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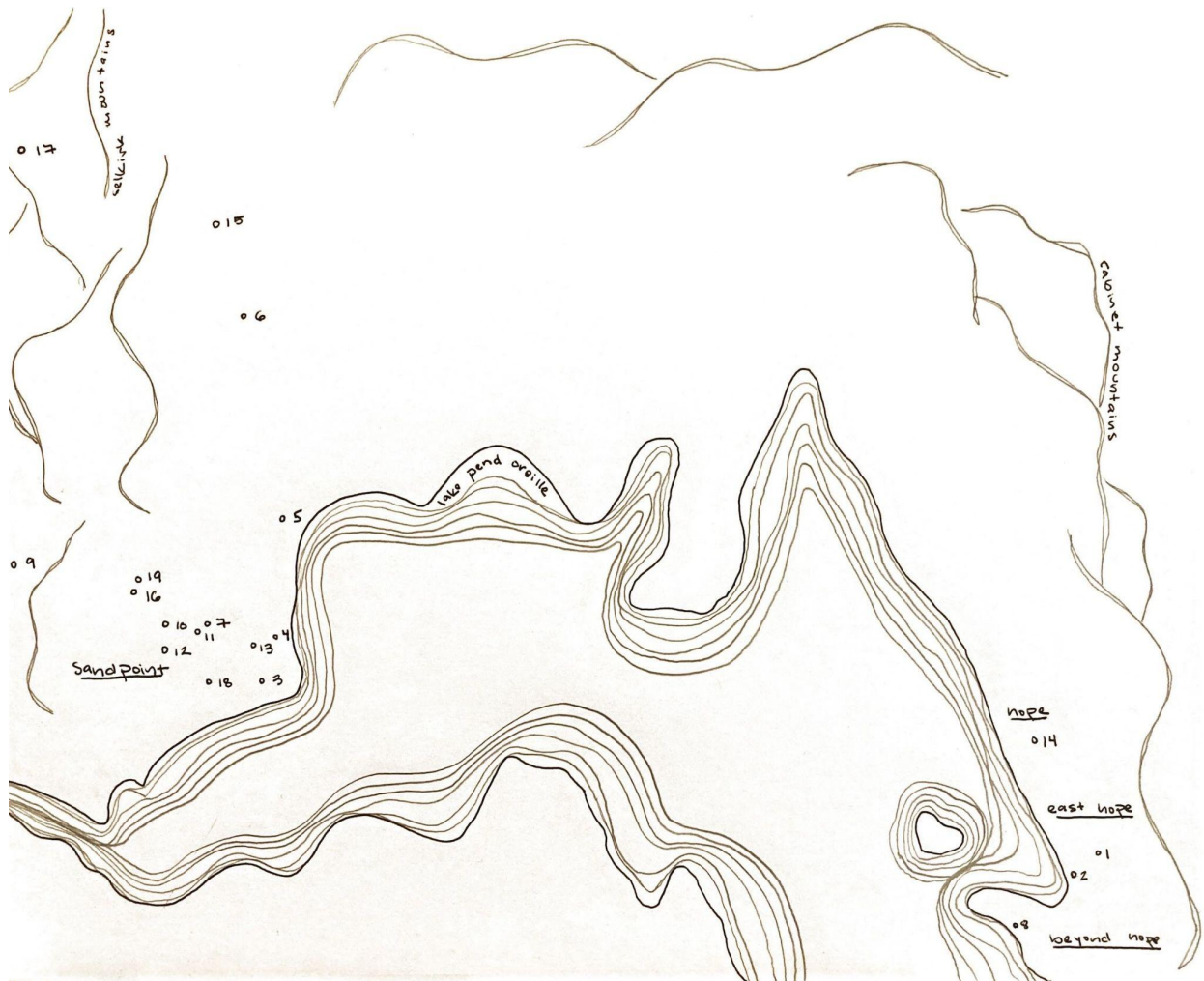
Retracing Home in the American Political Imaginary of Housing

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American Studies 302: Senior Project

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RETRACING HOME

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For Nathan and the memory that holds us together

INTRODUCTION

Making home is about the (re)creation of what Eva Hoffman would call 'soils of significance' (1989: 278), in which the affective qualities of home, and the work of memory in their making cannot be divorced from the more concrete materialities of rooms, objects, rituals, borders and forms of transport that are bound up in so many processes of uprooting and regrounding. Homing, then, depends on the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted - in migration, displacement or colonization. Inherent to the project of home-building here and now, is the gathering of 'intimations' of home, 'fragments which are imagined to be traces of an equally imagined homely whole, the imagined past "home" of another time and another space' (Hage 1997: 106; emphasis added). In this respect, being at home and the work of home-building is intimately bound up with the idea of home: the idea of a place (or places) in the past, and of this place in the future. Making home is about creating both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present.¹

Rituals of Returning

It's early December and I'm visiting Idaho. My sisters are with me. We are in my mom's warm living room. The walls are textured by beautiful, handmade quilts and the many plants nestled into vibrant mosaic pots. Outside, deep shadows cling to the landscape, gripping the threshold between fall and winter. Fog dances at the edge of perception. The whole world has been cast in gray.

