

Advanced Nonfiction Writing

Final Portfolio

Fall Semester 2018

ENGL: 4723: 0001

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Reflective Essay

Making and Moving through Meditative Works of the Essay Form

Reflecting on a class to create a lifestyle; a reflective essay

Advanced Nonfiction writing is more than I ever hoped it could be, and it is in the experience of this course that I hope to continue to make writing apart of my aesthetic, my way of moving about the world, and my overall lifestyle. As a senior in this fall course, I did not expect to still be able to be surprised or so heavily influenced by texts and a group of classmates in one class. However, like most experiences in life, this semester proved me very wrong. I not only found out that my love for the essay grew exponentially, but I finally began to understand why through the lessons we learned and the people I grew to meet and know. Using critical texts and learning exercises for the writings we produced, I was able to feel like I could take away everything thrown my way in the nonfiction genre, even as I became more aware of its presence as a dynamic form. The essay to me as a result of this course, has only made me want to experience its magnetic nature more, but I hope I can continue to learn a trick or two along the way as I move on from this class as well.

Of all the works we dissected and read in this course, I had quite a few favorites which influenced my stories and bodies of work that I submitted. Of all the attempts at different kinds of essays, my favorites neared the end when we got into the childhood essay, self-observation, and lyric forms of the essay. I found these forms or attempts at essaying to be the most natural to write. I feel the most natural not only because of this poetic and meditative aesthetic that does not follow strict rules or grammatical goals, but because through the lens of my own experiences I was able to try to understand the larger world as a whole that only these forms seemed to produce for me. Of the readings, I most enjoyed *Egg and the Chicken*, *Glaciology*, *Loitering*, *The Crack up*, *The foil Astronauts*, and *Didion* and *D'Agata's* texts. This is because all of these forms

utilized a meditative style, many devices to keep concepts flowing, and also had a personal point which influenced or incorporated a tie to a larger meaning or ideology. It helped me make decisions about my own essays as we continued to post weekly pieces. Of all my works I wrote I am most proud of my workshopped piece, *Awakening*, because of how I used elements of my own style with *Glaciology* and the lyric essay as form to explain my own observations of myself and its relation to the relationship of having a twin sister which I reflect on. I found with a guide to create a collage of meditations, I was able to sit on a moment without forgetting where I was trying to go using the most natural form of essay I knew how to write, that being the lyric essay.

From here I have mixed confictions, I will be graduating just after a summer trip abroad this June, and I will no longer be an English major. I love writing and being apart of this department has shaped how I see the world, how I view art, and all the people associated with such has changed drastically as well. I hope to continue to write a collection of essays, and one day create a large enough portfolio to turn it into a collection of essays that can then transform into a novel and one day get published. As for the field I am entering now, that would be graduate school. I am trying to see how my aspirations in theater go, since I have a career field in mind as a Dramaturg but becoming a full-fledged writer (and maybe even professor) is not yet off the table. Only time and my writing will truly be able to tell the story and the next chapter of this life. I would like to thank everyone involved in this course for their role in mine, keep reading and keep writing.

Fairy Tales

Thud. Thud. Thud. I hear him coming up the stairs, I can feel the weight of his body lifting each of his legs up each step in his echoes. I wrap myself tighter around my comforter and look out the window. It is dusk, and a sun beam from sunset falls into my window and onto the ground like a draped blanket on a sofa. I am not so sure why, but this makes me feel colder, I wrap my arms around my bed a little tighter.

Thud. I hear it again, another foot up another step of the stairs, so I close my eyes and imagine her now. Imagine Tinkerbelle and her small wings, her cotton tail slippers, and her green dress flying about my room. I wish I could be small like Tinkerbell. I am eight years old and have loved Tinkerbelle since I learned that fairies existed, and since I watched Peter Pan for the first time. I have lost almost all my baby teeth to meet the tooth fairy but remained unsuccessful in my attempts so far.

I imagine Tinkerbelle because she is better than me. She doesn't have to work hard to hide or get away from danger, she just takes her wings and flies to neverland whenever she pleases. She isn't afraid to show emotion, she doesn't feel a need to play pretend like the other lost boys, she just lives. I wonder where I would be if I could do the same. My dad's sluggish walk has now reached the top of the stairwell and I can hear his exhaustion from the door. As he begins to get closer and closer to my room, I imagine I am asleep and close my eyes to play my familiar game of pretend unlike my other fairy tales.

Often when I imagine I am sleeping, I feel safe, even if only for a moment in time. The room grows still, and it is as if I have an invisible cloak or a force field surrounding me from the dangers that otherwise would engulf me. I remember watching scary shows as a kid on

weeknights when my mom was at work and my dad was elsewhere, and I would run to my bed from the living room only to sigh a large breath of relief at the fact I was in now in the safety nest that was my bed. I imagined I was safe, so I was. I miss believing in fairies and pixie dust, I miss imagining in a place of safety, I miss pretend.

As I lay there, eyes closed, I imagine little light Tinkerbelle flying around my room leaving glittery pixie dust behind her while I lay in awe. When my father comes in and stops at the edge of my bed all I can feel is him staring at me. As I imagine I am dreaming, I can't shake the reality just outside the darkness of my closed eyes. He smells of old spice cologne, saw dust, and sweat and he breaks my silent moment of quiet escapades.

He leans in and gives me a sweaty kiss on my forehead. It surprises me before he lifts himself up to leave the room. My bed leaves an indent where he had sat, and my safety cloak breaks a crack in its illusion. As soon as I no longer smell him lingering near, I finally have a look under my pillow where my tooth lays. It is clean, white, and small. I smile at myself and lay my head back down now not to pretend but to dream for real. I dream of many Tinkerbelles and tooth fairies in a large forest fairy land and imagine I am a little fairy too. I have cotton ball slippers, wings, and a purple dress. Purple is my favorite color. I am eight but feel infinite.

When I wake up the next morning, the blanket of the sun is seen resting against my window to the rising sun where I had left it the night before, and I lift my pillow. There is three quarters and no tooth in sight. I smile for a moment, maybe it is okay to keep on imagining just for a little while longer, I close my eyes again even though I am no longer tired, and I pretend to sleep. Tinkerbelle greets me and hands me a palm full of pixie dust.

Wintergreen

In the darkness of the night I walk out as the sun decides it is time to go and the moon is left remaining. It has been an especially long day and I need some air. The colors of the sky smell like cotton candy and lavender and a linger in the wind leaves the smell of crisp wintergreen behind. I remember him in that moment.

In an instant of a second my father is back in my mind where he had left years ago, simply because of that wintergreen stinging me in the air.

I remember that gum as sweet and as pure as any child with a sugar addiction. The blue resonating in my mouth-watering agenda for a snack, was settled with a distraction for my immature cravings. My dad would often take that pack of wintergreen fresh gum on our trips to his construction sites. The offset of freshness in our mouths was deluded by the overbearing whiff of saw dust and cut wood that slid into our lungs against our wills. My sister and I would settle into a corner to color, chewing unbeknownst along to the rhythm of my father's nail staple as he prepared himself on roofs and behind on decks to make something that was before unreal.

We were in awe of him, yet now as I look out into the cotton candy lavender sky, and I cannot help but wonder how different things are now. How could I have remembered anything different? Wouldn't I be better off if I had?

A lingering presence of your life in its entirety lays resting in the back of your mind as you center yourself into the days tasks. This occurs daily only for one to slip into a solitude of emotion from the images and voices that make their presence known without nearly any warning for your sensitive heart because of a smell. What is it about smell that curates' memories? Is it

fair for God or whatever higher power out there forces these moments into our consciousness when we are trying so hard to forget?

Or maybe it is in the smell that the memory remains, and nowhere else. So, you can leave room for the memories yet to be built. Maybe remembering is a sign of strength, because you are forced to see where you have been.

I remember when I was old enough to help my father on the job he handed me a hammer and told me to hammer in a nail into a cabinet he was building. I didn't hit the nail hard enough. It smelled like raw wood stain cleaner, distinctly lemon and pine. My dad was breathing down my neck behind, trying to get me to grip the hammer harder, but I didn't have the strength. He became frustrated and ripped the hammer from me and hit the nail on the head in a second. I knew from then on, hammers would always be too heavy for me to handle. I took a sobbing breath in deep to avoid crying, and I smelled my father's angry blue wintergreen gum and old spice cologne sting my nostrils.

