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## **Subversion of Form: Mixing Poetry and Prose**

Darby Alexandria Brown

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Thesis title Subversion of Form: Mixing Poetry and Prose  
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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Ania Spyra 05/03/21  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Reader(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
Date  
Susan Neville 05/04/21  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Certified by \_\_\_\_\_  
Director, Honors Program Date

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**Subversion of Form: Mixing Poetry and Prose**

A Thesis

Presented to the English Department

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Darby Alexandria Brown

5-2-21

## **Introduction:**

### On the Process

When choosing a thesis idea, I knew I wanted to write a creative writing piece experimenting with form. I enjoy playing with form because experimentation nourishes my creativity, and I love being aware of how form and structure contribute to a writing piece.

My decision to focus on interweaving poetry and prose came because I love writing in both genres. I write with an emphasis on imagery and language, so even when writing a short story or essay, my prose sounds poetic. Since I love both forms of writing, why not write a story that switches between these genres? How would switching between prose and poetry logistically work? How would that interplay contribute to the message of the story?

Another reason I landed on this topic is that I'm pursuing graduate school in Creative Writing next year, and most programs require that the writer selects a genre. You apply for either poetry, prose, or creative nonfiction. Considering that many writers publish in multiple genres, it seems restrictive to me that young writers must choose. You can be a poet who also writes prose, or a prose writer who also writes poetry, but where is the space to be a poet and a prose writer at the same time?

*That* was the space I sought to work in. *That* was the space I sought to write in.

To do so, I needed to read other writers working in that space. First, I read *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. Primarily a poet, Vuong published this as his first novel. Although writing in prose, he interweaves poetry into his writing through his image-and-language-rich style.

Next, I read Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* and found a lot that I wanted to imitate. She separates each paragraph by a break—as one would write stanzas in poetry—rather than indenting each new paragraph. She also writes in a fractured, vignette-like style, and she avoids naming the characters. I have used *all* of those devices in my piece.

I then read *Cane* by Jean Toomer. Between each chapter, Toomer intersperses two poems, which each occupy their own page. Although I interweaved my poems directly into my prose, rather than giving each poem its own page, *Cane* provided an example of someone who used both forms in their distinctness to communicate his ideas. I noted that his prose sections rely on characters and situations to impact the reader, while his poems focus on emotions and images.

Finally, I read *Notes from No Man's Land* by Eula Biss. Similar to Offill, she writes in a fractured style. When I read this book, I'd already titled my piece *Notes from Behind a Window*, so I paid attention to how she incorporated that title into her essays. I also studied her division of sections, based off of locations she has lived in. In a similar fashion, I based mine off of months.

Drawing on these writers, as well as discussions from my prose and poetry classes at Butler, I began my project by considering what prose and poetry are separately in order to understand how to interweave them. What elements of each should I draw from? When should I write a segment in prose and when should I switch to poetry?

I wrote this in my proposal:

“The distinction between the two is difficult to define. Countless poets have meditated on how to define poetry, which is usually written in verse, but not always, and can deal with a range of subjects. Prose simply means a work of writing that is not written in verse, that is not poetry, which becomes complicated when there is no clear definition of poetry.”

While still an impossible distinction to define, I will attempt to gather my thoughts now.

Prose is the most common style of writing today. It's longer and more detailed, which provides a more expansive space for developing plot and characters. Factors to consider when writing prose include pacing and dialogue. The purpose of prose is to *tell*. Through prose, writers tell a story. Hopefully, a good one. Often, a *meaningful* one.

Poetry is harder to explain. What fascinates me about poetry is that it fills in the gaps that prose cannot speak to. Because of the combination of confinement and freedom found in poetry, the poet attempts to articulate emotions and thoughts that can't take shape any other way. In her book on the writing of poetry, Mary Ruefle describes the poem as "a moment of searching" (219)<sup>1</sup>. Her point is that poetry involves questions more than it seeks to answer them. So, to contrast with my assertion that prose aims to tell, I will say that poetry aims to search.

While growing in my knowledge of poetry and prose, I landed on a subject: Quarantine. Last March and April.

What better subject to use as I experiment with the interweaving of poetry and prose than last spring, my first experience of a pandemic existence? The time where so much happened that I struggled to articulate, that I even now struggle to process and understand. If poetry is about searching and prose is about telling, then through quarantine, I had much to search and much to tell.

I titled the piece *Notes from behind a Window*. It is creative nonfiction written in first-person and totals 49 pages and 12,090 words. I divided the story into two sections: March and April. March details my spring break trip to Arizona, returning home for quarantine, and adjusting to a pandemic existence. April includes my experience of school via zoom, my mental health struggles, and my grandfather's death. I conclude with a short epilogue.

One important theme is time. What did the pandemic do to time? How did we have so much time and yet so little time? How did we adjust to the slowing down of the world? *Did* the world slow down?

Another symbolic motif that arose is a contrast between water and glass. Glass symbolizes fragility, but also protection and clarity. Windows are made of glass, as well as screens. To contrast, water is fluid, able to change and transform while maintaining its identity as water. Water is also unpredictable and uncontrollable. This contrast fed into themes of mental health, isolation, and hope.

During the process of writing my thesis, I aimed to solidifying writing as a daily practice. This past semester, I spent one-to-two hours each weekday morning (and often on the weekends as well) writing on this piece. I also worked on exercises from *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron that pushed me to consider how I prioritize writing and creativity in my life. Going forward, I will continue to implement writing as an everyday practice.

## Notes From Behind A Window

### *March*

*March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021:*

March, for me, has always meant my birthday. The month begins with a celebration of me. This year, however, my birthday does not feel like my own. *March* does not feel like my own. It feels like someone has stuck a sign, a trail marker, into the day that should be all about me, and that marker reads: One year ago, it all began.

This year my birthday marks more than my aging; it marks the world's aging. The aging of experience. The aging of beginnings.

To me, as to many, March has become a window: clear glass inviting me, us, to peer into the past.

When I was a child, someone once told me that my birthday was special. It's the only day of the year that is also a command: March fourth. *March forth!*

The nature of commands is that they lack a clear subject: who is being commanded to march? And where? Why? For how long?

The month of March gained its name from Mars, the Roman god of war: "This was the time of year to resume military campaigns that had been interrupted by winter. March was also a time of many festivals, presumably in preparation for the campaigning season."<sup>2</sup>

What do you think when you hear the word "march"? I think feet clomp, soldiers' boots, shoulder to shoulder, following the pack all swallowed in their coats, right left right left, forward, forth, rat-



a-tat-tat, heartbeat drumrolls, chins jutting with pride even knowing red scarves don't keep heads from falling in the snow.

“March” defined<sup>3</sup>:

1. A border region

*frontier*

2. Forward movement

*press on*

3. To move in a direct purposeful manner

*progress*

4. To move along steadily usually with a rhythmic stride and in step with others

*unity*

A year ago, as we entered March the month, we began another march, one that would become a frontier, a border between then and now, between outside and inside, naked-faced and masked, hug and screen, between our past selves and the selves we currently claim.

*frontier*

We began (the) March unaware that we moved toward war, the month's namesake.

*press on*

We began (the) March deaf to the drums that drew us forward, the rat-a-tat-tat of time or fate or God.

*progress*

We began (the) March unaware that our shoulders brushed fellow soldiers, that our feet did not slap alone.

*unity*

\*\*\*

2020

*Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup>*

The airplane's window chilled my hand, but I did not remove it. Instead, I spread my fingers flat against the glass and wondered, if I kept it there, would the glass grow warm beneath my palm as my sister and I journeyed southwest? Would the window's temperature change with the air below, or did the sky hold a weather of its own?

