

FAMILY PORTRAITS

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by  
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## FAMILY PORTRAITS

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### ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of poems in two parts. The first section is comprised of poems about my grandfather and his genealogy research. It endeavors to explore the ways we see people after they are gone. My grandfather died nine years ago, and much of what he left behind for me were his genealogy records. Through his letters and research, I have learned more about his history and the history of my family than when he was alive. The first section of this thesis also considers the ways in which we understand the stories of those who have died without leaving an extensive print on history. It struggles to answer the question: How do we understand our histories when all we have of them are a few records or passed down anecdotes?

The second section of the thesis looks forward rather than back. It is a series of poems about intrauterine insemination and the process of choosing a sperm donor. These poems are about the financial and emotional struggles of having children as a woman in a same sex marriage. It looks at the ways we choose the process (whether adoption, IVF, or IUI) and how that process differs from the norm. It looks at the tests and language involved in going through IUI, including that used in sperm donor profiles. Many of the poems focus on what it means to choose a stranger as the other biological parent to your child. Others look at my own fears of how my DNA will react with our chosen donor and

what I both hope and fear for our child. In summary, this thesis, overall, is about how we understand the lines of family.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Family Portraits,” presented by Shannon M. Ashley, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## INTRODUCTION

As often happens with creative works, this thesis began as one thing and has ended as another. Initially, I set out to write a book of poems about family in three sections: the family we are born with, the family we create from friends, and the family we create with a significant other. The first section was meant to consider my parents and siblings as well as my extended family and how those relationships form our personalities when we are young. However, I then began to look at my maternal grandfather's genealogical research and found that the poems it inspired began to take over that section, to the point where the poems I had written about my father's family or even perhaps my immediate family no longer felt as though they would fit. A similar phenomenon occurred when I went to write about the families we build through romantic relationships. As part of a same-sex couple, my journey towards children differs somewhat from the norm, and though I began with the intention of writing about my marriage and having children, poems about sperm donation and the emotional and physical process of being a same sex couple wanting to have children took over. As a result, this project went from being one cohesive book on family to the beginnings of two books. The first section is what will eventually be a book centered on my grandfather's genealogical research.

As children, we rarely think of our parents or grandparents as real people with histories. Despite loving stories, I never thought to ask for the stories of my elders. Now that my grandfather is gone, I am left with folders full of stories I wish I had asked him to tell me. I find that I am learning more about him from what he wrote about not only himself but also the distant family members he looked so hard to find. The first section of

this thesis is comprised of my closest imaginings of the stories I wish I'd had the prescience to ask my grandfather for. It includes a crown of sonnets, an ambitious project I never would have attempted prior to this degree program. However, as I considered how to approach the varied people my grandfather's paperwork discussed, I realized a connected series would serve the subject matter well. It's something I perhaps never would have considered before reading books such as Victoria Chang's *Obit* or Molly McCully Brown's *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*, both of which use forms to create connections across subjects and individuals.

The poems in a crown of sonnets are inherently connected by their shared lines, even if the subjects or people seem unrelated on the surface. The individuals who struck my grandfather's particular interest or my own are spread across different branches of the family, sometimes directly related and sometimes not, but they are all intimately connected through either marriage or genetics. The shared lines and the sonnet which uses those shared lines create a thread of connection between the poems and individuals, much like my grandfather's family trees. These poems were also often the inspiration for other poems in the section. However, connected sonnets do make revision tricky. Though I did not use meter or rhyme scheme, the limited number of lines in which to work and the fact that the connecting lines must remain similar, at the very least, means working within a fairly strict frame. In the end, I sometimes found that breaking the form was necessary to a better poem, though I tried to maintain at least threads of the links.

In addition, I am working with limited information on the people I am writing about. Most of the documents I have are marriage and birth certificates, land deeds,

census records, and the occasional obituary, which do little to flesh out a life. Luckily, my grandfather kept several letters he wrote to a couple of distant cousins about their research, and these sometimes included anecdotes people found. Using these, I attempted to balance research and imagination in trying to represent individual lives. In fact, the italicized lines in the section are pulled directly from letters and articles in my grandfather's files. This process of creating full portraits of people whose existence is little more than a footnote in history was also aided by my experiences in fiction courses. Prior to this project, I very rarely wrote poetry which stepped outside my personal experience. However, much of the "Family Portraits" section of this thesis does exactly that. Taking courses in fiction, and even creative nonfiction, taught me more about developing characters beyond myself or my own ideas of people close to me. Writing fiction and participating in fiction workshops helped me learn how to bear down on what part of a person's story needs to be told, which helped me create succinct portraits of individuals in my sonnets.

The second section focuses on the process of finding a sperm donor. A few poems from this section were actually the impetus for my original project plan. In the spring of 2020, I took a poetry course focusing on medicine and mortality. I was just beginning the process of deciding between IVF and IUI with my wife. Because this was a topic at the center of my life that semester and the course was focused on medical issues, I wrote a few poems about our doctor visits and a medical procedure I underwent to begin the process. I then got the idea to do a series based on sperm donor profiles, which I had begun to peruse. I actually got the idea from McCully Brown's *The Virginia State Colony*

*for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*. Though she does not have any erasures, which is what I initially did for the series, she does have a section which includes fictionalized forms for sterilization. Those entries in the book are what inspired me to consider the repetitive language used for sperm donor profiles, which then also lead to two erasures of articles from donor websites about choosing a donor.

