

Sticky Memories

In the very back of my mind, there is the smallest bit of memory, dusty like a photograph found in a packed away attic box. If it were a photograph, it would be a beautifully deceiving scene of a perfect family. If I squeeze my eyes closed tight, I can see us all. Just a little bit before dawn, we all gathered on an old stuffy couch that sat on the porch in a very southern fashion. Fog billowed out over the trees at the end of the yard, and the smallest bit of sunshine started to peek through, casting yellow and pink hues over the mist that rolled across the grass. My father had been so proud of that property, three acres of land in a town with more cows than people. That morning in my little memory, I can recall, my mom, father, and Skylar, the youngest out of their collective eight children squished together on the couch. We listened as the world woke up and watched the sun move over the trees to touch every corner of that land. My father went inside and made us pancakes. I only liked them when he made them, perfectly golden and with a slab of blackberry jelly on top. I try to reach as far back into my brain as possible, but still, the first moment I find is the four of us tangled up in a big blanket made sticky and damp by the morning dew and some stray jelly, and the sun stretching itself over the trees to greet us. The memory stops and staggers on that scene of us staring out over the yard. And I have to wonder now, with all the knowledge I have of who we really were, how long did that peace last?

Everything always felt more there. The summers had more warmth, the winters brought more snow. That place lived and breathed just like me. It pulsed with life, drawn to extremes, both beautiful and bleak. I wish I could say that my childhood was filled with memories of that place as picturesque as a family, eating pancakes outside and enjoying the morning together. My childhood home is like the skeleton that holds me upright. All of the memories of that place,

which make me tear up with thoughts of the "good old days" and the ones that make my whole body cringe, have all built me into the vessel I am now.

The naked eye is blind to those pieces of me, but I know they are there. You can't look deep enough into my eyes to see the bright pink butterfly net my mom bought me, and how she taught me to catch butterflies in the yard. Or how I cried for hours when I accidentally crushed one, and how my mom pulled me into her lap and told me that accidents happen. With a far off look in her eyes, she said that my intentions mattered more than the harm I caused. You can't read the lines on my palms and see the fluffy, indigo comforter my mom would drag out into the yard, the one Skylar and I would roll around on while she read to us. You wouldn't see my father's absence, working maybe, or just watching the news and reminding himself of how evil the world was. I might have a small scar, but you wouldn't tell by looking that it's from the last step on the porch where I tumbled off my bike, newly released from the shackles of training wheels. The concrete had pulled what seemed like every piece of skin off my knee. And that wispy tree in the yard that I loved to climb and read my books in didn't leave any external marks on my body that one could notice. "If you fall out of that damn thing and break your arm, I'll kick your ass like you'll never forget," I recall my father screaming from the porch as I swung like a monkey back and forth from the branches. I loved that stupid tree, but pain or the fear of it, I remember, kept me from swinging just far enough to enjoy myself. My body bears no signs of the train that would rumble by. The tracks bordered our property, and every window on the house would rattle, the ground would shake, and still couldn't compare to the screams of my father.

I remember what started out as an argument between my father and my brother, Daniel, turned into our great escape, and the last night that place ever felt like home. My father never cared much for Daniel. To him, Daniel was baggage my mom brought with her into their marriage. He

disdained him so much that most of the year, Daniel lived with his own father. I don't remember my mom locking all the doors after a phone call from my other brother, Billy. He warned her to call the police and get out of the house as soon as possible. I wonder how my father must have felt when he realized it was Billy, his own son, who had betrayed him that night. It was Billy who had told us to run as far away as we could. I only remember my mom's panicked voice in the other room, and the swift scene changes from my bed to her car. That place holds all of these memories, it watched me move in as a scrawny child with bright red pigtails. And it watched me leave in the middle of the night, blinding red and blue lights dancing over my face as my mom's car pulled out of the driveway. My father screamed as loud as he could as if this time, he would be able to shake the wheels right off her car. I wonder how much would have been different these days if my mom hadn't received a police escort out of that place. I wonder if I would have grown up there, spent my childhood running through the fields or sneaking down to the creek to catch crawdads, gone to high school with a graduating class of 50 or so. Or if I would have been laid to rest in the pasture alongside my mom and siblings so that my father could make absolutely sure he was never abandoned. Cold and still in the earth, we would never talk back to him again. Those memories were never made or shattered. My family never sat all together on the porch again, watching the sunrise and eating breakfast. But my mom, Daniel, Skylar, and I had better breakfasts. Even in our journey away, sleeping in Mcdonald's parking lots and eating greasy, drive-thru hashbrowns as soon as we woke up in the morning, the world stood a little stiller. The sun came up and went back down, and the windows of that small red car never rattled like those of that house.