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Midwest memoir: Cole Carolan

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MIDWEST MEMOIR: COLE CAROLAN

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Date

Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

A rap on my window brought me out of my weekend state of comfortable morning half sleepfulness. My father knelt to look into my window, his grease spotted overalls a point of dark focus against the too brilliant white flame of an early October snow. Seeing my groggy gaze connect to his, my father shouted “Get dressed and come on out to the shop. I’ve got a surprise for ya!” through the pane. He turned and left without waiting for a response, knowing I would follow as directed.

I was a few months shy of what I imagined my first major age milestone, the brilliant maturity of thirteen. My bed clung to me on the cold morning, but my curiosity at what the surprise could be pulled me along. I already had my pellet gun, and once I completed Hunter’s Safety, the waiting promise of my own shotgun. I had the obligatory Hatchet, a pocket knife, a four wheeler and snowmobile, a bow I could barely draw. It wasn’t the season to get anything sports related. What more was there for me to want? I made my way upstairs, passed my cooking mother and started pulling on my coat.

“Where are you going?” she yelled from the kitchen.

“Dad said to come out to the shop.”

“Tell him Breakfast is ready in five.”

I didn’t have high hopes of being back in time for Breakfast. My Dad’s “quick 30 minute projects” had a habit of becoming 8 hour ordeals. I was hoping this “surprise” wasn’t just another misdirect into spending my whole weekend working with grease and stubborn metal. I grabbed for the shop handle, just before my hand connected, a muffled bellow keened out from inside. I flung the door open to see a brilliant burgundy calf walk with an unsteady regality around the oil-dri and discarded tools that littered the smooth concrete floor of the shop.

Seeing my astonished look, Dad launched into the story; “Earlier this week on Tuesday down in Oklahoma I had a load of 32 cattle headed for the kill plant. I said to the guys when I was loading them that I thought this one looked pregnant, but they wanted her to go regardless. It wasn’t a long haul to the plant, but in the trailer she gave birth to this guy here” he said, gesturing to the curious calf. “It’s a miracle he survived being born in a moving trailer with all them other cows tight in there with him, but he did. When I got to the plant, I asked what they were gonna do with him. Since he wasn’t listed in the sale record and wasn’t on their processing list, the plant didn’t want him. They didn’t want him, so they were gonna push him dead into a hole and be done with him. If it hadn’t have been for that, I wouldn’t have taken him. I put him up in the jail on top of the trailer and fed him milk from a pop bottle that I had to shove down his throat to get him to drink. His chances of surviving in my trailer like that for the three more days I’d be gone in cold like this wasn’t good, so I didn’t want to call and ask you this before I got him home in case you got your hopes up, but would you like to raise him?”

“Of course!” I replied with eager honesty.

“That a boy!” he grinned as he clapped his hand onto my shoulder. “We’ll have to get a pen rigged up for him, " I called Flo up the road and he’s got some spare cattle panels lying around that he’s happy to take my money for. You’ve already got your coat on, so get some gloves and we’ll go grab those quick.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing five minutes had since passed. “Mom said Breakfast is ready.”

“Well then, wouldn’t want to keep her waiting” he chuckled with mock anxiety.

Mom didn’t say anything about our tardiness, she had grown accustomed to the art of keeping warm, and our breakfast bounty was waiting in oven-warm ceramic bowls for whenever we got around to coming for it. She asked questions about the calf as we ate, having been let in

on the secret before me. “What do you think you should name it?”. I paused to consider, and my father, abhorring a vacuum, spoke up.

“Well he was born in Checotah, Oklahoma and that is where good ol’ Carrie Underdog was born, although the folks there, even some of her cousins, say they never see her much, so I think we should name him Checotah.”

“Checotah?” I tasted the word slowly. “I like that.” We spent the early part of the day picking things up; the cattle panels from the farmer we had bought our land from, some straw bales from Lynch Livestock who my Dad hauled for, and powdered milk, bottles, and buckets from a farm store thirty miles off. On the drive, Dad tried to instill in me a respect for the responsibility I was taking on.

“You know that I won’t be able to take care of Checotah during the week, and you know how your Mom feels about anything with fur. That means taking care of him is going to be your responsibility. You’re going to have to feed him before and after school every day and make sure he’s growing well.”

“I know Dad, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can too.” he said, one hand kneading my shoulder and the other on the wheel, eyes ahead. “This’ll be a good experience. It’ll build character and you should get a nice chunk of change for your college fund. Besides the cost of raising them, I’m planning on letting you keep all the money for your college education so you don’t grow up a fat old man like me who has to work all the time.”

A couple weeks later I had settled into a pleasant routine with Checotah. I woke up a few minutes earlier than I had previously to mix up a small pail full of milk for him, poured it into a bottle, and encouraged him to drink quickly before the bus arrived at 7:20. After school I went

straight to him, mixed powdered milk again, then played with him until he or I grew tired. As each day passed he grew more and more regal, a proud burgundy prince who pranced with forgetful poise. Never was his joy more apparent than when I approached. He would bound like a puppy in his excitement. I reveled in his joy, even knowing that I would cut it short for my future's sake.

Dad sits down to Friday dinner with a scream-gasp-groan of pain. He struggles against heavy lids, and the hollow crackle of his speech betrays how many hours it has been since he last saw sleep. His weathered paws pop-rattle a penance from a pill bottle platoon; pills for pains and blood pressure and ailments I can't name. "Hey bud, Howas school?"

"Fine."

"Been talking to a farmer I've hauled for, real good guy, with some calves for sale. He's got sickness running through the place and doesn't think they'll make it there. Only asking 70 a head though. We'll run over there in the white pickup tomorrow to pick them up."

We were not farmers; not for lack of training or experience on my father's end, but mostly in the lack of equipment. Using my Dad's company owned livestock trailer to transport a calf or two was out of the question. As a result, our methods of transportation were rather country. The half-conscious Holstein was negotiated onto the passenger side floor of our beat up two seater. Before it could stand, I threw my legs over it, and hooked my boots into the space beneath the glovebox, preventing it from getting enough leverage to rise. Soon enough the creature gave up trying to rise, but it was afraid, and let it be known by several spurts of diarrhea. As I frantically pumped the hand-roll window, my father chuckled, "That's the smell of Iowa money! If only we had a dozen more just like it."

My alarm beep-shrieks an early morning greeting with more persistent gusto than I can fathom. My sleep-drenched mind does some quick calculations. Outside it is, at best, zero degrees. Under the comfort of these covers I am warm and insulated. There are over two hours before school starts. With that time, I could go mix a batch of milk for the calves in the lightless drifts of snow. Or, I could stay right where I am and sleep. One final calculation crosses my mind before I surrender to my comforter; today is Wednesday.

I wake up and stifle my guilt. It's just one meal, and I'll mix them up a hearty batch once I'm done with school. I wait for the bus in the breakfast nook. From this room, I can see the bus from miles off. Usually I would just wait outside, but even from here I can hear the lowing of hunger and feel the twinge of cold waiting outside. I don't want to spend any more time being recriminated than absolutely necessary, so I wait until the bus is close and sprint down the driveway. I can't help but glance their way as I do. Every single calf is out of their hut, in the individual wrapped panel enclosure that serves as their access to the outdoors. Twenty-some faces look my way; twenty-some voices bellow unique blends of pain, impatience, longing. I forget about them until 3:18.

The bus route is long, and I'm among the first on and the last off, but it passes near enough our McMansion to let me catch a glimpse of the place long before I get off. Sitting in the shop driveway is a bright blue semi. Dad is home. Dread nestles in my gut, scratching at the lining. I have plenty of time to think before I get home, but for once that seems only a hindrance. There was no worry of Mom finding out about the missed feeding. She was ill disposed towards anything befurred and more academic than earthy. But Dad would know. He wasn't supposed to be home, it was Wednesday. He would know and he would be angry. He wasn't supposed to be here.

For the first time, I don't tell the bus driver to have a good rest of his night, too concerned with my own. The cattle in the yard are silent. Dad is leaning against the back of his semi, waiting, "Shop, now." He turns away without waiting, and as my hand reaches out to grasp the handle, I hear a keening heave-scream. Laying on its side and heaving a rattle-sigh was one of the young Holstein calves I was responsible for. It was in no cage but its own body, but couldn't bring itself to stand or move. Flecks of spittle dangled from his heaving mouth, and as he drew in ragged breath after ragged breath, I felt my own chest begin to mimic his. There was no recrimination in his eyes, which only compounded my guilt. I thought about why he was dying, and couldn't come up with anything except that he was dying because of me, because I had wanted to be comfortable. My Dad agreed with my assessment. Moments ago he had been all ice cracking beneath your feet angry, cold and quiet, now it shattered. "You didn't feed these calves this morning. You were lazy, and look at what has come from it. There goes a huge chunk of your profits, and for what, because you couldn't handle the responsibility. There isn't a lot of margin in farming, you need to get absolutely everything out of it." He railed on, but I stopped listening. It seemed almost laughable that he thought he could rebuke me any more harshly than the dying creature before me. But he tried.

My father is a farmer's son, and a product of that environment. Few things are more important to him than legacy and inheritance. The calf died later that night, and I didn't see Dad again until Dinner. I figured he would be calm again by then, he always calmed down after he blew up. "The calf is dead."

"Dad, I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"But you did. You were lazy and irresponsible, and your future is bound to suffer for it. If you aren't capable of taking advantage of all the help your mother and I are providing for you,

then you don't deserve it. You've proven you can't be trusted with it. We'd be wasting it on you. From now on you'll have no help from your Mother or I. We aren't going to help you with your college, and you won't see anything from us after you graduate. Maybe that's what it will take to teach you some responsibility." I didn't cry. I turned my back, held my breath, and waited for the wave to pass. The next morning he apologized, and I forgave.

