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Retellings : a collection of nonfiction essays.

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RETELLINGS:
A COLLECTION OF NONFICTION ESSAYS

By

Jenny Kiefer
B.A., Western Kentucky University, 2011
M.A., University of Louisville, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degrees of

Master of Arts
In English

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017

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A Thesis Approved on

April 10, 2017

By the following Thesis Committee:

Paul Griner, Thesis Director

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Martha and Mike Kiefer

along with my fiancé Robert Day

who have supported me through the process of working

towards my Master's Degree.

It is also dedicated to Reese.

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ABSTRACT

RETELLINGS: A COLLECTION OF NONFICTION ESSAYS

Jenny Kiefer

May 13, 2017

This thesis is a collection of nonfiction essays, extending both into the realms of journalism as well as into more traditional creative nonfiction essays. While each piece is based in true stories, each piece has its own style. As such, this collection is an exploration of different forms of and takes on the nonfiction essay. It is divided into four chapters, one for each essay. The first half encompasses journalistic pieces previously published in Louisville Magazine, one in the August 2016 issue and one in the February 2017 issue. The first piece is a literal retelling of three medical stories, incorporating both the patients' perspectives as well as their doctors and surgeons. It provides direct, linear storytelling based on interviews. The second piece details the technical production of a bourbon barrel. Although it incorporates some background on a worker at the Cooperage, its main focus is on the production process. The second half of this thesis is composed of more traditional nonfiction essays. The first of the two is written in an explorative second-person perspective, an epistolary exploration of guilt and mourning. The last

essay is modeled after Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, using a framed structure of books to explore a major theme of authority.

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CHAPTER I
CRITICAL ROLES¹

The patient: Dr. Dan Garcia, 68

The surgery: heart transplant

“Dr. Garcia, I don’t know you,” the woman began. Garcia had taken a phone call from a stranger in his home. “I’ve never met you. I’m in Bible study at Our Lady of Lourdes. Your patients have been praying for you to get a heart transplant for a long time. I know your whole story. I had a dream, and God said you’d get a heart transplant real fast.”

“Really? Well, that’s great. I really appreciate your prayers,” Garcia responded. He had been on the transplant list at the University of Louisville for five years. Now late 2015, he had outlived the complicated implanted device routing blood through his heart.

“You’ve got to transfer all your care to UK.”

“I can’t do that to all my faculty at U of L. I love my doctors. I love my hospital. I can’t do that.”

“I’ve had a dream,” she said. “You’re going to get a transplant real fast.”

¹ Previously published in *Louisville Magazine*

A few weeks later, Garcia transferred his care to the University of Kentucky. Eight days after he was placed on the transplant list, he had a donor heart. An exact match.

It was an unusually chilly Sunday in April 1990 when Garcia experienced chest pain. He blamed it on the cold. “That happens sometimes,” he says. He and his wife had returned home from church. As he gathered the newspaper from the yard, the knot of pain in his chest expanded, deepened. He tried his inhaler — no go. EMTs drove him to Baptist Hospital, where he had a heart attack, his first. Two days later, surgeons opened his chest, operated on his heart. He had 97 percent blockage. A triple bypass, a cold recovery. A 10-day stay in the hospital, years in rehab.

In the early hours of the morning, the day of his daughter’s graduation from Vanderbilt, he woke up in a hotel room with a tight, oppressive pain radiating in his chest. His fingers on his wrist, his pulse erratic. His wife drove him across the street to the emergency room, where he stayed for 11 more days. “My heart was working so hard, it was like a can of worms,” he says. “My blood vessels were all shot. They looked like strings.”

In an office in the back of his Kentuckiana Allergy practice, Garcia flips a magazine over and draws a diagram. He makes an oval with two tubes at the top, an anatomical heart. He draws a couple of lines to represent the aorta, and a few more to represent arteries on the other side. He draws the left ventricular assist device, or LVAD, the machine that kept him alive for nearly six years. The device is implanted on the left side of the heart,

where it creates a bypass to move the blood from the heart to the aorta, a detour around a construction zone.

“I knew I was in heart failure,” Garcia says. “I couldn’t catch a breath to brush my teeth.” His heart worked at 8 percent of its normal function at its lowest. He draws a larger circle around his initial drawing, saying that his heart was engorged. “They said my heart was the size of a football. It went from one side of my chest to the next,” he says.

He’d had a suspicion he’d eventually need his heart replaced — his mother, father and grandfather all had heart disease. Despite leading a fairly healthy lifestyle — a little extra weight, perhaps — he had his first heart attack at 42, and has had several other heart-related incidents since: A stroke. Cardiac stents. Arrhythmia. Cardiomyopathy after two bouts of pneumonia. A swollen blood vessel from the LVAD, which moves blood but doesn’t pulse it. Garcia was put on the transplant list at U of L in 2010. Patients usually wait at least a year before a donor heart becomes available.

Dr. Mark Slaughter implanted the LVAD during a five-hour surgery in May 2010. After the procedure, wires protruded from Garcia’s abdomen and attached to heavy lithium batteries — or into the wall at night while he slept, necessitating the installation of a whole-house generator. Garcia cut holes in his pockets, looped the battery connectors behind his shirt and tie. An extra 10 pounds, batteries rotated every few hours, hidden. When he traveled, he made a spectacle at the security stops, sounding the batteries’ alarms — which usually warn of low power — and taking them out, proving their use. “My quality of life went like this,” he says, pantomiming a rising line on a graph with his flattened hand. “Then it went like this for a number of years.” The line evens out,

horizontal. “Then my right heart failure started and I started going down.” His hand drops. His right heart failure caused lung hypertension — another high risk during surgery.

The estimated 12-month waiting period passed — five fold. Two close calls: One heart came up, a match, but when the heart was tested — arteries inflated to check their usage — it was faulty. The next heart was given to Garcia by a family in his church whose grandson had passed. But it was too small. He attempted to switch his care to Vanderbilt, but they rejected his case. “Too old, too tall, too complex,” he says. But the device regulating his blood flow was not meant to last six years: There’s a 60 percent mortality rate after five years, 90 percent after eight.

Sometimes you have to advocate for yourself. Garcia says this several times. Being a doctor himself, he knows the right questions and when to ask them. He knows the shoptalk, the jargon. He does his research. “If I had not known about the heart-failure clinic, I would probably be pushing tulips right now,” he says.

Sometimes advocating for yourself means listening to prophetic calls. After taking the stranger’s call, Garcia drove the 75 miles to Lexington on a Friday afternoon in January just to see what they had to say. If they gave the same prognosis as Vanderbilt, he’d live with it. After all, the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville pull from the same procurement pool. “I had a mindset that I was going to live maybe two or four years, and that’s it,” he says. “I was trying to get some things in order.”

Back at home, after the consultation, Garcia was passing time before a planned movie date with his grandchildren, twins. His wife was sewing. It had been only a week

since he'd added his name to UK's transplant list when he got the call. "We've got a heart for you," a nurse said on the other line. "We need you here within three hours."

"I wasn't ready for it," Garcia says. "I thought it was going to be another month, or three or four, or another year." They'd had their bags packed, waiting — a change of clothes, toothpaste, deodorant. "And my curling iron," Garcia jokes. Tracing their path from a week earlier, Garcia sent messages to his family while his wife drove — prayers and gratitude, all good vibes. Garcia says he felt confident on the journey. "One way or the other, I was going to win," he says.

The University of Kentucky is aggressive in searching for donors. It will take hearts that might be at the edge of optimal, ones that other places won't accept.

"Typically the ones that have been turned down by other people are usable if we have time to manipulate the donor's criteria before the harvest goes on," says Dr. Michael Sekela, the lead surgeon for Garcia's transplant. The donors he's talking about are typically patients declared brain dead. "Dr. Garcia was up in years and had other issues that made him high-risk, but we had a donor that would fit him that nobody else would use. But it's really not the edge of what you can do with donor (hearts). Those donors work out just fine if you take some time to get them better." The UK heart transplant team has performed nearly 30 operations. Their first year survival rate is above 90 percent, higher than average.

Sekela says Garcia's transplant was fairly standard. "Just the usual stuff. Tough getting in, tough getting out." Blood and nicotine tests, a surgical staph bath, a psychological test, echocardiogram, kidney and pulmonary checks and X-rays before anesthesia. The most complicated part was coordinating the extraction and transport of the donor heart

with the removal of the assist device and the patient's heart. In a span of 12 hours, the surgical team cracked his sternum, revealing the heart and the LVAD, connected in two places. Scar tissue had built up around the LVAD device, the toughest part of the surgery because scar tissue means bleeding. It took eight hours to remove the LVAD.

The surgery is a matter of arrangement: extracting the heart from the donor soon enough to transport — the organ, on ice, traveling by jet with a handler — to the operating room without having the patient waiting on bypass support for too long. But not so soon that the donor heart sits unconnected. From the moment of extraction it begins shutting down. The longer it takes for the heart to reach the recipient, the higher the chances of graft dysfunction, of rejection. But it can't arrive too late into the process of LVAD removal, lest something happen during transport of the donor heart, and the LVAD needs to be replanted. "That's the toughest part of the operation," Sekela says. "Once the heart's in the operating room, putting a heart in is really not technically difficult."

Garcia woke up in Colorado, thinking he was standing in the snow-capped mountains, hearing John Denver, remnants of his honeymoon camping in Yosemite. "I didn't know whether I had died or not," Garcia says. "I thought maybe I had died and I was entering heaven." But his periphery trickled in; his wife, Rita, his children and grandchildren stood next to his bed. On the bed tray was a laptop, a homemade slideshow of Estes Park and the Smoky Mountains. The stranger whose dream pushed Garcia to pursue treatment at UK was in the waiting room.

His fingers found his abdomen — no more LVAD wires. Moving up to his chest, he felt where they had cracked his rib cage. No longer would his pockets be filled with

the sagging weight of batteries, charging ports scattered throughout the house and office. The generator would become a convenience, a way to keep the fridge running in a power outage.

His first directive: get moving. “Every day you’re in bed, it’s going to be seven to 10 days recovery,” his doctors said. Day two: Twenty steps with a posse of nurses carrying fluid bags, oxygen. “I looked like I had a whole ICU with me,” he says. Days later, laps around the nurses’ station. Moving was hardest, going from couch to chair, lifting out of bed — always too little breath, too little stamina. But after months of cardiac rehab, Garcia can walk two miles, nonstop.

Seven weeks is the magic number, the goal of recovery. Garcia spent 17 days in the hospital ward. Behind his bed was a mural — painted mountains and calm streams. A couch pulled out into a bed for visitors. His window faced south, catching natural sunshine and students on campus. He rented an Airbnb home five minutes from the hospital to make his frequent outpatient checkups.

After months of cataloging medicines in an organizer, monthly heart catheterizations and drives to Lexington, Garcia says the biggest change is warmth — in his hands, his feet, his bald spot. His muscles aren’t achy. “You know the feeling you have before the flu? I always had a touch of that,” he says. “Looking back, it’s like a whole new chapter for me. They did a good job on me.”

Garcia is in the process of writing a letter to the family of his donor. “A lot of people go through guilt or depression (after a transplant),” Garcia says. “I never had any of that. I see it as a great gift. I think it’s very generous to give a heart.”

The Patient: Nat Maysey, 18

The Surgery: arm replantation

Only slivers of the blue walls in Nat Maysey's room at University Hospital are visible behind the greeting cards — some colorful with cartoons, some inspirational with rolling script, some handmade from construction paper — and purple No. 15 Louisville City FC jersey hiding the walls. A stiff, white brace encases his left arm, which he lifts occasionally. Maysey's mother, Alisa, sits at his bedside.

“I would say there are probably about 115 (cards) now,” she says. “I haven't counted. Probably 20 of them are from people we don't know.”

It's been just over a month since doctors reattached her son's arm.

There's a spinning machine inside the plant in Glasgow, Kentucky — components inside rotate clockwise, counterclockwise. There are pieces — Alisa, who's more talkative than her son, calls them “baskets” — Maysey manually manipulated at work. On the morning of June 6 — 12 days after graduating high school, just his 6th day on the job — Maysey reached in to complete his task and got caught. The machine's gears closed around his fingers, twisted against his arm, pulled him in. “I just leaned back,” Maysey says. He felt relief only when his arm detached a few inches above the elbow. Better his arm than his whole body. He felt no pain — or can't remember feeling any — until after the surgery.

