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Crucial Silence

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CRUCIAL SILENCE

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CRUCIAL SILENCE

by

AMY HOWARD

THESIS

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The University of Texas at El Paso

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Preface

James Baldwin tells the story of being arrested in Paris for allegedly stealing a single hotel bedsheet. After spending several weeks and Christmas Day in a cold prison cell, Baldwin was brought to trial. As he was acquitted for the petty crime which he did not commit, he heard “great merriment in the courtroom.” Baldwin said, “I was chilled by their merriment even though it was meant to warm me. It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home, laughter which I had sometimes deliberately elicited. This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real...it was borne in one me that this laughter is universal and never can be stilled” (Baldwin, 161).

These essays seek to hear and resolve what produces the fake laughter Baldwin describes. This laughter echoes in American society as well as through much of the American literary cannon. Jess Row, in his book, *White Flights: Race, Fiction and the American Imagination* asks, “What would it mean to accept that America’s great and possibly catastrophic failure is its failure to imagine what it means to live together?”

Row, a key influence in this thesis, focuses on deconstructing and reckon with white identity in his essays and in his novel, *Your Face in Mine*. The novel follows the life of the main character, Martin, a white man, who undergoes racial reassignment surgery. The novel is satirical and critical of privilege and artistic blindness. Row doesn’t assume his race and his body do not matter in the art that he creates. In his 2019 collection of essays, *White Flights*, Row proposes a new way of writing called “reparative writing” (12). Row does so, “semiseriously, because it can’t exist until it exists in a community, as a process of dialogue and exchange; and it can’t

exist initiated by me alone (or, necessarily, me at all)” (13). That point should be emphasized, the reparative community is incredibly small or as Row notes, essentially non-existent.

Row assumes reparative writing would have tangible implications such as literary activism and resource redistribution. Row also argues that reparative writing means the white writers consider that racism is her “proximate cause of disorder and distress” (14).

Row acknowledges the “reparative work the white subject can undertake in response to racism is...poorly understood and understudied” and that “white American writers are almost never asked to bring their own sadness or their own bodies into play when writing about race or racism; their dreams, their sources of shame, their most nightmarish or unacceptable or crippling fantasies, or their feelings of sadness, paralysis, isolation, or alienation” (15).

Toni Morrison described the issue through a conversation on binaries. She wrote about colonial American’s insistence on defining personal freedom on the backdrop of slavery. To be a free and independent American required an alternate category of enslavement for the idea of freedom to become altogether real (34).

Morrison showed that this dichotomy persists in the white writer’s mind and art in her work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*. In her review of American literature Morrison argues that there are endless tendencies for “Americans [to] choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (17). Morrison argues that the consciousness of the white writer uses the enslaved other to free oneself and give the mind license to move freely in the white writer’s “playground of the imagination” (38).

Morrison concludes that “images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious, and forgiving, fearful, and desirable- all the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness alone,

is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59).

There seems to be two literatures in the United States. The racialized authored by people of color and the largely deracinated literature authored by white writers. It isn't that race isn't on the minds of white writers, but the topic is avoided. For starters, if a white writer digs into the issue with any depth or genuine curiosity she will soon be met with difficult feelings or to use Toni Morrison's phrase, one's own mute meaninglessness. It is a feeling of shame one would want to escape.

Or it is the question of, “What if anything could a white American possible add to the conversation on race in America?”

There is nothing to *add* per say other than sorrow, a reparative stance, and actual reparations. The conversation white people must have, in our lives and in our art, is a conversation with ourselves and one another about how to repair ourselves, reallocate resource, and learn to live together.

W.E.B. DuBois asked, “What on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” (228). Taken to the bone, there is little to the identity other than a posture. DuBois described this way of being when he wrote, “I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever. Amen.” (228). In these essays I am trying to explore consider the cost and alternatives to white identity. In my essay, *Lunar Phases*, I write, “White writers have a history of escaping to nature as I have attempted to do in this essay. In the frontier we imagine ourselves to commune with nature or the stars or the moon. In this gaze we become raceless. But if we listen, even to nature, we hear the call to return to our natural rhythms. White women like

myself, in ongoing relegation to housework, forced birth, and lack of protection when become mothers, will recognize the ways that we are out of step” (31).

Michal Chabon called the dichotomous or categorical as an “apartheid of consciousness.” This split is within the white writer’s expression. It could be described as an artistic mental illness to continue to create art out of such an intense and pervasive dissociation.

In Toni Morrison’s review of the white literary cannon, she sites *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, as one attempt that failed not because of Cather’s limited gifts but on account her limited vision in the narrative subject matter, namely the writer herself. Morrison writes that Cather was trying to address a buried subject which is “the interdependent working of power, race and sexuality in a white woman’s battle for coherence” (20). Morrison noted the flaws in Cather’s attempts and concludes that Cather deserves credit for “undertaking the journey” (28).

Coherence is a goal of these essays while I am aware that it is a process and not a destination that will be achieved here or in a lifetime. Reconciliation itself is a process that must be returned to again and again and not something that can be achieved. Coherence, even in the realm of the imagination, requires that the writer understands where she is from in terms of her gender, race, time, and place.

In my essay *Electric Feel* I give witness ongoing white flight, now from one suburb to the next. It is spoken of in veiled language under the guise of a need for safety. I write of the neighbor worried that “anyone could come over that fence” (132). Jess Row writes that. “a house is not just a house: it’s an act of psychic positioning, a feedback loop, in which visual surroundings condition the owner’s inner landscape, and vis versa” (114).

To gain coherence would be to bring awareness to this inner landscape of whiteness that desires to be deracinated or color blind and yet still seeks to be surrounded with reflections of

oneself, of whiteness. Last week, a *non-racist* woman told me, following her vacation, “It’s hard to say why Montana was so relaxing for me, but everyone there was white. I think that was it, there was a calmness to it.” Jess Row called this brand of white flight an “aestheticization of social reality” and “a posture of avoidance or evasion: the desire not to have one’s visual field constantly invaded by inconveniently different faces and relationships that are fraught, unfixed, capable of producing equal measures of helplessness and guilt” (117).

Perhaps in Montana the woman was unburdened of her subconscious guilt- the environment catered to her peace of mind. I am arguing in this thesis that a prerequisite to coherence as a white American requires one to become racialized.

I argue that we can find one example of reparative fiction in Barbara Kingsolver’s, *The Poisonwood Bible*. The Price family is a religious family headed by the evangelical Baptist father, Nathan Price. The family sets off to the Congo to redeem the ‘lost peoples’ of Africa and convert them to Christianity. The narrative follows each daughter’s perilous journey through the Congo and her evolving relationship to the land, the people of the Congo, and their father. The daughters evolve, the mother disintegrates emotionally, while Nathan Price remains rigid in his belief that he can save the Africans even as his youngest daughter dies from a snake bite, his crops and farming methods fail, and the people of Congo proceed on with their way of life, their farming own practices and spiritual traditions.

The cost of Nathan Price’s shortsightedness is everything. He loses his family, his youngest daughter dies, and he comes undone mentally and lives out the rest of his life meandering the Congo alone. In this way, the novel does what Morrison claims fiction written by white writers should do, “to advert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject;

from the described and imagined to the describers and the imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90).

Towards the novel’s end, the elder daughter who remained in Africa and married a local man from the Congo concludes: “If I could reach backward somehow to give Father just one gift, it would be the simple human relief of knowing you’ve done wrong and living through it. Poor Father, who was just one of a million men who never did catch on. He stamped me with a belief in justice, then drenched me in culpability, and I wouldn’t wish such torment even on a mosquito. But that exacting, tyrannical God of his has left me for good...The sins of my fathers are not insignificant. But we keep moving on. As Mother used to say, not a thing stands still but sticks in the mud...I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt, loam, dust and clay, an infinite palette for children of their own, and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether” (526).

Part of reparative writing must come from a reckoning that whiteness itself belongs to a category of people who have given up attachments to their violent histories, and often to their lineage (Irish, Italian, Croatian) to assume an identity that is based upon conformist ideals and so often assumes false superiority. If this uniting principle were removed, whiteness itself would be erased, reparative writing might offer a new language for what could take its place.

It is also true that if the divided consciousness that creates racist structures within the mind were abolished, most other seemingly unrelated neurosis might find their cure. One might learn to move through the world as Ta-Nehisi Coates implores, “to respect every human as being singular” (69). Coates writes in his letter to his son that, “There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs

on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism” (105).

To live and write differently would mean living in a different world, it would mean falling out of that dream. This new world is constituted of different subjective realities that exist in different relationships to time. Human history and interaction might lose its linear structure and appear more as a kaleidoscope. Everyone would have to come home to their experiences, to the present moment, a moment in which we might reconcile our ideals of freedom to the actual conditions. There we might be reduced to what really matters, which is our own level of curiosity, empathy, and kindness in each of our interactions with one another and how that might be reflected in our art.

Reparative writing is created out this place albeit an idealized plane that doesn't exist. However, fiction at its best might be just that, hopeful, reparative, and truly creative of new realities. Of course, this doesn't mean harsher truths are to be sidestepped. Reparative writing would have to include difficult feelings of shame, guilt, and regret. These feelings have their place in this work. Row notes that reparative writing means the white writer does so “without a break down, or meltdown, confession of sins, and seeking of absolution- that is to make *my* feelings a catastrophe that has to be dealt with” (32).

This is a key limitation of my work thus far. While I am well acquainted with the feelings of shame and guilt, I have yet to provide an appropriate language for it and I believe this is a key opportunity for myself and white artists moving forward. I explore this lack in the essay, *There You Are*, in which I experience expression of shame and sorrow in Germany and fail to find any similar expressions in the United States. I write, “In Germany, a sense of shame was allowed, if not welcomed. The citizens there were ashamed of their history, ashamed of the genocide, and

ashamed of the hatred that lived in the hearts of the ancestors. They spoke about the shame, and they made it into public display in Nuremburg and at the concentration camps. In the United States, the shame isn't expressed. The confederate flag can blow widely and freely over citizens. Plantations, riddled with violent histories, can be toured freely while one is on vacation, one can even book a wedding that will provide the *charms of southern history*" (47).

All these essays draw on experience. Jeffrey Swartz wrote, "In quantum theory experience is the essential reality, and matter is viewed as a representation of the primary reality, which is experience" (278). In that way, experience is speaking, and experience cannot lie. The conclusions of these essays were drawn because of experience. Here I share a few experiences, how those experiences led to these essays.

In my years in Iowa City, I was drawn to a photo titled, *Invocation*, by Adam Fuss at the university museum. It depicts a baby's silhouette that is suspended in water. Perhaps in this invocation, or summoning of a deity, the baby is being baptized. The background is warm and bright like the sun, the baby appears a shadow, floating in the water. The baby's head and arm look as if they are trying to reach for something. I saw in that reach, my own reach, my own searching. The museum was canopied by expansive northern oak trees and after a visit, I would go outside the museum and sit on a bench and take Jimmy John's tomato sandwich out of my bag. I'd watch the university rowing squad cutting the water's surface on thin boats. I always wished I had become a rower. I loved the way they moved in unison, in full agreement on when and where to move. They went in a sleek line right down the middle, underneath the pedestrian bridges that were crisscrossed by students who lumbered like turtles with bulging backpacks.

This project is about my experiences, how I went out searching, and what I found. At the river's edge in Iowa City, I was at the start of my adult life. Everything I knew about the world and my place in it was based on my experiences with my brother, Joshua. And those experiences centered on the backdrop of my family's community which was the insular evangelical church in Iowa.

And by insular, I mean that it was all white. I write about worrying about my brother's soul. He couldn't pray or speak and therefore he couldn't make a public confession of sin and claim Jesus as his savior. I was, as a child, deeply worried about his soul.

By the insular logic of the church, Joshua was irredeemable. I remember once being in a service and a high schooler raised his hand and asked, "What happened to the native peoples that did not know who Jesus was?" The answer came quick, "They went to hell." It was that day I began to question conservative Christian ideology, politics, and spiritual tradition and it was that day I realized they might be wrong, which meant maybe Joshua's soul could be redeemed after all.

Joshua came to be a major thematic element in this collection. In these essays, I start with one of my first memories of him from 1996. From there, I provide flash memories of most of the years leading up to 2020. These memories alternate and weave through the other essays which explore experiences outside of that relationship.

If we'd been born earlier, in the 1950's or prior, many of these memories wouldn't have existed. My brother, around the onset of adolescence or earlier would have become a family secret because he would have been locked away in an insane asylum. The short memories I share from 1999 and 2000 illustrate why his commitment most likely would have been inevitable.

There is an important history that led to the shift away from asylums, a movement known as deinstitutionalization. The idea was that those needing care would have their needs met in the context of the community. Hospitals and asylums were riddled with violence, pestilence, the suffering of human beings that were caged like animals. Community care was seen as a solution to the abuses brought on by institutionalization.

The full history of deinstitutionalization is far beyond the scope of this preface, however, here I provide a summary. A major note in the history being that the shift led to the rise of mass incarceration of the mentally ill, overcrowding in nursing homes, and homelessness (Parsons, 2018).

Roy Grinkler, in *Nobody's Normal*, wrote, "In the late 1770's, when British prison reformer, John Howard visited the vast network of asylums that had emerged throughout Europe he was disturbed to find that hardened criminals were kept in the same place as the bankrupt and the insane. He understood that the goal of confinement was to create a new space for people who diverged dramatically from what had become the ideal person in emerging capitalism" (27).

Grinkler argues that disabled and mentally ill people were categorized and shut away in asylums largely due to the rise of industrialization and capitalism which created an ethic of "individualism and personal responsibility" (17). The criminal, the bankrupt, and the mentally ill were "new and shameful category of being" which led to the American trend in the 1800's to divide people into two categories: idiots (congenital abnormalities) or imbeciles (developmental disorder of the mind that was lifelong) (Grinkler, 17).

E. Torrey, in *American Psychosis*, provides a compact account of the recent history and laments all too common incidents of abuse and neglect. He tells of Charles Furry who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and found with hundreds of maggots falling out of his socks, with

more maggots wedged in-between his toes and under his skin, as he sat alone at home in a drool-soaked shirt (Torrey, ix).

Community-based care is a failure in the United States. Care for disabled adults is pushed to the individual's nuclear family often with catastrophic financial results for those families and the individuals in need of help.

The history is further nuanced where it intersects with race and mass incarceration in the United States. Additionally, as Martin Summers shows in his work, *Madness in the City of Magnificent Intentions*, the American mental health system was founded on legacy of racist psychiatric treatment and research at a hospital located at the nation's capital where there was a "reduction of black madness to a state of mind... and the tendency to think about insane African Americans as flattened caricatures" requiring separate and most often impoverished care when compared to the white patients at that institution (7).

Joshua formed my way of being the world, the relationship made me aware of systems, matrices, and dichotomies. Joshua acts in many ways as what Buddhism calls bodhichitta, which is the "kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, it is the discovery of our soft spot...[a] tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence" (Chödrön, 88).

Joshua removed me from any denial of injustice in the United States.

In the United States, the category of being an individual is so rigid that the alternate category of being dependent or in need of help is equally extreme. I remember living in the tiny village of Bruckberg, Germany where there is one brewery. I was once sitting in that pub alone when two men entered. They had the physical characteristics indicating Down's Syndrome. The men had a beer. They talked with one another for a while and then left.

For about a year, I lived in a small apartment that was on a hill overlooking Bruckberg. At the center of the village was a yellow structure, the largest in town with a bell tower. It was a home for disabled people I would watch people of all abilities roaming the village and returning in the evenings to the home.

I had never, in the United States, seen such an image of care and freedom. To “allow” a man with Downs who was institutionalized to wander freely and “allow” him to drink a beer was foreign.

The German institution challenged the category of being dependent or independent. The residents of the home needed some structure, some help, but they were not solely dependent, they had freedom. Freedom to roam around, stop over and have a beer.

America’s relationship her most vulnerable is extremely rigid. In the case of the disabled the pendulum swung from institutionalization and subjugation to another extreme, absolute neglect in the form forced self-determination.

James Baldwin wrote, “It must be remembered the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality” (21). In speaking of someone as being disabled or able bodied, or in terms of one’s gender or one’s race, we are entering into the system of categorizations and a constructed reality. We run the risk of perpetuating the very systems we would like to escape. The writer must, as Baldwin explained, reject the category as the defining feature of the human being (25).

In these essays I write about experiences sometimes in the context of my gender, my sexuality, my abilities, and my race. I do not understate the importance of gender. The

intersection of gender and race is explored more deeply in *Lunar Phases* and *Boss* and more generally in the stories about who was the caretakers for Joshua, and the essay *High Rise*.

Categories must be named, but I recognize that the categories themselves fortify a structure. Categories are the structure; the real people are operating within or outside of those boxes. My reach here is simple but honest, they are experiences. I hope that in my future work I can go farther and take more risks. In these essays there is a recognition of categories and structures and a few modest escapes.

These essays lay a critical emotional and intellectual foundation for me as a writer, to proceed into other forms of writing such as fictional short stories and novels with a base from which to begin to relate myself to the world in all my identities, connections and even limitations. I believe that it is a white writer's obligation to do as writers of color have been doing alone for far too long alone, and that is to bring white identity into our art and our conceptualization of what needs to progress in the United States and the world.

We need look no further than the work of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor to see that effort was made to reckon with whiteness. But the limitation was in their faith. I believe O'Connor and Faulkner saw racism as America's proximate cause of distress, however, I am not convinced that they wrote from a place of believing that progression out of and past that distress was possible.

White writers should be asking, what will those that come after me find disgraceful? One way to avoid the pitfalls is to listen, listen to the writers and thinkers such as Brittany Cooper, James Baldwin, DuBois, Toni Morrison, and others as I have tried to do in these essays. And the other way is creating our art and our fictions not from despair but from an almost inconceivable faith that the future will survive, and it will be so much better than the present.

And I hope that the conclusions of these essays are like the conclusions I express in my essay about white flight, *Electric Feel*. In that essay, I explore my reactions to the white women I meet that want to move away from Pflugerville to Georgetown, sometimes explicitly stating why and sometimes veiling their reasonings, leaving in their wake a lack of coherence and a crucial silence. In that essay, I'm not so sure that I can change anyone's minds in conversation or even in the writing itself, but I identify in the children a reality none of should miss:

“There is an electric feel in Pflugerville, Texas. The traffic buzzes in patterns of red and yellow lights, Tesla charging stations pop up on every corner zapping every sleek car engine into their electric lives of modern speed and acceleration devoid of petroleum.

The children here are numerous, they crowd the grocery stores with incredible enthusiasms, and they line their shelves with unheard-of books about new children that come from everywhere flagged in their country's lost glory.

The children overtake those playgrounds baking in the sun, their skin a kaleidoscope coming in multitudinous shades of melanation. They climb the slides backwards to the tops, claiming their thrones as sweaty kings and queens with holes ripped in the knees of their pants. I can hear them speaking multiple languages and they seem to laugh at my confinement to a singular language, English.

These children easily conquer English, and they also speak Spanish, Swahili, Yoruba, German, and Hindi. The words and sentences and paragraphs roll off their lips so easily.

I can hear their words gathering strength as lightening does. They swing next to one another pumping their legs furiously as they all shout, “Higher! Higher! Demanding once and for all to play together” (136).

CRUCIAL SILENCE

Joshua 1996

I was watching the rolling hills and a tractor kicking up dust clouds on a side road. The other kids were rowdy. Joseph, who always sat in the very back, had taken a harmonica out of his backpack and was screeching as the AC vents were spewing short bursts, not cooling but providing little breaths of air that were fresher than the gas fumes that permeated from the bus's old tail pipe.

It was through the window that I saw him running. It was my younger brother, Josh, age two running down the sidewalk. He was naked. We had just pulled into the edge of town, and we were two stops from the house. He was a streak of peach baby flesh, headed for Second Avenue, the road he took for the town square. I was trying not to think of the worst, but it seemed inevitable, *what if he gets run over?*

My Great Uncle Junior, who was married to Great Aunt Nina and father to nine children, owned an auto repair shop at the city square. Sometimes Uncle, still wearing overalls covered in grease, would see Josh, and sling him over a shoulder and bring him home. Or Uncle's youngest daughter, Tammy, who kept books and answered the phone would see Josh and hold him in her lap and drive him home in their minivan.

The driver of the bus didn't notice him. I kept looking out, I watched him make a left off the main road disappearing out of site. When we got home that day, I skipped every other step to make it out of the bus quicker. Mom came out holding a basket of clothes.

"He's out again," I yelled.

Mom dropped the basket and went out of the door to find him, my sister followed. I stayed inside to watch the other two. There were five of us total and mom was home with three kids under the age of five.

Child Protective Services started showing up at our front door. It was probably a concerned neighbor that called in sightings of a naked two-year-old running alone. They would always show up with clipboard and look around the house, taking notes of what was in the refrigerator or on the stove cooking. Mom would sometimes explain things with an apology.

“Sorry for the cheerios all over the floor” and she’d start sweeping.

Or “Oh those clothes on the couch, they are clean, just need to put them away.”

The inspectors would nod and keep taking notes and then pull us to the side and ask questions like, “Who gets angry in the family?” or “Why do you think your brother wants to run away?”

The day I saw Josh from the bus, mom found him and brought him home. I went outside to get my bike. It had a pink banana seat with wicker basket. I pulled it to the driveways edge and hopped on, taking the downhill for my initial push.

