

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

Masters Theses & Specialist Projects

Graduate School

Spring 2020

The Memorialist

Lindsey Houchin

Western Kentucky University, lindsey.houchin@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Houchin, Lindsey, "The Memorialist" (2020). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 3225.
<https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/3225>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

THE MEMORIALIST

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty in the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Lindsey Houchin

May 2020

THE MEMORIALIST

Date Recommended 29 July 2020



Dale Rigby, Director of Thesis



Jessica Folk



Wes Berry

Ranjit T. Koodali

Digitally signed by Ranjit T.
Koodali
Date: 2020.08.05 16:14:25 -05'00'

Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

To my dad for still answering my calls when they felt more like interviews than simply catching up, to my mom for the words she gave me through vocabulary lessons in bathtubs and beyond, and to my family full of stories and slant—thank you.

Without you, there'd be nothing to say.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere gratitude is owed to the high school teachers who recognized my voice and inspired me to daydream of words printed on pages, including my own. Without you, I wouldn't have landed in the Cherry Hall classrooms and offices where the WKU English Department embraced me and encouraged me for all eleven of these years, nudging me forward when I needed it most. And a special thanks to my thesis committee—Dale Rigby, Jessica Folk, Wes Berry—for joining me at the finish line, and long before it, too. You belong to a handful of dearly loved mentors and friends who have heard these stories again and again, helping me rescue treasures from boxes of other people's junk.

PREFACE

In *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, memoirist Caitlin Doughty shares observations from her work in a crematory, where bodies are “transformed by fire into thousands upon thousands of anonymous chunks of inorganic bone.” There, I read her narration of scraping remains from a cremation chamber: “No matter how many times I dragged the mini retort broom across the breaks in the ceramic surface, fragments of each body were lost. Not that I didn’t try. I attempted to gather each sliver. The hot air would scorch my face as I stuck my body a little too far into the machine, dislodging trapped bones with the mini broom until the straw bristles melted into a slump.”

Like it or not, she writes, some bones will be irretrievable, and even the State of Kentucky’s cremation authorization acknowledges this, too: “While every effort will be made to avoid commingling of cremated remains, inadvertent or incidental commingling of minute particles of cremated remains from the residue of previous cremations is a possibility, and the authorizing agent(s) understands and accepts this fact.”

To eulogize, to memorialize is not unlike cremation; entire lives are transformed into thousands upon thousands of fragmented, lifeless words coordinated into a *Danse Macabre*, a Dance of Death. When my uncle died soon after my mother did, I dwelled in the commingling of their starkly contrasted lives and the burden of capturing histories halted. Here, I have attempted to gather each sliver—sometimes getting unbearably close the fire—but I know some are, inevitably, left behind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Narrative..... | 1 |
|----------------|---|

THE MEMORIALIST

Lindsey Houchin

May 2020

44 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Jessica Folk, and Wes Berry

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

The Memorialist is a work of creative nonfiction. In this long-form essay, the author digests the memories and secondhand stories unearthed while exploring the junked, rusted, and wrecked life of an eccentric uncle who was preceded in death by his sister, the author's mother. Through its associative and slippery structure, it follows the author as she untangles two histories halted—connected, contrasting lives disrupted by death. Meditative and metaphorical, the narrative explores both the beauty and burden of death through the eulogy form in a quest to determine how to memorialize a life defined by what death leaves behind.

I pulled into his gravel drive with apprehension, every crackle and pop under my tires announcing my presence on forbidden ground. The sun shined bright, but the barely breathable spring air called for rain. Across the street, a weathered couple emerged from under the hood of a car and stood tall with their shoulders back and their fists clenched, ready to defend their neighbor, if need be. I had disrupted the quiet of their rural Edmonson County lives.

For years, my Uncle Bill stood strong in front of his threadbare house with a rifle held across his chest and roots running deep into the earth of small-town Kentucky. We were not welcome—no one was—and he need not speak in order for us to receive his message. But he wasn't there now. Remembering my last visit to his house, I sighed, drifting into buried memories.

“You never know which Uncle Bill you're dealing with, so stay here until I wave you in,” my brother-in-law had warned as he opened the truck door on a blustery December day. My sister had recruited me to ride home from Christmas at Grandma's with them, promising me a pit stop on the way. We had stopped at Bertie's Ice Cream Parlor, a dairy shack typical of almost any small town in Kentucky, for a pick-me-up and a peace offering before swinging by our uncle's house. I sat in the car, my small banana milkshake in my left hand and a large chocolate milkshake for the uncle I could hardly remember in my right hand. Beads of humidity collected between my hand and his styrofoam cup.

At the end of my uncle's driveway, I apprehensively rolled down the window and let the humidity back in, keeping the chocolate milkshake in my hand and bracing mine in the nook of my armpit. I watched with wide eyes as my brother-in-law navigated the

overgrown weeds and stumbled over remnants of junked, rusted, wrecked, and lifeless machinery in the yard. He scratched the back of his head as he stepped onto the cracked concrete stoop. He took a deep breath, one I could see with my own eyes, and then he knocked on the door. The dilapidated curtain that covered a window to the right jerked to the side, and Uncle Bill surveyed the situation.

Surely the loss of my mother, his sister, was enough to buffer our attempt to reach out, I thought. The door shook the way that makes one imagine there are at least eight deadbolts to be undone before it could be opened. We waited. He opened the door wide enough for us to see half of him.

“No visitors, thank you,” he said, loud enough for me to hear from the truck, before slamming the door shut. My brother-in-law returned to the car and moved the gear shift to reverse, exhaling a breath he’d held too long. I felt offended that he wouldn’t open the door beyond a crack *almost* wide enough to show his whole face, for I couldn’t quite remember what he looked like, and the finality of his “thank you” without even a “please” rattled in my head. The gravel crackled and popped underneath our tires, and I noticed the sweat between me and the Styrofoam cup I held. We drove away with a milkshake no one wanted.

I would later learn, while writing an obituary for the Uncle Bill I no longer knew, that he was 72 and dying when I saw a sliver of his face that day. And he had spent every one of his years on that forbidden land.

--

I put my car in park and rolled up the windows. I marveled at the scene before me. It was hard to believe that the ramshackle house at the end of the gravel driveway could be anyone's home. The rusted metal roof of his house quivered, like the bottom lip of someone trying not to cry. From beneath the rust peered the memory of a threatening message, painted haphazardly in red, for the government officials he staunchly believed haunted his life.

Had it been a political stab at Obama? Or was it Bush? I couldn't remember the message, but I remembered a younger, bewildered me reading it in wonder as Mom and I pulled into the drive years ago.

At each year's Thanksgiving, when my sisters and their families had stuffed their kids and leftovers into their cars and said their thank yous, Mom would convince me to climb into her car. It took two turns and about thirty minutes for her white Pontiac Bonneville to drive from Bowling Green to Brownsville, depending on how fast the trucks in front of you felt like going that day. After turning at the sign that pointed left to JCT 259, a winding road would end at a stop sign. Directly ahead was Uncle Bill's house, seemingly abandoned. Passersby, Chalybeate locals who didn't need a GPS to mispronounce their community in order to find it, knew otherwise.

Mom must have known what was at the end of this journey each time, because even I knew that we visited the house, but not the person who lived inside. It was clear, though, that the pilgrimage was sacred to her. She told stories all along the route, fragmented by lapses in memory that became more and more frequent. I grew up in that car. I listened to her while I scribbled in coloring books, then read chapter books, then played handheld video games, then listened to music in one ear on a first-generation iPod

and, eventually, text messaged friends from my cell phone that finally had unreliable service in Edmonson County.