Other workers reported Maysey running from the site of the accident, yelling for help, but he has no memory of this. A volunteer firefighter yelled for a belt. Another worker handed the firefighter his two-inch-wide leather belt, which the firefighter tightened around the top of Maysey's wound. (The doctors would later call it a perfect

tourniquet.) Maysey felt a slight sting — the only discomfort he recalls — and the bleeding ceased almost immediately. Other co-workers piled ice into a barrel while another extracted the teen’s arm from the machine.

“From what we’re told, everything that happened after the accident, the people responding did everything right to make his replant possible,” Alisa says. This includes calling for a helicopter to fly to Louisville instead of rushing to a local hospital less equipped to handle such a severe injury. “My arm probably wouldn’t have made it otherwise,” Maysey says.

Wide awake after the accident, he called his mother while waiting for an ambulance outside of the plant. “Mom, you need to come here,” he said. “I’ve cut my arm half off.”

“I just thought we were going to make a trip to the ER for stitches,” Alisa says, thinking exaggeration, maybe a bad cut. Thinking: Mom can fix it with a bandage. But she arrived to fire trucks, police cars, ambulances. She was so frantic that an EMT blocked her path, telling her, “Ma’am, there’s a lot of blood.” She needed to be calm. “When I walked in and saw that there wasn’t an arm hanging there,” she says, “I just thought about how his life was changed forever.”

In the minutes before a helicopter landed on the scene, Alisa sat with Maysey as he was given preliminary treatment in the back of an ambulance. She rubbed her fingers against his forehead, the constant motion calming. As they prayed together, Maysey said, “Mom, I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not going to die,” Alisa said. “They’ve stopped the bleeding. You might lose your arm, but you’re not going to die.”

Suddenly, panicked: “I’m sweating, Mom! I’m sweating!”

“We’re all sweating,” his mother said. “It’s hot in here.”

Later, she asked him: “Did you think profuse sweating came right before death?”

And he said, “Yeah, I kind of did.”

Maysey was lucky to be in Glasgow, only a 40-minute helicopter ride from University Hospital. The Kleinert and Kutz Hand Care Center hosts the world’s largest fellowship for hand and microsurgery. In 1999, its surgeons performed the first successful hand transplant in the nation. Dr. Elkin Galvis, the lead surgeon on Maysey’s case, says there’s a time limit for reattachment: “After six hours, you can’t try to replant because the muscles start dying.” The team had to reject a potential patient from Georgia, an 18-year-old who lost a limb in a mining accident. The timing was wrong, unfortunate; he’d already spent three hours in a local hospital. There was too little time left to transport and reattach.

After transferring Maysey’s iced appendage to a garbage bag — no room in the helicopter for the oversized blue barrel — his ride was quick. He was more worried about the view of the ground than what had happened at the factory. “I’ve made fun of him because he was scared of the helicopter ride,” says Alisa, who drove the length of I-65 to the hospital, her phone ringing with worried calls and messages. She arrived at the hospital after the surgery had started.

But her fiancé, who lives in Louisville, made it to the hospital in time to see Maysey surrounded by at least 20 OR team members examining the injury, prepping for surgery. The waiting room was already filled, an entire corner of the ER clustered with familiar faces when Alisa entered, faces she’d known from Lyons Missionary Baptist

Church. She'd yearned for her parents' support and wisdom on the drive up — both passed away in 2014, 45 days apart. She found it in her church community, in older couples who had acted as surrogate grandparents to her children.

“I realized that what I really wanted was just for him to be OK,” Alisa says. “When I say OK, I don't just mean not die. I just mean spiritually. A lot of young men would get angry at God for something like this.”

The machine had fractured most of the bones in Maysey's arm — in his hand, his forearm, and, obviously, the point of severance was an unclean cut. But first, blood flow. Galvis had never replanted an upper arm. He and two others rejoined the arteries, to continue pumping blood to the limb, racing against that six-hour time frame. They plated the humerus bone, a bar of metal and screws in the bone joining the two halves of the break. The surgeons lacerated the side of Maysey's arm to reduce the swelling that occurred during transport. Even more dangerous, the swelling could have led to compartment syndrome — a condition in which blood flow is impeded, which could have resulted in Maysey losing his arm all over again.

The surgical team had toiled in the operating room from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., four hours longer than Galvis' shift, when Dr. Huey Tien, another Kleinert and Kutz surgeon, took over the lead, working for another two hours. (Kleinert and Kutz hosts fellows from all over the world, already-practiced surgeons shadowing lead surgeons, learning the trade of microsurgery. Galvis, a former fellow, is a transplant from Colombia; Tien arrived from Taiwan.) After reattaching the veins, Galvis met with Alisa. In 10 minutes, he told her, they would remove the clamp on Maysey's arteries. In 30 minutes they'd know if blood would return to his fingers, an unexpected possibility. The team's main

goal in reattaching Maysey's arm was to save his elbow, to give him that natural bend. Galvis told Alisa that he expected that blood would not return to the fingers, that they'd amputate as many inches away from the elbow as they could, and fit Maysey with a prosthetic hand. That 30 minutes became two and a half hours. Finally, Galvis relayed the good news. "We did some arterial sutures, and we saved the fingers," he told her.

There are three nerves in the hand that control motion. Galvis and his team discovered that the nerve that controls wrist movement and hand closure was destroyed. But the nerve controlling fine motor functions — like pinching or writing cursive — was functional. So they made a switch, connecting the fine motor nerve to the end of the other. Since the replanting, Maysey has been in and out of the operating room. "In surgery every third day for the last month," Galvis says. Now, back home in Glasgow, Maysey receives rehab, lucky that a semi-retired hand specialist lives there. Maysey will need to make periodic trips to Louisville. Right now, he's working on moving his fingers, waiting to see if any feeling returns.

The patient: Trinity Goodson, 14

The procedure: bone-marrow transplant

"Trinity's rapidly approaching two and a half years post-transplant, and she's still not been back to school," says Laura Goodson, Trinity's mother. "She doesn't go anywhere except the doctor." In the four years since Trinity's diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2012, they've seen a floor nurse at Kosair Children's Hospital — the very first nurse who administered Trinity's chemotherapy — go through promotions; now she's the assistant nurse manager. Trinity hasn't been to school since Nov. 19, 2013.

The only red flag was weight loss. Trinity lost four and a half pounds in about ten days. She was sleepy and wheezy, but had been diagnosed as asthmatic in 2003. Days prior to the weight loss, she mentioned an achy shoulder. A 10-year-old with growing pains, her mother thought. On June 21, Trinity's grandfather, watching her for the day, told Goodson, "She's only had about three bites from an egg and cheese sandwich today." She'd only had about six ounces of water.

They drove her to an after-hours clinic later that evening, hosted by doctors that Goodson, a nurse, worked with. They first listened to her lungs, heard near silence on the left. Another red flag. "Why it never dawned on me to listen to her lung sounds I have no idea," Goodson says. A breathing treatment didn't solve anything. They drove to Harrison County for chest X-rays. Goodson, who had sat with a heavy lead apron through many chest X-rays with Trinity already, was pushed into a viewing room with her husband. The X-rays came up on the screen. "Anyone would have known something was wrong," Goodson says. The right lung was white. The left lung black. Back to the immediate-care center. The doctor said, "I don't know what's going on with your child. I could waste time trying to figure it out, but she doesn't have the time to waste."

"Can't we drive her down to Kosair?" her husband asked.

"You don't understand," the doctor said. "She doesn't have 30 minutes to waste."

Back to Harrison County. Three and a half hours in the ER, with tiny Trinity frightened, just for the doctor to declare that he wasn't sure. Then Trinity, by ambulance, on her way to Kosair. Goodson packed clothes at home, kissed her other two children while her husband rode with Trinity to Kosair, where a chest CT revealed fluid and a mass.

The fluid had deflated her left lung, moved her heart, pushed her diaphragm into her stomach. Excess fluid pooled around her heart and was starting to attack her right lung. Doctors drained 1,500 CCs for biopsy. Another 1,000 drained from a chest tube. That big plastic bottle of soda at the grocery store? That's slightly less than the amount of fluid drained.

They had arrived at the immediate-care center around 6:30. It was nearly eight hours later when the doctor at Kosair led Goodson and her husband to an empty room, made them sit. He said that Trinity had cancer. They were almost certain that it was lymphoma and would know for sure later that afternoon, after testing. "I can remember walking through the hall as a zombie when I first heard the words," Goodson says. "In the beginning, I felt so alone."

But the Goodsons haven't been alone. In her time at Kosair, Trinity has met other children — different diagnosis, perhaps, but same journey, same feeling of abnormality. You get close to families, trade shoulders to cry on. In Trinity's four years of treatment, she's lost some friends. "You never think that your kid is going to have to go to a friend's funeral so young," Goodson says. Trinity wanted the closure, attended the funerals if she could.

Even in the midst of tragedy, support continues. "All the new families," Goodson says, "I'm able to tell them, 'This is a club that you never, ever, ever want to be a part of. But once you're in it, you're in it for life. You'll always have someone on your side.'"

Trinity's fears upon hearing she had cancer were about missing school and losing her hair. "She had four people at school that actually shaved their head for her," Goodson says.

Angus has been with Trinity since just after her first surgery, the first of many long nights and hospital stays. Angus is a stuffed frog, given to her by a friend's brother. Trinity's immune system is too weak for visitors. When arranging the interview for this piece, Goodson and I settle on a phone conversation. When her sisters, one older and one younger, arrive home from school, Trinity is confined to her room until they have showered and changed, removed any bacteria or viruses from the outside world. Her younger sister, now nine, has been going through this routine since kindergarten. "It's an ongoing joke with her," Goodson says. "We have to 'de-cootie-fy' from school."

The Goodson household in Indiana has three high-efficiency filters, an electrostatic unit on the furnace, ultraviolet light to kill bacteria. "Before I was even allowed to bring her home, when she finished with (a bone-marrow) transplant, I actually had to have Coit cleaners come out and clean my ductwork," Goodson says. Carpets were sliced from the floors, to reduce dust mites and worse from settling. When Goodson cleans the house with a mixture of alcohol and water, Trinity must stay in her room, avoiding the upswept dust. Goodson used to change bed sheets daily, now does so weekly. "Angus gets a bath once a week," Goodson says.

Trinity rides to the doctor in a car for that purpose only — wiped down with the alcohol-water combo once a week, packed with clothes for her and Goodson. Designated last-minute bags stay in the house — for medicine, books and Angus. "We don't have two of Angus," Goodson says. "So Angus is one of the last things that gets thrown into her bag."

“It’s actually quite underwhelming,” says Dr. Alexandra Cheerva, Trinity’s oncologist from the beginning. “There’s no surgery involved. They don’t have to go to any special room.” A bone-marrow transplant is like a blood transfusion. An intravenous infusion through the central line, like a catheter — Trinity’s in her chest — and the donor marrow is transplanted. For about an hour or two, Trinity only needed to sit in her patient room, decorated blue and lime-green, perhaps taking medication for slight nausea.

Trinity’s initial donor (neither sister was a match) started with a simple cheek swab, to test for her human leukocyte antigen (HLA) typing, a protein marker that must match the patient’s. Donors are on a worldwide registry. When doctors need a donor, they check the database, receiving basic information: matching HLA, gender, approximate age. Both Trinity and her donor were tested in the week prior to the transplant date, to test for illnesses or complications. That donor postponed, then backed out. They secured a second donor. (For a year after the transplant, neither the donor nor the Goodsons could make more than anonymous contact, per the registry’s rules.)

Before transplant, Trinity received high doses of chemotherapy and radiation to attack the cancer cells, leaving her in a “blank” — but very fragile — state. The donor bone marrow, or stem cells, provides white and red blood cells, as well as platelets. Usually, transplant recipients are immunosuppressed for about a year, a period in which they are susceptible to viruses, bacteria, germs. A week before Trinity was set to receive her transplant from the second donor, a nasal swab tested positive for a cold-type virus usually found in newborns. “All the chemo that she had basically killed her immune system so much that that’s basically what she was, a premature newborn,” Goodson says.