I rode out to the edge of town, past the sign that said, Lewistown Pop. 348. I went out onto a side road amongst the farm fields. I decided to peddle until the landscape changed, until I saw something other than corn and soybeans alternating in a pattern, but it started getting dark and nothing changed, other than an occasional sign that pointed to another town like, Hannibal or Quincy or LaGrange. As the sun set, my eyes adjusted slowly to each new shade of darkness and my legs grew heavy so I turned back around and went home.

Lunar Phases

I. New Moon

The leading theory on how the moon arrived is that a misguided meteor whacked into earth about 4.5 million years ago. As the meteor came zooming in for the whack it took some earth dust with it and formed itself into the moon in orbit around earth. During “The Big Whack,” as it is called, the earth tilted, and the tilt is why we have season. This set into place day and night and months lasting 29.5 days.

The Big Whack changed everything about life on earth, setting into motion the rhythms of seasons, night and day, and years. Most of us, whether we realize it or not, are longing to sync our bodies and brains to natural rhythms.

If we slice a coral, we can see bands that are formed daily. In the summer months, when the days are longer mineral growth is longer, so the bands are larger. In the winter, growth slows creating shorter bands. In each cycle there are 365 bands, coral as a cyclical attachment to the season and calendar year. In his book on the topic, *The Universe Within*, Neil Shubin drew this conclusion about our lives, “The different clocks in bodies and in rocks don’t tick independently; they are part of the same planetary and solar metronome” (61).

Our cells and bodies beat to this solar metronome. We grow and live by a 24-hour day and a 12-month-year with seasons. Rhythms and not time chunks and strict schedules. A rhythm comes naturally, and we feel compelled internally to follow the rhythm rather than the external pressure exerted upon us by schedules. Rhythms are adaptable, they can flux with the seasons as they do when we have a few more hours of daylight in July. Rhythms can shift in one’s personal energy reserve due to hormones or milestones such as the anniversary date of a loved one’s death.

I know I could be more productive in the summer and less so in the winter, however, the schedule that I adhere to survive the modern world does not change with daylight hours. We could think of the natural universe as rhythmic and the economic one was a machine.

I had never paid much attention to my own deficient in rhythm until I had become so exhausted I had nowhere to look but up. Shubin wrote, “we live in an age of disconnect between the ancient rhythms inside of us and our modern life” (77). That disconnect was never so apparent to me until the birth of my second daughter.

At the time, I was working as a director of a large corporate childcare center with a daily responsibility of 170 infants and young children under the age of five as well as 40 staff members, not to mention the hypervigilant parents of the kids. This responsibility spanned our opening time at 6:00 AM until our close at 6:30 PM each weekday. There were also text messages from the team that would start pelting my psyche with the day’s problems every morning by 4:30 AM. The nature of the job was made more difficult by the year-round nature of childcare, we didn’t take any seasonal breaks. The center catered to working parents, so we only closed for ten national holidays, two of which were used for teacher training days.

Infants naturally demand more. Capitalism demands that less be given. Capitalism demanded that I put as many children into the space and as few adults as possible. The less food and supplies I purchased with our tuition, the better.

This conflict between a newborn’s care and corporate profit was felt in my body manifesting in all sorts of physical symptoms including headaches, nervous tension, digestive upheaval, trouble sleeping, and weight gain.

But I stuck with the job because I was being paid well enough and I needed to provide for my family. I knew it wasn’t sustainable which was why I had gotten a counseling degree by taking

night courses. The state had given me an intern license that could be converted to a full counseling license only after completing 3000 hours of intern work. Typically, intern hours are not paid, and for several years I volunteered one evening per week and Saturday mornings as an intern.

In all, I worked 50-60 hours per week for several years. In the seven years total I was a director, I had to become a master at ignoring my body and all the natural rhythms it craved.

Often, despite the exhaustion, I couldn't sleep. When I did sleep, I had a reoccurring nightmare of being in a rush and leaving my youngest daughter in her baby carrier on the top of the car and driving away. In my nightmare, I saw me driving and her body tumbling into the pavement disappearing into the darkness.

I knew that once I had my counseling license, I could do work that would give me more time. So, I pressed forward, and I created a vision of the day when I would have my own private practice and a schedule I created, a schedule more in tune with my rhythms.

II. Waxing Crescent

Feeling is an interpretation of the body's rhythms and the body's reality.

Feeling is crucial for moving forward in life, making decisions, and forming connections.

Feeling is also an integration of the past into our plans.

Problems arise when trauma or stress paralyzes our emotional regulation or reality so that we are rendered ineffective or in a state of emotional chaos. Or we might deny feeling all together and live in a state of being dead while alive or feeling *numb*. In these stressed states our nervous systems are hyper aware of danger and suffering and rendered incapable of living. In a

traumatized state or in a state of working in the modern world we long to return to homeostasis within.

My father was the first in either side of his family to go to college. He went through college when I was in elementary school and became an engineer. Dad used to always go out into the garage in his off time and fix cars. I think the mechanical tasks in the garage made him feel closer to his roots and happier, unlike the office where he worked. Environments that required he hang up his greasy Carharts and wear pleated khakis and a tie. He seemed proud of what he had accomplished as a professional, but social mobility proved elusive as he raised five children, one of them with a costly disability.

Dad sometimes told us that trying to move up or increase our financial class was pointless, that the energy we exerted to those means would be eaten by the station in life from which we came.

His conclusion, as his years of toil wore on, seemed to be that accepting one's life as it is handed to them by the previous generation might be a person's best bet and the only way to avoid excessive toil that may or may not pay off.

III. First Quarter

In "The Brain's way of Healing" Norman Doidge describes mental health as the ability to achieve homeostasis or to achieve "self-regulation, [or] maintaining order" in a world that is perpetually chaotic (279).

There is an electrical way our brain regulates or finds its natural rhythm despite the contradictions and complexity of the world and relationships.

The natural rhythm of the brain is taken off track in epilepsy, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and in children with sensory issues. It is also observed in brain damage that results from toxins, stroke, infection, radiation therapy, blows to the head, and degenerative diseases.

This electrical misfiring and deviation from natural rhythm is also found in brains that have endured sexual, emotional, or physical abuse or neglect in childhood.

As in the irregular waves of an unhealthy heart, so too can the brain become noisy, irregular and fire in an excitable dysregulated manner.

As the director of preschools, I was constantly in a highly deregulated state exerting all my energy to bring homeostasis to environments that were designed to reap profits and not peace. I lived in a hyper aroused state, something like fight, flight, or freeze. In this state, the calmer more regulated brain never had a chance to take over and allow time to rest and digest.

Neurostimulation helps to revive dormant circuits in the brain. We stimulate our neurons through the senses through music, light, electricity, vibration, movement, intimate relationship and thought (Doige, 298).

We've all experienced the reregulating effects of a meal and meaningful conversation with friends, a dance party, sex, or live music. When I pick up my children from school, they often seem to be unable to contain their bodies, they are dysregulated, agitated, and sometimes tearful from the stress of sitting and following all the rules. The best thing I can do for them then is drive them to a trampoline park where they can bounce and move freely while music plays overhead providing rhythms for them to move along to.

When we learn to think in new and creative ways, we can improve the ability of the noisy brain to regulate and modulate itself, making homeostasis possible. Neurostimulation helps to revive dormant circuits. The hurt brain longs for stimulation, to wake it back up to the normal

electrical firing that is integrated and coordinated. The healing brain likes new and challenging thoughts that diminish old harmful patterns and habits.

IV. Waxing Gibbous

Since the beginning of time, even in the initial first whack of the moon, trauma has been a part of the universe. Overcoming trauma is the task each of us faces, it is what we do to thrive rather than merely survive.

It is not something we can escape nor is a complete recovery possible. Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist turned black belt turned healer, believed recovery is not our goal but he did believe that each human had the unique opportunity to wire their brain and that the goal should always be improvement, not a full cure, which he describes as a “gradual bettering which has no limit” (Doidge, 185).

We adapt to our trauma; we learn to lean into the ever-evolving process of healing. The work of life and of healing is to render trauma our asset, the greater our trauma, the greater our adaptive response. Trauma teaches us that life is fragile and that people we love can be hurt or hurt us. Trauma shows us that a human life can be here one moment and gone the next. If we go through these traumas, rather than avoid them through numbing as an alcoholic might do, one can have a greater appreciation for the moment of being alive today. The recognition that life as we know it is incredibly fragile. In that, the here and now becomes more precious and we become more alive to what is happening moment by moment. Or as the Buddhist's say, “recognize it as impermanence and let that intensify the preciousness” (Chödrön, 61).

My father's father, or my grandfather, was an alcoholic. He died in his 50's of liver failure. In his life he worked in machine shops following the death of his father in a farming accident.

This great-grandfather also died young, killed by the farming machinery that would be sold off along with the land following his funeral. My grandfather was 17 at the time and the only witness to his father's violent death.

We weren't close to grandpa because he was always drunk and angry. Despite this, in his dying days, dad brought him to live with us. Hospice was in and out of the house until one morning I opened my bedroom door to see grandpa's swollen body lifeless on a stretcher being wheeled out by paramedics. His death scene is one of the few images I have of him, aside from the one time we went to visit him in rural Missouri.

On that singular visit to see grandpa I noticed that his house had a lot of carpet. It smelled like Budweiser and there was a cup with his chewing tobacco set on his table next to a worn-out lazy boy. His house was full of taxidermy and old paintings that looked like they came off the set of a 1980's PBS nature show rerun.

I do not believe he ever spoke directly to me. In a way, his entire life stands a warning sign against leaving our traumas, such as the tragic death of a parent, unresolved. His life also illustrated the way addiction can eat an entire life and erase any potential to commune with others.

I remember his candy dish in the living room. He also had an unfenced backyard with a lot of maple trees. There was little to be desired in the presence of my sullen, speechless, beer bellied grandfather, but his candy and backyard provided enough of an escape to make the visit tolerable.

Of course, my grandfather probably had little choice in finding relief from the effects of his trauma. Therapy was inaccessible. And he was a man. bell hooks, in her book, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, illustrates the multitudes of ways men in our culture

“cannot speak the pain” and must “learn to cover up their rage and their sense of powerlessness” (6).

The expectation to be manly, to be needless, strong, and stoic when faced with difficult emotions such as deep loss, grief, and depression led my grandfather to bury his pain and trauma in booze. He never found a way to change, to take responsibility, to become emotionally aware which might have allowed a way to grieve.

V. Full Moon

It was January and the moon was closer than ever.

My daughter Jade had asked for a telescope for Christmas. The days were short, my energy was lower, and something sad and un-nameable had visited me. It seemed like there were more obituaries than usual in the news, so I googled it. Facts. More people die in January than in any other month.

Maybe people die in January because they feel like they have permission to go. Or maybe since it is so cold and there is less sunshine in general the feeble have less to keep them going. It might just be a symptom of January, slowing down for many of us, dying for some.

Maybe that is all that needs to be said about the month.

But on that January night a warm front had come in and so jeans and a light sweater were all we needed to wear. The telescope was pointed at the moon and a perfect cratered image had us all captivated. We were taking turns peering at the surface and chasing one another around the quiet cul-de-sac. My husband Jeff was sitting in a lawn chair watching. He had cancer years ago and on occasions such as this, when life is good and simple, I am amazed at the miracle that the four of us are still alive and together.

Home life. Love. Health. Long after these are gone the moon will still be up there. That night I felt bliss, but I was also fearing the inevitable day when things would change. When bliss arrives fear can chase it down. I took another look at the surface of the moon; I peered deep into a one of the craters. I knew such happiness wouldn't last forever, but I was there fully anyways.

VI. Waning Gibbous

Years ago, after I gave birth to my second daughter, my doula told me that the birth process had broken me open physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She told me I needed time to heal. After 12 hours of unsuccessful labor, I had a c-section, a major abdominal surgery in which the sheath of my abdominal muscles were cut with nine-inch incision in order to reveal my womb. My intestines were placed outside of my body and my bladder moved aside. I felt nothing but panic as I lay conscious awaiting my baby's debut. The horror of birth began to fade the moment I held my daughter.

I went to work six weeks after giving birth. I knew that my body had only begun to heal and that I did not have time to properly bond to my newborn.

I was recently told that I couldn't bring an adopted puppy home from its mother until nine weeks after it was born. In America, women are not afforded maternity leave. In fact, the United States ranks last for parental leave out of the richest 30 nations in the world. My puppy remained tethered to its mother longer than my daughters to my body. In fact, in some states there are more laws protecting a puppy's right to its mother than the human child.

At this juncture of my life, I lost all connection to the natural rhythm of my body, to my role as a mother, to my own physical and spiritual healing. The pain of leaving a six-week-old unable

to hold up her own head is a pain that I adapt to but not one from which I can never fully recover.

VII. Third Quarter

In the months after giving birth is when I first felt a connection to the moon's reflective presence. In the grounded state of caring for a newborn, the moon somehow became my comfort.

I need to look no further than the American childcare complex to know the facts, American capitalism treats humans as things, as means to an end. And as a person who had given birth and was trying to nurture a new life, I was personally impacted as I didn't have a chance to recover from childbirth or bond with my infant before reentering the economic machine.

I couldn't help to question, what, in the age of progress for women had been left behind. Jade, my second daughter, was born in October of 2016. It was in my postpartum state that I watched Donald Trump win the presidential election. Pundits reported that white women in large part helped Trump to be elected. Many of those women were not outraged at Trump's blatant racism but did express anger when Trump's court appointees overturned Roe vs Wade which would force American women to give birth in a country that offered no protections for mothers and their newborns.

Black feminist, Brittany Cooper conceptualized it best when she wrote, "Most racial stereotypes of Black women- that they are sexually insatiable, unrapable, and prone to having a bunch of babies they can't take care of, are gendered stereotypes. But most of us don't learn to identify the problem as one rooted in racism and sexism. This is a problem that Black feminists and intellectuals have been attuned to since the very beginning. But I didn't know that white feminists had a version of this problem too. Namely, white women's voting practices tell us that

they vote with the party that supports their racial issues, even though this means voting with a party that hates women as a matter of public policy” (172).

Matthew Desmond added to this idea writing, “Nearly two average American lifetimes (79 years) have passed since the end of slavery, only two” and he argues that many of the principles of slavery remain in the American economic system (1). For example, “In the United States 1% of Americans own 40% of the country’s wealth, while a larger scale of working people live in poverty” (Desmond). Additionally, workers’ rights to unionize or to be treated fairly in areas of dismissal and severance pay ranks dead last in the ranking of 71 top economies.

Traditional feminism did not reckon with the full picture. As Angela Davis discussed in her book, *Women, Race and Class*, as early as the 1800’s white women and Black women were fighting for the right for an education, yet in 1848 when the daughter of Fredrick Douglass gained admittance to a women’s college, it was a white woman, an abolitionist nonetheless, that blocked the young Black women from entering the school. Ultimately, education became more widely available to all women only when a sisterhood was able to emerge among women across racial lines to promote literacy for women in the southern United States (Davis, 59).

White writers have a history of escaping to nature as I have attempted to do in this essay. In the frontier we imagine ourselves to commune with nature or the stars or the moon. In this gaze we become raceless. But if we listen, even to nature, we hear the call to return to our natural rhythms. White women like myself, in ongoing relegation to housework, forced birth, and lack of protection when become mothers, will recognize the ways that we are out of step. In times when we must go back to work six weeks after giving birth, we might find ourselves longing for a return to nature’s rhythms and we might see the ways we’ve made a return impossible for others and ourselves.

VIII. Waning Crescent

My husband was a traveling Covid nurse, and I was able to join him in San Diego for a short time during the pandemic. Everything was shut down, even restaurants. There was nothing to do and for the first time in my adult life, I didn't have a job. I had finally finished my 3000 intern hours and was a newly minted therapist. I was in-between jobs for a few months because I had quit the director job at the end of 2020 following an arduous ten months of trying to socially distance two-year-old children and bear the anxiety of the staff and families.

There was a policy that parents weren't allowed in the building so at drop off and pick up we had to valet babies and children back and forth to the classroom one at time in protective gowns, goggles, and gloves while being careful to change gloves and wash our hands in-between deliveries.

Luckily for me in my valet duties, enrollment was down, most of the parents that kept their children enrolled in the center were essential workers that had to physically be present for work in hospitals and grocery stores, or they had to report in person for military duty.

When I arrived in San Diego, my only task was to find a way to be still. Within a day or two I discovered a new connection to the tides, the moon's calling and sending back of the waters. I was also in tune with the rising and the setting of the sun. I felt homeostasis or self-regulation in the face of a chaotic world. The fact that everything was shut down only helped. There was nothing to do but be outdoors and San Diego is a great place to be outside. We would go for morning hikes and get takeout lunches we'd eat as picnics. Then we'd go back to our room, watch TV for a few hours before heading to the beach where my daughters would play until sunset.

It seems so obvious that the sun's rising marks the beginning of a new day. But in San Diego it took on a real meaning in my body, the sun rose, and I rose with it. I was attached and grateful for the light. When the sun set, I detached, I watched the sun disappear and I could feel all the day's moments, good and bad disappearing with it. Often, my daughters and I watched the sunset on the beach wrapped in blankets and I remember feeling thankful that I was able to reclaim some lost time with them when they were so young.

A full moon only lasts one night, and if you keep track, you'll notice that on many nights the moon is invisible, nowhere to be seen. On these lonelier cycles of lunar abandonment, we can find solace in the sun's familiar pattern. It is in the sun's reliability we find universal truth: the day will come, and then the day will go.

Joshua 1998

The photo cards were spread out on the table. I was trying to teach Josh to associate language with the objects in the photo.

“Touch Apple!” I told him.

I had been pulled out of the eighth grade to be homeschooled and help with Joshua’s therapy. I certainly was at home all day, every day, but I was not being schooled. That isn’t to say I didn’t learn anything.

“Touch Chair!”

“Touch House!” I said the commands over and over.

Joshua’s disability caused my family to turn to the state for direct support. The State of Iowa said they had a legal requirement to provide 40 hours of therapy. In Missouri where we had been living, the state would provide a measly five hours. As Joshua’s issues got progressively worse and my parents made the choice to move the family across state lines.

I was told on a day’s notice that it would be my last day of school. The decision was made quickly because my parents were overwhelmed by Joshua’s behaviors, his night terrors, running away, lack of ability to speak, and violent outbursts. It was reactionary.

I had recently designed a mural that had won a contest and was being painted at the school. I had to leave it unfinished. The mural was a part of a conservation initiative of the school. I had designed a mural of a rainforest and the intent was to pay homage to biodiversity. When I left school that day, I stopped by the unfinished mural. A few of the vines had been painted green, I had sketched some of the flowers, a tiger with only its eyes painted starred back at me.

I was the starting center point on the basketball team, played flute, and had a lot of friends. I had one day to say goodbye to all of it. Overnight, it was all gone. After my last day of school, I

stayed home and helped pack up the house. My parents put it up for sale and decided to deal with the details of selling it from afar. We moved into a rental house in Iowa. A small blue house that stood in-between a highway and the parking lot of a shopping mall.

When we got to Iowa only 20 hours of therapy was provided per week because they didn't have enough staff. It was better than Missouri but not enough. So they trained me to do the therapy with him. My dad said Joshua was relying on us, it would be a small sacrifice to put our lives on hold for our brother. This was the Marine in him talking, there would be no one left behind.

“Your brother will speak” he'd say, there was no question in his mind.

My room in the house was in the unfinished basement. It was cold and dark. In one corner was a washer and dryer and in the other, my bed. I had no friends and no other family close by. I stored some notebooks in the crevices between the two-by-four studs that were bare in the basement. I had no other belongings to speak of. Some of the therapists that were in and out of the house made small talk, that was my only contact.

It was in the cold basement that I learned writing things down could help me. Writing took on a new gravity. Nothing around me seemed all together real. When I wrote something down it seemed real and therefore I felt real. I made very simple observations at first, but it helped.

“Today Joshua recognized a rabbit. Success.” Or “A lot of fighting with sisters today, horrible.” I didn't have many books and no access to a library. My parents had brought some Christian homeschooling books and sat them on a pile on the kitchen table. The only one I bothered reading was the biology book. It started with a literal interpretation of Genesis. There were photos depicting ancient man living with dinosaurs. Only the people weren't really that ancient because they book said that they earth was only a few thousand years old.

During the year of doing therapy, Josh came to understand the commands we were giving. He was able to read many words as young as three. But he never spoke to us normally. He never put together sentences. Dad pressed forward telling us that Josh someday would speak.

Due to Joshua's needs and the hasty move money was very tight. Christmas that year only added to the sadness. What used to be a time of excess highlighted our want, a simple meal a few small presents each and sullen stares had replaced the other Christmases that were spent with family and more presents than could fit under the tree.

We were in a vulnerable state, reliant upon the state system for help. I don't think that made my parents feel good. It didn't make any of us feel good. Looking back, it was one a moment of great definition. We went from self-reliance to total reliance overnight.

In my isolated basement days, my parents told me many times to keep the back door deadbolt locked. They didn't want Josh to escape. But I did forget once, I had taken the trash out, come back inside and went downstairs. It was late January and I wrote, "Forgot to deadbolt back door. Josh got out. Dad said it was negative seven degrees out, negative 12 with the windchill. He yelled so much. I can't stop crying, even though we found him."

