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ANTITYPE: AN EXPLORATION OF SELF AND POETRY

A Capstone Experience Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

Faith Harris

May 2022

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2022

ABSTRACT

Antitype is a collection of poetry that examines childhood and adolescence through a lens of place and loss, while exploring both poetry and creative processes. The work presented begins by contextualizing *antitype* within the history of poetry, assessing influences of specific poets and poetic movements on my own work. Next, I share excerpts from my poetry collection to illustrate connections from its five different sections, each investigating facets of this overarching theme: my childhood affected by loss and as it contributes to my development as a poet. Section one examines how my childhood was shaped by place and family heritage. Section two delves into the loss of my sister, while also addressing, more generally, death and our reactions to it. Section three looks at the influence of my sister's death on me as poet. Section four focuses on coming of age after loss, with poems that characterize my life during college. The final section examines romantic love, with poems that highlight the fears of loving and possibly losing someone when one's life has been shaped by such a loss. This highly autobiographical collection aims to showcase the shared effects such loss, particularly loss in childhood, that people experience.

This project is dedicated to my sister, Kelsey, who paved the way for me to become a writer and to my soon-to-be husband, Seth, who showed me how to write about love without tears.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Stickle, your support throughout this project was invaluable. You helped me take a few scattered poems and turn them into not only a collection, but an exploration of myself as a poet. I mean it when I say, I could not have done this without you. Dr. Hunley, thank you for your inspiration and insight. You pushed me to grow and become a better poet. I also want to thank Dr. Hopson for showing me that I am a poet, and Dr. Rigby for teaching me how to tell my story. Additionally, thank you to the Mahurin Honors College for the opportunity to complete this project.

I also want to thank my family, who have loved me and supported me for all these years. Thank you to my parents, especially, for instilling in me a love of learning and for your unending support of my work. To my best friend, Abigail, I am forever indebted. Thank you for introducing me to the world of poetry. You made this project possible. Finally, I, of course, have to thank my fiancé, Seth. For giving me advice on my work. For talking me down numerous times when I was bogged down with stress. For loving me as I completed this project.

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INTRODUCTION

Antitype comes from the Greek *antitupos*, or ἀντίτυπ-ος, a propositional adjective that means “responding as an impression to the die”, that is comprised of two parts: ἀντί meaning opposite to and τύπος meaning stroke, stamp, or type, from the stem τυπ- to strike (“Antitype”). Today, both the literary and non-literary term is used to mean “something that is represented by a symbol” (“Antitype”). It is often used in Christian religious discussions of Jesus and his many types, for instance the Christ-like similarities of Isaac being brought to an altar by his father Abraham to be the sacrifice or the scapegoat for sin during the day of atonement.¹ For me as a poet, the word evokes the image of typewriters: that now, near archaic machine that presses down a key to stamp the paper creating a text. The antitype or raised impression on the key’s hammer leaves the type on the page. (See Appendix B for corresponding image). The word is used just once in the following collection, in the poem of the same name, but it is not indicative of the concept’s exclusivity; instead, I use this image—the impressions created by the impact of experiences on me as representative of this entire collection. I am the type, what is left behind, the impression and impressionable, and the antitypes are for the reader to discover.

¹ God mercifully stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son and instead provided him with a ram to take Isaac’s place, which is another type of Christ.

FINDING THE WORDS

Antitype is not a word you hear frequently in poetry. Occasionally in scholarship of poetry, writers use the word in discussions of poetry, in its typical sense, but the way I use it is not found in poetry. However, the concepts of my Antitype, forming of identity, the impact of loss, childhood, all these things are common themes within poetry. In fact, much of poetry is an exploration of self, the formation of self, and the impact of experiences on the self.

My experience with poetry began with reading contemporary collections like *Equinox* by Jen Handoko (2018). I read the entire collection on a flight to or from college during my freshman year. The poems felt so real and raw to me, like the experiences and emotions I was living. I had always been led to believe that poetry was stuffy and hard to understand, but I could understand Handoko's work; I could feel it in my chest. I loved the way she used second person pronouns without clearly explaining to the reader who the "you" referred to, forcing the reader to consider who the "you" might be, while also allowing them to supply their own "you". For example, in "22," Handoko writes,

I'd never tell you
that my biggest fear
is to watch adoration
drain from your eyes (114).

The way she talked about love and heartbreak was inspiring. She also wrote about Magnolia trees (a theme I would later use) in her work in her poem, "Magnolias:"

He once told me how as a child, he'd climb the
highest point of a magnolia tree and pick the most
fragrant, blossomed flower to bring back to his
mother (72).

From *Equinox*, I dabbled in Instagram poetry of Rupi Kaur (see Appendix A) and Atticus. These bite-sized morsels of poetry directly influenced my style when I first started scribbling my own verses.

I began to grow as a poet, a writer, when I began taking a creative writing class, and when I was introduced to Sharon Olds's "I go back to May 1937." One of our assignments was to write a poem mimicking the style of one we had read for class. I was drawn to Sharon Olds's dislike of the past, but her unwillingness to change it. For the first time, I truly opened up and wrote poetry about my life and my loss. I let Sharon Olds be my guide for imagery and line breaks, opening me up to a whole new world of poetry. The poem that grew out of this exercise came full circle and is included in this collection.

My professors taught me, not just through classes but their own works. Both the works of Dr. Hopson and Dr. Hunley helped me to shape my own collection. Both showed me works by educated contemporary poets who were interested in family. Dr. Cheryl Hopson's *Fragile* also explores the loss of her sisters. Her poem "My Sisters' Bones," made me feel like my experience of loss was seen. She refers to herself as a palimpsest, which was a concept she taught me, and I used in this collection. These lines in particular spoke to me:

i want to forget about bones.
but my sisters'

bones compel me to them; to
battle the dirt that holds them, to beat at it
with the arrogance and fists of a younger sister (11).

They express a tiredness of dealing with death, but also inability to rid oneself of death because of the way it has affected life.

Dr. Tom Hunley's *Adjusting to the Lights* (2020) highlights familial relationships and childhood from the perspective of a father. His poem, "I never pushed my daughter" was moving to me in the way that it highlighted missed moments in his relationship with his daughter. While it is different than my experience, I was able to relate to it in that I also missed moments with my sister and knowing that my father missed moments. However, the moments missed in "I never pushed my daughter" are the moments that my father did get to experience, but the poem's contrast of pain and familial joy is similar to the feeling of loss.

I wasn't studying poetry; I was studying the art of writing poetry. I read poetry like someone curating a playlist. I moved from contemporary poetry to older, more canonical works then back to contemporary poetry but instead of finding it on Instagram, I found it in published anthologies. At times I was guided to work by my professors, but other times I just read whatever I could find at used bookstores.

I also found poetry through friends and family. My brother recommended Yeats to me and specifically the poem "The Stolen Child." It is filled with nature imagery, which I also utilized in parts of this collection. However, the whole poem is about faeries stealing a child. It, much like my poetry, is about childhood, while also being sinister. The refrain of the faeries, "For the world's more full of weeping than you/ can

understand” is relevant to my childhood (31). Even further, I often felt that loss stole my childhood, so I felt connected to the stolen child.

Other poems, like Olds’s “I Go Back to May 1937,” inspired me to write works that ended up in this collection. For instance, Keats’s “When I Have Fears” (1818) inspired my poem “I am (not).” Tony Hoagland’s “Sunday at the Mall” (2021) inspired my “Monday at Target.” Tony Hoagland’s *Art of Voice* also influenced my work immensely. Many poems in this collection began as prompts from that book. Both using prompts and writing poetry after specific poems was like an apprenticeship in poetry, allowing me to study not only with my professors, but also with the greats of the past and present.

KEYSTROKES

For me, it started at a Mexican restaurant on a Sunday in February of 2008. It was our weekly tradition to go out to eat after Sunday morning church. Mexican was a common choice. Like many Sundays, we ate out with another family who had two sons around the same ages as my older siblings. Everything was 'normal'. My brother had gotten a trick laser pointer at Walmart a few days before. The kind that shocked you when you pressed one of the buttons. We all found it amusing, but Kelsey couldn't feel the shock.

It was the first sign that her cells had mutated against her, growing at a pace too rapid, putting pressure on the nerve center at the base of her skull.

She was fourteen and I was seven. It might have been the next day when we found out. My dad took her to the chiropractor, thinking it was some kind of pinched nerve. The chiropractor warned him that something else was going on. My mom flipped through the phone book looking for an available doctor who could figure out what was happening to their daughter. She joined my sister and father at our family doctor's office, leaving my brother and me home alone.

I kept on thinking about eighteen months earlier. I had broken my arm and my siblings had cleaned the house and made cards for me while mom and I were at the doctor's. I felt like we should do the same thing for Kelsey, but I was too self-conscious to initiate it.

When they got back, we all gathered in the living room. In my memory, we're all circled around my dad, who is either standing or sitting on a barstool, so that he is taller than the rest of us. He tells us Kelsey has a brain tumor.

I didn't know what that meant. But the tone he used scared me, and I cried.

The next fourteen months are a blur.

I remember my parents being in Memphis with my sister, leaving my brother and me with our grandmother. After she had brain surgery, we went to visit them. When we were walking into the hospital, the lady from church who drove us there was trying to pick the knots out of my hair. Normally, my mom had to braid my hair every night to keep my hair from getting tangled while I slept, but for some reason I didn't ask my grandma to do it, and I couldn't braid my own hair.

That night, when we were back home from the hospital with my grandma, I threw up. It was a combination of the stress and all the candy that my mom had fed my brother and me when we were at the hospital. People had sent more candy to Kelsey than they knew what to do with.

