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Hillbilly heroin(e)

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HILLBILLY HEROIN(E)

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APPROVAL OF THESIS/DISSERTATION

We, the faculty supervising the work of **Lauren Tussey**, affirm that the **thesis "Hillbilly Heroin(e)"** meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the **Master's in English program** and the **College of Liberal Arts**. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signature, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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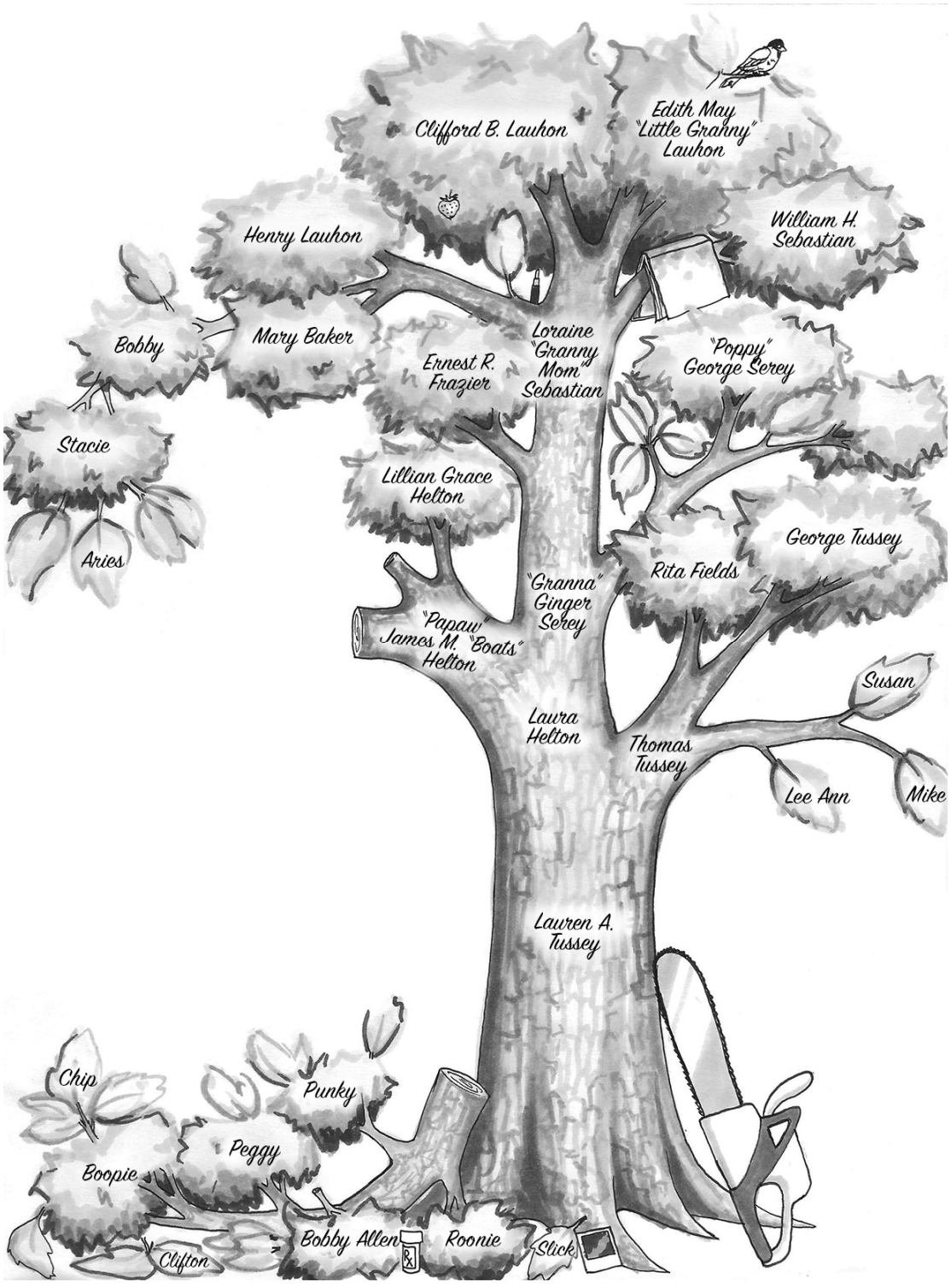
DEDICATIONS

This work is dedicated to my mother, Laura Tussey, who has always been a brilliant inspiration to me through her strength and wisdom; and to my mentors, Rachael Peckham and A.E. Stringer, who have guided me through my education and provided me with the skills I needed to find my voice. I appreciate you all.

The following manuscript is a work of creative nonfiction.

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

TRIMMING THE FAMILY TREE



Original Artwork by Katie Rabalais

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ABSTRACT

As a native to this region and a writer I have spent much of my life attempting to capture a unique aesthetic of what I see through my essays and poetry. The following thesis is a manuscript of nonfiction essays with a critical introduction and conclusion that work together to provide a cohesive narrative centered in the Appalachian region. Through place specific imagery and implementation of regional dialect, and a narrative lens, my collection reveals an aesthetic of the rapidly expanding genre of Appalachian Literature. By exposing the patriarchal structures present in the region and emphasizing issues such as domestic abuse and drug addiction juxtaposed with strong family ties and a deep, tangible pride for my heritage, I attempt to provide a complex view of my home.

As the collective narrative of my manuscript unfolds, the reader is introduced to my Papaw and learns that his siblings played a rather tense role in his life and ultimate death. Despite their roles in his death, my mother and I were expected to keep positive ties with the family. By emphasizing the importance of family structures within the region, my essays demonstrate the dichotomy of the undeniable power and culturally inflicted powerlessness of Appalachian women today.

In my critical introduction, I provide insight as to how Appalachian women can find their unique voices through education and writing and use those voices to speak their own truths, whether those truths speak to power or speak to uphold the power.

THESE WOMEN REMAIN: VOICE & POWER IN APPALACHIA

As an Appalachian woman, I am all too aware of the stigma that accompanies claiming personage to this region. Our people are met with a barrage of stereotypes by mainstream culture that dictate how we are viewed and how we view ourselves. In conjunction with the social tensions caused by this stereotyping, there exists a sort of "double-think" where women are simultaneously revered for their strength yet made powerless by the traditional patriarchal structures that dominate the region. The dichotomy functions through socioeconomic dependencies and the influence of the family, which can frequently project a clan-like groupthink that perpetuates patriarchal ideals by informing young women that they are subservient to the men in their lives and their elders. Many of these elders can be strong matriarchal figures despite the patriarchal proclivities of the culture. Though these young women are expected to be submissive they are still required to exert strength when they transcend into the matriarchy either through age or necessity. Often, the women of Appalachia translate this message of submission into a silent strength in which they internalize their emotions and the emotions of others. Symptoms of this type of patriarchal climate include a loss of voice and power and a desire to seek a patriarch if none is present. As a young, Millennial, Appalachian woman I have been steeped in this culture as well as the culture of third wave feminism; therefore I am compelled to attempt to speak truth to the patriarchal powers that I witness. My experiences in navigating the regional patriarchy have led me to wonder how other Appalachian women might find their voices and use those voices to speak truth to the culturally ingrained patriarchal power in hopes that I might be able to intellectualize my own process.

My thesis, which follows this short critical and cultural analysis, is a manuscript of nonfiction essays that work together to provide a cohesive narrative centered in the Appalachian

region. By utilizing place specific imagery and my regional dialect, my collection provides a new insight into the aesthetic of my region and the rapidly expanding genre of Appalachian Literature. The essays of this manuscript work to navigate the climate of the Appalachian patriarchy by unpacking the concept of the Appalachia *homeplace* and they inquire as to why women seem to remain in living situations where they are abused. These essays shed insight on the "double think" present in the region, which juxtaposes deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, that have their roots in "blue-collar" issues of socioeconomics against strong matriarchal influences, which stem from the concept of "combative motherhood" that occurs when women must fight oppressive powers to maintain a sense of normalcy for their children. My essays demonstrate the dichotomy of the undeniable power and culturally inflicted powerlessness of Appalachian women still today.

Many of our people are viewed as poor, uneducated, lazy, racist, lacking personal hygiene, and the like, by the dominant culture. We are perceived as existing on the periphery of the dominant culture as subalterns, lower than, occupying a space in between, a space *other* than that of mainstream America. The dominant American society is invested in creating subcultural groups such as the popular mythologized version of Appalachia, because it defines what mainstream America is not. As Ronald D. Eller notes in *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945,* Appalachia "is the 'other America' because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of [mainstream America's] own lives" (3). This tactic of compartmentalizing the people of Appalachia in their own subcultural group establishes the region "as a separate place, a region set off from mainstream culture and history, [which] has allowed us to distance ourselves from the uncomfortable dilemmas that the story of Appalachia raises about our own lives and about the larger society" (Eller 3). The notion of distancing oneself from a group of

people as an act of defining identity based on contrast crafts a narrative that divides the rest of the country from Appalachia.

Moreover, Appalachia is treated as an extraction region where our natural resources are mined out for the rest of the country at grave environmental and human costs. Growing up in this region, one encounters no shortage of tragic stories about trapped miners or devastated land, yet the major corporations are rarely held responsible for these acts. Eller attributes this abuse of the Appalachian people and landscape to the: "diversity that is modern Appalachia [which] belies a growing gap between the rich and poor, and [ignores] the continuing sacrifice of Appalachian resources and people for the comfort and prosperity of the rest of the nation" (5). Essentially, much of the economic wealth produced in Appalachia is never seen by the locals who largely work in these underpaid blue collar jobs. The economic diversity is present when one considers that the owners of these plants, factories, and mines live elsewhere in the nation. The financial exploitation of the Appalachian becomes justifiable when one considers how the people are stereotyped. Thus, Appalachia is the scapegoat for the rest of the nation; we become a population that is used and a catch-all for every negative aspect of American humanity based solely on our economic status of destitute. If the lowly Appalachian is uneducated, then the rest of America is not. If the lowly Appalachian is racist, then the rest of America is less so. If we are dehumanized through stereotyping and misconceptions, then the poor wages, lack of access to adequate education, and environments made toxic by weak government regulation on mining sites can be excused. Mainstream American culture is highly invested in this narrative of Appalachia and perpetuates it through various forms of media and the collective consciousness because these stereotypes justify our poor living conditions and lack of opportunities.

Editors Sandra Ballard and Patricia Hudson attempt to provide a space for the voices of Appalachia women writers in their anthology *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia,* but in doing so they also must classify the political climate of the region. They achieve this by calling attention to Lee Smith, one of the most prolific Appalachian women writers, when she says "Appalachia is to the South what the South is to the rest of the country. That is lesser than, backward, marginal. Other." Further, Smith states, "Look at the stereotypes: 'Hee Haw,' 'Deliverance,' 'Dogpatch,' and 'The Dukes of Hazzard.' A bunch of hillbillies sitting on a rickety old porch drinking moonshine and living on welfare, right? Wrong" (Ballard and Hudson 1). Smith calls attention to a barrage of stereotypes that plague the region, though she is quick to undercut them and assert that they are, in fact, "wrong." However incorrect they might be, these stereotypes, and many others, are still prominently reflected in mainstream media, therefore reducing Appalachians to the status of "other."

Though some women, such as Lee Smith, are able to speak truth to the powers that bind them, Appalachian women writers largely remain unheard because of their lower status. Further, they are doubly effaced in the sense that Appalachians as a whole are stigmatized and the women reside in a patriarchal society. Therefore it is essential that Appalachian women writers not only find their voices and learn how to harness those voices, but they must also find a venue in which they can be heard.

The bombardment of media laced with derogatory language and imagery about Appalachians is toxic to the public and private perception of Appalachia; meaning that, not only does America believe these negative stereotypes, but through learned conditioning, Appalachians also begin to believe them. However, I assert that it is the Appalachian woman who suffers the brunt of these stereotypes because of her lack of visibility, power, and voice within the culture.

Virginia Rinaldo Seitz, author of *Women, Development, and Communities for Empowerment in Appalachia,* notes that the women participants in her study felt that the "men also released their frustrations and aggressions on women, replicating the violence of the social relations of class in the relations of gender" (42). Often, these women's husbands would come home from work tired and frustrated and would then take out these emotions on the women. This environment occurs because both the men and women feel disempowered; the men by the workforce and the women by their husbands. Despite this polarizing relationship, many women remain within the homes and can experience both comfort and grief due to their living situations.

As Parks Lanier Jr. observes in *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, the women of Appalachia understand that there exists a "tension and ambivalence between ways of perceiving the home—as nest and as cage—and a tension between the values represented by the house and those represented by open spaces—the road, the forest, the mountain" (7). The home becomes a cage when the women are unable to achieve social mobility due to a lack of opportunities and a lack of social capital. Because Appalachia is primarily a blue-collar region, many of the opportunities for employment are available only to a masculine workforce. This certainly does not go to say that there aren't women who subvert these typical gender roles and pursue employment in manual labor professions; however, they are the exception and not the rule. Therefore, many women pursue employment in retail, education, and secretarial lines of work which pay greatly less than jobs in the extraction or construction industries. Due to the lack of well-paying opportunities for employment, many women are socialized to search for husbands as an act of increasing their social capital. In doing so, they can be limited to the types of lives which they may desire to lead because they can become complacent with a guaranteed quality of life and future. However, this limitation can be relieved when women find their own spaces for

expression. Not unlike Virginia Woolf's famous work *A Room of One's Own,* Appalachian women have consistently searched for spaces in which to connect and be heard—whether it be the beauty shop, church choir, or a quilting-bee, as was the case with older generations, or the contemporary outlet of expression that is higher education.

The notion that there is a need to create a space for women writers speaks to the patriarchal climate of the region. Of this, Ballard and Hudson demonstrate that the woman's role in the Appalachian literary canon is far from realized, as they quote Jim Miller, a late Appalachian theorist, who notes, "The Appalachian region is still seen as the site of an unmitigated patriarchy, with the result that the region's women writers and the impressive body of work they have created is not sufficiently visible, recognized or appreciated" (3). This lack of visibility of women writers in the region perpetuates a lack of power and also prohibits other Appalachian women from pursuing writing because they do not see themselves represented in the canon. Yet, despite this fact, countless Appalachian women—Lee Smith, Marilou Awiakta, George Ella Lyon, and Barbara Kingsolver, to name a few—have turned to literature and education as outlets of expression and activism, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the sense that they are insisting that their voices be heard despite the patriarchal society that systematically attempts to silence them.

One of the most profound ways Appalachian women negotiate power within the patriarchy is through their drive to maintain some semblance of normalcy despite overwhelming adversity. As Virginia Rinaldo Seitz asserts, "working-class women actively negotiate between dominant and oppositional ideologies," which she likens to the ways in which black women negotiate systematic racism (41). The family unit is the forefront of the battleground in the Appalachian patriarchy. As Seitz notes, "Women learn how to be subordinate within the nuclear

family and can experience profound isolation, degradation, abuse, and exploitation based on their position within patriarchal capitalism" (41-42). Several women in her study of rural Southwest Virginia found that they were financially or emotionally dependent upon their husbands or families and were often the victims of verbal and physical abuse. Further, she notes that these "women were beaten by their husbands because their husbands had ideological and often institutional license to do so" (60). This notion stems directly from issues of social capital. Here, we see women who are dependent upon their husbands who serve as their dominants. However, despite the verbal and physical abuse that these women face, many of them opt to keep their families intact as a means of ensuring financial stability and in hopes to provide more structurally sound living conditions for their children. As Seitz observes "Mothering, then, is a strategy to conserve a heritage and survive oppression" (41). By preserving their marriages, the Appalachian women were able to maintain their positions within their family units, their social capital, which often include the security of extended family members as well as nuclear.

My own mother, or *Mama* as I affectionately call her, is this sort of strong, defiant female force throughout my manuscript. My essay "Father's Fence" details our experiences navigating my father's complex emotions, habits, and reactions. Yet despite his displaced anger and sometimes lack of regard for our feelings, my mother maintained her relationship with him, in part, due to the sense of duty that she felt as a mother. Through imitation I gained the strength that she demonstrated when dealing with my father as a sort of defense mechanism. Of this, Seitz would assert that:

> Claiming your mother as a powerful figure is also a way to construct the role of 'combative motherhood' as a model for women's struggles. Those women who recognize the accomplishments of their mothers in combatting the limitations of their poverty and subordination, their efforts to create something strong and beautiful within the bleak material reality of their lives, were also claiming that possibility for themselves. (131)

"Combative motherhood" allows women to maintain some sense of power in a society where they are, in effect, completely powerless. This concept gives them the license to remain in the situations that disempower them while simultaneously giving them control over how their children are raised. Generally, the combative mother will choose to remain in a relationship where she is not appreciated or where she may suffer abuse so that her family has the resources necessary for survival. While there are abuse shelters, social resources, and government programs in place to offer alternative options to abused wives and children, my mother opted for the financial security of her existing marriage over the uncertainty of raising a family alone. By emulating my mother's strength as a "combative mother," I learned how to cope with the overbearing patriarchal figure of my father as well as my Papaw's siblings. The skill to tolerate injustice is quite important to Appalachian women because many women rely on their relatives to increase their social capital and allow them to move through the patriarchy.

Appalachians are connected to family and place, traits that can be traced back to our Native American and European settler roots. Because of the confining hills and deep valleys, many Appalachian families have claimed residency in some way to this land for generations spanning hundreds of years. With this connection to our environment also comes a connection to the *homeplace* or the ancestral home. Observing traditional gender roles, Appalachian women were often the keepers of the homeplace while their blue-collar, working-class husbands worked the land either through farming or the extraction industry. Thus, the homeplace became an integral part of the Appalachian woman's life. In Lanier's anthology, Don Johnson describes the homeplace as "the oneiric house… [which] often carries with it a sense of deep loss and dislocation" (41). Further, he contends that "the effect of its abandonment is especially profound,

having both personal and societal implications" (Lanier 40). The societal implications suggested by Don Johnson can include abandonment of the culture and the family.

