

CIVILIZATION
and
MEMOIR OUTSIDE OF SELF

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SARAH HESTON

Dr. Andrew Hoberek and Dr. Scott Cairns, Dissertation Supervisors

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertations entitled

CIVILIZATION

and

MEMOIR OUTSIDE OF SELF

presented by Sarah Heston,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Andrew Hoberek

Professor Scott Cairns

Professor Johanna Kramer

Professor Anand Prahlad

Professor Rabia Gregory

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CIVILIZATION

Sarah Heston

Dr. Andrew Hoberek and Dr. Scott Cairns, Dissertation Supervisors

ABSTRACT

This memoir that recounts my struggle to decide whether to follow my father, Trevor, training for survival in the cataclysms that he believed were imminent, or to settle into society in a way he never could. At the center of this narrative is Trevor's sudden death when I was a teenager. Alone after Trevor's death, I sell illegal guns on the streets of San Diego, figure out how to pay the phone bills, and pit my power against that of lawyers and cops. This is a braided narrative of a girl becoming a woman of Endtimes, in a world dark enough to hold my father's delusions about the meaning behind earthquakes, celebrity deaths, and genocide, but bright enough to show me how the lowest man can—beyond death—educate a girl in the most exalted love. The narrative barrels through scenes of California's restricted mountains and skunky highways, a state mental hospital on the Arizona-Mexico border, and the eerie plains of Missouri. This is a contemporary work of literature that fits in with apocalyptic works of fiction and genre literature, but what separates *Civilization* is that it is not fiction—it is a disarming memoir that shows a hidden California upbringing as native as the Blue Oak and as foreign as the Wormwood Sage, where an orphaned daughter learns to separate dirt from concrete, coincidence from prescience, and the death of one from the death of all.

If he ever coughed, it was because he had a cold, and he rarely did. Now he is dead, but through no fault of his own. If I die now it will definitely be my fault. That is the difference between us, and it is a big difference.

—Per Peterson, *In The Wake*



The day there is detachment from the world at large, the brakes of each exalted Volvo will be repaired. This day will be Saturday or Sunday or both, and my father will let me know by backing up a vehicle into the carport in the early hours, a clouded hand made from exhaust reaching down, down the open carport door, through the back hallway, and into my bedroom. My father will rev the engine to mark this day, our day, until I scream from my bed that I am awake already so he doesn't have to break some California pollution code, or kill me, or render me sterile in the process of his work. Trevor will yell back down the back hallway to me, his pierced, dyed, and very serious teenage daughter,

well if you're awake already, why don't you come help me drain the brakes

and since it will be true that I will already be awake, that I will be cold enough to see my breath in the winter months, and in the other months I will still be cold and my hands turned to fists from fear, from my own dreams, I will oblige my father. In this way, we are both exalted as the thick metal, we are made, and that is why when I emerge from a punk rock-postered room my father will have the Volvo driver door open for me, will have learned by then not to close the door on my leg. I will think,

I could punish him later for each door closed on me, but that will be when we are
both well enough to tease

and that's not even to mention the leg burns I will have collected from the motorcycle
rides through California canyons—Decker, Topanga, Laurel, Mulholland, Sycamore—
and the deserts, which will always surround us to the east. You can drive through
Southern California forever and not know there's civilization, if you want to. On the days
we will not drive, I pump brakes because it's one of my jobs. I will have done this so
many times that I will rest my eyes, listen for his sounds,

go or now

and I will drop my head into one god, a large Volvo steering wheel with braided plastic
or leather, and pray, which will mean sleep, which will mean sleep without the rest of
what I can't drop into a hole. Our house will not know a vacuum for months, but the cars
will meet the Snap-on shop vac,

a beautiful red and white robot that will not be made like they used to, a thick
funnel of a machine that I can put my arms around and at times I will

After the brakes there will be orange juice and cereal, sometimes bran flakes with a scoop
of vanilla ice cream

because there won't be women around to tell us not to

and there will be an orange juice and vodka for Trevor before 1995

but that will be done after that year, done by what will be now

that will be gone forever with many things

then it will just be orange juice and that will be much better than before. We will learn that there are ways to change things. He will not be as hard on me. He will not tell me

do it again

every time I do anything. He will not tell me I am not as adept as I should be. There will be two forks and two spoons in the kitchen drawer. There will be one load of laundry between us each week. There will be a case of illegal and legal guns that will protect us in California, and there will be Volvos outside and money under a living room mattress. There will be his red beard and my red head. There will be fire. There will be red unless we're in a black and white photograph, and even then, that image

will only exist in the world's film

because our story, when we tell it

is red, red.



In the beginning there were sharp things. There were my father's knives and my mother's face. There were porcelain dolls that I busted open with a hammer from my stepfather's toolbox. But things change. Rich left his toolbox and newborn son, Spencer, for jail again and LuAnn got so high that her face softened like a dollop of cream resting in a spoon. LuAnn lifted sharper things around her, glass and razors and mascara wands. I was eleven or twelve and my name was Sarah. I was Spencer's older half-sister and Rich's step child and LuAnn's first born. I was terrified and moved permanently to what was before my weekend home, with my father.

Trevor sharpened the knives and swooped inside gun hollows. He killed deer and rattlesnake, simmered chuck and corn, put meat on our metal plates. With our two forks we ate out of a crockpot full of ham hocks and black-eyed peas. He eventually stopped using, and LuAnn eventually disappeared. I had a better version of the father I already liked more at his worst than my mother at her best, which was when she stopped yelling, flailing, sat under the covers and let me be. At Trevor's I lay in bed and listened to the rhythmic movement of a blade across an oiled block, always the blade turned away from him but working the sharpness in, in. Sometimes I even slept. Sometimes I didn't worry

about porcelain dolls who I knew wanted to kill me with their teeth gnawing through fixed smiles, biting my skin until it was as smooth as theirs. I accepted my father's education in masculinity, and just as on the weekends before, we camped in the mountains of California with our guns, with our bodies covered in mud, and nothing else. We were like the quietest beasts, so I didn't worry about becoming a woman. I never worried about that with him. I worried that if he left me, I would die.

Was it worry that made my heart and hands move so fast? Was it why I graduated high school and started community college at 14 years old, worked full time at Tower Records? I had been at Conejo Valley High School so briefly that when I walked to get my diploma, some officials blinked at me because, who was I? I woke at 5 AM each morning to do step aerobics on one of my father's ammunition boxes, start my History of American Women class at 7 AM, then off to work by 3. I planned to finish a PhD and be rich by the time I was 25. It seemed so soon. There just wasn't enough time. I had always known there wouldn't be enough time for any of us. My father said to his 14-year-old daughter at her high school graduation, *why do you want to do everything so quickly?* My father said to his 12-year-old daughter, *get a job and contribute so you're not a waste of space.* I lied that I was 16 when I was 12 so I could work at a surf shop on Thousand Oaks Boulevard. I lied to fellow students in college that I was 18 so they wouldn't shun me. I don't think I had ever lied to Trevor.

One day after work and school it occurred to me that LuAnn could be dead. I had a feeling and here's the crux of living in civilization: you need to examine the difference

between coincidence and prescience, you need to know that you might worry a thing will happen while it does happen and it means nothing. Or you need to commit. You need to know that coincidence is a lie, that this world will kill you because you are supposed to be dead. You can go live in the mountains. You can limit the risks. But while you plan for that, you can drive to your mother's and see if she's dead.

I drove to LuAnn's house because at times she was there. I walked through the front door of the house I grew in every week day to the living room where Rich watched Jeopardy and Magnum P.I. A group of men there asked me, *who are you?* Indeed. I said, *I am LuAnn's daughter*, and I had never said that before. I walked to the back of the house. Spencer was asleep in a room that used to be my own. In the farthest bedroom, I saw my mother. LuAnn stared at herself in a mirror. She was shaving her face with a razor, as a man would, but on her dry cheeks. She was alive. What to ask her at that moment to understand? My eyes darted between a poster of Fabio or a man like him taped to the ceiling above the waterbed and lacy, feminine details hanging here and there, and a crack pipe. Maybe all the woman things all over could have been my way into asking what it meant to be a woman, what I was supposed to know before she died. I wanted to know what kind of woman my mother was. I wanted to know what kind of woman I came from if I was wrong and she wouldn't die. But I wasn't wrong, and I couldn't ask LuAnn what would have been most helpful in that moment. She shaved her face over and over with Rich's razor because Rich was in jail without razors. I asked, *what's the pipe for, Mom?* She looked up at me as if I had always been there, and you know, sometimes someone doesn't have to tell the truth for someone else to get it, even

someone who was like me, 16 years old, working and in college for two years, no longer a virgin, like that had something to do with being a woman or a child. At that moment I knew being a woman was in prescience. *It's not mine*, she said, and smiled deep into the fold of her oval face, paused and tilted her head up to the sky like a saint, like she might say something else, but she didn't. She walked past me like I was the ghost who had always been there, and I followed her into the living room. She sat with the men, and they all stared at me. She asked if my nipples were pierced like my entire face. She said she wanted to pierce her belly button. She lit a Winston Light and suggested I show the men in her living room sitting on our couches my breasts. She asked again. I lifted my shirt and she started to cry. *How could you do that?* she wailed. How would I know. I knew that we weren't built of before, but the future. I knew that there were no before in the California we lived in. In the beginning of where I came from, there were afters.



I killed a raccoon suffering from distemper on a Sunday. I was 29 and blistering along with the Missouri summer. Around July the lesser animals took over. Possums and a raccoon family in the walls, tarantulas around the tub, wolf spiders in my linens. Black snakes circled around the porch beams, while a hawk perched on the old meat hook. I wondered if the world was changing to something older and I had been left behind to watch. The months passed and my body took a sun rash like a ghost's burn. In August I saw a raccoon circle and fall in the backyard, get up and do it again. I called the town's Animal Control, which informed me that Sunday was for rest unless in cases of rabies. What my particular raccoon had, the attendant said, was distemper. If the raccoon circled like the snakes, it had distemper. If it walked slow but straight, it was rabies. The man said the raccoon should be killed right then, as the pain was like a needle's slow death prick.

Does your neighbor have a shovel, Ma'am? he asked.

I don't know who my neighbor is or what he's got, I told him, *but I have a shovel.*

Only in Missouri could it be true that my landlord's father-in-law had shot a baby raccoon in my kitchen with a BB gun earlier that day. It was the cause of a foul odor

coming from my air vent. Several men in my landlord's family came to examine the cause of the smell, sure for an entire month in which I called them about scratching sounds that an animal couldn't get in an air vent. I walked into my house and they were all there, wiping their shoes on my carpet and a wife watching my television. One of their trucks had a bumper sticker that said *Real Men Love Jesus* and only men have bumper stickers like this, because only men think that real men who love a real Jesus also shoot real baby raccoons with BB guns. Over the weeks the scratching sound of the caught animal turned to a smell. And yet, that baby was still alive. It had fallen in from the roof where the rest of its family was. It was a furry little test that we all failed.

I was ashamed that those men thought I needed help killing a creature that small or that it needed to die in the first place. But I didn't say so even though I could have taken the babe down to the park with my father's Los Angeles Department of Water and Power leather gloves. The gloves had handled the harder things in my father's life, splinters on the wood poles he climbed to reach the power lines, the hawk he nursed after it tumbled down from a Eucalyptus into our yard, badgered by crows. My father shot the crows first, then scooped up the red-tailed hawk with his gloves. Into our backyard, where secrets were buried under oaks, he rested the animal on his bare chest when he thought it well enough, his body the temple from which the divine does emerge. My father spread his arms as if that moment understood him, made him, and this is where I come from—an uncomplicated killing and a silent, unshared reverence. Every year two hawks came back to their nest in our yard, and every year my father killed the crows. Out

there on Irving Drive in Thousand Oaks, California with a .22, east of the Santa Monica mountains and the Pacific.

In Missouri I didn't know my neighbors, and besides, the second raccoon was a test that was all mine. Was this solipsism? No, it was a reminder. The world knew me too well. I didn't want to feel from my end of a shovel the raccoon's skull crack from its spine even though I knew, I knew a swift push down into the fragile neck fold was the way. Refusing that sound, I beat the raccoon indiscriminately. And again. Cicadas screamed and I wailed on the raccoon, most often landing on its head as it circled away and back into me. When I dug a grave in the loose, wet earth, I didn't know if the animal was resigned to die or dead. The moist ground pulled at us both. I thought I might sink into it and be done with all the trouble in trying to do right, turn. Without my own will, my feet already sank in.

One of the problems with me I learned early on, I learned from my father, was that I didn't kill right. Right means quickly, and I had fucked it up with animal and human alike. My hands, they always felt so new to holding. They didn't want to let anything go. The world was too old for my grip, and my grip was too insistent for my lover. I felt them both slipping away. So I killed the raccoon and I called my boyfriend. I wanted him to know what I did, as if that could serve as evidence that I didn't need his help to navigate the strange world. I puffed up like I was ready for anything to end. I had a pick-axe, a hatchet, a mallet, hundreds of knives. But they were all better make-shift death machines than the shovel. I didn't tell my boyfriend I wasn't willing to lose any more, that those tools had rotted over the years I moved to every new home, that killing

and loss had long been conflated in my mind. The truth was that I thought I needed a lot. And the truth was that I didn't need my boyfriend to hold onto. But when it came to saying either thing, I had never not felt like a thief.

As a child before 10 I stole food from my family. I could say it was from hunger and in a way that's true. It was easy to take from the dark kitchen, to take from them. LuAnn in her bedroom, Rich in front of the television, music loud and the neighbors calling, whiskey. While Rich sucked on his decaying teeth, I opened the refrigerator enough to let my small arm in but no more. In more reckless moments I set a chair next to the fridge and balanced on it to reach for Rich's change jar up top, removed quarters resting around his bad teeth. A tall man, I could see his feet dangling off the end of his couch from atop my chair. When they were still, I moved.

LuAnn allotted food to the women in our home, that is, herself and me. Sometimes I took Rich's *Little Debbie* snack cakes from their box in the pantry and pulled another snack cake forward in its place to hide what was stolen. One crinkly package of two cakes surely exceeded my seven-hundred-a day calorie goal, and I was always found out. Mostly, I just took fruit from the crisper that belonged to no one in particular. No one questioned that. I brought my item back to my room and sat in front of the colored dots on a little television, peeling an orange or slicing an apple. Sliced apples made less noise. I was there with what I wanted, occupied in ritual and sometimes relief.

Not that LuAnn would wake for any sound I made. She only rose if Rich's lanky body ran at her own curled under a polyester duvet. I knew those steps that led elsewhere.

He moved fast, bare-footed, made floorboards ache when he wanted to fuck her.

Sometimes in a drunk mid-stride he'd slice his foot open on the exposed carpet staples that divided our entryway and kitchen, a lesson we all learned tenfold. Sometimes she and I escaped in the night to my grandparents' when Rich faltered a second but was sure to come back harder. In his lost moment she'd run to my room and jump on my bed. He always stopped at my doorway. When he went back to his couch to recoup, we'd fly. Sometimes she couldn't get to my bed soon enough, so sometimes we stayed. Sometimes I slept.

And when we stayed, LuAnn would notice the next day that I had taken one of Rich's snack cake packages and we practiced talking about this act as though it were one of the problems with our family.

If you don't lose weight by Jr. High, she would tell me, no one will want to be your friend.

It was true, and I hated my mother for her savvy.

One time LuAnn left work to watch our third-grade talent show because I begged her. Standing in back, with her head in her hands, LuAnn sometimes watched while I performed a one-woman show chocked full of symbolism. That's what I told the teacher in charge of the show, anyway, when she advised me not to perform. When I finished, no one clapped. Some people laughed, and like other times, when I came home to LuAnn looking for justice after a day of being made fun of, she would say, *see? Lose weight.* About this one thing my mother was correct, and I never lost weight. I moved to my father's when I was 11 and got taller when I was 12. I hated my mother, I stretched out, I

grew breasts. I was like every other child who became a teenager before me. And at my father's home, I didn't sneak food.

Before I moved in with Trevor full-time, my wide, short center of gravity was a buffer for the times my body would meet LuAnn's. When she ran at me, I held stiff on my feet. Heavy and still, facing her slim frame, I didn't waver. Not once. Rich beat LuAnn a lot, she flailed at me rarely, and Rich and I left each other alone. This was our family, and this is where I learned I didn't want to be touched.

LuAnn mentioned decades later, between inhales from a cigarette in her father's backyard, that she had never let a man beat her. *Emotionally, spiritually, sure, but I would never let one hit me.* It was a taunt to my own memory after I had become too powerful to be beaten. It was an assertion over the narrative. And at the end of the day my mother could never hurt me that bad, even the one time after she was pounding on me and I told her, *that doesn't hurt. You can't even hurt me* and she went in harder.

Food was a gift in our home, too. If 700 calories a day is ideal, the goal is rarely met, and food continues to be a simultaneously dangerous and beloved thing, ungotten. LuAnn and I had our shining moments with food when we weren't eating my grandparents' leftovers or canned goods from Christian neighbors when money ran out, or Taco Bell when money was good. After an afternoon of gardening and when Rich was away in jail or who knows where, LuAnn would buckle me into her station wagon that my grandparents purchased for her, and we would go to TCBY Frozen Yogurt. After Rich was in jail again for a DUI, that time for crashing his car into a neighbor's car, then pushing his own back

into our driveway in the hopes that no one noticed, we ate frozen yogurt. You could say we were like every other suburban mother and daughter in Southern California in the 1980s. My mother gardened while I watched television or peered at a neighbor's house that was rumored to have a pomegranate tree in the backyard. Girls on Calle Margarita Street said that if you lifted your shirt to the man, he gave you a pomegranate. I wanted one so much it hurt me to think about, and I wondered if I would get one if I raised my shirt, or if I wouldn't be good enough. No matter what I pondered, LuAnn was my constant. She invariably called at me that we were getting yogurt, a treat that reached a sale of 25 million dollars in 1986, when I was five and desperate to know what a pomegranate tasted like. We went for yogurt. It was our time away from the men who could, lasciviously, not count calories.

Once in her car, LuAnn would light a Marlboro Red, or a Capri, or a Winston when two-packs were on sale, and pop a Supremes cassette into the tape deck. She knew every lyric, harmony, tambourine beat. And I was a study of my mother in the times she let me be. With each song, she was Diana and I was Mary Wilson or Florence Ballard. I was both the latter, I was LuAnn's harmony, I wanted more, I wanted to be lead. I wanted the power to love or ignore whomever I chose. While in the car, I joined along with my mother's dismissal of the world. And when we arrived at TCBY Yogurt, I selected LuAnn's chosen non-fat flavor and requested that it be blended with candy. It was called The Blizzard, and it killed the memory of the *Little Debbie* snack cakes every time because it was a slap in LuAnn's face. Because I studied my mother's choice then tried to make it my own, the dessert tasted like a solid, defiant life.

Trevor's house was across town on Irving Drive, a place where he practiced his identities of killer and cook. Even long before that home, when he was 17 and LuAnn 18, Trevor went out one night to get them food. LuAnn asked for groceries, but Trevor cut the necks of two sheep from a nearby farmer's flock. When he returned, he yelled to LuAnn to lay out sheets so that he could butcher the animals. What a peculiar sight it must have been to notice a redheaded teenage boy drag two dead or dying sheep into an apartment complex. The police followed the blood trail to my mother's apartment, and as the legal adult, only her name appeared in a newspaper article with allusions to sacrifice and Manson, who was believed to have followers hiding out in the Simi Valley caves. My mother has often told this as her sentimental story about her love for Trevor, and as I doubt her ability to love, I necessarily doubt this story.

What I know is that if we drove a truck home through the canyons of Southern California instead of a motorcycle, and a deer passed us, Trevor always asked if I wanted to stop and kill it for dinner. And I remember that when he was the keg master at the Renaissance Faire, sitting by barrels of beer under the shady oaks of a canyon, once a rattlesnake crawled from its hole to coil in the sun by the kegs. Trevor let me visit the Faire's psychic, who told me that one day I would go to Hawaii, and by the time my prediction was finished, the rattlesnake lay dead and Trevor's knife had its blood. Along with women from Topanga Canyon hippie cults who wore feathers in their hair and no bras, we ate the snake that Trevor killed fresh from our front yard grill. It was so good and the skin was ours to dry and mount on our living room wall with the faces of deer,

sometimes just a triangle of fur from their crowns. The women brushed their fingers along Trevor's collarbone while he cleaned up, circling him with their long hair. I wanted to draw his attention also, for only in his work, his methodical silence, did he seem most like himself, a creature built of loss and reverence that I would never know. But the women, with their long fingers, confidence, and turquoise jewelry, who could win a battle against them? Fucking sirens of California. They get god, men, the great oaks, and wildfire.

When it was only Trevor and me for dinner, he filled a crock pot with chuck and black-eyed peas from Albertson's market, we ate and listened to records, and he drank from a mason jar with plenty of ice. Trevor played the Plastic Ono Band record a lot, and like many men his age, revered John Lennon. I could tell because Trevor sang along with all his voice when he thought he was alone, or sat silent and stared when he played the record during dinner. In our home there were no casual conversations, but conduits. So I learned every song.

In one of the many heartbreaking Julian Lennon interviews of the 1980s, a reporter asks the son to describe his relationship with his father. Julian chokes up and explains that after his father's murder, he was only given a modest sum from Lennon's estate. Yoko Ono hadn't considered Julian for the blood, for all the bleeding, but more, neither had the father. The father had a newer son, Sean, and a newer life. Lennon may have sang the Plastic Ono Band's "Mother" to his own parents in an attempt to revel in the displacement of that primary, formidable experience of belonging to others, of

sharing their red insides, but really, to have your heart broken by the people who made you and then to go and do it to someone you've made. It's a misdirected revenge. It's deciding not to love in order to save some part of yourself. It doesn't work.

In "Mother," Lennon screams, *Mama, you left me, I never left you*. While, like my father, I love this song because I've escaped my parents but for the red insides we share, I wish I could ask Trevor if his stomach doesn't turn at Lennon's possibilities in fatherhood, squandered. Trevor might say nothing, which would not surprise. Or he might say that things are more complicated. But if that were true, I'd say, I don't think singing along to "Mother" would feel so, simply, good. Julian is named after Lennon's mother, Julia, the woman who "left" a little John in the song "Mother," after she was hit by an off-duty drunk cop and there was a seventeen-year-old John, with a drunk father. If you haven't already done so, let us take a second to say that death is never without irony. The red spills out into a long con with a punch line. So "Mother," in addition to feeling good to sing along to, also makes me nauseous. But so does love and pleasure and most things that would settle me into this world, which is at this point my own fault, and not my parents'. In "Mother," Lennon sings, *Children / please don't do / what I have done / I couldn't walk / and I tried to run*. I can see why Trevor matched murder and a meal. And just as for Julian, my favorite Lennon song is "Isolation." *Afraid of the sun / Isolation / The sun will never disappear / but the world may not have many years / Isolation*. When you're scared to lose, take. Kill. Which is another way to understand that when I called my boyfriend after killing a raccoon, I could have ended it before he got the chance. Which is another way to see how I, like Julian, don't just walk away with dignity. We're

no sirens. We close our eyes, we hold on, even if nothing's holding back. In "Hold On," Lennon sings, *Hold on*.

My favorite plants to handle were the hanging fuchsia that LuAnn grew in our front yard on top of the hill of Margarita Street. We balanced downward slopes on each side and isn't that a nice metaphor. Our front yard was higher than others' so we got the dreamy sun. Segmented purple, magenta, sprigs of pink, lime-colored stems and delicate petals, translucent pods wet with dew from being saturated by light, then pushed into night's darkness with a sweet drop to sustain. I picked the fallen blooms from her garden floor and pushed the pods between my finger, comforted by the wet death coming for each pod cast from the roots. As for the blossoms still on the plant, I admired them above me like a great chain of authority that attested to LuAnn's skills, despite, well, everything. My mother the Ceres, the goddess who makes plants and children thrive alike. And she did. On the nights she woke to escape the house when Rich faltered in a run against her body, she wrapped in a blanket, threw me on her shoulder, and suddenly I was a dreamy five foot, six inches tall. I glanced the garden as Ceres' legs ran us to the car, looked down at plants from a great height. In the late hours, the fuchsia petals closed around the pods in their comfortable hanging pots, and these were the only times, in escape, tucked into the long neck of a goddess, that I was held high enough to see what I was missing. They turned inward as if to surrender to their own brilliance, and even tucked away from the cold, they were luminescent and full. They were safe from civilization and I wanted them for my own. They were safe and pink and never red.

LuAnn bought cans of lady bugs each rose season and sometimes I got to shake the container over her roses, watch the red bugs eat aphids or fly away into the birch trees. Some would end up in my long, red hair, a few found their way to my bed sheets, and there were often many stiff and dead in the bottom of the can, having already been smothered or starved. I emptied the dead ones in the brick flowerbed ledge so that I might examine the desiccated red shells before blowing a puff of air to send the bodies to dirt. The carcasses were pretty things I didn't want to die that were dead with or without my desire. The light bodies blew into the wind, and rose plants reached underground to feed from the earth, and the ground was where we'd all end up so soon, I knew from my father's lessons. Everything was red on the day of ladybugs, and everything died.

After my father's brother, Derek Van Dusen, called by the *Los Angeles Times* "a transient," was stabbed to death by John Robert Kilroy, Todd Jones, and David Dunlap while squatting in an abandoned house when I was five years old, my lessons in survival got worse. Derek's death broke my father. By the time I was six years old, I handled a .22, was forced to jump into Ojai waters from high up rocks, had been thrown in the back of a jeep for Trevor's drunk four-wheel driving, a vehicle he eventually crashed and left in the woods as he emerged from the trails into the suburbs. Dying was close and that was the lesson.

One afternoon, as I watched the news and LuAnn gardened, I learned of another man who died in his early thirties. I asked my mother through a window into the yard how old she was. She was in her late twenties. I told her *you're going to die*. And me,

too. I said that we would be pulled into the ground. I couldn't breathe, tore my toenails clean off to release, knew that she would die. I didn't like my mother but I knew that I needed her. To watch out. And that I would be dead soon after. Some neighbors told me that I could always scream and run to their house if I needed to escape—but would I make it in time, is what I asked myself. Would either of us make it out of this house alive, off of Calle Margarita, out of Thousand Oaks, California in time? Now I guess I could say that I was scared of my father's complete undoing, that he was the one I needed, as LuAnn would never rise to the occasion to save me. I could say that I worried he would crash us into Decker Canyon if we both didn't lean together in unison on his motorcycle. But then, I only had a sense of our future. I saw red, and black, and red. I saw that coincidence and prescience had the same colors. This is a lesson and for years there are lessons.

When I am twelve my father teaches me how I am dying. He makes us dig holes. We rip up the ground. We work for it and we have no garden to speak of. The lilies, the cactus, the Kumquat tree, they grow wild in our yard and our yard is plentiful. Trevor gets laid off from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power for drinking on the job but that ends nothing. It doesn't stop us. We work. We build a concrete trench around the back of our house, fill in the front yard with landscaping gravel, bury dead animals we find on the road, smooth out a flat spot of earth to build sheds on. We don't understand flowers or calories or women, but these are some things we do to learn. We know dirt, and there are many lessons about feeding the hours of each day in the yard, about filling the gut with a

hard expertise. There are many lessons. There are timed knot tying sessions. There are guns to shoot without earplugs until you can take the kick without a flinch, do it again until your eyes rest blank. I grease the case iron pans, sign his name on checks, clean the carport with the air compressor, dig the trench under his eye always watching to discern my stroke and exhaustion. I am not good at this. But I am full of lessons. The trench takes months and we do not talk while digging. It's labor, plain and simple, father and daughter. I learn about autonomy from landlords because we lay our own carpet when the house floods. I learn about winter, wool gloves over hands bloodied from ripping out the fingernails. I tie my hair back with a rubber band. My extremities bleed. I want affection, but when adults I barely know try to touch my hands or reach for my shoulder to tell me *if you ever need anything, if you need a safe place* I see a flicker and light fades, I get nauseous and stiff. I dig into the earth, into my body. I am the daughter.

One day our Manx cat gives birth to the most amazing kittens that I hold and hold and it's different than adults. The animals are perfect. There is one runt that my father calls "deformed." It drags its back legs a little. My father says the mother will reject it. It seems fine to me. Trevor tells me that I need to kill it. He tells me I have to for its own good and now I know I never knew then knew the line between suffering and difference. He suggests a shovel to the head. Or a boot sole down on it fast, but I can't, I can't do it the right way. I tell him I will do it but my own way, it will get done father but please let me decide. Not your loss. This lesson you learned long before. This is after.

I lay the kitten in my hand as I have done before to pet it or hold it into my neck, only this time I do both then slide my hand into the toilet. The runt struggles, squirms,

tries to kick its weak back legs, meows but gets water, and stops moving in my hand.

From my right hand I place the wet fur baby into a hole I've already prepared for it in our backyard. Even after lowering the runt into the ground I hold onto it, then I let go because that is what I must learn from another creature's death. Scoop dirt on top until level, rise from my mark, and from below as if from deeper than I dug, from below where the shallow oak roots thrive, the kitten cries and cries. I can hear into the ground, and I didn't know that could happen. The kitten is alive and in pain that I don't know if existed before or after I drowned it wrong. I claw the dirt with my stupid, bloody fingers and run back into the house and plunge my hand into the toilet, this time out of fear instead of a want to kill it. I kill it right only after I panic, and this second time I bury it there is no sound from below. Which time did I fail worse. I could have learned a lesson my father never did—we can have a second chance. The kitten could have lived if I let it. We all could live a while longer.

I don't know what I need to learn to stay alive with my family. Are we a part of the old world or the new? Are my hands made for holding or the letting go? Trevor lets a hawk sink its talons into his chest like an offering that he will be the world's conduit if it will take him, if it will suck him into the earth and use him. It did. And it wanted his brother. It took. Or is it Trevor's threat that he will kill until the world takes him? It did. Even now with two nows layered and my eyes seeing the flicker and fade, I don't know I don't know but I want him alive and I love him. I will learn every lesson no matter the cost. I did.

The oak limbs in our Irving Drive backyard reached out to the world, extended beyond a fence to tangle with the neighbors' trees. The house next door belonged to the Greers. Their daughter, Virginia, who we called Ginny, was born on the same day and in the same hospital as me. I often saw her gardening with her mother, Mandy, from my own yard. Their house was covered with a lush, dark green of perfection. Their soil was wet and smelled like a clean stream. Inside their home, lush, dark woods gave the living room a decadent sheen that looked like untested elegance.

One day I arrived from Margarita Street and saw Ginny out front with Mandy. Mandy went inside for something. I said *hey* to Ginny, who was unlike me in every way. As a smart, blonde, quiet child, she looked alive and clean. Her father, Peter, built her a beautiful playhouse in their backyard and fixed up their home and others, certain he could buy multiple properties on Irvine Drive while the neighborhood was still bad. Peter was smart—Thousand Oaks boomed and boomed. But while Ginny and I were children, our street was known as the location of a gang shooting of a pregnant woman. A rumor. Irving crosses Houston, the then hangout of the mostly white Houston Hoods, the rival gang of Tocas. Tocas, a Mexican gang, also lived in the neighborhood. Irving and Houston, behind Thousand Oaks Boulevard, was one of the lower income areas in town, and rivals were often neighbors. On the corner of Houston and Thousand Oaks Boulevard was Porky's, a rib joint with blacked-out windows said by children to be an Italian mob hide out. My father, the white biker with guns, always had protection handy from all the supposed violence stemming from race and class in the neighborhood. His drinking intensified after Derek's death, and his paranoia about people living side by side saturated

our home like an omen. When Derek's murder trial hit a bad year because the main offender who was given up by the other two killers for a deal suddenly had an alibi, Trevor's skills turned into our preparation for an end. I took my lessons, and Trevor slept in the living room in case someone tried to break in through our panel windows. Sometimes he spoke of Mexican ninjas. This was not funny. He worked from home. We prepared for some end, and one option was a race war. Another was an alien invasion after he read William Cooper's *Behold a Pale Horse*. We looked out for all possible predators. We practiced for the end in the woods on weekends.

Since other parents mandated that their kids weren't allowed to come inside our house, if Ginny and I wanted to play, we did so at her house. And on that day I got dropped off, my father was inside with his girlfriend Charlene, a woman who my father was very much in love with, so I looked for something else to do. I went to Ginny's.

As I walked through Ginny's front gate that day, I removed my shoes to feel the Greer's wet, tended lawn between my dirty toes. Ginny ran to her backyard playhouse, and I was to follow, I would follow into the depths of their good family, but the front yard roses were too beautiful to pass by. Alone in the front, I faced the blooms with a watering mouth. I smelled deeply into one bulbous, pink bud and rubbed the petals along my lips. They were softer than I could ever remember a human's hand, and gentler, thorns far down the stem. I felt hungry for something that their quiet house wouldn't stop me from trying for. I looked at Ginny running toward her playhouse, and she didn't look back at me because how I looked when I played with her toys and during our pretend games seemed a little wrong, too jealous and mean for a countenance like hers. I was

starving, knew that to be a thief was to be barren, so I put the entire rosebud in my mouth and bit down. The petals felt more different from a human's hand than I could ever remember anything being, and the thorns didn't hurt me because the rose bush would never be human. The taste was not like I thought it would be. Once ripped from the stem, the bud was dry and unyielding, bitter away from its source, dying but still with the perfume that first drew me. The whole day I felt something like being human among my kind, the whole day I tasted bitter.

Back on Margarita Street, a girl named Melissa lives down the block but still on top of the hill, up a steep driveway with a construction truck parked in it, broken house windows and a moldy backyard pool. Melissa says she's had a pomegranate from the man who makes girls lift up their shirts to get one, and I'm not surprised. I want one so bad. She shrugs and says *it's no big deal*. When I screamed from the living room to my mother in her garden that we were all going to die, my mother brought me to Melissa's so her mother, Gigi, would watch me. Gigi is the one who explains to me that Rich put an axe in LuAnn's head so I would understand why my mother had stitches. *That's why you'll be around your dad's more right now*, Gigi says. Melissa's father is short, stout, with a red moustache like my dad. When he's in the room no one talks. I don't ever know his name. When he's out of the room and Gigi is gone wherever, Melissa and her siblings turn on the Playboy channel and stare at naked bodies. Melissa makes us touch each other for I don't know how long. I only remember two times because they are unlike the others, once when I make a point to act casual about what we are doing so I seem more mature,

and another when she wakes me to touch her and I tell her I just want to sleep, so she leaves in the night to go back to her house. Blonde, beautiful Melissa. She's a tired part of me, but so beautiful to look at on her own, someone to aspire to be. One of those California girls. She is much older than me, almost grown, long and popular. Melissa can almost leave home forever. She tells me she's moving to Anaheim with her boyfriend, where Disneyland is. It sounds an impossible distance for my own escape. I watch her and her boyfriend kiss off of Avenida de los Arboles. They look like Southern California looks on television. They look unmarked to the world that doesn't know them.

Sometimes both our refrigerators are empty except for condiments but we still watch Playboy on the television. I ask the Jehovah's Witnesses halfway between my house and Melissa's for cans of food when my mother tells me to, and I get to take two bags home in two trips but I don't share any with Melissa *ha ha*. My mom says *ew* to a can of hominy but is still glad that we get it. Sometimes it's like this in our homes but we're never starved. Everyone still has cable television, hamburger meat in the back of a freezer, Christmas. I'm at Melissa's house one time when we put ketchup all over our arms and pretend that we're bleeding. First we ask, what's better on arms, ketchup or mayo? Ketchup: it's like blood and it's better to pretend that we're dead *ha ha no one knows we're not let's scare them*. Smear, smear, almost done, stagger down the driveway like you're dying. Scare kids from down the block, Ashley and Ryan, make them scream and run down the street. *Ha ha we got them*. We make Margarita Street think that we are close to dying. When Melissa's parents are gone and it's too early for her to touch me, Playboy is always on and her brothers stare. We're watching boobs. I don't like watching

because it doesn't feel fun to see naked bodies. I don't like being reminded that I have a body that isn't like the ones on television. I feel sick. I smell ketchup. We're like kids but like something else, red marks all over and never a thought of a world with answers, just a world where Anaheim is salvation. Knees pressed together on greasy shagged carpeting. We stare. Fleas and roaches. *Ha ha kill it don't itch.* We learn, always have a glass of water nearby to put the fleas in. *Ha ha you have the most bites. You suck.* I'm the one who gets lice all the time, I don't even know how. I suck the worst. Something is happening to these children who live in the house with Playboy, who knows what, and who cares that we are all forced into sexuality by some other person, the point is that we feel better when we play dead, we feel light and forget we're hungry so hungry. Margarita Street has too much to hold and that's why it bends itself backward in a spine of hills. Margarita has too much weight, I know that feeling. But we are on top of it all. Closest to the sun. Who knows what happens to kids *ha ha who knows what?*

My father liked the Plastic Ono Band and my mother liked the Beatles. Every Christmas LuAnn and I woke while Rich was in jail or slept in, *sick*. We drove to her parents' house while listening to the local Los Angeles radio station's twenty-four hour of Beatles Christmas. Was it K-EARTH 101? LuAnn turned up the dial, and I sat in the back seat, both of us not happy to interact. Our most restful time together was in a car. Each time we drove down Westlake Boulevard, I felt safe, sun streaming in my light eyes, even when I closed my thin, white eyelids to see how black turns to orange. It was warm on

each Christmas in Thousand Oaks, unlike on Halloween, when it always seemed to rain. I wonder if that feeling is the reason I've never gotten over how amazing Christmas is.

At moments on these holiday mornings there was something in LuAnn's singing along that was sad and I knew it, even when I was young enough to still suck my thumb. I didn't understand how someone as mean as her could be sad. One Christmas when the sun filled my eyelids except for the quick shadows from passing the giant sycamore trees on Westlake Boulevard, I clenched my fists while LuAnn sang along to "Julia" because it occurred to me that I had never seen my mother laugh. I'd seen her smile, snicker, give an ironic chuckle, but never any of that turning to a better thing. My love for LuAnn was complicated by my hatred for her, and I knew like I thought I knew death what hate felt like. It was so close to me. But I didn't like to understand my mother as a person who didn't laugh in our family.

Lennon wrote "Julia" to memorialize his mother, but also to celebrate his love for Yoko Ono, whose Japanese name means "child of the sea," and who must have known the lyrics "Oceanchild calls me" were for her. Lennon once said that Yoko wrote "Julia." If Ono made it possible for Lennon to love his mother more complexly, richly, in a way Ono did write the song. Testimonials are never our own, nor is joy. It was harder to hate my mother when I knew she didn't laugh because it made me aware of history and where that landed: me, a child who didn't laugh. But this is the way we love. After knowing, you either hold on or you don't. You may pick at your hands until they fester, your grip may stiffen, but you decide. You aren't already made in regards to love. You decide this.

At Trevor's there were nights when I awoke to an empty house, and while this wasn't a surprise, the feeling of wanting LuAnn's help was. One night when the house was empty but flooded with light, my eyelids allowing the orange from the hall light to seep through, I awoke because I was cold. I opened my eyes. The house was a dreamy yellow cloud that allowed me to see all the roaches but not my father. I knew my house was empty and that was why the bugs felt safe emerging. The bugs were safe.

Trevor had gone again. I jumped over the hallway roaches and ran to the living room, where I called LuAnn. She told me to walk next door to Barb and Bob Rapanak's rock house to look for my father. She said she'd stay on the phone until I returned. I knew that if I screamed, she would hear me. That night, with my hair wet from a bath hours before, my nightshirt hanging off of my boyish shoulders, I was LuAnn's child. At the corner rock house without windows, I tiptoed past the adults, and they did not look up to me. My father sat in a corner, and I approached him and stood still. They all were doing what people like us do, what we grow up to be. I understood their hunger because it was my own, and I was jealous that they had ways in which to satiate.

Trevor stood up without a word and walked home behind me while I looked back to make sure he was there. He whispered something short into the phone while LuAnn screamed back, his cue to hang up. I stood there with the bottom of my large t-shirt bunched into my fists. For years I would try to unwind them in the late hours, I would sleep on my stomach with my hands smoothed flat underneath me, try to stop holding on to every damn thing.

Trevor and I both knew the other was in need, and we both felt guilt for not grabbing the other. I didn't hold on to my father. How to reach out for something that close? It's you. Where does one hold oneself? If we did latch on, I worried I would never let him go. I needed to hear him clean his knives or awake in mid-cry from his nightmares in order to keep me asleep with my own. Only in that moment when he was lacking do I return to find when my mother was not. It was over the phone and I loved her like it hurt, I loved her enough to stick my face into every thorny rose, I loved her more than seven hundred calories, I loved her like Diana Ross's heartbroken voice in every Supremes song, the woman who turned even the phrase "so satisfied" into a dirge. In this memory I see where one thing becomes its other. I am struck with tenderness for this woman I hate, and there are no lies in this, no undoing my mother from me. There is no loss. I've decided.

When George Harrison died, I found out from a Los Angeles radio station while inside my Toyota Camry. "My Sweet Lord" played for twenty-four hours across the city's incredible radio. Like that, for hours, listening over and over as I drove across the basin from North Hollywood to Irvine for graduate school. I cried because I missed him. George. I didn't know why I missed him so much. I was a teenage girl unready to let him go. It was the twenty ninth of November, warm Santa Ana winds reaching north and east from the direction I faced on the 101 to 134 to 5 to 710 or 605 to 405 South. Against the wind in traffic, windows open, the air swirls tying around my neck. I was tired from something that wasn't the drive, a lullaby made from the dreamy Southern California

morning sun. It was Thursday, my favorite night of the week to hunt down tamales and beautiful men, and turn away from the West Side film editors in Silver Lake bars. I had a suitable fake I.D., in case anyone asked. No one ever did. But that day I was scared to go out in the evening. It felt like we had all lost so much in this Southern California, a city whose industry made stars, made so many more people to mourn. I didn't want to lose anymore. But "My Sweet Lord" and the record it's on, *All Things Must Pass*, make clear that Harrison, our star, had been ready to leave us for a long time coming. He had arrived on the precipice, and I would stay behind as one of the people who hoped our stars would look back. Reconsider.

My father's lessons taught me that I'm not a good killer. I killed the raccoon when I was twenty-nine, but I held onto it longer that I should have, even when that holding was beating its body. If it kept dying and I was safe in that moment from death, somehow that moment proved we were both together, alive. The boyfriend I had when I killed the raccoon did leave me, of course, but long after I should have left him. An astrologer told me, *has it occurred to you that you're not the one who is always left by men but you're the one who always uses men to learn lessons?* I am my father's daughter. I'm learning how to hold on without making my own hands bleed, without equating death with a loss of love. The amount of blood that must have poured into my mother's hands before her scalp was stitched. How fast it fled my father in each motorcycle accident. Their blood is my blood. Their songs are my own. There is a long red line of history with each thing I don't know but am.

Even Harrison, our star, couldn't escape where he came from. The release of "My Sweet Lord" instigated a lawsuit that lasted ten years, in which the final verdict says that Harrison had subconsciously written the song in the same bars and harmony as the Chiffon's hit, "He's So Fine." If you listen to the two songs, the similarities are unmistakable. Harrison's own prayer to move on from this world, his testimonial to god that he was ready, had been plagiarized. Harrison's own authority as the one who could leave, who wouldn't hold on to this world or the people in it, had been a pop song about crushing on a really hot guy. Loving god came from loving a man.

It goes without saying that from origin much is made. It's harder to understand how we speak once the beginning has died. There are lessons in each our hands, but that doesn't mean we're each stuck in a world apart. It's January 2013. I'm thirty-one years old. I am the proponent of victim's rights in regards to the murder of my uncle Derek Van Dusen. My father's mentor, the man who might have prevented Trevor's downfall into addiction and who could have cared for me once it was necessary, had been stabbed by John Robert Kilroy, Robert Dunlap, and Todd Jones when I was five years old. Years later, when the trial took a heartbreaking turn because suddenly Kilroy had an alibi for the time of the murder, my father made us dig deep into the earth, set concrete and bury animals, focus our eyes down. Jones got immunity for his testimony, and I am the one left to speak at Kilroy's and Dunlap's parole hearings. I made a video for the parole board meeting on March 26, 2013 to decide Dunlap's fate. I tell them that death doesn't stop. I say that even when we learn to lift our heads from the ground, some of us die. I say to the parole board, *hallelujah*. If you don't love the man, can you find the love for

god, is what I don't know. But I speak because my father's voice is my own. There is no undoing his testimony from me. Of all the saints who wrote their memoirs and claimed that god spoke the words to them, I tell you now that I speak the words for my dead god. Harrison gave us a lesson in how the past is the way. Just write a better version of an older song. Of an older anything. Learn that lesson. Which is to say, songs aren't already made. You decide. You decide what's worth your singing.



After I went to my mother's home and saw her shave her face, I didn't hear from her for a while, maybe six months, which was a common blessing in my life. I woke at my father's at five AM, did step aerobics on Trevor's ammunition boxes, let my Volvo 164E idle for ten minutes before driving off into the darkness to buy bagels, started classes at Moorpark Community College at seven AM, and went to work at Tower Records around three PM. I heard LuAnn was homeless, motel hopping from Newbury Park to the Valley, sometimes staying in the underwater room at a themed motel when she got a coupon. She had a guy who helped her pay. She claimed me as a dependent. I got gynecological exam bills from appointments I never attended. Spencer lived with our grandparents most nights. Me, I was never tired of my simple routine at sixteen years old, and this felt safe.

But each lie becomes an after, so I got a call on a late afternoon while working the register at Tower. My grandmother was friendly and calm on the line. She told me to come to their home after work because something had happened. I didn't need to leave my shift early. I remembered the last time I saw my mother, the relief I felt at watching her lift a razor to her chin merely to shave instead of worse, but months after, after

replacing the phone receiver, wondering if she were dead or who knows what, I didn't know if my relief was misguided, and I was ashamed to think that way. LuAnn was an addict who shackled up with violent men, and then suddenly there was an emergency that wasn't urgent enough for me to leave work for at that moment. How many times had she barely survived? Coincidence versus prescience.

When I was much younger, before Spencer was born, Rich stuck an axe in LuAnn's head and a doctor stitched a straight line from her forehead to crown. LuAnn told the nurses that a lamp fell on her head but the nurses must have known. A lamp wouldn't slice clean but shatter. I knew what Rich, did but I didn't figure that out all by myself. *Rich did it with the axe*, Gigi down the street told me. But Gigi had problems of her own. Bruises, children that I watched Playboy with, a moldy pool, sweatpants that fell down when she rose from a seat. I remember that LuAnn had stitches in her head in a line that looked straight. She sat on one couch and Rich on the other, both silently smoking cigarettes and ashing in a coffin ashtray. Reds for LuAnn, 100s for Rich. Rich watched Magnum intently and LuAnn read the Enquirer, wearing sweatpants and a Jafra Cosmetics t-shirt, a resigned wound of a human being. The scene wasn't that abnormal inside the space we all took up as a family. I sat on my mother's couch and crossed my legs underneath me as she did to avoid carpet fleas. Eventually Spencer was born, Rich went to jail for longer stints, other men came, I left, and after a mysterious fire that LuAnn said burned every last thing from our childhood, she was kicked out.

Years later, after Rich was gone who knows where, Spencer visited his mother and her current boyfriend, Ram, at a Motel 6 in Newbury Park. Ram fought with Spencer about a video game, then left to drop off his own kids at their mother's. As the kids left Ram's car to go into their home, Ram pulled out a knife from under his car seat and approached the porch where his ex stood with her new boyfriend. Ram stabbed the man until he was dead, got back into his car, and returned to the Motel 6 to continue fighting with my brother. The police were at the motel before Ram's adrenaline slowed, before his breath caught his yelling in his throat and he could sit down, think. What happened? What happened to Spencer there? *He was breathing hard*, Spencer told me. Maybe right then everything showed itself to Ram, each consequence of love and suffering, our ability to survive desire and then kill everything after still living. Maybe Ram used too much meth.

The police tackled him even though he was just standing there. He stared. They put him in the car and he stared up. LuAnn and Spencer had their arms in the air, this familiar routine played out in a new way, and they were escorted out at gunpoint. A child was escorted out by gunpoint. After that day I sometimes asked Spencer what happened. He sometimes spoke. Our grandmother said he awoke in the night, screaming that a dead man was on his floor. He told her only once that LuAnn had blamed him. *Why did you have to fight with Ram?* she said to her son. I hoped that Spencer had more to say, or would say the same again. I took him to his new favorite place for ice cream in town, The Coldstone Creamery. I told those people that fold the candy into the frozen cream to add extra, and Spencer would tell me how good it tasted. Each time he remarked this the hairs

stood on my arms and my eyelids fluttered. My breathing deepened at his desires met, such a perfect thing. I asked him about his favorite, and he would tell me the best combination, and I wouldn't tell him that his favorite was always what the ice cream store advertised as a new favorite. I would never tell my brother this. I heard his words and my skin tightened. After, I would ask him to floss before he went to sleep because he got his father's bad teeth, and you know what, sometimes he did. Sometimes we need to tell ourselves, for years, the same thing. Sometimes what we know clogs our fingers tight, never to hit our hearts with a thump.

LuAnn was with Don after Ram. He beat her sometimes, but it wasn't as bad as it had been. He looked goofier than the men she had chosen before. The two of them even came to my grandparents' house for Christmas one year. Don sat there all quiet after introducing himself as *Donald*, a righteous two-syllable name that my grandparents drew out when they asked him, *Don-ald, can I get you another Bloody Mary? Would you like some stuffed celery?* They filled his face like they did with the rest of us, and that meant for the time being that he was like us, even if he and LuAnn stole checks from their bedroom while they entertained. That was a before in a life made of afters. My grandparents believed in the possibility of LuAnn's happiness even after years of late nights and missing weeks, and it sounded stupid to me—to believe in someone like that—so I sat back into my seat, sunk into my insides. She was indifferent to living, and I was stuck in it.

Then there was Brian. Bri. He called himself an anarchist and beat on LuAnn even when Spencer was well over a six-foot tall teenager. Spencer was at their paid-for

apartment because he got in too much trouble as he aged, stole our grandparents' car when he was fourteen and crashed it in Kanan canyon, flooded their neighborhood community center, drugs, theft, juvenile hall. LuAnn pointed out Spencer's flaws as much as she could, disparaged him. Said he was a troubled child. Said he was the reason Bri got angry. Got arrested. Got their single-mother public housing taken away. While LuAnn's men could take a minute and change your entire life, your skin split open and a house full of fist holes, Spencer was stuck in a forever moment with whoever she was with. She didn't pay rent, but she tanned. And she proclaimed that she would never let a man touch her wrong. But I saw differently. The LuAnn I saw from afar on a major thruway I took between school and work was orange in a parking lot, walking in or out from the tanning salon with a Big Gulp. And my brother's sweetness, the part of him that as a terrified child only wanted to be held so that he could sleep, was gone.

As I did step aerobics in the early hours, I thought about what I would say at LuAnn's funeral. I sweated, felt guilty for planning my words when she was still alive, then didn't feel anything. In the chemical space, under a low watt light bulb, while outside Southern California made that faraway sound of freeways stretching like a spine to wake, I worked through the inevitable. The way I thought about my mother's death was too easy, and that's because it was that easy. In the harder times, when I wondered if it would happen so easy, Trevor, then sober, let me cry. A luxury my own brother never had. And I remembered the mornings before I knew that the beautiful humming sound that rose with the daylight was from the freeways. I thought it was the sound of this world

waking up, and that perspective locked me into considering a larger life, a luxury I longed for at sixteen years old, exercising on ammunition boxes.

The Tower Records manager lifted his eyes from a spreadsheet and rested them on me. We weren't supposed to make personal calls at work. I had also run over my lunch break that day because there was an accident on Thousand Oaks Boulevard. I didn't explain that the phone call wasn't my fault or that there was traffic on my lunch break because my boss drove from Simi Valley to the Thousand Oaks Tower Records every morning on the two-lane 23 freeway. He was never late—sometimes even early, when Stevie Nicks had a boxed set coming out or Frank Sinatra died—and I only drove a couple of miles to work on the days I didn't have school.

Sarah, let's try to keep the one hour maximum for lunch, okay? he said, smiling, his left arm rested atop the Tommy Lee and Pamela sex tape cardboard cutout, a bunch of orders rolled tight in his left fist, and his right hand spread in his pocket, surely where the Carmex he slathered his lips with lived. He loved Carmex, Stevie Nicks, Arby's, and women's hair products. I hated that I knew so much about him, and I didn't want to say anything about my own life. *Yeah, okay, sorry,* I said.

While driving southeast on Thousand Oaks Boulevard to my favorite lunch spot, the Local Squeeze, I slammed my breaks when approaching a line of cars. Ahead, the town's thoroughfare was marked by what seemed like a block of blood, metal, and corrosive fluids. An accident. The police stopped traffic and without an outlet, we all sat in our cars. I reversed before cars packed me in from behind and made a right turn on

some side street, La Baya or Via Colinas, that led to the town's megachurch, Calvary Community Church. I drove parallel to Thousand Oaks Boulevard on a side street and hoped to come back around to the main road farther ahead, but when I turned left on a new street, I was met with a road block and what seemed like a quarter block of blood. Or fluids. Pools drying in the mild April sun. I went back to the line I had previously tried to avoid, and sat with everyone else while the police cleared the road of debris.

Never a squeamish person, from my birth I was incapable of not being affected. So I didn't look at traffic accidents while the rest of Southern California slammed their brakes even when they didn't have to so they could catch a glance. But this accident was unavoidable. While I inched by the scene on the Boulevard and a side street, a covered lump on concrete shown bright in the sun, surrounded by a mess of fluids on the hot black street, a shredded motorcycle, and a smashed Volvo. I'd never seen a dead human being, but at that moment I saw what that human never saw for itself. Its own insides. I looked down at my hands on my own Volvo steering wheel. I didn't want to know what I was made of, but I knew it looked like what poured on the street. I was ashamed to be stricken by someone else's tragedy, so I counted syllables and inched along the scene. *Thou-sand Oaks Boul-e-ward. Thou-sand Oaks Boul-e-ward.*

Back at work and after my grandmother's phone call, when my boss wasn't watching, I called my father over and over. I looked at my palms, pushed on the dark veins inside my pale wrists. My insides already looked as though they were reaching out for escape, and my father wasn't reachable. I left messages at our home and on his cell

phone, picked at my hands until they bled; activities in a day that could be defined by my inability to be an ideal employee.

As a punkrock teenager in Thousand Oaks, you love where you live but pretend not to. The suburbs. Wastelands for culture and arts. Homogeny. White nomads landing in wealth. A planned community putting its smiles forward but really an antithesis of gathering, a place for fear and isolation, convenience and waste. With each Food Not Bombs benefit at the Black Panther house in LA, every metal show at the Living Room in Goleta, Mojoes in Hollywood, jumping down into the Hollywood Bowl from the trees in back, the Museum of Jurassic Technology with its sly humor, Perversion goth dancing with a fake ID, we were reminded how good we had it in comparison to everyone else in Southern California, and how uninteresting that made us. I pretended to my friends that I bemoaned where we lived just as they pretended to me. And then we hiked on each full moon into Wildwood, drank beers in the tee pee, ran up Mt. Boney into the fog and got high while our parents, addicts or poor or struggling to pay property taxes on an inherited home while on disability, in jail for domestic violence or incest or another DUI, were examples of the otherwise to wealth that Thousand Oaks thrived on. Not that Thousand Oaks didn't make me feel rich. Malibu was near enough to be ours whenever we chose. Rich friends' beach houses when their parents left town. In the hills I caught snakes, then hung them in pillowcases on meat hooks set high on our Irving Drive porch. When the snakes slept, I put them in my father's underwear drawer and invariably took them out before he returned because I never wanted to really scare him. Coyotes everywhere. Deer

tracks pressing paths into the tall spring grass. Then the tall grass dry and singing through the summer. Atop Mt. Boney the perfect glimpse of the Pacific from a deep green seat. Weekends riding the back of a motorcycle with my father to Neptune's Net for a fried shrimp basket. Now a paved celebrity haunt with a steamed seafood bar, then it was a dirt driveway with bikers, my father one of them, where a homeless man and his son, Willy, one of my best friends, lived part of the time. If they were there, we'd pick them up in a car and bring them home for the weekend. Willy taught me to play "Blackbird" under the backyard oaks on my father's guitar, while our fathers whispered over bowls of stew and drank in the living room. Willy's father, twenty years later, sits at the same booth at Neptune's. On Irving, I climbed into the gully and walked through the moss when the water was low, wriggled through a manhole at the end of the street and landed in a creek lined with blackberry bushes. I ate each one and forgot that it was the gully the Rapanak children threw cats down, including our own while she was pregnant. Another neighbor, Mandy, pulled Patches out with a rope that the cat clung to. And our pets got shot, kicked, or disappeared one by one. But it was a good place to be a teenager; when the water was high in the gully, I swam, dirty and pleased. No matter how integrated into civilization, I could be barefoot and no worse for it.

At sunset in Thousand Oaks, especially when the fog set in, you could smell sage, a full scent as if from inside the earth but wet and deep, not unlike coyote shit. An invasive plant that kills the kinder natives, someone told me once. With each drive across town, the red-tailed hawks above, the green Santa Monica Mountains to the west and the snow-capped Topatopas rising above the low clouds to the east, the southern descent into

city lights and the northern descent into Camarillo where the white-washed adobe mental hospital that became Cal. State Channel Island stood, I loved where I was born and felt a part of it in a way that I never felt a part of family. The land there held me. Every time I returned and wished to own a part of it, I ended up in Sycamore canyon for the ten-mile loop hike amongst the parrots and fog. Wet and warmer than it looks, beautiful and primordial. Walking into the bottom of that crevice feels like what I eventually sought from men, alcohol, anything. The words themselves. *Thousand Oaks*, I love to say, as slowly as I say *Conejo Valley*, *Ventura County*, *Los Angeles*, and *California*. These words feel like home when I speak them. These are good words.

Right now you know what will happen, but I didn't. Everything I repeated to myself over the years got caught in my fists and never found a way to my center. And now, we look back as if we've left anything. I try to leave but there is a thing to contain here, a way to identify what departure means. Locate the moment of breath where a before becomes an after.

I drive from Thousand Oaks Boulevard to Westlake Boulevard and into a rich darkness where Sycamore trees veil streetlamps and the concrete is a wide, smooth passageway to the better neighborhood, quiet and nestled into the Santa Monicas. If one were to write "Thousand Oaks" on an envelope with my grandparents' address, the mail would still be delivered to their house. Parts of Westlake Village are annexed into Thousand Oaks, but parts are not, and either way the community is still a part of the Conejo Valley. After a long history of ownership, with strange stories like a race for a

land deed put forward by Andrew Russell, William Randolph Hearst purchased the area in 1925, and it was eventually sold to Fred Albertson of Albertson's market in 1943, then the American-Hawaiian Steamship company in 1963, when the planned community plan was implemented. But the complication of Westlake Village is that it sits in both Ventura and Los Angeles counties. Because California law prevents a city from existing in more than one county, the half of Westlake Village that is in Ventura county is officially known as Thousand Oaks, and many of the residents in that part of the "Village" don't know they actually live in Thousand Oaks. But to be able to identify one's hometown as Westlake Village versus Thousand Oaks, the presumed wealth and all the luxuries that come along with that is worth an avoidance of facts.

My thighs set into a burn, a manifestation of foreknowledge in a woman's body. But I am no woman. The heat, limb for limb, is what my body does to show me what I refuse to see—to be—what I already know and have feared, how coincidence and prescience sit taut beside each other. I sweat even though spring is a mere layer in the air, and the heat feels certain, the earth and my old car holding on tight. These things know.

In my 1975 Volvo 164E—the Cadillac of Volvos, my father calls it—I drive slow, as I've had two hours and a boss's lecture to decide what will happen when I arrive at my grandparents'. I love my elders and want to do right by them. I don't want them to see me squirm. But the heat has set into an adrenaline thump that ritualizes my drive toward some end. I feel powerful for the first time in my life because I know something bad has happened that I always knew would happen.

My father loves to drive. He will slow a block before a stop sign as others honk behind him, shift into neutral and lurch into a red light. He downshifts. He says *no one downshifts, anymore*. I roll my car under the intersections lights of Triunfo Canyon Road and Westlake Boulevard to see my father approach from the south. I wonder if he too is on his way to my maternal grandparents', but he heads the direction that I come from. I don't recognize his car, but that's not uncommon in our life, as he supports us by fixing up old cars and selling them for more money. He doesn't trouble over the simple jobs of tires and breaks—that's for me—unless he has to. Trevor, he builds transmissions, revels in the calm, methodical way of metal circles. I will realize years later that this is his mystical practice, the way into the ether, and then a way out. But for now, I know that when I got my driver's license a few months before, I only had to walk out front and point to a car that I wanted. A 1965 Volvo Amazon. No wait—I want the 1975 164E. Heaven. And when he gets the motorcycles, like the recently purchased Ducati, I'm old enough to tell him that I don't want to ride them anymore, I'm old enough to say *no to that* and be heard. After a childhood spent horizontal on the back of a bike while weaving through canyons with my drunk father, I'd had enough leg welts and lessons in *leaning into it*. That is his own sublime entry to the Pacific. But I understand his want to drive slowly, especially now. I drive toward a stop that will change my life, and I don't doubt this. But this path can be used, as can the car. So I learn my lesson slowly, I learn how to mourn with the body and metal.

The night is temperate, as if fall's Santa Ana winds have started their clean sweep of Los Angeles from the east, spinning in the Valley and dying out northwest, in the

mountains. One of the good childhood memories comes to me each year during these winds. I get out of the tub and my hair is long, wet. I am at my mother's. I put on one of Rich's large t-shirts and kid-run out back to the vast, green yard. School has just started so I have to bathe every night, sometimes twice and then again in the morning when I have lice. At my mother's I've started combing my own hair and laying out my nightclothes, turning on and off the tub faucets by myself. I don't like the hair dryer, so I sit outside with my knees tucked into my arms and up into my chest under the large cape of soft cotton, feel the grassy moisture under my feet. As the sun sets, my fallen hairs lift in the wind to look like gold in the last light. I am amazed by my biology. Each hair shows itself as purple, brown, bright, translucent, rich with life. Tomorrow I'm off to stay with my father and I'm happy. I'm only happy. For minutes I don't see LuAnn or Rich. They are somewhere else in the house, and I'm calm, thinking that I could make it out here on my own. It's the season for children to run away—the new beginnings of bullies, cursive, and long division—and even if a child makes it only to a garage or a neighbor's yard before turning back, it is an achievement. This memory is at a point in my life before I've considered what it means to see my mother's skull. I haven't moved beyond seeing. I don't need to run away yet, but it's fun to think about. No one is around, so there is no one I need to run from.

But it's spring, not fall. No Santa Anas, just California against the mountain on a Wednesday, April 29, 1998. My mind has drifted to Septembers, the time of Virgo, the month of the feminine, of the befores, but there aren't anymore befores. I pull up to my grandparents' home on Cheswick Place. It is dark and quiet but for the breeze in the

Sycamores. This is an imaginary place, shrouded by an annexed calm. I don't pull my old Volvo into my grandparents' driveway, as even the possibility of a leak is one of my grandfather Larry's first worry upon meeting guests. The homeowner's association is clear on such matters. I park on the street and step into my favorite part of this house, the marble entranceway. Light from the dining area beams onto the marble, and then I know that my grandparents will be waiting at the dinner table for me. Right now I know what will happen. I look back to learn as if I've ever been a before. And they are here, through the sleek, cool entrance into blue carpet, each in their usual spot at the table, Grandpa Larry with a J & B on the rocks and Grandma Shirley with a chardonnay. The husband of my youngest aunt, Mark, sits on the couch, and I don't know why. I stay in the entrance and peek at them. My right hand holds the open door frame, I don't know why. They look back at me, straighten their backs in unison to a grotesque degree when they see me, their crowns almost pointing in their reach. I realize they have all inhaled and paused. My brow sweats, my throat is nauseous and holds me back from entering the dining room for fear that I will fall down in a slump before these people. I see layers of soft, translucent waves. Is it sweat in my eyes? Is it adrenaline? I wonder.

LuAnn and Spencer are not in the room. I'm right and I hate myself for knowing something so meaningless. They're dead. LuAnn got them killed. But my maternal grandfather and his wife aren't crying. That doesn't make sense. They simply look at me, and I look to my left and see the hallway light on, meaning that Spencer is asleep in his room. He needs the light to help his fear, as I always did. Only LuAnn is gone, and for this second it feels like I've gained one instead of lost two. But as the relief passes it

leads to a feeling I've known from my beginning but that has changed, an accumulation of all that has discomfited me, the want to peel the skin from my bones. Is it prescience or shame? It is all here. I feel it in my stomach first, then in my mind and from there, on. My doctor told me what I feel is growing pains, a glitch in development that makes itself better over time. He told me it would pass. But now I sense it articulating, pressed into my rib cage. It says there's a self separate but stuck in the middle that can escape. I want it all out. This sense for my entire life was a preparation for what was about to happen. I mean, is happening. I was telling myself something all those years. I mean, I am telling. I knew this would happen, but I still don't know what has happened. The tense moves with my blood and that is the only way.

My grandfather suggests I sit. I will not. I say I won't until someone tells me what has happened. A bribe they bite. Larry places his hands on his glass while Shirley and Mark do not speak.

Your father was in a motorcycle accident on Thousand Oaks Boulevard. He's dead.

My grandfather says it from the head of the table that is taken only by men who say such things. He says it to me because it's his job and now he cries large, real tears.

I'm so sorry. And now his head is in his hands.

Thousand Oaks Boulevard.

I move backwards into the cool marble and flip down somehow, the back of my shoulders onto stone. From my ribcage arching up toward to ceiling as if by rope, knees bent underneath me and my arms crunched under my back, I turn my face away from the

ceiling, what's above it and who knows, who knows, but I'm done. I roll into a living room of sea-colored carpet and don't understand how it didn't come out from inside of me. It tried.

Before I fell and hands pulled me up from the Berber carpet, the blue of it all, the Christmases without cleanup, doll hairs on the soft floor, remote control car tracks around the coffee table, glitter from my projects and a room away from my mother who couldn't help but not want me, there was a second, maybe a few, that were mine, my mouth comforted into a silent O. I didn't see those people anymore with my head hung back, first up and then down on the hard entrance, and one word slipped from my mouth. *No*. I saw the marble at my back and my eyes turned over, over to my ankles but from around my back. Then my knees came over my stomach and I was around to the same awkward position. I had done a backflip. I was amazing. My ribcage tried to reverse itself because the part of me caught was inside of my intestines. It was shit. Just shit. All those years, that's what needed escape. My skin pulled from my back and it started to come out. Small hands, like children's, found their way to my arms and waist, six of them. I was made to be upright when I knew, I knew I was base. Hands were all over me, patting my skin and where were my own? I didn't want them anyway. Never again. Without them was a state that made sense to be, so I said to those people, *don't touch me*.