Each year, that familiar crackle and pop of the gravel beneath our tires would signal a reverent silence. When we came to a halt at the end of the drive, we would take our time gathering our offering in the backseat. “I wonder if he’s home,” she would say with an eye toward the window, always the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

“Watch your step,” she would warn as she parted the tall grasses for me, pointing out the best pathway to the front steps of his porch and redirecting my attention from the cat that lurked skeptically nearby. She would nudge me forward, silently instructing me to knock on the door, and I would—but not without apprehension. Though I hadn’t known him to answer the door often, I silently feared that he would, for my family’s whisperings had built his character in my mind, and I wasn’t sure I’d like to be invited inside.

Alas, my knock would go unanswered time and time again. I would turn around and shrug, pulling my pursed lips to the side in acknowledgement of Mom’s sorrow. “Maybe we’ll catch him next time,” she would say.

We would empty our arms, piling the things we had brought with us in front of his door: plaid flannel pajamas and long johns to fend off winter’s bite because his house was only heated by an old wood-burning stove, and a new wallet with a sizable check tucked inside. Inside old sour cream and Country Crock tubs, “tupperware” we knew wouldn’t be returned, was a Thanksgiving meal.

When Mom and I took annual Thanksgiving care packages to a poor family in Bowling Green, they always sent me away with a trinket of thanks, like the porcelain

Jesus kneeling at a rock that I still stow away in a musty closet something like a quarter-century later. An offering of gratitude. When Mom and I left Uncle Bill's house, we were always empty-handed.

"Everyone needs someone to take care of them," she would say, curling her arm around my shoulders and pulling me close. Did she know she was making memories that would need to last far beyond my twenty-fourth birthday?

--

I stepped onto Uncle Bill's porch, deeply aware of how much time and life had passed since then, and noticed a sign scribbled onto cardboard: "The camera's have got you from 4 angles so just sit down and make your self at home. Don't waste any more film."

"Look at this," I said to no one, picking up the sign. I looked into the corners of the ceiling, and then noticed the skeleton of a camera—not connected to a single wire. It was a facade, a line of defense against intruders and visitors alike.

From inside the house came a familiar voice. "It sure is somethin'," said Dad, emerging from the front door and leaning his pot-bellied body against a neglected brick pillar I wasn't sure would hold him. "Apparently the only thing that kept him from a college degree was freshman English," he said. "Funny, ain't it?"

He pointed to another cardboard sign that leaned against the house: "Yurn hart. Min hart a bleedin." And, under raindrops of blood spilling from the cartooned broken heart, "I broke both of them. Call me." I lingered there, marveling at the differences in

spelling, wondering if the message at the bottom was written by the same person as the top. I craved more context.

Then, for a moment, gravity seemed stronger. My stomach sank, bringing my attention to the irony of my presence there. After so many years of visiting Uncle Bill's house, there I stood with stronger evidence of his humanity than maybe I'd ever known. Now that he was dead, that is. The chasm between the two of us, which had always been the rattling door that now stood wide open, seemed larger than before.

One class kept Uncle Bill from a college degree, apparently, but at 25 years old, I was working on my third degree, my second in English. I had built my young life around my fascination with words and teaching others of their power. I surrounded myself with stories to tell.

My love for words started long before I declared my major. In elementary school, "elusive" made an appearance on one of my vocabulary lists. My mom said I studied best in the bathtub, so she would drop the toilet seat cover shut and make herself comfortable, quizzing me while I relaxed in the tub. There, she taught me how to learn by juggling thoughts and ideas in my mind until they found the right resting place inside.

"Elusive. It means difficult to find or catch, difficult to recall. What does it mean?"

"Difficult to find, catch, or recall," I said, watching the surface tension of the water break and bury my hands again and again.

"What words or phrases are connected to the meaning of 'elusive'?"

This was my favorite question. It was always my intention to stun her. To make her sit back and stare at me before she said another word. To show her how complex I could be.

“Elude. Transient. Vanish. Disappear. Mirage.” I said. And then, “Uncle Bill.”

“Uncle Bill is the most elusive man I know,” I said without turning her way, with two memorable appearances flashing before my eyes in my memories, using the word in a sentence before she’d even prompted me.

Sometimes, while we sang hymns from memory at “Church in the Woods,” Easter morning sunrise service at Mammoth Cave National Park’s outdoor amphitheater, just as Mom’s family had done all her life, my Uncle Bill would appear in the back of the congregation.

“Look who’s here,” my sister would whisper in my ear before darting her eyes to the man standing tall in the background. He would not sing, he would not speak. If you were lucky, he might tip his forehead at your gaze, making you feel secretly loved. He would vanish before the service ended, before we had a chance to talk to him.

One year, while waiting for fireworks to erupt from Barren River Lake State Park, I wandered with a friend down the gravel road that connected our lake property to the water. When the road ended, we waded through weeds taller than we were, which we knew hid the rocky point of the land at the opening of our cove. Standing there was Uncle Bill in battered jeans and a white t-shirt, skipping flat white rocks as if my family knew he would be there, strong and firm with an I-belong-here air about him. I stopped in my tracks and ran back to my mom.

I whispered in her ear while she sank her teeth into a slice of watermelon she was salting one bite at a time: “Momma, Uncle Bill is here.”

She turned her face toward me, still chewing, and I stared into her warm, wise eyes. “Let him be,” she said, returning to her July feast as if it were a normal day at the lake. And I tried, but I spent the rest of the evening looking over my shoulder, wondering where he was and how he got there and what he felt.

When the first firework boomed atop the lake lit by boat lights, I looked around, as I had always been more fascinated by watching people watch fireworks than I was by watching the fireworks themselves. Beyond my mom’s upward gaze, I saw his silhouette in the gravel drive, occasionally and momentarily lit by the fire in the sky. Mom pulled me toward her with her arm around my shoulder, and I said nothing.

A bug buzzed around my head and lingered in my face, coaxing me away from my memories again. I swatted it away and looked over my shoulder with a deep breath, half expecting to see Uncle Bill standing there.

--

“How much land is here again?” I asked my dad, reluctantly returning to reality.

“Two hundred acres, or somewhere around there,” he said, after I handed over the Subway sandwich he’d asked me to bring along. Its bright green and yellow packaging glowed against the sepia-toned setting. Uncle Bill’s house looked like it had been lifted from a forgotten photograph found inside a trunk bought at an antique shop.

Obviously distracted, he bypassed the sandwich. “Check this out, Linds,” he said. I followed the point of his finger to the right side of the front porch. “You recognize this?”

There sat a black electric scooter, torn at the seat and left victim to the weather. I stared at it for a moment, and I looked up at Dad. Of course I did.

“Can you believe he rode that damn thing all the way to Bowling Green?”

In its best condition, the scooter might have gotten up to twenty miles per hour. And when Uncle Bill arrived at my mom’s funeral only a year and a half earlier, Dad and I, whispering, agreed it must have taken him two hours to get there—and pissed off a lot of hurried people along the way. He didn’t stay for the ceremony, he had told my brother-in-law, because he had to get home before dark. Elusive.

Dad stepped onto the front porch. My Aunt Naomi, now a Michigander who had returned to her humble hometown from her snowbird home in Florida just for this occasion, emerged from behind a camping blanket that was hung across an open doorway leading somewhere beyond the living room. She tilted her head toward her shoulder and smiled, but not before briefly curling her chin in the manner that gives way to tears if you let it. The way people smile at motherless daughters.

“You wouldn’t believe the things we’ve found,” she said, recognizing my curiosity and apprehension.

It must have been written all over my face. To find myself on Uncle Bill’s front porch without my mom was enough to pull on my heartstrings; to find myself on Uncle Bill’s front porch with two people so close to my mom – her husband and her sister – was enough to break my heart.