I probably learned something about the sky's temperature in fifth-grade science class (in addition to dissecting an owl pellet and watching *Bill Nye the Science Guy*), but that was long ago. Now I was in college, where you never learn whether an airplane's window remains cold during flight when its destination will be ninety degrees and sunny.

*Ninety degrees and sunny.* Indianapolis had been as chill and dreary as it always was in March, gray and faded like a photograph from the early 1900s. The gloominess was worth tolerating, though, for the warmth and growth campus holds in April. Earlier that week, I'd spoken with a friend about how excited we were for spring, the spring of our Junior year! Spring is the best time on our campus, and we longed for it! We longed to taste that floral scent of cool warmth in the air that unravels winter's spell, that pries us students from our hibernation dens and shoves us onto the lawn where we swing from hammocks and lounge on picnic blankets and breathe in the sun.

I needed that sun. I needed that hammock-soaked lawn, I needed that warmth. I needed my time on campus to be better than the two months of anxiety and isolation I'd endured so far—the result, I knew, of having been abroad in the fall and having to force my way into a community that had closed up without me.

The airplane's frame rattled, and I slipped my hand from the window. Next to me, my older sister was listening to music with her eyes closed. When they were open, her eyes were the same shade of green-blue sea as my own. Our hair, too, shares the same blend of blonde and brown, like honey poured on wood. (Both heirlooms from our mother). Her face, though, is narrower like our dad's, and my jaw is squarer, my eyes deeper set like our mom's. Several years ago, my sister began highlighting her hair so that it looks more honey than wood; mine has always contained auburn hints, a dash of cinnamon.

My sister was living at home in Nashville for the awkward stretch of months between her college graduation in December and the start of her job in May. Since she'd decided against working part-time and, thus, had four months of nothing to do but prepare to move, she'd proposed that we travel together for my spring break. We'd wanted a solo sister trip for years, but I hesitated. A few of my friends were planning a beach trip, and I'd never spent spring break with school friends, only ever with my family. But I knew that in May she would move to Philadelphia. By the time I got home from school, we would only spend a few weeks together before the change: living in different states, no longer clinging to shared breaks at home—when she would begin her adult life and our accessibility to one another would forever be diminished.

She drove up from Nashville to fly out of Indy, so that she could celebrate my birthday with me. It had been years since we were together for one of our birthdays, both of which are, ironically, in

March. *When was the last time?* I tried to remember. Perhaps she had come home for mine one of the two years she'd been in college while I was still in high school.

The icon that forbade our access to laptops flickered off, and I pressed my hand against the window again. Still cold. Although, the grass beneath the clouds was probably still Indiana anyway. Arizona would be warm for us—that land of sun-soaked cacti, of hot, red dirt.

\*\*\*

*Wednesday, March 13<sup>th</sup>*

We had not planned to leave Arizona the whole week. On the Wednesday, however, our halfway mark, we found ourselves driving to Utah. It had snowed at the Grand Canyon on Monday night, and we didn't want to waste another day squelching through the mud trail around the rim, staring at the mist that should have been red rocks.

So we found ourselves in Utah, and in a Mexican restaurant outside of Zion National Park, my sister and I reflected on the day. And I received an email.

The Park greeted us with its pink, prehistoric mountains, and, though the dinosaurs have been long dead, my eyes compulsively searched the brush for a dinosaur's tail.

*The steps I am announcing this evening are being taken with the highest concern for the health, safety, and wellness of our campus community, and I believe are most appropriate, given what we know at this point in time.<sup>4</sup>*

We visited a waterfall—merely a tube-sized trickle that pooled at our feet, but it flashed like a rainbow fish writhing in the sun.

*Extend Spring break through Wednesday, March 18 for students (no classes) and all classes will be conducted through virtual instruction from Thursday, March 19 through at least Saturday, April 4.*

The inscrutability: that Zion appeared unaltered by time when only time itself could shape those mountains

*Events of more than 50 people will be suspended until further notice.*

We watched the sun's rays of rose

*inconvenience and disruption*

tuck the mountains into bed

*fluid and changing daily*

from a rock that jutted out onto the valley below.

\*\*\*

*Saturday, March 16<sup>th</sup>*

The airplane returning us to Indianapolis smelled of hand sanitizer and fear—the scent of elementary school bathrooms and doctor office waiting rooms (the scent of numbness).

There were more empty seats than there were taken seats, and this time, I did not place my palm upon the window, because who knew what germs lurked on the glass?

\*\*\*

Campus reminded me of the day my sister and I had left for Arizona, when spring break emptied the sidewalks and the lack of parked cars widened the streets. Was that only a week ago? Last Saturday? Today the sun poked through the clouds; the air tasted like spring.

My sister helped me pack. Since she had driven up, we would be driving home in separate cars. I did not want to pack. I wanted to throw enough sweatshirts and underwear to get me by until Thursday when the dorms would reopen and I could come back to campus for the rest of the semester. But my dad's words from our phone conversation had chiseled themselves into my brain: *I know you don't want to hear this, but....*

I did as he asked. My sister loaded our cars as I bolted up and down the stairs with armloads of books and clothes and boxes of granola bars. My diffuser, sure. My binder of sheet music, why not? My guitar (thank goodness I brought that home). *Of course, I'll have to cart all of this back up in a few days*, I grumbled to myself, though I didn't believe the words.

When we drove away from campus, I shivered the way I would from standing in a graveyard. From being alone there but feeling that I was not alone.

The air outside sang of spring, but I was shielded from the warmth by air-conditioning and windows. Twenty minutes south of Indy, the clouds shifted beneath the sun, but I could not feel the chill. Later still, rain arrived, poking at my window shield and the roof of my car, but I could not feel the rain.

My tires felt it. They skidded on the wet pavement as if resisting the route I took, aching for me to swing around and return to my other home, the one I was not approaching. To the dorm room I had just half-vacated. To the lawn thirsty for students. To the promise of April days ringing with humidity and laughter.

\*\*\*

As I passed through Louisville, I called my friends who were vacationing in Florida. I had tried calling them on both Thursday and Friday, but they had just entered the grocery store, they were just sitting down for dinner, they were literally on the beach, they would call later. (I wasn't one to talk: I was hiking, exploring caves, pretending as if the world was not beginning to unravel.)

Now, I caught them, though only enough for exchanging "how are you"s and realizing that those clichéd three words had a harsher ring than normal. How was I? *How was I?*

*I am falling apart, I wanted to say. I am angry and upset, and my sister doesn't understand why. She yelled at me for complaining too much because, to her ears, I was complaining about having to come home, about having to spend time with her, and she doesn't understand why I'm not thrilled at getting to come home from school.*

*But she doesn't know our campus, she doesn't know the scent of spring on the lawn, the feeling you get on that perfect sunny day when the line at Starbucks spills out onto that courtyard under the oak trees and you have to loop around the quad a few times to find a spot for all your friends and blankets and hammocks, although you'll most likely find a group to join before you make it halfway around.*

I did not have time to say this. I did have time to ask whether they planned to stay on campus until school resumed in-person classes. I was afraid to hear their answers, because I wanted everyone to come back, for things to be as normal as possible. There would be no walking to class or club meetings, but we could still hang out, play games together, watch movies, try those restaurants we always said we would try – perhaps even road trip somewhere for a week, out west to a national park. I'd always wanted to see Colorado.

My friends could give me no more answers than I could give to them. Funny that I worried so much about that, about what campus would look like while everything was virtual...I had already tasted the emptiness of campus. That feeling of walking alone through a graveyard...it is the feeling that your presence is unwanted, unneeded, superfluous. The graveyard will live on just fine without you there.