That Christmas I did get one gift that I wanted, 12 freshly sharpened colored pencils and a notepad. At night, after I had done my chores, I would turn on a corner light in the basement and resurrect the tiger of my abandoned mural.

When I was allowed to go back to school the first classes I remember taking were ceramics and Biology 101. In the ceramics class, I immediately made a friend with a boy named Aaron who would go on to become a meteorologist. Aaron took nothing seriously, except for the weather which he would comment on every day as we sat right next to a window overlooking the school's

baseball field. He had no way of knowing he was my first human contact following the isolation, but I am glad it was him.

We sat at table together making pinch pots, coiled pots or throwing pots on the wheel. I formed sculptures furiously, I made an octopus and a cheeseburger alongside my pots that I glazed in as many colors the teacher, Mrs. White would allow. Arron sat mashing clay, telling jokes and talking about the drizzle forecasted to make it's hazy debut at around five that evening.

In biology, I sat alone. I viewed the teacher with great suspicion. I sat in the back of class listening to him talk about fossil records and evolution and thought to myself, *I'm in the presence of pure evil*. But I came around, and eventually took AP Bio, Chemistry, Physics I, Physics II, and Botany. The year spent in the dungeon would become an asset because I never took books, friends, or an education for granted, ever.

There You Are

It is a well-known pattern in literature and religious stories that when a person leaves home, they will inevitably end up back where they began. This universal pattern isn't true for me, and it never will be, because I have made a clean escape from the trope of the prodigal child.

I had an advantage in a clean break because I am from Iowa. Most of my family and friends have scattered away, into large cities with better paying jobs. Cities like Dallas or Chicago or Atlanta. In the modern world one must be willing to leave rural communities and extended family in the name of survival. It is easier to never go back if everyone you knew is gone.

I also had a very strong initial push. I started out depressed. At my worst, I had become unhealthily thin, unable to eat, lethargic, and riddled with an unspeakable anguish that felt like grief at some points, guilt at others. My parents had tried everything, valerian tea, prayer, cod liver oil, and time spent outdoors in the sunlight following a particularly long and dark winter. All had failed and an exorcism was in order. They took me to an illustrious house at the edge of town to meet Rosemary, a woman known in our evangelical congregation for driving demons away from the tormented.

The thing I remember about Rosemary was her home, it was palatial. As she led back to her study, I saw her indoor pool room with red-leafed tropical plants lining the perimeter. In her study there were many statues, all angels, and some as tall as I was. A blue stone angel sat in the corner with eyes of a child staring at my huddled emaciated frame on Rosemary's green velvet couch.

Rosemary sat across from me in her tall chair, she was a thin and well-dressed woman of at least 70 years.

Rosemary told me, “Evil beings fight against the truth, they tell us evil things that make us question ourselves. You must flee from evil, and the evil will learn to leave you alone. Right now, you are making space for it. Close the door on evil...there is nothing wrong with you.” And then she laid a hand on my shoulder and said a short prayer and sent me on my way. I did feel better although not cured.

I decided that the only thing I could do was to listen to God, or my higher self, or my calling, or my intuition. Whatever it was, it was a voice that urged me to pack a bag, get out, and never go back.

I had no money, and my parents didn't have any to give, especially not to a clinically depressed daughter that was hearing a mystical call. I found work, first in Boulder Creek, California where I saw the ocean for the first time. When I saw the ocean for the first time, I was overcome. I hugged my friends. I laughed. I had tears from nowhere in my eyes. I took off my shoes, I ran in and out of the water like a child. I sat in the cold San Francisco sands, and I tried to bury my legs, a feeble attempt to cement myself in that moment forever. I stuffed my pockets full of shells. I looked out into the green waters, and I was thankful for every moment in my life because it had led to me that, to seeing the ocean. Nothing else that had come before it mattered except that it had brought me there to the water's edge there in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. I put the shells in a jar and saved them. I bought post cards of the city and sent them to everyone I knew.

A few months before I left Iowa, I loaded up boxes of all my writing and took them to the downtown bridge that went over the Cedar River. It was about midnight. I parked my 1984 Oldsmobile in an empty parking log.

The Quaker Oats factory was looming overhead. There was a neon redlight of the man in the Quaker Hat that cast a red timber over the road. I tossed everything page by page, notebook by notebook, into the frothy waters. I peered over the railing occasionally, watching it disappear into darkness. The white pages hit the surface, turned dark, and disappeared.

I was the eldest sibling, the big sister, I had wanted to fix things and in my estimation I had failed.

My apartment in Germany had a bed, dishes, and food. That was it. I did not write as much there aside from diaries because I didn't own a chair to sit in. I didn't want a chair; I was body in motion. I also never wanted to back in time, through the Quaker Oats portal so I worked very hard to maintain financial independence.

The German landscape was intoxicating, and I certainly was lost, intoxicated, or otherwise blinded. In Germany the weather came in four distinct and reliable seasons that were relatively mild. Summers were warm but not hot, most buildings did not have air conditioning. Winter was cold but short enough that the cold and snow could be enjoyed, especially at Christmas markets with warm wines. The Germans were never short on reasons to take a day off work and take to the streets to celebrate.

There was great value placed on Sundays. I once got in trouble with a landlord for running the vacuum cleaner in an upstairs apartment on a Sunday afternoon. The weekends were a state sanctioned time to relax.

Most people did not fly German flags because, as a German friend explained, many still lived in regret over the Holocaust and did not like to express German pride. Unless there was a soccer game, and then everyone flew a flag for that day only. I even had two German flags that

would attach to either side of my back car windows that my friends and I would fly as we drove to the town center to watch the games on the jumbotron that would be set up when Bavaria was playing a match. There we would eat plates of doner kebab and doner fries covered in secret sauce and ketchup.

Soccer aside, expressing national pride was not glorified in lieu of the not-so-distant history. At Hitler's rallying grounds in Nuremburg, one could hear replays of the German masses supporting Hitler and watch full videos of the Nuremburg trials in which the Nazi regime faced consequences for the war. The rally grounds and much of the public display in Germany evoked sadness, guilt, remorse, and shame.

I spent a lot of time in Nuremburg. I visited the rally grounds on several occasions and I also went shopping and walked around always taking the hike to the city center that was elevated so I could see the city lights.

Visiting a concentration camp would mute my appetite for a day or two. The sight of rooms full of human hair and stacks of shoes that once belonged to the murdered children was viscerally disturbing to say the least.

Aside from all the history, I also joined the Germans in their love of indoor swimming pools. Many of the towns had huge swim complexes that had multiple pools, each with different concentrations of salt, the higher the concentration the easier the floating. I would go often after a long day of work and pick the easy pool. I paid a few measly euro for a spa experience that would cost hundreds of dollars in the United States.

Of course, Germany had its issues, but because I was being paid with American money and had mostly American friends, I was detached from any real German issues. Additionally, I

could enter public spaces and physically blend in creating a privileged place in life in which I was free floating in the world, without a care except doing my job and traveling.

I lived in a political and personal limbo. I was no longer interested in what was happening back home in the United States. I also detached from family problems that I'd hear about in cards or letters that I stuffed in a box and kept under my bed.

It is hard to say if I saw anything of reality, other than myself enjoying life, which would prove an important step in ensuring I never went back home. But it wasn't going to last forever.

Towards the end of my years in Europe, I took a three-day vacation to Pisa, Italy with some friends. Walking down a road one night I saw three men standing on the corner singing. We were in and out of bars and people watching. The man had a cap sitting out front of him for people to toss in spare change. I kept walking when my friend, who was from the Philippines and was also working on the American military base, burst out laughing at one of the men who she recognized, Jeff. Jeff was an American stationed in Germany who happened to be there singing. He would later explain that he was teaching the other two guys, both younger, how to attract women by doing strange things. My friend gave Jeff continual shots of grappa; it was his birthday after-all. At some point, in the evening Jeff told everyone he was going to marry me, which was absurd, but I also knew he was right.

By the end of the night, we ended up in a plaza waiting for the last bus back to our hotel, only to realize we had missed it. There in the plaza the landscape was wide and green, the white buildings shown in the moonlight like tombstones. I was sober by then, convinced in part that I was going to marry the man that lay in the plaza.

It was a strange landscape, I was faced with my past, present, and future as I sat alone, the only one still awake in the cold Italian plaza. I dated Jeff for about a year and then we were

engaged and before I knew it, he had orders to Columbus, Georgia where he would be company commander of a small unit at Fort Benning.

In Columbus, Georgia we lived in a loft apartment that had been an old cotton mill and was converted into a modern living space. It overlooked the Chattahoochee River. The first thing I noticed moving to Georgia was the architecture and its relationship to history. I was living in a historical building and the landlord explained that the brick was left exposed throughout the loft. There was no specific story with the original brick, but it was understood that just seeing it added value to the property and the experience of living there.

The physical structures in the south were repurposed for profit, but the specificity of the stories was not on the display. Yet, the past was cherished with detached nostalgia. This nostalgia was especially present at The National Infantry Museum at Ft. Benning in Columbus, Georgia. There I was met by replicas of men in uniform valiantly replaying battle scenes alongside ornate displays of weaponry throughout American history. The displays tried to create some inspiration for war, to even find beauty in its images of bravery.

The Fife and Drum Restaurant is attached to the museum, and I'd sit at a table with a window where I'd put a cloth napkin in my lap, order a glass of the house red wine and could look out and see the long road leading to the museum that was lined with weeping willows in perfect symmetry on either side.

Unlike the war memorials of Europe, the American display had no bearing on my appetite. Americans choose so often to glorify and relish in history, reenact it even, rather than to turn to it as we should, like a cannon full of mistakes and some victories that we can learn from.

The museum restaurant had a delicious chicken salad sandwich as well as food I had never tried before like deep fried pickles and fried green beans. I even bought a cookbook at the

gift shop. As a newlywed I had decided that I should learn to cook and I started with American southern dishes like chicken broccoli casserole, yams, and yeast rolls.

Living in the loft several miles from Ft. Benning I could look out my living room windows and watch the Chattahoochee River. I became convinced that the buildings of downtown Columbus were trying to say something but were continually silenced. It was the first and only time I felt this strange sympathy for architecture. Walking in their long shadows I felt shorter and shorter until the towering brick stood over me crying, I could almost see blood pouring out of the crevices were the mortal was packed and chipping.

There was an old water tower wedged in-between the tall brick buildings that sat on the river's edge looking out sadly to the Alabama side of the river. In Alabama there were no tall buildings, just some smaller businesses and a Piggly Wiggly grocery store. There were no tall buildings to commune with over the river's rushing.

The river itself was also fascinating to me for several reasons. The first being the way that people were afraid of it. I was training for a triathlon which would involve a short swim down the Chattahoochee. Every conversation about my upcoming swim was the same, "Watch out for the dead bodies in the river," or "Be careful the waters are haunted."

In a way, I believed all of it. Columbus was a place that wanted to think of a future, but there was no language to make it happen. It was in Georgia, in this return to the United States that I first started noticing myself within the American landscape. On my swim down the river, I made sure the swim cap was tight, the goggles de-fogged, and my limbs held close. I felt the unsettled spirits around me as I elbowed my way through a mass of swimmers.

The other reason that the river was interesting was that it flowed at a difference cadence during the day, almost like the tides of the ocean. During the day, large flat sandstones were

revealed, and one could puddle jump out to the middle of the river and fish or bring a lawn chair and just enjoy the waters slipping by. In the early evenings, a dam was released upriver, and the waters would quicken covering the stones. It seemed to be the perfect place for someone to meet up with a friend and have a private conversation which many did, or people went fishing.

When the sandstones were revealed, I often daydreamed of meetings between characters or authors sometimes dreaming of large banquet tables that would be placed in the middle and filled on either side with authors in conversation. One possible meeting that visited me often involved Flannery O'Connor who had once been asked to meet with James Baldwin. O'Connor refused to meet Baldwin in Georgia but said she would do so in New York. The meeting never happened. Although I sometimes saw them there sitting in the middle of the river finally recreating the meeting that could have been but never was, the words were drowned out by the sounds of the rushing waters.

There has been little commentary written as to why O'Connor refused to meet Baldwin. When we take O'Connor's work and the racist views she expressed to friends in letters or in diaries we meet a stunning representation of a consciousness divided (Elie, 1). O'Connor's stories in many instances are known for humanizing Black characters and the stories recognize that Black Americans have lives separate from the white gaze. And O'Connor's stories demonize the racist elders of the south.

Yet, Flannery O'Connor the person did not want to sit next to people of color on the bus nor did she ever meet James Baldwin in person (Elie, 1). She was split between her aspirational self, her religious self that could affirm dignity in all human beings and the earthly self, the self that didn't not address her own adherence to the caste system in the United States which made

her, falsely, into someone who felt she was above a meeting with a Black American artist, James Baldwin.

No one I met in Columbus could say out loud what made the Chattahoochee haunted or who was doing the haunting and for what reasons. I couldn't fully imagine their conversation, but I reasoned that James Baldwin and Flannery O'Connor could have explained all if the meeting could have happened, if only O'Connor's idealism and O'Connor the woman could have risen and converged, that meeting might have happened.

To soon we left Georgia. Jeff left the military and we found jobs in Austin, Texas. I did not want to leave Georgia when it was time to go, I had grown just attached to it as I had Europe. It was the silence there. I wanted to stay and keep listening because I knew that just because I heard silence did not mean that there wasn't great deal to be heard. I loved the Chattahoochee, and I was attached to whomever was haunting the river. The weeping willows, the pine trees, and the old buildings but once again, the economy would take us elsewhere.

In Austin one feels the great restlessness of an internet highway, people moving from one place to the next inevitably, as in a predetermined electrical circuit. There are a lot of jobs in Austin. The city itself is comprised of people that all seem to be about 25 years old and employed in a tech start up or large tech company like Meta or Dell. This was a major juxtaposition with Georgia, and we felt like time travelers going from Columbus where the pace of life was slow to Austin in which everything buzzed quickly in neon. We also had to adjust to the cost of living. In Georgia we had easily afforded a waterfront loft. In Austin the same amount of rent money could get us a one bedroom on the outskirts of town.

My dad's side of the family was from up north, but my mom's side is from south Texas. Austin is in central Texas and seemed to be a safe enough distance that I could still maintain my commitment to never return home.

I suppose I would like to be from a place, but I am not sure what that place would be. I do have a cousin that lives south of San Antonio, and for a while my frequent visits with him and my family were starting to give me more of a sense of place. But my cousin and I had a falling out that led to estrangement furthering sealing the deal of never going home.

The disagreement was over the Confederate flag. I imagine that to my cousin the Confederacy represents the idea of being from somewhere. Some of our Texas ancestors fought in the Confederate army and although my cousin doesn't explicitly say it, he is, in part, defending the honor of our long dead grandfathers who fought on the losing side of a bloody war.

In Germany, a sense of shame was allowed, if not welcomed. The citizens there were ashamed of their history, ashamed of the genocide, and ashamed of the hatred that lived in the hearts of the ancestors. They spoke about the shame, and they made it into public display in Nuremburg and at the concentration camps. In the United States, the shame isn't expressed. The confederate flag can blow widely and freely over citizens. Plantations, riddled with violent histories, can be toured freely while one is on vacation, one can even book a wedding that will provide the charms of southern history.

While I can relate to my cousin's longing for a connection to personal history, I can't relate to his affections or his methods. He once told me once in a particularly heated argument that if I had an issue with the flag, I should leave Texas.

There are people in every state that support the memory of the Confederacy, some more than others and often in places I had least expected. I once stopped at a pizza place in downtown Llano, Texas where I saw several confederate flags hanging over the entrance to the kitchen. On road trips throughout the rural US, I see them flying in people's yards. After having already paid the deposit for catering at my wedding, I saw a Confederate flag hanging in the chef's storage room in Georgia.

The argument with my cousin happened well before the pandemic and the civil unrest that was highly visible at that time. In the post-2020 era I notice fewer Confederate flags and we've seen many monuments removed entirely. However, in the case of my cousin, the mindset that adored and respected the Confederacy remains.

In terms of my family and my relationship to American history you could say I saw the check engine light come on, but it was Isabel Wilkerson that popped the hood and provided a comprehensive diagnosis of what was going on. In her book, *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* she observed, "In Germany, displaying the swastika is a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. In the United States, the rebel flag is incorporated into the official flag of Mississippi" (346). That flag and unquestioned respect for it was also incorporated into my cousin's mind and his home.

He lives on several acres of land, he is the oldest male cousin in our family, and he has a very large table. At Thanksgiving the family gathers at his home. The counters are stacked with turkey, cranberry, stuffing, sweet potato casseroles, green beans, gravy, and corn bread. There is a swimming pool and hot tub out back and the kids also have four wheelers they can ride around. My grandfather generally prays for the family, and he says something meaningful. I can't remember exactly what he said in the past, I just remember a sense of belonging.

I stopped attending family holiday gatherings years ago. The Confederacy perhaps was once home, but no more.

I prefer to heed Wilkerson's warning. She concludes that the last frontier resides in our own hearts and to resolve things we must adjust our relationship to America's violent history, the Confederacy being one aspect of that history. In doing so we might reject the idea of the caste system, the lie that one group should dominate over another based on the physical features that race ascribes. One should resist dominating just as one should refuse to be dominated. To do so, one must be willing to break ranks and one cannot, as Wilkerson writes be "reliant on the approval of others for the sense of self" (380).

Wilkerson likens our attachment to the Confederacy as a sort of mental death or like having a corpse in one's mind. The only way to move forward would be to give this mental corpse a decent burial (364).

I've dug my own hole, and laid several bad ideas to rest, and I still have more digging to do. I believe I should help others dig the required graves just as I dig my own, it isn't fair to just leave people like my cousin behind as if I'm somehow better. I'm not. But at the holidays my priority is my children. My daughters need to know how to walk out of certain rooms and into better ones.

Nonetheless, it seems that I am arriving at a different place. I can't keep running, it seems that I must go deeper, I must find a way to create my own home, even though it will not be at my cousin's table. A favorite pastime is to go into a bookstore or a library and grab a bunch of random new books. A recent haul was a book on European medieval times, a picturesque travel book by a woman who visited every country in the world, and some poems by Langston

Hughes. But recently I made a list, I'm trying to focus, going deeper is a different way of being in the world. I think I'm ready, it is time to pull up a chair and sit down.

There are ideas that call me back to a foundation that might provide a place to begin again. For starters, a Christian idea to which I return is the idea of being a co-creator of reality. It derives from 2 Peter 1:4 in which the believer is exhorted take part of the "divine nature, having escaped the corruption of the world through lust."

Lust maybe has its place in a life, I had a wanderlust. It was phase. Eventually, if we are lucky enough, our lusts run dry, and we must reach for something else in life. Christian writer Matt Tebbe explained, "This is what it means to become 'participants of the divine nature' and it is what the Eastern Church calls theosis: union with God brought about by the cooperation of human activity and God's uncreated energies" (25).

God's uncreated energy is also explored by the mystic, Jeff Carreira who wrote about that uncreated energy saying, "That power, that higher being, wants to be born, and it is giving birth to itself through us...we are co-creators of reality" (49).

Finally, the idea is also confirmed in many interpretations of quantum mechanics. In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad, explores an individual's responsibility in a world of entanglements that occur at the quantum level and radiate out. She concludes, "... meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all being and becoming. We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role we play in the world's differential becoming" (396).

Barad applies the human entanglement in nature and reality, the ways in which what we do and say in the world matter and somehow influence outcomes. Each of these ideas or theories

points to the idea that a person has some agency or responsibility in the world of infinite entanglements. A place to start in terms of responsibility would be understand one's entanglement with history.

Sometimes I think I might find home if only I could pack my bags one more time and head for better shores. It might better if I lived in San Diego. Or maybe, I think, I'd be happier the open spaces in Phoenix. I've never visited New York City but sometimes I like to imagine myself in the city where I might lose myself in endless human entanglements.

Or I fantasize about life in some secluded natural landscape where I am alone and can find solace in nature. But the nature-based experiments were already run by Emerson and Thoreau. They failed in a way because one might seek to escape humankind in nature without considering the realizations of modern physics which shows that humankind creates the fabric of nature, our understanding and relationship to it and one another. If the self-reliant Thoreau would have written more plainly about his time in his famed cabin, he would have given more credit to his human entanglement with his mother who did his laundry and delivered hot meals freeing up his time to write. New York City would be a better bet than an escape to nature, but even then, there wouldn't be any point.

I would still end up here, within myself struggling to avoid a return to the place where I am from and trying to live up to the illusion of self-reliance.

The other day I was in bed recovering from the flu. I had a cough, high fever, my lungs felt heavy, and my head throbbed. I had a felt longing that took me a while to name. I wanted my mom. I wanted the warm veggie soup she used to make when I was sick. She'd serve it with saltines, sprite, and a clean blanket from the dryer. It was there in bed incapacitated, not moving for once, that I remembered what mom used to always say.

“No matter where you go, there you are.”

She said it often, especially when we were complaining and wanting to be somewhere else as in, we were doing the dishes and as she had asked but had wanted to go out with friends. She said it as a response as a consolation when we lost a race, didn't make the team, or were rejected by someone at school. Mom the woman who had no time to read books, never traveled, and was a homemaker had summed up the quantum field.

