FAMILY ALBUM ↔ MOJ ALBUM

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by

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Tea Gerbeza, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing and English, has presented a thesis titled, *Family Album – MOJ Album*, in an oral examination held on July 25, 2019. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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*via Zoom Conferencing*
Abstract

*Family Album ↔ Moj Album* is an experimental memoir that uses a multi-genre structure—poetry, prose, and photography—to examine what it means to witness atrocity. I was born in the middle of the Yugoslavian Civil War (also referred to as the Bosnian War) in 1994, and my parents and I immigrated to Canada a year later in 1995. Because both of my parents lived through this war, and I was born into it, I have memories surface that I can’t explain, memories that reveal an unknown past that demands my attention. These so-called memories engage with what Marianne Hirsch coins “postmemory”: a recent concept in the study of atrocity that investigates how people who have suffered trauma pass on “memories” of the original trauma to their children. Postmemory is primarily used throughout the thesis to explore what I have experienced as a child of survivors and to understand what these experiences mean. In fact, I complicate Hirsch’s notion of postmemory because I am both a survivor and a child of survivors. Therefore, *Family Album ↔ Moj Album* uses this liminal position to examine what memories of the war are my own and which ones are transferred to me by my parents. *Family Album ↔ Moj Album* also asks the question: what happens when a child is the primary “witness” to a father’s war-story. I use M.D. Dori Laub’s conceptualizing of the witness as a framing device for the entire thesis. Laub writes of three levels of witness: witness to oneself, witness to other’s testimonies, and witness to the act of witnessing itself. My memoir uses these levels to investigate how I fit into each level throughout my life as well as complicate Laub’s notion of the “empathetic listener.” Photographs are used and “created” in my memoir to show how postmemory, photography, and trauma are interconnected since photographs produce a material connection to the past. I manipulate photographs and include a variety within the memoir because they connect me with a past to which I do not have direct access. The memoir examines
the effects of intergenerational trauma, and how memory can be recovered with the use of technology—like that of scanner photography (scannography). The memoir acts as a space for me to reconcile my past and give me room to have a voice amongst the loud events of my family’s past.
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Introduction

I was born in Zenica, Bosnia on May 6, 1994 in the middle of the Yugoslavian Civil War.1 My parents and I immigrated to Canada in late 1995. I’m the first-born in my family; my sister was born seven years later in 2001. Although my mother shut away her past when she came to Canada, it slowly seeped into her daily activities. My father’s past, meanwhile, saturated every moment we shared, whether it was playing video games together in my early years, or having long talks in our garage when I was older.2 When I was a teenager, my father told me that the surgery for my scoliosis was more painful and frightening for him than what he experienced during the Yugoslavian war. Since that day in 2011, his sentiment is all I can think about when I ponder my family history. How could a surgery be worse than war?

During my childhood and adolescence, I often returned to family photographs I’d found in old shoeboxes hidden away in our storage room downstairs. The photographs were a mix of portrait and candid shots of my parents or of myself as a child. Each time I looked through these photographs, they felt more uncanny, as if I could remember the moment they were taken, except that was impossible for some of them because they were taken before I was born. However, memories I couldn’t explain often surfaced, revealing an unknown past that demanded my attention. By placing my surgery and his experience in the war together, my father created a linguistic link connecting me with the war, and this connection has made the intruding memories impossible to ignore. To recover this past, I had to accept that what I remembered was not enough to tell the full story. My earlier experiences are lost to a younger self I try to access but often fail to uncover. And so I’ve had to rely on my parents’ memories to understand our history. Writing this memoir has made me realize that all of my life, I’ve been searching—searching for parts of myself, for an understanding of the pain that my family has experienced, and for a space
where my voice can be heard. My experimental memoir concerns itself with what it means to witness and what kinds of witnesses exist. These concerns are prominent in the literary tradition that engages with war and trauma. I add to this tradition by giving a fresh perspective on explorations of memory and intergenerational trauma with my liminal state of temporal closeness and distance. *Family Album ↔ Moj Album* questions the various ways in which we witness trauma, how trauma can affect a family dynamic, and how trauma is articulated.

Because I have memories that engage “postmemory,” my thesis responds to what it means to witness devastating violence and uprooting from the temporal remove childhood provides, and examines my role as a continuous witness to my parents’ traumatic history. Postmemory investigates how people who have suffered trauma pass on “memories” of the original trauma to their children. My parents’ experience of surviving the Yugoslavian Civil War has done much to influence our family dynamic, and their experiences have resulted in complicated “memories” that have affected me, a member of the so-called “generation after.” It is unclear, however, where the boundaries are that separate my parents’ memories and those I consider to be my own. As Marianne Hirsch explains in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, “these [parental] experiences [are] transmitted to [their children] so deeply and affectionately as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (5). However, being born amidst the war differentiates me from those children who were born after the events that devastated their parents such as Art Spiegelman, who had to contend with the fact that both of his parents were incarcerated at Auschwitz, whereas he was born in Sweden after the war. Like Spiegelman, I grew up with parents who had experienced horrific violence, but I was also present during the Yugoslavian war as a fetus and infant. My presence, however minimal,
categorizes me as a survivor, complicating Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. I am, therefore, in a liminal position of being a survivor of the war and a child of the second generation.

My liminal position calls for a variety of techniques and forms in order to address the memories and traumas that comprise my life. Any one form would be inadequate in articulating the multifaceted nature of trauma. My experimental memoir *Family Album ↔ Moj Album* weaves together a mixture of forms—poetry, lyrical prose, and photography—with the intent to create a patchwork of narratives and other forms of discourse that testify to and record some parts of my parents’ experience and in doing so connect them to my own. The multi-generic structure investigates the blurring of personal and cultural history, acts as an exploration of trauma and memory, and examines the nature of postmemory; that is, some of my memories might be from childhood, but others that I believe to be childhood memories may actually be ones that were transferred to me by my parents.

A primary example of my experience of postmemory is my recurring dream about a grey dog who follows me to a bus stop, and in my hands is a dirty blanket that I hold to my chest. Hirsch defines “postmemory” as the relationship that the “‘generation after’ [children of survivors] bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up” (5). The memories are transmitted to the children so deeply that they “*seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (5; emphasis original). My recurring dream is one that has been transferred to me by my father (see my piece “Me↔Dream↔Memory↔Me”). During a phone conversation with me about the war, he mentioned a kinship he felt with a dog while he was hiding from soldiers that were searching for him in order to arrest him. However, in my dream there is a dirty blanket, whereas in his memory there is no blanket. The blanket is a detail
I created in order to contextualize the memory. As Hirsch describes, the structure of postmemory is a connection to the past that is “mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (5). That is, to mediate memories the child periodically takes agency in the creation of her own memories that make sense to her and help her contextualize the transferred memory. This creation of memory involves both the unconscious and the child’s narrative to help in its inception. Owing to the often unconscious aspects of postmemory, I’ve included some dream sequences in my memoir. As Eva Hoffman notes in After Such Knowledge, “Whereas adults who live through violence and atrocity can understand what happens to them as actuality… the generation after receives its first knowledge of the terrible events with only childish instruments of perception, and as a kind of fable” (16). The dream pieces replicate recurring dreams I have had since childhood and I use the second-person perspective in them to produce the effect that these dreams are happening in real time for the reader. Dreams are mentioned more subtly in various other pieces throughout the manuscript; for example, in “Me↔Dream↔Memory↔Me” (59), I discuss two dreams I have, but each refers to a different aspect of my position as survivor and child of the “generation after,” complicating Hirsch’s theorizing of postmemory.

My status as both a survivor of the war and a child of the second generation constitutes my liminal position within the frame of postmemory. I am a survivor because I was born into the war, but more curiously, I am a survivor because my mother believes that since she was pregnant with me during the war, I was, in a way, there living her experiences along with her. I experience many of the same problems that children of the second generation do, and this similarity makes me a child of the “second generation.” For instance, Hirsch states,
To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness is to risk having one’s own life [story] displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however, indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (5)

Children of the second generation are overwhelmed by their inherited memories, of pasts that they grew up with but did not directly experience, and they often grapple with how to navigate their familial relationships without being displaced by narratives that have permeated their childhood. In my poem “Silenced,” I write about my mother,

In fact, her past comes out whenever I am in trouble in a repetition of similar statements:

“Back home, you wouldn’t have a choice.”

“Back home, you’d be hit for that.”

“Back home, you’d starve with that attitude.”

“Back home ________.”

“Back home ________.”

I take every statement to heart. My voice is lost in her past. (71-2)

My voice being “lost in her past” exemplifies the problem with the “second generation”: our experiences will never match our parents’. Because I am a child of survivors, the hardships in my life will never (presumably) be as terrible as what my parents experienced, a situation which casts a shadow and creates a precedent that does not give space for my own pain to be articulated. Instead, my hardships are always compared to the war. There is even less space to articulate my experiences and problems within my family’s dynamic because of my sister’s
depression and all she has suffered. My thesis grapples with this yearning for space, as it both
gives room for the speaker to express her pain and experiences, and constantly places her in
relation to others as an observer and listener.

Despite my similarities with the second generation, there is still the problem of my
mother’s proclamation about my experiencing the war in utero: “You were there. You were in
my belly” (60). In their article “Echoes Across Generations,”7 Patricia M. Schulte and Judith G.
Hall claim that fetuses carry biological memory in their cells. They argue that “the DNA
sequences of the fetus act as this biological memory that records the past” (57). Families are tied
together “by a complex web of shared cells across generations” (60) and this biological memory
records the past experiences of our parents. So the cells passed down to me from my mother are
written like marginalia on my cell walls. Schulte and Hall’s conceptualization of fetal memory is
present in my piece “The Ultimate Cornbread Recipe” when I write in the perspective of myself
as a baby, “I wanted to eat the walls of her flesh, I was so hungry. Growing in her womb as she
starved imprinted a memory on me that forgets itself until I feel the walls of my stomach cave in
with hunger” (90). The “imprinted memory” I describe here is what it was like to be that hungry.
Given these imprinted memories, the manuscript asks what else my bodily cells retain and
remember that I don’t.

I am caught between being a first generation survivor and a child of the second
generation, and this liminality creates an uncanniness that permeates my thesis. While I can
recognize the problems of the second generation through reading books like Spiegelman’s Maus,
I am still not exclusively a child of the second generation. I have to grapple with similar
problems, but I also have to confront a history I will never know as intimately as my parents do
but have memories of, however faint they might be. Freud in “The Uncanny” states that the
uncanny “proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed” (638). The “familiar that has been repressed” within me is in my faint memories of the war, and this uncanniness pervades the different ways I remember the war and my childhood. That is, I am constantly turning to my parents for memories, but at the same time I am also wrestling and “competing” with my younger self for her memories because she was closer to the experiences my parents had after we immigrated to Canada. Freud further explains that, “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (639). What Freud argues is that the uncanny unsettles foundational knowledge. Since I situate myself in a liminal position and “unsettle” my foundational knowledge of my childhood with my investigation of my memories of the war, the uncanny becomes inherently liminal. For Brenda Sabo, liminality is a state where an individual is “betwixt and between” a threshold “or margins of time, space and place,” and a state that “induce[s] a transformation” (186). Perhaps then, in this negotiation of self, the individual can “transform,” and connect their opposing selves with the results or illuminations of that which has been repressed or hidden.

The manifestation of the uncanny and liminality throughout my thesis reveals the sense that my voice (my speaker’s voice) is in the background as she searches for her identity between the thresholds of stories, experiences, and memories. The speaker’s voice is purposely in the background to explore Hirsch’s claim about how a child’s life can be dominated by the pain and individual histories of family members. I struggle with having my voice heard over the loud events of the past. However, there are also instances where my voice is louder than the past that overwhelms me. My story is not displaced by my parents’ but rather it is also my story. In being a witness to my parents’ experiences as they tell them to me, I also witness myself.
My manuscript attempts to answer the question: what happens when the child of survivors is Dori Laub’s “empathetic listener,” and suggests that I become witness of both parent and child. Parts 1 to 5 of my thesis follow Laub’s levels of witness (witness to oneself, witness to other’s testimonies, and witness to the act of witnessing itself). According to Laub, an empathetic listener is essential to witnessing the transmission of trauma. In his chapter “Bearing Witness or Vicissitudes of Listening,” Laub states, “the absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story [and its realness]” (68; emphasis original). By affirming the “realness” of what happened to my father and my mother, the manuscript is a testimony in itself. Laub also asserts that “Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears” (70; emphasis original). I write in “The Listener,” “Laub’s empathetic listener is a duty for a stranger to fill, someone who has distance from the victim’s testimony. Laub didn’t anticipate that this role would be filled by a child for her father” (55). This role of empathetic listener bestowed upon me is what complicates Laub’s theory of witnessing and how I add to this overall cultural conversation about what it means to witness trauma.

My manuscript suggests that when the child is the empathetic listener, the adult—that the child grows up to be—becomes witness for both the parent and child; however, this dual witnessing is complicated by photographs. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes, “Every portrait of another person becomes a self-portrait of the photographer” (70). What Sontag implies here is that the photographer’s “self-portrait” is made through the decisions the photographer makes when shooting, how the photographer frames the photograph, and the overall perspective
of the photographer that comes through in the photograph. Therefore, the photographs of my father that my mother took become a photograph of her as well, and the photographs of my mother that my father took also become a photograph of him. Furthermore, when either of them took a photograph of me, that photograph became one of both of us. Now when I take photographs of either of them, they become photographs of myself. So what happens, then, when I deliberately merge two photographs of my parents on photoshop like I do in my poem “Silenced” (71)? This photograph of both of my parents becomes a photograph of all three of us, making us transform into each other, and seemingly witness one another. In addition, this photograph visually represents the transference of their memories and experiences onto me.

Ulrich Baer, in his book *Spectral Evidence*, usefully theorizes that viewers of family photographs have the responsibility to “not merely to view the evidence offered in [an] image but to read, to interpret, to tear open what [they] think [they] know, and to respond” (115). The inclusion of the photographs (family or otherwise) that are dispersed among the text all respond to the “evidence” offered in the images and become modes of witnessing and remembering.

Photographs, postmemory, and trauma are often interconnected because photographs produce a material connection to the past. The family photographs I’ve found have been integral to my understanding of my history. The manuscript includes a variety of photographs and they provide a “point of memory” (Hirsch 61) that connects me to a past to which I do not have direct access. As Hirsch asserts, photographs—especially family photographs—become “both instruments and emblems of the process of [the past’s] transmission” (61). Photographs, Hirsch continues, “enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch the past, but also to try and reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’” (36). The fragmented structure of my manuscript “reanimates” and “undoes” the family photographs that I keep coming back to,
allowing me to write in the various stories and background for these photos. Some photographs—like the one of my father styling my hair (66)—in themselves capture the past’s transmission in small details like recording a shirt my father used to often wear that says “one tequila / two tequila / three tequila / floor.” This shirt captures my father’s sense of humour—he found this shirt very funny—but it is sinister because of the juxtaposition in the following poem, as he “foresees his death” (66) in his moment of trauma, and with his addiction. I have “reanimated” this photograph because I have contextualized it with my childhood experiences of my dad’s struggle with addiction and violent outbursts, but then I contrast these violent episodes with his gentle touch in doing my hair.