And the strands of normalcy continued unraveling....

\*\*\*

My sister and I arrived home at the same time, but the dog greeted her first. Strange, considering I used to be the dog's favorite and I had been gone the longest. She did make up for it with the ferocity of her bounding toward my shins, her yapping and licking of my knees. I stroked her white wisps of fuzz and breathed in the scents of home. The house swelled with the notes of my favorite meal: butter and cream, cheese and spice, blueberry sugar.

"My babies," my mom sighed as she drew me up from the floor and enveloped her arms around me. Tears began at the back of my throat, but they never reached my eyes.

My dad asked, "How was the drive?" as he switched places with my mom.

Before my mouth mustered enough energy to open, my sister spat, "Ridiculous! It rained the whole fucking way—"

"Hey!" my dad cautioned, and she propelled her arms through the air in response.

My mom drew me into another hug. "Honey, how are you? The poppyseed chicken's in the oven, I have the cobbler prepped to go in as soon as the potatoes are done—"



“Let her speak.” My dad again.

My eyes flitted between their wrinkled brows and twisted lips. “I’m tired,” my tongue managed. “I...I don’t know.”

The dog licked my leg again.

\*\*\*

Dinner tasted hot in my throat and sunk heavily to my stomach. My body ached from the day: I had woken up at five in Arizona (and though Arizona is technically Mountain Time, the state does not switch to daylight savings, so should I count that as five Pacific Time?), travelled five hours on a plane to land at two Eastern, and then drove another five hours to arrive home at six Central. So many hours gained and lost.

What a ridiculous concept: gaining an hour, losing an hour. As if time is something we can barter, something we can step out of, something we can move through. But I am no time traveler. If we can gain or lose time, then time is something we can own, something tangible, something we can grasp, instead of what it is: elusive, unyielding, uncaring. Like storm clouds above our heads, which form when they want to, rain when they want to. We are wet or dry, sunny or shaded, at their will.

What would that be like? To form when I want to. Rain when I want to. Dissolve when I want to.

\*\*\*

Later that night, I explored my inbox of fresh disappointments: my summer mission trip cancelled; campus closed until April Fourth. (Unlike March, April is not a word, april forth has no meaning, even my computer knows, without its uppercase “A,” april gains the squiggle red curse.)

My mom hugged me again. She said, “I know you’re upset you had to come home, I know you don’t want to be here, but your momma’s happy right now.”

My tongue unraveled and I could speak—

Y’all don’t understand, you’re not listening to me, I want to be here, I’m happy

to be here, I love here and I love y’all,

but I love there, and I love them,

and I’m confused, angry, hurt, grieving,

scared, and I don’t know, I don’t know how I feel,

I know I am tired, I know this is hard, but I don’t know

I don’t know

I don’t

know

My family did not know either.

My dad did promise that they would be there for me (whatever that means).

My mom did massage my aching neck.

My sister stood and watched and then suggested we go to our favorite brunch place in the morning: *Well, on the bright side*, she said, her smile cautious, *you know where we can go tomorrow?*

\*\*\*

Did we *really* only arrive in Arizona one week before—

*Saturday of Spring Break, March 7<sup>th</sup>*

Our first day in Arizona was full of singing, sighing into the sun, voices snatched by open windows. We named our rental car Westie and listened to the playlist (called “the wild west”) that my sister had made for the trip. On the drive from Phoenix to Page, we stopped at overlooks to snap photos, for once set free from our parents’ eyerolls and tapping of the steering wheel. They preferred the arrival over the act of arriving.

\*\*\*

*Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup>*

The next morning, I woke at seven and sat on my couch for an hour while I waited for my sister to wake up. Then, we went to brunch.

We had expected to eat here, but the world had changed around us. If I’d entered with closed eyes, I would have breathed in the familiar espresso-bacon-sourdough scent that clung to every surface and wafted onto the outdoor patio. Instead, my eyes open, I saw the tables that, with their chairs stacked upside-down and dripping sanitizer, resembled spiders flipped onto their backs, legs waving wildly. I saw how the workers whispered through their cloth, their eyes flitting to the exposed noses and mouths of customers.

We were naked-faced in a masked world.

Was it my bare face that made me feel so exposed, so vulnerable? Or was it something else?

\*\*\*

*Hey, hon, I need to talk with you.*

My dad caught me in the hallway later that day, which wasn't hard to do, considering I'd been wandering aimlessly around the house. With spring break extended, my first class would be on Thursday. I couldn't decide whether it would require more energy to write a paper or to relearn how to have down time (I think I decided on the paper).

*I know you don't want to hear this, but...*

I focused my eyes on a spot on the hardwood. Rainbows, from the way the light cut through the front door, dotted the floor, like iridescent footprints—what imaginary creature tracked those into the house?

*It's not looking good. Schools are going to start shutting down for the semester.*

A few days before, I would have retorted with a stream of complaining about how overdramatic the world was being, how this virus was just a cold. I would have drawn up false statistics I'd seen on Instagram about how low the death rate was, how purposeless all of this cancellation was.

But I had already begun to change with the world. I found other statistics, heard other versions of the story. I had, also, already begun resigning myself to my father's words (although full resignation would take much, much longer).

*I know, I reassured him. I know.*

\*\*\*

How was it only one week ago that—

*Sunday of Spring Break, March 8<sup>th</sup>*

In Page, Arizona, we sipped sweetened lattes from a shop that smelled of coffee and cinnamon. We then wended down the side of a cliff to arrive in Sedona, where we explored the red rocks that reflected the sun's setting. We ate at a sandwich shop with an old-fashioned soda machine.

\*\*\*

*Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup>*

Day one of quarantine: the Monday. (Remember this moment? That moment in history when we counted quarantine in days as if there were an end in sight? As if those days would not become months, as if we would not be as masked and scared, as enclosed behind windows and trapped within screens, a year later.)

The first day, I did not leave my house at all, not even for a run.

I chose my room at home for the windows. The wall facing the cul-de-sac contained three: each arching upward toward the abnormally high ceilings, the middle almost reaching the top.

I choose spaces for the ways they hold light. Here, I wake to sunlight resting on tree branches, oozing through those three arching windows. In spring, the sun casts leaves onto the wall across from my bed, and I can spend half an hour in the morning watching the leaves dance without even looking out my window.

Windows are such a paradox. They are cut into our homes to let in the light—but they are made of glass to keep out the heat and the cold, the bugs and the creatures of dirt, thieves and beggars and others. They enclose us into our spaces, allow us shelter, allow us to feel sheltered. They divide us, craft borders into our daily lives – but they also unite us to the sun.

And for that—for the light they let in—windows are still beautiful, I think.

\*\*\*

*Monday of Spring Break, March 9<sup>th</sup>*

We drove along the Grand Canyon’s rim. Pines whisked past and then: violet-rose-gray ripples of rock, (what you’ve seen on TV screens, in magazines) as if once, a long time ago, a giant lay spread-eagle in the earth and nestled there.

\*\*\*

*Tuesday, March 17<sup>th</sup>*

On Tuesday, I sat on the couch in my living room, my fingers stroking soft leather, and called one of my friends, who I will call Chicago, because she is from there. She was one of the friends I would have shared spring break with if I had chosen to go to Florida.

We began by exchanging images of spring break.

Her: the sound of white sand kissing saltwater, grocery store runs, cinnamon toast cereal.

Me: red dirt, two-lane highways, granola bars.

We exchanged thoughts on the state of things.

Her: too much talking about it, so exhausting to talk about it.

Me: I have no one to talk to about it, I have been unable to talk about it.

