

Popular Fictions and Unspeakable Family Stories: Weaving an Autoethnography through Shame and Deviance

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I don't have any memories from before my brother's birth. I am told I would ask endlessly for stories. My godmother says *you were so self-absorbed as a child*. I don't know. I could tell there were holes and horrors in what we'd all known together, and I wanted someone to say so. There are things my family would hint at but wouldn't easily talk about while I was growing up, and still won't. The reason everyone always spoke to my grandmother like she was a child waking from a nightmare, for instance. Or an explanation for the absences of my father and Chrissy, my godmother's son.

My mother and godmother raised me, and so they've claimed the right to narrate the years I don't remember.¹ The stories I've been told about my childhood, stories they still tell, seem fantastical, impossible. They say *you were speaking at six weeks old*. They swear *we moved fourteen times before you turned four*. They say *Aunt Viv's ghost moved the teapot to the*

¹ Cavarero insists that our own story, from birth, can't be told autobiographically—the tale of one's own life story can only come from the mouth of another. In this way, each of us entrusts his or her identity to another's story (xvii). For me, the relationships that are constructed in this essay reflect my inability to represent even the very intimate others that I am in relationship with, while I also recognize my definition is attached to them. In fact, following Madison, the articulation I make about my family is one I make about myself: "they are part of me now" (51).

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coffee table where she always kept it, floated it across the kitchen and out to the front room right in front of our eyes. They say we could leave you, as a two year old, on the back of the Clydesdale all afternoon and the horse would babysit. I was also watched by a black lab, Strider, a wonderful person, they say, who was smart enough to keep you out of the lake.

I am building this essay from the incongruences and hard wonders of my childhood. I was sure I would never write about things, once commonplace, that I learned to bury in borrowed shame: the mistakes I made on my way to socialization, the mistakes I watched my family and friends make that have marked them forever inside the categories of deviance.² This is an autoethnography of formative stories that were untold, mistold, and covered over. Stories that we sometimes don't tell because it is our power to keep, and more often, don't tell because we don't want to carry the burden of having fleshed out our shame and given it a place in the world.

This essay weaves together the gendered stories that taught me how to be a woman, and how to understand men to be men. How women's bodies became a site to hide trauma, to manifest illness. How women stay, sick and hopeful, or leave their men. How men are to be understood as trapped between uncontrollable addictions and their own hopelessness. And in their dark hour, will repeat the violence they want desperately to escape. These gendered patterns feed one another, creating a web, which is a

² I would like to re-awaken the elements of the sensory that have been relegated to the "common" or "everyday," and have been, thusly, dismissed—consigned to "spaces of social amnesia and anesthesia." "There can be no reflexivity unless one passes through a historical reenactment of perceptual difference," re-opening the spaces that we have forgotten and muted (Seremetakis, 19; 23). Attending to ways of seeing and sensing become key to shifting the discourse away from dominant cultural constructions of logic and toward the possible lessons buried in everyday experiences. The experiences of the body—deviant bodies, our own bodies—become critical.

genre, marking our failures in repetitious plotlines, tropes, and character roles. Our lived genre sometimes sits uncomfortably close to sensational stories: the popular genres of horror and crime literature, which do not reflect the ways we would represent ourselves, while we can see that it is *us* that is being represented. I share the pieces of stories I still hold from the men, women, and children who I knew in my childhood community and the institutions we encountered—the prisons, hospitals, schools, hotels, and libraries that invited and validated cultural conformity. Even the explicitly educative institutions failed to create collective mobility within my community. Instead, they divided and isolated many of the people I knew deeper into the isolation of deviance, while separating the few of us who have learned to thrive within institutional frameworks from carrying those we both fear and have loved the hardest with us, to some better possibility. The essay ends in a reflection on how our bodies hold our stories, cycling a haunting pain that is spun under our flesh, generation to generation.

Although I signal an order for this essay, it is important to mark the way my own shame, and the shame of my family members, many of whom are afraid of my education and found voice, gets into the form and structure of re-telling broken and hidden stories. Before each sentence I write comes the question: how do I move in a way that is meaningful rather than sensational, between a hyper-policed, criminalized, and often silenced or self-silencing family and community and a more recently accessed community in which I share more consistent privilege, education, agency and voice? I find, as I track through memories and old writing, that there is a second question that closely follows the first: Which stories are mine to speak now, and how do I navigate the still-pressing silences that punctuate these stories?³ I fall into the very logic that, for the sake of my

³ The silences of shame and power that keep secrets work on as I write. I'm making choices—out of love or fear. I read again what I have written. Participating in the hiding, I remove things I think might hurt my mother or aunt. I cannot take enough of it away.

family, I would like to resist: I let sensationalized fiction sit close enough to the lived experience of deviance that the two might be conflated. This is a condition of my relationship to popular literature and, to a lesser extent, teledrama that wrote the cultural story on deviance in the 1980s and 1990s. Sensationalist fiction was a significant part of my cultural education as a child, and the things I remember from my youngest years are as much in the books I read as the encounters I had with my family and community. These books gave and keep giving voice to things I was to stay silent about, webbing over my fractured unspeakable life with clean narrative arcs and predictable generic frameworks.⁴ They also articulated

I will share my work with them, but not my godmother—who assumes hurt, and does not want to read my writing, afraid she could come upon Chrissy’s face. And she would. Even with their permission to write, I know writing this close to the unsayable borders on a violation. Is the optimist in me, who keeps putting wild hope in reflection, in amplifying the edges of unsayable narratives, actually going to do more harm than good? I don’t know yet. I sit at the flank of the ethical, which, in this case, carries the burden of also being familial. I am as attentive as I can be to how my speech acts can hurt and deepen the very shame that I am trying to write through to write past. I hope this essay is not a false start, but instead a first step toward something new for us—interpersonally within my family, but also in the larger world that this autoethnography might reach. This is why, though I cannot make the choice for others, I ultimately chose speech over shame. I hold on to Judith Butler’s idea of “a speech act as an insurrectionary act.” She claims that “as we think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible; the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the “offense” that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms” (p. 41).