It felt like my parents were in Memphis for months. In reality, it was only weekends at a time after the initial surgery. When they got back, Kelsey had a bottle of orange juice that she didn't want to drink, I wanted it, but I couldn't bring myself to drink it, even though my parents told me cancer wasn't contagious.

Sometimes we would go with them to St. Jude. I loved it. There were play areas everywhere. My favorite was this little crafts room that I played in while Kelsey was getting radiation treatments. It was run by a "child life specialist," who just seemed like

an adult who would pay attention to me, but she was actually trained and certified to help children going through trauma. All I wanted was for her to hang my drawings up.

It was just a game to me. St. Jude was a playground. People sent me gifts. We got to go on special trips.

My mind could not comprehend it, but my body bore the stress. I wet the bed, had digestive issues, and there were small signs, like deciding that I hated chocolate milk, even though I had always loved it.

Things got worse for Kelsey, but I barely noticed. She was sixteen, an adult to my eyes. She should have been learning to drive and dreaming about boys. Instead, she was in a wheelchair, bloated with steroids, and half of her face no longer responded to her brain's commands, forcing her to tape her eye closed and wear an eye patch so it wouldn't dry out. Eventually she didn't walk at all. She had to be helped to the bathroom. Once when my mom was busy, I went with her to make sure she didn't fall. I turned away to give her privacy, but I saw she wore a diaper.

She didn't eat on my brother's 13th birthday. My mom was having to pump her full of morphine to keep the pain away. I didn't realize the seriousness that bright blue liquid carried with it.

She was laughing the night before it happened. But when she woke up the next morning, she couldn't speak.

That's when my parents told me. They had been waiting for her to get a hospital bed. They didn't want to tell me too soon. Didn't want to make me bear the burden. But it all happened on the same day. I woke up with no doubts that my sister would be healed, and within hours I saw her dead.

I've been processing it ever since.

This collection was born out of those experiences.

Kelsey loved writing, and it was always one of her goals to get published. Before she died, she spent hours typing up stories on her white plastic MacBook. My dad thinks she was doing it for me. Soon after she died, I decided to take up the mantle of writing to honor her memory. Thirteen years later, I am a writer and a poet. Writing has become central to my identity, but I am a writer because my sister died. This collection is not just about me and my antitypes. It is also about me coming terms with the fact that I am a type of loss.

SECTION ONE:

INNOCENCE

The first section of this collection is centered on two main themes: childhood and place. These poems are meant to give the reader a glimpse into my background and my experiences. This section does not yet delve into the heavier subject of loss that consumes much of this collection, but instead shows what is at stake in loss: innocence, family, naivety. While the poems in this section are about childhood, they are written through the lens of adulthood, placing value on things that the child would not. They do, however, reflect with the nostalgia born out of loss.

Maternal Lines

This section begins with “Maternal Lines,” a poem about the history of sewing in my mother’s family lineage and culture. It was inspired by “Digging” (1966) by Seamus Heaney. In Heaney’s poem, he reflects on his paternal history of farming, and his deviation as a writer. I felt connection to the gendered heritage in his work, which I saw reflected in my own family. In my poem, I kept similar lines such as when I write, “The woman knows her Brother / As her mother knew her Singer.” Additionally, I attempted to include similar auditory imagery in my first stanza. I chose this as the first poem because not only does it tell the reader about my family, but its ending lines become almost a preface to the collection when I say, “But my skill lies with/ Pens, not pins.” I am telling the reader this is my gift; these are my tools. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Maternal Lines

After Seamus Heaney’s “Digging”

In the sunroom, the chugging rumble
Of the needle in fabric at high speeds, sounds
My mother sewing, quiet and humble.

The pieces cut into neat shapes
by her sharpest rotary blade. Stacked
And sorted, they await selection
As she studies patterns
And marks seam allowances.

The machine stops and beeps a warning.
She raises the foot and removes the fabric
Before steady hands complete the ritual
Of threading the eye.

The woman knows her Brother.
As her mother knew her Singer.

My maternal line hand-sewn
Holding families together.
Binding broken people and worn-through
Garments into starbursts of comfort.
Each night I cuddle beneath their creation:
My ancestry imbued in an unassuming coverlet.

Perhaps I too, can give a gift
Like my mother,
And her mother before her.
But my skill lies with
Pens, not pins

Roads

Next is “Roads,” a poem I actually composed while on the road to my fiancé’s parent’s house for the weekend. It deals with a theme that as a frequent traveler and mover has been in my mind for a while: the lower-case *j* kind of journey. This is not the epic travels of Odysseus, but rather the everyday travels home for the holidays or to grandma’s house for the weekend. This poem also includes hints of many of the collection’s themes, which on their own may not be apparent, but may become more meaningful when read in context with the other poems in the collection. For instance, I reference my sister’s death when I say, “When the vacancy afforded my promotion,” as well as when I mention the “white laptop”. Other themes from the collection, such as writing and growing up, are more apparent.

Roads

I was born in a state
Whose motto is
The crossroads of America
Which really means
You just drive through us

So maybe I was destined for the road.
Not the romantic road of metaphor
Possibility, discovery
No.

The literal road
The lower-case *j* kind of journey
Pot holes and cracked pavement
All the other drivers going
Too fast or too slow

I wish I had a log of the time
I spent in the back bench of that light blue Entourage
And then in the captain’s chairs in the middle

When the vacancy afforded my promotion
And eventually, the only back seat passenger
In the silver Jeep Cherokee,
Still occasionally referred to as “the van”
Without thought.

As a child in the back bench
I would dream that
I was in some middle-grade novel
Until I upgraded to writing my own
On a clunky white plastic laptop

And now I am once again in a light blue Hyundai
But this time it is a sedan and I
Am in the passenger’s seat

Maybe I do see the road as romantic
But not for where it might take me.
Not for the destination
And not quite for the journey either

But for the state of limbo that exists
In the diagonal of Ohio
And the cornfields of Indiana
The rolling Kentucky hills
And the valley towns of New York

Where time is replaced by distance
And distance is filled with stillness.

Where are you from

I continue this theme of travel in “Where are you from,” which more deeply explores my relationship with home. Again, taking a theme that we too often idolize and mythologize and demystifying it by making home a reachable, changeable place where one develops, loves, and grieves. It is not exclusive to long-term residences but expands to include any place where life happens and where one is comfortable or “at home.” (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Where are you from

How do you say
Home is the sandbox
Surrounded by tulip poplars
And gold finches on thistle feeders

Home is the blue and white
Striped walls and the shared queen-sized bed

Home is the kitchen with the saloon doors
And the cosmic brownies in the bottom drawer

How do you say
Home is the basement
With the big tv and the typewriter with glass keys

Home is the pine tree line
Whose border we would cross
When the tornado sirens went off

Home is that swamp
Of a lake and the brick wall
That no longer exists

How do you say
Home is the bunkbeds
With the broken slats
And the Barbie dolls with nail polish painted bras

Home is the daybed by the window

And the seashell shaped soaps

Home is the house
On the corner so close to the Nabisco factory
That you smell cookies in the front yard

How do you say
Home is the tree swing
In the backyard claimed by fire ants

Home is the magnolia tree
In front of the house in which
I never lived

Home is the coffee shop on Market St
With the cookies better than your mother makes

How do you say
Home is the yellow house
With radiator heat
And no AC

Home is the snow
Covered trees and mountains in the distance

Home is the green and pink walls
And the fire escape fridge

How do you say
Home is the patio garden
Waiting for the roses to bloom

Home is the cherry blossoms
And dog food breezes

Home is the slanting floors
And closed up fireplaces

How do you say
Home is every place
That has held me
But Home is somewhere
I've never been?

A Failed Attempt at Removing the South from my Vocabulary

I wrote “A Failed Attempt at Removing the South from my Vocabulary” for a few reasons: first and foremost is that I am commonly made fun of for calling soft drinks *coke* as well as having a Southern accent when I was younger. Unlike other features of my dialect, such as pronouncing “crayon” like “crown,” my insistence on calling soft drinks *coke* is a feature I share with very few people. It is a feature found in a select few southern cities, one of which is Louisville, Kentucky, where my parents are from. However, as poets often do, or I like to think they often do, I discovered more in this somewhat silly poem than an emancipation from my dialect roots, and that is my complex relationship with the South, which I called home for the majority of my childhood.

A Failed Attempt at Removing the South from my Vocabulary

I forced myself to
Get rid of
The lilting *Is*
and
I trained myself
to say
You guys
And never
Y'all
My vocabulary is
Without a trace of
Ain't
But I call every soda *coke*

Southern Perils

“Southern Perils” continues this theme of my complex relationship with the South but conjures up a more directly childlike experience as opposed to the earlier poems which tend to editorialize my childhood more than present it. It also brings in the theme of nature, both as a haven and a place of danger. It begins a mini section of poems, all about the South and my childhood in it. While this mini section, ranging from “Southern Perils” to “Euphoria,” is perhaps the most childlike part of the collection, these events actually take place, chronologically, after the death of my sister. (See Appendix C for previous draft.)

Southern Perils

We always walked barefoot
In the grass
Despite knowing
That by the swing set grew
Clumps of stickers
Too vicious and thin to remove
So each step after
Stings a reminder

We always walked barefoot
In the grass
Despite knowing
That the yard belonged not to us
But to the kingdom of fire ants
Too determined to be eradicated
And who coordinated their attacks
With secret messages and left
Us itching for days

We always walked barefoot
In the grass
Despite owning shoes
Because the seconds were too precious
To spend shoving feet into socks and shoes

We always walked barefoot
In the grass
Because otherwise
We would miss
The blades tickling our soles
And the mud between our toes
And the grounding that the earth provides

Hide and Seek

Similarly, “Hide and Seek” is my attempt to get in the mind of my childhood self, while also showing the refuge I sought within nature in my childhood: hiding in trees, playing in creeks, and lying in the grass looking at the stars.