“Look here,” Dad said, always eager to explain something to me, like the way to a place even when I had a GPS to rely on, a habit that always emphasized the different worlds we inhabit. “He was working on a stone covering for the house,”—*you mean facade*, I thought—“and I guess this is about when he started getting sick.” He held his hand against the doorframe at the highest point of the stone mosaic, like a proud father marking his youngest daughter’s height as she grew. Our silence lingered on the unfinished project.

“And do you remember this old thing? It used to be in our living room,” he said.

He shoved a mound of black trash bags with a forceful push. Their rattle and clank sparked Polaroid memories, stills slowly developing years later, of wading through RC Cola cans covering the floor to explore the treasures of Uncle Bill’s old house before the relationship turned sour.

Underneath the bags peeked the brass studs of an oak and black leather couch. I remembered the creaky groan of the tired coils in its underbelly that creaked every time you shifted your weight on it.

“We used to keep Uncle Bill’s guns inside it, right?” I knew I was right without asking the question. I could smell the memory of polishing the wood bones of the couch with lemon Pledge and a rag made of an old t-shirt as, for the very first time, I wondered why we would have been holding Uncle Bill’s guns in the first place.

“Sure did,” Dad said. “And now all twenty-seven rifles are hanging on the bedroom wall in here, and that couch I took such good care of for years is all tore up.”

My aunt, perhaps sensing where the conversation might be going, hugged me tight. “Thanks for coming,” she whispered.

She, like Uncle Bill and my Mom too, grew up on this land, where her parents had raised four children alongside cattle and horses and tobacco. My mom and each of her siblings had moved away, leaving Uncle Bill to it. I wondered how long it had been since her last visit to the house, as I had more memories of going to Michigan than of her coming here.

My family had whispered about my Uncle Bill's death long before it occurred. Surrounding his existence was the careful kind of curiosity that knows its limits. As a young girl, I knew not to ask too many questions about him. The answers were always "It's complicated" and "It's too hard to explain." Hushed utterances of "bipolar disorder" and "runaway wife" and "schizophrenia" were sprinkled into the stories that swirled around him.

Once, on a road trip to visit my Aunt Naomi in Michigan, my parents were debating whose turn it was to pay the taxes on the family's farm. The other three siblings rotated the financial burden while my Uncle Bill lived there. The only income I had ever known him to have was bartering antiques and selling vegetables that grew from the garden he'd tilled by the creek. I remember asking, "What will happen to all of Uncle Bill's stuff when he dies?" And I also remember Dad's reply: "That'll be the day."

Just weeks before I stood there inside the house I hardly knew beyond storybook memories, a hospital employee searching for Uncle Bill's next-of-kin had connected the dots all the way to my oldest sister. That's Kentucky for you. The nurse told my sister he had been in the hospital since January, and they needed to intubate him, as he probably wouldn't make it through the night with the way he was breathing. They had tried the three phone numbers listed in his records with no luck, she said. One of them was Mom's

number. Two were names we didn't recognize. I'd later learn that one of them was a neighbor who lived across the street from him, basically the only relationship he had left.

I rode with my sister to the hospital that night, unsure what was before us. After a lull in conversation, she almost whispered, "I wonder what will happen to all of Uncle Bill's stuff if he dies." I remembered my old conversation about the same thing, and I sat in silence, wondering about what it meant to be defined and outlasted by what you leave behind.

There, on the cracked concrete of a front porch older than its owner, under the metal roof that bowed under years of rain and snow, I thought about the legacy that was buried within the cluttered house before me. I was overwhelmed by the realization that because the character was gone, I could now explore his story, for it had survived when he hadn't. I was surrounded by memories that weren't mine.

"Comin' in?" Aunt Naomi asked, absentmindedly picking up the RC Cola cans that clanked against each other as she shuffled through Uncle Bill's space.

With the touch of a button, my cell phone illuminated. I considered the time: 4:17 PM. I had night class in just under forty-five minutes, and it would take me at least thirty minutes to get back to campus, not counting parking. I looked around, filled with the kind of curiosity I imagine a child feels in an environment unlike anything else she'd ever seen.

I thought about the syllabus from my class, English 403: Writing Memoir and Autobiography, which I was taking toward my graduate degree with a storied man who preferred "Dale" over Dr. Rigby and decidedly threw almost all conventions of higher education out the window. At the bottom of the first page, the syllabus read, "NOTE: the

ONLY way to be considered for an EXCUSED absence is to produce FOR THE NEXT CLASS a typed, 750-word, creative, even outlandish excuse for why you missed class. I will accept/reject these excuses on the basis of your writing's energy, verve, and panache." Looking again at my surroundings, I saw a story begging to be told.

"Uhh," I said, stalling. "Hang on a second."

I headed toward the top of the gravel drive, noticing the crackle and pop beneath my feet with the attention to detail of a writer whose notebook is out of reach. I continued to walk until my cell phone came alive with text messages; it had network service again. I addressed a text to a peer who never missed a class either. "Hey, Katie. Will you tell Dale I probably won't make it to class tonight? I'll follow up with an email. Tell you more tomorrow. All good."

Flipping to the camera on my cell phone, I turned around and snapped a picture from the street. And, with another glance at my phone, as if it might light up with my professor's approval, I made the decision.

"Yeah, I'm coming," I shouted, picking up my pace to the front steps again.

"Great," she said, warm in tone but without looking at me. "Don't tell the others you've been here," she shouted from inside the bowels of the house, "but you can write about it someday." I smiled at her in acknowledgement, stepped up to the door and, with a quick glance toward the window whose curtain I half expected to jolt to the side, I stepped inside.

"Everyone else would want to take things," she continued, lowering her volume at the sight of me in the doorframe, looking me in the eyes. "But I know you'll just take stories."

I smiled, the kind heavy with rain. I had a pretty good idea what she was referring to.

--

Just a year and a half prior, I was standing in the lobby after my mom's funeral, expecting to thank people for coming, and sending flowers, and dropping off unidentifiable casseroles. I was prepared for saccharine, empty platitudes like "I'm sorry for your loss" and "She's in a better place, you know."

Instead, I was fumbling, unexpectedly thanking people for compliments, the way mothers teach their daughters to do when they're young enough to be pinched by old women in the grocery store and old enough to realize it's strange. This time, I wasn't thanking them for compliments on my eyelashes. This time, I was thanking them for compliments. About my writing. About my mother's eulogy.

"I didn't know you were such a good writer," one of my mom's friends said as she curled her fingers behind the squish of my arms. Her eyes red around the edges, she had been crying behind her glasses, as friends do at funerals. I grinned with one side of my face, unsure where to go from here. "Would you send me a copy of the eulogy?" she finally asked, and I looked to my sister, who really hadn't left my side in days, in disbelief.

Five days before, when Dad, on speakerphone, his muffled voice emerging from a cell phone resting on the console in a car full of sisters, asked us to pull over, his words had already been spoken. More than halfway to Orlando, Florida, where my mom had

suffered through a handful of heart attacks while on vacation, my older sisters and I were told she didn't survive the battle.

I was wearing black pants, a plum tank top, and a navy blazer trimmed with black piping, still dressed for the work shift that preceded that middle-of-the night call. I remember wailing, and I remember turning from the phone to the window, but I don't remember seeing anything except nothing. My best friend would later tell me she woke up to 32 missed calls from me, a sure bet something nearly unbearable had happened.

We migrated to a Waffle House parking lot in a nameless town, which I only remember from the sign's yellow glow casting shadows from my sister's features, to grieve and to gather ourselves.