She had been telling me all along that my ill-conceived ideas about never returning were a farse. In fact, leaving in the first place was nothing but an illusion. It has always been true to say, *here I am*. No matter where I have been or where I might go, I am here, and there is no escaping it. I am co-creating my reality, playing a role but not fully controlling anything. I am entangled with those around me, reaching out to lay a foundation for a home I've yet to actualize but long for. The unnecessary part might have been all the roaming, although I seemed to have required it.

Joshua 1999

There were a lot of things he liked to break. Sometimes, for fun, he would take a carton of eggs into the driveway and throw them one by one into the concrete. Other times, if he seemed angry, he would take dishes, a stack of plates or two coffee cups. He'd throw those too, the sound of disintegrating ceramic exhilarating.

He would hide food under his bed, save it for later. He soiled clothes, cracked VHS tapes, tried to flush stuffed animals down the toilet. When he was younger, he would inexplicably smear feces on the wall. He ate his own feces. The doctor said it might be a deficiency, vitamins and special diets did nothing to help.

He had insomnia and would be up until two or three in the morning. He tried to run away in the middle of the night, but we locked him inside. Mom stayed up with him, mentioning in small talk in the grocery check-out line, "I haven't slept in years."

He would grow agitated and jump violently at the same spot in the hallway, throwing all his weight into the floor over and over until finally he'd break a floorboard revealing jagged splinters and leaving holes.

He was self-injurious, taking gashes of his own flesh, banging his head on the wall. He would bite his own arms leaving scabs to form that he would later pick off and leave bleeding.

Mom was lost on him. She took him to sensory specialists, dieticians, psychiatrists, herbal healers, occupational therapists, chiropractors, developmental experts, spiritual healers, and prayer groups. She followed him relentlessly trying to teach him, to reach him somehow, and of course to try and keep him from running away.

One day, mom said, "I need something for myself."

She decided on jigsaw puzzles. She bought a mat that could roll up to save the puzzles when she wasn't working on them.

Her favorite puzzles were prints of Thomas Kincaid paintings. They were mostly cottages in nature adorned in lights. The cottages were usually next to streams and had mountain ranges in the background.

One day she left an a nearly complete puzzle of a green country landscape with a small church on the table while she went to the restroom. I saw Josh do it, but I was on the other side of the room. I didn't get to him in time and he smashed the puzzle, breaking it into its original 1000 tiny pieces many of them falling to the floor.

It was the first time it occurred me that I wanted to kill him and I thought of ways to do it.

The easiest way seemed for us to out to the highway that ran behind our house. Cars zipped through at 70 mph. I could just wait until dark, dress us both in black and go stand in the road. We could both disappear and mom would be free.

The day of the smashed puzzle mom came back from the bathroom, and she said nothing. She put the pieces in the box and in the top of the coat closet and I never saw her do another puzzle and it would be many years before she ever spoke of herself again.

Mt. Fuji

Every beginning, this one included, exists because something else ended.

If it seems a strange or jarring premise, we can consider plants, like the strawberry vine that starts to swell and grow redder just as the white flower that came before it wilts and falls away to the ground. There is fruit and there is decay.

When it comes to people, the beginnings and endings are the same. I know that the dead ends in my life will turn out to be a new beginning for someone else. This is the end. And it is the start of something.

My break came in life came while working in a field that women often feel trapped within, childcare. I worked caring for children on military bases around the world. I wore an apron with school supplies and baby wipes during the week and on my days off, I shed this womanly utility to explore the world. That is all I wanted to do, I just wanted to see everything there was to see in the world. Everything. That was my beginning. It was also the end.

For a while I lived in Iwakuni which a small city located in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan. It was a day trip from Iwakuni to Nagasaki or Kyoto. Tokyo was farther, at least eight hours by train. The United States Marine base there was occupied by American, British, and Australian forces by the war's end. And that was where I lived, on a military base in Japan that the US occupied. The architecture was utilitarian and invoked the impersonal nature of American's military machine. One friend I had there, a hippie from Oregon, would get up early every morning, even if we were starting work at 6:00 AM because she needed to walk off base and look at something other than the dull interiors of the base. I had a similar affliction and would sometimes go with her, or I would jog on the four and half mile loop on the seawall on base that

provided a dam between the military base and the Monzen river. The river opened, a few miles down, to the larger waters of Hiroshima Bay.

I was traveling at the height of the Iraq war and had just arrived at Iwakuni from Rota, Spain. In Rota, we were told that planes carrying the dead would be flown from Iraq and through Rota where they could refuel before returning to the US. The kids would get into the inevitable squabbles of childhood and when they saw cargo planes overhead, they would say things like, “Yeah, there goes another one flying in so they can put a flag on your daddy’s coffin.”

These children did not cry often, it was a well-worn insult that would insight more fighting or dissolve into a more playful banter leading to the next game of kickball. Rota was a transitory place and I’d often met young men when we were out at night that would tell me melodramatically that this was their last night before going to Iraq. I also got to know some of the pilots that flew shorter missions in and out of Iraq. They were married men, unafraid to talk about their wives and children back home in one breath and confess their love in the next. They might not have realized that we heard the same confessions and sad speeches nearly every evening because Rota was the last stop for many of the convoys before going into the warzone.

Iwakuni was a calmer environment in that there wasn’t as much coming and going of troops. There was much less talk of bodies because they weren’t physically present on that base. Yet, Hiroshima was very close, and we took several trips there.

In the middle of Hiroshima sits the Peace Dome, which is a grey transparent skeleton of the building that was directly underneath the atomic blast. It was the only structure left standing because the force of the atom bomb came from directly over the Peace Dome. The blast first went down stripping the dome of all its flesh and then straight out, destroying the rest of the city leaving only the frail frame hovering precariously over absolute annihilation.

In that way, present day Hiroshima is built on the memory of its destruction. The memory is ever-present in the city, but one can see in the shopping malls, the markets, and in the silhouettes of the women carrying umbrellas around the feet of Buddha that the city is revitalized.

The metaphor was felt personally and politically. Personal loss strips the insides bare, I often questioned, in those days, my own ability to find a way to revitalize my own spirit. The felt memories in the streets and the museums made me see the war from the Japanese perspective as I saw displays of orphaned children with burns, melting skin, and failing organs from radiation. There were also world maps that illustrated where atomic bombs are concentrated in the world. I learned that when it comes to having the potential to annihilate the world's human population via atomic bomb, the United States ranked at the top. Every display of pain appeared next to an invocation for peace, some desire for a world without atom bombs.

I had left my family and disabled brother behind, and I was naïve in the way of the very young. I was expecting to find the world to be more beautiful and more just than home. Instead, I found the world's intra-actions far more complex than anything I could have imagined back home in my little room that I had painted green because green was the color of growth and peace and therefore a great comfort. The fact that I worked on military bases riding the coattails of World War II was not lost on me, that intra-action brought to light the complex ways we each interact with one another, history, time, place, and war's collateral. There would never be enough green paint to make any of it feel tranquil.

After traveling locally through Iwakuni and Hiroshima my coworkers and I took stock of our time and money and realized that we could afford a trip to Tokyo or to nearby Mt. Fuji. Both were a day's travel north from Iwakuni. We took a vote and decided Mt. Fuji. We caught a taxi

or a Saturday morning at 4:00 AM. Four trains, two buses, and ten hours of economy travel later, we arrived at the base of the mountain.

I was carrying a small pack and wearing a tank top and shorts and the only pair of shoes I owned at the time, a pair of worn sneakers. I brought one extra shirt and some candy bars, I would later relish while regretting my general ill preparedness. Anyone who hikes or knows anything about hiking will be appalled by this story and what seems to be a trip based on a death wish. Yet, we were determined not only to climb Mt. Fuji but we timed our climb so that we could reach the summit at sunrise.

The climb started out sunny and with each step I felt increasingly euphoric as if all my limitations were an illusion. It was warm and I was drenched in sweat. The soil was so unlike the Iowan fields, it had a lava like texture and stones jutted from the earth, daring us upward. The clouds seemed to be on our side, walking with us. Everything growing on the mountain was iridescent green and gave off light that seemed stronger than the sun.

The first few hours, I now remember like a fleeting honeymoon phase, because soon the sun started to set, and the cold came in. I realized that I should have brought a coat, gloves, maybe even a hat. But I still felt energetic, and we were optimistic about seeing the sunrise. We climbed into the night and were told by hikers that at station seven we could rent a bunk in a shelter for the night for 100 Yen or about ten bucks per person. I took off my sweaty t-shirt and balled it into the bottom of my backpack and put on a warmer shirt and some athletic pants over my shorts. There were no bunks available at station seven, so we went on to station eight. The plan was to rest and sleep there until 2:00 AM and then hike to the summit and the sunrise. The temperature continued to drop as the air became thinner making it increasingly difficult to breath. We encouraged each other for the bunk that we should find at station eight but once again

we should that the shelters were all full. We had dreary conversations about what to do next as far as sleeping or quitting all together. Exhausted and cold we found a clearing on the side of the path and tried to sleep on the ground. We spooned one another in a huddle trying to create some heat by proximity.

We were too cold, so we started moving again at midnight. There were three remaining stations. We knew that they weren't any shelters, but we reasoned we could rest 30 minutes or so at each of the remaining stations and then reach the summit just before sunrise. My heart was racing in an unfamiliar pattern as I was cold, tired and nearing 24 hours of being awake. We kept moving forward. The cold must have propelled us quickly because we reached the summit at 1:30 AM, nearly three hours too early. There we were met with extreme cold, and we moved about the dark summit in a small huddle with blurred vision. It was windy and all efforts to generate warmth proved impossible. I was a long-distance runner, a habit that I think enabled me to breathe but one of my travel mates had fallen into a dream like trance and she could hardly stand on her own. The collective misery caused us all to agree, regretfully that we'd have to leave the mountain and forfeit the sunrise.

As we went for the exit path, a man stood in our way.

"It is too dangerous to down at night. There are some lights coming up but not even one going down. You'll have to wait." He pointed to a hut in the distance and said that it would open at 3:00 AM adding, "They serve hot soup."

We lined up at exactly 3:00 AM and found our way through the doors with a small crowd of fellow climbers that were gradually reaching the summit. The soup was a simple broth, and the hut was warmer than the outdoors. We were still tired, and oxygen deprived. All the candy

bars were long gone, and we were hungry. We huddled at the soup table for a few more moments and then headed back outside.

At 4:05 AM the sun finally made a silvered debut and was out fully by 4:25 AM. As I watched the sunrise everyone around me did the same thing, we were still. I forgot for a single moment myself and I stopped thinking in terms of where I was from and where I was going. It was just light shining over a world I was observing from above.

The moment passed. A gust of wind picked up and we quickly investigated the crater at the top of Mt. Fuji in the morning light and we then we began our descent down the side of the mountain. Within two hours we were warm again and within three hours I was wearing shorts and t-shirts once again. On the train ride home, I didn't see the Japanese countryside, the rice fields, and ranges of forests and hills. Instead, I went into a deep sleep.

I woke up in a strange nightmare of disbelief. The climb and the eventual return had made me, for some unknown reason, think of home, of those I had left behind in pursuit of my dreams. I quickly went from the summit to the volcano's edge of despair. Somehow the edge bubbled with fire that threatened to consume me and yet it simultaneously reflected by disfigured image back to me, like a still pool of water.

I thought of atomic bombs, the children back on base hoping their parents would come home from war alive, my family back at home, my parents still engaged in the arduous task of being caregivers to my disabled brother who was nonverbal and knocking holes in the wall, living in a rage unable to express his full desires to the people around him.

I met the divide within. I felt loyal to me, the individual I was trying to become, a free agent responsible for my own pursuit of happiness. And me that I recognized existed as part of a

we. I felt then more than ever that I was someone's sister, I had an extended family, a country, a world. Yet, I reasoned that I was not my brother's keeper, I was free.

Freedom did little to assuage my terror if anything it increased its tenor. I looked out the train window, I looked for a door, I wanted to fall out, to be crushed maybe or at least disappear. I went back to sleep, lost for the rest of the trip in another place so unlike the summit of Mt. Fuji I had just left.

I once knew an elderly priest and I was talking to him because I was unsettled about my past, I felt disconnected from my parents, if not suspicious and angry at them. I wanted exoneration from them, their stamp of approval that I had been a good big sister and daughter. And I wanted connection at the same time. I was cycling through these conflicting feelings when the priest gave me these words, "You are playing a role that they wanted you to play, and they are rooting for you in some way. When you stick with this process you will find that at end, you'll say, 'Thank God for my parents.'"

A few weeks after the climb up Mt. Fuji, I called dad to wish him a Happy Father's Day. We didn't talk much, maybe a couple times of year. But I did try here and there. He asked me about Japan, what I was doing and what it was like. His voice become sadder than I had ever heard it before. Dad told me, "Right after your mom got pregnant with you, my job offered me Japan, but I couldn't bring the family. I turned it down. I'm glad you are there." And then, "Gotta go." I had never heard my father mention Japan, or travel, or any other desire he had left in his pre-father youth. It was news to me.

Where one life is ending, another is beginning. One dream dies, another is born. Grief is the reflection of the love we had, and we use grief to create other things. My dad never explicitly told me what his dreams may or may not have been for my life, but either way, I found out a way

to feel them, to go in the direction of his dead end. When the sun finally rose over the horizon, I remember for a fleeting moment a familiarity as if I must have been there many times before.

Joshua 2000

There were funny moments, embarrassing ones too. I once found him sitting on the living room couch along munching carrots. He had the whole bag sitting next to him and they were the big ones, unpeeled right off the farm. I said, “Joshua what are you doing?”

“Neigh, Neigh,” he said taking another bite. He kept this up for weeks, I called it his horse phase.

Josh was a homebody. When we all got home from school he handed us our pajamas and would follow us around until we put them on. In his mind, none of us were leaving in our PJs and he was right.

When it was time to take a bath, or brush teeth, Josh would run and hide. When I found him, he would close his eyes tight. In his mind, if he couldn't see me, I couldn't see him.

He liked to dance in the car but only with his left arm. He held his whole body still and he let only his arm dance to the beat of the music. Sometimes we would join in, a band of five children in the back of an old minivan dancing with one arm only.

Josh didn't talk to us but he would occasionally repeat things or make up phrases. He loved his bed and his pillow. He named the pillow, “Her majesty the white pillow.”

He loved Disney movies; he played them on repeat all the time. He cried every time he saw Mufasa die in the Lion King. He went through a phase where he would blast the dramatic music from the Hunchback of Notre Dame every morning at sunrise. He'd throw all the doors open, slamming them on the walls, waking everyone in the house.

He loved Christmas time. He kept count of how many days until Christmas every year starting January 1st. Every December, when he saw a man in public with a big belly and a white beard he'd try and get to them so he could pull their beards, try, and test if it was a real or a fake.

I took him to McDonalds once. He ran ahead of me and before I could stop him, he had taken a bitten cheeseburger from a man's hand. Josh ran with it. I offered to buy the man another burger. He was so thrown off, he offered to buy us burgers, assuming we were hungry.

Once we were at the YMCA swimming in the indoor pool. Josh went to the hot tub; I was watching from one of the lap lanes. I thought he was going to get in and soak. Instead, he dropped his pants and peed directly into the hot tub. Five grown men leapt from the water.

Thoughts

I was *it* before I had thoughts about what ‘it’ was. In this case, it was terror, it was death. I was walking at the water park with my daughters, they loved to go swimming. I was holding my youngest daughter, Jade, by the hand, my girls were having fun. But on that day, all the good times ended.

I suddenly felt a sensation in my stomach like a shot or jab with a knife. Adrenaline coursed through me like fire. My legs were rendered useless and unmoving, soft like pillars of cotton. I felt it first.

I felt it before I could see anything. I felt it before I could think.

Then, I saw it: a child’s body lying on the concrete and several lifeguards hunched over the body doing CPR. The sight of death was like the rakish pit of a peach tearing the flesh from my insides.

But then...I saw more. I saw that it was a drill. It was not a child, but a mannequin. The lifeguards were just doing a drill. Preparing for the worst. But the worst wasn’t happening...at least not that day.

Only then, I had thoughts. *It is only a drill- I thought I saw a child, but it’s not.* I made the connection. I thought about Lylah, my friend’s daughter, who at two-years-old escaped out the back door, fell into the family pool, and drowned in a matter of minutes. Lylah who I had held in the hospital when she had just been born, when she was only one day old. I had gone to the hospital to visit my friend after she gave birth, but someone handed me the baby. I remember holding Lylah, she stirred something new within me...*Maybe I do want kids.* Little seven-pound baby Lylah bundled in a swaddle, her eyes not even open yet, her tiny breaths, each precious. In

living even one day, she had changed me. *Maybe I do want kids*. Lylah, the baby that didn't make it past 3 years old.

“Ouch!” Jade was pulling away. “Mom, that hurts.” I wasn't holding Lylah! Baby Lylah! It's wasn't Lylah. It wasn't even a real child; it was a mannequin. I was at the water park. I looked down to see I had been gripping Jade's hand so tightly her fingers were waxed. She was in her strawberry red swimsuit. “Mom, let go! Commmmmon Mom...can we go float in the lazy river?”

We think our thoughts through the window of our memories. We assign thoughts to our experiences of the world. And we assign thoughts to the experiences of our bodies. In his book, *Mindsight*, Daniel Siegel explains, “The neural networks throughout the interior of the body, including those surrounding the hollow organs, such as the intestines and the heart, send complex sensory input to the skull-based brain.”

The networks of my body experienced a death before I was aware of what I was seeing or aware of my thoughts. All day in moments we face little deaths in the form of our fears. We are killed off by our worst nightmares. If we are lucky, we are reborn just as quickly, brought back to life by the tug of a child's hand, we feel it as something like hope.

Joshua 2002

It was Easter Sunday. Most good Christians in Iowa were eating ham. Not us, Mom made us a fall off the bone roast instead. She did it because roast was one of dad's favorites. She also made mashed potatoes and gravy, fried okra, and buttery biscuits. Next to the biscuits, she placed a small vat of honey with a spoon so that we could spread honey on our bread.

Josh wasn't interested in family dining. He was watching Sponge Bob Square Pants in the living room and my parents let him be.

The rest of us were ready to eat. The smell of the feast billowed out into the garage cutting into the smell of gasoline. I was in the garage sitting on a bucket on the grease saturated garage floor.

Dad was fixing our family's 16-year-old minivan, again.

This time, it was the timing chain, the most involved repair we had done to date. The engine itself was hoisted outside of the car and dangled by a chain on the cherry picker. Hoses and wires were everywhere. Tools were lined up by size and spread across several benches.

Dad had enough equipment in the garage to do any type of repair to nearly any vehicle. He was known in the neighborhood for this skill, and he often spoke of these missions to fix cars as if he were a surgeon and the vehicle was a willing patient. He treated me like his assistant in the operating room. Instead of saying, "Scalpel!" he'd say things like, "19 mm wrench!" Or he would say, "Throw that ratchet over here." Sometimes, he'd be laying under the car on his scooter and I'd be looking at the engine from up top and he would say, "I'm gonna wiggle this wire you tell me where you see it up there." And then he'd reappear from the under the car with his headlamp on and attach two wires leading us one step closer to automotive restoration. And

there was always a restoration. Dad never pronounced a car dead, ever. I often wished he would because some cars just needed to be given up on, but he always had hope.

Mom sent my sister out to the garage to tell us, “Dinner is ready, time to eat.”

I used the water hose and orange degreaser to clean my sooty hands, dirty from handing over tools as dad demanded them. All four of us kids filed into the kitchen, like a rehearsed choir scuttling across the church stage. Josh kept changing channels in the next room, *click, click, click*.

Dad stomped in, threw his boots at the wall by the door and sat at the head of the table. No telling why he was angry, but I did notice as I got older that holidays seemed to be harder. Christmas especially, but Easter also and birthdays too. Even as a kid, I felt very curious about why that was, clearly there was a story, probably involving family. But all of it would be left unsaid.

All of us kids put hands in our laps while Dad prayed. And when he was finished, we said in unison, “Amen.”

We passed the dinner around in a circle each taking a portion of food. The biscuits came by and the honey. I spread some honey on my biscuit and I passed the sticky jar along. We took our food in tense silence as was our norm. Then, *WHAM!* Dad slammed his fists onto the table and stood up.

“Where is the honey spoon?” he boomed.

I looked down, tense, and saw the spoon forgotten on my plate, its gooey home vessel had already floated down the river of food that flowed in an oval among us.

“Dad its right here,” I said.

“It is not a big deal.” I reached and put the spoon back into the jar. I looked at him and I rolled my eyes.

The color rose in dad’s face. He took my plate and food untouched and threw it away. He yelled something about ‘*respect, and the good food that was provided, and your mother and I worked hard for this*’ ...or something like that. I looked down at the empty spot on the table where my food once was, got up, and went to my room.

I had never seen mom stand up to dad. She did as she was told, period. That day, for whatever reason, Mom tried to stand up for me, defend me and win back my Easter dinner so I heard her say, “This is ridiculous. Over a honey spoon? Let her come back.”

I heard yelling and the sound of a body falling. I sprung from my bed where I was sitting and ran back into the kitchen.

There, I saw mom laying on her back, my dad hunched over her, his hands around her neck. He was choking her.

I jumped onto dad’s back. My 100-pound frame suddenly capable of taking his body off hers. I threw dad to other side of the kitchen. I remember hitting him, yelling. I didn’t think before I acted. Sometimes the anger would come and stay for hours or days even, that day the round of yelling and screaming that ensued was short lived. Everyone dissipated to their own corner.