What do we do if the scents of our memory overlap each other? Like a song you heard on the radio as a child that was once adored and is now jaded with inappropriate significance on your less than innocent young adult ears. Do the memories change in our lives as we are sucked back into the scents of memory, or do they remain stagnant in the age in which they came? Does it remind us of who we are less than if that smell solely remained in that one moment in time?

I remember the last time I smelled old spice cologne. My now boyfriend wore it on our first date. I looked at him almost waiting to see him flash the sight of blue gum between his teeth in the crevices of his new and warmly affectionate smile. But I did not see my dad in that moment, but a young twenty-one-year old boy, just trying to say hi.

Envious

I envy the sky, how effortlessly its motion miraculously moves across the earth, completely exposed, naked in all its eloquence. The sky is never ending, never wrong, never inconsistent, never scared. The sun rises, sets, and the moon comes before morning. Where is my eloquence?

The atmosphere reminds me I am small but also that the world is too. In the sky I see the beauty of a quiet painting, so still yet encapsulating everything that is exquisite. This painting is not a painting at all, however, it is a mirror on the reflective emotions of life that shifts in its seasons.

The sky is beautiful because looking up all that is found are the strokes of humanity in every gust of wind and every smeared color floating in the atmosphere, but it is in fact not human at all. They are memories, visions of time, hopes, and truths. It feels undefinable, it is a feeling. The art of the sky remains in real time, yet no else seems to ever bother to look up. Colors collect across my eyes from cornea to cornea and I cannot look away, I am scared to miss even a second. I don't think I could remove myself even if I wanted. I look and am mesmerized, hypnotized, stoically still in the pull of this beauty I have no say in changing or challenging nor dare I try. I wonder where this sureness of beauty comes from, maybe if I stare long enough the truth will come and I too will understand.

The sky has clouds like the thought bubbles of my mind, not the puffy white clouds in shapes of bunny rabbits and kittens, but the grey removed chill of seeping darkness on a stormy night. It reflects the deepest parts of me. How can something so inhuman expose me and betray me in this way where I am revealed without consent or warning? I have no choice but to look and see the truth. I am not a vast array of color like the sky, and I know this too well.

But the sky is also vast, diverse, and full of all kinds of emotions. Sometimes the sky is unforgiving in its intentional betrayals. It exposes because it is the exposure in its existence. When the

night falls and the shadows of the day drop the darkness meets my neck, and I feel it clamping down. I cannot tell if I can breathe. I am reminded in these moments of airlessness that not even the atmosphere is always my friend in its nostalgia. But yet I forgive the sky, for it is all the hope I have. I remember again the colors, and the brisk crisp winds of fall that I drink into my lungs enthusiastically on warm fall afternoons instead.

Sometimes, the sky can be forgiving too, leaving a blanket of blues and sunbeams to boost me from time to space without making me think much deeper into my thoughts, unconsciously helping me to continue as days go on. I am thankful for the forgetfulness of the mundane blue and white consistent sky, against the darkest of shadows which bring myself into the light. I am thankful that with the night there is also day.

I look forward most when the sky is giving. Winking sharp twinkles from stars at night so that I am reminded that there is still light in my eyes, still sparkles to be seen in the stars, the world reminds me it is still my home. For these moments of magic, the mysteries of life help to move me to keep going.

I envy the sky, how effortlessly it is never scared. The sky is romantic with pinks, purples, and the various shades of blue and violet, it encompasses every feeling without being felt or having feelings at all. The sky is mean with its thunderous beams shaking the earth, but also honest. It is kind with its sweet serene sunrises of morning, and nostalgic with its winding whimsical sunsets of warm weaning days to nights. The sky reminds me that I am alive in this way, whether I wish this or not.

My sacrifice is to reduce myself to my inner self. To expose myself like the sky. For the moment the external reflects the internal where no internal can truly exist at all, I can be free where the internal currently hides behind and beyond. This internal deception of being that compactly keeps my secrets downfalls safely from disarray in hiding and for a moment I am cushioned into calmness. However, in sacrifice I am not safe. The sky has no where to run and continues cultivating me frozen in awe and amazement at this anomaly that I face day and night. Where did it learn these skills and where can I

learn them I wonder but remain wondering in emptiness despite myself without any real plan to take action quite yet.

I now realize I don't really know if I am real at all or if I should be. The sky, that is real, I know this with every speckle of light in my blue eyes which reflects the stars, the purple blues, the clouds. In the effort to become the inner self of the person I feel hallow to and become exposed from emptiness, I must eloquently be naked, so nothing can be saved or protect my fears. I risk being taken for granted in this exposure, but I am already in pursuit of this against myself.

This process, though brutal, is necessary. Like every stroke on the sunsets of the sky, the color and winds are what makes the art, and if I wish to exist at all, I need to see as to why. We forget sometimes, and sometimes, we never knew at all. If I ever wish to feel whole, I must feel empty to live and be allowed to be filled again. The sky fills me, but I am still envious of it all the same.

Blow me away

There is something humanizing about the winds of Iowa. Like a warm kiss to clean the hot tears off my face, like a cotton blanket to smooth goosebumps from chilled nights, the wind is there to remind me I am real. There is something painfully comforting about a midwestern wind. For when the night hits, the winter whispers a chill down your spine, but in the yellow belly of the afternoon the wind wallows solemn songs of fall comforts and promises to the days winding end. In the spring this afternoon abyss is amiss to the warmth of the brewing microwave of summer nights rapprochement.

On an Iowa night, there is safety and uncertainty in the breeze, nostalgia and sadness, love and pain. Like the end of your favorite book, the last page falls and you wish the story wasn't over but are so glad you got to hear it one more time. Nothing in life is guaranteed, and the dichotomy of the decent of day from Iowa's winds, blows me away into the unending depth of my consciousness and I remember time again, that I am real.

Iowa is known for only a few select objects; corn, farms, and windmills. Driving by a windmill near the cornfields of an Iowa afternoon, you can't help but feel its swift power in the atmosphere. The tall white blades pierce around in an unending cycle from earth to sky back to earth again, never deciding where to land, if land is even the destination at all. Like the windmills of Don Quixote, narrative and reality are blurred, the soft grazing of feeling drafts in from windows and back porches, keeping nature alive and well in deserted towns and suburban streets at sunset. The dissonance of space soothes and worries me in an instance and I am reminded that wind can cut and much as it can smooth.

This feeling of something more lingers in the faintest touch of seasons shifted in the wind. Wind indicates the shifts sorting in time and space. In the potent placements of winds decent, like Pocahontas I feel the colors of the wind. Winds remind us that time is always changing, and nothing can be held onto for long. This helps us remain human, to remember we don't get to choose our time here, only what we choose to do with what we are given before change inevitably comes. From winter to spring to summer to fall to winter again, wind winds us down to humility with or without permission, so how will you handle the shift?

Have you ever tried to fly a kite like in Mary Poppins on a windy Iowa day in May? Or before a humid storm in late September before the faintest feeling of summers end drifts away for good? It is impossible to grasp the thread of the ribbon, or maintain momentums, because there are too many dips from gravities gripping grasps and too many tears from the airs tantrums to hold you from your hopeful expectation. It is as if the universe is in protest to the change as much as you are but is pulled by something more.

Strong winds are just that. Strong. Winds are either strong or they are not, and in Iowa the winds whip you to reality without hesitation just as much as the harsh silence of stillness when they no longer live loudly, which leave no trace of their existence. It is either still or violent, rarely anything in between. How could anyone live in such extremes?

Iowa is fairly flat, so when wind whips, it whips with deliberate intention, rarely whimsically. Like reality there is only harsh truths and there is no escape. Like colors of the wind, there is life in the air which welcomes suspicions of suspecting doom and calm hopeful tomorrows. There is truth and only truth, because there is not enough time to live in the in-between before the shifts begin to surcome to their inevitable beginning.

You can't help but wonder, if what you are feeling is fleeting from reality or towards it. Sometimes truth is easier than a lie, but often, it is the last thing we wish to endure because it means changing ourselves deep within. Iowa is a swing state, both red and blue, republican and democrat, dependent from year to year. Liberal and conservative, the wind works swaying from left to right to back again. In a wave of wondering uncertainty the swing state swings us to sway in the in between even if we are adamant to one side or the other, because in the choice, we must dwell in the choosing.