An impasse: what else could we talk about when it had seeped into everything, already?

Her: we cried together, we cried and prayed together, we talked about it together.

Me: I wanted...to be there.

(I wanted to be everywhere.)

Her: we received the email from school.

Me:

Her:

My sister's laughter trickled from upstairs. The click clack of paws announced the dog's arrival from the kitchen; she cocked her head at me as her tail curled over her back in a question mark.

Me: I don't think it's hit me yet.

Her: Me neither.

I met Chicago on our first night of college at a school-sponsored party where all the first-years clumped into huddles and alternated between shouting get-to-know-you questions over the hip-hop beat and swaying silently, pulling on loose strands of hair and hugging our elbows. Within one of those huddles, we found each other.

Me: I miss you.

Her: I miss you, too.

*How long before we would see each other's three-dimensional faces again?* I wondered.

\*\*\*

*Tuesday of Spring Break, March 10<sup>th</sup>*

It was misty at the Grand Canyon. What had, only yesterday, been those violet-rose-gray ripples was now a white haze, impenetrable. If I had not seen the place in so many pictures and paintings, had not yesterday shared the experience with camera-clad tourists, I would have wondered if this was a magic place. only discoverable on Tuesdays or every crescent moon. Instead, I knew this was not magic but weather and, perhaps, bad luck.

We drove to a trailhead where backpacks and trekking poles bustled out of cars and disappeared into the mist. Hiking boots squelched in the mud. Glancing at our tennis shoes, our school-sized backpacks, our empty hands, we returned to the car. Another trip, perhaps.

On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at an overlook. I threw a snowball into the Grand Canyon. As it disappeared into the mist, I waited for the sound that never came. But what sound would it have made? Snow striking rocks miles beneath my feet. A hiss, perhaps, or a sigh.

\*\*\*

*Wednesday, March 18<sup>th</sup>*

I woke at seven again. I descended the stairs, my eyes already aching with the weight of the day. On the couch, I drew my Bible toward me, but instead of reading, I cried.

I remembered: prehistoric mountains, pink and raw,

sun's rose rays

and rocks

And I no longer wanted to think of the week before.



As my tongue tingled with wet salt, I thought, *This is strange.*

*I don't often cry.*

\*\*\*

This was not the house I imagined when I thought of home. Not the one that had seen me through middle and high school and half of college, through the first time I felt a period cramp and that time I ran a hundred-and-six-degree fever. This wasn't the house that had witnessed cupcake competition birthday parties, countless summer pajama days, my first attempts at scrambling eggs.

My parents had moved here almost a year ago. Last summer (the summer right after the move), I'd grown acquainted with the halls. I memorized the walls of my room, and my mom stenciled one with the rose color of my previous room. I filled the house's empty spaces with the music of the piano, thunder and rain, sigh and breath. I sent the smells of cinnamon wafting through its halls, cumin and paprika, onions and garlic and bread.

Still, that was—how long ago? Seven months. I'd lived here for three months and then I'd slammed the door behind me as I left for Spain, and then came a two-week respite for Christmas before speeding back to Indy.

And now, home again, somehow. What felt most like home? This house, which I had lived in for a handful of months last summer? The dorm room I'd lived in for just two months—small enough for the furniture to brush each other's edges, dark enough for us to always use the ceiling light during the day? My room in Spain that I would never sleep in again?

Or the old house, my old house...another that I would never sleep in again.

\*\*\*

*We are mourning*, people said. We are grieving. We are experiencing a loss.

I had never mourned before. Sure, there were faces I used to see that I no longer saw. I had undergone our mourning rituals: black dress, heels sinking into grass, coffin lowered into the ground.

Was I mourning now? Was that why, after twenty-one years of being a non-crier, I could hardly last a day without shedding a tear, or reach the end of a week without having at least one mental breakdown?

I hoped that this was mourning. Because if it wasn't...what was wrong with me?

\*\*\*

Time drew me forward. Days swirled around me. When had I stopped counting them? I wondered what that meant, that I'd stopped counting them and hadn't even noticed.

\*\*\*

A lesson on the art of arguing, featuring my sister and me:

Her position: I am selfish. I am acting like a martyr. I make no secret of how miserable I am to be home, to be with them. I need to realize that I am not the only one going through something. I am taking out my anger and my fear and my frustration on them. I am the glass they fear to walk upon.

My position: She is unsympathetic. She is not listening to me. She is hardly being affected by this at all. She makes no effort to understand why I am angry and scared and frustrated. She is also a bitch.

The truth: I am selfish. I am acting like a martyr. She is hardly being affected by this at all (yet). I am taking out my anger and my fear and my frustration on them. She is not listening to me. I am the glass they fear to walk upon.

\*\*\*

*Water*

They fear I have become glass.  
They watch with unblinking eyes and pick  
around their words as if  
their tongues were pen tips, I  
the fragile paper beneath.

They fear their breath will shatter me,  
that my bones will break into shrapnel,  
arching outward to strike their tongues and cheeks,  
or else imploding inward  
to carve letters into my stomach,  
my lungs, my heart.

Have I?  
Have I become glass?

I do not want to be glass.  
I want to be stone. No—

not stone,  
not hard nor immovable.  
I want...  
to be water.

I want to be ungraspable  
untamable  
unfathomable

What can cut water, what can impede its flow?

Imagine this: to be water, to flow onward without fear  
of becoming a rapid or a waterfall or an ocean—  
because to be water is to be all forms of water  
rapid, waterfall, ocean  
ice, stream, storm  
river, rain, snow  
lake, creek  
sea.

to become new and old again with every crack and thaw of time

Just imagine:

The inscrutability  
of always changing and never changing at all

\*\*\*

One morning I made it past the opening of my Bible—even past the reading of my Bible—before  
crying.

Ecclesiastes 7:14: When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has  
made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.<sup>5</sup>

Next to Ecclesiastes 7:14 in my Bible: God, give me comfort with this.

When was that *this*, I wondered? When had I last read Ecclesiastes? Fall of sophomore year, perhaps? When the friend group I'd accumulated the year before had crumbled and, while everyone else sought shelter elsewhere, I clung to the ruins alone. It also could have been earlier, the beginning of college, when I would return from playing cards and watching movies with people and cry because I knew they weren't it, they weren't the friendships that would last. Or even earlier, perhaps, in high school, when one of my best friends began treating me like a stranger.

*God, give me comfort with this.*

Comfort. Asking for comfort implies that one is in a state of discomfort. It also implies humility: being humble enough—desperate enough—to ask for help.

*God, give me comfort with this.*

Hardships always pass. We know this. How can we not? Human history is made up of hardships that have passed. All that is left of the Black Plague is a children's song (*ashes, ashes, we all fall down*), and who even thought of the mask mandates and quarantines of the Spanish influenza before we discovered a pandemic of our own? Our own lives are built up of hardships that have passed: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

*This, too, will pass.*

*I know, I know that, God, I know because hard times always pass, I know, but—*

*How long? How hard?*

Because the past never passes completely—it stays with us. *How* will it stay with us? *How long* will it stay with us?

*The creaking of the house;*

*a crack from the ice in the freezer.*

\*\*\*

The first time I joined a Zoom call was Monday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. Time reappeared. I had to think of time again. I rehearsed it in my head (*2:25 Eastern is 1:25 Central, 2:25 Eastern is 1:25 Central*), and I wondered what it would be like to see my classmates' flattened faces. Would there be circles beneath their eyes, like mine? Would they, too, wrap a blanket around their legs? This day, unlike those that came after, I dressed myself in a decent top (a close-fitted turtleneck the color of sage) and I even put on a bra, although even then I could not bear to wear jeans. I curled myself in my desk chair and cringed as it squeaked beneath my weight (would they hear that on the other side?). My mouse icon hovered over the zoom link (ten minutes early). *When would people join?* I wondered. It is common at my school for students to settle into the classroom ten minutes early. Would that happen over zoom?