This road, these past couple of years post-transplant, have not been easy for Trinity. “It’s been a long and complicated journey,” Cheerva says, one that included brain surgery after an infection. Surgeries to put in a central line, like a more permanent IV, or her port — a harder-to-access-but less-obtrusive line inside her right rib cage.

Her immune system has improved over the two and a half years since her bone-marrow transplant, but not enough. After a stem cell boost in early June, her CD4 count, the measure of her immune cells, was up to 200. (Cheerva estimates a normal range would be close to 500). “I thought everybody was going to go dancing in the streets,” Goodson says. “Everybody thought that Dr. Cheerva was going to do a jig in the hallway.” Once her count is higher than 200, doctors can begin decreasing medication — the slew of antivirals, antifungals, immunosuppressants — and get on the road to immunization. On the road to school.

In January, Kosair hosted a pre-transplant party for her. “Pre-transplant,” because, as Goodson explains, “You never know how long it’s going to be before these kiddos are going to be able to be around a group of people again.” Trinity chose food from Texas Roadhouse. A plethora of cake and ice cream, gifts. Other families and children they’ve met at Kosair, the families and children who can most identify with Trinity’s journey, celebrated with her.

Post-transplant, Trinity was lucky to avoid an extended stay in intensive care. She couldn’t have fresh fruit or vegetables — too much bacteria. No pepper because it harbors aspergillus fungus. The meals she ate had to be completely consumed within an hour of preparation. Most transplant patients are fed through a tube. Post-transplant, Trinity’s body was recovering; she was tired.

Now, Trinity is spunky. “We would always tell the doctors since transplant that we missed our happy, bubbly girl,” Goodson says. “We’re finally getting her back.” If Trinity’s older sister complains of a headache, she’ll say, “I dealt with headaches for three months and nobody knew what was going on with me. Cry me a river.”

CHAPTER II

BEFORE THE BOTTLE²

“I got to Louisville on a Saturday,” Charlie Harden says. “Got an interview with Brown Forman on Monday, and started working at the Cooperage the next day. I’ve been at the Cooperage ever since.” Hardin is now the cooperage’s most senior worker, sometimes working 80 hours a week, waking up at 3AM each morning. At his current station — a large jointer — in what seems to be white chalk, he’s written: *47 yrs+ Goal 50 yrs*. To the right, he’s taped up a Brown Forman ad; he stands in front of finished barrels.

Forty-seven years ago, 19-year-old Harden worked in the Shook department, reversing the barrel raising, pulling off the metal rings and pulling apart the staves, the pieces to be shipped abroad. “We were given a used barrel to do something with, so some of the guys turned it over to drain any leftover whiskey out of it,” Charlie says. “A little came out and it was Jack Daniel’s. It was the best whiskey I ever had.”

“The life of a barrel starts in the woods,” says Bob Russell, manager of mills and wood procurement. “When we’re buying a white oak log, we’re buying the very first ingredient.” Making a barrel takes up nearly 60% of the cost of producing bourbon, and just as much of a bourbon’s flavor and color is extracted from the wood — by law, bourbon can only be aged in new, American White Oak barrels. “We’re grading against knots — where a limb has broken off the tree,” Russell says. “We’re grading against natural defects. Streaks. Cracks. Rot. Fire.” A seasoned forester by trade, he can

² Previously published in *Louisville Magazine*

determine the characteristic and quality of a log by looking at its “butt” — the bottom ten or twelve feet of a tree, the exposed slice on either side.

Brown Forman sources its 60- or 70-year-old oak — Russell says a landowner may only harvest trees *twice* in their lifetime — from mills across the Midwest, where, like the baby bear’s belongings to Goldilocks, the conditions are *just right*. The trees don’t shoot up too fast or grow too slowly, stunted by months of snow. In this region — from Southern Michigan, through Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, all the way down to Birmingham — trees produce eight to twelve rings per inch in a cross section, just the right amount to allow the wood to bend, and not snap, for a bulging barrel. “We don’t like to go very far south,” Russell says. Humidity and year-round heat create faster growing conditions, producing more knots, more rot, more defects. “I draw a line at I-20. Don’t want to get below that.”

“I’m trying to keep a whole year of wood technology in about five minutes,” Russell says after I ask why logs are quarter-sawn to create staves. This involves a complicated explanation, starting far before any cuts are made. He moves to a whiteboard and draws diagrams with an orange marker: a squiggly circle (the outer bark) and straighter-lined circles inside (the growth rings, one per year).

But he zooms in. “We’re going to look at one ring,” he says. Active growth begins in February, before the first pricklings of blossoms and leaves. Within one yearly growth ring, there’s earlywood and latewood; he draws thick lines and thin lines. “It’s growing really fast in the spring and it’s adding these bigger rings until about May.”

To the side he magnifies even further: a sap line. “If you’ve seen the inside cross-section of oak, you’ve got the white line and that’s sap,” he says, drawing a series of close pores. “Sap leaks.”

The drying process removes the sap, but keeps its membrane: a tiny, natural tube running vertically through a log that halts the flow of bourbon. “That’s why white oak is so important to barrel-making,” Russell says. To cut oak for barrels, mills slice the log in half twice, until they’ve got four long pie slices, shaving off the flat slides until they’re left with only a small scrap piece, a tiny triangle of bark.

“We basically cut the log inside out,” Russell says. This process takes advantage of the inside dimensions, the special characteristics of the wood — the medullary rays, the growth rings, the sap membranes — to trap the bourbon. If you look at a used stave, a bowed slice of a barrel, the inside will be black and flaking. Along the inside edge, there will be a reddish, curving stain — the soak line, proof of the seal. “It only goes about halfway through a barrel,” Russell says. “(It’s) a natural barrier for whiskey to move in and out.”

After slicing into heading or stave pieces, there’s more waiting: the wood needs to season, to dry out. Fresh wood is wet wood, no good for raising barrels. Dried too fast and the pieces will break, too brittle to bend. In fact, the wood needs to dry so slowly that sprinklers add *more* water to the wood. “If it lays out in the sun in the summertime without anything to protect it, it’s going to be like your skin,” Russell says. “Burnt and crackled.”

The Brown Forman Cooperage is a maze of conveyor belts. Heading boards tower in 15- or 20-foot stacks in an expansive warehouse. Michael Nelson, Director of the Brown

Forman Cooperage, says they turn over this massive supply weekly — around 2500 barrels are raised daily. Tucked behind the shipping airfields, the cooperage was originally a furniture manufacturer, the building erected in 1920. Later, as a munitions plant, the Wood Mosaics Company produced over one million walnut gun stocks for war efforts in World War II before being converted to Bluegrass Cooperage in 1945. The name was changed to Brown Forman Cooperage in 2009.

In the din of the machinery — even with earplugs, the grinding and motors feel piercing — Nelson leads me through the cooperage, which employs about 300 people. Workers wear hard plastic goggles, leather boots and gloves, pressing stave boards against giant jointers with circular, upright blades as large as monster truck tires. It's chilly inside — even the constantly revolving motors can't heat the place. Someone taps a marker to the bottom of finished staves. "That's our high-tech inventory system. Fully automated, very computer driven," Nelson jokes. "He's counting."

When I visit in early December, Hardin is tapering thin staves at a special jointer called a Slicker Wheel which towers overhead, at least eight feet tall. His joint work requires precision: the sides of the staves must be tapered to achieve a round, leak-proof barrel, but thinner staves only need a slight touch. If Charlie removes too much, he'll have a pointed piece. He just needs to kiss them to the angled blade, barely creating sawdust.

Barrel raisers pluck pieces from carts stacked high with straight, jointed staves, thin and thick, ensuring a tight barrel. They fit the staves into a temporary steel ring, round like a hula-hoop. The raised barrel resembles a bloomed flower, the still-straight staves blossoming out and away. A metal lasso slips around and pulls the petals together, just

briefly. “We always use an odd number,” Nelson says. “You don’t want to get to the end and have two (staves) to kind of work in together.”

To bend the staves permanently, barrels take a steam bath to relax the wood, a sauna injecting the dry and brittle oak with moisture. Another temporary metal ring is placed on top to secure the shape, now a bloated belly. At a separate station, long coils of metal roll through a cutting machine, curled into circles, each slightly wider than the last, two distinctive B-stamped rivets to join them. Later, a ten-armed machine, like a spider with extra legs, pushes six rings into place over an already-rounded barrel — the first three secured, a mechanic flip, then the last three.

The heads form at the “green machine.” Gloved hands poke twin vampire-bite holes for dowel pegs into the sides of short, stout planks. There’s no carpenter’s glue in the barrel-raising process: just squeezing before spinning — horizontally like a record — a router shaving off the corners, beveling the edges to fit into the triangular “crow’s joint” in the staves, slightly below the edges.

The heads fit inside cast-iron rings connected in a chain, rotating in an elongated oval like a tank wheel. The chain pulls the heads through heat, like toast machines at a hotel breakfast, to char the inside. The heated iron runs upside-down through a water bath, steam rising from the floor, to save them from cracking. The charred heads return to their conveyor, ready to be fit into the still-open barrels.

When barrels finally look like barrels, they go back on the conveyor belt, through the Buffalo machine — named after the city — which evens the joints, pushes everything together. Three 100-pound barrels, already toasted, roll into the charring station. Toasting requires indirect heat, which lightly caramelizes the oak. But the charring station is the

big show: the insides are fully on fire. Large flames leap up, blackening the insides. The age-old argument behind properly roasted marshmallows. Metal claws grab the barrels like cartoon hooks pulling a poor performer offstage, and then run them underneath a shower to quench the flames.

The char imparts the wood's sugars to the bourbon, but legend — more than likely just that — says that charring bourbon barrels was an accident: fish or pickle barrels were charred and scraped to remove any residue before being reused, sometimes for whiskey. When the whiskey in the used barrels traveled, mingling with the barrel while floating down the Mississippi or Ohio, the taste was preferred to a younger whiskey in a non-charred barrel. We'll have to take this with a grain of oak.

Then the final steps: affixing the second head, flexing those staves just enough to wedge it in. Centering the thickest stave underneath a lasered X to cut the bung hole, an oversized drill press carving down into the belly.

Then the test: a gallon of water — just 1/50th of the barrel's capacity — pours inside, pressurized. "It's like if you've ever had a leak in a tire and you spray soapy water on it," Nelson says. In the warehouse, the bourbon pressurizes the barrel, constricts and contracts. "We try to replicate that — if it's driving air and water out, we make the assumption that it'll drive out the bourbon."

If it bubbles, the coopers, a group of senior employees, will mend it. A row of four cubicle-esque work spaces are equipped with electric drills and rubber mallets. If there's a slight gap between the staves, the coopers hammer in a wedge. If there's a hole, they shove in a sharp-tipped spike, drilling the hole to size if needed. A reed pushes into an oozing crow's joint.

“We’re pushing 600,000 (barrels) a year,” Nelson says. “It’s a lot. A lot of work.”

“This is the oldest building on campus,” says Ronnie Brooks, warehouse manager of the Brown Forman Distillery in Shively. He’s talking about the filling station, the cistern room. “Literally ready to fall down.”

Inside, the small room houses another conveyor belt, snaking around the room in a U-shape, no gaps from wall to wall. In the middle sit more barrels: some too large for their ricks, which hold smaller, 52-gallon barrels; some in need of repair, too many leaks for a quick fix. Trucks from the cooperage dock at the left, a large, square mouth in the wall, carrying nearly 200 barrels per trailer. “We usually make about three trips a day on average,” Brooks says, “bringing barrels back and forth.”

The new, still-empty barrels are pulled from the truck and placed sideways on the conveyor. The filling station hosts three slots, curved metal barrel holsters with dangling nozzles, an orange, coiled telephone wire rolling up to metal tubes that lead to the four tanks. The filling station is cramped, just a small space for the filler to align the barrels in the rung, cozy, bung hole up, dumping distillate inside. What comes out of the tank is clear. “You’ve heard the terminology white dog?” Brooks asks. “That’s basically what that is.”

