

How Does Your Garden Grow?

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Lyndie Mesina

Thesis Advisor

Angela Jackson-Brown

Ball State University

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Abstract

Poetry holds the ability to touch on very specific moments in a person's life. Unlike a novel, poetry tells you stories in little moments and images. There is no "Once upon a time..." or "They all lived happily ever after." Yet, strung together, these little moments can form a longer story. That's why I believe poetry can be so impactful. In a collection of poetry, a person will always be able to find one poem or just one line, even, that takes them back and makes them feel something. In my own collection, *How Does Your Garden Grow?*, I reflect on my own life and in this process, I talk about themes such as: death, family, grief, mental health, childhood, growing up, love, letting go, and self love – among others. I take a look at the people and events that shaped me as a person and I end on a girl, just about to graduate college, looking forward towards the future. I hope that somewhere in this poetic journey through my own life, someone is able to find solace or maybe even hope. I hope this collection makes someone feel less alone. At least, I hope someone gets one of my lines stuck in their head all day.

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Process Analysis Statement

When I first came to Ball State University, I thought I had a clear idea of who I wanted to be. I had loved writing stories since I was a little girl, so I figured majoring in journalism was the clear choice. I also decided to minor in creative writing because I wanted to be able to continue being creative, but everyone around me told me I wouldn't be able to get a job with just creative writing. By the beginning of sophomore year, though, I found myself hating the majority of my Journalism classes and loving all of my creative writing classes. Surprisingly, I found myself really enjoying my mandatory Spanish classes as well. By the end of fall 2016, I changed my major into a double major in Spanish and creative writing.

Changing my mind has always been a trend in my life. I think I have a clear idea of what I want to do, but then I slowly discover what I thought I wanted to do leads me to a path of what I *actually* wanted to do. It was no different with my Honors Thesis. Going into senior year, I was sure I had found the perfect idea. I planned to write a series of essays highlighting the experience of what it's like to be of mixed-race in today's society. I was going to base my essays on interviews with mixed people and my own experience of being half Filipino. Yet, as I approached the halfway point of fall semester, I still hadn't started. This whole project had turned into something I was dreading to do. I couldn't make myself go through the whole IRB process or even ask anyone to let me interview them. It wasn't until a few weeks ago that I realized the reason I didn't want to do my original project was because it was so journalistic. That should've been obvious at first due to my distaste of all of my Journalism classes I took at the beginning of my college career, but it wasn't. Instead, I was engrossed in my Advanced Poetry class. But, it wasn't until I read Chen Chen's *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* that I knew I wanted to change my thesis topic. I wanted to write a collection of poetry.

My Advanced Poetry class was the first time the majority of poetry we were assigned was written by people of color. In Chen Chen's work, I was able to identify with his Asian heritage. I also learned from the way he used humor within his poems. We also read Hanif Abdurraqib's *The Crown Ain't Worth Much* where I saw my home state of Ohio represented and learned how to incorporate music into my poems without coming off cheesy. As part of our final project, we had the opportunity to find our own contemporary poet and study a collection of their work. I picked Natalie Diaz and her book of poetry, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Through working with her poetry, I learned a lot about experimental form and the importance of an enticing title. All of these poets greatly influenced my work in this collection of poetry.

When I decided to change my thesis topic, I was nervous about how my advisor, Ms. Jackson-Brown, and the Honors College would respond. Yet, my advisor was all for it and the process of changing my topic was relatively easy because of the fact that I had decided to start my thesis in the fall semester. The very next meeting after my topic change, I knew I had made the right decision. I was so excited about writing a collection of poetry and I could tell Ms. Jackson-Brown was also excited to be working on this with me.

I had always been drawn more to writing fiction because that's what I grew up reading. My dream, for as long as I could remember, was to write a book. I always wanted to write something that would affect a reader the way my favorite books had affected me while I was growing up. I had written poetry before in my classes but I wasn't completely sure if I had the talent to write an entire book of it. After the first time I showed my poems to Jackson-Brown, though, she told me I had absolutely made the right choice in embarking on writing a whole collection of poetry. Every meeting, she would give me the praise I needed, along with the critique to make me better. She gave me a lot of confidence as a poet and made me even surer I had chosen the right thing to do.

Yet, again, I thought I knew what my poetry collection was going to be about. I wanted to draw upon the work of Hanif Abdurraqib and the way he includes music in a lot of his poems. Music had always been a huge part of my life because both of my parents are music lovers. I grew up listening to bands like Led Zeppelin and Queen because of my mom, but I also was listening to disco and Motown because of my dad. Because of this, I had planned to include music in each of my poems. I wanted to base them off certain bands, songs, and even lyrics. When I first started, poems were flying out with no problem, but I quickly found myself running out of ideas. When I spoke with Jackson-Brown about this, she told me she thought the whole music theme might be a little constricting. Again, I was trying to control my creativity too much and that just doesn't work for me. She encouraged me to write whatever I wanted and to not worry. She told me the themes would come out on their own. So, I did exactly that and quickly found themes emerging. Changing the poetry collection to writing about my life turned the whole Honors Thesis into a therapeutic experience for me.

For the most part, I stuck to a pretty strict schedule. I was writing about three to four poems every week and then on Tuesdays, I would meet with Jackson-Brown to edit. I have always felt the most creative at night so I would write after I finished my homework. A typical night of writing poetry was in my bed, listening to music and writing in my journal. Some nights, I couldn't think of anything to write about. Other nights, I would crank out three to four poems in a few hours. Sometimes, poems would come to me in class. I brought my journal with me everywhere, so, when this happened, I would pull it out and write down a few lines so I could get back to them later. Now that I have finished the collection, I have a completely filled-up journal and that is one of the most satisfying things.