Erasures were initially the bulk of the section. In addition to the two article erasures, I had fifteen sperm donor erasures under three different designations. However, after putting them through workshop, it was decided that the sperm donor profiles became too repetitive spread out as they were. In the end, I combined the parts of the profiles which listed physical features and facts and combined the poems with what was originally its own “Baby” series. The hope is that by combining these two types of poems I created both the feeling of being on a dating site, which is what the lists of attributes felt like to me, and the fears and hopes tied to different types of sperm donors. The two remaining erasures were revised after reading Kiki Petrosino’s *White Blood*. Initially, I tended to keep almost as much text as I erased. I was worried that erasing too much of the text would mean the poems lost the clinical feel of the language, which was part of what I wanted to contrast against the intimate act of having a child. However, I found that keeping too much of the text did not allow for as much artistry or poetic expression. Petrosino’s erasures, in contrast, often only kept a few words here or there from the original text. They allow for more white space than I was initially comfortable having. After reading them, I tried to pare down the language I kept, working towards concision

much in the way I would in a completely original poem. The results are slightly sparser poems that allow more sharpness in the language that is kept.

The remainder of the section is comprised of several free-verse poems and one prose poem. Some of the poems are part of other linked series (the definition and “Landmine” poems), which are something I did not work with much until this thesis. In fact, I think one of the largest things I took from my readings during this program is that repetition is okay and even encouraged in books. Of course, I was aware of motifs in books prior to this program. Many poets have obsessions they write about and language that threads through their pieces. However, the discussions in this program about form and books as whole objects have led to my realization that more formalized repetition is also okay. Virginia Chang, Molly McCully Brown, and Benjamin Garcia are all authors with whom I connected who use series of poems with repeating titles to connect or expand upon ideas. McCully Brown even uses mirror poems which are almost exactly the same in content but a few changed words create an entirely different meaning between the two.

Finally, this thesis is a reflection of this program’s tendency to push me out of my form comfort zones. I had written several non-free verse form poems, including sonnets, but I never would have attempted a crown. Granted, writing so many sonnets did lead to most of the other poems in the first section being fairly short and similar in form. However, those are indicative of the project not my growth in the program. Reading one of Simone Muench’s prose poems my first semester in the program led to me writing my first prose poem. Most of the poems from the cut section of this thesis were actually

prose poems, and I hope to write more for the eventual full book on IUI. In addition, my experience with Dr. Bar-Nadav and writers such as Molly McCully Brown, Danez Smith, and Patricia Smith, among others, has pushed me to move beyond my narrative roots. Though none of these writers shy away from narrative, they also explore more associative ways of writing.

My previous program created a tendency towards very narrative poetry in me, but this program forced me to explore poets which utilize flows of associative imagery. Even poets which often have narrative poetry, like Natalie Diaz in *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, have ways of weirding language and flowing through associative images that I never would have considered before but which I tried to channel more. Though we didn't read much in the way of erasures, the push to explore different forms and ways to weird language is what encouraged me to try them. A byproduct of my attempt to focus in on language and image a bit more also led to an improvement in my concision. By breaking out of narrative, I was able to better explore what image alone could do, and I believe that helped me write in a stronger, sharper way. Over the last couple of semesters, I certainly found that fewer words and lines were being cut from my poetry in workshop. Though some of the variety in form ended up cut from this thesis as a result of two subjects overtaking the intended third, I do feel it is important to emphasize the effect this program has had on my ability to branch out from free verse and well-learned and established forms and experiment.

Dedicated  
to

my grandfather George, the genealogist  
without whom the first part of this thesis could not exist

## Family Portraits



## The Genealogist

I am told he died laughing  
thirty minutes before I reached  
home. I am told it was sudden, and I picture  
wrinkles left by too much loss, imagine  
eyes widening when too much inhale chokes  
his last exhale. He was always too large, mouth  
booming, pulling us in, wrapping us  
in stories of Ireland, creaking boats  
on windswept seas and a distant connection  
to the Kennedys, while he poured  
waffle batter into the iron at Easter. I refuse  
to see his muscles slack beneath skin, stay  
leaning on a barstool just outside his door. When  
I enter the room days later, family trees spill  
from file folders, black lines holding the dead  
together. I watch my mother gather everything  
while I stare at the blank bed smoothed white.

## Paper Lives

Ship manifests show when each  
ancestral line crossed to the New  
World, which war they came early  
enough to fight in, and soldier  
pension lists tell me who fought  
and who survived. Birth certificates draw  
lines connecting generations, report  
who belongs in our set. Marriage  
licenses tie us to others, Maddens  
to Downings to Logans and all the buried  
names in between. Baptism records show  
the Catholicism at our roots, except  
that one married Mormon. Deeds  
and census lists are proof of our spread  
from New York or Virginia all the way  
to the gold rush, concentrated in Nodaway  
County, where my grandparents met,  
and at the end, coroners and obituaries  
are reminders of who died and who was left  
behind. These are the flat sketches, but how  
can I give breath to their stories? Who  
will give breath to mine?

## Family Omissions

Slipped between family groups  
and Christmas newsletters is an accusation  
of a *biased and invalid story of family* based  
on omission of those who don't want  
screaming mouths and chubby waving arms  
in their households. Two siblings: one  
a single son who died young, crushed  
between twisted cars, a would-be mountain  
man who had yet to grow a beard. The other  
an educated daughter outside expectations- short  
hair and masculine clothes- who taught  
the history of women in books and lived  
with a psychologist life partner who kept  
her own name, the first documentation  
of a queer woman like me in the family. *How  
many other family members over several  
generations have been disappeared?*

## What We Know

My mother boasts of distant threads reaching  
through whispered family legends into history.  
The first of our family is a footnote, worth  
only a sharp-tipped musket nestled above  
the mantle. Strings of obituaries insist  
no one knows what led one to war--  
a strike spiraled down the spine, buckshot,  
a shooter walking free. Across generations,  
Janes stand side by side. The last went  
by Jennie Matilda, an escape from tradition.  
Her hair fell steel beneath her shoulders, sister  
and daughter to dirty old men. Dust settled  
in their stories until two cousins conspired to catch  
the past, dug through plots in a search for family.