We are here for our brother's memorial.

My sisters climb into my small, red car. We start the eighteen mile drive between Sandpoint and Hope. As we drive, we take detours to old houses. This is my family's ritual - we come back to the many houses we no longer live in but that hold so much of our lives together. We drive past a house, creeping slowly in the car, attempting subtlety. This is our house and not our house at all. We can see it. We can trace the memories located here - see ourselves in it. But we cannot touch it, we cannot go inside. Behind a layer of thick glass, it's an artifact of our lives.

We start taking pictures.

I count the houses that spanned my childhood. It can be hard to keep track. Nineteen. We moved into the last house a month before my fourteenth birthday. Nineteen houses around

¹ Sara Ahmed et al., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Routledge, 2020), 9.

the same county of rural North Idaho. We were the tokens in the making of Monopoly more than the players themselves - the dice are rolled - we're moved again.

I don't have a childhood home to go back to. I have the memories of nineteen houses that watched me grow and that watched me leave. But, I can't give up on home. Because even in the fragments of it, even as it holds the pain of housing instability, violence, and grief - it is mine. I know its presence in the rich scent of cedar. I see it in my mom's worn hands, her wry smile, her dry humor. I feel its weight as I fall into the deepest and softest loves.

This piece enters my memories of home, bound and understood through my story of housing. I tell these stories because the language of housing insecurity, instability and crisis obscure more than they reveal. This language does not begin to describe the realities of un-homing, of precarity, of not being presented with agency in creating and maintaining home. And it certainly doesn't implicate the systems and the actors responsible for the uprootings and displacement characterizing so many lives. It's one story, layered by the stories of my family, and the purpose is not to present a totality of housing issues. The purpose is to add nuance and texture to the lives embedded within them.

Hidden Closets and Open Windows

Memory lives in the space between the real and the imagined.² Assumed to achieve accuracy only when it reflects untouched truths, memory is understood as an archive - the storage house of life. But, this perception of memory reflects attachments to objectivity that are themselves distortions. Consider photography: pictures present portals into another time and place. Unlike a painting or narrative portrayal, the viewer may be inclined to see a photograph as a form of objective memory, not influenced by the artistic license required of a painter or a writer. But, photographers are not objective nor is their work. Photographs are crafted to include certain objects, people, and places while simultaneously rendering invisible that which is not in the frame. They depict a constructed story and particular point of view. Accordingly, memory is not something that can be possessed as a discrete object in a discrete time. Rather, as Sue Campbell's theory of "relational remembering" describes, "We

² Q. M. Zhang, *Accomplice to Memory* (Kaya Press, 2017). Zhang's work served as my first entry point into the meaning of memory work as an exploration of the space beyond what can be captured by the traditional qualitative research approaches utilized in social sciences, the space between the real and imagined. Her work emphasizes that the pursuit of fact should not be conflated with the pursuit of truth. In her book, truth is uncovered through multiple modalities of narrative, fiction, and photographs. Crossing boundaries of medium allows the story to move towards truth, even as, at times, the facts are unreachable.

remember with and in response to other people and their needs and histories. And this makes philosophers nervous: we share our memory and sharing shapes memory.”³ In shifting the focus of memory from archival to relational, Campbell emphasizes that the integrity of memory does not reside in its objectivity - itself an impossibility. Memory is, after all, an interpretation of the past generated in social, cultural, and historical contexts. The integrity of memory, Campbell contends, rests instead in the rememberer’s commitment to faithful representation of the past.⁴ In creating this piece of memory, I have worked to be attentive to this distinction. I cannot make a claim of objectivity in my work, nor do I want to. But, in conversation with my mom, my sisters, and myself I pursued faithfulness and integrity in reconstructing subjective pasts. This collaboration didn’t aspire to locate a single truth of our lives together but rather it enabled a fuller story to emerge, one that pushed the boundaries of my individual understandings. This work does not represent the entirety of my experiences or those of my family - I pulled into the frame the fragments of memory that felt the most true to my evolving understandings of home and housing.

Further, my memory is located in the space of childhood. That does not make the memory less accurate, more, it provides a distinct and important perspective. In her book *Seeing Like a Child: Inheriting the Korean War*, Clara Han raises that a child’s perspective is one in motion, being formed and pulled together without the discrete categories of understanding that demarcate adulthood. She writes that children “reveal the ways in which violence is braided into everyday life, precisely because the child does not have recourse to a pre-given vocabulary of the historical event. Thus, rather than transcend intimate relations, the child is learning what it is to be embedded in them.”⁵ For children, everything bleeds together, into the ordinariness of daily life. Han demonstrates that remembering childhood, seeing as a child, can indicate simple truths of a world forming before your very eyes. For me, as a child, moving, instability, and violence marked normalcy. This was my world - all that I knew. In writing that world, I am excavating how power structures and the domestic are not separate - they are interwoven in the most intimate ways. They are the fabric of everyday life.