I turned to the couch in the living room. It was empty.

“Josh?!” I yelled, “Joshua Dale!”

No sounds. I ran into the basement and looked there. I came back up and stuck my head in the backyard where mom had gone to look for Josh. I could tell because she was yelling his name.

The garage lamp was back on, and I saw dad's legs sticking out from underneath the minivan. I guessed he would find a way to get his own tools, assistance no longer needed. Dinner sat on the table getting cold.

I checked the bedrooms, the bathrooms and yelled his name again. The TV had been left on but instead of cartoons it was a documentary about whales. I heard a monotone voice explaining the migration patterns of Humpback whales, they traveled farther than any other mammal on the planet in search of food or breeding grounds.

I grabbed a biscuit off the table sans honey, and I took my jacket from the hook by the door as I went out to find him. My sister followed and as we left, she slammed the door, hard. It seemed to rattle everything; front steps, whole house, and everything inside of it included.

Texas Walk

It isn't necessarily a straightforward thing, the decision to go for a walk. But there is a right and a wrong way to go about the project. The first step is to sit in the car at the Rabb Park gate and try and forget the walks you had taken there on the wooded trail before. Walks at a better time of year, when the air was cooler and kinder to the lungs. Or a time when your child was with you picking flowers.

I was there on a lunch break, creating the steps I share now, steps for a successful walk. It was very hot, the weather app reported 102 degrees with no winds. But the extreme weather created the ideal conditions because it the heat helped me focus which brings me to the next step—one must pay full attention.

Start simply, by paying attention to the feeling of being alive. You could do this several ways. You could think about your heart muscle, and its faithful rhythm, the beating that provides the internal cadence for your life. It has been working nonstop for your entire existence without a break, taking hot blood from your center to everything, even your brain which is powering the volition, this choice for a walk. It also brings up the thought that one day the heart will decide, *enough is enough*, and that is the day that we are no more. And blood makes me squeamish, so I prefer to focus my attention on the breath. The air coming in signifies all that we take in for ourselves in the form of oxygen, food, affection, and love. The air going out signals all that we might give in return in our life's work. No matter how you arrive, it is important to accomplish this first step which is the acknowledgement of one's body in the present moment. You must realize you have a life. You can do this by noticing you have a heartbeat, and you are breathing.

Once my daughter, at about two-years-old, was running down the Rabb trail. She wanted to “get to the sunrise.” She was running as fast as she could and I kept trying to explain, “the

sunrise is here, it's happening now, we don't have to get there". But she kept running. That was Maya, my morning bird, the one that like me, thinks 5:00 AM is the best time to be alive, to be awake. Having that amount of intense energy in one's body every morning will compel one forward. It convinces one that one has places to go, a destination. For Maya that morning the destination was the earth's horizon- but we were already there. It is important to notice that while on a walk, you are already where you intended to arrive, you are in motion.

The next step for a good walk is to disregard the weather. We must abandon our submission to precipitation and the UV index. If it is misty and humid, your hair will frizz, and it will leave your makeup worse off but the water and pressure can also leave one refreshed. If it is cold, dress in layers. Raining...bring an umbrella and wear the appropriate shoes, trust the process.

On the trail, the wasps and hornets threatened in bushes with scorched yellow leaves, the stream that ran next to the trail seemed to be on pause, but on closer inspection, it was still moving, just slowly. In summer, the waters are low. In the spring, after a rain, lethargic waters are transformed, becoming rapids. But I was trying to forget the other walks, like the time I came here on a springtime lunch break and said out loud to a redbird: "I quit!" And went back into work and typed furiously, a two-week notice. It was the trail and the quick moving spring waters that propelled my fingers to hit send.

But the waters were so slow that day.

On the side of the path, I noticed children's bikes and a small dirt opening leading to the streams edge. Children must have been wading in the waters, cooling off, I could hear them playing, bantering, and laughing. In my childhood home, in the backyard was a barb wired fence.

If I was careful, I could hop the fence without cutting myself, go across a golden wheat field to a stream. A few times, I tried to follow the stream to where it led, but I never made it to the source.

I was thinking on the trail that I was the only one crazy enough, me and these kids to be out there, at noon, in the unbearable heat. My lungs and stomach felt like they had melded together in a heavy mass as the core of my body. But as I was thinking the thought, the one about being crazy and being the only one on the trail alone, a woman sped by on her bike. Her bike was painted blue and on the front, she carried a basket with flowers and a lunch box. She had a speaker attached to the basket with the volume turned all the way up on a podcast or talk radio. I heard a voice. I immediately recognized the tenor; it was Charles Stanley the evangelical preacher. I couldn't make out the words, I could just hear his voice, a steady impassioned voice streaking through nature. My parents listened to him a lot and Rush Limbaugh. Now, I find those voices to embarrassing or dangerous. That day, it was funny, to see her peddling so determined through the forest, looking for inspiration from another time, another era.

It made me think of going to church as a kid, wearing panty hose and dresses with a lot of lace. As a kid, I hated girl's clothing because it was so constricting. The best part of church was sneaking away from the adults afterwards and climbing the old trees out back. I'd cover the dresses with dirt, filling the lace with pieces of bark. When I'd come back inside an adult would say, "Someone get the girl some water" because I'd have a salty ring around my mouth from dehydration.

It brings up a few more important things about going for a walk, like what to wear. I prefer tennis shoes and spandex. Spandex is great because it is flexible and moves in whatever way the body commands. The other thing is water, which is much more important than the clothes. You must remain hydrated. Exert yourself in high heat without water and one could be

dead in a few hours. Respect your total dependency on water, moment by moment for mere survival.

Once I couldn't hear Charley's voice, I shed the desperate tenor of the preacher's voice. I listened to nature, and it was louder than I had imagined. Louder than I had ever supposed nature could be. I was surprised I could even hear the woman's speaker in the first place.

I heard the wind in leaves, the cicadas, some screeching in the distance, and the hum of longing for water that came from the ground up, thick. It pressed onto me, nature's longing for water, for rain. It got harder to breath. The hornet's buzz increased, delivering blackmail to my heart. I had to go home; I turned around, headed for the car, suddenly sprinting.

Joshua 2003

Josh was able to go to school. The district made sure of that. He required an aid for most of the school day and he went to a special education classroom. Church was a different story. My parents insisted that we all, the seven us, go to church every Sunday.

Growing up, I was always deeply concerned about my brother's soul. It was explained again and again that to avoid hell, one must simply say the pray, confess sins and one would be saved. There was nothing they said from that moment forward that could separate us from the love of Christ. Any human that didn't say that prayer would go to hell. It was as simple as that, and terrifying to think of everyone that would go to hell.

My parents approached the church about hiring someone to come and hold a special needs class which would allow my mom to attend service. The church said that would be impossible. So, my mom watched him in a classroom while we all went to service. They needed to amend the verse, 'with God all things are possible...except having a classroom for disabled children.'

My parents could have hired someone themselves, but we didn't have the money for that, there were five of us and Josh required a lot of extra doctor's appointments, supplements, and expensive foods for his special diet. It was just the way it was going to be.

I usually went to youth group as I was told. Sometimes I stayed and helped mom. And other times I would go to the church library. I can't remember the name of the saga, but there was a seven-book series that I checked out, book by book. It was about a woman that was a nurse in Europe during WWII. They were fiction books full of danger, adventure, and romance.

The books had a big impact, I become obsessed with the thought, *someday I'll go to Europe and fall in love.*

The obsession might have come also from some of the conversations that we had at home. Their social circle had once included many people from our church, even at one point our local congressman, and his family.

After Josh came along there was a shift. Instead of friendship we were offered sympathetic gazes, everywhere we went and especially in the church. The evangelical church preaches healing and seldom acceptance of suffering brought on by illness or other tragedies we might have wished God could have prevented.

The conversations my parents had about the social stigma sometimes included my sisters and me. They would wonder out loud if we would be passed up by some of the families at our church as potential marriage material. Dad said, "That Pagel family is a good family...if it weren't for Josh, you girls might marry one of the Pagel boys, but not like things, not with Josh running around there."

When it was time to leave church and go home, Dad would find me in the library and tell me it was time to go. He was usually in a better mood after church. Mom came away even more exhausted. We would load up the minivan and head home as the other families met up for lunches together. Mom would always cook lunch and dad would turn on western reruns like Bonanza and The Lone Ranger and he'd often fall asleep.

Everydayness

Some mornings I sit on my back porch and think about the shape of things. My yard, a rectangle. The house, a box. The cup, the same cold cylinder it was all the days before. Things were constructed with mere survival in mind, all imagination was lost. It's a...*you've got to kidding me* feeling about reality, it is so disappointing. It could be that I am greedy, I fail to content myself on the feast of survival, of being un-dead.

Too soon, porch time is over, and it is time to go to work. Time to punch in. On the drive in the shapes of things get astronomically worse. I see strip malls, a stray dog rummaging for hardened french-fries. There are industrial buildings circled by overcrowded roads. Steel cars lumber antiquated in a mix of fumes, honking horns and burning rubber. The headlines on the radio are do depressing that I switch to music instead, but every station is on a commercial break. It seems like I am always stuck at the same red light just before the interstate behind the same blue minivan with the stick figure family figures pictured on the back alongside the bumper sticker that says, "My child is an honor student at Kelly Lane Middle School." I feel salty and think '*for fucksake good for you*'.

I get to work and its first things first. I go to the mirror, and I fake smile. I am a therapist and I want to avoid any embarrassing moments like a blueberry skin stuck in a tooth or whatever. Research has shown again and again that therapy works best if clients perceive their therapist as a functioning adult. I suppose I am functioning well enough, and I welcome the first client.

Much of our work has to do with memory. And in the world of memory, the shape of things is far more interesting than they are in suburbia. With EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy a client's brain is taken into a different state of consciousness and can reprocess memories that are causing distress. EMDR works through

bilateral simulation like the movement in hypnosis or via tappers that deliver a slight buzz no stronger than a cell phone in alternating fashion to a client's hands. Unlike hypnosis, EMDR clients have dual awareness which means that they are aware that they are reprocessing a traumatic memory, but they are also aware that they are in the therapy room.

EMDR seems to restructure consciousness or the way the client is filtering information. It also helps a person connect thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations to present responses to stressors in the here and now. Sometimes in EMDR, the prefrontal cortex goes offline giving the amygdala, hippocampus and probably some other parts of the brain a chance to create metaphors that help the client move past maladaptive emotional and cognitive belief systems.

Even clients that seem unimaginative and intensely logical in their personalities can have transcendent experiences, like my client Brian (a client whose real identity is entirely concealed). Brian was a middle-aged accountant who took methodical approach to himself, and the world.

Underneath it all he lived in landscape of suffering.

Brian's presenting concern for therapy was his job. He had tried to enter the US Airforce as a young man with dreams of becoming a pilot but failed out prematurely. Accounting was his fallback career. He did well and was able to come up with good ideas for solving problems, the trouble was a certain coworker would always take credit. This coworker would even call Brian after hours and put him down. On several occasions the bully humiliated Brian in meetings in front of the entire team.

Brian was unable to stand up for himself and set boundaries, in fact his shoulders stooped when he came into my office for each session. His love life, friendships, and family ties were off the rails in their own disastrous way mainly because Brian truly believed a negative cognition about himself which was, "I am powerless." He wished to believe, "I deserve to be happy."

He could say the positive affirmation all day, but he didn't feel it to be true, so it didn't matter. EMDR helps with these beliefs that are stuck on an intuitive emotional plane. I can't fully explain how it works; science can't even do that. What I do know is that the bilateral stimulation via eye movements or tappers help clients move past these stuck points. Unlike hypnosis, clients have dual awareness or the knowledge that they are present in the room with me and re-experiencing a memory.

These are associations and metaphors that Brian's brain created. I simply started the process with his negative cognition, the situation (being bullied at work) and how this was making him feel, beat down, sad, overwhelmed, and worthless.

As Brian processed via EMDR, the bullying and the stooped posture, his brain discovered a feeder memory, or a memory that came before the work situation that was directly related. He remembered an Air Force lieutenant that told him he would never amount to anything. And then there was another feeder memory of being in high school and getting beat up behind the bleachers.

Further back, was the core memory. The core memory is where the negative train of thought starts, like the grand central station of a memory network. For Brian, it was the memory of getting beat with sticks by his abusive mother. Brian's mind automatically made the connections between these memories and the insight alone was helpful, but he wasn't done.

In future EMDR sessions Brian's mind entered a different landscape. Here he started verbalizing his problem in metaphor. He described being in a dark forest and feeling like he needed to collect all the sticks. He was on this idea for a while, describing the forest in detail and some of the internal struggle he was feeling, until finally he said,

“I know I can gather them all.” And Brian, in his imagination collected the sticks of that forest and put them in a pile.

Then, he knew what he needed, a match. Brian went for a few minutes of searching for an imaginary match encountering obstacles in the forest like dark gravelly pits. It eventually occurred to him that within himself there existed a light strong enough to light the fire. He took some of his own light and lit the pile of sticks.

Brian explained that he felt he could carry the power to light fires with him wherever he went. He knew that from now on when he was presented with a present-day bully, his trauma of being hit with a stick could be triggered. But Brian knew he could burn the hate away in a fire of his own making.

The belief of “I deserve to be happy” transformed from an idealized affirmation to an emotional reality. The belief of “I am powerless” was like an old newspaper article deep in the archive of his brain. This might sound too good to be true, but trained EMDR therapists experience these moments with clients often. I see client’s emotional regulation and life circumstances improve incrementally over weeks and months.

For me, it is an escape from the everydayness of existence. In our memories we see that everything started by something else in a denser form. Memories resist silence and amnesia. If we can access our own memories maybe we can access the core memory of our collective consciousness, or as our professor wrote, we can commune with the ancestors or commune with all the books that we have ever read. Memories can fold back and lead to the divine. When we access memory, language can debilitate through dissociation in an individual or in a group of people, a culture. Language in its better form can reveal, create space, or repair.

After experiencing this strange access to memory with clients like Brian, the drive home from work is different. As the sun descends below the horizon things take on weightlessness, the shapes evolving. I remember that the universe is still expanding, forget the bumper stickers. The traffic is levitating going to a future far better than the nightmares of the past. This is an isolated hope in an isolated moment, and it is fleeting...but I take it because I'll need it when the other shapes reappear. The backyard, a rectangle. The house, a box.

Joshua 2004

I learned so much about him that year. The first thing was that Josh loved the rock band, Kings of Leon. I had just graduated high school and I had a job working at a center was for disabled children. It was in a church that was vacant during the week, a space that was rented out by the state.

As soon as Josh arrived for the day, he went straight to the CD player where he could choose the music. He'd pick the album *Youth and Young Manhood* by Kings of Leon and he'd play the same song, *Red Morning Light*, every day. The director of the program, Tara, loved rock music and she let the kids listen to whatever they wanted, if it was rock.

All day, bands would play *Red Hot Chili Peppers*, *Kings of Leon*, *U2*, *Aerosmith*. My parents didn't allow anything other than Christian music in our home. Tara took it upon herself to educate me. The next song would come on and Tara would be across the room helping another child and she would yell, "Hey Amy, name that band!"

And I'd take a stab at it, "Oh that is *Foo Fighters*"

"Wrong!" she'd always say, and she'd correct me, "*Tom Petty*, Amy, that is *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers*." I never really got into rock music as Tara thought I should, but the *Kings of Leon* album was very good, my favorite as well. There were a lot of sexual lyrics, it wasn't something we would ever play at home.

As soon as the opening guitar rift hit, Josh would dance a wild dance I had never seen him dance at home. Every day he came to that CD player smiling. I think he enjoyed the choice. And he really enjoyed that song, the opening lyrics would blast through our classroom, *You know you could've been a wonder, Takin' your circus to the sky.*

For the first time, it occurred to me that Joshua was a complete person that didn't need to be fixed. He may or may not have wanted my help. I was starting to accept him the way he was. And it led to something that was foreign, something I had assumed was impossible: I really got to know him.

Josh and I, in those afternoons at the center, developed a language that will be hard to describe to you, it was nonverbal. We shared feelings. Or we would move around the room in a way that was funny to one another. There were inside jokes. Sometimes we shared the feeling of sadness or anger. If Josh got angry and I joined him in it, by doing something like slamming my fist on a counter and saying, *I'm mad*, he loved that. The anger wouldn't last long because he seemed to think it was hilarious when I shared in his anger, or he just felt relief at the fact that he was angry, and someone was joining him in that experience.

From there, it was a lot easier to be around him. It helped that everyone that worked at the center were college students. They were open minded towards the kids. They saw no need to make the non-verbal kids talk. And instead of becoming upset by the outrageous behaviors, they found a way to joke around whatever was happening.

All my life I could only see in a disability was the lack, there was a person, and they were lacking normality and therefore it was a sad situation. I had grown up thinking of him as less than a whole person.

But Josh had a good taste in music and there were other things he enjoyed in life. The lyrics would play on, we'd started putting snack on the table and Josh would keep dancing, *You couldn't take it on the tight rope, No you had to take it on the side.*

Another thing Josh liked was the oft serve ice cream covered in frozen crunchy chocolate known as a dilly bar. There was a Dairy Queen on the way home from the center. Every

Wednesday was Dilly Bar Days, they had a dilly bar for one dollar only. I often gave Josh a ride home at the end of the day. Every Wednesday we went to Dairy Queen. If it wasn't wintertime we would sit outside on a bench, one dilly bar each. And I soon noticed something of a pattern, on Wednesdays Josh didn't try and run away.

Resident Weirdo

We were in a dim room, the strobe lights were turned off, and the praise and worship band had taken a seat. The youth pastor made an invitation for anyone with prayer requests to come forward.

The auditorium was in the basement of the church, so it was very dark and there were 100 or so of us crammed into folding chairs in a half circle around the small stage. It almost felt like a nightclub poetry stage, except instead of alcohol we all had sodas from the basement vending machines.

A stool stood empty on stage and a lone spotlight shown on the hot seat.

That evening, a senior in high school named Jason, got up in front of everyone, sat on the stool and picked up the microphone. Jason was good looking, so he had our attention. He was tall, a football player, and he had a gentle way about him. He always had that look on his face, almost like Princess Diana in the paparazzi photos, knowing that she had attention and adoration but not necessarily wanting it. Jason seemed to be unaware that he was good looking which added to his appeal.

He was shaking a little. He gently did a mic check, *tap tap tap*. The sound echoed through the room.

That evening, Jason's cheeks were red. He started out by telling us that God had really been working on his heart. He was seeing the consequences of sin in his life, and he was going to get his life on track, but he felt so weak, and he needed our help, our prayers. His eyes fell as he confessed his worst sins, that lately he had been fantasizing, imagining people doing unholy acts...and masturbating.

We were all stunned. It was so weird, so funny, and so humiliating to even be an audience member. Jason must have been mortified too once his words really caught up to him.

There is a lot of weird sexual energy in many evangelical churches. And for that reason and a few others, I've gone back and forth in and out of church in my lifetime. When I had my children, I decided to try and go back. I wanted my kids to learn about spiritual matters. I'd rise on Sunday and make chocolate chip pancakes. I'd dress my girls, smooth their hair with bows, and drive them into Austin to one of the only fully integrated churches in town.

Things in the church were strange when I was a kid, but I knew that the church had evolved, progressed even.

Pastor Morgan, the leader of the church, was a very energetic guy. The best part is that you can tell from his sermons he was very well read. I even remember he once quoted and told a part of Clarice Lispector's life story in a sermon. That might have been the day he had me hooked. The pastor told us that Lispector, at the height of her writing career, had an accident in which her house caught fire and her body was burned including her right hand, the one she used for writing. It could have been the end of Lispector, but it wasn't, she went on to write some of her best works.

Pastor Morgan told us that we needed to be like her, to lean into our vocations in life, whatever our purpose might be. He said that it was up to us to create heaven on earth, a task that wouldn't be completed until the end of the world. And he said it we must learn to deal with our pain and keep building whatever God had told us to build just as Clarice Lispector had kept writing even after her writing hand was nearly burned off.

He helped me find more meaning in my role as a parent because a lot of "kingdom building" as he called it, had to do with how well we loved and taught the next generation. To

Pastor Morgan, our role as parents was our most sacred duty because we were creating the future and laying the foundation for everything that was to come in the world. When it came to parenting, God was watching. I knew it was hard to be a parent, but Pastor Morgan brought the meaning and the importance of the role to life, which would give me more energy and hope for the task.

There was only problem with my Sunday attendance, which was the intense fear I'd experience right before the start of every service. I was overcome with an irrational fear of a mass shooting. Irrational because all things considered the chances were slim. Odd, because church was the only public place that brought up this fear. I would spend the first ten minutes of the service planning my escape, the ways I would retrieve my children and get out alive.

My escape route involved an elaborate tuck and roll under the isles where I could alternate between quick stealth moves and playing dead until I reached the curtain covering the side stage. From there, I'd hide in the folds of stage curtain and make my way to the side exit where I would sprint to the kid's corner. My daughters were in the same class at the time, so a quick *grab and go* would be easy. I'd even have time to yell and warn the teachers and kick open a few doors for the other fleeing children on my way out. Once I had created and executed my escape in my mind three or four times, I would force my thoughts to other things and relax.