"There's really no reason for you to come down," Dad had said, with a little more weight this time, compared to his initial calls when we were still in Bowling Green. "Why don't you check into a hotel close by for tonight?"

Except that, instead, we turned around, and we headed north for Kentucky, because somehow, against all odds, you keep going when something nearly tragic, nearly unbearable happens. We watched the sun rise again, and this time without a mom in the world. We hit rush hour traffic in Atlanta.

Back in Bowling Green, significant others sorted sisters, and we made moves toward next steps no one seemed to know. I couldn't bear the thought of returning to a home without a mother, so my boyfriend drove me to his grandmother's house, where he was living at the time, for a shower and rest. I didn't know it then, but I'd never really go home again.

--

Trickling from just a few inches above my five-foot-eight-inch frame, droplets rolled like tears over my grieving silhouette. I looked through the shower door as steam blanketed the clear glass. Noticing the pile of yesterday's clothes my boyfriend had peeled off of me minutes ago—the navy blazer, the plum tank top, the black pants that would be stained with memory of that longest night—I turned around to face the showerhead, the way sunflowers seek the sun.

The warm water hugged my heavy shoulders and curved around my elbows. Wrapping my right arm across my chest and my left hand across my belly button, my signature stance of sorrow, I stared blankly at the shower wall, finally lifting my hands to the showerhead's offering. I opened them; water pooled. I closed them; water gushed. Pool and gush, pool and gush. *Like a heart*, I remember thinking. *My hands, her heart*. I opened them again.

I closed my eyes—her eyes, they say—and I splashed water onto my face. I cried.

My tears, swept along in the shower, trickled off my chin and dribbled down my chest and eddied under my breasts before tracing my narrow waist and then my wide and womanly hips. I reached my hands beyond my face and pulled my hair over my head, untangling my thoughts as my fingers untangled soaked hair.

I thought about the water pooling in my belly button. *We were one*, I remember thinking, feeling selfish for taking far more in nine months than I could give in nearly 24 years.

We are one, I hoped.

Swirling with thoughts, my mind grasped for some kind of equilibrium. Again, I stared at my hands, amazed that, even after the nearly tragic, the nearly unbearable, they still worked. Hands she created. Open, close. Pool, gush.

I raised my finger to the foggy glass door, and I paused, remembering her often-whispered words. I traced the pregnant curves of an S, an O, my letters creating windows to everything after this moment. Steeping in the cathartic feeling of scribbling scrambled thoughts on a blank page, I recalled her warm and voluptuous voice, which I would crave forever. *So proud*, she would say, when I solved a complicated problem, when I won an award. When I carried on.

Tracing the final loop of the D, I shifted my focus, seeing through my words. My boyfriend sat on the edge of the bed, his arms supporting his slumping shoulders. He watched through the open bathroom door to my steam-filled shower. Watching, wondering.

I wiped away my words, widening the window through which I stared. I studied his face for a brief moment, startled by his unrecognizable emotion—a rare moment after something like twelve years of knowing each other. Beneath his sunken eyes, he raised one cheek just enough to be reminiscent of a cautious smile. He furrowed his brow, and he pursed his lips. The kind of crooked, unbalanced smile that stifles tears, that likes to think it can imagine your pain.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion writes about the certain look people who have recently lost someone have—an extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness. “It is the look of someone who walks from the ophthalmologist’s office into bright daylight with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made

to take them off,” she writes, claiming that these people look naked because they feel invisible, incorporeal. That day, in the shower, I reckoned with that notion before someone else’s words could help me grapple with it. I was not who I had been, and while I grieved the sudden and startling loss of my mother, I grieved a loss of myself, too—marveling that some part of me, if only my hands, could go on. My mom was now entirely and undeniably in the past tense, and with that so was part of me.

--

Just over a month after my mom died, I was squeezed into the back corner of Tidball’s, a dive bar that put my hometown of Bowling Green, Kentucky—population sixty-something thousand—on the map, at least for rock bands rising from the South. An article published by Deadspin a year later would call it “seedy and disreputable,” descriptors earned by its low ceiling and dim lighting. Being the sort of place that feels underground, especially on cold fall nights, it was the perfect place for escapism. You’d rather not be sober there, and \$5.50 pitchers help the cause.

Occasionally, homegrown bands that made it far beyond the sagging stage of Tidball’s would come back for reunion shows, beckoning old generations and new ones, too, to the local haunt. That late October night, I joined Will, my cool-kid nephew just six years younger than me, to see members of Cage the Elephant play with a former rendition of their band, Perfect Confusion.

Feeling one step ahead of the grief, and of the bouncer who didn’t bat an eye as Will slid past with a fresh new fake I.D., drinks flowed freely. We were still alive, still

moved by music in dark, dank places that feel everything and nothing like the hometown we were in.

I had drifted into a fog of familiar faces passing the table, the way you do at bars when your hometown and college town are the same thing. And then my eyes clicked into another's.

“Ho-ly shit,” he said, putting a chasm of space between the first two syllables to emphasize his disbelief. “You have to be Martha Houchin’s daughter.”

I looked at him, trying to map his face, framed by hair past his shoulders and a mustache, maybe five years older than me, and then looked to my nephew for guidance, knowing good and well that neither of us knew what would happen next. Nervously admitting that yeah, he had it right, I feared his next words before they even made it out: “How is she?” he shouted, wavering as he stood close enough to spit on me.

“I, uhh-, I mean, well,” I stammered, fumbling for words and instantly regretting the whole occasion. “I, uh, hate to be the one breaking this news to you, but she died about a month ago.”

As his face folded, it hit me. Motorcycle Man. At least, that’s what I’d called him a decade or two prior, when I’d sat at my mom’s desk in an office at the local community college where she often invested extra hours in people like him. She had been consoling him upon realizing the nursing career he had been working toward had soured with a D.U.I. charge.

Now, in a blur of beer-hazed memories, I watched a nearly unknown, burly twenty-something man unravel at the unexpected news, searing my own wounds with his words.

“No, are you kidding me? No,” he said, tears spilling over his eyelids in the middle of a crowded bar. “She was always so damn proud of me, even when I fucked up.” I nodded and let him hug me, and I wondered how many hearts I had shared her with. We were her existence.

--

“We’re gonna pack up all this and put it in storage,” Dad said. “The people around here, when they find out he’s dead, they’ll come for anything worth even a little bit.”

I returned to the notecards in my hand. On one side, “Student Teacher Registration Card” with blank lines for “Learner Teacher” and “Critic Teacher.” My furrowed brow must have asked the questions I hadn’t voiced, because between bites, Dad said, “They probably came in a box of stuff he bought at an auction.”

“He’d inspect the boxes and buy the whole damn thing just for something that caught his attention, and could never, as you can tell,” he said, shoving more RC Cola cans away from us with his foot, “throw a damn thing away.” I briefly imagined the joy he felt, coming home and unpacking a load full of boxes, not knowing what he might find, like a stranger’s passport stamped with adventures he’d never know.

Looking around the room, I wondered if I belonged there, in the gut of someone’s life I didn’t know, one that he might have been ashamed to show others, but proudly called his own. I wondered if he would mind. I wondered if Mom would.

When my grandparents died, lines on legal paper deemed their farm Uncle Bill’s—so long as he paid the taxes, which he never did. There was another piece of land,

Little Jordan, near the local baptism hole, the property of their kids, not eligible for sale until 99 years after their youngest died. Just like us, they hadn't seen Mom's death coming. My sisters and I fell into line.

"You wouldn't believe the things we've found. And whenever we get done with this," my aunt said through a long exhale, "we'll have to talk about the plans. I'll need your help with the obituary. I hear you're good at that stuff."