Addiction is in the background throughout the manuscript, as my father turns to alcohol for solace. In “What I Need,” the speaker goes through a memory of her father asking to borrow money for cigarettes and notices that he only asks for money for either cigarettes or alcohol. I write, “I find myself thinking: Well, he did serve in the war, let the man be” (82). This thought represents how I feel remorse for my judgment about my father’s addiction because I know he relies on it due to his past traumas. Marc Lewis in his book *The Biology of Desire: Why Addiction Is Not a Disease* states, “Humans need to be able to see their own lives as progressing, moving, from a meaningful past to a viable future…. The addict’s life is lived in the tomb of the present, dead because it has lost its connection with the story from which it came” (204-05). My father uses alcohol to not think about his past, to live in the present where his life is better. He focuses on how drinking makes him feel happy, and this happiness connects him to the present and further removes him from his past. However, the repetitive nature of how trauma works pulls him back to his past, no matter how much he tries to forget it.
My thesis plays with the resonances of repetition to illustrate the multitude of ways one’s traumatic past can confront them. Cathy Caruth states that trauma “is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death but also the missed encounter with one’s own survival” (“Parting Words” 6). Trauma, then, manifests in the various reminders of one’s traumatic past. Caruth maintains that “the theory of repetition compulsion as the unexpected encounter with an event that the mind misses and then repeatedly attempts to grasp is the story of a failure of the mind to return to an experience it has never quite grasped” (15). The mind “never quite grasping” the traumatic experience is at the heart of traumatic repetition, which my manuscript engages with in many ways. One example of traumatic repetition is the repeated image in the poem “My Father Foresees His Death” of my father “kissing the ground”: “When he kisses the ground / there is nowhere deeper he can go” (66). Later, in “Secrets of Soil,” in the poem that follows the photograph of my father’s fist, the image is repeated: “he kissed the ground / to avoid a sniper’s bullet” (112). The line in “My Father Foresees His Death” foregrounds one of the main traumas my father deals with: almost being killed by a sniper. The detail of “there is nowhere deeper he can go” suggests that there is nowhere deeper his trauma can extend to, but also that in this survival there was nothing more he could do. The fact that the bullet missed his head by a sliver is something his mind cannot grasp. This detail is shown again in “The Listener:” “He takes a slow sip of plum brandy and tells me, ‘I was laying in the dirt and the sniper’s bullet shot right above my head. ZOOM, my hair stood up like this.’ He moves his hand fast through his nearly buzzed hair, trying to mimic what this sensation would have looked like if I was there to see it.” (54). This moment comes before the other two poems, but it sets up my status as my father’s witness and again tries to set up a scene for his mind to grasp his moment of trauma. The dynamic I have with my father and the photographs he takes of me allow me to have
a better understanding of what it is to witness one another. I’m not only a witness of him, but we witness each other. In order to conceptualize this dual witnessing, I have manipulated a photograph in my manuscript that my father took of me. In order to explain this photograph, I will use Roland Barthes’ notion of the punctum.

Barthes’ concept of the punctum informs my work with scanner photography and how it can be used as a tool to recontextualize memory. In Camera Lucida, Barthes describes two essential parts of a photograph: the studium and the punctum. The studium refers to the cultural attributes of the photograph that can be read as a semiotic code, whereas the punctum is a detail that disturbs the studium, one that, as a part of phenomenological time, cannot be explained according to cultural semiotics (43). The punctum Barthes notes, “is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (44). The punctum is also something that is always already in the photograph, but whether or not it is triggered remains up to the viewer (55). For example, Barthes writes about the punctum found in Lewis H. Hine’s photograph “Idiot Children in an Institution.” The punctum in this photograph for Barthes is the bandage on the girl’s finger (51) because underneath the bandage is a wound that is healing in real time and can only happen in real time. The studium of the photograph is the two children living at an institution and the generic attributes of such photographs.

Each family photograph that I use throughout the manuscript has had a punctum that pricked me. One primary example is the image (accompanied by a poem in a footnote) I created on my scanner “My Father Catches Me Confronting Memory” (114). The composition of the photograph of myself as a child startled me, its punctum appearing as an accident of the exposure. My head in the photograph is translucent and goes toward a second window, while the
lamp on the nightstand and the original window is seen through my head in the background. My father could not have achieved this exposure on purpose, as all he wanted to do was capture his daughter playing a game of pretend in his bedroom. With the punctum in mind, I set out to experiment with this original photograph on my scanner. I wanted to see if manipulating the photograph on the scanner would unloose some memories for me, possibly around the punctum to which I don’t have conscious access. Using the scanner, I moved the original photograph around in different patterns with no idea how the new image would turn out until I was finished and the scanned image came up on my computer screen. The image that is in my manuscript shows the original photograph repeated three times, once with part of the bottom cut off, once in full, and then the last repetition is upside-down—all against a black background. My goal in this new image was to recontextualize my memories to understand my present. I thought that using this technology would tease out an image of a memory that is dormant in the photograph, and by exposing the photograph in different ways, I could spark something new. What happened in the end surprised me; I discovered a new punctum.

The process of creation for the new image happened in real time; therefore, how the image turned out on the screen once the scanner finished scanning produced a new punctum. The middle iteration of the original photograph stopped and then started again upside-down, as if it was trying to slip away from me. My new photograph recontextualizes the original photo into my present; thus, the newly discovered punctum places this new image (consisting of variations of the original image) into my current moment. The discovery of the punctum in the scanner photograph acts as a reflection of the memories that I desire to have from both my younger self and my father; as with the turn of the last image, the collection of the memory slips away belonging to “where I’ve never been” (114).
My desire to be where I’ve never been leads me to take photographs of my father while he tells me stories about the war. Sontag argues that “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses” (23). I agree with Sontag here: the viewer with no knowledge about the context of the photograph will only know what is explained to them. Contextual knowledge makes one photograph have two entirely different registers. Hirsch points out, “The conventionality of the family photo provides a space of identification for any viewer participating in the conventions of familial representation; thus they [the family photographs] bridge the gap between viewers who are personally connected to the event and those who are not. They expand the postmemorial circle” (“Past Lives” 668). While there are only very few people who experience postmemory, Hirsch suggests that postmemory wants to connect people who are outsiders to both the survivor’s experience and to the child of the second generation’s experience, thus creating a “postmemorial circle.” Family photographs connect the child of the survivors to the survivor’s experience, and similarly, the family photograph’s conventions connect an outsider to the events in the photograph. The circle consists of a ripple effect where the viewer participates in the events of the photograph in some way. Therefore, when different viewers “participate” with the photograph, the “circle” expands. Photographs in my manuscript act similarly, as they echo the nature of traumatic repetition, the nature of memory, and the nature of memory recuperation.

I theorize the process of recovering memory through my work with scannography (scanner photography). Scannography is “the process of capturing images using a flatbed scanner with a CCD (charge-coupled device) array capturing device” (ValDelinder “So What”). Items—which are the subject of the photograph—are laid on the glass platen and the image is made from the item (“So What”). The subject of my scannography images are various family photographs
that I have moved around on the glass platen to create different manipulations. Scannography, unlike traditional photography, requires a tactile hands-on approach, where I choose a photograph that incites an uncanniness and then I move it around the glass in an attempt to recover the memory. The end results are usually surprising, almost as if the process is a means to unlock or gain mastery over the memories captured in the original photograph. The touch aspect of scannography allows me to hold a memory in my hands, as it were, and allows me to manipulate memory on the scanner and therefore add myself to it. By making my own images out of family photographs, I am directly inserting myself into the historical moment while I simultaneously control the image. For example, in the photographic sequence “Searching” (124), the final photograph shows a blurred version of the original photograph of me on a balcony staring at the camera with a hand—my hand—placed in front of it. This placement emphasizes my control and position in history, but it also blurs time—what is past and what is present no longer are distinct. Time merges together so that memories of the past almost become moments in the present whenever I make something new in the photograph.

The photograph that precedes the one with my hand in it visually represents a process of recovering memory. The little girl in the photograph becomes distorted as the photograph moves down the scanner—her head disappears; then on the opposite version, her head is multiplied. There is also a brief shadow of a hand present that identifies movement in the photograph. This shadowy hand implies that the speaker is searching for herself and her memories in the same manner as this photograph moves. In doing so, however, the photograph, like her memories, is distorted and hard to work out. To complicate things further, “Searching” is accompanied by a poem (125) that discusses the procedure of developing a photograph in a dark room. Sometimes, when putting a photograph into the developer chemical, one sees the desired exposure for the
photograph for only a moment before it disappears into white—never to be replicated again. The blurred hand in the last photograph and the poem work together to show that, despite the effort of trying to reach the memory the speaker desires from her past self, the memory is not fully attained. It’s lost to time, to the endless blank white space that saturates much of the manuscript. The use of scannography acts as both the overarching metaphor of how to attempt to recover memory, and as a tool; that is, taking a physical representation of a memory (the photograph) and capturing different points and versions of the original photograph with the scanner recovers the memory. While the manuscript also makes clear that some memories are unattainable, the speaker continues to search for inklings of a memory revealed by the scanner.

The metaphor of scannography provides insight into how the multi-generic form works together. These fragmented forms work together to do what my photograph “Issues of Translation” (62) does: they capture the moment, but the moment is always layered. The manuscript, then, becomes a kind of “photograph” of me; it purposefully presents fragments and orders those fragments in ways that do not fully cohere into a comprehensible whole because it illustrates the parts of the past, and aspects of her familial relationships that the speaker struggles to reconcile throughout the work. There are moments where I know the reader will feel confused or want more details, but I am purposefully withholding information to task the reader with the work of figuring out memories and experiences alongside the speaker. The disjunction that happens in the numbering order of the sections is paradoxical in the way it connects fragments together that don’t easily cohere. And because the fragments also jump around in time, the reader is supposed to feel confused and question the ordering of the sequence. For example, the photograph of my mother climbing over a balcony (87) that precedes the piece entitled “The Ultimate Cornbread Recipe” is there to amplify how memory works—the photo and poem show
two experiences that do not make sense following each other, and in doing so, exemplify the confusion the speaker feels as she receives information in sequences that do not make sense.

In addition to numbered sections, the manuscript has many gaps and white spaces throughout. One purpose of these gaps is to visually signify how postmemory strives for connection. As Hirsch writes, “the fullness of postmemory is no easier a form of connection than the absence it also generates. Full or empty, postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired” ("Past Lives” 664). The gaps function as a space to pause, as if the reader is in the speaker’s mind while she tries to figure out what these fragments mean. The pause also serves to visually display what the speaker means when she says, “Words are missing; they can’t fill in what is unspoken” (61). The gaps “fill” the space, but there is nothing but a daunting blankness that fails to accurately capture my parents’ experience and how I fit into it. While writing this manuscript, I felt drawn to the gaps; they represented for me the liminal space I occupy being not exclusively a child survivor nor a child of the second generation, but nevertheless having an uncanny connection to the events. The gaps, then, also become visual echoes of the absence of desired memory and connection. There are other visual echoes that manifest throughout the manuscript, one main one being the family photographs. Images repeat themselves constantly throughout the text. For example, the photograph of my mother after my birth (49) and the photograph of my father after my birth (53) repeat twice—once in the “Issues in Translation” (62) photograph, and then again as the two photographs are overlaid on one another and interrupt the “Silenced” poem (71). This repetition acts as a traumatic repetition of their past during the war, but it also, when layered, shows how they map over each other, and then in “Issues in Translation,” how they map onto me.8 This mapping affects the reader, too, because the reader is plunged into memories with
the speaker. Thus, by participating in the memories alongside the speaker, the reader too becomes a kind of witness.

Throughout *Family Album ↔ Moj Album*, my speaker is the primary witness for her parents and her younger self; however, no one witnesses the speaker. Through the album-like structure of the thesis, and the reader’s participation in the memories—especially the pieces written in the second-person perspective—the reader is tasked with being a witness for the speaker. The reader may not experience the events with the speaker, but because I disrupt the reader with dream sequences using the second person, the reader is placed in a position where the narration is defined “not by who is speaking but by who is listening” (DelConte 204). Reading, then, is a form of listening. By listening to the speaker, the reader engages in a form of witnessing. My text makes its reader engage with various perspectives. This engagement puts the reader in a position similar to Laub’s “empathetic listener” because the reader participates in the process of witnessing through the speaker. However, the reader not only partakes in the same testimony that the speaker does, but also becomes the speaker’s empathetic listener. Therefore, the reader bears witness for the witness.

Authors that have influenced the writing of this thesis include Carolyn Forché, Sara Nović, and Maggie Nelson. Forché approaches traumatic experiences of atrocity from a distance, often as a response to the event, rather than a mimetic description of it. In *Angel of History*, Forché states, “The Angel of History is not about experiences. It is for me the opening of a wound, the muffling and silence of a decade, and it is also a gathering of utterances that have lifted away from the earth and wrapped it in a weather of risen words. These utterances issue from my own encounter with the events of this century but do not represent it” (81). Forché “opens the wound” of historical atrocities like the Holocaust and writes her responses to these
events. Many of her poems ask what comes back to us when time passes; for example, the poem “VIII” ends on the line, “Then someone calling. It might be from the past. It has that quality” (32). The ending of this poem asks its reader to consider how the past calls to us in different ways and speculates how the past makes it back to us. This poem is a part of the poetic series “The Notebook Uprising” in Forché’s book, and all the snippets of poems act as small “notes” in a larger notebook that concern themselves with the question of how we respond to atrocity and how we might go about responding to it. In reading this poetic sequence, I found that perhaps by repeatedly returning to “open wounds,” we might find new memories or details. A similar repetition takes place in my work, as many images and situations repeat themselves throughout, all adding more details to the memory. What Forché made me ponder most while crafting my manuscript was how to engage with my unique problem of being so close to the historical event that has shaped my life, but also being removed from it. This problem explains why my speaker yearns to reach her younger self—she believes that if she can get into her younger self’s mind, she would be closer to the event and be able to understand its effect on her. My manuscript continually deals with someone calling from the past, and how I work through hearing that voice, something which Sara Nović’s character in her book Girl at War also grapples with.

Nović’s Girl at War was a major influence in my writing of my thesis. Girl at War is a novel that revolves around the Yugoslavian war and a girl, Ana, who grows up during some of the most gruesome times of the war and then immigrates to America after her parents are killed. Most of the novel focuses on Ana’s later years as a twenty-something English student and survivor. She contends with her childhood trauma, which later on makes her decide to confront these traumas by going back to Croatia and to the site of her parents’ death. In the writing of this book, Nović tells us that the genesis of her book was from stories that her family members and
their friends told her when she lived in Croatia for a period after high school (Novič 325). Novič herself did not experience the war.