About this time last year, a woman in her 40's gave her testimony. She explained that she had once been with a woman in a committed lesbian relationship and that she had been lost in darkness. But God had saved her, and she reverted to being holy, that is, she found someone with a penis, they fell in love, got married and enjoyed the heterosexual sex ordained by God. This woman spoke for an hour and never mentioned the word, bisexual.

I am a mental health therapist and I see many clients trying to make sense of their sexuality, so she really got me to thinking. The woman said she had been with other women, but then Jesus saved her and now, she's with a man. Dicks seemed in that way to be spears of spiritual redemption.

If anyone is having good sex, I don't recommend telling anyone their private parts are offering you redemption. But it is kind of how the church was framing it. And really, the specificity of our pleasures seems better off left as personal matters. Yet, there we were relishing in this woman's public confessional of her personal bedroom time with other consenting adults. And that was just weird, just as weird as Jason's masturbation confessional years ago.

At what point was she redeemed from the sin of making love to a woman? Or was it when she asked God for forgiveness? Or was it when she did better (she had dick?). I wondered if she could simplify things and say, "I'm a bisexual woman that is happily married to a man." But she was saying that her previous loves were a sin, and that God did not like or approve of those other loves (because no dick and no marriage were involved).

It was a decision point for me. Seeing her on stage made me worry about her and all queer people. I've had clients that have been kicked out of schools and social circles because of their sexuality and even more that have hovered precariously at death's door thinking about ending their own life to deal with shame and rejection.

We are a society that likes labels, especially when it comes to identity. If you are a person who doesn't fit into a neat category it can be difficult because you might not find acceptance and understanding in any community. Being bisexual can leave one feeling alone. This woman was just creating a way to belong. So, I don't judge this woman as much as I feel compassion for her.

I also felt that since church leadership was concerned with sex, and parts, and who was doing what with whom, I had another concern. If we were going to have sermons on sex, I was wishing we could hear one on women's orgasms in the context of heterosexual relationships.

Christian marriage seminars will tell women that they need to have more sex with their men. But they don't address the issue of a woman's orgasm and that is apparent in the consistent complaints I hear in the therapy room. The first step to a woman's orgasm is that she can't be super stressed out, it overrides the female biological sex response.

A women's orgasm could start with men taking on their share of project management at home. This is an issue that comes up in almost every couple's counseling relationship. I wish Pastor Morgan would get up in the front of the whole congregation and say,

“It is no longer acceptable for a man to go to a woman and ask, “How can I help?” Men need to evolve into project managers in the home so that women can relax...a little.”

But that sermon wasn't going to happen. We were on the topic of women, not in the context of their pleasure. This was a sermon about what women were doing and with whom. It is hard to say how many bisexual women were in the audience that day, because bisexual women, if we are being honest, are everywhere. They are serving coffee, teaching, leading teams, creating art, and some of them are married to men. And the marriages are just like the others. Other bisexual women are partnered with women, they are identified as lesbians and often their bisexuality is just as hidden as it is with bisexual women partnered with men who often pass as straight.

I was in relationships with women for a culminative four years before marrying my husband. When I was growing up, I thought a bisexual was someone that was gay and was too afraid to admit it. And I thought gay people were bad people.

The only gay woman my parents spoke of was Ellen. And a lot of my family members told me that gay people, Ellen especially, were disgusting. As you might imagine, since I wasn't necessarily gay and I wasn't necessarily straight, I was very confused. As a young person, I didn't have the language or the stories to help me make sense of my sexuality. There was also no way I was going to tell anyone the truth about myself or my relationships because I already knew from the conversations that I heard that people like me were spiteful.

I just remained quiet on the issue and loved whoever I was loving at the time. I eventually fell in love with my now husband, we got married and after a few years had two children. We've been busy raising kids and working. And I've been reasonably content in those pursuits. I haven't spent an incredible amount of time labeling my sexuality and then sharing that label nor have I spent a lot of time thinking about labels. Although recent mainstream conversations about sexuality, bisexuality, and fluidity across the lifespan have certainly cleared up a few things for me personally. The conversation helped me to understand myself which has been a relief of a lifetime of pent-up self-doubt at best, self-hatred at worst.

The woman in church who said she was redeemed by dick really brought it all up, again. And it really forced my hand as far as how to define things. Did I see it, my past relationships, as sinful? Or just a part of my dating past? As a normal part of my sexuality?

And all I can come up with is that I've contributed in my own way to oppressive systems by remaining silent. So, the truth. I am your resident weirdo. I am the undercover queer in your church pew. Queer people are queer because that is who they are. Queer people are being discriminated against, murdered, or dying by suicide. And that is a sad reality. I can't keep quiet about it.

Joshua 2005

Josh tried to run away, a lot. Josh would sometimes run to the gas station and steal a few donuts. Mom told the owners to keep an eye out for him and a running tab of what he took so she could pay for it.

The police were called several times about the boy, age five, ten, 12 that was out running, half clothes and sometimes taking things he didn't pay for. CPS made occasional visits but after observing Josh for ten minutes or so, they could see that there was little else to be done. We'd make plans, install locks, take shifts watching him, but Josh was always waiting for a moment he could break away.

Josh could give basic commands or requests if he was told to repeat a phrase over and over, so we taught him to memorize dad's name and number, that way when he found himself in the backseat of a police care or alone with strangers, he could at least tell them something.

I remember once my high school friend called me and said she saw Josh walking down Johnson Avenue with nothing but a large vanilla buttercream sheet cake in a shopping cart.

The cake said, "Happy Birthday Brian! Big #10." Brian, whoever that was, probably had to sub in some prepackaged cupcakes for his party. Josh was wearing nothing but some red boxer shorts. No shoes, nothing, and it was the middle of an Iowan winter.

Santa Claus

Dad always explained to us at kids that Jesus was real, and Santa was fake. He said he wasn't going to lie about Santa, it was his way of teaching us to separate fact from fiction. It didn't bother me that Santa wasn't real because mom found a way to make Christmastime special. What really bothered me was that all the kids were living a lie. When I was in the first grade, I remember one day sitting at lunch, and it hit me, *they deserve to know the truth*.

So, I set down my spork and my milk carton, cleared my throat and launched into my best persuasive speech about the lie of Santa. I went into detail about the lies adults were telling and explained the ridiculousness of a man making it around the world in one night and giving gifts based on a child's "goodness." All chaos ensued.

I remember a few kids crying. Jayden Fleming picking up some mushy broccoli off his tray and threw it at me. I launched some of my broccoli square onto his forehead with such a force that it stuck there for a moment before sliding down his face. I remember toward the end of the riot standing on a cafeteria bench yelling like an old school Greta Thunberg. It was the only time in my life I got sent to the principal's office. They called my parents and I got into a lot of trouble. I never spoke of the lie of Santa again. I guess it taught me a lesson about having a soap box, but it hasn't stopped me still from having a few to stand on.

When my husband, Jeff, was a child, he witnessed the murder of his eldest sister. She was a junior in high school and one of her classmates shot her. Jeff could have withered but instead he grew outward, wanting to use his life to save others. Jeff enlisted in the Army at 17 years old to become a combat medic. He eventually commissioned as an officer and ran Army health clinics. When I met him, he was the officer over the Illeshiem clinic in Germany. We dated for a year in Germany, I focused on traveling together while he was always in a state of obsessing

over how to make the processes for helping better at the clinic. He returned to civilian life shortly after we married.

These days, my husband is an ICU nurse. And for the last 18 months he has been the one holding the iPad for families as their loved one dies. One patient Jeff told me about was a dad. Jeff coordinated a phone call and the patient's adult daughter cried for him over a screen and told him over and over, "You are the best dad ever." As the father took his last breath, Jeff did his job, holding the dying in one hand, the iPad in the other. This family was particularly heartbreaking for Jeff, because our four-year-old daughter, always says, "Dad, you are the best dad ever." There have been days when he has witnessed up to ten deaths in a day. In normal times, nurses could go months without having a death on the unit. Jeff describes the ICU in the age of COVID as more traumatizing than a combat zone. For the man that exists to save people, it's been hard.

Most of the people that are dying from COVID complications have Type Two diabetes, are obese, or have hypertension. In Jeff's experience if you go to the ICU with COVID you probably have one or multiple of the three above. And you are probably going to need a ventilator and you are probably going to die.

To cope with the loss Jeff in the ICU Jeff started coaching people on how to lose weight and change their relationship to food reversing insulin resistance. I've realized only recently that his drive goes go back to his life's principle, which is to save as and help the people around him. Jeff coaches' people to reconsider their food choices and to engage in intermittent fasting which helps the body develop a better relationship to food, insulin, and the way that carbohydrate is metabolized.

It wasn't just about food and weight; it was about how one feels in their body and the ways the body could or couldn't function because of one's health. Jeff knew a guy was a diabetic that suffered from erectile dysfunction. He was in his early 50's and assumed that his sexual life was over. One day a few weeks ago he called Jeff and said, "Hey man, this is really embarrassing to be talking about with another guy...but yeah, I'm off of most of my diabetes medications, but also...my dick started working again."

A lot of people want to lose weight. They have tried by will power and failed. Some people that are pre-diabetic or diabetic believe that they have a genetic condition or that the condition is out of their control. The truth is that diabetes and especially pre-diabetes is reversible and most of the time it is the result of lifestyle. These lifestyles are not created by individuals or course, by rather by our culture.

Drive through most any American landscape populated by people and there you note endless opportunities for fast food. On a road trip especially one can note the diminished possibilities to eat anything other than prepackaged food from gas stations or very unhealthy fast food. Every year when I go in for my annual checkup, my doctor tells me to eat a Mediterranean diet and he hands me the same brochures with the fat rich foods like hummus, avocados, eggs, olives, and green leafy vegetables. If we venture out to find such a meal, be it in our neighborhoods or even in our kitchens it might be hard to find access to these foods. If we are working in American society, we will also feel pressed for time to go seek out these foods and prepare them. At times, things are so hectic the drive through or going to bed hungry seem like our only options.

In his book, *You Are Not So Smart*, David McRaney explains that we must trick ourselves into doing what is best for us and one way to do that is to spend more time thinking about thinking (65).

The more I think about food and the more I think about how I think about food, I realize that my mind is constantly being programmed by advertisements and by what food is available. And most of the food, consumed on the long term would lead to my premature death. I've also become mindful of how foods make me feel and what is good to eat. If I eat some pie, I'll sit and notice how my body feels afterwards. Same with a good salad or a homecooked meal. I have been thinking about portion sizes and I've been trying to think about how hungry I feel.

If we don't become aware of our food ecosystem and think about how we are thinking about food, the American fate awaits us. And that is to become overweight, and eventually obese leading to all kinds of bad things like vulnerability to viruses like coronavirus. McRaney points out, "If you fail to believe you will procrastinate or become idealistic about how awesome you are at working hard and managing your time, you never develop a strategy for outmaneuvering your own weakness" 51. McRaney says that in the here and now we can avoid overindulging but our future selves will give in. If we want to prevent that from happening, we need a system to overcome ourselves (52).

For a lot of our friends and family, Jeff has been that system, he is there with daily reminders, text messages and even heated lectures about the 'goal' and the goal is to live. We all need help, people, mentors, and an ability to think about thinking to avoid reverting to the mean. Many older Americans can hardly lift their legs to come off a curb. The problem isn't the 80-year old's body, it is the environment that the person lived in for across his or her life span. A life that was sedentary and devoid of uneven paths.

An even path is much more comforting than an uneven one. Santa Claus is comforting too. We must start thinking about the ways we think about food and the functions food serves in our lives. We must because our lives depend on it.

Joshua 2006

I've always been a little bit of a crackhead, and this is my best explanation as to what led to that condition. It started when I made one attempt to settle in Iowa after my living in Japan. It lasted about nine months.

I found an apartment that cost 300 dollars in rent, it was in a basement, and I shared it with one other woman that I would later learn was selling drugs from our dwelling, but that had nothing to do with my own crackhead status...and it wasn't living in Iowa that caused it either, there was more to it than that.

I found a job working at a program for autistic students that had been kicked out of the mainstream school. I was an aid to a girl named Rachel. Rachel was a live wire. She'd ask, "Do you think I'm pretty?" I'd think fair enough question for a preteen girl, so I'd say, "Yes Rachel, you are very pretty."

But it was never enough.

"No, you don't" and she'd kick me in the shins, hard.

This went on and on for weeks and I had to go to the lead teachers for tips and strategies for dealing with the behavior. One boy there was non-verbal, and he seemed drawn to me. He would spend all day trying to find me so he could rub my arm. This was his way of expressing some interest in a somewhat socially appropriate manner and he spent the entire day trying to do so, so I let him.

Another boy named Bobby was also non-verbal. He had a very stout body and a constant look of being dazed and confused. He would go limp noodle at the most random parts of the day, we had to roll or pull him from one place to another. Each student had a 1:1 aid and there was 1 lead teacher for every 4 students, so I was always in good company.

We took the kids on one fieldtrip per week, and we took them out to eat once per week. The idea was we were going to teach them social skills.

Once in the fall, we took the kids to Goodlove's Farm. We went on a hayrack ride and the farmer that was giving us the ride was also clearly out of his mind, a fellow crackhead if you will. As he drove us around his farm, he told us a long rolling history of the land. I think he had dementia because he was repeating himself and not making any sense. At one point in the journey, he stopped the wagon and said, "Trivia time!" and as he said it, he put the tractor in park and turned the ignition off. He shifted his body and turned look at us.

"Alright kids, this wagon isn't moving until one of you kids get the right answer."

The thing was every child on that wagon was non-verbal except Rachel. I had known each of them for six months and could attest that I had never heard any of them utter a single word and there was no way Rachel was going to talk to Goodlove. It would be way out of her comfort zone.

But Farmer Goodlove went on, "Alright kids, who can tell me, what was Dorothy's dog name in the Wizard of Oz? As soon as someone says it, that'll be the ticket and we will move along."

He was met with absolute silence aside from Rachel who was just laughing which seemed to agitate Goodlove. She wasn't going to try and answer because getting a question wrong was a level of rejection, she wasn't willing to risk. Goodlove was perplexed and agitated.

"Ah come on kids, what was the little dog's name?"

More silence and more laughter from Rachel.

"I'll give you a hint, it starts with a 't.'" I think he felt disrespected because he was getting angry.

Again, more silence. This went on and on for so long, finally I hid my face out of Goodlove's view and said, "Toto," in my highest most childlike voice.

"That's right!" Goodlove said and he pointed to Bobby, "You are a smart little fella."

And Goodlove pulled a caramel candy out of his back pocket that he had been sitting on for the duration of the ride. It was a sad squished piece of hot candy.

Bobby tossed it overboard.

And Goodlove shook his head and finally turned the tractor back on. We kept driving along through the Iowan fields for another 30 minutes while he was going on and on about his great-grandfather, Frank Goodlove, in the glory days. Bobby stared off into space.

We took a lot of fieldtrips and there were a lot of interesting people that worked there. Diane was a teacher in a different room had once been stuck by lightning and every time she put on a watch with a dial it would stop ticking. She brought bags of watches that had stopped ticking to show us and did a few demonstrations.

There was also Tom who seemed to want to date me, but he never asked me out and, but he would do random things like put bags of groceries in my car with things like Lucky Charms, green tea, and soup when I wasn't looking. He knew I was hurting for money.

Bud was the leader of the of our pack of about 20 staff and he was over all the staff meetings. At one of the meetings Bud was trying to teach us how to have better communication with the parents, "Listen up everyone... most of the disabilities that we are dealing with are inherited, they are genetic. It could be that many of the parents have a hard time understanding what we are telling them. They might have cognitive deficits themselves, so we need to be aware of that."

Bud went on... and on... and on. I listened quietly, as I usually would, until I could take no more. I shot up straight out of my chair and yelled, "That is exactly right Bud, if someone has a family member that needs a little extra help that means the whole family is a bunch of FUCKING CRACKHEADS!" And I threw a book across the room. It hit the wall, and I ran out of the conference room.

Bud later found me and apologized. We had a long talk. It ended in laughter; we both couldn't stop laughing. I couldn't believe I had said *crackhead* in a meeting and Bud couldn't either. And from that day forward I had a name for myself, a nickname, *little crackhead*. It suited me.

I would still go home, and I even watched Josh for my parents while they went on their first vacation in decades. Josh was so upset by my mother's absence that he spent the entire week melting down or in the basement alternating between projectile vomiting and diarrhea. He never made it to the toilet, and I had to spend the week cleaning it up and trying to convince him that they would come back. And when they did return home, I had never been so happy to see them.

That short time in Iowa was mixed. My depression was so deep. I might have a good day at work, but I would come at the end of the day and collapse directly into bed, not able to move until the next morning when I had to be awake. My paycheck wasn't covering my basic monthly expenses. Sometimes, I would stare at the same dead fly that was trapped in the light fixture above my bed and feel intense kinship with its entrapment and demise. I couldn't help but to decide to leave again the day I got the email that said they were still looking for staff at childcare centers around the world.

I had to break my lease but that was easy because when it rained my bedroom would flood. I could see the water seeping in from my ceiling as I was in the basement. I threatened a

lawsuit in a letter I typed up. The landlord let me go in peace. I got rid of most everything I belonged condensing my worldly possessions to two suitcases.

To Meet a Murderer

We were seated at Thanksgiving dinner, four adults and a lot of kids, I don't remember how many kids, at least eight or nine. The adults were making small talk and my husband's brother, Marcus said something like, "You know, we really need a better system to reform pedophiles and murderers. Clearly, they have serious issues and need help."

My husband and Marcus grew up in low income in the south. Marcus is a tall guy well over six foot, he married his high school sweetheart, and he teaches at a public school. Marcus takes care of his nieces and nephews at his house, hence the Thanksgiving table. I respected Marcus but the day of the pedophile comment he really lost some of his luster as a human being, in my eyes at least.

When I was a kid, I remember my family members, mostly the males expressing strong opinions about pedophiles. One told me that he thought all child abusers should be tied up, taken up in a helicopter, and dropped onto a sharpened pole so that their bodies would be split in two. The family ethos was that we *really* hated pedophiles. My Dad even taught my two sisters and I defense moves to take down predators (one move involved grabbing someone's hypothetical manhood and twisting).

Looking back, I appreciate the sentiment of protection. I now make a living as a therapist and see first-hand the cost of childhood trauma and abuse. Childhood sexual abuse requires inordinate amount of time, energy, and heartache to heal from and I do believe that child abuse is the worst evil on earth.

About eight years ago, I spent a year working with food stamp recipients. I was assigned to career rehabilitation for ABAWDs (Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents). After a few weeks of seeing clients for their 15-minute appointments I learned that the majority of the

“ABAWDs” were felons; abusers, and violent offenders. My task of helping them find work was essentially impossible due to their records. It was eye-opening to enter a professional helping relationship with a human that seemed likeable enough, and then to learn a few weeks later that the person sitting across from me was a convicted murderer.

Anika Harris, in her book *Consciousness* offers a few insights on human behavior: “...we can’t decide what to think or feel, any more than we can decide what to see or hear...a highly complicated convergence of factors and past events—including our genes, our personal life history, our immediate environment, and the state of our brain—is responsible for each next thought” (34).

She also notes that we feel that we are in control but in many ways, we are just “along for the ride” (66). Meanwhile, in his book, *Incognito*, David Eagleman expands on the idea. We think we are the center of our own universe, when really, our awareness is just some distant star within (9). We have the delusion of knowing ourselves and free will is an illusion. The brain is composed of a team of rivals, and some of those team members are destructive, others are constructive. Those of us with highly developed impulse control can curb our behaviors into socially acceptable forms. Criminal behavior emerges when one loses the battle within. Eagleman says that when it comes to criminal activity it isn’t fair to assess blameworthiness – but rather, we should ask if we can ‘change’ or ‘reform’ the criminal. If we can change the criminal mind- then we should do so. If we can’t, the criminal should remain secluded from civilization (Eagleman, 192).

I agree with Eagleman, our conception of criminals needs to evolve, and the criminal justice system needs reform. But I’m not fully on board with an absolute abandonment of freewill.

For starters, Eagleman left out an important life phase: early childhood. Criminals lack impulse control and the main developmental task of a child from birth to five years old is to learn executive functioning skills, the foundation of which is learning impulse control and to balance and regulate one's urges to engage in socially unacceptable behaviors.

I worked in the field of Early Childhood Development for some years as an entry level infant caregiver as well as numerous leadership roles. Rather than trying to 'reform' a criminal, our money, time, and thought would be better spent helping young children to "think about thinking" and to learn to regulate their feelings and think about the consequences of their actions. It has also been proven, that investing in Early Childhood Education reduces criminality and helps societies economically.

If we know how to think about thinking, if someone teaches us this skill, we might become better humans or we might even access our own volition or freewill. In *The Mind and The Brain* by Jeffrey Schwartz one might start to understand the brain more in terms of quantum physics where everything about how we experience the world, our thoughts included, exist as instruments of possibilities and not strict certainties (273). In treating people with obsessive compulsive disorder Schwartz has proved that with willing patients a brain can be taught to act back on itself realizing possibilities other than one's ingrained patterns of behaving and thinking (292).

