

Portrait of a Grandmother



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“Renece...should give an honest account of her fears, tears, joys & sorrows being brought up in a home with conflict, pain, and yes, I believe some joys & happiness.” (“Family History”)

This project is dedicated to my mother—the strongest woman I know. Out of the madness, you are the beauty.

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Introduction

My grandmother was an artist. Not in any formal sense. She had never been trained in the ways of the painter (in fact, she didn't even finish high school), but the dozens of oil paintings scattered among the homes of my relatives can attest to her skill and proliferation. She always drew inspiration from nature, and had a keen intuition into the interaction of colors—the way that water is not merely comprised of cool blues, but that it reflects pinks, golds, and browns, and the intermixture of light and dark hues that capture the liminal spaces of dusk and dawn. I can only guess at the role that painting filled in her life—an outlet for the creativity so often intermixed with madness, or perhaps an escape from the turmoil of her mind to the serenity of the landscapes she crafted. By the time I came along, my grandmother had become arthritic and feeble, and had largely resigned from the craft she loved.

As a young girl, I gave myself over completely to that most awe-inspiring of God's creations: horses. My girlhood passion filled my shelves with figurines and my dreams with galloping beauties. Some of my family's best friends owned a ranch just outside of town where they housed a large tract of open land, a wooded trail, a beautiful country home, and the objects of my greatest desire. To this day, the happiest memories of my childhood occurred at the Timmerman ranch—joyful Alabama fall nights full of laughter and food, s'mores sugar-highs, the rush of staying up past bedtime, and the ecstasy of flying full-speed atop the paint horses they owned.

My grandmother, knowing of my affection for all things equine, commissioned herself one Sunday over lunch to complete an oil painting for me full of grazing ponies. I became immediately enthralled by the idea, and the impatience of childhood set in almost instantly. Certainly, she should begin that very day. But she did not start then, or the day after that, or the day after. There is nothing more crushingly painful to a small child than delayed gratification, and I have always been temperamental, impatient, and easily wounded. She did, eventually, begin work on the promised painting. She stashed the piece behind her old desk, and I

repeatedly pulled out the canvas to see if any progress had been made. Colors began to appear—fields of blue and green that would become the earth and sky bisected the canvas, and the vague promise of trees emerged in the midground; even the faintest hint as to where my cherished pony would appear began to whisper its way onto the canvas. And then it stopped. My grandmother would never again, in the remaining decades of her life, pick up a paintbrush. As time passed, even my young and hopeful heart began to understand that there never would be a horse just for me. Yet, I never stopped returning to the canvas, pulling it out time and time again. Eventually, I suspect it just became habit that each time I passed the desk, I would pull out the canvas, run my fingers over the texture of the work, and return it to its unfinished place of rest. In the weeks and months I have spent thinking about this project, I have come to realize that I am the horse in that well-remembered painting.

It took me many years to forgive myself for the fact that I did not love my grandmother as I thought a grandchild ought to love their grandparent, especially one with whom they shared a residence for over a decade. Her fragmented mind, prone to paranoia, delusions, and violent fluctuations in mood made it difficult, if not impossible, to form loving familial attachment. While I have always felt reluctance toward my grandmother's presence, I have always borne a great deal of fascination about her. In reflection, I have come to realize that in many respects, our distant, if almost nonexistent, relationship has put me in a particular position to read and understand her life and psyche in a manner unavailable to others in my family. My grandmother was deeply delusional, and drawn to binaries. She had a "good list" and a "bad list," which were not concrete, or even spoken of directly, but were made evident through her behavior. Those on the good list, such as my mother in her younger years, could do no wrong, and remained too tainted by her syrupy façade to see her illness clearly. Those on her bad list, on the other hand, having been demonized by her sharp tongue, are too emotionally traumatized to see the complexities of my grandmother's mind. My position, then, in many ways mirrors the unfinished painting of my childhood. Like the horse that never was, I inhabit a space in which I

am unarguably present and yet noticeably absent. It is this very presence-absence that has fueled my lifelong fascination with my grandmother, and which necessitates the investigation of her that follows.

In May of 2016, my grandmother died at the age of ninety-six. My family always jokingly claimed that she was “too mean to die.” Though I was neither influenced by her false sweetness nor her vicious cruelty, this sentiment shows that my particular limitation in understanding my grandmother was my callous invalidation of her. Even in choosing to complete a project promoting empathy for those with psychosis, I did not believe my grandmother’s story had much value. Nearly six months ago, I read one of her notebooks of daily diary entries and dismissed it off-hand, relegating my grandmother’s story to a supporting role within my project.

The more I studied psychosis, particularly through Elyn Saks’ memoir *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*, which details her struggle with schizophrenia, the more I found my perceptions shifting. Truly engaging with the narrative of someone with psychosis taught me not only how to understand mental illness, but also how to understand identity, normalcy, narrative, and art. Psychosis is a very particular kind of crisis, and understanding the nuances of its crippling effects gave me a new framework to read my grandmother in a meaningful and compelling way.

First, it is important to understand both the definition and effects of psychosis. I have chosen the more general term psychosis rather than any particular diagnostic label when discussing my grandmother for a variety of reasons, but predominantly because she received no diagnosis in her lifetime. Psychosis is a severe form of mental illness in which an individual loses contact with reality. It is a characteristic feature of several mental disorders, including schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and bipolar disorder. Two primary symptoms of psychosis are delusions and hallucinations, which, though similar and often working together, are different perceptual experiences. Delusions are typically defined as unusual beliefs that are generally regarded as being in conflict with reality. This definition is problematic, as what is

deemed unusual is very culturally specific. Hallucinations on the other hand are sensory experiences that are not grounded in reality. Visual and auditory hallucinations are the most common, though one may experience olfactory, tactile, or even gustatory hallucinations.

The symptoms described above are considered the “positive” symptoms of psychosis—not because there is anything remotely pleasant about them, but because they indicate the presence of behavior that is absent in healthy individuals. “Negative” symptoms of psychosis, on the other hand, refer to the absence of normal behavior. Negative symptoms are more difficult to observe, and include anhedonia (inability to feel pleasure), avolition (inability to initiate willful action), alogia (inability to speak), and blunted affect. It is difficult to know how prevalent negative symptoms were within my grandmother’s life, as she most likely did not produce any writings during times when she experienced negative symptoms. I know from speaking with my mother and aunts that she experienced severe depression, which at times led to blunted affect. In addition to positive and negative symptoms, there are underlying social, cognitive, and behavioral deficits associated with the kind of lifelong psychosis experienced by my grandmother.

Psychosis both creates and perpetuates fear, which is one of the most generalized experiences of those with severe mental illness. Auditory hallucinations usually consist of voices telling the individual that they are worthless or evil, and often urge them to kill themselves. Visual hallucinations are often bizarre, morbid, and frightening. My grandmother’s predominant delusion was that of persecution, as she always believed others were talking or plotting behind her back and stealing her things. The perceived sense of imminent danger created by psychosis demands increasingly more of the brain’s metabolic resources. In effect, this puts individuals into prolonged periods of sympathetic nervous system dominance. This system is responsible for human survival instincts, including the “fight or flight” response.

Human survival mode is evolutionarily beneficial, as it allows humans to put aside non-necessary biological tasks, such as digestion and sleep, in order to utilize all energy for

immediate threats. The problem with sustained activation of this system is that individuals become trapped in a hyper-present state. Planning and processing oriented towards the future temporarily take a backseat and all responses become focused on surviving the present moment. This survivalism in turn limits an individual's ability to create personal identity, as this requires a certain amount of future orientation to produce. Though personal and group identities are crucial for long-term satisfaction, from an evolutionary standpoint, they are less important than immediate survival. Without the freedom to process and build a sense of self grounded in past actions and future plans, individuals with psychosis are unable to engage in an understanding of themselves or others.

Though the mind and body are so often conceptualized separately, mental and physical anguish are often too intimately interwoven to be separated from one another. Anyone who has experienced a panic attack can attest to the embodied components of their suffering. Fear produces excess cortisol, which affects various aspects of the body, producing damage to the systemic functioning of the body. I have already noted one biological mechanism through which individuals with severe mental illness lose their ability to produce identity. The body and mind in pain offer another way of understanding the loss of identity present in psychosis.

Elaine Scarry depicts the relationship between pain and identity in her paramount text *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Her argument rests in the connection between language and identity. The ability to form narrative is a linguistic effort. Without language, there is no way to produce and reproduce identity. Scarry explains, "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its resistance to language" (Intro). Not only, according to Scarry, does pain resist language, but "actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language" (Intro). What she refers to here is the progressive loss of language as pain increases. What fills in the void are sounds which are "anterior to language." The sounds of pain are not cohesive words, sentences, and thoughts, but "moaning in pain and

grief” (Saks 112). If we understand language as the means through which we construct and share identity, this argument suggests that suffering has the power to destabilize identity.

Psychosis creates a body in pain and a mind in pain, but what the inability to form identity creates is a social self in pain. The symptoms of psychosis make communication and connections with others difficult if not impossible. Because of the breakdown of language and identity, and the inability to construct the self through social interaction, people with severe mental illness require an alternate platform for creating identity. Art has a unique role in accommodating the needs of those experiencing psychosis. It offers a platform where meaning is not based on temporality, like oral communication. The rules that govern art seem to be more accepting of difference—a quality which is not altogether free of social restrictions.

My grandmother’s art functioned as a coping mechanism through which she could try to claim agency over a life that too often seemed out of control. Though art was never able to fully replace the elements of her identity that she lacked, the very pursuit gave her a sense of meaning. Her lifelong production spanned such a variety of forms that it would be impossible to utilize all of them in a project of this size. I tried to incorporate what I saw as a representative sample of her work throughout this text. I consulted a spiral notebook, yellowed and rusted from its many years, full of nearly a decade of poetry, two of her notebooks of daily journals, written in a phone and telegraph address book respectively, a romantic novella entitled “April Love,” a handful of her oil paintings, and the “Family History,” which is divided between a romanticized account of her parents and grandparents and a gritty and poignant account of her own life.

I faced a number of challenges in choosing to engage with my grandmother’s works. The first, as will become apparent over the course of this project, is her lack of formal education, resulting in huge inconsistencies in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Looking at different periods of her work, the handwriting makes it appear as if they were written by different people—at times she wrote in textbook cursive, and others a nearly illegible scrawl. Another difficulty, as alluded to earlier, was my own numbness to my grandmother’s life and works. My

childhood home was filled with my grandmother's landscapes, making them virtually invisible over the years. Finally, I anguished over how to interpret such blendings of fact and fiction as my grandmother produced. Her psychosis seemed to draw her reliability into question.

It seems that the acceptance of artistic efforts aimed at constructing personal identity are subject to a positive feedback loop in which authority to produce meaningful art rests in the preexisting identity of the narrator. In simpler terms, as far as the social component of identity is concerned, identity begets identity. Thus, those with mental illness who remain unable to establish a cohesive narrative for themselves become further barred from identity formation due to being socially marked as unreliable. On the contrary, those who have the privilege of living without illness establish a reputation that allows them to engage in the same type of reality construction without question.