When I was about halfway through the process of writing all of these poems, themes started to emerge the way Jackson-Brown said they would, themes like: family, heartbreak, childhood, grief,

growing up, and more. The most central theme of the whole collection is family, especially centered around my parents and grandparents. Two other major themes of the collection that appeared were death and mental health. I lost my grandmother when I was 16 to Alzheimer's disease and a lot of my poems deal with the process of losing her and dealing with the aftermath of her absence in my life and my family's life. In regards to the theme of mental health, depression runs in my family; my grandmother suffered from it and so do my mother and two of my aunts. It wasn't until I turned 21 that it really started affecting my life. It was only natural that it found its way into a lot of my poems.

This project allowed me to process and really grapple with the tragedies I had encountered in my short 21 years of life. It also really made me appreciate my family and the childhood that my parents worked so hard to give me. It helped me get over my last relationship which I thought I was over, but obviously wasn't over due to the amount of poems I wrote about it. It allowed me a space to look back on my own life and reflect on the person I used to be and the person I am now. I was able to take a closer look at all the things that shaped me into the person I am, like: my mom, my best friend, my grandmother, Spam, the game Kick the Can, my cousins, music, and more. I was also able to really have an open conversation with myself about my mental illness and how it affects me. I had a space to talk about the dark ways it makes me feel and the ways I try to manage it. This collection of poetry really gave me a place to take a deep breath between all my other schoolwork as I looked ahead to graduation.

I think the hardest part of this whole project was trying to finish it. I had to find a way to organize the poems in a way that makes sense with the content. At first, I tried to group everything together by theme but that wasn't an even spread of poems. After thinking about it for a little bit, I decided that grouping things chronologically worked best for my collection. I have four different sections corresponding to the different phases of schooling: elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. The elementary school section also includes a lot from when I was really young,

before I was in school. The rest of the sections deal with the ages corresponding to the different grade levels. This way the themes are more spread throughout the collection rather than being grouped together. I feel like that would have made them too concentrated.

The thing I probably struggled with the most in finishing this project was trying to think of a title. I tried to think if there was a song that would apply to the collection I created to try and bring back my original plan of centering the collection around music, because there are a lot of traces of music still in the poems. I also tried to see if any of the titles of my poems could be used to title the entire collection. I asked a lot of my friends and family to help me think of one but, for the most part, none of them were right. It wasn't until I reread all of the poems I had written, that I noticed a new theme that would eventually turn into the title: gardens. In many of my poems, there is garden imagery and metaphors about gardens. I write about my grandmother a lot throughout this collection as well and she always loved to garden. This collection is also my own coming-of-age story and really shows how I have grown up. When I asked Jackson-Brown for her help, I told her I wanted my title to have something to do with gardens. She looked at me and asked, "What's that saying again?" and after typing away for a second she said, "Mary, Mary, quite contrary. How does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockleshells and pretty maids all in a row." I knew I had found my title – *How Does Your Garden Grow?*

Now that I have finished this project, I have started thinking about what those who read it will be able to learn from it. Obviously, they will learn a lot about my own life, but I hope the collection does something deeper than that. The thing I have learned to love the most about poetry is the way it can touch upon very specific moments in someone's life. I have read poems that have made me think about my own childhood and the way my friends and I used to play in the neighborhood. I have read poems that have made me cry because I could think of an exact moment in my own life where I felt the same way the poet was feeling. That's what I want this collection to

do. I want people to be able to relate to it. I want people to be able to find a favorite line that gets stuck in their head for a week. I want this collection to be a safe space for someone else the way it was for me.

I. pollen.

In the beginning, I sat on a roof

I believe I picked my own family and
so does my mom because when I was 2
I told her I used to sit on the roof with
an angel and watch them.

I watched them at the dinner table –
my mother cried while her thick, blonde
hair that brunette girls like me dream about,
cascaded over her sunken shoulders into
her lap. my father stared at his hands with
molten eyes and wrung his peanut butter
skin. I watched them beg God for a baby,
11 years in the making and I watched them
pull it together to smile at their son in the
morning.

I saw hugs after long days and tell-me-
all-about-your-day-talks at the dinner
table and silent dances in the kitchen.

I heard laughter billow out of the
chimney at night and in the morning.
I heard music splash against the windows.

I saw love perched in the corner of
every room, dripping down the walls
and seeping into the floorboards and
I told the angel I pick them.

Kick the Can

it's big-coat cold and my
cousins holler like monkeys in
the dewey darkness then
they hide

 on shingled roofs
 in big ol' bushes
 under rusted cars and
me, a pink marshmallow with
a blue raspberry scarf and
a strawberry beanie
watch as,

 luke got tagged
 sam got tagged
 erich
 dan
 mitchell until

i was left quivering
behind a tree trunk
bigger than me and
luke saw from jail that
for once
i was the last hope and
joe went looking in the backyard but
i shook in the front until
luke gestured to the can a
gleaming pearl in a clam and
i ran past

 big ol' bushes
 shingled roofs and
 rusted cars until

i kicked it and it went off
like an accidental firework or
car alarm and
i lifted off with it on
luke and sam's shoulders and
i was four and happy and
it all didn't really matter but
they all still talk about it
on Thanksgiving

My dad is a playlist

that you put on after your dream date
or a perfect summer's day. He's earth,
wind, and fire with the windows down.
The B-52s, dancing in the kitchen. He's
off the wall and cart-wheeling around
in boogie shoes. He's Sir Duke during
celebration. But he's also the man in
the mirror and serenading me with
someday we'll be together.

