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### But Without The Funny Parts

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

BUT WITHOUT THE FUNNY PARTS

submitted by

SARA BARRETT '21

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Bachelor of Arts

2021

Thesis Advisor: Ciaran Berry

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*“Your life is like a soap opera  
but without the funny parts.”*

- A kid from high school

~

*Section 1*

~

## Shocking Accidents

Worn tread slides right  
as her eyelids shut in exhaustion—  
lashes flutter to fit tight.

Tires glide the two-  
door, soft top jeep hard  
into a spineless pine tree.

Tan metal crumples  
into the engine—  
all is still

around the accident.  
Ambulances zoom in, careful  
of black ice hiding on the road.

A navy neck brace  
with flaxen straps stabilizes  
her spine. Before PET scans

and MRI's, doctors ask  
*Could you be pregnant?*

*No.*

A messy watercolor tray  
of bruises, scrapes, and muscle  
aches will last a few days.

*Oh, we did find something  
on one of the scans.*



## Right on Time

Water monsoons from her amniotic sac  
at five-fifteen on a Wednesday morning.  
Lumbar pain seethes  
through her spinal cord.

One centimeter, four centimeters,  
nine centimeters, ten centimeters  
dilated by 5:25 A.M. She wants  
an epidural, the drugs to soothe  
her aching back, but the baby  
is ready to come.

The doctor's blue hospital gown  
crinkles while sitting in target position  
between stir-ups, her legs parted,  
shaking, wide. Creamy latex gloves  
stick over his sweaty palms—  
time to push.

Six pounds, eleven ounces, the baby  
ceases tearing inflamed vaginal walls  
at 5:30 A.M. on 11/11. The mom,  
breathless and relaxed, cradles her daughter  
against her clammy chest and whispers,

“you didn't have to be  
in such a rush.”

## A Misprint

I took my first steps on legs like stacks  
of uncooked biscuit dough. My eyes were baffled  
by the sight of hairy knees, my cochlea filled  
with twelve voices saying: “look, she’s walking!”  
Two steps in and my rolls of fat strained  
to keep my body from wobbling,  
so I reached out to the glass protecting my supple skin  
from being baked to a crisp. My palms  
faced the fierce heat of the flames smoldering  
in the fireplace. A single tear swelled in the welt  
of my eye as I stumbled back and tumbled  
onto the braided carpet in search of balance.  
My skin was scorched, and the epidermis peeled  
back as my nerve endings severed.  
Blood pooled in cylindrical splotches:  
my fingerprints had disappeared.

## My Parents Hoped I'd be a Burglar

### I.

Steel wool scratched  
her decaying epidermis  
every day for one  
month. Her screams echoed  
in the hospital halls,  
and blood dripped  
onto the tile floor.

We gazed at winching  
eyes with each ripping  
razor movement the nurse  
made to heal her skin  
from scar tissue—*now*  
*she may never grow*  
*new fingerprints.*

*It may happen if you wrap*  
*her hands each day:*  
*salve, bandage, sock,*  
instructed the nurse.

### II.

*She would be a great burglar—*  
*the cops couldn't ID her,*  
joked the dad.

*No one could catch her,*  
laughed the mom,  
staring at her chubby toddler.

### III.

While healing, she cradled  
a bottle of formula  
between the soft soles

of her feet. The sweet  
milk supplement coated  
her heat-sensitive tongue  
and would occasionally drip off  
her plump toe and splash  
over her cheeks.

IV.

The story grips  
the heart of the nurse  
in charge: she quits  
and opens a daycare center—

*Helping Hands.*

## Bathroom Lessons

Soap suds were as soothing  
as my great grandma's words:

*You're a princess,  
that's why they named  
you Sara.*

*People will be jealous  
but always be kind,  
even when they  
are not.*

Her deep wrinkled hands  
wiped watermelon  
bubbles up my arms—  
silky gloves made  
me feel protected,  
proper, and proud.

Great Granny Grace's thin  
lips parted wide and filled  
with laughter as I splashed  
water droplets over her light  
purple button down.

That was the last  
time I saw her, us  
smiling together,  
until she was lying  
in a casket—hair  
as white as dove  
soap.

## Bike Crash

### I.

My tire tweaked slightly, hurling  
my first-grader body over the white  
handlebars adorned with cotton-candy  
plastic fringe—shimmering in the wind.

My purple, slightly sparkling helmet  
smacked and snapped against the pavement  
followed by my mouth, knocking  
out a front tooth—my first lost tooth,

truly lost. My orange shirt  
ripped open and showed  
blood rivering down my chest,  
accompanied by a few

scrapes on my palms  
and kneecaps. Wobbling legs carried me  
to mom where my body collapsed  
like lettuce in her arms.

### II.

My boy best friend  
rubbed the peach  
fuzz on my stomach  
with his salty fingers.  
He looked to my mom,  
asking if I'd be okay—  
palm shaking  
from clenching  
the enamel found  
in the curbside seam.

My eyelashes broke their seal  
to see his buzzcut head  
gazing guiltily at my bandage

wrapped torso; we were racing  
when I crashed.

He reached out  
his hand, smiling,  
and spread his fingers:  
my missing tooth.

Linnaeus

The squashed but still squirming cockroach  
lies in the corner lit by an iridescent  
light that flickers whenever the toilet flushes.

Scum ridden clay tiles cradle  
his brown crepe paper exoskeleton.

Nowhere to fly off to, no one  
to exterminate his suffering—  
the A/C blows lightly

through the abandoned dust filming  
the spider web stretched over him,  
somehow safe from the hay fingers

of the janitor's broom. What do you  
think, should we pay him more attention—  
pin dot eyes searching for relief,

small waiving feelers twisted,  
and translucent wings cracked?



## Life Shifts

I.

On my third day of fifth grade, my dad  
picked me up in the car-rider line—  
he never did that. He was always working.  
He drove my brother and me to the house  
he'd moved out of five days earlier  
and said: "Your mother is in the hospital."

His words from a few days before,  
"I have asked your mother for a divorce,"  
were finally drowned out.