³ Sue Campbell, Christine M. Koggel, and Rockney Jacobsen, *Our Faithfulness to the Past: The Ethics and Politics of Memory* (New York, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2014), 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Clara Han, *Seeing Like a Child: Inheriting the Korean War* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 7.

Memory is my point of departure. *Retracing Home* is my point of view.

A House Is Not a Home

During a presentation in the early spring of 2019, a tenant organizer asked a question that entirely reoriented my life : “What is your relationship to housing?” We were put into pairs and my partner carefully discussed his experience growing up in one home and his current status as a homeowner and what this position afforded him. In that moment, I was made aware of a distinction I had never considered - as a current renter, having been raised almost exclusively in rental housing, my experience of housing had been completely different than his. I had lived in nineteen houses during childhood and, by then, five more places as an adult. By now, including college housing, I’ve lived in twenty eight different places. I didn’t know it then, but this moment guided me into political consciousness as a tenant, brought me into conversation with other renters, started my exploration of housing issues and questions of home, and led me to become a tenant organizer myself. I continue thinking back to this moment because until that point housing instability had been so consistent for me and my family that it didn’t register as something that could be different.

Further, as I began this work, I realized that this normalization of instability serves a critical function in both the U.S. and global housing systems. It’s what allows them to operate without disruption. In the introduction of her book examining mountaintop removal, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, Rebecca Scott writes, “Once a mountain disappears, how do we know it was ever really there? It becomes a ghost, nearly possible to ignore. The repetitive redoinings of modernity...make it hard to see what was there only a few moments before. What we see appears natural, as if it had been there always.”⁶ Naturalization undergirds exploitation - it renders the obscene normal, the constructed inevitable. For housing, that means the daily crises of renters and the unhoused are normalized until they become invisible - as if they have always been and will always be. However, in reality, the housing crisis that has emerged as a dominant theme in politics over the past several years has been ongoing for centuries, shifting and metamorphosing over time, but nonetheless deeply present in the lives of those but the most privileged. It’s estimated by Eviction Lab that in the U.S. between 2000 and 2016 over

⁶ Rebecca R. Scott, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1-2.

60 million eviction cases were filed, primarily for non-payment of rent.⁷ And as many community organizers have identified, this is almost certainly a significant undercount.⁸ Further, this number does not reflect no-cause evictions; displacements due to rent increases and gentrifying neighborhoods; coerced moves resulting from landlord harassment, unsafe housing conditions, or discrimination; and much more - realities that little national data examines. The housing crisis didn't just start - it's been ignored.

People live *crisis* everyday. Most renters and many lower-income homeowners have already been submerged into precarity and some have lost their housing entirely. But as the crisis escalates, it starts to trickle into the lives of higher-income renters and comfortable homeowners. Maybe, they only feel its tendrils gliding across their arms as they see a rain-worn eviction notice or a family living in their rusting station wagon. But this unsettles them, it signals a departure from their normal. They think something has gone terribly wrong. But in actuality, as David Madden and Peter Marcuse emphasize in their book *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, "Housing crisis is a predictable, consistent outcome of a basic characteristic of capitalist spatial development: housing is not produced and distributed for the purposes of dwelling for all; it is produced and distributed as a commodity to enrich the few. Housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as it is intended."⁹ The housing crises embedded within ordinary lives are not legible because they are foundational to the maintenance of private property and landlord-tenant relationships. Housing as a commodity, something to be bought and sold as mediated by the market, has no reason to be attentive to the needs of those without capital. It has no reason to prioritize housing as a potential location for home, as something sacred, or as something nourishing. When housing is a source of profit, the collateral damage on people's lives is secondary, if considered at all. Under capitalism, a house is not a home unless you own it.

There's No Place Like

Home is a contested site. White, bourgeois understandings of home privilege property ownership, exclusion of the 'Other', safety through policing and surveillance, heteronormative family values, and the maintenance and consolidation of power. This

⁷ Emily Benfer et al., "The COVID-19 Eviction Crisis: An Estimated 30-40 Million People in America Are at Risk," *The Aspen Institute*, August 7, 2020.

⁸ Daniela Aiello et al., "Eviction Lab Misses the Mark," *Shelterforce* (blog), August 22, 2018.

⁹ David J. Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2016), 10.

version of home necessitates violence and oppression to uphold its existence. Some feminist scholars argue that 'home' should be disregarded, that yearning for an ideal version of home will never be more than expression of continued violence.¹⁰ But I do not believe the definition of home should be relinquished to this version of itself - co-opted by a ruling class primarily motivated by the continuation of its existence. Although there are compelling arguments challenging the ways home has functioned as an agent of oppression - both in its material and imaginary forms - it's overly reductive to disregard it entirely. Home can be and has been a generative place, a place to affirm dignity and to reclaim agency, a place to recover and a place to resist.