Further, young Appalachians who decide to relocate are considered to be denouncing their heritage, and thusly, are ungrateful for the sacrifice and struggles their families have made. Inhabiting ancestral lands and the homeplace is therefore not only encouraged by the family but expected by the community, and in many ways, linked to the emotional development of a young Appalachian. Because family ties are so important to the people of Appalachia, the history of their families must also be significant. Therefore, "the house is not a structure from memory inhabited by spirits from the past. Instead, it becomes a metaphor for the life that seeks to incorporate those memories" (Lanier 43-44). In other words, the homeplace can become a catalyst for learning not only about oneself but also one's ancestors and cultural history.

The homeplace is a concept that has been extremely important to my life as an Appalachian, and therefore, it has taken center stage in my essay "3407 (1/2) Spring Street." In the years following my Papaw's demise I began rebuilding my life and searching for a place to heal. As noted, Appalachian scholar and poet Marilu Awiakta said, "One way to heal the deep slashes that sever us from relationship and hope is to go back to our homeground—our primal space—and find within it the deepest human root" (Lanier 195). The location that afforded me this opportunity was my mother's matriarchal homeplace where both her mother and grandmother were raised. This reflective essay provides the readers with introductions to many key characters in the manuscript, while demonstrating the culturally ingrained importance of the ancestral home through my act of restoring the homeplace and attempting to understand its previous inhabitants. James Byer notes that this sort of self-reflection is not unusual of Appalachian women because "the enclosed space home . . . binds the present generation with the

generations gone, which nourishes and protects the imagination" (Lanier166). However, he further contends that it "demands of the woman sacrifice upon sacrifice [and] entraps as it nurtures" (Lanier 166). My time in the homeplace has afforded me the opportunity to heal and become aware of my women ancestors who made continual sacrifices in their daily lives so that I, and other generations, might have the opportunity to live comfortably long after they have left this world.

One facet of the Appalachian condition is an overwhelming presence of family ties. In my region, it is better to be inside of the family than outside of the family. As the collective narrative of my manuscript unfolds, the reader is introduced to my Papaw and learns that his siblings played a rather tense role in his life and ultimate death. Despite their roles in his death, my mother and I were expected to keep positive ties with the family. Seitz asserts, when talking of the informants in her study—whose situations were not dissimilar to mine and my mother's—that "for the women as well as the children, these were especially severe instances of emotional abuse because women in this study were socialized to avoid at all costs being cut off from family and its extension in kinship" (65). For Appalachian women, remaining within the support group of the family can offer a great amount of security despite any abuses they may face; while being excommunicated from the family—either through divorce or the like—can cause a threat to one's social capital while freeing them from the abuses they may have endured as a part of the family. In a sense, this paradox seems to cancel itself out in that while they face abuse, they still have a level of support, versus not being abused and having no support at all.

The reader of my manuscript soon sees the consequences of going against the family when my mother and I stand up to my Papaw's siblings about their roles in his life. This act of defiance goes against the concept of the Appalachian clan. In my region it is known that families

stick together regardless of what may happen. As Seitz noted in her study, one of her informants said, “I think Appalachian people are real clannish about families . . . It doesn’t matter what your brother or sister does, what matters is that they’re your brother or sister” (129). This quote gets at the heart of the clan mentality in Appalachia, which was brought to mainstream attention by the recent spate of literature and television programing about the infamous Hatfield and McCoy clans. This notion is further demonstrated in the character development of my Papaw’s siblings in that throughout my manuscript they consistently uphold or ignore the egregious acts committed by other family members.

The role that the family plays in the lives of Appalachian women can be both a hindrance and an empowerment. One of the biggest challenges that women in Appalachia face is a lack of voice and power, sometimes associated with the influence of their families. This lack of voice affects their social capital, their upward mobility, their ability to leave toxic situations, the opportunities that they are afforded, as well as their receptiveness to learning. However, I assert that Appalachian women can learn to break this silence through the influence of education and writing as I have done in the creative nonfiction essays that follow this introduction.

In their study, authors Mary Belenky, Blyth Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule, track the development of women as they search to find empowerment through their voices. The study, published in the classic text *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, classifies women learners in five categories: Silent Women, Received Knowers, Subjective Knowers, Procedural Knowers, and Constructed Knowers. Using my manuscript, I contend that an Appalachian woman can begin the process as a silent woman and transition into a constructed knower through higher education.

Silent women are characterized as "passive, reactive, and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering" (Belenky et al. 27). I assert that the silent woman is the first developmental phase of the Appalachian woman. She looks to authority for answers, she mimics what she sees, and is unable to speak her mind because she is unsure if what she has to say is relevant or if it will be well received. Further, "The women see blind obedience to authorities as being of utmost importance for keeping out of trouble and ensuring their own survival, because trying to know 'why' is not thought to be either particularly possible or important" (Belenky et al. 28). For Appalachian women those authorities are their elder family members and the men in their lives. In my essays "Sticky Fingers" and "Small Town Politics" I allude to my own time as a silent woman in reference to my Papaw's siblings and my cousins. I was unable to speak my will when communicating with them because I was afraid of judgment and not being accepted, or worse, being excommunicated from the family. Noted scholars Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann and Thomas Petersen classify this fear as the "spiral of silence" in which "people who believe that they hold a minority opinion tend to fall silent and conceal their views in public" (339). In "Sticky Fingers" my inability to point out the unfairness of my cousins enabled them to continue their mistreatment of me. On the flip side, when I broke the spiral of silence and spoke truth to my great-aunt's power in "Small Town Politics," I gained my voice and therefore power over the situation. Because I spoke up against her, my Papaw, the peer group present, I was also able to speak out against the way she was treating me, thus breaking the spiral of silence.

The received knower is quite similar to the silent woman in that she is concerned with her peer group's perspective. Received knowers "relish [in] having so much in common [with their peer group] and [they] are unaware of their tendency to shape their perceptions and thoughts to

match others" (Belenky et al. 38). In effect, they receive their perceptions from those whom they are around. Another aspect of the received knower is that everything operates on a binary—if it is bad, it cannot be good at all, if it is wrong, it can never be right. Further, Belenky et al. asserts that "if one can see the self only as mirrored in the eyes of others, the urgency is great to live up to others' expectations, in the hope of preventing others from forming a dim view. Thus, women of received knowledge listen carefully and try hard to live up to the images that others have held up to them" (48-49). The received knower bases her entire self-worth on the opinions of her peer group. Frequently, they are either cut off from education or have limited experience with education.

Many women within the Appalachian region could be classified as received knowers because in many parts there is a lack of access to and importance placed on education. According to Katie Hendrickson, author of "Student Resistance to Schooling: Disconnection with Education in Rural Appalachia," "many families in rural areas have not seen economic advancement as a result of schooling, so school is frequently not seen as a way to escape poverty or provide upward mobility" (3). Because there is a general lack of employment opportunities requiring higher education in the region, many families do not stress importance on education. Further, Hendrickson contends that "schools frequently portray a message of worldliness and broadening horizons, which tends to be inconsistent with place-based local values and local knowledge" (3). In this social climate, education can be viewed as a luxury and those who pursue it are sometimes met with skepticism and suspicion by their families and the ever prominent perspective that the student is *trying to live beyond their raising*. This is a very common perspective in rural parts of Appalachia where the extraction industry and other blue-collar jobs are the only available sources of employment.

While not explicitly stated in my manuscript, it is important to note that there is an undercurrent of skepticism about the education presented in my work. Only one of my Papaw's sisters pursued higher education, largely due to the fact that they were a lower middle class family and the women were expected to get married and raise children rather than pursue professional degrees. In my essay "Small Town Politics" my Papaw's skepticism of education is demonstrated in his inquiry of me as to why I would want to move away from home for school: "'Louisville? Ah, Noble, why would ya want to go all the way out there. There's crime in that city,' he replied with a brazen tone. I felt instantly defeated and couldn't fathom why he would want me to stay in a town where I had so few opportunities" (66). Even in that moment, not quite out of high school, I felt the pressures of my middle-class upbringing and my Papaw's skepticism of what I felt I wanted to do with my future. Earlier, in my essay "Meat," I describe a scene in which one of my Papaw's sisters uses her granddaughter's social anxiety in public school to coerce money out of my Papaw for private schooling. While he was willing to pay her tuition at private school, he was unwilling to do so for me, nor would he help me purchase my books once I began attending college, the same treatment he gave my mother when she was struggling through graduate school. Finally, in "Meat," I describe the way in which my mother took care of her grandfather at the expense of her teaching job at a university. I write, "She did it because it was the right thing to do. She did it because in Appalachia you take your part and help your family" (36). Both my and my mother's care of our respective grandfathers and the personal growth that we gained from these experiences could be classified as part of the received knowing process by Belenky et al. This is evident when the authors hypothesize that "For the received knowers, being thrust into roles of responsibility for others helps erode the belief that they are

dependent on ‘them’ for ‘truth.’ For these women it is the act of giving rather than receiving that leads them to a greater sense of their capacity for knowing and loving” (47).

In a sense, I came into my own after my Papaw’s fall and his death. In caring for him, I learned how to care for myself. This experience is quite common for Appalachian women who generally become the care givers of the family, whether they are caring for siblings or caring for their elders. However, what allowed me to transition into the next phase of women’s development, as defined by *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, was my mother’s influence as both an educator, who pushed me to pursue higher education, and as a “combative mother” who fought the adversity that we faced together.

It wasn’t until after my Papaw’s death that I evolved into a subjective knower. According to Belenky et al., the subjective knowers in their study often did not come from supportive, stable, and achievement-oriented families but grew up in families that were either less advantaged, more permissive, or frankly more chaotic than average” (56). This trend is not only represented in my own life through the character of my father but it can also be seen in the lives of many other Appalachian women who grow up in families where there is no importance placed on education, or situations in which they are the victims of domestic abuse. Belenky et al. observe that many women in their study were only able leave their toxic living environments after some sort of “crisis of trust in male authority… [and learning through education]… that they, too, could know something for sure” (58). Essentially, the realization that these women had agency over their own thoughts and education is what drove them to seek our better lives for themselves. While there were a few moments where my trust in male authority had been broken before, the most notable was my experience navigating my Papaw’s irrational drug induced

mood swings brought on by his addiction. I know that it was in this moment that I became a procedural knower shortly before I transitioned into a constructed knower.

Belenky et al. define a procedural knower as one who "is 'objective' in the sense of being oriented away from the self—the knower—and toward the object the knower seeks to analyze or understand" (123). The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* observed that most of the women in their study who were procedural knowers were often college graduates, which might account for why they are able to analyze others better than the previous types of knowers (103). Further, they observed that many of the procedural knowers "learn[ed] through explicit formal instruction how to adopt a different lens… to get out from behind their own eyes [and look through] the lens of another person" (Belenky et al. 115). As a writer, I am not sure that I can truly be oriented away from myself (writing is such a vain endeavor); however through higher education and several creative writing workshops, I have learned how to view the world from other perspectives. In my essay "The Art of Dying" I practice reverie and assume the perspectives of several other individuals. In doing so, this allowed me to step outside of my own subject position and attempt to learn how these other individuals were affected by their respective circumstances. It was through this act of reverie that I found empathy for the drug addicted woman in "The Art of Dying," despite how my Papaw's addiction made me feel so involved yet alienated from drug users.

The final phase of women's development identified in *Women's Ways of Knowing* is "*constructed knowledge*— [which] began as an effort to reclaim the self by attempting to *integrate* knowledge that they felt intuitively was personally important with knowledge they had learned from others" (134). The entire process of the manuscript that follows has been an act of self-reclamation because it has required me to find my voice despite experiences that

disempowered me. It has required me to meld my intuitive knowledge and the learned knowledge that I acquired in college. Because of my creative writing workshop courses I was learning the skills that I needed to apply narrative to my personal experiences. In doing so, I developed a level of self-awareness that I did not have previously. This process is vital to the constructed knowledge phase of development; of this Belenky et al asserts that:

> Becoming and staying aware of the workings of their minds are vital to constructivist women's sense of well-being. Self-awareness aids them in setting the ground rules for their interactions with others and in self-definition. Constructivists seek to stretch the outer boundaries of their consciousness—by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them, by imagining themselves inside the new poem or person or idea that they want to come to know and understand. (141)

For the constructivist woman, self-definition and awareness is at the crux of her quest for knowledge. The learning process, then, becomes a means for understanding herself.

There was so much that I had hoped to understand at the beginning of my writing process. I had a deep desire to understand my Papaw's addiction and who he was before. I craved understanding why his siblings were driven by greed to separate us from him, and I am still searching for that answer. Moreover, I wanted to know who I was without Papaw and his siblings. Higher education and writing courses gave me that outlet to construct my own identity and find my own voice amongst the wreckage that was my falling-out with the Appalachian clan. I was, by choice and necessity, cut off from the very people that I wanted to understand, but in resigning myself to this fact, I was able to move forward and open myself up to learning about who I am without them.

My experience writing as an Appalachian woman has been quite similar to what Parks Lanier Jr. describes when he identifies the "tension and ambivalence between ways of perceiving

the home—as nest and as cage" (7). I look at how my experiences in this region have both defined my character and, in some ways, hindered it. I recognize my place within the Appalachian patriarchy, and though I push back against it with my writing and the manner in which I live my daily life, I am reminded of it when I go to look for a job. I am further reminded when I see young women driven to the marriage altar as their only means of financial stability, or when they discover that their new husbands drink just a little too much and like to take their anger out on their new wives; even still, when these women remain in emotionally toxic relationships with their husbands or their family as a means to ensure the financial stability of their children. While I am grateful for my home and the brilliant, rich culture afforded to me by my geographic location, I have experienced many limiting viewpoints and societal expectations that I have attempted to push back against in the following manuscript. However, no matter how limited I may ever feel, I have felt just as nurtured, if not more so, by the rich history and deep roots that my family claims in this region. And without education, a space to speak my truth, and the influence of my own "combative mother," I would be completely unable to explore that tension in the following text.

FATHER'S FENCE

Every day the sun rises behind the holler and over the ancient, wrecked barn, where, nearby, my father stirs in a tiny white farm house down a muddy path. There are piles of discarded, unused pieces of metal from a swing set or an out-building, layers of license plates and old fishing rods, rusted cans of paint, and antique tin buckets boasting holes like colanders. They tower in jagged heaps around the yard, waiting for toes or the sleeves of shirts to slice clean through. After my father sunk three grand into a used F150 and couldn't get it to run, it became one with his piles; an ever expanding dumpster on flat tires.

He is a Northeastern Kentucky collector. The piles grow and multiply in size each time he brings something new home—a deli style meat cutter, bagged in plastic and left to rust on the Amish made rocker or the John Deere tractor, money still owed, with leaves composting on the yellow seat. I run my fingers across the spindly stalk of a maple tree that cuts its way through the fifty thousand dollar terrarium before plucking it out, letting it spiral to the ground. Mama and I hum the theme to "Sanford and Son" when he is not around. Somehow that makes us feel better.

Once, when my father was away on a "golf trip," Mama urged me to call up some football boys and have them remove one or two of my father's piles. Their pickup trucks held tight in the muddy earth, *awh she-it* one of them hollered over Nickleback on the radio. Tires spinning and snuff juice spitting, they hauled the refuse of my father's collective depression down the holler. Maybe if we just took the piles away he'd stop screaming. Maybe if we just took the piles away we'd have a family again. Maybe if we just took the piles away this farm would stop failing. The ground underneath was woven with pale, waxy strands of grass and beetle tracks, rust from a paint can flaked like red rain in my hands.

When my father returned he was angry, perhaps even disappointed. That building was a *gift* from his dad and he was *going to put it together one day*, but the windows were broken from goat stamps and the washers and screws had been lost three years before.

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Before the dew has hazed pale from the morning earth, my father fills a grocery bag with two pairs of extra socks and heaves himself down concrete stairs for another 12 hour work day. This is every day. When I was sixteen I would hear them fighting, the dishwasher door slam, a few clicks of a lighter, inaudible yet booming voices, the truck door clank, the gravel spray. I hated the mornings when Mama and I had to get ready together. I skirted around the tiny bathroom with its rag rugs and cracked tile floor. I listened to her breath quicken as I grabbed my toothbrush and a rag. I timed my entrance based on the hiss of hairspray cans. The mornings when they fought were worse and she didn't smoke cigarettes anymore, which seemed to calm her nerves. So I took up smoking as I tiptoed past trees that I still have no names for and down to the bus.

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When I was little, my father used to make me biscuits and gravy every weekend—a recipe passed down from his grandmother. He'd brew a pot of coffee, fry a pound of bacon, render the fat and pour it in jelly jars. One morning, when my bedroom was still princess pink, he brought a piece of bacon in and held it above my nose until I woke up. That night I laid my head in his lap as we watched cartoons. When my walls were painted lavender he used a five pound package of bacon to smack me across the mouth. That night I locked myself in and pretended to snort Percocet. When our kitchen was painted green he pushed me through the window. He hit me and I hit the road. When my kitchen was painted yellow in January 2015 I

left home with boxes and crates and the hard realization that there are some things that can't be mended.

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One night before I left home I waited until dinner plates pushed swirls of steam into the current of the ceiling fan and condensation edged its way down my father's frosted glass mug. He had been working his usual eighty hour work weeks, but was almost on vacation. I knew I could get him to plan just one day outside with me, to point out the trees on our little thirty acre farm like he used to do when I was young. *That one is a sugar gum, and that's a pawpaw. Over there is a black oak, see the shape of the leaves? All oak leaves kind of look like that, but there are variations.* I looked up from my plate, hoping to distract him from the commercials blasting through what would be silence.

Hey Daddy-o, what do you say about you and me taking a walk around the farm this weekend? I'd sure like to know what trees we have around here and I've forgotten all of them.

He shoveled more food into his mouth and told me that I knew them; that I had had conservation camp just like him, and that's where he learned them so I knew them too. Then he turned up the television and I went outside for a cigarette.

Three days later he took the day off and spent it with his friend Rob mending fences for Rob's girlfriend. He walked back in our front door mimicking the same light that I had given him days prior when I tried to persuade him to spend time with me. Hopefulness. Instead, I received the sour pungency of Budweiser from his heavy breath. The gift he has always given me—disassociated drunkenness. He looked happy, maybe even relaxed. *Hey Daddy-o,* I looked up from my book to see him lay his plastic cooler down and kick off his shoes. I seized the rare opportunity to connect with him, *how was your day?*

Pretty durn good, me and Rob fixed the fence for Patty and then we walked all around her place drinking beer and I pointed out all the trees for him. Good day. I nodded, put my book down, and excused myself outside for another cigarette in time to hear him belch-speak *Barrrrrrt Simpon*. On the porch, I kicked at a flowerpot, then sunk down on the splintered steps with my knees to my chest.

The next day, while my father was at work, Mama asked me what was wrong. She held me close to her warm chest when I asked her if she noticed that my father took his friend on the walk that I wanted to go on. I imagined myself crying, but couldn't. *You know how he is, always bumbling around. It's okay, baby, we can do it together*. We call him *Bumble* to forget that he is inconsiderate. Sometime later, I'll buy a small Kentucky tree guide at a thrift store. I'll never use it.

Where my father is concerned I have issues with mending fences. Our fences have been weak since I was a sophomore in high school. The principal would call me in from class once a month or so. Old party buddies with my father, she was sympathetic to our situation. She'd send the animal control man away and have me call Mama at work to beg her to put the goats up. Once the principal let me hop in the passenger seat of her Chevy truck. We cruised the curvy mile down the road to my family's farm. I stuck my head out the window when we got close and called the goats back up into the holler. They had been grazing on the fire department lawn again. Their plump, fuzzy bodies trotted in single file lines up the tire tracks and past the glistening junk piles. Their humming bleats bounced back toward me as I envisioned them welded in place with the rusted buckets and license plates. *You'd better have your dad fix that*

fence, it's illegal for me to take you out of school for this, you know. I knew and embarrassment stung my cheeks, *thank you*.

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When I was 20, I met a boy who would help me mend those fences and keep the goats from running down the road. I would call him crying and ask him to come over and help me fix them once and for all, and he would. We walked the trails that I had hoped to walk with my father, pulling rebar from the cold, tight earth. We'd collect sticks and rocks and old sheets of metal from my father's junk piles. We'd carry it up on the hill and find the fallen fence. He'd hand me our foraged materials and I'd weave them through creating tiny, makeshift barricades, busting knuckles and breaking nails. Each mending of the fence felt as though I was taking it back; taking back the farm, taking my independence. After a few weeks, my father even gave me a claw-like fencing tool, though I didn't have the materials to use it. Some of our patches didn't hold and the goats would push right back through. Some days this would make me cry and the boy would wrap his arms around me. Sometimes he would stand next to me when I told my father that the fence was down again, when I would ask him if he could help me this time; when I told him I couldn't do it alone. But the boy would waver when my father's voice boomed and soon he would refuse to come back over when my father was around. The boy wasn't *raised that way*.

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My father is not a man who I can turn to for help, though he undoubtedly works hard—he saves his best self for strangers and animals; he goes to every funeral of every person he marginally knows, he cries when he sees dead animals, he cries harder for dead people. But for as long as I can remember, his help has come laced with rage; an intricate tatting of the slam of

his fists and his screams. It was like this when I discovered my tire was flat. When I told him, he threw his fists down and sighed “goddamn it,” his eyes accusing. Even my father’s sighs sound like screams. Each turn of the tire iron brought a grunt from his mustached mouth louder than the next. His anger was tangible in the thick summer air. His face glowed red in the evening light, not from burn, but from belligerence. As curses floated up from him and to the sky I felt myself sinking into my own ribcage. I flitted about his feet, handing him tools, flinching at his interjections. Mama and I make up songs about his outbursts when he isn’t around. Our most recent is to the tune of “Dancing Queen.” It starts “he is the drama king, bald and mean, oh watch him scream.” Sometimes I think this must be what we do to cope with his constant abuse. Yesterday Mama asked me if I thought that we had PTSD. I’m not sure. *Probably*.

The first time I remember my father’s rage, I was six. I’m not sure what facilitated the fight. I have no memory of how it started; one moment I was surrounded by my stuffed animals, sucking on my pointer finger, and the next I heard their fight move to the porch and Mama’s screams from the front yard. Her screams were different than they had been before. This time she wasn’t calling him a *stupid son of bitch* and telling him *to get the fuck out.*

Lauren, call the police, please baby, please! Dial 9-1-1 like they taught you in school. Do it! Her voice cracked as my father mocked her and his defensive lineman frame ambled toward her again.

So I did, I called 9-1-1 just like I had learned to do in first grade. I told the operator my name, I told her that daddy was hitting mommy in the front yard, I told her that I was scared, I told her our address. She told me that it would be okay and to tell my mommy that help was on

the way. Before the police rolled up our holler, he was gone. I sucked my pointer finger until I fell asleep that night and for thirteen years after.

In October of 2013 I felt like I had lost a lot. My goldfish died of a toxic white rot. My relationship died on the hill above the barn. I sat cross-legged on a picnic table thinking about my infidelity, as the boy that I once loved pleaded for me to stay, then called me a bitch and ran away. I eyed his fuzzy brown hair stumbling down the hillside that we had spent so many days carrying found objects up to mend the fences. My red tailed hawk, the one that I whistled to, circled above my head in the autumnal air then swooped twenty yards away and sunk its talons into the back of a baby goat. The bleats pierced the air and the hawk released, retreating to a tree as the herd descended around me. He didn't look back. I didn't follow him. One week later, driving country roads through Harlan County my father called me up. They were all dead, 40 goats lying in the pasture, throats ripped plumb out. Our makeshift mending of the fence had failed had been compromised by untamed animals that shredded the necks of my herd. *Coy-dogs?* I asked my father under the cover of darkness and Jim Beam one evening before they died. We'd heard them cackle in the woods surrounding our farm. We heard them getting closer.

They're a cross between feral dogs and coyotes, he said taking another swig, *we had a run in with them when you were a little girl. Do you remember that? They took out our whole herd when you were about three. That was the night that your mama had to cut a baby out of the mama-goat's belly*. I nodded, shifted my weight onto my other foot and grabbed the bottle.

While I was still in Harlan, my father started the tractor that he bought to bury our llamas years before and dug a cavern in the hillside for the bloody bodies. They were all gone by the time I made it home, all except for Clyde, the billy goat I had bottle fed and watched grow into a

stud. His black beard glistened umber, his smooth mouth and tongue nibbled cracked corn from my palms every day at 3. A week after I came home I willed myself to walk the tire tracks past the fallen fence, past the feed building, past the cistern. Thirty feet from the barn, wisps of decaying flesh wafted into my nose, and there he was, my Clyda-goat in a palsied heap with gnaw marks on his chest, his horns still thick and proud. And I left him there.

That December I left home—or rather, I mentally left home and began fixing up the old Lauhon family homeplace ten miles down the road. The tiny three room house had been in my family since 1907 and sat mostly empty for a half decade after my great uncle Henry died and his wife, Mary, used it as the vessel of her unraveling. Her mind consumed with grief, she abandoned her own house a few blocks away. She began food wasting, making giant meals and taking a bit of each plate. She let her seven year old granddaughter paint her name with nail polish on the walls, “Aries” in foot tall pink lacquered letters. Mary threw out all of our old family photos, deciding that without Henry she had no past, she had no future. I’ve always heard that the Lauhon homeplace was where Henry went to escape Mary after his mother, Little Granny, died. So Mary assumed it after his death to get closer to the man who she loved with fierce dedication, the only man she cared for more than her Lord and Savior.

Before I took over our homeplace, the ceilings were stained a sick yellow with carbon monoxide and mouse shit clung to the crevices of the aged hardwood floors. It took two lice infestations that Aries carried to elementary school before my methadone addicted cousin, Stacie, received power of attorney over Mary. Think thousands of lice crawling through fluffy gray hair. Think larva in the carpets. Think bloody, itchy scalps and Exodus 8:16. Stacie sold the house to my grandmother right out from underneath Mary. We let the greasy film of bug bombs

permeate and bleach cleansed the plague from the homeplace. For a moment I hesitated taking over the house, feeling guilty for the way that Mary had been displaced, feeling guilty for her grief, feeling guilty that I would be afforded an opportunity where she had not been—feeling I had to earn it, unsure if I deserved it.

With paint, and spackling, with caulk, and trim I spent my evenings—again—busting knuckles on hole filled walls, and my nights back home in the little white farm house escaping screams through headphones and cigarettes on the porch. For a time I flirted with the man who installed my stove. He would do odd jobs for me in exchange for beer and company. He didn't scream when he installed the sink. He didn't thrash when he changed the gas line to my heater. He brought his kids over to play football in my yard. I bought them tiny green shaker eggs and gave them instruments to play while they drank juice boxes on the porch. After a month he asked me if he could move in with me. I paused for a moment and then laughed, crushing a can and tossing it across the room into the trash. I didn't see him after that and my hot water heater remained broken. I called my father every other week to ask him if he would help me fix it. I think that he must have wanted to, because eventually he did, but I heated my bath water in a tea kettle on the stove for five months while I waited.

I'm not sure when we began to make a joke of his rage. All I can remember is how badly it terrified me as a child, and then suddenly we began to mock it. To this day, I am the only person with the power to shut him down when he rages. I think this must be because perhaps he sees the disappointment and betrayal in my eyes every time I have to put my body between his and Mama's, every time I have to ready myself to take a missed swing. Or maybe I remind him of himself in the way that I am not afraid to be hit by any man. I wonder if he sees a fight in my

eyes that mimics his glory days when he laced up his gloves and hurled his body at his opponents. I wonder when he started to see us as his opponents. I don't know what goes on inside his head, but I know for certain that he feels that we are closer than we are, and I wish that we were. I know that most of his anger stems from being overworked at his proletariat prison, being raised to fight in rings, and being taught by his community that men don't talk about their problems. Despite his rage, I know that I can come to my father for a level of support, as long as it is immediate. Talking with him about what I hope to accomplish, my dreams, goals, is always an option, but I've learned not to ask him to use his hands to help me. I've learned not to expect him to desire to pass down knowledge to me. Despite his rage, I know that my father loves me the best way that he can. I can see this more clearly now that I am no longer in his house. I can see this in the way that he messages me when he reads a troubling horoscope. I can see this in the way that he always has a twenty waiting on me when I walk through the door. I can see this in the way he always reminds to wear my seatbelt as I walk out the door. Somehow, I have learned to appreciate the nuances of his love.

The homeplace is quiet now. When someone stirs in the morning, it is me. When someone pours hot water over coffee grounds, it is with my hands. My father never showed me how to identify the trees and he never taught me how to mend our fences. But that's okay—I'll find another way.

3407 (½) SPRING STREET

Last week I got a letter in the mail from the Post Master, addressed to *Current Resident,* informing me that I have been using the wrong address for several weeks. There have been many discrepancies about my actual address. Prior to 2001, when Little Granny, my great-great grandmother, was alive the three-bedroom, shotgun style house claimed the address 3407 ½ Spring Street. Ten years after her death, when my grandmother, Granna, bought the house, we found that the ½ had been dropped, though no reason was given. Little Granny's name was Edith and upon her death the township named the alley after her. I am now *Current Resident* o*f 340 Edith Alley.*

I am unsure why this bothers me. Maybe it is because it is missing the seven, maybe it is because I like the way *Spring Street* sounds or looks on the page—or that all of my bills and online purchases are sent to 3407 Spring Street which no longer exists. Maybe even still it is because I keep everything so ordered here and a change of address is something that I cannot control in my meticulous environment, or that I was technically the only resident affected by this change because I live in the only house that sits on the alley. I must admit, though, I rather like making my rounds through the neighborhood and being greeted by my Little Granny's name every time I am close to home. Although the new address comes with minor inconveniences, it's rather nice knowing that I am the only resident of Edith Alley.

Originally, the late 1800s home measured well under 500 square feet total, with one room upstairs for sleeping, two downstairs for living, cooking, eating and playing. The outhouse around back was replaced by an addition in the fifties that now houses a tub, a sink, and a toilet. Before the addition Little Granny would *warsh*, as she called it, her hair in the kitchen sink. "To

warsh" means "to wash" in one of the many Appalachian dialects. Our language can, and often does, shift from town to town and it is a magnificent thing. Little Granny had a beautifully rich voice that would pipe colloquialisms all day over black coffee. It mystified me to hear her and Mama talking about the *old days* when she was young and had coal black hair down to her waist. Little Granny saw so many changes in her lifetime. I only wish that I had been old enough to appreciate her stories before she passed.

I am lucky to have some memories of Little Granny that enhance my experience in her home. Though most of my memories of that time seem laced with sepia tones, I want to attribute that to the fact that everything was the neutral shade of wood paneling before I moved in. She had several, weighted, plush geese that sat in a row the back of her couch, a large floor television with three channels, and a black rotary telephone that rang like a phone booth. Everyday her house smelled of coffee and fried eggs. She warshed out the Styrofoam cups from her McDonalds brew and placed them on the counter for her next cup of coffee. Then she folded up the plastic bags from her morning trip to the store and tucked them safely inside the old white Sellers cabinet. One morning I came into her house, a mess of tears and pink stained cheeks. My teddy bear Possum had gotten his paw ripped off and I just couldn't bear to part with him because his body was molded to the shape of my neck and I loved him so. Granny hushed and calmed me down and took the limp stuffed animal from my arm. Even still, I can almost hear her say *hush now* in a sweet Northeastern Kentucky draw, her voice like honey. She sat Possum on the kitchen table and brushed a bit of lint off of his blue sweater. She pulled out her butter biscuit tin and inside retrieved a single needle and a long strand of white dental floss. Her tiny, ancient hands worked quickly once Mama threaded the needle for her and in a matter of moments,

Possum was healed. I grabbed him from her and placed him right back in the space between my neck and shoulder, then latched onto her small waist.

I remember how large the earthworms in Little Granny's yard were when I was a child—they looked like long, squirming fingers as they glistened and writhed in black dirt. Mama always told me that it was because Little Granny threw out her coffee grounds in the grass, that those grounds alone grew those worms so big—but these days I wonder if it was because of poverty and meager means, like newspaper comics as insulation on particle board walls, wine corks stuck in the floor to patch holes, or the outhouse that I've never seen.

Though I have never experienced true poverty, the voice of my Little Granny comes to me when I finish a tin of coffee or a jar of pickles. *You should save that, you might need that.* I have boxes, jars, and bags for everything in my home. After each use of a creature-comfort—a pot or pan, a pillow or pair of shoes—I wash it off (if needed) and place it exactly back in its place. I know where everything is and have moved it there down to the precise angle. I have always been like this with my space. I have several things on shelves, in drawers and cabinets, all of which I can call my own. I am without roommates—their messes, noises, and company. Everything here is of my own doing—the paint on the walls, the trim, the table, the desk, the garden, the fresh cut flowers, a dozen coffee cups, the kettle, the cigarette butts—all mine.

I've needed this for quite some time.

My ancestral home heals me and gives me the space that I've needed to grow from young woman to adult. Here I am surrounded by ghosts—Little Granny and her daughter who died before I was born. I feel them often when I come in from working in the yard or feeding the birds that Little Granny so loved. I first met Little Granny's dead daughter when I was a child gazing

at the black and white photo of her on the top level of Little Granny's *playpretty* shelf that held all of her delicate music boxes with caged birds and toys from McDonald's Happy Meals. I remember being delighted when I was allowed to tinker, though she was always quite particular about the toys and even more so about the photographs. In the frame, the shiny finish of the image of daughter was obscured just slightly over the lips, and I was told that the pink smudge was smeared by her own once living fingers. I wonder how alike we could have been when I put on lipstick just to walk to the store for eggs or how like Little Granny I am when I make two trips each day for fresh food or human contact.

Sometimes I wonder if other people attempt to know their long dead relatives. If they weed through black and white family photo albums searching for themselves in the faces of those whom they've never met. I met Little Granny's dead daughter for the second time the December when I began restoring the house—a deal that I had made with my own grandmother, Granna, for free lodging when she took over care of the home where she grew up. Granna is often demure when I probe about her life in Little Granny's house. She had a *happy* childhood despite her tense relationship with her once living mother, Little Granny's dead daughter. Hearing Granna's stories leaves me wanting more. It leaves me wanting to experience Little Granny's dead daughter myself, and I did that in December.

With the floors tarped and my roller slathered in yellow, I scanned my computer for forgotten songs to occupy my mind and stumbled upon Etta James's *Greatest Hits*. As the ascending violins of "At Last" filled the air around me, a comforting chill ran over my entire body and I began to sway to the syncopated beat. I spoke to Little Granny's dead daughter that night. I asked her if she was happy that I was moving in. I felt comforted. I have never asked

Granna or Mama if Little Granny's daughter listened to Etta James, but I know that she did because I felt her there.

I feel my ancestors in every crevice of this house and my interactions within it. There is still no shower in the bathroom, and only hot water comes from the *spicket*, or spigot, that is backed up with years of rust and debris. As I carry pots of cold water from the kitchen sink to the tub, I wonder if I am tracing the ritualistic steps that Little Granny made as she filled an outdoors warshtub for her four little babies. As I hunch over the kitchen sink to wash my long blonde hair, I wonder if this is how she got the hump in her back, twenty years of warshing waist length coal dust hair once a week with Ivory soap. I am fortunate that I can wash mine when I please.

Everything about my life here is fortunate—I answer to and am responsible for only myself within these walls. If there is screaming here (and there is not), it is only because of me. On the two occasions when I have dropped or broken something on the kitchen floor, I did not make a peep; I only sopped it up and moved on. This is something that I did not learn from my parents, this is something that I learned from Little Granny's spirit that resides within this tiny house. There is no television here now, no on-demand, or internet. I have nothing to distract myself but the stove, which is hot every day, the silence of living alone, which soothes my soul, and the peace of cutting zinnias from my garden and arranging them into bouquets in every room. Here my life is ordered, my life is clean. Here I am regaining strength that I never knew I possessed. This ancestral home is the warm steam from a kettle.

It is something that I am not used to. Growing up there were always window-vibrating arguments that echoed through our tiny farm house and then the pill addicted guttural coughs of my Papaw Boats, my mother's father, as I watched him slowly disappear from the man I once

knew. Now, the only thing that rattles are the coffee mugs in the cabinet from the tremors of trains going east down the tracks. Where once my mind was filled with blaring sitcoms and shouts, it now has the freedom to linger over morning coffee and chirping birds, and the only time I seem to get lonely is when I preheat the oven and the sky has grown dark, or when I glance at the fridge to see Papaw Boats' face smiling back at me. Sometimes I think that he is not here among my maternal ancestors, that his spirit resides ten miles away in his own farm house. Though, sometimes, I wonder if he's attached to his old jean jacket that I have covered in pins and wear in autumn when cool winds sting my arms.

I wonder if Little Granny also felt uneasy when the sky grew dark and her husband was gone and her children grown. Growing up, I heard stories about Little Granny's husband. How he kept another family in Marietta, Ohio, on a strawberry farm and sent most of his earnings back there while Little Granny and the children lived like paupers. I heard how he used to *carryon* and holler—Appalachian men always seem to be fussing about something—and how he, for the most part, ignored Little Granny. But she, with her 4'9" frame would just go about her day, quiet and reserved. Even in pictures she looks quiet. I wonder if this temperament with men is a genetically inherited trait—if this can explain every time I've sat quiet, reserved, a mental, self-conscious wreck while the men in my life exerted their will.

That's how it was with my Papaw Boats after his death and the subsequent looting of his possessions by his siblings. I recovered his paint-smothered palette, something they thought too insignificant to maraud—a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that mimics my memories of him. Though as the years have passed since his death, flakes of paint have spiraled to the floor leaving gaps in my memory and changing my perspectives.

There is a place where my memories of Papaw Boats and my new life intersect—stories that I have inherited from my mother about the time when Papaw Boats fought for her. This must have taken place after he knocked out one of Granna's teeth. One tale occurred in the parking lot across from Little Granny's house—what once was a gravel lot and a Victorian home is now a fast food restaurant with all-day traffic and the nauseating scent of grease. Mama retold the story for me: she was five years old and staying with Little Granny in the small house where I now live. Granna and Poppy, her mother and step-father, moved to Minnesota to start a new life away from the "squalor of Kentucky." They left Mama to stay with Little Granny while they moved. I can't remember exactly how it happened, but somehow, maybe she answered the door, and Papaw Boats scooped his child up over his shoulder and ran away with her. She was young and scared. The only thing Mama remembers is how exposed she felt fresh from a bath, wearing only an oversized t-shirt and the kiss of night air.

Little Granny and her once-living daughter told Mama that Papaw Boats would take her away from her family, that he was bad, that he would hurt her. They denied Papaw Boats any right to see Mama, so he hid in bushes like a *jasper*, a stranger, to catch a glimpse of his only child. My mama's matriarchal line, terrified of the man that I loved so, vilified him when my mama was just a child. For decades this would follow Mama and it would manifest in our relationship by her ensuring that I always had both of my parents in the same home. For better or worse, Mama would attempt to keep our little family intact.

That is one of the burdens that this house carries. I shudder when I think of how my Papaw hid out across the alley way, attempting a glimpse of his child. I shudder when I think of how Little Granny and her daughter feared my Papaw because of the violence he inflicted on Granna. I shudder when I think of his beautiful gnarled knuckles meeting Granna's cheek. There

was nothing that she could have done to deserve that. There is no way that he could justify this action. When Papaw would get frustrated with Mama during his addiction, he would call her "Ginger" which is Granna's real name. Looking back, I see now how polarizing this was. I always knew that he intended it to be an insult, but now, knowing how he knocked Granna's front tooth out, I wonder if he called Mama that when he was mad enough to hit her, but wouldn't.

What is most troubling to me about this narrative of my Papaw is the fact that it goes against everything that he has ever shown me. Even in the throes of addiction he was not violent. Growing up, I knew that I could escape to Papaw's house when my father began to rage and stomp. I knew that Papaw's house was a safe space where I could count on the silence only to be broken by the melodic harmonies of his guitar. Papaw would inspire my young mind through art projects and adventures, he would speak to me with kindness and love, and I would grow to revere him as my hero when I couldn't count on my father.

Since moving into Little Granny's I have had an overabundance of time to spend in happy contemplation. I have sought out therapy to ease my mind and I have begun to grow, and with me, so has the house. While this house carries the burden of my Papaw's violence, it also allows for redemption. As I moved in, so did many of my Papaw's belongings—his old guitar, his paint palette, the dining room table where he once played poker and painted, the print that hung in his living room, pots and pans from his kitchen, his old jean jacket. They all have a place here amid the memories of my matriarchal line. After decades of conflict he now coexists with Little Granny's house and her memory and maybe that is enough to redeem their troubled pasts.

STICKY FINGERS

There is an innate human desire to idolize; an instinct within us all to gaze at our own imperfections while ignoring those of another. I am not exempt from this impulse. I find myself putting my Papaw Boats on some sort of pedestal, like he was a golden god with his amber colored arm hair and brilliant crooked smile. One autumn night, caught in the waves of gin and tonic, I sat on my front porch and was delighted by the looks of wonder and respect that appeared on my friend Danny's face as I recounted all of the beautiful things about James M. Helton, about *Boats*, my Papaw. Danny asked, while inquiring about this enigmatic man, "So what should I call him—Papaw Boats?" To which I instantly responded, "No, you can't. You can call him Boats. I was his only grandchild, he was my papaw *only*." Danny listened intently as I described our poker rituals, our Sunday night kitchen table jams, and the way I clung to his hip as though he were the only man who existed.

But the man who instilled in me my love of music and art, my cunning mind for business and cards, and my fierce, yet sometimes wavering, self-respect, was no golden god. He was mortal and flawed. It's hard for me to talk ill of the dead, but is the truth really an ill thing? It was, after all, a part of who he was, and though my memories of him are nearly unflawed, save for the time following his addiction, my grandmother's memories of him consist of nothing but handsome imperfections and brutal violence.

In many ways I feel that I am the product of violence. My grandmother, with her perfectly coifed hair, flawless makeup, and meticulously cared for nails escaped my Papaw's brutal fist but not before he knocked out her incisor. This is a fact that I have heard frequently and still hear today whenever Mama or I elevate Papaw too highly for my grandmother to

stomach. I do not know what events led to the crashing of his fist upon her tan, moisturized face, nor do I know where they might have been when it occurred. However, the thought of a man, who, in my mind, was so gentle and beautiful, inflicting such uncharacteristic rage on a woman who embodies absolute grace and physical perfection, baffles me still.

I say "uncharacteristic rage" because the only time he ever laid a hand on me that wasn't full of tenderness and love, was to correct me from showing disrespect toward him and my mother while they renovated his apartment complex. At the time, I had to have known that the way that I was prancing around impatiently was improper. They had work to do and I should have occupied myself. I remember that the neighbor children with whom I liked to play were out with their father so their mother sent me away. But after noticing my slumped posture she agreed to let me play with their toys in the front yard. I remember feeling lonely, the special kind of lonely that only-children understand—the loneliness of sitting in a sandbox and seeing minivans of siblings dressed in little league gear flash by. It was also the loneliness of being so extroverted that I literally had no idea how to behave when I couldn't talk to someone. This also must have stemmed from how wonderfully overindulgent my mother was when I was young and she would take me with her everywhere she went. The greatest punishment that I received when I was young was being sent outside to play alone. My parents, craving just a moment of afternoon rest before dinner, would send me out the door and lock it behind me. "Child abuse!" I would cry from the porch looking in through the windows before trekking up the pasture to go talk to my goat friends. (The only life left on the farm now is wild coy-dogs and crows, but if I could be that young again with my mind as it is now, amid all that vibrant life, I would go back and wander those hills with my small mosquito bitten limbs and never take it for granted again.)

I remember that Mama and Papaw were laying tile in the front entry way and I remember accidentally pulling off the tail of a sleek blue salamander. I cried as the tail lay limp in my pudgy hand, glistening. I performed my impatient dance just moments before, and seeing that this act of childhood defiance and terror was not fazing them, I began to tiptoe over the freshly laid tile and pace from room to room. I was hot, I was thirsty, I had sand in my socks and it itched my feet. Actually, everything was itchy, and I was starving to death, no, thirsting to death, and I needed to go home right away because *Clarissa Explains it All* was just about to come on and I could not, no could not miss this episode! What if she actually explained it all? What if she finally started dating Sam? What if Ferguson stole her diary again? Wait, where was my diary? My tantrum heaved out of my chest and I wailed louder and louder. Until, mid-wail, Papaw plucked a piece of pine trim from the floor and thwacked me on the back of the legs. I stopped. I looked at him with blinking blue eyes and flopped to the ground in complete shock. The man who carried me on his shoulders over briars and sticker bushes just whapped my on the rump. My perception of safety and comfort was altered. How could he do this? At that point in my life I had already experienced the occasional switch picking and busted bottom. At that point, I may have even called police on my father for the first time. Papaw called him “Screamy, Ragey” behind his back, so it was unfathomable to me that Papaw could cause me any physical pain at all.

At some point during the throes of Papaw’s addiction and after his broken hip, he sent me to his building out back to reorganize or fetch something. In the process, I knocked over a can of white paint, spilling its sticky contents on the concrete floor. Not knowing what else to do, I dipped my fingers in the cool substance and began to smear a heart on the back of the chipped

wooden door, followed by an “L.” As I did this, I hoped that he would make it out to the building again—I could almost picture him walking into the musky concrete structure, noticing the old mildewed basketball that we used to play with in the corner, and then glancing up to see my calling card. He’d know that “L” was from me—and he’d love it. Papa always saved scraps of paper, letters, and receipts to remind him of precious things. This is something I’ve learned from him and now I have my own boxes full of paper and pieces of promises. He never told me if he ever made it out to the building again. At the time, I knew how *sick* he was, and I think that I left the heart and “L” there as much for myself as him.

I think about it often. What it must look like now, darkened from over five years of neglect, or maybe peeling from many seasons of rain, snow, and heat. I wonder who else has seen that heart—his brother? Pilfering through a dead man’s belongings like he pilfered through his money and his mind. I hope that he saw my tag, just as he was leaving, saw the finger prints of innocence and love. I hope that he remembered whom he hurt and for a moment I hope he felt as though he were being watched by the manifestation of me as a small child clinging to the sides of his hand-me-down jeans. I hope that he remembered the little girl who sang to his basset hound Sadie in the summer sunshine and brushed away flies from the tiny spills on the table of her lemonade stand.

My only truly fond memory of Uncle Roonie, back when I claimed him by title as my own, was one summer day when I mixed pitchers of instant lemon drink on the cornflower blue countertop of my Papaw’s kitchen. I will never forget the odd smell of Papaw’s kitchen counter in the summer—stale beans and something sweet. Even now, as I run my fingers across the smooth surface of the counter, it feels a little grimy. Papaw had told me for weeks that he was

going to help me set up a lemonade stand and I was excited to enact something that I had seen on so many television shows. He set up the table for me at the end of his sidewalk steps and carried down the gallon pitchers and cooler of ice. We crafted a sign and waved at people passing by.

When Papaw got me set up and saw that I was comfortable he retreated to the front porch to watch over me as I called to the cars with little chants from my juvenile voice. The lemonade business is tiresome and not quite fruitful, but Papaw wanted to teach me the value of a quarter since I had been raiding his quarter jar to buy after school snacks for the better part of the year. Imagine my delight when a passerby told me to keep the change from his dollar, smiled, and drove away. An hour into my sales, Roonie waltzed across the yard and breezed past me, instructing me to stay put while he retrieved something from the house. Moments later a brown and white mechanical rabbit with a red collar hopped out before him. I squealed with delight and picked it up only to find a crisp twenty dollar bill stuck in between the white and red. In that moment, Uncle Roonie was my hero; I had more than enough money for whatever small Polly Pocket trinket I wanted and I didn't even have to spend the rest of the evening slaving behind the lemonade stand. (Though I did because the capitalist bug had already bitten me and I reveled in the opportunity to talk to new people.)

Later I would learn from my mother, after lamenting the loss of our family, that this money actually came from Papaw and not from Roonie at all, though the rabbit surely did. My first impulse, despite the open wounds left by the untimely and unjust death of Papaw, would be to defend Roonie because I needed to have one purely good memory of him. Bearing both the loss of my Papaw as well as the loss of his siblings and their children was devastating and exhausting and made me feel as though my entire childhood teemed with disillusion.

One summer, perhaps when I was too old to really believe in the make-believe, my Papaw showed up in the driveway with an invisible dog. He called him Fido and Fido also wore a red collar. He tensed his arm and clenched his jaw as though Fido were barking and stretching, trying to break free from his chain leash. I wanted to see Fido from the perspective that Papaw wanted me to, from those young eyes that he saw drifting away from him. However entertaining it may have been, I knew that it was nothing more than a heavy metal chain and collar attached to a thick gauge wire that suspended it in the air. Looking back, I would give anything just to see Papaw and Fido again, but Fido as he wanted me to see him.

That summer Papaw and I perfected our routine by bringing Fido around to all of the neighborhood kids. There was something about the early two-thousands that zapped the imagination from the youth of that time. Maybe it was video games, violent movies, or that fact that a national tragedy burned hot in our minds, but all of the children were reluctant to believe what my Papaw saw—at first. Papaw had this way about him, this pure infectious charisma that radiated from every pore on his smooth, tawny face. “Aw, whaddya mean ya can’t see him? What’s wrong with ya son, ya need glasses?” He’d tug on the metal chain a little tighter. “Whoa Fido, that’s about enough of that.” The little boys would giggle and squint their eyes with one part frustration and one part wonder as I bent down to pet Fido on the head. Papaw could always incite emotion in whomever he met.

I remember when Papaw met my sophomore homecoming date, Ray. Ray was tall, built like a man at age sixteen, and awkward, having spent most of his life in a rural cult known as “the Truth” or the “Two-by-Twoers” because of their door-to-door quest for the salvation of their

community. He was proper, boring, and had never even had a sip of alcohol, but he was smart and did well in school despite being so reserved. Ray's traditional Appalachian patriarchal attitude was something that I was sure Papaw would like.

I sat inside the air conditioned farm house and peeked out the kitchen window toward the barn. Ray stood squinting in the sunlight, though he generally always squinted out of habit and bad vision. He stood with one large hand on his hip, frustration in his shoulders as Papaw's straw cowboy hat and Hane's V-neck ordered him from corner-to-corner of the large field. The Kentucky sun baked them overhead as Ray struggled to keep up the pace of my Papaw's demands. "Go on and move that pile of sticks from behind the barn to brush pile over yonder" Papaw might have said as Ray squinted in the sun, a bead of sweat dripping down his broad nose. "Now when you're done with that I want you to get the tomato stakes out of the shed and bring them down over here. You can get the posthole digger and start on that too."

After a grueling four hours, when Ray struggled to meet Papaw's demands, he was sent home. Papaw declared Ray "lazy" and told me that I shouldn't waste my time. After all these years I suspect that he was so hard on Ray because Mama told Papaw that she wanted us to be boyfriend and girlfriend. I never had a real boyfriend while my Papaw was alive and I wonder how he would have acted if I brought one around. I bet he would have been protective of me and made sure that the man worked hard but was still mild mannered.

I imagine now, that if Papaw could have known, he would have tried to protect me from the Heltons, from Roonie and his son. One of my earliest memories of my cousin Slick was when he came home from college. He had left when I was just a baby and I grew up hearing

stories about him, but I never had a face to put to the name. I was excited to meet him and maybe a little pushy, as I was wont to be at age thirteen.

He was older than me and had a treehouse that I had coveted since childhood because, although I grew up on thirty acres of trees, I never had a treehouse of my own. I also never had an older brother and I was envious of my friends with siblings. When Slick came home I thought that he would want to be my friend, my surrogate older brother. I thought that he would want to teach me things and show me how to skateboard. This was not the case. The treehouse was made of particle board and had a spray painted sign that read “No Girls.” I knew that I was different because I was family and the first rule of family is that you stick together. More clearly than anything, I remember sitting at the base of the tree trunk looking up as Slick laughed because he wouldn’t help me up and I had already fallen off the first rickety rung of the nailed-in ladder. Tears stung my pink cheeks and I felt overwhelmingly alone.

On the car ride home Mama told me how her cousin had done that to her too when she was my age and that Slick was a mean person for that. She said that I was fine and that I shouldn’t be upset. “Besides,” she coaxed, “that tree house is dangerous and you could have gotten hurt.” A bead of chlorine water dripped down the side of my face and landed in the pool of my clavicle bone as I looked at the freshly skinned flesh of my palms.

It’s hard for me to remember when the family turned its back on me. As a child I felt that I was welcomed into their homes, I was allowed to play with my cousins, and I was greeted with generally positive attitudes. But it was that summer of my thirteenth year that I realized I was treated differently than the rest of my cousins, whose fathers made more money than mine.

Two cousins, Christa and Cassidy, had recently received a go-cart and I watched them from Papaw's porch as they made rounds across the pasture and around the umber rusted bar then down the browning hayfield. They screamed with delight at every bump of the rolling hills, pleasure beaming from their faces. Papaw told me that I should go and tell them that I wanted to play too, but I was reluctant because of Slick's mistreatment of me, and I didn't know if they would be just as mean. The adults came over to me as they saw me cross from Papaw's yard and into his sister's. My eyes watched the ground below me, as I was careful not to smoosh a bee with my bare feet.

With my hair piled on top of my head to display the new cartilage piercing I had just gotten, I stumbled over and asked if I could join in. Three years older than the oldest, Christa, I thought that surely the adults would let me have a taste of freedom—let me experience the wind kissing my cheeks and the deep stomach drops of Papaw's farm. Bobby Allen, Papaw's nephew, told me that I absolutely could not drive the girls' new go-kart, that I wouldn't know how to operate it and that he would not allow it. Then he tossed me a helmet that even the youngest could not wear and watched as I struggled to pull it over my head, ripping out my new earring with a concentrated pain more severe than I had yet to experience. A small trickle of blood escaped the hole and I dabbed at it with a sticky red finger as the girls pulled back around. I let out a small cry from pain, eyeing the go-kart and my cousins with their smirks. Then Bobby Allen said "no helmet, no ride" and the eldest sped off down the browning field into a wave of fallen leaves.

Sticky fingers are the mark of youth, of imperfection—but there is something wildly beautiful and very real in the messiness of childhood before one *figures it out*. For as long as I

can remember I was the little girl who would walk up to any group of children playing anywhere and ask them if I could join. “Remarkable,” my mother once called it when she told me how she was terrified that the children would tell me *no* and send me away. Though the first group of kids let me join them, I have had plenty of people throughout my life tell me *no* or that they didn’t want me to play with them or be my friend. When that happens—and even as an adult, that happens—I pick myself up and I go find somewhere else to play (maybe with a salamander or a goat).

Most troubling about my experiences with the Heltons is that they never seemed to accept me, though for a while they let me exist as one of them. I feel that this must have stemmed from the way I interacted with the adults, so comfortable and confidently, but I can’t be certain.

When talking to Mama about this, she tells me that they were envious of me in the same way that she was envious the day that I approached the kids with the ball. She told me that my confidence was too big for a child my age so they wanted to knock me down a few pegs and remind me of my place. I’ve met people like this my entire life. Slowly throughout my childhood, the Heltons taught me to be insecure about interacting with them through little slights and sneers from sagging lips. The interactions have carried over into my young adulthood in the form of a reluctance to maintain eye contact with others and an insistence to uphold an unreasonable standard of perfection. I think about these people when I catch myself slipping back into the habit of pandering to those who I consider to be of more importance than myself. Only time and world experience has dissolved the thick layer of self-consciousness from my life and it has melted away like a thick, sugary syrup from tiny fat fingers. Though sometimes, I swear, I can still taste it.

MEAT

It was one of those days when I felt like I was drowning in the air around me. My thick blond hair hung limp with moisture around my face, stress zits budded on my chin and I felt like a rag doll in the only semi-fitting black dress that I owned—a V-neck that I fastened together with safety pins and tucked into the corners of my bra to keep from falling down. I had been living on my own in a large, filthy house with seven filthy roommates for the better part of a year and my split ends proved it. Our house was a community of artists and misfits, those removed or displaced from our homes, collegiate urban refugees.

The comfort of my dirty house was thirty miles away from the gold-and-velvet-clad funeral parlor. I hovered outside my body looking at the small, bloody blisters forming on the tops of my feet as I shifted my weight in too-tight Mary Janes around a small mass of grievers, none as devastated as I. There was bad blood in that room. Though my mother and I were the principal mourners, being the only immediate next of kin, we were shunned by half of the attendants and I realized that there were too few people there for us. I could have requested a friend or two to attend, but my college friends only saw me in the abstract, sipping black coffee from the café Java Joint's signature maroon mugs and humming classical music while I scribbled in my notebooks. I *wanted* them to see me in the abstract and not for the turmoil that bubbled below my surface. What I didn't want was for them to know how much I hated myself because of my role in my papaw's addiction. If I could have just known sooner maybe I could have stopped his addiction, lessened it somehow. Instead, the guilt welled up inside of me and rendered me virtually useless. Self-hate, the kind that makes someone recoil into her own core, rarely generates sympathy and I didn't want it. I wanted it all to go away.

If the cover of my notebook had read “My Papaw Just Died, Please Someone Come to the Funeral,” I could have had half a dozen people in that room just for me, but as it stood the only friend I called was Evan—a sometimes-screw and graduate of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. I knew he would come—if only to check out the makeup work from a competing funeral home. As I drifted around Mama, holding onto her hand, our bodies seemed to be permanent fixtures next to the snake skin boots and Stetson hat that I placed by Papaw’s coffin. My eyes explored the terra incognita of funeral baskets and little white cards; my feet still shifted weight from aching toe to aching heel. The pains were insignificant, I see that now; after all, I had the luxury to feel pain.

My temples began to throb as though I’d drunk six shots of espresso on an empty, pitted stomach—a thousand tiny images of fishing, painting, collecting rocks, playing guitar, flew by my face as I saw the Heltons, *his family,* filter in through double doors—Appalachian Spartans though they carried no weapons, only dripping sallow eyes and sneers of hate spawned by a community of greed. I had spent the last few months only hearing about their accusations that I had thieved something as trivial as a television from my papaw, when in reality I was hiding away in Huntington, attempting to heal. But my absence was a means for his siblings to insert themselves in his life at a price.

“Brother, it’s just too hard for me to come over and see you all the time. I really need a new golf cart if you want me to bring you breakfast,” said three of them.

“Brother, my granddaughter just doesn’t do well at public school, if you want me to come over and help you clean, I need you to pay for her private education,” said the sister who also had him buy her a new car and addition on her house. He never bought *me* the first book (instead

insisting that my mother paid for her education herself, and therefore, I should as well) and though I can't see any logical connection between her granddaughter's inability to thrive in public education and Papaw's need for help around the house, his willingness to subsidize his siblings was testament to his innate need to provide.

"Uncle, I want to start up a photography business. I need five thousand dollars of equipment," said the son of his pill pushing brother. Now I think that Papaw's purchase of the equipment must have been a cover for the amount of pills he was consuming, but I can't be sure.

Those who are affected by drug addicts rarely realize that their loved ones have problems until they are confronted with undeniable evidence: track marks, stolen jewelry, an overdose. Even then, a kneejerk reaction is to dismiss the severity of the addiction, to turn your back on the problem and blindly wonder why this person is acting erratically. Looking back now, I'm not sure if I ignored the signs because I felt that I had no power to change the situation or if I had no frame of reference to realize what was truly going on. My best friend at the time had begun experimenting with OxyContin and I was around her enough to know what the pills looked like, to know the various neighborhoods where she shopped, the approximate price per milligram of the drug; but even she concealed much of that truth from me—mainly how much she spent per day. This was very much the case with my papaw.

I never had a taste for opiates, though one boyfriend convinced me to snort a line when I was 16. This promptly resulted in my head hanging out the window of his white Mustang vomiting streams of blue raspberry slushy across the quarter panel as he barreled down the interstate screaming *God damn it, no!* It wasn't an overdose, it was a reaction. I hated the way it made me feel, a feeling that lasted for three days. I never touched an OxyContin again—in fact,

when it was offered to me, and frequently it was, I responded by saying that I was allergic—I wish that I could say I hadn't seen one since.

Little by little, I noticed that my papaw's siblings wandered around him when they wanted something. To be clear, I would never begrudge Papaw for the way he spent his money—he earned it through sheer determination and will—and as the eldest son from a family that had next to nothing, it is reasonable to think that he might want to provide for loved ones. However, what I do take issue with is how his siblings attempted to characterize me with a running narrative as they were extorting him. One sister, Boopie, "found" a pizza box and a Tim Horton's doughnut bag in his kitchen the day his flat screen disappeared. Being overweight and living away from the family for college, I became her target. I wasn't there to defend myself and I was fat, so *logically* I must have been the culprit. As though, while Papaw was out of the house, I just happened to come to rob him, only to gorge myself on fast food and leave the remains—the real bonus to this narrative was that she could comment on my weight. In a society that objectifies women, one's worth is tied up in one's physical appearance, and Boopie had a skinny granddaughter who attended private school. All the while, Boop, drawing Social Security, just happened to come across the cash to buy the same 2008 model television. I suppose the five thousand dollar room renovation, private school tuition, and the Lincoln weren't enough. But I wasn't really there for much of her conniving, so Mama filled me in with hour long phone calls and the occasional visit.

I remember the day that Mama called to give me the latest update on the Heltons. I was working full time at a call center and attending university as a full time student as well, so my trips home were infrequent for several months despite being only twenty minutes away. The tone in her voice was incredulous, "Lauren Audrey, you will not believe what a web that bitch Boopie

has been weaving behind the scenes. I just left Dad's and he asked me what your address was so that he could send Little Charlie down to peek through your window and see if you had stolen his TV."

"Wait, someone stole his television?"

"Yeah, but I'll tell you what the funny thing is, they left his computer, his checkbook, the orange enamel jar of quarters, and every other valuable thing, right where it was. No sign of a break in, either, and he blamed you."

"Mama! You know I didn't do it."

"I know, honey, I just asked what a college student with no cable would do with a TV and reminded him that you've been in class all day."

For months I worried that he believed this about me despite Mama's insistence otherwise. I don't remember if I ever confronted Papaw about this. Certain days are fuzzier than others. My therapist says that this is normal for someone undergoing trauma and that maybe it will come back to me one day when my brain is ready to remember. When I asked him if I was *crazy* for not being able to recount so many of those days, he told me a story of a veteran from the Vietnam War whom he frequently treated. This man watched his friend get blown up before his eyes—there's a leg, there's a thigh, an arm, a shard of skull—and he rallied in that moment, left the scene and continued fighting. "He was 80 when he first came to my office," my therapist said, "and he still didn't remember specifics of the event, but that is what he had to do to get by. That's not dissimilar to what you've experienced."

It was time for me to face Papaw's shell and I turned to him, breaking the strong grasp of my mother's hands—expecting to see him lightly tanned and thin but he looked like any other dead old man in a new gray suit, bloated and coated with too pale paint—except he was my dead old man. I wanted everyone to know that too, feeling that I had to exert my place in that room. I reached down into my purse and pulled out a heart that I had bent out of guitar strings and adorned with a pick that read *Legends Never Die*–relics that I had pulled from his guitar case the day before. With every failed bend of the strings that pierced my thumbs that day I felt a little better. I liked the pain a little more. I eyed my makeshift talisman, a tribute to him, next to my scratched hands and I wondered what the others would think when they saw it. I placed it on his chest, nestled it under his left hand that felt hard and ridged to the touch.

The first card I read in the jungle of baskets was anonymous and to—*beloved sister*—Boopie. I wanted to tell the anonymous sender that she helped to put him here with a dosage of iron supplements eight times the daily amount, impacting him with anxiety, facilitating a breeding ground for the pseudomonas that, in conjunction with the opiates, wrecked his immune system. I wanted to tell them that not two hours after his death, Boopie let herself into his house and took his car keys, boat keys, and checkbook. I wanted to tell them how she shook that checkbook at me and Mama like it was a shrunken head on a stick. For a moment, I wanted to replay the venom dripping from her puckered mouth for the entire room. Now I can't remember what she said, though I know Mama holds onto those words. Mama holds onto more of this story than I do, but it is a burden that I am trying to learn how to carry—I am trying to *take my part.*

As my fingers grazed the sharp edges of day lily leaves, Boopie's grandson thug-walked in past the casket, with a swagger in his hips that said *nightclub* and *Miller High Life,* and I

remember that he's always treated me like a pariah since I was skinned knees and freckles following him around the farm. A quick pass through, he stopped and turned to face the room, then beat his chest twice and threw up two fingers, and walked right back out the double doors. My stomach dropped, *what the hell was that?* I could almost hear Papaw in the back of my mind, *that little shit— that disrespectful little shit.*

Everything looked simultaneously rich and pale in hue—blurry. Papaw's best friend and enabler, Mike McGlone, reeked of whiskey, but he talked like he was on pills—a cocktail maybe. Everywhere I looked in that family, in that county, there were pupils the size of pinheads. When he hugged me I felt a sense of weakness bubble in my core because I tried to tell him, I tried to tell all of them after Papaw fell that if they didn't make him walk he would never do it again.

Mama and I think that the night Papaw broke his hip he must have been high on Oxies, but we can't be certain because he didn't tell anyone until a week later. With Mama working fulltime and in the process of seeking tenure, much of his care was left up to me and I couldn't give him enough physical therapy on my own. Through her strong community ties, Mama found a room for Papaw at Kings Brook where he would meet with physical therapists three times a day for rehabilitation. He had a single suite with cherry wood paneling, a large window that opened to a courtyard, a flat screen television, and the very best care in our area. But he was detoxing and picking bugs from the sky and off his arms. Roonie started bringing him pills again, "little blue boats" he called them, and I suspect that Papaw liked that because "Boats" was his nickname.

I remember Mama and me visiting him in the beginning of his detox and the way his voice sounded strained and pulled apart as though he were screaming into a box fan. I was

scared. I must have still been in high school. Still, after countless lists attempting to track the chronology of events the timelines seem fuzzy. Even now, when Mama wants to talk about it all, to release some of the burden, I feel the same funereal weakness emanating from my stomach, creeping through my veins.

I try not to remember Papaw's cracked screams and guttural coughs or that way he accused Mama of trying *to put him in the ground* when she would try to speak with him about his drug use. Just one mention of his addiction or the way that his siblings took from him and he would begin to raise his voice and hyperventilate as though Mama, rather than confronting an issue that needed to be addressed, were picking on him. We didn't realize the gravity of his addiction until the doctors confirmed that he had been using. I feel like a part of me always knew, though, especially in the winter of 2009 when our entire house had pneumonia and Papaw requested that I bring him the rest of my codeine cough medicine and Mama's bottle too.

In the same way that he turned on me with his assumption that I had stolen his television, he did it to Mama with the accusations that she was *trying to kill him*. In the moment I was more concerned with my own wellbeing than anything else; I felt as though I was losing myself to his addiction, and that no one else could see the pain I was in. I was selfish and scared. I never once considered what it must have been doing to Mama. I wish that he could have known how terrified she was—for his life, for their relationship. I wish that he had been in his right mind because I know that he wouldn't have hurt us so badly if it weren't for the pills. He sat by, years before the drugs, and watched her spend tireless hours arranging for her maternal step-grandfather to be removed from a nursing home that his ex-wife had stuck him in. Her grandfather didn't even have his teeth when, on a whim, Mama decided to look him up and try to find him again. Singlehandedly she pulled him out of a living hell and made sure that his last

years were comfortable. She did this at the expense of her job. She did it because it was the right thing to do. She did it because in Appalachia you take your part and help your family. Papaw sat by and watched Mama's fight for medical power of attorney unfold. Once, when reflecting on it, Mama told me that Papaw seemed jealous that she was spending so much time with her grandfather. This was years before his addiction.

It wasn't a week that Papaw Boats was in Kings Brook that his siblings convinced him we were leaving him in a nursing home. They had Papaw sign himself out against medical advisory and brought him home. Within a few days, his brother and sisters, sick of the three-in-the-morning phone calls, dumped him in Wurtland nursing home half an hour away without his glasses or a change of clothes. They didn't tell us. To this day it boggles my mind how they could unload a man in one of the cheapest nursing homes in Northeastern Kentucky when he had enough money to pay for at-home rehabilitation care. He called us a few days later when he was given phone privileges. Mama and I made the trip to flickering fluorescent lights, the smell of urine and boxed stuffing; we made the trip to go find him. There were three dying men in his room, moaning, all separated by curtains, and for the first time he looked frail to me, unable to fight against the backdrop of a small bricked up window. When we got him home I would come to see him after school, but they'd have him so doped up and drunk that he'd be asleep. I will never forget the way that pyramid of half gallon jugs of Heaven Hill sparkled so inconceivably innocent yet so toxic on his kitchen counter.

"Hey Noble, would you get your old Papaw a glass of whiskey? Three fingers deep and two ice cubes!" He started calling me "Noble" when I became a teenager. I think the day I earned that name must have been the first time I ran to his house from my father's booming

voice. Papaw never was one to scream and I think he must have been afraid that I would pick up the habit. The name “Noble” became positive reinforcement to ensure that I would be mindful.

“You know I will, Papaw—but can we walk a few laps around the house first? Think you’re up for a little treadmill action?” I always tried to bargain with him, like he taught me to do when I was child and he’d send me in to haggle with the Wal-Mart clerk. Some days Papaw was receptive to his own technique.

“Well, I suppose so—why don’t you give me a hand?” This was a fine system—we walked, making careful steps not to trip on the raised edges of the carpet—but I had a night class and when I couldn’t come his sisters would. They wouldn’t walk with him; instead they would drown him in whiskey and in would come his brother with a pocketful of pills and any number of addicted girls not much older than myself.

Mama and I have always thought that Roonie used these girls as objects to show Papaw his mortality—my beautiful Papaw, with his handsome jaw line and thick red hair, his All-American man persona and perfected bravado, *the ladies’ man*—but no more, Roonie made sure of that when he began to shave his mane with the drugs and reminders of what he could no longer have. His last ditch attempt to regain some of his manhood came in the form of a penis pump I found under his bed while I was dusting and his confession to my mother that he had *bruised* himself somehow and would she *take a look*. Mom was embarrassed but did so to placate his paranoia. She rarely recounts that moment and I am not brazen enough to bring it up, though I wonder now if she blocked it all out. I can’t imagine the shame he must have felt that day. Over the course of two years I saw my golden Papaw lose luster every single day, but it was

when Roonie started bringing the girls—barely legal, hollow eyed, addicted— that his spirit faded and he began to give up.

To this day, I believe that my papaw, however supportive and beautiful he may have been, viewed women as objects, and I was treated no differently. At the same time that Roonie paraded the girls in front of Papaw, Papaw began to be consumed with the subject of my weight and physical appearance—the size of my feet to the size of my waist, the length of my hair to the color of my nail polish; everything was fodder for scrutiny. Papaw even went so far as to tell me that he was including a passage in his will that stated that I could not access any of my inheritance after his death until I lost 80 pounds—at the time he made this clause, I weighed 185 pounds total—he wanted nearly half of my weight gone, to reduce me into something that seemed unnatural for my build, like my only worth was in how skinny I was, how attractive I seemed to him and other men. In the year leading up to his death and the year following, I gained the 80 pounds that he wanted me to lose. I took refuge in bean burritos and aimless driving, consuming myself in saturated fat and carbohydrates to make up for the loss and confusion. As I have accepted the pain, I've watched more than half of that fat melt away, but I still carry the stretch marks and insecurities from his pressure despite Mama's encouragement and insistence that it was the drugs that turned him so evil.

On cue, Roonie's wrinkled skeletal frame shambled in the funeral parlor, a hillbilly Hugh Hefner with a junkie Jane Doe on each arm, one wearing a bubble hem mini skirt and five inch heels, and the other clad in filthy ripped jeans and boasting fresh track marks on her skinny arms. He was smug and held a manila envelope in his geriatric hand. I needed a cigarette—but this thought made me whimper and Mama's hand flitted on my back in comfort, "It's okay, baby."

On Papaw's poker table there was a small white notebook. On the last page was a contract that he wrote and I signed, circa 2005, "I, Lauren Audrey Tussey, do solemnly swear never to smoke cigarettes or marijuana for as long as I shall live." I remember getting addicted to nicotine in high school—crying the first time I bought a pack of cigarettes, feeling the pressure of my oath, doing nothing about it—needing an escape from the pressures of academia and the intensity of my home environment, finding the dizziness from the nicotine necessary to manage these two worlds.

With serendipitous timing, I saw Evan out of my periphery with his shaggy black hair gelled back, his thick glasses, scruffy yet trimmed beard, and a black and red suit. He had never looked so good as he walked straight over to me and wrapped his arms around my waist, picking me up a little with the force of his hug. His lips landed on my forehead and I looked around the room to find several Helton eyes scowling at me.

Evan pointed his nose towards the casket and with his warm hand on the small of my back, we proceeded. He eyed Papaw's body, dissecting the undertaker's craftsmanship. My head was lost in the noxious scent of peace lilies and carnations, but he snapped me back when he muttered "I could've done better," with the same sly smile that he gave me when we connected at a friend's basement party some five years ago.

"I don't doubt it—he looks so cakey and big—not like my Papaw at all. What do you think of his new suit, we bought it for him last night?" I led him over to Mama who was sitting in a plush chair just right of the body, "Mama, you remember Evan."

"Oh yes, hello, Evan, thank you for coming." She reached up to meet his embrace with her tissues wrapped around his neck like a fluffy white bow.

“I’m so sorry for the loss of your father. It’s very nice to see you again, beautiful as always. I believe Lauren and I are going to take a walk outside, would you like to get some fresh air with us?”

I turned my head to him, *you’ve read my mind or do I look that caged?*

“Oh no honey, you kids go ahead,” but I was already looking around the room at a dozen bodies that had been haunting my dreams for months. I paused, “Mom are you sure you don’t need me here?”

“No, baby, it’s fine, go visit with your friend.” I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and squeezed to transfer my warmth to her cold. Evan grabbed my hand once more and our shiny leather shoes clicked to the door as each step sent a sharp pain over the tops of my feet. I didn’t complain. I didn’t know how I could. Without him there I couldn’t have left Mama’s side—she told me not to, to stay put until I had a friend to go out with. She didn’t want the Heltons to corner me. She didn’t want them to have the opportunity to confront me.

There was a cool breeze blowing down Central Avenue and I thought it might have been the coolest day in May that I had seen since I was a girl. *May*. One spring Papaw’s hands carved deep in the lush soil of the back yard. He carefully scored and broke pieces off giant stalks of bamboo that he collected and dried, and plunged them into the soil next to his heirloom tomatoes. I frolicked around the concrete patio and my little mouth opened to erupt in song, a hybrid of the “Teddy Bear’s Picnic” and “the Merry, Merry Month of May,” and Papaw laughed. I still don’t remember the correct lyrics to either tune. He broke off a special stake for me and one for him, “Here you go, little granddaughter, now watch this.”

I stood mystified as he placed the gnarled stalk in my tiny, messy hands. His fingers, as gnarled as the bamboo, moved elegantly despite their visible wear from decades of farm work. “Now you.” I mimicked his motions and dropped the hollow tube on ground as we giggled. “You’ll get it—just takes practice.” That day I pranced all over his back yard keeping time with my mish-mashed melody, the evening sun melting the world around us in pale golden haze like the tiny hairs on his arms.

Back at the funeral, I finger-thumbed an absent thread on the hem of my skirt as I eyed the throng of people entering and exiting the stone building. “Evan, these people are monsters, they’ve killed my papaw and they’ve tried to take everything—there were three of them at his house before his body was even cold,” I said to him, moving my index finger to the checkered gaps in the wrought iron patio table.

Under the shade of ivy, Evan replied, “you know sweetheart,” in a way that made my pulse quicken because he sounded shockingly similar to Papaw, “I *do* have access to a crematory.” I buried my face against the silk on his shoulder and inhaled his sweet scent of fabric softener and tobacco. His joke set in and I imagined being one hundred feet tall and picking up Roonie by the scruff of his neck then giving him a little toss into the inferno before scooping the rest of them up too.

Gravel crunched some twenty feet away on the other side of the building, there was no one coming for me that I wanted to talk to—I knew that. “I think I’m ready to go back inside.” I snuffed out the butt of the Camel Wide that he’d given me and eased back up into my confining shoes. Four cousins, who were connected but not involved in the hell that I was in, headed us off at the corner of the building. “Lauren Audrey, Boats was a really good man, uh, I’m sorry,”

muttered schizophrenic Chip, but I didn't miss a beat and kept on walking—there was nothing that I had left to say to any of them—each individual causing or enabling his sickness. Even if Chip didn't have anything to do with the pills or the extortion, he had kept silent as it was happening. All those nights when I sat crying, bait for mosquitos in the summer twilight, I prayed that someone would give me answers. I wonder now if they could have spoken up without facing excommunication from the Appalachian clan. I certainly experienced the way they disowned us at the funeral and before his death. Not unlike the Hatfields and McCoys, the Heltons turned their backs on us when we stood up against the drugs and Mama told Roonie that he had better stop bringing them in or Papaw was going to die. I think that must have been his plan all along.

Evan paused at the door to check his buzzing phone. "They need me at the home, another body just came in."

I looked down at my reddening feet and replied, "Okay, I understand. Evan, I really appreciate you—your support means so much to me," and I wrapped my arms around his neck. He embraced me with the same pressure as before but his hand slid down the back of my dress and he forcefully grabbed my ass. I let out a whimper and moved my hip from his grasp. I felt like a slab of meat. I imagined that if Papaw could have seen us then, he would have cringed, but I realize that he has done this to women a thousand times, though in more tactful ways, I hope.

In that moment I remembered the funeral parlor doors were open and I looked over my shoulder. There was no one gathered by the doors to see me, but if they had it would have only fueled what they wanted me to be—*all shacked up* in Huntington, desperate enough to steal from my Papaw, desperate enough to be a piece of ass.

I walked back in and saw that my father and his brother were next to Mama—both of them were petting and hugging her as she held Roonie's manila envelope. "Mom, what is that?"

"Lauren, they're cremating him, they're going to burn up my daddy."

Our bodies collided, crashed into each other in waves and heaving sobs. I didn't understand because the top of the paper read "Last Will and Testament," which we had looked over the day before, when we finalized the funeral arrangements. His grave was dug, we had just bought him a new suit. As my mind snapped back into the moment, I stammered, "Mama, where do his ashes go?"

"Lauren, they go to Roonie, it says they go to Roonie."

THE ART OF DYING

I.

Earthen wafts of soup beans and onion flit up to my nostrils. I perch on a sturdy oak chair, while my Papaw Boats, the guitar in his long golden arms, fiddles with shiny strings that erupt in crisp, melodic vibrations. Light from the dining room filters about us; meets stacks of playing cards, white handkerchiefs, and a tin beer can. “Noble,” he croons, “do you know that the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plains?”

I am a child, my hair likely in braids, my feet dangle loosely below my seat—unable to reach, “Papppawww!”

“Will the rain hurt the rhubarb?” he asks, his crooked grin exposing sand colored teeth. He knows that this always frustrates me, and it does again.

“I don’t know!” I sigh because I have no concept of Spain or rhubarb.

He tosses his head back in a full body laugh, “not if it’s in cans!”

Papaw always played with me—sticky fingers on crisp cards, cardboard lemonade stands, slimy worms and fishing for sunfish in the pond behind his house—but the times when we would congregate around his dining room table over long sheets of printing paper with perforated edges were rare and magical. We mainly drew squids. Squids in elaborate underwater worlds with bright red starfish and curly kelp. Papaw always loved my art and, surprisingly for a Depression era man from meager means in Northeastern Kentucky, he supported my juvenile dreams of

becoming a famous artist. He was an artist himself and a deep, deep thinker. Every drawing, every painting, every picture that I took, he wanted for the fridge.

He's been dead for over five years, our squid yellowing on the white magnetic door.

II.

In a study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse it was discovered that "non-medical prescription drug use got 'out of control' [in Appalachia] when OxyContin was introduced to the market in 1995" (Young and Havens 587). My small Northeastern Kentucky town, nestled in the heart of the Appalachian region, experienced the explosion of this drug and the many lives that perished in the lava flow that followed.

After the manslaughter by overdose of my Papaw, the torment of his will in probate, and a mass familial estrangement, I found myself divorcing my feet of American soil. I found myself in Spain with a host-mother, a cocker spaniel named Inso, and the winding metro of Madrid. With euro cerveza and tapa clinging to my palate I toed my way into the Museo del Prado, a student stamp on my left hand, trapped in a throng of Americans. Passed Rembrandts and Goyas, passed Raphaels and Titians, our bodies swayed in a dead sea of rich oils and canvas. Each room revealed visions of an archaic empire shrouded in gold and luxury.

My fingers flicked through the welcome packet as we were sectioned into tour groups based on our fluency. Lost in my head, I entered the herd of tourists closest to me as one of the pamphlets informed me that *Las Meninas* by Velazquez was housed within those marble walls. This is one of the few great paintings that I have always recognized and I remembered studying

the figures in the only art history class I had ever taken. I realized that my rural schooling did not prepare me to have this experience as my peers, with Virginian and Pennsylvanian accents, began to chatter about who they wanted to see, what great works they hoped to steal secret photos of.

Sixty tapping feet were led through the belly of the museum. Our guide wore a red smock over her tiny designer cardigan, her voice, a music that I did not understand save for articles, the words of colors and numbers. I directed my eyes toward her gestures but did not laugh when the others did. Her smooth Spanish wit fell flat on my deaf American ears and I thought I noticed a hint of frustration in her posture when I strayed from the front of the group to a painting that she had already shown us. Her words continued to trickle from her mouth but gradually softened as she led the group through a passageway on the right and I, indifferent to the glances of others, went to the left.

I entered into a cavernous room where two people stood admiring a painting some fifty feet away from me, and where, to my immediate right I noticed something magnificent. I had found *Las Meninas*.

As if through some unspoken bond, the couple to my left began to walk out of the exhibit, leaving me with my head tilted upward, and my feet back-stepping so that I might have a full view of the roughly one hundred square foot master piece. Perhaps they had seen each painting, studied each brush stroke, and were bored with the old world realism of Velazquez's portraits. I thought for a moment that perhaps we were united by a mutual respect for this vast painting; that they, aware of how emotional this must be for me, decided to leave me with my solitary contemplation.

I have seen that painting a thousand times reprinted in textbooks and on the fronts of glossy postcards in every gift shop in Spain, but there it towered over my head. My feet carried me some six feet backwards but my eyes never left the pale outline of the Infanta Margaret Theresa until the entire painting came into view. It was all that I could see and I was overwhelmed, blinking back tears of inspiration yet feeling so small as every oil painted was upon me.

III.

In Greek "ekphrasis" means description. In literature ekphrasis is more commonly used to describe a type of poem or writing that draws from the visual world and attempts to create a visceral image with words. It is art inspired by art. Ekphrasis occupies the space between two seemingly contradictory places; "the conversion of . . . visual representation into . . . verbal representation [through] description," and "the reconversion of . . . verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader" (Mitchell 164). In other words, ekphrasis aims to inspire the reader to see the object in their mind, to view without their own gaze, and assume the author's instead.

I don't know if I will ever have the chance to see *Las Meninas* again, but I want to relive it for as long as I am able.

Las Meninas, Revisited

Maids of honor crouch
dutiful by her side, extend trays
of tonics and sweets
to the posed infanta, the blonde
heiress de España.

One maid curtsies, the body guard
and chaperone conspire.

Their eyes watch me watching
while the painter to the left
studies the curves of what must be
my own face.

Oh! Infanta, your soft cheeks
are alabaster, your corseted gown
too restraining for your age.

You look at me knowingly,
a slight smirk elevates
your pale cupid's bow.

But I wonder if you know—
surrounded by such finery—
that this world in which you live

cares not for young ladies in whale
boned skirts, but for young boys
who will seize your throne

in his infancy.

IV.

It was the summer of 1998. I was seven and boarded a plane for the Twin Cities where I spent the summer with my grandmother, Granna, and step-grandfather, Poppy. Many years later I learned that they chose these names because "grandmother" and "grandfather" sounded too old. I boarded the Delta flight and sat in first class behind the pilot who gave me a small pin with

wings on it. He smiled at me, said I was too pretty to cry. I cried harder. After I arrived Granna took me to the Minneapolis Science Museum. I still think of the charred bodies of the Pompeii victims, naked mummies crouched in fetal position, clinging to one another. I dreamed that night of the faint umber sheen of their black corpses—what color the skin must have been before Mount Vesuvius rained hell upon them.

This was the first time that I had seen a dead person and I was both horrified and mystified at how they curled in defeat or stood proud, accepting their fate. They were immortalized, even in death; the mother clinging her child to her breast, the man hunched with his face to his knees, the dog forever sitting. They were beautiful. My tiny fingers reached out to run the length of an arm before being swatted at and led away by Granna.

V.

For centuries the devastation of Pompeii has been the muse of countless painters, poets, and musicians. They re-envision the ancient Roman society, reconstruct the elaborate market places and murals. They breathe life back into the rumbling belly of Mount Vesuvius moments before lava and ash choke out the lives of its victims. They do this for art. Italian politician Luigi Settembrini once wrote of the Pompeii victims upon hearing of plans to cast their bodies for artistic preservation. He said, “They have been dead for eighteen centuries, but they are human creatures seen in their death struggle. This is not art, this is not imitation, these are their bones, the relics of their flesh and their clothing mixed with plaster, and the pain of death that regains substance and form” (“L’invenzione dei Calchi”). I think back to the beautiful terror of their

faces, some with mouths open exposing teeth behind thin lips, all of them, every part of them, glistening black.

I wonder what it must have been like to be a young girl weaving a rug in Pompeii the day of the eruption, how the land was plush and green. My morning routine is normal—feeding the hens, going to the market to buy fish and olives for our midday meal. Mother is forming a new stoneware pitcher for our water; the last one shook from a shelf last night. My younger brothers are playing in a clearing off from our stone home while father attends a meeting of the elders. The gods are upset, we have heard rumbling from the belly of our sacred mountain.

As my fingers work through the silken yarn, and my first delicately patterned rug begins to emerge, the rumbling gets louder. Mother calls me inside to the laraium for prayer as one-by-one tiles from our mosaic mural of Minerva begin to crumble and fall to the floor. I see my brothers huddled with our pet dog. They are scared. Mother clutches the baby to her chest as she vibrates with every tremor of the great mountain above us. It is day light, hours off from sunset, but just as soon as father breaks the threshold of our house everything becomes dark. He flings his body over mine and I can hear everyone crying as a blanket of hot ash forces its way into our home, into our lungs. The last thing I will hear is my father coughing through muddled prayers and the softening screams of my family.

Pompeiians thought that “swarms of butterflies. . . carr[ied] the souls of the dead as they flitted over the slopes of Vesuvius on weightless wings” (Rowland 15). Sometimes I imagine my Papaw’s soul housed in the body of a monarch, but as it ascends, it is plucked from the sky by a swift beak.

VI.

On the night before my Papaw died, his brother, Roonie, had visited him. Fresh from a doctor shopping trip in Florida, he had just re-upped the scripts for some two thousand OxyContin and Xanax pills. Roonie stayed long enough for Papaw to eat his tray dinner and for him to feebly write a check, one of dozens, for a thousand dollars. Around midnight, with no explanation, Papaw's blood pressure dropped and he became violent and irrational. The nurses put him in four-point restraints and sedated him. By the morning he was in decline and his sister and niece, aware of Roonie's visit, arrived. They informed the doctors that they would handle calling the rest of the family so that everyone could see him one last time. We didn't get the call until he was already dead.

My mother and I clung like wet clothes to one another at the sight of his chilled, white frame. The sister and niece clucked about the room, attempting to grab his personal effects. Mom ran them out and I folded onto the bedside, petting his soft arm hair as I wept. That night we went to JC Penney to find his burial suit. Our fingers disappointedly fluttered through sale racks—orange and brown plaid, navy and black pinstripe—nothing looked like him. Nothing felt like him.

We settled on a soft gray suit with a bright silk lining. We paid full price. Even in death my Papaw would be dressed to the nines. I remembered his house, now empty and dark, and all of the fine clothes that he wore before he got "sick." In the coming months I would learn to cherish the unscented laundry detergent that he used and how his clothes always seemed to maintain his essence.

VII.

May 29th, 2010: Mama and I were the first to arrive, an hour before the service was due to begin—my working class father left work early to meet us there and then returned to finish his shift. The night before, between bouts of sobbing and numbly playing his guitar, I fashioned a heart out of a set of old guitar strings and suspended a pick from the center that read "Legends Never Die." I placed it in the casket with him. *This is not art, this is not imitation, these are his bones, the relics of his flesh.*

Per my request, the funeral director displayed his snakeskin boots and Stetson hat, and when we arrived, I handed him a burned CD that contained Bob Dylan's "Forever Young" and Willie Nelson's "Pancho and Lefty"—both songs of loss, both songs Papaw used to play.

We had been there just long enough for anxiety to make us walk two rounds from casket to flowers to chairs. I wasn't sure if there were other people there but my mind snapped back when I noticed Roonie shamble in, manila envelope in hand, accompanied by two skinny girls not much older than myself. As they signed the guest book and bubbled around the room, Roonie made a direct passage toward the director and handed him the contents of the envelope. I grabbed a cigarette and went outside.

Upon snuffing out my cigarette and returning, I learned that Roonie had presented a new, forged last will and testament, witnessed by Roonie himself, one of the skinny girls he walked in with, and a man I later learned was Roonie's accomplice in the drug ring. This new will absolved Papaw's siblings from any liability or prosecution for the cashing of checks from his estate before, *and after*, his death. It stripped us of our inheritance; rather, the will ensured that Roonie's son and nephew drew allowances from the estate until it was gone. It required that

Papaw's silk lined casket and three hundred dollar suit be thrown out and his body cremated with the ashes to be in possession of his *only brother*. This was Roonie's way of protecting himself; he thought that it would ensure there was no evidence, no blood work to be tested, no autopsy.

Will-in-probate and several months later, we heard through the local gossip chains that Roonie and the siblings spread Papaw's ashes. Weeks later, while buying goat feed at the local market, I saw him in front of KY Plumbing Supply. I demanded to know where my Papaw's ashes were and he ran from me as I called out "chicken-shit" in the summer air. Shortly after, Roonie was arrested for trafficking, along with his accomplice. It was estimated that, through a heavily funded and carefully calculated drug ring, they were bringing eight to ten thousand pills a month into the tri-state area of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia.

I have no notion of what it must look like to see the ashes of a loved one spread; I can only imagine they fall like charred volcanic remains, not an eruption but a light dusting of a man's life blanketing the ground. I would never find him now.

VIII.

I boarded an overnight bus from Madrid to Barcelona to reunite with an American friend who had been teaching in Spain for two years. Tiana met me at the train station, and with just two hours to spare she gave me an express tour and history of resistance belonging to the great Catalonian city. Off the metro we ran down the bricked sidewalk, weaving through hordes of couples and children. "Come on, it's this way to the sea," she piped in her bold smoky voice. Her

almond eyes glanced ahead, feet well-attuned to the Spanish pace, while I shuffled my backpack into place and we continued running.

Hundreds of people gathered at the shoreline, topless men and women splashed in the Mediterranean, their bronze bodies shifting with the currents. Tiana told me that I could go topless too, but my American sensibilities seized me and I changed into my black suit, feeling scandalous that I was, for a moment, bare breasted in the sun. I have never tasted water so salty, seen beach glass in so many colors, and felt more revived than by that water. A line of sailboats teetered across the azure horizon. I could see the Balearic Islands in the distance.

Later, I wrapped my bathing suit in the plastic bag that held dark red cherries during my bus ride, and Tiana led me past avenues of trendy shops and tourist stands boasting inflatable bats, fútbol regalia, and mini magnetic replicas of buildings. Over the top of the mammoth market place something medieval began to expose itself like a stone dragon looming over the city. If a community's core values are affected by the type and presence of the architecture that exists, then I imagined that this community must be marked by a history of archaic war and wealth (Haji et al. 12). As we neared closer, Tiana called it *La Segrada Familia* designed by the great Catalonian Antonio Gaudi. I began to notice hundreds of stone people shackled to the body of this great cathedral, where they seemed to be immortalized.

I cannot fathom how La Sagrada Familia must have been created. Gaudi's work projects such "gentle[ness]" with "soft rounded shapes [that must be] conducive to feelings of affiliation" (Haji et al. 12). Thousands of people flock to the base of the cathedral to pay homage. But as I stared at the massive structure, I did not feel affiliated with it as everyone else must have. I was in awe of its mystery and I wondered how many died in its creation, though I'm sure the blood

spilled there is but a drop compared to the red sea spilled by the familial feuds that trickle through time.

IX.

Independence is alive in Catalonia. As Tiana led me through the ancient city and away from the sea, she described the gravity of the Catalonian Independence movement. “The people want it,” she told me, “they are tired of watching the Spanish government strip away their heritage, word-by-word.” The Spanish government feels that “to be competent in Catalan in Catalonia is not considered as having the same meaning/importance/legal status as the duty to be competent in Castilian (Spanish)” (Guibernau). Tiana suddenly paused and turned around to face me. “I’ve been working with some of the activists making documentaries, and we’ll be traveling with them while you’re here. They’ll love you but you won’t understand them. They refuse to speak Spanish on principle. They are preserving the art of their language.”

La Noche de San Juan, the summer solstice: I was in the heart of Catalonia, an hour train ride from the closest tourist, in a swarm of sweaty, vibrating bodies. The salt air from the Mediterranean clung to my temples and the soft, pale hairs of my upper lip. Between twelve of us we had eight bottles of gin and the men rolled several spliffs with Moroccan hash. We formed a circle around our bags and our booze, protecting our buzz and our place in the crowd. It was midnight and a deejay on the pier-side stage piped “I Shot the Sheriff” through five fifteen foot speakers. My lips mouthed every word with calculated, learned precision as my hips kept time under the sway of my burgundy bohemian skirt. Our bodies gyrated through the night—some

never stopped dancing, some searched for sustenance and sleep, some scrubbed their feet with salted sand then gently brushed it away—it glittered as it cascaded back to the dark beach floor.

It is well known that "Catalans often refer to their own country as a *terra de pas*, a place people pass through, a thoroughfare" where strangers travel and "each leav[e] their traces behind" (Eaude xi).

X.

In 2007, when I had the fleeting dream of pursuing a career in photography, Papaw offered to buy me a new midrange camera. I, however, possessing an uncanny ability for letting good opportunities pass me by, told him that I was happy with my Sony CyberShot. Two months later it lay broken in the driveway and Papaw put down five thousand dollars on camera equipment for "Little Slick," Roonie's son. This was my lesson to learn.

Slick began showing up at my school, having graduated ten years before, to take photos with his new camera equipment. He captured our football games, parades, and even offered to give me and my friends free sessions for homecoming dances. He flattered our egos and let us take racy photos with cigarettes hanging from our lips and peace signs in the air. The family, Papaw's siblings, convinced me and my cousin Jessica to have our senior portraits taken by Slick. Every shot was through a fisheye lens, obscuring reality with backdrops made from spray painted sheets and bobbles bought from dollar stores.

I learned later that Slick's professional sign, equipment, and studio (all purchased by my Papaw) were a front for Roonie's pill industry, and that Slick wasn't trying to do us favors by

capturing our innocent high school years. Rather, by photographing these cheerleaders, he was attempting to familiarize himself with them, to entice them to his studio for a taste of OxyContin and a few intoxicating clicks of his camera.

Feeling desired is intoxicating, and though I have never posed nude for Slick's camera, I wonder what it must be like to be the subject of his gaze. *The studio is dark, musty. It is sparsely decorated, except for the used furniture from someone else's living room and a fully decorated Christmas tree. They both seem out of place. I've been here five times over the summer for what started out as modeling headshots. Slick tells me I'm gorgeous and that he's going to make me famous but that I need to diversify my portfolio first. Today he hands me a pair of knee socks and a popular romance novel after he gives me my fix. He tells me to take off my clothes and act like I'm "into" the book. I hesitate when he hands me elastics to put up my hair in pigtails, but then he tells me that he found an agent so I lay down on the love seat and smile for the camera.*

XI.

If we are attracted to buildings that are comprised of smooth, rounded curves, and our bodies are temples, as Christian mythology suggests, then the naked human form— divorced of cotton, polyester, and denim shackles—must be the ultimate artistic beauty. This is how I felt, when the sun finally rose on that Catalonian beach, as I and my dozen companions stripped our bodies and tiptoed into the icy sea. Beautiful, natural bodies washing in the Mediterranean, delighting onlookers who filmed us from the pier. I remember how my breasts floated in the salt saturated sea—sensual—in a way the embrace of a lover could never compare.

Once Slick had insinuated himself in our school events and ingratiated himself among the most attractive girls in our small town, he began to trade his daddy's pills for their bodies—and soon, he was gone; no pep rallies, no after school events. Candid shots of recent graduates passed out naked on toilets, or in bathtubs in basements, began to emerge on the internet. Photos of local girls spread eagle, wearing only striped socks or mud splatters found their way to online community forums. All the pictures looked the same. Same dead eyes, same backdrops, same costumes and, for the under aged girls vying for a taste of that hillbilly heroin, the same mask to obscure their identities.

Slick developed an artist profile and an online presence to draw in actual models in an attempt at legitimizing his business. When they refused, he sent insulting emails which later came out in his reviews. Meanwhile our community was shaken.

The family called him an artist and insisted that he was a good Christian man, a humanitarian, and a rescuer of stray cats—I imagine him now wearing house shoes and shaking a bag of Meow Mix trying to bait in a flea covered calico. On several occasions Mama sent screenshots of Slick's *photography* to the family in an attempt to prove to them just what Slick was doing. The most recent was, what she called a "beaver shot," next to a framed photo of my Papaw's parents. They clicked their tongues and it was forgotten.

XII.

"Pillbilly," that's what Slick called her, or the image of her, but I knew the subject of this photograph as Nichole. Inside the frame, her face is obscured, she holds a needle in her mouth,

naked, crouched on the floor. A lighter and spoon in hand, she is cooking her buzz on the filthy red carpet as Slick snaps the photo with a fisheye lens. He tells her to thrust her chest out. *Click.* He tells her to growl at the camera. *Click.* He tells her to "hurry up and do your shit so we can move on." *Click.* He takes her needle and hands her a package of sparklers. She lights one for each hand. *Click.* He gives her a distorted Lady Liberty mask and tells her to do it again. *Click.* The drugs set in and she gets too high so he carries her to loveseat in the front room where she can sleep it off. *This is not art, this is not imitation, these are her bones, the relics of her flesh.*

This image earns Slick his fifteen seconds of fame, featured in a collection at the Kinsey Institute Gallery in Bloomington, Indiana. I cringe at the thought that this representation of my region is on permanent collection in any gallery.

Critic Hans Maes describes pornography as "explicit," representing "people as objects, while art invites us into the subjectivity of the represented person and relies on suggestion" (385). I see no *suggestion* in Slick's work, only the skeletal remains of a woman who once had a future. "Pillbilly" is only suggestive of a community ravaged by addiction, where our daughters are treated as commodities for a drug ring. As I look at her young flesh juxtaposed with dirty walls I see only objectification, no art, no inspiration. She is posed—not unlike Infanta Margaret Theresa, not unlike the onyx Pompeiians, not unlike the chained statues of La Sagrada Familia, not unlike my Papaw in his grey suit—and the needle in her mouth is not a prop, it is a symbol of her slow death fueled by the men who fed her addiction in exchange for her body. "Pillbilly" depicts a reality for my Appalachian town, one that was inflicted upon us by Slick and his father.

XIII.

In the months following my Papaw's death, I learned just how addicted he had become. I learned that Slick had worked with his father to include himself in the new draft of Papaw's will, his attempt to become the new patriarch of the clan. I learned that this draft entitled him to a significant salary each year and that it would forbid me and my mother from touching our respective parts of the inheritance until we each turned 62. In the years following Papaw's death Mama and I began putting the pieces together. We attempted to make sense of it all, to understand his addiction. She told me that Slick made a production about getting the family crest tattooed on his leg. I began to realize that though my mother was the only child of the family's patriarch, Slick felt that he was entitled to the ancestral land. He felt that he, as a man, was the only true heir. I remember how he staged photos on the farm—one cheerleader's senior pictures on the porch, one naked junkie on a tractor, his wife posed on top of Papaw's stone mailbox. These were all his attempts at co-opting our claim.

Though unlike Infanta Margaret Theresa, who watched her three-year-old brother, the only male heir, take the crown, unlike the people of Pompeii who watched their sacred mountain rain hellfire upon them, unlike the stone figures forever stagnant on the body of La Sargrada Familia, unlike "Pillbilly," and unlike my dead, burned up Papaw, my mother and I have the opportunity to fight.

XIV.

It has taken every bit of five years for our lives to normalize after Papaw's death. The will is no longer in probate—we took them to court after three long years—his family is no longer in my life. His paintings have been moved from his house to my own—they line my walls. Each one calls out to me as I pass by them throughout the day. The giant sunflower print from his living room now leans against my bedroom wall. Every morning it screams to me *remember.* Three oriental wood panels with lotuses and cranes hung in my bedroom at Papaw's house before he died. They fit perfectly on the empty wall in my hall. They proclaim *addiction*. In my office his paint smothered palette bleeds a cacophony of color. It whimpers *murdered* among muted sunlight.

SMALL TOWN POLITICS:

ELECTION DAY 2014, NORTHEASTERN KENTUCKY

There was a point in my life when I hesitated to vote in elections. I loved the idea of having a say in the way that my county, state, and country were run, and by whom, but when I woke up on Election Day, 2014, I had little faith in anything greater than small town politics. In small towns, you *do* have a say about who is elected; you *do* have the power to vote for your best interests—something that the shadow of G.W.'s second term hadn't quite erased from the hills of my Appalachian home, made toxic by lax environmental standards and poverty. Sometimes *Good Ol Boy Politics* does work in your favor in small towns. I saw this first hand from my cozy front porch. I smelled the sting of fresh asphalt as it infiltrated my nose. The yellow county service lights flickered in my peripherals as I watched the pothole that had caused countless twisted ankles be erased by a Stone brand Wolfpac 2500. In small towns you can get results because the separation between leaders and people are not distanced by corporations and money—our leaders are *us,* more or less. I put up the mayor's campaign sign, bugged him for several months, and he filled in the pothole just after the election—*quid pro quo* for my single vote, I suppose.

Election Day 2014, I had almost forgotten to vote, and then I remembered the small town election that held the most interest for me that year; how I had been told by my mother to take down the sign for the opposing candidate for Judge, and put one up for the incumbent. The opposing candidate was somewhat of a mentor to me in my younger years when I would enter into court rooms with my high school peers and play attorney and witness. Mock Trial was my version of the debate team. I was never good at memorizing facts, but I could recall stories and convey them with emotion. I remember the stale smell of books and lemon oil, the way the

fluorescents gleamed harshly against cherry wood and red velvet as I tottered, self-assured, but young, in the front of the courtroom. Judge Goldstein had even offered to write me a letter of recommendation to law school after he saw our team make it to regional and then state competition. There was part of me that wanted to vote for him simply because he saw something in me. *Nomen est omen* is the notion that one's name is predictive of one's destiny. If nominative determinism holds true, then as a "Lauren" I am likely to be a lawyer. For as long as I can remember—save for fleeting dreams of acting—I have always wanted to practice law. In the fall of 2009, as I readied to enter my Pre-Law program at the University of Louisville, my dreams were put on hiatus when my maternal papaw, Boats, fell and broke his hip. However, despite his fall, I know that he wouldn't have wanted me to be so far away for school. When I received my acceptance letter to university he was the first person I went to, knowing that he would be proud. I pulled out the envelope from my messenger bag that cool spring day and placed it neatly before him anticipating his response.

"Louisville? Ah, Noble, why would ya want to go all the way out there. There's crime in that city," he replied with a brazen tone. I felt instantly defeated and couldn't fathom why he would want me to stay in a town where I had so few opportunities. Looking back, I am glad that I didn't move three hours away in, what would be, the final months of his life. However, the court cases that ensued following his death a quick year later have only fueled my interest in justice and pursing a law degree. In a way, *he* fueled my interest in justice.

I remember Mama with anxiety furrowing her brow, frantically weeding through hospital records and letters as she wished that our attorney was worth a damn. I remember when I was twenty-two and standing up in front of the courtroom when our probate case went to trial nearly four years after Papaw's death and the look on the judge's face when I told him that I was aware

that I was signing over my inheritance. I explained to him that I was aware of the stipulations in the will that granted my cousins a percentage of the money and the property per year of their service as executors. I explained to him that I was aware that at the time that the will was executed my Papaw was heavily addicted and under *duress*. I explained to him that, under the guide of legal counsel, I wanted the entirety of the inheritance to go to my mother in exchange for a small, agreed upon, severance. He asked me if I had anything else to say and I quickly responded, "Yes, your honor," and then turned to the opposing attorney. "Mr. Armstrong, I have called you no fewer than ten times inquiring as to the location of my Papaw's ashes. As your client, Mr. Roonie Helton, is the keeper of my Papaw's remains, I would like the court record to reflect that I am, once again, requesting to know the whereabouts of his body. Your honor, as you can imagine, this has denied me and my mother any semblance of closure. We request that you help us resolve this matter." The attorney was taken aback. The judge inquired as to whether or not this was true and suggested that he accommodate my wishes. It wasn't a victory and it was coincidentally Mr. Armstrong's last case, but the will was finally settled and my Papaw's siblings could no longer claim anything but his body, his remains.

A month before the elections I stood barefoot under the street lights of my neighborhood, as Mama retold the story that I had heard half a dozen times—except now, it mattered. The incumbent judge, "Judge Havens, hates the Heltons," she had said from inside her idling Jeep, "and he cracks down on pill heads." Some fifteen years ago, my great-aunt Punky, Papaw Boats' sister, was the court appointed juvenile officer for our county, and during her tenure she practiced her own small town brand of affluenza. Though the Heltons were one of the original outlaw families in our area, coming from small means and doing whatever they could to climb the teetering social ladder of Boyd County, Punky had gotten a bit of an education and

positioned herself in small town politics—a good place to be for a family convicted of arson and insurance fraud in the 1980s. Punky used her position as juvenile officer to ensure her connections in a town where socioeconomic stratification is marked by who is above the poverty line, not by who actually has any money. Only the doctors, lawyers, and old money hold the wealth in our town. The Heltons conducted themselves much in the way of old money and had since Papaw Boats' youngest sister, Boopie, struck a small coal deposit on her property. The coal was quickly mined out and the arson began because the Heltons, finding that they had all lived beyond their means, were not willing to go back to their small farm houses empty handed.

If they couldn't achieve social mobility through money, Punky would have to ensure their place in the political realm—and so she did by working the system in favor of the connected children brought before her. If a teenager from poor parents came to her she would throw the book at them, ensuring that they received the fiercest punishment possible. But if a wealthy, "connected" child came forward, say for selling drugs at school or being caught intoxicated behind the wheel, Punky would brush it to the side, advocate for them, and take a small step up the social ladder, as the kid's parents thanked her profusely for her selfless service.

When Judge Havens, not coming from social privilege, was elected to circuit, he told Punky not to come back at all, to spend the rest of her term at home. Family lore says that he even called her "a piece of shit." I remember the look on her face when we were standing in Papaw Boats' living room just a month before he died and the way that she demanded my respect when I told her to leave. At this point, the Heltons would not allow me to be alone with my papaw—they would see my green Camry pull into the drive and immediately flock to his house on the golf carts he had bought them. At the time, I didn't realize that they were crafting a narrative of estrangement around my family. Growing up, I paid more respect to my elders than

they probably deserved—I would bashfully tiptoe around the room, eyes cast down, doing whatever they told me to do, but as the days went by and Papaw's addiction worsened, fueled by his siblings' enabling and greed (think five golf carts, think room additions, think new cars for two of them, think thousands of dollars to buy their children and grandchildren Christmas presents—think Mama telling him to use his money on himself, think him spending a month in Las Vegas or getting a lung transplant, think him living for several more years, think him seeing me graduate from college), I began to lose every shred of respect that I held for his siblings.

So when Punky demanded that I respect *her* authority, I laughed in her face: "Where I come from you have to earn respect, and you are nothing to me." I felt delighted as soon as those words escaped my mouth, *delighted* like a child sneaking out of her bedroom to play under the stars of her farm at two o'clock in the morning. She bubbled up, her neck closed in on itself like an angry hen's, and she reached out for my arm, screeching "don't you talk—" But just like that Papaw Boats cut her off. "Punnnk, it's time for you to leave now, go on," boomed his raspy voice from his bedroom and she slithered out of his house shooting me glances like knives. I was unsure if he would stand up for me that day, having never tested those waters before, but something inside me made me feel that it didn't matter. Maybe he was more lucid, less high on OxyContin, maybe Roonie hadn't paid him a visit yet. Later, I would learn that this is how he behaved most of his life, that he cared very little about upsetting people—that his self-respect was so high, there wasn't a person alive he wouldn't stand up to. I don't remember what happened next, or if Papaw ever said anything to me about the scene, but I do recall settling in next to him on his California King mattress to watch *Lonesome Dove*.

Papaw and I had several rituals. Every time *Lonesome Dove*, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, or *Jeremiah Johnson* replayed on AMC, we would pile onto his bed and eat Dots. Our

teeth would make sticky sounds as we gummed the gelatin candy—we both liked the green ones, but he gave me the lion's share. Frequently Mama was there too, but as I think back to those nights, he is the only one I can remember.

There was something about watching my hero die slowly over two years—something about the way addiction changes a person's interactions with loved ones—that made the timid little girl inside of me evolve. After Papaw fell and broke his hip, he was asleep or high much of the time that I spent with him. When the hospital bed got moved into his living room, I sat on the floor while we watched our "Spaghetti Westerns" and I ate Dots alone, choking them down as I heard him wheeze from chronic bronchitis in his sleep. Sometimes he would wake up in shakes, death rattles emerging from his broad chest as he fumbled around for the pill case that his brother packed for him the day before. He'd have me fetch his whiskey or his "vino" and I'd sit around while the concoction took hold before quietly leaving with the door latched tight behind me. I can't say that I knew he was addicted to prescription pills at the time. My papaw had always taken a fair amount of medication and I knew most of them because I would fill his prescriptions at the local pharmacy. What I didn't know at the time was that his brother, Roonie, had a pharmacy ring of his own. After Papaw's death I would find out that Roonie had been bringing eight to ten thousand prescription narcotics into our town a month. There would be police reports, there would be people asking Mama if she was related to him, there would be half a dozen of my high school friends addicted and dead. For several years I felt static. I couldn't move. I went through the motions of life robotically and did the minimum of what I could to get by. I cut the Heltons from my life, I tried to heal, but it wasn't until I allowed myself to reflect that the healing actually took place.

Standing up to Punky while Papaw was still breathing gave me the strength to stand up to the rest of them after his death, after my grief had subsided. It would take several years and the court case before I would feel *whole* again, though I'm not sure that I know what it actually means to feel whole when I glance at the fridge and see Papaw Boats' smiling face glinting back at me. I don't think we ever truly feel whole as adults—maybe the only time we feel complete is when we are children provided for, nurtured, safe. I tell myself that what makes me feel *whole* now is writing my story and having that chance to reflect, but every single day it is a struggle to get the words out and on the page and it forces my proud mind to remember the time when I was most vulnerable. Seeing the Heltons, seeing my Papaw, seeing myself through my perspective now is difficult. It is difficult because I am not so far removed from the memories, removed from the Heltons, so that I could, for a moment, become that girl with her eyes cast down. Every single day I fight that girl—my twenty-something clenched fist meets her trembling cheek, toughens her up through force. That young, sad girl has begun to grow with me, become a part of me. Sometimes I allow her to speak, but on Election Day 2014 that sad girl and I demanded *justice* together on the side of the road.

I spent that morning organizing my life—washing dishes, sorting dirty laundry, drinking tea—and then a glance at social media had me throwing on my makeup three hours earlier than I would have for my night class. A banner at the top of the page questioned as to whether or not I had voted, encouraged me to share my voting status with my friends, and reminded me of the voter's report card that I had received in the mail three weeks prior. Then I remembered the three giant signs outside of the Heltons' "photography" studio (think cover business for the pills) proclaiming the election of Judge Goldstein. I teased up my hair, put on a flowy blouse, grabbed my belongings and called Mama as I made my way to the car. "Hey, have you voted yet?" I

asked her, hoping that she had. Mama told me she was going to go vote with Dad when he got home from work and that my grandmother was calling, so she'd call me back in a bit. I reminded her what she told me about the election in the confidence of the streetlights and idling Jeep weeks before.

With music turned up to vibrate my rearview mirror and the windows rolled down for an unusually warm autumn day, I made my way down I-64 through Northeastern Kentucky to the dying town mall to cast my ballot. As my car neared the polling location, a three foot by five foot sign for Judge Goldstein and the frame of an old man illegally campaigning in front of the polling location came into focus. Goldstein's name was familiar, comforting almost, because he knew me and thought fondly of me in a time when I needed his support; I needed another man to be proud of me in the wake of Papaw's addiction. More familiar than Goldstein's name was the truck that held the giant sign—summers spent climbing in and out of the black Ford bed, dozens of errands run to fetch Papaw Boats' oxygen tanks from the back of the cab—it was Papaw's truck. But the man, wearing tan trousers and a matching windbreaker that reminded me too much of what Papaw would have worn for the same sort of occasion, was Roonie, gray and withered, an imposter.

My pulse quickened and rage bubbled in my stomach at the sight of my Papaw's brother—I immediately fumbled through my purse, eyes half on the road to find my phone and call Mama. As I pulled into the parking lot, four failed phone call attempts later, I dialed my father's number too. I grabbed my purse, stepping out of the car and adjusting my clothes. I began thinking exactly what I might say to either one of them—voice mail, hang up, dial again, voice mail, hang up, dial again, repeat. *Mama, you're not going to believe who I just saw campaigning for Judge Goldstein on the side of the highway.* She'd say, *Who?!,* already having a

faint idea. *Mama, it was that pill-pushing son of a bitch, Roonie*. As I entered the double doors of the mall, still trying to reach Mama or Dad, I hoped that they would pick up as I was walking through a throng of potential voters so that I could make my declaration about Roonie and Judge Goldstein to an audience. If I could sway someone minutes before their ballot was cast, maybe Goldstein would lose. Mama never answered, neither did Dad, but I threw my shoulders back and scanned the polling place to see if there were any more signs of the Heltons. There weren't.

After casting my ballot, and walking back to the car, still trying to call Mama, and hoping that someone would hear me as they walked into the building, I felt a sense of rage and then defeat. I turned down the road, facing the opposite direction of Roonie now, and kept driving, but feeling that I was missing an opportunity. I had given myself the courage to interact with the Heltons under the guise that it was *just another chapter in my book*, and here I was, about to let the opportunity to say something to Roonie slip away in the autumnal breeze. Two U-turns passed by my peripherals, and as the third approached, I hit the brakes and whipped around to the other side of the interstate. The ninety second drive felt like half an hour as I approached the truck once again and Roonie's frame emerged.

As I began to pull towards him, I dug the pocket knife out of my purse and stuck it in my pocket, just in case. I parked on the side of the interstate fifteen feet away from him and slammed the door. My head held high, I took quick, powerful, steps toward him, my spine straight, the pressure of my high heels not fazing me—he saw me coming and turned his head. Stopping just short of him I tensed my body and said in my biggest voice, "Where are my Papaw's ashes?"

Trying to match my strength and attempting to broaden his own shoulders, he muttered, "Get on out of here, I ain't got nothing to say to you."

“You had better have something to say to me, motherfucker. Where are my Papaw’s ashes?” He ignored me, trying to turn his back to me but hesitating, from what I’m not sure; maybe he thought that I would hit him; maybe he couldn’t look at me because he knew what a role he played in my Papaw’s demise, though I doubt it, how could he be that self-aware? His entire pill trade was built on a lack of self-awareness. No one who deals toxic substances can be self-aware, or else they’d realize who they were killing; they’d realize what they had done.

“Leave! Go on,” he said, his voice tremoring.

“Not until you tell me where my Papaw’s ashes are. Do you realize what you have done to me and my mother?”

“I don’t care what I’ve done to you and your mother.”

Wisps of my hair flew with the wind off the interstate. There was a red light. I couldn’t tell if anyone was watching, but I wanted them to. I couldn’t hear anything but the beat of my own pulse emanating from my neck. “You’d better care, you murdered my Papaw.”

Shaken by my statement and obviously unnerved, he stumbled on his words, “Your mother murdered my pap—murdered my brother!”

I laughed at the obviously staged narrative that I had heard echoing through the county gossip chains and reflected in the vitriolic lies of their depositions. Hoping that someone had their windows down, I screamed, “you delusional old man, you over dosed him in the hospital.” His mouth dropped like he’d been kicked in the groin. “Where are my Papaw’s ashes?”

“I’m not telling you anything,” he croaked.

Feeling that my time on the road was over, and knowing that I wasn't getting anywhere with him, but being pleased at causing him pain, I yelled louder, "That's fine, I hope you rot in hell, you lecherous pill-pushing piece of shit."

In a last attempt to salvage some of his dignity, he sneered, "you'll be right there with me."

I laughed as I turned to walk away, "you don't know me." Feeling the gravel crunch beneath my feet, I stomped back to my car as his final shouts were muffled by the passing vehicles.

I started the engine, waited for a few travelers to pass and half on the road, half on the berm I punched the gas toward him, hoping that he would think I was going to hit him, leaving him behind in my rearview. I took the curving road to my parents' house as quickly as I had taken it on those days when I left Papaw's house to drive, just drive and escape the pain of his addiction. Within minutes I was stomping up the stairs to relay the events to Mama. She was amazed that I had the courage to say what I did to Roonie, told me that she would not have been able to do it herself. I responded with my mantra that this was just another chapter in my book and she looked down, *Wow, Lauren.* I retold the story to her twice, and a third time when Dad's sore hips and knees carried him through the front door.

There is no way for me to avenge my Papaw's death; there is no way for me to become the hero of this story. Each interaction that I have with his family will forever become j*ust another chapter in my book*. This phrase, so simple, so self-assured is what the timid little girl holds on to—it's what she has to tell herself, to tell me, in order to cope with the loss of an entire side of her family, and her hero. *Just another chapter in my book* allows me to be an active

participant in my story when I've felt that so much of the story has occurred around me, without me. It keeps them from making me feel less than I am, less than I want to be. *Just another chapter in my book* allows me to be the Hillbilly Heroine that I feel like I have to be in order to justify my Papaw's death. But in reality, it is impossible. The only thing that restores my internal heroics, making me my own hero, will be to excel in what I do; to show them, the Heltons, that despite their best efforts, I *am* fine.

So many of the years leading up to his death and the years following stripped me of my power, made me feel as though I were a helpless little girl, a bystander at a twelve car pileup. I'm not sure if the Heltons really acted out of ill intent toward me, or if it was merely greed that spawned their actions, but one thing that Papaw's death gave to me was the freedom from my own insecurities; the freedom of not being afraid of what others might think or do; the freedom to account for myself. I don't know if I will ever be this Hillbilly Heroine, or if I should be or want to be; I'm not sure that I want anyone else to see me as a heroine of my own story—but by-God, I better see myself as my own heroine because if there is one thing that dealing with the Heltons, the Appalachian clan, has taught me, it's that nobody is going to save you but yourself. So I'll take these lessons that they have so *graciously* given me and I will let them fuel the fire that was started by my Papaw Boats, as my memory of them clouds like the black smoke from a smudge pot.

THE LAST WORD

Appalachia is home to a culturally inflicted patriarchy and an institutionally inflicted perishing work force, both of which contribute to the lack of importance placed on education. There are pill pushers and addicts, there are harsh working environments and even harsher bosses, there are men caught in class-struggle who take their aggression out on their families, and there are women who stay despite. There are greedy brothers and sisters, there are murders, pornographers, and thieves—but there is also hope. Hope in education which I have found in my kitchen working relentlessly on homework. Hope in strong families not bound by greed which hangs in the form of my Papaw's paintings on my walls. Hope in justice which I saw reflected back to me in the cherry wood and dusky velvet of the courtroom. Hope in self-reflection that I and so many other Appalachian women have gained and can gain through writing. Hope in the power of harnessing one's voice, which is exactly what I have done.

When I set out to write this thesis I was not concerned about the image that I would project of my region. I had a story to tell and I felt justified in telling it. My story does not always illustrate the Appalachia that I am proud of, but it is honest. The strained family relationships, the addictions, the injustices, while centered in Appalachia, occur everywhere else in the United States. We are not a region apart. We are not the Other. The only thing that makes us different is the way our vowels are carved in mouths and our mountains carved in a class struggle to feed our families.

In spite of it all, I am thankful for the experiences that I have had in this region. I am thankful for those who have wronged me. I am thankful for every moment of confusion,

frustration, and self-doubt that I have experienced over the last eight years because without them I would not have found my voice.

A hallmark of the Appalachian woman is unyielding strength; the sort of strength that compels women to endure physical, mental, and emotional abuse in an act to provide for their children. The same sort of strength that forces women from silent lives into the education system in an act to nurture their minds and give them agency. The same sort of strength that entices young women to publically confront those who have wronged them. We weren't born that way. We were raised on the Appalachian battle ground. We are the combative mothers, daughters, and sisters of the mountains.

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APPENDIX A

MARSHALL UNIVERSITY
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Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

April 7, 2015

Lauren A. Tussey
340 Edith Alley
Catlettsburg, KY 41129

Dear Ms. Tussey:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract which will be a selection of essays and poems that detail your experiences growing up in Appalachia. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director