When they are filled, real manual labor comes in. A poplar bung fits into the precise hole in the middle of the stave. The worker smacks it into place with a rubber mallet, arm swinging in huge parabolas.

The barrels continue around the U, rolling through the stamping machine, a square metal box that rises over the conveyor. It stamps both sides of the head with the date and a Brown Forman logo. On the way out, the barrel pushes a small metal tab, a

turnstile-like counter. According to the counter, when I visit around 1:30, nearly 450 barrels have been filled, just 100 under the daily goal, 535. “You see that it’s leaking a little bit?” Brooks says, showing me a newly-stamped barrel, wet from seepage, the new ink smudging. “That will seal up probably before it gets to the warehouse.”

The repairman waits inside the U. He’s got his hands crossed, watching the barrels roll across another length of rolling metal bars, heading to the second wide mouth on the right, to be loaded onto another truck. “He may sit down here all day,” Brooks says. “He might not do any (repairs).”

He’ll only need to repair a barrel if it’s peeing — exactly what it sounds like. A solid stream pouring from the barrel, as if it’s relieving itself, caused by wormholes — bugs in the wood — or loose staves. When a barrel pees, it’s pulled off the line with a hydraulic lift, into a stirrup just inside the conveyor belt. Wedges fit into leaks, usually between staves or heading pieces — a peg hammered into wormholes. “That wedge causes the wood to tighten up,” Brooks says. “If a barrel is so bad that we can’t make a repair, we’ve got this pump to refill a new barrel.”

The filled barrels are rolled sideways onto a second truck, sliding into rails. A curved metal triangle holds them in place as they roll less than a mile, the truck door wide open, to the warehouse on the same campus.

It’s pure whiskey-air in the warehouse. When the elevator door opens, I’m smacked in the face by fumes, thick and sweet, as if I’ve got an open bottle directly under my nose. I’m not sure how they make it through the day, maintaining a level head.

“*Barrel!*” is the oft-heard cry in the warehouse. It’s entirely coordination: between the truck driver, who loads barrels into a barrel escalator — a ski lift for bourbon — large

hooks that capture the barrels and deliver them to the correct floor; between the men guiding the barrel along rails, like train tracks, to the mouth of the ricks; between the ones inside the ricks, lining them up.

“Five hundred pounds,” Brooks says to an overall-clad worker, paused between rolling barrels. “It doesn’t take much to smash a finger. Does it, Jay?”

“No, it does not,” Jay responds.

This campus only uses ricks — large metal structures housing barrels on their sides, always 31 barrels per rick, 450,000 barrels in all five warehouses combined. The original warehouse is just through an oversized-doorway: the ricks here are three-high, the walls brick, the lighting dim, like a cavern. The bottom rows are lower than the floor, a groove carved into the concrete. Some of the barrels are weathered — rings copper from rust, the staves beaten and worn — but these were only filled in 2014. “But here’s the thing,” Brooks says. “You see the white paint on it? That’s a whiskey barrel.”

In the newest part of the warehouse, workers load barrels into the bottom row of a six-high rick. In between each rick is a thin sliver of space — barely enough room for someone to slip through to guide the barrels into place. “These guys rotate their positions throughout the day,” Brooks says. “You don’t (want) two guys stuck inside the ricks all day long. That’s probably the worst part of the job.”

“The most important and most wonderful part and the least maintenance of the process is the damn barrel,” says Jackie Zykan, master bourbon specialist for Old Forester. She’s brought a long box with her, about 30 small samples of bourbon, a cold glass bottle of clear distillate which smells like artificial popcorn butter. She says once the barrels are

warehoused, they don't move. "I've yet to find anyone out there that moves their barrels."

Zykan traces the red line along the side of the curved oak stave. As the barrel sits, it's developing flavor from moving in and out of the oak and the char, absorbing the caramelization and sugars in the wood, pulling from what's called the red layer. "Pulling from that red layer of slightly toasted sugars, the whiskey in the barrel itself is red," she says. All of a bourbon's color — and over half of the flavor — comes from the wood. "Everyone thinks bourbon is brown, but it's not until the air hits it." Takeaway: if you distilled bourbon in space, it'd be red.

The day it's filled, nearly 10 percent of the distillate is sucked into the oak. "People go, 'Oh, you lost a lot of whiskey,'" says Zykan. "We want that, because you want the wood to get wet."

All of the color is obtained within the first year of aging. She draws a graph. "If you look at color and time, and this is six months, a year," she says, "you see the color go *pshhew* to year one. Then it starts teetering off." The darker the bourbon, the more interaction it's had with the barrel, but this is straight from the barrel, before filtering. You won't find the best bottle of bourbon by comparing the variations in amber between bottles on the shelf.

For a good bourbon, you want the distillate to move in and out of the wood. Heat accomplishes this. "It's kind of like a teabag," Zykan says. "If you just let it sit there versus dunking it." In the summer, Kentucky's heat does this naturally, but barrels filled in September through the spring are heat-cycled: shut the windows and crank up the heat, a barrel sauna. A fiber optic probe curls out of selected barrels. "You're measuring the

temperature inside the barrel — not the air,” she says. “So it feels like it’s 130 degrees and it’s just pure whiskey air.”

Kentucky isn’t a humid environment, according to the barrels, so they lose water vapor, not alcohol — called the angel’s share. “If you aged a barrel in a really humid environment, the water in the barrel isn’t fighting to leave, because there’s some of it outside,” Zykan says. “With bourbon, you’re losing water, which is concentrating the alcohol.”

Six months before the bourbon is ready, Zykan drills a hole into the head of the barrel, facing out into the tiny space between ricks. She tests for warehouse must, for flavor and development in the bourbon. In the ricks, Brooks points out a barrel head that’s been tested; there’s a round freckle of wood in the middle of the head — an oak peg. “It literally just shoots right out,” Zykan says. “Just catch it, plug the hole, taste it, spit on the floor.”

After sitting for at least four years, the barrels roll backwards to the escalator, carried down and driven to the dump station. More conveyors here, these in a boot configuration, curling around three consecutive rights and then a left to lead back to where it began. The dumping station itself resembles the gates at Churchill Downs, a long row of bowed metal stirrups, housed in individual stalls. Each station has a pump to siphon out the bourbon. A few drills hang down on a coiled wire, attached to a rail to move side to side, down the line to drill away the bung. Broken poplar pieces litter the floor.

“Everything runs through this, whether it’s whiskey or bourbon or anything,” Brooks says, pointing to the large, stainless-steel tank, connected to the dump stations by a tube which hugs the ceiling. Straight from the barrel, the bourbon is littered with oak,

large chunks and fine particulates, filtered out by mesh screens. The oak pieces are spit out into a dumpster behind the building; never wasteful, the cooperage burns these remnants as fuel.

“The stuff that comes out of the second filter looks like mud,” Brooks says. “I just hung up with South Africa today,” says Liz Braun, Brown Forman’s Used Barrel Sales Manager. “I was in Ireland last month and Scotland. I was just in Guyana.” Brown Forman sells around half a million barrels annually — depending on how much bourbon they bottle — accounting for nearly half the used barrel sales worldwide. Used barrels might be used up to five times and age everything: beer, wine, scotch, whiskey — I’ve even seen “bourbon-barrel-aged mustard” at Kroger.

After being dumped, the emptied barrels are set in the yard, waiting to be put onto trucks. The campus in Shively may reuse them to make ET whiskey, or they may be sent to the Used Barrel Cooperage in Lynchberg, TN in a circus wagon.

In rural Scotland, Braun visits distilleries which have been aging scotch in Brown Forman barrels for fifty years, the B still clearly stamped on the rivets. “I’m talking to a 75-year-old man who we’ve been working with for 20 or 25 years, but he was never distilling his own (whiskey),” Braun says. She’s in Ireland, at Teeling Whiskey, a new brand started by the man’s two sons, currently the only distillery in Dublin. “He’s showing me this bottle of 30-year-old (whiskey) that his boys just packaged (using) Brown Forman barrels.

“When you strip down to the process of raising that barrel, I can go back to my office and show you a manual from 1930,” Braun says. “Barrels have been around for over 2,000 years. It hasn’t changed dramatically from that.”

CHAPTER III
INSIDE THE BEAST

“Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.”

-Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

1.

I don't remember how I heard about it. I'm certain it wasn't a phone call. It must have been online, some impersonal, hazy article. What I remember is reading that you were killed on a training mission, during your second tour of duty. You had just reenlisted. The day of your wake, I drove down the length of Preston Highway and

Eastern Parkway, the intersection of our former elementary school, now shuttered, changing hands from montessori to puppeteers to nothing. Flags probably whipped in the middle of their poles, but I only remember veterans lining the sidewalks, too close to the curb. They wore ribbons, held hand-scribbled poster boards and flags.

This was the summer after college, when I was still living with my parents, telemarketing newspapers, applying for anything else after my first bid at graduate school was a bust. I hadn't thought about you much in the five years since we last talked. I haven't thought about you all that much during the five years since your death. I'm still not sure how to fit the puzzle together, to reconcile this part of my past. It seems I should feel *something*—but there's a void of feeling: digging reveals no trigger, no moment of singularity which sparks some form of anguish, no tears or frustration or any of the typical stages of mourning.

Our history dots with convergences, with sputters and flares. We briefly attended grade school together—I don't remember much besides your relation to your cousin who remained for the full term of eight years while you left for a neighboring school, where we spent sparse summers in the same out-of-school daycare, with the same bored staff members, less than ten years older than ourselves. You returned for the yearly summer picnics, dimes on long numbered boards and clacking against the nails along the circumference of matching wheels to win baskets of fruits, boxes of candy. Our longest convergence occurred the summer after I graduated high school. An announcement had been made over the intercom a few months before, an opportunity for a summer job with the state fair. Your mom worked for the fair board already, in advertising.

The job: spend the summer traveling the length of the Bluegrass State's county fairs, through the tiny towns and cemeteries and steeples, to the hand-stitched blankets in glass cases, to pies with a single slice removed, jars and jars and jars with fabric hats. All this splendor and more, engulfed in fur: a traveling mascot for the Kentucky State Fair. A Fair Bear.

2.

The summer I turned 18 we scraped rubber across the hills of Kentucky, following a ragged paper of instructions, detailing each left and right, each tiny, half-mile segment across smooth highways, pot-holed and numbered county roads, backtracking with dog-eared turns. We drove through pockets of rolling green, through acreages of farms sliced in half by the pavement. Along these paths I read Sylvia Plath and of Holden Caulfield--one beyond my empathy, anxieties I would only experience later in life, and one beneath, too whiny, too reminiscent of my younger brother.

We passed roadside billboards, proclaiming: HELL IS REAL. Asking: IF YOU DIED TODAY, WHERE WOULD YOU SPEND ETERNITY?

My answer then: giggles and consternation.

My answer now: in the ground.

Other signs stood perched on top of rock faces above the road, looming. In scrawled paint, a round clock floated next to a cross. These signs persisted: Will you be ready when He comes? The hands of the clock pointed at 11, specifying neither a date nor side of meridem, as if devoted subjects must hold their breath for a single minute, twice a day, for a suspended miracle, the big homecoming.

3.

It was late when the van got back to the fairgrounds, the oversized parking lot dotted with only a few vehicles, half of them our own. We loaded the empty suits, the skins and heads of cartoon bears still reeking of sweat, into the closet, spraying a mist of floral cleaner to hide the stink. Too dark and too late to walk, you asked me for a ride home. I don't remember the conversation during the short trek--you lived only a few blocks away.

When I stopped outside of your house, you didn't open the door. You asked if I would go out with you.

I laughed. I said no. It was only after you dropped your head and mumbled, closed the door in the post-midnight lull that I realized you weren't joking. On my own short journey home, I dwelled on all the obvious clues: picking at your nails, examining the dirt-streaked floorboards, the ones I mirrored weeks later at the close of the summer, after our brief and numbered dates: a movie where I purchased my own ticket before you had the chance; a ride through the park, ending with your cleaning out my car in front of my parents' house; dinner where a taco shell crumbled in your hands. In the driver's seat, I pulled at the skin near my cuticles, memorizing the miniscule tears in the rubber on my steering wheel, where I said that a two-hour-long-distance relationship wouldn't work, when I began my undergraduate studies that fall, masking my indifference to you.