I joined at 1:23 (Central), and I was not the last to join, and the professor's face was cut off by the camera's angle. No one was muted because we did not yet know that to be flattened into screen, one must also be silenced.

\*\*\*

My sister's birthday is March twenty-eighth. It is not a sentence, not a command. It simply is: March twenty-eighth.

“So what’s it going to be for your birthday—where do you want takeout?” Mom asked, although we already knew where she would want: our favorite Mexican restaurant near our old house (now thirty minutes away).

My sister had for a long time wanted to take the top off my jeep. I had as well, although it had always seemed like such an ordeal. But now? Now that our sole entertainment for the day could be walking the dog around our neighborhood lake in hopes of being able to wave at our strangers-becoming-friends neighbors?

Instead of taking the interstate, my sister and I wound our way south through Tennessee hills of spring-kissed grass. We pointed to houses we thought beautiful and joked that we would remember the ones with for-sale signs. We blared the songs we would sing on drives like these in high school: “Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked” by Cage the Elephant, “Weight of Love” by the Black Keys, “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by the Beatles—but the live version with Paul McCartney and Eric Clapton. During one guitar solo, my sister drove slow, the jeep tucked within a wooded side street, and I stood up in the back seat and stretched into the air. My hair flung behind me, my mouth widened to taste the humid, late March air.

We took fewer detours on the way home so that the queso would stay warm. Then we made a picnic on the living room floor, like we used to do in our old house. After our feast of chips and tacos, my mom, sister, and I watched *Pride and Prejudice*. My dad, with a sigh of “chick flick” under his breath, retreated to his room, but, later, when he refilled his water, he hovered over the couch for twenty minutes.

Beneath us, in the garage, my jeep remained topless. My sister had already drawn from me a promise that tomorrow, a Sunday, we would drive out again—this time we’d go farther, out to

Leiper's Fork where we used to go in the summers to get ice cream on our way to an overlook, halfway to Mississippi. She wanted to play our "wild west" playlist again like we had in Arizona. Had it only been three weeks before when the sun and red and heat of Arizona had welcomed us? Had it only been three weeks since I'd pressed my palm on a windowpane and wondered if the glass would remain cold or grow warm? I'd forgotten to check.

Glass changes temperature with the world outside, so my question should have been directed toward the sky. Does the sky change its temperature based on what happens below?

Water doesn't change with the air around it. At least, not quickly. In spring, when the air grows warm, water remains cold for much longer, not as readily changed by the world around it.

If I had to guess, I would say the window remained cold until the plane's nose broke through layers of clouds to carry us down to earth.

I wanted to drive with my sister. I wanted to watch a movie every night with my family, to read books for fun, to make the most of being home. But classes had begun, and I knew that tomorrow I needed to scrape aside time to read for my Monday class. I needed to look ahead for Tuesday because I always had a mountain of work on Tuesdays, and a research paper lingered on the horizon—but, surely, there would be time enough for all that and to drive.



## April

*April 2021*

April is not a word, but it used to be.

“From the Latin word *aperio*, ‘to open (bud),’ because plants begin to grow in this month. In essence, this month was viewed as spring’s renewal.”<sup>2</sup>

In Spanish, the month is called Abril, and the verb “abrir” means to open.

Can you hear it? April. Open. April. Open.

Like March Fourth, it sounds like a command: April, open!

Did the month listen to us?

There is talk now of opening. Of second doses and the removing of masks. Of restaurants allowing more than six people to gather at a table together, of colleges considering in-person classes for the fall, of grandchildren hugging grandparents without fear. *This* April brings hope, a word that contains the first three letters of “open.”

But we have not moved past last April. It still sits with us, those days of waiting behind closed windows, of wondering how a month named for openings could contain nothing but cancellations and closings.

Open, defined<sup>6</sup>:

1. Having no enclosing or confining barrier: accessible on all or nearly all sides

no more bagels smothered in garlic cream cheese

or coffee brewed in cinnamon and honey –

closed until further notice, they said

2. Having a barrier (such as a door) so adjusted as to allow passage

we leave the front door open for the dog

she likes to station herself behind the glass

3. To move (something such as a door) from a closed position

my dad closes the front door whenever he finds it open

I think he does not like leaving things unlocked

4. To make accessible for a particular purpose

my dad also does not mind that the bagel place is closed

but he is upset at the absences in grocery store shelves

April first is the day of jokes, the day of fools.

Open also means:

1. Exposed or vulnerable to attack or question

*open to doubt*

2. To enter upon

*to begin*

But the open in April does not speak to humans; it speaks to branches and roots and growing things, and we were not (yet) growing things. (Have we ever been growing things, will we ever be growing things?)

\*\*\*

*April 2020:*

There was enough time that Sunday at the end of March for driving in my jeep with the top off, allowing the wind to entangle my sister's hair with my own. We licked strawberry ice cream and got lost surrounded by yellow-growing-green fields.

Monday's arrival made it clear, however, that there would not be time for daily jeep rides. With the beginning of my second week of zoom classes, I realized I was still expected to be a full-time student. Professors deemed us recovered enough to read half a book for each class session on top of submitting papers and revising short stories. Student clubs shifted meetings to zoom, and my friend groups planned zoom game nights (different friend groups, different zoom nights) where we tried not to talk about COVID. And whenever I could find the energy to, I scrambled to text or call or facetime (or zoom) every friend that I could all the time because it had finally sunk in that, unless we planned a road trip, we would not touch, not meet eyes, not breathe the same air, until August. And in August we would be seniors, and in August would begin the countdown, the silent timer that clicked until May of next year, when we would all tip our graduation caps at one another and move off into unexplored spaces.

I hate time, I discovered. I hate the trick time plays, the way it pretends to be consistent (unchanging), yet hours, weeks, minutes, days, pass differently all the time. I hate that time pretends to be a gift, but if it is, it's a gift given by a distant cousin that you haven't seen in years. You receive the package, and before the eager eyes of your family, you pluck apart cream tissue paper, your heart moving, eager to know what's inside. And then it is a movie that you hate, a gadget you will never use, a gift card to a store you would never shop at. But you have to smile

and thank your cousin and clutch the movie, the gadget, the gift card, to your chest and pretend that you have not, once again, tasted the bitterness of disappointment.

This is how time fooled me as we moved into April. Being home for the trees' budding, being home during the heart of the semester, reminded me of high school, and I allowed time to excite me. Could it be like high school again when I had so much time? Time, *time*—oh what I could do with time! I could read for fun, bake, write poetry—I could watch movies with my family, run outside, play piano. I could finally get to know the strings of my guitar. Perhaps, even, begin a puzzle.

Instead, my life resettled into the same rhythms I adopted at school, except with adaptations: zoom, instead of class; family, instead of friends. Meetings and social calls burrowed into the empty spaces of my schedule until I became as busy and drained as I had been at school. Now, at least, I had a dog.

\*\*\*

My sister and I fought often. We cycled through the same arguments, the same accusations and hurts. We fought when she would barge into my room in the mornings and plop herself onto her bed. *I'm busy, I'm working*, I would snap, because I felt unproductive, and I could not write with her scrolling through tiktoks on my bed. *But I'm bored, I want to do something*, she would pout.