⁴ Devitt suggests that genre is not simply a literary form and organizational structure, but instead invites genre to be understood “as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by reoccurring contexts of situation, context of culture, and context of genres” (31). This framing guides me to put pressure on socially defined

the supernatural, frightening, criminal, and ill in markedly different ways than I imagine we would have, had shame not kept my family publicly silent and intimately cryptic.⁵ As I weave a relationship between popular culture and autoethnography, I reflect on the way popular fiction has infected and filled gaps in my memory, refiguring the narratives I know.⁶ But popular fiction is not only mobilized to fill the place of silence with stories that lack the tenderness and possibility of stories I would claim as mine: as sensationalist fiction is re-evoked, as it comes to fit into my own life, popular stories becomes contaminated with the more complicated stories I have known. The simple narrative structures and logics of popular stories become disconnected as they are inserted into my own stories and nightmares, an uneven adaptation that fails to unify the fictional and lived unspeakable worlds. In this way, there is no perfect integration. I want to emphasize both the dissonance and overlap between experience and popular representations of deviance. My hope is that recognizing

contexts and popular and predictable genres that might obscure or disempower individual articulation.

⁵ I center the supernatural in relationship to other unspeakabilities, recognizing the uncomfortable ways that leading with the uncanny creates a place for academic dismissal. In this place, I must ask: What does it mean to write within and through pre-dismissed ways of knowing and writing? Ghosts as ghosts, and not as perfect fictions are not typically welcome in academic journals. Maria del Pilar Blanco considers how ghosts and the uncanny have become “staples” within a set of genres. “It would appear that ghosts haunt genre theory and genre haunts ghosts.” (33). I wonder: How do we challenge the entwined dismissal of haunting, horror, and generic conventions, and create a way to consider and welcome new articulations?

⁶ As Lepselter has asked: “how does the indeterminate nature of what the ethnographer is trying to represent infect the way he or she chooses to portray it in writing?” (141, *The License*). I recognize the ways both the supernatural fiction I have absorbed and the half-concealed family stories are unfixed and partial representations of the larger unspeakable, and in often dissonant ways, contaminate the story I am telling.

dissonance will inspire an ongoing effort to listen to imperfect and partial stories that complicate what we have known and judged in our culture because of what we have accepted from sensationalizing literature. I hope, also, that this essay guides a recognition of the complicated way stories of horror and crime have been woven into the social “webs of significance,” even for those who are socially controlled by, and might otherwise challenge, conceptions of deviance.⁷

The web is a useful structural metaphor because of the multiple ways it can be evoked.⁸ I am spinning this essay, searching for meaning. It is marked by empty, still unspeakable space around which I am drawing tiny repeating and interconnecting frames. It is fragile, ephemeral, replaced again with a replica of itself. I walk in the woods daily, and the webs I meet as I think about writing also resonate into the framing for this autoethnography. I have grown accustomed to orb-weaving spiders stringing their webs across deer trails that I follow. Accustomed does not mean, however, that I remember to consistently see spider webs. Instead, I should say that I have grown accustomed to walking through webs, the structure lost, the thin silvery threads ghosting across my face and throat, stuck together in new ways, in less precise ways, because of my encounter with the web. I have sometimes stopped short of running right through the web: attentive to its structure. Often I am attentive to the web only as my body and my memory collide into it, the structure lost because I moved

⁷ I am echoing Geertz’s web, “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (248, *Interpretation of Culture*).

⁸ Burke argues that metaphor is important in its capacity to create such knowingly provisional and partial accounts, while offering an “invaluable perspective from which to judge the world of contingencies,” allowing us to remain open to the possibility of error, and thus the possibility of further invention (266).

through it. This metaphor—which partially contains and organizes the unspeakable, and partly acknowledges the disruption that story telling carries—builds silver-threaded bridgework between popular and personal experiences, and structural generic conventions and poetic rule-breaking. Ultimately, the bridges do not lead between or create more direct roads in content or form. Instead, they weave cyclical and interconnected pathways, often disrupted in the re-telling, where ghosts and dreams, crime fiction and serial teledrama, family secrets and white lies, can be read both as untrustable *and* critical articulations that put pressure on the real and unsayable.⁹

When I started to question family stories, or started to press my mother and godmother for details, they both stopped talking about who we'd been. I'd search boxes in the basement for clues—stealing, collecting, re-ordering, re-concealing relics as I found them. Both my mother and godmother always talked about *boxes of pictures in the basement*, and I searched endlessly, but never found more than a handful of photos tucked beside old clothes or in book flaps. When pressed, my mother would say *the boxes must have been lost in the moves*. If I bothered my godmother enough she'd throw up her hands and say, *Luthie, I simply can't go looking. I'll find pictures of Chrissy and it would break my heart all over again, and can't you just sit and watch the television?* I found two pictures

⁹ Similar to Orr, I seek to “actively re-fuse and confuse the boundaries between the real and the unreal . . . playing seriously with the logistics and illogics of perception” (13). Orr suggests that transformation in form and content that disrupts the hegemonic flow of scientific prose allows an author to become a tactical player in the cultural production of perception itself. She claims that performative writing not only dissolves the hegemonic order of form, but also draws attention to the breaking that is happening, revealing and challenging the terms of who has the power to create the real and sustain the discursive and political structures used to control both knowledge and nation.

of Chrissy and me together. I would never tell my godmother. Chrissy's jaw was set sideways. He was drooling. His arms were pulled into his chest and lacked muscle tone, like he didn't use them. I had carried a sense of having lost an older brother and best friend that I would recognize in a photograph; a picture would reawaken a memory. But the pictures didn't create any connection: I didn't know his face, his physical disability.