4.

While we do not have the requisite data on grief to document its vulnerability to social

shaping, we do have data, especially from social history, on crucial experiential components.

These components are:

(1) the level of significance of the other who dies;

- (a) a once close friend who tried to venture to lover; the friendship was drained, nearly depleted at the time of death
- (b) correspondence suggests that the deceased held feelings for the author long after

(2) the definition of the situation surrounding the death;

- (a) the deceased accepted a second round of duty in the Marines
- (b) the official cause of death is unknown; five-year-old news reports state that an accident occurred on a training mission
- (c) the last correspondence between the deceased and the author is post-dated nearly two years before the time of death

(3) the character of the self experiencing a loss through death; and

- (a) not applicable; no loss is experienced

(4) the interactional setting/situation in which the three prior components occur.³

- (a) insufficient data

5.

The June we drove through Kentucky dressing as bears was the same summer, two days before my birthday, that a young girl--a soccer player, of course--had her feet sliced off by a snapped wire while descending on a ride called Superman: Tower of

³ Italic sections from "The Social Shaping of Emotion: The Case of Grief" by Lyn H. Lofland (1985)

Power, formerly called The Hellevator (the top was repainted with a Superman emblem), the same red tube bulging up from ground so tall it served as a landmark. Each morning we'd pack the van with oversized duffle bags holding the carcasses of the bear suits and curve around the looped expressway, the red pillar the last visage of the fairgrounds to disappear. Stinking of sweat, the blinking light was our beacon, our first cue that we were almost home.

The first ride visitors encounter after passing through the gates, the red tower rose 177 feet in a straight line *up* (at 12 miles per hour), carting riders, their legs dangling and kicking, to the top. A short overview of the park and then a stomach-tingling drop (at 54 miles per hour), stopping several feet above the concrete. On her drop, this thirteen-year-old's feet were whipped away at the ankles. Rumors abounded that dark drops of blood rained on other fanny-packed spectators, dotting their noses like a bridge of freckles. Someone else claimed a foot was discovered in the bushes that surrounded the base of the ride.

They said in the aftermath:

She was pretty and she was popular.

We seen the cable break loose soon as it got to the top on the right-hand side.

My son's over there tripping out, man. You want to come to a park and feel safe, you know. We've got season passes. We're not coming back for sure.

Cables broke on the ascent. Their heat stung her face. Wrapped around her neck, her feet. She yelled to stop the ride, but no luck. Saved herself by removing the effective noose, but not those on her feet. "I remember feeling like I was on fire and smelling burning flesh," she said.

One report writes: “But her right foot was cut cleanly, almost like it was sliced off with a guillotine.” The right foot was saved, now functions normally. The left remains amputated.

The people on the ride just came and hit the ground.

While we traveled to some county fair, a thirteen-year-old girl lost her foot. It was a certain topic of discussion, probably even the center of jokes not meant to be spoken. We discussed the mechanics of snapped cables, but not the mechanics of ankles, of reattached bones and tendons, of a young girl relearning to walk.

Every park, one in a million maybe something happens. But I have no fear.

I am a stunned spectator, moved to indifference. *Although we can't be with you while you remember your loved one, you're in our thoughts from afar.* I am removed from the defunct Kübler-Ross stages of grief. I know it happened. I believe it happened: you died. The evidence is not even an empty weight in my hands. It's helium. It's a headline in the middle of the paper. The monitor screen of my grief for you is a flat, shrill line, a mirror of that summer, of that girl, whose name we did not know.

When did the adrenaline ease? When did she feel the sting, the loss of weight at the ends of her limbs? Did she feel it right away? Did it come in waves? Did she trace a map of decisions, a butterfly of actions to her hospitalization? When the ride ended, she asked if her friends were okay, she saw her own ripped pants. But she didn't notice her loss. In a daze.

When will I feel it?

When I got up there, the lady, she was just sitting there and she didn't have no legs. She didn't have no legs at all. She was just calm.

6.

It is an emotion, however much based in biological capacities, which touches directly on the mutual interdependence of selves and societies, of actors and others, of me and you.⁴

7.

Embry-Bosse, the funeral home that hosted your wake, now hosts a permanent online guestbook for condolences, a book that someone has paid to restore, to make the entries visible forever. On the right are pre-written, suggested entries; maybe one of these can stand in place for my grief, my disconnect between actual sincerity and indifference.

Placeholders for grief: *In loving memory of a wonderful person. We will love you and miss you always. Easter offers hope to those who grieve.*

Mothers of Marines, otherwise unaffiliated, write of your heroism, your sacrifice. They list names of their sons, dates underneath. Someone posts an edited picture, a strange amalgamation of cut-and-paste, a soldier on a bridge in salute. At the other end of the bridge are religious images, a yellow choir of angels on the right, a blue-toned crucifix on the left, gray, duplicated clouds in the middle. A soldier crosses the bridge, wearing camo, holding a rifle, the bridge flanked on either side by a chorus of Marines. In the left corner, a message: *Welcome home.*

Peggy Childers of Carson City, Nevada: “To the family of Cpl. Aaron M. Faust: Aaron gave the ultimate sacrifice and will be held in the hearts of Americans forever. I

⁴ “The Social Shaping of Emotion: The Case of Grief” by Lyn H. Lofland (1985)

cannot and will not let our fallen heroes be forgotten. My deepest sympathy to you. Some gave all."

Laura Swink of Ralphine, Virginia: "RIP MARINE. You will never be forgotten. Prayers for your family. ~FREEDOM IS NOT FREE~ GS Mother, Laura Swink, 2/9, HM3(FMF) James M Swink, II, KIA 27 Aug 2010."

Gloria Foster of Longview, Texas: "This must be such a difficult time for you, and I pray you will receive the peace and Grace that you need to see you through it. God be with you and your family."

Is this the same God who inspires the threatening billboards I passed in Upton, Kentucky, midway between college and home? The same God who apparently promised to arrive at a specific face of the clock but without further instructions?

8.

In between damp rounds of the bear, we hovered around the van, behind sheds, in the recesses of the carnivals. You smoked. Maybe you talked about your dad's time with the Marines, maybe I had finished another tour of my anti-war literature. I don't know what sparked the subject; but I remember we were in agreement: my choice from a fear masked by morality; yours perhaps only to side with me.

I remember the outcomes of these conversations, though I can't tack down the words, our eighteen-year-old wisdom, my head immersed in the literature of Tralfamadorians, of no-win loopholes, of catches, of a soldier left with only a torso and a brain, left to smash his head against a pillow, to tap out words. We agreed, then, in the thick air of Kentucky summers, that we would not fight. As you smoked and I inhaled second-hand, we knew we would not be soldiers.

A month later, you wrote: “So I joined the Air National Guard to pay for school and am going to basic training in the next month or so. The bonus for signing and completion of basic training are enough to get a car and place to live. Plus since I'm joining as a Chef they will give me training in cooking while I'm going to Sullivan.”

A day after that: “The biggest reason I'm joining the ANG is so they pay for school, and the difference between the ANG and the Air Force is really nothing its just in the ANG I will be working with my Dad.”

These are the pieces, with a gap between the messages. My words are evaporated, lost to some digital archive I can't buy back. But in the gaps I can assume. I can shove words back into my mouth.

9.

For the past two years, I have been living in a rented house only a few short blocks from your parents'; theirs brick with a screened porch and tall wooden privacy fence tucked in the corner of a busy street. The house where someone must have shown up in full Marine regalia, knocking on the door to deliver the news, under the seasonal wreath; it would have been pastel, perhaps still leftover from Easter just a week prior. But this scene only develops into a TV movie. Did your mother answer the door, fluttering suddenly with perspiration, leaning against the door frame, unable to breathe? Or was it your father, a former Marine himself, stoic, standing up straight as your mother called from the next room, asking who was there?

Tucked behind an apartment complex is a small structure composed of rocks, a Grotto, part of a former hospital. Two short walls protrude from a tall, arched cave, a statue of the virgin Mary, arms parted, sits on stacks of rock, peering at the second-story

level of the apartments beyond. A small pathway curves around a middle island, where small shrubs and flowers are pruned. Nestled among these are individual rocks, pieces of those which make the Grotto. A friend and I walk to this spot after coffee in early summer to sit in shade. Your name adorns one rock, the letters hand painted.

In these moments, I only feel the overwhelming absence of feeling. Seeing your name painted on a memorial rock doesn't recall our time together. Imagining your mother or father or sisters opening the door or arriving home to a bad news messenger doesn't provoke empathetic catharsis. Instead, only mild guilt that I am not mourning for you, that I never have, and a selfish desire to absolve that guilt in this conceitedness of writing.

10.

There's still a phone number in my contacts for you. It keeps reappearing after deletion, some zombie feature of merging accounts. I don't know where your master file is, so you remain alongside other out of date phone numbers I can't get rid of.

11.

Maybe I want to feel guilt. I want to believe in that convenient narrative, that timeline in which every cause and effect is discernable and dramatic, where I can fan the map across my lap in the passenger's seat, unfolding the creases, point A weaving to B. A course which required that I be attentive to the intercom, announcing the job, that I apply and take the job, that your mom had taken her job and presumably led you to your position alongside me that summer. Boy re-meets Girl. Girl devastates Boy. Boy joins the Marines. Boy dies in Afghanistan. But paper maps are like sealed envelopes; the creases never fit together quite as perfectly once unfolded.

A series of now one-sided correspondences, now almost ten years old, are buried in my former email account. My responses are absent, perhaps buried in the accumulated spam of your account—if it has not itself been purged, a dead man’s data erased from a whizzing server. It seems you sent an entirely new message with each response. Each subject line is varied and in the column, the single page, of your spare messages—numbering twenty-six—a small, curled arrow exposes where I had replied—and where I had not.

In your responses I can create the border of the puzzle, find the pieces edged with 180 degrees, some at a right angle. Emails are impersonal, removed; no intonation. The bulk of the messages are dated during my first semester of college. But the distance—the two hours south from any acquaintance, a nearly straight line down I-65, wavering between my half of a tiny, cinderblock dorm room and classes—did not matter. We did not need to share the same time, but neither did we need to wait.

In these sparse lines you wrote that you had signed up for some division of the air force, then the marines, following your dad. A choice counter to our summer talks. But were you just agreeing because you were immersed in me, in my bygone Vietnam, more than secondhand rhetoric? Did you change your mind in despair, join the army as a way to forget our three dates? You wrote that you joined to pay for school. In the gaps, I wrote my contingency plan.

Wednesday, August 29, 2007: *You do know that when the draft comes back (if it ever does) it will include women, because they allow women in the army so they can be drafted. Besides I don't see you as the kind of person who would go out and get pregnant just to dodge something like a draft. If you did*

get drafted you could move to Canada, but you would lose your citizenship.

On the bright side I would visit you in Canada.

Gespräch zu dir bald. (talk to you soon)

Aaron

Just two hours later: *Prison time is life in a military prison (boot camp for the rest of your life). I'm not sure how an insanity plea would work. Hopefully it never comes back and you don't have to worry about that.*

If I trace our digital correspondence, our emails, our only relic, I can see a change: the fall after, you sent nineteen emails. The next email was not received until 2009. By the time my responses are included, embedded underneath your new message, they are robotic, zombie responses, awkward first-date form letters.

Saturday, April 24, 2010: I haven't been up to much lately. Just school but it's almost over. I've only got two more weeks of classes and then finals. I have/had a full course load this semester, so I'm looking forward to summer.

Thursday, April 29, 2010: It sucks that you have to work so much. Where are you planning on going to school when you're done? This semester has been tough for me, but it's almost over. I've got one week of classes and then finals.

Monday, May 3, 2010: I've only got one year left. I've only got one week left and then finals. I have three take-home finals and three in-class finals that are all on Friday. At least I get a long weekend before finals. I hope everything is going well over there. I'd love to see some pictures.