She had no job, no zoom calls to fill up her time. Although I hate myself for it, I relished a feeling of satisfaction when she had to cancel her graduation trip to Europe, scheduled for midway through April. I didn't want to see her sad, but I also thought...*surely, now, she'll understand my pain.*

We fought in the afternoons when she wanted to go on hikes or car rides, but I had essays to write and books to read and was it too much to ask for time to *myself*? Because every time I agreed to

go on a ride, I knew that ride would lead to dinner, which would lead to movie or board game or both, which would lead to me slipping into bed wondering how I'd gotten so little done and done so little of what I wanted to do.

I made it no secret that I did not want to be home, that I was miserable, she claimed. And I would cry, because it wasn't true, it wasn't true at all, but I *was* unhappy, and I couldn't stop being unhappy for them, and so I would snap at them, and I didn't mean it, but I would snap, I would anger.

I'd never been the angry one before. I'd always been the calm one, the mediator. The one who would take the dog upstairs to my room and wait out the fights that went on around me. Never the one causing all the fights, never the instigator. And I was so tired, and I couldn't think, and I loved to play the martyr: I'm sorry that my pain is *inconveniencing* y'all, I'm *sorry* that my unhappiness is too much for you—if my presence is making y'all miserable, I'll just move back to Indy as soon as my lease begins in May.

They did not feel that, they did not want that, and I knew they did not feel that, did not want that, but it felt good, a raw pain, to convince myself that I was unseen, unknown, unwanted.

And so I became the persecuted, the victim—the one suffering the most, the one always yelled at for not sacrificing all of my free time to watch movies and go hiking, the one always misunderstood.

Some of this was true, but not all of it. And on top of it all, we had zoom.

\*\*\*

Zoom class introduced me to my classmates in new ways. There were the zoom backgrounds, of course: the cats streaking across screens, the dungeons and dragons posters, the hot pink wall paint probably leftover from middle school. There was the private chat function and the fact that each person's name was typed out so easily for me to read.

I had my Monday class with another close friend, a fellow English major I'd been friends with since freshmen year. Once, she private messaged me telling me to look closely at a classmate's glasses. The girl was playing a "what kind of potato are you?" quiz on BuzzFeed, so BuzzFeed she became. I'd since noticed her on paint-by-numbers and Microsoft solitaire, but BuzzFeed was her go-to, it seemed.

We nicknamed the professor Flustered. He would smile and bounce around his little box until a student couldn't share her screen or breakout rooms failed to load or someone lost connection, and then, sweating, he would click away at his computer, murmuring about how technology never worked when he needed it to. We didn't call him that often, though, because we felt bad for him.

There was also Hermione Granger, who we named when class still met in person, because every time the professor asked a question, she thrust her hand into the air and twiddled her fingers. On zoom, she was the first to unmute and refused to perform the customary pause-and-apology when another spoke at the same time.

That class also contained English Major Boy #1, of the average white boy variety, and English Major Boy #2, who had not once been seen out of his bed since zoom university began. He spoke mostly of video games, even when discussing the class's topic (Medieval literature).

My first Tuesday class consisted of black boxes with names typed across them. I joined the handful of us who kept our videos on, partially to sympathize with my professor, whose under-eye circles

darkened with each session. In that class, BuzzFeed joined the black-box variety, so I couldn't distract myself by zooming in on her glasses.

My second class on Tuesdays contained a girl I swear I'd never seen before zoom. I called her Snacker, because she never failed to produce some sort of food during the hour-and-fifteen-minute timeframe. Once, when we had five minutes left and she still hadn't drawn a handful of popcorn or potato chips from her lap, I wondered if she would break the streak—then she reached *behind* her computer and placed a bowl of spaghetti in front of her. *Had that been there the whole time?* I wondered.

That class was the one where the professor's computer angle cut off half of his face. Some days we saw just the eyes and forehead, while other days we glimpsed lips and cheeks. My other classes were asynchronous, which meant that they became a list of things to do with no lectures or discussions to break the monotony of work.

\*\*\*

I saw a tweet posted across Instagram: Isaac Newton was sent home from university because of a pandemic. During his time at home, he discovered gravity.

\*\*\*

The second week in April, Chicago and I found time to talk (not facetime, she requested, we were all seeing too much of screens). I joked about the tweet: *So this is the expectation the world has for us? To spend our time discovering gravity and solving world peace?* (I thought: *to write a novel.*)

*It's comparison culture all over again,* she said. But how had it gotten here? Through our screens, our social-media infested screens? Through the cracks in the windows that we never open, only

peer through? *Instead of “what are you doing this weekend?” it’s “how many books have you read, how many puzzles have you worked, have you baked banana bread yet?”* my friend concluded.

I couldn’t stop myself from thinking: two (for class); zero; no.

\*\*\*

*Morning rituals*

i sleep between sheets  
between dreams and i wake  
aching and tired

my eyes scream for tears  
but my cheeks taste sticky  
and dry, so i do not cry

i only cry when i wish to yell,  
and when i wish to cry i only ache

when i wake i wish to yell  
and to cry and to feel  
but instead i extricate myself  
from the sheets and undergo the morning rituals  
of brushing sleep from teeth and hair  
washing sleep from face  
stumbling down the stairs  
to fumble with my sister’s nespresso  
until i craft a honey latte that tastes too sweet  
and hardly opens my eyes further at all.



\*\*\*

I stopped wearing bras to class. I would change from the t-shirt I slept in into a sweatshirt so that no one could tell that I stopped wearing bras to class. But would they have noticed anyway? On zoom, I exist in the amount that I choose. I am not a body; I am shoulder, neck, head. I am not a being; I am the accumulation of pixels on another's screen. If I choose, they can't even hear the noises of my living. I am an invisible ghost, beyond this dimension. I am flattened and silenced and when the call ends, I disappear from their screens, from their eyes.

\*\*\*

I spoke, too, with another close friend who went on that Florida trip that I did not go on. I'll call her Caffeine, because she is the only person I know who consumes more coffee than I do.

We skirted around talking about COVID, about the pandemic, but at the first lull in the conversation, we realized we had nothing else to talk about. *Some days I hate this*, I told her. *Other times I just think about how cool it is to be alive right now. Living through history like this.*

She said nothing, and I had a moment to consider whether I meant the words or not. *We'll definitely have the ultimate guilt trip over our children—"you think this is bad? You weren't even alive during 2020."*

And then she laughed—that open-mouthed laugh that I should be hearing in person, not through a phone—and I longed for fall. Caffeine and I had shared a room sophomore year. We grew close through Spotify playlists made when we each had papers to write, through laughing as we rolled on the unvacuumed carpet and conversations whispered as we fell asleep. We'd be living together again next year in a house near campus.

*On a serious note, she concluded, living in history sounds a lot better than it feels.*

\*\*\*

To live in history  
does not feel like living in history.  
It feels like

living.

It is the waking up:  
the brush of teeth and hair,  
the crack and bustle of bones  
shaking off sleep.

It is the scent of morning:  
banana bread clothed in butter,  
embedded with walnut chunks.

And it is the dusk air:  
walking the dog around the neighborhood lake,  
two laps sometimes.

It is the evening hush:  
the shuffling of cards as I sit  
with Mom and Dad and Sister,  
the dog sighing below.

And in between and all around is the clock's magic trick:  
the whittling away of time,  
the sporadic dance of sun across sky.

\*\*\*

Life existed in faces flattened by screens, faces stifled by masks.

Once a week, my sister and I drove to our nearby coffee shop to be handed our lattes through her car window (even outside, always windows).

Life existed in memories, images displayed across my mind like a drive-in movie where the film ripples across a moth-dotted canvas and once the credits cease to roll and you're reversing out of the parking lot, you realize: you never even had to leave your car at all.