In a box in the basement I found a photograph of my mother and Strider with a man and another dog. And a necklace with two tin plates. My mother said *they're your father's dog tags from Vietnam*. They are smiling in the photograph, even the dogs. *That war made your father crazy*, my godmother said, *but he was a good man before that*. No one says anything else about my father, and these articulations burn into my memory. My godmother says *there's a set of old-style photographs your mother took of you on Greek Easter one year, that she made to look like tin types, and someday, my godmother said I'll get up the energy to find them*. I haven't found them, she never looked. I found a picture of my grandmother, grandfather and me. My grandmother looked younger than I ever remember her looking. Her hair was yellow in the photograph and not white as I remember. We were standing perfectly straight, untouching, in front of my Aunt Jo's barn in Rosebush. I was the only one smiling. I found a photo of me, maybe one year old in a sink, backlit by a kitchen window so that I look more like a grey and yellow smudge than a baby. Me, in a red robe in front of a Christmas tree, me standing on the hood of an old work truck. These photographs have no stories that weave into my memories.¹⁰ Except this one: I remember posing to hold my new baby

¹⁰Hall claims "photography gives us dramatic access to our multiple identities" (370). The photographs that I cite here dramatize my formative identities, but in decidedly dull ways, making my childhood appear more "normal" to me than the stories I've heard. This adds complicated layers to the divide between how I am remembered and how I was photographically recorded. Found photographs served and continue to serve as a window to moments in my past that were rarely articulated, illuminating details that were left out of the stories that my family was unable or unwilling to tell, but it often remains unclear

brother. Years later, I found the picture of me curled up on the sofa, my arms wrapped around that tiny newborn.

My mother and godmother would let me stay up to watch television with them after my baby brother was asleep. Mostly, I remember watching reruns of the CBS fantasy teledrama *Beauty and the Beast*. I remember the episode where Vincent went mad in the underground labyrinth—where no one, not even Catherine, could get through to him and I thought, maybe, he was going to kill her. I remember when Catherine was attacked in the dark by two police officers and Vincent came to her rescue and ripped one of their heads back. I remember when she was given a lethal injection by someone working with the police, or maybe by the police, right after she gave birth to a baby boy, and the way she died in Vincent's arms because he got there too late. I remember he went crazy. I started to have a nightmare on repeat: It was already dark, and my mother pulled the car into the driveway and left me in the backseat while she took in groceries. She said *I'll be right back for you*, but after a minute I could see her through the kitchen window, washing something at the sink. I heard a crunch on the gravel behind me. I turned and saw nothing. I turned back and Vincent had his clawed hands at the top of the window. His eyes were wild, and he broke through the glass and reached through to grab me. I woke in a sweat. *He is good*, I told myself. *He is good in his heart, something just made him go mad. He's still good*, I'd say, like my mother would say to the television when it seemed like it might not be so.

When we moved and my mother got another job my godmother was already sick with cancer and so neither of them could pick me up from school on time. I went to latchkey and read on the steps by the back door of the school while other kids were sent to different corners of the room to

how to interpret the story the photographs *do* tell—and impossible to situate them in relationship to how we remember. As such, photographs increase pressure on the still unknown, marked by inaccessibility as much as accessibility.

wait it out, to take a break, until it got dark outside and our parents could sign us out to go home. I had my own library card and would find popular horror in the public library on weekends when my mom was working. It was the only reading loud enough to tune everything else out. It let me safely into problems that I couldn't articulate—and then let me out again, with a tidy conclusion.¹¹ The explicit exposé of the unspeakable, partnered with the predictability, seemed brave and safe in comparison to the maddening way stories were half told and obscured in my family. I see now how sensationalist horror and crime fiction are not personal and so do not defame the author—while my own narratives, both as autoethnographies and family stories, become less tellable because of the double-stacked shame in echoing sensationalist literature that defines deviance *and* the shame of everyday lived experience.¹² Even as fictions I consumed are inescapably interwoven into my childhood memories, the sensationalizing genre conventions and narrative structure of popular horror remain impossible and unethical¹³ to mirror in my own writing.

¹¹ Following Radway, I consider the genre of horror in place of romance, and think about what it means for readers to absorb and interpret genre in our messy lives. “A more complete cultural analysis of the contemporary romance might specify how actual readers interpret the actions of principal characters, how they comprehend the final significance of the narrative resolution and, perhaps most important, how the act of repetitively encountering this fantasy fits within the daily routine of their private lives. We need to know not what the romantic text objectively means—in fact, it never means in this way—but rather how the event of reading the text is interpreted by the women who engage in it.” (55)

¹² Stewart marks “everyday life [as] a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things” (9).

¹³ The editors and many of the authors of *Women Writing Culture* demanded recognition for the long history of female contributions to the ideas that were taken up as “new” ethnography, while also insisting that one could not accept “new” forms and techniques without acknowledging the way they informed emerging ethical and political orders (See

Both my mother and godmother were bedridden and homebound for most of my life. They had diagnosed and horribly painful conditions: Cancer of the blood, breast cancer, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, migraines, irreparable shoulder injury, fibromyalgia, cystitis, allergies. And other ailments I have forgotten. My mother is afraid to talk about her pain now. Some of her diagnoses, such as multiple chemical syndrome, have become discredited in the medical world; now she, too, dismisses them. She hides her pain as best she can and keeps to herself because *people just think you're crazy*. I built my own narrative about their stacked illnesses growing up, sure that illness was put up as a barrier to prevent me from asking hard questions – a defense that would allow them to stay silent about uncomfortable stories. I held tightly to this interpretation even after I moved away from home, nuancing it only slightly, growing convinced it was all tied somehow to their shame, which changed their vision, affected their ability to move through trauma and their ability to tell the stories I wanted.¹⁴ I still conflate their shame and illness, as I conflate their shame

Behar's "Introduction: Out of Exile" and the eight essays that make up Part II: "Another, History, Another Canon" by authors Lamphere, Babcock, Finn, Hernandez, Cole, Lutkehaus, Frank, and Harrison,). Similarly, Hicks argues "conversation, debate, discussion, narrative, and poetic [production] are not simply different forms of expression, but rather each of these genres of communication is constituted by different norms, functions, and effects. Furthermore, each genre activates a different moral and political universe establishing distinctive rights, obligations, and orientations to the other" (237). While borrowing generic conventions from other genres as it becomes productive to do so, I may claim that autoethnography projects consistently share goals that turn on the personal, situated, and political and that the limits to autoethnography are the questions: What moral and political universe does this intervention or invention construct? Within it, how might we ethically create meaning? How and what might we ethically know? I might add one additional set of questions: "Is the knowledge useful? If so, to whom?" (Hale 15).