For three months, I only heard my mom's voice  
on the phone for two minutes while eating  
with my dad and brothers at Corky's.  
My brothers spoke with her longer,  
her allotted time ran out  
just after it was my turn. I cried  
in the women's bathroom,  
eyes pink and puffy, wondering  
if the sterile smell lined with barbeque  
was anything like what my mom  
was smelling in her hospital bed.

My life was now a series of schedules  
constantly having to be retaught:

Dad moved back in.  
Granny and Grandpa moved in.  
Dad moved back out.

Aunt Marica moved in.  
Granny and Grandpa moved out.

Aunt Tracey moved in.  
Aunt Marcia moved out.

Grammie moved in.  
Aunt Tracey moved out.

Who has soccer practice this day? When is your cast coming off? Who is allergic to kiwi?  
Where is the house key? What bills need to be paid today? Why aren't they talking at school?

Grammie couldn't drive. I got my first cell phone to contact my friends' parents to tote my brothers and I everywhere. They took us to soccer practices. A teacher took us to school. A neighbor took me grocery shopping.

Mom moved back in.  
Grammie moved out.

II.

When we moved to Tennessee, I was three and my room was white—a blank slate. I lived in this realm of possibilities until I came back from vacation when I was four. My dad had painted my room light pink. I loved it. My friends loved it. It gave my creativity direction.

When I was nine, I decided I was not a blush type of girl. I wanted teal, but my parents said no—I wasn't old enough.

The summer before my eleventh birthday, my bedroom walls were painted teal.

Sometimes I see the pink peeking out to say hello. It paints a picture of dance parties and family dinners on my birthday. I imagine screeching in excitement when my dad was finally home on the weekends and confidence in my quirky faces—nose scrunched, eyes wide, tongue curled.

It shows for a moment,  
but quickly gets forgotten.

My friends who have only seen the teal  
are surprised when they learn  
of the pink. We wonder what color my walls  
are now: a cotton candy swirl?

If life were so sweet  
that the blush cheeks and endless adventures  
of the girl who loved her pink room  
could be better known by the people who met  
her once the teal was up.

III.

The rusted spade pierces the soil,  
slowly ripping roots of nearby bushes.  
I rub the dense bulb between my palms  
and notice the smooth exterior encasing  
the potential for new life.

The hole cradles the seed  
that will sprout a tulip when the season  
is right. The soil surrounds  
it with minerals to help it grow.

Now covered with dirt, I must remember  
where it is, so I can water it each day.  
It needs me to keep it safe.

Mid-March the weather warms  
for a couple days, causing the shoot to sprout.  
Every morning, it relishes in the rays  
of the sun—enjoying this time of life.

Nearly at full bloom,  
Thursday night brings a frost  
that freezes the ground  
where the young roots live.

I awake Friday morning  
to wilted petals. I try to revive  
the tulip with a heat lamp and some  
signs of sustenance appear, but suddenly  
fade when the chill breeze  
returns to stay.

The drooping stem weighs down  
my spirits as I can no longer linger  
in the beauty of my pink flower,  
identical to the one that lived inside  
the vase next to my mother's IV drip.

Maybe next year I will plant  
more than one bulb—a community  
of tulips to support each other if the weather  
changes unexpectedly.

Isn't 11:11 Supposed to Be Lucky?

Dad and daughter, birthdays twenty-nine  
years and four days apart; we always celebrate  
in the middle. Eleven and forty, quite a big  
year, so I asked for a little trip  
to Connecticut with a day in New York.

We sang the happy song and split confetti  
chocolate cake by the forkful, sloshed  
down the effervescent root beer—  
a real special treat.

I slipped away to the apartment's only  
bathroom where I noticed a birthday card  
on the wooden bedside table. It was signed:

*I love you forever,  
Diane*

My heart sank to my heels—who  
was Diane and why did she love my dad?

The scratchy but plush living room  
carpet met my knees as I opened  
my gift, maybe with an explanation:  
a hair dryer  
speckled in mermaid teal, majestic  
mountain purple, and toenail pink dots.

From behind my back, I pulled  
out the sentimental card  
and handed it to him:

*Shoot, I forgot to hide that.  
She's just a friend I'm taking  
to New York so her daughter  
can explore someplace new.*

My irises turned grey and glassy  
with tears. So much for turning  
eleven on eleven – eleven .

## Anxious Molds

Tears drop onto hardened  
plexiglass like raindrops rocket  
rooftops—thundering sharp pain  
through my cracked growth plate.

A smile shivers to a frown  
as cotton gauze rubs my right wrist  
hairs, causing the stench  
of sweaty slippers to seep  
from ghostly dry skin.

Fractured bone number three breaks me:  
it is the hand I use to write  
my thoughts out into letters  
and brush my hair after a shower.

Anxiety casts itself in the sulci  
of my brain, lingering,  
suffocating my happiness  
with claustrophobic attacks  
and scattered breathing.

Each time my watercolor  
of emotions bleed together;  
each time I let nerve's teeth chatter,  
anxiety's roots snarl  
deeper into my heart's scaffold.

## Definitions of the Self

I'll burn if I set foot in the church  
and feel persistent judgement from God;  
my goodness is not near the white of birch

bark, at least according to my research.  
I do not wish myself to be a fraud;  
I'll burn if I set foot in the church.

The black pupils of my eyes besmirch  
my name as what I have witnessed leaves me flawed:  
my goodness is not near the white of birch.

I believe my left shoulder served as a perch  
for the Devil as its fingernails clawed  
*I'll burn if I set foot in the church*

into my sunburnt skin. Haunting memories lurch  
forward each time I wonder why bad actions are awed;  
my goodness is not near the white of birch

trees that grow in the brambles of my brain. Search  
the Word to find a confirming nod:  
I'll burn if I set foot in the church—  
my goodness is not near the white of birch.

## The Window

A rainbow of immaculate stained glass  
stared down at me, holding my gaze  
on the children admiring the gash  
in Jesus' hand and feet, sun ablaze

behind the window. Guilt pierced  
my downcast heart as the wood-  
carved pew was exposed to clammy,  
bouncing thighs, that didn't part

when *leave if you don't want to be here*  
boomed from the priest's mouth.  
My mind ached, consumed with fear  
that leaving would mean landing south

of heaven. So I stayed,  
praying to no longer be afraid.



