Learning that you have to let yourself rot in order to grow into new gardens

THESIS

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By

Emma Kindall

Graduate Program in Art

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Master's Examination Committee:

Sergio Soave, Advisor

Alison Crocetta

Carmel Buckley
Abstract

This work is about her leaving, creating a mythology surrounding her imagined return, realizing she couldn’t, mourning the loss, and returning to her instead.
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For listening to me while my voice shook, helping me stand my ground, telling me about your experiences, validating my experiences, sharing your expertise, challenging me, questioning me, encouraging me, being patient, and being present.

To Julia Kindall,
For speaking for me, collaborating with me, being angry on my behalf, and being a brilliant being.

To my peers,
I love them.
Vita

2012..........................................................Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts

2014 to present .............................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Introduction

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“Sometimes when I wanna understand my pain I look in the mirror and I ask my body where it Lives and I see it in my chest and I cupped my hands and pulled it out and rounded it in my hands for a while and I put it above my head and pretended it was on a string. I was underneath it and I broke it and it went all over me. Like, I took a shower in it essentially. It was her love. It was exactly what I needed and I realized I probe the world like a water balloon hoping it will break and what will be inside it will be the love I need I'm learning we may need to learn how to love her to be able to love ourselves”

Text message from my sister, September 2015
“Hi J dog it’s mom calling hey um I’m calling you because um texting is really difficult for me because I text something and then I think ohhhhhhhhhhh my god I hope she doesn’t think I’m bleh bleh bleh bleh and anyways I am calling you as your mother to say I am doing well I am doing so fucking well oh I know that I am writing a play in my mind which...you have a kaleidoscope mind I hear I know that is how I talk to god who is he she it, more than a pronoun and I know, look at it this way, you know being a recovering alcoholic is just toooooo narrow but since that I have learned that I actually have PTSD anddd something that happened when I was four years old... that opening line, I’m joking, it’s not but you know what I’m saying I have met so many many different women and it’s not what we talk about it’s the way these women speak they use the same words I I in my brain, safe and healthy, that’s the first thing that’s my first thought before iii...go to the bathroom and pee...it’s and literally literally yesterday as I’m thinking about all these things I’ve had another meeting with my therapist and I did my.... I whipped out my opening line... there scout was playing with her little boys and um this is what I know is that her eyes turned into circles and here’s the best thing we then started talking about oh I’m going to walk and get some milk I’m...it’s somehow maybe less shaming then being a recurring er
recovering alcoholic oh that was funny that was funny you you know what I’m saying that’s how I’m doing and I am doing amazingly well because my broken head my brain um I’m going to start something um probably in a couple of months called EMDR but I look at it this way my broken heart is healing as well and the way I’ve always done that is by creating some piece of theater that is really is really from the words of other people that have given to me and I can shape it so that it’s palatable for people they love to see it and then the best thing is they applaud and they go home and talk to each other about it so yeah yes things are great okay alright I’m going to give you my phone number again and I’m so glad I just hate texting because I felt like ughhhhhhh are you going to read it and not come this summer if you don’t I’ll jump off a...no you know what I’m not going to jump off any cliffs I will not try and commit suicide again the only way I know I will not drink alcohol is because I lead at least three of the meetings that I can walk to , I lead those at least three sometimes five times a week and I and I deeply deeply am humbled by that so I’m trying to am trying to go over all the serious things about me but hey here’s the thing I am least frightened by the fact that I have PTSD which what is beautiful is that that’s the most fucking frightening thing so, I got a show here. I got it. And do you know
iiiiiii believe that if you could laugh at something and cry at something that’s when the har-“

Transcript of voicemail from my mom to my sister, March 2016
Chapter 1. *There are words at the back of my teeth*

Figure 14. *There are words at the back of my teeth*, video still
My mom attempted suicide for the third time in 2012 when I was twenty years old. I found her wedged between the wall and her bed all crouched down. I asked her if she was praying. My dad called the ambulance. My sister took me down to the basement and apologized for me having to see her like that. The ambulance took my mom and my dad followed. My sister and I sat on the kitchen ground and shook. Then we put on Rihanna and danced. My brother cried on the stairs a year later because nobody remembered to explain it to him.
Here is something my sister wrote in January of 2016:

“I remember her telling me something in the kitchen. She told me she left her body when she fifteen. That she didn’t know why, but the world had gotten to be too much and she wanted to live like a ghost instead. Mom said she was still looking for her soul. That maybe she was drinking alcohol to get back to it. The funny thing about mom is I never questioned how much she loved me. I knew her body would bend over backwards to make something beautiful for me and my sister. Mom’s body was beautiful, her body was love. But mom was nowhere to be found inside of it.”
Figure 16. We made camp around your exoskeleton, video still 1
Figure 17. *We made camp around your exoskeleton*, video still 2
Figure 18. We made camp around your exoskeleton, video still 3
My mom went to Kentucky to live next to her parents. When she left, I pretended she had died. I made her into something I could mourn, some sort of goddess or movie star. I made shrines to her in my house and in my art. On bad days, I whispered to her ghost.

Here are three pictures of her that I love:

![Figure 19. My mom in her mid-twenties](image)

I didn’t want to see signs of her as sick. I stopped answering her phone calls and stopped listening to her voicemails. I sifted through my mail box looking for bills and left the rest of the mail behind. I checked my email through squinted eyes. Sometimes, bad things would pile up and the world I had built would crack. In 2015, she ended up in a coma. It felt like being hit hard.
Here is something my sister wrote in June of 2015:

“Voicemails voicemails voicemails and a strange six-month period where all I heard was that she was very sick somewhere out there in Kentucky. Grandma had to climb through the basement window to find her bra hanging off her chest and her face in the carpet. I thought she was going to die. But I had thought she was going to die before. I had stared her death in the face, with the same two eyes that kept me only a blink or two away from looking just like her.”

My grandma asked me to come see her. I visited her the summer of 2015. My sister came with me in 2016. We hadn’t seen her in a long time.

Figure 20. My mom, age fifty-two
Her legs look like chicken legs. She has lesions on her brain; they make her stutter when she speaks. Sometimes she yells. She talks about being hurt by a neighbor when she was four years old. She talks about my brother, wonders if he will come. She talks about her mother. She’s mad my grandma sold her car. She talks about my dad, about the divorce. She talks about seeing a babies’ fingernails at church. She talks about birds. She talks about her pets. She talks about a boy at church who reminds her of my brother. She talks about writing a children’s book with an employee at the Verizon store. She talks about writing a play with women who have PTSD. She talks about Hillary Clinton. She talks about crawling into bed next to my grandpa and singing hymns to him; he is sick.

*There are words at the back of my teeth* is a fourteen-minute video containing stop animation, footage from my visit with my mom in Kentucky, and footage I pulled from a VHS tape sent to me by my dad. It is about mourning my mom as she used to be, but also confronting the fact that she is still alive.
“He would sit on my lap and I would rock him back and forth and I would whisper in his ear just close your eyes”

"Mhm"

"and I said I can't turn the lights off when I sleep and Noah I get so anxious that I leave the lights on and the TV because because that's just my anxiety and I said Noah I don't deal with it and I want to go up to the cross until Jesus is off and people started laughing and we said he is not staying on the cross and I just kept rocking him and ooo so that's just….it was a miracle to me that you came to visit me last year but this year it truly will be mm mm my my mm mm mir ric ricle le le le”

"yeah, it's going to be so so good, it's going to be so good. We'll see your house and go to church with you"

“yeah and the thing you can share with Julia is um because of the pain the memories that I still have of Murray I frequently walk through places that we uh Kindall family used to walk through”
"mhm"

“and I just breathe which helps me but I am praying unceasingly but I just talk to our heavenly father and I just touch things you know, this was just one part this was just one part of a much larger story”

"mhm"

“so you might mention that to ja ja julia”

"I definitely will"  

“because it um to see her again would be such a beautiful thing”

"yeah and to realize that we can keep going, the story keeps going"

“it is going, you know or you may not know my my three healthy safe words which is amazing no psychiatrist or
even Jill my therapist can give me those I came up with these three words myself"

"mhm"

“healthy, safe, and positive”

"mm"

“I think for Julia it would be one tiny step in her healing yeah”

"yeah, I agree I agree. I’ll definitely talk to her about it"

"okayyy"

"I’ll see how she's feeling and I'll definitely tell her all of these things"
“yeah ohhhhhhh I love you so much”

"I love you so much too mom"

Transcript of phone call with my mom, July 2016
Chapter 2. *My grandma’s, my mom’s, my dress*

My mom attempted suicide for the third time in 2012 when I was twenty years old. The sober house called. They told us she had crashed the car, it was totaled. They said she wouldn’t take a breathalyzer, that she had become “volatile.” They said she couldn’t come back to them, that we should call the police to find her because she was wandering the streets. They said we should let her spend a night in jail and not let her come home. They said we needed to let her hit rock bottom. They told us not to answer her phone calls. A day passed. Brad asked us if it was okay if she came home. We said yes. She came home. We hadn’t seen her in a long time. Julia cried in my lap at the dinner table. My mom watched TV with Brad in bed. I could hear them laughing. My mom went to Brad’s church the next day. I held her hand tight. It made me want to die. She stood up and said, “I am an alcoholic.” Julia left the sanctuary. Everyone laid hands on her. Brad prayed over her and cried. I went to find Julia.

The next day I found my mom in the kitchen. She asked to make food for me. I told her no, it’s okay. I can do it. She told me that yesterday had been one of the best days of her life. That she felt a weight had been lifted. She said she felt free and loved. She told me
she had gone on a walk just like how I do, that she had gone on a long walk and thought about the day and felt happy. I told her she should download podcasts, that’s what I do. I told her I would show her how and I would give her music to listen to like Aimee Mann and Nickel Creek. I went downstairs and sat by the fire. I watched TV. I heard a thud upstairs. I ran halfway up, said “what was that?” She laughed, she said “it was Harper jumping off the bed.” I laughed. Harper is a dog. I went back to the fire and watched TV. I went upstairs to make dinner. I remember I started to make rice. I remember noticing a quiet. I remember noticing the lights were off. I called up to her, she didn’t answer. I thought she had gone on a walk. I saw her coat on the rail. It was January. I called up to her, she didn’t answer. I went into her room, called her name, looked in her closet, looked behind her clothes. I called for her. I felt panic. I heard the garage door open. I thought it was her. Brad and Julia were home. I told them I couldn’t find her. Brad said “Leese, Leese, Leese,” like the way that he always would. It was gentle and nervous. She said, “I’m here,” it was small. Brad said ‘Leese,’ she said, ‘I’m here.’ She was wedged between the bed and the wall, all bent over. I asked her if she was praying. I saw blood on the floor. Brad told us to go downstairs. Brad called the ambulance, then followed the ambulance in his car. Julia took me downstairs and we laid in my bed. I cried; Julia didn’t. Julia pet my hair and apologized for me having to see her like that. Julia and I went to the kitchen, we sat on the floor. Shook. I took out all of mom’s spices and reorganized them. I took out all of mom’s cookbooks and reorganized them. We put on Rihanna and danced. Sam came upstairs. He had been in his room the whole time.
I threw bobby pins around my room 3 years ago and twisted Harry Potter action figures when I was eight. I feel not unlike that now like I could be a thousand cars comin' atcha.

...and it felt really terrible in here like taking vitamins on an empty stomach and losing a child at the grocery store and being the child lost in the grocery store but you don't understand do you being piece in the back of a pickup truck and tears collecting in your neck and having skin burning it off so people could see that you had known death like a neighbor who keeps coming back and leaving notes in your bed and dinner in the oven and what in the toilet and blood by the bed frame and I'll never forget a few feelings and it was Tuesday and it did like normal and nobody...
Knew that i knew and you
would have cared to because
you have kids and maybe you
could have helped me and
i'm wondering how long this
will last and i'm wondering
what's next and i'm falling
asleep to the sound of my
silence except breathing
like super-fast
sometimes like night
terrors and i don't like
to think of those
because they remind me of
breath against my neck
which was not a bad
thing
My mom tried to kill herself for the second time in 2011 when I was nineteen years old. I was in Connecticut. My sister called. My house had bad reception, so I had to stand behind the TV. My sister said mom had tried to kill herself and that she didn’t know what was going to happen. My roommate came out of her bedroom. I told her my mom was sick. I walked to the beach, walked to a rock. I laid down. My dad had been preaching. My sister had gotten a text from my mom that said, “I love you” during the service. My sister told Rita that she felt like something was wrong. Rita called Sue and asked if she knew where my mom was. Sue found her in a car. Rita went up to the pulpit and told Brad. Brad started to cry and said a prayer, then ran to find my mom. I went to school. I went into a closet. I had a panic attack under a desk, ran to a bathroom, and threw up.

Here is something my sister wrote sometime in 2015:

“Perhaps when we die, I’ll see you whole again up there. Because right now I miss you in no words, but a language my body weeps out. I saw your body in my body in the mirror today. That happens a lot here. As I get older, as I get woman. I see your hair in my hair, and your face in my face. Every day I am becoming a reminder of somebody that I used to know. Some people, when they become, they become whole. Piecing their pieces together. The more I become, the more I begin to run away from my body. Rip apart and away. Run to a place elsewhere. More and more I try to pretend that I grew up as a plant from the ground. Coming from no one. Growing up all by myself. Wrapped up in my own roots.”
Figure 23. *Dog book 1*, excerpt from book I made with my sister.
Figure 24. *Dog book 2*, excerpt from book I made with my sister
This is a dress made by my grandmother, worn by my mother, taken by my grandmother, taken by my mother, taken by me, worn by me.

My grandma made the dress for my mother when she was sixteen. My grandma hid the dress in a closet. My grandma kept photos of my mom in there. Also, her clothes, jewelry, dolls, and wedding dress. Her artifacts, keepsakes, and memory-holders. One year, I asked my grandma to see young photos of my mom; I wanted to see if the women in my family grew into their noses. My grandma said they were lost (she didn’t want us
to see or touch them). My mom and my grandma yelled at each other in the spare bedroom. That year we left my grandma’s house with the dress.

When my mom left home, she left behind the dress. When I came back I took it. I keep it in my filing cabinet. In my filing cabinet it is untended and unharmed. The dress is a reminder of her, but also a lack of her. One month ago, I took the dress from its drawer and smoothed it out on my floor. Each day I fill the thread bare gaps with white paint. It’s stronger now, like, I can hit it and it will make a noise. It made me feel something between guilt and nothing. It made me clench my teeth. I drew a new pattern, redrew an old pattern. I stitched it back together where it was torn.
My grandma made this dress for my mom, she took it from my mom, she cared for it in a closet when my mom went away. My mom took the dress, she left it in a closet when she went away. I took the dress. I kept it in a filing cabinet. I touched it once in a while, hung it on a wall once. On a bad day I dragged the dress out of my filing cabinet, I treated it
with tenderness and affection. Through clenched teeth, I bestowed upon it a benediction.

I repaired the dress. I put it on. In it, I go back in time. In it, I am equipped and in control.

It’s like armor. It’s hard, like a rock, like when you hit it will make a sound.

Figure 27. Painting the dress
“the PTSD thing was when I was well I’ll show you all those papers but I saw oh eating disorders and I figured it out because I have my first full PTSD attack and there it's in my Hazleton papers it's written there and I remembered us talking about me going to Los Angeles basically my psychiatrist said he said your husband is not going to stay married to you and I said oh no no that won't happen but anyway that's when I had my first PTSD attack”

“mm”

“later I just I did some papers and we were talking about Los Angeles and that's when I made the phone call and said was I ever sexually abu… because well no he would never no no no no so it's a shit load of stuff “

“mhm”

“so I try to have a separate life as much as I can but that's that's who I am, it's very surreal but however here's the thing I I and you know I don't bull shit you”
“Mm, mhm”

“and I I God really is my best friend and I know why I came back here to discover the whole story and only now I can, what we were talking about before, how one small thing happened to one small person who didn't understand it and that thing is just covered up and covered up and there are repercussions”

“yes”

“so I so that's why I know a play will be created cus to me my art form that is my art form and a way to look at something that people are afraid of or they wanna judge it or they wanna simple explanation, people see things in art that are frightening”

“yes”

“but that's what art is, it's not ever easy for me to pretend that something isn't happening if it is”
“I’m the same way”

“but that's why I don't I really really don't know what's happening in your life because I don't I cannot I cannot look I feel like I’m prying into your life and I’m not going but I’m glad we talked about this stuff”

“yeah, me too. I think it's so good to talk about mom, it's so good to be transparent”

“I I have just I have to be because me because this is the other thing why this isn't bullshit I know that's why I got in that car and I drove from Minnesota to here because I needed to discover I tell ya I said to you I am 52 I am very healthy I have no desire to end my life cus at least now I have a context for things”

Transcript of phone call with my mom, August 2016
Chapter 3. Anger in her eyeballs and Love her like a myth or a made-up place

Figure 28. Anger in her eyeballs, installation view
Figure 29. Love her like a myth or a made-up place, installation view
Anger in her eyeballs and Love her like a myth or a made-up place are creations of feminist fiction. They are reclamations, prayers, reimaginings.
In making them, I return to nearly dead and wounded women.
Figure 32. Love her like a myth or a made-up place, detail

I treat them with tenderness and affection.
Figure 33. *Anger in her eyeballs*, detail

I position them as my protectors,
Figure 34. *Anger in her eyeball*, detail

I vow to protect them.
I rewrite us not sick, I make us heroines.
I rewrite us as not passive, I make us angry.
In this realm, we are back together,
Figure 38. *Anger in her eyeballs*, detail

helping and holding each other,
Figure 39. *Anger in her eyeballs*, detail

reassembling what was broken,
and collectively keeping darkness at bay.
My sister puts comforters over her windows and sleeps. I have panic attacks; they make me vomit. My brother holds her clothes. My mom has lesions on her brain. We think she has Korsakoff’s Syndrome. My grandma is my mom’s neighbor now. My grandma took on everything. I visited them in 2015, my sister came with in 2016. My grandma held us tight and cried silent tears. My mom told us she has PTSD. We said we know. We held her hand.

Figure 41. Holding my mom's hand
The collective trauma of the women in my family is hard to hold. I have a desire to articulate it but an inability to touch it. Finding that I can’t walk directly into it, I have tiptoed circles around it. I have hinted at it, but rarely named it. I’ve buried it only to wake up and find it next to me.

The only way I can get near it is to rewrite it. I’ve created space where I can reconstruct, restore, pay homage, and mourn—a space where I and the women who I am tied to are equipped to protect and care for one another. In this alternative narrative, trauma is present but it can be approached, moved, and transformed.

Here is something my sister wrote sometime in 2015:

“And maybe not new skin will be made, but our leftovers leave room for plants to crawl up the ground and make us beautiful again.”
My family was a unit for a blip in time, now we are islands. This thesis will be bound. I would like to seal this into it:

My brother’s name is Sam. He can hardly see out of his eyes. He sleeps under a blanket full of rice so his legs will stop kicking. He is autistic and high functioning. He has something between Asperger’s and Nonverbal learning disorder. He struggles to write his name. He doesn’t say excuse me when he bumps into old women. He yells when his favorite sports teams lose, sometimes cries. When he’s angry he looks in the mirror. He preaches sermons in the bathtub. He plays drums and the guitar extremely well. He knows everything about sports, politics (left), and music. He calls me a lot. I should
answer more. We talk about feminism, podcasts, and how to talk to Annie. When things got bad, he her clothes.

My sister’s name is Julia. She is four years younger than me. She is my brother’s twin. I grew up not speaking, she grew up speaking for me. She is my best friend. I think she has prophetic dreams. She taught me how to be angry. She never lies. When things got bad, she screamed on the stairs. When we told her to stop, she took Benadryl and put blankets over her windows.

Here is something she wrote in November of 2014:

“Sleeping on my back, arms up-crossed, inability to dream myself elsewhere, even. Thinking underneath everybody else phone-whispering. Having nobody to speak to and following my feet to the bathroom. Where I let the equivalent of an empty house eat me from my insides out. Holding my hair in one hand, and my face in between fingers, I let sobs quietly collect in my chest. Earth quakes, like broken plates, and moments I had made screams echo around in the kitchen. Making the neighbors nervous. I held me in my own arms, and hugged out all of my heat. I opened the door only for my seven year old self to come in and crouch on my lap like a little girl. And in the bathroom her and mourned for a moment making music with the combination-faucet-light switch. I carried her back to bed with me and lay on my back, arms up-crossed, inability to dream us elsewhere, even. Tears colliding wild with my cheeks, and welling up in my ears. Drowning out the sounds of my best friends breathing themselves awake and asleep.
again. All of the things they would never know. There is no other aloneness quite like that. I listened all night, until I could tell morning had made it too bright and beautiful to be mourning anymore.

And so I made some coffee. And the kitchen looked different. And I was okay again.”

My dad’s name is Brad. He is a pastor. Once, he cried while talking about God making the color green. Once, he gave me a book on how to overcome being shy. I threw it against the wall. He bought me Dairy Queen and I cried on his shoulder. Once, he put on music and ran around the house throwing a roll of toilet paper around. He laughed and my mom laughed and they danced in the kitchen to a song about a golden retriever. When things got bad he stopped letting her come home. He kept us safe. He bought us Dairy Queen. He cried.

“Dad: I feel like things will get surprisingly better.

Me:

Dad: Or maybe they won’t.

Me:

Dad: It’s okay to call it winter. We don't have to pretend winter is spring.”

My mom’s name is Lisa. She got her MFA in theatre. She was in plays all while I was growing up. Brad said she was a pebble that sank to the bottom of the pool. He said everyone else was just floating. He said she had the ability to walk into people, feel all
they felt, and become them. Brad said she used to be the funniest person he knew. Once, she kept us home from school to garden. I remember watching her. I remember wanting to be her. When things got bad she tried to kill herself, she disappeared, she cried, she yelled, she drank, she got help, and she left.

She used to be the saddest person in the world. When I visited her in 2015 she wasn’t so sad anymore. She has lesions on her brain and they make her forget things. She talks about birds and babies’ fingernails. She carries around a troll doll that she calls Baby Lisa. She takes care of Baby Lisa, her dog, and her cat. She’s writing a play. She doesn’t remember the things she tells me, but she always tells me she loves me.
Here is a picture of her that I love:

Figure 43. My mom, my age
Here is a picture of her I that I love:

Figure 44. My mom, age fifty-two
Here is something my mom wrote in November of 2016:

“PTSD is supposed to stand for this: P for post but to me it stands for perennial- a beautiful, strong flower that manages to push herself up from the dirt and weeds into the sunlight and bloom. T stands for trauma but to me it stands for tenderness, S stands for stress but to me it stands for softness which gently heals the wounds that stress has caused and the letter D stands for disorder but to me it stands for dance because I know I have always been clumsy but I do watch Dancing with the Stars every Monday night with my 85 year old new best friend, Jean so…I guess my favorite word starts with the letter L- love because love gently washes away PTSD and allows us all to rest.”

My name is Emma. I grew up not speaking to people outside my family. In middle school, I shook my head yes and no. I shrugged my shoulders. In high school, I whispered. By the end of high school, I started to audibly laugh. I think the collective pain of the women before and in front of me lodged in my throat. When things got bad, I had panic attacks in the park. I hid in the basement. I moved away. I stopped coming home for Christmas.

In 2015, I started talking to my mom again. A few months later I visited her in Kentucky. In 2016, my sister came with me to Kentucky. In 2017, my grandpa died. In 2017, my brother came to the funeral with us. He saw my mom for the first time in a long time. She touched his arm, cried, and stuttered. I thought she would die before I graduated. I’ll visit her again in three months. I miss her.
Figure 45. Me
Figure 47. Sam
Figure 48. Julia
Figure 49. Brad
Figure 50. Julia
Figure 51. Mom
Figure 52. Sam
Figure 53. House
There are words at the back of my teeth is a fourteen-minute video containing stop animation, footage from my visit with my mom in Kentucky, and footage I pulled from a VHS tape that was sent to me by my dad. It is about mourning my mom as she used to be, but also confronting the fact that she is still alive.

The video is projected into a small white wooden box that sits within a house made of painted white sticks. The sticks are bound together with rope, fabric, and plaster—like the way a cast would be wrapped to heal a broken bone. The house is flimsy, but also stronger than it looks.

I made the animation on a table. I scratched into the table, drew on top of it, and colored it with pastels. I repainted the table and arranged cut-out prints and drawings on top of it. I took pictures on my phone for immediacy. I deleted the pictures and took them again and again. I formed the images around my sister’s words.

“There are words at the back of my teeth, but I don’t know how to say them”

“We made camp around her exoskeleton”
“I have seen your ghost and she is beautiful”

The footage that sits in-between the animation was taken when I went to visit my mom for the second time. I took the footage because I didn’t want to forget anything and maybe because I wanted proof that she still existed. There are some videos that I watch repeatedly because they make me laugh. There are some videos that I don’t watch at all because my mom starts to yell or cry.

“Maybe she’s the best thing that ever happened to us”

Figure 54. My mom at her house, 2016
The footage pulled from the VHS tape is from the only home video we have. My dad sent it to me in the mail. I got it on a Saturday night. I walked to the art building on a loose theory that I’d run into a VCR player somewhere on the third floor. When I didn’t find one, I thought about the library. I walked to the library and pulled on the locked doors. I sat on a cold bench. When I finally did see the home video, I watched it three times. My mom appears in it four times. She dances with my brother, talks to my sister while a girl named Hannah touches her hair, holds my sister on her lap, and says goodbye to the camera at the end.

Figure 55. VHS tape, my mom and my brother, 1997
My grandma’s, my mom’s, my dress was touched once a day. It was painted, stitched, pattern redrawn, and printed on. When I first pulled it out of my filing cabinet, the fabric was threadbare. Now it is heavy with paint. Sometimes it was worn alone in my studio. In my studio, I pretended it was armor. I carried a bow made of bent sticks, a clothes hanger, and string. I imagined the faces of those who had harmed us, made a vow to protect us, and took aim. For the thesis show, the dress was put inside a display case meant for precious objects.

Anger in her eyeballs is cut from wood. I collaged on top of the wood with paper, fabric, paint, and prints. Three women project out from the wall via a network of sticks that are bound together with rope, fabric, and plaster—like the way a cast would be wrapped to heal a broken bone. The woman at the center is my height, the two women surrounding her are a foot taller.

Black velvet wolves stand at the periphery of the piece. They are both form and shadow. They protect, guard, and surround the women. The central figure has no arms, the women surrounding her become her arms. They hold her up. From their hands are strung tears, that turn into leaves, that die over time. Once a week I attached new leaves to the dying. While doing so, I meditated on a mental image of the women in my family becoming well.
I painted my mom’s face on the central figure. My mom’s face looks like my grandma’s face, my face, and my sister’s face. I masked our expression to make us look angry, not passive. At the base of her feet there is text, it says:

Anger in her eyeballs, girl raised by wolves. I have no love to give, it got eaten.

The central figure holds an image of a mother and daughter in her chest. It is something that was lost. In this realm, the women got it back and are equipped to protect it.
Figure 56. *Anger in her eyeballs*, reference photo

Figure 57. *Anger in her eyeballs*, detail
*Love her like a myth or a made-up place* is cut from wood and cardboard. I collaged on top of the wood and cardboard with paper, paint, fabric, and prints. It stands two feet away from the wall, propped up by one stick and grounded by a base of painted green rocks. On the back of the piece is a voicemail from my mom to my sister. To read the voicemail, the viewer has to stand within the two-foot space between the woman and the wall. This way, only one viewer can read it at a time. Likely, many won’t read it at all.

Figure 58. *Love her like a myth or a made-up place*, back view 1
The woman in this work stands at my height. When in front of her, her eyes meet mine. She holds a flock of geese. A small girl stands next to her and speaks an image of hands tending to a fire. The girl is my sister, the hands are my mother’s. I transferred an image of my mom onto the wood. My mom’s face looks like my grandma’s face, my face, and my sisters face. Her head is armored. The armor provides protection and intimidation. She is equipped to protect and care for the girl attached to her hip. The woman holds a flock of geese that are leaving or returning. If she leaves, she comes back.
Figure 60. *Love her like a myth or a made-up place*, reference photo

Figure 61. *Love her like a myth or a made-up place*, detail
“Trauma, from the Greek meaning, “wound,” refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm. Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it.”

Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography, Trauma and Testimony*, pg. 6

“The return to the feminine to our culture is, deep down, a mythic enterprise rather than a historical one: it is a deliberate regression set against progressive modernism. To engage with mythic history is to step outside historical consciousness, to find points beyond history, to tie up each loop of pre-history and post-history, to reach a point beyond anthropocentrism and linear time consciousness.” Rosetta Brooks. “If Walls Could Talk.”

*Otherwords: The art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith*, pg. 89

“When we hear any secret revealed, a secret about a grandfather, or an uncle, or a secret about the battle of Dresden in 1945, our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of the unspoken truth is dispersed. For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.” Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*, pg. 8

“Though perhaps for those of us who have learnt silence through shame, the hardest thing of all is to find a voice: not the voice of the monstrous singular ego but one that,
summoning the resources of the place we come from, can speak with eloquence of, and for, that place.” Anette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, pg. 29

“I think we gain power over our worlds only when we imagine into existence a narrative of our lives that combines elements of our cultural, familial and individual experiences. As we know, the common root of authority and of ‘authorship’ tells us a great deal about power, so whoever authors your story authorizes your actions.” Rosetta Brooks. “If Walls Could Talk.” *Otherwords: The art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith*, pg.
References