What influenced me most about Novič’s work was how she wrote dialogue with both Croatian and English present. The book itself is written in English, but Novič directs to the reader that another language is at play with the addition of foreign phrases written in Croatian. The Croatian never disrupts the flow of the sentence or the dialogue. For example, Novič writes, “The dull roar of a distant explosion rumbled through the TV speakers. In the background more bearded men with black skull flags marched down the empty street singing ‘Bit će mesa! Bit će mesa! Klaćemo Hrvate!’ There will be meat; there will be meat. We’ll slaughter all Croats” (64). Novič’s style of blending languages here inspired me with my own usage of Croatian sprinkled in with English dialogue in my manuscript. The way that Novič’s translation of the foreign words come right after acts as both the translation, but also of a haunting repetition of the soldiers singing the horrific sentiment of massacring Croatians in Vukovar. In my poem “My Father Foresees His Death” (66), there is a mention of songs the sniper bullets sing as they fly through the air, and this detail comes from my father telling me about similar “songs” enemy soldiers sang while they shot at him and his fellow Bosnian-Croatian soldiers on the front lines. Another aspect of the construction of Novič’s translation made me think about languages; because the book is written in English, a reader might assume that all these characters speak primarily English when, in fact, that is not the case at all. The way Novič skillfully weaves the two languages together suggests that everything that goes on in Ana’s life before she is in America is actually “in Croatian,” and all the characters are speaking and thinking in Croatian despite the English words on the page.
I used Novič’s strategy in my own construction of blurring the lines between both languages. For example, in my piece “Housing Movements,” the speaker tries to order food in a buffet line in Croatia: “‘Could I get the chicken and noodle?’ I attempted. Her eyebrows scrunched together, clearly realizing I had no idea how to ask for what I wanted. ‘Kokoš?’ She asked, but the word wasn’t the one I grew up with. ‘No, the chicken penne dish,’ I tried again, searching my brain for the right words” (45). I do not provide a translation in the way Novič does, but the exchange the speaker has with the woman shows that both are speaking in Croatian. The speaker is failing to speak in her mother-tongue and the back and forth of Croatian and English shows this confusion and questions what it means to know a language and be a part of its culture. A difference between Novič and me is that Novič’s book is fiction and my manuscript is a memoir. I suspect that this difference comes from my liminal position, and that my project tries to uncover my identity and place within my family history. However, I also presume that Novič’s decision to write fiction instead of memoir is her way of relating herself to the war. Novič’s work was also important to the construction of this manuscript because she is a woman with a similar background to me and is only seven years older. There was a certain kinship I felt reading her novel, and it informed much of my thinking about language and how to display it on the page.

My manuscript’s non-linear storyline and formal structure were informed by Nelson’s Bluets and The Argonauts. Nelson structures Bluets in numbered paragraph fragments in order to tell a non-linear memoir which conceptualizes and connects the colour blue to events in her life. The numbering of the fragments keep them linked even when their connection does not make sense. I used this numbering strategy because it felt similar to flipping through a photo album, and the numbering kept my disjointed sections connected. With the pieces that do not feel
logically connected but are linked owing to the numbering strategy, I signify to my reader that sometimes two things that are connected do not always make sense together. This confusion is true of memory and trauma as often the connection between related things is not fully comprehensible. The numbering also provides an extra layering effect that works in tandem with the various forms, photographs, and headings. Nelson’s *The Argonauts* inspired me with how Nelson uses theorists to reflect on her own life.

Nelson’s engagement with theory and the personal is how I came to structure my manuscript’s parts, as all of the conceptual titles for each part were informed by my conceptualizing of witness and Laub’s levels of witness. Additionally, my “conversation” and exploration of Sontag’s notions about photography in my piece “Between” (94) was informed by how Nelson “converses” with theorists by exploring how their ideas relate to her own life. Similarly, Kristjana Gunnars’ *The Rose Garden* helped me relate the critical with the personal. However, Gunnars, unlike Nelson, weaves her memoir with a deep discussion of Marcel Proust’s theorizing of memory and uses his conceptions about memory to reflect on her life, leading her to extend Proust’s thoughts about memory. Gunnars’ introspections about memory inspired some of the ways I conceive of memory and how it operates in the manuscript. My manuscript differs from both Nelson’s and Gunnar’s texts because I use a mix of forms to construct the fragments, a strategy which adds different layers onto the text. While some of my prose pieces are more expository in nature, they are at times interrupted with a poem or a photograph—startling the reader, but also fragmenting the reading experience much like how a memory might invade daily thoughts with its presence.

While Gunnars and Nelson influenced structure, Teju Cole influenced my use of photography and text. Teju Cole’s *Blind Spot* uses image and text to explore how humans
perceive what is around them. To define “blind spot” Siri Hustvedt states, “inside each human eye and the eyes of other vertebrates, there is a blind spot where the retina meets the optic nerve. This area, the optic disc, is insensitive to light and receives no visual information” (x). The rest of Cole’s book plays with this concept that there is an area around the eye that receives no visual information. Cole’s investigation of the “blind spot” inspired my use of image and text, and my experimentations with scannography. For Cole, the disjunction between his image and the text creates meaning within itself, albeit one the reader needs to work for. Cole writes at the end of the book, “Even in the most vigilant eye, there is a blind spot. What is missing?” (325). This question inspired my experiments with using family photographs to create my scannography photographs, and my statement that the camera always misses something (118). By putting photographs and text that do not go easily together, I create a meaning within their “blind spot” and point to questions of what we miss when we look at photographs or remember moments.

My experimental memoir has given me the space to explore how I fit into my family’s history, and has provided me room for my voice and experiences to be heard. Hirsch’s theory of postmemory helped me understand my experiences, and pushed me to start a dialogue with my parents about how their actions influence me and my life. Unfortunately, given the limitations of space, I could not go into everything as deeply as I wanted to, like my sister’s experience and our relationship. My sister’s suicide attempts are present in the manuscript only minimally, but she is important in comparing our experiences with trauma. The way that my parents act so differently with her than they did with me is important in my formulation of the manuscript. The writing of this thesis has allowed me to reconcile my past, and to realize that I’m not, in fact, an imposter in my own life. In addition, Family Album ↔ Moj Album adds a Canadian voice to this lesser-known history and tells an as-yet-untold family history.
I

TESTIMONIAL OBJECTS
1. Inventory

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.

—Antonio Gramsci, The Prison Notebooks

1969: my father is born

1975: my mother is born

*

1991-1995: Duration of the Yugoslavian Civil War

Is there any sense

for a child to feel remorse for bandaged legs

where shrapnel & blood flow into guilt

because the wounds of others are left open

not enough care
to go

around

1991

fingers crumple

try to erase typed letters out of paper
long for blankness instead of a draft notice my father doesn’t heed

absent from the line

war begins

1992

June rivers are red 200 people thrown over a bridge, throats slashed by

a knife used earlier to cut into a plum others preferred to shoot

a man watched from his window as 200 people bled

into the river knowing

he could be next

Today, in a backyard, children were picking cherries. They were still unripe, but it was the first fruit the children had seen in months. Suddenly, a shell hit. Seven innocent children were killed—only because they wanted a few cherries*

had I been born

I might have helped

pick berries

for my parents

*Nadja Halilbegovich, My Childhood Under Fire, 14.
so that my mother could rest
so that my father could laugh

the Siege of Sarajevo begins

an estimated death toll of thirteen thousand children killed—*

what an ugly thing for children to count

1993
i begin to form to remember
marks made on me in my mother’s womb permanent
like the marker spelling my name on the walls of our apartment
stolen from us
covered with paint the letters will always be underneath waiting
to be discovered

When does a fetus begin to understand?
the baby grows up haunted with images that precede
her birth I am that baby forming

my parents are married on August 15, 1993 in city hall

no time for proper celebration no time, no money to waste

on a wedding dress

*“They say that thirteen thousand children have been killed in my country. Yet the world remains silent” – Nadja Halilbegovich, My Childhood Under Fire, 32.
(when my mother speaks of dresses she is melancholy maybe even a hint of envy
while helping choose prom A-Lines thinking of eventual wedding gowns
she dreams of ivory
she lives through her daughters (I live through her

a couple is murdered crossing a bridge
peace declared, snipers still shoot to kill
“Bosnia’s Romeo & Juliet”
their story is one that survives

I see my parents in them

my father’s decision to ignore his call
to join the ranks
has consequences
he & my mother are hunted by soldiers
15 are found
dead in Zenica
another 50 wounded
my parents are not among them
they threaten to kill his family they know where we are my father turns
himself in they take him to the Mužicka Škola

*Bosko Brkic (Serb) and Admira Ismic (Muslim) are known as Sarajevo’s “Romeo and Juliet” because while they were trying to escape their ruined city, they were murdered on the Vrbanja bridge. Their love story was turned into a documentary by John Zaritsky called *Romeo and Juliet in Sarajevo.*
he isn’t supposed to survive
he lives to be transferred to KP Dom Zenica

We recognized our neighbor by his clothes.
He was dead for three months. Probably they poured gasoline
or something on him to burn him up.*

1994
I am born on May 6th I was supposed to be born on the 30th
such a small amount of time
makes a difference in death
when the doctors didn’t want me to survive didn’t want to deliver me until the last
second
my mother is alone my father concedes & joins his place
in the army

the hunt for us paused.

a young girl spoons soup into her mouth the wall behind her explodes
she is killed mid-swallow

a shell sent for direct impact

elsewhere another girl writes in her diary

*Joe Sacco, Safe Area Goražde, 90.
her back faces the window
the sun warms her cold body

a sniper shoots her in the back of the neck
her entry incomplete
I could have been either of these girls
such a small amount of time
makes a difference

near the end of 1994 my mother secures plans to escape

1995
an estimated 250,000 people have been killed
my parents cross the border into Croatia
in Vodice

two women help my parents escape
they feed us give a safe place to rest
my parents get to the Canadian embassy
two strangers help my parents
more than family ever did

May 24th “welcome to Canada”
the Balkan leaders initial a peace settlement

8,000 murdered in Srebrenica only 6,000 identified by DNA

others
late 1995 my parents start their job at the Regina Delta Hotel

1996

some 30,000 people are reported missing in Bosnia

3,000 in Croatia*

Kosovo is still under siege by aggressors

*Alexander Kitroeff, Good People in an Evil Time, lv-lvi.
1997

siege on Sarajevo is declared over*

(simultaneity

ephemeral delights:

Mom places a tray of Turkish coffee

for four down on the kitchen table.

Dad blow dries his hair.†

1998

Serbian aggressors in Kosovo are condemned by the UN‡

*Alexander Kitroeff, Good People in an Evil Time, lvi.
† My growing bones conspire / against my body / neither parent knows / there is greater pain to come
‡ Kitroeff, lvi.
1999

Kosovo is evacuated

Yugoslav forces launch offensives against Kosovo

I catch my first cold.

My parents take me to a walk-in clinic.

The doctor tells them I have scoliosis. I learn later that scoliosis for my parents is worse than war.

Yugoslav forces withdraw*

(caption) I look at myself, looking at myself
(I want to believe that I knew to search for myself then to save the code for our memories in the photos but she doesn’t know what I do. Seeing you hold us in your tiny hands unnerves me familiarity/disconnect
(help me recover you
(photographs will return you

maybe/not
2001
peace
on April 10th my sister is born

2006
my father’s mother dies he hasn’t seen her since the war started
her breath catches on his name

Miro

2009
I stop wearing my back brace

2011
December 15th* I go in for spinal surgery

I flatline

for a few minutes I dream

I’m dancing in a castle ballroom, my yellow dress
sweeps the floor with its lace < chest pain
code blue† pushes on my chest I wake.

In the waiting room my father faints, my mother catches him

* The day before: “Honey, people go through this surgery all the time and can still walk. Don’t worry too much about it; everything will be all right. Daddy promises.”

† “I told her everything would be all right. Daddy promised… I tell her she would be able to walk, that she would walk out of this place without worries. Jadranka, ako nemogne više hodati… fuck I will never forgive myself.” / “Please God help her”
December 16th I face my second spinal surgery

    I don’t die this time.

2013

June 11th my parents & I gain Canadian citizenship

2016

my father tells stories

my mother cooks soup on the stove

I sit on the white couch in the garage

press record on my iPhone

listen

witness

(begin again
2. Uniform(ed)

*Slip me on in ‘87 line up for pictures in me a great honour
live in me believe in peace naïve nineteen-year-old boys believing in peace
I am worn by the innocent & the guilty, all someone’s enemy all someone’s
neighbour we separate with cloth. In ‘89 you took me off, folded my arms
into my chest laid me to rest. I am resurrected in ‘91 by your neighbours who sat
at your table the night before laughing at a joke you told while hiding a gun in their pockets
ready to shoot with the snap of my button.

(1987-1988", My father is the third boy in)
All the facts I had about this photograph are wrong.

This photograph was taken during the 90s war (false). When I conjured an image of my father fighting in the war, the uniform he’d be wearing is this one (true). False, it was the aggressors who wore these uniforms in the war (true). My father is nineteen in this photo (true), and it was taken during his one-year mandatory service (true). It was the law in Yugoslavia that all boys eighteen and older were expected to do at least one year of military service (true). He was taught how to operate artillery, and—as he says—“survive” (true and false). He survived on the front lines (true). He liked the feeling of shooting (false). He survived his displacement in Canada (true). Years later, he tells me, “There was no rules anymore. That war… it was completely different, I didn’t know how to hold a gun anymore.”

There are no photographs of him in uniform during the 90s conflict.

3. On Translation

My mother’s hand rests on my shoulder, heavy, its weight presses my spine back into my flesh. My name is called. I am fitted for my new brace, it engulfs my whole torso, stops at my undeveloped breasts, pushes against my skin, imprinting its shape onto my body. Three straps hold the brace in place. Space between skin and strap must be two fingers apart. Air is weighted with the doctor’s words my mother doesn’t understand. Medical words explained by a five-year-old aren’t words until she lies on a bed waiting to be cut open to untangle spine from lung.

Childhood becomes metal holding bone
4. Housing Movements

I’m not sure when I first started noticing the small movements my mother makes when she’s in a good mood. I was about fifteen when we were headed to Saskatoon for an Akon concert, her favourite singer at the time. She’s never cared for song lyrics, just the beat and the way she could twist and curl her body to the rhythm. We didn’t talk on our road trips. Instead, we waved our arms with the rhythm of the music, claiming we were the best arm dancers in the country. My mother does this move with her right hand where she sticks her index finger to the sky, her thumb slightly pointing towards herself, and with every beat she moves her hand higher until her fingertip hits the roof of the car. Such an insignificant move to a stranger, but it’s how I know she’s having a good time and has put her worries to rest.

During the concert, Akon asked us to yell out where we were from. I yelled “CROATIA!” while my mother screamed “SASKATOON!” I don’t know what possessed me to say it, but I was mortified at the “mistake” I made in my cry for origin. I wasn’t even born in Croatia. My birth certificate states that I was born in Zenica, Bosnia. Should I have yelled “Bosnia” instead? Though when I asked my mother, “Am I Bosnian?” she firmly told me, “No. You’re Croatian.” Throughout most of the concert, I kept thinking back to my decision, wondering why I didn’t realize I was supposed to yell the city’s name where Akon was performing. I learnt my lesson, though. I didn’t do it again and with each “where are you from?” I yelled in unison with my dancing mother: “Saskatoon!”

In the former Yugoslavia, Croatians, Bosnians, and Serbians were not distinguished by birthplace; it was the religion they practiced or their last names that gave others the information they needed. My parents identify as Catholics; therefore, they’re Croatian. To add further
complexity, because they were born in the “province” of Bosnia, before the fall of Yugoslavia they were “Bosnian-Croats,” not “full” Croatians. Apparently, there is a difference there as well. But what does this mean for me and my identity? I don’t believe in the religions that form either Croatia or Bosnia, so do I belong to either ethnicity? Do I call myself Bosnian strictly because that’s what is on my birth certificate? Then there is the problem of also being Canadian. How do I hyphenate myself? On what grounds am I Canadian-Croatian, Canadian-Bosnian, or Canadian-Bosnian-Croatian? My mother would say, “You’re Canadian, you don’t need to be anything else.” Getting our Canadian citizenship was her greatest achievement.