My mother cinch-pulls my Spongebob life jacket tight as our sleek green streak Cobalt boat slides with a welcoming crush into the shimmering murk of the Mississippi. I am 6 years old, and although I flunked out of public swimming lessons that year for barely being able to manage a doggy paddle, I chafe at having to wear a life jacket. Partially because the thing literally chafed after hours spent getting wet, but mostly because none of my siblings had to wear one. The law was that life jackets had to be worn at all times for anyone under 13, but the closest of my three siblings was a fully mature 16. Today, however, in spite of my Spongebob life jacket, I was determined to prove I was more mature at my age than they had been. None of them had started water skiing until they were nine or ten, but I couldn't stand looking on with the confined envy of a youngest sibling any longer.

As soon as the boat idles slower I throw myself with blind confidence into the middle of a broad branch of the Mississippi River. The sudden chill of the water shocks my eyes open. Everything around me is an impenetrable brown, and I not so much hear but feel the omnipresent thrum-whine of an engine reverberating through all the hollow spaces in me. I can feel the click-keen of the engine bouncing around in my throat, my lungs, building into a fatal scream I can't let out. The moment seems to stretch, and confidence cracking I lash for the surface just as the momentum of my descent reverses and my life jacket pulls me upward.

Immediately upon breaking the surface, my Dad lobs a mocking line, “Alright, we’ll pick you up in New Orleans in a few weeks!” I half-chuckle to myself. My parents would never leave me for long, and even if they did, I was certain the current would be kind enough to carry me wherever I needed to be. Following in the wake of the lobbed line came a rope and two tied together flaking red skis that my sister’s boyfriend, Joey, helped me slide on. “Alright, so you’re gonna wanna get into a position like you’re sitting, but with your skis poking about halfway out of the water. Bend your knees at around 90 degrees, then lay back a bit. Make sure you keep the rope between your two skis. When you’re ready, yell it to the boat, then be ready to hold on. You’re gonna get a face full of water as you’re trying to get up, don’t try to fight it, just hold your breath and let the boat do the work.” After giving me this advice and making some adjustments and further recommendations about my form, I expected him to swim back to the boat. After all, once I started skiing, he would be left behind in the middle of the river until I was done. He stayed despite my protests, saying with good humor, “I’d be pretty impressed if you took off on your first try, but I’ll be fine here for a while if you do.”

The moment I gave the signal, bits of the Mississippi rushed eagerly to greet my mouth, nose, and eyes. Almost immediately I lost hold of my shaky form, and was pulled head over skis to plow face first through water which wrenched the skis from my feet and my swim trunks to my ankles. Disoriented and having failed, my mood was souring already as I came up for air. At that moment, a remnant-ripple wake from a since-passed boat rolled over me. My life jacket couldn’t react quickly enough to the size of the wake, and I took in a mouthful of what might generously be called water. Mood fully soured, all that drove me to put back on the skis Joey had grabbed and brought to me was my white knuckled desire to beat my siblings.

After five or six more or less identical flops, even that motivation began to flag, and I whined for my father to drop the ladder so I could come in. “What?! Giving up already are we? How about we do it one more time and then I’ll letcha in.” I chased “one more time” another dozen times, and the only real progress I made was learning to keep a constant eye out for passing wakes. On that branch of river, water levels are regulated by the 9th and 10th lock and dam, so there are no natural waves, only wakes. The character of a wake depended greatly on the character of the boat that produced it. An old man in his fishing boat left only scant small patterns, while a polo-bedecked family on a houseboat could leave tunnel-hills for jet skiers to cavort in. Whenever a wake arose which I knew would overwhelm, I learned to turn my back and hold my breath until it had passed.

A year and a half after meeting Checotah it was time to say goodbye. I swung myself over the runged fence into the cattle yard brimming with 42 one ton beasts about to be loaded up and shipped off. Checotah charged at me, legs kicking up and bucking from side to side. When he was a few feet from me, he threw on the brakes and skidded just comically short. The time had long since passed when I was the one who petted him. Now, with his massive head and neck, he was the one who pet me. Dad was only a few weeks out from his hip replacement surgery, but that didn’t stop him from bending his cane on the backs of one ton beasts. We had nothing to fear from these creatures, massive and powerful as they were. Months ago I had held them down by the neck in our yard as my father took a razor blade to their testicles, then threw the white sacs in trailing arcs into the garden, where they were eagerly devoured by our hens (I threw the next few days worth of eggs into the field). Shortly thereafter the vet had burned their horns down to nubs. Despite all that, they could be nothing but grateful for all that had been provided for them. When we sold the cattle, they were at incredible highs, and each life, even after expenses, netted me

nearly six hundred dollars a head. I'm not quite cynical enough to say there was no difference between the calf I killed in the morning and those that I killed later. After all, these at least had an extra year of life they were allowed to live in their bondage. But still, in the end they died by my will for my comfort. My father was angry not about the loss of life, but the loss of a potential means of profit.

We butchered one for our own meat, Dad selected one of the nameless Holsteins that had been purchased in bulk. I wish it had been Checotah. I owed him that, to look in his loving eyes as he died for me and to make him a part of me. I wish I kept those eggs. I don't think anyone who hasn't raised and butchered an animal should eat meat. There are too many things that are too easy to do because we have built a separation from the hurt. I understand not wanting to feel that way, but being actively involved in the cycle of life and the ends taken to sustain it grew something vital in me that I can't imagine living without. Yet, even for those who live alongside it, it is a lesson that often seems to go unlearned. For most of my life my Mom, Dad, and I were the only people in our house, yet we'd make two pounds of meat a meal and throw a deplorable amount away.

My small unwitting hands rap around the base of a thistle which has sprung up in our garden. I pull back in pain, and my Mother offers me a small tool which I use to take my fatal vengeance on the offending defensive weed. My six-year-old stock of patience wears thinner and thinner in the Summer heat of the day, plucking plants just sprung and half-grown from the wide garden bed. "Is this one a weed?" I wheedle, hoping for a no so I won't have to pull it.

"Yup," replies Mom.

"Is this one a weed?" pointing to another.

"Yup, pull it."

“How about this one?” I ask, gesturing to one all but identical to the last.

She doesn’t bother looking up from her task this time “yup.”

I’m quiet for what must be a few blessed moments before something new catches my fixation.

“Well, what about this one?” I ask, gesturing to a flower I had never seen before.

“That’s a thistle, just like the one you pulled out earlier.”

“What?! No it’s not, this one has this pretty purple flower on it, it can’t be a weed!”

“That’s how they look when they’re in bloom, all of these thistles would get flowers if we left them long enough, but then they would make more thistles that would prick our fingers when we tried to pull them.” she replied with patience

I returned to weed pulling for a while. I didn’t like her argument, but couldn’t quite get my fingertips under the edges of why, let alone how to say it. In my sullen ruminations, I came across another flower. “What about this one?” I ask, holding out the freshly severed head of a dandelion. “I heard in school that these were brought here as a crop, why can’t they stay in the garden?”

“Because they’d overrun it and choke out all of the good things we do want growing here. Don’t you want some delicious fresh tomatoes and peppers?” My mood only soured, and eventually she sent me inside.

I have a friend who’s fond of the saying “It is better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.” I suppose there’s some difference between the two in terms of training, but in the places that matter to me I see little distinction between the warrior and the gardener. There is some “other” which must be eliminated for the sake of the prosperity of the “good”. And what are those “good things”? Whatever suits the tastes of the powerful. The glutton heart of agri-

culture is rooted in this mentality: that which serves us will prosper in greedy abundance until it's grown ripe enough to harvest. As a result, there's little to no space left for all that is deemed lesser.

My childhood home was an impeccable country McMansion that my parents built off White Tail Road when I was 4. My father took a small vengeance for having lost the family farm in building his monolith to bootstrapping hard work on top of 3 acres of rocky field. The house alone had 5 bedrooms, an office, a formal and informal dining area, two immense kitchens, two living rooms, an entertainment center, 3 rooms and closets galore for storage. Engraved on a grey stone crest at the apex of the roof was a C. The backyard was what passed for a valley in this stretch of land, and fell a precipitous ten feet from the front yard. Besides the isolated trees in their ordered rows of our yard, the skyline in almost every direction was dominated by corn and soy, except for to the West where a crown of trees laid cautious claim to what had once been a farm dump. We moved there from a small town apartment with the kind of dirty orange shag carpeting that made my parents comb for needles. The house had been built to accommodate all my siblings, but they all struck out on their own short years after it was built. Since Dad was usually only home on weekends and Mom stayed late at school, I spent a lot of solitary time rattling around the immaculate space they made and maintained.

My shoes are pried loose and my bag flung aside before the gravel dust wake of the school bus finishes rolling over me. Another wave of grease and diesel follows shortly after, and I dart my nose out of my raised shirt to steal a quick breath before it reaches me. With arms outstretched, I wobble walk atop the retaining wall which drapes our buildings. I pick up to a stuttering run up capped steps that jut as the land contours. I grit my teeth as the rigid-sand-

cinder wears against my uncalloused soles. I descend around the side of the house, where a sloping retaining wall carves out a level bed a ten foot drop from where I stand. Not risking the fall, I leap into the soft, sedated carpet of a lawn that has been picked pure and clean. The slope of the land pulls me unresisting into a reckless, feckless sprint; the flow of the world has always taken me to good places. Abandoning the rest of the cinder-block path which will lead past the shop and back to the driveway where my bag awaits, I cavort through the imposing halls of the lawn, observing each lone mulch-wrapped Maple and Birch for the imported sculplature they are arrayed as.

In a playful, feckless step I am back in thick carpeting, strewn with browning needles. I am in the shadow of the arborvitae, the liminal wall between my pristine world and the cornfield beyond, upon which both depend. The inhabitants of this middle ground hold themselves close and tight, afraid to lose what little space they have left. Sadly, to spook one of these creatures is as easy as to be present, and the cottontail I intruded on bounded from me in an arrhythmic, graceful run. I leapt to the chase, knowing from past intrusions this game of tag would end in inevitable loss; I pursued the game only until they managed to disappear into the corn. Only this cottontail, instead of bounding over the relatively short side of the sloped retaining wall, veered deeper in until the wall rose like a jagged highway. Tremulous and stranded between the house, the high wall, and me, the rabbit made its choice. It charged at the retaining wall, scrambling for purchase on the jagged faces of the manufactured stone. Finding some, it forced itself a block further, but found no purchase. In a splash of red mulch, it was back on its feet and attempting the wall. Eventually, incredibly, it struggled up the entire rough length as I watched. I didn't pursue. The taste of pennies swollen in my mouth.