## Imaginary Castles

There are whispered family legends  
of a castle nestled amongst cliffs and sprays  
of heather dotted by sheep and emerald  
grass, but with only sheaves of paper  
to shuffle through, no expert grandfather left  
to connect DNA tests to property deeds  
in looping script, I cannot find a castle. I only  
see ships crossing Atlantic to Brooklyn, clear  
cerulean skies and desiccated bodies  
swallowed by steel grey water after sickness.  
A farmer stands with his wife at the bow, later  
sits crammed below streams of steam  
on the way to Illinois, the first of our Maddens  
to escape starvation in a search for amber waves.

## Buried

There are graves amongst  
the records, photos of lives summed  
up in stone. Monuments to Maddens  
and Logans and Vennemans spread  
from Illinois to northern Missouri,  
sprinkled between strangers or grouped  
together, like the new stone for John,  
Margaret, and Maggie, the first from Ireland  
buried with the daughter who preceded  
them into ground. I picture my grandfather  
pacing plots, boots crunching through the crust  
of day-old snow or slipping on dew slick  
grass, camera and palm pilot in hand.  
I wonder if he wandered the aisles,  
brushed the leaves from their faces  
the way my mother does when  
she visits him.

*Women Dropped Like Flies Back Then*

Mothers and daughters erased  
from the census, rotting under  
each other. One wife falls, fever  
wracking a thin frame or blood  
bursting into river of after-  
birth, and another takes her place,  
slips into ghost shoes and paces  
through the house, chases  
her children. They all take  
the same name. They bury each  
other with marriage certificates  
and sewing lessons, new designs  
over old embroidery, first forgotten.

## Sisters in Law

*Two girls conspired to catch* brothers, aided  
and abetted each other's plots. Zella fell  
easy, all rose petal kisses and parental  
approval. Josie seduced the school  
teacher, quoted Dickinson and Twain, argued  
him into Chopin, and when scandal  
broke, Zella helped her run  
away from her father's ruttled  
brow and expectation for marrying  
rich rather than educated. Four generations  
later, the cycle repeats without rose  
kisses or books, just two country  
girls marrying red-faced brothers as a way  
for drifting friends to become sisters.



## The Force of Tradition

Two Janes stand side by side, one with hands on hips, lips quirked on a broad face, wide brimmed hat sloping over her eyes. She's the first, the wild namesake, wife of a scoundrel, mother of a murderer. When raiders came for her (first) husband, she stood between steel and spouse until everyone got to go home. Then, she pushed her way past the taboo and *divorced him anyway*. The other Jane moves sightless through rooms that never change, her apron as starched as her frown over those who break the Church's rules, her hair pulled taut, wound tightly in tradition. After her aunt's divorce, she went by Jennie.

*These Things Stick With You*

A round cheeked boy with dark curls toddles across linoleum to push chairs, blocking his blind grandmother in his haste to explore his ability to move others.

The same boy stands outside a door, listening to the screaming entry of his sister. Later, he slinks into the nursery, catches the baby with lips tight to skin, *eating his mother up*, and wonders if the little monster can be returned.

Slipped between two feather ticks, the boy watches the moon shift between stars until he hears a door slam and quick steps across the meadow, sees flames twist from a distant house. Come morning, only the chimney reaches for the blue dawn.

The boy watches two men face off on a rippling screen, a stereotype with feathers sprouting from his head and tomahawk in hand against a cowboy in a white hat. Decades later, the man will remember loincloths and scalps when he goes looking for his own Native blood.

*Looking for the Indians*

Her hair fell tangled beneath her shoulders,  
a dark sheet swept back from the bronze face  
that would spawn generations of legends  
about Native American blood dripping  
down through Logans and Downings and  
Maddens to me. She was listed last  
in the house despite being born first, adopted  
into whiteness. There are no records of who  
she was before the missionaries but plenty  
to tell us she was fifteen when she married  
into the family line, caught by a man  
whose brothers and father drove her second,  
colonizing community away. *Must  
have been a dirty old man.*

## Cowboy Mode

*Must have been a dirty old man*, road dust  
caked in every line of his face, callous  
tipped fingers scratching day-old beard  
and coming away more brown than tan.  
He lost a wife and twins in childbirth and ran  
west to prowl mountains, drove cattle  
where even mail carriers on prancing  
ponies couldn't reach him. He left his first  
daughter behind, exchanged her for a new  
family he could keep at a distance, only expected  
him when snow buried trails and penned him  
into one pasture. When he swaggered back  
to civilization, he pretended he never met  
his last wife, the first girl to catch him.

## For Lost Children

I went searching for twins  
and found four where I thought none  
existed. Two are distant  
cousins on my father's side,  
genetics buried so deep  
I'm not even sure how  
they'd surface, but the others  
are ghosts one generation  
above me, two sisters  
or brothers or one of each  
my mother (should have) had,  
dark curls and too early bodies  
baptized but never listed, names  
buried in my grandfather's ashes  
and my grandmother's wine-soaked  
history. They are vapor gone  
before memory could solidify  
them into lines on the family tree.

## The First Lathrop Resident to Lose His Mind

No one knows what led one Ben to war  
with his own mind. Could have been  
the death of one wife and fifteen  
children- grief reaching up, fingers  
climbing the throat to squeeze grey  
matter twisting in on itself- but  
children and women *dropped like flies  
back then*, so perhaps it takes more  
to shatter slate worn smooth by civil  
unrest and reconstruction, a time  
when disease is an unresolved expectation.  
Perhaps he's just the first kink in our DNA,  
the source of chattering nerves and unbalanced  
chemicals spiraling down the line to me.