Writer bell hooks foregrounds the role of the house and the value of home as a site of resistance in her chapter "Homeplace" from *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. She begins the chapter with the story of her journey from her house to that of her grandmother and her feeling of homecoming when she finally arrived. Bell hooks writes, "In our young minds, houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place - the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls."¹¹ She continues to identify that for many Black folks within the U.S., historically and at present, home, even in its most fragile and liminal forms, contains radical political possibility. Amidst conditions of slavery, segregation, and state violence, she contends that refusing to be denied this homeplace, refusing to relinquish this space for affirmation and healing, was itself an act of resistance.¹² In homeplace, bell hooks maintains, there lives the potential to cultivate wholeness and build solidarity and communities of resistance - the potential to pursue liberation. Home is where all that's truly important takes place.

It's overly cynical to dismiss home outright. Bell hooks raises many crucial points, including that home can serve as an anchor in a world of violence. Allowing its cooptation would be ceding ground critical to survival. The commodification of housing, private property, speculative development, and landlord-tenant relationships work tirelessly to enact boundaries around the possibility of creating and maintaining home. This then becomes layered by issues of class, race, nationality, citizenship, language, gender, sexuality, ability,

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2014), 41.

¹² Ibid, 43.

and histories of incarceration. Home is not meant for most people. But, home is not something that can ultimately be taken or possessed. Despite intense ruptures and persistent pressures, people reclaim agency in whatever ways we can. Home is ours.

Tethered to Desire

I was raised in a handful of towns in North Idaho - a place that by most measures is insignificant. It's small, rural, and resides on the margins of imagination. Its humble notability is woven into the landscape itself - remembered by tourists for its looming mountains and dazzling waters. Growing up, the long-term residents varied - some retired here, some were born here, some brought money, and many struggled to survive. Most of us inhabited the hollow contours left by the visitors vacationing here; the rich and the famous with second, third, fourth homes here; and the affluent outsiders transitioning into affluent insiders. We molded our lives to set specifications. Relinquishing our needs in the shadow of their desires - we oscillated between presence and absence.

Most of the people I knew during childhood were homeowners, some were landlords. We were renters, but renters didn't exist here. Our struggles didn't register beyond the quiet crises of our lives. Everyday was groundhogs day - never knowing when we would be allowed to stay or forced to leave. After thirty days, three months, three years - spring inevitably arrived. And when it did, we transformed into the ghosts of a house that holds someone else's home. I was taught to believe my family didn't deserve more than this, that dignity was something to be earned not embodied. The lies embedded themselves in my body, twisting into the tension of my muscles, until I sensed nothing of my own.

I'm not telling my story but uncovering it.

Sifting through distortion in pursuit of
felt truth.

Tentatively at first,

tenderly,

I reclaim home for myself.

RETRACING HOME

1. The Blue House

Speeding around the sharp curves opening to stunning views, we arrive in a small, lakeside town. A green sign greets us, "Welcome to Hope! *Population: 79*". A collection of houses speckles the mountainside - ours hides itself behind a grove of evergreens - quiet in its distance.

The Blue House is the only house I can't remember. I know it through the memories of my family. Histories told so many times they become a part of my reality. My imagination constructs images of these moments. Images so salient and vivid, if I'm not careful, I might believe they are memories.

Images settling so deeply - they become memories.

This is the first and only house my parents ever owned. My dad hears about the property from a woman at the farmers market. To purchase the Blue House, my parents take out a private loan with high interest and bad terms. They expected nothing else.

The house rests on seven acres of land dotted with cherry trees, hidden treasures, and a cold, rushing creek. Inside, the house is small with wood-paneled walls, a screen porch, two bedrooms, and a rotting linoleum bathroom floor. Outside, tall grass weaves itself through a graveyard of lawnmowers, old appliances, and rusted car parts. The house is bare and a little unfinished - complete in its incompleteness. When my parents move in, my mom is five months pregnant with me and has my brother, two-year-old Nathan, in tow.

The first months of a new millennium.

In the middle of July, the day of the full moon, I am born in this house. Gingerly, my godmother carries me outside to bathe me in the sun. She whispers in my ear, "Your name is Gabriel. You will be water - strong and fluid and powerful."

My mom works at the gas station down the road and cleans units at the nearby Pend Oreille Shores Resort - a building containing a few dozen lakeside vacation condos.

We run out of food. Every day my mom gives Nathan the little food left: cheerios, butter, and peanut butter. She alternates mixing cheerios with butter and cheerios with peanut butter. The electricity is turned off. For three months, my mom heats water on the wood-burning stove to bathe me and Nathan and washes laundry by hand, beating our

clothes until they are clean.

Welfare reform pushed people through the gaps it widened.

My older sisters Kate and Erin, my dad's daughters from his previous marriage, come to live with us. Their mom has full custody, but my dad and sisters started a 'family reunification' process in recent years. They arrive from Santa Cruz, California, to enter the very different place that is our home. Kate says our home was a freer place filled with humor and openness, few rules and less taboo. It was also a place where my mom climbed out the window during one of the volatile, explosive fights that characterized my parents' relationship.