¹⁴ I call this "trauma," knowing this language has been used to dismiss women, knowing also that the fragmented and veiled narratives and silences from the women in my family

and my own. I weave shame into every part of me in which I can find them, into everything.

Just a little before my grandmother decided to die, she told me the dramatic details of the missing stories about her, with none of the context. She told me my mother didn't live at home as a baby and about shock therapy, about *the leather restraints and the bit in your mouth, so you couldn't thrash around and potentially injure yourself or crack your teeth. She said each time you were sure you were being killed by being made softer, made liquid, like the bath you were in. You just became the bath. And then in between baths they'd give you drugs to keep you feeling like water, keep you forgetting about your babies so you wouldn't go crazy. It was all poison though, maybe they thought they were helping you get better, some of the nurses seemed so nice and like they really cared, she said. They just didn't know they were killing you.* I was reading *The Green Mile* in the waiting room at the hospice center when my grandmother was pulling the needles from her arms. I was reading the electric chair scene. Aunt Jo said *your grandma was paranoid, delusional, that was always her*

fails to fit the genre of trauma testimony. Gilmore suggests fragmentation and inconsistencies in representation can be productive ways to address the traumatic, while she also finds careful ways to refuse scripting (predominantly) female narrations of trauma in ways that would accommodate persistent imaginations of the feminine as scattered, hysterical, broken, and deceitful. Gilmore argues that insistence on "truth" discourse is insistence on a legibility that obscures women's experiences, or attempts to code women's self-narration in deception. She claims fragmentation is critical to women's narration, but not because it is a natural condition of the feminine that proves a woman to be less capable than a man. Instead, Gilmore marks fragmentation as a residual condition of the power that the feminine is enforced within. She emphasizes fragmentation as part of women's writing of trauma because of the way it is part of their lived experience (x; see also: Walker and Curry). This intervention does not only script new possibilities for the form of narrating trauma, but a careful consideration of the usefulness of the suggested forms and an awareness and refusal of the way the inventive possibility could be co-opted to universalize and denounce feminine expression.

problem. She said your grandma never got shock therapy, she said your grandpa wouldn't let them do it because his own mom worked at a mental hospital and she had told him what it did to people. Maybe grandma just saw people get shock therapy or heard about it. Aunt Jo said your grandma had a hard time separating things that happened to her from things that frightened her. No, they just gave her drugs, Aunt Jo said, just got her drugs right so she could come home. She would just get confused and dangerous to herself, and needed some help. She was not really dangerous to anyone else, harmless, really, just paranoid. I didn't trust either of them, any of them. And I learned to tell stories that I wanted to be true. I learned this is how you make it through the parts you can't forgive. I learned to not trust myself. Or I learned to trust my family, myself, with the same trust I gave to fiction I read- knowing I should not believe, but feeling all the emotions that go with belief anyway.

Davey Wexler's dad was killed in a botched robbery at the convenience store that their family owned. I imagined this end for my own father, imagined that he was a good man and that if it had been a few more years before he died, I could have held him like Davey Wexler held her father while he died. I could have cradled him in my arms and gotten his blood all over my clothes, and then kept the clothes hidden someplace. I turned toward the wall so no one could see me sob and read the passage of his death over and over again, and let it run through me.¹⁵ I told people

¹⁵ Davey Wexler was a character in one of my favorite Judy Bloom books. When I sort through memories, I still imagine her as a friend of mine, a friend who I know well enough that I might accidentally conflate pieces of her memories with my own. When I can sort our memories apart, I must admit that part of me still wants her story because it is more recognizably heartbreaking and cleaner than mine. This appears, of course in how I represent the story in this essay. Davey Wexler is introduced as a person, the fictiveness comes late in the presentation. As I go on, I realize other places in this essay when the markers around the fictional emerge late, or fail to emerge because the emotional connections I made with fiction are as real as my other remembered experiences.

that my father died in the war, until a teacher remarked that Vietnam was over before I was born.

We moved out of my brother's father's house when things got too rough. *You can't save an alcoholic* my mother said, my godmother said. My godmother moved, too, because she was convinced that the old women who argued in the downstairs living room of the old house were keeping her sick. I could hear the women, too, or I thought I could when my godmother was asleep and I felt alone. *They must have had a bad end, my godmother said, for them to stay on as ghosts after they died and resist being cleared out even with sage smudging.* My godmother and mother refused to unpack when they moved. Mountains of boxes went into the basement or storage. The furniture was put into the living spaces, but otherwise, we started again. My mother wouldn't explain. My godmother only said *I need new dishes because if I look for the old ones, I'd be afraid I'd find Chrissy's face.*