There are inside jokes so old they are outside jokes, lines I don't remember, not even a wisp of recognition.

P.S. I was driving last week and almost hit a cloud cow, but it moved.

12.

something I need to say Monday, September 3, 2007 4:48 PM

From: "Aaron Faust" <aaron_fst@yahoo.com>

To: "jenny kiefer" <crazyj89@yahoo.com>

Jenny, I'm not trying to sound emo or anything I just needed to to tell you this. When you broke up with me you broke my heart, and I didn't think it would've been hard to keep a relationship going while you were at school. It still hurts me to think about that night, but it does help to know that we are still friends.

Aaron

P.S. I hope telling you this doesn't effect our friendship or anything I just needed to get that out of me. Hope your doing well.

Still no curled arrow.

13.

Nearly a year after her husband dies suddenly at the dinner table, between Christmas and New Year's Day, Joan Didion writes, "The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none." Around an hour afterward, a social worker calls her a "cool customer." Stoic. Not hysterical, flipping desks, crying too hard to breathe. Practical.

How long is too long to be a cool customer?

Darcy Harris, R.S.W., PhD, FT, states that *abnormal* grief is taking too long. Not converting from an uncool customer to a cool customer in the right amount of time. We are a product-driven society. It is uncouth to be out of commission. You get your three days leave.

In a 1974 special issue of *American Quarterly* titled “Death in America,” aptly chosen for the December issue, Phillipe Aries writes as if he is a time-traveling anthropologist, writing from thousands of years from now: “The laying out of the body is the beginning of a series of complicated and sumptuous rites. We open the casket “to restore to it the appearance of life.” Cemeteries are “adorned with monuments intended for the moral edification of visitors who are more tourists than pilgrims.”

But this is exactly it: I am laying out your body for my own moral edification. I am asking for my own personal gain: Is there a right way to feel? Am I a tourist or a pilgrim? Is opening this casket of nearly five years bringing you back? Making you undead?

The life of the dying man is compressed into this small space and this short moment, and, whatever kind of life it may be, it is then the center of the natural and supernatural world.

I have been writing this essay for months. I have saved these puzzle pieces for last, the pieces where I must explain myself. There has been no tipping point, no moment of clarity to force me to emotion. This expression of mourning has produced no grief.

Didion: *Because the reality of death has not yet penetrated awareness, survivors can appear to be quite accepting of the loss.*

Aries: *Death is the place for the realization of self.*

If I am honest, I am not writing this to honor your death. This is a selfish exploration. This is my poking a needle into my veins, trying to parse out pain. Is there a right way to feel? Is my non-grief acceptable? If we believe Lyn Loftland: “Grief refers to what is *felt*, mourning to what is *done*.” Can I therefore satiate my conceited desires? I have *felt* no grief, but I have *mourned* through writing. But have I mourned you? Or have I mourned my own lack of grief?

14.

There are, then, two ways to die badly: one consists of seeking an exchange of emotions; the other is to refuse to communicate.

What had always been required by individual conscience or social obligation is now forbidden; what had always been forbidden is now required. It is no longer correct to display one’s grief, nor even appear to feel any.⁵

15.

Nearly two years after your passing, another former classmate passed. A rumored overdose.

Her funeral became an unintended class reunion, a gravitational center, a black hole pulling former schoolmates in to her pink coffin, the color of a belly-ache soother. The coffin is open; her face is over-powdered, caked in foundation. She does not look like she is sleeping. In small cups around the open coffin were Sharpies, silver and gold; guests meant to write their condolences directly on the coffin.

⁵ Philippe Aries, “The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies” (1974)

THE GUEST BOOK IS EXPIRED.

*I will miss you girl you were my best friend always had my back.i love you
girl.rest in peace.*

Please restore the Guest Book to share in the life story. Permanent restoration of this online tomb of wounded memories, only \$79.99.

But her condolences are buried with her.

If you died today, where would you spend eternity? In the ground.

What to write on the coffin of the youngest corpse I've seen? Of the short girl who choreographed Cyndi Lauper songs in my parents' living room in 1998? One week before Christmas, I must make this decision. There are no preprogrammed suggestions to scroll through. No form letter, Jane Doe, with the name left blank. No expert condolence How To guide.

In loving memory of a wonderful person. We will love you and miss you always.

In the short days between her death and her wake, another unintended reunion occurs in a department store, another classmate. Her face is wet, red, swollen. I am stone faced, the cool customer. She tells me that our former classmate stopped sending messages in a text conversation. They assumed she had fallen asleep.

In the hallway at the wake, there are corkboards on easels, photographs tacked by tiny pins, some holding two or three at once. The night before I searched through my parent's house for a photograph to contribute. But scouring only found images from a birthday pool party, a host of snapshots of pre-teens in bathing suits. There was no room for the single acceptable photograph, cropped to show only head and shoulders. Someone has created a slideshow of images. In the vast, carpeted room hosting the coffin, it loops

through her life, childhood spliced with adulthood, as former classmates make pained small talk, ignoring the pink elephant in the room until there can be no more talk of college, of our pitiful income, of our still living just a few short blocks from our elementary school. But everything disintegrates when we arrive at our former classmate's death.

"It's weird," we say. We avoid those who are crying, those who are not here on the pretense of premature, nostalgic obligation to attend the funeral of our first classmate gone. We rearrange. We repeat this conversation like a speed dating ritual. We avoid her mother until we leave.

As I write this scene, one among the number of personal deaths I can count on my fingers, the uncomfot, the weirdness, the can't-quite-place-my-finger-on-it feeling returns. My body temperature drops; I reach for a thin blanket. I am slightly less than a cool customer. But I don't need a blanket for *you*, cooler than cool.

I do not remember what I wrote against the lipstick tomb, but I signed my name.

16.

What is this newfound virtual rubbernecking, these public archives in which people speak to the dead. What purpose does it serve those who post on my deceased classmate's still-active Facebook page? For them to address her directly, to showcase photographs of her tombstone, to tell her, "*I miss you. I still think about you daily.*" These gestures are, obviously, for the bereaved and not the departed, a goosebump-inducing public shrine, her unaltered profile photo like an embalmed mummy. In lieu of flowers, of gifts, we offer words.

So in the United States they have devised the plan of putting the body in a neutral place, which would have neither the anonymity of the hospital nor the excessively personal nature of the house. Like a hotel specializing in dead guests. It is not the dead who are being glorified, but the dead transformed into the almost-living. Our fairy fingers have given him back the appearance of life.⁶

After you died and your own Facebook page was not yet removed, I could pick out pieces I had missed. At some point between the last time you sent me a personal message in September 2010, you had met someone else and were engaged. On your mortuary forever posted, your paid-off guestbook, she wrote, nearly two years after your death, another puzzle:

R.I.P. Aaron i love and miss u deeply until we see each other again, ur always in my heart babe <3 you always and forever! I love and miss my Fiance Aaron Faust ? always. im sorry i never got to say goodbye :-)

Why wait two years to write this message? Virtual rubbernecking turned up no information about this (former? new?) girlfriend. Search results circled back.

Accompanying the message is a photo of you kissing her. Both of you have your eyes closed. Clip art is superimposed over the picture. She has captioned it: *The Night U Asked Me 2 Marry You! <3*

17.

However, there is a danger that this literature, that is both moralistic and polemical, will lead to a false interpretation. By suggesting either commercial

⁶ Philippe Aries, "The Reversal of Death" (1974)

exploitation and pressure of interests, or a perversion of the cult of happiness, it conceals from us the real meaning, which is the denial of the absolute finality of death and the repugnance of physical destruction without ritual and solemnity. This is why cremation is so rare in the United States.⁷

18.

Inside the bear, visibility is limited to four dark-colored mesh panels: the eyes and nostrils. Fur-covered foam boots, double the size of my size seven-and-a-halves, only allow waddling, wading, like kicking through plasma, through ecto goo. The belly protruding, a hot air cloud hovering in the absence. The gloves, which must be visible and identifiable in every photo, ate my hands. Blessed without a sense of smell, I did not have to suffer the stink of greasy sweat and stale body odor combined with floral sprays of Febreeze. I may not be able to determine if dairy has soured or if a gas leak is one match away from exploding the house, but at least I did not endure two thirty minute tours of nearly blindly waddling through county fairs in a cloud of a bodily bouquet.

Tracing the highways of Kentucky, we traversed the map through the summer, the bearskins zipped tight in their cases, containing their likely stench, until we suited up for our tour of county fairs. In Paducah, we arrived in the early afternoon to perform for a group of children from very young to old enough to know better, who crowded around, tugging on the costume. My hands stood, visible, in the air as a little boy shouted, “I can see someone inside! They’re fake!” An older boy followed too close, said he was the “body guard,” that he was making sure the other kids didn’t mess with us, the same kid

⁷ Philippe Aries, “The Reversal of Death” (1974)

who attempted to pull off the bear heads. I don't remember tears, but I'm sure some were shed on either side.

Too many fairgrounds were near cemeteries, both vast tracts of land scarcely populated. A morbid view from the top of the ferris wheel, the rows of gray slab were the same every time: old and dotted with plastic flowers. If our trail on the red and white lines of the map was unclear, headstones were the X we needed.

The same carnies poked their heads from water-gun games, between oversized, barely-sewn stuffed rabbits and cartoon characters. Squabbled behind their chrome counters, they negotiated ping-pong balls, thrown at their island of goldfish bowls. They collected our prizes at every stop, a varied color of an empty vessel: a floating, plastic cylinder with a threaded middle. A theme-park wallet.

"I'm getting these for my kids," one said.

In a southern county, we parked behind horse stalls and walked through patches of straw to the fair itself, the paper clip, miniature ferris wheel and spinning rides on hard dirt. That day I was the bear, the wife bear with the bow. You were the handler. In my haze of sweat, through the nose holes, you lurched in front of me, swinging a punch at a teenager, a beefy boy who moved suspiciously in our direction.

"I just wanted to hug the bear, man," he said. "What did you think I was going to do?"

"You know exactly what I think you were going to do," you said. *Tackle. Tackle is the word you're looking for.* Was this defending my honor, my bones, the very crushable bear head? Should this be it, the memory of memories, the one to make me crack? Or should it be when you bought a drink for me and placed it in the cup holder

while I slept in the van? When I woke up, we were stopped. Our supervisor, our driver and always-present older adult, asked while you were out of the vehicle, “You know he likes you, right?”

Or should it be that moment when your fidgeting transfers to me, still in my car, still dropping you off at your parent’s house? But now I am the one pinching the skin between my fingers, the one examining the dirt on the floor mats. The moment I told you that I was going to school two hours away. I didn’t think it would work out, with the distance. My excuse for not being able to say *I don’t like you like you like me*. But we can still be friends. Email pen pals.

Or is it a coin flip between the last two messages I uncovered from you, Facebook comments post-engagement, pulled from the tomb of my former email?

Aaron Faust commented on his status. Monday, August 23, 2010 9:47

AM. Aaron wrote: "dont worry hes goin to Afghan and hes goin to end up as screwed up in the head as me"

Aaron Jackfrost Faust commented on your photo. Sunday, February 27,

2011 11:18 PM. Aaron wrote: "Wow you are beautiful"

They aren’t the moments.

CHAPTER IV
PLUCKING FEATHERS

For our biweekly book club meetings, my co-leader, Megan, and I parked across the street from the jail in a small parking lot with a single street lamp illuminating a circle of pavement. We locked our belongings in our cars, everything except our keys and our books. The Warren County Jail houses both men and women, albeit segregated, both state

and federal inmates, a point of contention for the women in the book club, who claimed that in times of capacity or scarcity—too few beds for bodies, too few pillows for heads—federal inmates were treated like women and children on a sinking ship, a higher priority.

The brick building—squat, square—looked like a school, the same equally-spaced slate letters above the front door, a set of railed stairs and a concrete wheelchair ramp leading to the entrance, standard double glass doors. It was located just a few short blocks from Bowling Green’s historic center, a square roundabout enclosing a grassy park. The square had quaint stores, a small restaurant of American fare, an independent stage theatre, a law firm—the small town encapsulated at the bottom of the giant hill, Cherry Hall peering down upon this space where students never ventured.