He's slow rollin' like a wagon wheel.
He's a little Metallica too and a pinch
of old Kanye plus two scoops of uptown funk.
He's a little throwback rap. He's three little
birds chirping out a redemption song. He's
oogum boogum, free fallin', tin roof rusted,
and my favorite thing to listen to when life
gets hard.

I don't remember much

I only remember my Lolo with oxygen
in his nose and the hiss and sigh of the
breathing machine. He smelled warm and old. His
voice sounded like a home I'd never known.

I remember kissing him on the cheek and
thinking he kind of looked like a robot.
I remember how he always coughed when
he laughed.

I remember the funeral and how I didn't
cry because I was 6 and the man in the
coffin looked like melted candlewax and
smelled like nothing.

I don't remember much else except that
Lolo's apartment felt much colder afterwards.

Why I'll always cancel plans with you to hang out with my dad instead

In kindergarten, Dad was a warehouseman and Mom was a waitress and when Dad got home, Mom had to leave and I would stand on a stool and bang on the window and scream for her to come back like she had left me at an orphanage. But I needed dinner and a bath and a song and a story and a kiss goodnight all before 8. Dad made me ramen and vienna sausages and after, I'd ask when Mom was coming home. He'd put me in the bath, sing Stevie Wonder, and ask Isn't She Lovely? When my fingers were raisins, he'd wrap me in a towel and I'd ask when Mom was coming home. I'd fight bedtime like it was trying to kill me but he'd read *Bad Mousie*, *Brown Bear Brown Bear*, or *Bad Mousie* twice if I asked. At 8 on the dot, he'd kiss my forehead and say I love you and I'd ask when Mom was coming home.

I'm 21 now and he calls me all the time. I'll tell him about the big test I have next week and he'll say I guess you can't come home. Or I'll tell him about a guy I met at the bar and how he asked me to hang out next weekend and he'll say I guess you can't come home. Or how it's Becky's birthday next weekend and we're all gonna go out and he'll say I guess you can't come home. But when I do come home, we cook together. We sing together. We go see movies and in the summer, we fish. I hug him and tell him I love him. Then on Sundays, when it's time to leave I promise him I'll be home again soon.

Where Mom gets her cigarettes

In the summer, when ice cream cones dripped down kids' wrists before their third lick and Mom's leather car seats branded by thighs with a tsss, Ameristop was an arctic heaven after a day at the pool.

I'd get in line with Mom and touch all the candy wrappers – Whatchamacallits and Kit Kats and Cow Tails and Skittles and Snickers and Mom would always say no, *I'll get you a coke icee, though, if I can have a couple sips.*

The man in front would get a case of Bud Light and 4 scratch-offs and a turkey sandwich. I'd have to teeter on my big toes to look over the counter at Deb, who made sandwiches, and so I could wave at Sheryl at the register.

She had teeth like cracked piano keys and her eyes were always $\frac{3}{4}$ asleep.

What'll it be today, Amy? she'd ask.

Small coke icee and pack of True Blues.

One or two? and Mom would look at me,

Hell, today, let's do two.

And we'd get back in the car and my thighs would tsss and she'd roll down the window and light up a True Blue like she has ever since she was 15 and I'd slurp down my icee, knowing better than to tell her that she was letting all the AC out.

Kids around here

Kids around here all grew up on the swim team and met their best friend playing sharks and minnows on Friday Funday. Most kids almost drowned once or 5 times playing sharks and minnows.

Kids around here walked everywhere: to Ameristop, to the pool, to the creek, to the playground. They decorated sidewalks with chalk and stood up on bikes to pedal up steep hills.

Kids around here all got their vanilla cones with rainbow sprinkles at Creamy Whip. A few kids got their first jobs there. Most of them were lifeguards at the pool.

Kids around here would sneak out to the playground and drink four lokos and shitty vodka on monkey bars and most of them were smoking weed by 16. A few started selling back then, most of them still do.

Kids around here all know someone who died too young: drowned at the dam, got shot, shot up too much. Most kids have seen a syringe left in the dirt or at the bottom of a slide.

Kids around here all try to get out – go to college, get a good job. Some dropped out, got kicked out, and moved right back. Others left and never even craned their necks enough to look back.

But they all still talk about this town and how nights playing soccer at the Commons felt infinite under the street lamps, and how days at the pool felt like the sun would never burn out.

Summer to me

Summer is macaroni tuna salad and
stiff towels on the railing of our porch.
It's sparkler hearts and figure eights
and Marco Polo and handstand contests.

Summer is a vanilla cone with rainbow sprinkles
or a peanut butter shake with chocolate milk.
It's driving while Robert Plant screams what is
and what never shall be out the windows while
I howl out the sun roof of my friend's car.

Summer is my best friend
and the way the sun brings out the red in her curls.
It's the way she laughs after a few beers
and the way she dances in the driver's seat.

We've spent 15 summers together,
always 5 minutes down the road
but growing up means moving hours,
or states away but,

as long as the sun still shines,
and there's still vanilla ice cream,
she'll always be my summer girl.

II. a seed.

The Ape Club

I grew up with primates who thought it was funny to twist each other's nipples and make their armpits fart.

OJ was the retired silverback, 15 years older than me. Luke was acting silverback – pounding his chest and giving noogies proving he was strongest. Sam and Joe were mountain gorillas, loud and rowdy. Erich and Jimmy were chimps.

They said only boys were allowed in the club. Kate thought it was stupid anyway but I wanted in. So I learned

how to burp on command and make my armpits fart. I played kick-the-can and watched them play endless hours of Mario Kart. I swung my plastic lightsaber hard and aimed for their shins.