I think my mother suggested that my brother's father never hurt her, or she wanted me to think that. I can't say what I dreamt and what was real. I know that after she left him, she had a rule that we never open the door of the new house for any adult. Not even a friend of the family that we'd known for a long time. She wanted us to be safe. If anyone showed up when she wasn't there we were supposed to get the cordless phone and go to the basement. My brother tried to make the exception that if his dad showed up to take him on a fishing trip that it would be okay. This turned my mother's face pale. My brother's father never took him fishing, but he would show up every Christmas with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and expensive gaming systems or bikes or snowboards. I think he brought fishing poles and tackle once. My brother spent years detailing imaginary trips with his dad and I wasn't *allowed to say anything because he's hurting*, my mother said. *Just let him alone*, she said. Then the stories stopped suddenly, until one evening we were playing a board game and my brother said, *I wonder why my dad doesn't take me out any more*, and I

was so struck by the idea that he believed all of his own stories that I forgot I wasn't supposed to say anything. I just blurted out something about how he'd made up all those stories, that his father had never taken him anywhere. My brother's face flushed. I remember the way his spittle looked thick as he shouted. I remember the imprecision of the attack—his body so wild with anger that he had no control of the violence. When he was very young it was easy to get out of the way and then hold him down. My mother and I got him in a sleeping bag so he couldn't hurt himself or scratch us if he did calm down enough to strategize. Then we told him to breathe which mostly caused him to hold his breath. Eventually, and not because of us, he just crumbled and sobbed. When it was over and he'd fallen asleep my mother said, *Lindsey, don't make him mad. Don't make him crazy like that.*

I want to think most of my brother's rage was a mirror of his father's rage, a pattern that he remembered from before my mother left. I want desperately for it to be learned, and not written into the codes of his blood and bones. I want him to break with the men's genre that is woven and explained by the women in my family as inevitable. I know all of the men through stories. I don't have any actual memories with most of them. They were absent, or I wasn't alone with them. There is one exception: I remember staying up late to watch *Arachnophobia* with Aunt Jo's first husband. I don't know where Aunt Jo and my Mom were. I sat on his lap, my stomach lurching, while he played his hands like spiders across my back and neck. Years later my Aunt Jo's second husband was sentenced to a few years in a Mississippi State prison for drugs. *They raided his convenience store down south and the police knew exactly where to look and Henry didn't even know there was stuff there, and so it was obvious that he'd been set up,* Aunt Jo said. She said *it was his daughter from his first marriage and the girl's boyfriend who did it to get the boyfriend out of trouble somehow.* I didn't understand that part. *Henry's daughter testified against her own father and she blinked a lot* Aunt Jo said. *His*

parents wouldn't testify and that worked against him, too, and they were wicked people Aunt Jo said, and they showed how wicked they could be after that. I was reading the short story "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption." I got my uncle a poster of a dog for his cell that looked like his dog on a motorcycle but then learned he was in a dorm, I think, or I just felt weird about it because I didn't really know him at all and I never sent it. I found the poster in my closet a few months after he came back, right after he died of a bacterial infection in his lungs.

Once my godmother, angry at my godfather *for drinking so much*, fell back on the bed pillows dramatically, her mouth agape, truly exhausted, and she told me a story I had never heard. She told me *we had to both be sensitive anyway, because he lost his only son and he'd also gone to prison. It had almost destroyed him*, she said. I never asked questions about stories she wasn't supposed to tell because she would just stop talking and try to get me to watch television. If I let her go on though, she'd sometimes eventually tell me what I would have asked. *They tried him as an adult to teach him a lesson. It was just a joke, he and some friends pretended to stick up a convenience store just to freak out some kid from school who was working there that they didn't really like. It almost destroyed him*, she said. *It's one of the reasons he still drinks so much.* My godfather was supposed to be *like your father*. I didn't know if that meant he resembled or was supposed to replace my father, but we never spoke much to one another. He was a *kind drunk*, a loud man when he made noise, but most of the time he didn't. He was out of the way, *out of the circus*, he'd say. This meant he was mostly drinking cheap red wine by the gallon and watching basketball in the basement.

My Uncle Mark taught construction in the prison south of town. *It wasn't good work*, my godmother said, *it was part of what killed him, but it let him get the hours he needed so he could see his kids on the days permitted by the court. He had Wednesdays and Thursdays and his ex-wife kept moving to make it harder; he had to go all over the state to see them.*

I remember the story of one trip he took so vividly that for years I thought I'd read it in a book until my godmother told the story again. Sometimes he drove for hours and still didn't get to see them, *just sat in a motel parking lot, waiting. He'd sit up all night waiting.* And then he came back up and went to work long hours, and you *can't let your guard down in the prison.* When he did get to see the kids, he taught them martial arts, because he was sure his daughter was being molested by her grandpa, by his ex-wife's father, just like his ex-wife had been as a kid. *That's what really made his ex-wife so crazy,* my godmother said—and so she said *you had to forgive her some of her spite, rage, fear.* Uncle Mark's in-laws were horrible people, cheaters and molesters, which is part of what killed him. And his ex-wife, *no one knew at first, but she was really crazy, like nuthouse needs help crazy—it made him crazy, too, being around it long enough, and maybe he did overdose,* but my godmother said she *doubted it. It was mostly how crazy his ex-wife was that gave him the heart attack that killed him, and maybe the stress of working at the prison, but mostly, it was that she was abusive, bless her heart she'd seen some abuse, but she was institutional, out of her mind.*

Amber Deckard and I would smash windows to break into the closed state hospital. I took a whole roll of photographs that turned out yellow and black because of the dim lighting. Amber Deckard and I searched through the photos for ghosts. The state hospital was officially named the Northern Michigan Hospital for the Insane, but no one called it that. It shut down just after I was born. Some of the cottage type buildings were re-sourced to the primary hospital at the edge of the state hospital property. The rest of the buildings were left to rot. We broke into building 50 because it was the creepiest and largest and easiest to enter. It was originally the main hospital dormitory and had a large women's wing and a much smaller men's quarter. For a while there were windows we could smash to get in, and when all the windows were boarded up to keep kids out, it only took a crowbar once and then you could prop the board like it

was still keeping people out and use the same entrance for a while before they discovered it was open. You could also get in from a sewer hole that led to some of the tunnels under the building, but that was a last resort.