## Family of Forty

Staring at the blown up pixels  
on the wall, I practice remembering  
who belongs to whom, wish  
I could draw lines on the glass  
connecting Little John to Grandma's  
John, not to be confused  
with Grandpa's John who belongs  
with Ryan and Andrew and Kelly  
Rose, all with spirals springing  
from their heads to tie them together.  
My fingers dance across sixteen  
faces, pause on my mother as I try  
to trace dark waves and olive skin  
across the page, separate blood  
from marriage, biological from step  
siblings. I stumble on the cousins  
close to my sister's age, three women  
standing together, all white smiles  
and straightened hair. I can never  
remember where they belong.

## American Dreams

Sitting between three Johns in two generations, I was not surprised the first Madden in America was a John, but I was surprised he would leave a country I've dreamed of since the Celtic store opened blocks from my school, peddling wool sweaters and fairies in jars and the history of my mother's name. I listened to the soft cadences of Gaelic melodies over store speakers and learned the basics of Irish dancing, thighs together and fists tight against my hips. Then I see a date and know they left at the end of four years of famine, crops decaying in soil, stomachs pulled tight to spines, and back then, America was all land and gold grain just waiting to swallow a young farmer and his wife.



## The Passing

The first of our Logans is a footnote, worth only a few lines in one newsletter, just an Irish name lost in a sea of dark cloaks and creaking leather trunks fleeing famine for opportunity. His Pennsylvania wife and her presidential name are tied to a string of maybes connecting us to the leader whose claim to fame is bachelordom and failure to stop a war. She is a debate swathed in dirty skirts and scarves. He is a tradition, the passing of William across every generation, and a soldier, a legacy of revolution, our American history in crimson crusted culottes, a sharp tipped musket nestled above a fireplace.

## The Logan Romeo

A sting spiraled down the spine, buckshot  
caught in a man on the wrong side  
of a young girl's fence. Weeks after six  
lead pellets were pulled from sinew and muscle,  
holes sewn into scars, they walked the county court  
yard, hands slipped together despite her father's warning  
and trial. Owen's testimony first sentenced the man  
a year in prison, but when a stuck seventh shard  
slit a lung and lodged in a swelling gut, drowned  
Owen Logan in the yellow of decay, the appeal  
through slander (or truth) began: accusations of threats  
on both sides, the story of a father *in a wild delirium*  
to protect his daughter from a widower of *poor*  
*moral character*, and Owen's shooter walked free.

## Feigned Insanity

A shooter walked free of an asylum, Crane taking flight after killing his wife and pleading the reprieve of insanity. He chased her porch to hall to neighbor's yard, caught her there with three bullets in the back until she splayed wide across emerald blades. He was sentenced to hang, rope rubbing amethyst strips across his neck, but doctors claimed he was *hopelessly demented*, destined to die anyway as he chattered about the wife he forgot he killed. That is until he slipped through the system and into the sky. But what can you expect from a drunken jailbird except to rip straightjacketed arms through bars to fly free from history?

## A Well-Balanced Man

The obituary still insisted one Samuel Logan *was well-liked by all who knew him* despite his prejudice against Mormons, the result of coincidence or organized thefts-- a wagonload of ham, corn, and flour disappearing in concert with two religious farm hands, and later a brickyard (picks, shovels, molds, chains, all but the yard itself) up and walking away. His accusations led to musket driven threats by his sons against a Mormon who *took exceptions and roundly tongue-lashed the old man*. How did a reputation for being neighborly survive his twisting suspicions leading them to war?

## Captain of the Bloody Pontoosucians

See a sharp tipped musket nestled  
to a bricklayer's shoulder, common  
worker turned militia captain charged  
with driving the Mormons from their holy  
halls. This benefactor known for lending  
a young religious boy ammunition, a means  
to hunt for his family, became persecutor  
of his community, indignant over *thievery  
and roving bands of Mormons who took  
by order of the Lord*. And in the end,  
even the boy would side with the Antis,  
warn the captain of planted mines meant  
to destroy the lost town. Years later, he  
still insisted *one or the other must go down*.

## Who Are We to Judge

Military lined church walls, guns  
in hand; families huddled  
across a river; children trailed  
clay crusted blankets as they tripped  
in brambles snagging skin. Ran  
from Ohio and Missouri to Nauvoo,  
where the temple cornerstone was laid until (accused)  
theft (potatoes and corn and ham to feed  
2000 soldiers serving the Church)  
and fear of differences (can one trust  
a man with too many wives?) drove  
the Mormons out again. 160 years later,  
the state apologizes for supporting  
militia men who let paranoia heft  
their guns and tear them from their temple.

But my family remembers a father  
whose stores disappeared after gracing  
two Mormons with work; men with muskets  
hiding behind trees, crawling elbow deep  
in muck and bushes, ears cocked for rustling  
in a silent wood; and a descendent ranting  
about the waste of an apology  
to the sons and daughters of thieves  
and murderers, shaming the government  
for not considering *the fine old settlers*  
*conveniently tucked in their graves who cannot*  
*speak for themselves.*

## Family Folklore

My mother boasts of distant threads  
reaching back to Ireland and tying Maddens  
to Kennedy's, though I cannot find or follow  
the lines. My grandfather must have proven it  
somewhere lost in computer files too old for the next  
generation to open. Instead, I find debates  
between my grandfather, the skeptic, and an Illinois  
cousin about her connection to James Buchanan,  
a President my rabid relative reaches to collect,  
her jealousy relying on professional mistakes and lost  
records in her desire to claim someone more  
than a postmaster or farmer or soldier  
as hers. Discontent with only footnotes for relatives,  
she whispers family legend into history.