And after all that – they would only let me be a spider monkey.

Stuart is a boy's name and

it's my middle name and
I grew up in a school where
every other little girl was
blessed with the middle name
Marie or Grace or Elizabeth but
mostly, Marie. The girls with
unpretty ones at least got to pick
new ones when they were confirmed
except me. I wasn't allowed to eat
the bread or drink the wine, had
to stay in my seat.

My middle name was going to be
Beth but Dad said no. It had to be
Mom's maiden name – that's just
how things go. But Stuart isn't so
special. Mom says it's royal like
Mary Queen of Scots but the
Stuart kings were the three worst
kings of England. So what does
that say about us?

But what did Stuart ever do for me?
I have a boy's name but I'm a girl
and had to work harder than all
the boys named Michael or Jacob
or Bobby or George. So I can't wait
to change it because having a boy's
name doesn't make being a girl
any easier.

Recess Romance

I think my fondest relationship was the one I had in seventh grade. He had blonde hair like Jack Frost and skin like 2% milk. His nose was crooked and he wrote his 'Ts backwards.

I loved him when love meant holding hands under desks – when love was just as small as a canary and sang just as sweet. We wrote letters that we hid under our pillows and I told him how I loved his eyes and how I couldn't wait for recess tomorrow. I remember his eyes were the kind of blue that brown-eyed girls dreamt about. We'd play tag at recess and sneak a hug before my mom picked me up.

I wish love was easy like that still – a girl excited to hold a boy's hand, but now other body parts get involved. Things get serious and hearts get seriously broken.

I hope I find love that is easy again. I hope someone runs up and tags my shoulder and says, "You're it."

As a Consequence of an Ohio Judge Crashing into Our Car in 2011

- mom: a cracked knee cap and 3 broken ribs
- me: a grade 3 concussion, a fractured nose, and 2 broken eye sockets
- dad: one broken femur, a torn ACL, MCL, & meniscus

- my father, shame-faced, when he saw my black & blue raccoon eyes and his slow shake of the head before the morphine rockabyed him back to sleep

- a family that wears their seatbelt like an oath

- double, triple, quadruple looks even when the light's green

- my sore shoulder from being my father's cane and

- my sore cheeks from forcing smiles at my mother and

- my throbbing head from ramming my face into the back of the passenger seat

- my brother, after the call, hyperventilating into a paper bag at CVS as demons buzz in his ears, "your family is dead"

- my parents and their separate bedrooms

- our white knuckles in rain, snow, ice, and the dark

- the bellowing silence of my father and the weepy smile of my mother

- a distrust of yellow lights

- my father and his imaginary brake in my passenger seat

- tears that pooled around our ankles
the sloshing through of court dates and statements

- my father chewing on his knuckle skin as
I pull away from the house

- a flood of "did you make it?" texts and
"are you safe?" and "let me know when you get there"

- and money, a lot of money, worthless and unable
to make us forget

I took a trip to New Mexico with my grandparents when I was 11

to visit Gramma's cousin, Donna. I didn't pay attention to the mountains or the way the sun pan-fried the earth. I only paid attention to how much I missed my mom. Selfish, but that was just the first day.

When Gramma and I got into bed that night she scratched my back and told me how her cousins would make a back scratch train and turn over every 10 minutes so they all would get a turn. Gramma and I's train was short but it made me feel good.

I wish I would've known that was the only trip we'd ever get. I wish I would've complained less about how Donna only had rye bread to eat. I wish I would've missed my mom a little less and cherished Gramma a little more.

I wish I would've taken more pictures.
I wish I hadn't been 11.

In Defense of Spam

that shit is whack / that shit is gross / smells like wet dog food / smells like the other side of the family /
with a weird accent / with a darker skin tone / with different seasonings and condiments other than
/ mayonnaise / we don't eat that shit out the can / cuz then it does taste like wet dog food / crisp it
up in the pan / sounds just like sizzling bacon / sounds like dad knocking on the door / sounds like
the smell whispering up through the floor / sounds like my uncle and his accent / *Oi! Look who's*
finally up / sounds like mom and dad's fight last night / sounds like dad's way of saying / sorry about
last night / sounds like the rice cooker's going off / *Oi! Get your spoon and fork / How you want your eggs*
/ over easy / gotta have em runny / all together that shit is bomb / the spam is salty and / tastes
like bacon and sausage together / tastes like sacon or basage / tastes like family I don't see enough
/ tastes like the closest I'll ever get to my Lola / to half of myself / to the home country / to the
Philippines / tastes like *Ah, brings me back* / and *Remember that one time* / tastes like memories that
aren't mine / mom doesn't want any / she'll just have coffee / I grab another piece and / my dad,
uncle, and aunt all nod and smile at me //

III. a stem.

A Good Catholic Education

I went to a school where we prayed before morning announcements
and before the teacher started class.
Where teachers measured the length of girls' plaid skirts and we wrote
and re-wrote prayers in detention.
Where detention was called Justice Under God.

I went to school where girls who got pregnant were asked to leave.
Where girls who read at mass gave handies in the boys' bathroom.
Where football players showed up to first bell with red eyes every day.

I went to a school that taught that being gay was wrong and that women
have to be modest.
Where you got a grade in morality and you needed to know all of
Abraham's sons to ace a test.
Where I couldn't have bread and wine because I was baptized in
different water.

But I also went to school where teachers left their doors open for kids
who had no where to go.
Where you knew everyone's first and last names and that they had your
back.
Where I met people who taught me what it means to really laugh
and to put my mashed potatoes ON my chicken sandwich.

I went to school where I learned a lot of evils of religion but where the
people around me taught me the most about love.