"Right," I said, picking up a notebook from the floor, hoping to hide the tears in my eyes.

Only a year and a half prior, I sat, alongside my sisters and Dad, in a stuffy room at J.C. Kirby & Son Funeral Home, just around the corner from the caskets. With a dropped ceiling and a U-shaped conference room table, the room was decidedly lifeless, reminding me more of the all-purpose, no-nonsense room at the Kentucky State Police post my dad had retired from than somewhere "Time of Need Planning," as the projected screen called it, took place.

"Right, so first, girls," the funeral director said, "I'm sorry for your loss. Your mother sure was a good one." Harold Sanson was a friend of my dad's. Not much under six feet tall and a little on the heavyset side, you could tell he was previously the athletic type, someone you'd imagine told old tales with old friends who never brought new stories to coffee meetings in the mornings.

He explained the purpose of the meeting, which was to iron out the initial planning of services. Together, we'd gather some information, he said, generating the necessary paperwork. Sitting down at the keyboard that sat at the head of the table, he opened the computer's browser and navigated to the funeral home's website. "Funeral &

Cremation Planning,’” he narrated as he hovered over the navigation bar. Passing over “Funeral Merchandise” and “Forwarding/Receiving of Remains,” he spoke again: ““Start Paperwork Online,’ there we go.”

The first order of business, it seemed, was to tell the whole world my mom had died. Harold approached each information field in the online form like he was afraid of it, reminding me of the way my mom insisted that windows on a computer screen be closed with File > Close, and then File > Exit, and never the red X in the corner, lest you risk unknown harm. I smiled, charmed by the sliver of a memory.

Harold navigated us through the information requests, a list made more endless by the pace of his approach. *First name, middle name, last name. Date of birth, place of birth. Date of death, place of death.* “This information is for the death certificate,” he said. “Oh, but you’ll have that from the State of Florida, that’s right,” realizing his error and carrying on.

When he clicked “Next” to submit the first page of the form and a long list of additional fields appeared, I sat back and settled into my chair. *Education. Usual occupation. Kind of business. Company. Full Name of Surviving Spouse. Residence.* And an eyebrow raising yes or no: *Inside City Limits.*

Then, the tough stuff. A dropdown menu. *Disposition Will Be: Earth Burial? Mausoleum entombment? Cremation? Ship out of area? Not sure?* “I personally can’t stand the thought of it,” Dad said, “but she left no room for us to wonder on this one. Cremation, right?” I raised my eyebrows—curious, mostly, and certainly not assured—because the only memory of conversation this cued was discussing cryonics at the dinner table, sparked by an article in some newsmagazine.

“I mean, I don’t see ‘freeze with hope of resurrection’ on the menu, so yeah, let’s settle for that.” My sister smiled and buried her face in her hand, probably embarrassed. Dad paused and grinned, his red cheeks pushing the frame of his bifocal glasses up, and his eyes welled.

“Right,” he said.

“Okay then,” said the funeral director, unsure how to respond to a sense of humor on such an occasion. I wondered, is there a flowchart of appropriate responses in the training for this strange job? I couldn’t imagine what it must be like to be immersed in grief every workday.

“*If Cremation,*” he said, again narrating the words we could all read on the screen, “*Indicate Preference for Disposition of Ashes,*” cautiously clicking another dropdown menu.

“Sunny,” someone added, and I burst into a belly laugh, looking to my sister for validation of this moment’s absurdity. This time, the funeral director cracked a smile.

We laughed under fluorescent lighting while Harold tried to redirect us to the online form meant to capture the details of our mother’s life—and death. “But for the ashes,” he said. “*Cemetery Burial or Niche Wall? Scatter? Take Home? Other?*” And the option we chose: *Not Sure*. Because really, we weren’t sure, and even if we had been, a truthful option wasn’t there. One half of the ashes would be buried under a tombstone that bore both my parents’ names; the other half of the ashes—chunkier than you’d imagine—would be scattered at the lake while I wondered which half of her landed where.

Name of Church (if applicable).

Name of Cemetery (if applicable).

Is there an Insurance Policy on decedent? Yes or No.

I marveled at the arbitrary capitalization. And the final prompt on that page:

Please list any other instruction or information you would like us to have.

My stomach sank again, suddenly confronting what landed us there. Death, a life lived—past tense. *Is there anything else? There's everything else.* My eyes welled up again, and the funeral director slowly moved the cursor to the button at the bottom. Next.

“Okay then, now—” he said, the way old men do when preparing for a next step. Cautiously, he navigated to another tab, logging in and revealing what certainly must have seemed like sorcery to him. He downloaded a file and opened it. My mom’s details populated an auto-filled obituary template, like a receipt for a life lived, printed at the cash register.

The crumple of a sandwich wrapper pulled me back. “Remember writing your mom’s obituary?” Dad asked, looking for a trash can without realizing there wasn’t need for one in a place like Uncle Bill’s. “You got so fed up with his hunting and pecking and punctuation and how-do-you-spell-that you just looked the guy square in the eye and asked to do his job for him,” he said, his shoulders echoing a long-ago laugh.

“I asked to type for him,” I corrected, coyly smiling at the memory of the man’s surprise when I highlighted “was laid to rest” and swiftly typed “died.”

“Well, most people don’t want to say it so, you know, abruptly,” the funeral director had said.

“Well,” I had countered, “it was.” And that was that.

--

Mom had always said she wanted it to be a celebration, not a funeral, but nothing seemed quite right. She wasn't the member of any church that would have offered a formula for the service, so it was up to us—me, Dad, and my sister—to cobble together something based on funerals we'd attended before.

We gathered in the sunroom of my boyfriend's grandmother's house, a private but neutral space big enough to sit comfortably while we untangled the details. Justin Pate, a friend of my brother-in-law's family who I had worked with at Starbucks in college, sat with us. He was the best fit we could find, as far as service leaders go, a faithful Christian in seminary who also kept his feet on the ground. The kind of guy everyone loves to know who knew and loved my mom, even if by a few degrees of separation. Without any prior experience, that I knew of at least, he answered my strange request, agreeing to help us with the ceremony.

Some details came together swiftly, like location and songs we might incorporate. Someone would read the obituary, sure. Justin would speak where a sermon might otherwise go, carefully balancing the emotion of the occasion and the spirit of celebration we hoped to honor. That left one thing.

“What about a eulogy?” Dad asked, evidence I would later cite of the ways he clinged to tradition when navigating death.

We sat still, silent except for the slight creak of wicker furniture as Justin shifted his weight in his seat.

As I remember it, my sister looked to me this time, a role reversal silently suggesting a solution, and our oldest sister followed suit. It felt like everyone held their breath collectively, a pregnant pause in a flurry of details to sort, waiting for me to puncture it.

“I, um—” I said, pausing to hear myself, to let the others fill in the blanks. I struggled. “I could do it, I guess.”

“You really think you could?” Dad asked. It wasn’t an interrogation of skill or of role, because as the nostalgic one, the writer of the family, there was no other option. “I just—I don’t know if you could hold it together for that. I tried once for a friend’s, and I couldn’t do it. I just imagine with it being your mom and all...”

I wasn’t sure I could, but I knew I couldn’t let anyone else do it, either.

“Yeah, I guess I’ll try.”

--

Inspiration failed me. At 2 A.M. the morning of my mom’s funeral, I still had a blank page with undeveloped thoughts scattered like spilled ashes. It felt like failure to sit there, blinking back at the cursor, having studied words for collected countless credit hours in before this.

Dad had called sometime after dinner: “Just checkin’ on you. How’s the eulogy coming?”

“Uhh, yeah—just putting the finishing touches on it,” I had said. An overt lie.

It felt impossible to memorialize my Mom’s life, even if I was best suited to do so, which maybe explained why I so adamantly resisted support from others, barking

away my boyfriend and leaving my sister's text message unanswered. Here, in the eulogy, I was supposed to fill in the blanks, add color, explain everything the obituary hadn't covered. I didn't lack memories or inspiration. Instead, I was overwhelmed by them.

Google wasn't much help. One graphic, "Six Simple Steps for Writing a Eulogy" told me that after brainstorming ideas, I should write the introduction by acknowledging why everyone is gathered—as if we didn't all know?—and thank guests for attending. Step five, apparently, was to "Close With Words of Comfort & Goodbye," but who was I, the youngest of her grieving daughters, to offer comfort in the face of my sudden and severe loss?

Minutes melted while I clicked around for inspiration, wondering why I had taken on the task in the first place. Knowing someone else would have stepped up to write it, probably following a formulaic framework from a website like www.loveliveson.com, I closed the browser window, mindfully opting for the red X in the corner.

Grasping for ground to stand on and urging my writer's block away, an earlier exchange with Justin returned to me.

"Let's start with a layup," he had said, having prepared us for a few questions that would help him create his message for the service. "What's your mom's favorite color?"

As I remember it, all of us sat still. I shared a couch with my sisters, and my dad sat in a chair to our right. No one spoke up, and I wished someone would fill in this blank for us.

“I really don’t know,” I had said, and that was true. I cried then, a rare moment of vulnerability in a days-long stretch of keeping it together in order to carry on, and not because I didn’t know the answer. Because I never would.

Eager to diffuse the tension, Justin moved on. “How would you describe your mom to someone who has never met her?” He took notes as my sisters talked.

Now, staring at the screen, I had a device, a vessel for what I had been trying to say.

I worked through the night, writing and rewriting, tinkering with it only to walk away from it again. Even with momentum, I struggled with questions like *Has everyone lost the same person I have?* and *How much can I stray from tradition?* having dissected models online.

The next morning, I transferred the text to an iPad and continued to toil with it while I got ready, still regretting even agreeing to do it in the first place. I imagined everyone else was preparing to passively participate, occasionally nodding and remembering their own versions of my larger-than-life, late mother—all while I was charged with putting into words their feelings.

As I was sweeping on mascara, always the final step of my getting ready, my boyfriend stepped into the bathroom. “Morning,” he said, wrapping his arms around me and resting his head on my shoulder so that we both looked into the mirror together. Sleepily, he asked, “Did you get it done?”

I snapped, whipping around to face him. “IF ONE MORE PERSON ASKS ME ABOUT THE FUCKING EULOGY,” I shouted, gasping a big gulp of air and clenching my jaw before punctuating my anger with piercing eyes, “I WILL LOSE MY MIND.” I

was enraged at both his question and my answer, knowing it was an offering of support and recognizing, even in a split second, how comparatively vicious my response was. He knew not to press, and we silently gathered our things before heading out the door.

Arriving at the funeral home, I waited in the lobby. Even through visitation the evening before, I had stayed there, greeting people as they waited in the hours-long line instead of at the casket. My mom's body had been shipped from Florida to Kentucky because my Dad felt open-casket funerals were essential to the grieving process, like you couldn't accept someone's death unless you saw it yourself. I couldn't stomach it, though, so I resisted. And anyway, the consensus between my Dad and my oldest sister was that she didn't even look like herself. "Lookin' down at her, if someone didn't tell you it was her, you'da never guessed it," I remember him saying. "But from way in the back, lookin' at her profile, she's still there."

When I'd been assured the casket had been closed, I finally joined my family on the front row, staring straight ahead at the big box that had her in it, a cruel trick of object permanence. As we sat and waited, the room filled up, beckoning the funeral directors to open the side room and then another small room for overflow. It's no exaggeration to say there must have been four to five hundred people there—faculty, staff, and former students from the university where she taught, nurses in scrubs who must have stopped by before their shift, a whole neighborhood from Barren River Lake, her childhood friends, and ours too. Rooms filled with relationships she'd collected over the years, many I didn't even recognize.

I sat through the funeral I helped plan, fidgeting with the material on my dress the way I've always anxiously done: wrinkle the fabric, then roll it out until it pops. My dad

cried beside me through the song that played before my turn, only the second time I could recall in my whole life. I didn't, knowing I still had a job to do and doubting, still, why I'd ever committed to it.

As the song trailed, I stepped up from my seat on the front row, passing the closed copper casket on my way to the podium. I paused there, a moment I had promised myself, silently wishing for the very person I was supposed to memorialize. I watched heads turn, and brows furrow. "That's the youngest one," I imagined them saying.

Looking up, I clicked the home button on the iPad, illuminating the words I'd just written hours ago. One deep breath in, then out.

I don't know my mom's favorite color. It was always the color of the dress one of her girls was wearing for a big occasion or the color of the flowers we had picked out for her to plant on Mother's Day. It was the color of the crayon one of her grandchildren had in hand when they offered to draw her a picture and the color of the first tulips to break through the ground and bloom in the spring. It was the color of the sunset reflected on the lake, the color of red velvet cake prepared for her family, and the color of the words I'd splattered on a page for one task or another.

I don't know my mom's favorite color because she was, without a doubt, the most selfless and giving person I knew. The spotlight was never a comfortable place for her, simply because she'd rather be the spotlight shining on another person. Her best work was in bringing out the best in

others—students, colleagues, family and friends. She was everyone’s biggest fan and could fill a room with confidence in a matter of minutes.

My mom had a way of making you feel capable and strong no matter the task before you: childbirth and parenting, making a complicated meal from scratch, and overcoming the unthinkable—in whatever form it revealed itself in. Even today, I stand here in awe of her efforts to prepare me for the unthinkable. In her last months, to no one’s surprise, she was planting the seeds of strength I’d need to be able to stand before you.

For years, she’d gifted (and gifted again) a copy of Lee Ann Womack’s “I Hope You Dance” to everyone in our family, just to make sure we got the message. For Christmas, she gave me a plaque that read, “I can’t promise that I’ll be here for the rest of your life, but I can promise that I’ll love you for the rest of mine.” She taught my friends how to support me, encourage me, and love me. She had designated several people to step up when she knew I would need it the most. And just over a week ago she highlighted my ability to stay strong and stand tall when faced with a challenge, and the ability to speak in high stress situations as a strength I’d call upon for the rest of my life.

My mother’s heartbeat created my own and likely fueled yours at one time or another, and I am fully convinced that the only reason hers stopped was

because it had reached its capacity to love. She devoted her life to those she loved most, and I'd like to think each of the heartbeats she sacrificed has found a new home in each of us. She left no love to spare, and for that I will be forever thankful.

No, I don't know my mom's favorite color, but I do know she had delegated each of her roles in our family to one of us: relentless optimism and a talent for decorating Christmas trees to Staci, the ability to speak up when no one else will and a well-trained talent for taste-testing the Thanksgiving turkey stuffing to Sarah, an appreciation for the little, random, and often overlooked simplicities – along with the gift of clutter - to me. And to my dad, unconquerable strength and the strangely admirable ability to exude love, even in bickering. And in all of us is a bit of the Hilltopper pride that sparkled in her, a passion for life and all the people around us, and – let us not forget – a taste for margaritas.

We share compassion, loyalty, and a passion for life. And I can only hope that one day someone will be able to say I was half the woman my mother was and had touched half the people's lives her sun-spotted hands had, because her legacy is—and always will be—unparalleled.

--

If Uncle Bill had a favorite color, it was rust or dust or the fading blue of a discarded RC can. Every square inch of Uncle Bill's house was blanketed with intrigue. Dirt cast inverted shadows underneath objects that hadn't moved for years, like the smattering of orphaned antique padlocks collected on a wooden shelf, dissociated from the janitor's ring of assorted keys hung on a nearby nail. You could trace his life from room to room by the pathway through loosely categorized items begging to be picked up and inspected, as well as trash you'd rather not.

"Did you ever hear about the time," Dad started, laughing at a memory he hadn't yet released. He was pointing at a shadowbox of arrowheads, one of about ten in the bedroom that displayed about one hundred of nearly two thousand we found his house. "About the time someone broke into his house and stole a bunch of arrowheads?" he continued. I shrugged my shoulders, honestly unsure whether I'd heard this one before.

"Well, he was smarter than you'd ever believe. The cleverest son of a bitch in Edmonson County. When the arrowheads went missing, he called the police. Except he told them they were radioactive, so anyone who opened the case was in great danger," Dad said. "The State Police called in nuclear experts from Oak Ridge National Security down in Tennessee—we're talking the largest Nuclear Weapons Complex coming to Edmonson County—for an investigation. He knew enough to trick them into thinking this was a real possibility, if you can believe it. And it took 'em damn near two weeks of investigation before they realized he was full of shit."

Dad grew up in Edmonson County, too. It's the kind of place where everyone knows everyone, including where they live, narrated by turns where things used to be. Only 12,000 people call it home, a number that was even lower "before General Motors

come in and changed everything.” And, as Dad puts it, it was the kind of place where “you couldn’t shit outside without everybody knowin’ and somebody showin’ up to wipe your ass.” It’s a place of few surprises.

Dad left Edmonson County for college and a career in law enforcement, ultimately retiring from the Kentucky State Police. A man of law and justice, he carries a lot of contempt for Uncle Bill, who lived off grid and by his own rules ever since the 70s. “One time,” he told me once, sitting at my dining room table, “KSP called me while I was out of state, a sort of favor. They said, ‘We got a warrant for your brother-in-law, Billie. A dispute with a neighbor over a property line, and he’s apparently threatening to shoot.’ I told ‘em I was too far away to do anything about it, and wouldn’t anyway. I told ‘em ‘If you get in a situation where he needs to be shot, shoot ‘im. And that’s all I got to say.’”

Dad likes to say the Stice family, my mom’s family, that is, was “a little bit on the eccentric side,” and I suppose their farm family riddled with mental health issues probably was. “They were hoarders by heart,” he’ll tell you, “and if they ever owned something, they never wanted to let it go—and that wasn’t just one or two of ‘em, it was the whole damn bunch.” Mom’s parents were good people, but stubborn and hard-headed about their beliefs—like being Democratic in a deep red county. Her dad would go for all kinds of jobs, but couldn’t get them because he was alienated and rejected by the Republican structures that just plain didn’t like him, so he was left to farm.

Accustomed to poverty, Uncle Bill made use of what he had. So much of Uncle Bill’s stuff was valuable, but he also held onto salvageable scraps just in case he needed some piece of it to fix something someday. And, hardened by years of this life, Uncle Bill

was menacing at best, terrifying at worst. He'd take a relationship and wring it out, emptying it and inflicting pain while he was at it. Some of that can be attributed to the mental illness he inherited. People, including his own family, were wary of him. Some called it "crazy," others called it "eccentric."

My aunt, for example, set up a house ticket at the local Hilltop Cafe, a home cooking kind of place with a buffet on the best days, ensuring that he could get a warm meal anytime he could use one. The story Dad tells, though, is that he'd find familiar faces there and invite them to join him, treating the whole restaurant to lunch if they'd let him—and running the tab so high my aunt would ultimately call and cancel it. In the commodities boom of the 2000s, when the value of metal peaked, he ripped the metal roof off the house he'd grown up in, leaving it to ruin everything left inside.

"He'd abuse you," Dad said, putting it simply. Nothing was safe.

--

I approached every corner of Uncle Bill's house with a kid's curiosity and a heavy dose of fear, too. "Look at this," Dad said, beckoning me back to the kitchen. "Do-it-yourself barbed wire." Leaned against the wall was the half-finished project, and I wondered what he'd aimed to protect with it.

Especially as the sun started to set, you couldn't help but feel an eeriness as you sorted through his stories. Having surveyed the surface, I started digging deeper, flipping through notebooks of evidence for paranoid claims and diagrams for projects and plans

he'd never see through. I was beginning to recognize patterns all around me: protect the best with your strongest threats.

“Has anyone gone through this one yet?” I asked, not pausing for an answer. On top of an old oak dresser sat a small collection of cannons that, if not for being made of heavy metal, might seem like a child's toys. I pulled open the top drawer and shrieked—silencing only when I realized the coiled rattlesnake poised to strike the minute the drawer opened hadn't moved. Taxidermied and perfectly preserved, I recognized him—Uncle Bill, that is. He was too careful for this to not be a carefully considered line of defense.

Dad leaned in, eager to see what had happened. I backed away to show him the rattlesnake, my eyebrows up to my hairline and chuckling in disbelief, then went back to work. “Holy shit,” I said, marveling at the pile of papers below: photos of his parents, shipping receipts, funeral programs, and 100-round boxes of ammunition. I felt proud, somehow, of the mind at work. And then, sifting through envelopes, I found one of note. A return address: Natty Bumppo, Attorney at Law, Box 413, Brownsville, KY 42210. Inside, a will. “Um, you're gonna want to see this,” I said to Dad, handing the envelope over to him.

Uncle Bill's entire life seemed like a story waiting to be told, though the audience was unclear. The tail end of his obituary, where newspaper readers are typically told the details of the decedent's services, remained vague: “A memorial service will be May 10 in Rhoda near his residence. Expressions of sympathy may be directed to the recipient of one's choice.” The assumption, I'd argue, was that no one really cared to show up.

“You did so well on the last one,” Aunt Naomi said. “Would you write a eulogy for Uncle Bill, too?” Except this request was a complicated one, and quite different. It’s one thing to write a eulogy for the most important person in your life, and it’s another to write one for someone you hardly knew except to fear. I said I’d try.

--

The inner turmoil for writing Uncle Bill’s eulogy somehow rivaled the same writing occasion for the greatest grief I’d ever known. I didn’t know him, except the secondhand bits that didn’t exactly honor him, and I didn’t know what to say to a room full of people who did. “It’s not like there will be many people there anyway,” my aunt had said, attempting to settle me. The truth, it seemed to me, was that he felt more comfortable surrounded by junk than by people, and I wondered if there was more to that—to him rescuing someone else’s story from a box at an auction, recognizing it, knowing it, and treasuring it. That seemed like my job now.

As I prepared to write his eulogy, I kept assuring myself he was one step ahead of me. Shining among piles of what seemed like junk were highlights on display. On the backs of photographs he’d written the names, years, and dates of birth on any subject he could identify, along with a line or two about the occasion. In notebooks were drafts of letters to people long gone and some to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for whom he worked as a fruit and vegetable inspector decades ago. Some things were even curated, on display for visitors that would never come. A photo of his parents hung on the wall under seven handguns and two rifles. An empty bottle of Mammoth Cave Brand

Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey was captured in a display case plastered with historical information that made it better suited for a museum. The head of a deer accompanied by a plaque that explained—not just any deer, but the state’s largest buck on record. He dwelled in the wealth of storied pasts.

Mulling over topics for the eulogy, I remembered one interesting find. “Look here,” Dad had said, pulling a prism-shaped display case down. “His hunting knife. And that’s weird because he always,” and then reiterating for effect, “*always* carried that damn thing.” He handed it to me for a closer look. In the process, I caught a peek of the back, so I flipped it over. Scribbled on the wooden surface, a caption: “I got this while at Fairview in the late 1940s or early 1950s. I went to Brownsville to school in 1956. It was a prize for selling KY Farmer magazine. I have taken it hunting ever since. Look at notches.” And then, as if copied and pasted from the will, signed and dated—Billie Stice 2009. A notch in the sheath for each deer he’d killed. All I had to do was give an audience to the stories he was already telling.

--

Uncle Bill’s memorial service was held at Belle Key Methodist Church, a one-room church with white clapboard siding my sister swears you could see through, a rusted metal roof, and a bell that rang only if you pulled the rope that fell from the ceiling inside. Though it hadn’t even reached 80 degrees outside, it was sweltering hot inside—and that’s the first thing, if not the only thing, anyone can remember.

The setting was perfect. It was an old, simple country church and cemetery built in 1856 that didn't even have a parking lot—sacred and sentimental. Only about thirty people joined us, including my family, for an intimate service that honored the life of someone only a few people got to know. After a few simple hymns and an obituary reading by my cousin, it was my turn. I stood up, approached the lectern, and paused. Time slowed down the way it does when memories are being made, and I soaked it in, fully aware of the moment. There I stood, a city girl, comparatively, and certainly not as simple as my Uncle Bill had been. I caught eye contact with an unfamiliar face, and I wondered if I even belonged there, in that tiny, tucked away little church, memorializing a life I hadn't really known.

I clicked the home button on my iPad, illuminating the words I'd written. One deep breath in, then out.

Mary Randolph Carter said, "A perfectly kept house is the sign of a misspent life."

Anyone who visited my Uncle Bill's house walked away with a story to tell, and I think there's something to be said for that. He lived his life without borders nor seams. What he loved, he lived—nothing in between.

A few weeks ago, when I opened the door to Uncle Bill's house, I was immediately in awe of the museum I had stepped into. In every square inch of space was evidence of his curiosity and fascination with the world. Leaned against walls were projects in progress. On the backs of shopping

lists and to do lists were pieces of history. Inside drawers were anthologies.

His entire existence was an ode to his roots: to Mammoth Cave, to Brownsville, to Kentucky. He had filled notebooks with stories and written histories on the backs of objects.

My Uncle Bill's legacy is more tangible than most, as his hands-on approach to life left many memories behind. In fact, I'm told he even had a helping hand in the stained glass windows we see here.

Uncle Bill handcrafted iron molds of a sleigh and reindeer that added wonder to my winters since I can remember, and our circular driveway became a drive-thru winter wonderland for passersby in Bowling Green. Each year, as we wound Christmas lights around his handiwork, I'd ask questions. My mom would tell me of his talents – he can do anything, make anything, fix anything, she'd tell me. And in the garden behind his house, he proved he could grow anything, too.

If a perfectly kept house is the sign of a misspent life, my Uncle Bill's house is the symbol of a perfectly spent one. He stayed immersed in what made him feel most alive, most connected to the earth. His existence might bristle the hairs on an outsider's neck, and they might see in his stuff a whole lot of junk, but to me, his life was a curated collection of the things he loved most – right down to saltine crackers and RC Cola.

--

Sideways sunshine, the kind that softens everything in the late afternoon when the sun starts to set, was made for country roads. In the passenger seat, I sat silent, thinking about the country church we left behind, about the life we left behind—misguided, maybe, but richly sentimental. I watched the sun fall over rolling hills and other people's farms, and I thought of the way dust settles right before your eyes when the sun hits it just right.

When news that my Uncle Bill would soon die first reached me, I wasn't immediately fazed. My heart ached only because I knew my mom's would have. But leaving Edmonson County that day, I felt some new, nameless grief of histories halted. When that crumbling house finally collapses on a farm without a family, who will collect the memories that fall to the ground?

Darkness welcomed the night and, as it goes on summer nights in the south, fields lit up with lightning bugs. Uncle Bill, I knew, was telling a story to an audience he couldn't reach, yearning to be plucked from a pile of junk and treasured by someone who could see past the dirt. I wondered if I had delivered that closure.

I laid my arm across the center console, wrist up, and my boyfriend took the bait, intertwining our fingers and looking to me. After the slightest pause, a few words from him: "Today's was even better than the last one." I smiled back at him, knowing he meant well, knowing he was offering the validation at least one part of me was seeking. I wanted to know why, and I wanted to hear the whole story from his perspective, but my

chin trembled, and I looked away. I grieved, all over again, my mom, aching for an opportunity to revise.

--

Uncle Bill's estate—a funny word to use when you've been in the bowels of his humble home—later went to auction, an attempt to liquidate all the stuff only people like him might truly value. An iron, horse-drawn hearse earned the top bid. He had sold the very roof off his childhood home to make ends meet, letting the skies rain in, while he sat on over \$90,000 of antiques and collectibles the whole time.

I had promised my Aunt Naomi I wouldn't take anything, but in truth, I'd snuck away with one thing. Folded neatly into quarters and tucked away on a shelf that otherwise held old Tonka trucks was a browned piece of paper, with lines the color of a sea you'd find in an old, forgotten postcard. It seemed treasured, set aside, exempt. I had unfolded it, expecting to find directions somewhere or some other ordinary thing, and instead found it blank—preserved possibility. What did he almost say? And to whom?

I thought back to the times I had stared at a blank page, resenting the space between it and me. Any memoirist must know the battle of transforming a blank page into an essay of experience and explanation. We extract meaning from our everyday experiences, and then we scribble our notes on napkins, in pocket-sized notebooks, and on almost-discarded receipts, digging even further for the truth we aim to tell in our stories and musings. Truths, nestled into the dark corners of our memories, are shared by—carried by—us all, but it's the memoirist, the memorialist, who shares the story.

In *Lying*, memoirist Lauren Slater nods toward philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: “The greatest lie of all is the feeling of firmness beneath our feet. We are at our most honest when we are lost.” The very tension that binds the art of memoir is the weightlessness, the elusiveness, of truth and the gravity of narrative. When the cursor blinks in the top left corner of a white screen, when an ink pen hovers over a pristine page, our truths grasp at their expiring weightlessness, begging instead to swirl through our minds, our moments, and our memories—and stay there.

To eulogize a life is to memorialize it. In heavy keystrokes, in ink gliding onto paper, the gravity of narrative, of an entire life lived, pulls to the ground the memoirist’s mindful experiences, memorializing them, making them tangible and real. Lines become letters, letters become words, words become sentences, and sentences become stories, become eulogies.

My mom’s and Uncle Bill’s eulogies were the first and second I wrote; a third, fourth, and fifth quickly followed, like a game of connect the dots. Each one has been, painstakingly, written and rewritten until the words finally manifest some meaning, dancing around their purpose with carefully crafted choreography, evoking the spirit of their subject.

I am my family’s memorialist. When someone dies, I’m in line for calls to be made, entrusted with distilling an entire life into the spirit of someone who’s gone, based solely on what they left behind. “My turn,” my Dad had said, tearfully, when he called to ask if I’d write a eulogy for his mom, too.

My aunt still pretends we never found a will in Uncle Bill’s house, yet I can’t shake the image of a perfectly preserved blank page I found there—one that now hangs

framed on my living room wall. And when cleaning out my mom's house for its new owner, I broke down when I discovered a file folder in her desk labeled *Funeral Plans*.

We tell the truth, but we tell it slant, editing our experiences, curating them for consumption by readers near and far, scribbling what matters for someone else, we hope, to find. I am my family's memorialist, my keystrokes and scriblings transforming malleable memories into curated histories. And this is mine.