Lonely This Side of Nowhere

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ABSTRACT

LONELY THIS SIDE OF NOWHERE

By

Anne Madeline Okonowski

In this creative work, the writer explores familial relationships as well as what is home. Combining nonfiction essays, fiction, poetry, and images in one narrative, this work is comprised of multiple stories to create a related narrative. This project is a celebration of storytelling through multiple genres, and draws from multiple sources of inspiration, including both creative and critical work.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents, Lola and Joe Okonowski and my sisters, Katie Okonowski and Olivia (Okonowski) McCarthy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to first thank my thesis director, Dr. Amy Hamilton for her seemingly endless support, and vast library of books that opened my heart and mind throughout the course of this project. I would also like to thank my reader Professor Monica McFawn for all of her advice during my time at Northern Michigan University. And of course, many thanks to the many other professors and colleagues involved in this project in an unofficial capacity from the Department of English for their time, comments, and advice.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the department of English.
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INTRODUCTION

If our bodies are comprised of multiple systems and levels, then stories are what makes up our souls. We all breathe in stories like the very oxygen that sustains human life. It is through stories that we make sense of our world and our lives and it is also through stories that we learn our identity. I came to these conclusions through working on this thesis. Because of this project, I have experienced a transformation in how I think about stories. Instead of distinct, separate narratives that follow a linear pattern, which privileges written prose, I now see stories as circular. I value stories no matter what mode they may be expressed through. Constantly making connections between seemingly unrelated stories helped me access the heart of my project: I am a storyteller for my family and a continuer of Northward movement. Storytellers are historians with room for imagination. The entire process of this project undid my previous thinking. The resulting work laces everything back together again.

My thesis is a family history. On both the maternal and paternal sides of my family, I come from coal miners who moved north, drawn out of the mines to the promise of prosperity through production in the auto-industry. I see myself as continuing the exodus from the coal mines northwards, out of Detroit and into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which feels much more like a combination of Michigan and Appalachia than I possibly imagined. In this space, I wanted to focus on Appalachia because I thought that was what was calling to me as home, but I discovered that it was this snow-bound land mass calling me to home. Connecting myself into my familial narrative is a significant
shift from my original intention of documenting what has already happened in the past. Instead, I am making sense of loss and trauma for the present day.

There is a sense of nostalgic loss through both my mom and my dad. My mom often felt disappointed in not being able to “provide” a grandparent for her daughters due to her estrangement from her mom. Yet, despite this separation, she still proudly asserts her birth state of Kentucky. While my mom struggles with what has been referred to as a “living death,” my dad lost his mom to cancer at seventeen. Perhaps it is through these losses that my parents found a deep love and connection and it is through these losses that they were able to become the matriarchal and patriarchal figures today.

I wrote my thesis to celebrate my heritage, to celebrate my parents, and to celebrate my sisters by exploring my roots through storytelling. It is a collection of works in various categories that all share this aim. Overall, this thesis project draws inspiration multiple theoretical frameworks, including Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* for all of its beauty in craft, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Nothing Ever Dies*. I am indebted to these writers for their thought-provoking challenges to form, to narratives, to writing in itself.

My project examines personal family history as well challenging what it means to make a narrative. In this aim I was most strongly influenced by Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*. Silko organizes Storyteller through multiple genres, including images, poetry, and prose. She begins her book with this statement:

All human languages have words and tones of voice we use when we want to impart information. If you think about it, nearly everything of consequence that we tell one another involves narration or story (Silko xvii).
Silko’s assertion that “(n)early everything of consequence that we tell” influenced my expansion of the definition of storytelling to include multi-genre works. The concept of storytelling was something that I wanted to focus on throughout writing this project. Of course, Silko is drawing on her experiences as an Indigenous, Laguna Pueblo woman to inform her work. I do not share in this heritage but greatly admire the attention and care that Silko places in the craft of creating this book. Telling a narrative through multiple genres is an interesting challenge that allows a writer like to me to explore these genres and meta-cognitively think about the structure of the greater project.

Furthermore, Silko’s example of storytelling allows for a fluidity of genres that allows for different forms to become part of one whole. I surround myself with stories everyday through multiple mediums and revel in them. Storytelling as an art became important to me through reading, of course, but also through listening to podcasts or musical albums, through viewing art in whatever form that may come, watching performances by comedians or dancers or actors, and many other vehicles for storytelling that are in the world. Storytelling, for me, is the idea that there is a narrative to anything. And because of this realization of narrative, I want to consider myself as a storyteller in my own way. Because I am influenced by Indigenous conceptions of storytelling, I wanted to increase my exposure to Indigenous writers. Botanist, writer, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer approaches storytelling in a way that is much in line with Silko. Though their contexts and focuses are different, both Kimmerer and Silko write about their own familial pasts and link their pieces together to create a cohesive narrative. In Kimmerer’s work, I discovered not only an example of
writing through multiple genres to express concepts and ideas, but an idea that sustained my writing process: what it means to claim a place as home.

In Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she focuses on Indigenous wisdom, particularly through how humans interact with plants in a scientific and spiritual sense. She also focuses on claiming a place as home. In a chapter titled "Putting Down Roots" Kimmerer claims "A place becomes a home when it sustains you, when it feeds your body as well as in spirit" (Kimmerer, 254). This line became central to the latter stages of my project. I had initially tried turning my attention south toward Kentucky for answers. The truth is, Kentucky is merely where part of my story begins, if we begin it with my mom’s family. I am at peace in the green and humid hills of Appalachia, but I am not quite at *home*. I realized that I needed to turn my attention north instead. I claim Appalachian heritage yet I cannot fully claim an Appalachian identity. Instead of trying to force myself into an identity that I feel discomfort in, I realized my place in the narrative of my family history. I am a recorder of history, a storyteller who has found her home.

I had grand plans of digging deep into my family history and being able to justly portray my ancestors, but the heart of the matter is that I still do not feel equipped to portray more than my close relatives. Perhaps it is a shortcoming that I did not dig for more resources, but I think the work that I produced still aligns with presenting a familial narrative, albeit one much closer to me than I originally suspected I would produce. I had a goal of being a storyteller, but I wanted to tell my stories in a just way.

The idea of “just memory” in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s work, *Nothing Ever Dies* is important to this project because in telling stories, there is the possibility of
misrepresentation of events and people. Because I am featuring truths in all of these pieces, I wanted to acknowledge my own positionality. I wanted to make sure that I was considering all sides to a story and representing my family in a fair way. In Nguyen’s words, a “just memory” falls away from being far too sentimental toward either the victors’ or victims’ sides in history, “A just memory opposes this kind of identity politics by recalling the weak, the subjugated, the different, the enemy, and the forgotten. A just memory says that ethically recalling our own is not enough to work through the past, and neither is the less common phenomenon of ethically recalling others” (Nguyen 17). Here, Nguyen positions “just memory” in opposition against common practices of victimizing either side of a history. Nguyen’s argument is that “just memory” is the only ethical approach to carving a better future for any culture. For the purposes of my project “ethical” can be understood to mean the well-intentioned values we place on people and things. He is not arguing necessarily for complete understanding and identification of all sides of a trauma in history. This acknowledgement of identification, Nguyen claims, is the only way to attempt a more complete understanding of historical frameworks. In order to have a “just memory” one must approach all angles of an historical moment, to find sentimentalizing either side reprehensible, and to challenge all modes of delivering historical interpretation through questioning a source’s intentionality and authenticity. I wanted to avoid sensationalizing my family history so I have taken the liberty of withholding some details to whole stories, as they only seemed potentially harmful to my real life family. My understanding of a "just memory" includes the thought that I can fairly represent my family without violating their personal lives while still expressing
how their personal experiences and even traumas are significant to the overall family story.

Considering the craft and effort that went into constructing *Storyteller* and *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I believe that I was able to stay close to Silko’s and Kimmerer’s examples even though I shifted my focus to closer family members while Silko and Kimmerer work with long family histories. I also believe that through an awareness of my positionality, I am able to represent my family in a fair way and am a conscientious writer in the way Nguyen calls for “just memory.” I am showing my specific perspective while acknowledging that I am one side of the story. Through the creation of this project, I understand my place in family history. While we are connected to the past, I believe that by bringing this story forward I am better able to serve this purpose.

The title of my work, *Lonely This Side of Nowhere*, is a nod to how I needed to move to the middle of nowhere to be able to grow into myself. Driving above the 45th parallel, approximately 450 miles away from my family, literally crossing a bridge that sometimes is so covered in fog that it is truly a bridge to nowhere. Yet I am no longer lonely. I want to do right by family, by myself, and to explain how it is that I tried to look south but needed to go north instead. This is where my storytelling begins.
Sometimes I wish that I had the ability to hop through a picture frame and see every detail about an old photograph. Lively colors would seep into the sepia and suddenly the sky, the sun, and every shadow alive again. Maybe I would just be a spirit floating overhead, but I could still hear what people sounded like and still smell whatever is nearby, be it smoke or coal or daisies.

Of the nine photographs above my parents' fireplace, there are eight photos total from my father's side. There are six wedding photos; everybody in those has last names ending in -ski or -cki. There is one first Holy Communion photo also from his side. For my mom, we have a smiling portrait of her step-dad in his naval uniform. The final picture, however, is the only one that I ruminate on regularly. At my house, we simply address it as "Mance," after its haunting occupant.

My maternal side—the Appalachian side, holds plenty of mystery for me. The first problem is that we actually don't know who my biological grandfather is and my grandmother Helen is not forthcoming on the subject, much to my mother's personal pain. My mom has moved away from her Kentucky side, unlinking herself from Appalachia and becoming a matriarch in Michigan instead. Despite consistent remarks on my being a dead ringer for my mom at the age of twelve, I know next to nothing about her as a young kid besides her looks.

What I do know has been pieced together in a jumbled up quilt. Around my mom's birthday we hear some version of this message on our machine:
"Lola, it's mawm. Jus' wanted to call you's and say happy birthday." Despite residing in Gaylord, Michigan, Helen's drawl is just as Kentuckian as ever. Helen's rare phone calls always make me acutely aware of my hidden heritage but also give me an eerie feeling of not quite guilt, not quite nostalgia. Something about missing out on having a grandma, perhaps. I've met Helen a few times, but never consistently enough to actually feel like she is my grandma. While I was growing up, we would occasionally meet her up in Frankenmuth, a fairly even-split drive between my parents' place and Gaylord. Although I associate her with Bavarian chicken and the fact that she once dyed her hair red to match her poodle, her persistent drawl suggests a stalwart Kentuckian mind. Whenever I think on Helen, my thoughts leap to my parents' fireplace and Mance.

A twenty-something-year-old Mance Hamblin---my maternal great-grandfather---reclines on steps at what one could assume is the side of a house. He is in front of a pile of firewood. His legs are squarely out in front of him until you look closely at the bottom of the frame. It looks like his toes point in slightly---the same way that my mom sits. His wide-legged pants are sloppily cuffed so you can make out big, over-exposed patches of ankle, though the blurred brown tones don't illuminate if he's wearing socks with even more blurred shoes, or if he's forgone the footwear completely. His feet disappear out of frame. I like to imagine that he's barefoot with his feet wriggling against the earth. Proportionally, this barefoot theory would also make him very tall, explaining my towering height compared against my mother and Helen.

Mance wears a button-down, long-sleeved, collared shirt and a short, polka-dotted tie. Suspenders loop around his shoulders, though judging by the wrinkle patterns below, the right shoulder is tighter than the left. He has a belt buckled around his waist with a
pistol tucked into it. He has no holster and the gun is positioned so that you can see almost all of it in the photograph. To add to his fashion, he also holds a four-string banjo in his lap. His right hand drapes expertly over the banjo while his left fingers curl perfectly over the neck. He wears a pinky ring on his left hand, and I wonder if it was intended for that finger or if he wears it there out of necessity. I frequently need rings resized for my own stubby fingers, but I cheat now and just change which finger I wear them on.

I wonder if he was exceptionally talented at the banjo. Was his instrument tinny or rich or twangy or smooth? I know what banjos sound like, but I want to know what that banjo sounded like. Did he like plucking melodies on strings the same way that I like plucking at my guitar? Did he strum something before settling into his pose? I know if I were sitting for a picture, strumming something is what I would do.

I stare at his face and look for any resemblance between this miraculously preserved ancestor and myself. His hair looks dark and curly underneath a broad hat, but maybe the camera has tricked me into seeing darkness. Maybe it's more red than brown. Does he have freckles peppering his skin like me? Did he roast easily in the sun? His wide eyes are a light color. I assume they're blue like the rest of ours. His eyebrows and lids fold over each other, yet another trait that my mom and I share, evidently thanks to Mance. I try to read his eyes. I like to think I'm good at reading eyes in real life, but I can't find anything in these photographic representations.

I look at his square jaw (definitely not mine) and wider set ears (maybe mine) and his mouth. I think I see a smirk flickering across his lips, or perhaps my eyes are just crossed from holding this picture so close. Maybe he thinks pictures are artificial, like
me. Maybe this isn't even his banjo at all, and maybe it's not even his pistol for that matter. Maybe he just decided to pose with it to mess with his posterity. Although, pictures must have meant something different then--they weren't an every day occurrence. You would pose with meaningful things.

No, the pistol is definitely his. Everyone in my mom's family had firearms.

***

My mom always talks about how she would spend summers down in Kentucky instead of staying in Michigan. She doesn't say much but would talk about how she never wore shoes so her feet turned a dusty black. "Lola, you must be a Blackfoot Indian!" Helen admonished. Mom grew up thinking that she was part Native American--it wasn't until later that she realized she wasn't Native American at all: the whole thing was a commentary on her ill-kept summertime feet and on Helen's growing up in rural Appalachia. Who cares about cultural insensitivity when you can use someone else's heritage to talk to your daughter about the status of her feet?

She's also talked about how she remembers going into her grandparents' house and opening a drawer: "I was about seven and I opened that drawer and found a small gun. I picked it up and was waving it around. I didn't do anything with it but put it back. I knew I wasn't supposed to have it." In the same breath, my mom revealed yet another fantastically named relative. "I was sitting and swinging on the front porch swing when great Uncle Herman came running out with that pistol. He was mad at somebody but I don't know who. Everyone was crowding around to try to get him to calm down and I just kept swingin' away."

"No one told you to go inside?"
"Nope."

Many years later, my parents drove with my oldest sister, just three at the time, up north to visit Helen. My mom asked Helen if she wouldn't mind making sure that the gun in the kitchen cabinet was put somewhere safely.

Upon arrival, my mom asked again if she had put the gun somewhere high up so a toddler couldn't get to it. The request lit tempers, as Helen perceived my mom as thinking she was "better" than her. Helen accused my mom of being a snob. Without even unloading the car, they turned around and drove back south.

"A living death is worse than an actual one." The therapist said.

***

I doubt I'll ever find out who took the Mance Hamblin picture or when or why or where. But I do want to know more about the man. I've tried asking Helen, Mance's granddaughter, but her mind doesn't quite work the same way as the rest of the population. We did have a conversation about how she's going to sue the hospital that she's a cleaning lady for ageism because they cut her hours. Most of my conversations with her go that way. I have yet to hear of any actual court cases.

So, that's where a call to a very apologetic clerk in Kentucky comes in: the bureaucrats know that Kentucky didn't always keep a solid handle on records: they're happy to help. My whole family and I obtained documents about Mance Hamblin.

According to a nearly-illegible, scrawly affidavit dated May 1951, Mance was born March 27th, 1886. Two men, one named Joe Hamblin the other named George Reeves testify that Mance was born in 1886:
"I have no interest in this other than to state the facts," says Joe. Cover your ass in the system I suppose.

George comments,"...but just don't remember the month; I am considerable older than he for I was a large boy at the time. I am not interested in this claim in any manner." There was some dispute about Mance's age and he couldn't remember when he was born. We suspect that he was applying for government aid and needed to be a particular age to receive it. However, the court system didn't have a proper birth certificate on record. (Kentucky, remember?) So this affidavit is the best representation of his proper age that we have.

He was a farmer in Mulberry Creek, Whitley County, Kentucky at the time of his marriage. I think it was a family farm, but he could have purchased a plot of land. He married a woman named Bertha Reynolds when he was 23 and she was 18. (We can assume.) On the marriage certificate, Mance's age was originally listed as 22, but then crossed out with the addendum "corrected by court order." That affidavit must have had something to do with the correction. The on-going confusion and correction on his age gently tugs at my humor. He didn't even know for sure his own age.

Bertha and Mance's marriage took place at Bertha's father's home on July 29, 1909 and was witnessed by two men named Silas and Jackson. The looping cursive makes it difficult to read their entire names but they don't share any last names so they must be family friends. Given that we do know that the Hamblins and the Reynolds lived in Appalachian poverty, I cook up a simple, Baptist ceremony followed by a slightly better-than-usual supper. Maybe the banjo picture taken that day? If so, why isn't Bertha in it?
A few years after their marriage, Bertha and Mance already had two children, who my mom suspects are her great uncles Herman and Bub. Then, on October 13, 1916, Bertha Hamblin gave birth to a baby girl they named Allie. Allie Hamblin became my great-grandmother. At the time of her birth, Mance was still a farmer with Bertha continuing her duties as housewife.

Somewhere after Allie's birth and before Mance's death, he lost his farm. I assume he lost it during the Great Depression. He applied for Social Security June 2nd, 1937 after working on a W.P.A. Project in the county that could have been either the Cumberland Falls State Park or the Jack's Fork Road bridge over a river. After this, it looks like he went to work as a coal miner. I went to search for the specific mines with no luck---there are over 50 different camps listed on Kentucky's Whitley County coal mining heritage site. Mance died in 1969 in Whitley Country from miner's black lung after fifteen years of struggling with the illness, leaving Bertha as his widow.

***

Summers at my house when I was younger were always sunny. My mom would have June, July, and August to spend with my sisters and me. And when my sisters were old enough to hold part time jobs but I was still too young to earn more than my allowance for scrubbing the family bathrooms, Mom would watch me enthusiastically running around our backyard (which has grown alarmingly small since) and climbing a tree (which has since been removed) or swinging on the play-set (rest in fractured, pieces). If she needed me inside, she would call me in and insist that I wipe off my blackened feet. "You're dragging mud all over the house, Annie."
She would put a CD in the player and dance around the kitchen while cooking. One summer there was a lot of Loretta Lynn. My mom would sing the chorus joyfully along with the tune, "Well I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter." Although my mom only recently learned about her father, she does know that he died in a coal mining accident. Apparently it runs in our family.

"Your daddy is kind of like the modern version of a coal miner, but he makes more money."

"How?" I may have been small, but I was full of skepticism.

"Well, he used to melt steel because he's an engineer. And he would have soot all over his face, and it would be too warm. That's probably part of the reason why we have all daughters."

"What?"

"Never mind."

I later learn, after a somewhat unfortunate conversation with my friend's parents that heat near a man's sperm will make it more likely that you'll have a daughter than a son. They were desperate to have a daughter after having two boys so they were reading a lot of literature on the subject. It was a somewhat traumatic experience to have this conversation but it was an experience, nonetheless.

***

Just to the west of Whitley County is Daniel Boone National Forest, where my mom remembers playing as a kid during her Kentucky summers. When my oldest sister Katie went searching for our ancestry a few years ago, we found that we're related to
Daniel Boone: his sister had a child out of wedlock with a non-Quaker. We're descendents of that "heathen" child.

To finally find myself in this part of southern Kentucky, I was twenty-one years old and no idea that I was anywhere near the Hamblin's. Running for school swept me down to Whitley Country for a track meet. I made a note of each state we crawled through on the interminable, jostling bus journey: Out of Detroit, into Ohio, through the upper half of Kentucky. Almost there, almost there, my head pressed against the window. Our coaches droned on about how we needed to drink all of the Gatorade: this would be a hot one; we're not used to the humidity of being trapped between mountains.

Condensation from the air conditioner built up around the glass panes, misting my forehead by the time we arrived at University of the Cumberlands. Out into the oppressive humidity we went. I turned to my teammate, "My family's from 'round here," I joked in a thick drawl. "I can feel it in my blood." She laughed, "Are you really?" "Not sure." But then, eyeing the green, mountainous heights rolling around us, I suddenly felt compelled to be here.

Some day I want to go exploring around this state to find where my mom went to spend her summers as a kid. It's my hope that the pure Nostalgia Americanus in my blood would lead me right to where I needed to be. After staring at maps of Whitley County for this project to try to find any sign of the Hamblin's, I noticed something about the track I had been to. As it turns out, University of the Cumberlands is nestled right into Whitley County. More clicking revealed several businesses with Mance's daughter Allie's married name, Croley. A city populated by people that I'm more than likely related to, and I didn't even know I was standing there. What if the school was built on old
farmland? What if that track was built in that exact spot where Mance was photographed? It would be too coincidental, but for someone that had no idea that I was in the cradle of my own heritage, I probably shouldn't rule out anything.

***

Easter Sunday was sunny and warm, despite it being March. I regretted not having any sunglasses or sun block on. My mom had recently lectured me on how I need to really take care of my skin because she thinks that she's getting wrinkly and she knows that her mom has more wrinkles than "one of those really wrinkly dogs". The whole family had gathered together for the occasion, including Katie, Olivia and my brother-in-law, and Olivia's young daughters, Gabriella and Maria. Katie and I, as the "comedy dream team of aunting" (according to Olivia's in-laws) watched Gabriella chase bubbles around the yard in a floral, spring dress. She toddled everywhere, squawking in delight as the soap glistened in the air and burst when she tried to clap her hand around it. Her baby sister, Maria, gurgled in my lap.

My mom walked out from washing off the last bit of plates to join in the fun. She looked over at Gabriella, still chasing bubbles provided by Katie. Gabriella ran right into the dirt. She had already kicked off her white shoes in order to squish through the thick grass and run faster than she could with them on.

"That's the Kentucky in her for sure."
Miner's Lament

Earth’s deep maw opens up before us. Caverns twist throughout the mining tunnel. Where does coal go when unearthed? I’ve been swallowing anthracitic particles since the day I popped into this world. It worms into stoves, warming homes; bowls of split-pea soup, Dutch Onion Fritters, Italian Macaroni, Ham, Bacon, Fatback, Baked Apples and Fairy Butter Frosting. Above ground, in the homes, this fuel heats souls too. Organic matter fuels more than cooking.

Coal-ash gathers like snow over food, dwelling, people. I drive soot to surface; encourage each step up--but the work’s hard. How can one turn away families relying; depending; needing? It would be easier for me to drop all of my tools, to resurface and never again walk into the pitch darkness. The other guys want to do that because they have families--they want to spend time and energy with them, not down here where we hope to Jesus Christ himself that we won't die in here. As for me though, no family worth mentioning; might as well keep scraping by and filling my lungs up with rocks and coal.

Down here we holster pick axes, scrape walls via fingernails. Collect the rocks beneath. We hear pebbles shifting, clattering distantly.

Our bird sings sweetly so we keep going. I think it's just a bird mocking honest miners through bewitching tunes unknown. If she quits, so do we. Get out or die.

Sure, we're powering life above ground, and everyone's home lives are completely dependent on us, the ones pushed below the ground. The salary's steady but the money is definitely shit.
I'm longing for steel strings pressing against fingerpads--not sheer rock wall. I want creative instruments accumulated and to shed the shovels and axes. Carving stone times bygone; I'd rather be grooming soil. I want to feel the potential from the sun over head, or feel the air pregnant with precipitation. Land above, no longer banished below.

I'm supposed to have a small parcel of land but I needed to mine first. When my parents wither to nothing I'll plant them and their land. And I guess the dog too. For now, I bury myself in a waking death, hoping to earn enough to keep that land sometime. But here I still am.

I have a silent prayer and hope for every day, that I could just let others sink below ground, choke their flesh, lungs, hair, soul via confounded jet. Let their eyes shift to black like our quarry; giant pupils that see nothing but outlines and silhouettes.

Hopefully, I'm married pre-cave induced death, but the pickings are pretty slim below the earth, to be honest. Maybe someday, my wife will have a coal-fired Winthrop Children, even? Mine to bar to bed to mine again doesn't really allow for too much room meeting wives. Maybe church is the way to go. I'll trade in whiskey for wine and meet a woman.

Now, blacker jaws pierce flickering canyons. Rattles, whether bones; echoes, restless ghosts follow us workers everywhere. No idyllic dreams left; sharing daily horrific brushes with death, all resigned at working within.
Mance Hamblin
i hear a jingling in my ears, so i tilt my neck and thwack
my head, and shake shining diamond beads loose of the canal.
the diamonds fracture into coal dust as the particles smack then seep
between the wooden boards, straining to the cellar through the cracks,
like miners’ sifting for gold through sieves in california,
maybe more like an hourglass; its figure and sands subtracting time.

that coal dust from my ears flavors the hanging hams, fatbacks, and bacon
with grit and sweat and sweet idealization. sometimes, i still hear the pigs' whuffling
when my ears aren't jingling. i wonder which ham or fatback or bacon was the pig
that took a swig of my sweat and shredded my dress when i slugged
the slop bucket into their sludgedom.

the coal inches up through the floorboards now and buds
into cast iron and stoneware. big kettles bubble
with water and flavor-crusted pans pop with grease.
nothing but the coal touches the china laid out on the dining table.
and the stove, lined with bricks, eats the wood as an appetizer
before its full meal and subsequent grazing of coal.

the winthrop burns indiscriminately, my own fingers blistered
and unfeeling, but some curious fingers reach around my petticoats
grabbing at the grates. i won't say i didn't warn them.
i have some more coffee—the burlap sack freshly packed
with more ground beans. but really, the coffee is nothing more but coal dust to line my
gut.

i rub my gums and ruby pools spring free around my blackened teeth.
and now i gnaw on buckwheat and yeast but still make a feast of coal.
and my eyes were once sapphires but they burn
amber with flies stuck in them instead of tears.
She is in the garden alone with vegetable seeds and soil yearning for roots and trellises. In her upturned palms she held earth, letting the dirt fall through the cracks in her fingers. She digs with a small, hand held shovel into the earth. The shovel's grip is wooden and splintery. It splits her palms open and chews through her finger pads. She kneels against the ground; legs tangled in swathes of cotton. She wears pale brown. Tiny vines climb around the dress's pattern, swathes of fabric vegetation cocooning her.

Her dark brown hair is pinned back into a bun. She feels it clenching against her skull; a ball of her own growth, coiled tight like a cobra. She feels the wind ripple against her head and longs for her hair to drift with it. She resigns herself to keep digging.

She lets the dirt settle between her nails, and a part of her hopes that it becomes part of her blood. From dust she came and to dust she shall return. She decides that she would very much enjoy lying down in the earth and sleeping in the interim. She could return herself to the dust prematurely. What did it matter? She's already nothing to anybody but her garden. She digs her shovel aggressively against hard packed soil. The shovel rebounds back and she drops the tool, flexing her fingers and staring at her bloodied, callused palms. She turns her palm downwards toward the soil, watches the droplet squeeze itself free of her flesh and seep into the ground.

Each small hole spaced six inches apart, she placed the tomato seeds and jealously blankets them with dirt again. They will become the juicy yellow pears and the ruby red beefsteaks soon but first, sleep. She stands up and picks up the watering can by her side. She pours water into each seed's bed, making sure to not flood the seeds out, to drown the
tomatoes before their time. She whispers to each seed about spring-time and sunshine and promises to visit every day.

She set to work with the cucumber mounds next, piling the dirt high then pressed into the thickly packed dirt with a small wooden dowel. She made six separate spaces, sprinkled six seeds into each mound. Covered again with dirt. Whispered to each seed.

The corn, the beans, the squash, the cabbages, the lettuce. Repeat.

The corn will grow proud and shelter the garden from burning sunlight. She hammers together a trellis for the beans to grow up tall and plants the squash so they will spill between the beans. The cabbages and lettuce space far, far away so they will have space to sprout and spread and ball up together.

Satisfied with her time within the dirt, she dusts her hands off on an old, raggedy apron and returns into her house.

She returns each new day to her garden, pacing through it to water each plant, each seed. She makes the same promises of spring-time and sunshine and to come back tomorrow.

On a rainy day, she trudges through the mud. She stalks through the corn rows when the earth sucks her boot down. For a moment, she stands still, eyes closed and drenched-cotton arms raised in the pattering rain. Nowhere else matters to her.

Thunder growls in the sky, shaking her awake. She lowers her arms, and walks quickly from the garden, slamming the gate behind her. After the storm, she still visits every day but comes later and later, without shoes on. Her bun is looser and looser before long brown curls whisper against her cheeks and the nape of her neck.
The corn and squash and beans and tomatoes and cucumbers whisper secrets and promises too, below the earth before poking their shy first sprouts heavenward. They gain momentum and grow faster and faster. The plants are happy and their roots go deeper and deeper, reaching for something.

On a purpled sunset kind of day, she visits the garden once more. She has no shoes; she has even foregone her brown dress or a petticoat or a corset. She visits only in a loose, cotton chemise that hits just above her knees. It is vaguely transparent from constant use. She walks up and down each row of plants, methodically places her feet against the ground.

She cups leaves of plants in her hands, inhales the vines’ scents. The plants bend toward her as she walks among them. A heavy wind from the south picks up, whipping her chemise against her legs, pulling it taut against her body like a Greek Victory statue in motion. Her bright green eyes alight with emerald fire, she completes her journey around the garden before walking to the center of it all, between the varied tomatoes.

She braces herself against the dirt, standing straight backed. She recalls her promises to her garden, pulls those promises to her lips. She tastes them like salty blood on the air.

Roots clamor deeper into the earth and tap awake a Thing below the surface. It awakens and sends vines upwards. They quietly pop through the surface, wrap around her waist and shoulders. The vines have spikes that press against her throat and her wrists, warning against movement. Warning against panic. The roots propel her upwards, twisting around and beneath her feet.
She closes her eyes and remembers each seedling, each cornstalk, each scattering of beans. The Thing was claiming her as she had claimed them.

She smirks and remembers the blood dropped from her hands. The Thing could not claim her. She extends her arm outwards, palm facing the earth. The vines wrap tighter and sprawl across her arm. A lone spike reaches for her palm, and she clenches her hand into it.

The vine withers a bit, loosening its grip on her. She smears the palm's blood against the plant. It will not absorb into the plant. Rather, it rolls smoothly down the edge of the browning vines, faster and faster before dripping into the earth, into the roots.

She waits with baited breath, a scarecrow in her garden. The cornstalks and tomatoes and beans and lettuces and squashes quiver, lashing their roots against the spiked roots beneath the surface.

After a moment of eternity, the vines retreat, shrinking back into the soil, deep into the earth.

She stands once again on solid surface and smiles. Roots poke from the bottom of her heels, piercing the ground.
Knee-high By Fourth of July
Three Parts of One Whole

Since God himself claims three,
should we not also pay attention
this most holy number?

I am three of three.
Corn is not my mother
she is my sister.

Mom never likes when the corn
is tall. Corn, the tallest, sturdiest, scratchiest
of the sisters reaches toward sky.
Unfurls, sways in the sunlight.
Mom prefers the little
shoots in their neat rows.

"What is it they say? Knee-high
by the Fourth of July?" I tease Mom.
Tall corn is passing time
is imminent work
is the other side of the Summer Solstice,
Mom always wants to stop time.
I can't say that I blame her.

Corn is my tallest sister
ablaze with gold in her hair
and her heart. When she doesn't grow,
we are all down. She blazes the way
she also casts shadows. She does not intend this.
She is proud, she is strong, she is protective.

Beans. She grows as a middle child.
She births many more. My bean-sister
has three daughters now.
Corn, beans, squash. Again, again, again.

Beans can have scars and belly buttons.
Bean-sister has scars from two daughters
that were lost too early. Her scars are
candles lit in dim churches and flat rocks
inscribed with names, planted in her garden.
She still has endless joy.
She used to feel sorry for herself but,
she has grown up in the shadow of Corn-sister.
So what am I? Squash.

Patty-pan?

Turk's Turban?

Summer, crook-neck, pumpkin.

No wonder I feel unidentifiably split some times.

I am the "most grounded" because

corn has done the hard work,

beans grows up,

squash gets to grow where she may.

Squash sprawls, takes up space

unapologetically.
Anxiety Manifests as Trichotellomania and a Form of Onychophagy

thumbnail into her other nails, again
using her only two long healthy nails, crack
into nailbeds splinter tissue
into distinct parts. this self-made cuticle
earthquake fissure, jagged and bloody. Usually.

index and middle finger dug straight into.
curve of her thumb strains to ring finger
just uncomfortable enough
realize she is, in fact, peeling her nails apart.

she doesn't particularly like that she has jagged and bloody nails
but she also didn't particularly like not letting herself dig
into her own tissue. She was cracking herself open on her own terms.

For some months, she can put the nail cracking away
Hold back the river, hold back the flood
Let the nails heal and grow and then something happens
and she must pick them again.

You must ask but what of her mother?
How the thicker hairs had to be plucked
from the top of her scalp, but her nails;
long and smooth. How some hairs were dry.

little garden of short hairs sprouting
at the very top of her head. How the daughter
could see them because she dwarfed her mother so.

"Don't pick at your nails."

"Don't pull your hair."
New Fingertips
In Which I Learn to Bite

I learn to bite at age 3, sitting under stain-glass shadows. We kneel in church, even though I am too short to even peer over the edge of the pews. I think that children should get to stand at this part. It's the only part of the whole Mass that you can clearly see anything. I rise to my feet, my patent Mary-Jane shoes squeaking against the beige tiled floor.

Mom reaches over and tuggs on the hem of my plaid skirt.

_Shh, shh._ She whisper-hisses at the top of my head. _Kneel down._

Obedient, I return to my knees. Mom is so tall, her figure intimidates me. I slouch to the ground, shoulders dropping and head falling as if it is too heavy for me to continue lifting. My hands clasp together in prayer over the edge of the pew, my body sinking lower and lower to the ground.

Dad leans over then. _Sit. Up._ Staccato notes bounce across my head and I know this is Serious Business. He emphasizes his command by flicking his fingers up and back. I keep my back straight and look ahead. The priest lifts the Eucharistic wafers and wine to the sky. I am told later that this is the holiest moment of the Mass. God/Jesus/Holy Spirit are in that moment, present.

At 3, I don't see the Eucharist. All I see is Dad. He puts his fingers to his mouth; bites at his nails. He peels the skin off.

At 3, maybe this is something I can do to pass the time.

At 8 my fingers are peeled messes because of the feeling of childhood passing by but not knowing how to talk about it.
At 13 my fingers bleed more and more as I get better and more creative at how
take my nails off.

At 19 I briefly quit only to realize that I don't even know how to properly care for
nails, thus, removing the white tips seems to be the most important part and I was already
doing that without any sort of tools so why not just remove them via fingers? This has to
be an evolutionary thing.

At 23 I know Mom's nails. Trim, clean, one coat of clear polish on them.

They were always like that. I want mine to be like that.
I see a little boy walking hand in hand with his mom. They pace in front of the candy shop with the lollipops bigger than my face and rock candies from a time gone by. I press my face against a glass window, looking closer at the little boy. His blue eyes are sharp, and his mom smiles with both rows of teeth. He points to one of the swirled sweets and claps. His mom laughs, and walks him inside. For a few breathless moments I sadden at their disappearance. The boy emerges triumphant, licking one of the lollipops. Sugar and saliva melt from his tongue down the lollipop stick onto his small arms.

The little boy's mom must sing hymns to him at night. He must crawl into bed and snuggles into the blankets before the family Schnauzer hops in and settles the match once and for all by squirming between the two, the physical barrier of fur and teeth and tail.

The boy insists that he is getting too old to be sung to but jr privately cannot sleep without Mom singing first. Her voice catalyzes the melatonin to seep through his brains and whisper-sings him gently down to sleep. She has to sing the opening notes: *I the Lord, of sea and sky.* The little boy absently strokes the dog with his chubby fingers, washed clean of their sugar-scum drippings. *I have heard my people cry.* She sings in a wonderfully low alto tone, inviting the boy to join in with hi prepubescent, tinny true soprano. The chorus comes around and the little boy hums in the back of his throat. *Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.*

He drifts and drifts while Mom's voice gets lower and quieter, swirling down. Consciousness slips from him and Mom leaves the room to the little boy dreaming of lollipops and Schnauzers.
Years later, the little boy is no longer so little, full-grown. He puts his hands on a little blonde girl's forehead, her bangs tickling her eyebrows. She blinks up at him with almost his eyes. She is having trouble sleeping. His tinny soprano is now a tenor. He begins the opening note of the hymn his mom sang to him. His daughter's eyes that are almost his eyes close and she drifts asleep.
What possesses a reasonable individual to awaken before 8 am on a Sunday specifically to walk around in the cold? And yet I've done this before. Despite my penchant for snoozing my alarms, I like the morning. I like seeing the cold and the sun mix together in a stream of winter. Today it's just me, and Dad, trudging with our bows through an icy, forested ground. Nothing treacherous back here though. Dad always calls it his backyard. There's a thicket of trees to the north and to the south, with a clearing in between the two for an open field, two immaculately maintained port-a-lets and a clubhouse. Snow covers the shadowy corners of the place but the field is still green. The surrounding trees are naked, sleeping sentries though still thick enough to block the views.

We pull up into the range, located 12 miles south down Telegraph road from us. There's a variety of cars in the gravel lot. They're the kinds of cars a hunter drives: black trucks speckled with dirt and salt, a green Jeep, a red Jeep, a blue Jeep, another Jeep. Everything has some sort of hitch on the back end.

"Why are there so many cars here, Dad?"

"Indoor tournament."

I've only been in the unobtrusive white-sided building a few times, mostly to use the bathroom or to pay a fee to go shoot in a tournament outside, on the trails. Are we the true archers by braving the cold, or are the ones inside true archers in camaraderie? I can't dwell on this too long, though. I'd rather go for a walk in the woods. I'm a self-imposed literal outsider. My camaraderie is with Dad here.
Our destination at the range is always in flux. We hit our mark and move on to the next one. I get to spend time with Dad and he with me. It's always been an easy relationship with him. Only strained by how similar we can be. I'd never realized how similar we really are until spending so much time together at the range.

I zip my bright green coat up and clip my floppy-eared, colorful hat together under my chin. Dad jams his black and red hat over his ears and seems to debate wearing his coat for a moment, before decided that yes, it is cold, and throws it on over his subdued green sweatshirt emblazoned with the word "Ireland." We arm ourselves with compound bows and new quivers (that we each had purchased for each other as gifts for Christmas) and walk towards the first target on the edge of the woods.

Dad takes a big swig of his medium coffee with one cream. I do the same from my slightly more tolerable small coffee with one cream while he sets his drive-thru cup on a nearby picnic table. I observe as he takes the first shot of the day. He aims his bow easily, draws back. I wonder what it would be like to be the target of his focus; to see his face, the way his eyes zero in on his mark. I'm confined to watching only from the side. Safety is important here at the range, not my curiosities about a face. I see the arrow fly before I hear the telltale skim in the air and a thud against the bale. It's my turn now, and I step up to the same space. Marked with different colors the little PVC pipe stakes in the ground mark the standardized distances from the bale. I guess I'll shoot green today. Hunter class.

I shoot and hit my mark, but my equipment keeps malfunctioning. It's too cold. Dad takes his gloves off to twist my sight into place again. I'll have to keep doing this the rest of our walk in the woods today, I think.
"Mine's flat so it doesn't matter how it's pulled. But yours is at an angle."

"Could I change mine to one like yours?"

"Y'could."

We retrieve our arrows from the burlap target bales. Each bale has a different animal painted on, or at least some semblance of an animal. It looks like a Sharpie drawing. This particular work of art is a pair of bears standing on their hind legs. Dad hit the right bear in the heart-shot. I hit the left bear somewhere in the groin. I have to admit to myself that I need to spend time up front, in the open field at the distance bales even if I hate it. Those aren't nearly as fun as walking in the woods. In here, there is Earth and dirt and no reason to worry about anything except occasionally flushing out wildlife.

These preserved acres house the smartest animals in the world because hunting is strictly forbidden. Back in November, we startled some turkeys nesting near a target painted like a cougar. Mice, too, live happily at the range, although they live within the target bales. Their telltale gnawed holes give me pause when I aim at those targets. I still shoot, I just hope to God I don't end up with mouse guts on my arrow. Arrows are expensive, and I don't know how I would feel about actually killing an animal bigger than a housefly. In theory I want to go hunting, but I don't know how well that would actually go. Alternatively, I could do archery for the competition, but I question ruining the sanctity of a hobby by bringing in the competitive element.

"The best laid plans of mice and men oft go awry," I comment to Dad, still thinking about the little mice while we crunch along to the next target. The woodchips and dirt clump together with ice to make the path surprisingly easy to walk on today. Dad laughs. "Thanks, Robert Burns." He drains the rest of his coffee before we submerge
deeper into the woods down the paths. He tosses it into a white barrel and then he hovers above the trash. I follow suit and see in the trash what caught his eye: a new looking arrow. I didn't hover long enough to see what was wrong with it. Maybe it had mouse guts on it.

I catch up with Dad, lumbering along to the next target. Both of our boots are caked in icy mud and I see him annihilate a squirrel's prints with his own shoe. We arrive at the next target.

"Want to shoot first?" He asks.

"Nah, you go ahead."

Dad draws back.

I close my eyes to listen for the thud.

"Nice shot."

Dad grunts and pulls out his bar of ivory soap from his quiver and runs it up and down the bowstrings. This lubrication process is less about frayed strings and more about frustration with his shot. He puffs out a brisk exhale. "You're up."

He steps out of his spot and I quietly place my boots over his imprints. I learned archery through mimicry of my Dad. My stance, my drawback, everything is based on what I saw him do. I breathe coolly and lift my bow. Drawing back, I let my fingers tug on my cheek, pulling my mouth taut. Adjust my aim by millimeters.

Let the arrow fly.

My arrow follows the same path as Dad. I knocked my arrow straight through his, splitting the fletching from the vein.
Split Arrow
Sagittarius Rising

I am a wild and free thing: You
cannot bind me.
But your crooked smile
might undo me.

Maybe it's the crucifix fixed to your chest,
Maybe it's the albatross bound to mine.

Hell hath no fury like an assured
woman losing her footing.

Big magic is invited
when a woman asserts

Loose the arrow
straight from your chest

Blood Blue Moons
drip with more magic.

Sacrifice made, baptism in the sea, made new again.
Wearing A Necklace from an Aunt I've Never Met

She's still alive yet
I've never reached out--
nor has she. I don't blame
either of us.

Sent up box of jewelry
once from Toledo, Ohio.
I was 15. I fell for an
elephant.

Golden lined, fake diamond skin.
Resting in my clavicle the night
of my first kiss--all noses in eyes and teeth and
old age make-up and car consoles and
pure magic.

Aunt Jo maybe wore this before,
On a date, this vaguely Indian, intricate
creature. I breathe and the elephant rises,
too.
Ten years older now. Somehow, the elephant always comes with me. Crusted, needing professional care, or perhaps to be tossed to someone else to have a necklace.

I clip it on, once again. Brush my fingers across the old charm.

I can't seem to release.
Seek out your answers to the south,
Lay on the beach and recline in the sun
Down Kentucky mules and whiskey,
Travel to cave-lands and mountain-lands.
Reverse the path your ancestors trod.

Seek out your answers to the west,
Across the Mississippi River and through floodplains,
Drift over the amber waves of grain rippling through prairies.
Listen to the rain pitter-patter against your heart in Oregon.

Seek your answers to the east,
Find solace in the chrome cities,
The fast pace, the brusque coast
Brush your feet into Rhode Island,
Reminders of love and reasons to live.
March on

March on

March on.

Circumspice
"Si quaeris peninsulam amoenam circumspice."
- Michigan Motto
Seek your answers to the north.
Seek your answers about you.
Live in the place where bone white snow
Soothes and scratches against your soul.

Seek out your voice in the north.
Seek out your life in the north.

If you seek a pleasant life, *circumspice*. 