My old friend, Ruby

I'M SORRY that me and Megan convinced you to smoke for the first time at that sleepover when you still pulled at your shirt like it was trying to strangle you.

we spent that summer in my Dodge Dakota with its broken jaw and passenger door that never unlocked. we laughed like banshees through the smoky haze. i felt your eyes look up to me between puffs and passes. I'M SORRY that i let you believe that summer would last forever.

I'M SORRY i moved away and left you in that hell hole high school; it gobbled you up and vomited you out into a hospital bed. I'M SORRY I never asked about the cuts on your ankles. I'M SORRY i listened when you said you were fine.

I'M SORRY i wasn't there when Sam convinced you to do coke at that party, or when your asshole boyfriend got you to do Xans. I'M especially SORRY i didn't kick his ass when he left you shivering on the side of the highway, or kick your ass when you got back together with him.

I'M SORRY it hurt your feelings when i told you i was worried about you when i noticed you drowning in your clothes but I'M not SORRY i said it

the last time we hung out it was pretty quiet between the hiss of the lighter, so you asked if i wanted to meet your new friends and they came bearing bags of "white" and pills in pockets. I'M SORRY that i left early.

Remember him: Kris Ford

I went to school with a boy named Kris with an overflowing watering can for a heart. He had an ability to turn heads like sunflowers to the sun.

He was a connoisseur of high fives and said hi to all the daffodils and daisies on the walls. Love shimmered in a mist around him.

But the biggest hearts have to work the hardest and Kris's never worked quite right. When they tried to fix it, his heart gave out and it felt like all the lights in the school had been turned off.

We had a memorial and around me I saw all the plants he had watered and I found solace in the garden he left behind.

Gramma's forgotten homes

an oak table, solid as a trunk left
in the woods. Bunny Girl, on the
chair next to me, sporting a newly
sewn pink plaid smock. Gramma's apron,
made for children, cinched around her
plump waist, perfect for hugs. a
crossword puzzle sat on the counter,
almost finished. I asked her to massage
my hands. "Honey, will you look at
24 across," she asked him, "I'm a little
busy at the moment."

the frosty tile floors and now, stainless
steel appliances. the same tiny apron,
though, covered in flour from her hand-
crafted pie crusts. Rhiannon was on, she
sang along with Stevie and a crossword
sat on the oak table, not nearly finished.
"Sweetheart, need anything from the store?"
she shakes her head; he shuts the door. "Jackass"
she called him and I didn't get why.

now, a sterile, peachy room with two
hospital beds and a curtain between. nurses
in white go back and forth and my mom
whispers in the hall with my aunt. I sit in bed
with her and rub her hands, smoothing the
meaty muscle of her thumb. he sits in the
corner now and she asks, "Who's that man?"
50 years of marriage in between them, forgotten.
He reaches for the crossword and pen. "Okay,
sweetheart, 27 down."

The Memory Thief

I was an incapable witness
as I watched him commit his crime
He stalked her as she wrinkled
and shrunk
Until he could break in
working slowly
Stealing her address book
calendar
car
music
bed
friends
husband
children
grandchildren
brain
and finally
her last breath
And I watched him do it
holding her veiny hand as he hid behind the door

I feel him now
crouching under my bedroom window
waiting for my genetics to give him
the signal

And I cry and cower
clutching to my memories
shackling them to my mind
fearing that one day
he'll rob me
like he did her

I took a nap with my grandma the day before she died

in a hospital bed that was a foot off the ground and smelled all too clean. I held her tight and for the first time, I felt her bones - match sticks aching under the weight of flimsy muscle. I rubbed her hands and her skin was tissue paper, ready to tear under my touch. I wrapped myself around her.

A week ago, she kept telling Mom that she wanted to go home but home wasn't the condo or the cottage on Lincoln. It wasn't the apartment in Pennsylvania with Grandfather or her college dorm room. I think it was the little house in Oil City. I think it was her dad. I think it was her mom. She curled into me like a little girl who just wants her mom. So I wrapped myself around her and closed my eyes like shut blinds until I felt her relax, until her dream let her go home for a minute. And I pulled the covers up to our chins to shield her away from prodding, freezing, nurse hands and the How are you Marilyn?'s.

I don't know how long we slept or when we woke up. Her eyes opened and she looked at me and I know her brain didn't let her know who I was anymore and I know the disease had cut out her tongue, but I swear her eyes still knew me, and I swear they called me Chicken Little. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and Mom made that face *like it's time to go* and I kissed her feather hair and told her I'd see her later.

Speckles Changing in the Sun

They used to chase shrimp boats into the sun.
She kicked and pulled until he paused to turn
to ask her, "Are you tired, little bug?"
And she said no, with arms and legs that burned.
More miles than she could understand stood guard
between a little girl and impossible ships.
But just another hour swimming hard,
"I'll make it, Grandfather." She was sure.

Hair turns grayer and speckled boats moved on.
The old man ran away to the sea
while she chased new dots on the horizon,
inclined to stop, to skip, to put down her pen to sleep.
Her mind played keep away with her dreams.
"It's getting overwhelming," she said to him on the phone.
"Well, little bug, don't give up. You never
did before." She hung up, and didn't listen.

That night she decided she could no longer stay afloat;
Through tears she thought of her unachievable dreams
and shrimp boats.

IV. a bud.

A new home / An old home

Your chin was a roof and your arms were the walls.
Your kisses were high ceilings and your lap was the floor.
Your words hung tapestries and painted pictures modeled
after Monet and I hung them on the wall and admired them
every day. Your heart was the hearth and the fire was always
going. I stoked it with laughter and eyelash flutters and open
legs. Your eyes were a big bay window in the back of the
house, opening up to a big, green maple tree. I made
blueberry pancakes every morning and sipped my coffee
with a grin as I listened to the content hum within.