## *Section 2*

~

Spray watercolors  
in a ninety-degree ray  
of sunlight, adrift.

~

## Grandkids, Now Possible

Home alone and unaware  
of this being the start  
of a monthly trend for forty-  
years, I stuffed folded pads  
of toilet paper in my  
underwear in hopes of full  
coverage. Hours melted  
by until mom arrived  
home; I locked the gold  
twist on my doorknob—  
embarrassed for her eyes  
to meet mine.

At 1:30 A.M., I crept  
down the tightly curled carpet  
stairs, tears on the verge  
of boiling over.

*Mom, I started bleeding  
in the bathroom, quivered  
from my lips.*

She pulled purple bordered  
liners from the vanity's  
bottom drawer—  
they've been hiding,  
waiting for me.

*I can finally  
have grandkids, she exclaimed.*

My ovaries cringed.

## Fixed Eyebrows

Embarrassment loomed  
when I was fourteen  
as two toddler caterpillars,  
fuzzy and untamed,  
lived above my eyes.  
As they grew, antennae  
threatened to touch.

Hot, smoldering wax  
entered my life—  
*it's relaxing,*  
the beautician  
said. Friends said  
it doesn't hurt.  
Lies.

Classical and meditative  
music drifting into my ears  
didn't cease the spank  
of ripping dead skin  
and hairs between  
my brow and eyelid.

“So much better,”  
exclaimed the beautician.

The mirror showed  
red splotches dotting  
my t-zone and only calligraphic  
marker lines of brows remaining—

they curved,  
skeptical.

## Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease

Blistering sores swallowed my mouth and throat  
making me miss my first week of high school,  
making me one of the kids I always called a slacker.

I got sick sticking puzzle pieces together  
and eating pizza and grapes with toddlers  
who unknowingly carry this disease in their touch.

Words hurt coming out of my mouth  
as spit would sizzle on the sores, so milk  
of magnesia—pink and minty coating—was my refuge.

I sent emails to teachers and coaches, asking what I'd missed:  
the entire basics of French 101: *Je ne sais pas*,  
and a starting position in the first soccer game.

My limbs were limp whenever I tried to walk  
to get milk or wash my face. Brushing my teeth  
was the worst as toothpaste hid in the inflamed cavities

of my gums and was followed by warm salt  
water rinses: a two-for-one of pain. Three doctors  
saw me and said I should start to feel better

soon after the sores melted back into my oral mucosa.  
Blistering sores swallowed my mouth and throat,  
making me realize my dependence on being perfect:

the perfect student, the perfect athlete,  
the perfect friend, the perfect daughter.

## Mercy of an English Teacher

“Build out this idea  
more” was written  
in green ink at the end  
of an arrow pointing  
to the one-inch margin  
of my paper.

Thank goodness  
he used a green pen  
or else my thoughts  
would have been bleeding  
every two lines.

Red and green combined  
signal a season of joy  
and giving, but alone  
one signals stop  
and the other, go.

He told me to keep going,  
to keep getting better.

## Maggie's Observations of my 1st Boyfriend

Are you and him dating?  
It seems like y'all are—  
always sitting side-by-side  
at the desk, quietly giggling  
before lunch, and filling your water  
bottles at the bubbling fountain after.

He stares at you,  
constantly willing the back  
of your head to turn  
towards him. I bet  
y'all text until two A.M.  
most nights.

You have to be crushing  
on him—he's so cute  
with that goofy smile  
filled with mini-rectangular  
teeth. So come on,  
has he asked you out yet?

Taraxacum Erythrospermum

*Make a wish on me*

whispers the white tuft  
of pappus: a solitary  
disk shaped parachute  
craving an adventure.

Her basal leaves,  
low on the hollow  
stem base want to fly

but don't realize only  
the red seeded pods  
make haste into the world.

*Make a wish on me*

mumble the transparent-

when-sun-touched-flowers  
hoping for travel,  
a change in soil  
with nutrient rich roots:  
nitrogen, calcium, sulfur.

*Blow me into life*

*so my stem can meet death,*  
a desire to be narrowly

and deeply lobed  
in the unreliable  
relationship of change.

100 Proof

The bullheaded ram—horns curled under  
and round as cherry wood when touched

by a Morakniv hook knife—hits its thick  
skull on the same rocks over and over

again hoping that spindly roots clinging to the sheer  
cliff will collapse and thunder under his hooves.

He's my father, an example of why I never  
taste the bitter wheat of beer or fierce burn

of Tennessee whiskey two days in a row. Frozen  
Vodka bottles lined the top freezer shelf except

on the weekends when goodnight kisses wafted  
with fermented grapes and methylated spirits,

and our family picture fell as he stumbled  
into the eggshell wall. My finger traced

the car accident's scars, hidden in his coarse hair,  
infinite times as I hugged him tight each morning

he left for work. He's the shoulder that carried me  
at the park, to bed from the couch, yet he's my best

example of what not to do. If I drove with a drop  
of alcohol encased in my spit and crashed—hard—

he would never forgive me nor  
himself just the same.



## Splintered Solace

Mosquitoes taste my O-negative  
blood laced with sweat  
as I sit on the once stable  
bench, now scratchy to my supple skin.

The cerulean bottoms  
of my Asics know each slat of knotted  
wood creating the path  
to the overgrown gazebo at Johnson Park.

The grain is warped  
with the tears that smeared  
my mother's ring finger  
enough to remove the wedding band

that left a tan line  
as noticeable as the moss  
growing under my trembling  
feet. My legs slide toward the pond

with a stumble. The bees swarm  
around my head—family  
is fickle. Love is confusion.  
White tailed deer are no longer

accompanied by grey herons,  
wood ducks, chipmunks, or striped  
bass. I sit on the railing—three spindles  
high—and recollect the picturesque

habitat I knew for ten years.  
My shaky hand hides the initials  
TB+AB carved into the battered  
beam that supports my weight.