“Do I have dual citizenship?” I asked her once.

“No, why would you?” She replied, indignant. She constantly pushed me away from that identity, though she displayed the Croatian flag proudly in her car and in her home.

The Croatian flag has three equal horizontal strips of colour in red, white, and blue. In the middle there is a main shield, a chessboard of red and white squares, with a crown of five smaller shields, each representing historical regions of Croatia: Croatia, Dubrovnik, Dalmatia, Istria, and Slavonia. The small shields contain colourful images: the first image, a six-pointed star above a horizontal crescent moon on a light blue background; the second, two red bars over navy blue; the third image, three golden leopard heads against a light blue background; the fourth, a golden goat with red horns on dark blue; and the last point of the crown, a shield imaged with a six-pointed star, two silver bars with a running pine marten on a red field over light blue. This flag is rooted in a tradition and history that I can never fully know.

The Bosnia-Herzegovina national flag is quite different from that of Croatia. Its image hosts a blue field divided by a large yellow triangle and a diagonal line of nine white stars with the outer top and bottom stars cut off at the edges of the flag. This simple design was established
to differentiate itself from any single ethnic, religious, or political group. Bosnia was referred to
as the “safe space” where all ethnicities could live among each other in peace. However, despite
its attempt at being a neutral symbol, the flag still emblemizes the genocide of Bosnian
hyphenated people before and during the civil war. With such a violent past, a neutral symbol
can’t exist.

Both flags represent a history that is part of me and my ancestral identity. I don’t belong
exclusively to either one, nor do I belong only to Canada. The Canadian flag in its simplicity
reminds me of the Bosnia-Herzegovina flag with its violent history embodied by the colour red,
though masked by its recognizable symbol: the maple leaf. Its simple design, like Bosnia’s,
wishes to separate itself from one single ethnic, religious, or political identity. But in doing so,
what history is erased?

I’ve never fully understood what it meant to be Bosnian, Croatian, Bosnian-Croatian, or
Yugoslavian. My parents’ national identities were constantly in flux—they were born
Yugoslavians, raised as Yugoslavian and then, without warning, they were pegged as a different
nationality based on surname, and an ethnic and religious background. They became Bosnian-
Croatian, and because of this, weren’t trusted by either “full” Bosnians or Croatians. My father
told me that because they were Catholic (Croatian), many Bosnians did not trust them and
wanted them to leave the village once the war started. In Croatia, they weren’t trusted because
they were assumed to be Muslim due to their Bosnian heritage. In Serbian territory, my parents
were unwelcome because of the old Serb-Croat divide, freshly invigorated by political leaders
Slobodan Milošević (Serb) and Franjo Tudjman (Croat) in the late 1980s. The hatred this
“Religious War” incurred had devastating consequences and created casualties on every side. In
her town when the war started, my mother and her family were the ones being killed, their
community’s churches and graveyards destroyed. In another village, Bosnian Muslims were the ones slaughtered by Croatians. In the next, Serbians killed both Catholics and Muslims, even other Serbians who were deemed “not Serbian enough.” My mother told me that there is a saying: “U svakom žitu ima kukolja,” which roughly translates to “every rose has its thorn.” What she means is that among every group of people there are extremists.

For my mother, religion never quite mattered because, as a child, she was taught to never judge others by their beliefs. “Before the war,” she said, “I never knew who practiced which religion. We were just people. I have a best friend that is Muslim. I went to the mosque with her lots as a child and we are still good friends. But the war labelled us. It tried to tear us from each other, and for many, it did.”

As the war carried on, it didn’t matter who was being killed. It only mattered that someone was erased.

In the summer of 2011, my parents and I finally gained our Canadian citizenship. The ceremony was held in the theatre of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. The seats in the theatre were half filled with people and their families from all over the world. I imagined each of them quivering with anticipation to officially be Canadian. To begin again.

Near the end of the ceremony, the official asked if anyone wished to say anything. To my surprise, my mother raised her hand. She took the stage, all eyes on her, and I realized I had never seen her speak publicly before. I noticed my own nervous traits in her shaking hands as she held the microphone. I never envisioned my mother as someone who had a desire to speak about what it meant to be Canadian, but, watching as she steadied herself and cleared her throat, I
could see a confidence in her eyes that was new. She began with a simple, “We did it,” motioning to all of us in the room. Then, her cadence changed.

“How grateful I am to be Canadian. No more worrying about saying who you are. No pressure for what your last name is. No more hiding what your last name is. No more living life dependent on what that name means. We are free to be people.”

In the front row, a woman closed her eyes. Tears formed at the edges. She nodded her head with every word my mother said. Another woman and her husband lifted their hands in the air in agreement. More new Canadians stood, as if we were at a concert and they wanted my mother to sing an encore. She reached these people in a place I had no idea how to enter. I’ve never worried about telling someone my last name. Canada, for her, meant safety and a home where she could thrive. I turned to my father, who was beaming. His fingers were interlaced, as if in prayer, waiting in anticipation to clap. Tears in her own eyes, my mother finished, “I am safe to be a Gerbeza. We are safe. Congratulations to us all.”

We went to Croatia over the summer of 2016 for my cousin’s wedding. While there, I felt like an outsider, despite my lineage. My mother, sister, and I stayed with my aunt in Vodice, a small town a few hours away from the capital, Zagreb. The standard routine for most of Vodice’s residents was to spend the day on the beach and the nights at clubs, dancing or shopping at the midnight market. On one of our beach days, I sought refuge from the heat at a buffet at the beach market. The queue moved quicker than my brain could translate the menu into English.

“Šta želite?” the woman behind the glass asked me. I was puzzled by her question and struggled to make meaning of the words. I could tell she was annoyed by the way she looked at the person behind me. Frantic, I eyed a dish that looked like chicken and penne noodles. Well,
that’s pretty universal, I thought. But how the fuck do I say *penne noodles*? I scoured the menu, looking for something that looked like “chicken penne,” but nothing looked remotely close to the way I, phonetically, had learned how to spell *chicken*. I couldn’t even Google the damn translation because my measly phone only worked in Canada; my mother did *not* want to pay roaming charges, so I was left to my own wits.

“Could I get the chicken and noodle?” I attempted.

Her eyebrows scrunched together, clearly realizing I had no idea how to ask for what I wanted. “*Kokoš*?” She asked, but the word wasn’t the one I grew up with. “No, the chicken penne dish,” I tried again, searching my brain for the right words. She pointed her spoon at a couple more dishes, neither of them what I wanted. Grumbling came from the customers behind me. I gave up, gestured toward the closest dish to the front, and paid her. She did not have sympathy for the Canadian imposter. Mortified, I sat down and idly forked the vegetables I didn’t even like.

During my childhood, my parents were so impressed with how our mother language flowed from my tongue so easily. They constantly bragged to their friends, “She’s fluent!” I learned Croatian/Bosnian through dialogue. I never formally studied the language, nor did I know its slang or idioms. Was I really fluent? Sure, at home I could have arguments with my parents not stuttering over any words, and understand their Croatian TV shows, but here where the language flowed from the taps, I couldn’t understand a thing. I caught snippets of words my brain recognized, but when faced with strings of sentences, I faltered, speaking English to them in the hope that someone would understand me. I always considered myself fluent and that’s what I would tell my friends, managers, put on my resume with pride. But does conversationally aware count?
What does it mean to really know a language?

My parents learned English while they worked as housekeepers at the Delta hotel in Regina in the late 90s. My mother told me how she was frustrated with the language class she had to take at the Regina Open Door Society because she felt that she was not learning anything.*

“I didn’t care about grammar,” she said, “I just wanted to learn how to fucking say kupatilo. How could I learn grammar when I didn’t even know simple words?”

At the Delta, while she removed towels from the bathroom floor, she would ask her partner, “This?” And the woman would tell her, “towel.” “Towel,” my mom would repeat, mentally marking it in her growing vocabulary. She did this with every item she could get her hands on, teaching my dad when they reunited for their lunch break. At home, five-year-old me would teach them more words and how to string them into sentences. On a particularly cold Saskatchewan day, my father wanted to know how to say “It is very cold outside.” I remember most of the sentence was in Croatian with the word “cold” plopped in at the end, heavily accented. I pointed out the balcony door window; he nodded. I taught him slowly “Ti hoćeš kazati,” I started in Croatian, switching to English for the last part of the sentence, “It is very cold outside.”

“It cold vani,” he said.

“It’s very cold outside,” I repeated.

“It very cold out there,” my dad managed. I nod. “Odlično!”

Our experiences interlaced with each vocabulary lesson. While I learned the English language in elementary school, they did, too. Did my faltering in the buffet line in Vodice mean

*A requirement of my parents’ immigration to Canada was that they had to take classes to learn English.*
that I couldn’t consider myself a hyphenated Canadian? What right did I have to that identity if I didn’t have the language? Five-year-old me did have the language, so where did it go? Does language matter that much when I have memories of these crumbling houses from long before I tried to order a meal in Vodice?

During the same summer trip, my mother, sister, cousins and I ate at a pizzeria just down the street from the apartment where we were staying. I can’t remember what it was called, but it had this statue of a chef with an incredibly long mustache that mimicked a smile. He pointed toward the sky with a marble finger, chipped where the pizza dough he was spinning had fallen off. He looked like he’d come straight from a comic book; his chipped finger, however, was a sinister reminder of this country’s history. Our waitress took a liking to my mother and they chatted over thin crust pizza and cigarettes. It was late enough that the restaurant wasn’t busy, so the woman had the freedom to take short breaks. She worked 16-hour days with payment in kunas equivalent to maybe $100 CAD a week. She was trying to save enough money to move to the States or Canada. When the waitress walked back to the kitchen with our orders, I remember asking my mother, “How long will it take her to save up?” My mother grimaced, “A very long time. I gave her a big tip. There is nothing here for her. I hope she gets to leave soon.” There was a sadness in her voice as she squished her cigarette in the ashtray.

Nationality for my mom is a complicated affair. She is not fully Canadian, but she is proud to be one, despite aligning herself with a hyphenated identity. Her past will never leave her, just as her hyphenated identity will remain, her quest endless to find a community of Balkan people in our home city. She and my father have taken so many people into their home, feeding
them and helping them get their visas to stay in Canada the moment they meet them. The homeland beckons because their hyphenated identity still marginalizes them in Canada. Perhaps the reason I am so adamant about having a hyphenated identity is to finally have a place in the history that has shaped me throughout my childhood. But my experience will always taint my view of Croatia and Bosnia; I will always experience them through the lens of being Canadian first.

I imagine my mother sticking her finger to the sky that day, when she was nineteen, my small body cradled in her arms, her feet planted for the first time on Canadian soil. She was finally free. After a childhood of my parents working multiple jobs to keep hand-sliced French bread on the table and Dunkaroos in my school lunches, my mother and I finally took our road trip to Saskatoon, just the two of us, music blasting so loud that sound became visible and the dashboard vibrated. I knew she was happy in the car on the drive home after the concert. The black sky threatened a storm, but we didn’t mind. The cool breeze that came from my mother’s slightly ajar window felt good on our sweaty bodies. She lit up a cigarette and I reclined my seat. With my eyes closed, I listened to her quietly singing along while she bobbed her head up and down to the music.
5. Winter 2018:

Inside the car

My mother and I

exchange the how

when and why of no one

ever mentioning the word help. My father needed
to drink, and none of us asked why. We argue the nuances of the need for his rehabilitation, never asking what he needed help from. He left me on the side of the high way while he dealt with his hangover, Mom tells me. 

I needed him and he refused to come, so I told him to let the drink kill him. I’m done. She didn’t mean that, or she did. You could never tell with my mother. He betrayed her. She’s lost in this world without him, but addiction doesn’t care if you find your way. I think we both knew.

We want to go out to eat just the two of us. A rare occurrence. I am Dad
’s favorite. Not Mom’s. But

my sister is a teenage cliché,

out with her friends, ignoring texts.

I am examined

by my reflection. For God’s sake,

what always takes you so long

to get ready? Mom calls.

7.

Clearing Up
the Question of Why
It Takes Me So Long
To Get Ready in the Morning

1. Either I have scoliosis or I don’t.

2. If I have scoliosis, either it is a temporary condition or it isn’t.

3. If it is a temporary condition, either surgery will make it disappear or it won’t.

4. If it does disappear, then the ridicule stops or worsens.

5. If it worsens, either it was not the underlying issue I thought it was or there is more to it.

6. Is there more to skin? More and more and more to our belief about skin than of it?

7. If there is more to it, either I am the fairest version of myself or I accept that she doesn’t exist.

8. If she doesn’t exist, I either embrace the hunch-back or I attempt to slice off excess skin.
9. If I slice off excess skin, either I will become seamless or I will end up with a pile of flesh mountains.

10. If flesh mountains pile in my room, I am back where I started or I’m close to a solution.

11. Will my body turn itself insideOUT to show me its answer? Bone forgives

12. If Im close to a solution and that solution is piles of flesh, either the cloudiness my brain has in seeing beauty is my bodys fault or it isnt

13. If it isnt my bodys fault, then whose is it Either its mine or its hers

14. If its hers She must come back and kiss the frame she left or Im left here staring

15. If I am left here staring at my nakedbody either I will learn to love It or I wont

16.

17. If I dont learn to love it there will be hope or a Cycle of repeatedhatehate that lines the walls between bone and flesh

18. If hate lines the walls between bone Hope will be lost

19. or sought out

20. If hope is sought out either my time in front of this mirror will shorten or itOr it will continue

If hope is sought out either i will finally stop. obsessing over shapes or scars If I stop obsessing over scars maybe i will heal or begin to-pull-these-tights up to only my belly button if I pull these tights up to only my bellow button either i will wear a baggier dress or one that shows in its velvet snugness Chunks of skin that Dont abide by the rules
If I wear the velvety snugness showing chunks of rebelling

    skin either I will be ready on Time or ill be late

if I’m late I have lost the battle or have an answer to the question if I have the answer to the question its either scoliosis or its temporary if it temporary either scoliosis doesn’t exist or don’t exist - if I do not exist scoliosis doesn’t either

8. (My father after my birth in 1994)
9. The Listener

One night, my parents, one of their friends, and I hang out in the garage and while the other two occupy themselves with talking about the friend’s marital problems on the opposite end of the couch, my father admits to me that he believes he is traumatized.

He takes a slow sip of plum brandy and tells me, “I was laying in the dirt and the sniper’s bullet shot right above my head. ZOOM, my hair stood up like this.” He moves his hand fast through his nearly buzzed hair, trying to mimic what this sensation would have looked like if I was there to see it.

He shakes his head. “If I was just a little bit higher up, I would have died. The shit I saw… And they wonder why I am the way I am…."

When it comes to my father and his anger, my mother and sister tune him out. I am the one who receives the brunt of his foul moods, but afterward he comes back and apologizes. My mother and sister never sit down and listen to him talk about his feelings regarding the motives behind the fight—they immediately dismiss him, comment on his addiction and anger without acknowledging that his feelings were hurt. My father’s testimony, for many years, went unheard until I was old enough to understand.

According to Dori Laub, the act of bearing witness to trauma is threefold: a witness to the testimony of another, a witness is a witness to oneself within the experience, and a witness to the process of witnessing itself. In order for someone like my father to process his trauma, he needed an empathetic listener—an “other” who hears the anguish of his memories, affirms and recognizes its reality. The absence of such a listener would annihilate his story and its reality. The role of the empathetic listener is essential to the process of testimony, but there needs to be a
bonding and an intimate and total presence of the other who hears without dismissal. In his earlier years after immigrating to Canada, my father’s drinking problem was at its peak—he was violent, his anger uncontrollable. If we came home from a friend’s place and my father was drunk, I learned to stay away from him, rush into my bedroom because he would lash out, unable to control his rage. He would punch holes in doors, walls, and then sit and mutter angrily to himself until he was tired enough to go to bed. My mother ignored him, removed herself physically and emotionally from both of us, and went to bed early most nights. My mother swore to herself that she wouldn’t dwell on the war once her new life started in Canada; therefore, she refused to listen to my father. That role was mine to fill.

Ever since I have been old enough to listen to him, to give his story the attention it needed for him to process what happened to him—a reality that was destroyed throughout the years because no one listened to him—his drinking has subsided. He isn’t as violent anymore; the doors aren’t regularly punctuated with holes that constantly need filling. Laub’s empathetic listener is, however, almost always a stranger, someone who has distance from the victim’s testimony. Laub didn’t anticipate that this role would be filled by a child for her father. Furthermore, Laub imagines the listener to be an adult, someone who is capable of participating, reliving, and “reexperiencing” the traumatic event, but also someone who can be “safely” distanced from the person being interviewed. My childhood and early adulthood are saturated by my father’s testimony and my listening to it, and through this relationship, I not only acted as a witness to him, but I was also witnessing myself in relation to this history that has shaped both of us.

As a child survivor of the Holocaust, Laub witnesses himself through his memories as an adult, but feels that these memories he has are like distant islands, as if the memories are from
another child, but nevertheless, connected to him. I understand what he means: the child who remembers the war is a distant version of myself, someone whom I can barely conjure, but we are connected through memories that drift just out of the reach of my consciousness. While I listen to my father, I am reconnected to her, to myself, to my story.

And as I take a portrait of my father lost in thought on our white couch in the garage, we witness each other. The iPhone camera witnesses both of us and we become each other—if only for a moment.
11. Happy Childhood

I can’t remember feeling like a child

but I must have been one

there are photographs of birthday parties swarming with friends,
balloons & Dairy Queen ice cream cake with PowerPuff Girls
drawn in icing ink

In other photographs I sit on a stone ledge

with my mother, we both eat chocolate

she smokes & dad captures us

these photos contain what is missing
II

(I) (BECOME) WITNESS
I keep dreaming about a large stray grey dog. He follows me to the bus stop. In my hands is a dirty white blanket; it is caked with mud. I carry it close to my chest. Then, I wake up. I’ve had this dream so many times that I wonder if it’s a dream or a memory. But I’m not sure where this memory came from. I remember my father mentioning similar details during one of our FaceTime conversations about the war. He talked about a stray dog finding him in the street, following him everywhere he went while he avoided the soldiers searching for him. He got on a bus to find my mom and me, but there was no mention of a blanket. Still, I can visualize its subtle pink trim so clearly in my mind.

I’m overwhelmed with the task of writing a memoir about my family, about me. About our experiences in the war, and in Canada afterward. What can I say that is worthwhile? How can I capture in words what my parents went through?

My pregnant mother is carrying a sack the size of her torso on her back. The street and its surroundings have recently been shelled. She moves fast into a forest. The path she takes is concealed by brush, but it leads her to a safe house. The memory ends there. I don’t know what the safe house looks like, or how she gets to the path. The thing about this memory is that I don’t think it’s my own. I’m the fetus, so how could it be? Yet I can feel the contours of the memory: the heaviness of the sack with its canvas walls filled with canned food, firewood, and potatoes; my mother’s fear as she runs; and I somehow beside her.
This memory of my mother’s was transmitted to me so deeply that it has taken root as my own. Perhaps this is what Marianne Hirsch describes as “postmemory,” a concept she uses to examine how those who suffer trauma pass on their memories of their original trauma to their children. But I’m wrong. This memory isn’t just a transference. Whenever I bring up “being there” during the war, my mom—without hesitation—says, “Well you were there. You were in my belly.”

I am neither simply a first-generation survivor or a child of the second generation. I am both. Hirsch theorizes that a child of the second generation undergoes an act of creation to gain agency over their “transferred” memories, and in doing so, creates their own version of a memory to contextualize what has been transferred by the parent. The dream with the dog is a memory, but one that was passed on. Somehow, the vision of my mother with the sack is my own memory, but the dream is my father’s memory. There must have been a moment (or several) during my childhood that he’d reveal this memory and pass it on to me in different ways, whether that was kissing my forehead goodnight, letting me sit with him while he drank his beer, or when we picked out our first dog—a white Shitzu Maltese whom I named Bella. The detail of the blanket is my own creation to understand.…

My father is escaping, coming, near and nearer. He would find me. I wait for him to wrap his arms around me, snug and safe. He will lift me up.

There is a photograph of my parents and me when we first came to Canada; I am swaddled in white in my mom’s arms while my dad has his hands on her shoulders. Neither are smiling. There is another photograph of me in 1999 smiling over a balcony at whoever was holding the camera. That girl in the photograph is closer to my parents and their experiences than
I am now at twenty-five. She knows more about them than I do, more about “us.” Accessing that little girl is nearly impossible. I can try and experiment with *photoshop*, or language, and try to uncover my younger self with words—hope that I can discover different points of entry into my parents’ past and my own—but I always fail.

And I’ll continue to fail because trauma can’t be fully captured into words. My mother won’t suddenly want to share her emotions with me. The slight fidget in my father’s hand while he tells me stories about the war will always signify a detail that is missing. Something I won’t be able to uncover. Words are missing; they can’t fill in what is unspoken. Words cannot capture what happened to them, what continues to live in their minds, what somehow lives in mine. But words are all I have.

*By manipulating a photograph on *photoshop*, whether it’s changing the exposition of an image, cropping, or enlarging it, a detail might be revealed that wasn’t there before. This change in a photograph’s composition can create a trigger for memory.
13. Issues of Translation
14. Prior to My Birth

If only the adults could become children. There would be no wars.
— Nadja Halilbegovich, My Childhood under Fire: A Sarajevo Diary

What if in the middle of shelling your street the soldier turns into a child
drops the last bomb & leaves no one picks it up again. It stays there gets buried
under fresh dirt dormant Or if a sniper about to shoot
a woman walking alone in the street carrying a small bag of flour
turns into a child pulls the trigger anyway, thinking it’s a game misses
& she lives to feed her family slivers of fresh bread
they all survive another day If the group of soldiers
blocking the roads to each city & executing travelers turned into children
the dead bodies might not be piled in mass graves they might have gone on their way
given the children candy as they passed

Imagine if the men threatening to rape
my mother, slit her throat, bury her body in the acres between forest & mountain
turned into children
16. Flesh & Stone

My mother and father sit on a stone ledge in front of my aunt’s apartment

no money items to trade traded nothing left except

cigarettes & even those are ash fallen on concrete
my aunt and her friend suck nicotine into their flesh

cigarettes sloppy in their mouths hands preoccupied with small cups of coffee
the only warmth in the air is from the coffee entering through lips there is some to spare

but no one offers any to the two sitting on the ledge

in another version my parents sit on the beach sand coats skin
surnames replace the human for language meaningless

as sand falls from their clothes I become witness

my aunt and her friend smoke & drink

the same end

17. My Birth

Lines of blue, yellow,
red seed death in her
belly of spring.

Her belly at spring’s end
full of roses, bursts open
a red refusal.
19. My Father Foresees His Death

dawn breaks night’s uncertain ring
songs travel through tree branches
to men using rocks as pillows
they rise & sing along

their songs are encased in metal shells
the breeze carries them
hair from its root upon arrival
the bullets are singing

songs
sing along

when he kisses the ground

there is nowhere deeper he can go
20. Pint-Sized

I was born prematurely, almost a month too early.

In the middle of a war, my mom delivered a baby no bigger than a beer bottle and watched her daughter finish growing her lungs in an incubator. The hospital in Zenica in 1994 did not allow for fathers to come into the delivery room during the birth or for a while afterward. My father skipped over the back fence of the hospital and snuck into the room to see me. Somehow, I survived in that rectangular cube while the city was destroyed, my father risking his life to see me time and time again.

21. My Father’s History

In this letter
death is a space

between words: the memory of bodies,

lying – as if flung – on the floor.


He opens his third Pilsner,

the bottle cap cracking with release (d)

air, a hiss through teeth. He raises the cold
glass rim to his lips, gulps the familiar

fluid, desperate to stop thinking

about endless dirt caught in his throat.

I’ve watched him drink his evenings.

He tries to keep himself afloat.
There are hidden ghosts in this letter

documenting my father’s history.

I cannot read it.

The key is embedded
in the repetition of his past

with every bottle, drunk

he fights for the same grace:

may they find each other in death,

a generation of friends with no choice
to fight in a war of intertwined fates.

Death is a space

between living;
between memory;
between breaths;
between drinks;
between coping;
between chores;
between dreams;
between languages;
between stories;
between words: the memory of bodies
line up like the empty bottles that loiter
in our garage. I collect them
one by one, each a piece to history
never quite fitting
together. I fill in empty space.
I ignore & ignore & ignore
the false truths and full shot glasses
of brandy. He is guilty for surviving,
the liquor store receipts ask for an encore,
he is lying there—as if flung—on the floor.

22. Silenced

I
Mom yanks my hair. *You’re pulling too hard.* Her grip remains. Tug, tug, tugging until she
finishes putting my hair in pigtails. She doesn’t understand what mild pain feels like. I’m not
convinced that this has anything to do with her experience during the war or everything to do
with it. Hair pulling can’t be compared to men shoving her into a wall, knives ready to cut.

II
My father does my hair in the rest of my memories. Gentle hands smooth & messily braid hair,
finish with a kiss on the cheek.
III

Silence is my mother’s emotion. It simmers, is a pot of potatoes on the stove, liquid spilling over the brim, too quiet for anyone to hear until the potatoes burn. The fault of burnt potatoes is mine. Mine. Mine. Always mine.

IV

Become a parent. Then, become a parent at nineteen. Then, become a parent in the middle of a war. How do you look at your child as she grows up without the same hardships? I am twenty-five, seven years older than my mother was when she became a parent. Older than she was throughout the war. At nineteen, I almost failed my Philosophy 100 exam.*

*Essay question: Discuss the existence of God using the arguments of at least two philosophers.
My mother loses her temper for reasons I never suspect. During dinner, she puts a plate of stuffed red peppers in front of me. I refuse to eat them—I hate red peppers.

“Back home, you wouldn’t be allowed to cry over this. You’d be grateful and eat them.”

In fact, her past comes out whenever I am in trouble in a repetition of similar statements:

“Back home, you wouldn’t have a choice.”

“Back home, you’d be hit for that.”

“Back home, you’d starve with that attitude.”

“Back home ________.”

“Back home ________.”
I take every statement to heart. My voice is lost in her past. This happens with my father, too. Though it isn’t as repetitive. He shuts me up by saying, “You don’t know anything.” He never explicitly links it to his experience in the war, but somehow I know that is what he means.

VI

My sister never burns the potatoes. I get out of bed one night to pour myself a glass of water. I spot my sister and mother snuggling on the couch. Our mother rubs her back. I can’t remember a time when she rubbed my back like that.

23. My Mother On Watching the News

“I don’t pay attention to the news anymore. I don’t seek it out either. Back home, that’s how they would control us. No one knew what was true. I didn’t know about what happened on 9/11 until a few days later because I just can’t watch the news. That’s how I survived.”

24. Noćna Mora

You are hunted, but you can’t leave the house. This time, you made it outside, but you find out that you still can’t leave the area. You hide in a bush, a gun in your hand. Where did the gun come from? You shoot a vampire and run down the street, but once you pass the stop sign at the end of the block, you are back where you started: in the bush. Hiding, hunted.

You can’t leave.

All you can do is run in circles.
This time, you shoot a man with no face. Dirt spills out of his wound. You can’t figure out how the gun got into your hand. How you know how to hold it, to pull the trigger. You’re a child.

As children, we understand our parents’ traumatic stories as fairy tales. I ingested bloodshed in the form of a vampire. The men who threatened to rape and murder my mother were made of soil, faceless, nameless as she was to them. As I was nameless to them, still in my mother’s womb, to the woman soldier at the Muziča Škola (Musical High School) who told my mother she would deliver her baby and then kill us.

The Muziča Škola in Zenica was a high school for those who wished to study music and become professional musicians. However, during the war, the Muziča Škola was turned into a camp where civilians and prisoners of war were taken and mistreated, tortured, and murdered. In my mother’s words, “If you were taken there, you weren’t getting out alive.”

My father defied the odds, was just held there overnight. My pregnant mother, knowing the rumours about this place, went there to try and negotiate my father’s release, but the guards laughed in her face, touched her protruding stomach, and offered to deliver me there on a table.

“Then after, we can kill your baby in front of you,” the woman said to her.

My mother scoffed, “I’d rather die than let you deliver my baby.”
25. The Nourishment of Us

If Maggie Nelson is right, and words do change depending on who speaks them, then each iteration of “I love you” is different.


A couple days after my spinal surgery, I was still on a morphine drip. I remember the pain; it nested in the middle of my back, but every so often moved up and down my scar. The rest of my memories, like so many of the ones I have, are given to me by others. I was in and out of consciousness with each click of the morphine button.

Jay moves a stray hair away from her daughter’s forehead. Jay hasn’t done that since her daughter was little, but with her in the hospital bed like this, her daughter is that little girl again. Her daughter lets out a groan as she shifts in her sleep, her pain audible to Jay, but shapeless. There isn’t anything Jay can grasp to begin to understand the pain her daughter feels. She recognizes the physical signs of Tea’s pain—the slight attempt to lift her hips and pelvis to adjust her back, and the recoiling of her shoulders—but as she watches her attempt to alleviate her pain while asleep, Jay is suffocated. Her daughter can’t carry out her task, she is too weak, and her body didn’t respond to what she wanted it to do. Jay fixes the sheets, hoping that it will do something for her daughter.

Jay is alone in the hospital room, her husband out for a smoke. She finishes talking to her younger daughter—Mia—on the phone, and puts it in her purse. Thankfully Mia is able to stay with their friends, Ronnie and Michael, while Jay and her husband are in Saskatoon for Tea’s
surgery. Earlier that day, she picked up some groceries after she went to their hotel room to shower and clear her head after waiting sixteen hours for the results of Tea’s surgery.

Yesterday’s operation was surrounded by…


That’s all she can think about now. Code Blue.