In time, a police officer entered. Then LuAnn busted through the front door like a mistaken champ, jerked left and right, sucked on her fucking dry tongue, snapped her knees together, apart, together, apart, exposed her labia, and again. Once she shot a Thighmaster from her legs clear across a room. She wanted to know what the bother was

and was told, then swayed like a believer, crying for her lost love. *Trevor, Trevor, I loved him, he was my true love.* The man she brought with her stood back from all us, blinked, blinked, in a shadow. I told her *shut up, you shut up about you,* and the officer suggested to me that I calm down while LuAnn thanked him effusively and nodded. *Everyone has a right to be here,* he said. For years LuAnn will remember this moment—that an officer told me to allow her to be. She rocked back and forth on a comfortable chair and I let her, I left them all and walked out the door with my car keys.

I saw myself moving from the inside of my eyes. In the beginning of my turning I was full, knew my life had been leading up to that moment, that movement. When I was born, two lines were apart and every year they'd closed in on the other but never touched. That morning they felt the heat of the other, that afternoon they turned to each other and each other was all they knew. When I drove to that house, the lines set my thighs in a burn so I'd acknowledge a change, and I did. Five seconds before I left that home the lines touched and I felt the press on my hot, ugly body, the lie of being a woman outside of intestines and shit. As I left that home, my body was not without that moment of knowing something else finally won. My vision was clear, turned into an absence of before that day. I return to that absence now to know what I was doing. What was it I was doing? What do I remember, what did I do. I took care of myself. I drove away. I left those people, and when civilization fails, this is one of the things you will do, too.



After the rush hour fades into night in Southern California, the freeways open up to a grey that folds down from the sky after toppling over western mountains. As the grey spreads east, the sharply lit streets take on a dull orange glow, and where the counties of Ventura and Los Angeles meet, the air becomes an earthy perfume of sage and dirt. If you drive north on the 101 freeway from where the counties meet in Westlake Village, the land's balm stays with you all the way through Santa Barbara. Even while barreling through Carpinteria, the easy-to-miss town on 9 square miles of coastal zone separating the sea from the hills, a desiccated brush smell meets, over your left shoulder and cheek, salt. The 101 freeway disassembles the old and new, and no matter where you come from, no matter which history your family has been a part of or not, no matter what people tell you about who you are or will never be, you are the driver on the El Camino Real, or Royal Road, stampeding beside the Pacific and mountains, concrete and Denny's. Sage, the invasive plant, owns more square footage than you. You could breathe the sole exhale of the plant's oils for an hour. And even then, as the sage fades for a moment of skunk, salt, gasoline, it remains a memory in the lungs of a native. I am sixteen. Trevor is dead. I don't have a family, a home, anyone calling after me, but this

road is my place and for this moment, a place is life. *Thousand Oaks, Conejo Valley, Ventura County, Los Angeles, California, El Camino Real*. These words feel like home when I speak them. These are good words. To say them and yank your wheel into the ocean, or to say them and keep your hands set straight, is your choice. But you don't get to decide not to say these words. Whether you die on this road is a decision all your own until it's not, and I tell you, what I love most is a California freeway.

To have offered Trevor one piece of this land before he died, for either of us to own anything there, I would have given my long, red hair, years of labor, a finger, what I had. But we didn't own. We rented and borrowed. Would he have wanted a deed to anything, is the question. On the weekends in the mountains, covered in mud and naked, me embarrassed but jealous of his strong male body, my father owned this land. My father pulled dead trees from the earth with a tow bar, chained the trunks high up and ignited the wood to ward off bugs. He photographed his work and made posters, hung each image in our home as a reminder of where we were safe. As a warning of what might happen if we didn't go back. In the woods we ate venison, kept current with other wanderers about water moccasin sightings in the dam, walked softly near turtles. Every Manx cat we had climbed trees above our camp to see far. Sprigs of thyme and lavender rubbed on our forearms. But then he got sober, and a day without an AA meeting was a day of possibility. How to reconcile that with where he belonged, what called him, out and far away from rented church rooms? My father and I were redheaded and broad, smelled of fire and looked pink in the sun. Out there when our heads hit pillows on the ground

without doubt, we slept well. Without the terror of the dreams we had in the city. This is what I say about us. When I talk about us out there, I don't say my father was a paranoid drunk who prepared us for a race war. We were good out there. We were fed. But we had to return to the house at some point. To work and school, even though the fear of dying horrible deaths was in our blood, the fear of all ends. From the concentration camps in Estonia to the murders and accidentals, to my father's own death and then each family member left picked off after him, it was in our blood. And now the blood is only mine. I drove from my grandparents' north on the 101 into Newbury Park, then turned around and drove home. The wet fog rolled from west to east through my car.

My cat lies in a crease of blanket on my bed, dirt on both our bodies from her stroll in the morning's first sun. A child's fitted sheet pinned across my bedroom window scoops air and exhales. Maybe it was mine when I was a child. Outside the house on Irving Drive it's Spring and Trevor has been gone for several days. Neighborhood cats hunt in the tall grass out back, their wild eyes set on the squirrels jumping across one old oak to another—a passage and play from backyard to backyard I've seen my entire life from this bedroom window—and there might be guns buried around the roots of the big tree.

My sleep has gotten worse since Trevor's death, but it was never so great anyway. I wake, I go to school, I go to work, I come home and get the mail, I lay in bed. Yesterday at the mailboxes, my neighbor, the wife of a minister, told me that she said goodbye to Trevor as he climbed on his motorcycle that day, and when she inhaled, she set her eyes on me good.

I knew he wasn't coming back. Ever again. I knew he would die. I felt it.

She isn't the first person to say such a thing to me since that day. This is something that no one tells you. People want to be able to say they knew. But speaking back to her wouldn't have helped anyone. What would I have said, *You're an asshole?* If she doesn't know, I can't tell her, and what do I know to see, anyway? I know my head hurts because I see myself from behind my eyes and then through them. Things have doubled. Truth is a line pulled tight.

After Trevor's memorial today, I won't have anything to do that I can think of, so I lay still with my dreams from last night, sit with my eyelashes, my teeth, the dirt, the tight line. I come back into the first dream, leaping over our front fence, into the Greers' yard. Their grass is so green and wet with life. I smell the linens from their home, clean white draped across the furniture. The family isn't around, but I run inside. I know every way into and out of their house from afternoons with Ginny, the daughter. I know how their doors allow a view of the outside world and another section of the home, like a train moving in a circle. Or like a circle in an oak stump when before there were limbs for the cats and squirrels. In this world there are no animals, there is one strong, dead tree, and I've been running a long time. There is his hunger, his blade swing, my face.

This time he came to kill me with the rusty claw. In the Greer's doorway he grabs me by screaming into his fists until they burst vessels in my own arms. He pushes me into the beautiful, flowering yard, moisture warming my feet and then not as he pulls me up into his raw chest. My body is off the ground then backwards as he pleases, moves forward if he wants to slam me into his center, red with blood that attempts escape. His

own insides fear him, and thus do I. I hear that his heart wants to expel me from his world.

Here in the neighbors' yard when as children Ginny and I faced each other on each side of the fence and swallowed pennies our fathers gave us, smiled to show them we had healthy throats, my father hangs me with hooks on the big tree. The metal grows from a limb and then into his hands, connects this world's everything to everything else with my stripped flesh as my father flays me at the ribs. My body, for the first time, feels distinctly female, and I worry that my father, while skinning me, will see me naked. But he will think of nothing until I die, and now that I'm dying, I taste pennies. I'm so lonely.

I wake because the house is like a ghost field, jasmine, sulfur. It is the smell of life come back. I swing my legs over my bed, and I never make a sound as I walk into the living room to see what I know will be there. I don't see from my eyes but from the back left of my head, my body stuttering forward to a man with his head turned down like a sad child. My father is dressed from collar to ankle in denim. Now he sways like a beautiful woman dancing slow, she will fall. I grab his shoulders hard enough to bruise him if he weren't so strong. This world has humor, doesn't it? We are the same height here, and I shake him because he is disappearing and I realize this is a dream. This is the last time I can hold him, my only chance to get him back. His eyes open slightly, like a woman's exalted stare, but his pupils are rolled into the back of his sunk head; they fall deeply enough to make his throat gasp. My father doesn't breathe. Our living room is the same flat world as when this man pulled my skin off my body, and outside there are no birds.

He is steady on his feet now and isn't going anywhere. Wait. I am fading. I will go back to a world that has birds and cats, but they will never be the same because I am not a part of that world anymore. We all transcend something. I grab his back by throwing my body into him, chest to chest, father and daughter. I hold this man tighter than I thought I could because I am made of what he forced me to be. I hold on, surprise myself with how strong I can be, how fast I know when something needs to be held.

The lawsuit against his killer's insurance company has been filed, as have the emancipation papers. I ran the man from Child Protective Services off my porch when I said *try to take me*. The memorial has been planned, and the landlord was paid. So now we are here, and I tell him, *wake the fuck up*. I am waking up. *Don't go now*. I am gone.

In this world there is only the man killing me or the man dying while I watch. The haze of his body lightens under my grasp. This is the dance where bodies sway and lose their one and only.

I woke from these places with my eyes already open and my head lifted from a tense neck, watching the fitted sheet catch air in the corners and beat at the window frame. In sweat, with my fists, with my breath caught, I thought something so simple, banal. *It's spring*. And I heard a sound that helped me move back into the day: the whipping sheet. The surrender of cotton to a thump. It kept me contained for a second and made a rhythm for my mourning song. I thought about my father's name-sound, the *Trevor-Bryant-Heston* whipping like the skin he pulled broad my body what bit my dreams, the hacking bay of my breasts boor his hands, a burned world barring clothes where *Trevor* beast

wants the bell two-syllable of my cut nipples with a hook, the sureness of his whisper while hunting me hard hunt through windows hung homes run empty for his hunting me before I wake, before he cuts.

Before I can be sure that I've lost, that something else has won, finally, I am brought back to the waking world. The phone starts ringing and someone breathes hard on the tape, saying *oh god, oh god* over and over. Then the person hangs up. This happens several times each morning.

Before I realized the deftness with which my father could handle danger, I worried whether he was dangerous enough. He drove me to my mother's home on a night when I was still tiny, long before Spencer was born. LuAnn was asleep in her room and Rich was in the living room smoking *Marlboro 100s*, drinking whiskey, and sucking on his teeth. Tom Waits wasn't playing, so I knew he wasn't drunk enough to pull his teeth out, nor mean enough yet that my mother would wake me in the night for escape. Without saying good night to Rich, I walked back to my bedroom and flopped on my waterbed, waiting for the sounds of Trevor's GMC to roar away from Margarita Street. But it didn't.

Instead, my father's boots sounded across the kitchen and into the living room where Rich was. Then both their voices. Rich's body was the largest of any man I had seen. I could hear from the back of the house when he crossed his legs or got up for a snack. I heard him coming at my father then, joint cracks and steps short, fast. So I ran across the home and exploded into the living room, commanded silence as fat children do, saw my father's wild look up to Rich's face. I knew each weapon my father carried

on his body. Before Rich knew, too, I had to act, so my stepfather got my pointing finger in the air while I screamed at him that he was not to touch my daddy, leave my daddy alone and just die already. Trevor's eyes didn't waver from Rich's. Trevor's hands on his thick waist, close to an action. Despite Trevor's sureness, in the face of Rich ready for a fight, my belief in my father faltered. Rich had hit our house with his fist outside by the trashcans and, through brick and drywall, brought down pictures. And all the late nights we had to escape him. My dreams that he finally killed LuAnn and carved shapes into her back to show me a map of what might happen if I dared disobey him. I didn't know which man would kill the other and for that, in that moment, I wasn't ashamed.

I approached them and grabbed Trevor's hand, pulled him to the front door while Rich watched then settled back into his couch and watched the television. The moment was over. And I knew not what it was to begin with. My father knelt on his knees so I could see his face, and I grabbed his shoulders hard. *You have to get out of here now. Richard will kill you. You could get hurt. I don't want you to get hurt.* I needed to know that Trevor would come again, that for us all there was a way out. He hugged me, and I can't explain why I force this moment out of my mind now. To remember his embrace then is to remember how close we all were to dying. He walked out the door, and what does that even mean now? It was a shared moment in which I'm the only one alive now left to remember.

From the moment Trevor left my mother's until another day when I was twenty-five and found out that Adrienne Shelly was murdered, after years of men's violence and months into a dry winter, is the length of a line I stretched taught in my mind. I was

admitted into a state mental hospital in Tucson, Arizona, and I wanted to know what men talked about before violence. The truth, I thought, must be pulled tight.

The night Trevor died and I left my grandparents' home to drive on the 101 north into Newbury Park's fog, I circled back on the 101, north to south, to Thousand Oaks, and parked alongside our white picket fence in my usual spot. A friend followed me from Newbury Park, and two others were not that far behind. To go home alone to all the weapons was to weigh the differences between repetition and imminence. And both conclusions presumed that I could actually get out of my car. The porch light wasn't on. That was new to me in a house that to all seemed so old. But it was a fact that made the house already nostalgic. Our home smelled like machine oil and leather and Dial soap and moldy record sleeves. It smelled like men's oldest work, slick and unyielding.

You could come into this home. You would turn on a living room light. As you enter, you would see a large dictionary on a stand, both from 1908, next to a pile of brake pads, a Volvo cylinder, scattered metal rings, and grease stains. You might be compelled to touch the taxidermy rattlesnake or buck on the wall, both done by a lay hand, but the buckling corners of skin suggests that you shouldn't. On the pink wall across from you, there would be two posters of dead oak trunks set afire, chained up to living trees. And there is his bed, below the posters printed from photographs, because a bed in the living room means an intruder will be kept out. You don't mind stepping on the soiled rug with a machine smell that spreads across the room from the one rainy day in November when he decided that a sheet was all that was necessary to protect the carpet from a

transmission. There's another cold, oily smell that you can't parse out from the others, but I tell you it is for the lava block that knives go on, and the hollows of guns. Look at the ancient armoire from Trevor's Estonian mother against the east wall and you might recognize the sharpness of furniture polish. After everything Dagmar lost—her parents chopped up in front of her, a husband to a fighter jet, her first son to murder, Trevor to nothing. The armoire and Dagmar's daughter, named Dresden after the fire bombings and love that remained for a place after Dagmar's own escape from the camps, are still in the world. Dresden protected on an island by a wealthy Japanese neurosurgeon husband, and the armoire moving from country to country after each marriage to another Allied fighter pilot. After entering a convalescent home, then getting kicked out and entering each one in the county until she was banned or bored, my father put her armoire in our living room, changed an interior light bulb, and displayed antique dental tools. Now I tell you that I can't tell from the smell on the dental tools, what oil is best or preferred at least, and the real problem of that rented home packed like it was never owned by anyone else presents itself: I don't know how to take care of the things that are most apart of my life.

When I entered the Southern Arizona Mental Health Corporation (SAMHC) inpatient unit, I considered the night when Rich might have killed my father. But not that exactly. Mostly I thought about what happened before my father dropped me off at my mother's and confronted Rich about who knows what. We shared miles together. The long route. Streets instead of the 23 freeway. My father sat me on his lap in the driver's seat so that I could steer the primer yellow GMC truck, called Chuck, while he worked the pedals.

This was the time before the night's violence when my father trusted me enough to drive us in the correct direction. And in our home, to drive was significant. It meant, as he said, that I could get someone to hospital, that I understood the difference between necessity and law. When we parked outside LuAnn's house, he scooped me into the passenger seat and looked at me.

If you ever want to run away and live in the woods, she won't find us. We can have a good life out there. I promise.

Trevor's eyes set on me. He terrified me with his sincerity, his promise. I believed him.

I don't think Mom would be okay with that, Dad, I said as short and flat as I could without showing him how scared I was about either option. He blinked and looked at me, turned to his steering wheel and looked down. I said, *Dad.* A changed name that showed I could speak to such things. Not *Daddy*. Trevor's brother had just been murdered, but this was still before his drug use made him get hard on me. Before he scared me. When I called him *Daddy* it was because I looked to him to understand this world for us. But I knew at that moment that to stay or go weren't good options. To stay in civilization felt closer to dying, but to leave signaled nothing clear to me except my father's exhale. Of course, years later and in SAMHC, it was easy to see my mistake. Alone on a cot in the women's room, watching the cold and sunny desert December from inside a window, my hair matted to my head after weeks without water and laid out on a pillow for the ceremony of staring, I knew what we might have created with our lives seemed like each our loss but it was a burden all my own. We could have been in the mountains even then.

He could have been alive, and I might have known him enough to see the worst parts of him for only that—the wanting kidnapper, the man with knives, the man who caught snakes for women from the canyons who spread their legs wide enough for him to see. But he was also the man who got in a knife fight with his girlfriend, Charlene. When he asked me to leave with him, I didn't know what to say so I chose what already was, but as an adult with a quiet, cold space to learn from, I learned that what scared me about my father before, his capacity for violence, was only a link to his heart, both red blood big, held strong at his waist. A woman might remember the first time she flinched at the reckless man her father turned into. Fathers could be men who had sex and punched things, maybe one after another. They could feed and cut. But a moment of violence could be closer to a moment before it—one that protected—before people did what they should not have.

Adrienne Shelly was hanged from a shower rod by Diego Pillco in the way, he says, he strung up pigs on a farm in Ecuador. And like on the farm, it was not the blunt force that killed Shelly, but the draining of oxygen from her lungs as blood would seep from a pig after one good blow. There is a difference between dying and dead, space between the two for reconsideration. Pillco had fought with Shelly when she found him in her work apartment, rifling through her things. He left after the argument, but he came back to kill her because he was only downstairs after all, working at the construction site. He reconsidered letting her live, he says, because he worried she would call Immigration. He made her body look like she killed herself, left her husband and three-year-old daughter

and unfinished film *The Waitress* behind. Because he said it, others have said it: this is about immigration. This wouldn't have happened had he not been illegally hired.

Conversely, people say, this is about immigration. People have a right to come to this country, to legal work, to sanctuary. People say this is about immigration. Well then I say it's about pigs. This is about pigs. Fine, it's not about the moment when someone murders, it's not about the moment Shelly is murdered, it's not about the loss of beauty and sanctuary and home, *home*, the mother, the lover, all the red on her crown, the who knows how long she hung and thought about whatever good people think about after pigs decide the good people will die, it's about pigs.

Trevor tore off his belt with one pull, the crack of its momentum strong enough to split the bedroom door jam while his pants stood high on his thick, heaving waist. This is no dream. Probably half of ten, I saw for the first time the way grown women saw my father. Power. I don't know if that was the first time he aimed to beat me, but it was the closest he got, the only time his shadow grew big enough to forget that I was already as small as a beating could make me. After he unhooked his Colt Firearms belt buckle, he slashed at my bedroom door with his right hand, making an X across the doorknob, the frame, then right in the center with the leather strap. It sounded like the bullwhip he kept in our living room, the 20-foot warning that had been rumored to come from a plantation. Really, Trevor was left-handed. But he had been forced to change that in an army base school as a child. Did the colt imprint on his right hand mark where he had been forced to be unlike himself? I mean to ask, what is the history of each of our beatings, how many weapons

do we surround ourselves with to prove it can't happen anymore? Me, I sleep with a boot knife, balanced handle and blade. Good for throwing. Hit the target every time. Him, he shook in the hallway under a bright light, and I was in the dark in my room, on the bottom bunk, yelling into the dark that I was so *sorry*. And I was. For every way my little life imposed on others. LuAnn's anger that she was obliged to save another in her night escapes from Rich, and Trevor's confusion stemmed from loving me, his impulse to be a man like the one who punished him. I screamed from behind a pillow but didn't hide my eyes, in case he entered my room. That would make it worse. I had to show him that I accepted my punishment, that if saying *no* to his suggestion that we leave the city for the woods meant that I had to suffer, then I had to suffer.

Trevor never did come in my room that night he had his belt out to beat me. But his shadow did, and that's the way of where I come from. *Come out and take your punishment*, he whispered, slurred, to me that night. For all I don't remember from that moment on that led me to Tucson's SAMHC—the last name of the child I shared a bunk bed with when the child's mother, Charlene, and Trevor were together, the amount of times that couple stabbed each other and each went to jail, my drive from Ballard, Seattle through Nevada somewhere and eventually to Tucson, some promise I made myself that this move might make living in the world easier, that there was home some place in this world after violence—I remember his words that night. I remember because that's how memory loss works: we remember for others what they cannot themselves hold.

Before leaving Seattle for Tucson and landing in the hospital, reading about Adrienne Shelly's murder and thinking *no, no*, I was forced by a man who told me weeks after that he had just blacked out, that he didn't remember, that he still felt connected to me. When he was *out*, I saw him, his eyes rolled back deep into his head, then his twisted lips when he came as I bled and whispered *stop, just stop*. Despite the cold Seattle night, its mildew, his forehead sweated, and he sighed from the depths of some mute anger at something that wasn't me and turned away. Rolled off of me like we were married and this was perfunctory. That man too was unlike himself. And I, with scars on my hands from digging a ditch as a child, had a new abrasion that became a scar in my vagina. My home. I had been using that Seattle friend for sex even though I knew he was falling for me. He thought he found sanctuary with me, and I thought I found a fuck pig for my sanctuary.

In the hospital I couldn't remember what I did to make my father want to beat me that one night, and there was no one left around to hold that knowledge for me. Trevor grew tired of beating the door, walked away into the living room, and I finally slept in shame on the bunk bed purchased for the girlfriend he stabbed, her son, me, while still thinking that he had finally made some family that might save him, give him a home in the world. That night, my father passed out in the living room as he always did, in case an intruder came through our front panel windows. Even though Trevor was blacked out, I didn't doubt that he'd wake if I needed him. Was that the night I called to him that I was so cold, to please help, and through the walls he heard me and arrived, wrapped me in antique wool? And the buckle, did it ever get my skin before it was taken from me at

SAMHC hospital and written on an itemized list? Do I not remember? *One belt* an admitting nurse said. *You could hurt yourself with it but we'll give it back to you when you leave.* When I got in the hospital, did I want to know that the buckle imprinted Trevor's hand in his blackout as my own body had been imprinted by another man's blackout? Could I ever get as warm as my father made me each night I awoke to see my breath as if it would leave me? Was that a night my father remembered as one where he kept me warm or broke my bedroom doorframe with his belt?

I don't know, what do I know. That is the night, as he walked away from my possible beating, his body clenched and slow, my father whispered back at me, *coward.*

There were hairs torn from my father's head floating around the Santa Monica Mountains, but we looked elsewhere. We looked for the guns, people kept telling me that I should find the guns in the backyard before someone else did, people talked about guns. But I also knew the wind and the town had a reach beyond a bullet. Hairs were ripped from the side of Trevor's ear when his ear was ripped from his head, and that man who hit him never got out of his car to check on Trevor or pull the side of his head off of the concrete and lay his head back so as he died, he could face the sky. Sanctuary. Wind. Home. How much blood filled his lungs and then drained out to the earth while he couldn't move his arms or legs, while his silence was the difference between death and

dying. I drove past the accident, and this does not matter when someone dies. But I pull this truth tight, and the truth of God is in a blood clot.

Where are the guns. What did he have planned. How much had he recovered from his old ways. *Did he go back to all that?* people asked. What I knew:

The California moon is psychotic and for women.

The California sun is for snakes and women.

Every time a mountain lion mauls a child in Wildwood,

a mountain lion is hunted and shot for the women.

I am driving my father's car on my father's hair.

My father's hair where before there was only the lion's and coyote's.

What I would give for a handful from each of their wild breasts.

You can have the women, and their babies.

Outside our home on the night he was killed, I sat in my Volvo along the white picket fence, unsure how to proceed. I wondered how our home would smell. My driver's window was down, and I inhaled the smell of gasoline. Not unusual for our lot with all the cars, parts, and drums of liquids everywhere behind the upside down American flag cover to our carport. But the gas smell was more potent, closer. Trevor died and my gas tank started leaking. I hadn't yet learned how to fix that. Or do the big stuff with all the other cars on the lot. I didn't know how to care for them. I wanted them all gone.

I got out of my car and looked under it to see the leak, which didn't help anything. So I got up to rip out each peg of that stupid white picket fence that we painted ourselves

because I hated it sitting there. I went to do that but made it to the door and unlocked, entered. It was dark inside and out, and I grasped to find the light switch for the first time. The light was one of his responsibilities. I found the switch behind a cabinet full of motorcycle gloves, sunglasses, and watch parts. Then I looked out at the room and stiffened. The colors of our home, the brown walls and pink carpet, caught in my eyes along with the Manx cat's grey body, and together they all looked red, I don't know how, a dull crimson color like the chalk used by carpenters to measure. It was a memory, I realized, where if I ever saw brown and pink together I would know a worker's red.

My father had found the salmon-colored carpet in a dumpster, and thus it became a lesson. He blocked off Irvine Drive, and we spread the carpet on the street. With each of us on an opposite side of square, we held the chalk string between us and plucked down on it like a guitar string until a straight red line showed us where to cut. It wasn't hard, and for that it was one of my favorite lessons. I pulled the string until it was taught, then watched it bounce on the carpet and reveal a perfect, red line. Simple and satisfying. We carpeted our entire home with salmon carpet that stank of alley cat spray. And at the end of the work, we shared our red hands and a bar of Dial soap.

Three friends came in our home. Jeremy, who followed me over from his neighborhood, Billy, who I called, and Erik, who drove in from the Valley even though he had to work detailing cars at 6 AM. They stood until I sat on my father's bed next to our cat. Our couch. I offered them food because I didn't know how to not be a good host. There was pie from one of Trevor's AA friends, Jon, in the refrigerator. When Jon got sober, his girlfriend started making him pie. And since my father's sober pies came from

Marie Calendars, Jon brought a homemade one over so they could eat a better one together while they talked. Half the pie was left. I turned on the television because the guys were too polite to do it themselves, then divided the pie into thirds and drowned the tops with whip cream. The week prior my father had given Jeremy and Erik ten dollars to purchase the largest tub of tapioca they could find from the supermarket. When the two returned, the three of them sat there, watching the TV and eating pudding. Jeremy and Erik had thought it was so cool that Trevor liked tapioca that much. But with the pie, the boys didn't smile even though I knew it was so good. When I carried the bowls from the kitchen to the living room, my movement forward sent back waves of sweet cream, leather, gasoline, berries, and my mouth watered. It smelled like a good night in our home. The sugary pastry odor only came after Trevor got clean. It was a nice addition. They ate the pie slowly, trying not to scrape forks on the metal bowls. They did that because they wanted to like it less for me. They ate the pie until it was gone and that was a loving act. They helped me rid the house of my father's things that would decay. And what would not decay, I wanted rid of right then, wanted more than anything to clean the house of it all, so I watched them eat the pie and then I began.

At the hospital, I liked to keep my eyes set strong on concrete. The white wall of the women's room looked like breath without the work of breathing. It looked, if at all possible, like a friendly wall. But my eyes noticed the small, black man that kept passing by my door. Tyrone. Each time he passed the women's room he looked in through the viewing window but didn't stop. Then he would cross back the way he had come and do

it again. It had been twenty-seven times so far that day and I had been born on August twenty seventh and I was supposed to be at that moment in the Finnish Lapland winter for twenty-seven days instead of a hospital in Tucson, and the world, I thought, worked like that. I wondered if Tyrone planned to eventually attack me, and I wished he just would so that we could share that moment and move on to a time where he wouldn't be always watching me, every hour of the day, unless he was eating or sleeping. But we were before that. Twenty-eight times today.

I moved over to the other bed in the room that doesn't face the window even though I'm not supposed to if the door is closed, but Tyrone peeks his head inside to make sure that I'm there. And then he began passing the door again, singing a song that went, *he fell down, but he got up. He fell down, but he got up.* The word *down* sounded deep in his lungs while the word *up* rose in his mouth and stopped short. He wasn't a bad singer, really. He could mimic the meaning in words while I thought about what I couldn't hear anymore. The men's and women's rooms had a shared bathroom, and each morning Tyrone showered, he sang a song about a lost girl that just needed help from someone who could see her, yelling it all out from behind the bathroom door. Someone told me earlier that day that the staff planned to transfer Tyrone to a place *where he could get more help* and they could stop watching him watch me. Dr. Adriana told me that when someone gets like that, they transfer. That's a rule.

I had been inside the women's room for days when a Russian nurse came to take me to the back patio where people smoke, and also so that Tyrone could rest. SAMHC's backyard fence faced the backyards of a Central Tucson neighborhood and shared

parking with residents of Flower Street. It was December and even in mid-day—when the sun was bright and high—it felt like the month, with a cold, still desert air too thin to catch the rays. But the sun felt good if you could angle your back at it perfectly, so I did, and my hospital gown looked saturated with a glow that was felt in my kidneys and spine. On a mesquite-shaded driveway, a man unpacked a pickup full of concrete mix and buckets, worked fast and quiet, never looking up at me. I wore my gown like a backwards kimono, wrapped extra times and tied tight here and there. When I saw that first person outside of SAMHC since I had arrived, I felt embarrassed and glad he didn't look up.

Trevor used to put girl clothes on me backwards or inside-out or make my pig-tails lopsided. When he dropped me off with my babysitter, Ann, she would laugh so heartily at his fumbling that I knew she loved him. Ann had been Trevor's teacher when they both lived on an air force base in Panama, and somehow she kept up with our family enough to become one of my primary caregivers in life. She never had children of her own, and after making money in California real estate, she enjoyed feeding me shrimp and watermelon and creamed corn, my favorite foods, and enrolling me in karate. I wanted to stop thinking about her in the hospital because she called every day to speak to me, terrified of what my being there meant. And I wanted to stop thinking about Trevor because after years of doing it, I ended up nowhere. Outside on SAMHC's porch, I inspected the Arizona sky—flat clouds shifting west so fast, up from the Gulf and to who knows where. It wasn't ever not beautiful. I covered my chest in the sun because I was still cold, and the nurse moved to lead me back inside with an arm softly guiding my shoulder.

I was excited for the good life when I left Los Angeles for Seattle. I hadn't moved to Tucson then because a boyfriend there felt close enough to my heart to completely ruin me. I met him in Tucson one weekend when I went on a trip, and every weekend after we were either there or Los Angeles until our stuff became stuff that only I held onto and he started sleeping with a woman his own age. I made it to the desert finally because my want for the hot wind on my eyelashes lived beyond us, and a few more loves in between built some more layers in my sentiments. When I thought of Tucson from Seattle, I thought there was a line that people walked over to begin again, and I knew where it was even though I thought it was in the north before. The tight line was exactly at the Arizona border where the first big cactus sat and the dirt turned from a California yellow to a rust cream. When I crossed that line, I tried harder than I had before to write, I tried to be happy with less, but it was too late. Red dirt. The concrete buckets. Me wrapped all funny in a gown. I was led by a Russian nurse in the American Southwest on a path lined with cigarette butts and carefully trimmed cactus. I tilted my head back before the building's shadow and opened my eyes wide until all I saw was black and shine. My skin like that in the sun looked purple in its pale, and the nurse told me *it's bad to look at the sun, Sarah*, and laughed a little laugh, so I stopped as we moved toward the doors. For a few seconds it all looked black because I brought the sun into my eyes and with me through the doors. A part of me had been in that sky a long time. Another part of me had long been in SAMHC. I was a ridiculous, pale mental patient in the dry afternoon, but we made a fine enough pair, me and my Arizona.

Adrienne Shelly was murdered a few months before she found out that her film, *The Waitress*, was accepted into the 2007 Sundance film festival. In *The Waitress*, Jenna is married to Earl, a parody of an abusive male that is hard to believe might actually exist, even though they always do. Earl makes a pregnant Jenna promise to never love her unborn child as much as she loves him. Obviously, Jenna eventually leaves Earl and goes on to win a pie contest that he commanded she not be allowed to enter, purchases the diner she worked at previously as a dreaded mother, and walks home each night from work with her daughter, Lulu, played by Shelly's own daughter, Sophie. What Jenna thought would tie her to a miserable life forever, an unborn child, becomes her only way to understand freedom from that life, just as Sophie became for Shelly not an obstacle to making film, but an integral part of it. It all seems hard to believe. When Shelly plays the high school-aged Maria in Hal Hartley's *Trust*, she happily announces to her parents that she is pregnant and intends to marry her boyfriend, Anthony, because he will take over a family construction business and make a "bitchin" salary. Maria's father grumbles about her promiscuity, so Maria slaps him and he drops dead from heart failure. Maria tells Anthony, the high school quarterback, that she's pregnant, and he immediately asks if the child is his and then decries her for being a small town whore. She eventually meets Matthew, played by Martin Donovan, in an abandoned house after her mother kicks her out. Matthew is an abused teenage dropout who killed his own mother as she gave birth to him. Matthew's father enacts many lessons on his son so that the boy will never forget what his own life stole. Matthew carries a hand grenade, Maria wears Matthew's dead mother's old dress, and together they build a life after Maria has an abortion and Matthew

lets the grenade go off in an electronics factory. The closing shot is of Maria watching Matthew hauled away in a police car, the electricity wires of Long Island above her head, the glasses Matthew gave her in order that she may see in front of her resting atop her nose. And then, as Matthew is driven off to jail, Maria removes the glasses slowly so again, afar, she can see. It all seems ridiculous.

In *The Unbelievable Truth*, Shelly plays Audry, a young girl with a promising modeling career ahead of her. This is unbelievable already because Shelly stood not even five feet tall. When a stranger named Josh shows up in town, wearing all black, Audry falls in love with him, even though he's reported to have killed seemingly more and more people as gossip gets around. A gifted mechanic, Josh works at Audry's father's shop, and in one scene kneels down so as to look up at Audry because she is salvation, she is the saint, and deserves a kiss. Josh tells her the unbelievable truth about the manslaughter because she's the only one who will hear him, and when he kisses her while on his knees, the audience knows that in each fake world Hartley asks us to enter, there is still a way to find the exalted truth. Like in Shelly's *The Waitress*, we as the voyeurs suddenly become the supplicants to a strange but simple prayer that tells of how the world's jokes aren't that far from its sacred.

Adrienne Shelly's death was originally deemed a suicide, for she was found hanging in her own work apartment. It wasn't until a male shoe print was found on the toilet seat that it became clear that Shelly was murdered. But before that shoe print, there was her memorial service, in which everyone was told that she killed herself. Her family and friends remarked on how unreal it seemed that she would ever kill herself. When

Shelly's husband, Andy Ostroy, told *Newsweek* about his experience of the days following her death, he stopped himself and requested that his words remain private.

In SAMHC I was never on the bottom of the hierarchy of patients, I told myself. I never ate the mashed potatoes like the bulimic guy did, so he ate mine out of the trash of the common room before going to our shared bathroom and vomiting it all up. Each time, food coming up sounded like slop he rolled in affectionately, and then violently, and then I knew he was done vomiting when he screamed into the toilet. Then he would return to the common room and ask if he could get more food and Mamout, an orderly who revealed to me that after moving from Turkey his wife began an affair and Zoloft was helping him cope with this knowledge, would tell the bulimic that he didn't need more food, that he didn't need to eat like a pig just because it was free. Mamout got me a vegetable each day by yelling *double salad for Sarah* into a phone receiver. I would eat slowly, and it was the only time I ever spent with the other patients, all of whom were men. While I ate a plate of broccoli, Tyrone, the patient who had to be transferred because he was fixated on me, asked me why I didn't like him, why I refused his advances, and I set the plate of *double salad* into the trash for the bulimic guy to lift right back out and I ran back into the girls' room. The bulimic watched this exchange with his lips pressed so tightly together, his facial muscles taught with the knowledge of his impending pleasure, sweat beading—the anticipation—that he started snorting through his nose.

MANAGING THE SICK SOW	
Conditions	Action
Prolapse of the uterus	Destroy
Prolapse of the vagina	Replace and retain by suture.
Prolapse of the rectum	Replace suture and casualty slaughter
Rectal Stricture	Destroy as soon as noticed.
Open Wounds	Treat
Cuts and wounds	Mild Severe
	Treat sell when healed. Destroy
Shoulder sores and ulcerated hocks	Treat and move to a bedded area. Then sell when healed.
Lameness:	
Off back legs	Destroy
Acutely lame	Treat and assess.
Severely swollen infected joints.	Treat and assess or destroy.
Not severe	Treat and assess.
Lame, no obvious cause but weight on all legs.	Casualty slaughter or Treat.
No obvious wounds and no temperature	Treat.
Emaciated condition	Destroy.
Dystocia. (Difficult farrowing)	Treat then review and retain only if sow expels pigs and recovers. N.B. If live pigs are present consider on-farm hysterectomy. or Destroy N.B. Never send a sow with retained piglets for slaughter; in almost all countries it will be condemned.

(Fig.3-7)

Jeremy was a member of Calvary Community Church, the same church Robert Evans Jr. was headed to in his Volvo the day he hit Trevor, who was just off work from the Volvo shop he worked at and on his way to an AA meeting in Westlake Village. When I left my grandparents' the night Trevor died and drove to Jeremy's in Newbury Park, Jeremy's father told me he knew Evans, that the church was praying for Evans, and that Evans was a good man. I mentioned that my father was a good man, too, even though he didn't go to Calvary and neither did I. Jeremy remained a good Christian and eventually married a woman who was a born-again Christian, and they had a Santa Barbara ceremony where some of us lovingly jostled Jeremy for finally being able to have sex. At Jeremy's wedding I ran into Erik, who also came to my home the night Trevor died, all the way

from the Valley, and who moved in with me while I fought for my emancipation because a lawyer told me I needed to have a legal adult living with me, sixteen years old. Erik moved out when he recaptured his Christian faith, and I had become, along with all his CDs, a distraction. After Erik moved out, he almost immediately met a woman and got married, and they almost immediately got pregnant. At Jeremy's wedding Erik looked at me while pointing at his wife, who was in the month of pregnancy where she looked like the most uncomfortable woman I've ever met, and said *I got married*. I wasn't invited to Erik's wedding but I heard it was in a barn, and I heard that he worked hard labor jobs during the day, drank beer in front of the television at night, and had more children to bring into the Calvary fold. Billy, the third person who came to our home the night Trevor died, wasn't at Jeremy's or Erik's weddings because he moved to Echo Park and had a different friend group. Billy stayed straight edge through his teenage bands Mulatto Power and Topeka, but started drinking with the rest of us when he approached his twenties. Billy walked from the Echo Park house he shared with Chuck—the house that came with a rabbit named Mr. Buns who sat on Billy's lap while we all watched TV—to the Short Stop to work, while the woman Billy loved for as long as any of us can remember, Scarlett, stopped stripping at Jumbo's Clown Room and married a man named Blair from a band called Knapsack. Billy was devastated and started using cocaine, while Scarlett settled down in Henderson, Nevada with Blair and her best friend, Julie. When I visited Scarlett and Julie in Henderson, I had been out of SAMHC for almost a year and drove from Tucson through the Hoover Dam and saw goats on my way. When I saw their house in the suburbs of Vegas, I remembered being high on a waterbed with my best

friend, Kylie, when I was twelve and the Northridge earthquake hit. Something about the shiny metal of cars across the yellow suburb was reminiscent of the crashing sound I heard right before the ground shook and tore. While Scarlett lived around Vegas, Billy started disappearing after or before his shifts at the Short Stop. The last time I saw him while visiting LA from Tucson, he pointed out a woman to me at the bar and said, *that's my girlfriend* and she scowled at me. After that, when I returned to LA to live and I would look in the Short Stop for him and he was never there, I would remember the feeling of a time I was in his home back in Thousand Oaks. I was buying cigarettes from the laundry mat next door to Manny's Tacos on Avenida de los Arboles, where I ran into Josh Mellinger and Graham Austin, two straight edge kids that knew Billy's family a lot better than me, and seemed much older to me when I was twelve. Josh managed to handcuff me and drag me two blocks to Billy's house, while Graham, always the pacifist, did nothing and followed. Billy wasn't home and I didn't know him then anyway. I knew his younger brother, Jason, the fourteen year old from Los Cerritos Junior High who I had a crush on. Josh threw me in Jason's bedroom on a couch and then poured water on my shirt because I wasn't wearing a bra, while, unbeknownst to me, Jason's younger sister, Danielle, waited on the roof to pour more water on me when I was finally released. She missed. Josh had previously asked me to go down on him and I said *no*, so he spit on me in public when he saw me after that, or he would pour perfume on me when we went to Conejo Valley High School, or sometimes he would slap me, like once in front of the first-ever Starbucks. But that was years after. At the time I was in handcuffs in Jason's room, I thought I loved him because we had screwed around when he would call me late

at night and I would sneak out. One night I snuck out and there were gold records on the wall from his father's time in Crazyhorse, and the next night they were gone, sold for drugs, and Jason ate dry ramen noodles while looking into the otherwise empty cupboards. Billy stayed sober longer than any of us, and his father, Billy Sr., and his mother, Lori, were good reminders of what happens when you don't. All of our parents were. Josh's parent married the parent of another straight edge guy, Jeff Gretcham, who, along with Jason, I did go down on. Jeff and I were behind the Mortal Kombat game in the bowling alley arcade that at some point turned to a Borders. *A huge book store*, people would say. Josh and Jeff both died of drug overdoses and their parents, still married, suddenly had two dead sons and one reason. Graham remained the only straight edger who didn't attack but merely watched, well except that one time he and my best friend Kylie's brother, Keith, and Ben, who was on Alf, put a black cat bomb in my Marlboro Red when I was twelve and it exploded in my throat, on my face, in my eyes. With smoke coming out of my mouth, I whispered that I would kill them, kill them all, and it was the year of the Northridge earthquake, the year Keith, Kylie, and I started huffing rubber cement in our garages. Graham had an older brother, Jesse, who was also straight edge until he wasn't and died in a parking lot in the Valley when he was high and someone backed a car into his body. But that was years after the earthquake, and years after Ben from Alf, who used to bring hundreds of copies of a signed autograph to our grade school, Park Oaks, stopped being straight edge like the rest of them. Ben's younger brother, Matt, was from Hawaii, in my class, nice to me, and had the voice of Katharine Hepburn even in first grade, and Graham's younger brother, Wes, played pencil drum

band with me in art period at Los Cerritos Junior High. These younger brothers were much nicer to me than Billy's younger brother, Jason, who I ran into once as an adult at Billy's Echo Park house up the street from the Short Stop, and who laughed at me when he finally remembered who I was: the twelve year old who went down on him and thought he could ever date a girl like her. A few miles down Sunset Boulevard at Amoeba Records I ran into Jeremy one day when I was visiting from Missouri. He told me that he separated himself from Calvary and was looking for another church, maybe. I thought about how I had always preferred Aron's Records on Highland, which not surprisingly closed after Amoeba opened and Len, my friend Lana's ex boyfriend, managed while he was in the band Anubian Lights, which I heard had some person from the old band, Hawkwind. Billy's house up Sunset in Echo Park had Hawkwind records that Billy and I would listen to while we drank tequila and Billy would say to me, *slow down, girl*. Mr. Buns eventually died and Billy is still missing, with occasional word of him stealing from the Short Stop or owing some drug dealer, just like we heard Adam from the band Still Life owed, even though Adam was clean for a while when Chelsea was clean for a while, then they hooked up and weren't clean anymore. Last time I saw Adam it was at a party in the Valley where Chelsea showed up with guys who had swastikas tattooed on their shaved heads and several of us quietly said *holy shit* or *oh no* or *what the fuck is going to happen?* while Chelsea said loudly *have you spoken to your father, recently, Sarah?* and everyone stared at her while I reminded her that he was dead and she said she knew, she knew, that she also knew I could talk to him, and then crawled into my lap and asked me to promise her that I would pick her up from that house

tomorrow and take her away from Adam. That's way back when Erik was still living with me, and we left before shit hit the fan because you don't bring dudes with swastikas tattooed on their heads around a bunch of peace punks. When I called the house the next morning to pick up Chelsea, she had already stabbed Adam and ripped the phone cords from the walls so no one could call for help. As he bled into his collapsed lung, someone found a cell phone and called the police, and weeks later Chelsea's lawyer called to ask me to write a letter of support for her. I said no, which I now regret, and Adam healed, then went on the run from some guy he owed money to or something, while Chelsea became born again in prison, and Billy Sr. was sober for a long, long time while his son Billy Jr. was still missing. The last time I saw Billy Sr. it was when Billy Jr. and I went to his home in Mendocino, where I saw Billy's mother, Lori, who was also sober, and much better off than the times at Smitty Humphries' house when she would say to me *you weren't supposed to have been born in this time*, and then Smitty's mom, Diane, who doubled as a druggy mom with a little more heart than the rest of ours, died while backing out of the driveway in Chelsea's mail jeep on Hodencamp Drive. When Lori would tell me those words while waiting for Duane or Diane or drugs, I had to listen because I was waiting for drugs, too, but of the lighter variety, and sometimes Smitty and I would compile money to get an ounce of pot and it never arrived, and once I took mushrooms and passed out on the floor while Chelsea's brother, Tanner, calmly told me it would be alright. As my head pounded and my back knotted, a congenital kidney disorder having not been discovered yet, Tanner bounced with other kids on Smitty's backyard trampoline, and I kept thinking *I just want my dad, I just want my dad*, then I

heard the roar of his truck pull up and I ran out and hopped in the GMC. My father had told me to wait to do mushrooms until it was Spring, but I had done them anyway in early Fall, and I was so happy to be alive that I told him of my crime after Diane baked him cookies on her “special occasion” plate that said “You’re Special.” I was grounded, and I deserved it, and in Mendocino the Talbots didn’t have their gold records but they were sober, except for a missing Billy, and Jeremy had settled down to a good life in the Valley with his wife after being married in Santa Barbara, which, if I’m being technical, was actually a Mendocino wedding at the hotel. All of these people who have died or gone missing, and I can trace them to three people who came, lovingly, to my home the night Trevor died. All these people gone and I’m still around, I’m the one that anyone can find. Which, when I was a teenager, I hated because Josh Mellinger could find me to spit on me or slap me or tell me how ugly I was. Every time I asked those straight edge guys why they did stuff like that to me, they shrugged. They didn’t know. Graham just smiled. Nothing bothered him. All those young men struck silent when asked something, which is to say that while my father taught me to be a woman like a man, other dead men from Los Angeles like Josh Mellinger taught me that to be a woman was to be a pig.

The week before learning of Adrienne Shelly’s death while sitting in the waiting room of SAMHC hospital, I walked into the Catalina Mountains in the northeast of Tucson. I had arrived in Tucson in August, when the heat is unbearable save for some remnants of monsoon rain that bring the cool smell of creosote through Barrio Viejo. But in November it got cold. I sat under my father’s wool blankets in my little adobe on the

edge of downtown and watched my breath in front of me and in the distance, Mount Lemmon. But by December, I wanted to walk in the range.

While up in the mountains, I walked with my right hand against the dirt wall and closed my eyes as my left hand dangled out in a thick, settled fog, and I was elsewhere. In some mountains in California, my father would bring bolt cutters to open some gate for us to drive through and onto a rocky road in the GMC. Chuck the truck. I don't remember where we were but it was a place we returned to, as he had friends who lived in a rock house above the fog and clouds. We went there to shoot beer cans, and I imagine, because it was beautiful. We were close to their home when the fog appeared thickest, which was just before it ended and on the other side, an old, sunny world. One time my father parked the truck and we got out and walked the rest of the way because ahead of us in the fog wandered a group of steer. They blocked our path, so we walked amongst them, and when I feared one might attack, I ran close behind my father. So close to seeing everything but preferring to wade in the fog. Then, atop the mountain I did something a little wrong, I don't know what, and my father spoke sternly to me. He wore a flannel shirt and wool vest, a motorcycle hat turned backwards. I wore one of his long wool coats, his brown ropers, and a Stetson. While he scolded me, I laughed. I know this because I found pictures, which means that someone was there with us, but I don't remember who. And if I wanted to get to that mountain, I wouldn't know how. There were men who knew things, who could describe the geography of my life to me in a way where I could return to it, but all those men were dead.

I was supposed to be on my way to the Arctic Circle in Finland because I wanted to know a place that would be mine like all the places that were his. I thought it would be like love and a possibility for surrender. I thought it would be like being loved in winter or escaping a man chasing me in winter who would catch me and gut my arms open for every trout, every doe, every snake my father and I killed. I thought I would see my own insides before I fell over. And while my body passed into the white, his body still would seem more. But I would end up in a hospital where my body would remain, and there is a peace in that clinical truth. I would get something from life in my trespass against it, into the blue and black from white. But only at that moment, that missed plane to the Arctic, without my shoelaces or a hairclip.

Dr. Adriana will tell me that I deserve to be alive, and her ability to say this and not sound patronizing is why I will like her. She will tell me that when I leave the hospital I should bathe every day and eat breakfast in the tub to stay longer than I normally would. She will tell me this is a small thing, as small as my thought that I had done everything wrong. She will tell me that one day when I leave, I will get back my hairclip, and we will laugh, and I will read and begin a book because the people in the hospital tell me that everyone has a story. Because they seem unlike everything I hate about myself, I believe them.

When I start a cleaning that takes many years while Jeremy, Erik, and Billy scrape the last pieces of pie into their mouths, I begin with Trevor's motorcycle magazines. They are my first eradication. His shirts, his tools, the knives, all the cast iron pans. I make lists

and repeat them, each thing that must go. The smell of him in the water-stained pages, a cut into the Dial soap bar. A black fingerprint smear in the sink. The clippers with red.

His guns. The case, in the corner, behind the TV. I know where the key is although I've never used it. I've never looked inside. The boys don't watch me as I pull the key from its dusty tape underneath a speaker. They don't want to see me open the case, five feet from them, because they don't know what to do when I need them most. I don't know how to ask them to help me with something, something, so I pull out the guns, one by one. The men are done with pie, and we are all quiet now because I am holding to a degree I can barely lift something cold and long with two large barrels. This gun is mine. I place it on the floor by letting my body droop forward. It clanks through the salmon carpet to the concrete slab. These guns are all mine. Each weapon I lay on the floor has its own sound. Bayonets, assault rifles, clips, the diminutive .22—I pull at every last greasy hollow.

Right now I want to clean a gun, but I don't know how. Or a knife. A knife on the block. Cleaning and sharpening are the same with knives, and isn't that correct sounding, doesn't that mean something that's true? The knife goes back and forth across the block, from blunt to sharp when you want it to. I want it to. What is the word that means cleaning and sharpening at the same time? I want that word. I want to know what to do. Trevor was patient with oil and the block, but I haven't learned patience. These things are all mine, and I'm becoming a woman. I mean I want to be a woman because I'm sixteen years old.

Do you know the sound of a knife being sharpened on a block with oil? Or the swoop into a wet hollow with a brush that touches the whole inside all at once? This is the sound of the history of men and this is the sound of violence, work, and sex. This is the breathing memory of my childhood, a safety in knowing when he was at home. It sounds like, over, across, and back again. It sounds like forever. When I came home from work he was there. I'm tired from work, so tired, and he is by the oil lamp light, moving his hand with an intuitive ease that men come with or earn and it's better the latter. I go to bed and hear that, and hear the neighbors' wind chimes, and hear the oak trees shake. I hear those things until he wakes screaming and eats ice cream in cereal, sighs deep into his gut.

But before my father ever went to sleep, before each of our night terrors, I knew he was there from the sound of oil sliding across a block. We had a sink full of dishes but the weapons needed care. This is what makes me a woman, and this is my childhood. This is my story. Knowing what he was like as a man made the path of my sleep each night, so I loved him. And now my sleep will be caught by his blood and my blood and my incapacity to stop loving him.

Adrienne Shelly was the redhead I admired. Molly Ringwald was more famous, sure, and arguably more charming in her roles, but my teenage years got me to the 1990s and Shelly through Hal Hartley's first two films, *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*. Hub Moore and the Great Outdoors have two songs on the soundtrack for *Trust* that dominate the ripping and stasis embodied by working class Long Island. The song "Walk Away"

begins *Trust*, a few minutes before Maria kills her father through the simple act of testimony. Before she says to him, *I'm pregnant* an audience hears a song that goes, *We've been working / we've been swinging these hammers a long time*. The song "Mess With Me" plays when Maria takes a shower in Matthew's house after being kicked out of her own for killing her father. Matthew's father is supposed to be away visiting his sister, but he returns early. Maria ashes her cigarette on the counter, burns toast, spills canned soup on the floor, and turns up the stereo. The audience hears *I've got so much / so much to give / I've got so much / so much to live for / come on and mess with me mess with me / come on and mess with me*. Matthew's father walks in, proclaims Maria a hussy, and begins another round of physical torment on Matthew. Maria runs to find clothes as she puts her own in their washer. She puts on Matthew's mother's dress and runs out of the house. *Come on and mess with me mess with me / cuz I feel so, cuz I feel so lonely*. But something changes in "Mess With Me." Minutes in, our singing voice fades into an instrumental, repetitive pop song, after a short interlude of possibly violin with a woman's voice making a tiny, ghostly sound. This part of the song plays repeatedly during the quiet moments in the film when each character is at a loss for words, such as when Maria watches Matthew hauled away in the police car after he throws a grenade into the factory. In a movie that took only eleven days to film, Hartley reportedly says, because the actors' dialogue directed their actions so easily, the most startling moments for viewers are the times we hear the latter part of "Mess With Me" fade from sexy, rocking, fightin' words and an affirmation of life—a man singing lyrics that affirm he is *alive*—to a whispered woman's voice and then a voicelessness. The latter part of the song

plays when we see Matthew stare silently and know he clutches his father's grenade in his trench pocket. And when Maria, wearing a dress, a jacket, and glasses, none of which are her own, watches Matthew in the police car after blundering his grenade attempt. *Trust* ends with a viewer watching Maria under Long Island power lines. We know by that point that this is really Hartley watching Shelly, the actor who was the reason he pushed to make *Trust* so soon after *The Unbelievable Truth*. None of it seems real—it's all a little too quirky—but the voiceless song has a nice drumbeat. It carries us back to the real world quietly, doesn't demand our attention or sigh.

Hartley's Chinese zodiac sign is the Pig, the archetype known for its ability to invoke trust. It is often said in descriptions of the zodiac Pig that he seems *too good to be true*. And in the final scene of *Trust*, we are breathless watching Shelly through Hartley's lens. Shelly is not only a Horse in the Chinese zodiac, but because she was born in 1966, a Fire Horse, a title that becomes available every six decades and is said to be the worst years for Horses, who are capable of *great fame or notoriety*, but who also make their own families *subject to illness, accidents and bad luck in general*. It is said that the Fire Horse's *passionate nature and the frantic egotism which seizes him will lead him to commit his worst excesses when he is in love*, whether that be with an artistic project, like Shelly's film-in-production *The Waitress*, or with the people one builds her life around.

When we watch the final scene of *Trust* through Hartley's lens, focused on Shelly's wild red hair against a wash of working class mauves and greys, before and after her death, we see what kind of excess we would each perform for love, we imagine history rewinding to see a woman's face before each atrocity. She has us. She has me,

every time I watch, lips parted with a cool voiceless beat holding her in a space long enough that we might exhale, and she should not have been murdered. What is there to say? It happened, *Law and Order* made an episode about it, and I could tell you about pigs forever. What matters most to look at with all the information you can find? I don't know. After Shelly's death, when I hear "Mess With Me" fade into the instrumental bliss with a good pop percussion, I am reminded of the telephone wires behind Shelly's mane, electricity and red and eyes and home. Home. I remember home because I realize what I am capable of, where I come from, what I would do to Pillco if given the chance. Do you want me to not say that I would kill him, fill my fingernails with his skin and never, ever feel guilty? I would kill him like he killed a pig. This feeling is my home. It is, even for a month, what keeps me alive, and the percussion of this knowledge locks me in. If you want to listen to "Mess With Me" or "Walk Away," they are now collected on a soundtrack of Hartley's films called *True Fictions*.

I got out of the hospital because my sense of humor returned, if ever so slightly. I was handed back my hair clip and settled back into my updo. Before I drove from Tucson to Los Angeles to spend a month with my grandparents because it was the promise I made to the doctors at SAMHC, I spent one night alone in my little adobe, which I also promised not to do. I bathed for the first time in a month and watched the color return to my toes. I had thought suicide was embarrassing before that winter, and maybe that's why it took me so long to know that feeling. The world is yours the most when you're

ready to leave it. It becomes all yours right before you're ever able to remember you had it. It is the best feeling.

That night I slept well and deep under a stack of wool blankets that my father had previously wrapped me in and woke ready to drive on the 10 with a stop in Pioneer Town, California for a margarita. While in bed, my phone rang and rang as I slept. A final time and I awoke but didn't answer, sat up in bed until my back arched, and pulled my knee socks off my legs. Out of one sock dropped a feather. A feather there blink. A memory.

In my sleep I had dreamt that I was on Irving Drive. I faced the Greers' corner house, a new house on the other side of our home, where they had previously lived, and where my dreams of my father butchering me resided. This home used to be a rock house where the Rapanaks lived, and where, in the nights my father left me alone in our house, I would enter to make him come home with me so I could sleep. In this dream and at this new Greer house—the family that I always wished were my own with their taste and love—my father stood next to me and looked up. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans without a weapon attached or even a buckle. Brown boots. He didn't scream or come after me. He stood beside me, and I knew my father wasn't going to kill me that night.

I grabbed Trevor and he was the right height. He held me back but not hard. His chest felt large, ancient, like his own. His shirt was soft against me, but it was a shirt of his that I had given away. I had given everything away after he died.

You're back. But you died. You left. I can't do this. I'm not for this world. Oh my god. You suffered and no one helped you. I sobbed at him and rambled on, thought I

might claw his chest, then fell down before him. I was selfish and small. I couldn't help but want answers even though the history of my terror was destroyed right there in front of me.

I know I died, but they let me come back. Music is strange there. He told me about it and I didn't understand, then he went on to tell me the things I needed to remember that I would never again remember upon waking up. Then he told me that he bought this home for us. In this dream, we had made it into civilization.

We have money? I asked him. And he didn't respond. I stood speechless, and he walked me into our home. On the first of three levels a woman instructed a boy in painting and knitting. We left them to their lesson and walked up from the murky windows to a level with white-washed floors. The house was old but not sad because we would fill it, I knew. On the top floor the windows were less murky, and a light streamed in from a world I hadn't bothered to look at correctly before. There was a bed that was to be my own, and the white linens collected sunbeams that shone through a dull fog. I would sleep in the dreamy layers of white and gold with my mouth open as both ours were just then, drinking in the color, the air, the day we were back together and loved by another person who was also alive. He took me out to a balcony that rested against a mountain, so it was safe, and we looked out at the overgrown bushes in a yard that we would take care of, dried grass that needed to be ripped out before fire season. It was good; it was a fine home.

An owl swooped down on us, coming from our old, rented home. It had been there forever and it wanted us to die, I thought. I ducked down but Trevor laughed and

lifted me back upright. The owl was supposed to be there, he knew, and it landed on his left arm. It stared at me, but I didn't duck again because my father told me not to and never again would I do something he told me I should not. This time, I thought, I will be his perfect daughter.

Awake in my bed, my clavicles tilted high, then down, and again, my socks lying in a heated pile with a lone feather, our cat asleep on the bed's edge, I shook. I pushed my index finger on the feather that came out from my sock.

Maybe I wasn't seeing the world for what it really was. Maybe that was my chance to be gracious and honored. There are so many options for ways to see. Before that year I had thought suicide was shameful. Then, not only a month before, I couldn't find beyond that one way. But a memory. A memory of a dream. A feather. I was happy and embarrassed on the edge of a mattress on the floor, my nipples tight into my heart and goose bumps on my stomach from the cold morning air. I blew the feather into a sun spot, and my eyes blurred until I saw milky white and gold. A true fiction.

On a day when I was twelve and came home from school while Trevor was still using, he was most like the man I would know him as years later, sober. I walked into the living room, and he sat with a good friend whose name I don't remember, both wearing blue overalls and train conductor hats. I would say they looked ridiculous down to the bandanas around their necks, but they each shared something new beside their working class insignias. Each had a black eye.

They smiled large and looked up at me over the cowboy-boot shaped mason jars filled to the brim with Screwdrivers that sat on a glass-covered Yul Bryner movie poster for *The Brothers Karamazov*.

What happened to you two, I yelled through laughing. Then they laughed. None of us could stop.

You look like conductors in a train accident. What the hell happened? I asked and slumped my backpack on the carpet.

We were putting an engine from a cherry picker back in a Volvo and had it held high up at this angle, then someone slipped and it fell back on our faces, Trevor said. No blame. All together.

Wait. At an angle? Why did you have it at an angle, that doesn't make sense. How did you each end up with only one black eye?

They started laughing again and I did, too. It happened, and there were no answers for how. My father was an addict, a drunk, paranoid, deep into Hep C complications, preparing us for the end of the world. I became a woman by believing I would die any day. I had to practice killing and suffering—all his lessons—to show my father that if he died protecting me, I had a chance. His friends were sometimes homeless and in need of what little we had, which he gave them. I was halfway through my year sentence of being grounded because he found rubber cement-filled bags for huffing in my dresser, and the next week I would move back to my mother's house because I would still be looking for the least painful daily life. I won't speak to my father for weeks.

Finally he will call, drunk, and I will know at that moment what he looks like—still, but on the verge of a shaking cry, alone in the dark of our living room, on his bed, with a gun. He will be desperate for me to come home in a way that no man after ever will be. I will know at that moment how he suffers because it is larger than my own terror, so easy to see, and I will know that his love for me will always be more than my regard for my own life. I will return to Trevor for good because the least pain is with him. It is a pain that only comes from loving someone when you don't know how to, from living when you don't know if you want to, from being no more valuable to the world than the smallest of pigs.

After I leave LuAnn, a fire will consume her garage, and she will say this is why she has no mementos of our childhoods. I won't tell her she never took pictures anyway. She will move into motels, her boyfriend will kill a man and go to prison, some of my friends will die of suicide and overdoses, as will celebrities and those afar. My father will die. I will know after that it was an inevitable thing, even as each therapist will tell me to separate reading the signs from seeing things that could be signs. My father said to me, *there are signs*.

But at that moment, with those men in their train outfits, black eyes filled with smile lines, mustaches extending beyond their guffawing faces, I laughed. It was my authority as the little girl to roll my eyes at their absurdity. Because with those kind of men, a little girl can make or break them more than any woman. And I laughed because I loved them, because we were all so down low that their mistakes could only be felt as

pleasure. *We've been swinging these hammers a long time.* We get picked off one by one until we don't.



It had been hailing for nine minutes and the temperature dropped from 105 to 68 degrees in twelve hours, the only patch of dry gravel a few feet under my rear. I had seen the alley wire spark six times since living in Tucson, but just that one time I had been under the mesquite tree in my backyard, close enough for the spark to reach me. I sat there tracing circles in the gravel, wishing I had a rake because a rake would get more circling done; I was thinking about the lessons in staying I learned in the hospital, and before I decided how I fit into that thought, a spark. Smoke lines dissipated in the air, and I smelled the sweetness of burnt mesquite. Small things and omens.

The last time the alley wire sparked, that creepy gurgle sound like water being choked, I was in bed, asleep, and shot up to hit my head on the concrete wall behind me. I thought it was all over, everything. The end had come, and I didn't want to die. I had been dreaming about the man who will always chase me, and in the dream the air felt like jelly between my thighs. I faltered, and he caught me. It was the first time I had stopped running from him. Something was different about me, a small thing. I was done trying to get away from him. Then I woke to the stabbing flash sound, felt it in my intestines and the pulse of my neck. But before I knew I was awake, I thought I was back in my old

bedroom, where I fell off the top bunk and pushed over a mason jar of water on the outlet. The plug got knocked out, so I put it back in and got electrocuted. I didn't yell for Trevor because I didn't know what to say, and I shook intermittently for hours on the bottom bunk. Down the tunnel into a memory and out the other side to my real, waking room, my breath stuck until a few paces caught me awake before I fell on the red, concrete floor.

In the backyard of the little adobe, if I had been sitting in a chair when the wire struck, it might have reached me. Set my hair's messy bun into a flowering fire. But that didn't happen, and it had been a fine, sleep-filled month since I dreamed about Trevor coming after me. In the hospital, Dr. Adriana told me there were always second chances.

I counted the hail out before the spark hit. Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine: ten minutes.

I called Tucson Electric Power (TEP) because a neighbor across the alley came out to see the wire and we leaned over a fence to talk.

Someone should take care of that wire, finally, she said.

She had been in the Armory Park neighborhood a lot longer than I had. She cracked gum in her teeth inside of her big face, eyelids sinking down all slow and then up at me and then to the overgrown Mesquite tree, the mostly likely thing to catch fire first. She tipped back her tiny cowboy hat on her big head and called for her child to stay inside, then pulled the hat cord tight around her chin. She didn't seem real, but in Tucson no one really did to me in the summers. Their words held, their eyes dropped. The animatronic people of the sun. I liked those people.

I told her I'd call and took my cell phone to the end of our alley, S. Herbert Avenue, sat on a curb by the mailboxes and inhaled the creosote's perfume in the monsoon. I did this every time I tried to get my mail. I say "try" because the key most often didn't work. The downtown post office people shrugged when I presented them the key. So sometimes I tried to use it, and sometimes I gave up and sat by the bush when it rained. Nothing else smelled as wet and clean as creosote, and in my nose, life felt different.

Fifty-eight, fifty-nine: eighteen minutes. It had been hailing for eighteen minutes, and I was twenty-five years old.

In the weeks that followed Trevor's death, I found books on my porch, or in my mailbox, or set inside the screen door, the kind with uplifting quotes about perseverance and belief. I flipped through one about St Teresa of Avila and imagined what it was like to be her. My life as a sixteen-year old seemed mundane by comparison. The book had images depicting her face with eyes rolled back and arms stretched wide, a slight smile, refusing to look at the exterior world—done with it, I guessed—and apparently copulating with God. She spent her time in ecstasy with her maker, and I stacked books about how people survived and evolved to have sex with the spirit. Figuring out sex with human beings was tricky enough for me, so I was curious about how people managed the less graceful moments with God. I heard that sex was something a woman suffered through in the beginning but that it got better. I had lost my own virginity in a carefully laid out plan during a trip to Seattle when I was fourteen. I wanted to accommodate any peculiar

physiological reactions I might have and also hide the embarrassment of clumsily trying to get an erect penis in my vagina at least a thousand miles away. While my friends in LA lost their virginity in the garages of drug addict parents or in the hot tubs of kids who stayed with their fathers in Malibu on the weekends, for my purpose I found an older man who happened to also be a virgin. One notice of the way his eyes moved and I knew he was perfect. Then I could come back to LA and start community college—an adult—even though I still needed a ride to college. Males didn't have the burden of hiding away such a thing, it seemed to me. They were generally guaranteed a good physical time even if they felt uncomfortable in their minds. That might sound too simple, and even then I knew it was, but in looking around at all my teenage friends, the boys indulged in the thought of sex in a way girls could only pretend to. Even in the 90s, when difference was supposed to be revealed as a façade, that one thing seemed true. Sex was better for them. But then these books about Teresa arrived. Her lover was inside of her and surrounding, consuming the world via her body. Her suffering and ecstasy had its reasoning based in the telling of everything, the Malibu ocean lapping at the feet of rich and poor alike. No matter how I tried, I didn't understand her sex in relation to all of ours'. I didn't understand why she was the focus of a self-help book for a teenage girl who lost her father, or when sex would be, for me, that kind of surrender. I didn't doubt that if I stayed alive I would become a good lover, but I didn't know if that required a relationship with the sacred or if only women had special access to such a status. Staying alive was the question. The books started arriving the morning after he died, along with Child Protective Services. I told the guy who came to place me in foster care to *try, try to move*

me. He walked away mumbling that he was only doing his job, and in the shameful strut of a hack like that, I, indeed, felt in my genetics that I had something sacred to which he could never have access. And it wasn't being a saint.