Kate cherishes the adventure. She rides her bike five miles to and from the dump, following the winding road cut into the mountains - cliffs on one side and Lake Pend Oreille on the other. Erin feels uneasy in this newfound home. Uncertain of the independence required by this place and this family.

Kate stays for the summer and Erin stays for the year.



2. The House by the Lake

We leave our little Blue House and move to a house a few miles away, right next to the lake. The house is cheap, an off-season vacation rental. Cold drafts send shutters through the rooms, walls shivering from the frigid winter winds still lingering in early spring. It's big and hard to keep warm, no one is meant to live here in the winter, it's meant for the tourists who flock from fast-paced cities to our remote mountains and clear waters in the summer months. I don't know where they come from, but their luxury cars, expensive clothes, and high-strung affects tell me that they aren't from here. They are here searching for an escape from the pressure and demands of their upper-middle-class existence.

Nathan and I share a bunk bed. He sleeps on the top and I sleep on the bottom. I desperately want that top bunk. I want to climb up the ladder, into the top bunk, above everything else. It feels safe up there. But, at two years old, it is agreed that I am too young to sleep on the top bunk. I only make supervised visits to my safe, protective perch in the daylight.

We live here for three or four months. Then, we move eighteen miles around the lake to Sandpoint.



3. The Christmas Tree House

The largest town in Bonner County, Sandpoint's population hovered around 7,000 people in the early 2000s.¹³ The only public transportation in or out of Sandpoint is by train. The lone passenger train follows the tracks running between Chicago and Seattle and each night, at midnight, it comes through town. Sleepy passengers climb out of the train into the silent cold and restless travelers climb onto the train, dreaming of far-off destinations. Living here is living life in slow motion, savoring each moment, each conversation, each full moon, and each night of brilliant stars. Sipping on the sweetness of presence, coating lips with honey warmth trickles to your stomach. Living here is tender and intimate. We know our neighbors, grocery store clerks, librarians, the emergency room doctors, and the emergency room janitors. Living here *feels* insular, but nothing *is* insular. Slowly, the world seeps in. Even here, deep in the mountains of Idaho, it finds us.

When we move to Sandpoint, we move into a house on the Southside of town. Our new neighborhood sits close to the lake, populated by old beautiful homes and the people who own them. We live in a white house with red trim and green shutters. Each shutter has a carved out evergreen tree, or, as far as I am concerned, a carved out Christmas tree. The house rests on a steep hill, we enter the house at the top of the hill and as we walk further into the house it opens up with our kitchen and dining room on the right, our living room on the left, and the staircase in the middle.

My parents, Nathan, and I live upstairs. Kate and Erin live downstairs.

My mom brings home a grungy plastic bag full of Troll Dolls from the thrift store. The dozens of small trolls wearing crooked smiles and neon colored hair sticking straight up were the only dolls my mom ever gave me to play with - no barbies, no babies - just trolls.

Trolls and dinosaurs.

In the winter, a thick layer of snow coats the sloped lawn. We spend our days sledding down the hill, rushing over the snow, laughing, faces red and fingers icy. Sleds in hand, the whole neighborhood treks through knee-deep snow to our hill.

Erin and Kate are in middle school and staying up late into the night playing Monopoly. At two in the morning, sitting at the kitchen table they hear the upstairs floor creak. My mom appears and glides down the stairs without noticing or acknowledging my sisters. At the

¹³ *Idaho, 2000: 2000 Census of Population and Housing. Summary Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

bottom, she turns right and enters the living room where our Christmas tree still stands in late January. Opening the window, my mom grabs the tree and throws it, fully adorned, onto the hill below. She closes the window and without a word goes back to bed. Erin asks about it later and my mom tells her, very matter-a-factly, “What? The pine needles would have gotten everywhere.” When I asked my mom about it years later, after hearing the story, she said, very matter-a-factly, “What? Christmas was over.”

The owners decide to sell the house after less than a year.

After moving out, we drive by and see trees planted throughout the lawn. No one would be sledding there again.

Christmas is over.



4. Earl the Squirrel's House

Every garage we had was filled with boxes - empty and full. When you move once a year there's never a reason to completely unpack.

I crouch in the knee-length grass entranced, watching ladybugs crawl over branches and up thick blades of grass. Gripping my empty yogurt container I trek around the lawn carefully placing leaves and sticks into the bucket. Once satisfied, I sit on the ground and attempt to coax ladybugs into the habitat I created. One by one, they enter, crawling slowly into their new home.

My dad nicknames our landlord Earl the Squirrel and it sticks.

Six people move into this house: our parents, Nathan, Kate, Erin, and me. My mom supports all six of us with her job as a psychosocial rehabilitation worker. My dad doesn't work, or if he does, whatever money he makes vanishes as quickly as it appears.

Erin moves back to California. Before she leaves, she gives me a large stuffed leopard that I name Cheetah. I am four and don't know the difference. Cheetah provides me solace in her absence - there's no substitute for your sister.