My grandmother, as someone who suffered from psychosis, did not possess the kind of cultural capital necessary to have her artistic efforts engaged with and analyzed in a meaningful way. I, on the other hand, as a Vanderbilt student, possess a great deal of cultural capital, which I hope to share with my grandmother in order to provide her work the attention I now understand it deserves. As a student of literary criticism, I have gained the skills necessary to read the most difficult and important work of my academic career—my grandmother. I have also drawn both on my own experiences and interpretations, as well as email interviews with my mother and two aunts. From this elaborate, and often incongruent, depository of fictional and nonfictional bits of information, I hope to gain an understanding, twenty-two years in the making, of the woman who I finally acknowledge has loomed over the course of my life.

What I cannot do is finish the horse painting of my childhood. That absence will forever remain intimately tied with my own identity. Yet, what I can do is attempt to paint my grandmother—to finally understand the greatest enigma of my life. By humanizing her, I hope not to fill the void where a horse should be, but to soothe the sting that its absence left, and

understand the importance and value of that absence for my grandmother and for me. This is the greatest justice that I can do for her, and the greatest closure I can provide for myself.

Portrait of a Grandmother

I do not love my grandmother. Perhaps it makes me sound cold, but I feel it necessary to foreground my exploration of the truth in my own version of it. I accepted years ago the impossibility of having a relationship with her. This came not from want of physical proximity, as we lived under the same roof for most of my life. Rather, it was my grandmother's mental and emotional state that created the rift between us that could never seem to be filled. In engaging with my grandmother's life and creations, I have come to realize that the emotional distance my grandmother and I shared is one of the tragic consequences of her lifelong struggle with mental illness.

The second truth that I feel is necessary to emphasize before endeavoring on this journey through my grandmother's life and illness is the fluidity of mental disorders throughout a life course. Despite the fact that my grandmother's mental illness was the force driving much of her life, and as an extension, this text, there is little to no diagnostic language used in my understanding of my grandmother. My lifelong curiosity into my grandmother's mental and emotional inconsistencies led me for many years to try and diagnose her. As new stories and events unfolded, I constantly revised my theories. Bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, paranoia, depression—each of these categorizations hinges on the neat separation between thoughts, moods, personality, trauma, neurochemistry, and physiology. The complexities of the human mind are one reason why I have chosen to resist the urge to pathologize my grandmother.

Another reason for this decision is that giving my grandmother a diagnosis would be contradictory to my self-appointed goal of seeking the truth of my grandmother's life. Because I know now that truth is a perspectival construction, I feel it necessary to emphasize that it is my grandmother's truth that I have refused to hear throughout my life, and the version of events that I wish to capture now. Imposing a diagnosis that she never received during her lifetime would do injustice to her version of the truth. My focus, though built on a fascination for my

grandmother's oddities, is less on her mental illness, and more on her story.

Portrait of a Grandmother as an Old Woman . . .

When I was in early elementary school, my grandmother moved from her home of several decades in Gardendale, Alabama, to a pink house down the street from my family in Dothan, Alabama. Only a few short years later, she suffered a major heart attack and moved in with my parents, older brother, and me.

My grandmother never had eyes for me. My older brother she adored and doted on constantly. Of the many times that my grandmother watched me, we never played games or watched television together. Not only did she never bake for me, as stereotypical grandmothers always seem to do, but most of the time the pantry and fridge were tied, chained, and locked. On one occasion, I developed strep throat while staying with my grandmother while my parents and brother were out of town. My grandmother insisted that I was merely homesick, and told my parents to ignore my pleas over the phone. Days later, when they returned, the infection had significantly worsened.

Perhaps this explains why I learned early to avoid my grandmother. Or perhaps it was because I couldn't handle hearing the unkind words she always seemed to have for my mother. Maybe it was her paranoia and constant insistence that everyone was stealing from her. Or maybe even her inability to have a rational conversation, as her responses were often bizarre and illogical. Her religious fervor was overbearing, and always rife with hypocritical contradictions. She had no qualms about spitting venomous insults at those nearest to her. One moment she would be cloyingly sweet and complimentary, and the next she would become angry and combative. She was often intentionally difficult to please, and would criticize my mother's cooking, housekeeping, mothering, and appearance.

My grandmother's mind always seemed to be loosely bound, but as an old woman, those threads unraveled, and she completely fell apart. A high schooler myself, I was witness to her

deterioration into madness. In her final years, my grandmother remained floridly psychotic. She had visual hallucinations, paranoia, delusions fraught with persecution, and a complete loss of her reasoning abilities, which were, admittedly, not strong to begin with. She pushed away all of the people who had formerly been her favorites, and I became the subject of many of her elaborate fantasies.

The only relationship I've ever had with my grandmother existed entirely in her head. She contrived romance, and began to speak often about my marriage, which had not, of course, occurred. Over time, the fantasy grew, and my husband and I began having children, who she adored. Eventually my husband stopped showing me affection, and after a particular incidence where he refused to kiss me at an airport, I decided to separate from him, which greatly displeased my grandmother. As with much of her life, my grandmother wove a romantic story as a replacement for the relationship we never had.

In late 2015, my grandmother was finally put into live-in hospice care. Not long after this time, I became gravely ill and was forced to spend my Spring 2016 semester at home. During this time, I did not visit my grandmother, though she remained less than a five-minute drive away. She asked about me frequently, but in those days, she was asking about the married granddaughter in her head, rather than the real one living at home. My mother never told her that I was home, solidifying the simultaneous absence and presence that defined my relationship with my grandmother. I visited her once, briefly, just before her death on May 9, 2016.

I did not mourn my grandmother's death. Though I am hesitant to call this project one of mourning, it has definitely changed the way in which I understand my grandmother, and the non-relationship we shared. I didn't realize that there was anything for me to work through, or to understand. She was crazy; she was mean; end of story—right? If anyone had told me a year ago that I would spend my final two semesters of college working on a project centered on my

grandmother, I would have told them they were crazy. I didn't even *like* my grandmother. Yet, here I am, finding not anger towards her, but sympathy.

There are many difficulties in trying to reconstruct my grandmother's story. At first sight, the chaos surrounding her life makes it appear as if she didn't have one at all. I knew that my grandmother had spent much of her life producing art, but never gave much weight to any of her creations. It was in combing through the diaries (written in spiral notebooks, address books, and on any scraps of paper she could get her hands on), poetry, fiction, history, and paintings that my grandmother left behind that I began to understand the importance of this project both for myself and for my family. These creations did not establish my grandmother's identity, but exactly why her identity was absent in the first place. More and more I realized that these creations were how my grandmother dealt with her emptiness, which, as I have discovered, followed her and compounded throughout the years of her life.

A Barrett By Any Another Name . . .

My own lifelong nickname, Bear, was given to me the day my parents took me home from the hospital. It is a shortened form of my middle name, Barrett, which was my maternal grandmother's maiden name. I have always had deep affection for this name, as it has always been connected with the people who love me the most. My identifier in many ways symbolizes the constant presence of my grandmother throughout my life. Despite my efforts to ignore or even refute my grandmother's influence, I always carry her with me—in my thoughts, in my blood, in my name.

The sense of comfort and stability that this name has instilled within me is in direct contrast to my grandmother's experience of her own name. Her lifelong instability seemed to be foreshadowed by the instability of this most basic component of identity. Her birth records were lost in a courthouse fire many decades ago, which fittingly burned with it the formal symbol of my grandmother's identity. From that moment, her name, and indeed her identity, has been in a

state of constant flux. Jean Barrett Waller, Emma Georgine Barrett, Emma Jean Barrett, and Joy Jean Barrett are all names that appear on official documents for the woman who I would know as Nana. One's name is the first linguistic signifier, which is internalized to form the basis of the concept of self. Much of my own inability to understand my grandmother has arisen out of this basic revelation. I could not understand her, as she spent her entire life trying to understand and construct a self that had been lost long before it was truly formed.

Reading through her various journals initially seemed to raise more questions than it answered. Fanciful reimagining of events derailed factual accounts, and fictional stories contained more candid accounts of her thoughts and feelings than many of her diary entries. My mistake upon first encountering these texts was the highly normative critique I brought to them. I found myself trying, to no avail, to sort out the "true" story of my grandmother, by stripping away the details that did not fit the accounts of history offered by my mother and my mother's two sisters, who had known her best.

Engaging less critically with my grandmother's work gave me a new insight into my fatal error. I began to realize that the fictional portions of my grandmother's work were often some of the most truthful to the life that she lived. Her art was a way for her to try and create an identity for herself to fill the void. What she craved, and never seemed to receive until now was someone willing to give her creations the time and energy required to understand them.

My grandmother's life seemed to be divided into several different periods, each of which was defined by her attempts to ground her identity in the external, as she lacked the capacity to find it internally. My goal is to consolidate my understandings of each attempt to find her identity, and why each was ultimately unsuccessful. The first of these, her plethora of names, leaves her in a state of quasi-namelessness. This directly foreshadows the second way in which she attempted to find herself, which is through her understanding of place.

A Place of One's Own . . .

If I could just run away from it all, to the place I had heard my Mother talk about so many times—Deep in the woods by a stream of water. to dangle my feet in the Cool. Clear stream and listen to the birds sing their songs of Joy & freedom. smell the earth, and flowers and watch as the soft breezes blow the leaves from the tops of the trees and see them come floating down so gently, gently, and come to rest at my feet (“Family History,” 174).

It seems my grandmother's life was haunted by Heraclitus' famous aphorism, “You can never step in the same river twice.” Place, like a river, was always in a state of flux, and it seemed she could never stop it long enough to sink her roots down. By painting, she tried to create landscapes that would remain constant for long enough that she could traverse them in an effort to find herself. Even these seemed to elude her, as she was never able to recreate, let alone inhabit, the ideal, and indeed mythical, place in her mind.

To understand the necessity of reclaiming a sense of place, it is important to understand the historical relationship between my grandmother and location. She was the eleventh child of her parents, Minnie Elzora Barrett and Willie Evans Barrett, born in Oxford, Mississippi in the blazing summer of 1920. From the outset of her life, she was tasked with trying to establish a place within her family amongst so many siblings. Added to this was the family's move to Arkansas just after my grandmother's birth. They remained in Arkansas only a few short years before returning to Mississippi, where my grandmother would live out the remainder of her childhood. She writes fondly of her time here, growing up with her niece Merlene, who was the daughter of her eldest sister, Pearl. The two made paper dolls, played silly pranks, and on one memorable occasion, dipped their feet into a local well. She lovingly describes her father's sugar mill and her early education in a local one-room schoolhouse. Her “carefree childhood on the bank of the Pennyhook Creek” was perhaps the only time in her life where she had a clear sense of place, and she often nostalgically returned to these memories (“Family History,” 174).

At twenty-two years old (at the time, old enough to be considered an “old maid”), my grandmother got married to an itinerant preacher, and from that point forward, a place of her

own remained a fantasy only upheld in her mind. Her eldest daughter, Sherlyn, born not long after her marriage, poignantly captures the chaos of the family's constant displacement: "We lived in Grove Hill when I was a little girl. But I remember living in [Kosciusko, Mississippi] . . . then moved to Grove Hill, which is where Dad took me to school in March after I turned 5 . . . We also lived in Alexander City, AL. I went to school just one year in Alex City as I remember and I was in 8th grade...It was a pitiful place to live as I remember. Just 3 or maybe 4 rooms . . . Then we moved to Back to Mt. Olive for the second time and I went to 9th grade and graduated there. I was in either 10th or 11th grade when Mom and Dad purchased their first house in Gardendale. The first time we lived in Mt. Olive I was in grades 3-5, then we moved to Sylacauga for my 6-7 grades and Rhonda [their third child] was born there. A bit lopsided, but I think I have the facts covered, haphazardly" (Sherlyn Emails).