Since most of our leaf bearing trees were well spaced sculptures, we had relatively few colored leaves swirling in the prodigious Iowa breeze. That fortifying, playful fall breeze instead carried hollow corn husks to skitter in the skies. Basking in one such harvest breeze, I learned what happens to rabbits in an impeccably ordered world. It ran desperately straight before the combine. Hemmed in by the tight rows of corn, it couldn't afford to slow enough to break the ranks. The machine trundled on, the rabbit ran, flagged, died on the machinery of an extractive world. Praise be the sacrifice to the field that feeds.

Shortly before my high school graduation, my parents and I were gathered around the kitchen table going through my accumulated wealth.

“Well, after all was said and done the cattle got you just shy of \$25,000 dollars. Between that and what you've saved up from working at M&M's and our contributions, you should be able to graduate pretty much debt free, not too shabby.”

“Dad, I just want to say thank you. I know how much you sacrificed, how hard you had to work in order to give me this. ”

“Just your dad?” piped my Mom.

“Well, I mean, the money stuff is mostly from him, right?”

“Oh? You don't think that I contribute as much as your father?” my Mother's words were a crisp and clear warning.

Heedless I blundered on, “No offense, but we both know there isn't much to a teacher's salary. Dad never even went to school but he makes way more than you do. He just has to work a lot harder than you to do it since he doesn't have a degree. Anyway, I'm going to be a teacher too, it's just the reality of our job that we don't make much.”

“Hey now” My Father interjects, “Your Mother gets us insurance too, you have to factor that in.”

I know that every mother probably has a gaze that can melt their child beneath it. But there are none like my Mothers. She was running a small town bar by the time she was 12 because her father found kids easier to get ahold of than employees. She escaped the small town to become the first in her family to go to college. She raised four kids all but on her own, while simultaneously wrangling twenty-some second graders and my Father. She has a sharp wit and a strong spirit. To look at her you would never know, she bears it all with such gentle humor. Yet sometimes the force of that experience spools itself out into her crystal eyes, and woe unto them who stand and wither beneath it. Her eyes become the sea in storm, the underfoot splinter of river ice, the cold promise at the bottom of a lake and a bottle. Her eyes are the inexorable ocean brought to bare against the brilliant edge of a soul. Following my words, those eyes grated against mine. Then their force dribbled away into saltwater streams.

I clacked the state shaped magnets on and off the freezer, sitting on the ground in the kitchen so my Mom could keep an eye on me as she worked on Dinner. I didn't have all of the pieces of the map, only about 15 of the states, the ones I had visited from the cab of my Dad's semi. Whenever we stopped at a gas station in a new state, I'd pester him for a magnet to add to the map. I arranged them in order first, fitting the plastic-capped edges together into a mass of Midwest. Then I started to rearrange, clearing away Illinois to bring Tennessee right up to the Northeast corner of Iowa. Mom's phone rang, a grey boxy flip phone with a long antenna on the left side. “Hey Honey, gonna be home in time for Dinner?”

I strained my ears to hear the other end of the line over the sizzle-burble of the maid-rites on the stove. “Couldn’t get my reload” the wood floors creak as my mother pulls the pan off the heat “Still in Kansas” I slide the pieces around again. “probably won’t be home until late tomorrow.”

Mom looks down at me watching her “Want to say hi to your Dad?” I nod vigorously.

“Hey bud, how you doing?” crackles a tired voice from states away.

“Good, Mom’s making Maid-rites for dinner.”

“Awh, yum! I’m bummed, I won’t be eating nearly that well tonight, what else do you know?”

I paused for a moment before words tumbled out of me “Why can’t you be here? I miss you and I love you an-” Mom pulled the phone from me as I heard a choked sob rip from the other end.

“I’m sorry, honey, love you” she said into the phone before snapping it shut. She knelt next to me and waited for me to calm down before she spoke. “Listen honey, your Dad loves us very much, which is why he works so hard to provide for us. I know you were just saying what you felt, but it’s hard for your Dad to hear things like that when he’s out on the road. He wants to be here with us, but he has to work in order for us to have the things we do. What he has to do is already hard enough, it’s the least we can do to not make it any harder on him, right?” I nod. “Now come on, I’ll read two chapters to you tonight.” And all was well again.

“Hey Monica, could you send the kiddos inside? There’s something your Mom and I need to talk with the two of you about.”

My sister responded “Okay... that sounds worrying.” and sent my nieces inside. I wasn’t worried. I could read dialogue well enough to tell where this was going, and it didn’t come as much of a surprise to me.

“We just want you two to know that we both love you very much and that that will never change, but your Mother and I are getting a divorce.” They scrutinized my face for a reaction, but I had heard all this in my mind years ago. My eyes were focused on the wind patterns swirling through my sister’s long lawn, and I felt no anger or sadness. My parents have always been very different people, and they rarely spent much time together. One of my Dad’s favorite stories to tell is a little something I’d call The Ballad of That One Time my Unruly Wife didn’t Speak to me for a Month. His retelling usually ends there, without going into why. My Mom is a compassionate, quick witted, gentle romantic, whereas my father is a worker, his whole conceptualization of romance was flowers from the same shop every year on their anniversary. From my position their relationship always seemed more like an internship for my mother than a partnership between the two.

“Are you gonna be alright?” my Dad asks. I lift my gaze from the grass, the beautiful uncut hair of graves, and meet their gaze. “What worries me sick about all of this is that you’ll fall into the bottle because of it.” I fought back a bitter bark of laughter. Couldn’t they see my sister weeping? Couldn’t they see my dry eyes? Didn’t they know they were the ones getting divorced? I hadn’t had a drink in months, but they preferred to worry about others before they did themselves.

I let the wind swirling through my ears into my mind, let myself sink into lofty airheaded sentiment that I believed mature because it was detached. “I know that change can be hard, but I think it is often necessary for things to change in order for them to grow. If both of you feel like

this is the change you need to make in order to grow, those are your decisions and I respect that.” I made eye contact with my mother as I said the word “both”. Dad had a habit of speaking for them despite rarely speaking with my mother. She gave me a small nod, and I knew she didn’t trust herself to speak at the moment, but that she was party to this. I gave them both deep hugs and departed with horrendous awkwardness.

A week or so later, my siblings had put together a discussion document and planned a Zoom meeting with my parents to talk through some of the questions and concerns that had come up after the shock of the moment. My siblings were not so unsurprised as I had been, and they wanted details and a discussion. The first dread question was “Why?”

This time my mother spoke up. “Throughout our whole marriage, I’ve been working for the light at the end of the tunnel that is retirement. Our plan was that both of us would slow down and start driving around the country to National Parks and to visit our kids and grandkids. I went down to Texas a few weeks ago to visit, but your Dad didn’t come along because of work. I did a lot of thinking while I was down there, and when I came back I asked your father if he still loved me. His response was that he ‘would always love me, but that he hadn’t been in love with me for a while’, apparently over a decade now. Work on the divorce started pretty immediately afterwards.”

As a follow up question, my oldest sister asked “Why don’t you want to slow down on the business end of things? You always said that you worked as hard as you did for your family, but you don’t need to keep working that hard. Cole’s almost out of college and all the rest of us are settled with kids, what’s the point in working all the time?”

“Honestly, it’s what keeps me going.”

I've heard it said that the first daughters of stubborn fathers are often more alike than not. My sister has my father's Irish temper, tempered only slightly by my mother's tranquility. Her words were controlled and soft, but behind them prowled vicious emotion as she said "Okay, I get that, but it sort of seems counter to every single thing you told us growing up. You said that you work hard for the sake of your family, and now you're at a point where you don't have to work so hard anymore and you can spend more time with your family, but you don't. I Facetime you and you don't respond, but anytime we're with you and you get a work call you take it. I want Rivvy and Arlo to grow up with their Grandpa, but they hardly ever see you. It makes our whole childhood feel like a lie."

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way." My father began.

My tongue lashed its way out of my mouth with a sharpness. "That is not an apology. You should be able to apologize to your daughter for this." I was abroil. I had always taken more after my mother and her tranquility, but now I could feel a splintering rage spreading from my frigid stomach to my twitching lip as a wide, blue, glacial anger broke loose in me.

My phone lit up with a message from my sister; a heart emoji. It brought me up short. I hadn't said what I had out of love and appreciation for my sister having said everything I felt better than I could. My words were born of hate, but they were construed as love. Did the motivations matter if they had the right effect? My father had just taught me an abject lesson that they did. He had been motivated to become a hyper-provider by the fear and powerlessness he felt after losing the family farm. That fear drove him to work with desperate ferocity, spending 20 hour days trundling along five days and doing maintenance for as many on the weekends. Almost all the time I spent with him was spent helping him in the shop or riding with him for weeks in the cabin, falling asleep and waking to him facing forward, working. Eventually, he got

so caught up in the labor of love that it became nothing but a love of labor. When my family was home for my high school graduation, his idea of quality family time was pouring concrete and laying pavers. Eventually his love for work bled through and overpowered any love he might have felt for my family, and now he didn't know how to love in any other way. Motivation matters; what is mine?

I lost the dialogue for a while in my reflections, and came back to my father on the defensive now, right where he was comfortable. He had been attacked, and was playing it up with all the theatrical victimhood of a soccer player trying to draw a call. "Oh well sorry." he drawled in a mockingly apologetic tone before exploding. "I know I can't ever do anything right, and you and your fucking brother have just got to be right all the time." He stood up, fuming and lobbing expletives and walked away "I'm never doing that shit again." were the last words I heard. All in all, the most productive discussion about our feelings we had ever had.

I truly believe that we are in large part products of our environment, an environment which includes ourselves. My environment was a massive McMansion in the countryside. It was quiet, spacious, calm, and solitary. My siblings all have at least a decade on me, my Mom often spent long hours at school, and Dad was gone all week. Daycare isn't cheap, and I got frustrated staying with my Mom for hours in her classroom after school. I was a serious kid, so my parents trusted me to stay home alone pretty early. If there's one thing I learned from that environment, it is that quiet is not peaceful. If you go silent out into the shruburban bustle of some stand of woods you will begin to hear what peace sounds like; a-chitter-skitter-cra-snap-rustle-breath - BANG. Then the world will swallow all it's sound and in the post-gunshot quiet you will hear violent silence. My home was that post-gunshot silent perpetually. The silence hung on the dew-drenched blades of grass, in three acres of lawn with nary a dandelion or a thistle. It was in the

way the shadows hung to the rafters of the semi-stable-shop when it stood all week empty. I developed a habit of talking to myself aloud to keep the quiet in the corners of the room. Eventually though the quiet wore through, and I worried people would think me even stranger than they already did if they knew I talked out loud to myself more often than I did to anyone else. So I spoke to myself in my head, and in keeping my own company grew as quiet and solitary as the empty ground between corn rows. I was a self-sufficient-strong-Individual. I wouldn't worry anyone because I was strong, so strong I didn't need any help, didn't need all the help that was heaped at my feet, didn't want it for the price that I knew had been paid for it, but my debts just kept growing.

My Aunt married a small town bar owner, just like my Mother's and her father. He wore a perpetual sneer and only suffered clothes to be bought for her which were several sizes too small. He usually passed out in front of football within an hour or two of family gatherings starting. My Senior year of high school, she came by our house, and I could tell immediately something had happened.

She was smiling and laughing. "If you could just keep these things for a while I would really appreciate it." she said to my Mom, unloading box after box of tupperware and her few other precious odds and ends. I hear the conversation and jog up the stairs to where they stand talking.

"Hey Janice" I say, approaching with a hug, "How are you?"

"Well Cole, I am doing just wonderfully thank you so much for asking, and how are you doing today?"

My Mom catches my eye and says "well we'd better get you going so you can catch your flight, you've called Eileen so she knows when to get you at the airport?"

“Yup, I sure have.” She pulls the roller up on her two suitcases and leaves with my Mom. I’ve always known her husband to be an abusive ass, the whole community for twenty miles knows it, but Janice, as my father is fond of saying “wouldn’t say shit if she had a mouth full of it.” I’ve never known her to do much of anything without Sammy’s permission, and I can read between the lines well enough. Eileen is the oldest of my mother’s sisters, and after spending time in the military, she settled down in Texas. Later, my mother confirmed my suspicions, Janice had left Sammy to spend a while in Texas.

“Awesome, I’m glad she’s finally getting away from him, I could never figure out why she bothered to stay anyway.”

“She’s never gone this far” my mother began, “But she’s done things like this before, and eventually she ends up feeling bad for him and running back. I want to believe that this time will work out differently, but I’m not going to get my hopes up just yet.” She was right not to, I suppose. A few weeks later she was back behind the counter in the bar, living the life she had been trapped in since birth, but now with one difference. I saw her for the first time again after that day dropping things off at my high school graduation party. My mother beckoned me from where I stood greeting people, and I slid back into the kitchen.

“Your Aunt has something she’d like to give to you.”

She drew a folded white envelope out from her dress and pressed it into my hands, saying “This is your graduation present from me. It’s money I saved up from tips and things working around the bar. Even my husband doesn’t know about this money and I want you to have it. There’s a hundred dollars for every year you’ve been alive.” I opened the envelope and saw the cash to prove it. I didn’t know how to respond, so I moved in to hug my aunt and looked at my Mother imploringly, but this needed more than even a glance from my mother could give.

“This is too generous of you,” I began.

“Oh not at all, like I said, this is my money, and I want you to have it.” She pressed my hands together around the envelope and gave me another hug. As far as I know, that money was the last of her independence. Now and then, sitting bored and frustrated in a college P.E. class, the price of it will strike me.

I started my Freshman year determined to capitalize on all the work done to pave my way here. My foremost thought was not academics. As far as I was concerned, school would continue to be as much of a breeze as it always had been. I welcomed college mostly as a chance to gleefully stab my ego to death in the hopes a new, better one would rise in its place. So I drank heavily, started working out, and spent almost all my waking hours surrounded by other people. It was a wild, chaotic peaceful thrum where I never had to be alone.

Sophomore year I got a job as a line cook at a local microbrewery, and my coworkers were a brilliantly eclectic bunch, a considerable step up from the empty hours spent polishing shelves at the gas station-pizzeria-ice-creamery-clothier-grocery-store I was the sole evening employee of in high school. Between work, school, and planned recreation, I didn't have to spend much time with myself. Then my parents got divorced on the budding edge of the Covid-19 pandemic, the microbrewery I was working at shut down, classes started to move online, and I was no longer morally inclined to spend much time outside.

During the pandemic I had a lot of time to myself again. At first I filled it how I had learned in high school; I drowned myself in entertainment media, in outside words. But I had a lot of time, and soon my whole backlog ran dry, and I was left inquiet. Humans are animals. Water in, water out. Eat and wait until it's time to eat. Breathe, scroll, stare, sleep. Days cascade and seconds drag. I'm inside in a comfortable environment designed for me and it's rotting me

from the inside. The thought echoes and distorts. You can't spend time with yourself. You survive like a Great White; always going, always hurling the whole of yourself into something to keep your thoughts at bay. We're products and producers of our environment, but I've been renting or living in someone else's house my whole life.

Reflection:

Working on this thesis project has been, shall we say, interesting at the best of times. My interest in working in the genre of creative nonfiction reared its head last year while I was taking craft of creative nonfiction with Dr. Wonders, my thesis advisor. During that course, I had written a piece that was searing with fresh, white hot emotion. Because of all the feeling wrapped

up in it, I really wanted to get the piece to work, but it seemed like regardless of how I approached it, the piece kept coming up lacking. I simply didn't have enough space in the 2-3 pages that are recommended for essay length creative nonfiction. That wasn't a problem I had run into much before. I've learned rather well how to use concision effectively, and it had been some time since I didn't have enough space to say what I wanted to. Nevertheless, that's just what was happening in my essay, I was trying to say too much in too little space. Dr. Wonders recognized this more or less instantly, and with an almost sorrowful look told me that what I was trying to produce wasn't an essay but a memoir. I knew I had an honors thesis coming up, and I knew I enjoyed working with Dr. Wonders, so I decided there could be no better thesis topic than something I was still highly emotional about, and no better form than one I had just barely been introduced to that very semester. One of those issues proved easier to tackle than the other. Filling myself in on the genre of creative nonfiction turned out to be a less perilous journey than I thought it might. As a genre it's still relatively in infancy, and I had the opportunity to read several of the more seminal works in the genre as part of my research into the form I would be writing in. I read memoirs written by people with similar and vastly different experiences than mine, and read books centered around the craft approach to writing in the genre. Once I had amassed all this knowledge about what creative nonfiction was, however, the more daunting task still lay before me. To summarize it as simply as I can, creative nonfiction is an attempt to take real, lived experiences, and through the lens of memory or the craft of the form, make art from those experiences. Now, I don't want to or intend to dump a bunch of my trauma here, but suffice it to say that for me and for many making art out of our past isn't easy. That being said, I've come to believe it is one of the most important things for a person to do. I've long conceived of pieces of writing as a sort of Horcrux, a storage vessel for splinters of the soul. When I look at

the pages I've managed to produce here, those pages feel like me, and they feel beautiful even when the events they touch on are far less so. When I began work on this project, I was a bundle of emotions, many of them negative, many of which I had never experienced to such a degree. My first drafts reflect that emotional state, they seethe and gnash their textual teeth, lashing out wildly, they are not artful. Yet in them are the seeds of this draft, which by no means perfect, seethes far less. What I have come to realize over the course of drafting this piece about my life is that I may not love many of the circumstances which made the person that I am today, but I do love the person I have become. It is a fascinating bit of mental gymnastics to try to reconcile these ideas, to feel pride in where I have come from but to still be critical of it so it can become better. This is the core intent of the artfulness of my piece. I mentioned earlier that form can be quite influential on the artfulness of a piece. When I had initial draft comments on this piece, there was mention about the seemingly disconnected nature of some of my stories. I completely understand the confusion behind the ordering of some of these pieces, but think the flow is something I can improve without compromising the intent of having the pieces ordered in the fashion that they currently are. The intention behind having the pieces flow the way they do now is that this memoir is very much a reflection of my emotional journey as a reaction to some difficult events in my life. Many of those difficult events happened in the midst of quarantine, and I clung to the shreds of my sanity primarily by going on long walks. The form of the piece is meant to reflect that process, and if I can pull it off well, the writing should feel like a walk through memory, an emotional journey as well as a physical one. In discussion with my thesis advisor, it seems like my next bout of revision will be focused pretty heavily on this question of form and how my paragraphs are arranged. One of the chief comments that Dr. Wonders during our workshop of the piece was that I wrote incredible sentences, but that I often left them

stranded or suffocating in the middle of paragraphs. She recommended that one way I could immediately and significantly improve the quality of my piece would be to restructure my paragraphs so that these sentences are left at the end of paragraphs, giving the reader something to chew on before they move on. Another recommendation along the same vein that I'm eager to attempt with the piece is to cut down on my narration. Generally in memoir, the scene is balanced with narration. I bring a memory to life, and then I narrate through that memory with my more modern voice. However, given my intention of having the piece flow like a walk through memory, any moments of narration stick out like something of a burr in my writing. Dr. Wonders and I have come to the conclusion that while it doesn't make sense to remove narration from my piece completely, it can certainly be de-emphasized in favor of more emotionally active scenes. In essence, trim any moments of narration down to a few short, powerful sentences, then move on with the memory. This piece is a not insignificant part of me, and I like what it says.