Kate hosts family dance parties featuring David Bowie in our living room.

My mom and I drive to Round Lake, a small, marshy lake - or maybe a large, marshy pond - ten miles from Sandpoint. As we pull off the highway, we pass the Sagle trash dump. I beg my mom to pull over. I want to investigate the free shelf where I find many of my toys. The rickety wooden shelf boasts an old TV with exposed wires and a few nicknacks. I'm deeply disappointed, there will be no toys for me today.

Earl is unhappy with us because my mom pays rent twice a month. She can't afford to pay rent all at once and it inconveniences Earl. Poverty is always inconvenient.

Earl doesn't renew our lease at the end of the year. He doesn't need to file papers, he doesn't need to pay a lawyer or eviction fees, he doesn't need to prove a cause. Just like that, we're leaving. We complicated his desire to collect passive income *with the utmost ease*. A desire so entitled as to forget that my mom's paychecks pay his mortgage and provide him income while his real estate portfolio accumulates value. Value that we, as his renters, generate but will never see.

But, renters can't be seen in such generous terms, people might start to think they owe us something.

In the final step to prepare for moving, our family cleans the house from top to bottom. We wipe the walls with magic erasers - clearing the vestiges of our life here. Scrubbing each baseboard, tile, and cabinet we lift our accumulations. My trailing crayon marks, Nathan's ever dirty fingerprints, scorch marks from candles a little too close. We wash away these traces of ourselves. When we leave, it's almost as if we were never there. *Almost.*

Some damage cannot be so easily erased.

Earl steals our entire security deposit, money we don't have to lose.



5. The House by Sandcreek

I stand on the railing of the back porch, my spotted umbrella held high. I leap into the air, certain my umbrella will cushion the fall. I thud to the ground, laughing. Climbing up the steps, I jump again.

I want to fly - for a moment I do.

I start kindergarten in this house. My mom starts a quilt that she will work on for the next ten years.

She uses earth-tone fabrics and deep reds to craft pinwheels. To make each pinwheel, she precisely cuts eight identical triangles, four of one color and four of another. Triangle after triangle she stitches the quilt together. Pins scatter on the floor as she sews. She never picks them up. The pins find their way all over the house. Traveling from her room upstairs into the living room, entryway, and kitchen. The pins reappear when nestling themselves into my bare feet.

My dad starts playing online poker, assuring my mom that his Texas Hold'Em winnings will generate adequate income.

The movie Madagascar comes out. Erin visits from California for Christmas and Nathan and I each receive a pair of Madagascar themed slippers - Nathan gets the lion ones and I get the hippos. They fit us - his bold presence, my quiet defiance.

While riding home my sister falls off her bike and fractures her skull. The emergency room doctors life-flight fifteen-year-old Kate eighty miles to the Spokane Children's Hospital where she spends an extended visit in the ICU. When she returns, she spends two months home from school. She can't watch movies or read - she has only puzzles and music. I hear soft melodies floating through the house. *Plans* by Death Cab for a Cutie has just come out and Kate listens to the album on repeat.

*"I want to live where soul meets body
And let the sun wrap its arms around me,*

*And bathe my skin in water cool and cleansing
And feel -
Feel what it's like to be new.*"¹⁴

When Kate would leave to California, to Spain, to college, she sent mixtapes for me. Whatever she sent, I listened to on repeat. This music became a vessel for closeness through departures and distance. Continuity in our discontinuity.

*"Where I send my thoughts
To far-off destinations
So they may have a chance
Of finding a place where they're
Far more suited than here."*¹⁵



¹⁴ Death Cab for a Cutie, *Soul Meets Body*, Plans, 2005.

¹⁵ Ibid.

6. The House by the Frog Pond

Walking behind our house, I climb through a barbed-wire fence onto an overgrown dirt road. I turn left and follow the road through the woods into a clearing with a pond in the center, wildflowers shooting up all around it and cedar trees enclosing the meadow. Mesmerized by this place, I embark on daily trips to spend my afternoons watching the frogs crawl through the soft dirt and into the water, swimming until in an instant they disappear.

I lost my first tooth in this house. Kate wakes me up for a midnight dance party - a specialty of hers. We jump on her bed, laughing, dancing, playing music late into the night. Amidst all the playing and dancing, I realize my loose tooth is gone.

Sometimes, I think I'm gone too.

I ride the bus home from kindergarten. I bound down the road, ecstatic to dutifully hand my mom the papers my teacher sent for her. I hear it the moment I walk into the house - screaming, fighting - my heart drops. For a moment, the house quiets and I tentatively walk up the stairs. Down the hall, I hear my parents arguing in hushed, tense voices and the shouting starts again. I keep walking. Their door is cracked and peering through the small opening I watch as my dad slams my mom into the wall. I start running back down the hall, heart pounding, tears welling in my eyes. My stack of undelivered papers grows.

Everyone has been trying to teach me how to ride a bike with no success. Nathan is the coordinated one. I've always lived ten feet above my body. Erin holds the bike up while I balance myself precariously on the two wheels. She starts walking, holding me steady, telling me to pedal. I pedal faster and faster until she lets go and I sore down the dirt road. I can ride forever. I don't know how to stop.