When I was director of a Texas preschool, I had one little boy, I'll call Ben. Ben's father was his main caretaker, a stay-at-home Dad and Ben's mother the breadwinner in the family. When Ben was 18 months old his father suddenly died in his sleep leaving Ben's mother with no choice but to enroll Ben in a preschool. Ben was almost three years old and he exhibited rage unlike anything I have ever witnessed in a child before. He attacked the other children

mercilessly sometimes biting their faces and drawing blood. He would pin kids to the floor and way lay them as they cried for help. One of the fathers from the class came to my office, his blood vessels popping, and said:

“Disenroll that violent child or we are leaving!”

Technically, the *right* thing to do was to kick Ben out of the school. Outsider parents, unaware of the situation, saw an unhinged child. Ben was experiencing profound grief. I did not expel Ben and he gradually recovered and was able to participate in normal activities, although the center lost a few families over the whole ordeal.

Anyways, I hadn't thought about Ben for some time, and I left the field some years ago, but just recently I went to an Immersive Van Gogh exhibit. Spectators file into a large room and high-tech projectors showcase Van Gogh's paintings in a larger-than-life all-encompassing display. Cool concept, but I was underwhelmed, my high heels were hurting my feet, and I could tell that my husband was doing his best to feign interest.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a boy dancing through a Van Gogh painting. I turned and saw it was Ben. He was flying, a vision of light and darkness, a shooting star of twirling colors.

I chatted with his mom for a while, and she told me that Ben was doing well; he no longer exhibited aggressive behaviors and he was well adjusted at his elementary school. Harris discusses of presentism vs externalism. Presentism sees time as a linear and it views the past and future and inaccessible. Externalism states that, “just because you are in one location or moment [in time] doesn't mean the others don't exist simultaneously”.

When I heard Ben was doing well and I saw him mixing Van Gogh's color palette and hopping in and out of the swirls of Starry Night, I had a feeling of connectedness. For me, the moment was everlasting.

Joshua 2007

Being born is a traumatic experience. We go from warmth, solitude, and a routine of predictability to a world of physical pain, bright light, chaotic voices, hunger and cold. Only when we return to our mother and our tiny bodies are once again engulfed in hers do we stop screaming. It is the familiar hum and thud of her heart that we had grown attached to and when we are taken from it, we panic. The return is the blissful moment.

But Joshua was born into his own silence. The pain of life was too much for him to protest because when he was born, he did not cry.

And that was the first thing my parents said when my aunt brought me to the hospital to meet him for the first time. Dad said, “He didn’t cry, not at all, even with a little slap from the doctor he didn’t cry. But he is eight pounds, and his lungs work great, he is a healthy boy.”

Josh was swaddled in a yellow cloth, he had blond curls on top of his pulsating soft spot and blue eyes that blinked back at me, wide open.

As the years went on, we’d often get into a conversation about *why he was the way he was*. These conversations were just as much about us wondering *why we were the way we were*, even though it was never explicitly said out loud.

We had a lot of theories. It might have been the mold that was discovered in his room when he was a year old. Or it was the pesticides and other toxins in the food and water supply. Maybe we’d say, it was the vaccines, the MMR. We’d talk about the fact that if a mother has the measles when she is pregnant the baby is more likely to have disabilities and maybe the same is true for infants that get the MMR if they were predisposed somehow with some vulnerability in their brain.

We'd talk about studies that point to the father's DNA or studies on the interaction of DNA and the environment. We'd talk about the theories of the refrigerator mother from the 1970's and how horrible that was to think that mothers used to get blamed for their child's disability because they weren't warm and loving. But it didn't stop us from wondering about his birth order and how he didn't get as much attention as he should. We'd even talk about how mom drank a lot of Coca-Cola when she was pregnant and didn't take her vitamins everyday like she was supposed to.

There were questions about his hearing, his fine motor skills, and his gut health. We talked about the mind-gut connection and nutrition, the effects of gluten and probiotics, good fats and protein, omega fatty acids, and vitamin D. There were vitamin B-12 shots in the bottom shelf of the refrigerator that we injected him with before school every day.

There were antipsychotic medications, antianxiety pills, antidepressants, and questions about medical cannabis to help with the symptoms. Chiropractors said it had to be the toxins. They'd adjust the bones in his neck and head which he loved and send him to the back office for a chelation foot bath meant to draw the venom of his torment out and away from his body.

Church leaders said that if you pray the sick person would be healed and once, they came to our home with vials of oils that they dumped on his head while praying that God would *heal this boy of all his afflictions*. Joshua had a hard time sitting still for his séance and he ran down the hallway screeching once it was over. The spiritual theories were discussed most often. Perhaps there were demons tormenting him in addition to some biological issue and it all needed to be addressed at once. Dad sometimes considered all the sin in his life, the sin of his father before him and wondered if we had all been cursed. He'd sit in his chair every morning praying and reading the psalms and he'd make us sit with him repeating the verses back and forth, an

invocation for forgiveness. We'd plead for a return to the place described in Deuteronomy chapter eight, the land that was given to the people after they repented, a *land of abundance that flowed with olive oil and honey and had brooks and deep springs and hills full of copper*. This was a good land that could be found if only we'd remember God and his goodness and repent and go back to our love for the Lord.

There was the issue of finding a cure, which was spoken of as inevitable. Sensory issues were a big part of his seeming discomfort and so we had a trampoline. Joshua loved the trampoline. It didn't have the safety nets like they do now and more than a few times we were launched off, catapulted up and away landing on the ground most often unscathed. I was good at launching Josh and sometimes we'd jump for an hour at a time, and I was told this was therapeutic for him and that maybe the issues of his brain were a sensory issue. Different puttees, weighted vests, and textured mats were provided as well.

We spoke so often about *why*, and we spoke so often on how to help. The conversations often went right back to where they started, we'd conclude that he was born this way. Afterall, he didn't even cry when he was born.

Children Change Everything

In the town center of Ansbach, Germany there was an Indian restaurant with a patio overlooking the square and rectangular tables for two that were quaint and gave off a feeling of eloquence. The whole restaurant felt that way, fancy, but the prices were reasonable and everyone that dined there generally did so in casual attire.

At this restaurant, they served the most delicious lamb curry I'd ever eaten, and for the 5 years that I lived near that Bavarian town I went there, usually on Sunday afternoons, and ordered a glass or two of the house red wine with the same lamb curry.

I also enjoyed, farther in the city walls, a place that served doner kebab on fries with a garlic aioli that was to die for. I didn't enjoy German cuisine as much, although sometimes sausages served over sauerkraut served as a good dinner paired with a dark beer instead of wine. One interesting drink was a Cola-Weizen which is coke and dark beer mixed, a surprisingly delightful combo with German food.

One of the most memorable meals I had while living in Europe was on vacation in Italy. I had gone there for a few days with my good friend Sherri, and we rented a small car and spent three days wandering the countryside. On the final day, the day that we were supposed to catch a short flight back home to Germany we developed an inescapable urge to tempt time and to drive our little car to Cinque la Terra, have lunch, and then speed to the airport.

That day, we parked the car at an outside lot and walked into the village because the buildings were on the cliff and the roads were winding and too narrow for cars. There the vistas overlooked the cliff out into the Mediterranean. We found a table at a restaurant that was jutting out over the cliff, and we sat there hovering over the sea in a stone perch eating oysters, octopus, shrimp, and a few fillets of fish.

We left and hit the gas and we made it with what we thought was enough time but missed the flight anyways. We were caught up in security because Sherri had a forgotten pocket-knife corkscrew combination in a recessed pocket of her carry-on.

Meat has always been a staple of my diet. As a child, for dad's birthday mom would cook steak and shrimp. On more normal evenings we had chicken casseroles, turkey burgers, and bacon sandwiches. I hadn't given any thought to my love of meat, in fact I ate it often for over 30 years, that is until my second daughter Jade was born.

The chaos started a few weeks after I had brought her home from the hospital.

I decided to put a whole chicken in the crock pot. As I was lifting the naked bird into the pot, I was overcome with the sensation of holding a once living thing that somehow paralleled to the feeling of placing my newborn baby in her bassinet for a nap. I felt nauseous.

That night while eating it I felt sickened with the realization that it was flesh I was putting in my mouth. From that day on, I was struck by looking into the eyes of cows on the side of the road and donkeys at petting zoos. Cats and dogs had the same effect. Sometimes even the birds that be-bopped on toothpick legs in my back yard would glance up with glistening eyeballs that asked, "*Would you even eat beautiful little me? You monster!*"

Sometimes when eating a cheeseburger, I would think about the fact that the meat came from a cow with big soft eyes; the image of the eyes attaching to the brain by strings of firing neurons was an image that haunted me. More developed nervous systems became impossible to eat like pork chops and beef kebab, fish tacos and chicken tenders were easier.

As Jade grew older and started eating table foods, she would often leave the meat untouched and would eat vegetables and fruit. Or like most children, she'd opt for bread and

peanut butter sandwiches or cheese. Once she became verbal, she started asking me about where the meat came from, and she'd comment even at three or four about those poor cows or chickens or fishes.

And when she'd make these comments, sometimes she'd go blank with sadness while giving me side glances of distain and horror.

Once when she was five and I was walking her about a half mile to school for her Pre-K class I stepped on a snail. It made a sick crunch when I did it. Jade stopped and went back, she hunched over elbow-to-knee surveying the carcass, "Mom! You killed this snail," she said, her eyes lighting up with fiery indignation.

"Jade, it was an accident and I'm sorry, now come on," I replied.

Jade was still hunched, and she kept looking at the crushed snail, its goop-like body oozing from shell fragments, and then back at me in disbelief.

It was time to get to school, and the feeling of crushing a snail was gross, so I decided to try and outsmart her or at least get a conversation going so she'd forget the snail and continue walking with me.

"Jade, it really was an accident. And I've seen you kill fire ants. On purpose," I accused.

Without pause she launched back, "Mom, this snail," she said pointing again, "is an innocent creature that would never hurt you. Fire ants are aggressive, they were biting me!"

Jade went on lecturing me for the rest of the walk, by the end of it, I knew explaining myself was pointless. Cows for cheeseburgers, lambs for stews, and innocent snails were simply off limits as defined by Jade's intuitive morals. She had a code by which her choice to kill ants was justified but that also caused her to mourn the loss of the snail. And when Jade spoke on this topic, and others, she did so with absolute authority.

I've never had the heart to tell Jade what I had did as a child. My sister and I had collected at least 50 or so grasshoppers, the strong flying ones and put them in jars with holes punched in the top. We created a living museum and decorated around the jars with wildflowers. There were a lot of sandstones in our yard, and we created different levels of platforms for the display and put plants and smaller bugs in the jars for food. It looked nice.

One morning we woke up early after a thunderstorm and went outside to find the jars full of water. Each grasshopper floated or hovered a few inches below the surface, drowned. We had to pour their once vibrant bodies out and watch them roll lifeless down our backyard hill. They looked like the bodies rolled in sheets that you see in crime shows. This accidental mass murder did influence me as a child, the pointless death that I orchestrated stung. But it never made me question my love for fried duck, calamari, and veal.

When it came to Jade and meat and the animals, I eventually gave in. I became a vegetarian. First, I stopped eating mammals, then birds, and finally, seafood. Vegetarian meals, it turns out, are just as good if not better than all the meat filled ones that I had enjoyed in my previous 38 years.

I do not know how to make sense of this experience but to say that Jade, even in her pre-verbal infancy, was saying something to me about meat. I have developed a distant bewilderment at finding pleasure in meat. I am flummoxed at my former self that never gave it a second thought and enjoyed the flesh of mammals of every variety once, twice, or even three times a day.

Having children has changed everything about my identity, what I hope for and how I move through the world. My sensitivity towards animals is just one such change.

Parents try and explain to others what it might be like to have children. We want to say something about the exhaustion or about the love we have for them that breaks us. We say we miss our solitude. For suburban dwellers like me, we explain that we sometimes miss our old backyards like in the countryside of Bavaria or cliffside of the Mediterranean. We try to express the joy our children surprise us with in the small inconsequential moments which is why we show people pictures of our children, we know it won't mean much to the person looking at the photo, we had the same experience before we were parents, but we can't help ourselves.

We tell people that on those rare nights the kids go to bed early and sleep well, we still can't sleep. On those nights we are worried about the influence of social media or a school bully. Or we are awake worried about the insidiousness of white supremacy or the fragile environment or we are trying to remember the last time we switched out the battery in the smoke detector.

There is no point in trying to explain what it will be like. The truth is, each child has their own spirit and each child challenges their parent in unique ways, ways I couldn't have imaged when I was living in Germany sitting on a terrace, eating lamb curry, and feeling quite satisfied.

Joshua 2008

The Cedar Rapids Public Library was a large two-story building. There were seven private reading rooms downstairs, rows of books nonfiction on science, history, and philosophy and rows of fiction books, science fiction, romance, and mystery. There was a small café upstairs that served mostly pre-packaged food and the children's section.

I preferred to go to the library alone, which I did often, but sometimes I had to bring my brothers and sisters. I would read to my other siblings while Josh would pace the isles, or he would go to the empty corridor and sprint back and forth. The library, unlike any other space in my world, had the power to make me feel calm and relaxed.

In 2008, Cedar Rapids Iowa flooded. The federal government said it was the worst disaster since Katrina leading the locals to call it *Iowa's Katrina*. I just call it a disaster and I remember the ordeal in frames.

The cause of the flood was said to be due to a proverbial perfect storm. It rained too hard for too long in the wrong spot. A manmade levee broke. Careless farming practices in the area had made the lands prone to flooding.

The flood of 2008 was a complex event because it was an act of God, and it was an act of man too. My best friend from high school lived near downtown with her parents in an old two story built in the early 1900's. It had a big porch, a basement, and a downstairs. All their furniture looked like antiques and the whole place was saturated with cigarette smoke from my friend's parent's habit of chain-smoking most of the day. That house, like many of the old houses near downtown, flooded completely. It was bulldozed in the months following the flood and my friend's family was homeless for several months before finding another place far out of town.

Cedar Rapids is the only American city where the city's government buildings are located on an island, a small sliver of land in the middle of the river and the rest of downtown was built directly on the banks. The Mother Mosque of America, the oldest building in the United States built for use as a mosque, flooded. There was an archive in the basement of decades worth of artifacts and everything was ruined. The downtown YMCA was flooded as well as the Paramount Theater, the African American Cultural Center, the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library, the downtown YMCA, as well as Theatre Cedar Rapids.

The library flooded too. The entire first floor was washed out by waves of flood waters. Thousands of books were destroyed including the entire adult collection downstairs and all the reference materials. All the books that I had held over the years was saturated by the waters that poured in from the Cedar River, through the streets, and into the first floor.

The children's books on the second floor were saved. There were a few rare collector's items that were stored in the upstairs offices that were also rescued from the library once the waters receded. The structure itself was saturated and soon covered in mold. It was the worst public library disaster caused by a flood or other natural disaster in the history of the United States.

A few miles away our small family home was flooded. The waters came up first through the toilet that was in the basement. Mom tried to fight them back by throwing sandbags into the toilet but then the waters seeped in from the streets. Mom and my youngest sister were out front with the neighbors trying to make little makeshift dams with sandbags the city had provided. Josh was beside himself, anxious and yelling.

I was talking to mom on a short phone call, and I heard her ordering directions at my little sister who was ten years old at the time, to place sandbags on this side or that one. She

sounded like a drill sergeant at war, frantic but forcing a sense of control in the commands she was giving.

Dad wasn't there. He had taken a job on the west coast. He said it was for the family, it was a well-paying job, and eventually he would move the whole family out west with him. A few times he had emailed me pictures of him out on hikes or with people I didn't recognize. He flew home at least twice a month and was also renting an apartment. I didn't understand how they were affording this arrangement, but it would come to light a few years later when my parent's marriage ended in a divorce. Around that time, massive credit card debt was brought to light, debt my mom had hidden, and my mom took all the blame. She declared bankruptcy as an individual.

In 2008, Mom was left to fend for herself with Joshua and the other two kids. She had put the house up for sale and had updated some of the paint and decorations in the house to make it more appealing. None of that mattered that summer because she was trying to fight the waters, alone.

That year, I was on assignment in Corpus Christi, Texas. I lived in a small room that had a bed and little bathroom; it was like a hotel room, and it was all mine. The room provided solitude after work.

On the right of my bathroom sink I put bottle of Burberry perfume, one of my first luxuries that I still couldn't all together afford. And on the left a few cosmetics including red lipstick which I had started wearing every day.

The room was right on the waters and every morning I could walk out my front door and go sit on the dock. There were also giant hangers on base that were sometimes left open. I saw massive war planes and men scuttling around them hurriedly. In the docks there were war ships

that opened to wide open Texas skies. In the mornings when I would go out jogging, I was sometimes passed up by units of military men and women signing the morning cadence, *left, left, left-right, left.*

On mornings when I had gone for a run I would get back feeling hot, my face beat red. I would go out on the dock and take off my shoes and socks. I'd put each sock in a ball and stuff them in my tennis shoes. Then I'd ease my feet into the water and let the waves splash my legs, sometimes the cooling waters would come up to my knees. I would look out on the gulf and watch the same cove where I would eventually see dolphins and I'd watch their grey fins bob through the waves.

High Rise

The attorney wore black patent leather shoes. They looked like something a celebrity would wear, high platforms, thick soles. Let me tell you, those shoes were on trend. I told her, “Nice shoes.”

And she said, “Thanks. These are my Friday shoes.”

“Fun Friday,” I said. Which was the wrong thing to say. Very bad choice of words, a socially awkward moment because my friend, Calli, was right there and her face was still puffy from crying in the car.

I was her supposed support person, and we were there talking about her divorce. Retainers and timelines. We were also talking about custody arrangements for her two kids, the house, the minivan, furniture, and retirement accounts.

It wasn't fun, a 20-year marriage was ending, and my friend had been crying for months. She had lost a lot of weight, she wasn't herself. But it was sort of interesting meeting with a high paid divorce attorney downtown, Dallas. I have morbid curiosity.

When I said *fun Friday*, Calli looked away. Lucky for me the awkwardness of the comment dissipated quickly, Calli must have forgiven me as she usually would, or she was too preoccupied that day to care. They got back to business, and I sat next to Calli. I tried to focus on my role. I was there to be supportive.

Out the window I gazed into the endless maze of skyscrapers of downtown Dallas. I thought about the people that owned those buildings, the ones at the center of downtown. It took some money to rent those high rises or to live in an apartment in one. It took some money to hire an attorney that worked in one which made it hard to imagine the amount of money it took to own an entire high rise. That day, we were among the little people going in and out of the

massive structures that sandwiched attorneys, finance brokers, and executives in their own offices that reached far higher than the suburbs where we lived.

Calli's on the ride over alternated between an exhausted longing, "How could he?" and rage, "That crazy mother fucker hurt our kids!" For nearly two decades her soon to be ex had been leading a double life. He couldn't contain himself in one reality. He had to go in and out of several lives. Realizing the truth of his other secret family was shocking. Calli was still in shock, I had been a friend of the whole family, so I felt the secondary shock. The worst part was how much it was hurting the kids because they were young, both still in elementary school.

The attorney had been doing this type of work for 15 years. She came across to me as a strong person, yet she was able to communicate to Calli a calm message.

"You've done all you could" she'd say and at least four times she said, "We've got this, time to button this shit up."

When I've seen people in a rage, it has generally meant the person has turned to violence. It wasn't true for Calli. The rage, when she could feel it, would pull her away from sadness and into the truth. Only in the angrier moments could she fully understand that the man she married did not live up to his end of the deal. He was a liar. The lie started with the things he told himself and then radiated out to what he did and said to other adults and children.

Calli was an executive at a Dallas based company and she is the type of mom to go out in the street and play soccer with the kids or stay up late making a Halloween costume or give up all her spare time on a weekend to be at the recital. But there was so much crying and so many days of trying to convince her to get out of bed. I hated seeing her down in large part because she had always been one of the most vibrant people I had ever known. And I loved seeing her angry.

It is a sign of intelligence to be able to be able to comprehend that several things are true at the same time, things that might seem like they oppose each other. Or to understand within oneself that it is possible to feel many conflicting emotions at once and that all of it is valid feeling.

At a base level, Calli was sad, angry, desperate, and determined all at once. She wanted the divorce, and she didn't. The attorney was listening to Calli and providing counsel, the attorney was powerful woman, and she was also caring.

This is what I saw that day. I saw two women in a room that felt like it was in the sky. The earth below provided a foundation, the beds of roses around the entrance reaching up the side. The building outside steeped up into the clouds and into the blue sky that was peppered by birds in flight. They were talking about the details of a divorce that had to happen. The two women were powerful, and they were loving. Calli wanted the divorce, and she also didn't. The women knew how to express themselves and they wore great shoes. It was all true at the same time.

Resurrection

Again, he prostrated himself and said, "What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?" 2 Samuel 9:8

My father was a Bible loving, hard ass ex-Marine that relished in his power to teach his children to work hard. He was a disciplinarian, authoritarian and the type of dad that would take his young daughters out before dawn for Physical Training, or PT as the Marines called it. I can still hear his voice ringing in my ears,

"I will count the cadence; You will count the repetition."

"Yes, sir," I'd yell back as I commenced the morning's jumping jacks, sit-ups, and pushups.

My friends would later nickname my dad, "The General." When my sister and I were in middle school he pulled us out of school to be homeschooled so that we could help provide therapy for my younger brother who has autism. But during our year of homeschooling, he also decided to teach my sister and I the value of a hard-earned dollar.