Then I came home one night and someone had turned off
the kitchen light. The cupboards were open and half my
silverware was missing. I laid on the couch and the fire was
still going. I looked at the walls and only saw nails banged in
plaster. Then I think it was the next day or the day after, heavy
blood clot red curtains hung on the windows but I peeked
between and the tree was still green. I put a cracked bucket
under a leak in the ceiling. More days passed and I think the
power went out. The roof had collapsed and there were holes
in the floor. I looked out the window and the tree wasn't there
anymore.

I huddled around the fire and rubbed my hands like sandpaper.
I thought, this must be how cavemen felt. I fed the fire with
promises, ultimatums, bargains, threats, pleas, remember whens,
and it'll get better. I begged and begged until my tears put the fire
out. It took months for me to get my stuff out, box by box, day by
day. That old house says it's foreclosed now, all rotted and decayed.
I'm looking for a new place, but I like to drive by it when I'm over
that way.

Tears fall to the tune of “Can’t Help Falling in Love”

I had never sung in front of someone before.
Well, I guess that’s a lie, I mean
I sang in front of the whole school and
the hot guy who played piano told me he
liked how my voice almost cracked, but
it didn’t. It sounded really pretty, like a river
flows surely to the sea, but he didn’t matter.

I had never sung in front of just one person
before. That’s a lie, too. If we’re being
technical, I sang for my mom all the time, but
when I sat on the piano bench with its
broken foot, I had to beg my hands to stop
quivering so I could play for you, because
you had asked me to.

Wise men say – fuck what they say because
you kissed me and told me I was charming
when I started to play. You were filming me but
I didn’t know because I had blacked out from
this feeling like I entranced you. Like I could
sing as good as Elvis. I couldn’t help falling
in love with you.

Maybe I am a fool like the wise men say because
I tried to sing that song late at night alone
in my room and this time my voice cracked and
my tears flowed like a river surely to the sea, but
I finished the song – a squeaked out ballad. I
thought about the night you took my smile;
you took my whole life, too.

I wonder if you still have that video, or if you
still watch it and remember how it felt to fall
in love or how it felt when you fell out of love.
Maybe now it doesn’t sound as good
or maybe it does. I wouldn’t know; I never
wanted to listen to it and darling so it goes,
some things are
not meant to be.

I learned to write a sestina for you

I was never into guys like you because you were blonde
like my mom. Lazy eyes always bothered me but your crooked
gaze didn't. The first time you kissed me, the butterflies in my stomach
made me float above the bench by the dam where you asked to be mine.
I saw you the next week but I still cried when it was time to leave,
but you left your sweatshirt so I breathed it in and listened to your favorite song.

The beginning was carefree like a Stevie Wonder song.
You joked about dying your hair black but I learned to love the blonde
hairs you left on my clothes. We were obsessed and never wanted to leave
each other. We both wore glasses and you fixed mine when they were crooked.
But the passing days made me paranoid you wouldn't stay mine.
I saw you leaving in the future and it made a pothole in my stomach.

There was the time you punched the wall and I felt the hole form in my stomach.
We sat in silence but you smiled when I turned on our song –
And so it goes, a choking rose back, to be reborn, I want to hold you like you're mine.
We acted like things were fine. I asked you how I would look blonde,
but neither of us wanted to admit our love had gotten a little crooked.
I was so scared of not knowing the future, I wouldn't let you leave.

Then my world shattered – it wasn't working and you wanted to leave.
I sat in my basement and sobbed while everything in my stomach
tried to climb up my throat. I wasn't right for months. My life was crooked.
I tuned out everyone, lay in my bed, and skipped every song.
My mom would try to help but I hated it because her blonde
hair reminded me of you. The truth was now, nobody, nothing, was mine.

I tried to manipulate fate into telling me you'd, again, be mine.
You tried to tell me it was the right thing, you had to leave.
You brushed your hair out of the way and I remembered why I hated blonde
hair. I found out you got with your ex and I felt a plummet in my stomach.
I tore up pictures, burned up letters, and deleted every song.
I cleaned my room, took a shower, and made sure nothing was crooked.

I found an old picture and my friends were right, your eyes are crooked.
I'm working on myself and accepting the idea that nobody's mine.
I cried the other day because I let myself listen to that one song,
about the man who can't be moved and the girl who decided to leave.
I was in line for food the other day and saw a guy that made my stomach
drop because he looked like you, wore glasses and was just as blonde.

I met a guy last weekend who is not blonde or crooked.
I played with his black, curly hair and he left kisses on my stomach.
And when I had to leave, he kissed me, and I didn't remember when you were mine.

A forced puzzle

I wonder if you think of me when you're
laying with her and I get mad at myself
because that's such a cliché thing to wonder.

But I remembered the way we fit together and
I think you said some cliché shit like we were
puzzle pieces or something.

Do you guys fit together like that? Were we
just puzzle pieces forced together because
they looked like they fit?

My grandfather always forced pieces together
as a joke but then they'd get stuck, and rip
when I pulled them apart.

Maybe we were like that.

I'm glad you never met my grandfather, though,
because he probably would've liked you since
you golf and know how to dance a little.

And he would've been another person
wondering why our pieces didn't fit.

I think about you every time I write a capital E

because I got jealous when I saw that your handwriting was prettier than mine – your Es like a typewriter’s. But, you showed me how you wrote them – make an L first, then the top line, then the middle. I’ve noticed that Es are in a lot of words and on the days I don’t hate you, I like to write in all-caps.