Winds construct continuous questions of what is true and what is false in their uncertainty or predictability and no one is safe from drifts of doubt. Where does the wind go when it winds down from wild chaos before a thunderstorm? Does it disappear or remain distilled deep within us? Waiting to waken a beast, perhaps? And where does the wind come from on a summer day soaked in sunlight in the heat wave of July? What kindness brought such comforts of cooling to us, and when did we earn such grace? Do we deserve it?

Iowa is the heart of the nation and is shaped like a human face. The wind sits here in the in between, from the south and north, east and west of the other states. Iowa sitting center to the nations nutritious truths. Iowa city resides where students go to college near the tip of the nose, sniffing for understanding and knowledge, always searching, seeking, studying for deeper sentiments about ourselves and life. Bettendorf, Iowa, a suburb where a child could easily grow up, lives just below the nose. On the boarder between Iowa and Illinois, Bettendorf lays and the bridge it connects between the two states sits close to where runny noses drip to distant discoveries. In runny noses, are we running from home or towards it? Below the nose are we on the edge of doubt and drive?

Winds whip reality to remind us we are real. It is in the questioning that we question, and in questioning that we remember nothing is static or untouchable, and because of this there is substance and that what is being called upon is real. The unquestioned requires the most curiosities and winds wake our soul to these drifting days of knowing and unknowing. It is in these sifting sways that truth can capture us and us capture truth. Iowa is rural, and it is suburban. It is family friendly, joyous, and giving. And it is isolated, forgotten, and sad. It is aware, and it is ignorant. Winding winds whip into comforting kisses on hot tears of cheeks and as blankets to chilled goosebumps. And I wonder why I still feel the hair on my skin standing up when I am warmed. And I remember I am real, until I am not anymore, and the wind takes me away with it, someplace nothing like Iowa yet still all the same. And I remember no matter the changes, the doubts and certainties, I will always be blown away.

It's Time

Dawn. The sky rose quickly while I did not. My alarm clock relentlessly struck me awake with every ring of my ear. It is time. By 5:50 my reluctant legs had moved from the bed to the mirror, by 5:55 from the mirror to the door. I take a deep breath. At 6:10, I can hear sounds of doors opening and closing to opening again as I pass into the hallway. I hear a soft cough; half a beat long. A shoe snap on another's heel. A snuffle. It is time.

The earbuds come on and the jacket is zipped up and I take a second to look at the silence of the floor. It is still and solemn as if the day is still in bed, the sun peaks through the window and kisses the tables and chairs as I enter towards the stairway. It is the time of the year where I want to think about these shadows and beams of morning light intently, but I am not awake enough to convince myself I care.

It is now 6:15 and the rhythm of my legs falls heavy from gravity with every step. Stepping down again and again and again. Stepping down until I reach the ground floor. Stepping down until I have nowhere else to step down to, stepping down the only way I know how. The stairway echoes from the weight of me on each level. I feel this weight as much as I hear it.

I open the door to the day and find myself awakened like a splash of cold water. A cold breeze hits me, it is 6:20. Across the busy street of Grand avenue cars are softly swimming through traffic to their crucial destinations, tired students with heavy bags making their way to their next locations, buses screeching to a stop at bus stops and squirrels squirming to the next tree.

I begin in a matching rhythm of my speed to the first notes of the Lumineers' *Ho Hey*. "*I have been trying to do it right, I have been living a lonely life...*" and so it continues. 6:21 and my rhythmic walks become a steady drum of shuffled steps until together my legs and I are jogging. I wonder if I am lonely or just alone.

Sunrise.

6:22 and I make my way to the bridge as the sun peaks over the trees above the Iowa river. The water is calm but moves like the way a soft breeze moves my hair out of my face. 6:23 a man with greyed hair, glasses, and a briefcase in a hurry speeds past me with Nike tennis shoes on and a khaki pants and dress shirt. Where could he possibly be off to? And why do I want to know so bad?

6:25 and I am making my way on the bridge, winding down like a waterslide, letting gravity pull me again but this time with less strain on my body and more strain on the bridge. It is time. Thud thud thud I let my tension go and my muscle memory take over. Down down down again I go.

6:26 a girl with yoga pants on, a large sorority sweatshirt, and baseball cap walks slowly past so slow it is as if she is not moving at all. Her hair has been blond before and it has been blond for a long time I notice. The tips are tired as much as she seems to be. Her hair is almost white from the chemicals. I wonder if I look just as tired, even though I have never dyed my hair.

6:28 and I listen to the music echo the pounding rhythm in which my legs much stay in sync. I look out and see two ducks float fifty feet away from me on the freshwater of the river as I make my way over the bridge. They look as light as my rubber ducky I used to play with when

I was young. Easy to pick up, hard to let go. I wonder with those wings where those birds have been and where they intend to go. I wonder if I had wings, where I would go first.

6:29 my heart beats heavy in my chest and I can feel the color of my face. I feel every tendon every spasm of muscle and every breath I cannot catch. I wonder how bad I look but how good I am about to feel. I am going faster now, and I can see the main library. The next song begins to play, it's "*How to save a life*". Sad songs motivate me, they motivate me to think too much. Running helps me try not to think, this is a dilemma, but it is time.

6:31 and I see a young man and a small terrier on a leash pass by. He looks like he is in high school but must be 23. He has the body of the kind of guy who can't grow a beard or much muscle, so he blames women for his problems, and thinks of himself as a nice guy. His face is permanently pinched in thought. I immediately feel guilt rush to me for my judgement, as my tomato-face and wobbly body pound the pavement, but the guilt is replaced with anger. Stupid fragile masculinity, the dog stops to pee on the patch of grass next to me exactly as I pass by. He must know what I just thought.

I try to focus. It is time to get into gear. I push to the stoplight, then the cracks in the sidewalks to the next tree by the Iowa Memorial Union. It is time to turn around and kick things into overdrive. 6:34 and I am sprinting, the morning wind wipes away the frustrated tears that fall from my exhausted face as I push and push and push.

Up past the child boy, past the terrier, past the tired blonde, and past the unfashionable man in a hurry, their presence that was once there moments before leave ghosts as I go back on the bridge, back up the spiral hill, back up to the residence hall. I look at my clock, 6:36, it is time. I find my song. *Counting stars by OneRepublic*. Push, Melissa, Push, it is time to push. Book it.

And book it I do.

Buildings and trees and people blend together, colors like a water painting blend into one or maybe it is the tears surfacing to my face in motion. I cannot feel my legs anymore, are they even attached to my body? I feel the pounding through my head to my toes and I forget if I am alive, dead, or maybe somewhere in between. I look ahead and all I see is the door to the building.

“Lately I have been losing sleep dreaming about the things we could be...we’ll be, we’ll be counting stars...”

And now, it is morning.

The Melody of Melanie

Dear my sister's lover,

Before you ask her to marry you, before you take her hand until death do you part, I need to give you a message. Take care of her. I mean it, take good care of her. Everyone says this to their sibling's significant other in this time and in this moment in life, but I mean it more than anyone else. Give her as much care as a family erlume, a glass vase, a priceless picture, for she is more fragile than all of these things, and beyond more valuable. See, while you have been making plans to have her day in and day out for the rest of your lives, I have known her since life began. Trust my intentions for she is as much me as I am her, for we have existed because the other was born. I trust you have no malicious intention, but I want you to know that even in your darkest moments of marriage, you cannot hurt her.

You see, Melanie is a magnificent melody, she is the song one sings to get through the trials and tribulations of life, and if you silence that melody, there will be no more music. And Melanie is the music which motivates everyone around her, she is the tune which taps into the souls of those troubled and weary. She is the guiding light when the power goes out, she is the key to the locked door, she is the first thing you miss when you wake up and the last thing you think about when you dream which makes waking up a chore.

She is the muse to the art, she is the legs to the chair to which one stands. As you've experienced already, she has and always will be the kind of person for which you rely and hold closest to, which is what makes her the perfect wife, and I imagine, one of the many reasons you want to marry her and fell for her in the first place. My sister's lover, the reason I share this with you is because I too have experienced this, but in a different way than romance. Something far

deeper. We have shared everything. She is home, she is life, she is love. We shared the same quiet safe place that was our mothers' womb, to the first shared cradle, to bunk beds, to apartments, to houses, and now she is yours and this is one instance where I have come to resist sharing where I once found comfort in it. I don't blame you for this shift though, this is inevitable, and this is life.