Jay shakes her head to try to lose this memory. Her daughter is fine. The second surgery was successful. But this isn’t the first time that she had to think about the possibility that her daughter might die. Jay doodles her daughter’s name on a napkin. She goes over the letter “T” with her pen again and again, thickening the letter with the pen’s ink. She usually doodles when she concentrates, but this time her pain tries to make itself known through ink. She puts the pen down and paces around the room, hands clenched in her jacket pocket. Jay goes to the grocery bag and grabs a cluster of grapes to eat.

“Mom?”

Jay looks down at the grapes she dropped on the floor. She leaves them there and approaches the bed.

“Hi, hon. Are you hungry?”

Dazed, her daughter nods, wincing as she slightly moves her body.

“Do you want some grapes?”

“Yes, please.”

Jay gives her one grape. Her daughter chews slowly and swallows, already fighting sleep again.

Jay tries to give her another grape.

“No… no more,” Tea says, falling back asleep.
Jay laughs, her knuckles white.

Sometime in January 2013, “I love you,” my mother tells me.

It has to be love when my mother bathes me as if I’m a toddler again. She hasn’t seen me naked since childhood, but today I am simultaneously a grown woman and a baby. She helps me into the tub. I stumble and grab on to her. She steadies me.

Turning on the shower, I feel the water go from cold to hot; it feels different on my scar. The water is hot and only gets hotter. I wash my hair as my mother scrubs my back in sections, working her way around my healing wound. She nips a spot of skin near the scar with the loofa. I let out a shrill cry. She doesn’t apologize, but she puts a wet towel against the spot, soothing the throbbing pain. I get tired and sit on the edge of the tub. My mother wipes my shoulders and upper arms with a cloth, working the soap into the skin with a gentleness I’ve never experienced before.

Sometime in 2016: “I love you too,” my mother replies.

She doesn’t mean it. We’ve just had a fight, and she’s only saying it back because she feels like she has to. I know it because I know what she looks like when she means it. Do you ever wonder what it feels like when your mother stops loving you, even for a second?

Jay walks over to her newborn baby and tucks her in while she sleeps. She goes back to the window and checks to make sure he’s left. He has. She lets out a sigh out of relief. He’s a corrupt Croatian soldier, Jay could tell from the way he smoked his cigarette. Because he held it so effortlessly, letting the ashes fall wherever they wanted and discarding the cigarette before it was completely finished. She knew he was taking boxes of cigarettes in exchange for lives he—to his displeasure—didn’t take. He wanted to kill. His uniform was the same as the men that were hunting Miro. The power of killing is intoxicating for these men, there is no foreseen end to it, so people trade cigarettes for their lives.

Miro is in KP Dom Zenica. He had to turn himself in or they’d kill her and their baby as punishment. He refused to join the army when they drafted him because he did not want to be told to shoot his neighbours, or Jay’s extended family who lived on the other side of the Bosnian border. He evaded them until they figured out where he lived, where his mother lived, and until they threatened all of their lives.

Jay tries to find a way to get him out of jail, but first, she has to make sure her daughter is safe. Tea has to survive, no matter the cost. Children aren’t protected in this war. They’re killed just like the adults without even a blink from the aggressors.

The first time he harasses Jay is over some sugar for his coffee. She doesn’t have any, she barely has soup to last the week. He doesn’t like that very much.

“Give me some sugar or I will strangle you.”

“Go ahead and try,” she said. There is a boldness in her voice that only a nineteen-year-old can have as she slams the door in his face.
She draws the curtain, shielding herself and Tea from his perverse gaze and lies next to Tea on the floor. It’s been a few days since his last visit, but in the time between, she could see his shadow looming in the window across the street stalking her shadow behind the drapes.

There is a knock. Not the loud, familiar knock of a family member who knew to knock loudly to make sure she heard them. The sound is a loud thump followed by a crackling. Any kind of unfamiliar knocking puts Jay on edge. Even if a person is innocent, the aggressors will find a reason to take someone away or kill them on sight. Jay cautiously looks out of the small window by the door; he has thrown a petarda (firecracker) at the door—a sick game. Everyone knows that if someone is hunting you, and knows where you are, they won’t bother knocking. They’ll just break down the door. But he enjoys his games.

It is quiet for a moment. Then the knocking becomes the sharp hammering of fists on the door. The entire apartment shakes from his anger. The sound of his fists makes Jay feel like she is in a pot of boiling water, her skin searing with each slam against the door. Tea stirs in her sleep. Jay marches to the door. Opens it. She isn’t scared of him. She’s angry.

He stands cockily in the doorway, eyes bloodshot. “Give me your cigarettes. I’m out.”

“I don’t have any.”

“I saw you smoking on the balcony last night, I know you have some. Give them to me!”

He moves closer to her.

Jay kicks the petarda aside. She doesn’t move from her spot in the doorway.

“I don’t have any cigarettes. Get off my property.”

He knows that Jay is telling the truth, but still persists. “I’ll kill you and your precious child.”

Jay tries to shut the door.
He blocks it with his foot.

She kicks him in the shin. He stumbles just enough to the side that she shuts and locks the door. There is one last hard slam of a fist on the door.

Tea starts crying. Jay picks her up, rocks her until she’s silent again. Then, Jay swaddles her. She exits the house toward the police station. She doesn’t care if he sees her leaving or not. The walk is bleak; the streets are deserted. The only sign of life are the blouses and Levis jeans on the clothes-lines rustling in the crisp evening wind. Their sound keeps Jay alert. She looks over her shoulder at every corner to make sure she isn’t being followed or falling into an enemy trap.

She gets to the police station. The two officers look her up and down and she knows right then that they won’t take her seriously. But she tries anyway.

“He has been harassing me for two weeks now, threatening me and my kid. You guys need to do something.”

Both police officers shrug. “Žao mi je, gospodo” one says. “There isn’t anything we can do. Just keep your doors locked.”

“I don’t care if he’s a soldier. If he comes back one more time threatening to kill me and my daughter njega više nema samo neka dođe pa ćete vidjeti jebat ću mu majku! I will kill him myself!”

They smirk as she storms off.

The next few days are silent. Then, as she puts a can of beans into a backpack, there is another petarda thrown at her door. It is as if the quietness summoned him. Jay opens the door. Kicks the petarda back toward him while seething with the rage. He screams at her, but she can’t
grasp what he’s saying. When it’s life or death, there isn’t room for comprehension. He runs at her, stopping just as his fist comes into contact with the concrete wall beside the doorframe. Jay doesn’t move. Her body knows what to do. She speaks through redness, punching him first in the shoulder and then in the chest with a surprising force.

He pushes her into the doorframe. Fury spills from her lips in her last attempt to get him off the property.

“If you threaten me or my kid one more time, I will kill you with my bare hands!”

He laughs, turning away. He doesn’t believe her, but he should. She would kill him to protect her daughter. She watches from the window as he crosses the street to his apartment. She looks down at Tea who lies on her blanket on the floor, eyes wide with curiosity. Jay picks Tea up and holds her close, instantly feeling calm. Tea’s small hands touch Jay’s face. She coos. A weight lifts from Jay’s heart.

Texts from April 4, 2018: “I love you,” my dad tells me.

Me: I’m stressed because I can’t figure this out. Thank you for checking in on me. I really appreciate it. I’m sorry I haven’t texted lately... I’ve been in a weird place. I love you.

Dad: “You are my baby till I live. No problem [3 kiss emojis].”

“I love you,” my dad tells me.

I’m five. Or am I younger? This is Dad’s memory:
We are out to get some ice cream, and it isn’t until we are up at the window with the cashier asking us, “What can I get you guys?” that Dad realizes he doesn’t know how to ask for ice cream. He looks at the woman with panic. The line grows.

He mimics eating ice cream. His tongue out of his mouth licks the air, while his hand pretends to hold a cone. The woman doesn’t understand.

She asks again, “What can I get you, sir?”

He exaggerates his licking; his tongue waves as he shakes his head. With his final plea, he pretends to eat the tip of what would be a vanilla soft-serve.

I’m not sure what happened next, but I remember feeling the soft, cold ice cream against my tongue and my dad re-telling me this story in our garage as he drank a Pilsner years later. I try to dig up the memory, to see if the cashier laughed at my father, but nothing comes. It must be locked away in his brain, among the memories of jail.

We hang out in the garage a lot together, talking, and usually, after he tells me a happy memory, he will offhandedly also mention an unpleasant one. There hasn’t been a happy memory that he tells that isn’t always followed with a painful one. Such an odd idiosyncrasy to have, as if only existing to prove that happiness is also pain. The memories of jail and fighting on the battlefield are memories he has yet to talk about with anyone, but snippets of them come out every now and again. I guess in those memories there is no happiness to contrast with the pain, so he doesn’t know how to talk about them. And all I can do is listen.
26. What I Need

Some time last year, my dad came downstairs to ask if he could borrow fifteen dollars to buy cigarettes.

“I’ll pay you back. You know I am taking some delivery shifts.”

Except he won’t pay me back. It’s always the same old story. Two months ago, he “borrowed” fifty dollars from me when I was short on rent (I didn’t tell him that). It’s usually either cigarettes or alcohol. But I find myself thinking: *Well, he did serve in the war, let the man be.*

“No. You don’t need them.”

“Come on, I’ll pay you back.”

“No. You don’t need them, Dad.”

He starts to storm off. He turns around. “I never tell you what you do or don’t need.”

(I watch him drink, 1996)
It’s been an hour and I feel guilty for saying no. I stare at my shaking hand pouring dog food into its container. Sealed containers keep the essence fresh. Does my dad keep his essence fresh? Or has the war spoiled that? I take out my phone and text him: *are you mad at me? The audacity.*

*No.*

I should feel relief, but I don’t. He starts his routine upstairs. He stomps around. He sighs loud, heavy sighs. I can hear him from the basement:

“I work fifteen hours a day and still don’t have enough for a pack of fucking cigarettes.”

A door slams.

“And she won’t give anything up. Fucking cigarettes, she won’t give me. Selfish. I give everything and she can’t even give me money for cigarettes.”

It’s like clockwork. When I deny him the means for his nicotine or his alcohol, I become his enemy. This time, the war he fights is his addiction, but he doesn’t know how to help himself; after all, the last war started this one.
I (Become) Witness My Father
in thought

in testimony

between light & shutter
III

THE BODY’S REVEALING ECHO
29. The Ultimate Cornbread Recipe

It was a particularly bad week for food. They couldn’t sell any more of their clothing to buy groceries. He even tried to sell his cigarettes. But the simplest supplies were hard to come by.

**What You Will Need**

1. A Bowl
2. Baking Pan

**Ingredients**

- Corn flour
- Water
3. Fingers  Sugar
4. Electricity  Salt
5. An Oven (fire can be used as a substitute)

She’s pregnant with me.* The villa they live in is one room. There is no kitchen, only a hot plate on the floor, a fridge, and a small toaster-oven. She baked corn bread the night before. The smell of raw dough lingered on her fingertips. It needed to last them a few days.

*Starve v.
The bloated stomach: the baby depriving her mother of food.
The food of the mother deprives the baby: hunger.
She put a plate down on his lap: one slice of corn bread. He devoured it like the dog in the street ate the bird. Eating her own, I scratched the walls of her belly. I wanted more. She couldn’t give it to me.

*A mother should always be able to feed her child.*
1 kilogram of corn flour in a bowl
2 cups of boiled water
2 teaspoons of sugar
A pinch of salt
Mix all together
leave it overnight.
Bake at 400 until top is brown

flour stolen from your neighbour
2 cups of used water
oil traded for sugar
salt
mix
let it stand
there is a tomorrow
eat raw dough

He couldn’t help it. He asked her, “Can I have some more?”

She looked up at him. “But what will we eat tomorrow?”

All three were starving. I wanted to eat the walls of her flesh, I was so hungry. Growing in her womb as she starved imprinted a memory on me, one that I remember each time I feel the walls of my stomach cave in with hunger.
30. He Said

“Your surgery was worse for me than the war.”

How could my surgery have been worse?

31. Birthing Rituals

My experience with scoliosis and my surgery will always be tied to the war. That’s just fact.

My mother believes that my scoliosis was caused by my breech birth, despite the condition being genetic. The doctor who delivered me could have turned me to be born as usual (head first), but he didn’t because of my mother’s name. Because it was a “Catholic” name. When she came to the hospital in labor, the doctor and nurses shoved her aside and put her in a bed in the corner stating, “Oh, she’s not ready yet.” She was already in the process of delivering me within ten minutes.

When she tells me this story, she repeats, her voice shriller each time. “Because my name was Jadranka, they made me wait. They didn’t care. Because my name was Jadranka, they didn’t want to turn you around and give you a normal birth.”
32. A Photograph of Hands

My Mother’s Hands

I’ve never noticed the way her fingers caress her cigarette, such a familiar gesture as if holding a child. Her hands are witnesses: kneading bread, baking cornbread, lifting herself over balcony railings, an expression of joy I’ve never seen pass across her face lives in a photograph. Her hands know that she’s pregnant before she does. They swell with new life just as they do when she holds me, my small hands sinking into hers as one—palms marked with lines connected to another life. She has calluses on her thumbs and index fingers, thick skin protecting her hands from old wounds unredeemed, left underneath until split open revealing 27 years of things abandoned, some of them stories. Hands held her in place while she negotiated my father’s release from KP Dom Zenica. Her hands listen to the man’s voice telling her to retrieve my father’s shoes so that he doesn’t hang himself with shoelaces. Hands are her tool for survival: she whisks flour into cornbread, water into soup, all on a hotplate on the floor

My Father’s Hands

It took me a long time to realize that my father had hands. Such small appendages, I often forget what they live (d) through. I used to watch my father sign his name in my school agenda, assuring my teacher that a parent had seen my homework for the evening. His signature taught me how to do my own. He took my small hand in his, we’d trace over the letters of his name together. How many things he had to sign to get here. Hands that held an axe, cut wood in the forest for fire so that he and my mother could cook on their stove when their electricity was taken. What his hands learned lies within his signature, in the movement of the pen slightly askew in his right hand, a simple flick for a “v.”
Sometimes, when I’d come home late, I’d find him sitting on the couch, hunched over the coffee table with a cooked sausage in one hand and half a French loaf in the other. He ate late at night what he forgot to eat during the day. Hands now used to holding food, but reminders of starvation remain in the sides of his calloused fingers. 22 years later, his hands flatten pizza dough, clean apartments, become tools instead of parts of his body. The edges of his fingernails are yellowed by cigarettes, his hands smell of history and potent bone, the almost scent-less flour made of potatoes plucked by my mother & sweat residue from morning runs on the soccer field.