My job the morning I stacked up the books for the trash was to put on nice clothes, which meant taking off my father's utility vest for the first time since he died. I was told to wear neutral tones. I was told to buy a folder because I needed to carry things with me. It was hard for me to imagine someone instructing a boy that way, or a boy in a yellow shirt setting off some alarm. I thought about genetics and copulation, I thought about the word "sex," I said it like I imagined Eve Libertine would say it in a Crass song, repeated it in my fake British accent for the two hours it took me to get to a lawyer's office in Studio City, twenty miles from my house. While sitting in the waiting room of an office, thinking about a British punk saying the word "sex" during what was supposed to be a big day in my life, the significance seemed to be marked only by the hum of air conditioning. I slumped over. I wanted to compete with the calm air sound to mark this moment as important. I wanted to rise to the occasion of the day. But the problem was that the outside world had seeped into me in a way where I couldn't hear myself as loud as things outside of my control, and everything—the surf, the blasting air, commercials, office radio, shifting folders—came inside of me and made nothing. Things are quiet when we need a crying out.

The noise that kept me from hearing myself rested inside my ribs for a month after Trevor died, infecting each of my breaths as if I had swallowed a bell. A very quiet, perfunctory bell. And while I slept, the screams of my attacker, my father, followed me

when I wanted justice for him. Trevor would chase me until the soft murder lump that sat warm and still in my heart was satiated. I wanted to kill the man who killed my father. In the office building, waiting for lawyers, I wondered if Teresa felt murderous as she was lifted into the loving, horrible hands of God. Or if that feeling folded into her sense of eternity. I felt something else. I hired a law team because I was told to, and in the waiting room I pulled out only a few hairs from my right forearm before a secretary asked me to follow her to a back room. The problem was, I guessed, that I was sixteen and didn't know what to listen to the most: adults who were supposed to know about this kind of thing, or my own gut, which told me that they didn't care enough about me to help. So I listened to my perfunctory bell. And worked on a British accent. And like that, through repetition, through protection, I straightened my thoughts and kept myself from doing something bad. Those days were like that.

Tucson is the kind of town one prolongs moving to even when drawn to the caldera sunk deep in palm of rhyolite and granite. Then everything happens and you do things you didn't think you'd do, and after messing up chances to be happy somewhere beautiful like Seattle, after being stuck in a perception that won't let, an empty, hot place like Tucson in August seems like the right move to dry out from trying. Called The Tucson Mountain Chaos because of the volcanic eruption that made the round settlement, magma from seventy-million years ago turned to copper in the hills. The old and new are together and hard under your feet in this desert, so it's a place to wade through the harder details. But then the hail washes through the desert and the personal contract you made with yourself seems like horse shit. The temperature drops to a comfortable eighty degrees,

men show up to fix wires, problems disperse in the dirt. A woman's push toward catharsis just didn't seem to be available anymore.

The man from TEP, Carl, corrected me when I recounted to him what I told the phone operator.

It's called arching, not sparking, he said.

I continued with the words he gave me to use because I had been told by my doctors that thinking in a new way can be a good thing, can move you to a place that puts you closer to life than death. I welcomed my education in electricity because, although I was on the bottom of that hierarchy, I had what was surely the master, Carl, in front of me. With a few employees behind him, Carl, sunburnt and blue eyed with a potbelly, looked to me, and then we both looked up at the wire. Then he moved his eyes to my living room window, my car under a burnt mesquite branch, then back up at the wire, while I followed his expert gaze. He smiled and turned his eyes back to me in that lazy Tucson way.

Someone's gonna have to cut that tree, Miss. And it won't be Tucson Electric Power.

After I was brought to a back room in the law office with a few lawyers that were apparently my own, a man walked in and beamed before us all, still at least eight feet from me when he extended his hand for a shake. He joined the lawyers on one side of a table, while I sat at behind a glass of water and across from them. That man loved his job, and he was not my lawyer.

Sarah, he began, we are all here—I assure you—to just ask a few questions about your situation before the accident, and also to learn about your situation since the accident.

He was hired by an insurance company to compare. He shined with an upright back, and they all looked at me, so I looked back. I had been prepped on a previous day, had been told not to speak to anyone who called me or showed up at my work. We were all there to understand the truth, and I had been told not to speak about it unless asked to in the presence of my lawyers. The back of my throat pounded. That bright man wanted to know if I was a liar.

Sarah, your lawyers are here to help you with any of the questions I ask you that might be confusing. We all understand this is a hard time for you, but the insurance company needs to know what your life was like before the accident so it can guide the best course of action to be taken.

I was in there to talk about changes in my life with people who were there to evaluate those changes in comparison with what made life worth living. I wanted to defend myself about something but I didn't know what. Someone had offered Teresa to me as a model of how to proceed with life. Actually, a person not comfortable talking to me offered that model on my doorstep. I presumed Teresa wouldn't mind if anyone thought her a liar or compared her version of reality to their own, but I also knew I wasn't the woman she was. Teresa surrendered and through that she found a power, and I had acquiesced to adult knowledge even though I didn't trust the ones guiding me. Teresa allowed herself into God's hands, and she found a way with him, she had a new way. She

suffered obediently, and I had taken a five-minute break when my father's ashes were delivered to me while I worked at Tower Records. I couldn't do anything without feeling slighted already, so I couldn't really surrender. But I showed up to work, school, a law office. My fists kept hard and tight and my mouth shut while Teresa's arms opened, her delicate fingers turned outward, her lips parted and turned up to sky. My hands would not open.

One of my lawyers stopped the bright man to remind me that they all knew I was smart. Then all the adults nodded together. This comment only impressed upon me that my personality was the line of questioning for today, not my life before and after one day. One minute, really. One second when one boom stopped a town's main thoroughfare and all of us were late back to work from lunch.

When I was prepped over the phone for that meeting, I was also told I was smart. I was happy for that phone call not because it affirmed my self-perception but because I hadn't figured out how to pay the phone bill yet. And after the phone prep, I lay in bed and slept well for the first time in weeks. My fists flattened under my hip bones as I slept on my stomach, and my face smashed deep into a pillow. I felt heavy and gone. I dreamt that I was in the bathtub on Margarita Street, young enough to still float around in it. The tub felt warm, and it was summer outside, steam flicked around and above me, and my head set level with my bobbing toes every other second that the water shifted. My mother wasn't there but then appeared, a bandana covering her new haircut, and her face was even more beautiful with exposed cheekbones, her lips the first offering upon seeing her face. She looked like she had learned to surrender.

LuAnn pushed her sleeves up to her elbows, and I wondered if she had come from or was going to clean her parents' schools, which she did in that exact outfit. She turned the water down to a hot trickle and closed the shower doors with a light push of her index finger. I was covered in shadows. Steam billowed into itself in the tight space, and decades before a congenital kidney problem revealed itself and made it impossible for me to get warm, it felt simply good for my toe-shaped body to be covered in a hot, wet pocket, bobbing with a dinosaur sponge, my face enclosed by hair. LuAnn's body, from the other side of the shower door, was a silent figure stretched over light. She looked gigantic and powerful, then walked out of the bathroom.

In and out of the water I bobbed as I got no air, then some, then none again. I called for her a few times as my hair circled my neck, my mouth feeling a breath, then water. I remembered something my father taught me: everyone in our paternal family line could plug their noses to their upper lips and create a suction cup. I did that when my head went under and breathed when my head came up. I closed my eyes and taught myself to float.

After a while the thick fog softened because LuAnn opened the shower door. I opened my eyes and she stared at me, my mother, then picked me up and threw me into bed, still wet. I didn't care because it was a summer light outside and being wet was one of my favorite things. Maybe because LuAnn was a part-time lifeguard. Maybe because I was a Californian. No matter the things I was that people like my mother didn't like me for being, I felt most certain that no one could hurt me when I was submerged.

I closed my eyes and sat against the concrete wall. Pockets in the stone were hot and wet against my back as if the day's hail made a Tucson sauna. The desert felt good in my kidneys. I tried not to doze from being comfortable.

My last kidney surgery forced blood out of me for a month. Up the urethra to the ureter to the opening of the right kidney went a tiny knife and a balloon. The balloon stretched out my insides but dug itself in each step I walked. It was called a successful surgery. I didn't have a one-centimeter kidney stone anymore, I didn't fall on the ground with my own vomit and shit, my thinning hair eventually grew back after the anemia. I walked, I bled. Then I got a small stone in Seattle a few months before moving to Tucson. I was working at a southwestern restaurant on Phinney Ridge and passed the stone between serving chicken enchiladas. It was a small thing, and my body worked to get rid of it. It barely hurt. It wasn't like waking up from the surgery to feel electric lines pinning me down as I looked down to my thighs and saw a mess of red.

The two nurses holding me down asked, *where's your dad, Honey? You keep screaming for your dad.*

He's dead. Fuck he's chasing me. I'm covered in blood. It hurts so bad, I'm bleeding everywhere.

Did he die in the Twin Towers? Oh my god, Carol—we got a girl who knows someone in the Towers.

No, no. Accident. God, I'm dying, I'm going to be sick. Something's wrong.

Honey, what day is it? What's your name? Do you know where you are? You just got out of surgery. It's September 12th. You're in Los Robles, Sarah. Your grandfather is waiting.

Surgery, I know. But I'm bleeding everywhere. Something's wrong. The pain.

It's not all blood. Iodine is red, and you're on your period, remember? Some is blood from the surgery. Stop trying to jump up. Rest. Just rest.

The nurses turned to each other and talked about how the patients didn't know pain, that we weren't *in the Towers*, that we were lucky. When one finally checked my vitals, she screamed for the other nurse.

Get her these meds. And hot packs. Her pressure's dropping. God, look at her toes. Get Dr. Davendra.

I came to against the concrete wall in my yard in Tucson, Arizona, leaving that memory of being so cold and bloody. My kidneys stopped hurting when I moved to Tucson. There was so much heat to press them against. Up above, hail traveled between hot and cold layers, pouring down then stopping without a sign. Some balls hit my landlord in the eye as he trimmed the mesquite tree that the TEP crew would not, and his cursing grew louder. A man who liked to tell people that he lived in Japan and had learned real etiquette from there, a barrage of *fucking hail all in my eyes* was something I enjoyed watching. Carl, too. He smiled and looked up. Carl had a hat with a brim but an open shirt that seemed to fill with hail chunks every other second they weren't melting. He rubbed them into his chest hair. He loved this kind of day. It was cool, and he didn't

have to climb a ladder like my landlord. That day it was the tree's fault, not TEP's.

Carl seemed reasonable. He seemed like a good man.

I hope I don't get electrocuted while trimming this tree my landlord said. Carl and I looked up at him to see if he would.

Carl told him, *you probably won't*, and smiled at me. Then he told me, *the rest of the crew will be here within an hour—they have supplies we need—but your landlord needs to have that branch cut before we'll do anything about the wire.*

Then Carl leaned back into his truck and acted like he had a ten-second count before lifting his eyes back to me. People in Tucson and their eyes. His lashes fluttered and his left eyebrow raised. Even his droopy eyelids seemed to hold a large smile. For a man with such girth, his expressions were precise through his cheeks and beard. Every time he glanced my way I felt him wondering about me. I had nowhere to be, nothing to pretend I was missing. I was around for the show, like Carl.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LA DWP), the largest municipal utility service in the USA, was once the cause of probably the worst American civil engineering disaster of the twentieth century when the St Francis Dam collapsed. The accident caused the greatest number of deaths in California's history, second only to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Los Angeles started the infamous California water wars when DWP employees siphoned water from rightful owners' lands. It has been said that men were hired by the DWP to ride horses up and down the aqueduct and to shoot men who tried to redirect water back to Owens Lake, once called the Switzerland of California before it became a desert. Dynamite, armed factions, corrupt leaders, paranoia.

Eventually 90 percent of Owens Lake was taken under ownership of the city of Los Angeles. The metropolis boomed.

Trevor worked at the LA DWP for years. He woke at 3 AM and rode in for the early shift. Ice in his red beard. He climbed poles. Fell a few times the first year, and it wasn't as bad as you'd expect it to be, his body ached under leather and denim and straps, but nothing ever broke. Hardly ever anything broke. And he'd come home to a woman or a woman and me or just me, and we'd eat together. And he'd get up to do it all again to support me, people told me. Women said. *He was a hard worker* they all said when he died, after asking, *did he go back to the old way?* These were rephrased over and over after his memorial at my grandparents'. These are the kinds of things we say about poor men who die needlessly. We congratulate their suffering, we compare how much they were willing to _____. We tell a kind of truth, we say they were willing to die to support little girls like me, we feel grateful for men's sacrifices and pretend we aren't their sacrifices. We imagine when men's skulls are bashed in that it is a bad ending to an otherwise good life. A moral thriving. During the memorial at my grandparents', women squirmed and shook in the patio furniture. All those women, missing him in their bodies, thinking that when his body smashed the concrete and exploded, the earth below must have turned up to catch his blood in its mouth. A tiny balloon to open the ebb and flow from center to surface. I would have fought for that right, I would have fought with other women and the ground. And after getting out of the hospital, I threw out every journal I had ever filled about our lives because they seemed to say nothing. The narrative of our

reality lay flat on the page. The good one of us was gone and one was left. The one left tried and failed, and failed.

A museum in Thousand Oaks, California once had an exhibit dedicated to the history of the DWP with a special nod to its laborers, who appeared before viewers as poor men donned in shredded clothes and seen through a black and white camera lens. I went to the exhibit to study my father through the history of the agency that provided his most secure employment. With the DWP he had benefits, a weekly income, and a means to support me. The photos in the museum had placards explaining the proud working class men who built the DWP, but my father had never been proud. It struck me, as I looked at the dimly lit exhibit, tasteful and kind in soft shadows that whispered a bloody story where so few profited, that I had no idea what I had been looking for. My father wasn't on that wall of men nor was the history of how men such as him had their employment taken from them. The exhibit had nothing to do with us, and my mistake was that I had been looking for a big thing. A sign. I couldn't see my own desperation then, a seventeen-year-old girl with an anchor tattoo set black and red on her bicep. When I ended up in Tucson, a place with even less water than Southern California, I wondered how much blood set the price of water. Never less than too much. But outside of the TEP's financial downfall of the 90s, not much is said about its history with water, and I guess that means that comparison can be moot. Carl looked like my father, and he worked for the utility company. But the thing is, he wasn't Trevor. They never were.

Carl didn't have a wedding ring on. But Tucson is a loose town that likes its men. I bet he did just fine. Climbing and falling from the poles, all the bruises. Women always

find a way to turn men's pains to signs, we keep them alive, we nurse and fuck and rip our hair out when they die. Of course not all people are this easy to locate, but sometimes it feels good to sit in a flat identity in a kitchen and wait for a flat man.

Charlene, the woman with a particular affection for slapping me, screamed and fell on the porch a few months after he died. She showed up on what would have been his fortieth birthday. Every year on July 31 she'd come with feathers in her hair and scarves draped across her breasts to touch him. I could say that I didn't like telling her *he's dead, Charlene*, but I did. I did, and I wasn't worse off for it. I didn't believe it myself, yet. I told that woman that he was dead—I didn't even say how—and I watched her writhe from the knees, sink down to the porch in a hurt for his body. I watched to understand what it meant for a bad woman to mourn. I could see how to act. Charlene showed me how to use that first cry. Wail for the man who is gone. Cry once until your throat bleeds. Her scream was of origin. Her body, telling, this is what it's like to love a man. This is a big thing. This is a sign.

Next to Carl, outside my little adobe, my eyes got lazy and long, but on the inside I still pounded. There was a paper inside my house with calming strategies numbered in a sequence of severity that I was to practice. This was a narrative of making reality. It said that even this day is enough, and if you make it, there will be another. It was a loving thing to know: you don't have to die today. It was a memoir about the dangers of recollection. It was written down by a doctor to show me the real, big thing.

I looked up toward Carl. He fidgeted, and I didn't expect this. His leisure had diminished and boredom set in. He licked his lips and shifted to his right leg and glanced

at a watch. Carl looked up at my landlord with one of his famous raised eyebrows, his folded arms, unable to hide his disdain for an amateur trimming a mesquite tree without grace, when Carl knew that even with the extra fifty pounds on him, his climb would be faster, his stroke ultimately of better use. My landlord hacked the branches around the wire, trying to beat the arrival of the rest of the TEP crew, and finally stepped down from the ladder to see his work. He looked back at Carl with a blank eye. Carl nodded. It was done. The men got to work, and this is supposed to be the sign of what makes the most down low of us truly good men.

The bright, beaming man repeated some words to me, and I realized that my head was in my hands for a few seconds longer than was comfortable for the people in the room. I looked up, and one lawyer averted his eyes out of respect.

We're going to begin now, Sarah, the man said.

I pulled my head out of my hands for the last time that day. I was so tired.

Okay.

Were you and Trevor Heston close?

Each day I worried about Trevor dying, and I worried if we were close enough to save either of us. Whether that approximated closeness or distance, I didn't know. But that wasn't anyone else's business.

Yes, we were close.

The bright man shifted his legs and a woolen sound came from his crotch. It was loud enough for all of us to hear. He looked at me and paused. I thought that he might be

angry that my answer could seem facetious. People often thought I was at the moments I was trying hardest to affirm importance.

Okay, Sarah, what kinds of things did you and Trevor Heston do together?

That was the question, and I couldn't answer that we shot guns and got high. That we grew pot in the backyard and one day it was ripped up by who knows what person, and the police took Trevor away even though the plants disappeared right before they showed up. That I had seen him naked more times than I could count. The insurance company had a list somewhere of the quality of a child/parent bond with numbers next to each kind of bond it identified. The bright man couldn't help but show his excitement. He brought a passion to his work as evidenced by his want to know me, by his entitlement in speaking both of our first names. Did he bring such a passion into what he loved, I wondered. I wanted to know who he loved. Even God hurt Teresa when she gave him all she had because that's the big thing, the lesson. The necessary pain in exalted love. The way in which terror can never be overcome but only incorporated with love for a god who will surely make mistakes, who will, no matter how much you believe in him, die a death that only he owns. I wanted to give the bright man what he wanted—I wanted to be at the very top of his child/parent bond list—but he didn't understand that giving him what he wanted would prevent him from seeing how we worshipped.

We hiked. And ate out together.

Where?

At this one place between his AA meetings and my work, Tower Records. Roxy's New York Deli.

How often, Sarah?

We went there a lot.

Why there, Sarah?

It was close. He liked their borscht. He drank the single serving coffee creamers they kept on the table like little shots.

Borscht?

Yes, borscht. He tried it for the first time and liked it. He thought it was healthy and tasted good. He had been eating too much pie and decided to eat borscht.

So you spent a considerable amount of time together?

I looked at the man. We lived alone together.

He blinked, waited. He calculated how to follow up. I think he wanted me to cry. But I didn't have anything to say. I talked about borscht. The bright man wanted a memoir, but he didn't know what that meant. He wanted me to start at a precise point and then to evaluate me, because as his job told him, he was an expert in a woman's testimony. He was just a critic. He wanted me to cry so he could assess my morality.

Yes, we spent a considerable amount of time together.

Okay, Sarah, now please tell me what has changed since the accident.

He thought testimony worked like that. He was a man whose work was unlike his love. His question lacked compassion, it invaded, it tried. I tried to be in the world with as few questions as possible because they didn't stop, they would always remain. They kept me with questions, men like him, for years I could not escape them. I was raised to be like a man, but the man who had made me like him was gone. How long had he been

preparing us for the end of the world? He made me fight through terror, he made me kill, but he also held me atop his shoulders well after it must have been comfortable and bought me roses on each Valentine's Day. We lived full, hard lives. We worked. And then Robert Evans Jr. hit Trevor on the way to church, said that Trevor sped up on his motorcycle and into the Volvo, implied the biker had wanted to die. And the next day the *Thousand Oaks Star* said Trevor had died at age 40 instead of his actual age, 39, because he wasn't wearing a DMV-approved helmet. My father had been alive one year longer in the paper's account and was reckless. How had my life changed since the accident. How had Trevor Heston's life changed? He was said to survive beyond his own death.

There was a ringing in my ears from some primordial center that made me its home. It stopped me from sleep my whole life, inhabited while I tried to rest. And it taught me through its ringing that I didn't have a voice that could answer in a way that would be heard. *Now please tell me what has changed since the accident.* I couldn't speak of the bag delivered to my home from the LAPD. My father's sunglasses streaked with blood and hair matted where his ears would be, an old Rolex he fixed and that stopped the precise second his wrist hit the concrete, a leather fanny bag—ridiculous looking if not for the flaking blood. A leather wallet with a picture of me inside of it, standing in front of a motorcycle, and then covered in his blood. People said *sorry, I'm so sorry*, but where were his clothes? His body? Where were his eyes and hands? A friend of his came over and asked for the Rolex, said *I always liked it* as if I cared. How would I know what had changed when I didn't get to see the broken lump of him to know? My lips parted just then before the bright man. When love is exalted, there is no morality,

there is no history of testimony, there are only the signs. I was Teresa. I was in ecstasy. I was with my god, I knew my father. I knew of that man outside of lineage.

Once again, Sarah, what has changed since the accident?

I didn't tell him that I knew my father wasn't dead. That I needed more money than he planned to offer me so that I could find him because I had already begun researching for connections that revealed his death an impossibility, found out secrets unknown, dreamt about new leads. I found out that the man who hit Trevor was a member of the same church as the man who suddenly married Trevor's recent girlfriend. And she had called the morning after he died asking for him when we hadn't heard from her in months. Lori, who Trevor had broken up with for stealing from his mother, Dagmar, and who married almost immediately, then left town in a hurry. Lori's new husband knew the man who hit Trevor. There was something unsaid, something to figure out. I didn't say that if Trevor died, it was time to read the signs. All our blood would spill into the mouth of the planet. I didn't say that I knew it was the time for reading because I knew the earth—that through terror, I had become.

What has changed is that a part of me is gone forever. I'm really sad.

It was done. The bright man found his sad girl, thanked me, and left. Someone said to me, as I looked down at the table with parted lips, *perfect*.

The rest of the TEP crew showed up and changed the wire. One man climbed the pole, another climbed my roof, and it was over within minutes. When the man up the pole,

Jorge, looked in the box, he said that all the wires needed to be replaced. Jorge was new, and his crew admired that he was a quick study. He had never fallen, Carl told me.

The crew would have to return to change all the wires in the box and possibly for a large chunk of Amory Park. I was a voyeur of their competence, their ease with an unfamiliar situation, their ability to assess and perform what must be done. They had learned to respond to an uncontrollable thing. They would not be stopped. They were good men.

Carl approached me and my landlord. *We need to get some new wiring and we're gonna have to shut off power to these three houses for a few hours. This should have been done years ago. Old wires in Armory Park. Something always comes up during the monsoons. They gotta get changed so no one gets hurt.*

One evening before my bedtime, I asked my father what it was like to work for the DWP in Los Angeles, where he, at that point, was certain the race wars would start. Trevor took a dramatic breath and put down his stew, the orange cheese square gelling over. He told me, *last week a new guy was working too fast, trying to impress the old timers or who knows. The guy grabbed a live wire with both hands and shook so much that his face latched on.*

My father had put on his work gloves and pulled the man away from electrocution.

The guy's lips came right off, Trevor said, *just because he acted without thinking. What kind of man acts like that?*

That new guy lived but couldn't work anymore. He got severance and disability, Trevor presumed.

For not thinking! But I'm sure having no lips can really make a person think.

Trevor got his own severance package a few months after that conversation, and after I left LA for Seattle, then Seattle for Tucson, I opened the little safe where I kept the police report, a red-tail hawk feather, Trevor's cut braid next to my cut braid, his bloody things from the accident, and papers I found in his gun cabinet. Sometimes I even forgot what was in the safe. His severance letter says that he was being laid off for being drunk on the job. He had never told me this. One day I woke up and he was just there, working under a car. Then on to watches. Carpet. Fixing the world with a mason jar holding a Screwdriver. His work ethic sharpened. He got harder on me.

The letter from his supervisor is surprisingly gentle. It wishes Trevor luck as he enters treatment, sends hope for Trevor's family as he becomes a better person who can highlight his skills and not be crippled by his faults. The letter ends with a request that Trevor update the DWP bosses on his health and reminds him that anyone can become a better man, even if a man doesn't think he can at the moment.

I couldn't read this letter without being reminded of one time my father got pulled over for driving drunk in Simi Valley. I was in back, strapped into my car seat, and the officer asked Trevor to get out of the car and walk with him, thinking I wouldn't hear.

The officer whispered, *what are you doing, man? That's your daughter. You gotta get your life together. You have to do this for her. What kind of man are you? You aren't this man.*

My father the rebel, the naturalist, the one who could survive any end, the one who a community of people, including my mother, went to immediately following the Northridge earthquake and who sat, happily, by oil light with a gun, simply said to the officer, *you're right.*

Years later Trevor got clean and died on the way to an AA meeting. He was driving from his job at the Volvo shop, where he made the incredible ten dollars an hour that afforded us luxuries like borscht. When I went to the shop to get his Snap-on toolbox, the men had put a daisy on top of it. They took off their hats and one of them handed me the flower, said *Trevor was a good man.*

Carl stood by me while the men finished the job. *Do you have to leave for anything?* he asked, *the power will be off for awhile.*

No.

He seemed surprised by that answer. *A pretty girl like you should have something to do. How old are you, twenty-one?*

Twenty-five.

Carl looked down. I don't know why.

As my lawyers left the room, one said that I could stay to collect myself, so I did. I didn't want to disappoint them. My file was small and neat. I knew I would win the case. After my testimony, there was nothing to dispute any longer. Trevor Heston was killed by blunt force injuries, a thirty-foot skid mark proved he didn't speed up, the curvature of the skid showed that he knew motorcycle safety and tried to avoid hitting Evans Jr.'s car, and

ashes attributed to his body were delivered to me in a can. Beyond those facts, none of the people in that room thought I had a chance. It didn't hurt my feelings because adults like them never liked me to begin with, and to have such a clear outcome was almost settling. Because they thought me a caricature of a lost girl, I acted accordingly.

When Evans Jr.'s insurance company offered one hundred thousand dollars, my lawyers told me to take it and to avoid a civil suit, because Evans Jr. didn't have money, anyway. They told me that I didn't have to come into court or ever see him. My grandfather took the money I walked away with after lawyer's fees, which was half, and gave it to his financial advisor, who promptly lost most of it. I agreed with everything I was told to do for no particular reason and have since lamented the carelessness at the least, and the incompetence at most, of the adults who helped me. The little money I had left from the settlement I used for a trip to the Arctic Circle in the summer, the exact place I intended to go in the winter before I ended up in a state hospital. When I walked over the line to the Arctic, I fell on the ground and cried in the milky sun. It felt like a chance to get back everything I lost by not asserting myself.

But back at the lawyer's office, before the settlement and in a room by myself, I unfolded my fists to grab the table and stiffened my back. The table gave me something to grip, and it felt like I held onto it with an insistence made from every hand that had laid there, from every person who continued living without seeing the body of their dead beloved. I pushed hard into something that would only surrender to my hands and not break. Even when my hands hurt around the table, they felt right. Maybe in Teresa's hurt, she became, so I pushed on the table and brought myself back to the knowledge that I

wasn't dead. I wanted my hands, and I stayed alive for the length of that meeting even though I couldn't really meet with them. How does one ask for care? I didn't know. I don't know. So I practiced a woman's parted lips and unfolding fists.

The new TEP-installed wires looked strong and sunny, sure to prevent any arching for at least a while. The day had been long with nothing, and I wanted rest. I turned toward Carl and thanked him, then went inside my house and sat on the concrete floor with my back against a concrete wall. It was cold, uncomfortable, and what I wanted to do to myself. But the change was that I could tell I wouldn't want that for too long. I waited for the crew to leave the alley, then went back outside in the warm dirt spot I sat in before they came. A work truck's cloud of diesel dissipated into the clearing sky, and I didn't know if it looked bigger in the desert when it was full of clouds or wearing nothing but blue. A man I still loved, who was a thousand miles away, told me once I looked like a woman when I wore my blue dress, and right then under that sky I craved him. There were too many people to miss in the world, and because I didn't know what to do with that feeling, I had built up a desire to be gone in the pit of my body as normal seeming as the holes Trevor made us dig in our backyard. There were secrets still buried under the oak on Irving Drive. So many guns rotting in the earth, so many times he made me shoot when I said I didn't want to. That day in the desert, I was twenty-five and a wire stopped arching on a mesquite tree. Small things. But when you're alive, there's always the possibility for more signs.

Months after the day of the arching wire, I dreamt of the backyard as it was on that day, but my body and the mesquite tree were different. I was a flash of fire the size and shape of a thistle bloom, free-moving. I chose to flick around a great oak that was without leaves, where once the mesquite tree thrived. I was the weight of a thistle boom, too, the space of a gap, really, in comparison to everything. Weightless fire. I shifted in random sky positions because there were no feet below me, then landed where the roots broke from the dirt to figure out where to move next. The oak devoured me through a hollow branch that bent down. I ceased being the speck of fire, and the tree heaved into an explosive burn from eating me. The great oak died. While I waited for new form to animate me, I learned that in life I must never stop or else I'd be eaten. I would have another chance to be fire, but before that time I had to watch how other matter was formed so that I may too return. Both ways of being alive felt the same. There was only the difference in idea. But that didn't mean I didn't want a body. *Next time*, I thought, *don't stop moving.*



I awoke round 3 AM to the sound of someone keying my car. I jumped up, naked and with the pillow knife in my left hand, never not without that, and looked to the spotless dark of my Missouri side yard. My eyes adjusted to find a crumpled, grasping man on the back of my Toyota Camry. Lo and behold, fantasy's other: my drunk, incompetent boyfriend.

I tossed the knife on the bed after considering, admittedly, to keep it in my hand, always considering that, and walked to the living room and swung open the rickety front door. I called for Eric, and he slumped toward the sound of my voice, see-sawing step by step through the front door, then vomited on the carpet. He was on all fours, shivering, and I walked away from him to sit on the toilet. I looked up at the fluorescent bulbs above the sink until I saw the world glaze over in black flashes. I breathed. My eyes burned.

I moved to Missouri for a PhD program a couple of years after moving to Tucson, but not before a sweet nine months in Los Angeles's Koreatown and a long summer in Finland. In Koreatown I lived on Berendo and Beverly. It was the first time I had lived on the second floor of a building, and I slept better than I ever had before because I felt safer

from break-ins. The most dangerous predators seemed only to be the passed out homeless guys on the stoop who rolled onto the lawn when I told them to leave. My block of Koreatown was actually a part of the enclave known as Little Salvador. It had less money than the rest of Koreatown, and the neighborhood at large felt like the Wild West of Los Angeles. Underage Korean women danced on tables in restaurants with blacked out windows, no one checked IDs, and everyone smoked inside. Valet parking was one dollar. Our block of K-Town spelled Beverly as B-E-V-E-R-E-L-Y. But as quick as I moved home, I moved out to Columbia, Missouri to go back to school with a fellowship to write a memoir. I had only ever written poems, but I wrote them again and stretched the end of the line until it doubled down on itself, filling a page, then another. I had never written anything that felt longer than my life would last, but each blank page I tried to fill. I got a carriage house in the Benton Stephens neighborhood that was surrounded by lush greenery, possums, and tarantulas. It was a quieter place than my K-Town apartment, but I didn't feel as safe from myself or those who would kill me. And writing a memoir, far different from recollection, is a good way to discover what left there is to lose.

Before Eric fell into my house, he was out with Steven, a bear of a man who confessed his desire for me when Eric wasn't around, wrote songs about my mistaken choice in another, and eventually felt just fine telling Eric that he loved me. It brought the two of them together, really, the three of us petitioning the other and them settling for a drink instead of action. Then, at the long end of one year of living in the Midwest, something inside of me moved. I wanted out of all that. I became conscious of the fact

that I wanted to live, but I didn't know how to reconcile that with my unwillingness to lose. So the two of them had their own good time.

That night that Eric blacked out, he had been with Steven at a woman's house, drinking whiskey while they all sang songs about loneliness. And so the story goes as I heard it from Steven, Eric got drunk and fell into the woman's bedroom after dancing along to some old favorite, surely "Freebird" or a song like it that, because the person who used to sing it had died, seemed poignant. I knew Eric because he was my lover, but it seemed like I knew him better for every part of him that was indifferent to that title, the parts of himself that he talked about to remind me that being in love is like being in a blackout, and when someone's in a blackout, Eric would say, what is said means nothing.

Like the men before Eric who I had loved through blackouts, I imagined Eric's for what I knew about him. I bet he considered the problems with songs and sons. The problem with "Freebird," he might have said, was that no one heard it sincerely anymore. No one really heard the man sing before he knew he would die that he, Ronnie Van Zandt, was free as a fucking bird. So free that the band played the song as an instrumental behind a front stage microphone after Zandt's death. Eric's father, Terry, died when a part of the Omaha train tracks misfired onto his body. Terry had a room in their house for instruments, and from his death on, Eric tied together music and the death of love. Eric told me the first night we hung out that Terry had been murdered by gunshot, but it came out later from a mutual friend that Terry had died while working on the railroad. I understood Eric's impulse to say this, having said many times before that my own father

was murdered, when really, I had no claim to that word. To compare was to understand, and that's why Eric thought about Terry while singing songs like "Freebird."

After Eric vomited, I lifted him into my car and drove him to his home where he fell out of my car and hit his knee on the porch steps. He screamed and I called 9-1-1, and with the operator on the phone, tried to address what the actual problem was.

He's drunk, he fell on his leg funny, I said, he's screaming and holding his leg.

The operator asked, *do you want us to send someone out?* and I could tell in her whisper that she was remembering someone who had brought her disappointment.

Eric rolled on the ground and screamed *hang up the phone, hang up the phone.*

Eric screamed, and I stood silent.

If you need us, just call back, she said.

I wanted to tell her that I was scared and didn't like how we were living. And Eric, the one who always told me after his blackouts that what people say while they're drunk means nothing, was screaming into the ground in a way that sounded like the most sincere part of who he was. He showed me what I kept hidden away. I wanted to tell the operator that we weren't obliged to watch things like this. I wanted to say, *never again.* But I had already hung up the phone.

When Trevor died on the way to his AA meeting, steering the Ducati that met the front of Robert Evans Jr.'s Volvo, he was two years sober. A week before the crash we argued about Step Eight, Making Amends. After years of his tyrannical drunkenness, the weekends we spent in the woods preparing for end times, his speeches to me claiming

that I *half-assed everything* while I performed tasks, I felt entitled to have an explanation for his love, his tough love, and his love that made me ashamed that I wasn't more prepared to be the last person surviving.

I already apologized to you, he said.

You said sorry, but for what? You don't want to talk about it, I said.

My father put his fingers in his ears and hummed.

Stop it, I said, Dad—stop it.

He hummed louder.

That's juvenile, Dad, talk to me, please.

My father screamed: *I can't hear you.*

To be made to return to the person he was while using, to witness that pitiful man, to see my disappointment in him. These were things that might have killed him. To actually have this conversation could have led to his last drink. I didn't know at the time that I was already the stronger one.

That morning we each went to work and came home late. Trevor cleaned the knives, and I did my college homework. Maybe if he had lived longer, he would have approached Step Eight with renew, as many people do. But at that point in our lives, sobriety was a beginning, and how that narrative would unfold was cut from both of us.

When Trevor was using, he let me hitchhike in Arizona when I was thirteen, because to navigate the desert was an important experience. So from a tent in Cornville, I took off with a homeless friend, and when I returned home to my dad, I announced that I wasn't going to college, and he nodded. We got high together, I stayed out late. But these

times were in-between the hard ones, like when I was grounded for a year for huffing rubber cement and as a part of my punishment, could only read the Bible or *Steppenwolf*. When I told Trevor that I planned to move to Hawaii with his sister because I couldn't live with his drunk anymore, he quit drinking for good that time. I think he believed me. He knew that after leaving my mother's because she was an addict, after catching rattlesnakes in the mountains, after refusing to shave my legs for Thousand Oaks High School and being transferred to Conejo Valley High and graduating in my freshman year, I would leave him, I would leave everything. So he made a place for us to stay in the world he thought we should have left long ago when he told me that not even my mother would find us, and I told him I didn't want to go. It didn't matter whether the Step Eight conversation would have led to his last drink or to a moment where we tried again, because he died soon after. And that's probably why I remember what we talked about anyway. It was our last argument, so it rings poignant. Which is just another way to say that "Freebird" could have slipped into a void.

Robert Evans Jr. describes the accident in the police report as caused by Trevor Heston. Evans Jr. says that Trevor sped up into him and aimed for his car. Sergeant Kevin Mauch is reported as saying, "the cyclist locked his brakes skidded and struck the right side rear door of the Volvo." The Volvo was turning left in front of the cyclist. *The Thousand Oaks Star* says that Heston was forty and "wearing a helmet but it was not a U.S. Department of Transportation-approved model Mauch said." People in the AA community whispered, *did Trevor go back to the old way?* Two people told me before he

died that they knew he would die that day. Friends' parents called Evans Jr. a *good Christian*. Trevor said to me, *some day you will be sick of this world and we will leave it together*. *Steppenwolf* is often considered Hesse's meditation on suicide. Sometimes birds, when flying in a clear path, hit a window and die. After I moved to Missouri a cardinal hit my house, and I fed it water from a shot glass. It spit out blood with the water onto my face, then died. The next day a hawk landed on my porch and perched on my chair while our Manx cat sat underneath it. Freebird. Signs.

I liked rubber cement when I was twelve because it made me drool and slide. In neighborhood garages there was Kylie, raped by her father's friend with AIDS, Keith, scarred from his father's beatings, Robyn, who was also twelve and allowed to have sleepovers with boys, and all the others like us off of Avenida de los Arboles, preteens practicing their heritage. When my father found an old glue bag in my clothes and grounded me for a year, I stopped huffing even though he kept using. Between the Bible and *Steppenwolf*, I read the latter over and over. While this book is rumored to be about Hesse's suicidal thoughts, Hesse says it's his most misunderstood book. Pablo shows Harry the Magic Theater, and Harry kills his lover Hermine in it. Maybe. We don't know what happens down the surreal doorway because reality is loosely defined there. We know that after passing through five metaphysical doorways, Harry wants to kill Hermine, and that is true no matter if he does or doesn't act on his impulse. That, and the fact that the doors are located in one mirrored corridor where Harry sees himself no matter what door he chooses. After a year with *Steppenwolf*, I didn't huff glue again, but

I had already stopped months before my grounding, anyway. Trevor just didn't believe me. Then Trevor got sober, and that was supposed to be our doorway into a world we didn't need to escape from. I got comfortable enough with thinking that the world might be ending as soon as we thought that I even started drinking alcohol at friends' parties. For some reason, I don't remember anything that happens in *Steppenwolf*, but I will never, ever read it again to find out.

Alcohol turns my skin into a waving, fabric doorway that allows passage into this world as a non-believer. There, the world is gone but for my own body, half a glass down, warming from the pelvis out. I didn't know before drinking that I could feel a brightness deep in my insides, radiating out through blood into my extremities. If I have to stay in civilization or die, if living off an old land deep in the guts of a canyon isn't an option anymore, then let me feel his way sometimes. Let me be drunk. It's one of the ways in, how I lay down the urge to leave. Drinking in Missouri with my hair down lets cigarette smoke from other drinkers get into each strand, and it's like the campfires he used to build is in the mountains of California, and it's like the oily men of a Ballard, Seattle dock, and it's like the sand of Tucson against my eyelashes when the wind is up. It's my origins, the West come for me in the Middle. Drinking makes merging every place I've lived possible. Being drunk can feel like I've shortened the distance to God enough to ask, *how do I stay here?* I don't fly, I am rooted like the great oak into the ground, I don't fly. Through embodying a liquid that makes wet two worlds, I get close to an answer. I feel from my lips out that this civilization isn't without a reason to live. With

this feeling, I find a home, I want to stay. Unlike every man I've loved, I don't have blackouts.

When Evans Jr. pulled his Volvo in front of Trevor's Ducati, he was on his way to Calvary Community Church. If you look for this church in Westlake Village, California through a search engine, you'll find that the homepage presents a dazzling array of options, including a variety of ways to donate to the church. There are many "experiences" one is encouraged to opt into if one is a member. It's quite beautiful, really. There are so many ways to have a meaningful experience, from a new media observance to a stoic, traditional service, that it seems impossible to not understand why someone would want to be a member of Calvary. When I clicked on a link to join, though—thinking that the choice to become a member was all my own—I found that it's not as easy as showing up to your style of service. I was told:

Membership at Calvary is not like a Costco membership or your Netflix account. You don't just pay your dues and be done. As a member, you are committing to be a part of the Calvary family. To begin exploring this commitment to life with us, we invite you to attend a Discover Calvary reception. After the reception, you'll have an opportunity to join a Discover Calvary Group. These groups meet for four weeks to deepen our understanding of how we, both as individuals and as a local church, live out God's story on earth. At the same time, you'll meet others who are also beginning to join the Calvary family. This group will also help you explore your next steps in committing to life with Calvary.

Despite the depths of involvement one must enter into in order to approach an identity as "member," there is a simple, satisfying link on Calvary's home page labeled "donations" that leads a reader to a "secure" donation form in which anyone can donate any amount. One can donate without ever attending a "reception" or "group." The act of giving has an

immediate gratification. While other church websites have inspirational quotes about giving material goods as a means toward resurrection in Heaven, such as the often used “lay up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:20), Calvary’s donation page is austere by comparison to the rest of their website. The calm, unblinking page acknowledges that members get the home they believe in, the location of embodied resurrection, by giving up a little of what they are lucky enough to have in the expensive suburb of Westlake Village. Perhaps donation is the one choice you don’t have when you’re a believer. Resurrection might not have a price in itself, but giving to the place that walks next to you on the path toward forever seems like a reciprocal, loving act. Perhaps you can’t read this without thinking me a cynic, and in that, you’d be wrong.

While my father never told me that if we left civilization we were sure to somehow transcend, or that the mountains could be our opportunity for a rebirth, I believe he thought that if we left the city behind, we would go back to a time before both our suffering. He wanted to save us through erasure. His willingness to take me from my mother without even a word to her that I wouldn’t return was his way to show me that he knew I hated what I was supposed to love as much as he did. We both dealt with our addict mothers the best we could and took blows when the handling wasn’t helping. The simple narrative of our lives, though, is that I left my mother’s care to live with him full-time, and then he got clean for me. Instead of erasure, stasis.

Calvary’s website details their twelve-step program called “Celebrate Recovery,” and a death processing program called “Griefshare.” Both cost more money than my

father or I could pay. A truth in learning to stay alive is knowing when donation isn't an option. After Trevor's death, I found two hundred dollars in the bank. With no will or trust granting me access to it, its value felt like the exact amount of necessary. I sued for the cash and other things, and won. My lawyers were paid fifty percent of a settlement. I used the bureaucracy my father distrusted to get the money from Wells Fargo, and I was ashamed. I felt like I was telling the world that it owed us something for my father's and my own disappointment in it, for what was left of me and my disappointment. To be disappointed in the world isn't to be a cynic. It's a hope that things don't have to be what you fear most. To stay, I walked away with fifty thousand dollars. And that's the exact amount my lawyers were given for demonstrating how good they were at already being here. The money went quick, the financial advisor was inept, adults threw up their hands and said *oh well*. If you click on the little blue bird floating above the flashing images of Calvary's home page, the cute image that is flying above a layer of white, you can find ways to "follow" the church on social networking sites for free. Freebird.

A woman named Kathy lives with Trevor and me on and off for years. She's on meth, dumpster dives for our meals, uses rubber cement to stick pictures of cakes and meat from vintage magazines onto our walls, and she's my mother figure while Trevor works at the DWP and then after he gets fired. She's the one who tells my father I huff rubber cement and gets me grounded for a year. She's the one who shows me a vibrator for the first time. She's the one who tells me my father has Hep C and is sick. She's the one who shows Trevor my diary, where I lie and say I'm so cool with boys who I hook up with

then ignore me, but I love her anyway. And how does one tell another that her diary is filled with lies? Kathy takes me to the Valley for my doctor appointments after I return from a trip with my grandparents to Egypt and have urinary tract infections. I'm in the third grade, and she buys me Funyuns before each appointment. During these appointments doctors tell me that I have been raped and ask me to disclose, but I tell them nothing happened. Once, LuAnn comes to one of these appointments, and they ask to speak to me without her present, and she tells them no, that she's *the mother*. For years this is one of LuAnn's triumph stories. Another is that she told Charlene, my father's girlfriend, that if I was slapped again, there would be hell to pay. The doctors don't mention my kidneys or do an intravenous pyelogram. *Clearly this is rape*, they say. Then the infections go away, so no one sees that I was born with a blockage in my right ureter until my father dies, and I fall on the floor, shitting and throwing up. And even then, an appendix surgery is scheduled first, until I start pissing blood and a gynecologist says *oh*. Kathy and I drive to the appointments in each car my father brings home to our lot, and sometimes she sleeps in the Volvo wagons or the back bathroom when my father kicks her out again. She tells me that she loves Trevor, and even though they've slept together only once, she's willing to contract his Hep C, that's how much she loves him. I don't know what Hep C is, but I pull out one of her Marlboro 100s and smoke it because I'm twelve and no one would dare tell me not to.

After Eric's blackout and then his sobriety, I stayed. I told him stupid things like *I love you, I'm so proud of you*, and he would respond, *if someone were to ask me, I'd say you*

were a good person. But no one asked Eric anything because there wasn't any point.

When I finally left him, he told me, *you're worthless, you have a low tolerance for pain.*

He thought my optimism kept me from existing in reality. I guess I was optimistic in comparison to Eric, and I presumed my tolerance for pain was high enough that I stayed longer than I should with men like him. With any one of them, I endured. I mean to say that suicide, while always an option for getting out of a world I made for myself, was a concept I held in comparison with a measurement of withstanding. I was torn.

Eric had wanted to kill himself for a long time, and I didn't doubt that in that one task, he was capable. Whereas my drunk was in search of either connectedness or complete oblivion, if the world didn't oblige the former, a clumsy grasp at finding the intersection between form and formlessness, his was distinctly physical: a sinking into the ground, a run at another man's fist, a way to break what could be broken. I didn't know how to tell him, once sober, that his not drinking alienated me as much as his drinking. It felt like an old conversation about Step Eight, lost. When Trevor had told me, *I can't hear you*, he was telling me that I wouldn't be heard in this world, that this world wasn't for us, and because we never moved in the mountains long before, when he requested, we were both without a voice that mattered. Our testimonies would never materialize, and any better decisions we made didn't prevent our destined crossroads with life. Which is another way to say that everyone loves the song "Freebird" because of the reality it harkens and because of the reality songs can avoid.

There were moments with Trevor, Eric, and their voices where I was distinctly aware that I wanted to live. Trevor played the Beach Boys' *Holland* as my bedtime story

record, and I sang along to “Sail on, Sailor,” then listened to Al Jardine and Mike Love whisper the Robinson Jeffers’ poem, “Beaks of Eagles.” *Holland* is the Beach Boys’ nineteenth record and was the record that was supposed to save Wilson from himself. After three attempts to make it to the Netherlands, Wilson arrived, but barely. He contributed “Mount Vernon and Fairway,” the ten-minute narrative at the end of the record, only available on later editions. The critics panned *Holland*, and in our home, it was a favorite. The nighttime lullaby was a part of my father’s decision to keep us in the world that I loved best, and at that young age, I still hadn’t heard of *Steppenwolf* yet. When Trevor died, I went to Record Outlet on Thousand Oaks Boulevard and asked the owner, Casey, to put *Holland* on a CD for me before I sold all my father’s records to him. *Holland* wasn’t released on CD, unless you got a copy in Russia, where there’re no copyright laws. The record didn’t save Wilson from himself, and eventually I gave that recorded CD to a man I loved, Chris, and a harvested red-tail hawk feather to another man I fooled myself into loving. I had forgotten what saved me, settled for men that could talk over the cries of my father and hawks.

And with Eric there was a trip to Joshua Tree, California to stay in Gram Parson’s room at the Joshua Tree Inn. If one of the women in Parson’s room had stayed when he overdosed, he might have lived, but who knows for how long. Birds and bats dipped down to the pool as we slow-danced to “A Song For You” and smiled. Under the moon I thought about how I had first come to Joshua Tree with a man named Steve for the Gram Parsons music festival and watched Lucinda Williams sing “Hickory Wind” in a Keith Richards t-shirt, Tecates in all our hands. And then the time I came for Christmas during

a wind storm and exchanged gifts with Chris in Pioneer Town, Styrofoam cups full of Jack and Coke, fresh from Winnemucca, Nevada and my first time gambling. I had loved so many beautiful men, and I was trying with Eric. But the nights with Eric always turned. Music became a way for him to augment his silence into a mute rage. Over corn chips and margaritas, he told me that I looked ridiculous the way I put myself together, and I cried, cried and resurrected. That man acting like that place wasn't mine, that it wasn't a home. He became my crossroads, and I plotted each our ends until seven months later with his blackout. But still, I tried with him, I don't know why. While drinking was his way out of and testing out suicide, I guess Trevor, then Steve, then Chris, then Eric, and a few in-between, were mine. Even when they were bad men, they gave me a reason to stay around. They didn't listen, they thought I had too much to say anyway, they loved me for the same reasons they hated me, and they had a private reverence with music that didn't allow me in. But I believed in the easier moments with them that they heard something I heard, too. It was simple and good, it was being alive.

In the mountains of Southern California, up above the prestige and beauty of Santa Barbara, Trevor and I set up camp. How old are we? We are every weekend before I turn thirteen and he turns thirty-six. We are red-haired, pink-skinned stunners covered in mud from a nearby hot spring. He is drunk, and I've never been drunk. The machine guns are to the right of the army tent, and the steaks are on the left by the fire, which is burning high because Trevor pulled a dead oak from the ground with Chuck the Truck's tow bar and tied it up to a living tree, then toasted himself with a shot and a handful of something

I don't know. I am also chained up to a branch of living oak because I'm swaying like a pendulum back and forth across a rope swing that is secured by a tree limb. The flames lick me a little, but they're nothing to worry about. Here, girls only swing above fire out of pleasure, and my father has measured out the exact amount of space I need to be safe with rope in his left hand and a Coors can in his right. I can see above the trees when I swing high, and look down at the fire when I swing low. While four-wheel driving to this spot, after breaking locks of gates that read *Do Not Enter* or *Road Closed: Unsafe*, I flopped around in the camper while my father drank Coors in front and steered us through fallen rocks. We arrive always the first day right before sunset. When the dark becomes its deepest shade and the moon travels away from above to alongside, I sleep in a tent and my father sleeps in the camper. But before he sleeps, he sits by the fire, sometimes with other campers or a woman, sometimes alone. Out here he opens and shuts the cooler, hums a sad song. I don't like when my father sings because it makes me acutely aware that while he is built of things we share, what he is built of the most is a sadness that I know nothing about. It belongs to Trevor, held tight inside of his big, red chest. Even in the pleasure of being in the woods, where we belong, I know that the two of us, until something changes, need a crossroads. Even though we are safe from the world that will end, I know that my father needs to leave some things behind. If Dad is drunk, I am drunk. Me and this man, we got to get clean.

Kathy is evidence of Trevor's greatest fall into addiction. She eggs him on. She comes with us into the woods because she wants to leave the world. She tells Trevor, *me, too*,

and reads the William Cooper book *Behold a Pale Horse* because it is, in my father's opinion, the most accurate representation of the government's lies. Kathy tells me it is my father's favorite book. Kathy tells me Cooper has to go into hiding. Cooper is eventually shot dead by police in Arizona, long after Trevor dies. The police say Cooper was running and had drawn on them. But Cooper only had one leg at that point, and a community of followers online say they know the truth is hidden. A one-legged man can't run, right? He had one leg, right? Kathy digs a trench with us. She believes Trevor can save her in the upcoming millennium. Our family focuses on this for a few years. We store water. We prepare. We ride horses and hoard gasoline. There are many knives near at all times. Something is coming, so Kathy wears my father's fatigues, and my father wears his fatigues when he takes me to school in Chuck the Truck, now with camper. He drops me off with a gun and knife secured tight at his waist. Chuck can be heard blocks away, so I know that if the end comes when I'm in school, I can follow the Chuck's song to my salvation.

Then Trevor meets a woman and attempts sobriety for the first time. He buys bicycles to ride at night when he can't stop shaking. He kicks Kathy out for good. But Kathy always comes back, sometimes with police who hold me down, a twelve-year-old girl, while Kathy picks up my Manx cat and says *she's mine*. She tells the police that Trevor was her man and beat her. Other times she learns our schedules and breaks in through our panel windows and rearranges the rooms while we are gone. I don't mean that she moves around the furniture, I mean that she moves the contents of one room into another and so on. We joke that we might not know where our bedrooms are. Sometimes

a bedroom becomes a bathroom. Every Manx cat we have goes missing because she steals them to live under the freeway with her. I am glad she's gone when she goes because it's a sign that Trevor is less scared, but when she returns while I'm home alone I wonder if I'll have to kill her. One time a man shoved his girlfriend at my mother and told the woman, *get her, get her good*, and the woman attacked LuAnn. I was eating cereal and started screaming. I wet myself. I was so small. Those people had been kicked out of LuAnn's and Rich's. People don't like to be kicked out, and I don't want to cry if I have to protect us against Kathy. I want to rise to the occasion. When I drive by the Rancho Road overpass, she's there, only a few blocks from our house. Sometimes she's in the Taco Bell parking lot with a brown bag. She's never far.

For a couple of years, Kathy stops coming. I think my father held her down at gunpoint under the 101 freeway after the cops held me down. Then Trevor dies and I know she'll come back. I wait for it. I sleep with the same knife I will sleep with when Eric stumbles to my house, drunk. She busts into the house with her daughter, and they have half a head of teeth between them. Babies on their arms. They can't stop laughing. Kathy cries from laughing so hard. She can barely speak a sentence. She says, *we came to check on you*, and falls over, laughing. I want to tell her to leave, but what's the point. She will always get in. Eventually I pack up what's left of the house after moving many things to keep from her. Trevor's father knows a guy who turns the guns in San Diego, I wrap the knives, the William Cooper book because it might tell me what I need to know. And then it's just me and the Manx cat my dad got me after Kathy disappeared. For twenty years it's just us: me and the Manx cat, who patrols when I tell her, who attacks

when unsure. She is a good animal, and together our eyes see everything. Manx cats are for end times, we only ever had them, Trevor's father only ever had them. But before it is just me and her, I leave behind a lot. I forgo the cast iron pans and furniture. Kathy can take them. She can take every fork that the woman after her put into our pantry. Trevor, me, and the Manx cat survived with two forks for a long time, and it never seemed like a loss. When I think I'm ready to die again, I balance that with knowing there is so much to prepare for. I balance that with the Manx cat who protects me. Her name is Armetes, and she scrutinizes men who come to my bed. Trevor dies in 1998, and the millennium looms.

And when the millennium comes, I am closer to being a woman than a child. I spend it driving from LA to Seattle. Each mile of Interstate 5, red-tail hawks lay dead along the roadside. Trevor made us follow them into the woods for years because they were the best animal for the millennium that no human could own. He said they knew. Then he watched them and said nothing, lips parted, my father, Teresa. Before the millennium I never saw a dead hawk, only the ones my father fed, shot crows for, or made us follow for hours. He was sure of something about them, and I am sure that there are signs. This is like a crossroads. The millennium is the year of the dead hawks.

Once sober, Eric shook at first as my father did, only Eric's shaking never stopped. In the irony of learning to not kill himself, in a sustained sobriety, the DTs became an identity that Eric could hold onto.

When I can't sleep, Eric told me, I think of your father. I think of Trevor biking all over Thousand Oaks trying to tire himself out enough to rest. And for that, I loved Eric. I loved him deeply because of how much I had thought about his own father, Terry.

Eric wrote a story about a woman who sleeps with a knife under her pillow. The male narrator tells the woman that she doesn't have to do that, that being in the world doesn't mean being ready for a fight at each turn. I pretended that this story was Eric's way of making amends to me. He never talked to me about Step Eight, but he did make amends to the girl at the video rental store. I took what I got, I laughed. I imagined that Eric made amends, which is only something a person can do after being resurrected as a believer.

I have my own shaking to do yet. I dream that the world will end, and I will be eaten by dirt that is soft and wet. I dream of the Manx cat in a burning world, looking to me for salvation. Often I can't sleep because I know what will be there, and I count the men I've loved because a woman tells me, *you know, you've had so many loves in your life. Many people don't get that.* I'm shocked that I never realized how many there were.

Drinking provided Trevor and Eric that flying feeling, I guess, but it never stayed long enough. In a world where they had to engage or die, their sobriety led to a freedom from a preparation for the end. The men who live, and even my favorite one who died, found steps to stay put. But through engagement, we risk another kind of dying. You risk knowing right before you die that you are sober when you could use a drink, you risk

realizing that you are connected to the concrete by two motorcycle wheels and will soon lose it all. You risk being conscious enough to know you will miss this world.

You lock your breaks. You skid thirty feet because you are trying not to die. You have worked so hard to be conscious only to realize that when you have to leave this world, you don't want to. You remember the person you stayed here for, only to leave her behind. You have a picture of her with a motorcycle in your pocket, always with you, as you die after hitting a Volvo with your own motorcycle. Are you alive long enough to get the joke? Are you? People come to cut your clothes from your body. The side of your head sticks to your sunglasses. Sober, you risk remembering everything, and so before your death, you die a little inside. You leave behind blackouts to see your own death, and is it worth it?

If the end of the world comes in our lifetime, my father would have known what to do. He would have read *Steppenwolf* as having only one, true ending. I worry about believing in the end more than living. To lock your breaks is to have a steady hand—it's to demonstrate how far you've come in a world where no one wanted you. It's to leave behind romanticizing a bird's flight as freedom. But then to die on the way to an AA meeting. What to say? I wonder if each dead hawk I saw during the shift to the new millennium was a sign of exactly nothing, which is something I wouldn't wonder had we gone to the woods when he asked. So which is it? Prepare for an end or stop believing in the signs? I don't know, but I believe these are my options. So I postpone deciding. I have a drink, and it doesn't break me. I never saw that I've never been broken. Men like

Eric and Trevor converted to true believers, and only they have the answers to how they did it—how they finally slept, how they stayed. Freebird.



In Missouri, cardinals crash into my house. Dozens of them over the years. The only time I had seen a cardinal before moving to the Midwest was in a cage in Nogales, Mexico. While drinking margaritas with a boyfriend, Steve, waiting for his friend to get out of the strip club where underage girls were said to party, I watched the bird swing on a tiny dowel. Steve was a member of the Tucson Audubon Society, and while we walked through downtown's Barrio Viejo, hands held and beers in tow, he would stop us and point to the sky.

See that? he would ask.

Without the question, I never would have. For the entirety of our relationship, I saw more kinds of birds than would fill the years of my entire life, but never once with him did I see a hawk.

The cardinals I saw in Columbia were larger than the one I saw in Nogales. Every animal was more bloated in Columbia in comparison to the ones I saw out West, excluding the snakes and coyotes, which seemed miniature. Cardinals are most often seen in open woodland, and my carriage house was set back from the street and surrounded by lush green and a large yard. When I rode my bicycle up the gravel drive one day, a

cardinal hit the side of the house and fell to a spot overgrown with grass and wild garlic shoots. Its wings unfurled but couldn't lift above the green thick. It breathed hard, beak open with terror.

I ran inside and filled a boot shot glass with water. Back outside, I found the bird still stuck in the grass, unable to get space under its wings. I moved the cardinal to the porch by lifting my fingers to its breast, hoping there it could find a stable footing, wing space, and then take off. On the level ground, the bird's chest still heaved, and each time it stretched its wings as if to take flight, they fell back down hard like a sleeping dog's haunches. I put the shot glass to the bird's mouth and poured a little water in, I don't know why. I don't know why when seeing it hurt, I thought: *water*. The cardinal spat the bloody water onto my hand and face, and maybe I had accelerated its ending. I sat with the creature until it was time, which came when the bird lay down and took one last, hard breath, then sighed with a sound of an animal much larger than it was.

In Nogales the cardinal chirped in a cage along with a canary. I closed my eyes, trying to compare the birds' songs. A waitress came up and told me that only male canaries sing, then set down two Tecates. Canaries used to be important for scientists who wanted to understand how new neurons were formed in the adult human brain, and through some incredible twist of fate, the birds taught doctors how humans construct and group their memories. I will remember a Nogales spring for the canary's song, and that song, in the strange way the world is worth each breath we give it, is a way that memory is understood. Rather than recollection, we arrive at recognition. I will recollect being in

love, being young and beautiful, but recognize that at the time, I thought I was ugly and might die. I thought my strength was beholden to the world's end.

I love being here with you, Steve said, and pulled out a Tiger's Eye bracelet from his pocket. At that point he did love me. I traveled each weekend from LA to Tucson, or he would come out to the coast, and at twenty years old with my thirty-three-year-old lover who hadn't started sleeping with other women yet, I saw every bird from North and South America pass through the Rincons, the Catalinas, the Santa Ritas. I was willing to leave the rich ocean air for his eye that always saw farther than my own, and to learn the song of each bird. In the dark scoop of a range, not knowing each other's last names, Steve was brilliant, gorgeous, and the birds taught me how to remember.

Yes, I said back to him. I always pretended I wasn't terrified, and I always said *yes*.

The first time I tried to go into the ocean after Trevor died, it had been about two years. I couldn't remember the person who I previously was that had plunged in before. As a child who took to water early and dove into the ocean without fear of wave or shark or a jellyfish sting, I arrived at being an adult who was astonished at her own still feet, sinking into the dry sand. In front of me, a toddler stomped a sun dance in the foam and screamed every time the water touched his toes. He was unmoved by the vastness of the water, didn't back away from the waves. I guess I mean that he was moved toward it, and that sense of being able to navigate my body had abandoned me without my knowledge. I

wondered how this happened, but it was the amount of questions in the years after Trevor's death that had stopped me from finding answers.

Before my father's memorial I had to go to my high school for some work form, as it was also a place I had worked part-time while I was in college. A secretary asked me, *don't you think god is helping you through all this, right now with everything that's hard?*

I said I didn't know what I believed. I laughed, shrugged, and she began to shake.

She stood tall and stammered out a loud declaration: *well of course he is! How could you say that about my god?*

I didn't know. I left. And didn't think about it until I faced the sea. Maybe I had wrought some curse on myself with my cavalier reaction to her beliefs.

So what do you want to do about this ocean? a man behind me asked.

He was my boyfriend. First he was my forty-year-old yoga teacher who exhaled deeply when I told him I was eighteen. *Thank god*, he said. I didn't care how old he was, but knowing that I was eighteen had told me that one and a half years had passed since Trevor died, and it had taken me longer than that to get to the ocean. Craig thought he could help me walk in the water, but his small hands on my back just made me nauseous, maybe because it was creepy, maybe because of my kidney problems. A gentle touch there made my eyes roll back into my head. I stepped back from Craig's hands and took black and white photos of him on the shore with my father's Rikon. He carried his body well, and for that I admired him. But his sureness about his ability to help me transcend the difficulty of those days bored me. I just wanted to be quiet with him. The moments I

liked him the most where when he went down on me. I could close my eyes and hear nothing beside when each of us spoke, *yes*.

Let's go in, he said, and jumped into the water. I dove in and away from him, swallowed in the salt water because I forgot to close my mouth. Sand in my teeth. Sand in my eyes. Underneath the surface it wasn't quiet like it had always been for me. I felt my body, large and flailing, a clumsy shiver through my palms. I grasped for the sounds inside waves, tried to hold the reverberating water to make it quiet. The ocean had changed for me, and its slaps didn't seem unrelated from the day I laughed at the secretary's god. She was a good enough woman to come to the memorial and stand in back, give seats to those who knew him.

When Craig and I broke up, he wrote me a letter that said "I will renounce Daoism for you." I believed him, but that didn't warm my heart. My own sense of belief wasn't nonexistent, as the secretary might have thought, it remained to be tied to something as clear as the god she knew. My father and I prepared for the end a long time, and I knew that weaponry, sustaining in the mountains, and hunting was his specialty. Keeping us alive was his specialty. But mine was escape into the water. It had been my plan. If our departure into the mountains came only after the end began, if he were to die, I would only need to get through the Mt. Boney trails down to Sycamore Canyon, come out on the PCH and dive in. That's the thing about working toward the end with someone you love. At some point you have to acknowledge that you are joined together because it increases each of your chances of survival, that the point of coming together is to not believe in the power of the other one to save you.

The ocean was my last measure of time in the world's inevitable stop point.

But the plans had changed, and I wasn't sure who held the agency of my belief, if it was me or the water, if it was my father who let me hold onto his back when he went far out and made me get off and swim back to the shore by myself. The day I couldn't swim in the ocean was long before David Foster Wallace said that we have no choice with worship—that atheism isn't an option—and that to return to our awareness of belief we need only say, *this is water, this is water*. But when I read those words, my fists unfurled.

I lived through my first Fall in Missouri, landlocked with the mosquitoes. Then the humidity dropped and winter came on hard in my California bones, but the cardinals still came to the snowy yard, and the blue jays. A day of ice would lead to a temperate tomorrow, and back and forth until the breaks meant nothing because the ice closed in on itself and around my throat. I broke toes sliding around the frozen, gravel driveway in a pair of red Justin Ropers, and my tonsils, I was told, needed to come out. My doctor, an elderly white man with the largest teeth I had ever seen, had an impeccable sense of humor and was confident enough to stop counting procedures after the tonsillectomies reached into the tens of thousands. So he said. After looking at my medical charts, then into my eyes, he told me that everything would be fine and that I needed to believe him. I wondered if I could focus my belief on him.

Not like the kidney surgeries, he said, and not like the night terrors.

I asked him to do the surgery without anesthesia, as I had done with the dentist who removed my wisdom teeth and who obliged me that because I promised to sit still.

He told me *no, no, this is not like other things. This is not in the deep of the kidneys, but you need to rest for us, nonetheless.*

I told him I wouldn't do it if I had to go under. I wouldn't go under ever again. I believed that about myself.

