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE SELVES

on the shore are seven coffins
small enough to fit my songs inside
and though for many years i’ve tried
to lovingly hold them often,

my brain has worked against me and i’ve simply forgotten
what it’s like for music to thrive
inside me, to be truly satisfied
to feel a string of words weave into song

by the swell of my voice and air exhaling in time with my heart
to cast the spell from the hollow of my throat
and for a moment there’d be something there

i must believe there's still a part
of me out there, afloat
on some lonely voice, somehow, somewhere
I found Jesus a few months ago. Aren’t you glad? I’ve heard my whole life that Jesus will Save Me and I fucking found him! He was posing on the Internet as a man named Cesar. Hazel eyes, dimples, eight-pack. You know the type. From the get-go, I craved him: a soldier who painted and spoke three languages.

Soon I became “honey,” “dear,” and “baby” and I’d been so hungry for him to bestow those words unto me that I curled them to my breast and wept. And when he visited for the first time, I welcomed him between my thighs so easily — he didn’t even need to ask. Again, I was starving. I’d been alone for too long, and he was supposed to Save Me.

He held my heathen body against his and loved me for who I was, in his image. Soft kisses down my neck baptised me in the name of the Holy Spirit, his collarbone was my communion, and his arms encircling my naked body welcomed me into the faith. Even his hands wrapped firmly around my throat showed me the devotion he had for me.

When Jesus left, it was like waking up to a new life, reborn from his love; and so it would be every time we would meet. Forever and ever.

_Amen._
Illustration 4.2 Collage, a brain scan with the words “I’m so damn tired of thinking about you” written repeatedly.
FUCK

(after E’mon Lauren)

Word of the Week: Fuck

Uses of the word fuck:

- (noun) people who frequently makes mistakes, often to the detriment of those around them; see also: fuck-up, disappointment (ie. “the family fuck-up”)
- (exclamation) (1) spoken in anger (ie. "fuck you"); (2) breathed into the ear of one’s lover when they lay their lips on an expectant collarbone or hipbone
- (verb) (1) to have sex with (oneself or another person); see also: consummate, make love; (2) to destroy something (ie. “my childhood was fucked from the first breath I took”); (3) to change in an undesirable fashion

Examples of fuck in a sentence:
- “My ex was a stupid fuck.”
- “If nothing else, he was a good fuck.”
- “Oh, fuck, I’m pregnant!”
- “Don’t fucking talk to me.”
- “Fuck yes, I’ll marry you!”
- “Oh, fuck me. I forgot the money in the cab.”
- “Who the fuck do you think you are?”
- “What the fuck took you so long?”
- “Look at me when I’m fucking talking to you!”
WINTER

There
in the forest of your eyes
I see both

a warning to turn back

a plea to stay
JESUS (PART II)

I’ve memorized the pattern of your mouth on mine, the parting of your lips and the warmth of your hand as it cradles my cheek. The way your hips roll when you thrust yourself into me.

And I remember your eyes blinking slowly, looking back at me as we lay, spent, on my bed, as if to say:

*I want you.*
*I need you.*
*You’re beautiful.*
*I’ll never let you go.*

I can perform the routine in my sleep: let you in the door, follow you to the couch, lie on the bed, to the door again. Hungry for me —

until you got your fill and learned just how far your arm’s length can push someone back. Just like you used to push me back into a door frame, back onto my couch, back onto my bed, you’ve now pushed back to the place where we are strangers, and you are carefully picking your words from the lineup to say as gently as you can:

*You are not wanted.*
*You are wanted... but not like that.*
*You are wanted but I’ve saved every picture you sent me, so that will do.*
*You are not wanted, not even in my ears, so don’t bother leaving a voicemail.*
*The number you’ve dialed has been disconnected.*

*You are not wanted.*

I’ve memorized the pattern of you saying goodbye:

A kiss, a promise, a lie.
THE ROOMS OF MY HEART

Video calls at all hours, shower steam wrapping my body, fogging the mirror, but I find my reflection in you

Nakedness unabashed, showing off my tattoos, dark on pale milky breasts you can’t get enough of, resting a hand on my collarbone