Dad signed us up for a paper route. Every morning we would wake up at 4:00 AM. Freshly bundled newspapers awaited us at the end of the driveway. He would throw a bundle in middle of the backseat and stack the rest throughout our minivan. As we drove my sister and I would roll up the papers and bind them with a rubber band. If it was raining or snowing, we used sleek plastic bags to protect the papers. We never missed a day. Our hands would be tinted grey from ink as we sat smelling the aroma of fresh papers sometimes still radiating warmth from the press.

We would run down the right side of the road papers slung over her shoulder and I would run down the left. We had color-coded maps to tell us who got the paper. Some people got a paper Monday-Friday only, their house was colored purple. The Saturday/Sunday only houses were yellow. The green houses were everyday houses.

“Keep up with your sister” he’d bellow from the car

Or “Not that house, Keep moving!”

We instinctively ran as fast as our legs would carry us, we took the route and dad’s watchful eye seriously. He would drive the van down the middle of the road and then pick us up to refill out sacks and we’d got to the next road.

Snickers was our dog. She was a chocolate lab, and she came on the route and would gleefully jump around keeping our little weary paper throwing souls company. Snickers was about two years old at the time and full of bounding energy. I would often go home with her muddy paw prints covering my clothing top to bottom. We didn’t have anywhere to go, so I didn’t mind. Snickers was our best pal.

One morning it was time to cross over this field that had a dirt road going through it get to the next neighborhood. We jumped in the van and left Snickers out running because she refused to climb back in. On this morning, dad was gunning it through the field. As he drove, we suddenly felt two very distinct and hard thunks. The unmistakable sick feeling of running over a body, twice. The first clunk was Snickers going under the front wheel and the second clunk was the back. Dad hit the brakes.

We looked back through the tall un-tinted back window to see Snickers laying there in the middle of the road, lifeless.

Dad got out of the van, and then did something weird. He fell to his knees, and then on his face. My shock and sadness over Snickers were eclipsed by the sight of my father laying face first in a dirt road. His back flanks were heaving with dry desperate sobs.

In all my years, I've never seen Dad cry. The General was down, dad was eating dirt. He uttered a prayer, a moaning prayer, about Snickers, our beloved dog, and forgiveness.

A train lumbered in the distance. I stood there, and I too felt my eyes fill with hot tears that started rolling down my face. Dad lay there unmoved in a trance of submissive prayer. I took my sister by the hand, but she wouldn't move, so I walked towards Snickers, alone. Our puppy was just a pile of sad brown fur.

I was about two feet from Snickers when a bird flew overhead squawking loudly. Snickers, in an instant, jumped up straight up from death back into the morning light. She shot off running again. It was as if nothing never happened.

“She's alive” I yelled, “She's alive!”

I went running through the field with Snickers. Snickers got back into the van without being asked, unscathed and without injury.

Dad looked up from his dirt alter. He got back in the van and yelled, “Come on, next road, we don't want to be late.”

BOSS

Mrs. Freeman was a boss. She had a solid oak desk in her office. When she laughed it filled all the Ansbach School Age Services building. If something broke in the building, Mrs. Freeman didn't put in a work order, she fixed it herself. If she couldn't fix it, she called her husband who was a Sergeant Major in the Army. He would come help her because they were equals and they took care of one another. Mrs. Freeman would brag all the time and she'd tell us, "If he gets home before me, he cooks dinner. If I get home first, I cook." If it was a late night at work she'd laugh and say, "Mmm I wonder what he is cooking tonight! Ladies my man is cooking something."

I had just arrived to that German base. I was a little lost, I was very skinny, too skinny. I was disoriented. The kids I taught there were a handful, most of them had at least one parent deployed to war so they would arrive full of nervous energy. I would usually just take them out back to a big field and have them run laps. They'd run farther and longer if I ran with them so I often did. The housing where I stayed was about a mile away and I didn't have a car so I walked back and forth to work. In wintertime it was very cold, but I'd arrive to the center in the mornings to the pot of hot coffee Mrs. Freeman, the director of the program, was brewing in the staff lounge.

Mrs. Freeman's speeches about dinner were fascinating to me. I had never in my life seen my father cook dinner. Honestly, coming from the evangelical community in Iowa I couldn't remember ever seeing a man cook anything. I had seen men do plenty of other things like take out the trash, change a lightbulb, or fix a car.

But to see or hear of a grown man cooking food? Never.

Mrs. Freeman is the first woman boss I ever knew. And she was certainly the first Black woman boss. Mrs. Freeman was from the deep south in the United States but he had been living in Germany for years. She was fluent in German; her children had grown up there. Mrs. Freeman told me she was going to keep her family in Germany as long as she could.

There was a lot of work to be done at the center. There were 200 children in and out each day. Some of them showed up at 5:30 AM for breakfast so that their parent could report for duty on the Army base. Most of them arrived after school and would stay at the center until late. Mrs. Freeman was also in charge of several smaller centers in the area.

Mrs. Freeman delegated a lot of work to me. I've always had a high excess of energy so I was happy to take on more and more work. She handed me a sheet of paper with ten rules for the kids scrawled on it, things like, 1. Clean Up Equipment After Use, 2. Use Respectful Words with One Another. She told me write the ten rules on a poster board and hang it up. Instead, at night I used large scrolls of butcher paper to create cartoon characters that illustrated each rule and I printed the words underneath the drawings. I had the drawings professionally laminated and then hung them in the gym. It was a wall sized mural. After that, I was Mrs. Freeman's favorite, her right-hand gal. She loved that mural and she showed it off to all of the officers that came to visit the center and all of the new parents that came to tour. I was happy to do Mrs. Freeman's bidding. I had never been someone's favorite before; the feeling was sublime.

Mrs. Freeman didn't just brag about her dinners, she bragged about a lot of things and I loved to hear her stories. I'll never forget some of her stories about her first marriage. She was with a man that would beat her. She told us about the day she had enough. She picked up a phone receiver, the old school heavy ones, and she hit him back. Mrs. Freeman told us, "I fought back,

and I got out” and she’d tell me and the other young women that if we ever found ourselves in a similar situation we should do the same. Fight back. Get out.

Growing up I saw women serve. I saw them obey. I saw them endure violence and I heard too many stories of rape and sex abuse. It was the norm. I had never heard a woman talk about leaving or fighting back. Alice Walker invented the term Womanism which is a feminist perspective that centers a Black woman’s perspective and experience. Even if Mrs. Freeman never said it, I believe she was a womanist.

I consider myself to be a feminist because there are certain things, I want such as an education or free expression and Mrs. Freeman showed me the ways that white feminism had failed. Every time I tried to thank her for being my mentor, there in Ansbach or over the years in a card or email here response has been consistent. She asks me a question, “Do you know how powerful you are?” And the question did wonders then, and it still influences me. It takes me away from my hope for my Hallmark moment. The question itself dries my tears. The question helps me to forgo what a white woman’s downfall has traditionally been: conformity, obsession with thinness and being frail, obedience, gentleness to a fault, never ending forgiveness for bad behavior, and silence. The question makes me feel powerful and it makes me feel responsible.

I remember I had come to Germany for three months and left and then come back for other three months. Mrs. Freeman saw me, and she lit up. She hugged me. She was standing next to the cook and said, “Look her, she came back!” It was that warmth in part that led me to decide to stay in Germany and make it my home.

Mrs. Freeman told me that she was hosting reunification event at the center for the soldiers that had just returned from deployment to Iraq and their families. She asked me if I could stay late and help. “Yes ‘mam,” I told her. That night while we were setting up, Mr.

Freeman came through the door. He was holding a pot of hot soup he had brought in from the car and with corn bread.

Mrs. Freeman was the person that eventually helped me land my first good paying job, my first real opportunity. Mrs. Freeman would never accept my thanks or my gratitude. Her source of power and energy didn't come from me or my feelings. Mrs. Freeman was a real leader and a real boss.

Joshua 2020

It was a Tuesday around 4:00 AM and Josh had left the hotel on foot. I would later see on Google maps that there was a McDonalds visible from the front door of the hotel just across the interstate. I think he was headed there for a burger and fries. He was on a trip with our dad.

At 4:30 AM, Josh was hit by a blue sedan. The police guessed Joshua's age to be 25, they were only one year off.

He was taken to Live Oak Memorial Hospital and treated for a broken leg, road rash, and injuries to his left ear and temple. The police report described the driver as a man with his son who provided first aid and called 9-1-1 and waited with my brother until the police arrived.

When Dad woke up and Josh was gone, he called the police and eventually traced him to the hospital. As they stitched him up, Josh led them in a rendition of a Disney classic from the movie Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs as the needle pulled his torn flesh back together. Josh always loved mimicking the words to Disney songs. That morning the ER staff and Josh all sang together, 'Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho, It's home from work we go...' When I went to visit him, I didn't know what to bring, so I got cupcakes.

His ear was gnarled, and his scalp and flesh were textured like ground chuck. Josh was limping for the fractures in his leg and his eyes communicated a searching and unspoken anxiety

Electric Feel

Superhighway 130 provides a ten-minute-high speed zip from my house to Gigafactory Texas or ‘the new Tesla plant’ as the locals call it. It’s a great whale structure, employing hundreds of Jonah characters in hard hats coming in and out of its gapping steel jaws. The mammoth covers over three-square miles, one drives by it and wonders if its grey plank side will ever end. Tesla and other tech companies have come to the Austin area in swells consuming life as we knew it whole, like krill through the baleen plates of a humpback.

I chose this suburb, known as Pflugerville about six years ago, unaware that soon Tesla and an offshoot of Space X would be so close. At the time, I was looking for trees. Back then, in the earlier 2010’s before COVID-19 and the explosion of tech industry this little corner at the outer edges of Austin was quiet and affordable.

I don’t remember thinking about the physical house that much when we signed the contract for the first home I would own, I just wanted shaded walking paths. It took a few months of living in the house for me to realize that the living areas were enormous and the kitchen very small, a detail that now stands out like neon. In the mornings my husband, two children, and dog bump into one another endlessly over bobbling cups of coffee, lunchboxes, and cries for buttered toast with jelly.

My first impressions of things can be off, my visions self-deceiving.

On a recent walk after dropping the kids at school, I stopped to talk to a neighbor. She was pissed at Elon Musk. The issue was she was having a new swimming pool installed in her backyard and that tycoon Musk had taken all the concrete and used it up for his factory leaving all of us in the burbs in need. Musk has more than his fair share of concrete and with a net worth

of 240 billion dollars more than his fair share of the world economy. Still, despite having Elon as a neighbor, the increasing traffic, taxes, and never-ending construction and lack of materials for homeowners like us, I still like the neighborhood. Enough of the trees remain and I enjoy my walks and sitting on my back porch. I can hear birds and quiet presence of wind giving the leaves a shuffle. I can hear the quickening hum of the interstate and it reminds me that I am in the backyard of the world's richest man. On an otherwise quiet and shaded back porch that overlooks other people's back porches I am sitting on the shoreline of all that is to come.

This all gives me the feeling of living in the future. Sometimes, it is even a glamorous feeling like I am living in Detroit in the 1950's, only better. I have the house, yard, car, fence, two kids and a family dog that completes the picture. Sometimes when I'm in a better mood and the traffic isn't grating on me too much, I imagine these scenes coming to life with all of us in electric cars, and some super-sonic electric grid pulsing underneath us, a grid that has zero carbon emissions. In these dreams, we are all doing well for ourselves, and enjoying the newfound utopia.

It must be that some happier time is repeating itself in Pflugerville, while I feel crowded and pressed, things feel prosperous. It's a boomtown. But what of history repeating? What of the 1950's and Detroit and my vision? In her essay, *The Future of Time*, Toni Morrison spoke on the idea: "The fifties, a favorite, has acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony, although it was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution. And here one realizes that the dexterity of political language is stunning and shameless. It enshrines the fifties as a model decade peopled by model patriots while at the same time abandoning the patriots who lived through them to reduced, inferior, or expensive health care; to gutted pensions; to choosing suicide over homelessness" (117).

In my faltering visions, Detroit of the 1950's appears pristine and prosperous, maybe like Pflugerville today. It could be that the prosperity has gone to my head. I struck out and opened my own business and didn't have to do much marketing, there are enough people around with enough resources to get a piece of the progress for me and my family. In my little world, things are booming. Pflugerville itself is booming, but not to everyone.

Pflugerville was the topic of a recent therapy session with a client I have been seeing for nearly a year, a client whose identity I have concealed in writing this.

She was a stay-at-home mom, and her husband did very well in the restaurant industry providing a nice home, this one with a completed pool, and tuition for their three children to attend a local private school. She is a white woman who was working to overcome childhood abuse. Her father had physically abused her causing her to adopt a stooped and fearful posture in her otherwise ideal existence. We had made a great deal of progress, she was walking taller, metaphorically. She reported feeling more confident in her role as a mom and a wife and she started coming to some of our sessions with an unashamed smile that was coming to replace her once grey and tearful presence.

At one of our sessions, she came in to talk about how she was thinking about moving away from Pflugerville, it seemed like a good idea, but she was torn about uprooting the kids. It wasn't the traffic or the taxes it was something else, something she was having a hard time describing. She said that her backyard led up to a road that was getting busier. Her husband told her that anyone could jump that fence.

"Anyone could come over the fence, anyone! They could attack me and the kids," she said it with a detached fear. I'm not so sure she believed it herself.

But she went on, “The demographics around here are changing you know. We are looking for a house in Georgetown.”

Georgetown, Texas just ten miles from Pflugerville is comprised of 90% white residents compared to our area which was only 65% white (Census.gov, 2020). A recent report from my children’s elementary school reported that only 40% of the students were white. Georgetown, although only ten miles or so to our West and equally as plagued by rising taxes and traffic is for all intents a white enclave. Pflugerville, with increasing numbers, is comprised of Black, Latinx, and Asian residents and these numbers continue to shift, the percentage of white residents continues to decline.

Despite Pflugerville’s low crime rate, despite it giving me the feeling that future had arrived, Pflugerville is, a feared place, a place of changing demographics in which men jump fences and harm unsuspecting white women and their children. At least that was how my client saw our neighborhood.

Reparative writer, Jess Row, put it this way, “the particular genius of whiteness in this cultural moment is that it has become transportable; any space, imaginary or physical, present, or past, can be deracinated, or, in the language of gentrification, ‘pioneered.’ These regions include Crown Heights, The Mission, Boyle Heights, South Austin, or U Street in Washington...There’s always a feeling about white flight—which could be better described as white movement white space appropriation, or, as some critics call it, a new form of colonization—that it is a natural inevitable, process, like the movement of the free market itself” (118).

That afternoon, I picked up my daughters from school. They love to go to the school playground afterwards and run around, blow off steam. There aren’t as many trees there but there

are large shade structures I can sit under and watch the kids. I usually bring some snacks and some waters; it makes the transition home much easier when they get to play.

There were three or so Indian families whose children ran too, a Latina girl alternated English and Spanish phrases with her father, and duo of Black sisters taught my daughters new gymnastics moves next to a white mother watching her son swing. The scene is not so unusual. The U.S. is now 57% white, and that number is shrinking faster than predicted, from 2010 to 2020 the multiracial population increased by over 200% in ten years the white population was the only population to see a decline of 8% (Census.gov, 2020). Things are changing just as the Austin landscape is being forever altered by the influx of the tech industry, an industry that defines the economies of the children that live here and will continue to do so in the future.

I've met several Pflugerville women who are moving to Georgetown. One white woman was talking to me at a pool party holding a mimosa. She told me that she was moving to Georgetown,

“It's getting depressing around here,” she said.

I kept asking this woman ‘why?’ I wanted to understand how she understood her reasons. She had a hard time articulating and became exasperated and asked me if I had seen any high school homecoming decorations up in our community. I told her the truth, which was I hadn't seen any decorations to which she replied, “Exactly, not a single homecoming decoration. That's why it is depressing, that's why we must get out of here, because things are going downhill. That is why I'm moving to Georgetown.”

I don't find it as depressing, as much as it is dizzying at times, the future is after-all, fast and accelerating.

Last week, May 14, 2022 an 18-year-old entered a Buffalo, New York grocery store and murdered ten, injured several others, and added to the collective racial trauma in the United States.

The next day, I was at the swimming pool with my daughters watching them dive for pool toys. It was one of the first swims of the summer, so they were having a really good time. They had different colored diving gems. I was taking them in groups and throwing them out, sending them on “missions” to collect five blue gems, or seven pink ones. I had to sit and watch them, my youngest is still learning to swim and sometimes I must reach out and help her. There was a group of ten or so white folk behind me and their conversation was coming in and out of my awareness as I watched my children on their adventure. This group of adults started talking about neighborhoods in Austin, the good and the bad ones. One old white man's voice described a neighborhood in Austin as bad, “Yes, you know that one to East. It is a predominantly Black one.”

The shooter terrorized a gun, this man at the pool with his words. Everyone in that group said nothing or they nodded in agreement. The Buffalo incident was devastating but this man's words were as well, because the sentiment of racism is so prevalent and so accepted that things like this shooting are going to keep happening until white Americans change and that starts with our relationship to our history and the future.

I can't help but to go back to Toni Morrison. I can't see the past clearly, places like Detroit in the 1950's, without considering a broader view of experiences.

In the past, we settled for seeing the past, and envisioning the future through our white eyes, our own lens. Singular vision did not survive the past, it won't survive the future.

Morrison in another of her visions wrote that in the past we spoke of “our children” (117). The Georgetown ladies, although misguided, are thinking of their children. But Morrison asks us, what about changing the pronoun, what about “the children.” Morrison went on, “...[the] future will be shaped by those who have been pressed to the margins, by those you have been dismissed as irrelevant surplus, by those who have been cloaked with the demon’s cape” (126).

Morrison concludes that when we re-tell the past for what it truly was, through lens of those that were unheard, the “future can take its first unfettered gasp” and she wrote something that sitting to the side on the playground, watching every child, all *the* children, I believe, “Time does have a future. Longer than its past and infinitely more hospitable- to the human race” (126).

If Toni Morrison was right and there is a future, it will be a future that survives threats of singular vision, systemic oppression, glorification of historical violence and the military machine, and the nuclear age. The future though won’t be found in self-deceiving visions of the past, in my idealized version of Pflugerville or Detroit. The future isn’t in Georgetown. I’m speaking to myself as a white American and to mothers of white children. I am speaking of all the children.

There is an electric feel in Pflugerville, Texas. The traffic buzzes in patterns of red and yellow lights, Tesla charging stations pop up on every corner zapping every sleek car engine into their electric lives of modern speed and acceleration devoid of petroleum.

The children here are numerous, they crowd the grocery stores with incredible enthusiasms, and they line their shelves with unheard-of books about new children that come from everywhere flagged in their country’s lost glory.

The children overtake those playgrounds baking in the sun, their skin a kaleidoscope coming in multitudinous shades of melanation. They climb the slides backwards to the tops, claiming their thrones as sweaty kings and queens with holes ripped in the knees of their pants. I can hear them speaking multiple languages and they seem to laugh at my confinement to a singular language, English.

These children easily conquer English and they also speak Spanish, Swahili, Yoruba, German and Hindi. The words and sentences and paragraphs roll off their lips so easily.

I can hear their words gathering strength as lightening does. They swing next to one another pumping their legs furiously as they all shout, “Higher! Higher! Demanding once and for all to play together.

Conclusion: A Retelling of The Book of Ruth Chapter One

The soft white roses were swelling, and she wore a long red dress. It was velvet, the tips of the fabric dusted the wood floor as Ruth sat by the fire, watching.

The Christmas tree was set, it was beaded in fuchsia garlands and decorated in the purple feathers of peacocks. A black cat with a shiny coat lived in the corner, keeping warm in the empty decoration box marked “X-Mas”. The cat was clawing the cardboard fibers raw as the gold lights of the tree shown out a small window reflecting on new snow.

A butcher knife and the blood of pears pooled on the coffee table next to cherry pits, wine, and unwrapped chocolates that spilled mousse. In time, Ruth looked away from the fire. She saw the ornate wallpapers of Queen Naomi unfolding like green sunrises down the long hallway lined with candlesticks. It was leading her to the front door. Ruth followed the light, and there at the door on either side were two columns and the passage was guarded by a man.

It was a tin man, and he was dressed in the square and rectangular ways of a soldier with medallions pinned to his uniform. The soldier told Ruth she could leave if she desired. But he advised against it. The tin man told her unknowable things about her life and her memory, and he handed Ruth a white tablet of stone and on it a chiseled symbol showing her true name. Beyond this door he said, “You will lose everything.” But there was nothing to lose.

Ruth went out, expecting a road. But there she was met with darkness and arctic air that threw her dress and clipped her ears and nose. There the waters and sky had become one and when she looked behind her, the door through which she had entered was gone.

She could not tell where the sky ended, where everything else began. She dipped her fingers over the side her vessel, it was like a small boat. She felt the substance below that was

like water, because it felt uniform, but it contained increasing texture, or multitudes of feeling like the swarming of rain clouds beneath. Ruth felt as if she were above. It was as if she was looking down on the sky and into the space in-between, the space just before the surface of the ocean. She could also hear what sounded like the full roar of a jet's engine or the flow of blood. The air was cold and clear.

In the distance appeared another small light, like a pin prick. Ruth was drawn to it and the thought, *If I ever see my parents again, they will not see me, I will not be recognizable.* She was carried forward, the light an ever-expanding magnet that pulled her to itself, to the alien homelands of her rebirth.

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Vita

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