The "lopsided" quality of her account is important for understanding my grandmother's relationship with place. As this description shows, the constant uprooting of my maternal family creates a narrative that is convoluted and difficult to interpret. Even those who lived this narrative are caught in the confusion of their relative placelessness. Not only did they lack a sense of place, but the spaces they did inhabit were "pitiful place[s] to live." My grandmother describes their apartment in Kosciusko, Mississippi as being, "rat infested and mites were crawling up and down the walls so thick it looked as if we had poka doted wall paper that moved" ("Family History," 162).

My grandmother and grandfather's constant moves disrupted my grandmother's ability to identify with any single location, and the conditions of the places created an aesthetic void in her life. In order to fill that void, she began constructing a relationship with nature, through the landscapes that she painted. Though these attempts never could never fully replace what she lacked, a certain type of escapism can be understood in the very process of putting to canvas what she visualized as her ideal place.



The painting above represents one of perhaps dozens of attempts my grandmother made to claim a space of her own through art. Much like her own relationship with place, this painting mingles both serenity and chaos. As with many of her paintings, the sky is not the idyllic image of clear blue. Rather, pinks and grays clash to frame the painting in a sense of liminality by evading any clear indication of time or even weather. The central feature is the flowing water, which despite her best efforts, will always continue to flow in a way that makes it impossible to ever return to the same location twice. In contrast to the flowing water are the trees, which would appear to be more stable, as their roots hold them firmly in place. Yet, the trees my grandmother painted always seemed to lean, perhaps under the weight of the very notion that anything about this place could remain stable.

This was the most unifying notion of my grandmother's entire life: that any attempt to ground herself would be thwarted by the underlying inconstancy of her subject. The process of trying to find herself through the painting of landscapes was a more macro example of this process. She had a similar experience of failed identification with nature simultaneously at work on a more micro scale within her daily journals, where weather would become both her language and understanding of her fluctuating moods. In her journals she writes:

“It really turned cold last night and it’s cold today. I’ve been feeling so down & out all day I can hardly stand it.” (“Telegraph Address Book,” Sun, Jan. 8, 1956)

“We have had the most beautiful days. But its cloudy today. Rhonda is sick.” (“Telegraph Address Book,” Thurs, Mar 19, 1964)

“Cloudy & dreary . . . My nerves are so on edge. I surely need God’s help.” (“Telegraph Address Book,” Wed, Nov 1, 1972)

What these entries help to establish is the continuity of the relationship between mood and weather over a period of nearly two decades. Upon reading through my grandmother’s journals the first time, I wrote them off as being not particularly useful, as they were merely a catalogue of the mundane details of her daily life as a housewife. In particular, she meticulously indexed the daily weather. It wasn’t until later when I read her novella, “April Love,” that her anticlimactic and highly climatic writing began to make sense. Within this text, she draws the parallels between mood and weather that allow for an understanding of her journals. Precipitation and loneliness are one and the same, both for my grandmother and her protagonist, April. “The wind was howling outside and the snow was turned to slush. April was feeling as bad, as the snow looked” (45). And later, “April awoke to a very rainey, dark, gloomey day. Those kind of days were always hard for her. On days like this she longed to be near her family. Their strong love and support always made rough times go smoothe” (74).

This, in turn, gave me a way in which to read the inclusion of weather in several of her poems, such as the following, which appears in a notebook she wrote between 1974 and 1975:

The storm is bad
 My heart is sad
 I’ll wait it out
 Then I’ll be glad

(Poetry, n.d.)

This stanza appears amongst a host of poems that are primarily religious in content. The verse above shows her underlying mentality in associating herself with the weather. The first two lines, though simple in nature, present the events and experience of a particular moment in time, read in the present tense. Both the rhyme and syntax draw the association between her heart and the storm. The third line, in contrast, breaks the syntactical pattern as well as the established rhyme, creating instability in the notion of her patience. The final line returns to the rhyme established in the first two lines, but remains unable to reconnect to them in a meaningful way. To begin, the break of the rhyme in the third line creates a noticeable rift that physically separates the first two lines of the verse from its conclusion. As much as the rhyme of the final line signals its desire to join, and indeed resolve, the first two lines, the tense of the final line keeps its resolution in the uncertain future developed by the third line.

Just as her use of landscape, this literary use of weather was a way for my grandmother to use nature as a tool for understanding herself. From a metaphorical standpoint, weather is quite fitting for comparison to my grandmother. The only constancy present in each is the very promise of continuous inconstancy. Weather can be understood as the framing component of landscape that is, itself, constantly in flux. My grandmother is the same framing force for the landscapes she created, always preordaining them to contain chaos. Additionally, just as the weather, my grandmother remained subject to her own changing moods, further exacerbating her struggle to find a sense of self. In the end, a place of her own was simply not a place my grandmother was ever able to find. This void necessitated her attempts to find herself elsewhere, such as through religion.

Be Still and Know that I am God . . .

Oh, Winds that blow,

Some fast some slow.
 Oh, waves that lash,
 Some high some low.
 Oh, earthly joys,
 They've come and go.
 But Christ has come,
 To stay, you know.
 ("Poetry," Oct. 4, 1974)

The first four lines of this short poem, which appear in her poetry journal from 1965-1975, show a shift in my grandmother's understanding of both nature and weather. Here, she highlights her own experience of both the wind and sea as being inconstant, as they can be either "fast," "slow," "high," or "low." The "oh," that begins the first, third, and fifth lines tie together the notion of joy lost to the inconstancy presented in the first four lines. The opening "But," of the seventh line departs from this, and signals a shift in content. What she attempts to do in the final two lines is find resolution for the void, experienced as a lack of "joys," established in the opening six lines.

This is characterized as an attempt because there remains an instability that haunts the closing phrase. As much as the seventh line, "But Christ has come," serves as a contrast to those that precede it, the final line seems to disrupt the resolution that this shift tries to establish. In fact, it is the final clause of this poem that reinserts instability into the poem. To start, the phrase itself, "you know," is one that does not contain any meaning on its own. In conversation, the phrase often serves as a placeholder, uttered much as "um," or "uh," merely to fill in space. By attempting to use "you know," as a way of highlighting the universal truth of Christ's "stay[ing]," what she has in fact done is shown the audience her cards, calling her own bluff. What the reader knows is, in fact, entirely reliant on what the author has just told them. The constancy of Christ is not universal, but reliant on her saying so.

Additionally, the rhyme of the final word "know," draws the reader back to the associations made at the beginning of the poem. This connection foreshadows the inconstancy

of religion, which parallels that of the wind or sea. The parallel between the unpredictability of water and my grandmother's understanding of religion would appear elsewhere in her poetry. Between August and September of 1974, she wrote a poem, which once again uses water as the predominant metaphor for her spirituality. Within the poem, she discusses Jesus' ability to save her by equating it with imagery such as "the foam on the tide" and "the depths of the sea" ("Poetry"). She creates troubled waters throughout the poem even as she is trying to assert that her Savior calms the "lashing tide" ("Poetry").

Following the aforementioned poem is one written on September 12, 1974, which takes the haunting presence of inconstant waters a step further. She begins by saying "My knee's were bent upon the ground," placing the scene fixedly on land ("Poetry"). Yet, the final line of the first stanza declares, "In trouble Lord I'll surely drown" ("Poetry"). She goes on to reassert her presence on land in each successive stanza. It seems that even when she attempts to place herself on a firm foundation, such as religion, the haunting, mercurial waters threaten destabilization.

In fact, the underlying inconstancy of religion, while often associated with my grandmother's understanding of place, is not always tied to it. In March of 1974, she wrote a poem whose predominant metaphor was more traditionally religious. In it, a shepherd watches his flock as they graze on each side of "a cavern deep and wide" ("Poetry"). One sheep eventually wanders too close to the cavern, and the shepherd responds through prayer. Though this is intended to be a resolution to the impending death of the sheep, the poem does not in fact offer any indication of what becomes of the lost sheep. Despite the shepherd's love, which is "very deep," the sheep becomes suspended, much like Schrödinger's cat, in a forever-liminal space between life and death ("Poetry"). The very security that my grandmother sought from religion is preordained to fail, because she is a sheep caught in an unstable space devoid of answers.

As these examples emphasize, my grandmother's body of poetry is predominantly religious in nature. Though I have seen that the contents of her poetry often fell short of

fulfilling its goals, it is interesting to note why the medium of poetry was one that she used to understand this particular aspect of her identity. Her paintings were all nature and landscapes, yet her poems were all religious. The clear divisions between the form and content of her various creative outputs signal that each medium had a particular usefulness for her various attempts to assert her identity. What poetry offers is a response to the unpredictability I have already seen at work in her understanding of nature and place. Poetry, and particularly the kinds of highly structured poems my grandmother wrote, offered her an artistic space that possessed an imposed predictability and organization.

My grandmother shares her desire for structure throughout her poems. In particular, she employs military imagery throughout to represent the type of discipline she believed that poetry and religion could offer. In the notebook of poetry that runs from 1965-1975, my grandmother wrote three poems that explicitly denote the military. The first, written in February of 1974, asserts, “We’re keeping step/In perfect style/We’ll soon be home—Just one more mile” (“Poetry”). It seemed that for her, the development of “perfect style,” through the discipline of religion allowed her the promise of “home,” which can be understood as both a home on earth and beyond. The second poem, written six months later, describes the scene of “Calvery,” as that of a “horseman” standing upon a hill (“Poetry”). The symbolic imagery of the cross elicits for my grandmother the promise of eternal order.

The final of the three poems carries the same message of military order and discipline, but keys into another role that religion served in her life. The regimented, marching steps of soldiers is similarly present in this poem, which begins, “The pearly gates are open wide/For Gods parade to march inside” (“Poetry”). Despite the celebratory scene set by the opening lines, she swiftly upends this in the second stanza, where she reminds her audience that, “The great parade is not a show” (“Poetry”). She goes on to explain, “We have to learn to break our will/We walk in step with perfect skill” (“Poetry”). In essence, the necessary ingredient to achieving order is suffering. If there is anything that my grandmother had in her life it was suffering. What

connecting her suffering to religion allowed is an imposed meaning for what she already experienced, namely, mental anguish.

Poetry, then, and religion, offered my grandmother a way to rewrite her experience of herself. The important distinction to be made here is the concept of *re*-writing. Religion, for my grandmother was as discontinuous as everything else in her life, and was not able to successfully give her a perceptive framework during her suffering, but later. During acute mental anguish, language, identity, and narrative all become shattered due to the immediacy of pain. However, through the act of rewriting her experiences through religion, she gained some access to creating meaning out of her pain.

I found this process to be present throughout my grandmother's writings. To start, it is important to note the timeline in which she wrote. She was unable to produce any writing until after psychosis and despair had left her, and thus her interpretation was always occurring in hindsight. Within her "Family History," she wrote about the process of finding God after her suffering. After the birth of her second daughter, Sandra, my grandmother writes about her struggles with her mental health. When Sandra became ill, she finally breaks, proclaiming that, "God was on vacation" ("Family History," 173). The same sentiment appears repeatedly in her writings during times of acute mental illness. The meaning that God brings to her suffering, then, does not affect her experiences as much as it defines the overarching narrative surrounding her life, created after the fact.