Exploring my apartment through your eyes, steadying the camera And you gush at the stacks of poetry books I show you on my desk, so I promise to mail you one

Lying awake til the early morning, veiled understandings behind tired eyes, stirred awake by your smile, always thinking in ten-hour time differences

Hours passing each other across the planet, not meeting, never touching, that recorded sunset from the car, your silhouette dark against the blaze of orange and purple

The dream of picking you up at the airport but settling for tucking you into my chest while heading out the door each morning, the snap of a photo with light just kissing my face

Thumping pain and honesty, a sternum broken open, black ink flowing cutting the understanding, bisecting into truth

Promising, promising—

There is still room for you.
To the Man I Can’t Have

I wish you quiet nights lying by her side, her cheek pressed to your chest rising gently with each breath you take.

I wish you restrained voices when you fight.

I wish you honesty.

I wish you easy silences in the car and on the couch, in the sticky booth at the Chinese restaurant you love.

I wish you love, so much that you don’t know where it can all fit within the cavern of your chest.

I wish you laughter, video games, bike rides, hikes, long walks with your puppies, bearded dragons.

I wish you shared projects — hanging the shelves you bought two years ago, tucked in the back of your closet, by her short, white courthouse wedding dress.

I wish you such mind-blowing sex that you’ll forget my bed.

I wish you the understanding that you already have what you need — so you won’t ever do this to another woman

like me
PORTAL

It smells like the lakeside in my water bottle: the funk of algae and rotting fish decomposing, stuck in the mud oil leaking from fishing boats waxy McDonald's cups wicking green water duck shit sunken kites and tangled fishing lines and worms wrapped around a buoy swaying on each wave.
i tug my shirt down
and follow you to the couch
where your jeans stay zipped
in place on your hips

you keep your arm at your side
rise to cross the room
stepping backwards into the afternoon light

and i lock the door
to keep myself from following you
to your 2003 Sentra
to Circle K
to the training camp in California where

i love you

hasn't yet escaped my lips
and i never sent you that message
where i asked you to come over

and my heart never knew
the taste of your mouth
or the sweetness of your voice

the prick of your thorns
when I look to the future,
there’s a vacuous, blank expanse
where my future should be

Illustration 4.3 QR code to a YouTube video of the song “Idumea” arranged by Rick Bjella performed by the Millikin University Choir.
Illustration 4.5 The poem “Apologies” written on notebook paper.
JUST LIKE THAT

Pappaw:

the anniversary of losing you approaches --
one more rotation around the sun
that you never got to see

the days your wife needed you to anchor her to reality
my wedding
the Covid vaccine that you were so close to getting
fish throttling through the water on Lake Tawakoni from your friend's boat
at least five movies I think you'd like

We can hold you in our arms, tucked into the gilded urn on the kitchen bar.
And the trailer still smells like Gold Bond lotion and Dial hand soap
mingling with musky trucker sweat. Mammaw still
looks for you, one foot in the past, the other in the present.
And Heather has breast cancer, and the trailer is falling apart, and

I hold these worries close to me, folded in my back pocket
and there's no damn room to mourn you
aside from on the page.
CHECKLIST: WRITING THIS BOOK

- poem about how a sentence caught my breath in my throat
- poem describing the disaster of opening a brand-new high school as a teacher
- poem about the first day working with a broken wrist from falling on roller skates
- poem comparing plastic bottles of mango juice
- poem with layers of text and music and punctuation
- poem with fifteen umbrellas
- poem plucked like a sunflower from a field
- poem with charts and graphics to explain my decision to live
- poem written without my glasses on
- poem written by my cats
- poem where I manage not to use dashes
- poem translated from the constellations of my freckles
- poem scraped into my body
- poem reclaiming my body
- poem composed of your moans
- poem about all the houses I miss
- poem for poetry’s sake
- poem referencing my colleagues’ work
- poem about the people I’ve loved
- poem constructed on a corkboard at school
- poem about the baby my mother lost before me
- poem in which a jacket becomes just a jacket
- poem where I learn to be poetic
- poem for my friends who need to love themselves
- poem to my students
- poem about how my feet feel after a pedicure
- poem about the fear of flying
- poem about sex
- poem describing the shag carpet of my grandparents’ trailer
- poem forgiving myself for all the things I’ve done
- poem whispering my secrets to you (and you alone)
- poem praising my yoga pants collection
- poem that makes you smile
- poem that absolves me of my sins
**Why I Didn’t Report My Rape**