Hide and Seek

One, two,
I know nowhere else to hide
Three, four,
No other tree will take me into its arms
Five, six,
I climb into the branches of the magnolia
Seven, eight,
Not so high that I cannot run to safety
Nine, ten.
He knows where to find me,
There is no other place I love so much.
He runs to its base, and I scamper down,
Hoping to avoid the dreaded task
Of being
“It”

Euphoria

“Euphoria” is a vignette of my time in Mississippi from age eleven to fourteen. I tried to capture the complex relationship of and tensions between freedom and boundaries that comes along with childhood.

Euphoria

I was never allowed to drive the four-wheeler
Or the Polaris

In that plot of land
We called *the back pasture*

It did not belong to any of us
And yet it was ours

With the cows
And the donkey

We rode
Probably too fast

Through the mud
And the woods

The wind whipping through our hair
Muddy water coating our ill-fitting jeans

we could not define *euphoria*
but we knew it well

as we rode
in that fenced in field

Like a Girl

“Like a Girl” deals with the physical constraints of being in a female body but, more importantly, it brings to light the social constraints that women deal with beginning in childhood. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Like a Girl

My father calls me *baby girl*
The term of highest endearment,
For me alone.
Both my grandfathers called me *girl*
One slow and calm,
The other gruff and hasty.

Once, my toddler body
Clad in Pooh Bear overalls
Approached my father and declared,
I wanted to be a boy, so I could pee outside
Like my older brother.
My father told me he loved that I’m a girl
But I grew up hearing
You run like a girl
Throw like a girl,
Tones indicating
This was not a thing
To be desired,
From men who didn’t know
What they were saying
Just that their fathers
Had said it first.

I watched little boys
And men alike
Praise the little girls
Who scorned pink,
And Barbie,
In favor of basketball shorts
And ultimate frisbee.

I never wanted to be a boy,
I just wanted the freedom
To play outside without being hampered

By a full bladder

Fairy Dust

“Fairy Dust” closes out this section with me, as a narrator, walking through a place that evokes childhood, loss, and thus loss of childhood, while also returning to themes of home. In it, I explore a series of memories from my grandmother’s house highlighting the innocence of childhood but through the eyes of adulthood and loss. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Fairy Dust

I walk through my grandmother’s house,
Devoid of furniture,
Light fixtures replaced,
The walls painted green
And scribbled all over by cousins –
Who barely even know me,
Or that we shared a grandmother –
I see the ghosts that aren’t there:

The late-night movies with ice cream
In colorful Tupperware cups.

The struggle of paying Webkinz
Without high-speed internet
On a teal green iMac,
Almost as big as me.

The purse that always contained candy,
A lost pair of readers,
And Big Red gum.

The time that my foolishness
Led to gum in my messy locks –
Not the first time –
And without reprimand
Or scissors it was removed
By the strength of acrylic nails
And goo-gone.

The hours spent with
Baby dolls, that we had been told

Were given by none other
Than Yoda.

The thrill of riding down the sidewalk
In the wooden car built by
A man who was not my blood
But was my grandfather all the same.

The affirmations shared as freely
As the glitter we knew
As fairy dust or the gift
That keeps on giving.

The magic of Grams and childhood
Haunts my esophagus
As I say goodbye to yet
Another place
That held me

SECTION TWO:

UPROOTED

The second section considers not only childhood and loss but also our reactions to it, both as people directly impacted by the loss and those more indirectly affected. In this section, I weave together poems written in a few different voices: the voice of childhood, the voice of adulthood, and the voice of introspective distance. These distinct voices allow me to capture the particulars of my loss from different angles, giving the reader, with all hope, a more complete view of my experience of loss. These poems also allow me to connect other themes in the collection such as my faith as well as the relationship of sisterhood, biological and metaphorical.

Magnolia

“Magnolia” acts as a transitional poem between the first section on childhood and place and the second section on childhood and loss. Magnolia trees are emblematic of the South and are mentioned twice in the first section, adding to the themes of home and place through their geographic niche. However, it is also the evergreen nature of Magnolias that allows me to invoke both the loss and healing in the section to come. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Magnolia

They praise you for your flowers,
But they do not know.
They think your worth is in your beauty,
But they do not know.

While you are a thing of beauty,
And your scent brings a smile
As it wafts through the air,
It was not your flowers that held me,
When I sought comfort.

They think you are delicate,
But they do not know
That while you beckon in the summer
With your pure white flowers,
You also fought through the winter.

They do not realize
that your blossoms are earned.

And they do not know
what we are meant to withstand,

But we know
we know the cold of winter
we know the struggle to hold on

Yes, we blossom

But we are evergreen

Looking Back to You

“Looking Back to You” is a poem inspired by Sharon Olds’s “I Go Back to May 1937.” Like Olds’s poem, it looks at the past and acknowledges its pain but refuses to change it because the speaker understands its importance to the formation of self. I wrote this poem before I considered myself a poet. In many ways, this poem was what made me a poet, in telling the story of my loss and through an apprenticeship of my craft made possible by letting Sharon Olds’s work light the way. I mirrored her line breaks and let her poem shape the arrangement of the story to create a poem. Upon seeing “Looking Back to You” complete, I found a tool in poetry, not only as a way to share my story with others but also to understand it myself. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Looking Back to You

After Sharon Olds’s “I Go Back To May 1937”

I remember you reading as I was falling asleep
The blue and white striped walls,
Our queen-sized bed.
Sometimes I would ask you to tell
Me a story in the dark in June,
So full of life and hope.
I wanted your dark, curly hair,
I wanted to be grown up like I thought
You were,
But we didn’t know.
We didn’t know when you
Went to England and lost
My favorite CD, that
The CD would not be the
Only thing lost.
You never lost
Your hair to chemo,
But you lost control
Of your eye,
Of your leg,

Of your life.
We didn't know when we
Moved houses and got our own rooms,
That you would die in that house.
We didn't know that you
Would never grow up and I
Would grow up too fast
And I would never tell those girls,
Lying in their bed,
That sixteen years is all you would get, and that
At eight years old she would watch your dead body
Be taken out of her house,
But what I could tell her,
The girl I used to be,
After all of it,
You will be okay
We will be okay
I am okay.
And maybe that is worst of all,
You are dead
And I am fine

I not the Bictory

“I not the Bictory” is a poem in which my sister speaks to me and could only arise after I found both my voice and my medium as a poet. It is based around the confusion I had as a child over having a name that is also an abstract noun: Faith. The confusion began after I heard the hymn *Faith is the Victory* being sung at my church. This abstract name is also a vehicle by which I show details of my childhood, as well as to highlight the sisterhood I lost.

I not the Bictory

Faith,
Once on a Sunday afternoon,
I explained to you—
Sitting on our queen-sized bed,
Your legs not even long enough
To reach the box spring—
The difference between your name
And the word in the song
We sang at church

You were confused and when the chorus
Came around again
You looked at our parents
And declared
“I not the Bictory”
Because you were too young
To understand copulas
And the fact that your name
Had a meaning beyond the label
To which you answered.

When we got home
And exchanged our church clothes for play
Clothes —yours hand-me-downs
And mine from the clearance rack—
I told you there are two
Types of faith:
One is a type of belief we talk
About in church, that we have

In God.
The other is your name.
And for the moment,
That satisfied your growing mind.

But I told you that, not because
It was accurate, but because
How can a child that can't even read
Comprehend faith.
Our mother told you that after
Our brother was born,
She was sick and a doctor
Told her she would be dead
before we graduated high school,
and she would not have another child,
but she had faith and then she had you.
It makes it sound like a miracle,
But our mother doesn't even believe
Miracles happen in our time.

As you grew older, I watched you,
As you trained
Yourself to differentiate between
The tiniest inflections
So you could tell which faith
Was meant when the word
Was spoken.

And I left before
I could deliver the second lesson.
I suppose you have learned
It by now.
But, there are not
Two types of the word
Faith,
Your name is the same word
As the subject of hymns and Hebrews 11,
The difference is that you
Are a person
And the other is an abstract noun.

Piaget would have explained this better,
To the short legged,
Copula avoidant girl,
But I was only a child myself.
So, listen now, Faith,

You are not an abstract noun,
You are a person
Not a personification.

Escape

Continuing with the themes of youth, “Escape” focuses on a regular part of childhood, play; however, I use the games I played as a child to give the reader a glimpse of the effects of stress and trauma on a child as these elements are ever-present from the moment one experiences the loss of a sibling who is a physical and emotional part of oneself. This poem also allowed me to include personal details of my childhood interests: Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables, and American Girl Dolls. In including these details, I aim to give to reader a better understanding of who I was as a child, which in turn, allows them to better understand what loss took from me. (See Appendix C for previous draft.)

Escape

When I was eight years old
I pulled the card table from the garage
Slid its legs out in my bedroom
Covered the cracking blue vinyl
With a comforter no longer used

Inside its womb borrowed audiobooks
Transported me to the infamous
Castle with Harry and Ron
And to the island of a girl
Who would rather be called Cordelia

Under that table, I hid in the bomb shelter
With Molly, my American Girl Doll
Who lived during the World War

And sometimes, I would sit on its top
And pretend I was in one of those commercials
Where the kid with cancer
Would live

Monday at Target

“Monday at Target” is inspired by Hoagland’s “Sunday at the Mall” (2020), and it, like its inspiration, is an attempt to contrast normalcy and loss. It makes loss more tangible. It is not just confined to hospitals and funeral homes; it happens when you are running errands. It is something that happens to children who cannot define the word cancer but are forever changed because of it.