33. Photographs of My Childhood

Where am I? Edges are blurred, incomplete figures approach me but their names I have long forgotten. Acts of memory should add cues to what the names are. They near the surface of my closed eyes but there isn’t a single letter attached. I don’t know my extended family, I met my mother’s side at a wedding in 2016, hugged them, kissed each of them on the cheek & laughed at jokes I only half understood. They all told me how they used to hold me kad sam bila mala (when the war was at its cusp of potential peace. They knew a version of me, a silent babe discovering the world in simultaneity of blood, love & fear—through hands smothered in squashed birthday cake. But after that summer, they all still feel like strangers, names on Facebook that occasionally click like on posts about my dog sleeping with her snout in my shoe. Family I say that I love but I don’t know what that means. (a silent babe finds a hot iron by the fire place & touches it with her small hands, scorching flesh. I still have that scar
34. Between

Opening his third beer, my father settles into his worn-out couch, lifting and crossing one leg to lean it just so against the coffee table. The garage is spotless from an afternoon’s cleaning, but still smells of Pilsner. There are bottles lining the wall underneath the only window in the place, reminding him that he needs to take out the recycling. My mother and I watch as he drains the last drops of the bottle and grabs another. He notices us staring and he says, “What? It’s Saturday night.” My mother types on her phone. Her 16-point font reflects in her eyes, as she holds the phone an arm’s length away to read (she’s misplaced her reading glasses) whatever she’s composed. My guess is she’s likely sending my sister a message asking her where she is. My sister, Mia, never responds to texts, despite the constant fighting her silence causes. She’s independent, damn it! I turn my attention to my hands, the freshly gnawed skin around my index finger a bright pink, healing only to be broken open again.


My phone rings as I am in the middle of unwrapping a new gym bag from my friend Kade. Mia’s name flashes on the screen. My sister and I aren’t close; we usually fight over stupid shit like how dark her eyebrows are.* We are seven years apart (she’s 17 and I’m 24), and I guess sisterly bonding and closeness are out of reach for us. So as her name continues to flash

* In 2016:
—You might want to go lighter on your eyebrows next time, Mia. They’re a bit too dark for your features.
—Shut up. You always find something to criticize about me.
—I’m not criticizing you. They look good—
—Just leave me alone.
—I’m just saying, use a lighter shade next time or don’t fill it in so much.
—Yeah well just look at you. You’re giving me advice? Look in the mirror. It’s not like you give a shit about me.
on my phone, my body tenses. My hands, grabbing my iPhone and accepting the call, know something isn’t right.

“Hey, Mia, is everything okay?” I ask.

Her voice is soft when she speaks. I hate it when she does this. I can never hear her. But this time something is different.

“I’m at the hospital.”

**INT. TEA’S BATHROOM – NIGHT**

Tea sits on the toilet seat. Her hands shaking as she talks on the phone with her sister Mia.

TEA
Are you OK? Who are you with?

MIA (V.O)*
(slurring)
I…

MIA (V.O)
(slurring)
I tried to killlll myselffff…

TEA
*(trying to hide her panic)*
Where are you?

MIA (V.O)
Pasqua Hospital… I think…

Tea shifts her body. She puts her hand under her thigh, cutting off circulation.

TEA
Who is with you?

MIA (V.O)
*distant*
My friend Taylor.

---

*“(V.O)” stands for “Voice Over.”*
MIA (V.O)
(distant)
I took some pills… I just wanted to stop thinking…

TEA
Oh Mia… It’s OK, you’re safe now. What pills did you take?

MIA (V.O)
(slurring)
…I’m hooked to a machine…

MIA (V.O)
(slurring)
Don’t tell Mom… she’s going to be so mad at me…

TEA
(firmly)
No. She won’t.

MIA (V.O)
(slurring)
Don’t tell Mom.

TEA
I’ll talk to her. Don’t worry. I’m coming.

Tea hangs up. She dials her mother’s number. She gets off the toilet and paces. Her mother picks up on the third ring.

MOM (V.O)
(annoyed)
Šta je?

TEA
Mia is in the hospital.

MOM (V.O)
(panicked)
What!

MOM (V.O)
(panicked)
Is she OK?
MOM (V.O)  
*(panicked)*  
What happened?

TEA  
She doesn’t want you to be mad at her. She—

MOM (V.O)  
*(frustrated)*  
*Šta je bilo, Tea!*

TEA  
She tried to kill herself.

Something falls onto the floor. A loud CLASHING is heard.

MOM (V.O)  
*(in a frustrated panic)*  
Fuck.

TEA  
*(gently)*  
She’s scared you’ll be mad at her. Don’t yell at her.  
I know you’ll want to. But don’t. She’s dealing with a lot.  
Her friend Taylor is with her.

MOM (V.O)  
*(distant)*  
Uh huh…

TEA  
I’m leaving now to go to Pasqua. Do you want me to pick you up?

MOM (V.O)  
*(distant)*  
I’ll drive. Come.

I hang up and walk out of the bathroom. Alex and Kade drink tea on the couch. I drop my iPhone. My hands are shaking. “She… She tried to kill herself… I…” I steady myself on the kitchen table. I sit. Clench my fist. Unclench it. Both girls get up. Alex takes my hands, pulls me
up. She hugs me. Kade joins and hugs me from behind. I let out a loud sob. I’m guilty for not noticing the signs. For not reaching out to her. How could I have not known?

“I don’t want her to die.”

“Let me drive you,” Kade offers.

“I’m going to the hospital with my mom. Their house is so close to us, I can drive myself there.”

“No, let me drive you there. You shouldn’t be alone.”

In the car, Kade hands me some mitts to wear. I put them on. I can’t speak. I can’t cry. All I can feel is numbness. I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry so hard that I’d start to feel more; to shake the shock. But I can’t. I don’t know why, but I can’t feel anything. I expected I’d be bawling by now—my sister tried to kill herself. Still nothing. Just numbness.

“She’s going to be OK,” Kade reassures me.

When we arrive in front of my parents’ house, I see my Mom’s car leaving the driveway. She speeds past us. “Wasn’t she supposed to wait for you?” Kade asks. I shake my head.

“Yes…”

I call her. She snaps at me, “What?”

I try to keep my voice even, “Why did you drive off? I’m here.”

My mother’s voice is distant. “I had… I’m coming back.”

I climb out of Kade’s car as my mom’s SUV pulls into the driveway again. She’s smoking as I get into the passenger seat. The whole car smells of wet ash. I hate when she smokes around me because it makes me cough. But I don’t say anything. Smoking is the least of our worries tonight.
We drive in silence. We walk through the hospital emergency ward in silence. We find Mia asleep in a bed, IVs in her arm, in silence. She drifts in and out of consciousness. I sit in the stiff chair. My mother won’t sit down. She stands with her arms crossed.

*INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT*

Tea reaches and touches her mother’s shoulder. She gives it a reassuring tap. She hopes this gesture masks her own distress.

**TEA**

*How are you doing?*

**MOM**

*(frustrated)*

*I don’t know what I did to deserve this. To make her do this.*

Tea’s mother’s mouth droops further into a frown deeper than anything Tea’s seen on her before.

**TEA**

*(trying to be comforting)*

*You didn’t do anything. This isn’t your fault. Mia needs help.*

She leaves the room. I figure she’s going out to stress smoke. I sit and wait. My father is supposed to join us soon from work. I don’t know how much time passes, but both of my parents come back into the room smelling like wet dogs who have rolled around in an ashtray. My father hugs me. He goes over to Mia’s bed, and moves stray hairs away from her sweaty forehead. Mom watches him with a blank stare.

The doctor on shift comes in. She tells us that Mia tried to overdose with Tylenol, that she didn’t take enough for it to be fatal, but they still need to pump her stomach. She also tells us that Mia will have to stay and speak with a psychologist at the hospital and be transferred to the
General Hospital the next morning. My mother doesn’t talk to me for the rest of the night. I remain seated in the stiff chair. My dad sits at the end of Mia’s bed while my mother stands opposite him against a wall. We watch my sister breathe through a tube in silence.

The hospital room in the youth psych ward is an off-white colour accented with stained blue plaid curtains. I can’t determine what the room reminds me of, but I feel déjà vu creeping up on me. The halls are quiet, there aren’t any patients walking around, only the day nurses and interns in the main office letting people in and out of the ward’s locked doors. Mia sits up in bed, plucking at the mascara that is still caked onto her lashes. She’s angry about being in the ward.

Every door in the room is locked. Even the bathroom. I knew she wasn’t expecting this to be the case. I can tell from the sighs that escape her lips as she tries to pull the door open. Mia has to ask a nurse to open the bathroom door for her. Getting help, for her, isn’t to be locked away without a phone or luxurious access to the bathroom. It is, or so it seemed to me, the absence of responsibility for her actions. Did she really think this would be like a vacation? I’m not convinced that she understands what she tried to do. How it affects all of us. I keep wondering—What if? What if she managed to pull it off? I would have never gotten the chance to mend our relationship. I would have had to help my parents deal with yet another trauma, except this time, I’d understand the real weight of loss and grief.

My father tries to connect with her on a level I can never fully understand." He focuses on the bed curtain fixture, the ends of the metal hook protected so that no one can physically hurt themselves. At least not with the curtains. His hand squeezes a clump of blanket, thinking it

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*I’m jealous because I want to be connected to my father in this way. But as the jealousy subsides, I’m left with a numbness. I don’t know how I feel. I don’t know how I should feel.
might be Mia’s knee, and says, “This is just like the jail cell I was in during the war. Fucking leaving you to your mind…”

Mia, exasperated with his attempt at connecting with her, “This isn’t anything like that, Dad. Stop trying to force yourself into this. You don’t know anything. You don’t know how I feel. What I’m going through.”

“Obviously he doesn’t,” I want to say, “But he’s trying.” Her inability to see that our father is struggling with a past we can’t even comprehend infuriates me. And I know that the time and place for this argument is far less than perfect—she’s hurting just as much as he is. I’m not trying to belittle her, not here, but I also know that this is a defining moment for our father. He’s never said anything about his time in jail during the war, not to us and not to our mother. It’s a complete mystery. We are all stuck in a loop of reminders that we don’t want to face, trying not to take away from one another’s suffering. My father steps away from Mia, picks up The Maze Runner, and finds a place to lean against the wall. Mia, freshly enraged, throws her blanket to the floor, and yells.

“I don’t need to be here! I don’t need this. I want to go home! It’s Christmas tomorrow for fuck sake, they should let me go home. I won’t do it again. I won’t. Call the nurse, I’m demanding to go home. I don’t need to be in here. Dad, tell them to let me go home.”

“I think you do need to be here. You need help,” I stammer.

“No, I don’t. I don’t need this shit. I need to be home where I can talk with my friends. Dad, can I use your phone? Please, give it to me. Dad. Please. I won’t do anything. I just want to play games.”
He hands her his phone, trusting that she’ll keep her word. Of course, she doesn’t. Instead, she Snapchat her ex-boyfriend (their breakup a huge part of her suicide attempt), triggering another foul mood swing.

In an effort to lighten the mood, my father reads *The Maze Runner* aloud to us. His English isn’t great, and he stumbles over the simplest of words, but he makes us laugh and that’s what matters to him. We wait for the on-call psychologist through his mispronunciation of “shuffled,” “hesitate,” and “jolt,” all accompanied with our laughter and his physical movements that help him explain that he knows what the words mean. For “shuffled,” he does a version of the moonwalk, his feet barely leaving the floor and his legs bending forward and then back repeatedly. This is when my mother walks in smelling of cleaning products and sweat; she has come from working her shift at a different hospital. Eyebrows raised, she smirks as she watches her husband read another sentence. She can’t help herself when she asks, “Do you even know what that means?”

“Heh-si-tat,” he begins, confidently, chest out like a bird feathering itself to impress its mate, “means I stop.” He stops talking, dazzling us with his knowledge of the definition.

“More,” claps Mia, her mood brightening. He defines “Jolt” by thrusting his body forward and back, ending with a gesticulating of his hips and a long gasp. We all howl in pleasure.

There is a knock on the door, putting a pin in my father’s performance. The psychologist walks in, introduces herself to us.

“So, I hear you want to go home,” she says to Mia. Mia nods, sucking in her bottom lip in nervousness. “You know when you first came here today, you wanted to die. You said things to me that make me believe you are unwell. How can I, in good conscience, let you go home?”
Mia tugs at strands of her hair, a warning sign of an oncoming temper tantrum. I hold my breath, pick at my raw nailbeds, expecting her to explode. My father can’t watch, either, so he turns to look at the wall. I notice him touch a crack and mutter something to himself. My mother, stern as always, nods with everything the psychologist says.

“Look,” Mia begins, “I’ve had all day to think and I don’t feel that way anymore. I don’t want to die, I do want help, but I’m ready to go home. What can I do for you to let me go?”

I don’t think it a good idea to let her come home because I know she isn’t ready. She should stay and work through her issues. But nowadays care is only given in the direst of circumstances. Beds are needed. And I’m not her parent, so my opinion doesn’t matter. I remain silent.

“If you promise you’ll come see me or one of my colleagues on a weekly basis and take this medication at home,” she hands my mother a baggie of pills, “I’ll let you go home tonight. What you’re telling me now I will take as honesty. I’m risking my job and your wellbeing doing this, so please promise me.”

I wonder how much of her speech is true. Is she really risking her job on this decision? Or is it a scare tactic? How can you trust a teenager who is clearly unstable to keep her word after one full day in a facility? I disagree with her, but my parents are obviously pleased with her being home for Christmas.

“I promise,” says Mia. “Thank you so much.”

Her face gleams with delight. But her eyes are wide, her hair has lost its curl and sits flat in long stringy clumps. She looks hollow.*

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*We all try to ignore what happened at the hospital by opening presents on Christmas Eve. Mia is too nice to all of us, making me feel especially awkward. Everyone pretends to feel happy about their gifts. A shadow of guilt and despair looms over us all.
The day before New Year’s Eve, my sister posts a photo of her and her friend Taylor in the hospital bed on Instagram. The caption of the photograph is long and does not mention us:

*I didn’t have a normal Christmas, but it was the most life-changing one. I tried to kill myself. I want to let others who are struggling with the same sadness know that they aren’t alone. You aren’t alone. You don’t have to go to the same lengths I did to get help. Ask for help. I haven’t thought about harming myself today, and that’s a win for me. This month has been the worst of my life. I lost myself. I never trusted doctors to help me. I never knew the support system I had—my friends, Taylor especially, showed me people loved me. Don’t be ashamed of yourself, your feelings are real and you’re allowed to feel them. Today is a beginning, not an end. You are loved, let what happened to me be helpful for you.*

This photograph shocks me, reminding me of something I read in Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*: photographs transmute, in an instant, present into past and life into death.*

In an instant, I am propelled into the past looking at the photo, reminded of how close she was to dying. Photographs exist between all spaces of time. They’re a depiction of life in the moment. Once posted on Instagram, they become the past. They show that the person who posted the photo was alive when they posted, but the image also connects them to death. The photo of my sister shows how close she was to death. This photo will outlive her, one day perhaps to be used as her memorial.

We don’t think about what our Instagram photos will become in the future, how the Internet will preserve us forever. We repeat our past, and photographs capture this, too. They capture our patterns, what makes us who we are, but they also point to something that is always

*Sontag, *On Photography* 70.*
missing: whatever the camera doesn’t capture. To complicate matters further, Sontag muses that “every portrait of another person becomes a self-portrait of the photographer.”* So when my father took the photo of Mia in the bed during her detoxifying process, he also sent a photo of himself that is enfolded within his daughter. If he is a mirror for her, what lies within him that we haven’t seen yet? If I take a picture of him or my mother, what do we all become?

The longer I stare at the photograph, the angrier I feel. She didn’t thank her family for being there for her. We are expected to care. While we do care, I can’t help but feel betrayed. I thought that this experience would finally make us build the relationship I always dreamed of having with her. But that won’t happen. Both of our fuses blow too quickly when we are in each other’s presence. Everything that I say triggers Mia’s mood swings, which then triggers a depressive spiral for me. We grapple with the same mental illness, but she doesn’t know it. I always have to be the strong one.