She is me as much as I am her, we share our souls together. When we are gone, we will be together again in the infinite abyss of whatever comes after life, after all of this. Heaven or wherever it may be, wherever it is we go, we will always be together. The woman you love, loved me first, or rather, I loved her first. She has probably told you the stories, we entered this world at 10:15 am on a Tuesday morning in the hot summer day in July of 1996. I was pulled out first, while she came out seconds after. See, Melanie was a surprise. A surprise; a gift to the world. Our mother didn't know she existed, that she was having twins, until an hour before we entered the world, the doctors missed it in the sonograms and the checkups. How they could miss a girl like Melanie, I will never understand.

She was named right there in the hospital, at first our parents wanted to name her something complimentary to my own. As deliberations concurred, they decided on an M name which led to Melody, but the nurse walked in and heard Melanie, and her name had been nominated. Melanie, however, carries this melody in the aura of her smile that gives you goosebumps when she looks your way. She lingers like a lyric, like a noticeable note you cannot unhear, and you are changed forever because of her. As you've experienced, she is as much as she was then, a present in the present and all the moments of in between.

You see, the thing that you have probably picked up on by now is that Melanie in her inevitable existence changes and impacts every life she comes into contact with. When she

leaves a room, you reach for her perfume when her body no longer lingers. When the phone call ends, you can still hear the ringing of her laughter in your ears, you can still hear her smile from miles away. Melanie moves through the world and changes every life she passes, consciously and unconsciously, with her cultivated kindness, her sweet sensibility, her loving laugh. She evokes love in everything she does. Being born was my mother's living breathing reason for life, as she puts it, and as I grew older I would come to realize, that she was mine as well. My mother tells us to this day, she doesn't regret what our father did to her or how things ended, because of our birth and our existence. But deep down, it is implied knowledge that the day the surprise present that was Melanie came into the world, that she was the strength my mother needed to get out, the reason for life, and a reminder and symbol of love. So, don't take for granted this love, for it is the most powerful kind you'll ever experience.

Melanie and I, were born mirror twins, meaning we are identical but mirror each other in appearance and personality. The moles placed on my right arm are placed on her left, the smile line on her left cheek is on my right. She is left handed, I am right. We are stronger than romance, we are soul sisters. Mirrors of each other in the good and bad. So, take care of her, for she is as much a part of me as I am a part of her. She carries a part of me with her in every breath she takes, we share the DNA in our body, and we share the same worries, fears, childhood experiences, pains, joys, and memories. When I find myself missing her more than usual, I look in the mirror and she's there. Just the right angle and there is her smile and I feel that beautiful smile growing as I think of her.

She is funny, charismatic, impeccably kind and selfless, self-indulgent and mischievous, playful and flirtatious, curious but cautious, intelligent but faultily humble, she is easily embarrassed but easily envious, she is respectful but can be disrespectful if she knows you well

enough. She's the kind of person you go to for an honest opinion but stick around long enough and you'll be the first person to peer pressure you to do something you shouldn't thanks to her persuasion. She is easily irritable and beyond sensitive and accusatory, but she will be the first person to hold you when tears fall down your face. So, don't let her tears fall, hold her close when she is scared, and help bring that beautiful smile out every second you possibly can.

We were born in the month of the Cancer astronomical sign, our symbol is a crab, but our birth stone is a precious ruby. Cancer's are the most sensitive signs in the zodiac, they are nurtured by nature, and love and feel pain to the extreme. Melanie is the first person to cry in a movie, the first to stare too long at the baby in the pew in front of us at church, and the last to apologize in an argument. The first to worry she isn't pretty enough or scared she scored poorly on an exam, but the first to hold you if you failed your own quiz before she confides in you herself. Cancers are care takers, worriers, go-getters, they are all about home. Melanie is my home, my love, my life. The muse to my art with which I write and draw. She creates a better world around it, by living in it. So, take care of her, be fragile but never see her as weak, for there is a difference.

You see, Melanie is like that. She will always without hesitation put herself second if it will benefit someone she cares about. She is the kind of friend that would buy you a candy bar she saw just because she thought of you. While we were growing up Melanie held me in the hospital when at fifteen I debated if God was going to give me another chance to live when I fought adolescent cancer. She was the one, at as young as 7, who faced the most hits from our father, because what he saw as a weakness in her emotions, was her biggest strength. She was always the vulnerable one, always torn down as much as she was able to build up. To others she was the most optimistic person I have ever met, yet alone or just revealing to me, she would

expose just how hopeless she often felt. But she made it through, because she is a cancer, a melody, a muse, a light in the dark, an unforgettable smile, a friend. Because she is home.

Now, Melanie is not the easiest to get along with despite her impressionable soul. Her joy is valuable because it can be matched with immense pain and self-loathing. Just as you know, she is stubborn and impressionable. Just as you are gentle with her, she can be careless. Growing up she and I in our teenage years could not go more than two hours without fighting with each other because Melanie is smart. She is smart because she is an intuitive observer, she knows me better than I know myself. She knows what triggers anger in me, and in sisterly quarrels would use it against me. When I would be mad she stole my shirt, she would call out my hypocrisy for stealing her jeans the week before. Exposing my hypocrisy was below low to my angsty 16-year-old self, and the retaliation would follow. Melanie is stubborn.

When we would fight, I would apologize first, or else we would never stop fighting. As time and distance make way between us these fights lessened, but I still cannot drive too long in the car with her, without her condemning my choice of song on the radio, pace too slow to a stop at a stop sign, or when decided to look in my blind spot. Melanie is envious. As a giver, she sees what people need and tries to fill in the blank. However, just as she sees their needs, she sees their desirable traits. Melanie is the kind of girl who will buy a crop top at the mall, only to not wear it ever again after its first use outside the store, because a thinner girl in her lecture hall wore it better and she couldn't erase her fat chunks from her mind when trying to put it back on. Melanie is the most depressed person I have ever met, and the most optimistic.

However, despite all of this you can still never hurt her, because she will bring you more healing than you deserve, and you will spend your whole life trying to make it up to her. She would sing to me when our father would beat our step-mother in the other room at bed time, be

the one to sneak into my covers and stroke my forehead as I would cry myself into an exhaustive sleep. Melanie would be the one to grab my hand in fear when Dad would raise his voice our way, calling out to his girls. Melanie was the first person to hold my hand when the hair started falling out and the first to comb it when it grew back on our way to homecoming. Melanie was the one who called me on our first day away at college, when she stood on one end of the state and I on the other. Treat her well and hold her close, give her nice things, and remind her she is beautiful. Because, Melanie is a gift to this world, the song to my life which echoes on my darkest days, and if you treat her well, you will see just what I mean, to the best of your ability as her partner. Nothing beats being her soul mate, but you can try to come close.

She loves fiercely and without expectations for anything in return. I love her Infinitely and beyond time or meaning. She is my everything, my best friend my twin, my sister, My Mel, Melanie Jane. She is the melody to the song which keeps me living, so take care of her. Because she is the best song you'll ever know. And be romantic when you purpose, because she eats that stuff right up.

Sincerely,

Melanie's other half,

Melissa Jean

Poison

It was understood that when recess came the children were left to their own devices. Freeze tag, kickball, tackle football, and playing house crowded the grass and mulch of the playground like ants spreading from an ant hill. The invasion was inevitable. Boys verses girls, the war was established and the only choice the children had was to pick a side if they wanted to survive. The youth of children spread across the surface in a raid of small shrills, small laughs, small hiccups and small squeals with big imaginations.

Even being so young, the circles were already formulating among them. The swing set had the dramatic types, those who swung from feeling to feeling. The athletes never left the mud pile in the field by the outside edge of the playground. The gossip girls hung by the monkey bars just like they hung their self-esteem out for the masses. The smart kids avoided the games altogether.

The common pastime after lunch was to play snake bite. The boys being much faster and much more aggressive, would play tag with the girls and enforce their wrath on them, the war always in the back of their minds to win. The girls would run, until they were caught, and if they were caught before reaching the safe zone, the boys had their tasting. But if the girls reached the safe zone in time, the boys always found a way to bend the rules. You passed the line, you're not in the zone, you stepped out. It isn't fair you distracted me. It doesn't count if you get a head start. We call redo. No matter the outcome, the girls always ended up wounded one way or another. His words always out ruled hers. But the girls never gave up trying.