After crossing the street, we entered the double doors and followed a bleached hallway, the walls lined with orange bricks and no windows. We were buzzed into the intake area, where we chatted with the guards while we pressed our lone fingertip against the digital monitor, hoping that this time it would scan, our waved prints straight down, smashed against the sliver of plastic. After several attempts, angling our fingers in precise motions our identities were registered and we had signed in.

Each week an officer led us to the small women’s library where the book club was hosted. Under tubes of fluorescent lights we curled through the hallways, the whitewashed cinder blocks blending into the floor and ceiling, a tunneling, antiseptic effect. We passed the men’s library: the size of a large classroom, colorful spines lined along the walls, a row of green law books filling the bottom shelves. A chalkboard along

a side wall. Chairs with plush, cushioned seats stacked in the far side of the room. Some weeks, men would gawk and holler as we passed.

We followed to the G Dorm area, where a security officer, a woman, sat at a desk partitioned behind a wall of bricks, the same composition as the walls, as if she were defending her castle, her fortress of paper clips and monitor screens. On the floor was a thick ocean of red paint, a moat past which the inmates could not dip their feet. They must stand beyond the red sea.

We were left in the women's library, a space a third the size of the one we passed previously. Red, hard-backed plastic chairs were stacked against the wall, and together, Megan and I began to form a circle, lifting a single chair away, the sharp edges digging into the groove between our palms and fingers. We placed chairs in front of the single utility shelf housing the women's books: a haphazard stuffing of romance novels, past book club titles, worn donations. A beige cabinet—locked—housed their law books. They must ask for the key, as they must ask for so many other things, an official protocol for aspirin.

After a few minutes, the women filed in, led by a guard. A heavy, blue door shut behind her, sealing us within the room. And we began.

The Vagina Monologues

We inherited this responsibility from two other passionate, like-minded young women, both of whom had graduated and left the county. At a conference in St. Louis, they stood together and described their experiences with the book club to Azar Nafisi,

who stood at the edge of the stage, away from her microphone, an intimate conversation in the midst of a crowded auditorium.

They invited us to their final session, to pass on the torch. We were told that the club was reading *The Vagina Monologues*, and in a quick sitting, I read and finished the play. The day I arrived for my first meeting, I was informed to leave the book in my car. The woman in charge of approving the book selections had rejected it on the basis that it would “incite sexual frustration.” We read and discussed a short story instead.

“Honey, we’re already frustrated. Ain’t no book gonna make it any worse,” one woman said to laughter.

On the miniscule, untidy bookshelf behind the circle of women the number of visible romance paperbacks, the embarrassing guilty-pleasure books heaping thrift store shelves with cracked spines, their covers adorned with sweat-speckled men and swooning women, quickly outnumbered my fingers.

But *The Vagina Monologues* has that word, that dirty, feminist, bra-burning, 1960s word in the middle of the title. Even Eve Ensler admits: “It’s a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word.” But it’s there, unmasked by euphemism (not *pussy*, not *coochi*, not *privates*, not even *down there*), promoting its ugliness, its anatomical reminder that is unfit for these women behind bars, as if they have a void between their legs. This book would only serve as a wake up call. This book about pubic hair. This book about genital mutilation and rape.

But these women must play dumb: *There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is. I do not know where it is. I do not touch. Not now. Not anymore. Not since.*

So they air their womanly grievances: they are allowed only a miniscule number of pads or tampons at any one time, having to ask sometimes several times a day to replenish. A quiet humiliation on top of embarrassment, on top of damning splotches of red.

“What do they think we’re going to do if they give us more than two pads at a time? Do they know something we don’t?”

Years later I worked for Dismas Charities, a transitional program for state inmates. My official title was administrative assistant, but my main duties were upholding the rules of the facility—a male-only site which housed 225 residents at full capacity. My experiences there gave me questions too late to ask about the pad rationing: Did they have personal storage space to keep these items? Had there been a prior history of clogging toilets with an excessive number of pads?

“Hate to see a woman having pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure.”

Little Bee

Little Bee’s story begins the same way as many of the protagonists of our book selections: *The men came and they...*

Little Bee can finish this sentence many times over. *The men came and they destroyed my village. Killed my family for oil, everyone but my sister and me.*

Chris Cleave’s novel about a young girl, a refugee from Nigeria whose life is saved by Sarah O’Rourke, a journalist on vacation.

The men came and they were caught off guard by British tourists. The men bartered with the tourists, Sarah and her husband, Andrew: your fingers for their lives. A

sharp blade fell into the sand, quickly stained with blood. But only Sarah's finger. Little Bee crouches beneath an over-turned boat as more blood saturates the sand. Sarah returns to England; days after her husband, Andrew, commits suicide, Little Bee presses the button of her doorbell, recently released from a British immigration center, after hiding as a stowaway.

Although Azar Nafisi says fiction should not be a stand in for our lives, I can't help but finish the line drawing from the dots: Megan and I were the wife missing her finger, dipping only a digit into their chaos. We were the careful women, the ones pursuing our degrees in four years, pressing a single digit onto a digital reader to record our coming—and, just an hour or so later—our goings. My fingerprints are cataloged, probably still, in this database, collecting binary dust. We wandered away from our tourist habitat to give our fingerprints away to a scanner with every visit. But we regained our digit at the end of the evening. Our finger is not buried in Nigerian sand.

The women of the Warren County Jail were the small Nigerian girl, those who hoarded nail polish, who lived in a maze of fluorescent lighting, passing their time reading—often completing the entire book in their boredom while we struggled to reach the allotted page count—let alone set up a discussion—while balancing our other work.

The same over-bright, whitening fluorescent filled the hallways between the dormitories and cafeteria at Dismas Charities, a transitional program for Kentucky inmates within two years of parole. In my role as administrative assistant, I remained mostly attached to my desk, ever-present to a small button which unlocked the door. My desk was part of the offices, removed from the blinding, bleached whites of the hallways;

instead, my chair rolled over dark-colored carpet, the desk an oversized C shape in the middle of gray and green wallpaper.

There were only three places I frequented: the administrative offices orbiting my desk; the glass-enclosed room where resident monitors scanned fingerprints, the ins-and-outs of the building; and a small meeting room beyond the disciplinary room where I distributed handwritten envelopes filled with dirty bills and coins. Though I had been given a tour of the facility, in the two years of my employment, the majority of the space remained a secret, a maze beyond the door separating the administration from the residents.

Even amidst the other staff, years my senior in their positions, I had more power: access to the internet; down time enough to read whole books on a computer screen facing away from the security camera; the ability to turn away residents, to disallow their entry through the self-closing door between the fluorescent, sanitized white and the cushioned carpet.

All this minute power, my upkeep on black and white. Measuring TV screens diagonally, gauging whether the expanded past the 15-inch mark. Plucking candy, canned ravioli, and crinkling chips from packages, leaving in their place an annotation of what had been removed and the coordinating rule. No exceptions except per the director's intervention.

I counted stained t-shirts stuffed into stretched plastic trash bags—sometimes instead a series of crushed cardboard, fifteen dollar postage stickers affixed in the corner—dropped at the side of my desk days after a new resident's early morning and long ride to the facility, well past the map line of acceptability at 15th and Portland

Avenue. After counting, still in the square, beige garb of the state, he must decide, must stoop and dig, must pick out which twenty tops he wants to keep.

“Tops include anything you wear on your torso,” I’d say, pointing to the property list and stipulations, as if it could make the number seem less arbitrary.

The excess bagged, I ventured into the fluorescence to store the tagged bundle behind more locked doors, into a cramped cabinet to be taken back.

* * *

Too often we veered off topic in Bowling Green, focused not on the fiction but on their isolated lives inside the grayed walls. The book club became a safe place, a place where—even if nothing but hot air would or could be produced—they were able to speak their frustrations. Their stories became their own myths, their own fiction; with no way to verify their stories, or to understand an alternative perspective, we could only trust them, give them our mirrored outrage, give them our *yes, and...*

The tallest tale being the pregnant woman. The fable unwound: the women were now unable to leave the jail to earn their state pay because one woman got pregnant, apparently while outside the facility, perhaps cleaning rubbish from roadsides. From my perspective, years later, I question how this would happen. How would they slip away from guards, to burrow and moan in a ditch, in sandy gravel? Or was it beneath overgrown grass, the tips bunched with seeds ready to drop? How weren’t they heard in their throes by the guards? Did she bite her lip to keep from calling out? Did he clench his hands into pale fists? Surely they were quick, in and out, back and dressed, their

sweaty lust mistaken for elbow grease, eyeing each other between head counts. Was this a woman they knew, a face, a name? Or was she herself a telephoned fairy tale, a whispering of vague gossip, the story slightly morphed with each retelling.

These are questions I cannot answer; likely questions the women telling this story could not answer. But whatever the tall tale, be it fabrication or truth, the result was this: the women could not leave the jail for work. Instead, they worked in the kitchen or the laundry, always second place to their male counterparts. Only allowed to feel fresh air in the yard, never by the roadside, always the same metal diamond cage, the same patch of clouds, the same everything.

And more horrors: there was the frugal woman—an employee—who oversaw the kitchen. This story begins: this supervisor wanted a raise, and she thought she could earn it by saving the jail money, by instructing the women working the kitchen to purposefully cut corners, to stretch the boundaries of what constituted a meal, to skimp even with a fully-stocked kitchen.

They described “chili”. “It was sad. It was like a pool of spiced water with three beans,” they said. “And this lady, she wouldn’t let us add anything to it. No meat, not more than this one can of beans, even though we got ten cans on the shelf.”

A co-worker, another woman, refused to serve it. In our hard-backed, red plastic circle, the women said the last time she served the men an unsatisfactory meal, she was met with a broken jaw. One look at his meal and he curved the plastic, sliced through the air, food plopping onto the floor as the tray came up and into her chin, the bone cracking, becoming displaced. “Ain’t no way she’s going to serve this so-called chili. Three fuckin’ beans.”

* * *

At my interview in October, after a few months of unemployment, I sat in the conference room where I would soon stuff envelopes with two fives, two ones, two quarters, and two nickels for hours, once a month—the residents’ measly pay for a month’s work. In my interview, I discussed my “passion for inmates’ rights” after my time leading the book club at the Warren County Jail, my desire to continue that work, to create another book club and literacy program.

Two months later, I began my main work, training with a woman who was retiring after decades. Although pip-squeaking and eager, there could—and would—not be a book club at Dismas. I looked to a separate facility, Diersen: my minute power would create an imbalance, the perception of favoritism for those residents in the club. Neither the company’s budget nor my peanuts of a paycheck could afford a complete set of books to distribute. I never submitted applications to the few grants I researched. After a few short months, it was tabled, where it gathered dust for the remainder of my two-year stint.

As I Lay Dying

In hindsight, this was a mistake. I’m not sure how this one passed the censures of the Women’s Studies department, who provided funding for the books provided they could be argued to have value to a gender studies reading, let alone the censure at the jail.

I'm not even sure why we thought this title would work, in any sense. Faulkner in the midst of cooped-up women? A long tangent about an insane family trek through earth, water, and fire to bury one of the only characters they might relate to?

The meetings were sparse and quiet. A woman who showed up reported that a woman not in attendance had hurled the book across the room, yelling for it to go fuck itself.

* * *

In our roundtable in Bowling Green, the women raged at confiscated shampoo, soap, nail polish.

“They probably take it home for themselves,” they said, side-eyes toward the guard at her C-shaped desk outside the door.

Megan and I nodded, able to produce neither verification nor the plucked toiletries. We could do nothing but mask confusion, never pressing, never asking, never knowing as I'd know five years later. Was there space? Had the containers broken in transit? Had anything been removed at all? Was there something other than malice, than conspiracy?

I don't believe these women had motive to lie to us. But even with my miniscule authority as an administrative assistant, I entertained supposed sore backs, sprained ankles, junk legs for the coveted bottom bunks. In a space I did not inhabit—and in fact never saw—the residents logged into a computer portal to send messages to staff, to

complain in all capital letters about the missing items in their packages, to plead for rubber rules—almost every request ending in a masked NO.