Maples, Oaks, and Evergreens  
overwhelm the aroma of dead  
bugs plastered around me: no longer living  
life as they knew it. The breath gliding

from my lips to my lungs shakes  
the posts pointing towards the canopy  
causing me to look up: cirrus clouds  
soften the sun. A toddler waddles over

the cracks and falls. The spider swinging  
down to greet him causes gleeful laughter,  
awakening the decaying shelter.

That young boy lives in the back

of my mind as I divorce unwanted emotions  
so I can appreciate the pickerel flowers blooming  
upon the six-year anniversary of my return  
to a four-person household, once a home for five.

## It Only Grows

My first heartbreak was high  
school love gone wrong.  
His chapped lips met mine for the last time  
Tuesday night where the couch cushions broke  
and the rom-com buzzed of love.  
It didn't break neatly into puzzle  
pieces, but shattered  
into sand.

How to heat the grains into glass  
is a skill I needed to learn  
so someone new could see through.

Teens are expected to break down  
entire pints of ice cream, but their hearts  
have more depth than parents picture.  
So, when my dad said I never  
really loved the boy because we'd only dated  
a year, I realized my dad had broken my heart  
for the first time.

My parents had a broken love  
that gave my mom staggered strength  
and a bond with her kids built  
on healing crushed trust.

Each shoulder squeeze and song  
of laughter added another grain  
of melting sand, reshaping  
my heart, ready for someone to look  
in and help it grow.

## Cookie Girl

I brought them to school  
to give away to teachers  
and classmates, to add a sweet  
spot to a salty day.

Most greeted me with a thank-  
you or that they were on a diet.  
Yet, one kid made me invisible.

We had classes together since  
Wright's first-grade Wranglers  
to eleventh-grade APUSH:  
he never learned my name  
and termed me:  
cookie girl.

I baked to make others smile  
wide, not to lose myself,  
but to feel like people  
needed me too.

Davalia Fejeensis

Furry-footed oddity—  
rhizomes reaping nutrients  
for light, airy foliage  
under bright but indirect  
sunlight. Rabbit foot fern,  
grasshoppers and beetles  
yearn silently for your creative  
leaves—like fingers  
making shadow puppets.

You and your cousins grow  
around the world: Tropic  
to Arctic, supporting wildlife  
scenes with timid roots, holding  
natural habitats snug together—  
making a beautiful world,  
behind the scenes forever.

## Dented Shin

### I.

The purple tread of a sneaker  
slips along the damp wood  
bench, my left leg flung  
up under, smacking  
the sharp corner.

Red splotches form  
like a border around the dent  
now in my shin.

*It can't be too brutal  
if I can walk.*

Mountains of bruises  
grow and fall for months  
as cross-country races  
and ten mile runs go on.

*It must be fine.*

### II.

The rubber red track  
behind the local elementary  
school brings the pain  
right back—the pellets  
aren't soft enough.

X-ray after X-ray, two  
MRIs, a bone scan: nothing.  
A blood test shows  
inflammation levels over  
three hundred.

*It's not all in my head.*

Running is done  
for now.  
I'll give it a year  
and try again  
with a short series  
of interval runs,  
building up speed  
and distance.

III.

Six years from now,  
it will still hurt  
when jogging  
more than  
two miles.

## The Discovery of Lordosis

A sore neck aching  
to be cracked pestered  
me during a five A.M.  
homework and cereal session.  
I rolled my skull on the pivot  
of my spine, slowly  
down to the left  
and curling up  
to my right shoulder—  
interrupted by a pop  
sounding like a balloon  
exploding and feeling  
like a lawnmower shot  
a rock into my neck.

My head froze, staring  
straight into the olive  
dining room. I tried to turn  
more than my eyes  
in another direction. Tense  
twinges tamed my will  
to move anywhere  
but to my mom.

*Can you lift your arms  
above your head?* she asked,  
panicked from the shower.  
Biceps pushed them straight  
to a ninety-degree-angle  
until my deltoids stung  
with stark immobility.  
A Charlie horse seized  
my upper body.

*We're going to the ER, now,*  
she screamed.



## Wisdom Teeth: the Aftermath

I fell asleep to talk  
of lobsters on my blanket  
and awoke to something  
hiding in my fist: pulled  
wisdom teeth—two were cracked  
open for removal due to their massive  
size. I felt my lips cut  
at the corners, the dentist  
needed to expand my mouth.

*I said I can walk  
to the car myself, pushing  
away my dad's arm  
and tripping down the curb.*

Once home, my brother  
tried to feed me smooth  
chocolate pudding until  
I stole the spoon and force-  
fed my chin while crying  
tears of genuine sorrow  
at my lack of ability to smile.

The filter between my thoughts  
and mouth was muddled:  
I said *shit* instead of *shoot*  
and explained a man's  
anatomy to my mother.

Sleep and milkshakes consumed  
with a baby-sized spoon  
were my life for three  
days where time was measured  
by oxycontin and anti-nausea pills.

At least, that's all  
I can remember.

## Half Marathon: Take 2

Temperature sustained in the mid-fifties  
with an overcast, cloud winking  
sky gazing over us: race day.  
My black, lint-dusted sweatpants  
come off minutes

before the gun shoots go.  
*I can do better than in May: eight  
minute miles today, not ten.*

After seven point four miles  
of Asics pounding the paved  
streets of Memphis,  
scenes of jazz murals  
and parking lots full of people  
cheering for us so-called  
“St. Jude Hero’s,”  
I look up.

Youthful eyes stare down  
from hospital rooms as I run  
through the campus.

Hands clap above  
their heads, but their hearts  
long to be running  
next to me, to be sweaty  
from exercise, not fevers  
breaking. Or to feel  
the ribbon snap  
around their waist at the finish  
line rather than needles  
poke into veins, bulging  
in their elbow creases.

I smile up to them,  
standing behind the large windows,  
knowing it’s not enough.

## Hiding the Pain

Flames burn  
through my left breast,  
shriveling layers of skin,  
melting globs of fat,  
turning the erect nipple  
to ash. The fire exposes  
my heart, beat-up  
and bruised from throbbing  
dun-duh, dun-duh  
when it needs to race  
dun-dun-duh, dun-dun-duh,  
skipping a feeling. Heat  
crisps and blackens  
the light pink and white  
sinews, suffocates the blood  
flowing through the pump,  
now numb—  
    still burning.