In building 50 we'd act out our nightmares: Vincent, going mad in the labyrinth under the building, evil ghosts taking over our bodies in the room we called 217. Sometimes I sat in a bathtub and pretended I was my grandmother, being shocked, and then staring blankly. Sometimes we forgot it was a game. We tried to make sense of what was left and what wasn't in the building—the doorknobs and locks stripped from doors, the medicine cabinets with their plastic mirrors left—the single wooden chair in the room, the three bathtubs, the floral curtains that would float up sometimes even when the windows weren't open. The building had taken water and the paint peeled off the bottom half of some of the walls and left piles of chips all over the floor. We called the rooms that didn't have peeling paint the rubber rooms. Their walls felt like dusty leather, but still not soft enough to keep someone from hurting themselves. By a nurse's station there were several spots on the wall showing the coloration where there used to be framed photographs blocking the sun's fade, but all the pictures except one had been stolen or taken down. The remaining picture was yellow-grey, and in it, all the patients were in long dresses. No one smiled. They did not touch one another and stood very straight.

I kept a spider collection on my bedroom wall. Originally I had lined up all the hacklemesh weaver spiders based on which ones had the most black on them, but their colors changed as they decomposed. The collection was left over from a science class project where we classified arthropods. I couldn't tolerate killing things I pitied, and so I collected arthropods of the class Arachnida. Spiders. *What makes you pity something?* My science teacher asked. *I think fragility*, I said, *like soft wings, like moths, I don't know*. I remember that we all wrote KILLING JAR—POISON on our containers, and we dropped in rubbing alcohol cotton balls. Depriving spiders and insects of oxygen alone would have

worked, but it would give them time to thrash around and potentially injure themselves or curl their legs. The aim was to kill so they still looked poised with life and not too beat up. My godmother said that *if you killed and collected spiders you would always have bad luck because the Greeks believe spiders are the weavers of people's fates, the connectors of past and future. You don't mess with that, I don't care if some scientist told you to*, she insisted. We hadn't used the toxic preservation chemicals for our collections, and so the bodies eventually hollowed out and became a translucent yellow. I started the collection over again to replace the dusty exoskeletons left from the original. The second time I didn't use a killing jar because when I was in Washington visiting my grandmother, my Uncle Bill taught me that you can put spiders in the freezer in Ziplocs to kill them. I brought several huge spiders back to Michigan with me to pin to my board. One night I was awoken by a scratching sound at the wall. One of the spiders was alive and was scrambling its legs about on its pin. I thought for sure I was dreaming, but I got my mother and she saw it, too. She thought maybe it hadn't died all the way in the freezer. After that I went back to using the killing jar.

The Soviet Union had just fallen. My godmother and CBS couldn't stop talking about it. In Social Studies we listened to the news and then drew maps of Europe and Asia, filling in the blurry middle places and changing borders. I did a "war events" report on my favorite story by Stephen King, called "The End of the Whole Mess." The narrator is writing a journal about how his little brother, a child genius, isolated and collected a naturally occurring chemical that calmed people enough to reduce violent crime. Ultimately, he defused the threat of a nuclear war and the destruction of humankind. And then it was discovered, after the chemical had been intentionally disseminated all over the world, that it caused degeneration and death. The thing I found so brilliant about the story was that the language starts to be incoherent near the end, just babbling, so you're not just told about it, but you really feel the world, in

the language, breaking down. My Social Studies teacher told me that I was supposed to report on a real war. He said I had to cover Vietnam. I couldn't do it. My nightmares came back. I was dying in the war, or my father was dying and I held him, soaked in his blood. I threw up every day before Social Studies. My mother had me see a psychiatrist.

I started homeschooling in Jr. High. I was too sick to go to school, to get out of bed, for months. *Write something that matters to you* my mother assigned. This was an echo, from years before and one of the most important gifts my mother has given me. In kindergarten or first grade, our class made father's day books and I wrote the word *nothing* all over the pages when I was supposed to copy stories from the board if they were things I did with my father. My mother had been sick, and *wasn't excited to be pulled into the office again*. But her eyes went to steel when she found out what I'd done, and she took me home with her. She told me *that it was a stupid assignment and you don't have to do it. I don't know what they're trying to teach you. Write about whatever matters to you*, she said, she kept saying.

The summers in my home town were mild and sunny and there was a lot of beautiful water and so lots of people vacationed there. Amber Deckard and I pushed at the boundaries of our bored days. We jaywalked just to jam traffic, we took the stacks of maps from the tourist information center and cut holes in them and sometimes added details, things like "Rita's grave" or "entrance to secret labyrinth." Then we'd put them back. It was an assertion of the fictional worlds I knew in the "real" world, a game, a meanness, even. Amber Deckard intentionally smeared fruit all up her face and made herself puke at the cherry pie eating contest trying to get her picture in the paper. At an exceptionally slow Cherry festival parade we decided we could log roll at the same speed the parade was moving, and so we ran out in front of the police motorcycles that are always at the end of a parade and we lay down and rolled as fast as we could down the street. A policeman got us up and asked us to walk over

through the crowd and down a side alley. A cop car showed up, silent but with its lights on and the men circled around while the first cop kept talking to us. *Ladies*, he kept saying, *ladies*. One of the policemen recognized Amber and they all kept getting closer. I was suddenly terrified and tried to run. One of them caught me and pulled me over to the side of his car and handcuffed me but my wrists were too small. I think there were three of them working on it. When they gave up on my wrists, they put me on the sidewalk on my knees and cuffed my ankles together.

I dreamt that Vincent came and saved me from the police who were going to kill me. I dreamt that Vincent went mad again and had me cornered. I dreamt that I locked the front door and then a hand shot through to grab me. I spent the night at Amber Deckard's house and her parents weren't home and the police came and they saw us and yelled at us to open the door but we didn't, we just went to the basement like we were supposed to, and they broke in or found an open door and we could hear them above us, but we got out a basement window and ran to my house. I dreamt the police were at the door. I dreamt that I was a child and Vincent broke the window to the backseat of the car and reached in. I dreamt the police were on a motorcycle and I ripped one of their heads back. I dreamt I was at Amber Deckard's house and the police showed up and her mom made us go in the basement and we heard the sound of bodies fighting, slamming into things above us. I was prescribed medicine for night terrors.¹⁶ When I spent the night at Amber Deckard's house I always

¹⁶ I saw a therapist for frequent nightmares, and later for Attention Deficit Disorder and Panic Disorder—diagnoses for an embodied repetition, never for a single event. Lauren Berlant argues for a movement away from assumption of the traumatic as exceptional and outside of the everyday, claiming instead that trauma is rooted within the fragility and uncertainty built into ordinary domestic and social conditions of “crisis ordinariness” (10). This is important to consider, as Didier Fassin does, recognizing the ways that trauma discourse refuses or obscures certain people and experiences, and obliterating embodiments of trauma when reducing trauma to a single event that must pass through specific processes of victim recognition (281).

forgot my meds. Her dad was drunk and her mom made us go to the basement. I heard the sound of things crashing, of bodies.