He put his hand on my shoulder, and he was a good man. *Each time you get Strep, bacteria deposits itself in your heart and kidneys. You've had years of this depositing. You've had Strep six times in the last three months. Listen to me. You need to be healthy. No one is forcing something inside of you without your permission, and even the stitches dissolve. I take a gander inside your throat and take out what causes you pain, what kept—with your bad kidney—your immune system down. In comparison to how sick you've been for years, this is nothing. Most people have a boost of immunity for years after.*

I agreed, and I decided it was because I believed him. But even then, on the day of the procedure and after three women couldn't find my pulsing blue veins below my pale skin but kept at it, moving needles under the surface and hunting around for the right places to poke, I ripped a woman's hand away and flung sweat across the room, grabbed a needle from a tray and stuck it in myself to show them, cried, screamed, and threw the needle at them from my arm. I yelled that my blood wasn't hard to find. I said, *can't you see how easy this is?* Tense enough to be unable to lay back down, I breathed hard and red as I jumped off the bed and walked toward them.

A large nurse came in and stuck the needle in my arm before I knew it and glanced back at the nurses, hard. Once in my arm, I laughed at the nurses and unfurled like the cardinal, but the thing was, I wasn't dead and aimed to prove it.

You fucked up, I told them, you can't even get a needle in an arm. You fucking suck at your jobs, so I'm out of here.

I tried to sit up again but the large doctor came in. He said, *trust me and look over there.*

I threw my head back, I fell back, and I looked above while my gurney slid out of the room and under strong lights in a white hallway. Then I was gone. I woke up in pain, but it felt like recovery. A month over Christmas without my voice, living off of Tecate and watermelon while I watched little red flashes dart around the white world, pale and warm and wrapped.

For my first Christmas in Missouri, I sat inside of a wool blanket that Trevor folded me into many times before when I awoke in the night from cold. It smelled like the best parts of where I came from, an oily, cold home with feathers and old wool. I opened a Tecate to wash down my pain medication and thought about how Trevor's hands tucked the blanket under the crevice of my hip bones while I slept on my stomach, a deft move that made warmth in a body that ran a nervous, dry cold. There was a heat in even his thick body over me in the dark and in his ear that always heard me when I called, in the gift of him the nights he stayed in the house. A lion on two legs, this was my father. To remember was my sacred holiday after months of trying to not think about him. There were always times like that, and when they happened and he occurred to me

while I was sitting, I would stand, and if I were standing, I would walk, and if I were walking, I would run. I sued someone. I went to college. I wrote poetry. I went to graduate school. I walked over the line of the Arctic Circle in summer. I moved. I talked. I ate an apple. I thought I might repeat what was already gone. I thought I'd become what was dead. Sometimes I said, *it's time to die*, and sometimes I told myself, *to speak is to live*.

I pulled out all the photographs Trevor had taken when I was still a child. In the pictures I am the child who is the happiest or most ruminative. I run in the grass, swing on a set he built, look pensive around flamingoes—my favorite—so many flamingoes at the LA Zoo to be humbled by In each photo, I am alone. There are caught moments where I raise an eyebrow to him—surprised he is watching me at all—and other shots where I don't know someone is watching me, so I test how close I can stand to a goat, a sheep hound, a fire pit. In some shots I lift my slight eyes to the children across our front yard fence who I don't understand, and in many shots I stare at parts of my own body from all fours, trying to find where my neck can't turn. I'm on a motorcycle. I'm on the hood of a car. Inside an airstream trailer. I run in fields and mountains until I fall, then I get up and run away from him until I am ten, then twenty, then thirty feet away, then so far that I seem only like a mild interruption in the landscape. I remember, I wanted to always go. He watched me and didn't interfere. He trusted me because he made me what I was. I ran, and I became. And ran and ran through our sudden, shared world.

In Missouri I meet people who can't swim, who say they're scared of water. Even knowing the couple of years after Trevor died as a time when I forgot how to have an ease with the water myself, I can't believe that people don't know how to swim.

I ask them, *why don't you just move your arms and legs? That's all it takes. You just move.*

People try to explain to me what it's like to try, and even when I recognize what they mean, I pretend that I haven't felt this. I pretend I know what happens when I go into the water. Either I will swim out and return to land as it was when I left it, or I will swim out until I die because I choose that over a death the world decides for me in its ending.

After a breakup I go to St. Croix and visit friends. Instead of the usual bikini or lounging stylish suit, I bring two racing suits, unaware. One day at the beach my girlfriend looks at me, annoyed, with her arms crossed.

Do you think you can jump into the water and swim forever until your problems are gone? she asks, laughing. *Are you going to race around the Caribbean until everything's okay?* From her back on a towel she makes a running motion that serves both to mock and love me.

We had both been on swim teams for years as pre-teens. She doesn't know that it took me years to jump into the ocean after Trevor died. I hadn't thought about the fact that I brought racing suits, but I realize she's identified one of the most ridiculous parts of who I am. Preparation and endings were together inside of me.

Yes, I say, yes to the water and escape. Race you into the end. But before that, rum and meditation. Sunburns and lobster. Superficiality at its finest when women are the

most low down. I had just started my research in millennial studies. I had sharpened the knives. Then I packed my racing suits for a Caribbean vacation, just in case, but forgot my passport and driver's license.

We laugh at how fucked up I am. We can't stop laughing at how I'm made.

Into the Missouri Winter, as I heal from my tonsillectomy and my voice returns, my grandparents call to tell me that my mother has been beaten up in jail by her cellmate. They hear reports that they can't be sure of—LuAnn has a fractured nose and jaw, all of her teeth are busted out, LuAnn had warned an officer that she needed to be reassigned to another cell. What is known is that LuAnn's cellmate was a large woman who sat on top of LuAnn, placed her thighs over LuAnn's arms, and beat her repeatedly in the face. LuAnn is assigned to another cell, and gets out of jail shortly after, when, again, she goes missing. Her boyfriend Bri is supposed to pick her up on the day of her release, but in unrelated events, is arrested at their apartment that morning when the police come for some reason and find him with meth and paraphernalia. For months we don't know where she is, but in late March she gets in touch to say that she has a Beverly Hills attorney who is suing the county to get her dental work completed. Most of her teeth, it turns out, were knocked out, and we don't talk about the fact that most her teeth were already gone or wavering.

Spencer starts disappearing, too, in-between stealing from our grandparents, going to juvenile hall and then jail, living with girlfriends. When our grandmother, Shirley, gets cancer all around her intestines, he doesn't show up to help with anything. She dies, and

for her memorial, I find him smoking pot in the garage. When our grandfather, Larry, gets cancer in his face and unbelievably survives the surgery, Spencer shows up to say he will help but steals Larry's credit card number, cash, and disappears. Anne, one of my primary caregivers from childhood, has a stroke and starves herself to death. She barely eats when I try to force the fortified mush down her throat. She screams during physical therapy, and eventually I'm asked to not come or call because it upsets her so much. Trevor's sister, Dresden, dies from an overdose a few months after her husband, Yoshio, dies from hanging himself by the foot in a waterfall while hiking in Utah. Spencer is stabbed in the neck by a girlfriend, and he survives. Then he disappears somewhere near Sacramento with a relative of his father's who I don't know. Then he disappears again. I come back and forth to California from Missouri to help, to bury, to hunt.

When Trevor died, an Airstream trailer that he was fixing sat still on a driveway down the street that led up to a house owned by a woman named Carmen. Carmen lived alone, as her children were grown and living with their own families, and her husband was deceased. I don't know how Trevor met her, but he spent a part of each week at her home on Irving Drive, fixing this and that and coming home to tell me how her son didn't show her the love she deserved. Carmen didn't have money, not even a car as far as I could tell, but she did have a large hat and purse for her walks, and she let Trevor park the Airstream trailer on her lot while he prepared to sell it. She made him enchiladas, tamales, and water with macerated lemons and a pinch of sugar. She came to our house and they would speak in broken English and Spanish while he ate until he made wild

gestures about his fullness to her, and she unfolded her hands for a moment to motion for him to eat more. Trevor introduced her to his mother, Dagmar, and tried to forge a new friendship between an old Estonian grouch with her arms crossed tight, and an old, Catholic Abuelita from Central America who stood under five feet tall.

When Trevor died, the Airstream trailer was still in Carmen's lot, and I needed the money from its sale. Although strictly religious, Carmen said nothing when I sold the Airstream to people who were making a porno and handed me three grand in an open envelope. But before Carmen let me onto her property to show the trailer to interested buyers, she came to our porch. I heard a slight knock on the door and opened it and the screen. Carmen was prostrate on the concrete, her hands clasped together, connecting the ground to her lips. Mid-afternoon, the April crispness had turned to a honey sun casting perfect slants of light with shadows and lilies.

Carmen rose to her knees and then to her feet, a rosary of blue beads wound between the fingers of her right hand. I didn't know what to say.

He is the one who helped me. He is the only one. He was my son, she said.

I stared at her.

I'm sorry. He was the one. He was the good one. I'm sorry. He should not die.

She clutched her hands to her face, and the crucifix bounced on her right hand along with honey and lilies and wide eyes and women.

I didn't know what to say.

Carmen nodded. *I'm sorry,* she said again, then turned in her sweater, skirt, nylon stockings, and walked away holding the crucifix in her right fist. She walked slowly

along the white-picket fence, the eucalyptus trees, under the hawk's nest, and didn't turn back to look at our house. She had fed my father many meals while she ate little. She had worried that he would not be full. I had no idea what they talked about while together, how they met, how so many people called him when they needed help, how he knew so many when he was such a stoic man at home. She knew a different man that I had known. It seemed like what I knew most about my father was that he was unknowable, but he made people believe.

When I want there to be an end to the story of the ones who are still alive, I imagine my mother walking onto a spaceship. When she walks out of her court-mandated drug class, a silver disc lands on the 101 freeway and lowers a staircase to her. I imagine that it lands in Channel Islands while it's Spring in Southern California, near the detention center I sometimes visit Spencer at and near the freeway exit for my paternal grandmother, Dagmar's, convalescent home. In this fantasy, there is no chronological time of our past lives. LuAnn walks inside the vessel and sees the sprawl from above, the strawberry farms and Santa Susana Mountains, the new outlet malls, and the one tall building in Oxnard visible from the Conejo Grade in Thousand Oaks to Ventura. As the ship lifts high, my mother sees the county from above, planned communities against the Transverse Ranges, the Pacific along the concrete, all the sage and oaks and tall grass waiting to be cut before a dry summer. Higher up, LuAnn sees the continent and doesn't blink. The world. Besides a trip to Jamaica with Spencer's father, Rich, when he made a killing selling drugs one year decades before, when she got her hair braided, this is her

only time traveling, and I imagine that she enjoys it. She rises above the blue of atmosphere, and to be above is back—back before Spencer and I are born, even before she met Trevor, even before her own mother, Rita, died of a drug overdose when LuAnn was a child. In this before, my mother has all of her teeth, and her breasts are without a bird tattoo. Her upper lip doesn't have the faded pink line scarred into it by a friend with a makeup tattoo machine, and her bum leg from falling while wearing heels in a Simi Valley parking lot is just fine. She is without us and everything else. But still, we are all there with this woman, before the beginning, seeing her for her beauty and hardness. We are drivers on the 101 but also in the traffic of her body, navigating the ribs inside her slender waist, tangled in her center with each other, waiting to be born. This woman's body holds the world, and you can't take that from her.

For her final glimpse of Southern California, LuAnn sees cars driving on the freeways lined with those West Coast wild, miniature roses. She spots the flowers and thinks about the roses she kept alive for years on Calle Margarita, remembers how good she was at keeping beautiful things alive. Then she forgets everything, including all of us, so she doesn't feel us in the hot metal below or in her blood. She sees the 101 only for the mute white flashes of din on each car hood. My Missouri is layered with my California, and my car is with everyone else's on the 101, and in her body, stuck between the Ozarks and the Pacific. LuAnn knows she will not come back. She will go to a place that none of us California natives will ever see. She will go to a place where we won't bother her. She will be held by a new home, and she will be safe.

I've never been particularly good at endings, myself, but endings are what make me in total the person I am. I am already ready at the moment of departure, and if the world is as beautiful as I think, an arrival. So this fantasy doesn't end here. Our lives are made of afters, so I make us some befores. Trevor is alive, and I wait to and am yet born. No one can stop me. At our ending, I see what could have been. This place can't be kept from me. When LuAnn is gone to safety and we are without her body, my father and I, we are left to drive together through this wild, ungotten world. And I drive through this wild, ungotten world.

MEMOIR OUTSIDE OF SELF

Sarah Heston

Dr. Andrew Hoberek and Dr. Scott Cairns, Dissertation Supervisors

ABSTRACT

Memoir Outside of Self is a scholarly work that accounts for the ways Western memoir from Late Antiquity to the present does not conform to memoir scholars' focus on selfhood in the genre. My introduction examines readings by canonical scholars like Philippe Lejeune, Roy Pascal, James Olney, and John Paul Eakin, laying them against readings of the same texts by scholars from other fields, such as medieval studies and critical theory, in order to identify and correct the historical and philosophical gaps in the canon of memoir studies. Toward this end, each chapter reevaluates a canonical memoir to argue that autobiographical testimonial is meaningful precisely because it is ambiguous. Chapter One places Augustine in a tradition of hagiography to argue that he is not the first memoirist but a writer mimicking the testimonial tradition of women martyrs. Chapter Two places Rousseau in a tradition of slave narrative memoirs to show the ways his text does not provide the genre's secular shift but works against divisions of spiritual and secular. Chapter Three jumps forward to the present, arguing that the intense resistance to Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* misunderstands the historical and moral stakes of memoir as confession, conversion, and self-articulation which Harrison herself rejects by following a tradition of women's hagiography. The final chapter advocates for reading the very theorists that memoir studies derides, such as Derrida and Barthes, as memoirists because they produce life writing that rejects concepts of the self in favor of representing ambiguous authorship, forms, and themes. My conclusion asserts that studies in nonfiction are appearing at universities at an accelerated rate, and advocates for this discipline to use a collaborative approach across English departments.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Memoir Was Never Who You Think They Are

Prelude

David Shields' *Reality Hunger* is a book of creative nonfiction that collects the author's own quotes, some from his colleagues, and others from famous authors. The quotes revolve around the theme of questioning conceptions of reality. Through the arrangement of the book's various narrators and a lack of linearity in organization, *Reality Hunger* solicits more questions than it provides answers. One can open the book anywhere and begin. *Reality Hunger* is biographical, autobiographical, archival, and lyrical. As an exploratory, philosophical text, it is non-linear in format. Explicitly, the project addresses a scholarly mode in creative nonfiction—especially memoir—that assesses the value of truth in autobiographical narratives and then judges authors based on their perceived truthfulness. *Reality Hunger* asks the community of scholars and writers in the academic field of creative nonfiction to shift from placing importance on the author-text relationship to a reevaluation of the widely accepted self, truth, and autodiegetic narratives that consume scholarship in creative nonfiction. Simply, Shields suggests that there are a variety of ways to approach creative nonfiction. Sounds inoffensive enough, right?

A panel at the 2010 NonfictionNow conference called “Satisfying Our Reality Hunger” and dedicated to Shields' book ritualistically slammed *Reality Hunger*. The panel was presided over by well-known members of the nonfiction community, including

Dinty Moore, David Lazar, Patrick Madden, and Bonnie Rough,¹ with a packed audience (including me) who emphatically nodded along. The united critique was that Shields' book was uninteresting to read. It was a litany, unfocused, and off track with the concerns of creative nonfiction. Two members of the panel flatly read back lines from the book to the audience as their panel contribution. They were proving how annoying the book could be. It did not satisfy, it seems, the panelists' or the audience's "reality hunger," which was remarkably uniform. At no point did the conversation need to critique the particular reality for which a reader's satisfaction hungers. Shields, with meekness yet interest, simply said repeatedly after gulping glass after glass of water, that he was attempting to start a new conversation in creative nonfiction. What Shields explored in order to show more ambiguity—the role of reality as such in creative nonfiction—his colleagues criticized as arbitrary.

In my Ph.D. program at the time, I was experiencing a crisis of faith about the field of creative nonfiction, which is why I went to a panel focused on *Reality Hunger* in the first place. My interest in seeking information from "outside fields" such as critical theory when constructing arguments about memoir was questioned at first. Ultimately I was told that my outside searching demonstrated that I had no interest in creative nonfiction, as well as no expertise or relevant past education that would allow me to demonstrate competency—let alone mastery—in the field. My M.F.A in poetry from a

¹ For some reason this is the only panel that does not have its audio file from the 2010 conference on the University of Iowa website. To see the audio file collection, see:
<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/search/collection/vwu/searchterm/NonfictioNow%202010/field/subcol/mode/exact/conn/and/cosuppress/>

school known for theory presented a problem for my career in creative nonfiction because it contributed to my interest in using critical, medieval, diasporic, and religious studies theories. Out of a benevolent interest in my future, I was told that with my background and interests I would not be a good candidate for a nonfiction job because I did not do what others in the field did. Scholarship on memoir is most valid, I was told, when composed by memoirists or at least by those members of autobiographical studies who have been let into the field of creative nonfiction. Furthermore, it was noted, in order to get a tenure-track job in creative nonfiction, I would have to know work by Sven Birkerts and Vivian Gornick, while it would be a detriment if I made it known that I knew work by Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes. Sidonie Smith? Nope—*she teaches in a women studies department*. She is not a creative writer and therefore not *in* the field. But the most influential scholars of memoir, those who built the field of autobiographical studies, such as “our reigning autobiography guru,” Philippe Lejeune, (Miller, “The Entangled Self” 538) were not creative writers, I suggested. Philippe Lejeune, I was asked, who is that?

It did not occur to me at the time how uncomfortable an introduction of ideas could be to the autonomy of a discipline and its scholars. While the modern university champions interdisciplinarity, that does not mean that the conversation about interdisciplinarity within a department happens seamlessly without anxiety pouring into the ether of the conversation—*the creative writers get everything, the literature faculty are preventing the creative writers from succeeding, scholars cannot properly critique creative work, creative writers will have a harder time getting jobs if they are interested*

in theory, having a tenured literature scholar on your committee if you're a creative writer is a disservice to your creative writing professors' chances at tenure. I did not know at the time that I was in one of the most typical conflicts that English departments face this century: how do we collaborate without risking our own disciplinary autonomy? And more difficult for a body of academics who work on memoir—a field that does not exist as such yet—conversations about interdisciplinary have to exist alongside questions about what kind of scholarship and creative writing is necessary to have expertise on in order to become a card-carrying member of the disciplines of creative nonfiction, life writing, and specifically memoir.

The Terms Without Debate

The argument of this project is theoretical and historical. I will go into detail in this chapter, but for now I will simply note that in this project I argue that scholarship on memoir needs to scrutinize its use of the concept of autonomous selfhood in order to come to a more ambiguous but comprehensive understanding of the genre's history and themes. First, I want to set the stage for a reader of this work so that she might consider what “work on memoir” is, where it began, and how it is situated in the academy. Two goals of this project are to speak to scholars and writers of memoir as a member of the creative nonfiction field and to inform other disciplines about the history and preoccupations of the discipline that concerns itself with memoir. We might simply say that scholars of memoir concern themselves with how a self is constructed in a memoir, what that self consists of, if that self is moral, and if, therefore, a memoirist is moral. But what discipline is it that houses these memoir specialists? What terms might we use to

group these scholars and creative writers? These are not easy questions to answer, which is perhaps why no one has ventured to champion a term that can collect the multiple fields working on memoir into one discipline. There are reasons for this, of course. It is a daunting task simply to consider from where to collect. Canonical authors of fiction, poetry, or a variety of genres who happen to have written a memoir or two already have their specialized scholars from established fields, especially writers who lived before the twentieth century, such as medieval saints. There are scholars who specialize in something other than memoir who happen to have written a well-known study of a memoir, like Paul de Man, and there are genre scholars who look solely at memoir, like John Paul Eakin. And our most famous memoirists in the West have scholars across fields and author specialists. Aurelius Augustine is the focus of a plethora of medievalists, classicists, and historians of philosophy such as Pierre Courcelle, who read or translate Latin and undoubtedly look at his *Confessions*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the focus of French specialists such as Jean Starobinski who focus on one author's entire oeuvre, and so on.

Importantly, memoir specialists rarely cite scholars from other disciplines who note specialization by century or nation, even if one of these "other" scholars has happened to write a highly regarded work on a particular memoir. As it happens, these scholars who specialize by century and/or region and who write important work on a particular memoir rarely cite memoir specialists. But our confusion does not end here. Contemporary memoir, a massive industry, includes scholarship from journalism, creative nonfiction, critical theory, cultural studies, and pretty much any writer or scholar

who wants to talk about it—these many kinds of writers are cited by those in creative nonfiction or by scholars of memoir but not commonly by specialists in other academic disciplines. We can view all of this generously by thinking about how all these people who work on memoir are a testament to the implicit academic and/or cultural belief that if memoir is about the self and everyone specializing in literature has a self, everyone can in some way talk about memoir with some authority (even if the specialists in other disciplines think otherwise). Or we can view all this lack of citation or collaboration negatively by noting the disinterest each discipline has towards the other. For example, memoir specialists ceaselessly naysay critical theorists who write about memoir as a way to question the existence of selfhood as whole or even true. With all this in mind, it becomes clear why it is difficult to identify and contain the field that looks at memoir as its specialization.

I will use multiple terms throughout this work to refer to various kinds of writing about memoir, but the parent term I introduce to collect the disciplines that write on memoir is memoir studies. I will explain soon why I use “memoir” as opposed to “autobiography” and I will show how well-known writers and scholars of memoir studies define the field at large. But first I must explain where memoir studies fits in academia. The often-overlapping fields that discuss memoir as a practice are creative writing, creative nonfiction, journalism, and autobiographical studies. Autobiographical studies is a small field of specialized scholars—not creative writers, which separates autobiographical studies from those other sub-disciplines—who have dedicated their academic careers to the understanding autobiography as a genre. There are arguably no

academic programs in undergraduate or graduate education in the United States that specialize in autobiographical/autobiography studies,² although scholars in autobiographical studies are well cited by members of other established academic disciplines who are writing about memoir. The scholars of autobiographical studies are perhaps all well known because there are so few of them. Philippe Lejeune is considered the founder of this field, which is often noted as a disciplinary reaction to critical theory in its historical origins. Lejeune's written response to Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement" is a well-known testament to this history. Autobiographical studies is also arguably an offshoot from narratology, a field with more academic tracks for students in Europe than in the United States and one whose scholars focus on the many kinds of fiction³ rather than nonfiction (although its stated focus is on any and all narrative). Moreover, narratology developed in the mid-twentieth century along with structuralist and post-structuralist movements—movements that autobiographical studies sought to separate itself from. In addition to Lejeune, Roy Pascal is another early scholar of

² The exception might be the University of Michigan, which lists autobiography studies as an "area of study" for students in the English department. Other places of interest are the University of Hawai'i's Center for Biographical Research (which acts as a resource center rather than an academic track and publishes the journal *Biography*) and the universities that collaborate on the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, which is published by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in connection with the University of West Georgia, the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, and the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

³ See Paul Jay, Charles Berryman, and Jakki Spicer for the history of autobiographical studies' relationship with critical theory. See Jonathan Loesberg for a good discussion of the conflict. See Ruth Ronan for a history of narratology.

autobiographical studies, and later twentieth century scholars of the field include, most famously, James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, and John Paul Eakin. Some lesser-known and more radical scholars in the field (if we are thinking of critical theory as radical because the more prominent scholars of autobiographical studies reject it) are Sidonie Smith with Julia Watson, Nancy K. Miller, and Leigh Gilmore, all of whom specialize in women's autobiographical writing, teach or have taught in women's studies departments, and are cited less often than their male colleagues. Elizabeth Bruss, a prominent scholar in autobiographical studies, also discusses the importance of critical theory's inclusion in autobiographical studies, which she claims is necessary to prevent "an intellectual loss for all concerned" (766). There are other scholars who make up this discipline, of course, but in this work that attempts to create a new avenue of exploration outside of the self, I will necessarily refer to these most well-known authors quite often, especially the male scholars who have established the terms and focus of autobiographical studies as an academic discipline.

The other fields that make up memoir studies are harder to locate within clear parameters. Creative nonfiction, in addition to looking at the essay, literary journalism, and reflexive and reciprocal ethnography, in which the ethnographer considers how her presence changes the research and interviews she conducts, also contains both memoir and writing about memoir. So we might have a memoirist, like Daniel Mendelsohn, writing an essay about memoir that becomes a part of the canon of scholarship on it, but this also might be considered a journalistic piece, depending on where it is published. His "But Enough About Me" is published in the *New Yorker* as a book review of Ben

Yagoda's *Memoir: A History*, but it is also a much cited piece about the history of memoir and its contemporary concerns. In fact, we find more and more that the book review is an important genre in which memoir is discussed at large.

Mendelsohn's book review of *Memoir: A History* is emblematic of the unique scholarship that is written on memoir because it is an example of how journalism, genre scholarship, and book reviews collide. Cynthia Crossen's scathing *Wall Street Journal* book review of Kathryn Harrison's memoir, *The Kiss*, is a part of what makes up the canon of scholarship on memoir as much as an article from a scholar of autobiographical studies. In fact, Crossen's review, which engages in no way with any scholarship on memoir, is cited by scholars in autobiographical studies such as Eakin and Gilmore—a citation circumstance that rarely, if ever, happens in other humanities disciplines. Lastly, websites and blogs also contain some of the journalistic experiments on memoir that make up the canon of scholarship. For example, Slate.com had "memoir week," and Ben Yagoda was a participant.

Considering all of this information, we can see the complication and strength of memoir studies' relationship to journalistic publications and Internet endeavors: any large-scale published work that furthers the conversation about memoir or is representative of an already pervasive conversation is brought into the discipline for comment. The parameters are ambiguous and sometimes arbitrary. It is easy for a reader also immersed in autobiographical studies or creative nonfiction to read my accounts here and say, "wait a minute—you left out so-and-so!" But it is just as likely that another

reader might remark, “that particular so-and-so you just talked about belongs to a less scholarly wing of studies in life writing and is not worth mentioning here.”

The field whose relationship to memoir is most certain across universities in the United States is one of the sub-genres of creative writing—creative nonfiction—as is evidenced by the B.F.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. degrees that are conferred in such writing. Sometimes memoir writing is merged with a fiction track because they are both prose writing, but this trend is declining as more creative nonfiction programs develop across the country. When I applied for my Ph.D. in creative nonfiction, for example, most of the universities I applied to told me I had to apply in fiction (there were a few programs that had specific creative nonfiction tracks, but even those had faculty that doubled in other areas), whereas five years later the amount of Ph.D. programs that have their own creative nonfiction track has increased to at least nine—“at least” is used to account for programs that have accepted students in creative nonfiction even though there is no stated track. Once again, it is hard to provide specifics because creative nonfiction remains less institutionalized than poetry and fiction. This academic trend reflects the relationship of creative writing to memoir studies. When the *New York Times* published a piece on memoir, Billy Collins, a poet, was one of the participants who made declarative statements about the history of memoir. And some of the most well-known contemporary memoirs are written by writers who are affiliated with other fields of creative writing, such as Mark Doty, a poet who wrote the memoir *Heaven’s Coast*, and Geoffrey Wolff, a fiction writer who wrote the memoir *The Duke of Deception*. If we look at memoir’s history, though, the writer of something else who happens to also write a memoir is not

so unusual—Augustine and Rousseau are the most well known of this kind of writer, as well as the most discussed writers in memoir studies.

The writers I have mentioned in no way constitute a comprehensive list, as there are tens of thousands of memoirs and thousands of pieces of writing on memoir, of course. We have not even considered the specialists from the many disciplines across the humanities who focus on specific writers, time periods, or geographic locations and have produced some of the most famous writing on specific memoirs. I do not include these academics from other disciplines in the discipline of memoir studies because I am trying to create an understandable way to consider writing about memoir as a discipline focused on the genre, not a specific time period or country. As far as this project is concerned, I work from and where memoir studies does: the West, from Late Antiquity to the present.

The quick descriptions I have provided might lead to the conclusion that talking about people who talk about memoir rather than just talking about memoir can be difficult. What is considered “scholarship” for memoir is different from other disciplines, not only because of the ambiguous parameters, but also because of the newness of the discipline, and perhaps these two considerations are related. Remember that Crossen, a journalist who has no affiliation with memoir outside of her own opinion, is cited by some of memoir’s most famous scholars. In what other humanities discipline does that happen? This shows us that even memoir’s most beloved scholars have difficulty knowing where the boundaries of scholarship versus impression exist for memoir.

Another difficulty in talking about memoir is the word “criticism,” which often and unfortunately can simultaneously refer to writing about memoir and the disparaging

of memoir. While this phenomenon in no way pertains solely to work on memoir, criticism and disparaging combine in extreme ways when memoir is the focus. We find this most in criticism of memoir published in newspapers by journalists and creative writers, and we find it least in works in autobiographical studies. Famous writers seem to have a position of authority in talking about memoir, too. Billy Collins is considered an authority in bashing memoir for the *Times* just as much as Friedrich Schlegel was back in 1798 when he bashed Rousseau by bashing the genre as a whole, saying:

pure autobiographies are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case; or by authors of a robust artistic or adventurous self-love, such as Benvenuto Cellini; or by born historians who regard themselves only as material for historic art; or by women who also coquette with posterity; or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries. (Yagoda, "A Brief History")

We might note that such bashing has been happening for a long time, and in essentially the same way, for Schlegel's critique is certainly a precursor to Shields' critics' uniform desire for a satisfaction that was not met.

All the voices in the conversation are concerned with the self and subjectivity, which is reasonable considering that a memoir as a document presents a concrete link between author and text. One would be hard-pressed to find thousands of articles and book reviews claiming that poets or fiction writers are all egoists, and therefore, that their work is a product of weak morals. So the question arises, is it memoir studies' focus on

the self that allows for such cultural criticism of memoir, or is it a culture focused on the self that makes so many memoirs that are easy to criticize in this way? This project aims to explore this question by suggesting avenues for new conversations in memoir studies.

Paradoxically, the basic problem with establishing a discipline that focuses solely on memoir is one of memoir studies' strengths: the specialized scholars and the not-so-specialized writers are in constant conversation. Grammatically, the problem still remains: the terms *criticism*, *scholarship*, *book review*, and *critical reaction* are often used interchangeably. Thus a reader will see that I use these terms as synonyms unless it is important to note that what I am discussing is one of these kinds of writing, and only that.

The impetus for this project comes from a reaction much like Shields' in *Reality Hunger*. My specific argument is that memoir is interested in the annihilation of subjectivity and selfhood, and it encourages us to read away from certainty by utilizing paradox, ambiguity, and elusive methods. These methods might be distinctly belief based, such as magic and mysticism, or rhetorical and formal, such as masking, exclusion, name changes, and lying. Toward that end, the reader will see that I refer to some of the same male writers from autobiographical studies quite a bit in this book, and that is because they are generally considered the important figures for defining the genre, its history, and its preoccupations. I need to argue with these well-established positions in order to show how and why my own argument departs from the status quo of the field. I hope to show that memoir complicates more than it satiates, elaborates more than it

codifies, and supports ambiguity rather than an arbitrary definition of selfhood, just as who and what constitutes memoir studies is ambiguous and helps us to reevaluate specialization in academia at large. Finally, like Shields, I think the conversation in memoir studies can and should change, and further, with this change the discipline prompts our universities and culture to converse anew.

Memoir as a Term, Memoir as a Practice

A reader may wonder why I use the word *memoir* instead of *autobiography*—two terms that are often conflated. *Memoir* is best for my purposes, even though the two terms are often used as synonyms by the lay reader and publisher. For example, Benjamin Franklin's eighteenth-century book is published as his *Autobiography* and his *Memoir*, and Michael Ryan's twentieth-century book, *Secret Life*, has a *Time* review calling it a "memoir" along with the publisher's choice of the word "autobiography" printed on the book jacket. A quick history of the words placed against some prominent scholars' histories will demonstrate why.

In their informative study, *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson explain that the word *autobiography* was first used in Ann Yearsley's eighteenth-century book of poems, but many still use Robert Southey's "anglicizing of the three Greek words in 1809 as the first use of the term in English" (2); they say "*autobiography*...is a term for a particular practice of self-written life narratives that emerged in the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the west" (3). Yagoda's study, *Memoir: A History*, for example, which uses *memoir* and *autobiography* as synonyms, cites Southey for the first appearance of *autobiography*. Yagoda cites the first use of the word *memoir* as 1676 (2).

A quick look at the *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)* tells us the word comes from twelfth century Old French, then appears in English in the fifteenth century as “a note, a memorandum; a record; a brief testimonial or warrant,” so depending on a reader’s preferences, the word’s origin in English could be traced as early as the fifteenth century or as late at the eighteenth, presuming that between the twelfth and the fifteenth the word was used within French and English, if we consider the Norman Conquest. The *OED* entry is a confusing, dazzling read because the use of the word *memoir* signals public and personal testimonies. The important connection between the many ways the word is used is that some *testimonial* is performed, even if only to note that a memoir is “something kept in memory of someone; a memento.”

From its beginning, its beginning is in question, and as we will see, this is emblematic for the history of the genre as well. Even if we can identify a beginning to the word, it is an often conflated and wonderfully elusive term. It has “floated between public and private, between ‘auto’ and ‘bio,’ and between literary discourse and what early theorists of autobiography sought to keep out of the genre, namely non-literary writing” (Rak 484). With the word and the text we can call by the word, we begin in productive ambiguity.

To summarize, in comparison to *autobiography*, *memoir* is an older term without a clear historical origin such as the association of an Enlightenment-linked focus on subjectivity and rationality that Smith and Watson rightly locate in *autobiography*. So, *memoir* is more appropriate for me to use if I indeed want to think of memoir’s arguments, history, and goals as ambiguous to readers. Thus, for my purposes, *memoir*

makes the most sense as a term to use. Still, I think it is important to note that for the average English-speaking reader of memoir today, it is not wrong to consider these terms synonyms, just as it was not wrong for the English- and French-speaking readers in the twelfth century to consider memoir something that existed in a variety of genres and public and private spaces. Although, as Julie Rak would note, even though *memoir* predates *autobiography*, “in most autobiography criticism memoir is treated as a secondary development” (495) because it is synonymous with a “non-professional or non-literary textual production...writing when it is considered a commodity” (484).⁴

Scholarly definitions of the limitations and expectations of the genre are a more recent phenomenon than the written testimonials themselves. Most definitions presume a true, complete self that, while susceptible to being caught up in change, is ultimately unchanging as a real thing. For example, in her review of the major works of memoir scholarship, Shirley Neuman describes their overall focus as always having “a self, an entity, which, however changing...rests on a ground of changelessness” (3).

In his 1960 *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Roy Pascal proposed an influential definition of *autobiography*: “‘Autobiography proper’ is a retrospective account that involves a ‘search for the true self’” (39). After the last forty years of critical theory complicating what a self consists of, one would presume that scholars have moved on from thinking that a self can be “true,” and for the most part, they have. But this

⁴ For my purpose in simply explaining what word I use and why, I will not delve into the arguments about why which word is chosen or not here, but I do discuss memoir and commodity with Kathryn Harrison later in this book. For an informative look at *memoir* versus *autobiography*, see Julie Rak’s “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity.”

conservative perspective of a whole, pure self is still something that memoir studies relies on. For example, Yagoda's *Memoir: A History* uses Roy Pascal's book to "succinctly" identify the "traditional contrast" (2) between *memoir* and *autobiography*. However, Yagoda admits that to separate the terms after "tens of thousands of autobiographies...have been written since the dawn of time" ultimately does not help a historical study that aims to be a "manageable, useful, and readable narrative" (3). Perhaps his need to be "manageable" is why Yagoda does not modify or dispute Pascal's fifty-year-old definition for either term, instead using it to separate terms for his own book. We might note that *traditional* is a nasty word in other academic disciplines, but a traditional definition of both terms is precisely why Yagoda chooses it in the first place.

For my argument, scrutinizing this definition is mandatory. I rely here on Charles Berryman, who reminds us in "Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography," that Pascal's definition,

while useful in the short term, [is a] prescriptive definition of autobiography [that] was soon undermined when advances in language theory began to question the meaning of 'true' and 'self.' Even the title of Pascal's work, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*...recalls old concerns at the very moment literary criticism was about to move through the looking glass into the new uncertainties of post-structuralism... . (71)

Berryman shows us the vacuum a scholar must contend with in order to define his terms. One must exclude. And indeed, Pascal's focus on the self and subjectivity was a direction that many scholars gravitated toward, perhaps because it is reasonable to critique the self

in a text by and about an individual's real life. We might say that in this case Pascal's "traditional" definition is based on not fixing something that has been working for a long time.

Another influential definition was proposed by Philippe Lejeune, who thinks of "autobiography" as a "contract" set up between writer and reader, in which the writer is "guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally" (*On Autobiography* 28). That is, the memoir must be a "retrospective prose narration written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Lejeune's definition presumes that memoir as a mode of writing must maintain an honest, real-life author (the concept of a narrator is bypassed completely) whose subjectivity can be evaluated juridically by readers. He adds that "the contract will define the genre...let us suppose I am writing and presenting my sentence (my text) as strictly autobiographical...[I am] guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally" (28). Importantly, Lejeune's definition presumes that, unlike fiction or poetry, memoir must be written by authors who are "literally" their narrators—people who have been or are in a shared world with the reader. These authors, as a moral obligation, should present themselves as reliable enough to make a contract with other real people. Considering that Augustine is held up as the moral bastion by memoir studies, we could say that Lejeune's definition implies that memoirists should be honest confessors, and this honesty then guides the author's formal choices, as the writing must be able to be taken "literally" by readers. Above all: do not lie to readers.

Hold up. Honesty guides an author's formal choices, and his text must be literal? This means that Lejeune's model memoirist should refrain from metaphor, foreshadowing, time composites, or any experimentation that might confuse or misguide the reader. Could an author write about his own confusion, even if that means he bypasses the literal in favor of the artistic or performative? Perhaps in consideration of the extreme narrowness of his definition, more recently Lejeune modified his theory, saying now that "an autobiographer is not someone who speaks the truth about himself, but someone who says that he speaks it" (qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20). The distinction here seems to be that Lejeune is more willing to accept that each subject constructs reality. Yet his parsing out of actual truth versus spoken truth confuses me because it seems that both or neither could be true. The difference between saying "I drank a glass of water" and "I am telling you truthfully that I drank a glass of water" seems to be one of diction or perspective, not one of what actually happened. In both definitions, it seems that what is most important to Lejeune is that the author does in fact speak her reality, and that is what creates sincerity. This seems to be the most generous way to view autobiographical testimonial, while Lejeune's insistence on the authorial self as an actual, pre-existing part of reality that constructs the text is the least. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (or *Memoirs*) would certainly fit Lejeune's requirements, but contemporary writers like Vivian Gornick, who uses time composite in *Fierce Attachments*, or Alison Bechdel, who creates graphic representations guided by the myth of Icarus in her memoir *Fun Home*, would not be memoirists under his definition because both authors admit fudging the details. Gornick admits placing together conversations

that never actually occurred next to each other, and Bechdel admits her use of literary allusion: “I employ these allusions...*not only as descriptive devices*, but because my parents are *most real to me in fictional terms*” (*Fun Home* 67, emphasis added). Both authors do not claim to “speak the truth” as they see it, but instead revel in the importance of fiction in order to get at much more elusive truths in their lives. At the very least, that they explore fictional construction as their ways to speak the truth as they see it undermines Lejeune’s idea of an author who remarks upon his own truth. So are we to abandon these texts from the genre?

A more recent and equally influential definition comes from James Olney. In his *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney (as editor) not only values the “I” in memoir, but states that the “I” is a necessary element for all literature, “for behind every work of literature there is an ‘I’ informing the *whole* and making *its presence* felt at every critical point, and without this ‘I,’ stated or implied, the work would collapse *into mere insignificance*” (Olney, *Autobiography* 21, emphasis added). But accepting Olney’s absolutist perspective on not only memoir, but also all of literature, makes impossible a discussion of the other important historical and formal elements of memoir. For example, many medieval texts rely on multiple authors, such as Margery Kempe’s *Life*, which was co-written with a scribe. And what about the use of time composites to understand synesthesia, a medical condition where one sense is stimulated by another, like Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak Memory*? Many of our most famous memoirs would be excluded if we

use this definition, and from Olney's insistence that slave narratives are not memoirs,⁵ it seems as though this is his intention. Olney's perspective is that selfhood is absolute, "whole," has "presence," can be "felt" (by readers, presumably), and that these are the qualities that make literature significant. Without this "I," literature falls into meaninglessness and—implicitly—banality. As a memoirist, you cannot be conflicted about your 'I'.

All of these definitions are as much a working code for memoirists as they are for scholars working with memoir, for if their creative writing or scholarship does not fall into line with an examination of some complete, whole self in a well-known memoir, they are the ones missing the point. If fringe scholars choose to examine memoir through the lens of ambiguity, magic, mysticism, feminism, black studies, or other critical theories that question the existence of a whole self, their work is viewed as insignificant by those in the center of the discipline. Not only does Olney, one of the most influential scholars in the field, promote understanding selfhood in memoir as absolute, but his perspective also becomes a necessary starting place for new scholars who look to Olney's perspective. The conservative history of memoir that presents this whole self then gets reproduced. But the ideology that supports this history excludes many memoirs, contemporary and medieval, especially by those writing about fragmented reality and consciousness.

⁵ See Olney's "‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," which argues that the slave narrative "tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act" (48).

There have been more recent explorations into the defining features of memoir by theorists coming from a variety of fields. In “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration,” Eakin says that he was pleased to see autobiography theory develop in the 1970s:

James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, and Philippe Lejeune were setting up the genre so handsomely in the 1970s, and I applauded when the upstart field infiltrated the MLA, eventually achieving Division status and parity with the other genres by the end of the 1980s. Literary history, formalist analysis, and even deconstruction swiftly moved in to survey the new terrain. Respectability, legitimacy...I gradually realized that a narrowly conceived literary approach to autobiography failed to engage much of the most important work it performs in the world. Autobiography is, to be sure, a literary discourse, a discourse of fact and a discourse of fiction, but even more fundamentally, I’ve been urging, it is a discourse of identity.

(124)

Eakin, another important scholar in the field, draws us back into the conservative definitions of memoir: when we read memoir, we are reading about a real person’s sense of self, and thus our ideas about the text are really our ideas about identity in our real world. The presumption is that if a creative writer or scholar questions a traditional notion of selfhood, she believes that selves are not simple, and—more dangerously—that ideas about memoir are not ideas about the world at large. So our most well-known scholars of memoir studies combat the accusations of simplicity made against them by

implying that to go against the beliefs they support is to not understand fundamental aspects of reality. Two conversations are happening with the same terms, but they are, nonetheless, two different conversations.

In his 1991 *American Autobiography*, Eakin says that the most important element of American culture that informs how people write memoir is its “pluralist nature,” (15) where “the *true history* of American autobiography and the culture in which it is produced and consumed may turn out to be the history of *identifiable groups* within the culture and of the network of relations among them” (12, emphasis added). In Eakin’s perspective, identity is containable and archivable, which is something that a long line of philosophy and critical theory has disputed, quite convincingly, for the benefit of many fields of inquiry that seek to expand notions of the amount of identities worth exploring, like queer studies, black studies, and feminist studies (that is to say, for the benefit of peoples traditionally subjugated within the real, human world). It is important to note that Eakin does say in a later work that people generalize definitions from autobiographical studies too often, such as when “poststructuralist criticism of autobiography characteristically—and mistakenly—assumes that an autobiographer's allegiance to referential truth necessarily entails a series of traditional beliefs about self, language, and literary form” (“The Referential Aesthetic of Autobiography” 131). Yet, the definitions we have seen can be read as quite traditional.

The problem is that the pendulum effect of accusations swings both ways, but critical theorists are in the right. They rightly question the actual terms and writing of memoir’s most well known scholars, but these memoir scholars never engage actual ideas

or words by actual theorists outside of memoir studies; instead, they arrive at an “if you say we’re being traditional, we will tell you that you are wrong” conclusion. Let us look at some twenty-first-century definitions that might be more in line with the “referential truth” that Eakin suggests.

A much more recent definition of memoir comes from Sven Birkerts’ *The Art of Time in Memoir* (2007) and relies on a Proustian conception of a memoirist having two modes of memory, one for daily functions and one for artistic creation. Using this “double vantage point” is the memoirist’s greatest power, says Birkerts (17). Also important is the double psychological mode a writer must inhabit, owning “the distance required for apprehension” and the “pressured immediacy of vivid narrative” (139). While Birkerts’ definition does not state that memoir is a writing of the self and subjectivity, it is focused on the psychology of the writer of memoir—what the writer uses to complete the book—and therefore assumes that the link between authorial self, narrator, and text is so clear that it need not be questioned or explicated. This definition, decades later, recalls Lejeune’s focus on honesty of the author-as-narrator to define the genre. Birkerts’ two-prong model reinforces, more than anything, that memoir is written to account for the self and to demonstrate the author’s conception of selfhood through a testimonial of memory. More troubling, Birkerts’ chapters on “Fathers and Sons” and “Mothers and Daughters” make presumptions about a universal self that is tied to biological sex and gender. In these chapters, Birkerts claims that it is a “common—possibly universal” motive in memoir that sons write about a distant father to reconcile that distance, and daughters write about a stifling, “hard to get away from” mother to

create distance (114-118). Unremarkably, the chapter on men comes first in this book. According to Birkets, female writers struggle with “the *opposite* of what their selected male counterparts wrestled with” (117, emphasis added). Employing a term disparaged by human sexuality theorists from a variety of fields for decades and presuming gender identification based on sex, Birkets typecasts each memoir based on the sex of its author, and conflates text with human biology.

The most moving part of this book is when Birkerts writes about his own need to reconcile with his father through a memoir (83), not only because it is a personal motive accounted for in the impetus for writing this text, but also because the lens he turns on himself does not condemn but rather opens up more possibilities for understanding the goals of memoir—possibly to speak to absence or to fill absent space. This openness is refreshing after reading Birkerts’ claim that most memoirs are written about “the coming-of-age period,” which can feel narrow (81). For Birkerts, memoirists can be grouped by their sex to reveal their concerns, and the way in which writers are sexed presumes the moral dilemmas they will explore in writing.

Diane Bjorklund’s ethnographic study of memoir, *Interpreting the Self*, which incidentally does not situate itself as reflexive or reciprocal ethnography, focuses solely on how memoirs are the “moral performances” (160) of memoirists—people who, she argues, “position themselves in terms of public evaluative standards of what is good and admirable” (159). Bjorklund’s presumption is that the morality of the author and the rest of society are cohesive and complimentary. Here we see memoir as a genre being defined not only as an interpretation of the self by an author, but also as an interpretation that is

placed before a group of readers who resemble a Roman audience deciding if someone in the arena is “good and admirable” enough to avoid being thrown to the wild beast. Rousseau, scholars’ favorite memoirist after Augustine, certainly did not care about appearing admirable, as most scholarship on his *Confessions* clearly states. Bjorklund’s is the least compelling definition to me, as it strips away all reverence for testimony in memoir and makes writing a memoir akin to seeking punishment or praise from an audience that has a singular moral identity. Bjorklund—although she does not state it—defines memoir through a common understanding of an Augustinian tradition, where confession and conversion (and therefore repentance) are important elements of a memoir if an author wishes it to stand as a successful act of testimony for himself as well as a successful “moral performance” for readers.

Interdisciplinarity As Arrival

The general psychologizing of the writer evident in the examples I have noted permeates the most celebrated scholarship on memoir, and we might understand this generalizing as a negative product of the ambiguous parameters that make up the scholarship in memoir studies. But not specializing does not have to mean a scholar is not studied. Dorothy Baressi, the poet, once told me that a poet should become a little expert about a lot of things. Let us take this advice and perform an exercise. For the moment, let us assume that the more specific knowledge we have of a time period and its writing makes our own perspectives on a document from that period more nuanced. If someone in memoir studies theorizing about medieval life writing hunts out scholarship by medievalists, the memoir scholar’s ideas about the psychology of selfhood, subjectivity,

and their relationship to memoir should, if we are being optimistic, become more nuanced. So let us toy with one of the most agreed-upon ideas in memoir studies: Augustine is the founding memoirist. The first thing we should note is that memoir scholars take Augustine's conversion narrative as such, while specialized Augustine scholars have long debated the historical accuracies of the *Confessions*⁶, even calling Augustine "the first 'experimenter' in the psychology of reading, who drew attention to the fleeting, ephemeral nature of consciousness in the reading process" (O'Donnell 407).

The question begged is thus: How much do scholars of memoir actually study Late Antiquity and/or the Middle Ages, the time in which their revered Augustine wrote? Smith and Watson state that, "in fact, much exploration of the forms of subjectivity in medieval texts remains to be done by scholars" (*Reading Autobiography* 87). I imagine that most medieval scholars would disagree with the idea that work on medieval subjectivity has not been extensively explored;⁷ perhaps they mean in the field of memoir studies? If we look out to some scholars, such as medievalists, specializing in other fields, we find that conceptions of self, truth, and privacy in memory for early, middle, and late medieval Christians were not only vastly different from our current ones, but also vastly different from century to century, class to class, and region to region. Thus, I

⁶ Robert J. O'Connell does a wonderful job summing up the most well-known Augustine scholars' (Boissier, Courcelle, Ferrari, Fredriksen, and others) debates about the veracity of the *Confessions* in his *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions* (259-261). See also James J. O'Donnell's *Augustine* for more on this debate.

⁷ See, for example, Caroline Bynum, Victoria Burrus, Jo Ann McNamara, Bernadette Brooten, Elizabeth Castelli, Amy Hollywood, and Jacqueline Murray.

will use some medieval theories about identity, specifically as they relate to sex and gender, to destabilize Augustine as the primary (and, with the exception of a couple of subdued nods to Margery Kempe in memoir studies, generally only) important writer of memoir from the medieval period. By simply perusing medievalists' perspectives on the same texts and beyond as a scholar in memoir studies who does not need Latin, I hope to show that what scholars of memoir include in the canon can become greater and less stable—and that is not an unproductive way to proceed. Scholars who wish to discuss subjectivity will have many more perspectives on the kinds of subjectivity available to discuss. And scholars who find that many kinds of subjectivity amount to memoir favoring ambiguity and elusive constructions of existence over a conception of a stable selfhood will have more knowledge on how to make their arguments work.

When scholars in memoir studies trace the history of memoir to Augustine's *Confessions* (397 AD), they also establish stylistic elements of memoir and an identity for the memoirist that must proceed from the *Confessions*.⁸ It is worth noting that well-known Augustine scholars like Brian Stock might quite simply disagree with Smith and Watson by claiming that theories of self and subjectivity start in late Antiquity and continue through the medieval period:

the self is an infrequent topic in philosophy down to late antiquity, when a number of figures from different schools take up the theme. Among the

⁸ See William Spengemann, *Forms of Autobiography*, which considers Augustine's *Confessions* the formal model for all memoirs after (xiv), Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography* (85-86), Yagoda's *Memoir: A History* (33), and Mendelsohn's "But Enough About Me" which claims that Augustine's influence provides memoirists an "...essentially religious DNA" (1).

Stoics these include Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus; among the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Porphyry, who provide Augustine with the starting point for many of his reflections on selfhood...namely, the view of Plato, in which the self is looked upon as an image in the mind or soul. As transformed and deepened by Plotinus, this became the most important philosophical influence on the formation of Augustine's notion of the self. ("Self, Soliloquy, and Spiritual Exercises in Augustine and Some Later Authors" 5, 8)

Stock points out some of the well-known philosophers who write about the self in late antiquity, and he also situates Augustine as a student of the many models of self offered. Stock reminds us that Augustine was not a maverick for considering the self, but a man of his time. We might still note that what constitutes the self or subjectivity for Augustine does not, however, necessarily provide a perfect model for Augustine's female contemporaries. Memoir studies does not discuss women's autobiographical writing from Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages that would be a close contemporary to Augustine's text. These women's texts, such as *The Passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas* (203 AD), set a very different standard for the history of memoir.

Perpetua and Felicitas' hagiography, or saint's auto/biography, is one of the few autobiographical testimonies by women of this time period still in existence (Mary-Ann Stouck 21) and it is considered important for its status as possibly the earliest Christian narrative written by a woman (Elizabeth Castelli 86). It is a memoir because it provides personal testimony by a real woman (Perpetua). It is also a biography, because other

authors contribute to the document when Perpetua cannot (such as when she is martyred). And it is arguably a conversion narrative because both women are catechumens (although they are surely post-conversion in this narrative). Finally, it is a martyr tale because the women, along with others, are martyred. If it is so canonical among medievalists because it is possibly the earliest Christian women's autobiographical and biographical writing, in addition to being a thrilling read, why is it neglected by scholars of memoir who speak instead about the later convert and memoirist, Augustine? Perhaps the account's multi-genre and multi-author status makes it a hard sell to scholars who focus mostly on autodiegetic narratives. But it is examined extensively by medievalists through the lenses of piety, conversion, gender and sex, Roman culture, emerging Christianity and pagan influence, Montanism, and martyrdom in Carthage, as well as for its influence on Augustine.

That multiple authors often contribute to one auto/biographical medieval narrative suggests that the ambiguity surrounding concepts of self in Christian memoir is worth discussing in memoir studies. Many of the memoirs from this period are simultaneously biographies, hagiographies, conversion narratives, martyr tales, and instructional texts on Christianity. If we consider that these texts fit into multiple genres, we might question how narrative and human identity were thought about by the writer of personal testimony in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, especially since scholarship on memoir traces the history of the genre to a male writer who identifies as man, instead of, for instance, a variety of writers who identify their gender and sexes more ambiguously, such as female-

born martyrs and saints. Certainly this is not easily answerable, and that is an important answer in itself.

Caroline Bynum's Introduction to *Gender and Religion: On The Complexity of Symbols* posits an important point for the scholar of memoir to consider in regards to women memoirists:

Women's mode of using symbols seems given to the muting of opposition, whether through paradox or through synthesis; men's mode seems characterized by an emphasis on opposition, contradiction, inversion, and conversion. Women's myths and rituals tend to explore a state of being; men's tend to build elaborate and discrete stages between self and other. (13)⁹

From Bynum's perspective, women's methodologies tend to emphasize reconciliation while men's emphasize difference. Bynum tells us that women tend to accept paradox as a matter of life (*Gender and Religion* 14), and with her perspective in mind we can presume that written testimonies by and about women from the Middle Ages would consider autonomy and group differently than men's testimonials. If we can find examples of women's memoirs that have multiple authors to contribute to the story of one woman, the writers are reconciled into one author. The autodiegetic tradition of memoir itself is, then, a paradox. Margery Kempe spoke her text to a scribe, and she

⁹ This is a canonical text for medievalists, although a little outdated in its conflation of sex and gender terminology, which is why interdisciplinarity is a helpful tool. Any specialist of human sexuality in psychology or biology would quickly clarify Bynum's conflation of sex (biological) and gender (cultural, psychological, personal, etc.).

“received” her narrative from God, but the book resulting from that collaborative relationship is attributed to her and called her *Life* or *Book of Margery Kempe*.

While Bynum hypothesizes that there are important sex and gender differences in the Middle Ages that would contribute to writing, Bernadette Brooten hypothesizes in *Love Between Women* that Roman Antique society saw “a plethora of orientations” that consisted of whether “a person took an active or passive sexual role, as well as the gender, age, nationality, and economic, legal (slave or free), and social status of partner” (3). But Brooten, like Bynum, claims that sexed roles are still important to consider when looking at early Christian texts, and that is something that scholars of memoir, shockingly, have not discussed. Brooten says that it was an idealized cultural tenet that “free, adult male citizens ought never be passive, and women should never be active. Should they transgress these boundaries, society deemed their behavior ‘contrary to nature’” (2). Her active/passive lens can firstly be used by a scholar of memoir to discuss how longer autobiographical narratives from Late Antiquity, such as Augustine’s, are not more important to the history of genre simply because of their length. But her theory also brings up questions about the amount of orientations a writer can represent and suggests that memoir scholars might not view a collected, elusive identity as having the same value for the history of the genre as does a stable, coherent identity. As a person in a respectable “active” power position, Augustine identifies as a male, and then a man, and then a Christian man, making it easy for scholars to critique representations of identity in his text.

However, Perpetua's and Felicitas' choice of an "active" role when they are supposed to be in a "passive" role complicates how they represent sex and gender in their text. We see them take on masculine gender roles, such as that of the gladiator and savior, and even a male biological identity (Perpetua actually sees her own body as male at one pivotal point). Brooten might say that Augustine has a more active/powerful position in society, while those in more subjugated positions have to wade through the "plethora" of roles available when testifying to their lives, making their representations of identity more ambiguous. Lastly, Brooten's perspective suggests that a memoir scholar's privileging of Augustine presumes that identity, change, conversion, and repentance are personal choices made in isolation. Writers of all periods have cultural identities that impact their personal choices. To treat the length of writers' texts or the directness with which they communicate their moral triumphs as belt notches on the path to canonicity does not acknowledge why literature scholars choose literature: it is complicated, messy, sometimes bizarre, and totally worth our time to explore.

While I have provided some medievalists' perspectives on selfhood in the Middle Ages to contest the argument made by Smith and Watson that there is not a lot of work on selfhood or subjectivity in the Middle Ages, I have not yet discussed memory. Memory is something else that the scholar of memoir is intent on examining, for the genre involves authors recollecting and recording their life events, and the word itself is, of course, related etymologically to *memoir*. It is interesting to consider memory in relationship to a person's death in a narrative rather than a person's life, for the nostalgic act of recollection hints at a close proximity to a life that has been lived—and therefore

acknowledges an end to that living—rather than a life with memories in formation.

Surely, this is one of the paradoxes of memoir. This consideration is also a rhetorical way for me to bring Christian martyr narratives into a discussion of medieval memoir. These narratives are important to Augustine's understanding of writing, but they are neglected by the memoir scholar. Elizabeth Castelli hypothesizes that the early medieval Christian martyr, such as Perpetua, not only has an individual memory, but also a cultural one, so that a martyr's memoir, also called a *Life* or the Latin *Vita*, provides "a trace" that "would serve as a public memory text for those left behind" (6). Castelli's reading shows the scholar of memoir the paradoxical relationship between what is personal and/or cultural in the early Middle Ages. This paradox revolves around memory as something that is simultaneously personal and owned by a group or culture. If we think of memory as having this double quality, we must also consider that our critiques of subjectivity must allow for many varieties of it. Castelli also broaches the question of whether subjectivity can be discussed without discussing an author's certain death. That is, how does a cessation of the self's agency play into a construction of someone's personal and cultural memory?

If we push Castelli's ideas a little further, we find that they show us that a foundational element of medieval autobiographical texts is an annihilation of subjectivity. This annihilation serves the purpose of championing memory as something not contained by an individual but instead put into a totem—a physical object that is emblematic of something non-physical. In this case the totem is the document. If we take Castelli's perspective on early martyr tales like *The Passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas*, then, in

addition to being paradoxical for its multi-authored status that nevertheless stylistically presents itself in an autodiegetic manner, autobiographical writing is also paradoxical for its conception of memory as simultaneously personal and impersonal. Of course what is paradoxical is also sensible, for a text that has multiple authors but utilizes the testimony of an individual to tell her own tale must necessarily think of memory as personal and grouped. What does this perspective add to our understanding of the history of western memoir? Perhaps that from its “beginning” memoir is more biographical than autobiographical, for it is in service of subjectivity that is not owned by the self. At the very least, by combining some perspectives from medieval scholars with the prominent histories in memoir studies, we memoir specialists can explore more holistic ways to approach the speculative nature and ambiguous representations of memoir itself. That might sound like a paradox, and I intend it as such. A little knowledge from medievalists and other specialized fields that work within a century, region, or language can go a long way toward allowing memoir studies to wade in some productive ambiguities. This is the ideal outcome of interdisciplinarity for scholars who work on memoir. And if we embrace interdisciplinarity as a means toward providing more complete treatments of the memoirs we examine, then we might also consider how embracing critical theory can also improve our work on memoir.

One of the biggest differences between critical theory and scholarship on memoir is that critical theory scrutinizes its own terms (some might say to its own detriment), while memoir studies would benefit from defining, and therefore clarifying, its terms. The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to suggest important additional ways memoir

studies can talk about memoir, and critical theory can teach us how to investigate our own terms. But it is taboo to champion the importance of critical theory in memoir studies because to acknowledge various fields of critical theory's work on the self as an accomplishment is to accept that notions of identity, selfhood, and subjectivity are far more complicated than memoir studies currently allows. The danger of this collaboration is the absorption of a field that is in a nascent, and therefore fragile, state. Scrutinizing memoir studies in its early stages does have the danger of bypassing its preoccupations altogether; however, in a more optimistic framework, such questioning can foster interest and engagement with the field.

Implicitly, the mere acknowledgment of critical theory within memoir studies asks scholars of memoir to reconsider their own positions as the specialists and experts of memoir (and perhaps of the self as well). This has not gone well in the past. As Philippe Lejeune, the father of autobiographical theory, reminds memoir scholars: beware of "the cunning deconstructionists who charge forward, heads lowered, like well-trained bulls, as soon as someone waves the red flag of sincerity" (qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20). While I may not accept Lejeune's word choice, I empathize with his sentiment. To change memoir studies at this nascent point would mean challenging ourselves and our understanding of the work the field has provided. Annoyingly, interdisciplinarity encourages those of us in memoir studies to accept a diffusion of our own conception of selfhood and specialization in academia, which can provoke anxiety. And at the same time, the field's status as in formation means that its relationship to other disciplines is ghostly but unavoidable, for memoir is discussed across the humanities. Ideally, we

might be excited to have new ways of considering the literature that has grown so dear to our own scholarly pursuits, and if we choose to be scholars of memoir, we want to embrace all the possibilities inherent in that choice. A part of that means we must acknowledge that the history of critical approaches to memoir developed alongside the history of critical theory—that what we try to keep out is always already in. The emergence of autobiographical studies came about due to a shift in critical theory from new criticism to semiotics. Ignoring this history to prevent critical theory from consuming memoir studies is to ignore the precise history of memoir studies as well.

Scholars working on memoir might not think that theory is important to their work, but the truth is that theory is a part of the history of their work. The history of theories of memoir (known separately or as a compilation of autobiography theory, creative nonfiction, creative writing, and/or scholarship on memoir) has been a history of identifying what the essence of “I” is and problematizing what that essence is. Charles Berryman identifies the origin of autobiography studies in a shift away from new criticism in critical theory in the 1970s, in which a text’s “I” is evaluated as an artifact that shows a universal element of human life detached from the author and culture in which the book was written and published. The shift was to post-structuralism and then deconstruction, where, in simple terms, a text is evaluated for how it relates to the world it is in, with the assumption that in analyzing these relationships, a reader assumes that there is no such thing as one, autonomous essence, identity, or truth—nothing is isolated and whole. A second development was the rise of new historicism, in which a text and author are evaluated in relationship to historical and cultural contexts. While

deconstruction does not allow for a true, whole subjectivity, new historicism presumes subjectivity exists in various forms of cultural, historical, and self-chosen layers of power. What these emerging theoretical focuses in the 1970s and 80s suggest is that there is always already more to human identity, selfhood, writing, and the text-author connection than we presume, which might be hard to reconcile for scholars in the burgeoning field of memoir studies. Deconstruction played a particularly volatile role in critical notions of selfhood and autobiographical testimonial:

A revolution in the critical theory of both literature and history was necessary to create the current interest in the study of autobiography, and here deconstruction clearly played a major role. By advancing a radical skepticism about the coherence and referentiality of language, deconstruction offered critics a sophisticated way to doubt the claims of historical truth...If deconstruction helped to free autobiography from the claims of historical truth, the critical agenda of new historicism called for a different blurring of traditional distinctions. Literature and history become interchangeable when all writing is interpreted as a form of power. (Berryman 71)

Due to this “revolution,” says Berryman, Roy Pascal’s definition of “‘Autobiography proper’ [as] a retrospective account that involves a ‘search for the true self’” (71) can easily be viewed as outdated by scholars working in the field today. So why is it not? You might recall in the history of memoir I just presented that Yagoda’s 2010 book uses Pascal’s definition. What does this tell us? Perhaps that, indeed, the history of criticism

surrounding memoir is as recent as the mid-twentieth century, and a much more defining and critical explanation can emerge so that scholars have a variety of sources and primary threads to pull from. Or, perhaps that the departure from the concept of a whole self is something that must be continually dealt with in theories of memoir—that in order to depart from the foundations of self in memoir studies, a scholar should account for its appearance and duration in the first place.

Some scholars who work with memoir do, of course, use critical theory, but most of these scholars/theorists are not recognized as members of memoir studies—they are the scholars of other disciplines who happen to be working with a memoir, not genre specialists. Recall that my dissertation chair remarked that one scholar who was in a women's studies department was thus not “in” the field I was taking my exams in. It is worth noting that the few scholars considered memoir specialists despite working with critical theory are women, and they do reach out to specialists in other fields besides critical theory. Leigh Gilmore, for example, shows us that definitions like Eakin's nationalistic pluralism, Lejeune's universal standard for honesty, and Pascal's belief in a true self are not the only definitions for a memoir scholar to proceed from, since “medieval and contemporary, spiritual and secular, and male and female constructions of subjectivity are sufficiently contradictory to undermine the notion of universality on which autobiography studies has depended” (*Autobiographics* 153). In a similar vein, Smith and Watson claim that after the backlash against misogynist psychoanalysis used to critique women's autobiographical texts in the 1980s, feminism, along with deconstruction and new historicism, were used to empower female memoir writers in

order to “erode the holding power of the concept of the universal ‘woman’” (*Reading Autobiography* 24). Deconstruction and Jacques Derrida have figured as prominently in critical theorists’ accounts of memoir as a criticism of deconstruction has figured in memoir scholars’ discussion of how memoir should be talked about. Smith and Watson also claim that memoir itself uses theoretical methodology, and women’s memoirs are sources “for articulating feminist theory” (*Reading Autobiography* 5). If this is the case, then the homogenized conceptions of self and truth can be radically problematized by the death of those perceptions in memoir’s history. Questioning subjectivity is par for the course for women who work with memoir, such as Nancy K. Miller, who writes about female friendships in memoir as an example of when “one tells about two and two become one” (“A Feminist Friendship Archive” 69). From the beginning of writing, that is, a woman memoirist and scholar is concerned with her own end, and the introduction of theory into memoir studies for scholars who happen to be female is a way that women writers (and scholars) have been able to articulate the end of how male scholars write them. It is shameful that the well-known scholars in memoir studies so readily disparage critical theory, a collective body of theories that have supported and incorporated women memoirists and memoir specialists alike, for in this disparaging is implied that women writers and scholars are not equal colleagues working toward important theories in memoir studies with their male counterparts.