### *Section 3*

~

Carnations curl in  
as petals fall. Stems lean left,  
fragrant white flora.

~

## Macie's Perspective of Us Becoming Friends

Sara sat in the chapel chasing  
the sun with her eyes, so I sat  
next to her, scooching to the middle  
of the center-facing wood-carved pew.

Shuffling out to the cloister  
post the final *Amen*, she stood  
quietly, observing people eating.

Turning around minutes  
later, I couldn't find her crouched  
in the archway saying brief  
"how are you's" to strangers,  
making small talk.

*That's sad, I really wanted  
her to be my friend, I thought.*

A few days later, walking  
towards Crescent Street,  
she called my name and greeted  
me with a hug.

I smiled as we sat eating  
chocolate chip cookies  
and writing a prayer  
about friendship.

## Who Is He?

I'd seen him once  
before, we have a picture  
together, crouching  
down at a birthday  
dinner, his tan skin  
accented by a light  
blue button down. I  
never got his name.

Slow motion around  
him, like in the movies,  
didn't happen  
the first time, but late  
on a fall Friday night—

our hazel eyes locked  
across Vernon Street.  
He sat on a stumpy  
wall in khaki shorts,  
mud-stained white  
converse and a three  
quarter sleeve blue  
baseball t-shirt.

He was the only  
memorable picture  
my brain captured.

## You Only Get One Sting

Your feet dance around the honeycomb  
floor, sticky with soul, flashing  
one-step and two-steps to impress  
a mate with the perfect yellow and black  
striping and fuzz hairdo.

You're sweet as glucose  
and have the power to force  
a human to run, arms flapping  
in the air and high squeals  
of fear escaping their gateway gums.

We're sure you'll plant your stinger  
in our skin, but you only get one sting:  
why do we assume you'll waste  
it on us, die for us?

Christmas Break, 2017

Living in a suburban house—  
malted bricks with four white  
colonial columns—surrounded  
by people who look  
just like me never felt complex  
until leaving and coming back.

White people in church,  
classrooms, dotting water  
parks. How did I not see  
this before?

College handed me a magnifying  
glass to see my background  
clearly. My sight expanded  
with instinct responses  
to colors and careers,  
and conversations  
about sex and gender:  
she, he, they, ze.

The small auditorium's  
blue cloth seats stayed  
mostly empty when Pride  
parade and Black Lives Matter  
protest pictures shone from the projector.

Responsibility for my privilege  
was echoing on social media  
in 140 characters or less,  
through video testimonies,  
and in conversations with friends  
under the elms.

I'd avoided it before.



## Review the Facts

Stripped naked and forced  
to sit and wait  
for the magnification  
of each mole on my body,  
I think of the smeared  
ink on my family health  
history form:

*melanoma: pre-cancerous*  
If yes, please specify: Dad

My neurons try to remember  
what the tri-folded  
pamphlets in the waiting  
room said: *the doctor*  
*will use a dermatoscope*  
*to methodically search for*  
*the following in an examination:*

- A: *Asymmetry* :: flag it
- B: *Border – Irregular* :: flag it
- C: *Color – Multiple in one mole* :: flag it
- D: *Diameter – Greater than 6mm* :: flag it

If the mole is an *atypical nevus*,  
I'm safe, and if it's  
a *lentigo maligna*,  
it's just a *sun spot*  
*with melena sites*.  
Yet, the *ugly duckling rule*  
can overrule my comforts:

*Please let them all look the same!*

*Melanoma In Situ*  
is simply superficial.  
*Malignant melanoma*  
means I have skin cancer—

tan to heavily pigmented  
splotches or pink  
*liver spots* are signs.

*A-melanotic melanoma* is rare;  
rather invisible and easily undetected.

*Metastatic melanoma*  
means it is spreading  
through the body  
like spilled calligraphy ink,  
flowing mercilessly  
while blotching out  
every influential cell that...

*Knock. Knock.*

The medical exam paper  
crinkles as my clammy  
thighs clench and my goosebump-  
lined body freezes when the blur  
of the doctor's white coat  
disturbs my worries.  
“Lets begin.”

## Stoplight Secrets

Three years in the hiding,  
and this little gem,  
a true diamond,

stayed buried in a courthouse  
until released under  
the pressure of a red light

and an ex's engagement.  
Dad's black chevy stopped  
at the crossroad of lies

and wasted time. The Ford  
dealership's American Flag  
hung neckless in the flat

air perpendicular to the—  
*Diane and I are married*—  
right. Dad's girlfriend

to step-mom, only a title  
change, like updated  
tags on a license. *Do you*

*have any questions?* He lied,  
again, so our trust is at yellow.  
The light turned green, his time to go  
try again.

At a Meeting, Four Months Later

There he was, under  
a stained-glass window,  
among wooden pews,  
kneeling on a purple  
puff of meditation  
mat in front of the altar.

We'd signed up  
for a Spring Break  
hike in England.

The drive in the black limo bus  
from the chapel to the airport  
was silent, filled with bouncing  
knees and texts updating  
parents before service was lost.

We finally spoke  
when arguing about the name  
of the blue and yellow  
pretzel shop in JFK's  
food court. This was the start  
of our first trip together.

*Will there be more to come?*

## The Pilgrimage

A silver loop is coiled  
around my finger. Eye-lit  
slits of two twisted bands  
create rigid bumps in my skin.  
An artist's craftmanship  
is found on the Holy Isle  
in a store near St. Cuthbert's church,  
fifty miles from Durham. Murky  
skies cover my group of weary  
travelers en route to Lindisfarne.  
My foot slips off the cliff's  
edge and drowns  
in the water's waves as we fight  
our way across the rain-pelted road  
at the end of low tide.

The straight journey circles back:  
the same places we'd hiked  
in joyful speech and silent meditations  
over five days seemed so short  
as we drove back through.  
On my right hand, my ring—  
slightly too big—sparks  
the memory of mud-covered hiking  
boots squishing into the hillside  
and the sound of laughter  
among my fellow pilgrims,  
with each correcting spin.

## Hidden Leg

My left leg was smothered  
in black foam, metal,  
and velcro for three  
sun-baked summer  
months. The height  
of the boot's base  
displaced my rotating  
hip: a chiropractor  
answered with crackles  
and pops.

Tan lines, a knee  
cap circle from my brace  
and a straight toe  
line from my boot,  
tattooed me. Salty musk  
clouded around me.

I still feel the pins  
and needles in my skin  
when the weather  
changes from warm to wet.  
The boot sits on the floor  
of my closet, and the knee  
brace lies under my bed,  
waiting.

## Convent Fieldtrips

Jean jumpsuits and blue  
veiled hard hats are not  
how I imagined nuns  
until one swung  
from a tree, chainsaw  
revving.

Never had I thought  
I'd haul trees to chippers  
with my academic advisor  
while studying medieval  
women writers.

The nuns crafted fine  
furniture to sell and farm  
stalls for cows and goats  
from the uprooted birch  
and burned fires in the bedrooms,  
saplings whistling.

Once chemists and ER nurses,  
they invite us among them now:  
dirty and sore,  
singing chants and breaking  
fast at sunrise.

## *Section 4*

~

Snow shivers in sun.  
Sun melts with the moon of dusk.  
Dusk dies as stars shine.

~



## Naked to Judgement

I.

Was it my fault?  
Many people, specifically  
men with crinkled  
brows, said it was—

if I hadn't opened  
the dorm room's  
door, he wouldn't  
have pushed in.

Campus Police said  
I should have called  
immediately—

I immediately  
ran, step after step,  
to feel safe,  
like being wrapped  
in a blanket,  
and distanced  
from the naked  
stranger, asleep  
and drunk in my bed.

II.

It was not my fault  
that an alum,  
with no keycard access,  
stood at my door banging  
his palm against the wood  
at eight A.M.  
on a Sunday morning.

I found a wristband  
colored with electric  
blue and neon orange

goldfish ripped next  
to my bed.

Tears drowned it.

*Wow, he's still  
such a partier.  
That was such  
a him-thing  
to do, isn't it  
hilarious!*

My boyfriend stripped  
the yellow sheets  
and washed them, twice,  
on high heat.

He held my quivering  
hand as I fell asleep  
on lavender Lysol  
doused pillows—

unable to remove  
99.9 percent of my fear.

*Be careful what you go  
public with, alums fight  
against a tarnished  
reputation.*

III.

Deans and the Head  
of Security scheduled  
a meeting: they  
said he was prohibited  
from Trinity.

His frat house is considered  
off campus—only across  
the street.

An Instagram post  
of him posing in front  
of the chapel proves  
he's been here since.

They said the Title IX  
coordinator would reach  
out with a supporting  
ear to talk to.

Zero contact  
was made:

no counseling center numbers,  
no "My Rights, My Options" booklet,

*nothing.*

My RA was  
never notified.

IV.

Those supporting me,  
professors and peers,  
said I should sue,  
make a ruckus.

I only asked  
for an  
*"I'm sorry."*

The Dean's office  
promised one,

and praised me  
for silence.

They emailed  
him once.

Seven months passed.

I recommended asking the frat  
for his updated contact card:

he responded  
in an hour.

A thank you.

His phone number  
was included  
if *I wanted*  
*to reach out.*

It haunts  
the motherboard  
of my computer.

V.

What if people knew  
that wasn't the first  
incident twisting  
my daily routine  
on repeat like wringing  
out a soaked towel.

Not even the first  
at Trinity.

Would people have laughed,  
pleasure bubbling from their bellies,  
hearing a "supposed friend"  
presented one-hundred dollars  
when I refused to sleep  
with him freshman year?

Or that my **no**  
meant he'd hold  
me down—

my wrists pinned  
to the pillow,

his nails digging  
into my veins.

My knee cracked  
his scrotum.

I ran away.

They would say  
not to blame him:

*Boys will be boys,  
he was drunk...  
why were you there?*

Why would I ask  
for rape?

Why would I lie  
about assault?

I was seventeen  
when he pulled down  
his khaki shorts,  
grabbed my hand,  
and yanked  
until cuming.

We were in a hammock.

Just because my clothes  
covered me, doesn't make  
it okay.

My brain reminds  
me of it every few  
nightmares.

VI.

I'm tired  
of hiding

behind oversized  
sweatshirts that disguise  
my figure and skinny  
jeans that are tough  
to pull off.

I've taken time  
to process  
and ask for help.

I still jump  
and feel  
my heart freeze  
at the sound  
of knocking.

I won't live  
behind an empty  
smile anymore.

I'm sharing  
for those who  
turn, scared,  
at a leaf  
blowing along  
while walking  
alone.

Who are embarrassed  
to stare into their own  
eyes in a mirror.

Who are left  
to fight  
for themselves.

## VII.

TrinSurvivors  
serves as an anonymous  
platform for over  
two-hundred  
voices.

I read three  
posts a day  
all summer.

Affirmations stand  
in solidarity  
against a teal  
and purple watercolor  
backdrop before  
every story.

“No Pity. No Shame. No Silence.”

“You did absolutely  
nothing to deserve it.”

“You are not overreacting.”

“You are allowed  
to feel whatever  
you feel.”

“You deserve to feel safe.”

“You do not  
need to find lessons  
in your trauma.”

“I believe you.”

“When people doubt  
you or dismiss you;  
I am with you.”

**“This is not a new problem.”**

VIII.

Violations  
are everywhere—

suffocating under  
a boulder of social stigmas—

clawing their way out  
into everyday conversations.

IX.

My voice is booming,  
**Listen.**





## An Intimate Silence

Tjeltveit: his last name of Norwegian descent  
is seen beside “Good morning, love bug” each sunrise.  
Upon introducing him to my family, I chose to present  
his name as sounding like “shark bait”: a compromise  
from initially including “ooo ha ha,” referencing *Nemo*.  
I took him from the Peabody Hotel to Central Barbeque  
and ended our tour of Memphis with a yellow  
lemon cupcake under tart blueberry frosting: a brand-new  
flavor at Muddy’s Bake Shop in Overton Square.  
Our sunburnt cheeks basked in the sun-lit patio  
as our eyes spoke when not a sound touched the air:  
a tender memory my heart won’t let go.