*These Things Stick With You*

Strong nails tipped gnarled fingers,  
tight on the bicycle next to mine, jean  
clad legs stretched, shorter than the big  
wheel. Even my grandfather's six feet  
struggled to reach the seat on this history  
exhibit. We joked about top hats and coattails  
flapping in a fake breeze, wished for open  
roads instead of museum walls.

\*

Sand seeped between my toes, shoes  
left dangling from my mother's fingers  
on the boardwalk. It's the first time  
I saw white-tipped waves curling under  
the sliver moon's pull, watched bottomless  
blue meet silver pricked black at the edge  
of a country, my grandfather's silhouette reaching  
for me, waiting to catch me as I rush  
the water, hands stretched deep, a torrent  
of giggles loosed from my salt-tipped tongue.

\*

His black curls, like ribbon after  
scissors run through, brushed  
across tan skin, never quite reaching  
the smile tucked in the corners  
of his eyes, his mouth yawned  
when he laughed, a cave full  
of the family's secrets.



## The Homemaker as Hero

She went by Jennie Matilda. Flour  
and sugar covered her hands, fell  
from her pockets, kitchen fairy  
dust. She baked blind, found everything  
by touch, but always heard trouble. One morning,  
pattering feet and screeching geese called  
her from kneading, elbows deep in bread. Dough  
crumbling across her apron, she ran  
to save her toddling grandson from biting  
beaks. She didn't need sight to shake her fist  
at her inattentive husband and gather the boy  
in ample arms. *She was a large woman, the better  
to give good hugs.* At night, her silvered hair was let free  
from its pins, a steel shield across her shoulders.

## Holy Sisters

One way for friends to become sisters  
is bound in holy orders and prayers. Even  
closer are sisters both born and united  
by promises to serve religion, like Clara who followed  
Cecilia into matching habits draped  
in black. One traipsed and sailed the Far  
East nursing little girls lost at elephant races  
and old women with rough hands and backs  
bent from carrying baskets. The other taught God  
and English while hidden deep in war  
torn China, sang with children in Spanish  
and sewed curtains into costumes in Bolivia.  
Their letters constant, visits every ten years, two  
distant threads reaching, pushed apart by dedication.

## Cradle Catholic

A person baptized as a Catholic as a baby or young child and raised in a religious family, usually attending religious schools throughout childhood. Often (but not necessarily) said with the implication that the person is Catholic in Name Only (CINO), remaining with the religion only because they were raised with it. -Urban Dictionary

I was Baptized bald, screaming  
pink beneath a white gown. I knelt  
as soon as I crawled or sooner, learned  
to dance in a loft to hymns, stumbled  
past guitars to stare over the parish at gilt  
and wood and smooth stone Mary. When no  
one was looking, I reached over the railing,  
tried to touch crosses on swinging  
chandeliers. I wanted to feel something  
holy, until I grew beyond belief, past  
occasional prayer and into sleeping  
through Sundays instead of listening  
for a silent God. And today I learned  
I am just a sprig shot across Missouri,  
Illinois, New York, writhing under the sea  
from Ireland to main land (Prussia),  
withering under the weight of a host  
of ghosts whispering down the lines  
about God and the sanctity of Sunday  
and Sacraments ending in me, Catholic  
in name only. I was always meant  
to reach for holy-- the smooth peace  
of fractured, stained glass light splintered  
across eyelids and mouths split open  
in harmony-- but never touch it.

## If I Have a Daughter

her middle name will be Jane. There are many in our family history, but ours will be after the twice married, pioneer woman, first to give birth in a newly built town. She had ten children, though only six survived. First, she chose the county's first postmaster at eighteen, stayed two decades. When renegades took him, she clasped her hands and cried, was told *He is a damned old scoundrel. He ought to have been shot long ago!* Her response- *I know it. That's why I am afraid you will shoot him.* She saved him to divorce him and marry a farmer judge. She was *a good, kind neighbor* in her obit but *a little on the wild side* in family recollection. I want a daughter like that-- a good neighbor still willing to break loose if she needs it.

## Nuns in the Family

My mother told me once that before my father, she wanted to become a nun or teach music, so when I find articles about distant aunts with square jaws and broad shoulders who pledged themselves to God and travel, I think of my mother in a black veil, mouth round for the high notes as she teaches hymns to girls in loose dresses and young men in ragged shorts. I wonder if she misses her chance to pray at the base of Bible Rock or atop the Great Wall when I tell her where our holy ancestors lived. If she was given a second choice, would she keep her life of tired motherhood and counting change or would she change our history?

## Conspiracy Theorist

Each tack in my wall is a bright face and scarred hands, stiff from tilling open land or sanding pine to lumber or laying bricks, no smooth society palms in my history. Strings cross rivers and mountains, blue yarn cascading into emerald thread, families flung apart and knotted together. But some connections are uncertain- too many Johns and Benjamins, Janes and Elizabeths mean scouring middle initials for the right pairs. How to pin pictures to stories to names that repeat every generation? Then there are the missing. Where to put the names with no graves, those lost in the shuffle of paper and red tape, the stories a widow refused to tell grandchildren born in the gap between a husband's death and hers?

Should I Want to Date my Sperm Donor?