I think about you when I eat biscuits and gravy because no one makes them better than your mom

I think about you when I listen to a record because the only record player I have is the one you got me

I think about you when I drive by a UDF gas station and how your eyes lit up when you tried my favorite milkshake

I think about you when I turn on the purple floor fan we bought at 1 AM when it got too hot to sleep in August.

I think about you when I open the ash tray in my car because I never had the heart to empty out our old roaches

and I thought this poem was going to be longer like a sonnet or an ode, but my life has started running out of the things that remind me of you.

A list of ways I say I'm sorry I didn't come, I was too depressed, without telling you I'm depressed

Hey, I'm sorry I didn't make it last week...

- I completely forgot I had a meeting that day
- My arms were too tired to brush my hair
- I woke up with a fever and a sore throat
- I couldn't resist getting back in bed even though I got up and showered
- I promised my dad I'd go fishing with him
- I got lost looking for wads of dopamine behind my dresser
- I didn't want you to ask why you haven't heard from me in a while
- My mom needed to borrow my car that day
- I dropped all my fake smiles down the drain
- I had to take my cat to the vet
- I lost track of time debating whether you really wanted me to come or not
- I had a horrible case of the shits
- The outfit I wanted to wear made me cry when I looked in the mirror
- I found out Hunter was going to be there
- I was busy trying to pull this obese feeling out of my throat
- I partied too hard the night before
- I was scared I'd pull the wheel if I got in my car that day
- horrible migraine
- I don't think you'd understand that depression is the realest excuse I have

yo,

i am getting so tired of feeling
like this, like it's a rainy day everyday and
my grandma said a storm is the best time to
take a nap. so i take a nap
 and i take a nap
 and i take a nap and
somedays, i get mad at the sun. because
it's so annoying and loves to remind me of
the things i could do, should do but
the rain understands and beckons me
back to bed and reminds me to forget and

how can collar bones feel so
heavy? some kind of fucked up dumbbell
necklace that has me slouching over until
i'm past quasimodo until
i'm just a ball, so heavy that
it wants to bust through the floor boards and
maybe down there, the sun won't be able to
say shit, but i could still hear the rain and
maybe down there, the silence will lead me
to myself again, or at least tempt me to try
and find her. dude,

do you remember when i was her? sometimes,
i don't. she was friends with the sun.
you could see it in her skin, where she let him
kiss her. she was caramel, sometimes
peanut butter on her goodest days. i miss
good days, sometimes, i have good nights.
lately, i'm lucky if i get good hours. but

bruh, yesterday, i forgot to tell you.
the sun peeked through my window and
i didn't close the blinds.

An Evolution of Kisses

2 petrified pairs of braces embrace at the Greenhills Public Pool
slippery lips swoop down while his bros stand behind him like bowling pins
a fishtail tongue splashes on cheeks up in the rafters of the old auditorium
his turtle mouth and hands under blankets in his parents' newly finished basement
a drunken battle of mouths against a Buick in the hood of Norwood
“my roommate's out of town this weekend” meets 6 shots of Captain Morgan
around a cigarette, around my tongue, on my neck, snaking down to Indianapolis for the weekend
a crooked eye looks at my lips with no idea he'd see them again
intoxicated knives cut the wings off the butterflies that used to live in my stomach
the lonely gyration friends sometimes do when “alone” echoes too loud in their ears
the crooked eye soars over the Cincinnati skyline and looks right through my glacier heart
the crooked eye looks to the left and pecks and says goodbye

sloppy lips smush at midnight like drunk friends do when they are so glad to be friends
and tipsy fingers sew wings back on butterflies blindly because new lips are on mine

Under Construction

Little men are stacking bricks and digging a moat while crocodiles and alligators single-file slide into the water. I called a locksmith to change the locks. Firemen have been working for weeks to put out that stubborn house fire while electricians try to turn the lights back on.

There are at least 10 fist-sized holes in the bedroom wall, filled with spackle. The contractor says *it'd be best to knock it down* – more room. I tell him *no one will be staying here any time soon. I'm actually thinking about downsizing.*

The gardeners are pulling weeds and flowers to give the landscaper a clean canvas. I asked her to plant tall trees – pines and maples, and some bamboo in front of the windows, and a weeping willow next to the porch. The bamboo will hide the bars across the panes and the willow will distract from all the locks.

I'll lock my family in the basement and a few of my friends. It's finished, so they'll be comfortable. The locksmith gave me the new keys and I gave them to the people in the basement. I hid the rest, even from me so I can't let in anyone based on smiles and kisses and tired eyes. If they want in, they'll have to break in and hopefully, by then, the lights will be back on.

Some notes for the person who loves me next

I like my eggs over easy.

I need 3 pillows and the fan on to fall asleep.

I try to save every stray cat I see.

I'm scared of mascots, mall santas, eye drops, bats, loving someone more than they love me, and bed bugs.

In the winter, I sometimes wear the same hoodie every day.

Arm and hammer is my favorite laundry detergent.

I'm allergic to shellfish and ibuprofen.

I get too loud when I play Catchphrase.

I always double-knot my shoes.

I bite the inside of my mouth to keep myself from crying.

I've always wanted to get into a bar fight.

I like to talk shit when I get too drunk.

I don't trust people who don't think I'm funny.

I love people so much that I cry when I talk about them.

I keep my flaws written on my palm.

I'm like a really good sandwich – messy to handle but worth every bite.

I am scared you're going to hurt me, so please

Handle with care.