“You must be a very sad person to take my son’s money order,” a parent sniped on the phone. Her voice poked through the earpiece like pinpointed daggers. She had sent a money order over the maximum amount of seventy-five dollars, and it had been marked return to sender, sent back the next morning inside the white plastic bin with the rest of the mail. Apparently it had not made it back.

In my most fluorescent, clinical voice, I neither confirmed nor denied. I repeated the postal service’s steps to trace a lost money order.

The Women of Brewster Place

Upon re-reading this book as the late spring weather jumped from warm to blazing, the scene that pierced me (just two days after fifty are killed in a gay club in Orlando) was the climax of the novel, in which Lorraine, a gay woman, is trapped, caught like a mouse in the unlit alley near the brick wall that separates Brewster Place from the economic hub beyond. Five men surround her, press her knees into the concrete, and cram a discarded paper bag into her mouth as they take turns raping her, leaving her crumpled against the clay until the morning, where she finds a stray brick as she crawls to the bustle, to the drunk at the end of the alley, who she bludgeons to death: Ben, the always-intoxicated caretaker, of Brewster Place and of Lorraine, who often visited him to talk. In fact, she was headed to Ben’s basement apartment that night. This scene haunts my sleep as it does the residents of Brewster Place, who see the light-skinned girl in a green and black dress, pleading in the dark alley. Some imagine the girl is them, even if

their skin is hues darker. I don't remember my dream, but upon awaking, my jaw ached from grinding, from clenching.

But the only character I had remembered from my previous reading was Cora Lee, the fertile mother obsessed with babies. Continually pregnant with men looking only to do *the thing that feels good in the dark*, she coddles Sopha, her seventh, the other six running wild in tattered clothing, truant notices from school piling in the mailbox, furniture ripped and destroyed. The scent of the baby's curls, her soft skin distract Cora Lee from her other neglected children. "But babies grow up," Kiswana reminds her. And by the end of the novel, at the block party, she is rounded with her eighth, Sopha now able to wander and nowhere in sight.

They don't latch onto Mattie Michaels, whose son is arrested for manslaughter, who pleads with his momma that he can't stay in jail anymore, not that horrible, loud, dirty place. Who predictably disappears before his court date after Mattie puts her house up for bail. Whose missing items leave gaps in the dust as Mattie cooks her last meal for two. It is a different mother they want to discuss.

The women in the book club latched onto Cora Lee. They want to talk about their babies. *But babies grow up*. Their babies were growing up without them, a new half inch between visits, cataloguing their childhood through mailed photos instead of notches on the door frame. Seeing them for an hour or two a week—if they are lucky enough to receive weekly visits—and then their baby disappears with a grandmother, with an aunt. These women, the mothers of the group, are all too aware that babies grow up.

Natalie checks off the mothers she encountered: those unsure of their child's new guardianship, either in the familiar, knowing hands of an aunt, a grandmother, a brother,

or in the wrinkled hands of the state; those who remembered their children only as a thing they could no longer lay their hands on, red prints left behind amongst freckles; those who tore their cuticles to shreds in their teeth, waiting for a letter or phone call, who left an empty seat at graduations, weddings, nighttime homework. There are the mothers who are passing through, who keep quiet and keep their heads down, their fingers fluttering the pages of a book until they can go back to their child after a few short months, knowing that *babies grow up*.

There are those who know all too well that their babies have grown up, babies who are now teenagers, adults, who have never been tucked into bed by these women, their biological mothers, the mothers who don't tear open envelopes with scrawled addresses, whose bitter hands remain empty. These women don't tuck their heads; they don't care to be well behaved. They can afford to yell and thrash and mouth off because there's no expectant mouth waiting to be fed.

There are the mothers who arrive with watermelon bellies, whose tendrils snake across the floor, twisting and attaching on the bars. The mothers who cried through labor during their sentence, the babies cleared from the room before their weight settles even in the damp, wilted hands of the new mothers.

There is a stereotype about fathers in prison, but the residents at Dismas, the fathers, were also relegated to inconvenient visitation hours, pay phone calls, Christmas in the converted cafeteria. In my daily scouring of the mail, pulling out candy bar contraband, I opened each birthday card with not-yet-steady, not-yet-practiced handwriting; letters from mothers or grandmothers with tucked school photos of missing teeth; photocopies of proud report cards or school awards among the envelopes marked

with greasy lipstick stains. I opened each letter, not purposefully reading the text, checking for money orders, contraband. Each one almost a punch in the face for its future recipient: *See how they have grown. See how they can read and write. Without you.*

The first Christmas at Dismas, only a shy month in, the facility handed out donated stuffed elephants to the residents—a soft, gray toy the size of a newborn, the toes full of plastic beans—to give as presents to their children during the Christmas celebration. A room full of identical long nosed animals. The excess toys were dropped in their plastic bags on the fourth floor—an unfinished attic space used for storage, collecting dust. One of these elephants sits in the corner of my living room floor, its fur matted in places with spit—my dog’s toy, nearly half his size, which he will clamp between his teeth and shake. The seams have not yet split for him to gut, to pull out the white cloud stuffing, as he does with nearly every toy he has.

The second Christmas, I spent three hours doling candy canes and miniature toiletries into undersized paper bags, makeshift stockings for the residents on Christmas morning.

Downing a Duck

In the bowels of the administrative computer, I found a Microsoft Word file, a seven-page, single-spaced story titled “Downing a Duck”. Sleuthing behind the corner of my desk, the assistant director said, “You should read that.”

The story entailed, from an inmate’s perspective, how he’d plucked the feathers from his duck, his unit’s officer, with minute precision, until his skin was left pruned, speckled with pock marks. The con gained friendship and small favors, praising the guard

for doing his job, requesting extra notebooks and pencils. The typo-ed, misspelled narrative continued to relay the escalations: slipping the guard's cigarettes from the box on his desk; guilting him into mailing a card full of cash, under the guise of newly, nearly orphaned children of one of the inmates; delivering an uninspected package. Mounting until the offenses had already crossed the line of acceptability, until the con yanked the last feather, the stiff end pulling at skin, until the guard was bringing in pieces of his uniform. The con successfully escaped in his disguise.

I read this story closer to the end of my stint at Dismas than at the beginning. The duck of the story disturbed his nest by giving into gray, by abandoning the black and white rules, the innumerable NO, the scant YES.

Absent of power, I could give into this gray with the women in Bowling Green, down the hallway of fluorescent, in our bubble of outrage, of repressed genitals, of babies, education, words formed as complaints we could not relieve. But I could never leave the black and white at Dismas; I could not alter or push against the arbitrary numbers, the two bags of hard candy per week, the allotment of ten pairs of pants, including shorts. I could only dole out my NO, my *I don't make the rules, I just enforce them*, lest I become a duckling, molting.

CURRICULUM VITA

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Education

- 2015 – Present of **Masters of Arts in English**, focus in Creative Writing, University of Louisville.
- 2007 – 2011 **Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing**, Minor in German. *Summa Cum Laude* with Honors. Major GPA: 4.0. Overall GPA: 3.94. Western Kentucky University.
- Spring 2009 **Study Abroad, Universität Regensburg**. Regensburg, Germany. Program through Western Kentucky University.
- Winter 2008 **Study Abroad, Berlin and Dresden, Germany**. Program through Western Kentucky University.

Experience

- 2016 – Present **Assistant Director**, Creative Writing Department, University of Louisville. Responsibilities include: Managing and scheduling itineraries for author visits, recording author talks, posting author talks online, producing promotional materials, managing entries to Calvino Contest, photocopying student writing, selling books at events.
- 2016 – Present **Intern**, Louisville Magazine. Responsibilities include: Sending media requests, scheduling interviews and photo shoots, promoting

events and publications, writing articles, typing transcripts, proofreading and editing final copy.

- 2015 – Present **Writing Tutor**, University Writing Center, University of Louisville. Responsibilities include: tutoring and assisting writers in all disciplines, assisting with administrative tasks, respond to writing electronically, host online chat tutoring sessions.
- 2013 – 2015 **Administrative Assistant**, Dismas Charities. Responsibilities include: assisting directors and other staff; tracking resident property, money, and bed assignments; assisting new residents with intake and discharge; holding orientation for new residents
- 2012 – 2013 **Editor/Video Editor**, Measure Consumer Perspectives. Responsibilities include: editing and proofreading contracted reports and recordings for consistency, grammar, typographical and spelling errors; editing video files; assisting contractors with correct instructions
- Summer 2011 **Summer School Teacher**, R. H. Bearden Elementary, Sumner, Mississippi. Responsibilities include: planning and developing individual lesson plans; deliver lessons to students; track progress of students
- 2010 – 2011 **Book Club Leader**, Warren County Jail, Women’s Studies Department, Western Kentucky University. Responsibilities include: engage in discussion of gender-based literature with female inmates; lead writing prompt activities; select appropriate literature
- 2008 – 2011 **Tutor/Advisor/Office Assistant**, Modern Language Department, Western Kentucky University. Responsibilities include: tutoring undergraduate students in German language mechanics, pronunciation, and grammar; proofreading student-written German pieces; advise students of policies and procedures of the Modern Language Department; administrative duties including lab maintenance, computer mechanics, and professor assistance
- 2008 – 2011 **Creative Writing Editor**, *Zephyrus*, Western Kentucky University. Responsibilities include: coordinate with peer editors to select final pieces for publication; edit final pieces for quality and content
- Spring 2010 **Teaching Assistant**, German Department, Bowling Green High School. Responsibilities include: teaching advanced German to

students; assisting with individual tutoring; prepare lesson plans; grading papers and exams

Conference Presentations and Workshops

- September 24, 2016 **“Of Lore and Stagnation”**. Creative Writing Studies Conference, Asheville, North Carolina. Oral presentation.
- October 30, 2015 **Axton Master Workshop** with Dan Rosenburg, Axton Master Series, University of Louisville.
- April 29, 2011 **“Between Our Legs: On Books and Women of the Warren County Jail”**. Women’s Studies Writing Celebration, Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- April 5, 2011 **“Der Teufel Unter der Brücke”**. Goldenrod Poetry Festival, Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- March 25, 2011 **“Hands”**. Sigma Tau Delta International Convention. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Oral presentation, panel: “Original Fiction: Connections with Youth”
- March 30, 2010 **“Shallow Roots”**. Sigma Tau Delta International Convention. St. Louis, Missouri. Oral presentation, panel: “Original Fiction”
- March 27, 2009 **“Solstice”**. Sigma Tau Delta International Convention, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Oral presentation, panel: “Original Fiction: Natural Wonders”

Grants and Awards

- April 29, 2011 **First Place, “Between Our Legs”**. Women’s Studies Writing Contest, Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- April 18, 2011 **Outstanding Creative Writing Major**. Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University
- April 17, 2011 **Gordon Wilson, Sr. Award**. Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- April 5, 2011 **First Place, “Der Teufel Unter der Brücke”**. Goldenrod Poetry Festival, Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- March 26, 2011 **First Place, “Hands”**. Original Fiction category, Sigma Tau Delta International Convention, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

- 2011 **Finalist, “Shallow Roots”**. Jim Wayne Miller Festival, Bowling Green, Kentucky, Western Kentucky University.
- March 31, 2010 **Second Place, “Shallow Roots”**. Original Fiction category, Sigma Tau Delta International Convention, St. Louis, Missouri.
- 2009 **Honors Development Grant**. Honors College, Western Kentucky University.
- 2007 - 2011 **Regents Scholarship**. Western Kentucky University.

Publications

- February 2017 **“Before the Barrel”**. Louisville Magazine, Louisville, Kentucky.
- August 2016 **“Critical Roles”**. Louisville Magazine, Louisville, Kentucky.
- Fall 2015 **“Between Our Legs: On Women of the Warren County Jail”**. *The White Squirrel*. The University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky.

Memberships

- Undergraduate student member, Sigma Tau Delta, International English Society.
- Undergraduate student member, Delta Phi Alpha, National German Society.

Related Skills

Proficient in German, APA style, MLA style.