## Lost in the Donor Search

My brain catches on repetition, a blur of athleticism and chiseled features, sharp chins and Roman noses. Genetic diseases swirl through my Google search; *Alpha Thalassemia*, *Biotinidase*, *Osteochondrodysplasia*, *Maple Syrup Urine Disease* glow neon across my eyelids. Instead, settle on *No disease causing mutations detected*, even if it means giving up the Shakespeare scholar, the dancer with dimples and high cheekbones, the perfectionist photographer with an MFA, the attractive Army K-9 handler who teaches guitar to veterans. Give up multilingual (English, Russian, French, and Ukrainian) with *thick, wavy hair* and *fit frame* and *tall, dark, and handsome toned chest* with the *infectious laugh*. Perhaps that's okay. I remember my cousin's too-early baby in the NICU, curled beneath bandages and breathing tubes, result of a panicked woman unready to be a mother, his first name lost because his aunt-turned-mom wanted him severed from his nearly aborted birth. I don't want that for my baby. I want her/him to come blaring into the world full of pink-cheeked breath and gripping fingers. I want her/him born completely mine.



## Hysterosalpingography

A machine crouches, an X-ray clamp sucking oxygen from the room with its thrum. Dead air, thick with orange and alcohol, whispers through my porous gown. Before beginning, I shuffle to the bathroom, but the mirror is too large, angled to expose. My toes catch crevices in the tiles, and I hurry back to the smiling nurse and the doctor with sharp metal in his cracked hands. Flat on the paper mattress, I rise, watch my eyes wide in the glass of the machine, ignore the prodding cold in my entry, the pressure of a popping balloon, ink and iodine winding through me. The glass is smooth, no light. How does it search for fibrous threads clutching my walls, webbing my halls shut, when all I can see is my blank face, etched in black and white? The nurse keeps asking if I'm alright.

## Perfect Candidate for IUI

For the first time, I am perfect. The doctor says my *pretty lady parts*, no fibrous growths or alarming bumps, ova aplenty, give me a 15-20% chance of first round success. My mother claims credit, says it's because she refused to put me on birth control, sticks teeth to tongue when I tell her I put myself on the pill years ago to avoid stabbing cramps from the perfect inverted pear in my abdomen. Despite my betrayal of her Catholic conscience (because her God would never change my body), I am free from defects, ideal, but am I suitable for screaming at midnight, tiny nails on the tips of alien fingers tying my sense of self in a knot? When I look into their bloody, perfect face, will I be enough?

## Baby Finances

When I first decide to carry,  
I see coffee waves, russet  
eyes, and cream skin, a marriage  
between my wife's gene  
pool and my immunity, a connection  
to both our bodies, but the cost  
of IVF is too high, ten  
times the cost of me mixed  
with stranger, and we already carry  
too much debt. So we decide  
to search for an imperfect mirror  
of her but find a pale imitation, more  
me but featured in the catalog, a buy-  
one-get-one option of sperm. We avoid  
settling for the faded reflection, the first  
bargain, and wait a month for the list  
to change, see rosy cheeks and dark  
eyes over an ornery smile and click,  
buy our family on sale.

## STARTING THE SEARCH

With

o p                      ti on                      s,

confidence

is

reduced.

children

become

defined

by inheritance.

genetics matter.

we recommend  
the qualities one might like to see. significant thought to  
guarantee, There is no  
but

a when you choose sperm you are selecting  
biological father

accept

this

and

you will find what you

need.

## Pez Dispenser Donors

In a quarantined world, shortages like toilet paper, hospital beds, and even condoms splash across headlines, but buried beneath bylines is a shortage of DNA, sperm donors stuck at home, unwilling to risk infection to provide pandemic babies. Instead, social media groups grow into prides full of direct-to-customer donors fighting over regions. Mothers-to-be interview (and are interviewed by) prospects where no bank regulates questions or exchanged photos. The only cost is travel and uncertainty. As children, we were taught not to trust strangers on the internet, so how would I know if your law degree and genetic tests are real? My research skills aimed towards academic search engines and debatable evidence do not extend to catfishing fathers trying to hook a whole school.



## Stacking the Deck

At gatherings, my wife is often surrounded  
by her curly-haired nephew hanging  
from a leg while she swings his brother  
and trumpets like an elephant. The girls  
hug her and run away or chatter about puppies  
and princesses. She engages in water fights  
and Nerf wars while I stand at the side, cradling  
the youngest and wondering when I lost my inner  
child. When a niece asks me a question, I stumble  
to understand, answer too late.

So when I search for sperm, I look  
for parallels, graduate students, men  
who read, rock climbers or dancers  
rather than soccer players or football  
fans, artistic types who sing with family  
and put language over math. I try  
to balance genetics and nurture and hope  
for a child I'll understand.

## DONOR SELECTION

Your ideal donor is

an  
individual,

outstanding

but

## CHOOSING

Perfect

can go wrong.

try not to be too specific.

Think about

the little things      the less tangible,  
your child may find fascinating      one day.

read      Personal Essays      as if you were reading  
them to your future.      Look at      Photos knowing  
your son      daughter recognizes that button nose or  
brown eyes as their own.      know  
your little one may carry them close  
for a lifetime.      make your  
ultimate decision that much      *harder*

An Epiphany after Binge Watching *Jane the Virgin*

At age 16, I sat in a Wendy's booth, thighs  
squeaking on plastic, and told my mother  
I wanted to adopt. *That's great, but*  
*you should still have your own babies.* I was  
sure I didn't want to carry the extra  
weight, didn't want to swell and sink under  
the pressure of contractions. I was afraid  
to be crushed, burdened, but by the time

marriage rolled around, I was unsure. I had  
held my youngest niece, a baby  
burrito with legs and arms tucked up  
against my chest, the first of my sister's children  
to have my sandy hair and cornflower  
eyes, the first to sleep with her nose deep  
in my neck as I sang *Secrets* to her. I watched  
my wife laugh with any toddler, connecting  
the way I only had with babies born  
into my life, and I pictured our someday child,

but I still worried about six weeks of cramping,  
red-smearred, rolling on the bathroom floor  
cheek to porcelain, fingers twitching to stop  
the crying, being frozen face to pillow too tired  
to move or feed anyone. My wife said  
it was my choice, and after watching Jane want  
a child she never planned for, I dreamt of the first  
woosh of a forming heart, the feel of bubbles  
popping under my skin as a tiny body shifts,  
and being the first sight of someone  
new, both of us drenched and screaming.

## Donors Who Look Like My Wife

### I. Profiles

- Eyes: **Brown**
- Hair: **Brown**
- Height: **6'02" 5'11" 6'06" 5'10" 5'10"**
- Weight (lbs): **180 155 190 190 225**
- Blood:
- CMV:
- Ethnicity: **Mix, French, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Hispanic, Polish, Slavic, Swedish, English, German, Irish, Scottish, Native American**
- Jewish Ancestry: **No**
- Education/Occupation: **A.A.S. Fire Science / Student/Firefighter Academy  
B.A. Communications / Student  
AA Degree / Brewery Owner  
B.A. English / Barista  
B.S. Psychology / Non-profit program manager**
- Live Birth / Pregnancy Confirmed: **No Yes**

## II. Hypotheticals

This baby is born dark,  
tawny skin and hickory  
hair already thick and waving  
over eyes so deep I know  
they won't stay blue. I search  
for signs of me, but the nose  
is straight and an oval face  
stares back over a long body.  
Will this baby bond over hiking  
and biking and kicking balls around  
fields, spaces I don't belong? Or will  
s/he grow to reach through fire, save  
the burning or the bored in school, strum  
my mother's guitar? Will this baby  
make us brighter? Will we sing together?

## Landmines I

My boy would have to watch  
carefully. His primary danger creeps  
up in middle age, a thickening  
of arteries and pushing of blood.  
He would need to dance and run  
through grass, exercise the muscle  
beneath his ribs which has proven weak  
in my family. He will not be a child  
who can sneak greens to the dogs,  
or he may end up with the highways  
to his heart blocked and rerouted,  
tunnels reinforced with mesh, a red  
slash across his chest to match  
the generations before him.

## What the Body Carries

*Ovary:* the groan of my body  
wrapped in down, sinking  
mattress and sharp frame

*Fallopian tube:* my toes catch on vent cracks, stumble  
over fabric bears with no eyes, search for carpet,  
softness on skin in the dark

*Uterus:* the scorch of butter on Teflon, dishes  
clattering from stove to table to sink,  
swallowed in bubbles and steam

*Cervix:* spinning fan pushing  
against the breeze, air squeezing  
for exit between thin glass slats



## Donors Who Look Like Me

### I. Profiles

- Eyes: **Blue**
- Hair: **Blonde**
- Height: **6'02" 5'10" 5'11" 5'08" 6'03"**
- Weight (lbs): **185 160 165 150 155**
- Blood:
- CMV:
- Ethnicity: **Caucasian, German, Irish, Polish, Ukrainian, English, Norwegian, Swedish**
- Jewish Ancestry: **No**
- Education/Occupation: **B.A. Communications / Cinematographer**  
**B.S. Psychology / Government**  
**B.S. Civil Engineering / Theatre Technician**  
**B.S. Engineering / Tutor**  
**B.S. Biology / Student**
- Live Birth / Pregnancy Confirmed: **No**

## II. Hypotheticals

This baby is born all rosy  
cheeks and cornflower  
eyes over Cupid's bow,  
me in a past mirror, giggling  
and grabbing with pianist's fingers,  
long like the body brought  
to us by athletic sperm, and there  
is my ski-jump nose and smooth,  
cornsilk hair. I wonder if s/he will run  
trails or scales. I see us on stage,  
all golden reflections and pale skin  
waiting for lights to come up, another  
mother, a salt and pepper haired shadow,  
grinning from the audience. I see us sitting  
with a large book in our hands, two  
with crooked tooth smiles, below Orion's belt  
stuck to the ceiling, but will others  
wonder how my wife, all dark  
eyes, perfect teeth, and sharp  
posture, booming voice, belongs?

## Landmines II

My girl's first explosion  
is almost inevitable and likely to hit  
young with hips pushing at the seams  
of her skinny jeans, chest tipping  
her forward and bowing her back  
to match the last three generations,  
puberty ripping through her inner  
walls. Her next step might  
(or might not) lead to swollen  
knuckles, knees stuck at the bend,  
a tightness in her joints that stops  
her from dancing, red butterflies  
itching along her back, flitting  
across her face, her body turning  
against itself. She will fight  
in a haze of camphor and menthol,  
balance medications and supplements  
in a search for the clear path through.

Empty Nursery Bouquet

*Trigger:* sharpness in my belly; blooming  
snapdragons and cyclamen  
beneath the skin

*Fertilization:* our palms twisting  
together; sunshine celandine winding  
beneath hawthorns, brushing bare toes

*Implantation:* her arms wrapping  
my waist, a tingle in the spine; blood  
iris petals dropping between thighs

*Wanting:* fluttering beats, baby bubbles popping  
into laughter; daffodils and daisies  
woven in a crown

## Donors Who Look Different

### I. Profiles

- Eyes: **Brown/Green Blue Green Blue**
- Hair: **Light Brown Brown Dark Brown Red/Brown**
- Height: **5'07" 5'06" 5'10" 5'11" 5'07"**
- Weight (lbs): **150 138 174 190 145**
- Blood:
- CMV:
- Ethnicity: **Caucasian, German, Irish, Native American, Scots-Irish, Dutch, Italian, Colombian, French, Polish, Scottish, Scandinavian, English**
- Jewish Ancestry: **No**
- Education/Occupation: **B.S Psychology / Social Worker  
B.S. Accounting / Student/Restaurant Server  
Doctor of Musical Arts / Teaching Assistant  
B.S. Psychology / Behavioral Health Technician  
Ph.D. in Geology / Geologist, Geological Consultant**
- Live Birth / Pregnancy Confirmed: **Yes No**

## II. Hypotheticals

This baby is born with electric  
eyes edging towards unsure  
green or coffee irises. Thick  
curls shift from cinnamon  
to auburn, all the shades of autumn  
inside, but the nose still has  
my turned up tip, and almond  
eyes scrunch under chubby  
cheeks with the first smile,  
and I can see soccer cleats  
tumbled on the floor next  
to sheet music, bright eyes  
blazing, glinting in the sun  
as my wife and I trade  
pushes on a swing, watch  
the baby fly into blue and wait  
for her/him to fall back.