Two years later in February, my father comes home on his lunch break to my sister sitting dazed at the kitchen table. She slurs her words while he picks her up, slapping her to come to. He doesn’t know what else to do. Holding her, he glances at her phone and sees an internet feed telling her how to over-medicate with her sleep medication just so that this time she would die. I am living in Ontario with my partner when this happens. I get a text from my dad with a picture of my sister in a hospital bed.

*She tried to do it again. She’s stable now. I just wanted to let you know...*

A fucking text? I am white with anger. I FaceTime him. I couldn’t believe it. A text? That’s how he thought was the best way to tell me? He answers and immediately shows me my

*On Photography 122.*
sister in the hospital bed with charcoal caked around her mouth. They had poured charcoal down her throat to detoxify her body of the medication she had overdosed on. My father is calmer than I expect him to be. However, his face is lined with worry. I realize that his calm demeanor is more relief that his daughter isn’t dead.

INT. BEDROOM/HOSPITAL ROOM – DAY
Tea’s dad gives the phone to her mother. Her mother holds it up to her face.

TEA
How are you?

Her mother shoves the phone away from her. Her parents’ friend is there with them. She takes the phone and talks to Tea.

FRIEND
She doesn’t want to talk.

TEA
(frustrated)
You have another daughter who needs you, you know.

DAD
(in the background)
Talk to her. My God!

TEA
(angry)
Whatever.

I hang up. Throw my phone on to the couch. I sink to the floor. With my face in my hands, I sob through this additional betrayal. I needed to talk to my mother, but she is silent. She never calls me back. My partner comes into the room to check in on me. He sits beside me and rubs my back. I choke out the words again.
“I don’t want her to die.”

I only know the details of my sister’s second suicide attempt because of a photograph. It shows me what she could have looked like had she died on the hospital bed during the detoxing process. This photograph conjures the night in December two years prior, but it also keeps me in the present. She posts that photo on Instagram, too, her caption similar to the last one. However, this photo is more sinister than the previous one. This one shows that she was ready to really die this time. She researched it. She was alone in our kitchen when the pills went down her throat. Her trauma lives in this photo. Anyone who looks at the photo will sense it.

My parents do their best to help her, but they don’t understand depression. They grew up without any knowledge of how the illness manifests and refuse to believe it’s real. Even after all of this, they still don’t understand, they still don’t even notice their own symptoms.

At 2 A.M. in August of 2018, I hear my father’s angry foot-falls, a routine thump, thump, thump that I grew up with. I know he’s also ranting to himself about whatever it is that made him upset. He and my mother had fought earlier in the evening. The fight, as his footsteps tell me, continued into the bedroom. I get out of bed and go upstairs to find him putting on his jacket, car keys in hand. He has had way too much to drink to drive. I run in front of the front door and push my hands into his chest.

“Stop. You’re not going anywhere like this,” I say, glowering at him. He pushes my hands away.

“Move. I’m leaving.” He tries to grab the doorknob, but I stop him with my hip. I push him away again.

“No. You are staying here. You’re drunk, you can’t drive!”
He throws his keys onto the table and pushes me out of the way, opening the door and slamming it shut. I let out a sigh. I always pick up my father’s pieces when he’s upset. I put on a jacket and step out to join him.

There he sits, cigarette smoke slowly escaping his lips. I sit down next to him. “What happened now?”

He flicks the ash from his cigarette before he speaks, which leaves a small trail on his coat. “I hate my life.”

“Oh, come on, you don’t mean that. You and Mom fight like this all the time, but you always make up.”

“I don’t want to live like that anymore. She doesn’t give a shit about me. All I do is work, piss, sleep for three hours and then go back to work. I have no life. All so she can go on trips… but never me. I have to stay and watch the dogs and work all of our jobs alone.”

“Dad, I’m sorry. You deserve to go on a trip.”

“Pf. Yeah, right. Where is my trip? My vacation? I’m going to die working.”

I don’t know what to say, so I stay silent. Hoping he will go on.

“And then she tells me not to drink, well what the fuck am I supposed to do? I work sixteen-hour days, sleep three hours, and come home to what? I’m alone. Alone in my garage with nothing but my brain. Of course I drink. I drink so I don’t have to think,” he takes a long drag of his smoke, “I can’t think. If I do, I think about the shit I went through. Then how many hours I have until I’m back at work. But she doesn’t care. She has good job and what do I have? My garage. Everyone can tell me to stop drinking, but no one can see why I do it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you felt lonely? I would have come over.”

“I don’t want to bother you with my life.”
“Dad, come on.”

He shrugs, flicking the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray. I’ve never seen him this upset before. There is nothing I can do. I listen as he repeats himself until he exhausts himself.

We hug in the doorway and go our separate ways, finally to sleep.

35. (My father Captures My Mother and Me Taking a Break on a Road Trip to Calgary in 2000)
IV

\[ WITNESS \leftrightarrow WITNESS \]
He didn’t notice his fingers tensing
while he spoke to me in photographs

Caught in the touch of his thumb
& index finger exchanging secrets of soil
my iPhone exposes
a secret with the light:

he kissed the ground
to avoid a sniper’s bullet.

37. My Mother Foresees Her Death

she wraps sour cabbage around seasoned ground beef and rice
adds it to the pot of sarma. She sets the timer on her slow cooker notices how thick
& orange the sauce is becoming. She adds a cow bone into the pot for extra flavour
its excess flesh flakes away she watches it for a moment too long

I will never know when my mother foresaw her death

the way she talks about the war—fast, without pause, without reflection

No, I wouldn’t call myself brave, I was stupid. They could have killed me

for talking like that to them.

I listen to her realization

38. Nightmare

You go to sleep. Although you remain in between being awake and asleep, you are still
able to dream. You are surrounded by blackness, unable to find a way out.

Dirt.
You can feel dirt.
You are buried.
You start to suffocate on soil that made its way into your mouth.

You wake yourself up. Shake your head violently in the hope of shaking the dream away.
You attempt to sleep again.

Your father does the same. In his dream, he accidentally kills you.

39. Trauma’s Location

it’s like cells reproducing
reproducing like a conversation
a conversation telling me what to think
telling me what to think about touch
touch to sound
sound to action
flinch, the past
the past is lost
lost in me
in me found
found in childhood
in childhood I seal memories away
sealed memories can’t be unearthed
to be unearthed I have to face
the cells reproducing
my parents
40. My Father Catches Me Confronting Memory.*

*Memory confronts me, catches my father. / My father confronts me, catches memory. / Memory releases / belongs where I’ve never been
V

SEARCHING FOR (ME)MORIES
41. Transference: (me in 1998)
42. Dream (1)

Two sisters play in a pool. Their mother lies on a towel trying to tan even though she knows that her skin will only turn red. The eight-year-old girl holds her infant sister in the water. They play a game of catch and release. The older girl releases her sister in the water and once the infant’s head goes under, the girl pulls her up and out of the water. The baby giggles with pleasure, slightly coughing up water. Up and out. Up and out, the game continues a few more times. The mother has fallen asleep.

The girl releases her sister once more and at that very same moment a man passes by that looks like her father. The girl is confused. She takes too long trying to figure out why her father isn’t at work and momentarily forgets that her infant sister is beneath the water. She looks down at her hands and realizes. She submerges herself and pulls her sister out.

(Dream) 2

Two sisters play in a pool. The father is absent. Your eight-year-old sister holds you in the water. She wants to play a game of catch and release. She blows a raspberry on your belly, making you erupt in that baby giggle everyone loves. Then she submerges you in the water. You aren’t sure what your lungs are supposed to do, so you open your mouth, allowing the water to rush down your throat. You’re choking. She pulls you out of the water. You giggle with the pleasure of seeing your sister. You cough up the water.

Up and out.

Up and out.

She continues the game. You want her to stop, but you can’t speak. Language hasn’t touched you yet. Your sister doesn’t understand what happens to you when you go under. Your father isn’t there to help.

Your mother is asleep.
You’re under again. This time, your sister doesn’t pull you out immediately. Water continues to rush down your throat. *She almost drowned*, I yell as I wake up.

It’s not fun this time. You can feel your infant body stop responding to your brain. You’re about to close your eyes when she pulls you back up. *I almost drowned*, I whisper as I wake up.

43. (A) Void

The camera always points to something that is missing.

There are no photos of my mother while she was pregnant with me. My parents didn’t own a camera of their own until they immigrated to Canada. Every photo we have was taken on a borrowed camera.

The digital space lacks other senses. It will never know what soft baby skin feels like after the ground explodes around her. It will never feel the hot breath of my mother whispering that she loves me while we wait to cross the border from Bosnia to Croatia, not sure if we’ll make it across. It will never give its viewer what a corpse smells like after washing down the river for a few days.

*Those pictures*...

*in my head*...

*terrible*

my father says remembering
44. Some Bridges Are Safe

Step by step we head into the past on a bridge of tires. The present encroaches on us with a slit in the photograph revealing my hand. I try to pierce reality with my scanner & leave it behind me sweep the picture forward then reverse fabricating lines that never reach me to the girl in the photo, to know what she does about how we grew to be older than our parents were when we began to understand what it meant to be born to become them

She holds our father’s hands and walks across a bridge of tires
45. (My Mother Winds a Music Box in 1994)

46. Because My Childhood Was

clinking coffee cups, *sarma*, trips to the Delta hotel’s water slide, helping mom & dad clean dirty hotel rooms, jumping on beds couches floors pretending to be a lion like Simba, violent yelling about bills food money money money, never enough money, never went to camp, had to quit dance, played soccer on a field with dad never on a little league team, debts hidden behind big birthday bashes, watching my mother cry, my grandma abandoned her when she came to visit
because we didn’t have a house money a full fridge, grandma spent all her time at the Tomič’s, an apartment with ants, toe surgery, *pita*, fights about money, dad drives drunk, gets more booze, chased into my room, misery, *Tea the trick is to look like we have money, people will believe it*, minimum payments paid on credit card statements, Money Mart, *don’t do this when you’re older*, scoliosis, contemplating the cut of flesh to rid myself of my fatness, coffee made over the stove, plates full of meats & cheese, house full of people dancing, my mother’s laughter, my father’s screech when Liverpool scores a goal, laughter, PowerPuff Girls backpack, Massey pool, we never watched the news, polaroid pictures of mom sun tanning, her skin only burning, broken curfews, teenage secrets dripping into couches, couches on the balcony, we watch the streetlights turn on, cigarette smoke, *pašteta*, wooden spoons on skin, barbies floating in bathtub water, shadows, preservation, we could build a house with our pain, there isn’t enough room for us to exist there
47. My Father Foresees His Death (Again)

my mother sets a blanket on the ground
I toss some skittles into my mouth

my father dribbles a soccer ball by Wascana Lake

we prepare ourselves for our first Canada Day firework show

******************************************************************************

my father winces at each crackle BOOM * cheer.

he leaves us, crosses the road & hides behind a tree ****

******************************************************************************

he kneels, covering his head with one hand

the other reaching for an invisible gun in defense

I will never know what fireworks actually sound like
Because she still runs a race already finished, walls around her have holes in them. Dad is still violent & angry when he drinks.

Because Mom didn’t read her bedtime stories, because Mom instead sat on the balcony couch smoking cigarettes, ash speckling the worn blue of the cushion, thin summer nights witness her fatigue from three jobs.

Because I (she) learned language before our parents did when children feel, they break protection spells during sleep.

She found out too young what McDonalds for lunch meant, sure, a celebration from classmates with each salted fry touching their small, ruthless lips, but the fridge at home is barren, her parents already at work & no time to prepare homemade school lunches.

There’s a heaviness in her father’s yell after a nightmare.

Because soaking in the sun at Massey pool with Mom was a memory for her to cherish, mine to forget as we aged, Mom’s gentle kisses on the cheek & carefree hugs deserted me stayed in the past. I don’t know what they feel like anymore.

Because what I know taints her on weekends a table was never without slices of meats, cheese, and Turkish coffee, laughter incapable of drowning pain.

She wants to protect me from knowing what it was we escaped, how war shapes her but fades on me.

Because she can forget still

I extend my hand, never knowing whether she’ll take it.
49. Searching
I appear in the photograph  
    stare at myself holding the camera

A head emerges from my chest  
    the balcony door opens

I move the photograph into developer  
    ninety seconds, the perfect exposure

caught. Then, fingers turn into hair  
    my fingers press, our fingers touch

I disappear into white  
    white, white, white, white, white, white,

I move the photograph into the stop bath  
    submerge my hand

into the photo pulling, pulling,  
    pull me, split me, lose me

overexposed
50. Inventory (2)

My father
is trauma is
guilt is
compassion is
the story is Yugoslavia

is gone is
memory is
the answer is
Bosnia is Yugoslavia is
my nationality is
my question is
a choice is

Croatia is Yugoslavia
is my nationality is
a question is the reason
is
the answer is
a choice is

My mother is
nineteen is pregnant is sustenance is on the run.

I am my father am trauma am guilt am compassion am the story am Yugoslavia am gone am memory am the answer am Bosnia am Yugoslavia am nationality am the question am a choice am Croatia am Yugoslavia am a question am the reason am
the answer am

a choice am my mother

am older than nineteen am

not pregnant am

not sustenance am

on the run.

I am.
Notes


2. The garage is a space he has renovated to host his friends. There is a couch and a TV in there along with one vehicle.

3. A recent concept in the study of atrocity developed by children of Holocaust survivors.

4. A detailed discussion of trauma and its multifaceted nature is beyond the scope of my thesis.

5. In my piece “Between” (94), the prose is interrupted by screenplay script formatting. The use of this form only occurs in this piece because neither a poem nor a photograph could communicate the removal and emotional distance that I felt. The screenplay style is sparingly used and is only present in moments that the speaker feels the most numbness or distress. This method is intentional as I want to illustrate the removal of the speaker, both in her ability to process the events around her and literally removing her narrative voice and replacing it with an omniscient one. Additionally, this form signifies that the speaker is not present in the traumatic moments because the events are too shocking and disturbing for her to be present.

6. Spiegelman in *Maus* discusses this problem when in the beginning Artie falls and his friends roller skate away, leaving Artie in tears as he approaches his father. When he tells his father why he’s crying—that his friends have left him—Vladek says, “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, friends!” (Spiegelman 6). Artie’s experience with his friends will never match Vladek’s experience in the Shoah, which Vladek unintentionally shows in his response to Artie, just as my mother does in hers.
7. This essay is based on an analysis of children who were in utero during the Dutch “hunger of 1944.”

8. Another example of traumatic repetition in my thesis is the image of hands. Right from the beginning in the poem “Inventory,” there is a photograph of my hands clawing at the scar on my back (37), and later on in “Secrets of Soil” (111) with the photograph of my father and the focus on his fist. The most overt reference to hands comes in the poem “A Photograph of Hands” (92), where the mother’s and father’s hands are tools for survival but also reminders of their traumatic past. In this poem, too, the speaker’s hands are interlaced with her parents’, showing how trauma is transferred to her. In the poem “Trauma’s Location,” the line “it’s like cells reproducing” (113) captures the notion of trauma’s transference and how it manifests throughout my manuscript.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