I remembered how the last weekend on campus, a group of us drove to an old theater to learn how to swing dance. I remembered twirling in a dress, I remembered jazz music and laughter and racing to Steak 'n Shake afterwards to dip fries into milkshakes. I remembered telling a friend (Caffeine, I think), "I can't wait for after Spring Break, for more moments like these."

Life existed in interactions behind closed walls:

sitting on the carpet forest of my floor with my sister, my fingers coercing guitar strings  
the movement of my father's lips giving a joke to the early morning  
tears gifted to the cotton sleeve of my mother's shirt as she held my shaking  
the snatching of food from plates at the dinner table

my family never ate together before

And always there was zoom: We are the army of the undead. We are the glazed of eye, the dead of brain. We do not hear our professor's rat-a-tat-tat, and we do not watch anyone's box but our own. We do not learn because we do not listen. And when the call ends, we collapse onto our beds and wonder where we will find the energy to join another call, to read the next chapter, to write another paper, to go on, to live, to breath, to live and to breathe at the same time.

\*\*\*

Halfway through April I still had not become water. I was not rapid, waterfall, ocean, nor river, rain, snow. I had not even become ice, though ice and glass are similar.

What is the difference between ice and glass? Ice melts, ice becomes, ice ceases to be ice; glass fractures. The tiny grains glass shatters onto the world do not melt, nor become, nor cease to be glass. They are glass's offspring, a reproduction, an invasion.

And when I sit on the floor of my room and undergo my weekly breakdown,

the kind of breakdown where the door locks

where I rock back and forth on my floor

I am a rocking chair

where I wail and sob loud enough for them to hear

sometimes they don't

I wait for my wails to subside

I splash cool water on my already-wet-cheeks

I descend into the kitchen for a glass of cool water

where I pound the floor because the floor cannot feel

when they hear me

I swallow pride's bile taste and rise from the floor

I unlock the door that I locked

they enter

I caused that worry on their faces

I caused that fear

where all I wanted the whole time was to be listened to and held

but it just feels so good to cause suffering

when one is suffering

I do not feel like I am melting or becoming

or even ceasing to be.

I feel like I have shattered into tiny grains of glass, striking those around me, becoming more

of what I do not want to be:

glass

glass

glass

glass

\*\*\*

One night after a fracturing, my sister and I rediscovered Baskin Robbins milkshakes. When we were children, we would set off from our old house in Franklin with our dad and bike though trails crossing over the Harpeth River until we reached our local shop, tucked within a 19<sup>th</sup> century brick building in our historical downtown. The shop itself housed ghosts, as did most of downtown, mainly Civil War soldiers and spies, though we never saw any strange shadows or felt chill air.

Our new house lies close to another Baskin Robbins, this one within a strip mall that probably grew up in the seventies. But my sister and I found it, and we smelled the sugar-cream scent again, and she slurped her classic peanut butter chocolate, while I explored a birthday cake flavor I'd never tried before.

When we returned home, we watched *The Sound of Music*, our favorite movie since we were five and seven. Pretending to be Gretel and Liesl, we used to fall into our neighborhood pool to flail in the water. We would fight over who would play Gretel, who would pretend to drown and be rescued. My sister usually let me, since I'm younger.

\*\*\*

The next day I taught myself to play "do re mi" on my guitar. I sent a video to Caffeine, because it is a favorite movie of hers as well. I promised that I would play it for her when we moved in together in the fall.

Plucking guitar strings sounds kind of like glass shattering on a floor; so does piano, sometimes. It is beautiful, I guess, in a way. Perhaps it can be beautiful.

\*\*\*

I created a hymns playlist days after coming home in March, but I didn't add anything until April. And I hadn't listened to it much, but on a Thursday just past the halfway mark of April, I set out for a four-mile run and decided to listen to it. The playlist was just long enough to outlast what should have been a forty-minute run, but what became an hour caught between sprinting and walking and jogging and crying.

The crying happened at the two-and-a-half-mile mark. I stopped, salty water sticking to the salty sweat on my cheeks, confused. I had never cried on a run before. I had not known that I was sad enough to cry—but, then again, I do not cry when I'm sad. So what, then, was this emotion swelling up against the inside of my skin, prodding against my joints and muscles and bones?

Layered over the confusion, there was also relief. I was one when I last had a grandparent die, and, because of my aversion to crying when sadness is involved, I feared I would not cry for this, for the next passing of a grandparent.

On Monday, my dad had received a call from his mom. She called every day or so, searching for distraction from the emptiness of her home. My grandfather had been strapped to a hospital bed in a nursing home since his spinal surgery in the fall, and she hadn't been able to visit since quarantine began. Before the pandemic, she'd visited every day, only driven away by the setting of the sun.

When she called my dad, she hadn't seen her husband in a month and a half. A few patients had tested positive, she said, and Pappaw had a cough. Sure, he'd had a cough for months, sure, they'd moved the positive patients to another ward immediately, but still, he would be tested.

When she called again Wednesday night, I was on the phone with a friend. *I have to go*, I told her.

*We have to go*, my mom declared as we gathered at the kitchen table, the table where we'd feasted on pizza slabbed in pesto hours earlier. My stomach still bulged from the weight of the carbs.

But—was it safe for Granny to have us stay with her?

But—would we make it in time?

But—would we even be able to see him?

We would decide the next day, we decided. That is...if he made it to the next day.

And so, I listened to hymns as I ran in the morning, and I debated whether to tell the world—*Hey, can y'all pray for my family? My grandfather's dying of COVID*—or to press this pain into a stone I could cradle within my body, like a secret or a child. But I only keep secrets when I want to be found out, and babies, too, find a way of showing themselves, of entering into the world. Of crying.

I wondered if my friends would see on Spotify that I was listening to hymns and somehow know. If it weren't for COVID, they would know. We would all be together on campus, and I wouldn't have to send out an announcement asking for comfort, they would just fucking know.

When I returned from my run, I continued my crying in the shower. I shook as the hot water mingled with my sweat, with my tears. This was all that came: the weeping before the pain, the mourning before the death. What did this say of me? That I did not cry for the death itself, only its looming shadow.

\*\*\*

The town in Kentucky where my dad had grown up was so small that the nursing home was a town over. We drove straight to the nursing home, only pausing to dash into a convenience store to use the bathroom and purchase those iced Starbucks drinks in bulk.

That convenience store was my first entrance into the public world in a month. The “outside my window but within another's window” world. The only faces I'd seen besides our own were the neighbors we passed while walking the dog at the lake, the workers at our favorite coffee shop who handed us our lattes through the car window, and that one family friend we'd had over for pasta the week before, a thank-you for her helping my dad with work.



Never before had my heartbeat risen simply from seeing a man's nose jutting out over a facemask, from touching a doorknob and being unable to apply hand sanitizer immediately. When we returned to the car, I scrubbed each coffee glass and coke bottle with a disinfectant wipe until the wipe dried up.

\*\*\*

My granny and uncle were already at the nursing home when we arrived. They'd driven their cars onto the grass so that they could park right next to my grandfather's window. After greeting us behind his mask, his window cracked, my uncle drove off to free up a spot for us.

We did not know whether to hug my grandmother or not. It seemed silly not to when we were staying in her seven-room home, but shouldn't we refrain? What was safe, what was moral?

Instead, we spoke to her through our open car windows. And we watched the room behind the window, and I wondered how, here, outside, there were still windows to divide us.