Monday at Target

After Tony Hoagland’s “Sunday at the Mall”

Those red and white circles
Stared at me like an eye
Shelves of picture frames
Their fake photos of happy families mocking
My young mind’s attempt at grasping eternity
The phone rang with the tone I used to know
The conversation muffled by time

Chubby hands holding a brown dog toy with
Ears like wavy hair. her hair.
Maybe we were by those bins
With their socks and toys
And kitchen towels, all
1 or 3 or 5.
The knowledge
And the lack was suffocating

I didn’t know
But I had been told in that room
With the navy blanket that it
Was coming.
One call led to another
This one for the lost
Only it wasn’t reaching

My legs ached for movement
As if my speedy arrival
Could revive her
Still chest
And open her closed eyes

Instead another detour
For photos to fill
Empty frames
And empty hearts
With real fake happy families
Then finally home, mom and dad waiting
To confirm the angels had come
To take her away

Please

Contrasting with the goals in “Monday at Target,” the next poem is “Please,” which utilizes the voice of childhood by employing simpler language, providing an emotional punch by showing death through the eyes of an eight-year-old, my eyes. While it is a shorter poem, I use formatting and white space to slow the reader down. The poem is about a child processing death and that is not a process to be rushed.

Please

I don't understand
What has happened.
You were here
Just yesterday
Laughing

But
 Now

You are so pale.
Your chest does not
Rise nor fall.

They are moving you.
They are zipping
You into a bag.
Where are they taking you?

Please
Come back

Please
I don't understand

Rebellion

“Rebellion” moves outside the mind of a child and is attempting to understand what it was like for my sister in her final day. It also hints at a later theme in this collection, one of speaking and writing.

Rebellion

Before your soul left you behind
Your language eluded you
Your tongue could no longer shape vibrations into words
The tool that you had dedicated yourself to
Betrayed you

You knew it was coming
Soon
Fire must have been stoked in your stomach

You were confined to the scribbling of your unsteady hands
While your mind remained and your heart
Pumped against your sternum
Your body cried out from the rebellion within

How that morning, those hours must have crept
When all had left you
But God and breath

Memento Mori

“Memento Mori,” subsequently, focuses on the way we talk about death and the euphemisms we have devised to try to soften death’s blow. However, the title, “Memento Mori,” Latin for “remember you must die,” warns the reader that no matter what you call it, Death finds its way to all of us.

Memento Mori

After it first happened,
I said
“She passed away”
My father refused to say he lost his daughter
When he knew where she is
My grandmother still fears saying cancer
In front of me, as if,
I didn’t know
She’s dead

The Bible calls it “falling asleep”
Because we know one day, she’ll wake up
But it is not always clear to those
Who aren’t disciples that
She’s dead

Recently, I have begun to alarm people
Because I no longer sugar-coat
Or dance around the fact:
She’s dead

I’ve had to apologize to strangers
For not shielding them from the traumas
I had to endure when I was eight
But there is no hiding it
No softening it
She’s dead

I'm Sorry

“I'm Sorry” follows “Momento Mori” by exploring the reaction I always receive upon telling someone my sister died, and what it feels like to hear this phrase so many times.

I'm Sorry

To say I'm sorry in Spanish
You say “I feel it”
You can't say *lo siento* without
At least pretending to empathize
But I've learned in English
I'm sorry means
I don't know what else to say
That *I'm sorry* means
You just brought down the mood
I'm sorry means
I'll forget about this in just a few minutes
I'm sorry
I don't understand what you went through
I'm sorry
I'm glad that never happened to me
I'm sorry
Please just stop talking
I'm sorry
I don't want to hear about it
I'm sorry
I really don't care that much
I'm sorry
Let's just move on

SECTION THREE:

WRITING

Section three continues to talk about loss but switches from the lens of childhood to the lens of writing. In this section, I explore the idea of legacy, and with the exploration comes the question of identity and self. If I admit that I was shaped by loss, then must I also admit I would not be the same had I not experienced that loss? I ask this question, particularly in “Palimpsest,” about my love of writing. This section is a battle between carrying on the legacy of my sister and being my own person.

Hand to the Plow

“Hand to The Plow” acts as the transitional poem from writing about death to writing about the writing process. In it, I take a step back to talk about writing loss to explain the process and the pain of my sister’s loss, allowing the poem to summarize section two, and open the discussion of writing that takes place in section three. The title and the ending lines come from Luke 9:62 (ESV), “Jesus said to him, ‘no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’” In context, the verse is saying that in order to serve God you cannot get distract by earthly things, just like if you look backwards when you plow, you will plow poorly. I use the phrase in order to show my commitment to writing about my sister’s death, despite the pain, which is why the following poems continue to deal with her loss. (See Appendix C for previous draft).

Hand to the Plow

I have spent my life
Writing about death.
I have written tears,
Read with tears.
I believed that penning with sorrow
Was my power.
The tragedy was my gift

Maybe I was trying to make sense of it all
If I could find beauty in pain maybe,
I could see the reason in chance
But I have grown tired of crying
I want to write without inking my pen
In blood

I fear however,
That without sympathy
I have no ability.
That sentimentality
Would lead to my demise

But I have stitched words with memory
Soaked in bile
And my hands are raw from the acid
If I continue without salve
They will rot away to bone

If I walk in the shadow
My eyes will burn in the light,
But I cannot put my hand to the plow
and look back¹

¹ Luke 9:52

MacBook

Next is “MacBook,” which is about my sister’s laptop, which was literally passed down to me after she died. Despite the sorrow attached with this inheritance, there is a joy in telling how her love of writing was passed down to me as well.

MacBook

Oh, the worlds
that a 13-inch
White plastic
MacBook
Can hold.

A “Team Edward” sticker
Plastered next to the trackpad.
Passed down
from sister to sister,
From dead to living.

Its power unhampered
By broken keys.
Its memory filled
With folders of drafts
Never to be completed.

It is your destiny.

Just write

Myths

“Myths” dives into the way that we talk about people who have died; glossing over their rough patches and telling the same stories over and over. It also deals with the deterioration of memory over time and how that can become almost a second loss.

Myths

Death makes myths of us all
And I am more acquainted
With your myth
Than I ever was
With your life

I was not there for
The stories of you
That have now become
Memories.

And the memories of you
Have now become
just
Stories.

I am sorry that
I do not know you.

I am sorry that
I lost you

Not just to death,
But to time
And to the inaccuracies
Of childhood.

I am sorry that
We have taken away your
humanity
And replaced it with
Idolization.

And I am sorry that
Your life has been replaced

By your stories.

But I will tell on
And continue the myth
Because I am afraid
Of what will be lost
If I do not

Palimpsest

The final poem in this section is “Palimpsest,” in which I contemplate another life in which my sister lived and wonder whether I would still be a poet. This poem brings up themes of identity and how it is formed: are our traits inherent or do we choose them?

(See Appendix C for previous draft.)

Palimpsest

You taught me the words
Showed me their power

Would I have known them,
If it wasn't for your stories in the dark,
Or your poems praised by our parents?

Would I have grown to love them,
Need them
As I do,
If it wasn't for the legacy
You left me
In the form of a white MacBook?

Could I have found them through
Some other means?
In the impassioned lecture
Of an ignored English teacher?
Between the stained pages
Of a borrowed book?

Could we have shared them?
Could we have emailed
Pieces back and forth
Adding comments to the margins?

Or would we have grown jealous of each other's
Abilities or successes?

Maybe they were in me all along
Mine as much as yours

Whatever the case

I have found them,
From you,
Or from myself,
And I have
Used them

SECTION FOUR:

SEARCHING

The next section focuses on coming of age and going to college. It continues to weave in themes of writing and loss, as well as bring up place, and the struggles of attending college during a pandemic. This section is written utilizing the voice of adulthood more than the previous sections. While the previous section looked at identity in the context of legacy and loss, this section looks at finding self, outside of just the context of loss, but more so in the context of life.

ACT

The first poem in this section is “ACT.” In it, I discuss how my sister was dying of cancer, while she was dreaming of college, and then reflect on my own experience choosing a university and major. The poem continues to play on the theme of identity from the previous section and whether we make our own path or follow in the footsteps of those close to us. (See Appendix C for previous draft).

ACT

After you took the test,
 Where you scored 29
 Still the highest in the family
Days later you were told,
That the very brain that worked
Through all those questions
Had mutant cells that would
Lead to your death,
But the universities did not receive
Those test results,
And they wanted your 29 brain
In their classrooms
And sent you postcards, brochures
 See this was before it was all done through emails
And you would flip through the packets,
Looking for schools that would allow
You to study writing without
Taking math and science,
 The subjects of your loathing.
You would speak of it
As you were struggling
Through physics and through chemo

When my time came,
I took the test
Older than you but only a 24 then 28,
And some postcards came
 Though not as many,
And I was not looking
For writing or avoiding
Math and science,

Well maybe avoiding math
And I applied to the alma mater
Of our parents,
 a place
 I never recall you mentioning.
And somehow,
I did avoid math
And somehow,
I am studying writing

I was not planning on following in the
Footsteps of your dreams
But before I realized it
The path was underneath my feet

 I did have to take science though

Ode to the Cherry Hall Women's Bathroom

Next is “Ode to The Cherry Hall Bathroom,” one of the more light-hearted poems of the collections, which is an attempt to glorify a very old public restroom in the building where I had most of my classes. Through this poem, I am able to indirectly discuss the college experience: rushing to classes, feeling overwhelmed with information, and being surrounded by others in the same situation. (See Appendix B for corresponding images and Appendix C for previous drafts.)