Amber Deckard's mom loved Stephen King like I did. Once, she thought our makeup looked slutty, so she read us the part of *Gerald's Game* where the woman gets raped, so we could know what looking slutty could get us. *Don't use foundation or eyeliner, it makes you look too old*, she said. I remember how ashamed I was. *Don't tease your hair. You're kids*, she said, *I don't want the men who come around here to think otherwise*, she said. *You don't need anything but lip gloss*, Amber's mom said. I had just turned 14 when I got my first job, scooping ice-cream beachside at a gift shop attached to one of the larger resorts. It was hard-serve ice cream, and my left arm thickened from the double scoop effort over the summer, enough for the boys who worked at the parasail rentals to tease me. All the girls I worked with, and actually all the girls who worked resorts along the whole bay strip and the golf course resorts inland, were young. We all wore our hair in pony tails and wore tight polo shirts and little khaki shorts, and we pulled our white socks up to our calves and we wore lip gloss. The gift shop had a roach infestation and part of my job before closing each night was to sprinkle poison around the baseboards in the entire store. I worked three resorts down from The Beach, where Kaylee Bruce was raped and murdered. The girls whispered that she was so mutilated and beaten up that she could have died from any one of her injuries. She was a little older than me, working a summer resort gig, a cute girl, a pony tail and lip gloss. The guy who they think did it was staying there, they said. He didn't even know her. My mother said *it was drugs and alcohol—everyone in the summer who comes to our town is tripped out on drugs for their vacation. Drugs could make you not know the difference between good and bad—they could make you crazy*, she said. She started talking about how *it's not who people really are* and it unnerved me that I couldn't tell if she was talking about the murderer or the men I'd seen her fall in love with. All of us girls who worked the

resorts and a lot of folks from town had a night vigil for Kaylee, walking the streets with candles. I remember that the bit of sky just above the flame of the candle looked like wet oil, and then, I'm sure I imagined it, the heat distorted above the flame and shaped a girl's face. Horror slipped to a haunting—a distinct shift in energy—a movement from shock and tangible fear to something softer, lingering. Something still unspeakable and more untrustable.¹⁷

Amber Deckard was convinced her mom was trying to kill her. Or maybe we were just pretending because we liked to freak ourselves out. Amber showed me where she found the poison hidden in the drawer with the syringes that her mom stole from work. Sometimes her pillow smelled like rubbing alcohol, and she said her mom came in at night and knocked her out and then gave her poison in shots, just enough to kill her really slowly so no one would know. Once we found a hole as proof, but it might have been a bug bite and we didn't want to call the cops and we didn't know who to talk to. Amber didn't read as much as I did, but she really loved the book *Flowers in the Attic*. The mom in the story was killing her kids with poison. I remember when Amber let me borrow the book. She said the story was true. I said *it was all made up—that none of the places or people were real*—but she said, *no, it doesn't matter if that part was made up. The reason we call things made up isn't because it's not true, but because there's a lot in there that you just shouldn't say if you're being decent. There's a lot people can't say about their lives, but books can say them because they pretend they aren't true, even when they are.*

¹⁷ For a more directed exploration of the ways narratives of the *unknowable* attempt to become *sayable* through and alongside narratives of the uncanny, see Susan Lepselter's essay, "Why Rachel Isn't Buried in her Grave." Lepselter examines how those things that exceed easy narratives in the genres we have, that is, the stuff "of class, loss, and colonization, and of the body's unmoored location in a world of accelerated technological change" merges with, and/or comes to be narrated within "historical trauma [that] can lodge itself in the bright, broken bits of stories about fantastic things" (257).

In *The Dark Tower* the guy called the weasel was reading John Fowles' *The Collector*. One day at the library I found the book, the real book that this character, who was supposed to be not real, was reading. The layers of the fictional worlds came together, like that, into my real. When I was returning the book the librarian wanted to talk to me about it. I told her *I didn't like that Miranda dies but I also didn't like how snobby she was*. I told her *I felt bad for Clegg*. She asked me, *did you read the whole book?* And when I said I had, she told me *the way you read the book is interesting because that wasn't exactly what the author wanted you to feel by the end*. She said *it was really about power getting into the hands of people who aren't educated enough and can't make reasonable judgments or be in respectful relationships*. She said *your sympathy is really interesting* and I felt ashamed that I hadn't read the book right and I was on the wrong side at the end.¹⁸ I got rid of my spider collection after that.