I. I can’t remember all of it.

II. We’d had consensual sex five times before.

III. I let him into my home willingly.

IV. I survived.

V. I had no bruises to show for it.

VI. Police believe mainly in the facts they create, and my story was too small, no threads to tie into a little knot *bunny ears, make an x, pull them tight*

VII. We’d eaten pizza and watched *Captain America* beforehand.

VIII. I said “no” as many times as I could but not loud enough. I didn’t fight enough.

IX. I had feelings for him.

X. When I woke up, I had to grade papers, so I tucked it all away.

XI. I didn’t want strangers to examine me.

XII. I was embarrassed about my body.

XIII. There was no point.
I’m part of a statistic: one in four. A member of the #MeToo club. But no matter how much it haunts me and those images flash back at me behind my eyes, I don’t like to tell my story.

I carry too much doubt:

What if they won’t believe me?
my mother was the first person I told, and she didn’t

What if they criticise my clothing?
  black and blue yoga pants, an oversized t shirt, my body
  covered in dried sweat from a long day of teaching

What if people brush me off because I survived? Because I wasn’t beaten or threatened? Because he left me there alone afterward and closed the door to my apartment, never spoke to me again?
  they do

What if the deep drown of sleep was a blessing? — I couldn’t fight but I also couldn’t feel anything but the pin-prick of panic.

I remember his wide brown eyes staring me down from above
  like even he couldn’t believe what he was doing

In my first therapy appointment, I said that I was lucky: I hadn’t been raped until after college. But then I consider:

The first time Parker and I were alone in a room together when I was 19, he closed the door to my bedroom, my mother inches away through the flimsy apartment wall, and told me I’d like it.

I dated him for a few years after, we adopted a cat together, and I loved him with my whole heart; we almost got married.

what does that say about me?

And then there was Eric, who almost broke my wrist and yelled incessantly about how I was stupid and my friends were embarrassed of me. His barrage of texts and calls made me afraid of my phone.

And Lee and Brian and Joel — they left without a word.

Each took a piece of me, and if you held me up to a light,

you could see right through me.
AN INTERVIEW WITH A WRITER

Interviewer: We're here with Tori Hicks, poet and author of *Elegies for my Past and Future Selves*. The yet-published collection is an intimate, if incomplete, look into the writer's early life and struggles with mental illness. Tori, welcome.

[audience claps]

Tori: Hello, hi.

I: How are you doing? How's the book coming?

T: It's going well. As you mentioned, it is not published yet in whole, but I've luckily had a few acceptances to some journals. Really great journals.

I: Well, that's great. What journals?

T: Uh, this year... the *Boundless Anthology 2021*. It's the anthology of the Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival. We had a virtual reading and everything. And then I got an acceptance from a journal I'd been published in before: *The Piney Dark*.

I: Oh?

T: Yeah! I won first place in fiction in 2014, and this year I won first place and an honorable mention in poetry.

[light applause]

I: That's incredible, congratulations on all counts.

T: Thank you. It’s a little like my singing in the sense that I've been working really hard to put myself out there again.

I: That's something I was hoping we could discuss, actually. Your CV has some lengthy periods without publication.

T: You are correct.

I: Why might that be?

T: It’s a lot of things, to be honest. I graduated from undergrad in 2016 and immediately starting teaching junior high in Katy ISD. I was deeply unhappy and didn’t feel the drive to write anything. Like, I’d want to, but wouldn’t.

I: Mm-hmm.
T: I guess I wrote a few things, actually, but it was different without my classmates around me. I had some great relationships in the program, a little community of people around me who would read each others' work and help each other -- and our professors said all the time how fleeting that is, and they were right.

I: Yeah.

T: Without deadlines, I just wasn't doing the thing. You know? So after I graduated, I submitted a poem one time and it got rejected. So I figured — whatever, just let it go for now.