Ode to the Cherry Hall Women's Bathroom

Marble walls encase us
Like a sacred mausoleum
The cold stone hewn for our safety
Grey veins reaching forward and back
Reminding us of the history in the
Patina of the brass handles
And the chipped paint

The doors are poetry
The gates are confession
Through which we see ourselves
Reflected
Or perhaps meet the gaze of some other
Wandering soul

We gather here for relief
After our minds have been filled
With thoughts of Dante and Allah
And the French Revolution

For one passing moment
Our minds can
Flow free
Washed clean
In those cradling walls

Almost Straight A Failure

“Almost a Straight A Failure” is a stream of consciousness poem where I discuss the odd state of limbo of my senior year as a perfectionist creative writing student in a pandemic. It intertwines the theme of college with the theme of writing, while also bringing up mental health and the uncertainty of growing up. In this poem, I also explore the infantilization of college students who are entering adulthood, but who are often dismissed by those only a few years older than them due to the world of education and the stress that comes with it being viewed as less valid than the world of careers.

Almost Straight A Failure

This I believe:
That life is a rollercoaster,
A cliché I know,
But going down always
Seems imminent,
Except
That can't be right,
Because the downhill rush
Is the part of the rollercoaster
We all wait for,
But maybe that is the key:
I have nothing else to wait for.

They say these are the best years
Of our lives,
And my chest is tight
With desire for their completion.

The best years of my life
Spent in stress and fear.
The looming threat of
Sickness.
I don't even like parties
But if I did
I would have lost a whole
Year of them.
I missed a March Madness

Because of this madness.
And these are the best
Years of my life?
When I am stuck
Inside
With no friends
And only 40k in loans
And constant stress
To my name.

All they want from me is words
Words that are beautiful
To them
Words that make sense
To them
But they don't want to hear
From me.
They don't want to hear that the
Three point nine something
Honors student is falling
Apart because she is a perfectionist with OCD.
And they would tell her that her grades are fine
Even if she gets a B
She is still gonna graduate Summa Cum Laude.

But I just want to breathe
And the air hurts my lungs in November
And I lost my inhaler
In my backpack for
A weekend
And I do nothing on the weekends
'cause I am gonna shatter
Without a break
But then I start the week behind
And the cycle just rinses to repeat.

All I want is to stop existing
Until May,
When I can hold some stupid piece of paper
With words that say
I wrote the words
-All seven million of them-
And now I can go
Out and get a job that I don't want,
But only if I am lucky.
And I'll say I'll write

On the side
But who knows if that'll
Actually happen
Because I've been told that I don't
Understand the real world,
But then what world am I living in?

My Sister's Mug

“My Sister's Mug” is a poem about growing comfortable with loss, told through the story of me staining a mug that was my sister's. It highlights that no matter what we do things cannot remain the same after loss. Life goes on, memory fades, and outsiders cannot see our wounds. (See Appendix B for corresponding images and Appendix C for previous drafts.)

My Sister's Mug

I have stained your mug
With black spray paint smudges.
Its turquoise glaze is forever tainted
by my finger prints
Wash after wash they remain

I had sanctified it
Never allowing another to drink from it
Keeping coffee from flavoring its pores with acidity
Using it first each time it was clean

But my careless impatience
My desire for a warm cup in the midst
Of a rainy-day project
Has marked it in inky eternity

I never leave it on the counter for another
To load, only to crack it against a pot or cup
I adjust its place on the shelf as I pass
So that it's safe
Centered

But I grew complacent, arrogant
Forgetting it is not mine
Not thinking of you
I slipped my blackened fingers through its
Half heart handle

Although our shared vessel is
Forever marred
I did miss the front

The five dancing leaf-birds
Were spared
From that aerosol end

So now when I press
My mouth to its lip
I am confronted with my blunder
While others see only the pottery rings
And the floating ridges
As if nothing ever happened

Rewriting

“Rewriting” is another poem that contemplates a different life where my sister lived, but this one looks specifically at dating and a bad college relationship. The poem continues to flesh out the theme of memory and identity, as well as their interaction. It closes out the section on coming of age and opens the reader up for the next section on love. (See Appendix C for previous draft.)

Rewriting

Sometimes I wonder if you could have saved me,
If you had been the first daughter
To go out with a boy.

Would you have equipped us all
To handle the hurricane of confusion
That is hormones and handholding?

Could you have seen the damage
Before it was done?
Could I have called you
That night in the dorm room,
Longing for escape, but
Lacking in conviction?
And would you have told me
I should
Do what I couldn't

And saved me

From the pain of
Whispered rebukes in
The living rooms of friends
Who chose him
Over me
Or of veiled arguments
Under the dome light
Of his Corolla?

But if I go back

And start changing the memories
To take away my pain
Who knows what else will be
Lost?

SECTION FIVE:

HEALING

The final section continues the theme growing up by looking at love. It focuses on dating in college and finding your person. It also is the most forward looking of the sections, in which I dream about possibilities after college. However, it still brings up the theme of loss to discuss the fear of loving after loss. It follows somewhat chronologically in the story of my relationship with my fiancé.

First Sight

“First Sight” walks through the places and moments of meeting someone with whom I would later fall in love. I use this poem to explore imagery and sensory information to give the reader an idea of place without a recreation of setting.

First Sight

We met in the great divide
Of freshmen and upperclassmen
In the place where you could park
But only on the weekends
In the Red Sea
Between the concrete blocks
We would call our homes

We met in the remnants of infatuation
Turned to hate
In that Edwardian house
Turned Thai restaurant
Where the food was too spicy
And the wait is long

Not to be confused with
The other Thai place
Run by the same people
In a different location
With a different name
And the food comes quick
Where we would go
For our first date
And where you would tell me
You loved me for the first time

We met where the sidewalk splits
And our paths diverged
But instead we stopped
to stay together
Just a little longer
Underneath the sky
Shattered by autumn trees

We met in the crack

Of bowling balls against pins
Amidst beer pitchers
And I had no socks
And you didn't play
Instead we stood
Watched our friends
And acquaintances throwing
Gutter balls and strikes

We met in a seven-dollar box
Of hair dye
That I could not afford
The auburn paste smeared
On my scalp
And you were in the other room
Joking with my best friend
My heart was a battering ram
At the gate of my sternum
In anticipation of a new me
And what you might think

Fall's First Cold Evening

“Fall's First Cold Evening” explores the anticipation of being asked out and starting a new relationship. I carry weather throughout the poem as a grounding technique. I also play with alliteration, particularly of *s* sounds, reminiscent of the whistling wind. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Fall's First Cold Evening

I put my yellow sweater on in celebration
As evening turns to nightfall
The air gets crisper
On those oversized steps
Where the sun shines without shade
I know what is coming
And so do you
On this first cold evening of fall

My hands shake
And it isn't the temperature
When you ask me
If I want to go somewhere quiet
We walk away from those
Dark sunshine stair steps
Down the sidewalk
And hide in the shadow
Of an unused building vestibule

The air frosts cooler
When you ask me
But I don't feel the temperature
When I say yes
Like you knew
I would
I think I practically skip in celebration
As we walk together
Together for the first time
On the first cold night of fall

Places of Our Firsts

“Places of Our Firsts” like “First Sight” looks at significant places in my relationship, but where “First Sight” tries to capture the feeling of a crush, “Places of Our Firsts” is about a serious relationship and the way that love turns ordinary things into special ones. This poem is also a chance to explore memory without trauma, love without loss, and to declare that this too is worthy of thought. In that, this poem becomes an answer to the fears expressed in “Hand to the Plow.” (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Places of Our Firsts

I told you once, I would miss it.
You looked at me
With your sky ice eyes
Unable to see
The heart of my statement
As we walked past buildings
That contained knowledge of the world, yet
Confined us in their walls.

We went to the colonnades,
That old football stadium
Turned staircase where students
Write papers and eat lunch

Where we first fell asleep,
Back to back, with the spring
Sun threatening your freckled skin.
And where after the singing stopped
You looked at me and my heart
Turned into a merry-go-round
And my soul’s hands reached
Out pulling me towards you
Like we were the right
Ends of a magnet.

See, that’s what I meant
When I said I would miss

Those steps,
Because we sat there together.

And that Thai restaurant
Because it was there that your
Arms would wrap around me,
Bringing your mouth to my ear
When you said it for the first time.

And I will miss that closet
Of a room where our lips
Became acquainted

I will miss that parking lot
Where my call brought
You into my vision
For the first time
And where we would stand
After dark searching
For anything to say
So we could stay

And those half circle benches
Where we spent afternoon,
Afternoon and evening
Till we could no longer feel our butts.

And I will miss that cemetery
Where we lay in the shade and
Read words of
And for the dead.

I will miss that donut shop
Where we would go
When self-control gave out
And we would study that display case
And savor each pick

And that coffee shop
Perhaps most of all,
Where we went while
We were still pretending,
And we talked about art
Until chairs were placed
Upside down on tables.
And the barista handed us

A treat that wouldn't keep
And we ate it on
Our way to the car under street lights.
Then later it became our ritual
Sunday afternoons and Friday mornings,
We would sit across tables
Laptops open
Minds focused on whatever
Needed to get done
Souls knowing
We were not alone

There will be new places
Places where we will form new rituals
Places where we will have seconds and thirds

But I will miss
These places
Because these are the places
Of our firsts

Love Language

“Love Language” digs into the way that people express their love and receive love. It is a poem that celebrates love that is ordinary and routine and love that is not just unbridled passion but intentional affection.