This is the house where my parents split up.

It's my sixth birthday. My mom and dad, Erin, Nathan and I are all going to eat at Fiesta Bonita, a small restaurant off the highway situated between the Walmart and Home Depot parking lots. Restaurants feel luxurious. It's mid-July. A warm breeze drifts through the patio, gently rustling the leaves of the small trees planted around us. The food arrives and I stare at the large burrito drenched in red enchilada sauce sitting in front of me. My parents are gone. "Where are they?" I wonder, "Our food is here." I get up to go look for them. Walking to the entry of the dark restaurant I see them through the window. They're fighting, yelling, I can't hear. I watch, hiding behind the large palm plant, as my mom climbs

into our beat-up gray car and starts to pull away. I watch, hiding behind the large palm plant, as my dad reaches into the car and rips a large fistful of hair from her head.

The next morning, my mom packs me into a car, not our car, and we drive to our grandparents. I don't know what's happening. I'm the girl searching frantically for her parents only to realize she should have never gone looking in the first place. I miss Nathan. I want to go home. There is no home for us to go back to.



7. The House on Spruce Street

My mom asks a family friend to host a sleepover with Nathan and me for the night. Our mom tells us she has an emergency situation at her job that will require her to work overnight but that she will pick us up tomorrow. We happily comply, packing up our things, and climbing into the car to head to our friend's house. The next afternoon, our mom picks us up, but instead of going home, we drive to a new house. The house is peach-colored with a dark purple cherry tree growing in the front lawn. When we walk inside, bright light-filters through the windows, and in the sparsely furnished space, a beautiful vase of flowers has been placed in the center of the dining room table. My mom has an eye for beauty.

When we move to the House on Spruce Street I don't ask many questions. I love this new house, with its big windows and overgrown lilac bushes. It becomes the home where my mom starts to piece herself back together after over a decade of abuse.

In the divorce, my mom fights for sole custody. The judge rules in my dad's favor, they will be co-parenting us, our time split equally. Nathan and I are deemed too young to know what's right for us, so the courts decide instead.

Nathan and I fight over the front seat, the dishes, and anything else siblings can disagree on. He tries to leverage his position as the oldest but my mom, the youngest of three, won't tolerate this. She devises a system - on odd days I get my way and on even days Nathan gets his. At night, we curl up in my mom's bed and she reads to us. This too becomes a terrain for our battle. But, in accordance with my mom's system, on odd days I get to curl up close to her and on even days Nathan does. My mom reads countless stories, not, she tells me, for us to learn to read. She reads to us because she loves children's books. She loves the pictures, the imagination, and the stories. She loves the magical worlds we wade into together.

My dad lives in Hope, then a few miles away, down the street, and around the corner. It makes the trip between houses a short one. At least for a little while.

My mom endeavors to provide structure and routine for Nathan and me that we haven't had until this point with our dad. Every morning, starting at six years old, I pack a lunch for both of us - always including a peach fruit cup for Nathan. We walk to school together and we walk home together. Nathan reads a book as he walks while I stride alongside him, discovering my own rich narratives. When we get home from school and my mom gets home from work, we have dinner together and Nathan and I clean the kitchen. Then, we do

homework together. When I finish mine, I make my way over to Nathan and see what he's doing. I want to do everything he does - including his homework. My mom reads to us and at a certain time we go to our rooms. We don't have bedtimes exactly. We can play or draw or read but we have to be in our rooms until we fall asleep. My mom needs time when she doesn't have to be on anymore - when she can rest.

We stay a week with our mom and then we leave for our dads for a week. Never settling in one place.

At some point, my grandma starts lending financial support to help my mom pay rent. She has access to the resources that being born at the right intersection of whiteness, capital, and generational wealth create. Her money helps stabilize us, not in making it so we were no longer struggling to survive, but enough to stop us from drowning. A lifejacket in the swirling, rogue ocean waves. My dad's underwater.

Often, we are underwater with him.

My mom picks me up from school and we drive to her office. She works in one of the few large three-story buildings in town - it's beige and unattractive. We walk down the hallway and she takes me to the elevator. I smile as the doors open and ask, "Can I push the button?" Elevators are a rarity in my town. We hear a ding as it stops on the third floor. Stepping out, we walk down the hallway to a small kitchenette. My mom pulls a bag of popcorn out of the cupboard and places it in the microwave. Popcorn is one of my favorite foods but it seldom finds its way home after I discreetly place it in our grocery cart. When it's done, we walk to her office. On her desk sits a terracotta pot. Next to it, a small bucket of tiles grabs my attention. Beautiful blues, greens, and translucent stones fill it to the brim. We sit down and she starts filling out paperwork while I create a mosaic. I place each tile carefully, lining them up meticulously. I wrap rows and rows around the pot - cobalt, turquoise, lime, sapphire, and cobalt again. The tiles shine, the reflection of the fluorescent lights transforming them into a sea of color. When complete, the beautiful pot stands starkly, out of place against the backdrop of the dull office. My mom also stands starkly, out of place against the backdrop of the dull office. Mosaics have been one of my mom's favorite art mediums for as long as I can remember. As a child, I worked within the safety and ease of pre-cut tiles to create my mosaics. But my mom collects beautiful, vibrantly colored plates from thrift stores. She takes the plates and smashes them with a hammer. They shatter into dozens of distinct pieces, each with sharp, jagged edges. Then, slowly, meticulously, she pieces the shards back together, making something beautiful from the wreckage. Her ritual of creating wholeness.