It is said in the bible that Eve is at fault for humanities sins. I find it strange that when Eve is enticed by the snake before eating the poisoned apple, that Adam blames Eve for their

demise immediately, rather than the snake. Can he really blame her? How could Eve know Adam didn't plant the snake there to begin with? Isn't she brave for trusting the snake despite the outcome, where Adam wouldn't have dared even try? What did he do to deserve or earn her trusting his insight? Why was she automatically at fault?

The snake bite was a maneuver which required a twist of the skin but not the bone. It was not meant to break the arm, just break pride. It was supposed to sting, like a snake biting someone with their fangs. The hands would twist the skin in the opposite direction that the arm was moving. No physical marks were often left besides a few hours of aggravated red heat from the friction. However, the poison always settled in, and there was no escaping the venom left behind.

I felt a red heat the first time when I was five years old. A few years before the recess hunger games and whirlwind wars between the genders. The game this time was cops and robbers, the boys were the cops, the girls the robbers. We didn't get to pick of course, her brother got to, because he was thirteen and clearly all knowing, the authority in the room. Her other friends that had also stayed the night were neighbors, my sister and I were the only two who knew Lauren from preschool. But her brother was a stranger to us. He was a new face, but his eyes were old somehow, I had seen them before someplace. I couldn't place them, but he could place me with just a dart of the eyes.

The games began. Run around the room robbers, find your hiding places, you will not be able to escape the authority today. I was arrested first. I felt the heat rise in my throat as I was told to lie down on the ground, so I could be properly arrested. I was being cuffed. But when I laid down to put my hands behind my back, I felt something between my hands. I asked what I

was feeling and began to squirm. He said it was his thumb and pinned me down harder. It was not.

We ran around again and this time my sister was this strangers' next target. My face got hot and blotchy, I felt the rosacea forming onto my cheeks. My hands were stinging into balls of fists as I looked ahead of me. Lauren's brother, my friends' brother, had my sister pinned as he had me.

But it was clear this time what was happening, because his pants were down. I rushed out of the room to get Lauren's mother, but froze on the staircase. Why would she believe me over her own son? I walked slowly back up the stairs and snatched my sister from the ground, glaring at the boy deep into his hallow eyes. We are done playing this game I said.

When I got into kindergarten and the recess games of freeze tag and tackle football and kickball and house sprawled across the landscape, I felt an uneasiness when snake biting was introduced. I felt the sting not as much in my wrists and arms, but in my hands. I was angry, I wanted justice, but most importantly I wanted to know when this poison was given to these boys and why they felt they had a right to pass it onto me?

My face grew hot and heavy and I became a smart kid and avoided the games all together. I found a book from the library and never forgot to carry it with me to recess each day. The only things between my hands would be pages between a book. I would find an anecdote. I am still looking.

Goodnight Sweetheart

Dad sung us to sleep every night for 4,1110 nights of the 4,745 nights he was a part of our lives. He would sing on the phone, in the house, in the attic, in hotels, in the car, in his cousin's house, in our grandparents' home, on vacation. Every night, after prayers without fail he sung to my sister and me. He would take the Spaniels song, *Goodnight Sweetheart*, *Goodnight* and make his own rendition. Melanie and I were his unofficial backup singers, while he sang his own version of the chorus.

I do not know if he sang us this song, because of the movie, "*Three men and a baby*" from 1987, or if he took inspiration from the spaniels who sang it or the McGuire sisters from the late 50's or someplace else entirely. Knowing my dad, it was a mix of all three. He lived in the 50's internally, yet behaved like he was from 1985, never acting older than he was at 15 years old. But what perplexes me the most is that he chose a love song of all songs to sing to us, as if he had the kind of capacity to love that the rest of us did.

Do Do Do Do, Oh Goodnight Sweetheart, welllll it's time to go, do do do do, good night sweet heart, well it's time to go, I hate to leave you, I really must say, but good night sweetheart, good night.

He would sing on Christmas and New Year's, Easter and Halloween. He would sing us sweet songs, close the door, then grab his bat to sing mom a song to sleep too. He would sing us sweet songs, then close the door, and scream through the halls until he lost his voice and my mother lost her tears, her grip, her sanity, her worth. He would sing us sweet songs, close the door, then grab his hammer and throw it against the wall near my step mother's head, to remind himself how it sounded.

My father was an artistic man, he loved musicals, he loved songs, building, painting. He especially liked the way he sounded, and how other things sounded when they agreed with him. He did not particularly like it too much when they disagreed.

His favorite sounds were ones which he created. He liked for instance, the muffled snuffles of my step mothers' sobs, and the way it reminded him of his neighborhood cat from when he was young, so nostalgic. Or the way, his tape measure sounded just like a whip if he slung it out fast enough. He liked the sound of his own voice, which is why he enjoyed the echoes cascading across the halls late into the early hours of the morning, when my step mom forgot to pack his lunch for the next day or when she spoke too loudly or forgot to dye her hair his favorite color.

Do Do Do Do, Oh Goodnight Sweetheart, well it's time to go, do do do do, good night sweet heart, well it's time to go I hate to leave you, I really must say, oh good night sweetheart, good night.

I find it funny, looking back, that my sister and I sang the "Do's" of the song as backup, because I always did wonder what it was he expected us *to do* when we were with him. *Do* I make him dinner, *do* I feed the cats, *do* I tell him I still love mom or lie and say, I don't? *Do* I tell him I don't want to split custody with him and mom, or say I do? *Do* I tell him he scares me? What will he do to me if I lie? What will he do if I tell the truth?

I remember mom reading us a bedtime story when Melanie and I were really little a few times. It was a nursery rhyme. It goes,

"What are little girls made of? What are little girls made of? What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice, and all that's nice, that is what little girls are made of. What are little

boys made of? What are little boys made of? Snaps and snails, and puppy dog tails,
that's what little boys are made of?

Why are girls supposed to be nice, but not boys? Why do men have to be made up of animals, snapping and sliding, with whipping tails and barking. Why can't boys be sweet too? Why do I immediately turn my head anytime anyone says the word, sweetheart. Is it wrong that I do? How can my heart be sweet, when it is not entirely full?

Well it's ten o'clock in the evening, and the sun has gone away, so, I don't mean maybe, You're gonna have to baby, go to sleep today. Do Do Do Do Do Do DO

Some nights I wished so desperately to end the song, so I could try to ignore the sounds I heard when the door closed, and the lock latched, so I could escape into a dream world better than my reality. Even if I had nightmare's at least I knew they were not real. But I always had to wake up the next day, I always had to figure out what I was going to do. I was tired of figuring it out.

It occurred to me that being sweet was a hypocritical character trait when I was in middle school. *Oh you're so sweet, oh you girls, you two are such sweet sisters. Melissa is just the sweetest student I have ever had in my class.* Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet. Girls are sweeter than candy, girls are a snack, as the slang goes. Girls are thick, and girls got back. Girls have rather than are.

Girls have kindness, so they can be kind. Girls are sweet, like a treat. Like a prize. They do not have a bitter side, because if they become bitter they are no longer sweet and if they are not sweet they are no longer girls, and if they are no longer girls then why bother figuring out

what they are, if they are anything at all. Girls are made up of everything nice. But boys have different standards.

Ohhh! Goodnight Sweetheart, well it's time to go, do do do. Goodnight Sweetheart, well it's time to go. I hate to leave you I really must say, well goodnight, sweethearts, good night.. Do Do Do Do Do. Dum.

After Dad left on the 4109th day, I turned 14 and forgot to sing myself the song each night before drifting to sleep. I stopped wondering what I had to do and began wondering what I was, rather than what I had or didn't have to be. I got to be me. I wonder what sounds he makes with his new wife, and if he ever sings her that song, I hope he lets her sleep, in peace, I doubt he does.

In a way I think of that song as his goodbye song to us, before he even knew he planned to leave. I wonder if with every goodbye, he was also saying hello, loving us the only way he knew how, even if it wasn't ever going to be enough.

Awakening

Waking

When the morning paper has landed on the pavement of the driveway and the sun peaks into the sky and the wind is chilled and the birds briskly fly, and the lady bugs settle on the window sill, the day will rest in a moment so still no time will pass and only feeling will remain. Sights will surpass time and space and the world will see itself in the act of awakening.

Making of Mirrors

And I will make my own epiphanies out of seeing my own sights. Like mirrors I cannot omit what reflections stare back at me. Mirrors mirroring the act of making myself known so I cannot forget, or rather, make unseen what sight has made unescapable; myself. The dusks dust will clear, and the bed will be made, and I will have to lie in it. Not lie to it but lye with it, and I will wake up wondering what wonders I have been blinded to in my sleep.