Religion's promise for my grandmother's rewriting of her present is in many ways eclipsed by the promises that religion seems to make for both the past and future. Christ at Calvary, and the Bible more generally, gave her an unwavering past to try and ground herself in. That past offered her the language in which to write a future that was stable and promised. My eldest aunt, Sherlyn, picked up on this notion, framing it in terms of her experience of her mother's behavior in the present. "She had very strong opinions about God," she claims, "but they did not seem to apply to daily life, just some sweet bye and bye. The nasty

now and now did not seem to contain God. All her connection to God seemed to be for her afterlife . . . even though she believed she was God's pawn, she was only used to help someone after they die. She didn't seem to believe that God was interested in our lives on planet Earth. The only thing that was important was life after death” (Sherlyn Emails).

My mother pushes the notion of the “nasty now and now,” by claiming, “She always held grudges. She would say ‘I've forgiven so and so,’ but then would continue to talk about their transgression (whatever that may be). I always felt that was un-Christian. No we don't forget what makes us mad, but to continually dredge it up is picking at the scab” (Mother Emails).

Both of my aunts and my mother noted the inconsistencies and hypocrisy present in their mother's religious beliefs. The distinction that Sherlyn makes between the “now and now” and the “afterlife,” can be collapsed down into one notion. For my grandmother, it wasn't that the present did not matter; it was that she had no hold on it. The instability which defined her life was always instilling the “nasty” in the “now and now.” Religion, by allowing her to rewrite this nastiness into meaning, allowed her the promise of a stable future.

The future she desired through religion was always inextricably intertwined with her morbid obsession with death. Her thoughts, and indeed her poetry, are always haunted by the desire for death. Throughout her writings, she displays suicidal ideation, often glossing it in a religious sheen. On January 26, 1965, she wrote a poem, which begins, “Today my heart is longing/For the touch of Jesus' hand” (“Poetry”). She then spends the second and third stanzas recounting the “steep path” and “thorns” present in life on earth (“Poetry”). In the final stanza, she returns to the hand imagery, thanking Christ for his help in allowing her to reach the “Gloryland” (“Poetry”). Within the world of this poem, there is no end to suffering on Earth, but only a promise that suffering will cease after death. The hand of Jesus stands as the symbol of that promise, which lovingly guides my grandmother towards her true desire: death. Within this poem, however, there are two hands. There is “Jesus' hand,” which is depicted as the object of desire, and there is also my grandmother's authorial hand. It appears that she is only able to

reach the grasp of the desired hand through death, when her own living hands, and the unstable identity they represent, are eliminated and replaced by the promise of religion.

The relationship between religion and my grandmother's mental illness worked in two directions. Above is an example of how she used religion to rewrite her own symptoms, such as suicidal ideation, in hindsight. The relationship also worked in the opposite direction, where her religious beliefs preceded and influenced the experience of her mental illness. Delusions and hallucinations do not happen in a vacuum, but draw on the preexisting culture and beliefs of the affected individual. In my grandmother's case, this would largely consist of religious notions of goodness and evil. This persisted both in her acute episodes of psychosis as well as during the more dormant periods of her illness.

The most exaggerated manifestation of my grandmother's illness was in the form of hallucinations. On two different occasions, she hallucinated either end of the good/evil divide. The first of these occurred after the birth of her second daughter, Sandra, when she claims to have seen an angel. Much like the "you know" at the end of the poem that opened this section, my grandmother spends most of her writing about this experience merely asserting how well she remembers it. She spends nearly a page assuring her audience that, "Its as clear in my mind today, as then" ("Family History," 209). What are entirely absent are any concrete details describing the angel itself. She claims that it had a "smiling face," indicating that this ethereal being was embodied; yet she gives no other description of the angel ("Family History," 209).

On the other end of the spectrum, years after the birth of her fourth daughter (my mother), my grandmother believed that she travelled to Hell. While admitted to the hospital for pneumonia, my grandmother believed that her dying roommate was pleading with demons not to take her to Hell. My grandmother travelled with this woman, whom she called "Mrs. Simpson," into the underworld, observing the interaction between Mrs. Simpson and her demons ("Family History," 220-221). Much like her account of the angel, she seems to spend an inordinate amount of space upholding the validity of the story, and a relatively small amount

recounting the actual details of the event. She repeats that she remembers the event clearly, only to immediately point out gaps in her own story. Mrs. Simpson apparently tried to quote scripture for her demons, but my grandmother did not remember what verse. What she did remember was the “eerey laughter” of the demons; if there was anything that was Hell for my paranoid grandmother, it was the thought that she was being laughed at (“Family History,” 220-221).

My grandmother’s understanding of good and evil was not always quite so pronounced, but seemed to have been fairly persistent throughout her life. Creating stark binaries like these gave my grandmother a way to impose order on her experience. It also gave her validation for her deep, lifelong paranoia. Her eldest daughter, Sherlyn notes, “Nana thought most people outside of her immediate family were bad. There were few exceptions. She thought everybody was trying to steal from her and therefore, they were bad” (Sherlyn Emails).

Sherlyn says of her mother’s paranoia: “Nana never learned that people were not stealing from her. She was convinced that anything she could not find had been stolen, and she accused whomever she thought was the guilty party. She thought her own daughters were stealing, or even their husbands. As her contacts with people grew over the years, there were more people to accuse. Her nurses, her caregivers, they were all guilty in her mind. She never once had the courage to go to the people she thought guilty, but she accused them to anyone else who would listen. It was irrational, and yes, I think she was mentally ill” (Sherlyn Emails).

“She was ALWAYS paranoid that someone was stealing from her,” my mother told me, “ALWAYS! It was the neighbors, or a church member, or Sherlyn, or [Sherlyn’s husband], or Sandra. (In her later years she thought I stole her money). The maids ALWAYS stole. Funny thing is, when we moved her out of her Gardendale house we found EVERYTHING I ever heard her accuse the neighbor of stealing in her basement!” (Mother Emails).

My grandmother’s belief in evil and demons helped to validate her beliefs that she was being stolen from. There were always spirits that controlled the behavior of others, and those

who did not believe as fervently as she were at risk of behaving wickedly. This is the reasoning she used to explain her belief that she was constantly being persecuted.

Not only did religion offer her a promise for the future, but a certain level of observation and persecution in the present. She connected deeply with the belief in the tempting forces of the devil, because she already believed in her constant persecution. The guiding principles of religion allowed my grandmother the opportunity to make sense of what was, for all intents and purposes, senseless. What the rest of us clearly saw as madness, she saw as the product of the forces of good and evil.

On top of every other promise she was afforded by her religious beliefs, Christianity helped fulfill my grandmother's need for drama and excitement. Being a housewife and mother in what I have already seen to be quite loathsome living environments, was dreary and mundane, and left her longing for exhilaration. The ways that my grandmother utilized religion in order to fill her life with excitement appear most predominantly in her "Family History," though traces of this appear elsewhere. In particular, she spends the first half of her semi-factual, semi-fictional familial narrative engaged in the dramatization of religion. This portion of the text is that which she devoted to the telling of her grandparents' and parents' life stories.

The most striking example of her dramatized recounting of religious events comes in the form of a travelling minister, Brother Walter Drew, who visited my great-grandparents' small Mississippi town several decades before my grandmother's birth. According to my grandmother, Brother Drew had just come from a large revival in California, and believed that God had sent him to this particular town in Mississippi. My grandmother went on to portray this mysterious preacher as Christ incarnate.

For his first act, Brother Drew laid hands upon a man who was crippled from birth, and like magic, the man rose and began to dance. As more and more of the town began to attend Brother Drew's revival to get healed, a group of townsmen decided they must put an end to the "fanaticism" caused by the teachings and acts of Brother Drew ("Family History," 91-92). The

men took Brother Drew to the woods and “beat him unmercifully, stomped on his back, with their feet, until all the ribs were torn away from his backbone, poured tar & feathers on his head, and left him for dead” (“Family History,” 91-92). Despite his assured death, Brother Drew recited scripture, and was raised from his dire state. By the very same evening, the amazing preacher had returned to his pulpit and the preaching of the word.

Brother Drew taps into multiple levels of my grandmother’s needs, as well as the reasons those needs remain unfulfilled. The most obvious need is, indeed, that of excitement and wonder. She had lifelong delusions of grandeur, and Brother Drew gave her a justification for that grandeur. By writing him into her “Family History,” she writes herself into the company of Christ by proxy of her parents. Her separation from this event (beyond, of course, its fictional quality) remains one of temporality. Earlier, I asserted that religion gave my grandmother a stable past in which to identify herself. She shows in this particular retelling, however, that the past remains subject to these types of retellings, and is in fact never stable. Even more factual narratives are semi-fictional constructions. Thus, my grandmother wrote Brother Drew in order to connect with the past she desired. While at the same time, Drew’s presence in her narrative undermines her ability to connect with any consistent past.

Returning to my grandmother’s religious delusions offers one of the most disorienting conflations that my grandmother made to religion—her sexuality. It is not a coincidence that my grandmother’s first indication of sexual maturation in her writings coincides with her first religious experience. One hot, summer night, before air conditioning in rural Mississippi, when my grandmother was “just a teenager,” she found herself in the presence of God. “I awoke in the middle of the night so hot & uncomfortable I couldn’t get back to sleep—When I felt a hand touch my brow so cool & refreshing” (“Family History,” 150). She goes on to explain that the hand that comforted her was none other than the hand of God.

It is difficult to deny the eroticism of the scene that my grandmother sets. The masculine presence of God visits my pubescent grandmother in her bedroom and wipes the sweat from her brow. She upholds this vision of God as a husbandly figure within her poetry as well.

“In the stillness of the night let me find thee . . . ” (“Poetry,” Sep 12, 1974)

“His tender touch/His loving voice . . . ” (“Poetry,” Oct 14)

“Please have your way with me . . . ” (“Poetry,” April 16, 1974)

What God gave my grandmother during this crucial formative period of sexual maturation is a socially appropriate outlet through which to channel her desire. For the moment, this outlet seemed to promise her relief from her suffering. Like everything else in her life, however, this relationship would only promise instability in the future. From this point forward, a standard had been set by which she would compare all of her future relationships.

Mama Married a Preacher Man . . .

My heart tries to give Him praise He deserves. But what comes out is only tiney drops of nothing, That God takes & turnes into pure, sparkling, dazzling drops of pure flowless diamonds that is so valueable, to me, that no ammount of money could buy them: praise Him (“Phone Address Book,” Sun, Apr 1, 1973).

The surface narrative of the above journal entry would indicate that my grandmother was satisfied with the romantic relationship she shared with God. However, like everything else in her life, there is a certain lack of fulfillment underwriting the sentiments of this statement. To start, she describes the love she has for God as an attempt, which is ultimately unsuccessful, saying she “tries” to give him what he deserves. Her own expressions of love, which she describes as “tiney drops of nothing,” are in fact, entirely missing within this romance. The speech that follows seems to compensate for the unfulfillment that she appears to feel in this relationship. Though she craved love, she managed to express here that her own inability to give

love underwrote any comfort that earthly, and indeed heavenly, relationships could offer. When it comes to romance, the flowery, gilded language that she used in her writings always served to replace the romance that she sees as missing in her life.