This project does not specifically make an argument for the necessity of a history of women’s memoir, nor does it make an argument about how women in memoir studies work differently from their more celebrated male colleagues. The latter argument could

be hard to make as of yet, for the discipline really is so new, but it is something worth noting. The former argument is easier to make, as women's texts (excluding perhaps Margery Kempe's *Life*, which might get a quick nod now and again) are simply not considered powerful mile-markers in the genre of memoir according to its most well-known theorists, all of whom happen to be male. By contrast, this project includes and makes arguments about the importance of women's place in the genre in every chapter. Thus, while this is not a project dedicated to women's memoir or focused solely on the promotion of women's fine works in and for the genre, with each argument in each chapter, women's theories and texts are utilized as authoritative perspectives from within and on memoir in a way that has not been done before in memoir studies. While the reason for this is to make a more complicated, comprehensive starting place with which to think about memoir, its history in the West, its big hits, and its status as a genre discipline for scholars, it is unavoidable that the subjective backbone of this work is that a woman scholar and memoirist is not seeing enough women scholars and memoirists counted in her own discipline. Lejeune would say that my use of the third person in this instance, as for all memoir writers, is to distance myself from the material in the sentences I am writing, but that is not the case, and that is the point. Moreover, it is what is necessary for memoir and memoir studies at this historical moment to establish itself as a discipline.

The Way of the Work

My dissertation rethinks the genre's arguably most important moments—Augustine's spiritualism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's secularism, and the contemporary

criticism of Kathryn Harrison. My first chapter, “Self-Annihilation in the West’s ‘First’ Memoirs” reconsiders memoir scholars’ claims that Augustine initiated the genre. Instead, I claim that we can rethink the genre if we see it as set in motion by the pre-Augustinian female martyr hagiographies—texts that influence Augustine’s narrative and philosophy and also frame themselves as anti-historical and thus resistant to being called originary. I thus suggest that we not see Augustine’s narrative of conversion and confession as the text that initiates the genre, but rather that we turn to the suicidal mysticism that permeates *The Passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas*, a martyr tale considered the earliest women’s narrative of the West. If we consider the impetus for writing martyr memoirs—certain and impending death—then the origins of the tradition of memoir begin, strangely, with an end of self, not the articulation of one following an experience of conversion.

My second chapter, “Memoir’s Secular Transformation That Never Was: Rousseau and Slave Narrative Writers as Strange Companion” rethinks memoir’s second most remarked upon writer, Rousseau. I take up Rousseau not as the man who moved the tradition from spiritual to secular, but as a writer who can be understood in conversation with the tradition of slave narrative memoirs. With this placement, we can see Rousseau’s investment, shared with slave narratives, in language’s mystical capacity to reveal destiny and act as a savior or messiah. Slave narratives are not widely discussed in scholarship on memoir, but I claim they should be in order for scholars to see eighteenth-century memoir as more than a departure from the spiritual and a movement toward private, secular writing putatively carried out by Rousseau. If we add these texts to the

canon of eighteenth-century memoir, we find that a more important shift for the genre is from a dearth of testimonials about the power of language to a widespread interest in understanding literacy and language as messianic tools that lead to salvation.

In my third chapter, “Kathryn Harrison and the Martyrs in the Arena of Death,” I question the plethora of criticism Harrison faced for her memoir, *The Kiss*. Among the variety of voices writing in memoir studies, one opinion resounds: Harrison’s memoir is evidence of the morally depraved person she is, not a work of literature that can be discussed as such. Another side of the debate, I claim, is that critical responses to Harrison often amount to a catalogue of a critic’s own moral beliefs so that they can disassociate themselves from the ways in which Harrison nuances consent in relationship to family and the market. Harrison places her own memoir in a tradition of women’s hagiography, a tradition of insolent texts to which my project traces the anti-history of memoir, thus confirming that her memoir is more aware of the genre’s foundations than the critics who lambast her supposed departure from it. While her naysayers claim that Harrison is a writer who has taken memoir into the trenches of self-aggrandizement by valuing profit over privacy, I propose that her questions about where responsibility lies in regard to consent is an important marker of memoir from Late Antiquity.

My final chapter, “Critical Memoir: A Recovery From Codes,” departs from this project’s focus on memoir’s most talked about moments and enters into a terrain that memoir studies refuses to consider altogether: life writing by the practitioners of academic theory. After looking at work from writers like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, we may find that contemporary memoir tries to articulate what it means to be

absent, and the paradox inherent in this literary approach is that this unanswerable question is precisely what builds the genre's presence from Late Antiquity to now. Thus, to acknowledge that life writing by theorists is memoir is also to acknowledge again that memoir studies must reconsider the very beginnings of the genre in the West.

I claim that if we understand memoir as a genre that challenges rather than presumes the existence of the self, then scholars' own presumptions about how morality and identity intersect in life writing must necessarily change. Thus, this project not only reimagines what memoir is, but also what scholarship about it can, and should, do. By starting with the hagiographical tradition that influenced Augustine, we can see that from its beginnings, memoir in the West has been preoccupied with challenging a cultural and personal affiliation with selfhood. This challenge is artfully framed through memoir's formal choices, like multi-authored texts, reliance on anecdotal over evidentiary knowledge, and non-linear narratives.

By utilizing popular theories from autobiographical studies, creative writing, medieval studies, religious studies, black studies, critical theory, women's studies, and cultural studies, my dissertation models a transdisciplinary approach to the genre. This model provides new ways to consider how memoir studies can profit from other disciplines' tools, in particular by complicating its own reliance on the self as the most important way to understand the genre's history, features, and implications. I conclude by calling for collaborative scholarship on memoir across disciplines in English studies in order to create new theories about the genre.

Chapter Two: Self-Annihilation in the West's "First" Memoirs

I therefore take 'magical weapons,' pen, ink, and paper; I write 'incantations'—these sentences—in the 'magical language' i.e. that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth 'spirits' such as printers, publishers, booksellers, and so forth, and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is therefore an act of MAGICK by which I cause Changes to take place in conformity with my Will.

—Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*

It is impossible for the scholar of memoir to discuss the preoccupations and history of the genre without discussing Aurelius Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine (AD 397) is overwhelmingly considered the first memoir writer of the West, not only because his narrative is autobiographical, but also because it is lengthy. William Spengemann's influential *Forms of Autobiography* names Augustine's the originary memoir and therefore the formal model for *all* memoirs after (xiv). Smith and Watson also cite Augustine as starting the tradition of autobiographical narrative in the West and claim that "in the next thousand years, most autobiographical writing was done by religious men and women as a form of devotion in the service of spiritual examination" (*Reading Autobiography* 85-86). Yagoda's recent, popular study, *Memoir: A History*, likewise claims Augustine as a progenitor (32), and Daniel Mendelsohn's recent *New Yorker* article suggests that treating Augustine as the original memoir writer infuses memoir writers with an "essentially religious DNA, the Augustinian preoccupation with bearing written witness to remarkable inner transformations" (1).

Augustine's memoir is also considered by memoir scholars to be the first because of its narration of a journey toward incredible moral accounting that produced those

“remarkable inner transformations.” His triumph in goodness is a moral standard so striking that memoir specialists compare all memoirists after Augustine to the genre’s “father.” When comparing Augustine to later writers, Mendelsohn remarks that “once the memoir stopped being about God and started being about Man, once ‘confession’ came to mean nothing more than getting a shameful secret off your chest,” it was a “short step” to art used simply for an author’s own “therapeutic purge” (1). This notion of the memoir as “purge” shows us that the vast amount of people who write about memoir and who learn from memoir studies that Augustine is the first in regards to history and taste might think, when comparing later writers to him, “more and more people are writing memoirs at younger and younger ages, with few, if any, ethical standards to guide them” (Hamburger 29). What Augustine’s memoir reminds memoir’s critics is that “there was a time when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir” (Genzlinger), and now, it seems, you do not. The history of Western memoir from Augustine, and the genre’s preoccupation—the self in conversion—has been remarked upon endlessly to address how contemporary texts rise to the heights of memoir’s challenge, or pale in comparison to its father.

But if Augustine is actually not the first memoirist of the West, then how does that change our understanding of the genre’s preoccupations as well as the genre’s critics who claim that the history of the genre has been in sharp moral and artistic decline? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by presenting a context for the ways Late Antique and medieval memoir rely on anecdotal knowledge that bypasses a hierarchy moral choices. Instead of the morality of an individual author, I focus instead on the genre’s collaboration with mysticism and magic. These anecdotal practices allow memoir

to reject any clear formulations about the self, conversion, and moral truth. Memoir from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, I argue, supports a more elusive understanding of truth and celebrates self-annihilation over the articulation of a self in conversion.

Further, the content of medieval memoir focuses on mystical happenings and magical abilities, so it seems important that we have the methodologies of the strange and even miraculous in mind while reading early memoir. Yet, any attempt to comprehensively understand magic or mysticism will be frustrated by the fact that an element of what makes these practices powerful is their inability to be completely known—paradox is an important element that we will have to consider when we attempt to “know” how anecdotal practices work. After exploring mysticism and magic as practices that encourage an appreciation of ambiguity and anecdote in medieval memoir, I will introduce a new text to the canon of memoir, *The Passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas*. This text changes how we understand Augustine’s status as a progenitor and invites us to consider how the history of memoir defies important markers an “origin,” creating a sense of history that is just as paradoxical as the narrative moments that rely on magic or mysticism. Then I will look at Augustine, Henry Suso, and Margery Kempe to show how these authors’ memoirs also rely on magic and mysticism rather than a narration of a moral self after conversion. With all these texts, my goal is to show how memoir and its history are messier than currently thought of in memoir studies, and to argue that this messiness is what makes the genre so rewarding to explore.

Magic, Mysticism, Language, and the Rest

So what is magic? Is it a means to an end or a process with a goal? Is it implicit in magic that a belief in a higher, perhaps godly, power is necessary by the practitioner? What about magic differentiates it from mysticism? Can mysticism and magic ever be conflated in our definitions? These are questions that I will explore here, with the caveat that these questions have multiple answers. As we will see, magic and mysticism in the history of Western memoir sway between conflated, separated, positive, negative, free association, and church-ordained meanings.

In *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*, Christopher I. Leirich tells us:

The proliferation of definitions of magic, positive as well as negative, among scholars as well as those whom they study, certainly attests to the confusion or diffusion of the term, but it also indicates in magic an unusual power to manifest distinction and division. (159)

This paradox in definition implies that the practice of magic is productive precisely because it is ambiguous. Leirich finds this “power to manifest distinction and division” not only in magic itself, but also in the criticism scholars who work with magic face: “Modern academe does not recognize a discipline devoted to the analytical study of occult, magical, or esoteric traditions” (xi). Although work on magic and the occult is prevalent, scholars who do work with magic, like Leirich, have to work to “situate themselves indisputably within a conventional disciplinary framework, as though thereby to ward off the lingering taint of an object of study still thought disreputable” (xi).

According to Lehigh, the problem with trying to fit into a “conventional disciplinary framework” of a field like anthropology, sociology, folklore, medieval studies, Renaissance studies, etcetera, is that this scholarly practice avoids what magic itself insists upon: simultaneous comparison and differentiation.

We might also consider how scholarship on memoir can be influenced by the messiness of the memoirs it examines. If memoir is paradoxical because it relies on an ambiguous practice like magic, perhaps a part of contemporary academic work should, or already does, embrace the paradoxes inherent in the texts it works with:

what ‘magic’ signifies is always a system of differential relations that at once depends on magic for its foundation and also encloses magic within itself as a structure. Magic works by analogies and comparisons, yet at the same time it attempts to think *itself* and in such a way that it might escape its own formulations...such total differentiation is the very principle on which *all* signification rests, and this the magic of ‘the so-called primitives [from Levi-Strauss]’ is equivalent to the writing of the so-called advanced societies. (Lehigh 175)

Not only is the paradoxical nature of magic interdisciplinary (a quality contemporary academia admires) in its demand for comparison and differentiation, it can also act independent from the mage and compare ancient tradition and modern academic practice. This interdisciplinarity in scholarship—that is, a breaking apart of the clear and distinct division made between fields working with the same texts—is something that is necessary to do in order to get into the meat of magic itself (and into memoir, I claim).

Scholars who accept the challenge of interdisciplinarity can even be considered mages, for, as Lehigh asks: “Might we say that comparison is indeed magical?” (83). After all, all that is required for a scholar today to become a mage, according to *Postmodern Magic: The Art of Magic in the Information Age* is simply “a new understanding of the way the world works—a new attitude toward reality” (Dunn 2).

If magic is paradoxical, it can also be understood as differentiation’s other: union. Important for our purposes in looking at memoir is understanding how union for anecdotal practices understands the self via relation, not as a whole, individually owned and controlled thing. This union might be within the practice of magic or show how magic is unified with another practice, mysticism. While Lehigh relies on comparison and differentiation to define what magic is, Ariel Glucklich relies on union and interrelatedness: “Magic is based on a unique type of consciousness: the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world by means of a simple but refined sense perception” (*The End of Magic* 12). This is different from mysticism, Glucklich says, which “is the direct experience of the divine resulting from an arduous and highly disciplined contemplation” (8). Yet Glucklich explores definitions of magic that do incorporate the mystical experience and allows that “magic and religion go hand in hand: All religions contain magical devices in the form of invocations, incantations, sacrifice, meditation, and yoga, as well as self-inflicted tortures of various devices” (56). Glucklich’s *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* explores much of the self-inflicted pain that mystics utilize to gain union with God. Glucklich says the mystic’s ritual pain (personal and/or cultural) is similar to the interrelatedness of magic because

this pain “weakens the subject’s sense of empirical identity and strengthens his or her sense of attachment to a highly valued new center of identification” (*Sacred Pain* 7). That is, the mage’s “refined sense perception” (*The End of Magic* 12) is used to understand how his sense of self comes from his “interrelatedness” to all things in the universe, and the mystic’s sense of self comes from an “attachment” to a powerful force that is actually the “center of identification.”

If memoir uses the methodologies of magic and mysticism to create narrative ambiguity and paradox, then it would make sense that a reevaluation of what constitutes self and subjectivity in memoir needs to occur. A question arises: If memoir is not an art that narrates a true, present self across an arc of conversion, then what does it narrate? We might find our answer in mystical practice. Glucklich says that the painful process a mystic endures dislocates a sense of individual selfhood and provides in its place an absence where the presence of self once was:

[the] more irritation one applies to the body in the form of pain, the less output the central nervous system generates from the areas that regulate the signals on which a sense of self relies. Modulated pain weakens the individual’s feeling of being a discrete agent; it makes the ‘body-self’ transparent and facilitates the emergence of a new identity.

Metaphorically, pain creates an embodied ‘absence’ and makes way for a new and greater ‘presence’. (*Sacred Pain* 207)

Recall Lehrich’s assertion that “magic works by analogies and comparisons, yet at the same time it attempts to think *itself* and in such a way that it might escape its own

formulations” (175). This is comparable to Glucklich’s focus on the emergence of absence. Lehrich concentrates his arguments on the activity itself (used by the mage, but independent in a way that is not definable) to define magic. He does not attribute agency to the mage. While there is an implied practitioner, the explicit guiding force is the process outside of the mage’s will. Thus the practitioner engages himself in a process that is outside of his subjectivity. He uses magic to enter into the comparing and differentiating that is outside of his control. While they may relate, compare, or contrast, what is central to both magic and mysticism is a breakdown of selfhood in service of another goal because “a diffuse self is correlated with the strength of perception, especially of relations” (Glucklich, *The End of Magic* 112).

In all this broad terminology, it is worth noting something perhaps more identifiable that magic, mysticism, and memoir share: language. Thus far, language has only been implicit in my argument that mysticism and magic are important features of memoirs. Obviously, a memoir uses language as its form. But do we find that mysticism and magic rely on language, and testimonial or autobiographical language at that, to support their own methodologies? This is an important question to ask. If mysticism and magic use language as a form to help manifest the practices themselves, then we can see that one of language’s capabilities is that it can support ambiguity. Steven Katz tells us in “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning” that it is a common perception that the mystic’s experience is one of exclusivity, privacy, and interiority, where language is perceived to be “too impoverished to perform the descriptive role assigned it...the true unity of Being transcends both linguistic expression and the very particularity that

language necessarily entails” (3). For example, we can all recall icons of saints, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas in ecstasy or peace, but I do not recall many images of these sacred figures engaging in speech, chant, or the written word. More often we see these icons represented with a knowing look, slight smile, or in complete, simultaneous agony and ecstasy. We examine these iconic images to explore, understand, and ponder. If you are like me, you find yourself focused on the mouth of the represented icon, for it is usually doing something that shows us the interior experience—agape, smiling, gritting, or relaxed with lips slightly parted—but not with language. As Meister Eckhardt says ““If I have spoken of it...I have not spoken for it is ineffable”” (qtd. in Katz 3). But not so long after, Henry Suso, one of Eckhardt’s students who I will discuss in this chapter, wrote an influential memoir in German about mystical experience. So could it be that mysticism and magic have a more necessary relationship to language and autobiographical testimonial than we presume?

We may have less trouble imagining magic rather than mysticism in proximity to language and autobiographical testimonial. If I ask you the first language that you associate with magic, you might recall a childish rhyme (like “bubble bubble boil and trouble” from *Macbeth*) or remark on spells, incantations, and rituals from popular culture, like from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which language is a necessary element to complete the magical task at hand. You may even recall Crowley’s quote beginning this chapter where he places the greatest importance on language. For Crowley, language is magical exactly because it is understood by others, and therefore, it is the appropriate system for a person to enact his will, which, according to Crowley, is enacted as Will.

Language, then, is intrinsic to the elusive practice of magic, and magic has an autobiographical nature that allows one to provide a testimonial to an audience. One must think of the magical words to say, speak them, and then hope to see the effects of forcing one's "Will" in the actual world. An audience learns of a speaker's or writer's desire or cause of desire, as well as how the speaker wants to be in the world.

Katz argues that language is intrinsic to the mystical experience, too, and implies that autobiographical testimonial specifically is an integral part of the mystic's journey. Prior linguistic knowledge of an "operative process" (8) influences someone's personal, mystical experience. One example are religious texts. People read others' accounts, write their own, and are influenced by written philosophical trends in their religious circle, such as Christianity's embrace of Neoplatonic ideas. Mystics write about how they are influenced by other mystics, such as Margery Kempe's written admiration for Julian of Norwich, and that establishes a tradition of mysticism in written word that signifies on previous writing while contributing new information to the formal practices of literature and mysticism. There are also speech acts such as "om" and mantras that are used ritualistically to achieve transcendent states—language that "does not 'say' something, does not 'tell' something, but it *does* something" (Katz 10). An example of this might be what Amy Hungerford calls the "supernatural formalism" of Allen Ginsberg's poetry—"a formal practice that relies on the supernatural to account for poetry's efficacy in the world" (269-270). Hungerford notes the important distinction of Ginsberg's language as something that is a spiritual practice, and not something that merely stands in as evidence

that the writer is a spiritual poet. In this distinction, language (as action) is a necessary element of spiritual ritual, but identification of the author's self (state of being) is not.

If language is viewed as mystical action rather than as evidence of a subject whose actions are his own, then what is spiritual is necessarily political (Hungerford 271), especially for a field such as memoir studies that has foregrounded a passive state of being—an author's self—rather than autobiographical testimonial as public action since its beginning. For our purposes, then, the political is found in how memoir scholars who focus on language as an action rather than an artifact of a human's being necessarily depart from a critique of a writer's morality. Importantly, this removes language from consideration as an artifact of the self to a public action without a self, similar to mysticism. Language as a formal practice of mysticism rather than an arm of the self can also be seen in the way it is used to convey mystical information to others who seek to be practitioners of the path, for it can “embody a primal, radiant, metaphysical energy” through prayer, text, and recitation (Katz 24). While the mage provides testimonial to others, one of the ways a mystic confirms his status as such is to narrate his experience from within the practice. While mystics in temples, ashrams, and convents alike might shun language as inferior in comparison to unspeakable experience, “whatever else the world's mystics do with language, they do not, as a rule, merely negate it” (Katz 33).

Katz's argument that linguistic knowledge precedes all mystical experiences suggests that while the mystical experience may be intensely personal, mysticism is a process *shared through language*. Incorporating Hungerford's idea that the spiritual is

political in regards to action and viewing language as that action, we find that the spread of mystical (and magical) knowledge through memoir is a public, political act rather than an interior comment on a self's moral change. With all this in mind, language is not solitary, but shared. Thus a consideration of another or a group of others is presumed before every act of language. This is what a branch of poststructuralism, deconstruction, posits,¹⁰ returning us to considerations of critical theory as a necessary part of memoir studies, not something that should be shunned.

Remember that for magic and mysticism, language adjusts an individual's center of identification away from the self and into a shared metaphysical space. That Hungerford notes the important similarities of the seemingly secular tradition of poststructuralism and formal spiritualism is no accident (269). If a consideration of the other precedes every act of language, as Jacques Derrida, deconstruction's founder, says, then we can think of memoir as a genre made of testimonial language that has a center of identification outside of the individual, authorial self. In this way, and importantly for this

¹⁰ From his seminal work to his last interview, Jacques Derrida remarks on the importance of language being understood as shared testimonial. He says "the beginning word is understood, in the intimacy of self-presence, as the voice of the other and as commandment" (*Of Grammatology* 17); that there is "*the promise, in the act of faith or in the appeal to faith that inhabits every act of language and every address to the other*" ("Faith and Knowledge" 56); "a language is not something that belongs. Not naturally in its essence. Whence the phantasms of property, appropriation, and colonialist imposition" (*Learning to Live Finally* 38).

project in particular, mysticism and deconstruction both understand language as something that is not an artifact of self, but something that makes us aware that an autonomous self *in itself* does not exist. Thus, memoir's language is not a recording of the journey of the self, but an active participant in the world at large, and seemingly separate practices like mysticism or magic and deconstruction utilize language that is relative to the other.

I began this chapter with a quote from one of the most (in)famous mages, Aleister Crowley, that seems to glorify the power of the self in relation to language and magic through the value of human Will. Crowley also has a memoir that he calls an "autohagiography"—a title that combines magic, mysticism, and memoir (auto indicates self-written, hagiography is a saint's life, and the memoir is about his growth as a mage). In light of the other theories I have presented since opening with Crowley, I would now like to rethink his comments on a stable, contained self that enacts its Will in the world. What Crowley does not analyze in favor of his focus on a contained self that directs its wishes in the world is that his individual Will, by his own definition, can only come into fruition through the participation of others via language. This participation negates the power of an individual self-directing his Will—his subjectivity—to have a result. Language is magical for Crowley because it assumes faith in others' ability to comprehend. So, could it be that language itself is an anecdotal practice that works mystically or magically? Certainly one does not have to become consciously aware of the feeling of faith before every sentence spoken or written, just as I am not mustering faith in myself that I can write this sentence in order for each letter to appear on the screen.

The actions of speaking and writing each conjure the faith necessary to complete the task of using language, just as the process of magic manifests magic's agency, not the mage's. Perhaps Crowley's capital W is to account for how big one's Will actually is, as it needs the World to proceed.

This anecdotal faith in language is important to think about in relation to belief, especially when looking at Late Antiquity and medieval memoirs that champion a belief in a Christian God. One may argue that belief, and therefore individual consciousness, precedes faith at every turn, even with language, and both require selfhood, for one must acknowledge how the self functions as a *believer* to experience faith in anything, whether that be a mystical experience or the federal mail system. Another perspective, provided by Steven Justice, is that:

our modern scholarly accounts of medieval belief, which try to explain belief from the outside, cannot actually explain it. One reason they cannot is that medieval belief already incorporates their possibility as part of its skeptical self-affliction: naturalizing or demystifying accounts of belief not only are available to medieval sources, but are internal to their acts of belief. (15)

If Late Antique and medieval memoirists, and arguably all memoirists, incorporate their own "skeptical self-affliction," into their texts, then even Augustine, the canonical believer whose speech act about faith is often analyzed by memoir studies as the beginning of a self's relationship to a faith conversion (and therefore belief) in testimonial prose, can be understood ambiguously.

Perpetua and Felicitas (AD 203)

The Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas is considered exceptional as a hagiography (a saint's life) because it is told, reportedly, in the words of two of the martyrs who were present in Carthage: Saturus, a man, and Vibia Perpetua, a married woman of the upper-class Roman culture.¹¹ The hagiography is one of the few testimonies by women Late Antiquity still in existence (Stouck 21) and it is important for its status as possibly the earliest Christian narrative written by a woman, Perpetua (Castelli 86). This text has been examined by medievalists through a variety of lenses, such as piety, conversion, gender and sex, Roman culture, emerging Christianity and pagan influence, Montanism, Carthage, and martyrdom. For my purposes in examining memoir, I will focus on how this text defies the notion that memoir as a genre begins with Augustine and the theme of a self in conversion. What makes this text most important to examine as an early Western memoir is how it can change our understanding of the history, formal markers, and themes of the genre. *The Passion* is a multi-authored and narrated testimonial rather than our more familiar autodiegetic memoirs. Furthermore, it rejects the value of linear time and a linear history of memoir, utilizes paradox, and ends with an individual using her subjectivity—her Will—to kill what others may identify as her self. What this text as an early Western memoir shows us is that the genre is

¹¹ Recently, it has been suggested that Perpetua was actually a concubine of the lower classes. For this counter perspective, see Cooper's "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage."

interested in articulating authors' self-absence rather than formulating a concept of how they are present with selves.

Perpetua does recount her own experiences, but *The Passion* has additional authors and narrators that complicate her self-accounting, as well as scholars' notions that memoir is an autodiegetic genre. That this "memoir" has several narrators to tell the lives of two women may seem odd to contemporary readers, but "one of the ironies or paradoxes of the text [is] that the final proof of [Perpetua's] internal and external consistency can only be written by someone else—the narrator who recounts her martyrdom itself" (Castelli 86). This is pragmatic as well as aesthetic. Long before the development of the printing press, many authors were illiterate. Particular to this memoir, the most poignant moment—the martyrdom—is an experience that requires Perpetua's death in order to be written. She cannot narrate her own death. Additionally, one of the voices added to the mix is an unnamed narrator at the beginning and ending of the text who appeals to readers to understand the text's aesthetic appeal through a particular context. He first calls upon readers to understand Perpetua's and Felicitas' tales through Montanism (Stouck 21), a movement most associated with Tertullian, the man who believed in the prophetic power of virginal women, an imminent second coming, and that Christ was completely human (so that God's son would not be confused with horrific angels who sought virgins to rape).¹²

This unnamed narrator also suggests to readers that a presumption of a linear, chronological narrative or genre is not valuable when reading memoir or its history, as

¹² See Elliot's "Tertullian, the Angelic Life, and the Bride of Christ."

that value is assigned arbitrarily. This becomes important for us if we are considering who began Western memoir and with what goals in mind. Our narrator begins *The Passion* by noting that older texts of Christian faith are ascribed more prestige than recent texts and asks if all these texts praise God and bring “comfort to men by the recollection of the past through written word[,] [s]hould not then more recent examples be set down that contribute equally to both ends?” (21). The narrator’s suggestion stands in direct opposition to how memoir scholars think of Augustine as the progenitor in a linear history of moral influence for the genre, as well as how these scholars think of conversion in autobiographical testimonial as a linear process (a self exists, it has an epiphany, converts, becomes a better self, and writes a memoir about this journey toward goodness after said goodness has been achieved). That memoir studies’ “first” and “best” are one-in-the-same is an unexamined aspect of the genre’s history that scholars in the field have constructed. Said scholars remark that the genre has been slipping into moral nether regions since Augustine because “*there was a time* when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir, by accomplishing something noteworthy or having an extremely unusual experience or being such a brilliant writer” (Genzlinger, emphasis added) and now one does not. But we might note after reading *The Passion*’s opening narration that this historical argument about the “good ol’ days” being over is one that has existed for a very long time and it does not stand as evidence of anything other than a critic’s nostalgia for an age that can be thought of from a distance as somehow better.

The Passion’s narrator warns against valuing a linear history when reading personal testimonies of religious people because we can conflate an examination of

artistic influence with a hierarchy of quality: “For indeed these too will one day become ancient and needful for the ages to come, even though in our own day they may enjoy less prestige because of the prior claims of antiquity” (*The Passion* 21). Indeed, how testimonials are understood in a genre’s history and whether they are included or excluded in that genre’s canon is the decision of scholars, not the writers or the texts, as memoirs as far back as Late Antiquity have noted. Older does not simply equal better, and for memoir especially this conflation might do a disservice to our understanding of the genre. Memoir performs a kind of time collapse by presenting recollections while they are being constructed for interpretation. Almost as if predicting the Augustine problem of memoir studies that begs the question, “should we be surprised when redemption and confession steal the limelight in a tradition whose origins are copyrighted by Augustine?” (Miller, “The Entangled Self” 542), this narrator suggests that an assignment of a “first” value to a memoir is arbitrary, for one cannot “restrict the power of the one Spirit to time and seasons” (21). And as with the timeless “one Spirit,” this narrator presumes an audience and body of work that contain all but are never stuck in one time period. Every time period, this narrator claims, is always the “last stage of time” (21), and we might conclude, the “last stage” of memoir, where a presumption always exists that it was “a time-honored literary genre that currently has about as much esteem as an episode of the Jerry Springer Show” (Hamburger 29). Where do we begin with memoir, and this memoir in particular, according to our “first” narrator of the “first” women’s text? Well, without the firsts. We begin in the end.

As we explore the text further, we find that Perpetua demonstrates that the agency to save comes from an incorporated and differentiated state of consciousness, not individual subjectivity. Because Perpetua's identity is relational, a paradox arises: the absence of an autonomous self becomes her true presence and evidence of her holy status. This reminds us of the self-diffusing power of language according to mysticism and deconstruction. To inch us into the many identity changes Perpetua will make, it is noted in *The Passion* that Perpetua's testimony takes place in a magical space—her jail cell—which becomes a “palace” (23) because it is her workplace for good deeds before her upcoming martyrdom. For example, in one of her visions she saves her brother from purgatory (he had previously died). She takes on a culturally masculine role of judge and savior, but her will must be deferred to God in order for her desire to be met: “And I prayed for my brother day and night with tears and sighs that this favor might be granted me” (25). At first she is without the forcible will to save her brother, for she says, “there was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other” (25). Upon waking she says, “but I was confident that I could help him in his trouble; and I prayed for him every day” (25). Only after Perpetua's body is confined by chains is her freedom to help her brother realized. She tells readers, “then I awoke, and realized that he had been delivered from his suffering” (25). Here she does what even her father, presumably a well-to-do man of Roman society, could not. She gains agency in positioning her sense of self only in relationship to the other—she is unwell, chained and dirty, close to death, but she makes Dinocrates suddenly well. He is “all clean, well dressed, and refreshed. I [Perpetua] saw a scar where the wound had been [on him]; and the pool that I had seen

before now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist" (25). Dinocrates can now drink, when before the bowl was out of his reach. Through the binary of her own confinement and Dinocrates' freedom from confinement to Hell, as well as her dressing of chains and Dinocrates' dressing of fine clothes, she demonstrates that the agency to save comes from an incorporated and differentiated state of consciousness, not individual subjectivity. The favor asked of God to save Dinocrates is granted, linking Perpetua in the holy chain where an individual self is non-existent; what exists instead is a subjectivity enacted by multiple presences—God, Perpetua, Dinocrates—who exist in a psychic space of which there is no evidence. Her own body at this point is confined to a reality she shares with others, yet *who* she really is and with *whom* she shares has dipped into a psychic space that there is no evidence of in her physical reality.

When she takes on the masculine savior role after her female body is confined, Perpetua begins to collect gender roles, showing that instead of having an individual self, she has a collaborative, magical identity. While she eats,

[w]hat Perpetua receives is no Christian sacrament...just the food that, in many times and places, has symbolized the embryo and the process of birth...what Perpetua is given with her morsel of cheese is her destiny, her celestial birth—with its inevitable corollary of physical death. We might say that her first vision symbolizes both all she will still have to face on earth, and its serene resolution. (Dronke 9)

Although Perpetua is "giving birth" to her new life for Dinocrates—only something the female body can do—Dronke also reminds us that her birth into this new life shows "a

crescendo in the inner conquests portrayed in these visions, and in the rewards—the cheese, the water that never fails, the golden apples” (15). This abundance of food, like the athlete with an abundance of strength she will later become, is a “conquest” associated with masculinity. Perpetua’s vacillation between and ownership of many gender roles suggests she has a collective subjectivity instead of her previous individual self that was culturally ascribed: female, woman, wife, mother. Dronke tells us that her “celestial birth” has “an inevitable corollary of physical death” (9). This is true for her impending martyrdom, but it is also evident in how she testifies about her visions and miracles: her female body is chained in a prison, so she recounts to us her visions of becoming more than the individual, sexed body, with a self made of individual suffering. She is her own absence, and she is paradox.

Felicitas cultivates her own absence and paradox, too, as her sex and gender identity become powerfully ambiguous. Felicitas begins her journey toward martyrdom in the final trimester of her pregnancy, bridging life and death intricately in her existence as a Christian. “It is against the law for women with child to be executed,” so Felicitas prays to give birth because she wants to be killed with the other martyrs instead of later with the non-glorified “common criminals” (28). For the pregnant Felicitas, most commonly known as the “personal slave-girl” to Perpetua (Musurillo xxvi), her own martyrdom exists in direct correlation to the birth of her child, making her identity as a martyr one that she uniquely cannot own. Also, as a pregnant woman, her status as an individual female is an impediment to her goal. Her child owns her martyrdom, and her culture owns the moral decisions of her self. Luckily for her, she does give birth in her

eighth month and is immediately made an equal to the other martyrs by the Roman crowd. Felicitas gives birth to a female child, “and one of the sisters [raises] her up as her own daughter” (29). The child is a kind of super Christian from birth, baptized by a mother’s blood so Felicitas may become a Christian martyr. Felicitas “suffered a good deal in her labor because of the natural difficulty of an eight months’ delivery” (28). Thus, beyond taking on the masculine role of providing baptism, she sacrifices for Christianity in much the same way Christ does, with her blood and suffering, and she lives beyond her own death through her child—the little girl who made a martyr, just like the young man who begot a religion. Yet this masculine suffering of the ultimate martyr, athlete, and soldier are products of her female body in labor. Strangely, while undoing gender roles tied to her body by using childbirth to become the ultimate man, her masculinity becomes a product of what only a female body can do—give birth. When a prison guard asks her why she wants to suffer so, she replies ““what I am suffering now...I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him”” (29). This is where the difference between suffering and pain becomes important. Glucklich distinguishes pain from suffering, which is an “evaluative reaction to any number of causes, some entirely painless” (*Sacred Pain* 11). Certainly Felicitas, on her own, suffers physical pain from a rushed labor, but this pain will be replaced by Christ, who both obliterates pain and shares suffering. Her female body leads to masculine gender roles and the location for a male body. Felicitas moves toward a mystical existence as a shared body, a shared consciousness, and an annihilation of an autonomous pain that cannot be shared with others as suffering can.

After Felicitas gets to the arena with the other martyrs, the crowd essentializes her, but this becomes an opportunity for her to mark sex, gender, ritual, and memory as ambiguous. “Fresh from child birth with the milk still dripping from her breasts,” (30) Felicitas’ body horrifies the crowd, for she is the visual location of their ideal female body—delicate, weaker than male—as well as a testament to relational identity, for she is a new mother. The women martyrs are clothed in “unbelted tunics” (30) to sooth the crowd’s discomfort. Thomas Heffernan tells us “the naked body can be the object of sexual arousal as well as physical abuse, and various attempts at shielding the maid are employed. Of course, such attempts actually focus the audience’s attention on the desired but forbidden object” (279). What Heffernan’s perspective does not account for is what this experience is like for “the object,” Felicitas, or how *her* gaze is directed at the crowd. Felicitas acknowledges the crowd’s horror and changes their reaction by covering herself. Nevertheless, although she is covered, the crowd’s memory of the immediate past of her dripping breasts is presumably still a trace in their thoughts. Who she is to them exists in their immediate past and changed present; who she is becomes ambiguous and irrelevant to the action taking place. Even if lessened by degree, the experience of horror is now layered with that of amusement, complicating the crowd’s experience, which is shared with Felicitas. Thus, her body is not an “object” of a stereotypical sexual gaze of the crowd; it is one point of shared agency that augments the crowd’s experience as well as Felicitas’. More than undoing the crowd’s perspective on her, she creates a psychic space that acknowledges the interrelatedness of every member and also presumes that memoir is a genre where such a union can be made apparent. The oddness of layered memory,

presence, identity, and ritual is being gazed at, and both the crowd and Felicitas become more than, and yet remain still unlike, themselves.

It seems like the more those around them try to pin the martyrs down, the martyrs become unlike who they are perceived to be. A reader's ability to locate an identifiable self in the memoir is irrelevant to the rejection of that possibility itself. In a vision of her final fight, Perpetua tells readers, "my clothes were stripped off and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest)" (26). Perpetua, female, magically takes on the most masculine of roles by taking on the role of the ultimate athlete—Christ. We know she is not just any champion, but the ultimate champion, because she says, "I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory" (27). While in her vision she is male and steps on the head of her opponent, in the reality that others are sharing with her in the arena, she is put to battle a deranged cow, and she is female. What is born of the female sex is essentialized as hysterical by her culture: "it was chosen that their [the martyrs'] sex might be matched with that of the beast" (31). The male animals are not mentioned as deranged or sane. It is more than sex being matched here for Perpetua and Felicitas—an identity associated with the female sex—hysteria—is being matched.

This "personality" match is not just made by the Romans; it is also made by contemporary scholars. A more generous reading might see that Perpetua cultivates an identity that is not confined to individual selfhood, but that is instead built of the roles available, of which she chooses. Heffernan urges readers to sympathize with Perpetua

and Felicitas during their behavior at this point in the memoir, saying, “the lives of female saints, even if their extreme behavior might appear *hysterical*, illustrate a desire to participate more fully in the complete dimension of what it means to be human” (244-45, emphasis added). While “Tertullian himself spoke of the Montanist ecstasy as resembling madness” (Wypustek 27), Heffernan disregards the articulate nature of Perpetua’s mystical state, which is something that is shared with the crowd and with readers but escapes verification. This productive ambiguity is important in the text as it leads readers away from coherence and into the messy, mystical experience of departing from individual selfhood into something else. Indeed, Perpetua’s vision of herself as male and as the ultimate man does show her desire to “participate fully” outside of the burdens of individual gendered identity (like motherhood or her piety in tying her hair back in the coliseum), as well as her agency in being able to make this decision. Therefore, while Heffernan dismisses Perpetua as having merely a “heightened emotional state” (208), we might see that her Will is not bound to a static sense of self but fluidly collects and moves between many selves.

We might further this idea by noting that some, such as Maud McInerney, have located Perpetua’s visions as an unreal departure from her female body: “the scene thus appears to represent a profound sense of its inalienability; even in a male body, she is still fundamentally and essentially feminine” (26). If one wants to locate Perpetua’s visions in a larger narrative of how she perpetuates identities, thus obliterating any conception of selfhood before she dies as a martyr, one can reverse McInerney’s formula and say that Perpetua is paradoxically masculine (and male) in her vision of overcoming evil, even in

a female-body-contained vision, and that she therefore experiences a double death—one of individual consciousness and one of an individual physical body.

The memoir ends with Perpetua using her subjectivity to kill what makes her uniquely a self. While she is a martyr, she is the only one in Christianity who crosses the lines between martyrdom and suicide by drawing the executioner's blade to her own neck. Perpetua makes a great noise at her death, one that is heard by all: "She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself was willing" (32). To be sure, Perpetua's death has never been called a suicide, but at the same time, there is not commentary by medievalists or religious scholars about how she is unique for possibly killing herself. While "the Latin says, 'ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit' (she herself transferred [the hand] into her throat)," it is also worth noting that "the Latin isn't quite logical as it doesn't say that she places the sword into her throat but the hand, leaving the final act unstated" (Kramer). While Kramer believes that "for theological reasons and on account of the historical and literary contexts (the official gladiators killed the martyrs, as the *Passion* itself makes clear shortly before P's death in regard to the others martyrs)," we might note that Perpetua also separates herself historically from other martyrs in the text by making a loud cry (*Passion* 32) while the other martyrs die silently. She also engages with the executioner while the other martyrs walk passively to the blade. Importantly for my purposes, the unique way Perpetua performs her own undoing in the face of her certain murder makes her story one of the paradoxical martyr and memoirist.

This is what memoir is. She never stops telling her story, and her story is evidence of the necessity of understanding the memoirist relationally rather than individually.

The final moments of the memoir also complicate individual testimony, for we are being told about Perpetua's experience and her voice, but we are being told these things by another narrator who uses the third person to speak about Perpetua. Notice that the passage about Perpetua engaging with the executioner is in the third person. While contemporary readers are most accustomed to seeing a first person, autodiegetic memoir (or third person autodiegetic only if the author seeks distance),¹³ this text makes us consider how memoir of the Middle Ages, and memoir in general, relies on ambiguity.

We can note that Perpetua would be incapable of recording her own testimony at this point, but it is still happening through human sound that is arguably not even language: the scream. The cry is the most recognizably human—the original—sound, and it is therefore one that each person who has been born knows. Yet it is a sound that can be many things: the baby's cry, the athlete's exertion, the woman's pain. It is the sound of the many Perpetuas. At the moment when the crowd views Perpetua as a female martyr, she is also the male athlete, merging her visions and others' perceptions into a world where belief is simultaneously witnessed and disputed. Perpetua *needs* to first be essentialized as female and therefore feminine by her culture to be disenfranchised enough to construct her own gender identifications, and she must die in order to achieve the essence that is the accumulation of her life as a Christian: martyrdom. While the others who die with her are willing to die, only Perpetua makes ambiguous the lines

¹³ See Lejeune's "Autobiography in the Third Person."

between martyrdom and suicide, taking the enjoyment of the crowd into her own hands, literally becoming her own executioner in the ultimate fight. The crowd is made up of willing participants in the martyrs' deaths, but they are forced into hearing Perpetua, through her scream, as the agent of simultaneous difference and confluence between herself and the martyrs, between herself and the crowd, and between suicide and murder. They all share subjectivity. Where do we end? With the cry of humanity.

In this final experience of life, Perpetua seems to magically envelop those around her in the arena with her visions, creating a layered reality where her body, mind, and spirit are diffused in several realms, incapable of being attributed to one self. Perpetua marks the executioner, who does not perform his death task, by leaving him stripped of his worldly role and shamed with his own "trembling" hands (31). It is only males who can be gladiators and executioners alike, and this male did not serve as either; instead, a female served in his place, taking on the role of a man even with the "marks of her rough experience on her person and her dress" (31). As she dies, the metaphor for the life she has created remains—the "arm" of Christian oppression is this gladiator with "trembling" hands who is ultimately unable to achieve his purpose and is thus defeated. In the ultimate battle between Christian and persecutor, this persecutor is an impotent male who needs guidance in battle from a female only good enough to be thrown to a deranged cow. But her testimony was heard.

In a relationship between martyr and society, where oppression and death are needed in order for both parties to gain what they want, Perpetua has gotten what she wants but takes the reward of her own death from her society. So while Heffernan says

that Perpetua's unconscious state before her death suggests that "this embattled community understood this moment of possession to be a lightning like divine enveloping of the martyr's person" (221), we can reverse this formula and say that Perpetua's integration of her visions with the reality she shares with the community is a "divine enveloping" of all those present who Perpetua instigates via her own death. They are all unified, but by paradox. Perpetua possesses her own spilt blood without committing a sin in Christianity—suicide—and how she comes to possess that by no longer possessing her role and status as an individual in her culture. With her final words, Perpetua suggests that others are also a part of her memoir: "'This is what I did until the day before the contest; if anyone wants to write about what happened at the contest itself, let them write'" (Castelli 91). This memoir does not construct a self—it annihilates self.

Augustine (AD 397)

Augustine's Latin *Confessions*¹⁴ is the most complete record of an individual from the fourth and fifth centuries, which is one of the reasons it draws so much attention. However, this text was not translated from its original Latin to English until 1620 by a Catholic priest named Sir Tobie Matthew (Ryan xxxvi), which is long after the writing of what is considered the "first" memoir of the English language, *The Book of*

¹⁴ Unless stated otherwise, I use J. K. Ryan's translation for direct quotes from the *Confessions*. I use F. J. Sheed's translation and introduction provided by Peter Brown for particular points of interest. While Brown describes Sheed's brilliant translation as one that "retain[s] the oratorical, even 'oratorio-like' quality of Augustine's Latin," (xii), I chose Ryan's for the added contemporary, colloquial ease that is suitable to examining Augustine in the field of memoir studies, in which scholars generally are not trained in Latin.

Margery Kempe—a text that was not discovered until the twentieth century. Knowing the ways texts have and always will have a trajectory all their own outside of scholars' timelines makes us consider that building a chronological canon of influence might always fall short and suggests to us that there are ways to examine Augustine in memoir studies other than as memoir's foundational author. There still might be one text that is one page longer and one year older than Augustine's, waiting to be discovered. In this project, *The Passion* sets the stage as a text through which other memoirs in Late Antiquity and the medieval period might be understood. The *Confessions* is one of those memoirs. Augustine's memoir *is* an incredible text for its thorough recording of confession as a means to heal what he thinks of as the sickness of Godlessness, but after reading *The Passion*, we can see that there are other ways to interpret his text and its place in the history of memoir. I will look at Augustine's memoir for its hagiographical influences, its function as a multi-genre document, its use of conversion as a means to heal sickness rather than demonstrate a self's moral progression, and its articulation of memory—and therefore memoir—as distinctly not singular. The *Confessions* requires those of us in memoir studies to consider how we read our seminal texts, if indeed “it was Augustine, the first ‘experimenter’ in the psychology of reading, who drew attention to the fleeting, ephemeral nature of consciousness in the reading process” (Stock, “Toward Interpretive Pluralism” 407).

I will not presume that Augustine fulfills the status as “the first Western author to make the accomplishment an invisible, internal one, and the journey to salvation a spiritual one” (Mendelsohn), as scholars in memoir studies do; instead, I will consider the

autobiographical influences behind his text, specifically martyr hagiographies such as Perpetua's and Felicitas'. We know that from an early age Augustine was invested in their text for many reasons. His sister was named Perpetua because of his mother's devotion to the martyrs, he went through an early childhood enrollment as a catechumen, pursued an education in Latin, Punic, and Greek, and spent a significant amount of time studying at Carthage, where the martyrs were killed (Ryan xix-xx).

There is evidence that Augustine was not only aware of Perpetua's and Felicitas' text, but also that he considered it a formidable example of martyrdom that must be studied before one composed his own autobiographical narrative. He says in his three sermons on these martyrs' feast day, "for what thing might there be more glorious than these women, whom men may wonder at sooner than they may imitate?" ("On The Feast of SS Perpetua and Felicitas" 39). Augustine goes on to describe the soul as sexless to prove that Perpetua and Felicitas were able to contain in their female bodies the "manliness of their souls" (39), thus demonstrating a spectrum of gender identity to which the Christian subject could aspire rather than one set and tied to a devotional self.

Let us pause to note that the moral and written testimonies Augustine hopes to imitate are those of women saints, wives and mothers who left their families for martyrdom. The implications of this choice can be understood historically and through narrative influence. The latter has not been discussed by medievalists or memoir specialists. Augustine's praise of these saints in particular occurs during the age of sexual renunciation that began with St Paul in the AD 40s and 50s and lasted till around Augustine's death in AD 430 (P. Brown, *The Body and Society* xiii). Peter Brown

reminds us that a striking difference between North Africans like Augustine and his Italian peers who praise virginity is that, “for Augustine, martyrdom always represented the highest peak of human heroism. To have triumphed over the bitter fear of death was a far greater sign of God’s grace than to have triumphed over the sexual urge” (*The Body and Society* 397). This quest for imitation and heroism is why Augustine instigated great reform in the way Christians worshiped the martyrs, encouraging the faithful “to become true companions of the saints, worthy of the company of Christ, because transformed by Christ's grace in the same manner as His grace had once, to a high degree, transformed the martyrs of old” (P. Brown, “Enjoying the Saints” 5). His instigations for reform were directly tied to his conversion. Before his conversion to Catholicism/Roman Christian,¹⁵ Augustine was Manichean (Ryan xxi), a gnostic religion that did not believe in martyr worship, so his conversion allowed him to beget the practice with which he was raised and that his community of Carthage celebrated. As we turn from history to narrative influence, we can interpret Augustine’s ode to Perpetua and Felicitas as evidence that he does not consider himself the first memoir writer by any means, but a follower of his own advice to imitate—one who emulates the women’s fearless path through autobiographical testimonial. Converting to a religion that allows him to worship martyrs also allowed him

¹⁵ While Roman Christian is the most accurate term to describe Augustine’s post-conversion allegiance to orthodoxy and the Roman Church, all modern translations of Augustine’s *Confessions* as well as discussions of his work and life use the term Catholic. To be clear, Catholicism is a term used to separate a kind of Christianity from Lutheranism that came about during the Reformation, long after Augustine’s life. So as not to confuse the reader, from this point on I will use the term that other scholars and translators use: Catholic.

to pick his favorites and then to study their writing to understand how he might *begin* his own autobiographical writing. That he identifies quite possibly the oldest Christian narrative written by a woman as being worthy of imitation shows the intricate ways his conversion and autobiographical testimonial are linked. Thus, his conversion not only allows for a moral change, something memoir studies points out often, but a change specific to autobiographical writing, something that has not been discussed in regards to Augustine. Let us explore his conversion beyond its historical and narrative implications.

Memoir studies considers Augustine as a pagan who testifies to his conversion to Christianity, which allows scholars to use his conversion and “repenting” as models for all subsequent memoir (Mendelsohn 1). Instead we might read the *Confessions* as “not a book about what happened in Augustine’s past [but rather] a book about why what should have happened took so long to happen” (P. Brown xvi). We know, for example, that Augustine was a member of the gnostic religion of “hearers” known as the Manicheans before his conversion, but that he seems to have always believed in his mother’s visions from a Christian God, just as his pagan father did. Augustine called his mother God’s “handmaiden,” who birthed her son not only in body, but also “in her heart,” so that he could enter “into eternal light” with God (*Confessions* 179). Scholars who admire Augustine’s morality consider his skepticism prior to his conversion, which he identifies throughout his memoir as evidence of his “sickness,” a “grave error” (Ryan xxix). But this skepticism should also be considered a necessary part of his faith as well as healing. After all, one must be ill first in order to seek out healing. As Steven Justice reminds us, medieval subjects (and those in Late Antiquity, for that matter), like all of us in the

contemporary world, do not simply believe or disbelieve—skepticism “attache[s] itself routinely” to faith (18). Further, and particular to the Catholic faith, “God is a looming presence. His very existence instilled in all human hearts...a restless yearning, a sense of being, somehow, forever out of place” (P. Brown xvi) in the human existence before eternal life with God. It is simultaneously no small matter to believe in a God who awaits one only after a human death and no big matter that coming to this way of thinking requires time and experience. Augustine himself describes his conversion to Catholicism as an attempt to “reconcile” with God (239) through Jesus Christ as “the one mediator” (240), as opposed to an always-assumed understanding of the power of God. As a Manichean, Augustine would not have been permitted to worship martyrs, but as a Roman Christian, he could, and therefore could value anew his mother’s deeply spiritual experience of martyr worship. This complicated and fluid transition between states of belief shows a conversion to be only one part of the whole experience of faith, not an conversion from godlessness to God.

We can also consider the historical implications of baptism to Augustine’s pagan father and Roman Christian mother. Because Augustine was the son of a Roman Christian mother, baptism was considered an important aspect of the human experience. However, “baptism was considered too precious a sacrament to waste on a young boy with many sins ahead of him,” and although we presume his unbaptized state had something to do with his pagan father, in fact, “the son of a good Catholic mother, Augustine was simply allowed to run wild, like a vigorous, unpruned vine” (P. Brown xiv). Knowing Augustine’s prior status as a member of a widespread prominent Christian

sect and considering the practice of later baptism in North Africa's well-to-do Catholic families should lead us to question memoir scholars' argument that his moral improvement comes strictly from his belief in conversion. Augustine does not have a self that rockets into the most ideal human characteristics and stops—suddenly—there. The experience of faith is more complicated than an upward trajectory, and we cannot presume Augustine's healing is without the memory of his previous "sickness," for his narrative details both as parts of his whole faith experience.

Not only is Augustine's writing influenced by hagiographies like *The Passion*, his text also prompts us to understand that memoir itself *must* involve biography as much as autobiography. Thus in this formulation, memoir is not only a collaboration of genres and experiences, but honorary of another person or people as well as genre(s). Augustine's biography is a hagiography of his mother, Monica. While a hagiography is a narrative by or about a saint, Augustine nevertheless feels confident calling his mother by the name of "St. Monica" (186) when he discusses her death, even though she was never ordained as such. While his mother is not officially a saint, it is worth noting that Church authorization for canonization of saints is not implemented until about ten centuries after Augustine's life. As was common in late fourth-century Christianity piety, he probably believed in "the need for intimacy with a protector with whom one could identify with a fellow human being" (P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 61). We might consider this trend in piety alongside James J. O'Donnell's claim that "we cannot tell, with the evidence we have, what Monica meant to Augustine before his conversion," although "in the *Confessions* he attributed much to her early influence" (90).

In the *Confessions*, Monica has many of the same attributes of official saints who have hagiographies written about them. Monica is the all-knowing pious saint whose commitment to God—and Augustine’s eternal place with him—is everlasting. He thinks of her as a mystic, “this devout and holy soul” with direct access to God (*Confessions* 187). She is a guiding figure in his sermons, acting as a patron saint to those around her, her son, and her son’s audience, a woman who, because she could provide “reassurance in the tight web of known human relationships,” helped men who then “turned to discover themselves” (P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 68). Monica teaches him of the saints and martyrs from his birth, acting as a guide on his spiritual and physical pilgrimage. After following Augustine “over land and sea” (94) to protect him, only to hear that he has still not converted, she remains pious and gentle: “Hence most calmly and with a heart filled with confidence, she replied to me how she believed in Christ and that before she departed from this life she would see me a faithful Catholic” (95). Like many saints, her physical journey is a pilgrimage where her mystical knowledge is shown to soothe others during their travels alongside her: “In midst of storms at sea, she reassured the sailors themselves, by whom inexperienced travelers upon the deep are accustomed to being comforted, and promised them that they would reach port in safety, for You had promised this to her in a vision” (95). One of the most widely read and influential texts of the Middle Ages, Bede’s *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (AD 731), collects the many examples of saints who crossed stormy seas just as Monica did, with a prescience that their journey would be successful. One such example is Saint Germanus, who prayed to alleviate the “hostile power of devils” evidenced by the

terrible storm on a voyage from Gaul (Bede 65). There is Cuthbert, who, after praying, made “the raging sea [grow] calm” (Bede 267), and Egbert, who, as a believer, was made safe even though much of the ship he was on was demolished by a terrifying storm (Bede 279).

Also like other saints, Monica must deal with non-believers. Her husband prevents her child from being baptized, setting Augustine’s early existence as that of someone who is “not yet healed” (*Confessions* 13). When her husband encourages Augustine to experience marriage and sex, Monica’s prescience shows her that this will encourage Augustine’s “disease” (27). Yet, this is not as serious for her as it might sound to us. She never loses faith in her son’s conversion, and she does not blame her pagan husband, who she lived with “together in great harmony” (187), which reminds us of the proximity of skepticism to faith. When he finally does convert, her happiness moves him to praise God, proclaiming, “thus You changed her mourning into joy, a joy far richer than she had thought to wish, a joy much dearer and purer than she had thought to find in grandchildren of my flesh” (147). St Ambrose is Augustine’s confessor, Monica is his saint, and as a hagiography, his text is in service to her just as much as it is in service to the sick who seek religious healing.

While both Monica and Augustine know her death is near, her power allows them to share a vision where they communicate, but all that comes from their mouths is the word of God. Monica dies at 56, but her death occurs when Augustine is 33—a holy year indeed. Each sentence in the section of the *Confessions* concerning Monica’s failing health and death is a paraphrase or direct quote from the Bible, and it can be a confusing

section for the reader to understand. Augustine describes this section to God by explaining, “but we were straining out with the heart’s mouth for the supernal streams flowing from your fountain” (184). When the vision ends, Monica claims that all she hoped to accomplish in the world had been completed, and knowing that Augustine is a Catholic, she welcomes death. At the end of their shared vision, she is ready and asks Augustine, ““what am I doing here?”” (186), and as readers we are led to the next section of the memoir, “The Death of St. Monica.” As martyr saints before her have proclaimed, Monica dies when she proclaims it her time. More than a memoir of an individual man writing about his self in conversion, Augustine’s text is an honorary biography of his mother, the mystic whose access to the Christian God he never doubted.

Medical language is at the heart of Augustine’s memoir. The “sickness” and “healing” he teaches others about presents itself as communal magic rather than an individual’s health in relation to conversion, where a human being “infected with loathsome sores,” a “burning tumor” (37), or “horrid pus” (38), who spends his time “scratching lust’s itchy sore” (168), may become one with a “distilled heart” (176), who smells of “healthful herbs which the Church provides against serpents” (172) and knows the “God of every kind of health” (175), who heals even a “grievous” toothache if the afflicted bends down in “devout supplication” (175). With his medical language that universalizes humanity by the same principles of sickness and healing, we find “Augustine’s tendency to describe other people’s conversions in terms that closely parallel his own; he seems convinced that, given the unity of our human nature, conversion must ‘work’ along the same general lines for all of us” (O’Connell 267).

To understand how the efficacy of his healing depends on group participation, we must first understand who his audience is. His text is divided into thirteen thematic Books that use the Latin “vos” (thou, plural) for a direct address to human beings, and “tu,” (you, singular) for a direct address to God.¹⁶ His direct address to God is not simply private, however, because it is placed before an audience; each Book functions as a thematic sermon that provides a lesson on some subject while referencing the Bible and personal anecdotes, which Augustine would be quite good at, considering “[a Catholic bishop] had to be an effective public speaker—which was why the congregation of Hippo was so anxious to grab Augustine for themselves” (P. Brown x). To heal his previous sins, he must have a human audience witness his “speaking with his God” (xiii) as a way to provide them with information about how to accomplish healing, which is why his book was “composed so to be read aloud. Each book was written as a single speech...[and would have] taken approximately one hour to ‘perform’” (xi). Since the human audience is encouraged to lead a spiritually salubrious life, Augustine’s healing becomes their own, just as much as their witness of his address solidifies his own wellness. P. Brown points out that “readers can feel that they have stumbled, unawares, on the most intimate of all scenes—a human being (themselves quite as much as Augustine) brought with joy and trembling into the presence of God, their judge and their friend” (xiii). Augustine’s relationship with his audience is therefore not passive but collaborative. Augustine may

¹⁶ As Sheed notes in his “Translator’s Note” to his translation of the *Confessions*, “the use of *Thou* or *You* in speaking to God presented a real problem. St. Augustine, of course, knew nothing of *Thou* as a term used for religious use” (xxx). Sheed resolves this by using “you” unless Augustine is “in moments of straight prayer” (xxx), which Sheed reserves for “thou.” Ryan uses “you” throughout.

be the one guiding the healing magic in the group, but he still requires others in order for healing to come to fruition. If he can be healed, he says, there are others who have not fallen, who have not had need of healing, and to those, he says:

let him not laugh to scorn a sick man who has been healed by that same physician who gave him such aid that he did not fall ill, or rather that he had only a lesser ill...for he sees that I have been rescued from such depths of sinful disease by him, who, as he also sees, has preserved him from the same maladies. (*Confessions* 32)

In order to contextualize the *Confessions*' idiosyncratic information that requires both speaker and listener (or writer and reader), it can be helpful to compare it to the folk healing performed by a shaman. Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* explains the importance of anecdotal knowledge and paradox to the shaman: "It is an enchanting and empowering notion that, in striking contrast to what we might call the scientific model of healing and sickness on which the university training of doctors is now based, folk healers and shamans embark on their careers as a way of healing themselves...the cure is to become the curer" (447). While Augustine's interest in medical narratives—especially those attributed to Hippocrates, who believed in identifying a crisis that would lead to either healing or death—has been noted by Pierre Courcelle (195), we can contextualize shamanism historically and geographically in relation to Augustine, or more ambiguously in relation to magic and mysticism. Rather than the "confessional technique, which was widely employed for penance and the healing of the sick during the Middle Ages," (Stock, "Minds, Bodies, Readers" 493) and

which, although there is room to discuss “the therapeutic effects of meditative reading that were commonplace in numerous ancient and medieval settings” (497-498), is primarily affiliated with a turning inward of a private individual, I prefer shamanism as a lens for understanding the *Confessions*. I do not use the “confessional technique” as a lens to discuss the healing in the *Confessions* because the extent to which this practice required a communal setting is unclear. It is also worth noting that

mind-body treatments do not figure prominently in the writings of the founders of Western medicine, Hippocrates and Galen. This attitude was the distant forerunner of what has become known as the ‘medical model’ of illness: the view that each clinically definable condition has a single cause that can be determined, and that isolating this cause is what dictates the appropriate treatment. (Stock 494-495)

Therefore, while Augustine was well versed in Hippocrates, I think it is appropriate to imagine that the healing discussed in the *Confessions* can be compared to a more ambiguous kind of medicinal healing that does not figure a “single cause,” nor a single patient, for that matter. I focus on the *communal* nature of healing in the *Confessions*. Thus I examine how the shaman as model guide requires sickness and healing from his community. Importantly, his self-impact depends on how he impacts others. A paradox emerges: if the shaman intends to treat his own sickness, he must actually treat others. Healing oneself only happens when one engages with healing in a community. A self-investment is never as such.

This shared healing is not like the shared wickedness Augustine experiences with his friends before his conversion, but the sickness is a necessary experience for the shaman that leads to his healing. To understand his sickness, we might look at one of his most shameful—and most well-known—memories from Book II of the *Confessions*, where he recalls stealing pears with his friends, despite the fact that he was not starving. Augustine tells us, “I became to myself a barren land” (Sheed trans., *Confessions* 31) or “I became to myself a land of want” (Ryan trans., *Confessions* 34) and remarks that he only became a thief because he was with like-minded friends. This group experience is different than the group participation of healing. The empty, malnourished land these men become stands in sharp contrast to the salubrious, rich soil that can produce pears, and like a disease, the barrenness spreads and is shared. Yet this sickness is the only direction toward healing and toward the transformation of the sick man into a new healer. This static, unwell oneness with others is what makes the shaman evolve out of the sick man, for the shaman requires a differentiated yet collaborative group made of “a medley of swirling discourses—the shaman’s song, the patient’s narratives, the bawdiness, the leaden silences, the purging” (Taussig 460). As a group, the sick men have only one signifier, only one narrative. To depart from them is to enter differentiation. According to Taussig, it is not simply that the shaman obtains power after healing himself—just as Augustine could not become healed simply by removing himself from the group where he contributed to sickness—but that he must have an audience to heal in order to truly heal himself: “the power of shamanism lies not with the shaman but with the differences created by the coming together of shaman and patient, differences constituting imagery

essential to the articulation of what I call implicit social knowledge” (460). This “coming together” is to create “differences” that aid in healing, while Augustine’s shared perspective with friends is an attribute of his sickness. The paradox in their sick group is that it acts with an individual subjectivity. While the group that leads to healing is made of many perspectives, even bound together, the subjects remain.

We must consider how memoir as a genre accommodates this paradox of subjectivity, and Augustine teaches us that memoir presumes a group, for it acts as an instructional manual for healing, and as each author needs others in order to heal, the audience is as much author as Augustine. Perhaps more mildly, Augustine’s need for others in order to complete his conversion requires us to question if memoir as a genre is a collection of the sustained work of individual authors. Monica, who has foreseen that Augustine’s destiny is to be a Catholic and a teacher, recognizes that the conversion—the event that occasions his memoir—that must take place is for him to turn from a sick man to a healer, which as we have seen, requires others. Augustine tells us, “she [Monica] felt sure that through this state I was to pass from sickness to health, with a more acute danger intervening, through that paroxysm, as it were, which doctors call the crisis” (95). Just as Perpetua and Felicitas need an audience to become martyrs—to create the occasion for their memoir, which is martyrdom—Augustine needs an audience in order to truly convert and heal, which is why his text is separated into thematic, educational chapters that display an author speaking directly to God in front of others. While

Augustine does not live in the ideal historical moment for the martyrdom of Christians¹⁷ in Carthage, he can testify to his status as a Catholic in front of others, which removes his subjectivity from any affiliation with an individual self by making his memory collective via a public accounting of anecdotal knowledge, or “implicit social knowledge,” that others can use for healing in their own lives. The memoir is the instruction manual, and it tells us that healing is never autonomous or within a soul, but that a soul exists relationally with others.

However, the question remains: Does the fact that the *Confessions* records Augustine’s memories—not memories of a group of souls—not solidify his writing and healing as distinctly solitary, autonomous, and individual? In fact, Augustine’s own perspective on memory can provide answers to this question for us. We find that memory is one of the ways through which the healing group transcends time and space, strengthening its mystical connection to God. Augustine’s philosophical writing on memory is beautiful but strange, and it demonstrates his engagement with the rich history

¹⁷ In AD 387 Augustine converted from Manichaeism to Catholicism and subsequently became a rigid opponent of Manichaeism and the Manichaean scholar Faustus of Mileve, even writing the *Contra Faustum*. This was good timing for Augustine, as Theodosius I issued a decree of death for Manichaeans in AD 382 and declared Christianity the only true religion (“St. Augustine of Hippo”). What is interesting is that Augustine praised martyrdom over other kinds of extreme religious practices, such as virginity. If he wanted to be a martyr, he had a much better chance staying a Manichean than converting. Thus his conversion rings even more remarkable and true—he suffered missing out on what he admired most so that he could participate in the faith he was raised in, and the practice of martyr worship that permeated his culture.

of mnemotechnic theory and rhetoric.¹⁸ The *Confessions* represents memory as a thing never confined to any one individual, or conversely, something possibly owned by an individual that nevertheless transcends that person's autonomous physical space. In Book X Augustine describes his memory after conversion as a paradoxical place where things are lost, irretrievable by his own will, which prompts him to consider a simultaneously pragmatic yet elusive riddle: if God is eternal, and an individual has always been with him, can one remember God? Augustine's answer seems to be that in order to recollect God, one must surrender any attempt to conceptualize memory as something that one possesses and controls, and secondly, in order to understand the process of recollection itself, one must understand oneself as without autonomy. He says that even one's own "seat of...mind...lies within" his memory, not the other way around (219). Instead, Augustine claims, one must trust the mystical experience of allowing information to "present itself" (213) because if God is in all, then memory itself has agency, and memory is a location where other things can lie "within." But therein lies a dilemma: God is placeless because he is all place, so how can he be contained in a location, such as memory? As David Tell says, Augustine's answer to this question is found by examining the act of written confession itself:

Confession is a performative remembering in which the object of memory is not contained in the mind before it is disclosed through speech; rather, it

¹⁸ See David Tell's "Beyond Mnemotechnics: Confession and Memory in Augustine" for a broad overview of this discipline in relation to Augustine. See also, Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory* and Mary J. Carruthers' *Book of Memory*.

is embodied in the speech act, actively ingredient in confession itself.