### Landmines III

Any child of mine will need to tiptoe  
through my gene pool, past bifocals  
and genetic mutations or malfunctions  
like cancer and diabetes. I will have  
to lead them through sneaking  
possibilities: tight lungs and numb  
fingers during tests or traffic  
jams, sharp words flung  
at friends before they can  
understand the catch  
in their throat or heat  
behind their eyes, an itch  
in their fingers to scrape across wrists  
and squeeze bone or throat- a desire  
for hard contact. They will need  
to be warned about a predisposition  
for dependence on wine, tequila,  
cigarettes, bees in the blood, any high  
that brings a beating brain in the morning  
if the other, stranger half of their genetics  
cannot balance me out.

## Genetic Jackpot

We choose a boy, or I guess  
now a man (his profile says  
31), but we only see rounded  
baby cheeks, a bowl cut straight across  
his forehead, and a mischievous  
grin, fingers pulled together  
under an elven chin. It is hard  
to fuse this face with sperm  
donor, described as proportionate,  
naturally lean, but we can't see him  
now, have only this childhood shot, a list,  
and his personal essay to decide if he is  
the one. So we dig through  
his education, skills, and family  
history and discover gold. Amongst  
1700 boxes for problems from high blood  
pressure to asthma or acne, there are nestled  
only two X's (one for extra rosy cheeks and who hasn't  
had cancer in their family these days). We'll risk it.



## Baby Imagined

Our final choice, this baby  
is born under a thatch of honey  
wheat, a hint of strawberry  
peeking through, or maybe  
with chestnut strands sticking  
straight up. Ocean eyes that may  
shift to ochre peer from under  
lashes that sweep up towards  
barely there brows. The nose  
is slender, with a hint of a flip  
at the end. The mouth rounds  
into yawn, and I can't wait  
to sing silly harmonies at bath  
and bed times. For now, I hum,  
nose to crown, and imagine  
grubby hands chasing dogs  
on stubby legs, black dance  
shoes lined up next to hiking  
boots, a bright yellow bicycle  
against the garage door, a warm  
body wriggling between my wife  
and I at midnight, little hands  
touching our faces. I save  
the worries (when will they ask  
about fathers, who will they reject  
when slamming doors at fifteen, what  
will we tell them about how babies  
are made when they were made  
in a clinic instead of a bed) for tomorrow.

## Newborn Fears

I wake when the screaming  
starts, eyes opening to pin  
pricks of light against a fake  
tree instead of the blinding  
halogens of my dream, ears  
ringing in the sudden silence.  
I blink to clear the imprints  
of sharp tipped alien hands reaching  
from a swaddled blanket, shake  
away wrinkles collapsing on blank  
eyes. I can't remember who  
was screaming.

## Waiting Periods

When you see red running through the shower  
haze, chance for new life smeared across porcelain  
and burning skin, thousands of dollars swirling  
in the blush whirlpool of the drain, wrap  
your black robe around the loss, hood up, curl  
into velvet pillows, burrow your aching pelvis  
beneath comforter and dogs, hold heat  
to your core, wife to your back, and remember:  
They say it rarely works the first try, try  
again. Wait another cycle, count one  
more time: seven days bleeding, two  
tablets daily, mid-ovulation take the shot  
to the abdomen, purple pinprick bruise over green  
failure, and wear white underwear for luck.

## NOTES ON THE POEMS

The lines in italics found in the “Family Portraits” section of this thesis are lines pulled from various letters, articles, and records found in my grandfather’s research. As his research and a desire to connect with him after his death were the impetus for this project, I included striking lines from his writing and records as a form of connection between my work and his.

The poems “Starting the Search” and “Donor Selection” are erasures of articles on finding a sperm donor from popular sperm bank websites.

The “Profiles” sections of “Donors Like My Wife,” “Donors Who Look Like Me,” and “Donors Different (from Us)” are based on actual formatting of public sperm donor profiles and the information they include but have been changed to protect anonymity.

In “Landmines II,” “red butterflies” are a direct description of a rash that often occurs on the faces of those with lupus.

## VITA

Shannon Marie Ashley was born on August 28, 1993, in Kansas City, Missouri. She attended the public school in Weston, Missouri and graduated in the top ten percent of her class in 2012. She received the Missouri Bright Flight Scholarship and a Board of Governors Scholarship from Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. She graduated summa cum laude in the Honors College from Missouri State in 2016. Her degree was a Bachelor of Arts in English.

She then went directly into a master's program and received her Master of Arts degree in English from Missouri State University in 2018. During her master's program, Mrs. Ashley was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship. She taught first year composition her first year and writing across disciplines her second. She was also teaching for sections of introduction to poetry and taught one semester of poetry on her own.

After finishing her master's degree, Mrs. Ashley moved to Kansas City to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Media Arts at University of Missouri-Kansas City, where she was awarded the Durwood Scholarship. Upon graduating, Mrs. Ashley hopes to work in an editorial position for a magazine or book publisher and focus on publication of her own work.

Her first publication is in *Curating Home*, a Kansas City poetry anthology.