As with the other aspects of her life, my grandmother craved romance as a way of filling the void created by her own inability to give and receive love. What she sought was salvation from herself through fairytale romance full of passion, joy, and love. What she got was Joe Waller.

I never met my grandfather. He died just after my first birthday. Through the stories, which always seem to end with “I wish you could have met him,” he has survived in my collective family’s conscience. Joe Waller, or “Pop” as he was known after having grandchildren, has become somewhat mythical through the years of retelling. My parents laugh as they describe the crazy outfits my colorblind grandfather would create, and sadden thinking about the family pets that my grandfather “took care of,” as they got old and sick over the years. They recount my grandfather’s initial distrust of my father, onto whom my grandfather projected all of his distrust of medical professionals. More than anything, however, my mother and aunts all swear that they survived their mother’s insanity because of their father’s love.

William Joseph Waller was a travelling minister who occasionally held revivals in my grandmother’s town of Oxford, Mississippi. On one such trip, he asked my grandmother for her hand in marriage. The two were practically strangers when they got married—a fact for which my grandmother never seemed to forgive my grandfather. Their second child, Sandra, says of her parents’ marriage, “. . . they never even held hands until after they were married. I asked why she married him, and she said, ‘because he was a Christian, he was good looking, and I thought he would be a good husband’” (Sandra Emails). My mother fills in additional details, claiming, “They NEVER had a date before they were married! He was a handsome minister who came to her town frequently to hold revival meetings. She was a pretty single girl from what I

can only assume was a respectable church family. Dad proposed and she accepted. It went down hill from there” (Mother Emails).

Sandra and my mother gave nearly identical retellings of the family lore, saying, “My dad made all the arrangements for the wedding. They were married at his parents’ home, and his younger brother was the minister who performed the ceremony. He and his wife had come from Texas for the wedding, and my father had the poor thought to invite his brother and wife to spend the night with them in their new house (with only one bedroom). And he offered the bedroom to his brother and wife!!!! While he and Nana slept on the floor in the living room. This set the tone for the next 50 plus years!!!!” (Mother Emails).

My mother goes on to say, plainly, “My father was far from romantic” (Mother Emails). Upon my first reading of my grandmother’s “Family History,” it seemed that her marriage was a tragedy due to my grandfather’s lack of romance. She writes extensively about the courtship she felt she had been denied, and revisits this wound frequently. Despite the fact that she wrote on page 159 of her “Family History” that, “neither of us were concerned about the strange courtship & marriage we had had,” she returned to blaming him not 15 pages later, saying “I also remembered I was never told ‘I love you,’ at the beginning too.” Her criticism went beyond that of their courtship, however. Within the “Family History,” she criticized his role as the head of their household. She claimed that they “never did things as a family,” and went so far as to say that “ministers never loved their families” (173, 175). She blames her husband for her loneliness, saying repeatedly that he was “too buisy” to pay attention to her. In one of her only moments of candidly acknowledging her own illness, my grandmother says, “My husband did not understand my mental condition” (“Family History,” 199).

On the last page of the “Family History,” she wrote the following words: “Joe’s thoughts & in put into all this is Very welcome also. I know, there is always two sides to every story” (233). Considering the way that my grandmother complained about her husband and marriage, I found it odd that she would include this at all. I came to realize, however, that like everything else in

her life, there were in fact two sides to my grandmother's version of this story. The request for her husband's input clashes with the most obvious story of her marriage, in which her husband wronged my grandmother by refusing to love her. The consideration towards her husband shown in this comment aligns more neatly with the other lived version of her marriage—that is, that my grandmother needed, and created, a loveless marriage.

My mother claims, sarcastically, "I once told Sherlyn that mom taught me how to have a happy marriage. I looked at her and did just the opposite!" (Mother Emails). I believe this to be truer than my mother realized when she said it. My grandmother was always very extreme and drawn to binaries. My mother captured this sentiment, saying, "Everything was black and white with my mother" (Mother Emails). If she could not have the perfect marriage that could save her from herself, then she seemed determined to have a marriage entirely devoid of love. Rather than eliminating her shortcomings, this kind of relationship gave my grandmother an outlet to project her suffering. Much like religion offered an opportunity to rewrite her present, my grandmother's marriage brought her one step closer to being able to rewrite herself as a martyr.

The following example from her "Family History," offers the most poignant example of her rewriting of her own suffering onto her marriage:

It hurts, to tell you how unpleasent I was. When my own husbond didnt want to be With me. But I didn't care. I had come to the conclusion he didn't love me and he never had, He only wanted me for a bed partner & some one to take care of the house & children and I was doing a very bad job of all of it. ("Family History," 208-209)

In the first line, she acknowledges her own failings, caused by her mental illness. She then reconstructs this sentiment so that the onus for how "unpleasent" she was fell on her husband's lack of romance. She is ultimately unsuccessful at trying to shift blame entirely onto my grandfather, and returns in the end to her own responsibility for the failures of their household. Despite the negative sentiments she expresses about her husband here, her inability to fully

blame him shows her underlying personal guilt and sympathies for my grandfather, which helps to explain the presence of her request for his input.

The quotation that opened this section illuminated the instability of my grandmother's ability to give and receive love—even the seemingly perfect love of God. If her construction of a perfect romance is a failure, there seems little possibility that she could have had a loving and romantic marriage. By ensuring that the lack of romance was reciprocal, she was able to deflect some of the blame onto her husband. My aunt Sandra notes, “she clearly had other ideas in mind [regarding romance] but seems she never conveyed those appropriately” (Sandra Emails). It seems there was no perfect love that could save my grandmother from her unhappiness. Rather than trying to articulate any constructive suggestions for her husband, she spent her marriage engaged in upholding the lovelessness of her marriage. My mother seems to confirm this theory when she explains, “So she craved romance that she never got. AND when my dad tried to be as romantic as he knew how, she belittled his meager effort, so he stopped trying!” (Mother Emails). These are the two versions of her marriage that worked simultaneously—the constant longing for romance, and her perpetual undermining of any potential for it.

This complex relationship only ensured another hole in my grandmother's life as she attempted to construct an understanding of herself. Once again, art gives my grandmother the opportunity to try and find what she was missing. Like those that preceded, this void was answered with its own particular artistic medium. In this case, narrative fiction fulfilled my grandmother's need for romance—or rather, I should say, reified the need for romance outside of the bounds of her lived experience.

In particular, my grandmother wrote a novella, “April Love,” to replace the love that was absent in her own life. The name of my grandmother's protagonist, for whom the story is named, gives a lot of insight into my grandmother's understanding of and need for love. Her character's name happens to be the first word of the text, mirroring a famous work written just two years after my grandmother's birth. The famous opening line of Eliot's *The Wasteland* proclaims,

“April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land” (29). What this depiction of April does is invert the clichéd expectations associated with the life-giving season of spring. Rather than focusing on the new life given by flowers, Eliot places the focuses on the death that inevitably precedes. As seen in my grandmother’s religious poetry, her own understandings of new life are dependent on her obsession with death. Despite the promises of spring and new life that April is supposed to bring to my grandmother, my grandmother’s predilections are always present in her depictions of life and love.

There is also the association between April and storms. Every child has heard and repeated the nursery rhyme: “April showers bring May flowers.” In trying to associate herself with the flower-bearing months of spring, it seems my grandmother traps her literary counterpart in the rain and gloom of cruel April. She wishes for April to find her way past the suffering of the storm into the beauty of May. Like her own experience, however, her protagonist remains suspended in the showers of April with only the hope of eventual “lilacs” through death (Eliot 29).

The family name, Love, is a much more obvious ploy on my grandmother’s part to claim love through her creative process. According to this model, love is not only as stable as one’s name—an irony that should not be overlooked based on my grandmother’s experience of her name—but also something that can be inherited from one generation to another. This final point seems to be the purpose of her novella. More important than the plot, which follows the extended courtship of April Love and her wealthy neighbor, Jim Branton, is the multigenerational portrait this work provides of stable, continuous love and affection.

Interestingly, the first half of my grandmother’s “Family History,” in which she recounts the lives of her grandmother and parents, is nearly identical to the events of her novella. The following are excerpts from each, which mirror one another not only in narrative, but in language and imagery:

Deep in the woods, away from the City, the factory and the children—they were waking up to birds singing and going to bed with cricket chirking and frog croaking. But Mary was missing the sound of Children. Despite everything they were enjoying thier rest.

Early on the Morning they had planed to go home. They were awaikened with loud thunder, lightening and pouring rain. There was a fierce wind browng through the trees. Wil rolled out of bed, closed the Windows and built a fire in the large fire place—Made it feel so cozy inside Wil climed back into bed, pulled Mary close to him and said, As long as I hove you close to me, I could go through anything

They did'nt sleep any more but they were enjoying the flickering light and the trickling rain and they loneliness that seemed to suround them (“April Love”).

She also writes:

It was a cool, clear night. Papa needed to stay out side for awhile—Moma was resting. He looked up into the sky and Marveled at the beauty of the Heavens. He had never seen so meny starts in his Whole life, he didn't think. The churping of the creckets and deep throated bull frogs filled the air with “knee deep,” knee deep—all kinds of lovely night sounds (“Family History,” 35).

These are only one of a plethora of comparisons that can be drawn between the two tales. The similarities between these two stories can be partially attributed to my grandmother's mental illness, which caused her to conflate fact and fiction. This is only part of the story, however. Much like my grandmother's attempts to connect with a stable past through religion, she is trying to write love into her own family tree in a manner that, as with the Loves, is heritable from one generation to the next.

“April Love” opens with the protagonist crying about her beloved in front of a window. The narrative then shifts into the past to establish the relationship between the Love parents, eventually tracing the extended courtship between April and Jim. The timeline of this romance seemed a bit convoluted, as it seemed that the relationship stopped and started quite frequently. According to her telling, April and Jim started dating for the first time on multiple occasions, only to be pulled apart. In the end, April and Jim are old and married with many grandchildren. There is never a return to the opening scene of sadness, which seemed to insinuate Jim's death. The romantic love between the two over the course of the novella seems to have overwritten the

necessity of death, even as the opening scene remains as a haunting presence in the reader's mind.

My grandmother focused so much on continuity of love that she was unable to maintain continuity of narrative, ultimately undermining her own efforts at stability. Much like her own landscapes, the flow of narrative always seemed to be moving too quickly for my grandmother to be able to hold down. Her own lived experience of romance would always influence her authorial role, underwriting her story.

Then Comes a Baby in a Baby Carriage . . .

A rose has bloomed
Among the thorns
It's shining bright
In perfect form

Oh rose of beauty
Are you choked
Wearing thorns and briers
As your cloak?
("Poetry," March 29, 1974)

The first time I read the above poem, I assumed the rose of which she spoke was representative of one, or all, of her daughters. The connection of blooming drew my mind to the begetting of life through conception. Reading it in this way, I struggled to understand the meaning of the following stanza. Later, while investigating more of my grandmother's creative works, I began to notice the way in which she spoke of motherhood. My grandmother was always narcissistic, and I began to realize that her understanding of motherhood was not the traditional one of selflessness, but an egocentric view that spoke of children as parasitic and dangerous. If the rose she mentions above is her own emergence into motherhood, the poem makes more sense. She finds beauty in her role as a mother, which emerges out of a lifetime of suffering, which she depicts as "thorns" in the first stanza. Rather than saving her from the

thorns, however, she sees motherhood as a progression of her own suffering closing in on her, strangling the life from her.

The following painting supports the reading of the poem above:



What struck me at first as most apparent about this painting was what I see as a glorification of martyrdom. I saw the subject of the painting, the shed, as my grandmother. Separated from the world, yet impinged upon by nature—this was my grandmother’s curse. The lighting seems to glorify the position of the martyr, forming a saintly halo or corona around the image of the shed.

In my first interpretation, this is where my analysis stopped. Pushing further, I realized that the painting could also be read as an artistic representation of my grandmother’s understanding of motherhood. If the shed represents my grandmother’s womb, the meaning of the painting shifts slightly so that the sentiment begins to mirror the poem that opened this section. The fence and vine becomes an umbilical cord in this metaphor, with the fetus represented as the bush and flowers in the lower left-hand corner. The direction of the fence as well as the aforementioned lighting patterns draws the viewer away from the fetus, and towards

the shed. The vines wrapped around the shed represent the strangulation of the mother by her unborn child, just as the rose is “choked...by thorns and briars.”

In 1944, my grandmother had her first daughter, Bettye Sherlyn Waller. In the “Family History,” I found interest in the way that my grandmother talked about pregnancy—the highly symbolic state of ultimate motherhood. Because of the literary significance of this particular moment in a woman’s life, there is a plethora of ways to say that one is pregnant. A woman is “with child,” “eating for two,” has a “bun in the oven,” or is simply “expecting.” Yet, my grandmother does not use any of these phrases to signify her own pregnancy. She returns time and time again to a phrase of her own creation: “In a short time I became sick with our first child” (“Family History,” 159).

She returns to the same phrase again two years later when she becomes “sick with” her second daughter, Sandra Jo Waller (“Family History,” 162). She takes this further when she discusses this particular pregnancy, in what is one of the first truly horrifying moments of her “Family History.” She claims that she didn’t know “if my baby was living or dead, and...I didn’t really care” (“Family History,” 165). Her ability to flippantly discuss the possibility of having a stillborn child is weighty and disturbing. This seemed much more like the grandmother that I had known and heard about—the one who left deep wounds on those she loved the most.

Through an analysis of my grandmother’s past, I have found a new understanding for her conceptualization of motherhood. Much like the discussion of April Love, my grandmother’s predilections made it impossible for her to understand new life without intermingling it with death. This does not reduce the horror produced by a mother whose womb becomes Schrödinger’s playground, but it at least offers a sympathetic view of her.

Like her marriage, motherhood quickly revealed itself to be incapable of providing any answers or identity for my grandmother. In the same manner, then, it became a place for her to project her own lifetime of horrors. I have avoided giving my grandmother a diagnosis thus far, because I don’t believe it does her story justice to impose boundaries on her experience as I have

done in the past. However, I do believe with fair certainty that she suffered from severe postpartum depression and psychosis. Certainly her past history showed her psychotic tendencies, which post-pregnancy began to overrun her life. Her description of this is as follows:

I couldn't sleep, I was crying all the time, I was afraid to go into the next room & leave my children alone. Yes, in the broad open daylight. The fear was greatest when I thought about getting pregnant again. Oh God please help me I cried & prayed ("Family History," 166).

The fear she describes is more akin to what we would call paranoia. She showed signs of paranoia throughout her life, so it stands to reason that pregnancy would compound these symptoms. Though she eventually found reprieve from her acute symptoms, the association between pregnancy and psychosis had solidified, giving her reason to blame her children for her symptoms throughout the rest her life. She always saw her children as parasitic, and thus somehow responsible for their mother's misery. The following offers an example of my grandmother's understanding of her children as a burden on her:

Only God know's my feelings right now. Alone, unwanted & depressed. Alone is what I am now except for 2 little girls who think nothing of making a lot of noise, fighting and calling the name Moma! . . . It's hot, partly cloudy and a very unpleasant day" ("Telegraph Address Book," Sun. Jun 14, 1964).

As I found with the other relationships in her life, my grandmother was incapable of giving love. The wounds that her eldest daughters sustained from being raised by a mother who was so unstable are largely due to their mother's inability to love them, combined with the abusive behavior that I can only attribute to her psychosis. Her second child, Sandra, said of her mother, "I think that she thought she was a loving person but I did not see her that way. She did not provide the mothering traits to me that I consider loving. It was my father who put me to bed as a child. And he was the one who would get up in the middle of the night with us if we were sick. I never remember my mother in any of those roles. I don't remember my mother ever hugging me

as a child. I have many memories of my father's affection and hugs but not my mother's” (Sandra Emails).

I do not wish to merely demonize my grandmother, as is certainly easy to do. Rather, her role as a mother shows the tragic consequences that mental suffering has for a family. Just as my grandmother could not find love in her “Family History” that was stable and heritable, she could not offer this kind of love to her own progeny. Instead, she gave them the only two things that she had to offer: her creative search for meaning, and her chaos.

I have already acknowledged, through personal experience and through an analysis of her life’s work, that my grandmother did not know how to love. It seems that despite her obsession with love as an object to be possessed, it was difficult for my grandmother to understand love as a continuous process. Within her narratives, love was something that each of the characters somehow already possessed. Her daughters help clarify this connection, as they indicate that their mother gave love in the form of tangible objects. Despite not understanding the process of loving, she did understand the process of creating. She used this ability as best she could to try to express her desire to love.

Nana always appreciated beautiful things, and spent wisely and had a knack for finding pretty things for not a lot of money. She did without things early on so that she could buy me pretty clothes, or she would make me clothes from pretty material. She spent weeks before one Christmas when I was about eight or nine, crocheting (or was it knitting . . . I think crocheting) a beautiful evening gown for a doll to sit in the middle of my bed (Sherlyn Emails).

I think she showed love by making us things. I do remember her making clothes for us that she was very proud of. I remember her cutting out paper dolls and paper furniture out of catalogs for us. I also have a fond memory of going to town with her and she bought me candy. So that's the way she showed love to me that I remember (Sandra Emails).

More than any of the dolls, clothes, or paintings that my grandmother gave her daughters, the transferal of her creative energies towards her daughters was my grandmother’s ultimate sign of

love. Throughout her life, this search for meaning and stability through art was the only constant. Once she had daughters, she spent less of her energy trying to hold back her demons or give meaning to her suffering, and more of her energy trying to replace the motherly love that she was not able to show.

This image of my grandmother as a martyr is not the entire story, however. To leave the discussion of her role as a mother here is to do a grave injustice to the experiences of her daughters. My grandmother did give parts of herself to her children, yet she also grew deep resentment towards them. As her mental condition worsened over the course of her life, her narcissistic and paranoid delusions grow. Sandra explains this dynamic between their mother's attempts at affection and her bitter paranoia: "Because mother put such a high value on things of beauty, she was obsessed with the fact that if something (anything, really) was misplaced or lost, she assumed/truly believed that someone stole it from her. Even in thinking about this now I see that if she equated things with love, then if she thought someone had stolen some thing from her, they might as well have stolen her love" (Sandra Emails).

Though her paranoia was generally turned outward from her family, she often saw her children as conspiring against her. Sherlyn told me about a particular occasion in which her mother's paranoia was turned on her. "She thought Daddy was on my side against her, which was unreasonable. I remember a particularly very ugly conversation where she was screaming at me for thinking I had won, but said she knew what was going on. It was very pointed in a way, but she never said what she knew. She even said, 'Yes, I know I'm mean, but you deserve it'" (Sherlyn Emails).

My grandmother's children each received their share of verbal and emotional injuries at the hands of their mother. My own mother has told me more times than I remember in my life that her first memory is that of her mother chasing her with a hammer, and the fear of what her mother would have done if she ever caught up to her. Her eldest, Sherlyn, recalls, "Nana was very affectionate with her children when they were young. She didn't fair so well with me and

the sister closest to my age when we got old enough to demonstrate a will of our own; she could not deal with me as an older child when I was ‘bad’ either and she would lock me in a closet. Dad would usually come home from work and let me out of the closet” (Sherlyn Emails).

Once again, I find it necessary to speak more clinically. Having engaged with my grandmother’s life, works, and children, I find it impossible to believe that the abuse her daughters endured came from anywhere other than my grandmother’s mental illness. Though she only ever gives brief indicators of the types of experiences that she endured, I find it nearly certain that these extreme examples of hostility came out of her experience of psychosis. It does not, of course, justify the cruelty that her daughters learned to endure from a young age, but it helps, for lack of better phrasing, to give meaning to the madness.

As I mentioned earlier, the efforts my grandmother devoted to trying to raise children took away from her ability to fend back her own demons, and her mental illness began to show through. I believe my grandmother was someone who spent a great deal of her life trying to hide her mental illness, which is why she never received the care she needed. With daughters in need of raising, my grandmother’s madness and attempts to rein in her symptoms bled into her ability to serve as a mother.

As mental illness encroached more and more on my grandmother’s daily life, she doubled down on her systematic efforts to impose discipline and order on her life. She became very rigid in her understandings of cleanliness and personal beauty. If she could not find stability within herself, she would ensure that the external world was within her control. My mother has always talked about her mother’s obsessive cleanliness. During my mother’s childhood, my grandmother would clean the house every Saturday, sending her daughters outside to play as she scrubbed their meager home. This extended to her treatment of her daughters as well. My mother recalls fondly, “She was fastidious about cleanliness. But I remember it fondly, that I would be soooooo sleepy after we had traveled somewhere, but we were not going to bed without a bath. So I remember that lovingly. She would bathe us, put us in

clean pj's and tuck us in. I remember how good it felt to be clean, smell clean, and be cozy in bed to fall asleep" (Mother Emails).

Appearances, which had mattered to her before, became of ultimate import to my grandmother after she had children. The same fastidiousness she showed in her obsession with cleanliness came to define her understanding of personal beauty. These efforts seemed to begin with the discipline my grandmother enacted on her own body, but radiated outward to her daughters.

According to her writings, my grandmother's obsession with beauty began quite young. She writes about her jealousy over the compliments her niece Merlene received based on her appearance. She writes, "As children, Merlene was given Compliments on what a pretty little girl she was. And I would get my feeling hurt because they didn't say any thing nice about Me" ("Family History," 130). Especially as she got older, and her other ways of maintaining order began to crumble, she seemed to place more and more of her personal value in maintaining her physical appearance.

Within her writings, she glorifies women's thin bodies. On the first page of the "Family History," while developing the image of her idyllic grandparents, she praises Sarah Byrd's "tiney little waist." My mother claims, "All of her life 'thin was great and wonderful' and those who were overweight were 'slobs that didn't take care of themselves'" (Mother Emails). In order to maintain control over her body's appearance, my grandmother purged herself in order to remain thin.

Her second daughter, Sandra, said of her mother's behavior, "Body image was huge to my mother! She equated beauty with a slender body. I'm sure she thought a genteel southern lady, which is how I believe she saw herself, would never be fat! In that regard, I do believe my mother struggled with bulimia when I was still living at home. I recall many instances when she would throw up after dinner saying that the food had made her sick at her stomach. She did not want her girls to be fat. I felt like her love was conditional, if we were pretty enough or thin

enough” (Sandra Emails). Her response shows how their mother’s body dysmorphia spilled over into the lives of her daughters. On another occasion, Sandra recalls, “She once told me that she would give me some of her clothes if I would lose weight. I told her that I didn't want her clothes. (Her love I would have gladly taken, but I didn't feel much of that either!)” (Sandra Emails).

Just as she held herself to unreasonable standards, she damned each of her daughters to feeling as if they never measured up. I have heard that one of the most effective predictors of body image and eating disorders in young girls is to listen to the ways in which their mother speaks about her body. My aunts and mother were exposed from a very young age to an exceptional degree of objectification and scrutiny. Her first two daughters she speaks of as her “blond and brunette,” conflating their identities with their feminine appearance (“Family History,” 178).

Each of my grandmother’s three living daughters carries with them the legacy of their mother. In many respects, this legacy is one that each has, to a certain degree, tried to outrun. Each daughter carries the memories of their mother’s anger and absence, creativity and chaos. In a way, the three of them are martyrs no more or less than my grandmother was. They all gave and took and fell short. In the end, each of her daughters found a meaningful life, full of the wide spectrum of joys and heartaches that life has to offer. It is not despite their mother that this was accomplished, as I have spent my entire life believing, but carrying their mother with them—always embodying a bit of the chaos that their mother’s life instilled in them.

Help Me Rhonda . . .

To Rhonda
A Special Angel:

A bundle of love, was dropped from
above. God gave her especially for
Me to love.

God said, "Take her home and Keep
her for me. When your life is finished
you'll come home to me.
("Poetry," April 29, 1988)

In 1956, my grandmother had her third daughter, Rhonda Jean Waller, after which things began to change. The story my grandmother tells about Rhonda's birth, whether true or not, is both tragic and horrifying. Her physician minimized her pain, and giggled throughout the beginning of her contractions. When it came time for delivery, the doctor was nowhere to be found, and the nurses held back the child in her womb for over forty-five minutes. According to my grandmother, the physician later admitted to his morphine addiction. My mother recently told me that the same hospital was eventually sued for the practice of physically damming delivery. Regardless of her entry into the world, Rhonda was born, and my grandmother's life was about to change.

It wasn't long, maybe a couple of months, before my grandparents suspected something was wrong with their child. Rhonda began to miss developmental marker after developmental marker. She did not raise her head around the time an infant should; she did not learn to mimic faces on time; she did not walk or talk on time. According to my grandmother, her physician advised her to institutionalize Rhonda, telling my grandmother that she would be vegetative, with no quality of life whatsoever. Perhaps the physician really did tell her this; after all, it was a very different era for individuals with mental disabilities. Or maybe remembering events this way allowed my grandmother to recreate the past so that she had a choice—and she chose Rhonda.

As with her other children, my grandmother became very mentally unstable after Rhonda's birth. Her feelings of guilt over Rhonda's condition spilled out into psychosis. Her daughters acknowledge their mother's devastation after their sister's birth, saying, "After Rhonda was born, she became very depressed and withdrew from daily life. She would sit for

hours rocking Rhonda without much interaction with us. Mostly her interactions were angry and she felt it was Mama and Rhonda against the world. But what I remember most was total lack of emotion. I was 13 when Rhonda was born and I had seen Nana full of life when I was younger. But after Rhonda was born, emotions were almost invisible. She was very depressed” (Sherlyn Emails). This description is extremely rich in its ability to capture my grandmother’s mental and emotional transformation.

As depression set in, my grandmother’s delusions and hallucinations mounted, fuelled by her feelings of personal responsibility for her daughter’s handicap. It is during this time in her life that she writes one of her few direct recountings of her experience of psychosis.

One day I picked up a book & opened it and there it was in big, bold black letters I read it over & over. It said I was to blame for Rhondas Condition, every thing was my fault If I’d been a better person it would not have happoned—Now I would have to live with it the rest of my life. Now, I could not blame anyone else—It was my fault—I had just read it in this book! What kind of book was this, anyway. I looked, it was a World Book Encyclopedia. I slombed it shut and paced the floor. I tried to pray but it did no good. If only I could rest (“Family History,” 201).

This new and final crisis seemed to be more than my grandmother’s mind could take. She donned alternating psychotic delusions and blunted affect, each carrying their own share of heartache. Her paranoia became too much for her to hide, and she writes about a particular instance in which she broke down in a grocery store:

More & more I was being gripped by fear & panic attaches,. When I’d have to go out in Crouds to buy grocery or whatever I had to do...I can remember having to rush out of the grocery store, away from the crowds, leaving my groceries, telling the grocery boy I would have to wait outside to get fresh air. He would bag my groceries & come outside to find me. Shakingm I would pay him and manage to get back home to the safety of my four walls. Over & over Day & Night the battle raged (“Family History,” 200).

Out of this experience comes a new and grotesque development in my grandmother's morbid conceptualization of the world. She finishes her tale about the grocery store as follows:

My heart would beat so hard I felt as if I was having a heart attack. I was short of breath, I was smothering. I felt like screaming, I've had enough—I can't stand anymore of this, Oh if only I could die! But I couldn't die & leave Rhonda. Oh, if we both could die. ("Family History," 201).

This graphic, violent desire for murder-suicide becomes a regular feature in my grandmother's writing throughout this period of her life. The calm manner in which she expresses this longing is enough to make my stomach turn. And then, something happened.

Perhaps the psychosis lifted just enough, or the guilt receded a tiny bit, but my grandmother began to rewrite her role as the mother of a child with disabilities. More and more she identified herself with her penultimate daughter. My aunt, in her remembrance of this time in their lives, accurately recalls the importance of the rocking chair that my grandmother spent her time in, rocking her child for hours on end. The importance of this scene did not make itself clear until I reread my grandmother's description of the rocker within her own account.

I was faced with a day of despair, no hope of change in sight cuddled in an old platform rocker with a precious little girl by my side Where we had rocked side by side, it seemed for hundreds of miles, With no destination in mind, I could find no place in the future where things might be better ("Family History," 199).

Up until this point in her life, my grandmother had been desperately trying to fill the emptiness that characterized her own life. She fought, and too often failed, to reign in the madness that always threatened to take away the meaning of her struggles. Something about Rhonda was a breaking point for my grandmother, and she started, bit by bit, to stop fighting. Much as she'd sought a place where she felt complete, the rocker represents a place that is omnipotent in its complete and utter emptiness. My grandmother saw this child as her truest progeny, as she

seemed to embody the same void as my grandmother. Together, the two could exist as nothing, and rock, going nowhere.

It was this epiphany, the newfound lack of resistance to her fate, that changed my grandmother forever. More and more, her identity became one with Rhonda's, as she saw them as two halves of the same void. She says of her penultimate daughter:

My time was still consumed with Rhonda. I felt I owed her so much, my time was what I had to give & Day & Night I had to be near her, touching, rocking, holding ("Family History," 198).

And later:

The happiest place I could be was touching Rhonda. I did not want to be away from her one Minute. I wanted to sleep with Rhonda. When I didn't sleep with her, I would sit or Kneal, by her bed and hold her hond while she slept ("Family History," 199).

She acknowledges the loss of herself to Rhonda through words such as "consumed." Her emotions became those of her daughter's, and she lived through Rhonda's experiences. Being close to Rhonda was the only time she felt complete, even if what was being completed was their nothingness.

The merging of my grandmother's identity with Rhonda's did not stop my grandmother's artistic pursuits. Most, if not all, of the sources I have used to understand her came after Rhonda's birth. What I do believe it did was eliminate much of the urgency and anger that she harbored in her pursuits. Though she did not become fulfilled or access the understanding of love as a continuous process, she seemed to lose the rage that mounted during her marriage and early motherhood. By the time my mother was born, three years after Rhonda, my grandmother seemed more fatalistic, and had a calmness about her during portions of my mother's teenage years and young adulthood that she had not displayed since childhood.

This is not to say that everything was happy in their household. My grandmother remained narcissistic, paranoid, bulimic, and often quite depressed. Her mental illness plagued

all of her life, but through this brief reprieve, she was able to produce much of the art in those few decades that solidified her life's story just as she would want it told. In the years that psychosis briefly lifted, she left a story of heartaches and failures that gave meaning to her life.

“I Wish We’d All Been Sweet” . . .

I can't believe how the years have passed, but I'm a very proud mother & grandmother. Four beautiful & talented daughters Three grandchildren (So far) that I adore. Who could ask For anything more (“Family History,” 217).

In 2000, right after my Kindergarten graduation, my grandmother moved to my hometown of Dothan, Alabama. Not long after this, she had a heart attack, and she and Rhonda moved into our house, where her mind deteriorated—slowly at first and then at a more rapid pace. At first it was in the way she treated my mother. She was always illogical, but her ability to draw meaningful conclusions vanished, and my mother never stopped trying to correct her. The relationship between my grandmother and mother worsened over time, and there were nearly always arguments in my house. A classic narcissistic manipulator, Nana would be syrupy sweet one moment, only to unleash her wrath the next. I grew up feeling bitterness towards my grandmother, and disbelief at my mother's inability to tell her no. And where were my aunts? Why would they leave my mother alone to deal with this wicked woman?

In reading and understanding my grandmother's life, I realized I was working through three generations of repressed and misunderstood relationships. My aunts certainly endured more than their share of traumas. My grandmother could be unbelievably cruel, and it seemed to be directed at them more often than not. Whether she acknowledges it or not, I think my mother took care of my grandmother as much out of condolences to her sisters as out of love for her mother. It seems she felt that she had not endured her share of their mother's madness.

And mad she became. For many months, there were chickens living in my car. Each day when I returned from school or work, I parked my red SUV in the driveway just outside my

grandmother's window. There was no explanation as to how the chickens came to be in my car, or even any particular interest in trying to figure out why. For decades, people have been trying to figure out why the chicken crossed the road, and yet there seemed to be no philosophical wondering as to their motives in taking up roost in a high schooler's car. Regardless of how or why they appeared, one day, my grandmother looked out the window, and there they were.

She told my mother in hushed tones about the chickens, urging her to warn me about their presence. (As I spent as little time in my grandmother's room as possible, she had little opportunity to tell me herself). Growing up poor in the agricultural south, my grandmother was no stranger to farm animals such as these. They would, of course, stink up my beautiful carriage. For months, the chickens were a regular feature of my grandmother's conversations, little details of their daily activities scattered throughout.

Eventually, she retracted her earlier concerns about the chickens. She came to realize over the course of her relationship with the chickens that they were much more polite and hygienic than any of the chickens with which she was familiar. Rather than laying their droppings willy-nilly in the cab of my car, they would climb out of the tailpipe and do their business in the yard before returning to the safety of the car. The rest of the family laughed over the chickens, and they became a running joke.

As I already described, my grandmother's mind was obsessed with the dark and morbid, and even seemingly benign hallucinations always seemed to become intertwined with her fascination with death. Long after they had appeared, my grandmother confided in my mother once again regarding my relationship with the chickens. "Don't tell Laura..." began the supposed secret between them. My grandmother did not want me to see what had become of the chickens, as she worried that it would be too upsetting for me. My father, a workaholic who was likely not even at home when my grandmother "saw" him, had slaughtered my companions, and strung their corpses up like a strand of perverse garland adorning what had once been their place of refuge.

Thus ended the chickens that lived in my car.

Visions of farm animals were not the only symptoms of my grandmother's psychosis. The tv spoke to her, and she spoke back. At one point, she believed the government to be chasing after her. She had visual hallucinations of bugs, crawling all over her lamp. She asked my mother to pick flowers that were growing out of her carpet. Much as my grandmother had always been an empty vessel, psychosis was what eventually filled her.

In 2015, she was finally put into residential care, where she received antipsychotic medications for the first time. My mother described a peace in her that she had never seen before. Less than a year after she was admitted, she had a stroke that nearly killed her. Despite the fact that I had been home for the previous five months, I visited my grandmother for the first time. I sat by her bed and held her hand, unsure if she even understood what was happening. A smile just slightly lifted the corner of her lips. When my aunts and mother sat with her, not long before her death, my grandmother said to them, "I wish we'd all been sweet." It seemed as if this was both a final recognition of what was missing in her life—sweetness—and an apology as her final offering to her three remaining daughters.



Not long ago, my aunts, mother, and I had an email conversation in which we mused over my grandmother. "She always said she was going to be published!!" Sandra wrote. Near the end of her "Family History," my grandmother scribbled out the words: "I've had a desire to be a writer, from childhood. I would scribble poems or short stories on any thing at hand" ("Family History," 212). The irony that my grandmother could possibly have her work read and appreciated by anyone, let alone such an audience as a Vanderbilt Honors committee, brought all of us to laughter. The humor resides in the very thought that she could ever do, or be, anything of merit . . .

Conclusion

The humor in realizing that my grandmother always wanted to be published, and after her death has become the protagonist of a literary work, is the shiny package that envelops a more solemn truth: we all invalidated my grandmother. Every major figure in her life, especially those of us who remained until the end, did not take her seriously. This revelation, if you could call it that, is not meant as a way of demonizing any of us that did so—any of my grandmother’s psychotic symptoms alone could be used to justify the attitude we all adopted in relation to my grandmother.

I said at the beginning of this piece, that I would have laughed in the face of anyone who had told me, or even suggested, a year ago that I would write such an empathetic piece about my grandmother. It wasn’t until I took the time to really try and engage with my grandmother’s voice that I began to feel a gnawing sense of irresolution. I thought that this process began when I first began reading my grandmother’s writings about six months ago. After completing this project, I have started to realize that my academic interest in my grandmother was born nearly two years ago when I interviewed my grandmother for my WWII class. The assignment was to interview any individual who had been alive during the war, and write a paper that connected the interview to class material.

I didn’t interview my grandmother because I didn’t have any particular interest in her answers, or even had faith in the validity of anything she said. I chose her because I was an overloaded undergraduate and it required the least amount of effort. My mother took my call and mediated the conversation, often correcting the details her mother gave, and trying to curve the nonsensical rambling that often threatened to overwhelm the conversation. There was something different about that conversation—a certain beauty in three generations of Barrett women simultaneously embodying and representing the past, present and future. On this particular occasion, there was even a kind of novelty in the unconscious blending of fact and fiction, as all memories exist as a certain type of fiction. Still, I was extremely hesitant to avoid

falsely representing my relationship to my grandmother, and spent a great deal of time trying to figure out how to truthfully acknowledge the complexities of my understanding of my grandmother while not allowing that relationship to overwhelm the purpose of the essay. It started as follows:

My grandmother is a trinket that sits on the mantelpiece. She has always been there, since the beginning of time, in just the form she takes now. The formaldehyde of my twenty years on earth has somehow preserved her sharp tongue and fragmented mind, and there she sits on the mantle—a soul collecting dust. She inhabits a space in which she watches, but never participates in the living. Her presence casts shadows from a time long ago. My grandmother has always held this position in the theater of my memory—never an actor, but merely a prop in a scene in which one stumbled or missed a line and would rather just forget. I have spent a lifetime actively ignoring this woman whose name I carry as my own; convincing myself of her insignificance. As I have reflected over the past weeks on my grandmother’s story, gleaned from the lips of the women who sprang from her womb, I have come to find that this is the tragedy of her life. A child among eleven, born into poverty in the agricultural South, destined by her sex to be no more than a figure of domesticity in a marriage without romance, burdened with the responsibility of a “broken” child, and afflicted with demons whose grasp she could not escape—it seems her life is forgotten by most, and one that those that remain wish to forget. A lifetime’s work cannot be so easily undone; yet I have already begun to see her story in a different light. Speaking to her about a time when she was very much alive, before she was suspended in the forever-liminal space in which she resides, reminded me that the difference between a trinket and an artifact is its story. My grandmother is an artifact.

Though I wrote in a shift in perception from trinket to artifact, I understand now that the change was purely semantics. That essay was not so much an answer, as I thought it was at the time, but a question. It forced me to consolidate two decades of emptiness that had separated me and my maternal grandmother into a single question that asked about my grandmother’s identity as well as my own. The question was articulated beneath my conscious awareness in the fall of 2015, but wasn’t punctuated until six months later when my grandmother’s last breath articulated the final dot beneath the question mark. I know with certainty that I could not have completed this piece while my grandmother was still alive. This epiphany is tied to my understanding of the horse painting that plagued my youth, and haunted the family history on which I unknowingly stood. I could not endeavor to try and find that missing horse until I was able to truly

understand its absence. With her death, my grandmother's nothingness achieved the kind of finality that I needed in order to proceed.

In setting out on a journey through my grandmother's emptiness, I naively expected to fill in the gaps that had always produced in me a great deal of curiosity. The most profound conclusion I was able to draw was the fact that these holes would always be unfillable. My inflated ego and underlying invalidation of my grandmother is evident in the belief that I could ever attempt to fill in the missing pieces of my grandmother's identity. She spent her entire life actively engaged in trying to find substance within herself, and somehow I thought that I would be able to achieve this within a few months.

Just as my grandmother, I failed to produce a horse out of the void, either for my grandmother or for myself. The nothingness that was born nearly a century ago had grown too omnipotent over my grandmother's life to combat now. Somewhere along the way, I realized that there didn't need to be a horse in order to bring meaning and empathy. The painting that I find myself completing is not equine, or even a landscape, but a portrait of my grandmother. This portrait is full of the same mixed hues and liminal spaces as my grandmother's paintings, and unlike her paintings, contains many gaps, rifts, and holes. This, more than any horse or flower or stream is the painting that represents my grandmother as she was. Now, in this artistic form, my grandmother truly is an artifact.

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Bibliographical Note

“April Love”: This is the novella that my grandmother wrote in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Though I can’t put a specific date on the work, my mother said she remembered her mother reading the novella to her husband, who died in early 1996. It is handwritten in a college-ruled notebook in neat cursive, with each page neatly numbered at the top. The work spanned 200 handwritten pages, following the Love family and the romance between April Love and Jim Branton.

“Family History”: This work is also within the 1980’s and 1990’s, but appears to come slightly earlier than “April Love.” It was sparked by Shari Oakes’ (Sherlyn’s daughter) interest in our family lineage. In the end of the history, my parents had been married, but had yet to have children, putting the completion between 1989 and 1991. This work is handwritten in cursive of varying neatness in a bright yellow, college-ruled, spiral-bound notebook whose pages have yellowed over the years. She numbered the top of every page, which goes from 1 to 233. The work seems divided into two halves, the first being a romanticized retelling of the lives of my grandmother’s grandparents (The Byrds) and parents (The Barretts). The second half is when she gives a retelling of her own life, from childhood until the current moment. This is the primary source for “Portrait of a Grandmother,” as it is one of the most forward accounts of my grandmother’s life and struggles given in her own voice. The final page is a list of individuals who she thinks should read and contribute to the family history, including my grandfather, two aunts, Shari, and mother.

“Poetry”: The poetry that I used within “Portrait of a Grandmother” comes from a particular notebook that spans from 1965 to 1975. Most of her poems are dated, however, few of them are named. The notebook is a magenta, college-ruled, spiral-bound notebook with dark yellow pages and a rusted spine. There are very few pages in the journal, indicating that many have been torn out over the years. Her poems are each fairly short, taking a page or two at most, though the majority are only two to three stanzas in length. She used very regular rhyme schemes, though often wavered from them. Her poems are nearly all religious in nature, giving me a way to analyze her views of religion.

“Telegraph Address Book” & “Phone Address Book”: These two small, blue notebooks are nearly identical in content. Within their pages, there are not telegraph or phone addresses, but daily diary entries that span several decades, with the earliest entries from the 1950’s and the latest in the 2000’s. Her entries were all meticulously dated (although often inconsistently, as she was frequently confused about

time) and noted daily weather patterns in detail. The entries were usually only a sentence or two in length, telling where her husband was that day and what daughter had a scraped knee or cold. These gave insight into the monotony of her daily life and the repetition of certain themes, such as weather, that were extremely important for her concept of self.

Email Interviews (Sherlyn Emails, Sandra Emails, Mother Emails): In early February, I reach out to my mother via text message to get my aunts' email addresses. I knew they each had strained relationships with their mother, so I was unsure what kind of response I would receive. On February 11, I sent them the following email:

Aunt Sandra and Aunt Sherlyn,

I have a few favors to ask. I believe both of you heard the short piece I wrote about Nana for my WWII class last year. That writing became the basis of my senior thesis. I am looking at the loss of identity for individuals with mental illness and how art and writing can be a mechanism for them to attempt to reconstruct identity. I am predominantly using schizophrenia for my thesis. While Nana obviously did not have schizophrenia, she had an obvious personality disorder--whether borderline, narcissistic, or schizotypal is unclear. What I am doing for my first chapter is juxtaposing some of her fiction and nonfiction (I use nonfiction loosely, as her journals do not reflect what I know to be true of her life) writings with details from myself, my brother, my mother, and each of you, should you feel comfortable with this. I want to show how her identity was in crisis through the differing images of who she was.

What this would entail is entirely up to you. I do realize that what I am asking is potentially troubling, and you retain the right to refuse. Should you find yourself able to do so, the discussion can take place via email, phone, writing, Skype, FaceTime, etc. I will not push, but I do want as much information into her psychological history and identity as possible.

In addition, any images of her paintings that you have would be useful for my analysis.

I hope you are both well and to hear from you soon.

All Best,

Laura

Both quickly responded with a great deal of interest and haste. Could I send them some questions to guide their answers? I developed a list of broad questions, trying not to lead their answers too much. The list that I sent both of my aunts and my mother is as follows:

What role did painting and writing serve in Nana's life? Do you have any specific memories about her doing these activities? What times of day/situations did she engage in these activities? What was her demeanor like when she wrote or painted? Did she do it publicly or hide away to do it?
Nana's concept of what and who were "good" and "bad"?
Who was nana? Where did she come from? What do you know of her grandparents? Parents? Her younger self?
Family structure/dynamics?
Evidence of mental illness? Fragmentation of time? Self? Delusional thoughts/beliefs/behaviors? Do you believe your mother was mentally ill?
Love and romance: what were nana's thoughts of love/romance/marriage? Did she ever talk about these things? How highly did she value them? What was her own marriage like? Her parents' marriage? Grandparents? Was she a loving person? How did she show love?
Beauty in objects and nature. What things did nana value? Where did nana find beauty? What did beauty mean in her life? What was her relationship to money? Did she value or devalue money or expensive things?
Food/body image
Perception of weather as representing internal state

Religion

The answers that they gave over the course of the following week are found throughout "Portrait of a Grandmother." I was shocked by how poignant and beautiful the responses were, and I did my best to include them with little to no modification.

Paintings: Finally, I want to include images from my grandmother's various paintings to give further context of her skill and subjects.