Confession, then, displaces memory; it surpasses the palaces of the mind for which Augustine has become famous and refigures memory within the confessional expression itself. As such, confession renders Augustine's absurd solution tenable: it is a way of remembering that which cannot be placed in memory. (234)

Augustine's *Confessions* are the vessel through which he acts as a spiritual healer who participates in group healing, whether that be with people he sees as he speaks his sermons or people who read thousands of years after his death. If, in addition, his *Confessions* acts as a means to allow him to remember without the necessity of scavenging through his own individual memory, each memory of God that Augustine recollects is not particular to himself as an individual. Therefore, in addition to his confession providing an example of how healing is a collective act, it also imagines memory as collective, even when the experience recalled might be particular to his own life. Certainly this is confusing, which is perhaps why Augustine says, "truly, you dwell *in my memory*" and "you are the Lord God *of the mind*...you remain unchangeable above all things" (*Confessions* 219, emphasis added) in the same paragraph.

Of course, that memory works paradoxically comes directly from Augustine's spiritual beliefs, in which to surrender autonomy to God is only to wake up to the realization that autonomy was never available, just as the agency ascribed to memory cannot come from the individual because "what we have completely forgotten we can not even look for it is so lost" (219). Memory is a mystical force that has the agency to

provide a recollection of God, but because it is tied to an individual human, it is also distinctly less than God. Memory is integral to the way God and humans interact through spiritual belief:

Great is the power of memory! An awesome thing, my God, deep and boundless and manifold in being! And this thing is the mind, and this am I myself: What then am I, O my God? What is my nature? A life varied and manifold and mightily surpassing measurement. (211)

One might retort that Augustine does talk about possessing memory in the same chapter, on the same page in fact, when he says, “I will pass beyond even this power of mine which is called memory, desiring to reach you, where you may be reached, and to cling to you there where you can be clung to” (211). But when Augustine elaborates on this formula, he carefully corrects his thinking that memory can be transcended. Instead, he realizes, “if I find you [God] apart from memory, I am unmindful of you. How then should I find you, if I do not remember you?” (212). With this rhetorical question, Augustine ties God and memory together in an amalgam where memory must then have the same eternal, omnipresent qualities of God, and thus it transcends its status as a specific location. As with memory, “for Augustine, all human life is a preface to a future the human imagination can scarcely grasp; so at every point, the whole past becomes anew and the future, whole and entire, remains” (O’Donnell).

I have suggested that for Augustine memory dislocates an individual’s experience of his place in time because this memory belongs to a healing group that may transcend decades, thus becoming a tool of God. I also want to focus on how this belief is equally a

product of Augustine's studies in Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism's perspective on time draws us away from individual subjectivity. Plato believes that memory is not constrained by linear time like past, present, future, and therefore is not stuck to the individual's past experience nor his present moment of recollection, for a memory signals that someone's soul is "remembering something it already knew in a pre-existent life. This is what the Greek philosopher called *anamnesis*, that is, learning-as-remembering" (Kripal 38). Moreover, Augustine understood Plotinus, the major Neoplatonist thinker, as believing that "our 'fall' was the 'lawful' consequence of a wrongful act of *tolma*, an 'audacious' turning away from contemplative subordination in order to delight in the autonomous deployment of our own active powers (*Ennead* 5.1.1)" (O'Connell 217). A less fixed notion of time engenders a less fixed notion of selfhood, in which an integral aspect of belief involves how "the irrefutable solipsism of self confront[s] with the absolute reality of God, the wholly other" (O'Donnell 80), who then teaches the human being that time and self are never autonomous. First, this concept of memory presumes that who one *is* consists of being what one *was* in a "pre-existent life" (Kripal 38). Second, rather than conceiving of a pre- and post-confessional state of the soul, this concept presumes that the linear movement of age and progress of the self engaged in action is a mistake with spiritual consequences. To even say "*his* pre-existent life" is grammatically incorrect, for the point of a Neoplatonist understanding memory is to acknowledge its inability to be possessed by an individual or any singular identity. For Augustine, Neoplatonic memory is a way to "distinguish between presumption and confession...that is, between arid knowledge and true wisdom" (Stock, *Augustine the*

Reader 74). In this understanding of memory, one must also believe that selfhood is nonexistent or destroyed once one converts to a (re)newed belief in God and remembers outside of the façade of selfhood. For a thinker like Augustine, “if predestination operates, it was God who directed him to these books before he had an opportunity to think seriously about scripture...so that the manner in which he was affected by such treatises might be imprinted on his memory” (Stock, *Augustine the Reader 74*). In this kind of memory, one does not have an individual experience that can be recalled; one always was with God, and God set roots inside the individual’s memory so that the individual remembers that memory is not simply his own.

Thus, memory and belief are intricately woven together as emblems of a reality that remains incomprehensible to the human due to its complexity and confusing nature. Strangely, when events particular to one’s life are recollected, they become a part of the universe at large. Here we see the paradox for the healer as believer: in order to have knowledge to heal and teach, one must remember, but one must reconceptualize memory as something that is not tied to the autonomous self. Memory, like healing, works mystically and exists in an ambiguous time space that must be fed continually by other believers, where temporal conceptions of past and future and spatial conceptions of in and out collapse. To testify is to teach, and to teach is to be taught. To know is to remember, and to remember is to annihilate. Just as healing cannot be attributed to the individual, neither can true memory. Memory is magical because it is shared and because it exists beyond human conceptions of time and space: “Augustine remembers God without placing God” (Tell 234). Yet, despite perception, what is magical is what is

actual, real, and constant. Years later, we are still consumed with Augustine's text, which means his place as a healer is, indeed, always present. Without linear or contained memory, there is no "first" memoir or individual author. Instead, there is the narrative of memory at large, the ether of the universe.

Interlude

I will now examine two more authors, who, like Augustine, are attributed with the "first" memoirs in their native languages (German and English, respectively), in order to show how these authors of the late Middle Ages rely on the elusive practice of mysticism. I selected the memoirs of Henry Suso and Margery Kempe to include in this chapter because they are virtually unacknowledged by scholars of memoir despite being canonical in other fields across the humanities. I do not include them because they fill "first" positions, to which I hope my discussion of *The Passion's* detachment of time and importance attests. Even memoir studies' "first" beloved author, Augustine, rejects the notion that memory and testimony fit into a linear, chronological timeline. I include Suso and Kempe to show additional important examples of memoirs that do not correspond to the autodiegetic traditions of confession and repentance or selfhood and subjectivity. Both authors' memoirs are multi-authored, work against an articulation of individual selfhood, and rely on ambiguous representations of truth that come from their mystical understanding of the world and magical experiences in it.

Henry Suso (AD 1360)

Gender exists across a spectrum for Perpetua and Felicitas, memory exists across a spectrum for Augustine, and the elusive, brilliant truth exists across a spectrum for

Henry Suso, the fourteenth-century writer who, along with his teacher, Meister Eckhardt, and his contemporary, Johannes Tauler, is considered one of the great German mystics (McGinn 4). Henry Suso's *The Life of the Servant* is often called the first (Middle High) German memoir. Yet in *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*, Richard Kieckhefer claims that Suso's *Life* should actually be called the first "auto-hagiography" (the term that the famous occult figure, Aleister Crowley, uses for his own memoir) in German. With the scholarly popularization of this term to describe Suso's text, Kieckerhefer suggests that *The Life of the Servant* does not employ the conventions of a particular genre. Expanding this idea, we may find that many texts employ aspects of multiple genres, and that memoir especially—a genre with conservatively defined parameters—might have conventions that are quite easy to transgress.

The most obvious way this text transgresses conservative conventions of memoir is that it is co-written with Suso's student, Elsbeth Stigel, making it yet another example of a well-known memoir that is not concerned with autodiegetic form nor the focus on the self that the form implies. It is also hard to think of this text as a "first," for while it is Suso's memoir, he is often noted as being ignorant of its existence for much of its progress. Co-writing implies an agreement between authors, at least as far as the task of completion is concerned, but this text was co-written without any amicable understanding other than the fact that both acknowledge a mystical guide who provided "a transcendent spiritual contribution to the autobiography...a man who was never formally proclaimed either saint or blessed, namely Meister Eckhart" (Wackernagel 100). This memoir works

against autodiegetic linearity so much so that it began without Suso's knowledge of its existence! Jotting down their conversations about his life, Stigel began writing Suso's memoir before Suso did. When Suso discovered it, he took all her work and threw it in a fireplace. When the pages began to burn, Suso received confirmation from God that the book should be written, rescued the pages he could (Tobin 38), and contributed his own writing to the project. Deciphering who wrote which parts is not always easy, except perhaps for sections that remark on Stigel's return from the beyond to show Suso that she is an angel in Heaven.

Suso's work is in part about his personal experiences as a mystic, but his memoir does not suggest that the popular fourteenth-century experience of "turning inward" celebrates the individual self in spiritual transformation. While mystical experience is often understood as private and interior to the individual, Suso's memoir shows us that a mystical experience in memoir has necessary social implications. The most obvious paradox of turning inward is that a human being begins in autonomous work in order to ultimately gain the capacity to have "an encounter with God" that will result in the breakdown of the autonomous self and an elevation of becoming "one" with God (Tobin 14). For a mystic, the move toward the truth of the universe is always a move away from the self. Mysticism is a giant category to tackle, so let us quickly examine at least some of the important issues upon which Suso, as an early member of the Dominican order from age thirteen instead of the more common age of fifteen (Tobin 20), would ruminate.

The Western fourteenth century is notable in part for the Avignon papacy and the Western Schism, so while scholars might note the fourteenth century as a "golden age of

mysticism...they also note the massive credibility gap of the institutional Church, which was only intensified by the popes' 'Babylonian captivity' in Avignon and the embarrassing schism that followed their return to Rome" (Newman 1). From 1309 to 1378 seven popes moved to Avignon, beginning with Clement V, and many popes claimed the title, in both Rome and France, until 1417. Soon after 1309, Emperor Louis IV and Pope John XXII began to struggle over power, and John excommunicated Louis in 1324, so "one now had to choose between emperor and pope at a time when papal claims to moral leadership had been greatly compromised" (Tobin 14). This breakdown of papal clarity combined with the Black Death made scholasticism as well as turning inward (sometimes called "Hesychast," or simply, contemplation) popular religious paths for Dominicans, beghards, beguines, and laypeople alike, including Suso.

While reasoning and contemplation can be thought of as ways an individual cultivates a spiritual self, that Suso and Stigel wrote his memoir collaboratively and in common German suggests to readers the importance of a widespread communal mystical path in opposition to specialized narratives written for a select group of religious people who could read Latin. His interest in shared religious experiences is evident in much of his work:

according to Suso, even heretics have an authentic experience of the divine. The problem stems rather from a certain difficulty in integrating that authentic spiritual experience 'here on earth' into the material and social life of the world around them. In other words, heretics are not wicked in themselves, but they are outsiders. But we could object that

among the saints many also lived an outsider's life. However that may be, and taking into consideration the prejudices of his time, Suso here shows great lucidity and exceptional tolerance. (Wackernagel 106)

Thus, Suso's memoir represents the act of turning inward as an element of integrating spirituality into the "social life of the world around" others. The common vernacular allows for a wider audience to gain access to the book's information, suggests a shared God, and disseminates Suso's own strategies for transcendence. At the same time it should be noted that Suso sought to expand his readership even in among the more specialized audience of Latin readers. He translated his German works, such as the *Horologium* and *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, for "in turning to the universal language of theology and learning, the mystic aimed to reach a much larger, international audience of monks, friars, and secular priests" (Newman 2).

The social nature of *The Life's* publication is complemented by the book's descriptions of turning inward as an interpersonal experience that involves both a union with God and an acknowledgement of an audience's relationship to God. This can be hard to see at first, as Suso seems solitary and grumpy in the text, "the sufferer [who is] compensated for all the suffering that he had endured" by others (Suso 157). But we find that even for a misanthropic mystic, a union with God relies on what can be understood as courtly love¹⁹ and audience acknowledgement. While spiritual memoirs of the

¹⁹ While courtly love is sometimes thought of as a nineteenth-century literary invention, it is equal to the medieval "fine love," in German *hohe Minne* (Boase 667), and discussed in texts from the Middle Ages, too.

medieval period are often thought considered narrations of “remarkable inner transformations” (Mendelsohn 1), Suso demonstrates that this seemingly personal path is actually what pulls the individual out of his status as such and into an erotic, shared relationship with a non-physical lover, God. Suso—or Stagel as Suso—speaks directly to “Eternal Wisdom” and uses chapter 3 to dissect his “marriage” to Eternal Wisdom. By the end of the twelfth century, Papal authority mandated sexual confirmation as a requirement of marriage (Fanous and Leyser x). While this mandate does not impact Suso’s physical relationship with women, as he does not seek out a wife, it does indicate that Suso—a man avoiding the charges of heresy that his teacher, Eckhardt, had suffered—would consider his mystical experiences to be sexual as much as spiritual:

Now Eternal Wisdom presented itself in sacred scripture as loveable as an agreeable beloved who gets herself up in a finery to please male inclinations, speaking softly, as a woman does, so that she might attract all hearts to her. Sometimes she would say how deceiving other lovers are but how loving and constant she is. His youthful spirit was drawn by this and he was affected like the wild animals of the forest when a panther giving off its sweet fragrance draws them to itself. (Suso 67)

In Suso’s experience, Wisdom as “Christ the Goddess” (Newman 1) understands his sexual inclination—he is straight—and has the power to lure him by acting as the playful flirt, coy yet with a knowledge of what males desire. She makes herself out to be reliable and loyal to him, understanding that he has been “deceived” by others.

Suso's written account of his relationship with God also provides a point of relation and community for his female audience, who would understand that "erotic mysticism had long been considered an appropriate form of devotion for women. Before Suso, however, it was highly unusual for a man to play the male role in a scenario of celestial love" (Newman 2). His audience, which "consisted largely of nuns and beguines—religious women who lived in same-sex communities, small or large" (Newman 1), are valued in the book's authorial decisions as likewise lovers in the sacred, sexual bond. The steamy memoir shows that Suso's perceived personal, spiritual path is actually a relationship he develops with another being who has even more agency to draw him to the spiritual through seduction. Furthermore, by ironically making his relationship with Wisdom subject to the same rules as his female audience would be as Brides of Christ, he draws his community into the narrative. Suso feminizes God at times so their relationship comes off as straight, but then he also feminizes himself while God is male, making himself the bride of Christ. He keeps the appropriate male/female sexual relationship by inverting the biological sex of God and servant.

The strategy of affirming gendered mystical relationships for an audience who would be familiar with these arrangements is consistent throughout Suso's work (Newman 2), but it is important to note that in Suso's memoir *Wisdom*, specifically, vacillates between gender roles in order to accommodate his widespread audience's spiritual needs, showing "that his wish to tell a good story often modified the original experience [with] almost a certainty (Tobin 44). We find him in chapter 38 in a distinctly male experience, where a woman, "deceiving and cunning...[with] the heart of a wolf,"

accuses him of fathering her child, and another woman tries to aid his suffering through an offer to nab the babe and “at night bury it alive or stick a needle through its brain so that it will surely die” (Suso 149-50). In this experience, Suso does not need God the female lover; instead, he requires God the strong, masculine martyr. Despite his continuous sense of being “overcome by a moment of weakness” (152), Suso’s task is to not allow anyone devoted to him (many come to offer a helping, murderous hand) to rid the world of the child who brings him so much suffering nor to become resigned when “gossipers” treat him like a “skinned carcass that has been torn to shreds” (153). Instead, he must endure each new length of suffering. In his communications with God, God acts as a coach, reminding Suso that he must be like Christ—the ultimate athlete in games of evil—and suffer like this man does: “Remember that Christ did not just want his dear disciple John and loyal St. Peter in his chaste presence. He also wanted to allow evil Judas near him. And you long to be a follower of Christ, but do not want to endure willingly your Judas?” (154). Apparitions visit Suso (156), reminding him that he must suffer and endure as Christ did. Ultimately to his benefit, Suso does endure, for “the malicious woman who had caused him so much pain died inexplicably. Many of the others who had abused him most harshly were plucked by death from this life” (156), and Suso is free to know that his written works will “become more valuable and loved than they ever were” (153). The transformations from female to male God across the book is tied to Suso’s consideration of audience, just as his suffering is tied to his consideration of his oeuvre:

The female figure appears first because Suso probably understood his courtship of Eternal Wisdom as a devotion appropriate to beginners, who are traditionally enticed into God's service with 'sweetness' and 'consolations.' Lady Wisdom fires the ardor of youth, but the mature man must learn to follow Wisdom incarnate on the difficult way of the Cross.

(Newman 9)

Suso manages to reach as wide an audience as possible by affirming widespread notions of mystical union. It is no mistake that his understanding of authorial influence arises in the situation where he must endure the many Judases around him: audience is always on the forefront of his mind. Thus, while we know that he was vastly interested in *Sapientia*, the Goddess Wisdom, and this partially fueled his courtly relationship with God as female, we can also see that his vacillation between the masculine and feminine to describe his mystical union with God met the needs of his large audience, marking his turn inward distinctly social. After his great suffering, Suso reflects (or Stigel writes down his reflection) that "God clearly let him know that he had been more nobly removed from self and placed into God by this misfortune than from all the many different sufferings that he had endured from his youth to that time" (157). His great suffering, then, is evidence of his departure from self and his merger with the greater spirit and readership.

In addition to illuminating the social nature of turning inward, Suso's vacillation between gender roles shows us that he values a mystical truth that is anecdotal rather than factual. In this way, Suso's text suggests that memoir places more importance on a

mystical path than on the articulation of a self in moral transition. This is difficult to justify to memoir specialists. According to a majority of these scholars, the memoirist is expected to know that people read events in memoir as factual evidence of an author's self. For example, we are told that "ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse" (Eakin, "Breaking Rules" 123), and "a memoir is almost any *record of facts*, set down either for itself or for use in a larger composition" (Seidensticker 46, emphasis added). With an author's ethical self and his ability to be completely factual in mind, we are told that "a good memoirist doesn't rely only on memory and imagination...she sticks to facts" because she knows "memoirists should commit to total veracity as a goal... No more reliance on memory only. Memoirists ought to do the work of a journalist or historian" (Hamburger 28-29). However, if we understand that the truth of Suso's testimonial discourse is more elusive than the facts of his life, then we have to consider that the link between truth and self is not readily apparent, and the self of the memoirist is incapable of being criticized, for even if it exists, it does not exist as scholars have understood it. For example, at one point in the memoir, the child Jesus appears to tell Stigel that Suso should endure pain for "this multitude of roses are the many different sufferings God intends to send him. He should accept them cheerfully from God and endure them in patience" (137). Jesus' visitation is an unverifiable event between his spirit and Stigel, and then Stigel and Suso, so we cannot attribute an ethical, clear truth to it. How can we understand this moment conceptually? Besides acting as one of many eerie, sensual passages in the book, it justifies Suso's path in decadent pain, and justification spurned from the anecdotal practice of mysticism is the reason we have

Suso's memoir in the first place. In one powerful moment in the text, an angry Suso burns Stigel's memoir/biography of his life, believing her a thief of his personal memories and life events. But, as he burns the pages in a rage, God instructs him to cease, and he then goes on to complete the memoir. Suso saves what remains of Stigel's writing and adds his own to it. The memoir is a product of an occasion that can never be proved through a hunt for evidence—God's visitation—yet without this un-provable experience, Suso would never have found the justification for the existence of the memoir, and we would not have it. We have to search beyond a narrow conception of the truth to understand, appreciate, and know this work as memoir.

Memoir scholars might lean toward "total veracity as a goal" for the memoirist because they feel implicated by an author's narrative if it purports to be nonfiction. After all, we all share this real world and its history. But if we read the memoir without focusing on how Suso's one self is being narrated, we might find some provocative pleasure in being implicated. We are told that God intended this text to come to us all, for it is written in a language the common people would understand. Suso's *Life* tells us that one's personal turning inward happens in a social way. Reading Suso's *Life* can be our own turning inward, a way that we quiet and strengthen our minds. This suggests that our relationship with the authors of memoir might be our way out of the isolation through a turn inward. The text suggests that perhaps we too can play with justification in our own lives. If we judge the self and exploits of an author, we might at least bring consciousness to the justifications we so readily make.

Margery Kempe (15th Century)

Margery Kempe was a Christian who became a convert to a more rigorous form of Christianity in her adult life. Her conversion does not gain the amount of acumen and support from her community that a reader might expect after reading about a convert like Augustine. Before she converts, this well-to-do daughter of a man of Norfolk is often ridiculed for wearing gold pipes on her head (Kempe 43), and post-conversion, her claim to be a virgin after having fourteen children, as well as her constant crying, do not win her much applause from her community, medieval scholars, or scholars of memoir (or even undergraduate students in a contemporary university setting, as anyone who has taught her can attest!). Yet she perseveres as a mystic on pilgrimage, even after being charged in Leicester and York with Lollardy, and she cultivates the chronic pain desired by a mystic or saint when martyrdom is not available as a righteous culmination of faith. While critics deride her for not fulfilling their notions of individuality, Kempe's memoir purposefully resists a narration of the religious path of individual, autonomous selfhood through the book's multi-authorship and Kempe's realized, sexualized body. I focus on two elements of *The Book*—her devaluing of individual authorship and her seemingly autonomous body—to undo notions that surround her text from outside the field of memoir studies. However, as with all other parts to this project, this section asks memoir scholars to reevaluate their notions about the genre. Through my argument about Kempe, I hope to support a greater discussion of her work in the field by showing how it conflicts with popular theories and encourages us to seek greater ambiguity in the theories we use to critique memoir.

The publication history of *The Book of Margery Kempe* makes us consider that while a linear history is a helpful way for scholars to talk about memoir, it is not a realistic way to understand the greater implications for the genre. *The Book* is considered the first memoir written in (Middle) English, but it was not found until 1934 (Windeatt 9), a time of economic depression, during which “the general level of spiritual aspiration...was no higher than the moral rearmament advocated by the Oxford Group. Prophets, let alone mystics, were not wanted,” and accusations of hysteria resounded around Kempe, then later, upon the text’s discovery in the twentieth century, claims of “post-partum psychosis” (William Ober 25 and 29). This appeal to something called “first” is reminiscent of Augustine’s Neoplatonic reevaluation of memory and time, as well as the opening section of *The Passion*. *The Book’s* status as “one” is established only when the numbers begin to reach the hundreds of thousands of memoirs, which means that the hundreds of thousands have each existed in a kind of number limbo that did not solidify until Kempe’s text was found and published. Kempe’s discovered text and her retroactively decreed status as “first English memoir” emphasizes the strange way memoir requires readers to think away from rationalism and materialism, something that magic and mysticism both do very well, even in autobiographical testimonial. It is fitting then that our “first English” memoir writer be an aspiring mystic who, even in her own text, pays no attention to chronology or time (Windeatt 23).

Kempe’s experiences are narrated by multiple authors, resulting in an odd document where a strange third person address from the scribe who writes for Kempe calls her “the creature” in her own first person narrative. This third person address might

be from herself speaking to the scribe from the position of a vessel who receives instruction from God. This already displaces the autodiegetic form as central to her memoir. Perhaps its seeming oddities are why her text is, like Suso's, one that does not get discussed in memoir studies. While Suso's or Perpetua and Felicitas' texts are never mentioned in memoir studies, Kempe's does get an occasional nod to being "the first" memoir in English (Yagoda, *Memoir* 34), but it still goes unexamined as a text that can be used to understand memoir at large. The complicated history that surrounds this text is further complicated by Kempe's illiteracy. Instead of burdening her composition, her illiteracy is evidence of her interest in the oral aspects of mysticism and magic. Her memoir establishes itself as a testimonial speech act rich with these practices. God speaks to Kempe, Kempe speaks to the scribe as God speaking to her, the scribe writes her words down along with an unknowable number of modifications, and the reader attributes the text to Kempe. It seems like directions for a spell, indeed.

Three authors for one woman's text is not something that contemporary memoir scholars expect to see in the genre, yet after looking at multiple medieval authors, we see that memoir's subjectivity is shared, while an individual self is nonexistent. What distinguishes memoir for the well-known memoir scholar Philippe Lejeune is that it cannot be written without an individual author "constructing and communicating a point of view towards *oneself*" ("Autobiography in the Third Person" 41, emphasis added), whereas in fiction an author can construct many or no points of view toward oneself, for the text is not expected to be a direct reflection of an individual author. Lejeune claims that the third person in memoir is "more often used for internal distancing and for

expressing personal confrontation” (28). He claims that his device shows us that “...all imaginable combinations reveal, with differing degrees of clarity, the nature of the person—the tension between impossible unity and intolerable division and the fundamental schism which turns the speaker into a fugitive” (32). His use of the word “fugitive” recalls his claim that memoir is an offshoot of fiction (33), but Lejeune implicitly establishes an essential necessity for memoir: an individual author. This, of course, presumes that an author be literate and not in need of a scribe. Kempe’s illiteracy obviously does not preclude her from having knowledge, though, as the text attests via her voracious memory and citation of Bible passages.

While scholars of memoir are intent to establish a history of the genre, they do so without deliberating over important historical happenings, even written language’s history. When considering Middle English, we know that the systematization and standardization of English is not a primary concern for medieval writers and readers; the farther back one goes with English, the more variety exists. This concern for standardization grows as the English language spreads, and the eighteenth century becomes an important time for dictionaries and encyclopedias, such as Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* or *Johnson’s Dictionary*, that demonstrate the “appropriate” etiquette for English grammar and spelling. What the third person means for medieval writers of Latin, then Old English, then Middle English, is probably different than what it means to us. But even if we take Lejeune’s position that the third person implies authorial distancing for granted, *The Book* still defies his possible classifications, for in it multiple authors and points of view complicate the third person. Is

Kempe speaking about herself in the third person to demonstrate that she is speaking God's point of view on her (as Catherine of Siena does, also while her secretary writes the text itself)? Is she speaking her story in the first person only to have her scribe change first to third to make her the object of piety in the narrative? Is Kempe vacillating between the first and third person and her scribe correcting her inconsistencies? Like a holy trinity, God, Kempe, and her scribe together create a magic subjectivity where words are repeated thrice, like an incantation that is ultimately laid down on parchment.

My suggestion that God is one of the authors of this text may seem odd, but in all cases where Kempe needs guidance in her life, God suggests that her autonomy does not exist, physically or metaphorically, and that she only need to welcome that, especially through her body:

For it is appropriate for the wife to be on homely terms with her husband...Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband...you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head and my feet as sweetly as you want. (Kempe 126-27)

What might this passage evoke in a reader? Instead of considering Kempe a hysterical woman who thinks she is copulating with God, I apply agency to God as an author who teaches Kempe something through her body. While some contemporary medical accounts of Kempe's memoir claim that "a psychologically more sophisticated readership may assess her emotional status some six-and-a-half centuries later, *there is no room for doubt*

that such conversations and visions were therapeutic” (Ober 33, emphasis added). A more generous reading by Bynum notes that Kempe is not simply “cuddling with Christ in bed” as an “uneducated woman taking literally metaphors from the Song of Songs” (*Fragmentation and Redemption* 41 and 44). That Kempe is medically diagnosed from 1934 to the present while Augustine’s and Suso’s spirituality are never once discussed in relation to psychological diagnosis shows us that we can put aside the pathologizing of Kempe and still come up with reasonable interpretations of *The Book*. This also shows us the pervasive sexism that still occupies academia at large, and memoir studies in particular. If we do not dismiss Kempe, we find that *The Book* shows us that although her mysticism solidifies her as a writer working from a lens of anecdotal truth, we as readers cannot separate the anecdotal from the literal, and any discomfort with what constitutes the literal in this text does not have to be an occasion for diagnosis. We might simply note that *The Book* collects anecdotal testimonial of Kempe’s literal experiences with God as her co-author and lover. That Kempe’s relationship with God involves both intercourse and authorship shows that “the connection between the sexual and devotional [is] a principal element of Margery’s innovative vision for her spiritual life and a testimony to her control as author” (Williams 529). It is important to note that Kempe’s intercourse with God is not akin to entertaining spiritualism either.²⁰ In the case of Kempe’s text, there is no divide to penetrate, no sense of the safety of autonomous

²⁰ Kempe does not treat her sexual experiences as a visitation from a ghost brought on by pleading or a séance. That particular kind of ghost sex is tied to the nineteenth-century phenomenon of spiritualism arising after the famous Fox sisters heard noises coming from their New York basement, supposedly by a murdered salesman buried there, and then spirit photography became a cultural past time (Kripal 50).

individual humans with discrete senses of self to persuade that the world they imagine has some room for elaboration. Kempe is God is Kempe. Kempe's body may be distinct, but that does not mean God does not have access to it at all times. When God tells Kempe that she may place him inside the "arum of [her] soul" while in her marriage bed, it is not just her non-corporeal soul that is to be penetrated by a mystical essence—the way to reach that arum seems to be by pointing out the lack of autonomy her body has. For Kempe,

sex becomes more significant in her spiritual life than it was in her earthly one. In most medieval devotional texts, sexual imagery expresses [merely] spiritual longing, and scholars have generally agreed that Margery's use of sex is inappropriately literal (or insufficiently figurative). (Williams 528)

Yet, this "inappropriately literal" sexual relationship demonstrates Kempe's spiritual strength as much as her physical desires. Her body is something that is necessary for her non-physical, spiritual state to thrive with God, as a wife would (ideally, at least) thrive in her marriage bed with her husband. Additionally, while the lines of physical and non-physical are blurred, what constitutes sexual consent is also unclear. If indeed God is everywhere, how can one's body ever truly be autonomous? While the blurring of consent for a female subject might make a contemporary reader pause uncomfortably, Kempe finds her sexual relationship with God liberating. She no longer has to consider her husband her primary lover, and her body, already known to be fertile, has a holy power. Her body is able to hold what is everywhere outside of it—God—making her

body more and less than the autonomous physical space it might inhabit. Her body has the power and acumen to contain God.

Kempe also acts as the powerful penetrator, guiding her scribe's physical actions as God guides hers. Yet the words she uses, shared with God and written through the scribe, are still her own; all sentences and physical actions are focused on who she is and what she combines with her body and spirit. Kempe's voice is not the tool she uses to speak her personal, spiritual path; it is the physical and metaphorical reality that three authors share.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to upset contemporary notions of the "origins" of Western memoir and its "first" authors while suggesting that memoirs' paradoxes and reliance on anecdotal knowledge complicate our existing notions about the genre. My hope for memoir studies is that we become more ambiguous and curious in how we approach and define the texts we call memoir. Early Western memoir shows us memoir's methodologies were once content with the elusive boundaries of testimony instead of demanding the articulation of a specific kind of self resulting from a specific kind of psychological or spiritual journey. If we as scholars of memoir acknowledge our bias toward a narrow definition of the self, we can then participate in and be implicated by the more elusive boundaries that memoir elucidates. While this may not encourage a linear history of the genre or its preoccupations, it can create space for us to discuss the ambiguities inherent to the genre, eradicate the sexism from our field that stands quietly behind scholars' thirst for the "truth," and perhaps allow us to work with ambiguity in our

own scholarship—not unclear writing, but exploratory arguments that may not arrive at a specific argumentative location.

While the authors in this chapter span from Late Antiquity to the later Middle Ages, they are by no means a conclusive list of authors for these time periods. Many authors, such as Catherine of Siena, Christina the Astonishing, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich (an important influence for Kempe), Christina of Markyate, Radegund, Umlita of Faenza, Luisa De Carvajal, and many others wrote remarkable texts, can be examined for their contribution to memoir. Since we that a memoir can be written by someone other than the author or subject to whom the text is attributed, and a hagiographical text is often also an autobiographical testimony, a new line of scholarship can emerge in memoir studies that examines how medieval hagiographies by people such as Aelfric, Bokenham, Chaucer, and Lydgate both serve the study of memoir and complicate our notions of what testimony is and can do.

Chapter Three: Memoir's Secular Transformation That Never Was: Rousseau and Slave Narrative Writers as Strange Companion

It is impossible for scholars of memoir to discuss the eighteenth century without discussing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Scholars applaud Rousseau as a canonical memoirist who took up where Augustine left off and, by addressing his fellow human beings rather than a God, made it possible for this formerly spiritual genre to take a secular form. In the opening pages of his memoir, Rousseau writes, "my purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true in nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself" (17). Smith and Watson place his work within a larger tradition of secularism and humanism, in which the eighteenth century begins to be about "the self-fashioning private individual" (*Reading Autobiography* 87) instead of the medieval memoir's perceived focus on an individual's relationship with a God. At the same time, Rousseau is derided by memoir specialists who think his "characteristically egotistical" (Sprinker 326) book is a self-serving attempt to vent about a "shameful secret" (Mendelsohn 1) without atoning for moral failings. As the Rousseau scholar Jean Starobinski notes, "there has been no end of proposed diagnoses of his disease...contemporary critics...hold that Rousseau was mad; others allude to his bewilderment and wounded sensibility; still others approve the writer and shift the blame to society" (201). For memoir specialists, there is a solid divide between Rousseau and the society to which he claims to speak.

For Romanticists, eighteenth-century specialists, or African Diaspora theorists, even if “autobiography revolves around a complex configuration of disclosure,” Rousseau’s *Confessions* shows that “no conflict exists between the confession and the excuse” (Thomas 240) of guilt. While Thomas notes this especially in regards to Equiano, we can make the same claim about slave narrative writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century—indeed beyond. And Rousseau’s lack of psychological torment or conflict” stands in sharp contrast to another kind of autobiographical testimonial from the eighteenth century provided by slave or recently freed writers with considerably less power. The latter memoirists endure psychological conflict that is to a variety of degrees coerced. Of course this coercion effects their written decisions and therefore “highlights the complex legislative subject status occupied by slaves at the time” (Thomas 240). It seems hard to discuss Rousseau with these writers because his freedom of expression can appear cavalier to even the contemporary reader, so how can his work stand as one in many kinds of works in the same genre in the same century? The primary idea that bridges the work on Rousseau across many disciplines is a notion that while Rousseau writes to other men in his memoir, he does so ultimately for himself. That is, any conflict he might have is self-constructed, and self-relieved.

All this focus on secularism and self-representation in memoir studies leaves out an important innovation in eighteenth-century memoir, the slave narrative, which does not fit obviously into an autodiegetic, secular tradition. As the prominent memoir scholar, James Olney, remarks, “the slave narrative, with a very few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to

autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act” (“I Was Born” 48). In addition, scholars outside of memoir studies, such as S.E. Ogude (31), have specifically noted that Equiano’s narrative is historical fiction, not memoir. As a result of such criticism, pioneering slave narratives like Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*, or Olaudah Equiano’s *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* feature seldom, if at all, in discussions of the memoir’s eighteenth-century transformations.

This chapter considers Rousseau’s memoir alongside the slave narrative memoir. The precedent for this is historical as much as analytical. Importantly, I begin with the slave narrative author, Gronniosaw, because he was a near peer to Rousseau, and also because he is the first black author published in Britain and is considered the father of the slave narrative just as Rousseau is considered the father of the secular memoir. The authors rival each other in having widespread audiences as well as being innovators in their respective genres. Gronniosaw’s slave narrative memoir, the first of the English language, was incredibly popular, like Rousseau’s memoir, and it went through at least nine editions (Hanley 1). That both Rousseau and Gronniosaw are canonical eighteenth-century nonfiction writers is apparent. What might be less apparent are the underlying connections between Rousseau’s memoir and any slave narrative. In this chapter I will explore what happens to our understanding of Rousseau’s apparent “secular transformation of the genre” (Mendelsohn 1) when we widen our perspective on eighteenth-century memoir and include slave narratives in memoir’s genre history.

While memoir specialists credit Rousseau's self-interested secularism with licensing all "memoirs of abjection" (Mendelsohn 1) after him, specialists who work with slave narrative credit Gronniosaw with influencing every slave narrative memoir written after his own, especially the more well known narrative of Olaudah Equiano,²¹ which I will also discuss in this chapter. Rousseau is central to the canons of European Enlightenment literature and memoir, while Gronniosaw and Equiano are central to the literary canon of the early African Diaspora. But these slave narrative writers are no less central to eighteenth- and nineteenth- century memoir than Rousseau. Specifically, these narratives show us that what might appear to be a secular shift for the genre is actually a more ambiguous representation of the ways God, time, and the human self co-exist within and because of language. Rousseau's memoir, far from being the "creative act" to the slave narrative's "painting by numbers," revolves around the same ambiguous representation of an individual's relationship with God. An individual's relationship with God must be considered alongside Rousseau and the authors of slave narratives.

Beyond these three authors' similar portrayals of spirituality and the self in memoir, Rousseau had a political interest in slavery that was related to his ambivalence about individual selfhood, the very thing for which he is both applauded and criticized for foregrounding:

²¹ For more detailed discussions of Gronniosaw's influence on Equiano, see Lisa Lowe's "Autobiography Out of Empire" (103) and Adam Potkay's "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography" (678).

In *The Social Contract*...Rousseau named the conflict between slavery and political right as the fundamental contradiction...Dissolved into the concentrated sovereignty of the collectivity, the individual person became human through membership and citizenship in political society. (Lowe 105)

Rousseau's understanding of the self as distinct from but dependent upon society is foundational for his thoughts about slavery. Gronniosaw's popular 1772 text, the first slave narrative published in English, with nine editions by 1811, might even have been a text that Rousseau was familiar with before his own death in 1778. But even if Rousseau was not aware of Gronniosaw's text, his awareness of slavery affected his understanding of the self. Therefore, our understanding of eighteenth-century memoir can benefit from thinking about how Rousseau and slave narrative memoirs have related versions of this self as distinctly not autonomous and subject to a relationship with God that is counter cultural, in which the "individual became human" through sharing selfhood with God, if not with society.

Gronniosaw, Rousseau, and Equiano all foreground self-absence in their texts, and in this way they avoid the memoir specialist's familiar perception that the genre is special because it revolves around the individual self.²² These authors show us that

²² Some examples of this perception include the following: Pascal says that "autobiography proper" involves a "search for the true self" (39); Lejeune says "[the writer is] guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally" ("Autobiography in the Third Person" 28); Olney says "without this 'I,' stated or implied, the work would collapse into mere insignificance" (*Metaphors of Self* 21); Eakin says memoir "is a discourse of identity" ("Breaking Rules" 124).

representations of a self under attack, whether perceived or actual, is a step toward articulating the truth that the self is nonexistent. While scholars of American literature, black studies, or the eighteenth century might use evidentiary details about Gronniosaw's or Equiano's lives to note historical facts versus fictional license in their narratives, these texts are not examined by scholars of autobiographical theory, a sub-discipline of memoir studies. That these scholars do not examine the slave narrative, even going so far as to reject its inclusion in the memoir genre, is quite shocking, as these texts could meet the judgmental analysis of scholars who focus on truth and the self quite well—Equiano's life in particular faces scrutiny.²³ Because these texts complicate what memoir is through their multi-genre status as slave narrative, memoir, conversion narrative, and abolitionist text, they destabilize notions of a whole self or genre and challenge a field focused on the appropriate boundaries in which a self articulates. To include slave narratives in memoir studies would mean changing the field overall.

To contextualize how all these authors write away from the memoir specialist's idealized selfhood, as well as maintain a strict division between the secular and spiritual, I discuss the messianic style of spiritual memoir, which counters Olney's perspective on the sense of narrative time that makes the memoirist the "creative and active shaper" ("I Was Born" 47) as opposed to the slave narrative writer. Olney's perspective resonates throughout scholarship in memoir studies,²⁴ but if we begin to understand how mysticism

²³ See Vincent Caretta, in particular.

²⁴ For example, see *Salon's* series on Vivian Gornick's use of composite time and characters (Sterling), Gornick's own *The Situation and the Story*, or Sven Birkerts' *The Art of Time in Memoir*.

functions in memoir, we need a new lens with which to think about narrative time as something that does not separate past and future, but rather seeks to integrate it through narrative reflection. Likewise, the timeline of conversion in mystical texts does not separate before, during, and after conversion, but rather attempts to understand how what is past was always ordained for the future. Due to this different appreciation of time, there is not a clean separation of the secular and the spiritual in mystical narratives. Therefore, there is not a whole, human self to witness a journey of change from a singular, converted perspective. Instead, the self is always less and more than the narrative event we witness the author experiencing.

A “messianic style,” as I will call it, is found in autobiographical narratives that are cyclical, move according to a pendulum effect, or are otherwise non-linear. This style represents a narrator’s “futural bearing and a hope for desire for coming justice that is inscribed in *‘the promise, in the act of faith or in the appeal to faith that inhabits every act of language and every address to the other’*” (Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 56). Non-linear time in spiritual memoir is always used to situate the narrator outside of the human self and within the substance of eternal spirit, in which, instead of a narration of a self on a journey, we find a narration of a human in absence.²⁵ We will find that these kinds of memoirs detail how “the embodiment of the Sacred dislocates clock time,

²⁵ While a conversation about messianic memory, the gain and loss of “self,” and slave narratives might most suitably recall African Diaspora specialist Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic*, this project works from within and speaks to the field of memoir studies. Thus, it departs from Baucom’s discussion of “a discourse in which the theory of value upon which a politics of diasporic remembrance founds itself” (62).

meaning linearity, which is different than living in the past or being bound by tradition” (Alexander 309), thus making a revisionist approach to memoir’s Gods and rituals compelling. Since Olney’s primary claim against the slave narrative as memoir is that it lacks the “interplay of past and present [where] events are lifted out of time to be resituated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance” (“I Was Born” 47), it is valuable to show how these slave narrative writers choose not to consider chronological time in their narratives in order to facilitate a more ambiguous representation of self, spirituality, and testimonial.

I will discuss how Gronniosaw constructs his time as non-linear and how his relationship with language helps him move away from a cultural representation of self and into a shared, messianic identity. Then I will discuss how Rousseau recalls Augustine’s spiritual text to present his own psychological conversion as not quite secular, which encourages him to understand time as having a messianic pendulum effect that results in self-absence. Next, I will show how Equiano resists a linear conception of time in relationship to the self and testimonial writing. His conversion is an event in which multiple time periods converge to support an anecdotal, vernacular understanding of the universe and God that is the focus of his narrative. All these authors’ preoccupations become opportunities for them to read their lives as a series of mystical signs that lead to a spirituality that is intensely personal yet outside of a standard cultural representation of God. Testimonial language is the vehicle for these authors’ arguments against a cultural narrative of God and traditional testimony. Likewise, their autobiographical testimonials are an opportunity for memoir specialists to understand

how a perception of memoir in the eighteenth century and after as self-focused, secular, and interior can and should change.

If we unravel the *Confessions*' secularism, then we must reconsider the text's portrayal of self. Memoir studies scholars repeatedly remark that Rousseau's text represents the danger of the genre as a whole: self-aggrandizement. Critics of his own time period made the same complaint. Ben Yagoda even claims that the very first case of "memoir bashing," comes from Friedrich Schlegel, who says in 1798, "pure autobiographies are written...by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case" (qtd. in "A Brief History"). What is fascinating about Schlegel's criticism of Rousseau is that it is a criticism of the genre itself. Contemporary criticism of memoir is made up by many voices—scholars, journalists, blog writers, creative writers, historians²⁶—who, despite their variety, make remarkably similar claims about Rousseau and the genre. According to Mendelsohn, Rousseau's text foregrounds "a kind of therapeutic purge" (1). Billy Collins suggests that his secularism demonstrates an "obsession with the self" that reads as "self-indulgence" (1). The Anti-Facebook League of Intelligentsia (Aaron Kheriaty) started at the University of California, Irvine even notes Rousseau as an anomalous example of "vain self-aggrandizement" that encouraged the kind of "narcissism" that led to Facebook. Even a theoretically potent remark such

²⁶ In fact, "the attack on memoir, now a regular editorial exercise, dates back to the advent of journalism itself...someone...published a pamphlet unmasking Defoe, thereby inventing...the exposé of the fraudulent memoir. Then came...a boom in autobiographical narratives, along with the requisite disapproving screeds [about the] 'unseemliness and just plain wrongness of the genre'" (Shulevits reviewing and quoting from Ben Yagoda's *Memoir: A History*).

as the fact that Rousseau “privileges the white male citizen,” making his text a “suspect site of exclusionary practices” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 96) can ultimately be read in the canon of memoir scholarship as reminiscent of what scholars are suspicious of Rousseau privileging in general: himself. For Rousseau especially and memoirists generally, the prevailing assumption is, “if you still must write a memoir, consider making yourself the least important character in it” (Genzlinger). And for our slave narrative memoir writers, not even their narcissism is remarked upon. That might be part of the reason for their exclusion: if a scholar is uncomfortable bashing a memoir, it might not be worth consideration in the genre at large.

James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1770)

Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* is (despite the title) a short text. As previously mentioned, it is the first text published in Britain by a black man, and it is considered the first slave narrative memoir. Furthermore, it was received by a wide audience, ultimately being reprinted many times. The text is written by another party and follows a diasporic slave narrative form in which Gronniosaw starts in his native east African village, traces his journey to and enslavement in the United States, and experiences confusion and loss at every turn. Also noteworthy and influential for subsequent slave narratives is Gronniosaw’s conversion to Christianity, which I will focus on as a way to trace his interest in messianic justice as it begins in his childhood questions about the universe and intensifies through his adult acceptance of Christ. This

messianic justice is a way for Gronniosaw to worship differently from his subjugators and ultimately achieve a radical, spiritual absence.

The end of Gronniosaw's text draws the reader back to the beginning to understand where his messianic preoccupation began, and it makes the text a circular document collecting events that amount to a mystical understanding of the universe. Let us examine how the beginning and end of the text work together to defy a clear chronology and support a messianic time. Beginning without him, the memoir offers a quiet nod to Gronniosaw's interest in a religious absence. Instead, readers are presented with a proem²⁷ similar to many medieval Christian memoirs, such as Margery Kempe's, in which the actual writer of the text is "a young Lady of the Town of Leominster" (*A Narrative* i). In Gronniosaw's text, the proem wishes the sale of this text to help Gronniosaw's family's poverty. So Gronniosaw's text nods to the historical religious memoir with its proem and outside author, and it thematically seeks to foreground a self-absence that can be understood as religious to the informed reader. Indeed, his family is poor yet faithful. At the end of the memoir, Gronniosaw tells us that his family's "situation at present" is one filled with his wife's "hard labor at the loom" and his own old age, making it possible for him to only "contribute little to their support" (21). Yet he is triumphant. In this final scene of the text, Gronniosaw finds that poverty makes his

²⁷ A proem is an interesting choice for this text, as it reminds us of hagiographical auto/biographies from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages that narrate an individual's life from multiple authors' points of view. Beginning a memoir via a second party's proem rather than the subject who is writing is something memoir studies could examine in order to reconsider selfhood as the primary preoccupation of memoir.

family “very poor Pilgrims” who “are travelling through many difficulties towards our Heavenly Home...when the Lord shall deliver us out of the evils of this present world and bring us to the Everlasting Glories of the world to come” (21). Abruptly, the text ends with Gronniosaw withdrawing his own testimony—a kind of self-annihilation that is indeed final. His last words of the book are “AMEN. FINIS” (21). These words mark the end of the text’s ability to “speak,” to testify to any imagined self. Readers are not presented with a future plan, a retrospective glance backward through some solidifying concept, or any commentary on progress through conversion and arrival at a better self. There is no thematic or logical end to this memoir that demonstrates a self transformed by freedom or conversion. Instead, we get a disjunctive end that functions as a beginning journey to God and a “present” that is already thought of as a past human life for Gronniosaw, a present in which “time is always already out of joint, not present to itself. The concept of ‘Messianicity’ tries to formulate this out-of-joint structure” (Nilsson 1). Similarly, as the end of the text is testament to his true elevation into a messianic absence, his conversion is not a choice for a better self, but a messianic destiny that is already decided for him.

From the very “beginning” of his life, Gronniosaw shows readers that he has always been a serious child, preoccupied with God, just as Christianity’s most famous mystics before him were. He was destined to be one of the holy souls who walk the earth. His text mimics a medieval mystic’s memoir by beginning with a proem, and his content puts itself in these writers’ holy company. From the first page he asks readers to think of his identity as imbued with an other-worldly knowledge that can be understood as holy.

He says, “I had, from my infancy, a curious turn of mind; was more grave and reserved in my disposition than either of my brothers and sisters” (1). He was more mature than children around him and had a keen knowing. He “teases” (1) children with questions about the mystical workings of the universe (instead of, say, a bug). His mother, like Rousseau’s “Mamma” and sometimes lover, Madame de Warens, is of the upmost authority:

My dear indulgent mother would bear more with me than any of my friends beside.—I often raised my hand to heaven, and asked her who lived there? was much dissatisfied when she told me the sun, moon, and stars, being persuaded, on my own mind, that there must be some Superior Power.—I was frequently lost in wonder at the works of the Creation: was afraid and uneasy and restless, but could not tell for what. I wanted to be informed of things that no person could tell me. (Gronniosaw 1)

A reader familiar with hagiography will recall the similarities between Gronniosaw and holy figures who are provided signs early in life that they have a spiritual destiny, and who, in their lifetimes, eventually surpass their mystical mentors. By comparing Gronniosaw to some of the most well-known medieval memoirists, a larger trend for the genre and the eighteenth century that it is distinctly not secular becomes apparent.

Raymond’s St Catherine is more beautiful and intelligent than her siblings because of her early childhood preoccupation with all things holy, Christina of Markyate’s holiness reveals itself at a visit to the Benedictine abbey of St Albans when she is a mere child, Luisa De Carvajal and St Euphrosyne are born of barren women, Christina the

Astonishing watches the family's herd despite being the youngest child because she secretly knows "God is a modest lover" (Thomas of Cantimpre 438), St Faith has people converting simply from the sight of her lovely, young face, and Jesus, of course, was born of a virgin. Gronniosaw has a deep sense of the universe from an early age, and, as we will see, can convert others as easily as Faith. So, how is this destiny instead of simply his personality?

In early childhood, Gronniosaw first realizes that his preoccupation with a monotheistic God can be understood as a mystical intervention when it coincidentally meets with some external drama. Once again, this memoir recalls medieval hagiographical memoirs, especially attributed to the martyrs, where we learn of how, when faced with danger, the holy prevail. While under a palm tree on the way home from his village's polytheistic church, Gronniosaw's concern with creation makes him "more distressed and afflicted than ever...[then] a remarkable black cloud arose and covered the sun; then followed with very heavy rain and thunder more dreadful than ever I had heard: the heav'ns roared, and the earth trembled at it" (2). The great natural wonder, the sun that Gronniosaw's mother tells him lives in the sky, is blocked out by a greater power that Gronniosaw instinctively understands to be "the Man of Power" (2). He knows now that there is one God, not many, and these many Gods are "covered" by the real God. While his preoccupation first causes him "distress," the coincidence of his rumination on the one God while an insignia of his polytheistic culture is covered by a storm makes this moment a sign of his messianic knowledge of the universe. Because something

noticeable happens when Gronniosaw thinks about God, God, he believes, is thinking about him.

Although Gronniosaw crafts this scene to indicate its status as a mystical happening to readers, the young Gronniosaw must still go through a conversion later in life in order to be able to read back through the events of his life with this lens. Thus, two narrative times are laid on top of each other in the text. The first narrative time is a chronological telling of the signs that lead to the conversion for readers, and the second is a retrospective narrative in which experiences are only realized in a mystical context years after they actually happen. Readers read forward, and Gronniosaw's text reads backward. We are caught in the pendulum of messianic time, where the messiah returns to read the signs. Gronniosaw reads the signs in his own life.

Coincidences, like the storm, are easier for Gronniosaw and readers to contextualize as mystical if they accumulate and a pattern is revealed. If that was a sign, the logic goes, then there must be others. There are plenty. On the day Gronniosaw is to be killed by a rival village king, he "was washed and all [his] gold ornaments made bright and shining" (4), and he is when met by the king, Gronniosaw displays an "undaunted courage" (4) that effects the king greatly. Just as a medieval virgin martyr's memoir tells of her own abilities, Gronniosaw's holy presence affects those who would do him harm. They want to convert. While the king normally and routinely beheads a threat to his leadership, this time he grabs the child Gronniosaw into his lap and weeps intensely over him. Gronniosaw tells readers that he "put my right hand round [the king's] neck and prest him to my heart" (4). Gronniosaw presents his act of compassion in the face of

death in order to place himself in a tradition of the holy. His childhood sophistication is a sign. Virgin martyrs such as Saint Faith, most often children, converted thousands who simply gazed on their presences. By placing himself in this narrative of rhetorical holiness, Gronniosaw is simultaneously making himself distinguishable from human beings and indistinguishable from the holy line that runs through humanity—and through memoir—for Gronniosaw is imbued with the power that is shared in the genre’s lineage and with the saints before him. The king, overcome with emotion, grants Gronniosaw the gift of life, and the mystical logic developed in the book tells us that he would have never been able to take Gronniosaw’s life in the first place. The king passed his own test from God, and Gronniosaw’s holy status is revealed through another’s test.

The king’s “gift” to Gronniosaw, however, means that he is sold as a slave. If we read the signs properly, his enslavement acts as a rhetorical tool in the narrative, making Gronniosaw’s experience of relaying anecdotal knowledge to the reader appear as knowledge that is mystically ordained. He is sold as a slave long before his actual conversion, but in reading his story, readers can see that all his life events are leading toward that, for the retrospective narrative fills them with mystical meaning. He is a martyr of the latter ages, a holy soul with knowledge that could provide all of humanity answers, yet those around him treat him as a commodity, just as Roman officials disparage the virgin martyrs long before him. Gronniosaw is one in a long historical line of those who faced but were ultimately saved from religious persecution. The gold is removed from Gronniosaw’s body, which the text contextualizes as an experience of relief, for indeed “God is a modest lover” for Christina the Astonishing and Gronniosaw

alike. After the wealth is gone, he is able to relax into being a poor pilgrim who suffers for a holy “3 Days and Nights” (9). In order to read this moment as a part of our messianic narrator’s spiritual journey, readers had to have his previous experiences contextualized for us as signs—even if they did not read as signs to Gronniosaw when they happened—not merely stages leading away from one country and into another for the narrator’s enslavement. Once again, we are reading up to an event, and Gronniosaw is reading back from it. The messiah crafts a narrative of the holy past for future readers to see.

Considering how Gronniosaw places himself in the tradition of spiritual memoir, we might also consider what he thinks about language in general, or literacy in particular. What we find is that literacy in this memoir is conceptually tied to human subjectivity and the self, whereas moments with language that do not demonstrate literacy are presented to readers as mystical events that solidify Gronniosaw’s holy, non-human substance. At first, an attempt to acquire knowledge through language is a terrible obstacle to ponder for Gronniosaw. He learns that his enslavers believe in a monotheistic God when he sees his master reading the Bible. This is a gift of finally knowing others who share his faith, but it still alarms Gronniosaw, for he comes from an oral culture, is illiterate, and is not an equal to these men who believe what he has always believed. When Gronniosaw sees his master reading prayers to the ship’s crew, he is stunned: “I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw this book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me” (5). Here, Gronniosaw reveals to readers that he believes in God’s power to

speak through a book, but we must be clear that for Gronniosaw this does not mean that God works through human literacy. The agency works backward here—the book is a sign of God’s will overtaking the human. Noting his interest in books in general, Gronniosaw’s master and mistress enroll him in school to encourage his literacy (7). Gronniosaw is stunned to see his master read Bible passages so “severely” (7) and presumes his master is actually speaking directly to him, in judgment. Here, reading becomes “reading” another human, not a strengthening of a relationship with God. Depressed and terrified that literacy, God, and power all go hand-in-hand, Gronniosaw attempts suicide once. He prefers to read spiritual memoirs by John Bunyon and Richard Baxter that explore a mystical experience with God rather than conduct a literate study of Him (Gates Jr., *African American Lives* 364). Of course, the irony here has a rich history in spiritual memoirs of the West—the book becomes the way to unlearn, to encourage absence from other humans in favor of turning inward to seek God. For Gronniosaw, literacy is viewed as reductive because it is bound with the human hierarchies that allow for slavery in the first place, so much so that he wonders if, as an African slave, he can ever actually compete in the first place. It is no surprise, then, that Gronniosaw’s relationship with God becomes one of personal dialogue instead of one bound to books and literacy.

Gronniosaw does not succeed in killing himself, but he does succeed in transcending his worries about literacy. Critically, he comes to recognize that language works not only to communicate with humans, but also to understand one’s mystical substance. Gronniosaw spends a holy three days and nights in bed. Others give him texts

to read, but these do not help him recover, nor does reading about his newfound religion or mimicking his master's ability to access God through reading. Instead, at the end of three nights, Gronniosaw recovers by *hearing* the words "Behold the Lamb of God" and something clicks inside of him (8-9). If the intervention of his suicide is a sign of who he has always already been as a messianic being, he can return to life only through mystical intervention: the words arrive in his ears without his will and without his self imposition, and then he knows. He, and his relationship with language, is messianic, which is something far stranger and more ambiguous than literacy and far more lasting than agitation. While the words he hears are the words he first read in the Bible, they did not comfort him via reading. Gronniosaw returns from the possibility of his own death by becoming the vessel for mystical language—it travels through his ear to his soul. In this moment, Gronniosaw un-becomes. He does not have the self attributed to him by others; he does not need to compare his own religious path to other human beings. There is no hierarchy of better devotee or more intelligent race when there is no comparison wrought by human will. Instead, what makes Gronniosaw in this moment is his spiritual substance that has no peer in the humans around him. He is the holy vessel rather than the student. After hearing the words, Gronniosaw knows that his faith is confirmed, his past experiences can be read as signs, and he is a pilgrim on a journey to be with God. God speaks to Gronniosaw; thus, he does not need to seek out signs of God's self in the Bible. Confirmation of one's existence with spirit does not come through the hierarchies of humans.

The functional differences of language and literacy in *A Narrative* can be better understood when we think of how Gronniosaw's experiences have been previously read by scholars. I claim that Gronniosaw's experiences with language help him understand that his existence is holy, and, therefore, it is outside of the concept of human selfhood that leads to hierarchical methods. However, this moment is more commonly understood as a rejection of a particular kind of selfhood, or rather, a creation of a self that can stand in as justice by way of existence:

This desire for recognition of his self in the text of Western letters motivates Gronniosaw's creation of a text... The text refuses to speak to Gronniosaw, so some forty-five years later Gronniosaw writes a text that speaks his face into existence among the authors and texts of the Western tradition. (Gates Jr. 136-38)

But what if we remove our presumption of selfhood when reading this moment in the text and instead read it through the mystical traditions that memoir extravagantly relies on? As we know from the story of Jesus, it is his return that contextualized his past as one always already imbued with power, capability, and destiny, and it is precisely this return that destabilizes his human existence as a man with a self who was born, lived, and died. Conversely, it is his miracle birth—his beginning—that solidifies his future as a messiah. His substance is a pendulum. To be sure, Gronniosaw first imagines his experience of witnessing literacy as one of supreme awe and disappointment because of his ethnicity, for when he tries to get the book to talk to him, it does not, and “this thought immediately presented itself to [him], that every body and every thing despis'd [him] because he was

black” (5). But Gronniosaw does not settle for linear reaction: I saw this, I felt that, or because I am X, I cannot get Y. As we have seen, for Gronniosaw, whose narrative tumbles forward and backward at once, “memory is given via a ceaseless cycle of withdrawal and return” (C. Yates 315), so a life looked at linearly is beside the point of his own beliefs, especially in regard to the intersection of faith and language. We cannot avoid the fact that if Gronniosaw is talking about the book, he is talking about faith. If we take his lead, then we not only avoid the trap of thinking of memoir as a genre of autodiegetic texts that narrate single lives made of single selves with single signifiers like racial identity, we also avoid viewing Gronniosaw by simple comparison to his subjugators. What if he does not create a self, *per se*, but peels away one attributed to him to reveal justice outside of comparison?

Work on Gronniosaw that considers how he constructs a self relies on the linearity of who he was, what he became, the event that rejects his self for all it lacks, and finally his reaction to that event. But Gronniosaw’s text works against linearity, and we must examine the important implications for Gronniosaw, in particular, and memoir, in general, in employing a messianic style that tells us over and over again: do not read the substance of authors linearly. Of course, the greatest implication for scholars is that the whole enterprise of selfhood on the one hand, and the separation of spiritual and secular texts in the genre on the other hand, must change. Gronniosaw’s moment of distress with language and faith, he realizes later, is also a sign of how his substance is not distinctly human, and therefore he cannot conflate a human birth, life, and death with what makes him *him*. He is a part of something else that is without such linearity. This is the

difference between being owned and sharing ownership. The messiah's time is not chronological; instead, it works as a constant looking forward and back—he is born into reflection.

As a messianic being, Gronniosaw does not write himself into existence, but he does situate himself “among the authors and texts of the Western tradition” (Gates Jr. 138), specifically spiritual memoirs such as Bunyon's, which narrates a path of integration with God over a construction of a human selfhood. Here is where we reach an impasse with Gates Jr.'s concept, if we are going mystical rather than social. For instance, in Derrida's account of autobiographical testimonial, “writing...has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos” (*Of Grammatology* 35). In opposition to this problem of stubborn traditionalism that Derrida identifies, “‘Autobiography’ is the name Derrida gives for this response or pledge to what remains outside...a body of writing and as an event or engagement wherein the self, which does not exist, ‘is *given* by writing’” (Kronick 999). If we consider that this memoir does not seek to be a part of Western tradition that is “external to the spirit”—in fact, it is the exact opposite—we can also note that this memoir is the kind of autobiographical testimonial that narrates a mystical “event” that thinks of the self as nonexistent. For Gronniosaw, to acknowledge the existence of the self or to even construct it is to imagine the enterprise of memoir as “external to” not only the spirit, but to “speech”—and God's speech is what both saves Gronniosaw and compels his memoir. Such a re-thinking, or un-thinking, of this potent moment in Gronniosaw's memoir is a way to consider how mysticism plays an important

part in testimonial texts. But considering mysticism and the ambiguous terrain it might lead us down is not a way out of acknowledging the unambiguous moral wrong of violence and the betrayal of those who commit violent acts. Indeed, there are moments of violence in our lives and others' that need not be critiqued, but should be met instead with rage, mourning, and justice on interpersonal and social levels. In this instance with Gronniosaw, I think it is important to acknowledge how his memoir produces justice through a mystical absence. That is a more elusive truth that rests alongside the truth that he was a victim of incredible violence at the hands of his peers.

An alternative to literacy is set up in Gronniosaw's text wherein race and slavery are not the only reasonable ways to contextualize his anecdotal, mystical knowledge. When we focus on subjugation and race, we are drawn back to looking at the self and how it is able to progress or how it is forced into regression, and that draws us out of the paradoxes of memoir and mysticism that Gronniosaw's text relies on. We see here that an individual's testimony is more complicated than representing the self. From the very beginning of his narrative, Gronniosaw shows that language outside of literacy is an anecdotal tool that can magically reveal what appears to be coincidental as mystical and that authorship can be messianic.

Rousseau (published 1782-1789)

Rousseau is perceived as a writer who recalls Augustine's *Confessions* in order to depart from the spiritual tradition of confessing to God; instead turning to his fellow human beings, and—to the contemporary memoir scholar's chagrin—himself as confessional subjects. After considering Gronniosaw's text, I want to examine how

Rousseau's work is also far more ambiguous than a reading of his work as strictly secular, and therefore self-involved, would suggest. While memoir studies condemns his text for having no spiritual core, I will argue that Rousseau thinks of spirituality as something most poignantly arrived at outside of an official designation, just as Gronniosaw does when he rejects literacy in favor of being a spiritual vessel of God's language. The goal of including Rousseau in a chapter on slave narratives is to suggest that when we group memoir of the eighteenth century, we find some wildly mystical texts that encourage ambiguous readings. Instead of grouping memoirs of the eighteenth century by the race, status, or country of their authors, let us instead examine how, taken together, the texts create a group narrative of the ways in which autobiographical testimonial of the eighteenth century plays with the absence of an author as well as elusive spirituality.

Rousseau's *Confessions* recalls Augustine's, but what memoir scholars have not noted about this narrative choice is that it marks the spiritual relationship with God and the secular relationship with other human beings as potentially relational. Let us ruminate first on the power of signification. Currently, in memoir studies Rousseau is viewed as a writer who lessens the greatness of memoir because he recalls a spiritual text in a secular way. It is accurate that there are many ways the latter text recalls the former, most notably that Rousseau uses the title of Augustine's text and signifies on the saint's experience of crime as transformative. I use the word "signification" specifically because I am speaking about one language choice recalling and changing a former and influential one: Augustine's shameful theft of pears leads to his Catholic conversion, and

Rousseau's infamous theft of a ribbon leads to a *psychological* conversion not remarkable as either solely religious or humanistic, where autobiographical testimony itself can work powerfully in spiritual and social ways. Therefore, Rousseau highlights how conversion functions in memoir. Rousseau also puts a twist on the consideration of the testimonial language of memoir itself. While Augustine's text shows a conversion of an individual sinner into a community builder who needs a discourse about belief with others to cultivate a relationship with God, in Rousseau's memoir, we find that the confident man who speaks his independent desires become one who sees the communal power of testimonial language, who knows by the end of his memoir that a man who disowns another is the one who should be "stifled" (Rousseau 606) from group engagement, which is why he begins in the moment where "the more wickedly [he] behaved the bolder [his] fear of confession made [him]" (88). The memoir itself, then, is evidence of his new life away from wickedness. Shared language in the form of a written text is his conversion.

Before I go specifically into the text, I want to further note that Rousseau's signification on Augustine's text promotes a messianic pendulum effect. While Rousseau's conversion seems psychological and therefore resists being read as purely spiritual, that Rousseau even signifies on Augustine's *Confessions* marks his psychological conversion as one that relies on spiritual strategies. For Rousseau, signification itself is messianic—a writing strategy that relies on the spiritual to understand a more ambiguous terrain of change. It is noteworthy that criticism of Rousseau relies on a chronology that signification necessitates—one writer recalls and

changes a style, concept, or theme of a former. Mendelsohn, for example, compares Augustine's and Rousseau's bold thefts in their memoirs and concludes that "once the memoir stopped being about God and started being about Man, once 'confession' came to mean nothing more than getting a shameful secret off your chest," it was a "short step" to art as "therapeutic purge" (1). Instead of discussing the act of artistic signification, Mendelsohn marks Rousseau's text as less meaningful than its predecessor. While Mendelsohn uses this as a moment to think of memoir as a genre that exists chronologically, he does not comment on the fact that Rousseau's signification has guided Mendelsohn to make such a link, and the act of signification itself contradicts a linear reading of time for Rousseau's text. Instead, we get memoir's messianic pendulum effect, just as with Gronniosaw and Equiano. We are not simply reading forward through Rousseau's life. We are reading Rousseau backward through Augustine, then returning to Rousseau to read forward and so on.

By starting out a six-hundred-page book in "Book Two" with a crime that "so disturbs" him during his "sleepless hours" (88), Rousseau creates a narrative early on in the text where shame presents an occasion for humility and honesty, just as in Augustine's text. However, for Rousseau, this only happens when another's discourse falls mute. The memoir presents itself, then, early on, as one that narrates not simply a man's personal journey, but the concept that a journey is never personal. Much as Augustine returns to the pears he stole when not even hungry as an anecdote for readers to understand his sickness as a sinner, Rousseau returns to the ribbon he stole years before to show readers his enduring psychological "weight of a remorse which, even after

forty years, still burdens [his] conscience” (86). For the rest of his life, he says, he is “loathing of untruth,” and lives “forty years of honest and upright behaviour under difficult circumstances” (89). While the contemporary reader might roll her eyes at Rousseau’s drama (and surely that is part of the fun of reading his *Confessions*), Patrick Riley notes that “the hyperbolic rhetoric” Rousseau uses in moments like these is much older than he, as it “is precisely the rhetoric of conversion, which...has the double characteristic of momentarily coagulating the subject’s being in a global definition but also of marking the self’s transformation into something else” (238). Rousseau’s “being” transforms itself from the safely singular to the uncomfortably “coagulated” as “global” through his realization that his true crime is not theft of an item, but his theft of another human being’s testimonial. Each person’s words are not his own, after all. While Augustine focuses on the homogenous group identity created when he and his friends steal pears, paradoxically making them one shameful unit that is “a barren land” (Sheed tran. 31) or “a land of want” (Ryan trans. 34), Rousseau focuses on how his shame blossoms only because another’s testimonial is stricken. We move from a joined sickness made of the shame of thieves to the theft of another’s voice. Memoir’s pear becomes the fruit of a woman’s voice, and memoir’s lone soul in the dark prior to the light of God becomes a man’s light so blinding that it drives another mute. Rousseau “boldly accused” another servant of the theft (87). This servant, Marion, “had the fresh complexion that one never finds except in the mountains, and such as sweet and modest air that one had only to see her to love her. What is more *she was a good girl!*” (87, emphasis added). The elevation of her goodness exists only in comparison to Rousseau’s own wicked words

that “boldly” accuse her because she simply happened to be on his mind (86-87).

When accused, Marion acts “confused, did not utter a word, and threw [Rousseau] a glance that would have disarmed the devil, but [his] cruel heart resisted” (87). Further, even after finding the words to testify to her innocence, Marion “never allowed herself any reproaches against [Rousseau]” (87). Marion, her testimony stricken from here, does not attempt to steal Rousseau’s testimony back from him. Thus, his spoken and written testimony from then onward exists in relation to Marion’s non-theft. He is not a thief without her, and he is not a memoirist without her. This memoir does not originate in an individual’s journey, but in the ways in which one human’s words steal another’s, without “reproach” from the other. In Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the memoir of conversion reveals itself to be a group endeavor in which, at its most poignant moments, even an autodiegetic narrative reaches outside of the individual.

While Rousseau’s psychological conversion is not Augustine’s spiritual conversion, it relies on its predecessor for the dramatic language and mournful narrator to craft the conversion as the event that led to memoir itself. For Rousseau, the theft of Marion’s words begins the memoir precisely because it is what inspires his desire for testimonial; so memoir itself—testimonial—is his way to mitigate a dearth of others’ language. His shame extends from a realization that everyone’s testimony is sacred, and his own written testimonial is a way to honor this realization. Thus, in the text we move from Marion’s silence to his own. After admitting that this shameful experience is what prompted him to write his *Confessions*, he ends the chapter seemingly about to collapse from exhaustion: “that is all I have to say on the subject. May I never have to speak of it

again” (89). Here, he uses what he originally forced onto Marion—his false testimony—and rights his wrong. That he rights the wrong through an exhaustion of language is how he paradoxically silences himself—an empathetic response to Marion, no doubt. We can discern his pleading hope behind the memoir’s opening drama: if my overwrought testimony is how I find silence on the subject, Marion’s silence can work backwards, too, and somewhere out in the world she may speak to my grave misdeed. While a spiritual conversion can be thought to lead “to the negation of the autobiographical enterprise” (Riley 229), if one thinks of memoir as a narrative of an autonomous self, we can see that the *Confessions*’ histrionic language in comparison to the suppression of Marion’s language shows us that, for Rousseau, memoir “simultaneously express[es] nostalgia for lost unity and anxious anticipation of ultimate reconciliation” (Starobinski 192). An autonomous self might be an ideal located in desire, an author’s or a critic’s or both, but it is not available in this memoir’s narrative. Even if, for Rousseau, “language *is* the authentic self. . .at the same time it reveals that perfect authenticity has still not been achieved, that plenitude remains to be conquered, and that no possession is secure without the consent of others” (Starobinski 200). Rousseau’s crime was that his language was without Marion’s consent despite its status as always in relation to her, and this understanding of language as shared—not a personal journey of salvation—is what spurs his memoir. In addition, we must consider how Rousseau’s memory, as with all memoirists, is an important feature of his text.

I have discussed signification of Augustine in general as a way Rousseau harkens the messianic, but I would like to discuss more specifically how his many discussions of

memory signify on Augustine's discussion of the same and allow Rousseau, like Gronniosaw, to contextualize his recollections as messianic rather than illustrative of a fact-based narrative. This is necessary in order for Rousseau to detail the metaphysical relationship he has with memory, which acts as his own God. While Gronniosaw uses memory to re-configure the events of his life as messianic, Rousseau extends Gronniosaw's notions to suggest that memory itself holds messianic agency and is, therefore, a spiritual tool. Yagoda argues that Rousseau is originary for addressing fellow men instead of God²⁸ and is the first memoirist to comment on memory as unreliable (*Memoir* 59, 102). Yagoda's argument relies on the opening of Rousseau's "Book Seven," in which the author claims that the first part of his book was "entirely written from memory, and [thus he] may have made many mistakes in it" (261). However, only a page later Rousseau remarks that when discussing his "genuine feelings," "the memory of them is too dear to ever be effaced from my heart. I may omit or transpose facts...but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story" (262). His senses are never without their past in their present, clearly influenced by Augustine. In his own *Confessions*, Augustine relies on Neoplatonic philosophy, particularly in "Book Ten." Plato's belief is that memory exists without the constraint of linear time; thus, it is not tied to the individual in a static place or moment, for a memory signals that someone's soul is "remembering something

²⁸ Yet in France, a wonderfully scandalous memoir, *The Transvestite Memoirs*, was written by the abbe de Choisy in 1737 and circulated in copies until its publication in 1862. Additionally, even Augustine's sermon style and Gronniosaw's address to his peers about God's grace work to upset this notion.

it already knew in a pre-existent life. This is what the Greek philosopher called *anamnesis*, that is, learning-as-remembering” (Kripal 38). We can see elements of this belief in Gronniosaw’s text, which relies on the pendulum effect of messianic time to reconsider how lasting experiences can be re-remembered as mystical signs. Augustine describes his memory after conversion as a paradoxical place where things are lost and individual will cannot retrieve them. Instead, one must trust the mystical experience of allowing information to “present itself” (Augustine, *Confessions* 213, 219). That is, one must allow that memory is not contained by an individual self. Like his predecessor, post-conversion Rousseau does allow that he may get the particulars of a situation wrong, but he is certain that when describing his emotional state, his being is saturated with the all-knowing presence of memory. Rousseau writes toward ambiguity rather than fact.

As in Gronniosaw’s text, Rousseau presents readers with a childhood memory that he can reevaluate in the text through his messianic understanding of memory. This works in three chronological stages in a memoir that allow us to read backward by the time we get to the third. First, we need his origin story. He contextualizes his sacred birth as understandable only in relationship to death, saying, “I was almost born dead, and they had little hope of saving me” (19). Through this opening, he establishes the destiny inherent in his birth, where, of the many gifts from Heaven his parents were given, the one they passed along to him is “a sensitive heart,” which “has been the cause of all the misfortunes in [his] life” (19). Also, his birth is evidence of what moves from one world into another, for Rousseau explains, “I brought with me the seed of a disorder which has grown stronger with the years, and now gives me only occasional intervals of relief in

which to suffer more painfully in some other way” (19). Gronniosaw read his life backwards to reveal the signs and presented the events of his life chronologically to lead up to his event with an otherworldly being. Likewise, Rousseau proceeds with his own strange, supernatural event of the past that can be used as a tool to read his present. The dangerous origin of his life preoccupies a fearful Rousseau, but he needs such an awful beginning—of his own life and of the text—to craft a later experience in the text as a messianic sign of his conversion. In order to do that, though, he needs to show that he has the power to commune with a magical world.

For the second part of this predestination stage setting, Rousseau, like Gronniosaw, must craft his memories as messianic guides for readers. In order to infuse his recollections with this spiritual potency, memory itself becomes a metaphysical being for Rousseau. “Book Six” drops readers into Rousseau’s magical abilities to commune, albeit mournfully, with his own God: memory. This is an extension of what readers encounter in Gronniosaw’s memoir, for in Rousseau’s, memory itself holds messianic agency rather than being used to re-imagines one’s life’s events as pre-destined. We might first remind ourselves that a writer’s ability to demonstrate magical abilities in a nonfiction text recalls a tradition of mysticism, which always involves the dissolution of individual selfhood.²⁹ More specifically for this text, “Book Six” begins uncharacteristically—our first sign to read *the* signs—with two quotes: “This used to be

²⁹ For example, Glucklich concludes that the physical pain a mystic experiences, “weakens the subject’s sense of empirical identity and strengthens his or her sense of attachment to a highly valued new center of identification” (7). Indeed, Rousseau’s painful brushes with death are what push him to a God that becomes his “new center of identification.”

my prayer: moderate-sized piece of land, with a garden, a spring near the house, and a small wood beside.” After this quote Rousseau includes the phrase “cannot add,” and under that provides a quote from Horace: “The Gods have blest me with more than I desire” (215). Lastly, Rousseau identifies *who* this chapter speaks to: “Precious and ever-regretted moments, begin to run your charming course again for me! Flow one after another through my memory, more slowly, if you can, than you did in your fugitive reality!” (215). This strange opening is reminiscent of a medieval proem just like the one Gronniosaw starts his memoir with—a kind of preface that, in nonfiction, is specific to medieval spiritual texts. Thus, Rousseau sets the reader up for a completely non-secular reading that continues for the entire chapter in a way best described as an incantation. The chapter begins already in Rousseau’s spiritual address. In the first sentence, he exclaims, “but no matter” and asks the reader to understand this chapter as evidence of the “short period of [his] life’s happiness” (215). Furthermore, he addresses the God of memory, who can hold for him his “precious and ever-regretted moments” (215). Just as Augustine’s memory must “present itself” to him from the beyond, Rousseau asks memories to become animate inside of him “again” and direct his narrative “more slowly,” (215) in the best possible way for readers. Memory here has the capacity to animate itself and to know how it should be best narrated to others. And memory becomes multiple “moments,” “one after another” that speak through the singular vein of memory itself. It is one and always more than one. Thus, Rousseau’s memories are what individualize him and also what make an individual self impossible for him. He is paradoxically divided and joined to his destiny, for “looking ahead always ruin[ed] [his]

enjoyment. It is never any good foreseeing the future” (106). Yet, he follows this, remarking, “I have never known how to avoid it” (106).

Rousseau cannot help but interrupt his own sacred moment in “Book Six,” for in this text the spiritual and secular are not clearly delineated. After making readers aware of the agency of memory, Rousseau turns back to his human audience to tell us that his incantation was due to desperation, for in that moment he was ill and feared death more than anything: “I thought I was dying; I took to my bed; the doctor was called; tremblingly I told him my case, which I considered to be past cure. I think that he thought the same” (217). If his almost death at birth is to be read as a sign, another brush with death is necessary to create the pattern that makes readers understand his early experience as more than mere happenstance; instead, such repetition signals that each of these events should be read as destined moments in the lineage of a great one. As with Gronniosaw’s text, a pattern of signs is what marks them as mystical. This second brush with death is what creates the occasion for Rousseau to be truly alive. As he remarks sparingly on the horrible salubrious treatments he went through, he tells readers, “I can well say that I did not begin to live until I looked on myself as a dead man...I began to concern myself with more nobler preoccupations” (218). His identity exists only in a messianic relation to his death; a return to the horror of almost dying shows him that his life has been destined to proceed from its start. What he always feared draws dangerously close, and he survives to know that his life is forever different. According to Rousseau, his psychology converts into having “more nobler preoccupations,” but further reading suggest that his conversion might be more spiritual than a purely secular reading of his text would allow.

After all this mystical stage setting, Rousseau makes sense of his mystical intervention through his spiritual mother's own deviation from the Church, just as Gronniosaw needs to establish his own relationship with God outside of his master's literate spirituality. Rousseau arrives at the ability to share his kind of religion, one that is secular as well as spiritual, for he needs a human guide to enter the sacred heart. He presents a portrait of Madame de Warens, who he calls "Mamma"—an all-knowing, spiritual guide whose appreciation of a more ambiguous, elusive kind of worship guides him. Rousseau says, "I had frequently made fun of religion in my own way, but I had never been totally without it...Mamma was more helpful to me in this respect than all the theologians in the world could have been" (218). Rousseau repeatedly rejects Catholicism in the text, claiming that "religion means to follow the one in which he was born. Sometimes one dispenses with part of it, one rarely adds anything to it" (66). But this does not mean he does not have a mystical appreciation outside of canon law. For him, the Church is inevitable, but spirituality is something that one arrives at only to comprehend how near it always was. After his second brush with death, the Calvinist Rousseau seeks solace with the mystic he knows, the woman who claims herself a "good Catholic" (219) yet who nonetheless had a "system [that] clearly destroyed the whole doctrine of original sin and redemption, and shook the complete basis of common Christianity, so that Catholicism, at any rate, could not subsist with it" (218-219). Augustine had his mother, Monica; Gronniosaw has his own mother who taught him of the sun and stars; and, Rousseau's own brazen, renegade saint is Mamma. If readers had forgotten by this point in the text that Rousseau's use of signification is spiritual, his

admiration of Mamma, as in Augustine's portrayal of his mother, serves as a critical reminder. Rousseau was already a convert to a new way of life, but now he is, in his own way (similar to Gronniosaw's reliance on language but not literacy), converting to a God. This is not an easy process for him. He fears that his faith might come in conflict with the tenants of Catholicism, and "the fear of Hell, which had bothered [him] very little before, gradually disturbed [his] ease of mind" (230). But Mamma soothes his worries: "and if Mamma had not calmed my troubled spirit, the terrible doctrine would have finally upset me altogether" (230). What is true for him, what he "relished and felt" (215), must be interpreted by another in order for him to arrive at who he really is. Thus, who he really is as a spiritual man is dependent on how another human being, Mamma, practices her beliefs.

While memoir studies understands Rousseau's text as secular and self-absorbed, after learning from Mamma, he thinks of spirituality as something most poignantly arrived at outside of an official designation. With the guidance he receives and the belief he retains, Rousseau is eventually able to acclimate back into his life with more wisdom and love. But as with Gronniosaw's impoverished state as a pilgrim, this is not a simple, happy ending. With hundreds of pages left in the memoir, Rousseau is always at risk of returning to his old ways of thinking. But just as spiritual and secular narratives cannot be separated simply, and moral selfhood does not neatly line up according to such separation, even a more traditional spiritual conversion does not simply signal the end of doubt, for "the formulary of belief is not that which goes without saying...but that which has to be said, and then said again, because saying it provokes reactive intellectual

energy: simultaneous with and inseparable from the act of believing” (Justice 11).

After looking at the ways preoccupation and coincidence merge in slave narrative memoirs to produce self-doubt just as much as mystical arrival, we can understand Rousseau’s text as one that also concedes that “belief already incorporates...skeptical self-affliction” (Justice 15).

Olaudah Equiano Gustavus Vassa (1789 [dedication added 1792])

As with many memoirs, the accuracy of Olaudah Equiano’s text has been widely contested. Vincent Caretta’s research reveals that Equiano’s baptism certificate of February 1759 and his naval records of 1773 suggest that he was born in South Carolina rather than what is now called Nigeria (Caretta 96). Conversely, Paul Lovejoy argues that “circumstantial evidence indicates that he was born where he said he was, and that, in fact, *The Interesting Narrative* is reasonably accurate in its details,” but he is quick to add that the text is, “of course, subject to the same criticisms of selectivity and self-interested distortion that characterize the genre of autobiography” (318). Considering that Equiano “reads the pattern of his life as reduplicating the pattern of salvation history found in the Christian Bible,” readers know that origin of place and self is at once messianic and duplicitous for Equiano, who “presents his earlier self as instinctively preferring to be read into a sacred Hebrew script” (Potkay 685). Because such parsing of the facts and fictions of Equiano’s memoir so closely resembles the work that autobiographical scholars do, it seems odd that they do not look at slave narratives. Of course, that this text is multi-genre complicates what a whole self is, and, therefore, any moral obligations that

self might have become more ambiguous. However, just because it does not correspond to scholars' notions of memoir does not mean it is not—in small or large part—a memoir.

Because Equiano's text works like a pendulum, a straightforward way for memoir scholars to explore his texts is to notice that only years later does Equiano see with complete clarity how an earlier experience resonated with mysticism. Perhaps Equiano reimagines his future because of his recollection with new clarity, such as with Gronniosaw's focus on reading backward for the signs and forward toward an entrance to Heaven. Evidence for this perspective abounds in *The Interesting Narrative*, which navigates what it means to be a catechumen—a convert to Christianity—but does not explain conversion as a linear progress of sinner, catechumen, saved, and devout. Because the narrative does not interest itself in an examination of identity as before, during, and after conversion, it draws readers away from understanding a testimonial narrative as a linear progression of the self across a timeline that works as before, during, and after a self's confrontation with something that changes it. As we will see, Equiano's conversion is an event where multiple time periods converge to support an anecdotal, vernacular understanding of the universe, God, and even narrative. Even the word "catechism" comes from the Latin "catechismus," meaning an instruction by word of mouth—literally a series of questions and answers ("Catechism"). For narrative purposes, this definition suggests that a conversion narrative need not be one that tells of a forward progression from sinner to saved, but rather that the event of an individual's engagement with the sacred is a series of events that a narrator must contend with in multiple time

periods, perhaps through personal reflection. There is always the “series of questions and answers” for Equiano, in which the timelines of the messiah, the catechumen, and the coming justice of the return to God/departing from this world are always swinging back and forth for him as he struggles to speak to his experiences through autobiographical testimonial.

Equiano is preoccupied with understanding time at large to the point that it causes him to be “much distressed” (Equiano 142), but he feels this preoccupation necessary to complete his conversion to Christ. A further complication for Equiano (and perhaps readers, who know him through written word) is that his experiences of time and conversion stand in opposition to his literacy. When Equiano reveals to a minister that he sometimes breaks two commandments—cursing and working on the Sabbath—he is told to “read the scriptures, and hear the word preached” for even “one sin, unatoned for, was as sufficient to damn a soul, as one leak was to sink a ship” (142). The “reverend gentleman” spoke words that “reminded [Equiano] of the shortness of time, and the length of eternity; and that no unregenerate soul, or any thing unclean, could enter the kingdom of Heaven” (142). We can see that Equiano links salvation with a knowledge of the difference between a human being’s short, linear sense of time that is self-focused and the mystical nature of a time that is broader than a human being’s life yet incorporates him through the return to God. Yet, this profound consideration of existential goodness is hardly as instructive as a couple of written rules, which is why the minister asks if Equiano can read as a follow up question to what he “*knew of Christ*” (142). The answer, Equiano is told, is not in conversation or contemplation, but with

literacy, and the official “did not admit [Equiano] as a communicant; but recommended [he] read the scriptures” (142). This scene is strange because Equiano is not seeking answers in the first place—he seeks communion, conversation, exploration, which he is denied over a suggestion of private practice. This more ambiguous sense about the vastness of the universe occurs to Equiano after knowing two rules he has read—do not curse or work on the Sabbath—and he is confused by the idea that one can only live a righteous life by obtaining a goodness accumulated through reading. This stressful pondering is not addressed by the written rules, and religious practice with another human being is denied him. Equiano’s confusion is so profound that he desires to be “annihilated,” that is, kill himself (143).

Equiano’s confusion that arises from an exploration of the “right way” to adopt Christianity does not come from constant, private reading, but rather when the messianic book he is preoccupied with *changes how it can be understood* by him. The book is not a recording of rules and stories, but a living presence. Thus, Equiano’s narrative becomes a testimonial to the fact that a book has the power to act on its own accord, separate from authorial agency. For Equiano, this change in orientation is from understanding the Bible as a book that is read in order to properly convert to an understanding of the Bible as a book that speaks to the devout. The concept of the speaking religious text is comparable to Gronniosaw’s memoir, and some have suggested that Equiano is influenced by the

former author for this reason.³⁰ But Equiano's moment of complete distress is unique in that it comes during his work on a ship, possibly on the Sabbath, when he breaks one of the commandments that might damn his soul. After Equiano's disheartening conversation with the minister that ends with the minister's advice to read and practice in isolation, Equiano contemplates suicide. But at the moment he intends to facilitate his own "annihilation" by jumping off "the very edge of the stern of the ship," (143) something magical happens to him: "this scripture was instantaneously impressed on my mind—'That no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him (1 John iii. 15.)'" (143). We might read this moment as a support for the minister's advice—the more you read the Bible, the more its lessons become intuitive. However, an alternative reading of this moment might suggest that simply due to the extreme danger of the experience and the finality of the consequences, what could otherwise seem like coincidence instead appears to Equiano and his readers as prescience—his very own mystical intervention. This reading undercuts the authority of the minister's statement to Equiano that in order to know God he must read. Much like with Gronniosaw, this moment where life might so easily become death becomes a moment of Equiano's complete actualization. Rather than an improvement to a better self, it is a realization that he has always been with God. Helen Thomas's thoughts on Equiano's experience of religion are quite relevant here. She says that

³⁰ For more detailed discussions of Gronniosaw's influence on Equiano, see Lisa Lowe's "Autobiography Out of Empire" (103) and Adam Potkay's "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography" (678).

His account serves to endorse the essential compatibility or rather, the potential tessellation of aspects of Ibo culture with principles of nonconformist Protestantism. One example of this is the author's correlation of the prophetic and healing qualities of nonconformist ministry with the power of African priests and magicians, the 'Ah-affoe-way-cah', to calculate time, foretell events, heal wounds and expel poisons. Both systems of belief demonstrated a rejection of institutionalised places of worship...and...an emphasis upon concepts of spirit possession and divine guidance, exemplified by the intense emotional investment characteristic of dissenting Protestants' confirmations of faith and the ecstatic bodily behaviour of African initiation rites. (233)

If this moment is a “rejection of institutionalized places of worship”—in this case the solitary experience with the book—how is it then a moment ripe with “prophetic and healing qualities,” one that indeed details the “divine guidance” of prescience? First, when coincidences correlate with such important moments and somehow involve a conceptualization of the sacred, they are just as easy to understand as destiny rather than coincidence. Second, this moment evokes time in an important way that further qualifies it as mystical destiny for our author. Reading the written word does not provide Equiano the comfort of a greater understanding of the universe that would prevent his suicide. Instead, it is the sudden words from God, heard as if in communion—what Equiano needed earlier with the minister—that provide him a sense of universal time. The “eternal

life” that is imbued in each human being and is “abiding in him” (Equiano 143) helps Equiano know that he was, is, and will be a part of the origin and return to God. He is destined to be caught up in the messianic time of the universe.

A mystical, vernacular moment is what leads to Equiano’s written testimonial, and through this pattern of cause and effect, we can see a rejection of an autonomous self and linear time in autobiographical testimonial and conversion. God’s testimony suddenly breathes into Equiano at the exact moment that he needs it, and then Equiano represents that moment in his own written testimony as an implicit acknowledgement that texts do not exist in chronological time and that individual testimony is a lie. Like a riddle to solve or a revealing spell, the relationship of the “speaking text” and “listener” is one that diffuses a sense of authorial selfhood in favor of focusing on the additional shared experience with readers, much like a trinity: God shared with me, I share with you, and I realize now upon looking back in my life that I was always already a part of this destiny. This shared experience distorts or disrupts the chronological time that exists in conversion narratives, in which one shows how he was, what he did, how he changed, and who he became through such a change. Instead, a “present experience of time has to do with something that is not present, or one could say, is present in the form of non-presence—like a ghost or a spectre” or God (Nilsson 1).

Suddenly it is not Equiano who is hunting for answers in The New Testament; the written word is spoken to him (and was also heard before it was multi-authored and became the books of the Bible—a further circling through of time) in order to show Equiano how its language is indeed holy—imbued with circular and multi-faceted lives,

layering the testimonials of God's and Jesus' existences into Equiano's own.

Equiano's individual life is suddenly involved with and authored by multiple people because his experience of "hearing" immediately before his almost death is intricately linked to Jesus' life and death as the messiah. The existence of Jesus beyond his own death enables Equiano to live, beyond his own possible death, as infinitely saved. The presence of the "non-present" author is remarkable here, where time is not linear, as Equiano's present moment is braided with a life from the past whose return in the present moment signals the length of eternity. Instead of this realization making Equiano want to "annihilate" his own physical life, what is annihilated is Equiano's preoccupation with the written Bible as salvation. His salvation comes when he realizes that he was already a part of the larger story, which leads him to remark, "my burden was then greatly removed, and I found a heart-felt resignation to the will of God" (143). Equiano does not surrender to literacy to learn the correct path that he might implement. Instead, his "heart-felt resignation" comes from understanding how intricate to a larger story he has always been. He "reads" his life backwards to understand the moment in which he might die.

God's will and Equiano's are not separate, for after his preoccupation with salvation becomes a moment of messianic understanding, Equiano recognizes that he too has the power to foretell. Thus, he sees that time itself is not chronological but always at play. His experience of being the listener is not a passive identity; instead, it is the product of actively changing his focus from reader to one who allows the words to enter. Equiano continues to read the Bible for sure, but it is when the Bible takes agency over him that it begins to guide his faith and testimony. On "the sixth of October," he tells

readers, “I thought I should see or hear something supernatural. I had a secret impulse on my mind of something that was to take place, which drove me, for all that time, to a throne of grace” (143). Equiano recognizes that a part of God’s testimony is a part of his own testimony, for this prescience teaches him that “it please God to enable me to wrestle with him as Jacob did” (143). This “wrestling” is not one where a believer is taught a more important way to enact belief, but a mutual engagement between God and Equiano that recalls Jacob in order to signify on rather than to merely repeat Jacob’s struggle. As we know, Equiano has found his own “throne of grace.” Thus, this moment of prescience—the foreseeing, repetition, and recalling of Jacob’s struggle—are all a part of Equiano’s present.

Equiano’s perspective on literacy and literature changes into a belief that a vernacular, ultimately incomprehensible experience with God is what is necessary for him to live. While Equiano reads Acts, chapter 4, it is the life imbued in the text that reaches him, not through literacy but through vision. Equiano tells readers, “the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light...removing the veil...I saw clearly, with the eye of faith, the crucified Saviour bleeding on the cross on Mount Calvary: the Scriptures became an unsealed book” (144). This is Equiano’s true conversion, not into better Christian, but into an individual who’s selfhood is annihilated as he becomes a part of the messianic story that has preoccupied him. In a mystical vision, he simultaneously sees the death of Christ (a historical moment far in the past), reads his own life through Jacob’s in the Bible (a story without any clear place in history), and “wrestles” with God (in his present). Equiano’s messianic hope for justice

has come into being. Because Equiano's sense of time has changed, "the Scriptures [become] an unsealed book" (144). While previously he viewed eternity as a long time to exist if one could not find a way to fit into the language of salvation, now sweet eternity is the only option. Importantly, eternity is not a chronological time that continues forever; instead, it is a complete breakdown of linear time. Equiano no longer worries about a certain future in which he will die and where he might go once that happens, nor does he worry about his past sins making it hard to live productively in the present as a Christian. Instead, his mystical moments with the text "were really as life to the dead... This was indeed unspeakable, and I firmly believe, undeniable to many" (144). The origin of his conversion is duplicitous before it is reverent, but once it happens, it is not Equiano who has gained a better self that might understand "eternity" as simply the "present." In his feeling suddenly alive while still knowing that this experience is "unspeakable," and then writing a memoir detailing his ability to *not detail* what his life truly consists of, Equiano still lets us know that many would not deny his experience. Alexander M. Jacqui's thoughts illuminate this moment quite well:

Indeed, the Divine knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making this the very process through which we come to know its existence. It is, therefore, the same process through which we come to know ourselves... How does one come to know oneself through and as Saints or Spirits? How does one not know oneself without them? What kind of labor makes this intelligibility possible? ("Pedagogies of the Sacred" 293)

Equiano does not seek a juridical messiah returning to the world to decide who put in the correct amount of a “labor” of literacy, for his belief in a change in time is most relevant to his understanding of how he shares in the same messianic justice that is God and Jesus. For Equiano, coming justice is already present, and the portrait of Equiano on the cover of his book with the Bible opened to the fourth chapter of Acts demonstrates this: ““Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved, but only Jesus Christ”” (Equiano 146). Even on the cover of his own memoir, it is the intertwining of his life with the messianic that preoccupies Equiano—that is, how he is not autonomous. That this “unspeakable,” part of his life is what resonates most for him—not his travels, not his enslavement, not his informative first chapters that detail elements of the culture of his youth—is strange. The book itself—as incomprehensible for his readers—is just like the experience he has while trying to read the Bible. However, when he adjusts his perspective on the power of the book, and indeed the power of the many who make a book, it is as if he is making a messianic call to his readers: you too are a part of this wonder, and what is unarticulated is where the heart of memoir and belief are most prevalent.

Conclusion

While I chose to discuss three eighteenth-century authors, this chapter could continue with how a non-linear style is used to articulate an ambivalence about self and God into the nineteenth century. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* shows how she acknowledges the messianic power of language by pointedly choosing to whom she reveals her literacy. This selectivity acts as a productive narrative device

alongside her pen name, Linda Brent, to defy her subjugation by Master Flint and reveal her narrative's quest toward absence from human society. Nevertheless, as Jacobs' testimonial ends with her successfully writing herself into absence, we see her counting her blessings that she is free but still desiring a home of her own. Thus, as Gronniosaw, Rousseau, and Equiano do, Jacobs shows readers that an achievement of messianic spirituality and testimony is not without its difficulties. Absence is transcendent and hard. In these texts, testimony brings justice to the authors, but it never confirms an author's self or presence. The justice is outside of humanity, yet the authors remain within it, for the time being. Likewise, Sojourner Truth's *Narrative* employs a messianic style that disrupts linearity through multiple authors, name changes, and a non-traditional depiction of conversion and pilgrimage that illuminates how language in general, and not literacy in particular, supports her own absence. Truth tells readers, "you read books, I talk to God" (xxviii), and we should immediately be reminded of Gronniosaw. Language implies faith, but faith never has verifiable confirmation, evidence, or an ending. Unlike with Gronniosaw, Truth depicts her conversations with God as causing her to become the woman her culture ridicules: "a genuine specimen of the uncultured negro" (Frederick Douglass quot. in Martha Washington x). However, this feature only brings her closer to the tradition of ambiguous spiritual memoir. Escaping the hierarchy of human comparison means one is outside of humanity at large. Absence does not come without a cost. As Truth is ridiculed, Rousseau lives in constant risk of turning back to his fears of death after his spiritual awakening, Equiano's messianic undoing of linear time results in constant dispute over the facts of his life, Gronniosaw's impoverished suffering results

from his achievement as a spiritual pilgrim, and Jacobs writes the worst parts of her life into absence, barely alluding to her years of rape by Flint, yet this achievement does not enable her desires to be fulfilled in her new world. Free from the bounds of self that their communities forced on them, unmade in the human world, and triumphantly torn apart in an elusive pursuit, each of these narratives and narrators become “like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea” (Jacobs 228).

Chapter Four: Kathryn Harrison and the Martyrs in the Arena of Death

Many styles and forms have long populated Western memoir. Regardless of the genre's style or content, the reading audience and the genre's scholars always await the moment to commence bashing. The exception to this norm is Augustine, who is often viewed as the humble, moral creator of the genre (Yagoda, *Memoir* 15). While academic specialists tackle scholarship on poetry, fiction, and drama, writing on memoir comes from a variety of voices, such as journalists, book reviewers, bloggers, and creative writers, many of whom do not specialize in the genre's history and forms and write about memoir in order to criticize its solipsism. The unique nature of the canon of writing on memoir certainly speaks to memoir studies' nascent existence as an academic discipline. But it also speaks to the prevailing belief that memoir is written by the people, for the people, and therefore belongs under the microscope of the people. Even John Paul Eakin, one of the prominent memoir specialists, claims, "autobiography itself isn't primarily literary. Literary autobiography is properly understood as an epiphenomenon of the self-narration that structures the production and reception of identity in our lives" ("Breaking Rules" 124). From the democracy of voices writing about memoir it seems that he is right. If memoir is accessible by all, all can critique it, and writers not trained in the forms or history of memoir can become some of its most accusatory— and most cited—critics. In the abovementioned article by Eakin, for example, the author cites Cynthia Crossen, a journalist who has no affiliation with memoir studies or the writing of memoir, in order to argue that the most obvious criticism of Kathryn Harrison's memoir, *The Kiss*, might be

that she ignores social codes about privacy (119). Or, as Crossen simply says to Harrison in her own manifesto on memoir/book review: “hush up” (A16).

If, as Eakin posits, memoir is an artifact of something we all own—identity—rather than a form of art that requires studied familiarity in order to critique, memoir can be considered simultaneously as a positive, all-inclusive form and as evidence of what is wrong with a genre built on people sharing their lives: self-aggrandizement. To memoir naysayers, Kathryn Harrison is the high example of how the genre became a lowly art made of writers who have replaced what should be moral conviction with a voracious appetite for money. The criticisms of Harrison’s text in particular reflect criticisms of memoir in general, a genre that has come to be understood as “a time-honored literary genre that currently has about as much esteem as an episode of the Jerry Springer Show...Part of the problem is that more and more people are writing memoirs...with few, if any, ethical standards to guide them” (Hamburger 29). It seems that in order to write about a particular memoir, one truly must be sick of seeing so many of them. While scholars of other genres choose amongst the many available texts in order to make arguments about the genre, writers on memoir homogenously and continually ask memoirists to stop writing.

The Kiss is a memoir that details the romantic relationship Harrison had with her estranged biological father when she was in college. Harrison’s father, a minister, visits Harrison and her mother, demonstrates a great interest in Harrison, and when departing, kisses her on the mouth, deeply. Thus begins their relationship. While Harrison’s already difficult relationship with her mother grows more tenuous, her relationship with her

father becomes intense and dysfunctional. But when Harrison's mother is hospitalized for cancer, Harrison ends her relationship with her father, forgives her family's many wrongs, and makes amends to her mother for becoming her sexual competitor. Yet more important than the possibly shocking situations Harrison writes about are the poignant formal choices she makes. Harrison illuminates the continual relevancy of hagiography (saints' auto/biographies) in contemporary memoir, writes in dramatic, lyrical sentences, and employs a confusing, episodic structure in her book that reflects the mad choices each adult makes in this family, as well as their possibility to make meaningful changes. In this narrative, a single moment—like the kiss—has the possibility to make or break someone, and it is ultimately Harrison who chooses to change how she is made by her parents.

I argue that Harrison crafts a frame of a self-absence for *The Kiss* that comes out of her interest in hagiography, particularly martyrs' *Lives*. These *Lives* show women willing to experience societal condemnation—even death—because they meaningfully reject cultural boundaries in order to cultivate a paradoxical presence made of absence. By drawing on the communal identity, boundary crossing, complication of consent, rejection of selfhood in favor of absence, and magical triumphs in saints' *Lives*, Harrison reveals the lie inherent in safe divisions between market and family, public and private, and moral and devious. Negative reactions to memoir remark on the “ostensible narcissism that has irritated critics the most” (Mendelsohn 1), and Harrison has been held up as the leading purveyor of this narcissism in memoir. However, an identifiable “self” and critics' ability to categorize that self by moral triumph or deviation are beside the

point of Harrison's text, which, just as the *Lives* that preceded it, is concerned with the absence of author and subject. First, I will contextualize the vast criticism on Harrison and *The Kiss* from 1997 to the present. Then, I will provide an in-depth look at Harrison's use of hagiography in order to support my argument that her concerns are completely different from the ones critics force upon her.

Selling a traumatic, personal life experience on the public market is one of the biggest examples of Harrison's moral depravity for her critics, who think of her as an author treating her "shocking experiences as a kind of publishing commodity that need only be converted into serviceable prose in order to appeal to readers" (Milburn 65-66). This criticism is predicated on a neoliberal economic model that posits the relationship between commodity and individual as ideal because each individual has the power to gain or lose depending on how she engages the market. An individual's "shocking experiences" are private and thus are to be protected from the economic market unless they increase a cultural market's diversity, like Rigoberta Menchú's memoir, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Gillian Harkins remarks, "neoliberalism seemed poised to absorb historical struggle by recognizing difference and even celebrating it, using the logic of cultural difference to incorporate the past into the present" (7). As a first-world, white, upper middle-class woman who sells a narrative of her choices that are protected from regulation, Harrison has sold what should be sacred—her independent, moral self—first to her father and then as a commodity on the publishing market. If someone crosses a moral line by putting her scandals on the market, her lucky freedom to have an individual self avalanches into her own exploitation of this freedom for self-aggrandizement; her

self-gain on the cultural and economic markets becomes her own self-exploitation born from a desire to succeed.

The morally devious who relate their experiences are hinting ominously at the extinction of morality in general. Therefore, the argument goes, they are so dangerous that each one appears to be taking nasty living to a new extreme. Fiction writers such as Harrison and poets who publish memoirs are especially under attack, for they should know better, as they do not solely write in the genre of moral extinction:

A growing batch of memoirs by literary screw-ups and also-rans suggests that mistakes—the bigger and more luridly described the better—might be a portal to the success, or, at the very least, the solvency, that eluded their authors the first time around. The formula is simple: when all else fails, write about your failure. (Harvey 96)

Forget that Schlegel criticized Rousseau in 1798 for writing in the most shameful of genres—“pure autobiographies” (Yagoda, “A Brief History” 1)—it is always the critic’s prerogative to claim that, finally, the genre has fallen, for *this writer, this time* is truly the worst. That is why Harrison is “slimy, repellent, meretricious, cynical... This confession isn't from the heart, it's from the pocketbook” (Yardley D02). Furthermore, as James Wolcott notes, treating incest as a commodity is especially detrimental for Harrison’s own family’s privacy from the market, for she “invite[s] misery and humiliation upon her children, *especially on her daughter*” (35, emphasis added). Memoir critics like to claim that they want a plethora of voices and experiences in which to immerse themselves, and a neoliberal ideal is to have ultimate market diversity. However, when marketing a new

good crosses a moral boundary of the dominant culture that controls the market, critics' anxiety about the dominant, homogenous culture that praises diversity sets in, and self-motivation is critiqued as self-aggrandizement that exploits "previously shielded sites—such as the white middle-class family and white male adulthood" (Gilmore, "American Neoconfessional" 674). Not only is Harrison's private family humiliated in front of the public world, so is her entire culture. She has exploited the sacred responsibility of the individual to choose what stays secret and what is shared.

A strange consequence of the Harrison criticism is that writers' anxiety about being viewed as suspect for even acknowledging her has created a body of book reviews and scholarship that is glaringly autobiographical. In place of a critique of Harrison's formal, written choices, critics catalogue their own moral gains. Thus, the disparaging of Harrison's self-interest is weirdly mirrored in criticism of her, from the moment *The Kiss* came out in 1997 until today. Crossen's infamous 1997 review of *The Kiss* lets readers in on her own philosophy of the problem with memoir today—that it has "yanked away the last veil of privacy that protected the sanctity of the individual from the mindless tittle-tattle of the masses"—and suggests her own family's moral triumphs as a counter to Harrison's family: "My own grandmother, herself a Kathryn... would have had two wise but widely ignored words of advice for Ms. Harrison *and her brethren*: Hush up" (A16, emphasis added). In a 2012 book review that has nothing to do with Harrison, Daniel Mendelsohn lets readers know that he does not condone Harrison's practices, calling hers "a memoir of abjection" (1). While seeming to discuss the merits of her text—it provides a "series of hard blows to the plexus" (177)—Sven Birkerts asserts in 2007 that

Harrison's was "disturbing...the most unsettling" (176) for *him* to read. Knowing that she is married with children and presumably happy in a normative heterosexual union does not ease his tension, nor does it prevent him from making veiled sexist comments about women's weakness that invalidate his earlier generous comments: "knowing that the princess is finally rescued by her prince doesn't do away with our fear and trembling" (188). Although rescued from her immoral weaving of market and family by re-entering the moral privacy of family that Birkerts values, her boundary crossing still resonates as dangerous. Notice his use of the word "our" to affiliate himself with a body of readers and critics who we are to assume have a similar moral point of view. We all want women who cross boundaries to be rescued. Unfortunately they cannot rescue themselves, even with a literary career, personal testimony, wealth, or parenthood. Only the institution of marriage provides safety from Harrison's previous transgressions. In 2012, Yagoda simply remarks as an aside that Harrison provides the reader "too much information" (*Memoir* 237). Without even discussing Harrison's text or the criticism surrounding it, these authors feel the urge to impress upon readers a careful persona that says, "I like memoir, but not memoirs *like that*."

Shockingly, even those who praise Harrison end up re-writing her moral failures as emblematic of their sexual proclivities in the place of a discussion of her writing. *Esquire's* 1997 "Women We Love" issue includes James Atlas' "Kathryn Harrison Writing Through the Last Taboo," in which he remarks, "those glossy photographs that come with the book now: They're the literary equivalent of an adolescent's Playboy centerfold...The windblown blond hair, the porcelain skin, the deep, staring eyes. This

person is a writer? Why isn't she modeling for Calvin Klein?" (40). Indeed, why isn't she posing for us instead of speaking? Atlas refers to Harrison's affair with her father as Harrison going "the distance" (40). In Atlas' review Harrison remains the loud-mouthed whore, and less-aroused critics should be reminded that "[her] children, [her] friends, perhaps society itself may pay a terrible price for [her] solace. [Her] ocean of horror makes anachronisms of such precious virtues as dignity, discretion and restraint" (Crossen A16). But because she has troubled moral and economic boundaries, she is also an exotic taboo-breaker, willing to take you, dear voyeur, "the distance." The larger and more dangerous conclusion we can make about Harrison's many critics and few supporters is that the "broad, thematic contours of women's experiences centering on emotional distress, bodily violations, and storytelling conventions" remain largely ignored (Haaken 57).

While Harrison's critics condemn her for crossing important social and economic boundaries, a more generous reading of her work might say exactly the same thing but with the important caveat that by crossing these boundaries, Harrison shows that they are a semblance—they have never not been breached. If these popular studies, articles, reviews, and other sensational accounts of memoir in the press acknowledged the pervasive tradition of women's hagiography in memoir, they would not be so scandalized (or turned on) by Harrison as a person. In fact, portions of *The Kiss* first appeared in the September 1994 issue of *Harper's* under the title "Seeking Rapture: Lessons for an Apprentice Saint," not, say, "Incest Trouble." What writers on memoir would find instead is a tradition of literature that should assuage their anxieties about this rogue boundary

crosser, for she is one of thousands of writers who go “the distance.” There is a rich tradition of memoir in which an adherence to socio-cultural boundaries is muddled by the ambiguities inherent in the consent authors, readers, and critics provide. It is true that reading about consensual incest has a creep factor that is hard to ignore and easy to malign. However, that does not mean that criticism on *The Kiss* should end with that understandable reaction and condemn the narrative entirely. By starting and stopping with their disgust, memoir critics miss exploring how Harrison traces her influence to hagiography from Late Antiquity and the medieval period and revels in the moral ambiguities championed by the powerful women in this memoir tradition.

While critics lambast Harrison for forcing an already morally egregious tradition to sink into the nastiest depths, her use of the saints’ *Lives* suggests that she is much more enmeshed in a tradition than critics give her credit for. Harrison places herself in a tradition of memoir that is comprised of multi-authored martyr tales that always lead to the subjects’ deaths. Harrison does not praise the canonical spiritual memoirist regarded as “the father of memoir,” Augustine, when letting readers in on her narrative preoccupations. Instead, her stated passion is with memoirs written before his that establish other traditions beside the autodiegetic, confessional model for which critics praise Augustine and that are arguably more consistent in the genre’s tradition. Even Augustine’s text is influenced by the earlier memoir attributed to Perpetua and Felicitas, *The Passion of SS Perpetua and Felicitas* (who Harrison refers to in *The Kiss* as “Perpetua and Felicity”), as we know through his sermons in praise of them, such as “On The Feast Of SS Perpetua and Felicitas.” He also would have been well aware of these

martyrs' memoir from his education in Carthage and his mother's mystical Catholicism, which most likely was the reason she named Augustine's sister Perpetua (Ryan xix-xx). Harrison seems to follow in an Augustinian tradition that critics do not discuss—one that considers the origins of Western memoir as beginning in Christian martyr narratives. While critics remark on her departure from Western memoir's nobler beginnings, Harrison seems to have as deep an understanding of the genre as Augustine.

Hagiographical memoir allows Harrison to promote communal identity in her own memoir rather than telling a story of a self who stares in the mirror. This communal identity is made of women who promote their own absence, and the community seems to choose Harrison before she chose it. Her group identity was established at her birth, as she was named “for saints and queens” and thus received books of *Lives of the Saints* (Harrison 102). Her destiny as belonging to this community is a common tradition in hagiography, in which women are provided early signs of the holy companions they will keep.³¹ While she reads and discards the volumes of male saints, Harrison “studied and slept with” the female *Lives* (113), demonstrating her interest in who these women were, how they wrote, and how they were written about, much like St Lucy's martyr status

³¹ Blessed Raymond's St Catherine is more beautiful and intelligent than her siblings because of her early childhood preoccupation with all things holy, Christina of Markyate's holiness reveals itself at a visit to the Benedictine abbey of St Albans when she is a mere child, Luisa De Carvajal and St Euphrosyne are born of barren women, Christina the Astonishing watches the family's herd despite being the youngest child because she secretly knows “God is a modest lover” (Cantimpre 438), St Faith has people converting simply by seeing how lovely her young face is, and Jesus, of course, was born of a virgin.

begins with her worship of St Agatha. In particular, it is the virgin martyrs that draw Harrison in: “Blinded Lucy. Maimed Agatha, her breasts on a platter. Beheaded Agnes. Margaret pressed to death under a door piled high with stones. Perpetua and Felicity mauled by wild beasts. And Dymphna...she refused [her father] and he cut off her head” (113). Harrison places her own story within the history of women whose narratives are written because they are willing to die for their beliefs, women whose absence is their real story. And from their absence comes their status: Christian, martyr, relic, saint. Harrison is not simply influenced by these *Lives*, she wants readers to know that she is a part of a community that endures by making its individual members absent. Paradoxically, the community itself is what supports the absence of each its members.

With St Dymphna, in particular, as an influence, Harrison marks transgression as the necessary narrative precedent to self-absence that characterizes these women’s communal identity. Beyond mimicking the formal tradition of naming influence in hagiography—St Lucy names St Agatha, Margery Kempe names St Julian, St Augustine names SS Perpetua and Felicitas—Harrison’s text exemplifies one of the transgressive themes particular to Dymphna’s *Life*, incest:

In particular she [Harrison] remembers Saint Dympna, a figure to whom Harrison alludes throughout her memoir. A seventh-century Irish princess, Dympna escapes her pagan father's incestuous demands by fleeing with her confessor, Gerbernus, across the Irish Sea and Channel to Belgium. There, disguised as minstrels, Gerbernus and Dympna travel deep into the forest, build a hut out of branches, and live as hermits. Dympna's father,

angered at her disobedience, pursues Dymphna and beheads her.

(Marshall 405)

Dymphna (the more common spelling and the one Harrison uses), the patron saint of the nervous and mentally disturbed, has qualities that are unique to her narrative as well as many that exemplify other saints' *Lives*. Dymphna's incestuous father is unique in the *Lives*, but Dymphna's escape from her father, her chastity, her miraculous beauty and piety, and her beheading are not. And the characteristics of her father—rage, desire, prodding consent—are not dissimilar to other fathers in martyr memoirs and biographies. Marshall explains that, “as in the plot of other runaway-daughter tales, Harrison's father pays little attention to his daughter until she is sexually mature” (417). This “runaway-daughter” theme, in which young women often leave their fathers' homes and a status of daughter and/or wife and mother in order to transgress, that is, in order to convert to Christianity, is familiar to readers of female martyr hagiographies. While readers might buy Harrison's signification on the particular transgression of St Dymphna's *Life*, it may be hard for them to understand her real life choice to engage in incest as an act of signification. But, if we look at what the memoir does instead of what Harrison did as a real human being, Harrison's text frames the her incest through the martyr's. Harrison's signification strips individual ownership, trauma, and reflection from the individual author who has engaged in incest and brings the reader to consider a hagiographical tradition in which taboo father/daughter relations are an impetus for a transgression that leads to each woman's goals: absence from a self that has been formulated wrongly in their cultures, personal lives, and relationships with God. Just as Lucy is often read with

Agatha, so should Harrison be read with Dymphna. In sum, all the *Lives* should be read together, not individually. The power and particulars of transgression in an individual *Life* are created and contextualized by those in other *Lives*.

Harrison also uses the martyrs, in general, and St Dymphna, in particular, to contextualize the complicated ways transgression and consent come together to shape an absence of self to be, if nothing else, glorious. Martyrs trouble the relationship between government and family in a remarkable way. Many martyrs are mere children when they consent to Christianity (for example, Agnes is thirteen), knowing it will most likely lead to their death, but their consent makes them adults in the local officials' eyes. In order to make a decision based on policy, it must be evident to the governing powers that these women/children have transgressed their statuses as daughters, mothers, and, less commonly, wives, and consented to Christianity. After they provide consent, officials, who often double as male suitors, can then abuse the women's sacred freedom of choice to identify as Christian and reject all sexual advances or marriage proposals because the women have demonstrated an adult status. The paradox is that in order to torture and kill them, the state must first acknowledge that these women are adults with the capacity to consent; the consent itself is identifying as Christian—not a particular girl with a particular family, but one of many with the same title who are willing to die. Thus, to name oneself Christian is to disregard previous identifications that distinguish oneself from others in society and to identify instead as a community, in this case a community of those seeking absence of individual identity and, then, death.

Harrison specifically frames her consent with her father as a necessary step to achieve her goal of stepping outside of an individual identity, and she understands the necessity of her consent to transgression through St Dymphna's *Life*. This consent is quite different from the frame critics place on her, in which participating in the act itself is a paradoxical finale, causing her self to be both evidence of and a finalization of her moral starvation. Like the male officials who decide whether women in the *Lives* live or die, as well as St Dymphna's father (166), Harrison's father is "repugnant" (165) because of his misuse of authority to fulfill his own sexual desires. Harrison's father's authority comes from his status as a minister and parent, markers of power he often uses against Harrison in order to proclaim the righteousness of his love for her and of their sexual relationship, both gifts from his kind of God: "'God gave you to me,' he says" (108). He is certain of his authoritative point of view, for he is "a brilliantly clear theologian, as only arrogance could make him. His faith is comprised of answers, no uncertainties" (113). He feels a righteous ownership of Harrison, repeatedly calling her "my girl" (108) and making sure it is only he who can cut her long, beautiful hair (196). In comparison to her father's "answers," Harrison follows the mystical tradition of the martyrs, which is made up of inherent ambiguities regarding consent and transgression. Obviously considering her own relationship with her father, Harrison wonders, "if I can just do it willingly, trusting in the ultimate goodness of God, and the way in which he sometimes takes unexpected and even repugnant forms, like beggars and lepers, like Saint Dymphna's father. How could she have been martyred without him? How could she have been glorified?" (165-166). Mystics like the martyrs and Harrison consent to pain that

“weakens the subject’s sense of empirical identity and strengthens his or her sense of attachment to a highly valued new center of identification” (Glücklich 7) because it leads to their own absence. This “new center of identification” that is outside individual subjectivity becomes important for a writer placing herself into a narrative community of hagiography, and it also establishes the transgressive steps she must take in order to experience pain as something that can lead to reward, which, in Harrison’s case, is accomplished through her affair with her father. However, as Glücklich reminds, pain and suffering are different. Pain is physical, while suffering involves a combination of factors. Just as the female martyrs enter into culturally and physically dangerous situations and profit from them in ways that might be hard for contemporary readers to understand as successful, Harrison implicitly consents to her father’s affections, which causes her great pain—she becomes anorexic, narcoleptic, and unable to control her physical reactions. Her father is the only one who can modify her appearance, cutting her hair when he deems fit. Her body exists at the whim of anything but her own will. Nevertheless, in her all-consuming destruction, Harrison understands this transgression as one that is required for transcendence. Her father is revolting in every description in the book, because he is “like Saint Dymphna’s father,” and Harrison knows that her glory, like St Dymphna’s, will come: “how could she have been martyred without him?” Harrison may have chosen to engage in incest on her own, not due to some signification, but she understands the stakes of her choice only by considering Dymphna’s glory, which required a father’s misused authority. And these women are not alone. Agatha’s breasts are cut off, Lucy’s entrails are spilled, Agnes is taken to a brothel, stripped naked, and

thrown to the fire, Cecilia lives three days after a botched beheading, Anastasia is burned at the stake, Petronilla dies in bed before she will tell a suitor no, so her friend Felicula is tortured in her place.

It is easy to say that these martyr tales do not end well. They all die young, beautiful, eloquent, and, often times, grotesquely. The male authorities around these female martyrs, including Harrison's father, do not know what to do with a mind and body that has transgressed to become evidence of absence and presence simultaneously. Male authorities torture and kill the young women. And thousands of years after martyrdom's prevalence in Christianity, Harrison's father can only proclaim "'how could you take it from me!'" (197) when she refuses his forced hair cuts and his sex. For the men, a body is there, but it will be without sex, family, or a sanctioned spiritual path. It is present, yet only as an absence of a woman's own fulfilled desires.

The choice critics focus on the most in Harrison's text as evidence of her moral failings—the sexual intercourse she has with her father—is also the most poignant marker through which Harrison recalls the tradition of absence that martyrs' *Lives* champion. While this intercourse is the most important aspect of Harrison's text for critics, competing with her written account as one of the most awful moral failings they can identify in her actual life, it is hard to find a critic that quotes Harrison's written account of this experience. Critics such as Crossen might question giving any details about the experience, which would have left Crossen's grandmother, if she had read the book, "fainted dead away" (A16). Presumably, this not often discussed act is one readers are interested in exploring, even if meekly, for its taboo nature alone. It is probably one

of the reasons many readers pick up the text. However, upon arriving at that anticipated scandalous moment, readers find that Harrison's prose about her initial intercourse with her father is sparse, almost nonexistent. In her most profound act of engagement for critics, Harrison is inexplicably absent. She reports, "the sight of him naked: at that point I fall completely asleep. I arrive at the state promised by the narcotic kiss in the airport. In years to come, I won't be able to remember even one instance of our lying together" (136). The description of their first sex launches readers into pages about Harrison's own sleep, not into further descriptions of sex. Harrison's consent to their intercourse is ambiguous, yet powerfully so, and it manifests the absence she admires in the *Lives*. Gillian Harkins remarks that Harrison's falling asleep is an experience that "makes agency into surrender" (213). Harrison chooses simultaneously to participate in and to reject their intercourse, just as martyrs passively participate in their own deaths by consenting to a Christian status that will most likely lead to their murders. In conversation or physical contact with her father, she falls asleep without any ability to control it, waking up minutes or hours later, sometimes with a phone receiver in her hand.

While her critics identify this sex act as one in which Harrison exploits what should be sacred, I found myself cheated of the details. The mid-point placement of their first sexual encounter in the book, outside of a chronology of their affair, and the lack of detail a reader gets about it (far less, for example, than her remarking on saints), speak to Harrison's purpose in writing a memoir that contains sex as a step in her elevation into absence but that is not exclusively about it. Similarly, we do not read the *Lives* to see the moment women transgress from their own cultural boundaries; we read them in order to

see what that transgression amounts to, what they become because of that choice. It is not due to leaving their families that the martyrs' *Lives* are written, but their deaths are started with this choice. Similarly, Harrison's sex with her father, which she cannot even remember enough to describe, is not the occasion for her memoir, but it is a necessary step toward her own depersonalized actualization—the death of who she is as a subject and the brilliant community she finds after she sheds her individuality.

While a rejection of the identity of good daughter or moral citizen in favor of a communal identity is the first step in these women's path toward self-absence, the sign that this absence has come to fruition is when magical, mystical triumphs occur. Harrison's position on her memoir is as follows: "I posit lives for myself, other lives than the one to which I will return. Lives that begin when I don't return. There are always those stories of young women, they just never come home" (131). We can presume she is thinking about these women's magical yet terrifying path toward their triumphant absence. Agatha's breasts grow back when a healer comes to her jail cell at night, and her defilement causes an earthquake (not uncommon for women martyrs). Lucy chooses to remain alive three holy days after her entrails are cut, and she only dies upon hearing a prayer end on "Amen." Agnes' hair grows the length of her body when she is stripped naked, and then a tunic appears on her. Cecilia shows her husband, Valerian, an angel that will kill him if he tries to fornicate with her. Anastasia is fed in her jail cell from bread given to her by the spectre of St Theodora. Petronilla, the daughter of Peter the Apostle, dies happily in bed before a waiting suitor can torture her. Instead of having her head cut off—the most common way martyrs eventually die after having succeeded at

surviving all manners of torment—Harrison mimics these women’s beheadings: she has all her long, beautiful hair cut off, and thus her own body becomes a signifier of a presence that is absent. Powerful men defile martyrs’ bodies to teach them the waste of their own beauty in choosing to remain virgins, and this defilement leads to their magic, then their deaths. Grooming Harrison’s hair is her father’s way to teach her that he owns her because of their transgression, and by cutting off her hair, she breaks his psychic hold on her, and their affair dies. While this is Harrison’s manifestation of magic that comes only after her transgression, it also becomes a way to escape her mother’s hold on her.

Harrison’s beautiful, full hair is evidence for her mother of a daughter’s unguarded, competing sexuality. During the “beheading” of her father’s hold on her, Harrison’s mother is dying of cancer in the hospital, her own beauty—one of her favorite possessions—long gone and beside the point of each breath she continues to take. Time is running out, and Harrison must make an impact before her mother dies. While martyrs’ magic causes earthquakes, raises sinners from the dead, allows them to live with parts of their bodies hanging by tendons until it feels right for them to die, Harrison removes what is, for her mother, a reason to believe that she is not her daughter, and for her father, a reason to believe that she is forever his daughter. She completely undoes her familial identifications, and she enters into an existence where she is neither her father’s lover nor her mother’s competition; she is, quite simply and finally, unknowable. The spell of her origin is broken. Unsurprisingly, Harrison contextualizes this experience through St Dymphna: “Dymphna’s father cuts off her hair, a long blonde tail of it, as much like my own as a statue’s [of Dymphna] could be. Except that I don’t let my father have that hair,

or my life” (196). Yet this hair is not an insignia of some new, bold, individual identity for Harrison. Rather, it is one example of agency that is prevalent only through surrender, to borrow Harkin’s phrase. Just as the agency of the first line of *The Kiss* is that people “meet”—a verb focused on the *action* of union itself and not what kind of union is being entered into—the agency here is on the action of cutting as an end. The cut locks do not become an artifact representing Harrison’s past, nor do they symbolize some self-aggrandizement wielded before her parents to signal that she owns herself. After showing it to her mother, it goes into the hospital room’s trashcan. The hair does not have agency; the action of cutting does. The affair with her father is over. Her mother will die. She will be without the individual identity of sexualized daughter that has been placed on her. Just as Perpetua guides the executioner’s sword to her own throat because her end could not happen until she magically wills it, Harrison takes her own death away from her father. He will not destroy her. Knowing this provokes him to terror, and he cries “how could you take it from me!” (Harrison 197). Harrison takes away his authority that she previously had supported by existing within his cultural boundaries. She is no longer his girl. And what she has gained is a place amongst the martyrs she worships. She is not anyone’s, even her own, as she participates in her own death. She is magically, and finally, not.

As in all writing on memoir, it seems, there is the truth to consider. Does Harrison really die as the martyrs before her did? No. But the written narratives within which she places her work trouble our understanding of memoir as simply the telling of actual life experiences. To write a subject into absence requires a deft hand and a hearty interest in

truth that is fantastical rather than actual. The *Lives* are hagiographies, martyr narratives, conversion narratives, prison diaries, biographies, memoir—all genres we associate with true-life happenings. So, when the virgin martyr Margaret is partially swallowed by a Satanic dragon whose belly explodes, are readers to presume that this is not true? We do not know, but we do know that female martyrs all provide consent to the transgressive and the fantastical, and, therefore, to their own absence. Margaret asks God to show her Satan, and he obliges. This is a radical moment of consent for a girl who is “a paragon of meekness” (John Lydgate 90) in the face of her father Theodosius’ distaste for her. The consent acts as a formal plot feature that welcomes magic, mysticism, the supernatural, and the bizarre into the narrative. Moreover, as readers, we incorporate faith into nonfiction narratives in ambiguous yet poignant ways that refuse the bland dichotomies of true/false and moral/immoral in which Harrison’s critics are stuck. After all, once out from the dragon’s belly, Margaret is considered the patron saint of expectant mothers. Has anyone criticized Margaret for her elevated status? We incorporate her into our narratives in a way that is true via a status only made because of her absence. Does Harrison really die? Yes, in a way.

Harrison’s narrative structure similarly implicates readers while rejecting a critical understanding of what is true. Or, more precisely, it corresponds to a spectrum of truth that the *Lives* put forth. While Augustine mostly speaks to God and fellow Christians (or might-be Christians), and Rousseau mostly speaks to humans, Harrison’s text is addressed, simply, “To Beloved,” and it begins with that wildly ambiguous sentence that would make undergraduate writing workshops rise up in arms about a lack

of specificity: “We meet in airports” (3). Like martyr narratives that begin with a proclamation about God’s glory, an envoi, or an address to God instead of humanity, readers begin Harrison’s text simultaneously excluded from and included in the action. What is happening? What is true? Who is true? We do not know who the beloved is (we might hope it is not her father), or who is meeting in airports, but the present tense includes us in the immediacy of the stakes of what will unfold. The book begins not with one individual telling of her transgressions in a public forum for profit, but with us all. We are all implicated, and in what exactly we do not know.

So what is true—even on a plot level? When we realize that Harrison is writing about her father with this “we,” the experience of chronology in the book is hard to decipher. She is writing after the experience with him and with all the reflection that implies, yet she is still writing from within the experience of meeting up with him, in the present tense. We start in the middle of their affair, and when we return with her to their first intercourse, she falls asleep, and we are left, as though under a spell, with no memory of the details of that experience to carry through the rest of the book. Beyond yet inside of these experiences, the book’s sense of time seeks to disrupt a notion of before, during, and after that could ultimately lead to a critic’s argument about some sense of self-progress. Only at the end of the book is it made clear that the first page’s dedication serves as an elegy. The second Harrison cuts off her own hair, readers know that the book is in dedication to her mother. What we thought might be true of consent, responsibility, or transgression becomes untrue. Truth itself is up for debate. In all this ambiguity, Harrison clearly relays her purpose and influence in writing a memoir from a tradition of

absence instead of selfhood: “I learned, at six, a truth dangerous to someone so young and so lovelorn. I saw that transcendence was possible: that spirit could conquer matter, and that therefore I could overcome whatever obstacles prevented my mother’s loving me. I could overcome myself” (106). What is “true” for Harrison has been true since she was a child: she “could overcome” her self, make her origins, magically and finally. Can “so great a woman, feared as she [is] by the unclean spirit...not be dispatched unless she herself [is] willing” (“The Passion” 32)? Yes. Absolutely, yes.

The fantastical moments in hagiographical women’s memoir, including Harrison’s, live next to moments that seem plausible, like father-daughter strife. These juxtapositions undo some of the obsessive true/false moral judgments heaped onto memoirists, and, therefore, can serve all contemporary readers who are skeptical of memoir, especially critics of Harrison. Harrison surely had this in mind when she marks hagiography as her guiding influence in a memoir about having sex with her father, an act that is not sanctioned by the culture in which the book was published. Recognizing this also raises the following question: Why does this same culture that judges Harrison so harshly also sanction some pretty awful things? Margaret’s father, Theodosius, loathes his daughter for not being pagan, and before she can consent to her own absence, he does it for her by throwing her away in his sentiments and into a jail cell. This is not fantastical, but it is pretty terrible. In memoir, horrible, unthinkable things happen all the time that are believable and not so easy to simply dismiss as self-aggrandizing for profit. Theodosius is not the big, bad father of martyr hagiography. His rejection of Margaret and willingness to have her tortured for her beliefs is pretty par for the course. His culture

allows this. We allow this for him. This common interpersonal punishment in hagiography, doled out from the family and society, is devastating for a reader who values family as a moral safeguard against the atrocities of the state. One might be tempted to ask, is he a real person who lived? Are all these fathers real? We do not know, but this question can be a good bridge from readerly sentiments to realistic expectations about nonfiction texts. It is much easier for contemporary readers to imagine that Harrison's father is real, for that is the requirement that allows us to lambast her and to ignore the fantastical elements of her text, like her father's proclamation of his direct line to God or Harrison's destiny as part of a hagiographical tradition from birth. The great fight for the right God. A larger point might be that all these figures in memoirs both old and new are real representations of cultures and beliefs. They are all, in some sense, Margaret's dragon.

So which is harder to swallow? A dragon's belly exploding after it consumes Margaret, or Margaret's father placing his daughter in a situation where she must implicitly consent to her own death? Harrison refusing to ask, as her critics would, "is there anyone in the solar system who didn't know that father-daughter sex ends badly?" (Crossen A16), or her father's understanding of their sex as a mystical gift from God? That is, how far are we willing to go in our culture to see that memoirists' choices are deeply connected to our own, and, therefore, we are all obliged to acknowledge that consent is never simply an individual's choice? These are complicated issues to explore that are not served by a discussion that simply disparages Harrison's, or memoir's, self-aggrandizement, for any experience that reads as terrible or fantastical simply becomes

further evidence of an author's self-interest. The preconception already determines the outcome of the discussion, whereas martyrs' *Lives* and *The Kiss* show us that any preconceptions we have about a self and morality in memoir are opportunities to elaborate upon cultural conceptions of reality. Harrison's immersion in a tradition of absence in memoir champions this complication.

Chapter Four: Critical Memoir: A Recovery From Codes

The field of autobiography studies in the United States emerged in literature departments in the 1970s largely as a response to such literary schools of thought as New Criticism and Deconstruction, which jettisoned the notion of authorial intention as a primary factor in the interpretation of a text's meaning, even proclaiming, as Roland Barthes did in 1968, 'The Death of the Author.' Thus, since its inception as a formalized field of study, autobiography studies has been preoccupied with whether an autobiographical text can communicate to its readers the reality of its author's experiences. One side of the debate—typified by theorists such as Paul de Man—has held that it is impossible for language ever to represent reality 'accurately,' even asserting that autobiography is theoretically impossible. The other side—elaborated by thinkers like James Olney—claims that the truth of unique individuals can be known through the autobiographies they write, even if language is not purely transparent and 'truth' is not the same thing as 'fact'—Jakki Spicer "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual" (388)

Memoir studies, a term I use to join the fields of autobiographical studies, creative nonfiction, and the vast number of journalists and creative writers who write popular reviews of memoir, has long had a contentious relationship with the field of critical theory. The exception to this contention is a group of scholars who work in feminism and post-structuralism and who also happen to be women.³² While many critical theorists

³² See Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and Elizabeth Bruss. It is also worthwhile noting that female memoir specialists do not posit the same perspectives on the general self, nor do they reject critical theory to the same degree as their male counterparts. Since the field itself is so young, though, it is hard to draw conclusions from this fact. We can note this, as well as the profligate citing of male memoir specialists over the female specialists, but whether this is an issue of sexism, a divide in approach that has something to do with essentialism versus alternative theories of subjectivity that feminism has championed, or both, or neither remains to be seen. We can note such trends, but, as of yet, it is difficult to conclude with certainty anything about them.

have produced autobiographical writing of their own and have written extensively on canonical autobiographical texts, memoir studies, especially autobiographical studies, has consistently rejected theory, especially deconstruction. Just as prominent is memoir studies' exclusion of theorists' memoirs from the discussions about what memoir is, both generically and historically. A famous memoir by a famous scholar, such as *The Future Lasts Forever* by Louis Althusser, in which the theorist explains how he murdered his wife, has never been discussed in the field that specializes on memoir. We might imagine that "it is in a way simply the bad luck of autobiographical studies, or the good luck of critical theory (or vice-versa; this all depends upon your point of view), that their development has been simultaneous" (Jay 44), but we do know for sure that one of the major projects of critical theory in the last thirty years or so has been to question and complicate concepts of truth and self.

It would make sense, then, that autobiographical literature, said by memoir scholars to be focused on articulating a true, individual self, becomes a ripe target for critical theorists:

Thus two very broad theoretical questions—one surrounding the problem of referentiality, the other surrounding the problem of the role and status of the subject in literary discourse—constitute in good measure the intrinsic attraction of autobiographical works for poststructuralist theorists. (Jay 46)

According to memoir scholars, "it seems clear that the dogmas of postmodernism (...poststructuralism and deconstruction), generally viewed and treated as 'discoveries'

(that is, as if they had proven, factual validity), threaten autobiography to the point at which its practice tends to become impossible” (Brosman 96) because critical theory tends to “ignore the very texts that stand in need of interpretation” (Arch viii). To combat this attack, memoir specialists claim they need to “recover particular ways of reading a particular genre...to recover discursive practices” (Arch 11), or they risk losing memoir to “the cunning deconstructionists who charge forward, heads lowered, like well-trained bulls, as soon as someone waves the red flag of sincerity” (Lejeune qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20). Moreover, Olney argues that critical theorists misunderstand memoir as a genre because “however much they talk about genre or linguistics or deep-lying structures, what they are still troubling about is the self...even though in a kind of bravura way some of them may be denying rather than affirming its reality or possibility” (*Autobiography* 23). Whatever else it might include, memoir scholars assert, memoir is “a discourse of identity,” that is, “a narrowly conceived literary approach to autobiography” (Eakin, “Breaking Rules” 124), and critical theory “with all its sophistication needs to be reminded that there is nothing perfunctory about the referential claims of autobiography” (Eakin, “The Referential Aesthetic” 142). Proponents of critical theory as well as memoir are duped “by those under the influence of various schools of modern linguistics, especially of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze” (Brosman 97). To consider some kind of critical theory while examining memoir, it seems, one must be under the influence.

Readers of both memoir studies and critical theory might be left wondering “whether this lack of critical consensus is a sign of decadence, crisis, or healthy

diversity...but the mutual isolation is an intellectual loss for all concerned” (Bruss 766). This impasse may, however, obscure a broad area of (at least potential) agreement and collaboration wherein we can avoid the ways in which “critics seem to wind up either playing fast and loose with genre in order to protect the most fundamental aspects of autobiography or [insist] on maintaining generic distinctions in fairly rigid ways in order to call into question the bases of that genre” (Loesberg 171). All this nitpicking leads to broader questions about how these academic disciplines function. Does critical theory really imagine the world as a secular realm where the death of the author is final? Does memoir studies really think that truth and self are that easily definable?

Certainly the rejection of critical theory speaks to memoir studies’ lack of power in the American university. Without departments hiring in this track and without graduate students competing for slots to study in this track, what constitutes “specialization” in memoir is unclear, and thus the prevailing trends in its scholarship have not come under much debate, let alone conversation. We have Rousseau scholars, so why would we need to know what memoir scholars say about Rousseau? It is not that scholars in the humanities do not care that memoir specialists reject critical theory; it is that no one really knows that there is a field that specializes in memoir that is as scholarly as well as a creative discipline. Perhaps that is because the group of people who work on memoir already come from a variety of fields. Eakin, a scholar affiliated with autobiographical studies, cites Crossen, a journalist who wrote a scathing review of Kathryn Harrison’s memoir, *The Kiss*. The parameters of the discipline are ambiguous and at times can seem arbitrary. Certainly, the lack of memoir studies’ presence as a university specialization

encourages this broad reach and also speaks to its nascent existence as a discipline that was born out of a reaction to critical theory trends in the 1970s. Ultimately, the humanities' lack of engagement with memoir studies allows the discipline to continue to reject the theoretical trends against which it originally reacted, with only the most "deliberate ambiguity" (Berryman 86).

While Eakin argues that "poststructuralist criticism of autobiography characteristically—and mistakenly—assumes that an autobiographer's allegiance to referential truth necessarily entails a series of traditional beliefs about self, language, and literary form" ("The Referential Aesthetic" 131), critical theorists are left scratching their heads, for the most well-known names in memoir studies push forward theories that read as fairly traditional. For example, Pascal says that memoir involves a "search for the true self" (39) Lejeune says the memoirist is "guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally" (*On Autobiography* 28); Olney says "without this 'I,' stated or implied, the work would collapse in to mere insignificance" (*Metaphors of Self* 21); and, as previously mentioned, Eakin says memoir "is a discourse of identity" (124). But what constitutes this self, identity, or honesty with which memoir as a genre is supposed to be consumed? Memoir studies does not clearly answer that question. However, it does set the standards for the history and canon of the genre by beginning with Augustine's autodiegetic narrative of conversion, proceeding to Rousseau's secularizing of the genre, and arriving—so we hear, anyway, when the most well known comments on memoir come from the blogosphere rather than the university—in a market selling "the stories of gilded losers [who] have become a part of our steady literary diets" (Johnson 01B). For their

part, critical theorists insist that, “empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm” (de Man 172). The lines of the debate are drawn, and, as the duel remains unsettled, they are drawn again.

But what if the scope and history of memoir that its scholars have established can be easily toppled over? What if it should? What if critical theorists eagerly engage in autobiographical narratives as an attempt to sincerely represent something we might call “the self?” What might readers of both camps be left with? Well, perhaps first with the thought that “once the autobiographical text exists, obviously, the dilemma of the text creating the self in such a way that it necessarily suggests a prior self that created the text exists not for the writer, but for the reader,” or that “the difficulties these theories often ascribe to autobiography may actually be the difficulties of the theories themselves” (Loesberg 182, 179). If we begin to examine autobiographical texts by critical theorists as memoirs in addition to the other genres they might be placed in—theory, interview, biography, political text, French literature—our ideas about what memoir is should change. Instead of the unexamined “deliberate ambiguity” that memoir scholars recall to define memoir’s dependence on the self, we find that memoir’s relationship to the self actually is ambiguous, and that is precisely what begs further exploration and collaboration. We might find that memoir’s self is referential or even absent, its truths are mystical instead of equitable, and the genre produces ambiguity because, more than anything else, it celebrates forms of resistance rather than conforming to a standard. We

might find that memoirs by critical theorists are exactly the kind of narratives that memoir scholars have been trying for forty years to define.

The irony of looking at memoirs by theorists is that their inclusion might be more representative of the history and preoccupations of Western memoir than autodiegetic narratives about a spiritual or psychological conversion. Before Augustine there are a plethora of memoirs by martyr saints that double as biographies, and even Augustine himself claims the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas—attributed with possibly writing the earliest Christian narrative by a woman (Castelli 86)—as worthy of imitation (Augustine, “On The Feast Of SS Perpetua and Felicitas” 39). Augustine’s own text denies its status as progenitor and provides evidence for that fact. Furthermore, while Rousseau supposedly secularizes the genre, the eighteenth-century innovation of the slave narrative complicates that history by presenting ambiguous, spiritual texts that are mystical and counter-cultural, texts that Rousseau claims influence his ambivalence about the self (Lowe 105) but that memoir scholars claim are not memoirs.³³ Rousseau, like Augustine, notes an important autobiographical influence. Additionally, critics who presume that a memoir and a moral center are one in the same easily misunderstand contemporary “memoirs of abjection” (Mendelsohn 1). By looking at autobiographical testimonials from Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, we will find that “still too much and not

³³ See Olney’s ““I Was Born,”” which argues that the slave narrative “tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act” (48).

enough is owned by Augustine” and the memoir scholars who claim him as originator (S. Smith 46).

A Quick Game Of Telephone

Before I begin to look at Derrida as a memoirist, it is important to show how poststructuralist philosophical preoccupations involve canonical memoir on the one hand and ambiguity on the other hand. Derrida’s work references Augustine and Rousseau with as much frequency as a memoir scholar’s articles. Yet the way Derrida approaches memoir is as much from the point of view of a creative writer as a philosopher. This exploration will show unexpectedly how memoir studies privileges origin and Augustine. Then, I will investigate how Derrida’s criticism of privileging origin acts as his own implicit suggestion for the ways in which autobiographical writing, including his own, should be understood anew.

Derrida is probably most famous for his book *Of Grammatology*, which makes a case for a philosophical perspective that does not revolve around a metaphysical presence or essence. In order to prove that intellectual hierarchies can be toppled in an avalanche, Derrida interrogates the widely agreed-upon linguistic concept that spoken language pre-dates the written sign and the implicit Western cultural beliefs that follow from that, namely that spoken language is more meaningful because it is originary. If one accepts his argument, then one must conclude that there can be no hierarchy in which first equals better, no essential truth in the specialized field of linguistics or in studies of literature, and no whole or true God. What remains is Derrida’s concept that meaning is made in relationships. Thus, while something might always stand as separate from another thing,

all things are ultimately reliant on each other as soon as we attribute meaning to them. The center of the universe is not God or a conception of God, because there is no center. According to the methodology outlined in *Of Grammatology*, which contributes to a de-centering of the universe, God is viewed simultaneously as merely one concept in the connective tissue of the world and as other in the world. Thus, it is not accurate to say that deconstruction is a secular philosophy, for it does not reject the sacred; it considers it alongside the world rather than above it. As Christopher Yates suggests, “if there is a ‘turn’ at all, it is not a turn of Derrida toward religion, but a turn Derrida performs on philosophy and religion, on any discourse vying for authority in the realm of truth. Indeed, in a rather remarkable way, both are placed on their knees” (330). Derrida’s deconstruction repositions a metaphysical presence away from the possibility of a center, but that does not mean that deconstruction removes God from the equation. Instead, Derrida topples long-held perspectives in philosophy about a hierarchy of importance. We are left with an assertion that there are layers to ideas, culture, religion, and language, rather than a certain position from which to view the world.

Historically, memoir studies has worked in much the same way as the philosophical and linguistic traditions Derrida decried decades ago. As I have mentioned, the privileged origin of memoir is considered Augustine’s *Confessions*. This origin becomes an intellectual center of memoir studies because scholars elide it with memoir’s moral center. The next most talked about text for memoir studies is Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Although, according to memoir studies, it demonstrates a secularization of the genre, it also departs from the genre’s moral center due to its self-focused (read:

secular) point of view. And most contemporary memoir comes from this latter tradition, which is why it deserves a good trashing from specialists and staff writers alike. For rampant examples of this, simply recall reactions to Kathryn Harrison's memoir about consensual incest, *The Kiss*. The more memoirs are in the public's eye, the more Augustine's moral status as a long lost champion of goodness grows in the specialized field of memoir studies. However, if we understand Augustine and Rousseau through Derrida's concept of meaning as referential, which he postulates in *Of Grammatology*, then the secular and spiritual are experiences that provide context for each other and cannot exist without the other. Augustine and Rousseau are not separate entities working in separate traditions, nor is one simply a lesser version of the other. An example seems relevant. While Rousseau uses his *On the Origin of Languages* to posit that writing is simply a supplement to speech and written language becomes dangerous when it stands in for speech, his own memoir, written and addressed to his fellow men, arrives at a mystical appreciation of his spiritual "mamma," who helps him strengthen his bridge with God, only through his written philosophical pondering: "Mamma was more helpful to me in this respect than all the theologians in the world could have been" (*Confessions* 218). Here Rousseau is not recounting a moment in which he once spoke with Madame de Warens—Mamma—about God. Instead, he is providing a written account of his arrival at spiritual understanding. Within the memoir and in Rousseau's genealogy, he defies his own overarching concept on language, and arrives, in his most sentimental, sincere moments with his Mamma, at God. This, of course, returns us to genealogy, which neither Derrida, nor Augustine and Rousseau, can escape. Since each of these

writers “alone can attest to the truth, autobiography shares with philosophy the problem of self-accounting” (Kronick 1003). If God, and later broad cultural morality, implicitly becomes memoir specialists’ way to divide aesthetics into good or bad artistic choices, what happens when God and morality become referential within a text and then within a genre? We have to reorganize what we privilege. We have to accept that God is one of many things, and our own moral preferences as readers or critics have nothing to do with the memoir we read. We have to actually consider the prevailing and disruptive aesthetics of memoir.

There are many conversations about Derrida and autobiographical testimonial in critical theory, yet memoir studies remains mute on the subject. Since *Of Grammatology* dissects a Rousseauian conception of the truth of language—that written language is not as good as (or, is more dangerous than) speech because speech is originary—and Rousseau is considered a canonical, secular memoir writer, it makes sense that one of the most famous memoirists and one of the most famous theorists would collide in various subfields of English studies.³⁴ But this conversation has yet to occur in the field of memoir studies. Since memoir studies conflates origin and morality, and it places origin for the genre on the religious text of Augustine, God is conflated with morality. It stands

³⁴ The number of sources, from articles to conferences to edited collections, seems endless. I find Christopher Yates’ “A Question of Necessity: Deconstruction, Khora, and Faith” and Kronick’s “Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida” particularly helpful. A number of collections that remark on Derrida, God, and Rousseau are also available, including Steven Shakespeare’s *Derrida and Theology*. Newton Garver’s “Derrida on Rousseau on Writing” is a heated and fun read, as well.

to reckon that at some point memoir studies will have to contend with Derrida's seminal text in the academic universe instead of merely rejecting critical theory in general and deconstruction specifically. Additionally, since Derrida uses Augustine as a reference point so often in his work on God and truth, it would seem that his interests in religion and spiritualism coincide with his interests in autobiographical testimonial—coincidentally, points of interest for memoir scholars. So, why the blanket rejection? Derrida does spend an awful lot of time on the two most canonical memoirists who, according to memoir scholars, established two genealogies of memoir—the spiritual and the secular (Yagoda *Memoir*). While memoir scholars focus on how Augustine created a memoir that made “the accomplishment an invisible, internal one, and the journey to salvation a spiritual one” and on how Rousseau championed the “secular transformation of the genre” (Mendelsohn 1), in fact, both Augustine and Rousseau have secular and spiritual, as well as private and public, threads in their work, according to Derrida's layered philosophy. For Derrida, “philosophic intentions are always and everywhere inseparable from intentions that are genealogical...if genealogy, then autobiography” (R. Smith 33).

The real problem for memoir studies might be that, as a discipline, it has not scrutinized its own history. For Derrida, the history opened up by memoir studies creates an opportunity. Derrida is interested in how established canonical memoirists contribute to the genealogy of who he is and what he departs from as a writer, in addition to what comprises truth and morality in human history. His interest in these canonical memoirists is an interest in his own autobiographical testimonial. And his philosophical intentions

are not separate from his autobiographical acts; as he asserts, “to ask me to renounce what has formed me, what I’ve loved so much, what has been my law, is to ask me to die” (*Learning to Live Finally* 30). For Derrida, the stakes of his profession are radically personal, radically autobiographical, just as they are for Augustine. If “still too much and not enough is owned by Augustine” (R. Smith 46), the same can be said for Derrida. If memoir studies wants to become a thriving academic discipline, engagement with critical theory, especially Derrida, seems unavoidable. I initiate this engagement now.

Memoirosophy

First, I will examine how Derrida’s philosophical writing can also be considered memoir writing. Then, I will move on to discuss Roland Barthes. I will use one of each these authors’ texts as an example, with the caveat that there are many examples of memoir to draw from in both their oeuvres. First, I will explain how *Jacques Derrida (JD)* situates itself in a history of memoir (and not only in a history of philosophy) through its subject matter and style, suggesting that memoir itself is a genre with a history that remains hard to codify. Memoir, *JD* seems to tell readers, is totally and delightfully odd.

JD is an auto/biographical text in two parts. In the autobiographical section, “Circumfession,” Derrida addresses himself as a confessional memoirist, attempting to place himself in the tradition of both Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions*. In “Circumfession,” Derrida quotes from Augustine and remarks on biographical details of his own life, which he uses to understand his own status as a Jew, a son, and as a writer in a literary lineage. Readers less familiar with the variety of memoir forms might note

quizzically that his text wanders through his life in a circumspect way, not focusing on a specific incident or a chronological narrative of his youth to present age and culminating in what Derrida calls his own “radical absence” (*JD* 191). Yet, the impending death of his mother, as it relates to his lineage as a Jew and a prominent literary figure and his own mortality, rules the text:

They are going to think that my mother’s metaphasic chaos is becoming my sentence, as though through an ultimate confusion with ‘the last loved face’ in *L’Amour fou*, at the moment when I have not even had the good luck to have the contemplation of Ostia, only of teaching it, of seeing it in San Geminiano, when Augustine can speak with *his* mother, in the imminence of her death... ‘*only write here what is impossible, that ought to be the impossible-rule*’ (10-11-77), of everything G. can be expecting of me, a supposedly idiomatic, unbroachable, unreadable, uncircumcised piece of writing, held not to the assistance of its father, as Socrates would say, but to my assistance at the death of a mother...it is in the sense of the witness who, through countersigning attestation, confirms the logic of the counterexample, by daring to kill the quotation marks, without quoting me, calling me back to the moment when, like twelve years ago, I did not yet know what circumcision means. (193-96)

The sentence continues, showing us that even though it is a sentence we may not see the likes of often, it nonetheless works as a sentence, and our ability to identify a representative sentence to stand as “sentence example” is fruitless—this is nothing new

for readers of Derrida, obviously. What is particularly noteworthy here is that language play becomes *genre play*. Just as there is no perfect “sentence example,” there is no perfect “memoir example.” All the parts of memoir are here—the much-discussed mother figure of memoir, the acknowledgement of previous, famous memoirs, the autodiegetic narrative, the author’s discussion of his ethnic and religious statuses. But all these generically appropriate parts are jumbled in a way that amounts to rumination more than an easy-to-follow, step-by-step telling of one event or time period in which one whole self changes into a different whole self.

The other narratives in *JD* are biographical writing about Derrida—Geoffrey Bennington’s “Derridabase” and “Acts/The Laws of Genre,” both of which play with “Circumfession” to create a “simulacrum of a duel” (319). “Derridabase” has the stated goal of “computing” (1) Derrida’s ideas into a system (a database on Derrida) that can be accessed by all readers, which Bennington calls the first round of one card game that explains Derrida’s thinking (319), while the latter piece, “Acts,” provides only biographical details of Derrida’s life:

Be it biography, bibliography, or iconography, I shall play, no doubt out of provocation with respect to my partner, J.D., or any other reader, a game which consists in following ‘the law of genre’ (one of the titles of *Parages*) or received norms, the very norms that J.D. has never stopped calling into question, in a theoretical mode but also in his work as a writer. These constraints appear particularly artificial in the establishment of the

Curriculum vitae, an expression I prefer to that of biography: it gestures toward rhythm and speed, race or cursiveness. (319)

“Derridabase” and “Acts” create a personal and theoretical biography/database of Derrida that seeks out the *savoir absolu* (absolute knowledge) “craved by systematic philosophical thinking” (Shakespeare 13), while “Circumfession” has the goal of revealing that such a database on Derrida is pointless beyond the play of testimonial, for a whole account of a writer/thinker will never be complete, just as a biography or memoir cannot ever be viewed as complete accounts of the self. Situating the biographies “Derridabase” and “Acts” in the same book with the memoir “Circumfession,” which disrupts their goals, makes a broader comment about a scholar’s inability to systematize literature, writing, and language, including the inability to define specific parameters for what qualifies as what kind of life writing. This conceptual organization of auto/biographical testimonial is the focus from the first page of the text.

In addition to an immediate allusion to the *Confessions* and the confessional memoir tradition, which presents the same preoccupations with Augustine and Rousseau that memoir scholars have, the first pages of *JD* cue readers to interpret this work dually as one, memoir, and two, scholarship on memoir. The table of contents has a peculiar heading that tells us that ““this book presupposes a contract’ / 1” (viii) between Derrida and Bennington, wherein each agrees to complete this work with the particular parameters they each chose. The context for this contract is critical for our interpretation of it. Derrida and Bennington do not simply refer to a *contract*, which could allude to ancient Greece, the Enlightenment, or other philosophical renderings of this word in

many time periods. Although scholars of other disciplines might read this allusion as resonating elsewhere, for memoir scholars, this “presupposed contract” is an allusion to the “father” of autobiographical studies, Philippe Lejeune. Of course, as is typical for Derrida, other authors could be in mind when he uses this term. This “contract” can refer to the social (or political) contract made famous by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, in which the author discusses the important divisions between sovereign society and the government. But this merely returns to Lejeune, who uses the additional word “presupposes” when speaking about autobiographical writing and who names Rousseau’s “contract” when he discusses the important signature—“I, the Undersigned”—of the memoirist (*On Autobiography* 8). This helps Lejeune set up his own autobiographical contract in which a writer is “guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally” by the reader, just as Rousseau’s government is guaranteed to do the same (28). Otherwise, as Rousseau suggests, the people should overthrow the government. Similarly, Lejeune claims, readers, publishers, and authors should overthrow the memoirist who does not uphold this contract, or else the enterprise of memoir fails (28). It is worth noting that Lejeune is the very scholar who remarks on “the cunning deconstructionists who charge forward, heads lowered, like well-trained bulls, as soon as someone waves the red flag of sincerity” (qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20), and who battles Derrida in print and conversation over the stakes of autobiographical writing for decades.³⁵ If there is any

³⁵ Many texts and talks could be cited here. A reader merely need type “Lejeune Derrida” into a search engine to find some bizarre and tantalizing material. Robert Smith’s *Derrida and Autobiography* is a great collection of sources for these men’s own “duel.”

doubt that this is a reference to Lejeune, readers should recall that memoir specialists take up Lejeune's cause and decry deconstruction and Derrida over all forms of theory and theorists. There is the General, and then there is the army.

Beginning with the father of autobiographical studies, Lejeune, this text, then, presumes an audience familiar with work on memoir. Lejeune's contract regarding "retrospective prose narration written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4) ironically and famously prompts de Man to proclaim that this "father's" work "does not seem to be founded on argument or evidence" (174)—that Lejeune himself demonstrates no responsibility to the contract of scholarly argument. Secondly, the reference to Lejeune's contract provides for readers the actual contract within which Bennington and Derrida are working. In this opening, Bennington says that his part in *JD* is to "limit himself to an argued exposition which would try to be as clear as possible," like "computers" (1). Lejeune's literalness becomes Bennington's computing. Bennington is the scholar. Derrida is the memoirist whose stake in this contract is conversely to "show how any such system must remain essentially open" (1). Thus, Derrida's response to Bennington's "systemization" is to "write something escaping the proposed systemization, surprising it" (1). From the text's first pages, the authors suggest that systems are fallible and that memoir does not systematize easily. Furthermore, the goal of the memoir portion of the text is to acknowledge and "surprise" the system of scholarship that understands it as a memoir. Thus, *JD* simultaneously acknowledges the scope and history of memoir that its scholarly "father" promotes, while purposefully creating an

autobiographical act that is meaningful as memoir precisely because it rejects this scope and history. Instead, the book suggests that memoir begins in reference and departure, that is, an absence of a “literal” author who can be discerned in the text. If there is not an authorial presence to be equated with individual selfhood, then our beliefs about this morally “faithful” author who is “guaranteed to be...taken literally” is, indeed, not “founded on argument.” Derrida’s “Circumfession” seeks to recall the *Confessions* of memoir’s most discussed writers, yet it frames this recollection as a contract that is entered into in order to detach, or circumcise, from *Confessions* and all that the word implies for memoir’s history and scholarship. Bennington stands in as the memoir critic whose frame for memoir is happily revised after reading Derrida’s circumcision from the contract that looms over the memoirist. Certainly, contemporary memoirists will be aware of the sense that they are in a duel with critics who disparage the enterprise of memoir in a way that would never be done to poetry or fiction.

How, one might ask, does this work constitute a memoir rather than a comment on memoir or the scholarship on the genre? Perhaps the very first circumcision from the memoir happens in absence: the book begins with a contract rather than with any auto/biographical information on Derrida other than a name, *Jacques Derrida*. The book suggests that contemporary readers’ experience of memoir is intricately woven with commentary on it, which is unlike fiction or poetry, as scholarship on memoir truly is by the people and for the people. Perhaps we need to *undo* what we think memoir should begin with—some basic information on the author’s life or an experience he intends to tell us about—before we *do* come to conclusions about the genre. Such a suggestion is

antithetical to contemporary practice in which conclusions about memoir often come before a reading of the text. On the first day of an undergraduate course that I taught on “Memoir and Scandal,” I asked students what they thought of memoir. They thought a lot, including the following: it is a sign of selfish writers, it is self-absorbed, it is embarrassing, writers of the genre seek profit over morality, and it is not as artistic as fiction. Of course, when I asked how many of them had read a memoir in the last year, one hand out of thirty raised. In the ambiguous field of memoir studies, in which scholars and non-experts alike make grand statements, critics are not so different. Their conclusions are always encompassing—talking about one text allows a commentator to draw conclusions about the genre overall.³⁶ Eventually, readers will get autobiographical information about Derrida, such as his experiences of being a reader (a common theme in Western memoir) and his experience of loving his mother (reminiscent of Augustine and Rousseau), as well as his fear of losing her as she dies. But for now, this project that acknowledges but does not participate with the most readily accepted concepts about memoir begs readers to ask, how does memoir depart from our expectations? The short answer is that memoir is an art form that explores absence and provides a location for readers to do the same.

³⁶ Once again, the number of examples I could provide here is enormous. I suggest a reader simply type “memoir” into a Google search field. The first page of results features Neil Genzlinger’s *New York Times*, “The Problems With Memoirs.” If one searches “memoir bad,” a whole slew of bashing articles appear, so much so that a great Rumpus commentary, Stephen Elliot’s “The Problem With The Problem With Memoir,” provides some much needed relief from all the condemnation.

The detachment represented in the first pages finds its required Other in the artistic act of departure: the origins on which memoir scholars rely—the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, and Lejeune’s foundational concept. Let us ask again—what is memoir? Answer: acknowledgement of history, for one. But how does this acknowledgement work? As a collaboration or literary signification. In order to cut from something, one must first determine where to make the cut. *JD* implies that the cutting itself is never possible—signification is unavoidable. Thus, instead of a clean cut, memoir is a literary removal in conjunction with Lejeune’s contract, or Bennington’s, for that matter. It is a botched circumcision. For Derrida, origin is inescapable, but also:

origin is elliptical; it must originally repeat itself, divide and share itself, in order to relate to something else; in order to be an origin. The origin is passion because it receives its determination from something else; in order to be an origin, to be the source of what is, of meaning, it must begin by dividing and supplementing itself. (Kronick 1004)

Recall Derrida’s words in *Learning to Live Finally*: “to ask me to renounce what has formed me, what I’ve loved so much, what has been my law, is to ask me to die” (30). Rousseau and Augustine are foundational authors for Derrida. However, the circumcision from the origins on which memoir studies relies in an auto/biographical text such as *JD* suggests that, for Derrida and Bennington, a memoir must, as a rule, engage in such ambiguous departure, for so does the memoirist. We might explore where “dividing and supplementing” happens by asking what is not named in a memoir and why. For example, Derrida is a noted secular theorist. As he tells us in the “Circumfession” portion

of *JD*, “the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist” (155). However, noting that Derrida is named Elie “after the prophet Elijah, who would come to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah,” we might read “Circumfession” as a memoir of an individual man that stands to open a pathway to acknowledging “a past beyond memory and a future that no one can anticipate” (Shakespeare 15). That is, it is not simply what is provided to the reader that can be called “memoir,” but also the pregnant darkness in which “even God, it seems, is denied absolute access” (Shakespeare 14). The memoir does not provide an account of the author’s or the genre’s history in total. While Augustine, then Rousseau, represent origin for memoir studies, each of their texts does so because it “receives its determination from something else”: memoir specialists. If origin is necessarily ambiguous, memoir’s engagement with the status quo should also be the first step of a departure to the not-yet instituted. No matter how long the established history and tenets of memoir have been accepted, they do not provide absolute access to memoir.

For Derrida and Bennington, then, engagement with memoir studies—the philosophy of memoir, we might say—is important because one aspect of a memoir is its status as a genre that departs from established philosophies about it. In order to defy, one must acknowledge what one is defying, as Derrida does with Bennington’s intent to “systematize.” For Derrida, then, memoir must “surprise” rather than fit into an established canon. Of his interest in creating a comprehensive yet clear glimpse into Derrida, such as one that might be made by memoir scholars intent on framing memoir as a definable genre with a certain history and set of tropes, Bennington says that only after

the “event” was he able to understand his attempt to construct this system as a desire “to provoke and welcome this surprise” (1). Thus, for Bennington also, memoir must acknowledge how it is perceived status in order to react to the status quo and become a experiment, an “event,” that astounds even the author(s). No doubt this double engagement is why *JD* has been called “a fascinating example of what might be called post-structuralist autobiography” in reviewers’ accounts of the book (Volpe 166).

Bennington’s resulting interest in “provok[ing] and welcom[ing] this surprise” is very important when we consider an ideology that promotes authorial intention as a means toward narrating a journey of selfhood. Just like Pascal’s belief that memoir “is a search for a true self” and Olney’s emphasis on the constant ‘I,’ Lejeune’s contract implies that an author begins with an intention that is—or should be—carried out in the text. The constant of the whole, true self that is a product of an author’s intention has reached grand new levels in memoir studies. Eakin is one of the most popular proponents of using the science of the body to prove the importance of the self, which he claims is “grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness” (What Are We Reading” 130). He then uses this claim to support his argument about the importance of the self in memoir. Eakin says that autobiography’s recording of the self across time “serves a homeostatic goal [and] the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, *whether neurobiological or literary*, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity” (“Living Autobiography” 4, emphasis added). Additionally, he argues that “developmental psychologists convince me...that we are trained as children to attach special importance to one kind of selfhood, that of the

extended self, so much so that we do in fact regard it as identity's signature" ("What Are We Reading" 122). This is an attempt to systematize the human being and genre both as somehow *scientific*, and at the same time, *present*—the system is founded falsely in the declaration that the system is present, exists. *JD* teaches that memoir does not contain conclusive authorial intentions; instead, memoir's intention is to experiment and revises during the process of writing itself. For example, Bennington's intentions are revealed to him as something quite other than his actual conscious, stated intention: to systematize Derrida's thoughts. Thus, *JD* prompts readers to see that "a narrowly conceived literary approach to autobiography"—what Eakin claims theorists are responsible for when they discuss memoir—is actually true only for specialized memoir scholars. Certainly, the experiment of *JD* itself is flawed, for human beings do not have a normative, constant physiology or consciousness. What the text *is* is not a product of intention, but rather, as both authors suggest, evidence of a surprising event. While the intention behind a memoir may not be to defy memoir scholars' positions on the genre, it is inevitable that this will happen, simply because intention itself is not normative, just as human physiology is not.

It is no wonder that Derrida and Bennington react against such normativity in a discussion of memoir, for it mimics some traps of phenomenology, the subfield of critical theory that Derrida has also reacted against. Drawing the connections, rather than solely the divisions, between memoir studies and a field of critical theory is important, for it shows us that even memoir specialists who decry the use of theory champion an ideology that is established in theory. Also, understanding how these memoir specialists utilize phenomenology draws us closer to understanding the conflict between their memoir

studies and Derrida in the first place. Julie Rak points out humanistic readings of autobiographical texts by scholars such as Olney and Eakin think of memoir as having “a phenomenological approach to the recovery of the self that could be appreciated in its best examples, and then found in other examples of the genre” (486). Although they never quite own up to it, memoir scholars envision the self as a metaphysical truth set in stone that scholars seek to “recover” in academic discourse. Moreover, although they decry the use of critical theory, they actually employ phenomenology to make their claims. According to Derrida, the phenomenological emphasis on the immediacy of experience winds up being a mere “transcendental illusion,” as phenomenology is, without being identified as such by its thinkers, a metaphysics (*Speech and Phenomena* 75, 104), or a privileging of an unproved presence in disguise that valorizes intention over reflection or relation. In explaining his failure to construct Derrida through computer code, Bennington reveals that the most valuable connection between text and author in memoir is that a failed intention for a text can end up exposing the authors as simultaneously, infinitely more and less than the text itself rather than as “embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival” (Eakin, “What Are We Reading” 126).

JD also fits into an ambiguous, non-normative subfield of memoir that is not acknowledged by memoir studies, but one that I claim is an important step in understanding the defiant history of memoir: hagiography. In a variety of ways, hagiography shows us that an individual’s narrative and, indeed, an individual’s life is never autonomous; instead, it exists in relationship to other narratives and other lives. For

example, Margery Kempe's hagiographical memoir, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, considered the first memoir of (Middle) English, has at least three authors: God via instruction to Kempe, Kempe's oral dictation to a scribe, and the scribe's written, third-person account. Just as for *JD*, in order to complete a narrative about one person, multiple parties are required to complete Kempe's text. Therefore, to explore the identity of one, a text of more than one is necessary. Just as Bennington's third-person perspective is the primary step in "the event" that leads to Derrida's inclusion of his first-person narrative, Kempe's text is written in the third person from her first-person accounts of God's first-person accounts to her. In order to have the text, the mystical event of God speaking must happen, then the event of Kempe's translation of his words to her scribe must occur. Kempe's narrative describes her in the third person as "the creature," making her a character in the unfolding action, just like God and the scribe. Yet the perspective is inconsistent: sometimes we hear from Kempe in the first person, sometimes we hear from others about her, and sometimes we hear through Kempe as a vehicle what God tells her to do. While the book is about and attributed to Kempe, *The Book* exists through a dazzling array of perspectives; her narrative self is never individual, for it is in constant relation, confession, and conversation (or one might say, competition) with other voices, just as Derrida's is. What *The Book* and *JD* suggest about memoir is also a suggestion about writers of memoir: an individual narrative and an individual life are only present in relationship to others, even when those others are physically absent: God, co-authors from afar, and even dead loved ones.

Specifically, Derrida's "Circumfession" shows that his life details are not simply his own. A group contributes to the event of his life and to his identity, but this does not formally present itself as simply the use of multiple authors, nor does this contribution preclude autodiegetic memoir. However, it does augment what an autodiegetic narrative might signal to readers. Derrida's "Circumfession" is autodiegetic, but it includes excerpts from others' narratives, including his own journal from the late 1970s. The inclusion of narratives attributed to others also supports an interpretation of this text as being about both Derrida and the history of memoir. By including his old journals along with the excerpts from others' texts, Derrida presents his self as inconstant, unpredictable, and unidentifiable, for it is split; one part of him may quote from and analyze another part of himself, and the journals from the 1970s are not his, but "his," who is not the person he is now. Derrida presents his subjectivity as a product of these other voices' agency, claiming, "I am not confessing myself, rather I'm confessing the others for the imponderable and therefore so heavy secrets I inherit unbeknownst to myself" (187). Memoir here is an autodiegetic disguise. Derrida is *Jacques Derrida* and Kempe is *Margery Kempe*.

This disguise might be an important part of how "Circumfession" is situated as an ode to a lost loved one that moves beyond personal, private mourning and brings the reader into a group mourning made of memoirs before it, dead loved ones, and a god knowable only through faith, never evidence. Just as Kempe is the voice through which readers can hear God's voice and her scribe is the voice through which readers can hear Kempe, a complicated kind of testimonial disguise is happening in "Circumfession." To

present this text as his memoir, Derrida frames his own confessions within Augustine's, often copying long sections of Augustine's *Confessions*. In order to understand the terror of losing his own mother, Derrida uses excerpts and images focused on the death of Augustine's mother, Monica. The self of memoir here is conceptualized as what Lauren Slater calls "narrative self" in order to differentiate between a definable, codifiable being and a fluid state of consciousness that critics try to codify as "the self" (*Lying* afterword). Derrida capitalizes on the concept of a narrative self by making his autodiegetic narrative fold into other narratives, drawing attention away from the author-text connection and toward the chaos of the community we each keep as writers. When one voice goes, like Derrida's mother, the other voices rise up. This is mourning, faith, and a spectral harmony.

This harmony suggests to us how memoir specialists can mitigate their own mourning for the self—acknowledge and collaborate with other voices, concepts, and fields. Just as Derrida's mourning is not his own, for each voice contributes to the memoir's expression of loss, so to leave behind a concept of the autonomous self in autobiographical testimonial is not to lose autonomy as a discipline, but, rather, to understand the agency of a large academic community. From this formal move as old as Augustine (and indeed, older), we might learn that we have been trained to make presumptions when we identify an autodiegetic narrative, specifically that the author-text connection is solidified in the memoir. Undoing this presumption, we might explore the number of narratives compiled to make the one and the weird formal ways authors defer to narratives that are not their own. We might even see the narrator recalling his

narratives from other time periods and understand this moment as one that finalizes the split within what we call “self” and what we think of as self-narrating. Every memoir is haunted by the ghosts of prior texts, and scholarship on memoir could learn a lesson from this. We are imbedded historically, theoretically, and sympathetically more than we can conceive of in a single argumentative mode. Our arguments, like our autobiographical testimonials, are never really autodiegetic.

Examining how direct address functions in “Circumfession” can further revise our ideas about autodiegetic narratives in memoir as they are related to divisions of spirituality and secularism in the genre. For example, the style and content of “Circumfession” owes much to Augustine’s *Confessions* (indeed, the former text often simply quotes the latter), which reminds us that this memoir is in constant play, affirming and detaching from the historical origins of spiritual Western memoir. Implicitly, Derrida addresses Augustine with the title “Circumfession,” reminding us of Augustine’s *Confessions*. A confession can be considered a private address when it is a *confession laudis*, or praise of God from an individual, like Augustine’s. Augustine’s memoir is divided into thirteen thematic Books that use the Latin *vos* (thou, plural) for a direct address to human beings and *tu* (you, singular) for a direct address to God. His direct address to God is not simply private, however, because it is placed before an audience; each Book functions as a thematic sermon that provides a lesson on some subject matter while referencing the Bible and personal anecdotes.

Also, as Derrida is prone to ruminations on origin, we can presume that his play with the word and formal structure of one *Confessions* through his title “Circumfession”

acknowledges Rousseau's *Confessions*, too, as the often considered secular origin of memoir. While confession can be understood as a praise of God, it can also be a more ambiguous public address when it is a *confessio peccati*, or confession of sins to God/someone/a group, like Rousseau's memoir. Rousseau says that his entire work is addressed to his fellow human beings, yet this address reads like a soliloquy: "my purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true in nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself" (*Confessions* 17). Although he claims to be writing to his "own kind," Rousseau appears to be writing to himself in order to revise how others perceive him in his own mind. A soliloquy is a form of address that allows an individual to ruminate through testimonial, but to whom exactly is ambiguous, especially in the context of the written word. This is Rousseau's *confessio peccati*. Derrida acknowledges both Augustine and Rousseau through his own confession.

The autodiegetic narrator in "Circumfession" is one immersed in evolving the group identity rather than articulating an individual self. Even in Derrida's most private moments of prayer, in which only the individual knows what is prayed for, only the group can aid the reception of the prayer, such as Bennington does with Derrida. Derrida relies on direct address to each person in his narrative and to the readers when he speaks about each of these parties in the third person. When Derrida addresses Bennington as "G," for example, it is in regards to what is commonly considered private matters, such as prayer, but, just as with Augustine, this private journey is placed before an audience: "for if you knew, G., my experiences of prayer, you would know everything, you who know everything, you would tell me whom to address them to" (*JD* 188). The quality of this

text as an event, just as with Augustine's and Rousseau's, is one that relies on a group discussion to reveal the autodiegetic narrator. We can glean from the style of address that "Circumfession" uses that it places itself in a history of memoir that is spiritual, in which address, prayer, and sermon are inseparable. This memoir situates itself as both *confession laudis* and *confessio peccati*. They are not separable, just as the author is not separable from his history, and a memoir is not separable from its historical roots in the genre. We know Derrida through his writing about his own and Augustine's mother, through Bennington's portrayal of him as a peer, and through a younger Derrida that we see copied in decades-old journals. But we know *JD* through its relationship to the themes and styles from memoir's history, such as hagiography. From considering the style of "Circumfession," we learn that memoir's biggest hits—Augustine and Rousseau—are similarly implicated in this relational interpersonal identity, as well as the historical identity of future memoirs, like *JD*.

JD is an experiment in critical theory, certainly, but it also establishes itself from its first pages as a product of and a testament to a lineage of Western memoir and scholarship on memoir. We learn from this work that autodiegetic autobiographical testimonials are never just examples in which an individual articulates the movements of his autonomous self. We also learn that scholarship on memoir needs to allow for more ambiguity, for the "contract" that begins autobiographical studies prescribes a reader-writer exchange that is normative and ideal but not representative of the way memoir actually works. Intentions change, and if we begin to think about memoir as a form of art

that challenges the prescriptions placed on it, what constitutes “memoir” must necessarily change.

Lejeune might say that deconstructionists are opposed to sincerity, but in *JD* we see that memoir’s sincerity is often ambiguous and difficult, and it comes without the security of a moral contract. The most heartbreaking parts of this memoir are Derrida’s reflections on his mother. He begins writing the book when she is ill, and by the end, he knows her death is imminent. Derrida, Augustine, and Rousseau all search for systems through which to understand the power mother figures have in their lives, but what each man is left with is love, loss, and worship. We could not know Augustine’s conversion narrative without Monica’s regard for belief over intention. Augustine says to God, “thus You changed her mourning into joy, a joy far richer than she had thought to wish, a joy much dearer and purer than she had thought to find in grandchildren of my flesh” (*Confessions* 147). We could not know Rousseau’s narrative of social torment without his mystical “Mamma,” Madame de Warens, who teaches him that God cannot be codified by church law or custom: “I had frequently made fun of religion in my own way, but I had never been totally without it...Mamma was more helpful to me in this respect than all the theologians in the world could have been” (*Confessions* 218). And we cannot know *JD* as a systemization that fails for good reason without knowing Derrida’s mother, who succumbs to a vegetative state while he is writing “Circumfession:” “this is why I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*” (56).

These writers might have had intentions that began their testimonials, but they are each within an unfolding event the moment the work begins. As readers, we do not know what they are thinking during the writing, what they want to fashion rhetorically, or what historical signification they intend. We ascribe agency because this is the grammar we have. We say that Augustine positions his conversion as that of a sick man who heals, Rousseau secularizes Augustine's memoir to champion the eighteenth-century "autobiography" of the autonomous individual consciousness, and Derrida treats memoir as an opportunity to play with language. We say *proper noun* and then we say *verb*. We create a contract to keep us safe; we judge an author's moral self to prove we know what *is* safe. Yet each author shows us that understanding him through his own intentions for a text, and then for his life, is wrong. Augustine wades through the thing "which doctors call the crisis" (*Confessions* 95); Rousseau admits that no matter his inclinations, his "feelings can only be described in terms of their effects" (*Confessions* 105); and Derrida, whose intelligence matters so much to the world that Bennington tries to codify it for an audience, is left bereft, asking, "why do I address her [his mother] like him, my God...you the knower" (*JD* 58). There is a lineage in these texts that can be codified for ease of research and understanding, but what each of these texts show is that memoir itself is an event in which "knowing" is beside the point of experiencing. What is memoir? It is both an attempt to codify and our chance to recover from codes.

Barthes' Speaking Memoir

The expected work for a discussion of Roland Barthes and memoir would certainly be *Roland Barthes*, for it is not only a well-known example of a theorist's

version of memoir, but it pairs nicely with *Jacques Derrida* because of the names-as-titles. This text is a wonderful example of a memoir by a theorist that bridges autobiographical and theoretical traditions. However, I want to use this opportunity to talk about *A Lover's Discourse (ALD)* because it, like *Jacques Derrida*, situates itself in the mystical origins of Western memoir, uses an ambiguous style of address that is, like Derrida's, imbued with secularism and spirituality, relies on a narrator whose self is relational, and imagines memoir and philosophy as disciplines that are transdisciplinary and, indeed, dependent on one other.

J. Gerald Kennedy claims that "Barthes...became himself a symbol of the dehumanization of literary study" because "semiotic analysis does not address itself to the uniqueness of the individual" (381). He further proposes, "in *Roland Barthes and A Lover's Discourse*, he was driven to self-revelation, yet curiously unable to bare his heart except in formal, oblique ways" (385). And Peter Brunette argues, "if the day ever comes when we decide to do away with the distinct borders which separate the literary text (which is 'creative') from the critical commentary on that text (which is 'analytic' and therefore somehow 'anti-creative'), Barthes will be our exemplar" (F6). *ALD*, published posthumously, is a text rich for this debate on Barthes. Two of his much-discussed obituaries cite *ALD* and *Roland Barthes*, and together they represent the complicated nature of Barthes' autobiographical writing. While Susan Sontag wrote in the *New Yorker* that "All of Barthes' work is an exploration of the histrionic or lucid, in many ingenious modes, a plea for savor, for a festive (rather than dogmatic or credulous) relation to ideas" (128), Hugh Kenner published an opposing response in *Harper's* in which he

argued that there is no use memorializing a writer whose autobiographical impulses only register as “codes [that] interweave with computerlike sureness” (68). With these dueling perspectives—wild versus codifiable—in mind, it seems appropriate to pair *ALD* with *JD* and to begin a discussion of *ALD* with its reliance on an eighteenth-century debate.

Conceptually, *ALD* is a response to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and much of the content of *ALD* is a rumination on philosophers’ and religious figures’ auto/biographical testimonials. Both of these aspects of the text’s approach signal that it situates itself inside of a memoir tradition. First, a reader might wonder why I say that *ALD* follows an early mystical tradition of memoir if it is a response to *Werther*. As Smith and Watson note, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, an autobiographical work of fiction published in the eighteenth century—a time when the term “autobiography” is synonymous with an autonomous self—becomes influential on the development of memoir at this time because it “reshapes Rousseauian radical individualism” in such a way that “self-preoccupation” can lead to an “artistic self-portrayal of passionate obsession” and self-harm (*Reading Autobiography* 118). According to Smith and Watson (119), this self-preoccupation is what Goethe rails against in his own memoir, *Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*, but we might presume that obsession and self-preoccupation, rather than a mysticism that celebrates a location outside of the individual, are what then shape *ALD*, if it is a response to *Werther* and regardless of whether or not it is an affirmation or rejection. It is both and neither.

Werther, a *Sturm und Drang* novel, rejects the rationalism and codified self on which Enlightenment principles were founded by narrating an emotionally turbulent Werther's secret devotion to Lotte, who is promised to Albert. More than anything, Werther is a lover consumed by emotional reactions rather than rational perspective. Goethe immediately became a celebrity after the publication of this autobiographical novel, and his love for the real-life Charlotte Buff, represented in the novel as Werther's love for Lotte, became common knowledge (Hunt, et. al. 566). This author-narrator/Goethe-Werther link, though, is a rejection rather than an affirmation of the self and its subjectivity directed through intention.

For a discussion of *ALD*, it is important to note that *Werther* presents itself as a hypothetical event for the real-life author, Goethe. This knowledge might appear to affirm the author-narrator link that autobiographical theorists focus on, but this link is one of hypothesis rather than reality. While Werther kills himself because his love of Lotte cripples him, Goethe's love for Charlotte Buff does not cause him to kill himself. Nevertheless, *Werther* as autobiographical fiction tempts the possibilities in Goethe's own life. The link is one of play rather than affirmation. In choosing *Werther* as a primary locus of influence for a memoir such as *ALS*, Barthes immediately establishes that he is not situating his work within the tradition of the self-focused, secular, and rational works affiliated with the genre in the eighteenth century (as Smith and Watson point out, Rousseau is always considered the father of this movement by scholars of memoir). Rather, *ALD* challenges the historical frame of the rational and codifiable self for memoir, just as *Werther* did. Challenging the same historical frame centuries after

Goethe, suggests that Barthe thinks presumptions about memoir still revolve around a rational self that is easy to identify and discuss: Schlegel criticized Rousseau in 1798 by saying that “pure autobiographies are written...by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case” (Yagoda, “A Brief History”), and contemporary critics often remark, “in the end, every sentence with the word *I* in it is a lie: self-justifying, self-righteous, self-conscious, self-sick” (Bottum 10).³⁷

As a text that recalls *Werther*, *ALD* can change our understanding of the history of memoir and the presumptions specialists make about it by showing that the self is not an ad hoc arm of memoir or scholarship on memoir. Barthes says, “everything follows from this principle: that the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in his voice what is ‘unreal,’ i.e., intractable” (3). The “I” is for “utterance, not an analysis,” and “offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak” (*ALD* 3). Like Goethe, Barthes imagines the self of autobiographical testimonial as a hypothetical and discursive branch of the author who uses the text to imagine what he

³⁷ These kinds of comments come from leftist and rightist publications alike, but with different goals in mind, and they are especially noteworthy in newspapers. While comments about the decline of humanity’s moral foundations and the need to usher forth values from a better day pervade the columns about memoir in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New Yorker* columns on memoir show its authors anxiously separating themselves morally from the controversial authors and issues of memoir, amounting to a kind of “one of my best friends is a memoirist, but not one *like that*” kind of comments. Memoir stands in as the American political system’s push for “family values” versus a push for diversity based on racial and economic guilt.

might do, and also, who he wishes to address. How can Goethe's Charlotte *not* be addressed by Werther's address to Lotte? And yet, the address is hard to understand—private in a public space, grammatically unfounded, and a little creepy. But what if we redirect our focus away from authorial intention and toward something else? Instead, the address is a location of the imagination that forms, re-forms, or deforms based on hypothesis and discourse. And instead of a presumed whole, true self, we find one that is not rational or objective. This self is elusive yet powerful, and non-existent but strangely motivational for the discourse that promulgates it. The self is hard to codify because it comingles in a layered action made of a devotional address to the lover in the present moment.

The self is also never secular as such; instead, it is a present-tense event in which “it is a lover who speaks and who says” (9). This “structural” utterance (3) might remind us of how Derrida surprises Bennington's code with his own utterance because it is “unreal” and “intractable” (*JD* 3). The self refuses the cultural code of “radical individualism” that we might associate with the shifts in memoir in the eighteenth century. *ALD* demonstrates how Barthes was “driven to self-revelation, yet curiously unable to bare his heart except in formal, oblique ways” (Kennedy 385). Both of these memoirs affirm that the genre refuses ideas placed on it that might locate it *as a genre* and that memoir works more like an unfolding event rather than a result of an author's intention. This unreal event of a lover's discourse will guide us toward examining the earlier, mystical tradition of address that Barthes relies on and that can change our perspective on autodiegetic connotations for memoir.

Although written, *ALD* documents an “unreal” spoken address that muddles the secular lover (who we know by way of discourse, not identity) and the holy God. First, let us understand Barthes’ style of address. The work is a direct address to a lover, which we might use to understand the work as secular, but in *ALD* the beloved takes the place of a God who the speaker is able to communicate with, for the address is one of devotion. Thus, the lover’s relationship to the absent beloved can be understood through the lens of the metaphysical “discursive site” of prayer. While Barthes says, “the lover’s discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*” (1), much like prayer, it is paradoxically shared, for the lover “speaks” and “says” his address, just as in prayer one addresses an other who is absent yet ubiquitous. An address is never without an other, and in this case, we do not even have the name of the one who makes the address. In this way, we see how language is mystical, without identifiable origin or end, and we are also left without the particulars of an author’s or a god’s identity to guide speech acts through what we might read as “intention.” We have our spectral sriptors, and we have love. Ultimately, we have mysticism, which means that we have the lover and God engaged in an impossible conversation.

This address relies on a spiritual tradition prevalent in medieval memoir—turning inward—in which the relationship between the devoted and God is strengthened by the devotee’s worship in a dialogue with absence. Turning inward is often discussed as a fourteenth-century historical movement,³⁸ but it is prevalent for centuries before and after

³⁸ In the fourteenth century there was a pope flight from Rome to Avignon and a power struggle between Emperor Louis IV (Bavarian) and Pope John XXII. John excommunicated the emperor, which

that. Even the rise in popularity of yoga and meditation in contemporary America can be understood as a cultural interest in turning inward that is, on the one hand, ambiguously secular or spiritual, or, on the other hand, self-indulgent. A proponent of turning inward, Catherine of Siena, tells us, “lively faith [is] recognized...by the fact that the soul never turns back for anything, whatever it be, nor rises from holy prayer...except (note well) for obedience or charity’s sake” (*The Dialogue of St Catherine of Siena* 158). Her work is titled a “dialogue,” which suggests that turning inward to complete an autodiegetic narrative or begin a private address does not discount the presence of an absent other for spiritual discourses. For Catherine, the faithful is marked by a present tense address to God that is only broken if human beings are in need of help, or if one is compelled by a religious superior to cease prayer. Less generous than Catherine, Henry Suso never mentions turning outward to community, even for “charity’s sake.” His insistence on turning inward makes sense, since his God is an amorous being who Suso addresses as “darling wisdom” (Suso 77). We might not feign surprise that God takes the form of a beautiful woman to be a lover to Suso. Here, turning inward for spiritual reasons relies on the secular, sexual form of courtly love, something with which the discourse of a lover would be full. In religious memoir, courtly love stabilizes the spiritual address from a devoted lover to an omnipresent, absent God. Questions of what

resulted in warring. This, combined with the Black Death (1348), made turning inward a popular religious path. Dominicans, beguards (male), beguines (female), and laypeople alike turned inward and wrote about it in common vernacular. The fourteenth-century movement of turning inward gets particular attention from German authors like Henry Suso because of Martin Luther’s influence. For more information, see Frank Tobin’s Introduction to the English edition of Suso’s *The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*.

to speak or how to speak are easier to implement when the discourse is limited to romance. In Baudonivia's *The Life of Saint Radegund*, for example, Jesus visits Radegund in the form of an attractive man (101), and in *The Life*, Christina of Markyate "scratched the sign of the cross with one of her fingernails on the door so as to mark that in that monastery in particular she had stowed away her heart's desire" (5).

These moments confirm God and love at once as absent presence.

Barthes reverses the formula of God-is-Lover to Lover-is-God, muddling the secular and spiritual just like our saints. Indeed, the only difference is that of syntax: the text locates the lover as the always unknowable yet worshipped object of address, and the text is the medium through which the lover addresses the beloved. In *ALD*, an autodiegetic devotional narrative, we are confronted by the text's consideration of itself as a spoken, private transaction, like a prayer. The chapter titles for the English version are a French word, the equivalent English translation, and a phrase that Barthes imagines the lover would speak while experiencing the physical state to which the translated word refers. For example, in the chapter title "*adorable/adorable*," the lover says, simply, "Adorable!" (18), and in the chapter title "*fou/mad*," the lover says "I am crazy" (120). Sometimes the lover does not speak in the titles, and we are meant to believe that Barthes is confronting the other through a more dramatic turn inward, such as in the chapter titled "*errance/errantry*," where the lover has written, ominously, "The Ghost Ship" (101). Once the book is opened, whether it is considered by the reader to be a devotional text or a lover's text, the conversation begins. It seems that the wild, obsessed lover and the pious, devout supplicant are not so different in autobiographical discourse.

For both, courtly love makes the absent lover or God into one that is present, although elusive. Thus, the discourse, even if written, has the power of an action that produces an effect, a result, even a strange kind of community. The discourse started by the speaker or narrator brings another into the discourse of turning inward. And whether the saint or lover, we see that in *ALD* “Barthes’s starting point is not to see solitude as anterior to the community, but rather the community as responsible for the solitude of the hermit” (Hillen 62). The mode might be autodiegetic or private, but the result is an event with multiple parties, and it is characterized by absence.

Barthes also revisits the content of historical prayers to strengthen the ambiguity between the lover as a secular and spiritual addressee and to show the narrator as one who is engaged in worship. In the chapter “*nuit/night/And the night illuminated the night*” (171), Barthes runs through references to St John of the Cross and Ruysbroeck, re-circles through St John, and then moves on to Tao in order to provide context for his own identity as the praying subject. To contrast St John’s *Dark Night of the Soul*, Barthes says that he is “in the very darkness of [his] desire” (171). St John’s turning inward to pray to God becomes Barthes’ prayer to a lover. Through Barthes’ lover-is-God formula, the lover in this book is not meant to be a particular individual who might come upon the text, but an omnipresent entity, for he is capable of being addressed without being present. The conceptualization of this beloved is where Barthes solidifies his work in an earlier mystical tradition of memoir that is prevalent in medieval hagiography rather than an eighteenth-century secular self-interest because in *ALD*, secular, “lower loves are transmuted into higher, more inclusive ones” (Sontag 140), like Gods. Therefore, *ALD*

promotes thinking of memoir less as a rumination on the self or a telling of events from an author's life than as a conversation in which a mystical addressee is presumed. Then, memoir is an exchange and a reverent (or obsessive, depending on your point of view) act of worship, not a reflective literary art that follows a clear spiritual or secular tradition, nor a narration of the author's self as such.

Of course, as in *Jacques Derrida*, *ALD*'s inclusion of a variety of texts that influence Barthes, as well as the style of direct address on which the book relies, suggest that the self of the narrator—for Barthes the term “speaker” is more appropriate—is relational, not stable, autonomous, or able to direct subjectivity with an intention that results in a text. We find that “it is not the least of paradoxes that often when Barthes speaks of the voice, he speaks in someone else's voice: now Derrida's, now Kristeva's, now Lacan's. It is as though to speak about the voice is somehow to be dispossessed of one's own voice” (Schor 31). And *ALD*'s use of aphorism in its section titles, sub-titles, translated titles, and short chapters “insists that its assertions are no more than provisional,” thus the author's “stamp of subjectivity” (Sontag 122) is waterproof, constantly erasable and under revision.

Conclusion: Die Die Kill Kill, My Love

You, my love, is it to you I thereby name, is it to you that I address myself? I don't know if the question is well put, it frightens me. But I am sure that the answer, if it gets to me one day, will have come to me from you. You alone, my love, you alone will have known it.

—Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*

There's always an implied love story between me and the writer. Me loving the book, loving the writer. 'Candor' is key. Being willing to say what no one else is willing to say. The act of writing is inevitably viewed as an act of courage ('brave' is all over the place). Life's difficult, maybe even a drag; language is (slim) solace. No one else gets what you're doing; I alone get it. You and me, babe. 'Intimacy.' 'Urgency.' We alone get life. Let me explain your book—the 'text'—to yourself. Let me tell you what your book is about. Life is shit. We are shit. This, alone, will save us. This communication.

—David Shields, "Autobiography as Criticism, Criticism as Autobiography"

We can conclude that philosophers' memoirs like *A Lover's Discourse (ALD)* and *Jacques Derrida (JD)* are artifacts of the ways in which the traditions of memoir and philosophy are already embedded in each other, even if scholars separate them out for ease of study. But just because these memoirs are by philosophers does not mean that those by authors we know as memoirists, or creative writers who happen to write a memoir, are any less weighty with their own scholarship in the meat of martyrdom, incest, slavery, theft, truth, and so on.

A reader might recall the text I opened with, David Shields' *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. This project suggests that a clear demarcation between philosophy and memoir can only result in an event that impresses upon us the surprising collaboration of these kinds of writing. Thus, the interrogation of what constitutes a self, a metaphysical whole, secularism, spirituality, and autonomy in post-structuralism is already intricately

linked to the philosophies of the author-text relationship, the separate histories of spiritual and secular narratives, autodiegetic memoir, and the authorial intention that memoir specialists explore. In my discussion of *Werther's* influence on *ALD*, Kierkegaard's influence could have also been discussed. Kierkegaard wrote two works of philosophy that are memoirs in their own right and are arguably models for Barthes. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents the narrator as a lover who breaks an engagement to marry, which Kierkegaard had just done in his real life with Regina Olsen, and in *Repetitions*, Constantius, a hypothetical, fictional lover speaks to his nameless beloved, much like the lover in *ALD*. That both of these works were published on the same day and originally without Kierkegaard's name attached to them is striking, as it suggests that the actual life of the author, who is filled with fear and trembles at the thought of commitment, could also be doomed to repeat his mistakes: "In both cases, Kierkegaard has covertly represented his own relationship to Regina, whom he has sacrificed but believes he will recover, as Abraham wills to do with Isaac [in *Fear and Trembling*] and the young man with his lover [in *Repetitions*]" (Sprinker 330-31). It also suggests that Kierkegaard rejected a notion of the self as such in consideration of the author-text relationship because it did not sit quite right with him. He explored an identity that was relational rather than autonomous, "a multiplicity of subjects" (Sprinker 331) instead of the one autobiographical subject.

The exploration of the difference between repetition and recollection is weighty with all authors dealing in memory, perhaps all authors in general, and it is a relevant concern writers of memoir and philosophy, such as Barthes, as he creates a hypothetical

situation to explore his actual emotions. With this example (and we could just as easily begin with Nietzsche, Lacan, Derrida, Blanchot, and so on), we find that memoir explores a relational self as a philosophy as much as recollects a person's memories. What each writer navigates is the difference between a recollection and an idea about what one has recalled. Thus, they explore the lineage and promulgation of the directed voice. That philosophy and memoir converge during these explorations is no mistake, as the fields seem to need each other to actually end somewhere after navigation.

The references to other thinkers alone are not what make the self of *ALD* an identity that is relational. As this project has explored through many examples, the address itself presumes an other, and knowing that, there is never the one. We know that the work is written as a spoken, present tense address, as is "Circumfession," so the reader takes on one of the positions of the lover who is addressed, and, therefore, is the one who can decide what to do with the information presented. So when Barthes says, "I am about to tear open the other's opaque body, oblige the other (whether this is a response, a withdrawal, or mere acceptance) to enter into the interplay of meaning: I am about to *make the other speak*" (68), we as readers, thinkers, perhaps writers, know that instead of narrating a recollection for readers, Barthes presents an event—the book—with which we engage. You are alive, thus you are obliged. That we will enter into the "interplay of meaning" is true, as we are reading, but how we will do so is not known. Will we *speak* back in our own minds, turn inward as Barthes does, a group of hermits reading the great philosophers and writers of the world? Will we remark aloud to the book, to the ghost of Barthes no longer in the real world, a man we cannot meet? Will we

mourn him, our dear lover who still provides us a present-tense address? The section “When My Finger Accidentally,” in which he tells us that he will “tear open the other’s opaque body” (68) is about the power of subtle exchanges between parties, so we know that no response is too small to be counted as engagement. I tell you what I do with *ALD*. What I am doing now. I mourn that this hypothetical exchange is the actual engagement I am in. I mourn him. Despite my interest in separating myself from an essentialized self in memoir, I cannot help but link this author with this text via my knowledge that he is gone. No one has ever spoken words to me that have demanded my presence as much, yet they are spoken in the present tense without a living being. Barthes says to me, “it is by this asphyxia that I reconstitute my ‘truth’ and that I prepare what in love is Intractable” (17). I am left not with love, but loving. The ghost? The author? The text? No, this event that I cannot prove, in which “far from ensuring presence—the speaking subject’s self-presence or the interlocutor’s presence—the voice is inhabited by death, coextensive with absence” (Schor 30), includes me. We are brought back to the all too familiar phrase of Barthes’ about a dead author. Often misread, in this case with his posthumously published event, it is simple and true. The author is dead in his present-tense address, and through that, we enter our own mortality with him. We are loving; we do not know what to do with this feeling produced by an omnipresent yet absent other. It is confusing, frustrating, and makes me not want to be a writer or scholar. How does this facilitate who I am as a lover of named things?

At this moment I know what Lejeune wishes for when he accuses theorists of lacking humanity. He wishes for a clear, sentimental connection between reader and

writer—a “contract” that binds us to life with reverence, optimism, trust. A marriage.

He wants us to celebrate life, to be alive, and to know that we have something to say and in hearing our words, another will be alive. Right now, right here in this *event*, I wish for that, too. I am not alone. But why, why do I experience such fulfillment of the promise of the autobiographical testimonial? Why do I think that *I will be saved from myself?*

Because another will save me. Has. Is. I am included in the subject of this event, and the most hoped for promises of memoir are what we wade through, for “once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the ‘unreal’...it has no recourse but to become the site, however exogenous, of an *affirmation*” (*ALD* 1). Just as with Derrida’s affirmation that deconstruction is “always on the side of *yes*” (*Learning to Live Finally* 51), I am included in the testimonial. What is relational self in memoir? It is affirmation of each voice. Someone is reminding me that I am lucky, that for all the world has lost, I am *alive*. I am alive and I can explore. Where shall we go now?

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VITA

Sarah Heston was born in Southern California and spent much of her childhood exploring the region's hills and canyons. She was emancipated at the age of sixteen after the death of her father and sole caretaker, Trevor. That began for her a serious consideration of a career in literature as a way to provide an artifact of the life she spent with her father. She went on to get an MFA in poetry from UC Irvine and a PhD in literature and creative writing, specializing in memoir, from the University of Missouri.