Love Language

People always ask about
Physical touch and quality time
Maybe they just want to receive gifts
But sometimes, a word of affirmation
Is an act of service

Sometimes I don't have the time
To watch Netflix on our tiny iPad screen
Because I need to wash the tofu pan from dinner

Sometimes my love is
Silence
After a sigh
Or a harsh word

My love is accepting your kiss
When what I really wanted
Was to be told that you love me
And my love is realizing that in that moment
To you they were the same
My love is not dictating to you
How I must be loved
But instead accepting your love
How you give

Because sometimes my mind
Is too exhausted for words
But my fingers are strong enough
To entangle yours
And sometimes your hands are too full
To hold me

The greatest love
Is not always exhilarating passion
Sometimes the greatest love

Is making the grocery list
And the voice that whispers
Assurances in the dark

Urban Smog, Dog Food Days

“Urban Smog, Dog Food Days” is a poem that looks forward dreaming of the city. It is capturing a longing that is so intense that the dreamer even wishes for the less than glamorous aspects of city life. It is also a longing that creates discontentment with the current setting. Unlike in “Places of our Firsts,” the ordinary places are ordinary, and while the speaker understands the imperfections of the dream, the dreamed of imperfections are preferred to the ones in reality. Additionally, this poem touches on the way that people in rural and suburban areas often try to dissuade young people from an urban life.

Urban Smog, Dog Food Days

I long for a miniscule apartment by the park
For subway commutes
For aching feet in ugly shoes
I long for late nights with writer’s block
I long for bustle
For dinner after 7 pm
For sunlight radiating heat
Off glass and concrete

I can see it
The window whose only view is
Brick walls and full dumpsters
Light streaming through the curtains
Long past the sun’s adieu
I hear the siren’s call
Awakening me in the night

But I am stuck in a world
That turns slow
Colored with only grey and beige
Where the amenities are
Walmart and KFC
Where cemeteries are the best parks
Where people complain about the urban smog
All the while, in their town, it smells

Like dog food when it rains

Antitype

“Antitype” ties together many of the collection’s themes, such as memory, place, loss, and identity. I wrote it after a vacation to Chicago with my fiancé’s family. While in Chicago, we ended up accidentally retracing the footsteps of a trip my family went on only months before my sister died. I used the poem to process some of the feelings that the second visit to Chicago brought up for me. The poem intentionally includes details that are meaningful to me but not fully transparent to the reader. While this poem ties together many of the collection’s themes, it is really a poem about healing. Even after years have passed and perhaps to outsiders it appears that we have moved on, we still carry the loss with us. (See Appendix B for corresponding images.)

Antitype

From My Cityline Anthology

I found myself
Sitting where we once sat,
Amid marigold and azure
Where the wind blows without mercy
I strolled streets where you rolled, only,
This time it was warm and I
Had lost innocence and lost you. Only this time,
I was happy

I carried you with me in the back of my mind
And in the ring wrapped around my finger
I saw you in the orange flowers
Beside the park and in the bus seats
That fold up, but
I did not think of you
With every breath, perhaps
I should feel guilty, perhaps I do

But as I consider the rush
I feel as I walk between structures, too tall,
Of glass and steel, or as I board
Trains that feel as if they could take me

Anywhere, I wonder
Does this infatuation spring
From that trip we took when
we were immortal, and you were dying.

I know the smile I cannot help as pen glides
Across paper is rooted in your memory, but now
I'm left here to ponder
How long have I been the type to your antitype?
What else has the shadow of your
Spirit, that lives in my mind, sculpted
Until I believed it was my own?

Why I am Afraid to Drive

“Why I am Afraid to Drive” looks at intrusive thoughts and the fear of losing people you love through a series of images of death. It highlights the way that trauma can change your perception of normal events. I struggled with whether to put this poem in section three, four or five, but ultimately landed on five, because I wanted to show that even when love brings healing, there is still pain and fear. While my exact fears, and the trauma behind them, are unique to me, I believe that this fear of loss is part of love. When we love fully, we must acknowledge the potential pain of loss.

Why I am Afraid to Drive

I see it when the tires screech and the breaks moan
And the car stops but only barely
The crunch, the throbbing
Of my head slammed against the window,
The sting of the seatbelt
Dug into my chest

Every time we make a left turn
I see it
The other car too fast, us too slow
And I wonder what would be worse
To leave behind or be left
I see it in the crosswalk
Wonder what could be
If the drivers chose malice
over mercy

I see a tangle of limbs, a red pool,
A snapped neck
Every time my foot
Catches on the stairs
I see it
Every time I reach for the kitchen towel
To dry my chef’s knife
The blade plunged,
My love lost
The fifth commandment broken

But where is my city of refuge

Every time the caller id
Flashes my mother's name
I wonder who it will be
My cat, my dad, my grandma
Because I saw it once

A trip to Target ended with a phone call
And home brought
The white face, the limp arms,
the flesh turned to wax

I am (not)

“I am (not)” closes out the collection by discussing my relationship with death in a poem inspired by Keats’s “When I have Fears” (1818). I was intrigued by the way that Keats spoke about death, while never naming it, as well as the idea of unfinished business in the poem. Particularly, I was grabbed by the line, “Before my pen has gleamed my teeming brain” (Keats). I wrote this poem starting with the idea of death as the end of writing, which I also explore in *Rebellion*. The poem is my battle between fear and faith, and I chose it as the final poem for that reason. This collection is saturated with death, but in most of the collection, death is distant for me, the speaker. In this poem, I face death or perhaps, I turn away. (See Appendix C for previous draft.)

I am (not)

After John Keats’s “When I have Fears”

One day my pen I must lay
I know it will call me, as it does all
I am not I am afraid

One night I will complete the fight
My body will give nothing more
I am not I am afraid

I have seen its cloud without silver lining
Watched what is left in the wake
I am not I am afraid

There must be some beauty in it
Why else do we write verse upon verse
I am not I am afraid

We call it many things
Personify it into palatability
I am not I am afraid

A woman without mercy
A man prepared for harvest

I am not I am afraid

We argue if it is an end or a beginning

I know it to be both

I am not I am afraid

The last enemy to be destroyed

Oh, hades where is your victory

I am not

 I am

 afraid

REFLECTION

When I came to WKU, I would have considered myself a writer, but I would have in no way considered myself a poet. I wrote my first real poem in my English 100 class. The class was based around the theme of gender, and I wrote my second paper on sexual assault. Researching the topic was weighing on me, so I wrote a poem about the topic to help me process my feelings and to be an epigraph for my paper. I didn't know much about poetry, but the form of poetry was enticing. I had a lot of feelings and writing about them helped me to understand them.

Growing as a poet is a complex process. I wanted to improve my poetry, but I didn't want to lose my voice. There is not one right way to write poetry, but there is both good and bad poetry. For instance, I am generally a more transparent poet. While I don't always spell everything out for my reader, I want to be accessible and understood. However, in my process of growth, I learned to allow myself to not put everything on the table and that it is okay for the reader to look for the meaning.

While writing this collection, I focused on improving my imagery. I did these especially in *Places of our Firsts*. For instance, when I started writing poetry, I would have described my heart pounding, just by saying "my heart pounded," but in this poem, I wrote, "my heart/ turned into a merry-go-round." This image is more striking and unique. It brings with it the idea of spinning and dizziness. Workshopping poems with my fellow students helped me to hone this skill. They encouraged me to find more unique imagery in my poems, and when they read their own work, I was frequently impressed by the imagery of my classmates, which highlighted what was lacking in my own work.

One of the biggest lessons I learned in the process of writing this collection was how to incorporate my faith into my poetry. Up until I started this Capstone Experience, I was afraid to bring my faith into my writing. While I was not in any way treated differently because of my religion, I often felt like I should leave my Christianity and faith outside of the classroom and my work, but in doing so, I was leaving part of myself out of my work. Dr. Stickle encouraged me to incorporate my faith in my work and inspired me with her master's thesis, which explored biblical references in poetry. When I opened myself up to write about my faith, I began to write poems with more depth. In fact, the title poem of this collection came out of me trying to bring my beliefs into my poetry. I was inspired to write it after a sermon about the concept of antitype in the Bible.

This experience also gave me the invaluable opportunity to work on a collection. In my classes, I worked on individual poems and shorter chapbooks. This experience allowed me to think about my poetry through the lens of a longer project. It challenged me to write poems that fit with the specific subject of this collection, but to also think about the interaction of themes. I was able to see my poems in conversation with each other in new ways.

Overall, this Capstone Experience allowed me to explore myself as a writer. It pushed me to write more and to write better. It gave me the opportunity to study great works of contemporary and classic poetry. Through this Capstone, I was able to read my work to an audience that wasn't just my classmates for the very first time. However, perhaps what I am most grateful for, is the opportunity this project gave me to see my growth as a poet and a writer over the past four years.

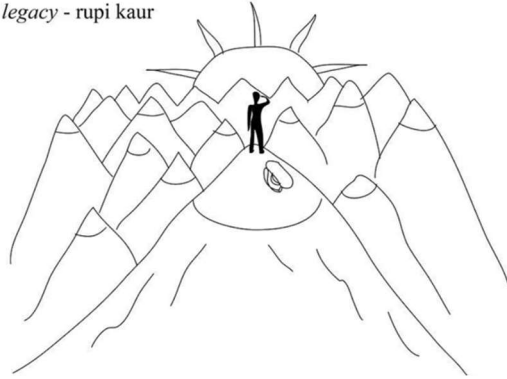
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APPENDIX A: INSTAGRAM POETRY EXAMPLE

i stand
on the sacrifices
of a million women before me
thinking
what can i do
to make this mountain taller
so the women after me
can see farther

legacy - rupi kaur



An example of a Rupi Kaur poem from Instagram.