As we approach the celebration of our second year  
together, our silent moments remain just as sincere.

## Finding a Balance

Catch a flight from Hartford to Chattanooga: older brother's college graduation. Work on finals at the Airbnb.

Catch a flight from Chattanooga to Hartford. Take two exams on Tuesday, go to grandparent's on Wednesday. Catch a train to New York Thursday morning, the South African Consulate awaits approving my visa.

Write a twenty-page paper on the train back to Hartford.

Pack up dorm room, move out. Catch a flight from Hartford to Memphis: little brother's high school graduation. Drive from Memphis to Chattanooga: older brother's wedding. Catch a flight from Chattanooga to Hartford. Move into summer housing. Work two jobs for one month. Move out of summer housing. My family flies from Memphis to Hartford, and we spend the fourth of July sparking fireworks in my aunt's backyard. They drive me to JFK the next day where I catch a flight from New York to Cape Town.

I land, unpack my two suitcases, and take a deep breath.

## Effects of Poaching at Chobe National Park

How do I forget the crimson tears shaped like dried  
glue globs dripping from the dead mother's opened eyes,  
the dilated pupils fixed to where her calf once stood?

How do I forget the rigid blade marks surrounding leaking  
layers of pus-filled tissue and muscle scabbing  
over with blood and sand where her trunk once hung?

How do I forget the swarm of buzzing gnats  
around the decomposing face and the crisp flakes  
peeling up from the lack of mud on her sunburnt skin?

How do I forget the other tourists taking pictures  
of her as we hear that *she's been here a week; the herd  
stayed near for three days until they needed water?*

How do I forget the fact that one day I will  
forget the miniscule details currently engrained  
in my mind and that her herd doesn't have that option?

## Devil's Pool

*"I've set my rainbow in the clouds and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Genesis 9:13*

My arms stretch out past  
the rocky wall of Devil's pool  
as an olive nylon spandex blend suction  
my body's waist to Victoria's edge,  
keeping me from spilling over into Hell.

The Zambezi River holds me up in stratus  
clouds of pure adrenaline and calm  
ripples of hippos mating 100 yards  
away—love making in God's sight

and baptismal fluids. My abdomen stays  
taut to rocks in the naturally made,  
human consumed purgatory. The stomp  
of elephant feet in a male tusk tumble  
quickens the raging rapid's quest to plunge

me into the outcroppings currents,  
three-hundred-fifty-four feet below.

The guide's arm catches my ankle, tense  
around saturated skin, and pulls  
me back to tranquil waters—halo ring  
still wound to my right hand—as sun and spray

display the arch of a rainbow, sealing  
the waterfall's drooling crest.

## Supply Shortage and Secret Steps

At a hilltop rest stop  
in the middle of Virginia,  
the problem shines as bright  
as the traffic signs flashing  
*stay home, save lives.*

I watch the janitor clean the restroom  
while only wearing a flimsy  
bandana to cover his nose and mouth.

I pull an empty sandwich bag from my purse.  
First a mask goes in, then a travel-sized  
hand sanitizer. Writing *thank you* on the baggie,  
I lay it on his cleaning cart, walk  
back to my car, and drive away.

This man is disinfecting  
the toilets every fifteen minutes  
so people like me, needing to travel,  
can do so safely.

*Who is protecting him?*

## Going Blind

We went prepared,  
my step-sister  
and I: water bottles,  
signs, umbrellas  
to mask the 101  
degree sun, and masks  
to stop the pandemic  
from infecting us.  
Thirty minutes in,  
we were learning  
a lot—but my vision  
started to wander off

into blackness.  
Splotches blurred  
my view of a field  
filled with people:  
under thirty seconds  
later, my sight  
was gone.

I stood and listened  
to speeches on economic  
separation, black teens  
speaking about walking  
through town watching  
people cross the street  
when they are seen—  
how they are afraid  
of getting murdered  
because of their skin.  
A call for continued  
education and self-analysis.

I poured water over  
my wrists in case  
I was overheated,  
but stayed there:

I didn't want  
to be blind  
to the message.



## Behind the Isolations

Life is constantly stepping barefoot  
on Legos scattered over carpet.

You scream out in agony, begging  
someone beyond your clasped front  
door to ask how you're holding up

in hopes of your pain having company.  
But, it's not safe to go outside  
unless for essential reasons: walking

your dog, grocery shopping, filling  
prescriptions in the drive-thru, emergencies.

You prick a foot every day, never picking  
up the Legos: they make you feel something.

TJsomething

He's the feeling of security  
when the mirror falling  
at two A.M. sounds like a break  
in: *you're okay, you're safe,*  
*I'm here.*

He is the sound of tea  
steeping, pages turning,  
and footsteps hiking—occasionally  
singing *she's so lovely*  
or crying at gum commercials.

He's the taste of peanut  
butter and jelly at lunch.  
His lips more salty  
than sweet and often dry.

He is the smell of old  
spice pomade, crest toothpaste,  
and pine trees in the snow. Paprika  
and garlic waft around  
him while cooking us dinner.

He's the sight that brings  
a smile to my cheeks,  
and dances with his shoulders  
while jumping to the drum beat,  
a head that turns when scratched.

The touch of his pinky twisting  
around mine is firm,  
guiding our hands to our lips,  
pulling our faces close.  
We whisper promises

before kissing the nail  
on our thumbs—  
a secret sealed.

## Writing a Thesis

I've tried to write  
poems set in mosquito  
ridden woods or based  
on plant petals scattering  
in the wind's current. I've  
tried to consider the way  
shoes leave different tread  
marks and how bugs  
may burrow inside the shapes,  
wiggling or crawling  
to the edges. I've tried  
to focus on the placement  
of people's hands when sleeping,  
fighting, thinking, throwing  
a ball, holding a fork, painting  
their nails, to see what objects  
they lie on, which muscles  
and tendons flex, how fingerprints  
stain cookie dough.

I've tried jotting notes,  
my pen clicking quick  
when an idea hits, and carrying  
a brown college-ruled  
moleskin notebook  
in my canvas tote whenever  
I leave my room. I've tried  
to bring the world into my writing  
and my writing into the world.

## Afterword

“The seemingly autobiographical” is a phrase Professor Berry taught me to use when describing Sharon Old’s collection, *Stag’s Leap*, and it is an expression I hope people will use after reading my thesis, too. Non-Fiction and poetry are my two favorite genres to read and to write, so I approached writing my thesis with the idea that I wanted to write a memoir through poetry. Putting twenty-two years of moments into seventy-four pages of poetry was challenging, but what proved more difficult was recollecting the memories and listing them chronologically. Having this list while I was deeply immersed in the creative process made writing much easier for me because I already had the ideas and details, I just needed to express them in a way that sounded right. Yet, I quickly learned that the process of writing a thesis goes way past the initial phase of getting your ideas onto the paper.

While I’m writing this afterword, I’m simultaneously finishing my second round of edits on all of my poems which took two days and a ton of green and blue pen ink. In my mind, this second round would be met with a few phrase changes or word choice selections, but I ended up completely rewriting two of my poems and changing the order of the collection. Earlier I mentioned that the collection is organized chronologically to follow the style of a memoir, but I wanted to add in breaks for my reader. These poems are metaphors based on flora and fauna that I have encountered in my life. There is one comparing cockroaches to bullying and another where a fern does not receive credit for constantly working behind the scenes. In addition to these, I surprised myself and ended up breaking my collection into four sections with the use of three “pauses.” For these section breaks, I wanted to give my readers a moment to breathe and process what they had just read and realize that there is either a change in time or change in intensity occurring within the collection. Some haikus I wrote for fun to help cure a day of writer’s block now fill these breaks to add a calming, nature centered rest.

One of my favorite things to do while reading poetry is to pause after an intense poem or after a striking end line. In A.E. Stallings’s book, *Like*, the poem “Crow, Gentleman” ends with the fantastic line: “And death a dainty snack.” When I read that line, I put the book down, pulled my glasses up into my hair, and sat for a minute. Stallings took this terrifying yet inescapable and permanent concept of death and compared it to something you have at a fancy tea. Once I’d realized the depth of this line, I’d continued to reread it to understand the connection to the rest of the poem. If I’m honest, I’m not sure what the connection is even having read it multiple times, but I do know that I found that ending to be stimulating, and it helped to incite new ideas for my endings.

Some of the inspiration for my collection lies with poets like Sharon Olds and Ada Limón who talk about the personal and the body in their poetry. Through courses and in my free time, I have been studying these poems for nearly two years and am constantly in awe at how they tell their own stories through poetry. For example, Olds wrote about her divorce in *Stag’s Leap* which was eye opening for me when writing poems about my parent’s divorce. She focuses on tiny details about her ex-husband’s skin and compares her emotions to burning an easel which

adds depth to a seemingly straightforward story. The first time I read this collection by Olds, I was convinced it was completely true and factual; upon rereading it a couple of months ago, I found myself questioning some of the moments because of what I now know about her as a person and an author. This is where the reader can approach the collection from the perspective of the seemingly autobiographical and question the details. How did Old's changing a description make it better for the poem overall? How true does poetry need to be?

I admit all of my poems are based on real events or emotions, but not all the details are true. Sometimes this is because I didn't remember the moment or specific detail, but other times, it is because I changed an element to meet the needs of the poem. You may be wondering how a poem needs to go in a certain direction, so I'll give you an example. My poem titled "Hiding the Pain" was originally written about how it feels to type on a computer when brainstorming; however, it is now about managing pain and anxiousness. The phrase "flames burn" is what transformed this poem into what it currently is, because it was my strongest phrase from the original draft. I felt the urge to put those two words first and see where they would lead me in a poem. It was the only one I wrote for my thesis where I didn't know the outcome or emotion I wanted to express while writing it. This process was enjoyable because I was able to listen to the sounds coming from the poem and build upon the imagery of something burning. For many of my other poems, my process began with a specific form like a villanelle, sestina, sonnet, or syllable count. I would then break from the form in my editing process to either narrow the poem down to the strongest images or expand the poem to give it more room to breathe and release the tension created.

The editing process is where I developed stronger connections to the poetry in my collection and realized certain themes emerging. At the beginning of April, I had a workshop meeting with Professor Berry to go over my work, and in response to one of my poem titles, he said something along the lines of "ah pain, your favorite thing to write about. Emotional pain, broken bones, blood. It is all throughout your collection." This comment, while surprising, validated my poems in a way because I intentionally focused on more intense and dark stories in my initial phase of writing. It also inspired me to change my title to "But Without the Funny Parts" which seems very fitting for the collection. Something I want to highlight, though, is that there is laughter and happiness found in pockets of my thesis. The idea of making someone read over seventy pages of despair and gloom did not seem optimal, so that is why I included the pauses and flora/fauna poems discussed earlier. I hope this collection is enjoyable and entertaining and leaves you thinking about moments in your own life. While some of the stories are very specific, I worked to write them in a universal way. If you find yourself wandering off into your own thoughts or taking moments to breathe while reading my thesis, then I have achieved what I intended.

This goal is one of the reasons I chose to write about and grapple with hardships from my life. I have this theory that pain is more universal and trustworthy than happiness because pain is steadfast, so it is grieved over and coped with. Yet happiness can abruptly become pain. While this may appear pessimistic, I find it encouraging because I thought about the joyous and

amusing moments in my life more often while writing this collection. I found my peers questioning if I was ever happy, and I responded by saying these moments in my thesis are only *moments* that interrupt the laughter and the smiles; they did not erase them.

So, my readers, I have thrown a lot of information at you in this afterword. If you have any questions about where I took creative liberties in my poems or where the happiness lies in this collection, then I encourage you to go back through and read it again. Search for the moments of laughter and the sweet connections. While this story is based on my life, there are so many other people who have impacted it that are strewn throughout. Find them. Acknowledge them. How does another poem change because of my experience with them? Read it again. Search for the answers to your questions, because they will be hidden between the lines of the stanzas and in the sounds of reading the poems aloud.

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