Her

How do I separate the mirror from me when one cannot survive without the other? I get out of bed begrudgingly and look at her in front of me and I think I see her. It is still so early, and my glasses are far away but I squint, and I begin to see her. She mirrors my pain, my memories, my failures, my weaknesses, my soul but yet she is still not me. Not entirely. I rub my eyes so the sleep clears from the corners of my corneas, so I can see more clearly Who is staring back at me, and why does she still seem so foreign yet familiar?

Reflections

A mirror is a reflective surface that reproduces a clear image. But that is just what it is, a reflection, not an actual reality. I can stare and stare at the image and not see what is real but what bounces back at me. A reflection is the throwing back of a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it. So how can this image this body, this being be me, if it is never absorbed, consumed, engulfed, engorged, or over taken? How can you see anything if you first do not reflect?

What separates myself from the mirror image in front of me is that I am not fully awake, imagining what I want to see rather than what is. I bounce my hopes into the abyss and pray something sticks when the light, the sound, the heat returns to me. I pray I can finally see what has been in front of me all along. When I look, I can only hope it is something I recognize. I reflect on myself, on this mirror, and wonder if I have been awake yet at all, or merely day dreaming.

Collecting connection

When the lady bug crawls to a new window sill and the paper has been picked up off the pavement and the sun begins to beam down on time and space and sights awaken the world, where will you be when you are no longer with me? For so long you have been here, by my side.

Since before I ever saw a bird fly or the morning peak out behind the trees. I have never been alone, but I feel so alone now without you. I cannot see how I can exist without you in front of me, reminding me to see.

Every time I see a mirror I reflect and think about you. How small you were when we first met, smaller than a button, smaller than a ladybug. One egg split into two then limbs began to grow and then we held each other, because we had no where else to go. And no one knew you existed but me. I saw myself in you and you were born into the world right after me, seconds after me. And one became two and the world was awakened to us both.

You were left handed, I was right. You had a mole on your right chest, above your breast, I had one on my left. When you sang loudly I whispered. When I walked you were content with crawling, but you always found your way to me. You could not disconnect from the unspoken connection that binded us. We had our own language, I could look at you and you knew what cup to bring me, what hug I needed, what teddy bear I missed. You reflected me and with you, I knew myself.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror when I was not yet as tall as the kitchen countertop and I saw you there, but you were beside me and I became confused. Who was staring at me in the mirror if not you?

Determining distinctions

We became inseparable until we weren't anymore. Braces bound our teeth almost as much as we did each other. But we grew more aware of our surroundings, of the stares, of the questions, of the pairing that made us a "we". And we became afraid or rather you did. You became afraid you would get so attached you wouldn't be able to separate your reflection from my own anymore. We weren't people after all, not really, we were twins. So, when this fear crept, we wanted a friend and turning to the nearest nurturer in sight, we found each other. But we were enabling ourselves from our distinctions, which were yet to be determined.

We did violin, or rather I did violin you did viola. We took singing lessons. Or rather I was a soprano and you were an alto. We tried to get involved. Or rather you led student council president and I led by hanging up the posters. We began to date. Or rather, you met boys and I watched you make mistakes and tried to take notes from very far away.

I felt like I was half asleep. Nodding off in the experience of living, if only I knew how to not simply live for you. We weren't we anymore, but I felt alone in the distinction. You seemed to feel free which seemed to make you happy. I hated that you were happy without me, despite me, because there was no longer a me in you. Why was I so lost without you and you seemed to be found?

Medical Marvel

When I was in ninth grade, mom pointed out the lump. I finally felt like someone had slapped me awake, and I can still feel the sting from when it happened. You had never had asthma like me, sties in your eyes like me, strep throat every three months like me, eczema flare ups like me,

infected retinas like me, damaged intestines like me. Growing up, you didn't even eat apples, but you remained healthy. But again, I was no longer healthy. Again again again, no longer healthy. Yet for the first time ever I felt awake, alert, alive, I could see me in the mirror for the first time. For I could not imagine you ever being in my shoes and refused to ever try.

The cancer had found its way into my neck and chest quietly our first year of high school and in the spring, it sprung to the surface in the form of a golf ball sized lump on my lymph node. Everyone was scared, especially you. I let myself be in denial until denial could no longer help me anymore. First it was just allergies, then it was just some odd infection, then we were sent to the hospital. We entered the oncology unit, and I still could not see the truth, but a week later they cut my hair to prepare me for what was to come, and I finally cried. My body was full of mistakes and this one was one that could not be unseen or undone. But we were united again. You no longer went off with boys and friends, but straight to me. You drove to the hospital for every chemo cycle, every CT scan, every time I had to get radiation. You missed as much school as I did. But no one seemed to understand except me.

And I was happy, because even though I looked at you and no longer saw myself, I saw hope. I saw hope in your long locks where mine had gone missing. I saw hope in your rosy complexion where mine had become pale and cold. I saw hope in your white teeth where mine had rusted and felt sore. I saw hope in how fast you could walk when standing hurt me. I saw hope at how thick your veins were budging out of your arms, where mine had become frail from fragmentation. I saw hope where the mirror brought me none, because you were my future and I was determined to let that be my reflection of hope yet again.

Making memories

Cancer made us kids again, where cancer had also made us kids no longer. You would push me down the hallway on my IV pole racing and running beside me but always letting me beat you to the finish line when I was too weak to race the way you could. You would help me with algebra late at night when the rest of the world was fast asleep, so that I would not fall behind when I got back to school. You slept in the hospital bed with me and held my hand as long as they'd let you before I was whisked off to surgery. The year I had cancer was the most awake I ever felt in my life up until this point. I smelled every smell and heard every sound. I saw people clearly, and I saw you. I saw you being my sister and being my friend. I also saw the toll it had taken on you, reflecting in me what you couldn't bear to imagine, a part of yourself was dying. But I was still thankful, because I saw you being myself when I no longer felt like myself anymore, like a human being anymore. But you are still only human after all and I wasn't being fair to you. We no longer looked the same or had the same experiences, but the making of memories bonded us all over again as if age was frozen still. Then one day I looked at my reflection. I saw you and I saw myself. I was no longer sick, and the healing finally could truly begin.

Making Myself

But when the dust settled, and sun beat down on me and I could breathe again and be again, we had to remain apart. We could not be we again anymore, because it had taken its toll onto you. Me using you as a way to live, no longer benefitted either of us, and it was time to face myself.

To look myself in the mirror and realize, despite how thankful I am for you, I must find hope from within. The world was awakened and so was I. I could not dodge my eyes or my heart any longer from the truth. We were not the same, but that is okay because we would always still be a we one way or another. Because I still look at the mirror and think of you, reflect on you, and always miss you.

After treatment, I began being a me, instead of a we. I took our family to France with sponsorship from Make-a-Wish. I wished, I hadn't been the only one who knew French. I got into running, while you did not. When we turned 17, I ran a half marathon, and you were waiting at the finish line for me. Eventually I went on my own first date my senior year of high school without even telling you. I didn't get kissed, but I was willing to wait a little while longer. You President of Student Council, but I did props for theater. We graduated, my lump became a permanent scar, and we took lots and lots of pictures. You still wanted your space, but I gladly welcomed it.

Facing Fears

I was tested on my ability to look in the mirror, when it was time to go to college. It was a mutual decision, moving away from each other. That's what they all say, but this time it was true. I knew we wouldn't be able to ever fully reflect the best in one another, if we did not first learn about ourselves. I wanted to recognize myself in the mirror without you next to me. So, we picked the same state just not the same schools, in a way we were still similar, but something still remained to set us apart. Leaving your dorm freshly unpacked was one of the hardest days of my life. And for you it felt the same. I watched as I hung your mirror to your wall with command tape.

I wish I could command the reflection to go away, disappear from the image starting back at me, so I didn't have to face myself, or rather leave a part of myself for good. But time and space keep going, keep us waking day after day. I will be graduating college in a few months and we have lived separate lives for four years now. I have survived more unhealthy days despite the apples I eat, but you never forget to call when I do.

I know one day, when you pass on or I do, that the other will look in the mirror and see each other and will miss the other and ourselves, when we no longer feel whole or real. But I will always be with you. I will always reflect life in you, because you gave life to me. I will forever be with you, because I am you as much as you are me. Not only in the genetic makeup that makes us up, but in the reflections of our lives with each other. We are the mirrors of each other, as much as we are mirrors of ourselves.