I: So creatively, what did your work look like between 2016 and this year? When you did write, that is.

T: When I did write, it was mostly poetry. Who's to say whether it was any good. I tried to write some nonfiction, a couple novels. Never got anywhere.

I: Why is that?

T: I just couldn't make myself do it. Again, I wanted to write something. I was teaching and reading all these cool stories with my students like “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Scarlet Ibis” and it was like: why can't I do that? I kept telling my students "To become a better writer, you have to practice" and then I wouldn't myself.

I: What changed?

T: I kept feeling that desire to write but felt like I needed to get some more guidance. I'd wanted to pursue an MFA since I was studying as an undergrad but chose to teach instead. I needed the money. I'd tried signing up for a couple newsletters, like the diy MFA, with the understanding — which I still have — that you become a better writer through reading and writing. Big surprise.

[light laughter]

I: (Laughs) Indeed.

T: Like, believe it or not, there's no special sauce. No one sprinkled poet dust on Kim Addonizio in her sleep and watched her wake up with words in her hands, you know?

I: I do. What happened with the newsletters?

T: I wasn’t self-motivated enough. It just kinda... puttered out.

I: What’s different now compared to before you started the program?

T: I have different priorities. My mental health is my biggest priority. Writing gives me control of the reins when my mind wanders into tough terrain.
[audience claps]

I: Wonderful, wonderful. (a beat) That must help with the overwhelming sense of failure, then.

T: Yeah, it does–

I: Good. Something has to.

T: Wait. I'm sorry?

I: One last question: did any of this make your parents love you more? Or anyone, for that matter?

[audience laughs]

T: I don't... I don't know. I don't think so. But this isn’t what we agreed to talk a–

I: Understood.

T: I don't understand, actually. Why did you ask me th–

I: We're actually out of time. Thank you and see you soon. Tori Hicks, everyone!

[interviewer turns to Tori, smiles and moves his mouth as if he’s talking. the music is loud. the audience claps. Tori looks around at all the smiling faces as the lights fade out.]
the three witches from macbeth
went on to live plentiful lives
despite the gossip and the stigma
when they head into town for their kale and golden apples,
children hiding behind their mothers’ knees
and mothers texting their brunch group chats about
who they saw at the farmer’s market.
and old macbeth — you know that story.
in the end, the weird sisters made their own power
from dust
and fire
Illustration 4.6 A poster with a cartoon brain and the words “Such a weird place to store human programming data.”
It's late December when I bring my music home
and resurrect a past self
On the living room carpet,
ragged, wheezing breaths
smooth out and release
hallelujah
PSYCHOMETRY

To scry the cosmos for visions,
Phoebe Halliwell and Theresa Caputo
hold objects belonging to the dead in their palms

and in my storage unit on Dairy Ashford Road with sheet music stacked in bins,
I execute my own attempt at psychometry to answer the question:

if the poet/musician resurrects their music from its dank tomb,
can the musician self rise from the dust to once again imbue the air
with a song to the moon in g-flat major?
thank you, maestro Bernstein
for conducting with your eyebrows
for exposing crunchy dissonances
and the range of the alto
for slipping Hebrew onto my tongue
for the words of jubilation and
solemnity and pain and peace
for head-voice tenor solos and a quartet
performed tempo rubato
for the 18 minutes of music that have
become the soundtrack to my life
for the music that reminds us
why music exists
CODA

I close the door on my grief because it is not welcome it right now
I close the lid on my grief divided into sugary discs
I close the window through which my grief attempts to invade my bedroom
I close the app that gamifies my grief
I close the book that documents my grief
I close my eyes to the grief
so that my dreams might resurrect everything
and everyone
    those pieces of music —
        those past and future selves
I've lost
IN CONCLUSION