V. a blossom.

Virtual Cousin

I have an aunt that I don't talk to anymore;
I think it's been 4 years. She has a son and
I watch his life on a computer screen.

I can tell he's taller now and his hair has dimmed
from sunshine to sand. But he still has tiny beads
for teeth and an invisible fishing hook still pulls
at the left corner of his mouth when he smiles.

He makes me think of my grandma's house
in the spring – when the wind blew the green
grass like ocean waves, and we'd sit on the
white porch swing and rock it like a ship.

He makes me think of playing Sorry! with a
gramma who never let you win.

He makes me remember how real adventures
are when you put two imaginations together.

I don't know if I remember what his voice
sounds like, though, and I realized I probably
won't see him again until the next family funeral.
I think that's kinda fucked up.

My mom stopped smiling *one time*

One time

my mom threatened to pack
her suitcase over a batch of lemon cupcakes
but she's on antidepressants now

One time

my mom threw her vodka soda
at the garage wall and shattered the glass
but she's on antidepressants now

One time

I called my mom crazy and she told me
I was right
but she's on antidepressants now

One time

I watched my mom watch her mom die

One time

I held my mom's hand at her mom's funeral

One time

I had to hold my mom up while her body racked with sadness

One time

my mom spent more days in bed than out

But now

she's on antidepressants
and they're working and
the good times are outnumbering the *one times*

And her smile, the first smile I ever saw, is back

And I'm on antidepressants now, too

The little girl I used to be would always follow me around. She'd tug my hand and ask if we could go hang out with friends or go to Luis's Halloween party. I'd tell her maybe some other time, I'm tired, I need to sleep. But she kept asking. Can we go see that band? Can we go see a movie? Can we play a game? Can we go shopping? Can we go outside?

Are we going to get groceries? Are we going to do our homework? Are we going to go to class? Are we going to open the door? The window? Are we going to get out of bed?

And then silence. I heard the silence the loudest. I looked under my bed and in my closet but she wasn't there. I called out to her. Silence. She was no where.

I called my mom and she told me there's nothing wrong if I need help finding the little girl. So I got help. And one day, between my friends, the trees, the flowers, the sunshine, and the music, I found her again.

I buy a lot of floral

a dress with roses
a poster with sunflowers
pillowcases with daisies

I like to put flowers in the places
I cannot grow them and

my grandma loved to garden.
She said the best time to plant hostas
was in the rain and

she planted bamboo around her garden
until it became her secret and in it she
planted more hostas and day lilies and
honeysuckle and love.

Love for flowers and sunshine and
family. I love her so much sometimes
I think about carving an iris into my
wrist but she always hated tattoos.

Rain smells

I wish the right words existed so I could write about the smell of rain. I can't say it smells like this or it smells like that. In 5th grade, Mrs. Surber told me that the smell is actually ozone but there's nothing poetic about that word or the way it sounds.

Maybe the smell of rain is subjunctive. My friend told me that she thought it smelled like chemicals. My mom says it smells peaceful. I think it smells like nostalgia.

Like running out of the pool while whistles blew or standing in the dugout while the diamond molted to mud or

Sleeping under a down comforter with the window cracked and burying my face into my mom's back when the thunder clapped

Or it smells like the week after my grandma died when it thunderstormed every day, but she always loved the rain. She'd open her window and jump in bed as soon as lightning struck.

And I like to think that when I smell the rain that she's telling me I need to take a nap.

And then she was born

When I was a little girl, I watched Peter Pan every day and I longed to fly so much that I jumped off my stairs and flew to the emergency room.

It's been a while since I've watched it but I remember that I cried the last time and I didn't know why, but I think I do now.

Maybe I never really wanted to fly. I've always been wary of heights. Maybe I just never wanted to grow up. I was scared of the big world, big jobs, big houses, and big responsibilities.

I was scared of wrinkles and adult diapers and aspirin and mortgages and people dying and living alone.

And then my niece was born...

with eyes the color blue that her mother and I always dreamed of and she smiles when I blow her kisses and when I tell her mother stories.

The first time I made her laugh, I decided I needed to grow up because

I wanted to make her laugh next year and the year after that.

I wanted to teach her how to hit a softball and write in cursive.

I wanted to tell her that boys aren't shit unless they're like our daddies and that us girls can always talk.

I wanted to show her what a strong woman is and what she can do.

I wanted to grow up with her, because at 21, I still have a lot of growing up to do, and I wanted to show her how to fly.

Tell Me About Your Childhood

I grew up in a warmhearted brick house where
laughter hung on hammered hooks and bed time
was always tucked in and kissed goodnight. Mom
and Dad did the best they could and I never knew
there was anything worse.

I grew up poking Grandfather's veiny hands and
building wrinkly bridges across his speckled skin.
I puckered my lips around Gramma's pickly tuna salad
and sipped Fresca in her secret, bamboosed garden
as I pretended to listen to her shrill wisdom.

I grew up in cramped classrooms
listening to sniffs and wheezy coughs.
I learned periodic and times tables and how to
write a thesis and kiss a boy. With my toothpick legs and
snaggled smile, I wondered how to be more than "just a kid."

I grew up in that cemetery
where my mother's sobs drowned my youth.
In front of that hole and surrounded by stones,
I couldn't think about heaven or hell or anything else
besides how my tongue ached for tuna salad.

I grew up in a cave of blankets in a girly pink room
lit by a lady bug night light. In its depths, books whispered
sweet nothings and terrifying somethings.
They told me things my parents couldn't or never did
and I tried to understand.

I grew up clinging to trouser legs and looking
up for answers. But now I'm growing up
far away from secret gardens and speckly bridges.
And my legs are stronger and my head and teeth are straight.