Amber Deckard and I still used makeup to cover up our bruises. I bruised really easily. *It runs in the family*, my mother said. I was never

¹⁸ Pointing to the way I have read the text "wrong" highlights the way that I let the text reflect my own understanding of the world I occupied. The fictional text became a surface upon which I recognized my alienation from the librarian's claim to authorial intention and, more deeply, to a middle class experience of knowing and interpreting. While I would hesitate to call my interpretation a representation of some unified lower class culture, I can signal the way our interpretations of the text were contaminated by what we knew and believed to be true in our everyday lives. Our cultural differences became visible as our similarities in interpretation broke down. There is a feminist history for exploring the reading of texts in this way. Judith Newton reveals that "materialist-feminist work also frequently emphasizes the way in which a text is reproduced by its readers, and reproduced differently in changing historical situations . . . What is inherent in the text is not a fixed verbal structure but, rather, in [Catherine] Belsey's words, 'a range of possibilities of meaning'" (20).

really hurt.¹⁹ Amber's mom showed us how to put concealer under the foundation and then green under eye concealer to balance the color and then powder over it to get rid of the shine. We didn't talk about how we got bruises, but I assumed it was her brother, too. My brother raged. He mostly hurt himself—he wasn't after me, I just got hit sometimes when I was trying to hold him so he'd calm down. My mother would have held him, but he had stopped calming down for her. We tried sometimes to not hold him, but he'd really hurt himself. It usually ended the same: eventually he'd go slack in my arms, he'd curl his legs in and look almost dead, or like an infant, sleeping, and we'd all be so tired and hollowed out. We hit a point when it stopped working for me to hold him, too, when he was about eight. He tried to hang himself from his bunk bed and he broke the window in his bedroom to jump out. My mother kept him out of school while they tried different *therapies*. In the end he didn't rage but he didn't care about anything. My family called this *getting the drugs right*.

Later, my brother told me he'd put me on his jail visitation list. I never went. I was getting out of a relationship that had its secrets and wasn't sure where I'd fall next. I was horrified that we were inventing ourselves in patterns that were written before us. I was ashamed of having failed him and afraid of going into such a locked place because my own panic had grown unpredictable again. I dreamt I was there and we were across a table from one another and there was nothing in his eyes like there was nothing in his eyes sometimes when he was a child. I dreamt there were spiders in his cell. I dreamt the cops were after my brother, or after me, and then they took my brother, just a baby still. I dreamt that I got to the

¹⁹ I am fairly confident that this line is both not true, and that I want it to sit there in the narrative, exactly as it is. I have proven myself, already, an unreliable child—lying about my father's death, and an unreliable narrator, unwilling or unable to separate my memories of fiction and family stories. I am unreliable here also, because I have become used to softening my childhood experiences, both to myself and to others.

door and locked it and we were safe and then it opened, and a hand shot through and grabbed me. I wrote a piece about my brother's incarceration so that he knew he was remembered and loved and that our lives were more complicated than the genres we were following. I wrote this because I wanted it to be true. I sent it to him, asking if I could publish it. He didn't say anything else except, *yeah, write whatever you want*. I wanted to be let in. I wanted to open the gendered ruts of incarceration and hidden abuses which are frighteningly extended generation by generation. I wanted to imagine a better story for us.

My five-year-old daughter was in the bathtub, stalling instead of drying off, saving a closet spider that had fallen in. It had long string-like legs, like closet spiders do, that even when dry seem incapable of balance. The spider was wet like thread, a lost cause. Every spider in this essay, every interwoven bit of the story that precedes this was born out of that spider. It woke up the memories. It marks the loss that sits before the embodiment of trauma. It frames the webbed and still webbing structure of the essay. I asked my daughter, again, *please get out of the bath*. And she closed her eyes, sunk down lower, so her chin touched the water and said to me *I just need to soak my shoulder for five more minutes*. It is a repetition of a narrative she has heard from me, which I have heard from my mother. She has no injury—she has been watching me. I have a real diagnosed and horribly painful old injury, marked with a silvery scar that my daughter runs her fingers over whenever it is exposed,²⁰ but I am

²⁰ Our bodies hold our stories, and inform how we tell our stories. Pezzullo claims that “if we wish to transform politics, we need to expose our physical, emotional, and political scars. We need to wonder why we feel compelled to look and/or to look away” (356, Breast Cancer Awareness). Conquergood moves us not to reflect only on how we engage the bodies of our external subjects, but on our own bodies as subjects. He suggests “Ethnography is an *embodied practice*; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing. The embodied researcher is the instrument” (83). Lidia Yuknavitch encourages thinking about how the body, and its lived experience through emotion and memory, informs our writing. She claims “linearity doesn't move the way the body moves. Linearity follows

certain, suddenly, when I hear my daughter speak, that I remember the pain from before the injury. It was waiting there already. I know this sounds fantastical, impossible, but I knew, like I know about love, that I carry my mother there in a tight knot in my right shoulder. It is a pain I feel constantly, exacerbated by stress and fear, a hard kernel of generations of American childhoods that sit at the periphery of the American dream,²¹ childhoods that are forced to reconcile intimate and popular constructions of insanity, illness, haunting, horror and criminality that seem to bleed into one another. Childhoods that grow into adulthoods, and must navigate the embodied unspeakability of shame.

When my brother was still young, but on the bipolar drugs, sometimes I tried to taunt him to see if I could get him worked up. For all his rage from before, I had no anger for him—I just wanted to provoke him to feel something. He was after it too, I could tell. I'd read him really horrifying stuff at bedtime—adult fiction we were both too young for, which sometimes seemed to reflect our every day, which we were also too young for. Our betimes story of choice—one that was just the right amount of frightening was *The End of the Whole Mess*. I read it to him over and over

logic and certain constructs we like to call “time” and “realism.” Our lives don't move that way, our emotional intensities don't move that way, and our memory for god damn sure doesn't move that way” (interview).

²¹ Constructions of self and space are “best witnessed not at center, which is a perceptual effect, but at the verges; at sites where modernity is an unfinished and contested hegemony” (Seremetakis vii). Pezzullo advocates for scholars to enter un-centered environments, bringing attention to the senses and bodies “excluded from elite sight.” She warns that “refusing to explore beyond what hegemonic relationships help make invisible, we provide further, albeit indirect, consent” (30, *Toxic Tours*). In this way, attention to the periphery is not only productive because the politics are incomplete and open to contestation, but because our acceptance of the active, political un-centering of disenfranchised communities refuses to see, and so comes to support the perpetuation of rampant inequalities and oppressions.

again. I think he liked it because he liked to see me cry, liked to see my face redden, and hear my voice break in sobs when I got to the last line, when the narrator writes to his little brother, "*i love you it wuz not yor falt i love you forgivyu loveyu.*"

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