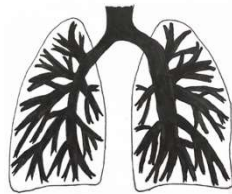
three weeks ago
we had heard the name
but we didn't know

we didn't understand
what a privilege it is
to just be together

we didn't think about
stocked shelves
and open dining rooms

and we forgot
that even to breathe
is a blessing

-Quarantine



A poem I wrote and posted on Instagram, inspired by Instagram poetry.

APPENDIX B: PHOTOS OF INSPIRATION



A picture of one of my typewriters.



The sewing machine of my maternal grandmother's mother, part of the inspiration for "Maternal Lines"



A quilt made out of old clothes made by my grandmother that I reference in “Maternal Lines”



My Siblings and me with Grams, who I speak about in “Fairy Dust”



Me with a Magnolia Blossom



Kelsey and me



The iconic (to me) blue and white striped walls and shared queen sized bed that I reference in “Where are you from” and “Looking Back to You.”



My dad and his Baby Girls, the term of endearment I reference in “Like a Girl.”



Me peeking over the stall door, which I hint at in “Ode to the Cherry Hall Women’s Bathroom”



The marble stalls I reference in “Ode to the Cherry Hall Women’s Bathroom”



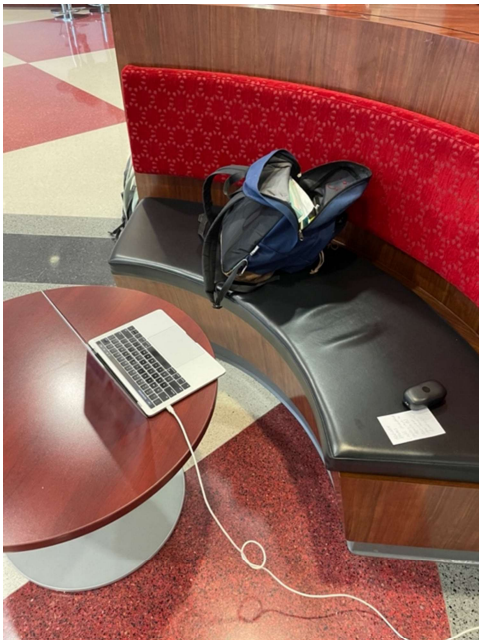
The “five dancing leaf birds” side of “My Sister’s Mug”



The “spray paint smudges” on “My Sister’s Mug”



The Colonnades which I mention in “Fall’s First Cold Evening” and “Places of our Firsts”



The circle benches I mention in “Places of our Firsts”



My fiancé and me in Chicago during the trip that inspired “Antitype”

APPENDIX C: EARLIER DRAFTS OF SELECTED POEMS

Southern Perils

We always walked
Barefoot in the grass

Taking care to avoid
The clumps of so-called
Stickers
That punctured our feet
With their stinging venom

And always looking out for
Fire ants
With their appropriate name
and their burning bites

We could have worn shoes
And avoided
These southern perils
Without a second thought

But then we would have been inside
For those couple extra seconds
Shoving feet into socks and shoes

And we would have lost
The grass tickling our soles
And the mud between our toes
And the grounding that the earth provides

Escape

When I was eight years old
I had a card table in my room.
I covered it with an old comforter,
Under it I took refuge

Under that table,
My imagination flourished.
I listened to audiobooks
About magic and friendship.

I pretended I was
Hiding in a bomb shelter,
Like the American Girl Doll
Who lived during the World War

And sometimes,
I would sit on its top,
And I would pretend
That I was in one of those
Commercials
Where the kid with cancer
Would live

Palimpsest

You taught me the words
Showed me their power

Would I have known them
If it wasn't for you
Would I have grown to love them
Need them
As I do

Could I have found them through
Some other means?

Could we have shared them?
Could we have emailed
Pieces back and forth
Adding comments to the margins?

Or would we have grown jealous of each other's
Abilities or successes?

Maybe they were in me all along
Mine as much as yours

Whatever the case
I have found them
From you
Or from myself
And I have
Used them

And one day I hope
They will be mine to give
Lighting the way for another as you illuminated me

I am (not)

One day my pen I must lay
I know it will call me, as it does all
I am not I am afraid

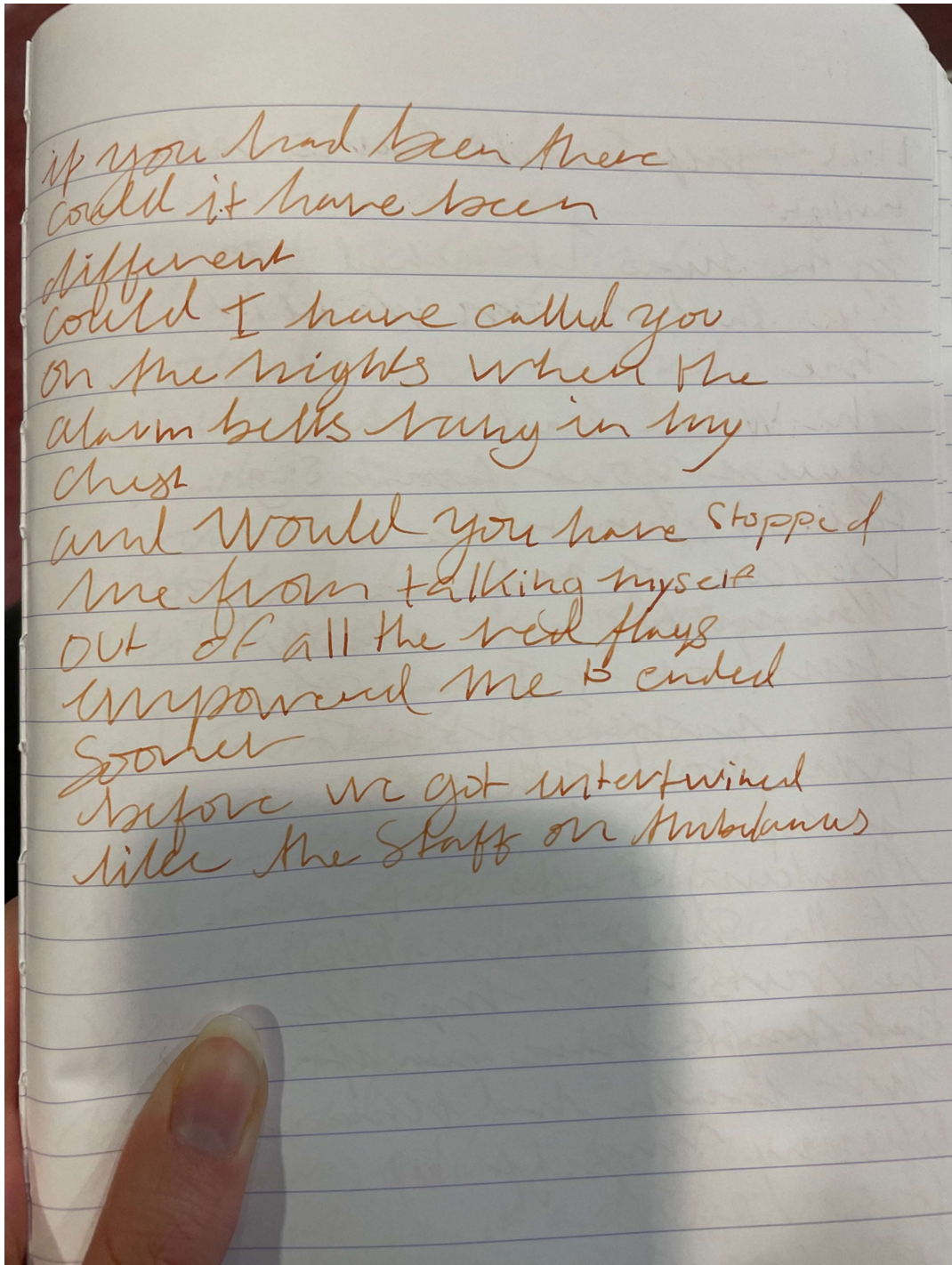
One night I will complete the fight
My body will give nothing more
I am not I am afraid

There must be some beauty in it
Why else do we write verse upon verse
I am not I am afraid

We call it many things
A woman without mercy
A man prepared for harvest
I am not I am afraid

We argue if it is an end or a beginning
I know it to be both
I am not I am afraid

Much of this collection began as notes, hastily scribbled in a journal during or between class. These are some of those notes.



“Rewriting”

474

The walls were of white marble
grey veins reaching out like
lightning from cloud to
cloud to ground.