\*\*\*

My sister and I had brought books, which we read in the back seat. The dog sat between us, sleeping. My mom chatted with my grandmother, their words snapping over each other's. My dad fidgeted his fingers against the edges of his book and, every thirty minutes or so, he leapt from the car to walk around the building or wander into the woods nearby. He returned to my grandparents' house every few hours to run or work or just get away.

On the other side of the window, my grandfather's chest rose and fell.

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At least twice a day a nurse would call and warn my grandmother that it was near the end. She would weep. They'd been married since she was nineteen, she couldn't even be with him, she just wanted to be with him. My sister and I would glance at one another, our lips tight.

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He lasted longer than anyone expected, all the way until Sunday evening. The stubbornness—that's what I wanted to remember. I closed my eyes against that body on the other side of the window—no, I wouldn't allow that image to imprint itself upon the backs of my eyelids. No, I wouldn't see it.

Instead, I would see the way he lumbered from his chair in the kitchen to the living room to growl and woof at my dog, who would wag her tail and run circles around his feet. I would see him sitting with my mom at the kitchen table for hours playing rummy. I wanted to hear his laugh when she would tease him for trying to cheat.

I wanted to remember his wittiness, his twisting of words that passed through my dad to me. To remember how his eyes were my dad's, the same blue the sky held on the day he died.

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The night before he died a nurse called my grandmother's phone and promised to sit with him through the night. (We did not know this would be his last night.) She asked what kind of music he listened to. When my grandmother suggested Alan Jackson's hymns, the nurse said that she would play them from her phone. She, too, was a Christian. She would pray for him tonight.

In the morning, we returned, and the nurse called again. She spoke to us through the masks, her scrubs, the window, the phone. She had sung to him all night. He couldn't speak, but he smiled. He smiled, he smiled.

*"What A Friend We Have in Jesus" was his favorite, wasn't it?* she asked.

My grandmother cried.

*What a friend we have in Jesus  
All our sins and griefs to bear  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer*

My grandmother asked me to sing at his funeral. She asked me to sing "What A Friend We Have in Jesus."

What I thought:

How does one sing for death?  
What words can lace together  
this empty space in the air?  
What sound, what noise, what song?

Music speaks of life,  
and the dead do not listen,  
and my tongue is too dry for noisemaking today.

What I said:

yes.

*Oh, what peace we often forfeit  
Oh, what needless pain we bear  
All because we do not carry*

*Everything to God in prayer*

The funeral happened on the Tuesday, just over a week after he was tested. By now, the number of positive cases in the nursing home was close to thirty. In total, it would be somewhere in the eighties.

*Have we trials and temptations?*

*Is there trouble anywhere?*

*We should never be discouraged*

*Take it to the Lord in prayer*

There was only us: my family, my grandmother, my aunt and uncle, my cousin and her fiancé, the pastor. It took place on a hillside I knew, the cemetery of the church whose recreation center hosted our family reunions. When I was younger, this cemetery was where the kids went when we grew bored of the indoors and the adults. We would stroll up the hill to the gravestones and those that lived in Kentucky (everyone but my sister and me) would point out the family members whose names were embedded in stone. They also knew the rectangles of grass reserved for some of the aunts and grandfathers who were just then licking pie crumbs off of forks down below.

Why is that spot so windy? Nowhere else have I seen grass bow so gracefully beneath moving air. Depending on the wind's intent, it sometimes smells of the farm nearby, of cows and manure. Other times, like that Tuesday morning, it smells of air itself: of breath, of movement, of change—and the grass that bowed beneath it.

It was the best funeral I've ever been too. And I sang. I sang badly, but I sang because music speaks of life, and I realized that it was not death that I was singing for.

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April showers bring May flowers, they say. April, the renewal of spring, the month so deeply tied to growing things it is in the name itself: April, open. Unlike March, that command—open!—does not speak to humans; it speaks to the buds of bushes and trees, it speaks to the hummingbirds, the honeybees, that feast on flowers’ nectar. It speaks to the birds that celebrate with morning song. In Tennessee, the end of April brings summer with all its crackling humidity and choking heat, which will only grow more stifling until September comes with cool breezes of relief.

It’s strange to consider how the months associated with seasons change depending on where your feet stand. In Tennessee the seasons fall like this:

Spring:	half of March	April	a week of May		
Summer:	most of May	June	July	August	September
Fall:	October	November			
Winter:	December	January	February	half of March	

Why have I always considered my birth an event of the spring? Laying it out so clearly I see how March fourth has hardly escaped February’s chill.

It’s probably because spring used to be my favorite season. I loved the flowers in the trees, the guessing game of what color would spurt from each branch: this one a baby-doll-pink, that one a lavender. I loved how each color transitioned into the color that most spoke of life: green.

I guess I wanted my birth to be a part of that season. A harbinger. To be nothing, then a color, and then green (life).

Now my favorite season is fall. At the end of April, I longed for fall. We could skip over summer—my least favorite season, after all—and I would not lament the lost time as I normally

would. In the fall, I would return to campus grass, to laughs exchanged among friends, to something resembling a purpose. In the fall, things would be open. In the fall, things would be good.

I suppose the guessing game applies to October trees as well, although the colors are more predictable: the burnt orange of fire, the crimson red of blood, the mournful tones of gold. They each, in turn, become nothing.

I am glad that my birthday does not fall among those days of death and dying. Although...there is such beauty in orange, in red, in gold.

There is much to hope for in orange, in red, in gold.

*From the Other Side of the Window:*

*Glass*

The world did not end with empty-shelved grocery stores, nor with dust-coated classrooms. The airplanes did not remain weightless. The restaurants once again smelled of garlic, of fries, of rolls. Smiles learned to shine from eyes, rather than lips, and the dark circles beneath our eyes retreated in defeat. My unlocked door swings and creaks often during the day.

Windows are more than panes of glass we invented to social distance from nature—they are the screens that came before computers, before phones, they are borders to cross, they are eyes, they are cold or hot or lukewarm (indicators of the world beyond), they are protection and invitation, they are a part of our home, they are behind and beyond, they are glass, which can break or mend or remain unbroken.

Some windows, even, have color. They shine when brushed by the sun. Would that be nice, to be a window of stained-glass?

Definition of stain<sup>7</sup>:

1. a discoloration produced by foreign matter having penetrated into or chemically reacted with a material; a spot not easily removed.
2. a natural spot or patch of color different from that of the basic color, as on the body of an animal.

Also:

1. to discolor with spots or streaks of foreign matter.
2. to bring reproach or dishonor upon; blemish.

Synonyms: mark, imperfection, blot, taint, streak, spoil, dirty

*Stained-glass.* Glass that has been discolored, blemished, made different. I wonder if the first human to see the beauty that could be a stained-glass window was ridiculed: *you won't be able to see out the window, you are wasting your time and money, you will be a failure.* I wonder if they doubted themselves. I wonder if they considered quitting. I wonder if they wept on the floor of their room in the middle of the day.

To make beauty out of the everyday is difficult. Stained-glass windows, from translucent glass. Bread, from water and flour and yeast and salt. A guitar, from wood and string and bits of metal. Rivers and rain and ice and seas, from water. A tapestry, from thread. Poetry, from words. Living, from life.

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<sup>1</sup> Rueffle, Mary. *Madness, Rack, and Honey*. Wave Books, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Boeckmann, Catherine. "How Did the Months Get Their Names?" *The Old Farmers Almanac*, 30 Dec. 2020, <https://www.almanac.com/content/how-did-months-get-their-names>.

<sup>3</sup>"March." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/march>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Danko, personal communication, March 11, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, NIV. Edited by Kenneth L. Barker, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> "Open." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/open>.

<sup>7</sup> "Stain." *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/stain>.