I made a mess of my life and my reputation, picked at the skin on my chest until it formed little sores that burst open, spitting puss in your eye, and I was far too honest about my family's drama and my sexual desires and my history of abuse and the suicidal thoughts that plague me as I stamp out these words but dammit I can't stop trying to explain myself and hope that someone will understand and help me believe it won't always be this way, because even with the medication and therapy and self-care and exercise and gratitude journaling and every goddamn thing else I try, I can't get the idea out of my head that I should veer off the road into that light pole or nosedive into a creek or hang myself by my wedding veil in a stairwell or down my entire bottle of antidepressants and fall asleep, and that if I do any of those things, I'll deserve it because my existence was a fluke to begin with, yet I also have this much larger part of me that knows all of that is absolute bullshit and I don't deserve to die, I don't need to kill myself to let out the feelings I can't control, I don't have to be so angry, and I can possibly control all of that if I just put my mind to it, and my therapist believes in me, dammit, she thinks I do good things and that I've improved so much and I'm resisting the urge to ask you whether you think she's right because it doesn't matter what you think no matter how easy it is to fall into that trap because even though I definitely care what you think, I have to deal with the outcome of my decisions, I have to live with them, like a bad footprint tattoo on my shoulderblade or an uncomfortable mattress that can't be returned so you stubbornly sleep on it for five years but not well until finally donating it and getting a Helix mattress like you heard about on that self-help podcast, and I think what I ultimately want to say is that I was as honest as I could be here, probably too much, and I will worry until the day I die about what you thought about every single word, but more than that, I will thank you for listening, as I am right now, earnestly, silently, constantly, and hopefully you will hear it from wherever you are, because you deserve to know that you have done a kind thing for me just by being here.
**The Opera Singer’s Encore**

The red dress fits even better than before, my wedding shoes the perfect complement as they peek out at the audience, twinkling when the spotlight hits them.

Everyone’s there — Pappaw, Uncle Bruce, Aunt Nannette, even Granny, who’s already patting the tears from her cheeks. All the friends I’ve lost touch with but still carry in a hidden pocket of my soul. My professors and colleagues, every member of my chosen family.

My shoulders relax back, Mrs. Watterston thrums the first chord onto the Steinway, I breathe, then open my mouth. And every word is on pitch, carefully articulated with excellent French/Czech/Italian/German diction, supported through solid breathing and posture. You can see the songs as they flow from me as easily as water streaming down Banita Creek, the notes print themselves on air then float out around the auditorium, and if you really wanted to, you could pluck one from the space above your head and cradle it in your palm.

I’m still her, still the one who kept sheet music tucked between pages in her notebooks in high school, conducted pop music in the car, belted Kelly Clarkson with a broom in her hand while pretending the couch was a stage. I’m still her, and her gifts may shift and morph, but she’s still here, as much a part of me as Lake Tawakoni or Garland or my mountains of books.

And I can feel myself shine as the last measures are played, the victorious high note to punctuate this journey. The last chord is played, everyone rises and cheers, and I bow, and my smile won’t fade until I fall asleep, playing the songs over and over, until the next time I get to share them with you again.
Illustration 5.1 Collage, closing.
Bibliography


Vita

Tori Hicks (they/she) is a writer, educator, and musician from Houston, Texas who writes poetry, essays, and short fiction. As a naturally curious person, storytelling, music, and art have always been a love – arguably an obsession – for Hicks since they started singing at four years old, eventually leading them to choose a career path involving music.

Though Hicks aspired to sing professionally, they set their sights on teaching high school choir. Plans changed during their undergraduate coursework at Stephen F. Austin State University due to struggles with anxiety and depression, and they turned to their other major passion: literature. Ultimately, Hicks earned a bachelor’s degree in music, but had the experience and credit hours to teach English in the public school setting, in part due to participating in the Creative Writing program in their minor studies. After teaching high school English and Creative Writing for four years, Hicks was promoted to the instructional technology department in May of 2020. Supporting other teachers to incorporate technology and interactive content into their instruction influenced the experimental nature of their writing, which is seen in the thesis.

Starting in 2013, Hicks had the opportunity to publish their work multiple times, some of which were written for the thesis project, such as “An Israel Keyes Kill Cache is in My Stomach,” “Love in Fast Forward,” and “How to Survive the Family Curse.” Included in Hicks’ growing body of work are a paper and presentation for the South Central Writing Centers Association “Self-Efficacy in the Writing Center” Conference with Dr. Mike Wicker, along with various photography publications.

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