I owe my awakening to you, Melanie Jane Trepa, let looking in the mirror remain memorable with every inch of me that brings me back to you, and let me not be alone in my missing of you, but united because I have you always with me in our reflections.

Hide and Go Seek

Continuous Counting

One, Two, Three, Four...

I count the numbers like I now count the years you have been gone. We're playing hide and go seek, your favorite game, mine, less so. I try so hard, even being eight years old, to remember what number comes next, afraid of making a ridiculous mistake that would have me ridiculed as stupid, void of knowledge. My voice waivers as I continue meekly mumbling the next number, one after the other.

Five, Six, Seven, Eight...

For the last eight years we have been playing this game and we will continue to play for four more years. I never asked to play, but here I am, counting. I had been counting on you for so long so when I looked up to you, I thought no harm could ever come to me as long as you would be in my life to protect me. But how could I possibly expect you to protect me, when I needed to be protected from you? I was used to you setting the tone, the rules, the guidelines, the technicalities of the game.

"Don't hide outside the park, stay inside the playground, don't go past the bridge by those trees or you're out of bounds, if I catch you, when I catch you, you're it".

But I was tired of being it, I could never out run you, no matter how far you seemed to go, and I was tired of chasing you, wishing you'd let me tag you, and give me my freedom, whatever that meant. Why didn't you ever ask what I wanted, and if you had, would you have taken it seriously? What if I wanted to count to one hundred and I decided never to go looking for you at all, instead I let you wait and wonder for once, if it was me who remembered you?

...Nine

My Birthday is on the ninth. It is in the summer, the sun is always bright, the pool always cool, and I always miss you. July ninth, nineteen ninety-six you held me in your arms for the first time, but now, I wonder when I will hold you last, if I am even there at all when it happens. It has been nine years since I last looked you in the eyes. I don't think you've ever seen mine at all. Do you know they're blue too? But mine, I am told, are a greyish blue with gold sprinkled in. Yours were turquoise and fiery, but the inner rims were duller, like an overcast sky. I wonder if they're still the same color now.

It has been nine years since I looked at you and felt anything at all. Now, when I look at old pictures of you at my age, I wonder what would have happened if we could have crossed paths in time, and I could have met you when you and I were the same age. What would be different about you? Would you be softer? Would you be on the chase or the one running away in this game of hide and seek? Would we be alike? It is funny to think how harsh the bark that scratches

the surface of your skin is when you pass it. How many scratches could I erase for you if I had been there, when you first went hiding? Hiding behind trees and hiding behind yourself.

Eyes Closed

While I count, I keep my eyes closed. I kept them closed a lot, pretending to dream when all my real dreams became only moments in my mind to escape to. When you were mad, I closed my eyes and there was only calm, and I would make myself invisible. I would keep my eyes closed in the car while you argued with mom. I would keep my eyes closed when the hole in the wall was punched, when the plate was smashed, when the crying started. As if that could possibly erase the feelings inside. I closed my eyes and I hoped to close them forever. But that's the problem isn't it, just because we close our eyes, doesn't mean the pain in the world just magically goes away. They say "ignorance is bliss" but ignorance keeps you from seeing, and when you see, you grow. Like a tree, you become wise, standing tall in the park, observing and protecting what you know from what you want to know...and also what you don't.

How can anyone grow if they can't even see? I take my hands covering my face and lower them ever so slightly, peaking between slits of light from my fingers, only to see this park I am in. And you are not there. I don't think you ever were.

Seeking

When I open my eyes, I so desperately want not to find you, so I can rest for a minute before being catapulted into a sprint as you attempt to tag me. You are so much bigger than I am, so much bigger than everyone at this park. Yet when I look at you now in photos, you seem so small. You are the only adult not on their phones or on the bench. I secretly thank you for that, but I wonder why you never did grow up. What stunted your growth when your height kept going? You climb the trees as much as I do, even higher to the top you go then I ever dare venture. I wonder if you take the risk because you know you can, or because you want to fall. I want to fall, maybe then you'd catch me, or maybe I could catch myself if I can find the courage to let go. What am I so afraid of?

Being invisible has always been a dream of mine. Ever since those games in the park, I thought about it. Looking out the window in class or hiding in my closet, I thought about a delightful blissful disappearance. Would anyone seek me out or leave me be if I disappeared. I already had a sister who could replace me, we were twin's after all. No harm would be done, my face would remain present in the day to day existence of time, just not my body or my soul. I played with fairies and small things like poly pockets, I wanted to fly away like a fairy, beautiful and silent, delicate and strong. I wanted to be a ghost for Halloween, I wanted to be Violet from *The Incredibles* movie, so I could protect myself and hide all at the same time. That would make an ultimate game of hide and go seek.

Calling

I call out to you and go looking. I look under benches, under swing sets, places impossible for you to hide in, and ones I think you will go. You trick me though, and you move when I get close to your hiding spot, moving from one tree trunk to the next, using their bodies as your own. You are used to this, maybe that is why it is your first instinct. Maybe that's why it's not mine.

You used to call me at all hours of the day, furious when I could not linger longer on the line. I told you that I would see you soon. But I didn't know this was a lie until much later. Now I hear the ringing in my ears and wish it was you. But you always expected me to call you. You never saw what you didn't want to see or hear what you didn't want to hear.

Count down

Now it is my turn to be found and I run to the trees. The maple sticks to me as I grip around the bark in the shade, and my dried and sticky hands smell bitter with bark and sap slipping into the creases of my hands. I look at them, these two foreign palms and grip them tightly together. I do not recognize them as my own. I try to wipe the maple off and onto my pants, but I can't get the sweet swarming sickle off of me, it sticks no where else but to me. And I am trapped tortured by my own mistakes.

You find me, when I don't want to be found, and I can't find you when you do. The tragedy of irony is a bitch. I hear a dog bark in agreement near me, taking a piss on a tree across from mine. I wish I could piss on the world too.

Contemplation

You told me that you were coming Dad, but you weren't. You ran at my sister and me only to turn the other way and never come back. And I hate you for that and I am terribly thankful for that and I wish I could unstick the sap of my sappiness of this nostalgia that I still attach to you so that I too could run away but I think that would defeat the point of being stuck at all. By being stuck I am forced to face my predicament that no one else can unstick for me, and I think I need this. I see this glue that attaches me to you, and I realize it is entirely on my terms.

You did not put the maple there, and you will not be the one to get me to safety as I had been waiting for you to do all these years Dad. As I stare at this tree, I think back to when I was climbing maple trees and how I was climbing all the wrong trees at all the right times. I think of the trees and I think back on you...Martin, Marty, Dad?

I wish I could tell you that every time you came looking for me on those Sunday's in the park, I just wanted you to give up finding me. Let me be invisible to the absence from this place and presence in my mind. Because it was in your discovery I felt like a failure. I felt forged into fear, because I could not stand to be seen, when I didn't even know how to see myself.

But now, I wish so badly that you could find me, or that you would want to so that I could be reminded again of what I already know, which is that I am better off without you.

Hanging out

The tree's stand straight like confident soldiers protecting their land against the bombardment of the sun. The sun in its defiance still peaks through, in between the feathers of the leaves as the patterns scatter on the ceiling of the sky like collages of memories. I look up and feel sprinkles of sun kiss my cheeks and I dodge for a new hiding spot. I don't want to be found after all I don't think. I don't want to be like you, but I think I am a lot like you, because we're both chasing and running from each other not knowing exactly what we are looking for in each other if its each other we are trying to find at all.

The tree is sturdy and unwavering until it needs to. Winds work and wind down the spine of the

bark like a spiraling slide on a playground. And twirling to the center of the roots the

roots grip a little tighter to the earth to remain centered. The roots are

where the heart is, I always thought. That is why they are always so

hard to pull and why it hurts the most when you do. Trees are shade,

trees are shelter, trees are comforts, trees are wisdom,

trees are useful, trees are painful, trees are annoying

taking frisbees and kites

and trapping stay cats

in its fingers and arms.

Trees help you

breathe and help

you slow down.

Tree's sometimes

take your

breath away

all

together.