~~The doors were painted a creamy
high gloss grey~~
and poetry and debate
were housed on it's lug,
gloss doors

over it's gates you looked
beyond at the reflection
of yourself or perhaps
caught your neighbor's
eyes

History whispered in it's draped
walls and the patterned
mass of door handles

"Ode to The Cherry Hall Women's Bathroom"

Marble walls enclose us like a sacred
Mausoleum

The cold Stone hewn for our safety
The grey Veins reaching forward
and back

Reminding us of the history
we see in the patinated brass
door handles and in the chipping
Paint

The doors are Confession Poetry
apart through which you see
yourself reflected
perhaps catch the eye of some
other wandering soul

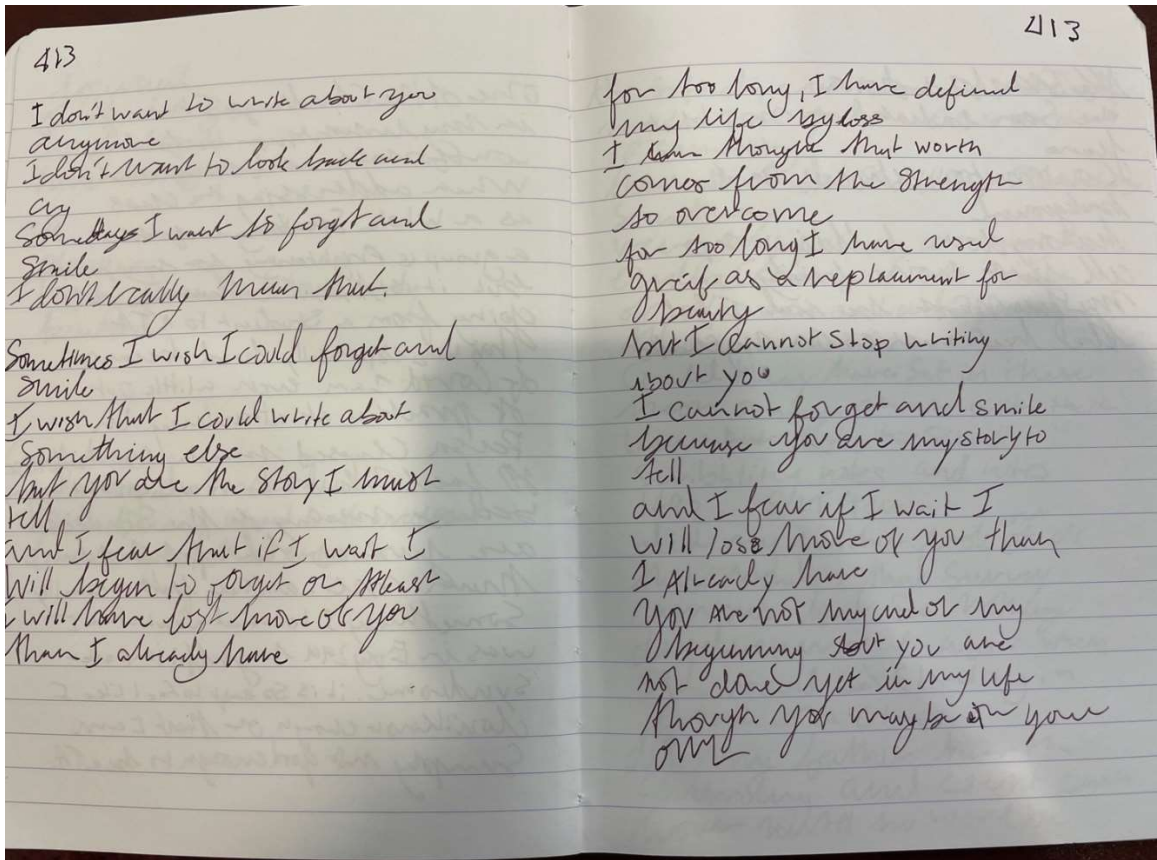
We gather here for belief
our minds full of ~~God~~
Dante or Allah or King James
for one passing moment
our thoughts can flow free
in these cubling walls

“Ode to The Cherry Hall Women’s Bathroom”

~~When I didn't plan for this~~
 After you took the test
 where you scored a 29
 the highest in the family
 to this day
 days later you were told
 that the very brain that
 worked through all those
 questions had cells that
 mutated and would
 lead to your death
 but the universities didn't
 know and they wanted
 your brain in their
 class books and sent you
 post cards and brochures
 see this was before
 it was all done through
 email
 and you would flip through
 the packets looking for
 the schools book.

would allow you to study
 writing without having
 to take math or science
 you would talk about it all
 the time as you were struggling
 through physics and chems
 I remember there was one that
 would let you I don't recall
 who
 when my time came I took
 the test when I was older
 than you and got a 24 then
 a 28 and some post cards came
 though not as many and I
 was just looking to avoid math
 and science like you
 well maybe math
 but I was not looking to
 study writing
 and I applied to our parents
 alma mater I place I never
 recall your name

“ACT”



“Hand to the Plow”

474?

~~474?~~
~~474?~~

we met in the great divide
between freshman and upperclassmen
in the remnants of infatuation turned
hate
we met around a dinner table
where our eyes met ~~met~~ met
we met in a \$7 box of hair
dye Auburn paste smeared on
my scalp
we met under the tree where
the sidewalk splits
we met in a bowling alley full of pitious
of beer and mediocre pizza and
I had no socks

474?

~~we~~ we met in the great divide
between freshman and upperclassmen
we met around a dinner table
mouth on fire eyes wet
we met in the remnants
of infatuation turned hate
we met in a seven dollar box of hair dye
Auburn paste smeared on my scalp
we met in the sun under the tree
where the sidewalk splits but we
couldn't say good bye
we met in the crack of balls against
pins amidst beer pitches
and I had no sock

"First Sight"

I never let anyone use your
Mug
I've sanctified only for tea
I don't want coffee to seep into
it's pores
and ~~mess up~~ taint my tea
with its acidity
guests have been forced
to pour their drinks into
other cups
When they didn't realize
what they had chosen
was Sakapat
was yours

I got Spraypaint fungus privet on
your blue republic of tea mug
I have kept it free from the tarting
acidity of coffee
it's sanctified for my use alone
I have confronted others when
they have ~~not~~ eyed it there
leaves and half heart shaped
handle
I have used it faithfully choosing
it just each time it was clean
I watched it closely never leaving
on the counter for someone
else to load
I have checked and adjusted it's place
on the shelf ensuring it would never
tip or tattered
but my longing for a hot cup of
tea while waiting on
my impatient desire for
a cup of green tea with Pommy...
had left it's back stained from my
grubby black fingertips

“My Sister’s Mug”

APPENDIX D: PHOTO RELEASE FORMS



Photograph Release

I, Simon J. Harris, Jr. (print full name) hereby assign full copyright and grant permission to Western Kentucky University and its campus offices/departments to use photographs and/or video recorded images taken of me on the date and at the location listed below for use in print, video, website, and/or social media projects such as brochures, advertisements, posters, newsletters, display boards, publications or on the university websites or other electronic forms of media, and to offer them for use or distribution in other university publications, electronic or otherwise, without notifying me.

I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished product that may be used in conjunction with them now or in the future, whether that use is known to me, and I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising from or related to the use of the image(s).

I hereby agree to release, defend, and hold harmless WKU and the <insert College/Dept> and its agents or employees, including any firm publishing and/or distributing the finished product in whole or in part, whether on paper or via electronic media, from and against any claims, damages, or liability to any misuse, distortion, blurring, alteration, optical illusion or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in taking, processing, reduction or production of the finished product, its publication or distribution.

I am 18 years of age or older, and I am competent to contract my own name. I have read this release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release. A photocopy of this consent form shall be considered as valid as the original.

Location(s) of Photo/Video: New Albany, Indiana

Date(s): 2002

Name (please print): Simon J. Harris, Jr.

Signature: *Simon J. Harris, Jr.*

Signature of guardian if under 18 years of age:



Photograph Release

I, Simon David Harris, (print full name) hereby assign full copyright and grant permission to Western Kentucky University and its campus offices/departments to use photographs and/or video recorded images taken of me on the date and at the location listed below for use in print, video, website, and/or social media projects such as brochures, advertisements, posters, newsletters, display boards, publications or on the university websites or other electronic forms of media, and to offer them for use or distribution in other university publications, electronic or otherwise, without notifying me.

I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished product that may be used in conjunction with them now or in the future, whether that use is known to me, and I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising from or related to the use of the image(s).

I hereby agree to release, defend, and hold harmless WKU and the <insert College/Dept> and its agents or employees, including any firm publishing and/or distributing the finished product in whole or in part, whether on paper or via electronic media, from and against any claims, damages, or liability to any misuse, distortion, blurring, alteration, optical illusion or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in taking, processing, reduction or production of the finished product, its publication or distribution.

I am 18 years of age or older, and I am competent to contract my own name. I have read this release before signing below, and I fully understand the contents, meaning and impact of this release. I understand that I am free to address any specific questions regarding this release prior to signing, and I agree that my failure to do so will be interpreted as a free and knowledgeable acceptance of the terms of this release. A photocopy of this consent form shall be considered as valid as the original.

Location(s) of Photo/Video:

New Albany, Indiana

Date(s):

Approx 2000 and 2001

Name (please print):

Simon David Harris

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Simon David Harris", is written over a horizontal line.

Signature of guardian if under 18 years of age:



Photograph Release

I, Seth Brown, (print full name) hereby assign full copyright and grant permission to Western Kentucky University and its campus offices/departments to use photographs and/or video recorded images taken of me on the date and at the location listed below for use in print, video, website, and/or social media projects such as brochures, advertisements, posters, newsletters, display boards, publications or on the university websites or other electronic forms of media, and to offer them for use or distribution in other university publications, electronic or otherwise, without notifying me.

I hereby waive any right to inspect or approve the finished product that may be used in conjunction with them now or in the future, whether that use is known to me, and I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising from or related to the use of the image(s).

I hereby agree to release, defend, and hold harmless WKU and the <insert College/Dept> and its agents or employees, including any firm publishing and/or distributing the finished product in whole or in part, whether on paper or via electronic media, from and against any claims, damages, or liability to any misuse, distortion, blurring, alteration, optical illusion or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in taking, processing, reduction or production of the finished product, its publication or distribution.

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Location(s) of Photo/Video:

Chicago

Date(s):

June 30 2021

Name (please print):

Seth Brown

Signature:



Signature of guardian if under 18 years of age: