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Senior Projects Spring 2023

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Spring 2023

## Unable to Locate a Fire

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*Bard College*

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*Unable to Locate a Fire*

*Senior Project Submitted to*

*The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College*

*by*

*Lily Taggart*

*Annandale-on-Hudson, New York*

*May 2023*

*For my grandfather, William Vincent Clementson. I hope that one day I will know you.*



## *Acknowledgments*

Thank you to Ann Lauterbach, for constantly challenging and encouraging me to be a more daring and honest writer and human. Over the course of this year of learning from you, you have shown me that I am capable of much more than I believed I was.

Thank you to my mother and father, for always helping me to see my work with fresh eyes, and for trusting me to do the same with your work. Your art inspires me every day.

Thank you to my grandmother, without you I would not have had the past four years of education, exploration, and growth.

Thank you to all my chosen family, the people who are kindred by chance and luck, not by blood.

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*Unable to Locate a Fire*

*Prologue: Before I Was Here*

Irma opens her eyes to a void. When she looks down she realizes she's seated at a dining table; the wood is dark, almost black, and it's covered in an assortment of embroidered tablecloths of varying sizes and shapes. The people sitting around the table look familiar to her. Some of them resemble family members: her great uncle Lou, her grandmother as a child—with two long braids running down her back. But even the people that she can't place look familiar.

She wonders if she's dreaming now. Maybe it began that way, but this doesn't feel like any place she's been to in her dreams before—it's too empty. It's like the part of her brain that collages environments together in her sleep forgot to build a world around this dining table. Irma feels uneasy at the lack of land; there's no ground at all. She is dizzy in the emptiness below her and forces herself to look up.

*I am Irma. I know this the way I know, in dreams, that I am someone I am not. In this dream, I am Irma, I am Irma.*

The woman sitting next to her asks Irma to pass the butter. When Irma passes it to the woman, she tries to meet her eyes and is surprised to discover that she can't find the woman's face at all. Every time she tries, her vision jumps around the edge of the woman's silhouette. Irma sees the edge of an ear, the slope of her forehead, and that's all. This woman is a trick of the light embodied, a blinding absence.



“I’m Virginia,” she says. When Irma shakes her hand it is warm, and she can feel a rough layer of callus on the pad of her thumb.

“I’m Irma, it’s nice to meet you.” Everyone else at the table seems to already know each other; there are several overlapping conversations in full swing. Irma’s uncle Lou is leaning across the table, telling a pot-bellied man with small round glasses that his new pair of gardening gloves already has a hole in the tip of one finger. The pot-bellied man chuckles as if he knew this would be the case.

To Irma’s left, the woman with no face has begun buttering the roll on her plate.

“You know, I think I had a great-grandmother named Virginia.”

Irma hardly recognizes the words as her own; Bill was Irma’s grandfather on her mother’s side and she had nearly forgotten that his mother was named Virginia. It’s strange, she thinks, Bill’s

story is a lot like his mother's. Virginia died suddenly of heatstroke in a parked car, and soon after that her husband had a new wife. Bill must have been around two years old when Virginia died, just like Irma's mother had been when Bill was killed in a car accident. Shortly after Bill died, Irma's grandmother found a new husband and had another daughter, Suzanna. Irma wondered how it was possible for these people to begin again so quickly. She knew that her mother never got to learn much about Bill; there were no photographs of him in their home growing up, and he wasn't spoken about. He was a secret; the only proof of him came in the form of photographs slipped into sock drawers, things Irma's grandmother tucked discreetly into her daughter's life.

Irma wondered if the same was true for Bill, if, from one day to the next, everything about his parent was removed from his life. Did he have the chance to form memories of Virginia? Even if they were dim at the edges, populated only by the corner of a smile, or light filtering through gauzy curtains onto her hands, they must have been treasured. Irma's mother told her about her

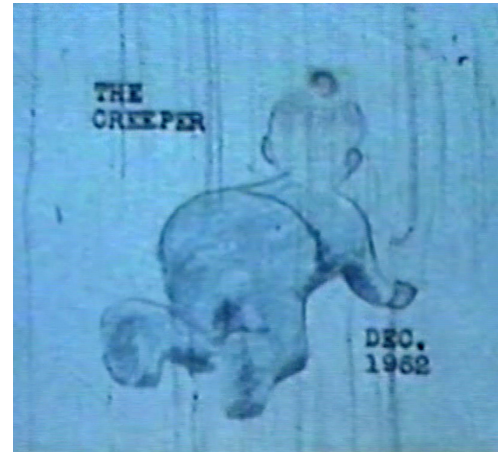
few memories of Bill. In most he was holding up a camera, following her around in the front yard, making home movies. Irma has never seen any of these film reels, but her grandmother showed her the title cards that Bill drew for them. Irma's mother is "The Creeper", with one tuft of brown hair springing from the top of her head.

"I haven't met any other Virginias, were the two of you close?"

"I never got the chance to meet her actually," Irma unfolds her napkin and drapes it over her lap.

"That's a shame."

"I don't think I've gotten the chance to meet anyone here either, how do you know them?"





“Well, it’s funny, I don’t think I could tell you exactly how I know anybody here, it’s been so long since we all met, but next to you—with the pigtails—that’s Mary Anne, and next to her is Lou, he’s her older brother, then there’s Vaughn, and that’s Opal talking to him.”

“It seems like all I ever get is names.”

*Irma once told her cousin that they didn’t share the same grandfather. This caused problems. Apparently, Irma was not supposed to know this; or if she did know she shouldn’t have said anything about it. Is it because nobody wanted to have to explain why? Nobody wanted to tell the story where the father died, leaving two children and a wife behind? Nobody wanted to tell the story where the wife had no choice but to carry on? Where she got married six months later? Where she had another child with her new husband, and he asked her children to forget their father? Scrub out his name and become someone else’s children? Irma wondered if she was*

*expected to do the same. She never shared Bill's name though, so what else was there to remove?*

Irma remembers, in preschool, discovering the concept of saving the best for last. She was sitting on the stairs leading up to the bathroom, with a plate of pear slices on her lap. Some of the slices were mushy, with little brown mealy bits in them. That was just the moment it dawned on her that she should eat the least appetizing ones first. She doesn't know why.



Nothing special happened; she just realized, if she wanted to finish that plate of pears on a good note, she should save the one that looked the best for last.

Irma is reminded of this when dessert appears on the table. Bowls of ice cream stacked four scoops high materialize in front of each guest. Irma tries to guess what the flavors are, based on their colors. One appears to be pistachio, another is either chocolate or coffee, one looks like raspberry, and at the very bottom is a quickly melting scoop of what appears to be vanilla. Based on her guesses, the combination of flavors doesn't make much sense. When Irma spoons the first bite into her mouth, it isn't a flavor she recognizes. Maybe it's something like anise, but not as harsh as licorice. There's also something like the last bite of an orange in it—the bitter taste of your teeth scraping against the rind.

Without warning, Irma's chair transforms beneath her; her dark surroundings begin to brighten. She finds that, instead of being seated at the dining table, she is driving a car. The spread of

knuckles over the steering wheel are wider than her own, and her arms hairier. She can see her face in the side mirror but it isn't her face. It is a man's face, a man she recognizes from her grandparents' wedding photos. She is Bill's brother, Charles. She turns to the passenger. It is Bill. The two of them are having a conversation that Irma can barely hear—as if she were listening in from the other side of a thick pane of glass.

Behind Bill's head, light surges through the window; the world becomes porous, and a cloak of glimmering ash settles over Bill's shoulders. It seeps through his skin, leaving a translucent husk that shudders under Irma's breath.

*I lower a hand through the roof of the car, lift her from her strange fabricated memory, and set her down in bed like her father used to do.*

## *1. Hands*

Sometimes I have a sense that there are magnets repelling each other inside my chest cavity, orbiting between my ribs. One side of this phantom tug of war pulls me deeper into the damp jagged recesses of an underground cave. The other launches me out of the calm darkness into a bright smooth place where I can hear the clicking undercurrent of the sun baking through my skin.

Sometimes I think of myself as a very old man trapped inside the body of a twenty-year-old girl. I don't know who this man is, or how long he'll be sticking around for, but I'm trying to get to know him better while he's here. I call him Will. My grandfather was named William but he went by Bill, a name that feels entirely different to me. Will is a name barbed with meaning; it is stubborn and sharp, it leaves a path in its wake, an inheritance void of explanation. It leaves behind objects. Will speaks in the language of objects; he speaks in texture, density, the

temperature an object might leave on your skin. If I try to persuade words out of the objects Will confronts me with, the idea of him begins to crumble; there is no man in my head, only memories tinged with the idea of a person I never knew. The idea of Bill. So I list for myself the things I know about Will, the things I am able to discern without language.

Will likes playing solitaire. He remembers my old neighbor Juanita Mock's card shuffling machine fondly. The whirring and flapping noises it emits—the feeling of the lever resisting the press of the index finger—how it riffles the cards into a new geography.

He looks at the language that worms leave in fallen branches and reaches out to feel the trajectory of the grooves.

*What are they saying, I ask him.*

His hands slide through the burrows like a marble rolling down a track, but I don't recognize any

of the words he pulls from those patterns.

Will is very particular with the way he cleans his fingernails. That's something I've learned from him. First, we file them, then, we find our pocket knife and flip out the blade next to the one with the sharp edge. This one has a dull edge, but still comes to a point at the end; it fits nicely under the nail. It feels natural to slide it from left to right, freeing up the space between nail and skin.

*I think Will might be the reason I'm not a good sleeper.* My hands have fingernails, my fingernails have chipped brown polish on them; they have the stacks of rings that come with the superstitions of girlhood. If I wear this ring I won't crash my car, if I wear this one I'll escape awkward conversations, if I wear this one it will link me to my mother and father. Will's hands have claws; the claws have a purpose but I'm not sure what it is yet. He might adorn his claws with the things that come with the superstitions of old-manhood, but I don't know what those superstitions are. Maybe Will has the kinds of superstitions that are more like the ones that

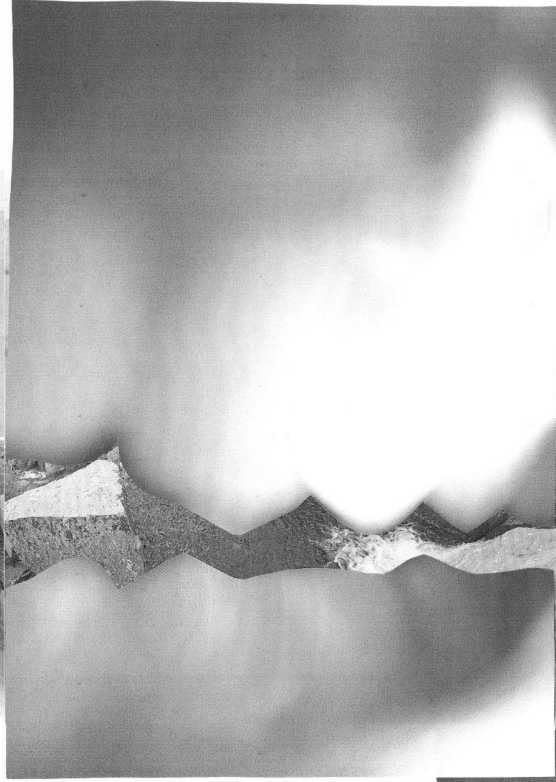
coyotes and raccoons have; maybe his superstitions aren't superstitions at all, but dormant instincts: the instinct to dig, to bury, to run.

I want to ask Will if he is nocturnal, if the way we experience time is set to different rhythms. When I can't sleep it feels that way, like retrograde motion. Triton, Neptune's largest moon, orbits perpetually in retrograde to its planet. We can't even be sure that Triton was always one of Neptune's moons, and not something big enough to have gotten caught in its net a long time ago. That one rotating piece, flowing against the tide, is following an enduring path. It remembers something and keeps following it back. As long as they continue on their paths they see mirrored views of their surroundings. One eye forward, one eye back.

*Is it like that? Are you following a different instinct? What direction is it leading in?*



from a copy of one of Gladstone's  
also written out of haste & in  
Africa. Young, in the office  
seems, there are some of  
and are called



...the  
...the  
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...the



I want to understand how Will sees. Do we see the same things, or does he have a different set of eyes than mine, hidden in some unknowable place? Maybe his eyes are the two birthmarks beneath my lower lip; birthmarks from a vampire, two inches in height, that scaled the inverted mountain of my chin and sunk Will's eyes into my skin. Maybe that vampire is Will. He could be a shapeshifter; he could be some strange and fluctuating phantom that found a familiar port with me.

*I think Will might be the reason I'm not a good sleeper.* My mother's insomnia began after her father died. Someone told her he had gone to sleep forever. I understand how that could make the entry into sleep feel threatening and cavernous. Unwelcoming. Hurtful. I don't know why I struggle with sleep. It's not nightmares—at least not consistently. Between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, I would wake up in the middle of the night and not be able to move. I don't know if I would open my eyes when this was happening, or if I was just able to remember the room was there even though my eyes were shut. When I woke up like this I couldn't breathe, my lungs

would stop filling with air; sometimes it felt like I was being smothered. I haven't experienced that in a long time, and I can only hope that I won't again. Those were the only times I felt afraid of sleep. Now, when I can't sleep, it is because my eyes open against my will. They tell me that they don't want to stay shut, that it takes more effort *not* to look. It's almost two thirty in the morning right now and I think I *could* sleep. Usually, when sleep feels close at hand, like it does now, I allow it to drift out of reach; I do this because I think I can return to it later. I'm learning that sleep isn't spatially or temporally fixed, it doesn't sit still and wait for me to find it whenever I would like to.

When I think about why Will and I see things differently, I get the sense that something is just beyond my field of vision. Everything we see is shrouded in swaying veils, each veil a different density. I can see through some of them easily and even pass my hand freely through the film.

These veils aren't consistent though, and some demand that I slog through them like thick pools of mud. Somehow, wherever Will's eyes are, they see in a different density than I do; that kind of sight is what allows him to read the worm script with his hands as if it were braille. He shows me what he can of that language, but there's something else there that I can't recognize, a type of language that is so diffused it leaves no image for me to interpret.



## *2. Dwelling*

At my parents' home there is a tree that's been outside my bedroom window since before I was born. It towers over our house, beginning in a full-bellied green trunk circled in thick sharp thorns. In bloom, it breeds inflated oval pods with tough wrinkled skin that drop from bright pink waxy flowers. These pods crack open to reveal densely packed cords of silk that unravel over time. As they begin to undo themselves, small black seeds come rolling out from between the fibers. To keep the seeds from scattering across the kitchen floor, my mother packs the silk into plastic bags and stores them in the drawer with her collection of aprons.

I think this love of aprons came from her Aunt Patsy. I don't know if Patsy gathered aprons too—she probably didn't—but she taught my mother her love for worn clothes, and for quilts mended and sewn by generations of hands. I never got to meet Patsy, but she taught my mother how to sew, and when she shows me tricks I didn't know with needle and thread, I feel as though

I'm getting to know a part of Patsy.

My mother has been mending lately. We have a basket that constantly overflows with clothes in need of repair. She patches thread-bare knees and shoulders, and stitches up ripped seams, with obsessive care. She mends these items by hand in front of the television. Some nights, when I'm at home, I'll pass by the living room on my way to brush my teeth, and see her mending when she should be asleep. Some nights, when I peek in, she *is* asleep, and I wake her up to remind her to get into bed. That feels like a return to childhood in some inverted way; like when my father would carry me in from the car and set me down in bed.

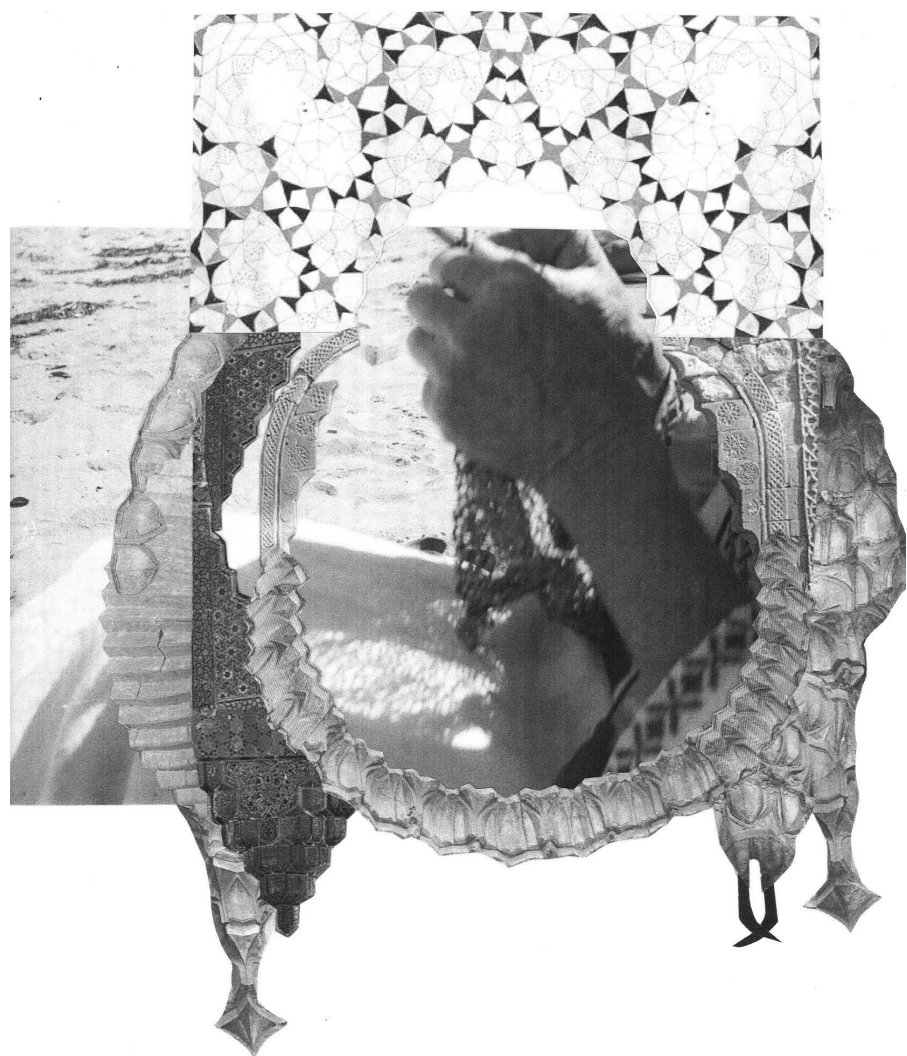
I've been mending a dress tonight, it's one that my friend Nora used to wear all the time, but it's falling apart now. I cut off the hemmed edge of a bathrobe to use for patching the holes. Nora and I decided together on which fabric to use, the way my mother and I do when I need her help fixing my clothes. I got caught up in the rhythm of the project, untethered myself from time for a

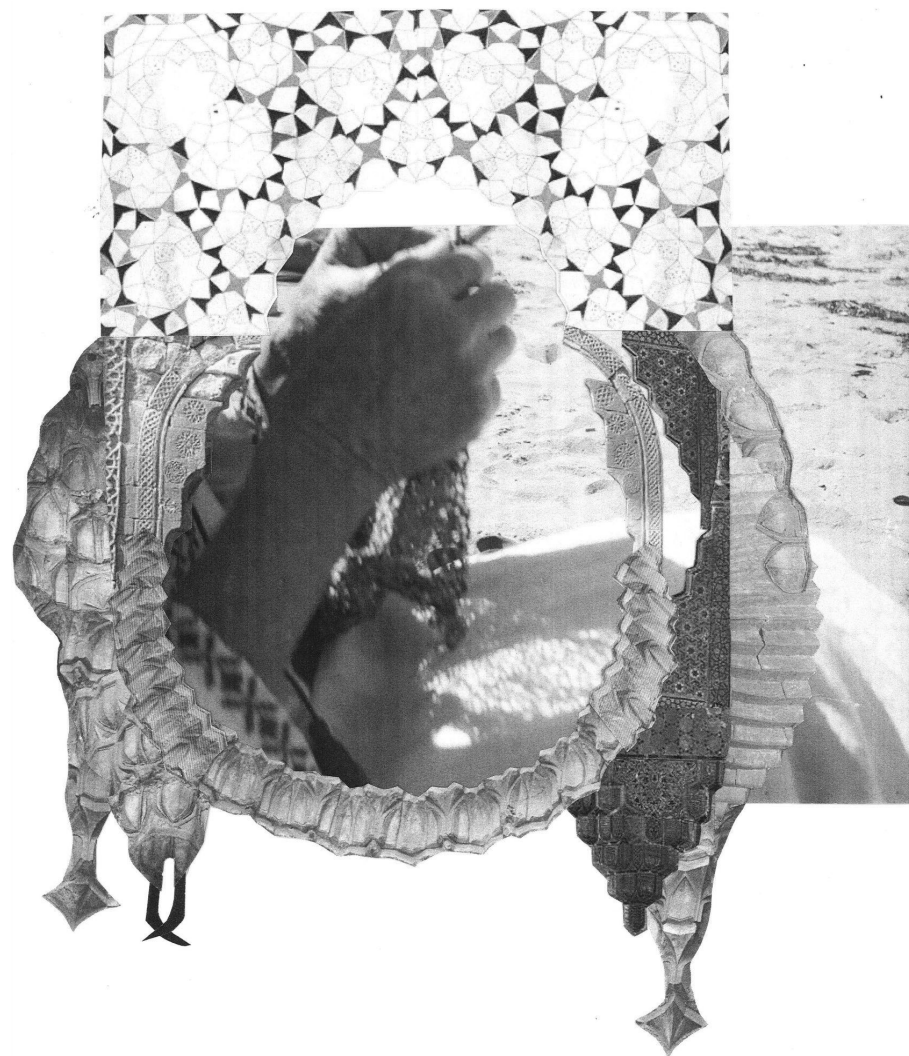
while, before realizing it was nearly four in the morning and I was still fixated on which scrap of fabric to patch the next hole with. I am aware of time again now, and the need for sleep, but all I want to do is keep maneuvering lines of thread through layers of fabric; all I want to do is keep writing the silkworm language that I don't speak into this dress. I'd like to call Will in from the other room to test the bumpy cloth with his hands (see if he can make out that familiar worm code in it) but I don't know how to ask him for favors yet.

I thought about Will while I was with friends the other night. I was sitting in a rocking chair, wearing holey stockings underneath jean shorts and a sweater three times too big for me, eating a piece of ice cream cake off a paper napkin. I felt like someone between myself and Will. I settled into the posture of a grandfather—forearms on my knees, prepared to tell my grandchildren a story—and a friend started to chuckle at me. She told me she was expecting words of wisdom to come streaming from my mouth, but my tongue was tacky with frosting and I could only laugh through my teeth with her. I was barely Will for a moment before my tangled hair and lack of



patience caught up to me and I was myself again. The sweater I had on was one I'd finished knitting a few days earlier; the sleeves were so long they dangled just below my kneecaps, so I took a few extra pieces of yarn and tied bows through the stitches to hold them in perpetual cuffs. The cuffs go up to my elbows now, but at least the sleeves stop before my fingertips. A sign of my impatience: I sewed the seams before going out that night, knowing that I would have to do it again, the next day, to fix my mistakes.

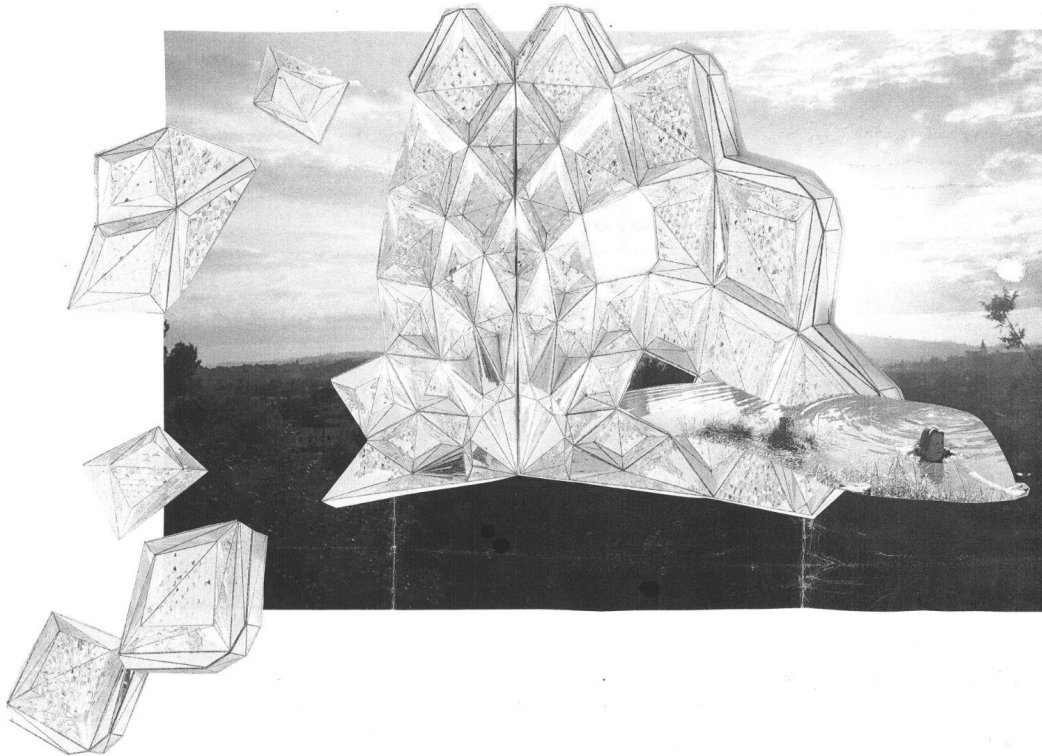




### 3. *Roads*

Driving from Los Angeles to Sacramento takes roughly six hours. This doesn't factor in stops along the way. There is an Indian restaurant in Buttonwillow, where my family usually stops for lunch. I recently learned that Buttonwillow is unincorporated, a catchall on the side of the highway. My family drove up to Sacramento for my grandmother's birthday this year, and when we got off Interstate 5 to stop in Buttonwillow, I looked up at the overpass. There were hornets' nests coating the undersides of the bridges. The hornets had gathered there, unbothered by the exhaust from the semis speeding through this dusty wedge of Southern California. They made *muqarnas* under the spine of the highway and I was mesmerized by the view from the underpass. It made me feel out of place, or like the place I was in was a mirage of some other place. The unincorporated town of Buttonwillow had a hidden highway chapel fashioned from spit and wood, but we don't stop to worship with the hornets under the highway. We buy gas and I sit

outside the Indian restaurant with the dog while my parents order food. I get to admire the nests one more time before we're back on the highway, heading north again.



All the roads in my grandmother's neighborhood make big loops around a park. If you walk to the park from her house you have to cross through a patch of tall trees filled with vultures—trees that elongate the rest of the landscape and make me feel as if everything has narrowed, as if everything is being sucked up into the sky. The grass there is covered in bird shit; it's impossible not to get it on your shoes. It's strange to walk through her neighborhood, full of tended gardens, and find myself suddenly in a swarm of vultures. The vultures aren't threatening; they remain in the highest branches of the trees and avoid contact with living things. Despite this, I get an itchy feeling at the back of my neck when I pass them; as if my skin were preparing itself to be split open. I can't stop thinking about the horde of birds when I'm falling asleep the first night at my grandmother's house.

My mother and I both have a tendency to sleep with our arms above our heads. Even if I don't

fall asleep supine and stretched, I will often wake up with my elbows cradling the crown of my head. It's funny, the way your body moves of its own accord when you're sleeping. It makes me wonder if there's some sort of residual gesture encoded in our DNA. I remember, in the story, Pippi Longstocking slept with her feet on the pillow and her head at the other end. Maybe that was something ancient that her body remembered.

I've always been a restless sleeper. I used to grind my teeth in my sleep, and my mother told me that when I was a baby I would sometimes sleep with my eyes open—which must have terrified her and my father. I would thrash around in my sleep, kicking, coiling, and stretching myself out again and again until I would end up in an entirely different position than the one I had fallen asleep in. Over time my body has become less agitated; I no longer wake up with all the sheets on the floor and my body perpendicular to the length of my bed. My mother has dreams about flying; my dreams descend toward the water rather than the sky. Maybe we're both diving in our sleep, her arms stretching up to the air, mine angling down toward the swell.

When we visit my grandmother, I wake up in a bedroom that used to be my grandfather's office. Here, when I speak about my grandfather, I don't mean Bill. This office belonged to Charles; he was the grandfather I grew up with; Bill is the stranger that came before him. Charles' desk is still in the corner of the room, perched beside a window that looks out onto the street. On this morning I can see somebody raking their front yard, piling up damp leaves. Some of the leaves stick to his shoes and I wonder if he'll track them inside without noticing. My grandmother had a dog named Woody when I was little, he had long floppy ears that would hang into his bowl while he ate. When we would take him for walks, we had to wipe the mud from his ears before coming back inside.

When we sit down to dinner that night, the sound of food being crushed makes my head pound. I wish there were a way that my brain could filter out the sound of another person chewing.



Instead, it is amplified. I often feel possessed at the dinner table; I'm unable to stop myself from saying something hurtful or covering my ears. I used to get into arguments with my mother about it because I wouldn't want to eat dinner at the table with her and my father. At my grandmother's table, it's as if someone has implanted microphones inside the mouths of everyone around me. I hate that I still lose control in these moments. It makes me wonder if Will is set off by the sound of chewing too. Maybe he is banging around the inside of my skull, thrashing, telling me to get away from the noise.

My grandmother keeps boxes filled with photos, letters, and documents in her basement. One of those boxes in her basement is marked *Bill*. Bill was my mother's biological father. When my mother was two years old, in 1963, he died in a car accident. Lately, whenever I'm at her house, I feel the need to burrow into the artifacts that my grandmother has kept. Once, I found an old

notebook of Bills in my grandmother's closet. She had pulled out boxes full of her old silk scarves, urging me to take whichever ones I liked. The notebook was at the bottom of one of the boxes, wrapped up in a striped yellow scarf. I asked my grandmother if she had ever shown this book to my mother and she said yes, but when I brought it downstairs to my mother in the living room, it was the first time she'd seen it. My mother had an easier time deciphering Bill's handwriting than I did. I think it was his notes for work, lesson plans for the high school English class he taught. I appreciated the soft indentations the words made on the pages. Holding his notebook made me want to burrow down to some missing root.

On this visit to Sacramento, I found a letter written by somebody from my grandfather's side of the family, in the Bill box. The letter writer's name was Charles. My grandmother married a man named Charles after Bill died, but this was another Charles, one I had never heard of.

*INFORMATION CONCERNING THE CLEMENTSON FAMILY DICTATED BY CHARLES CLIFFORD CLEMENTSON, on 11 SEPTEMBER 1978<sup>1</sup>*

*My oldest recollection of the Clementson family goes back to December 1898 when I was ten years old when my father, George H Clementson, decided to move from Braddock, Pa. (where I was born) to the West Coast. They had information about the Pacific Coast cities but I believe they got mixed up. Why they chose Port Angeles, Washington in preference to places like Seattle, San Francisco, etc, I do not know. Port Angeles was just a little town with no paved streets, had board sidewalks, etc. At that time our family consisted of my father, my mother Suzanna, my brothers Bill and Vaughn, four sisters named Millie, Leila, Opal and Erma and myself.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles' wife, Elsie, wrote this letter while he lay in a hospital bed, remembering whatever bits and pieces of Clementson history he could.

<sup>2</sup> I never understood why the Clementsons were able to select such a beautiful assortment of names for the women in their family but named most of their men Bill.

*My father was a lawyer in Braddock, Pa. He did not begin law school until after he was married and had seven children. I do not know what my father's occupation was before he went to law school. He played the fiddle for us evenings, but did not confide or express happenings of the family with us children, so I have no history of my grandparents. Later on we heard that my brother Bill in Braddock had married. As to his life between the time of our leaving and his death we have nothing but hearsay and the newspaper clipping of the notice of his death. My brother Bill had two sons, Bill and Merrill (Biff) who lives in San Mateo, California.<sup>3</sup>*

*My brother Vaughn was a very eccentric and "ner-do-well" individual who would drop in on us about every five or ten years. We received word of his death by train accident with no further details.<sup>4</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup> The Bill-ness of it all...

<sup>4</sup> I wonder what happened to Vaughn. In my imagination, it plays like a scene from a silent movie, where a woman is tied to the train tracks by a vagabond. From Charles' description of Vaughn as a "ner-do-well", maybe it's more likely that he would have been the one tying somebody to the train tracks.

*In 1912 I married Virginia Maloney who was living at Victoria, B.C. where our last son was born in 1915. He is Harry C. Clementson who is still living. Our second son was born in Seattle & named William (Bill) Vincent who is now deceased. In 1933 I was transferred to San Francisco by the Union Oil Co where I lost my wife Virginia as a result of a heat stroke suffered on an exceptionally hot summer. She received a heat stroke in our car when we were going to Seattle to attend the funeral of my father, in 1933.<sup>5</sup>*

*After my first wife's death I met Elsie Watt who was teaching school at Kirkland, Wa. The following June, 1934, we were married.<sup>6</sup> We had a child, a son named Charles; making three boys in our family. (Bill, Charles and Harry). Both Charles and Bill were killed in an automobile*

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<sup>5</sup> I can't imagine that day. The way that Charles describes it is so clinical, it's like he wasn't even there. Over the course of five sentences Virginia gets married, has two children, and dies in a parked car on the way to her father-in-law's funeral.

<sup>6</sup> The same thing that happened to my mother happened to her father. It feels like folklore to me; the evil stepmother (or in my mother's case the evil stepfather) arrives on the scene quickly after the death of a parent and the child is left to make sense of the fragments they are able to find.

*accident in Sacramento while traveling together in 1963.<sup>7</sup> The pathetic part about it was the fact that Bill was a school teacher in high school in Sacramento and Charles had just opened his doctor's office in Sacramento, and they were killed enroute to Charles' office for some medication for Bill. Charles was born in Sacramento. Elsie Clementson was his mother. My son Bill left a wife (Mary Anne) and two children; a son named Vincent aged six and a daughter named Laura aged two. Mary Anne has since married Charles Cooper and they have a daughter named Suzana. My wife Elsie and I still live in Sacramento.*

*Attached is a list of all the addresses I have of my family and living relatives.*

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<sup>7</sup> Before Bill died he gave my mother a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. When she was living in Buffalo, New York with her mother and stepfather there was a blizzard that shut everyone in their houses for days on end. My mother snuck out to drop acid with her friends in the fresh snow. She told me about coming home and flipping through the pages of that book as Alice traveled deeper and deeper into Wonderland.

There were no addresses attached when I found this letter in my grandmother's basement. I don't know if I would have wanted to find them. I like to imagine different versions of who these people could have been. I see my grandfather's name there, and I can make a sketch of him in my mind. I know a few small things that fill in the gaps. I have the brown corduroy blazer that he used to wear when he taught high school English. I've looked at his scratchy handwriting and wondered how it was possible that I couldn't read it, even though it looked so similar to my own. I've seen his wide smile in photos that my grandmother took, pictures where he's holding my mother. I see my mother's forehead in the shape of his, and the particular arch of his eyebrows on both our faces. These things form part of a person in my mind, and I tell myself that I'm grateful for these portions of a grandfather that I get to carry. But it feels like looking at pattern pieces and not being able to see what they could make if they were sewn together. No matter what order I put the pieces in, no matter what image they form, I can't see the invisible parts of

him: the sound of his voice, the intonations and gestures that were solely his. These signs, that would reveal his nature to me, are lost.



*4. Seance*



I'm having a dream where I toss a sleeping bag into the trunk of my car and drive up Highway 49 into the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I stop on the side of the road where the river comes up to meet the Highway. I'm tumbling down into the brush with my sleeping bag. There is damp rich-green moss closest to the water, and scratchier sunbleached moss growing on the trees. I collect as much as I can carry and begin to entomb myself. I stuff the coarse green membranes into the sleeping bag with me; I watch as the ground rearranges itself into a dirt mound where my body used to be.

I'm moving faster than I ever have in my life now; I'm an air bubble gliding under a sheet of ice, searching for an exit. I am blissfully unbothered. I don't have a body anymore.

But it's not how I imagined it would be—bodilessness. I'm overwhelmed in a new way. There's nothing to grab onto. No foothold. Everything slides over me too easily. It's like winding a bobbin. I've been unspooled from myself and rewound onto a machine. This machine is fantastic

and spontaneous, and smells of wet rocks and dew-glazed skin, but it is still a machine. And I'm still just a pinion.



I have animated the idea of Will in my mind and he reminds me that I have never been able to blow out birthday candles on the first try. He reminds me, also, that I never know what I'm wishing for when I try to make the flames go out. Perhaps I named him Will to hold onto my early childhood nature, when I was willful, outspoken, and stubborn. My nature now is more quiet. I keep my contrarian instinct locked up, for only myself and Will to know about.

I wonder if my condition warrants an exorcism. I don't feel controlled by Will. I don't think he could ever make me do something I didn't want to do. Sometimes it does feel crowded in my mind though, and I wonder if he could find someone else to inhabit.

I don't mean that though, not really, because if I truly wanted him elsewhere then he would be elsewhere. Will is not my affliction, I am his, I invited him into my mind only to keep him confined there.

I can't communicate with Will as directly as I would like to. He doesn't speak or send letters through some complicated noncorporeal postal service. Instead, he transmits images to me. I might wonder what he's doing and see a flash of blue, and pitted black rock. He's in a place that I know.

*Long Lake. A rock two or three meters in from the shore. I used to jump into the water from that rock.*

He lets me know that he is okay, that he hasn't been reabsorbed into the atmosphere.

Will travels through the places in my mind. He offers me images as he goes. I see silty light speckled water. Will's hand reaches under the surface and emerges with a fistful of dripping sandy clay. He draws my attention up into the branches at the edge of the water. The light bouncing off the pond's surface flits up and down the tree limbs. It looks like an animation of neurons firing in the brain, light jumping from branch to branch in a swiveling dance.

*Do you remember when I used to leave notes in the garden and wait for the fairies to reply?*

Will shows me the log I used to build fairy houses in. He remembers.

*Will you show me more things like that?*

I see the notes written back to me, my father's handwriting in a vibrant assortment of colored pencils; he voiced the invisible garden creatures for me.



*In this image, Bill holds my mother the way my father held me as a child, gently firm and curious.*

My father is an artist. I used to ask him to push me higher but slower on the swing set, believing absolutely that he would be able to make such an impossible thing happen. I still believe this. When I was young, he painted me flying; he painted me with outstretched fingers, with strange creatures springing from each painted nail; he drew me reaching up to an immense hawk in the sky. He could do miraculous things. Not only did he paint me, but he painted my toys too; since I've grown up they don't make appearances in his work. But our garden, the place where I played every day, where I toughened my feet on the gravel so I could explore without shoes, remains, and my father tends to its needs daily.



## 5. Waking

*I wake up to the faintest memory of a dream from years before. The dream where I met Virginia, the faceless ghost of my great-grandmother.*

It snows all day and I watch from my window as people leave imprints of their stride trailing behind them. You can see the differences in how people walk so clearly in the snow. Sometimes the mark of the toe becomes obscured by the glide of the heel brushing over it on the way to the next footstep. Other people leave footprints with crisply defined edges; they lift their feet completely and their steps are made with certainty.

I seek isolation. I make myself alone—amongst people and things—no matter where I go. I imagine the freedom of no responsibility to any other person and it's as satisfying as letting a lake swallow me on a hot day. That's the way I imagine it. I could be less of a person and more of an organism that receives nutrition and energy simply from the way it is embedded in its environment. I want the water to absorb me, dissolve me into its many molecules, split me between its atoms. I feel unable to connect, and that frustrates me. I can never fully emerge from the subterranean space my mind rests in. That place in my mind is an inner sensorium of clashing landscapes. It is every place that's ever frightened me, every place I have adored and romanticized. It is full of narrow tunnels like the ones from the 1978 film, *Watership Down*, that my parents showed me as a child.



*I remember the images of rabbits and blood.*



I try to wiggle through the space, but at a certain point, I'm wedged so deep into the ground that I'll never be moved again. I will mineralize. That's what worries me, I embed myself in what I see, and forget that everyone else is moving. I am willing to never change.

Weather change. Shift in air density. These things plague me. Whenever the weather veers from one state to another I can feel the compression and expansion of air molecules as pain in my brain's right hemisphere. The end of winter is fast approaching, but for the past week, every day has brought either snow or hail. It was warming up before this, and I could sense my brain's protective membrane loosening up, making room for warmer air. Now everything begins to contract again, shrinking away from the cold, and the only impression left behind from my dream is a sensation of water pouring over wood. That's how petrified forests come into being. In Arizona, there is a forest made up of fallen conifers two hundred million years old; floods

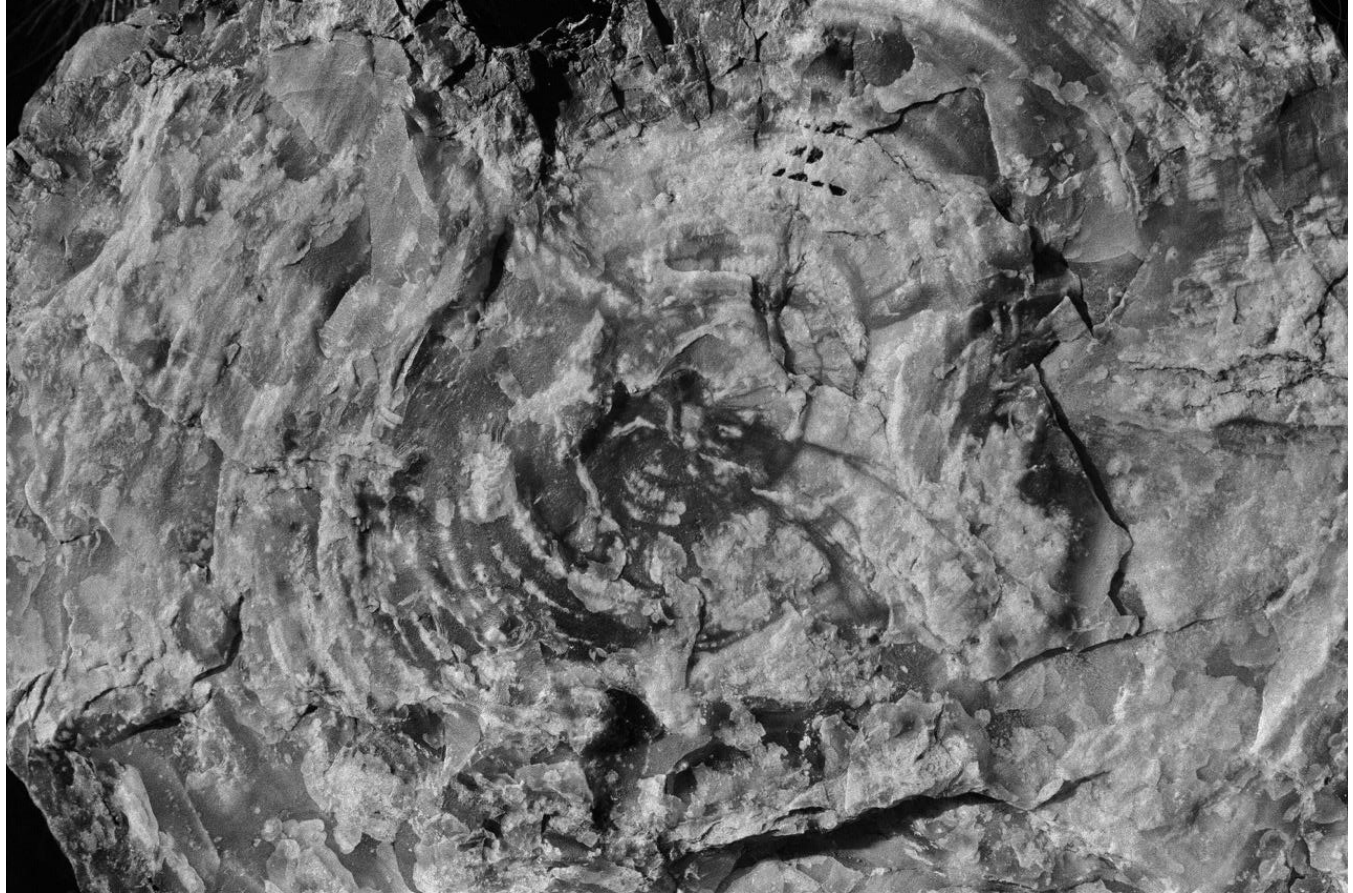
toppled the trees and gradually replaced their wooden cores with newborn stone. No longer vertical, the forest lays down, asleep in the Painted Desert.

Sometimes it seems like a family wound breeds a need for folklore. I know the harsher truths of what happened to Bill, but I also see the ornate patterns set in motion by his death, and even earlier, his mother's death. There is a latticework path between these things. These people. In my mind, the pattern has hooked edges, it wards me off—*don't get tangled up in this*—it tells me not to dwell in the past. But Bill has never felt like part of the past to me. I've only ever known him as a refracted apparition, permanently split open and petrified: like wood that has turned to stone. My grandfather exists somewhere out of time, untethered, untraceable. The pattern left in Bill's wake is an illegible mesh of overlapping stitches, overwrought and hypnotic. I'm not sure I will

ever know what to make of these remnants, but I will continue to assemble the various templates in reverential pursuit, searching for his image. Or maybe I'll let the pieces lie.

*From my mother's family, I inherited a history of unmeasured accidents. I can't remember when I first learned that my mother didn't have a father. It was hard to grasp because I had a grandfather; his name was Charles and he pronounced my mother's name with a Texan drawl that wasn't shared by anyone else on her side of the family. I made fortunate discoveries where I could, trying to understand who Bill was in fragments. I am aware that I can't know Bill this way, or maybe in any way at all, but for my mother I continue to search. I know I can't find Bill for her, but she was taught not to look, and nobody ever asked that of me, so now I look on her behalf. I look for the sake of looking, there's nothing that I need to find, I just need my mother to know that I see the void and I'm returning whatever fragments I find to that place.*

And Will? We're planning another trip to the mountains.



Note on the images:

Images on the following pages are stills from William Clementson's 8mm films:

11, 13, 24, 46, 50, 55

Images on the following pages are from my own personal collage and photographic practice:

20, 29-30, 32, 36, 44, 52, 58

The first image, on page 8, is a collage that I made using stills pulled from Clementson's 8mm films, and exists somewhere between the above two categories. I like to think of it as an image made in collaboration with him.