Coming or Going

I have wanted to die more than I ever counted hiding games, more than I ever wanted to go to the park and pet the sweet dogs or soak in the sweet sun. But I have never tried. I suspect you have, but something is keeping you here, even if it isn't keeping you with me. I want to know what it is Dad. Your brother who I never met, felt differently. He found a sweet escape in returning to his son, who also thought life was better left than lived. I wonder what it would have been like to meet them. Would they play hide and seek with us? Who could last the longest hiding? Is hanging by the limbs of trees by our hands anything like what he chose to do in his final minutes, or are they one in the same? I think about that, and wonder if people who kill themselves think about what happens to them when they're gone.

I have spent so many days in the park, still seeing you between the trees, and you are still alive somewhere. I can't imagine how often you'd occupy my mind if you were gone forever. What about people who decide on their own terms when they die then. Do they think about being found? Like a game of hide and seek, they go hiding, and who is supposed to seek? Or are they trying to seek something? Peace from pain? Pleasure from pain? Promise from the unknowns of tomorrow or none at all?

Who would ever possibly want to be *found*?

The Riveting Writing of Robert Vivian

Critical Essay by Melissa Trepá

“Looking up I saw that the sky was naked except for a few strands of clouds like trailing threads of smoke or ether that wanted so much to shine and looking that the moon was almost gone...” (Vivian). Reviving the empty page with riveting prose is Robert Vivian’s specialty. By elongating the page with unending thoughts, intentional rhythmic purpose, and beautiful articulation and alliteration, Vivian uses the combination of poetic devices with the form of the essay to create an experience for the reader and writer simultaneously to meditate on an unforgettable emotions and ideas. His lyric lines make readers long for the lines that come next as one sentence often lingers and his use of anaphora holds the tone of his writing. Robert Vivian remains an essential writer of the essay that should be studied, because of the techniques which keep readers in a moment in time unlike most essayists. Using the topic, the pace of the prose, and poetic devices, Robert Vivian expresses all that is right with the essay as genre and essay as a readable form.

Born in Denver in 1967 and raised in Nebraska and having traveled all over for his life and his work, Robert Vivian discovered a love for literature that would take him far in his work and his life. Robert Vivian is the author of many works from novels to essay collections to plays, short stories, and poetry. This, therefore, makes him the kind of man who is not tied down to one particular style and is willing to play with many along with their structures. In his writing career he has written, *The Tall Grass Trilogy*, *Water and Abandon*, *The Mover of Bones*, *Lamb Bright Survivors*, *Another Burning Kingdom*, *Cold Snap as Yearning*, *The Least Cricket of Evening*,

Immortal Soft-Spoken, Traversings, and Mystery My Country, just to begin to name some of his most notable works of writing (Vivian). Despite working in other modes such as fiction and poetry, Vivian utilizes his skills to create his nonfiction and essays with great intention and attention to detail. It appears his diversity actually benefits his style in the genre of nonfiction, because he incorporates so many choices which reward readers as they go along for the ride while reading his work of the essay style. The sounds as much as the meditation being streamlined in his essays are as important as the other, with his works moving and embodying a body-like almost life-like experience. He does this through the motion that his prose moves towards while he lingers his thoughts from moment to moment. Often, Vivian encompasses a theme or a spiritual component, an experience or visualization into his writing. These elements of style help to separate his work from others, setting him apart, while also remaining apart of the genre respectively thanks to the way he can pause on something and meditate on it so slowly and often unending. Today Robert Vivian works at Alma College in the low-residency MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, where he continues his talents to this day (Meacham Writers).

Another Kind of Waking is a piece of prose that wakes you up while reading it. This is one example of the many kinds of works Vivian finds himself writing in, where *Another Kind of Waking* acts as an essayistic piece which was submitted to a literary magazine for readers viewing pleasure. While discovering more of Vivian's works, it became noticeable that his material found its way to many submissions across many online mediums besides his polished published novels. It is with this earnest need to share his work in all its platforms that his work feels especially impactful when reading some of Vivian's material, because its apparent that Vivian is trying to express something to the larger world from himself and this desire to do so is

liberating and relatable. In the literary magazine, *The Flexible Persona*, Vivian sets himself in time to the scene on waking and places us with weather in order to stick us as readers right in the moment with him. He starts with a conjunction, so the reader already feels set in scene and in motion. “And then the empty page again come morning, cloud unwritten on, virginal snow may I be worthy of your blissful state slowly turning into a smile” (Editors). In this instance, “stare slowly” articulate strong alliteration, and the snow and nature connect to the experience of waking, as the title implies as if waking up to life around him. He sets the tone as dream-like and his personification of smiling snow indicate an othering of the literal world to a larger context of understanding.

This piece is an ongoing sentence that is beyond a page long, and resembles the devices in his piece, *Looking then Listening* in its choices. He goes from snow to trees to paper to cloth, and it is a continuous ongoing shapeshift of object to the subject of the narrator in relation to the experience of the reader. Vivian states “and here are a few feckless words to keep you company, a friendly tattoo down through the ages, a way to go sailing into the night darkness with a soft voice...” which adheres to memories listed in time, then he transitions into the second person only to shift again and goes next into first person. Listing, “I who have Emily Dickinsoned and Mandelstamed, I who have Jim Harrisoned and Paul Cleaned...” (Editors). Through this listing of himself in association with known people, Vivian creates context to his experiences, and a tonal shift is made from his first-person narrative. He creates his own verbs out of well-known names in an attempt to create a connection to his life and theirs, and reader to experience, without going into every experience Vivian has particularly had. By using anaphora with “in” the exhaustion of experience is emphasized as a full life is therefore the resulting conclusion by reader from this form.

The rest of the poem speaks on the anaphora and repetition of the “O” stating, “single syllable O to run through every quaking morning, the O of my O of my dearest, listing O not my own not on loan from high...” and articulates experience with this repetition of sound. Vivian then shifts tonal voices again to a more divine understanding when mentioning God, and relationships then shifting from physical characteristics back to an earthy natural relationship to the experience. Vivian goes on to use more alliteration and speaks on nature back to paper and then a hint of the tree returns with leaf. He implements the “O” in repetition again here saying, “O piece of paper piece of paradise how dearly do I know you here in the dark before dawn where I tremble like a leaf” (Editors). As the piece continues, the speed feels sped up as more of the words combine together, snow is brought back and mentioned, then a metaphor on books themselves and the experience of reading and writing, then dreams, death and finally “inconceivable meaning” finishes off the work.

The last line feels most heavy stating, “another kind of waking where the dream turns into birds and trees...and infinite light starring the pages until they burn and burnish and brightness with inconceivable meaning” (Editors). It all ties together while still incorporating Vivian’s most riveting elements of literary style, alliteration, and an incredible end to the piece from a less clarified start. The piece takes readers through place, relationship, experience, faith, God, and back again to the start. Taking us back again like the full circle of life repeating motifs of imagery with paper, trees, animals, nature, and then again takes a turn at the end when mentioning death as a contrast to the start of waking, which is essentially the end of waking, or in Vivian’s words, “another kind” of waking. It is in this shaping and shifting that the prose begins to take a different pace, there is some elements of rhyme and the sounds that are condensed along with the words that contain alliteration or repetition all aid the work. These

components help to encompass an experience of living that Vivian seems to be truly speaking on. It is in this style that the line between prose and poetry begin to get blurred with all the devices used, but the block of the long sentence adheres itself as essay ultimately in the end.

Robert Vivian is an incredible writer with riveting style whom everyone should read because of his uniquely stylized prose on the page. He has experience working in all mediums which only strengthen his ability to write essay pieces, and he utilizes his experiences of travel and career in literature to set a scene and shape a piece to encompass large ideologies to meditate on while moving through the motions of Vivian's prose. Just like what was read in class with *Looking, then Listening*, Vivian takes his readers on a journey with him. His form is a listing of never-ending commas that create a block page of prose that consist of one sentence. There are shifts in narrator and subject, and central themes and motifs keep the reader grounded. Anaphora, alliteration, repetition, and rhythmic choices all aid in creating a beautiful piece along with a beautifully sounding one. It is in this form that Vivian excels to express his living experience as his writing best articulates. In an example of this, one of his posts to a literary magazine speaks on *Another Kind of Waking*. This piece bridges large concepts of life, God, experience, and death into one moment thanks to the form of the essay as Vivian's practiced within the genre. Robert Vivian helps to create literature worth reading, and helps his readers meditate in the moment as much as he does through his uncanny ability to explain so much in just one sentence, to create his very own inconceivable meaning.

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