We live in this house for five years until the rent becomes too expensive and we have to leave. When we leave, my mom doesn't pay last month's rent, she tells the landlord to take her security deposit to cover it. Moving isn't cheap. A few weeks later, our former landlord sends a bill for \$2500 in damage. Almost all of it for damage we hadn't caused. He wants to use our deposit as a piggy bank for routine expenses - painting; replacing old carpets, blinds, and appliances; having the house professionally cleaned before new tenants move in. But my mom isn't one to put up with bullshit - she's been through too much. She calls our former landlord and tells him, "I've had a fucked up year. Take me to court," and hangs up.

We never hear from him again.



8. The Trailer at Beyond Hope

Nestled on the face of the Cabinet Mountains, overlooking Lake Pend Oreille, live the towns of Hope and East Hope just off of Highway 200. Follow the highway a few more miles and you can turn off onto the Hope Peninsula, home of the Beyond Hope RV Resort.

When my mom moved into the house on Spruce Street, my dad moved into a trailer at the Beyond Hope Resort. The irony, lost on me, most certainly wasn't lost on him.

My dad takes a job working at the lakeside restaurant that serves huckleberry lemonade and endless baskets of bread. Nathan and I spend our days swimming in the lake while our dad works. We swim out to a small square dock, covered in green carpet that will serve as our landing pad for the long days at the lake. I am always trying to get to the bottom of the lake. From the dock, I dive down, kicking furiously as the water becomes colder and colder. When I reach the bottom, eyes wide open, I search for rocks, carrying them to the dock with both hands, only my feet driving me back to the surface. The water doesn't scare me, the weightlessness, the coolness, the brilliant blues and greens, the quiet are home.

My mom's afraid we'll drown when we're with our dad because he won't watch us. He often doesn't.

We go on night hikes with our dad. There's a path not far from the resort, the Sam Owen trail. We leave for our hikes late into the night, once the stars have returned to their place in the sky. As we hike, we can only see the twisted roots and dusty switchbacks illuminated by the glow of my dad's flashlight. The forest fades into uniform darkness, the trail vanishing behind us. My dad turns out the light. I'm exhilarated but terrified - I beg him to turn it back on. He refuses, "Your eyes will adjust, just wait." I'm afraid of the dark, vigilant of the world beyond the flashlight. But slowly, a shadowy landscape emerges. The subtle outlines of trees and boulders take shape before my eyes. At the top of the trail, we lay down on a large, flat rock and watch as luminous galaxies and shooting stars populate the dark skies. Far away from any town, cloaked by pitch darkness, cold lapping at my fingers and nose, I witness a more complex and brilliant painting than I could have ever imagined.

Plunged into darkness - I surface with clarity.



9. The Duplex off Baldy

"I can't go today," I tell my dad. "I don't have anything here, I don't have my favorite shorts. Everything's at mom's." I'm crying. He starts raising his voice, "Stop crying, you're being a fucking child." I'm six years old. He starts rummaging through my pile of clothes in the corner of the room - no one put them away. He pulls out a pair of shorts and throws them at me. "Here, wear these." I'm hysterical. I don't respond, I just keep crying. "STOP CRYING! STOP IT!" He's yelling now. The more he yells the more I cry. I collect the wrinkled clothes he threw at me moments earlier and go change. When she comes back out, she can't look at him. Tears soak her face. They get in the car to drive to her soccer game. They get out. She stares at the ground, counting the blades of grass, hoping that no one will notice her. The game starts. She's running on the field, I'm watching from the sidelines.

Some places, all I remember is this. I'm there but I'm gone. I can see the house, I can see its burnt red exterior, its thick brown carpets, its drawn blinds, and yellow light streaming from its overhead lights. I see the house - I'm just barely in it.



10. The Apartments on Division

The top of our roof comes into view as I swing higher and higher. Gravity tugs at me, pulling me back to the ground. But it can't keep me for long. I'm soaring back up. I swing until I can't feel my legs then I jump from the highest point I dare. I land on my feet but immediately crash to the ground. The pebbles scrape at me, tracing small cuts down my knees.

My dad found a job as an apartment manager in a complex across from our elementary school. My dad, Nathan, Kate, and I live in a ground-floor building on-site. It has three rooms: one for my dad, one for Kate, and one that Nathan and I share. Kate paints her room dark hickory - or maybe she doesn't. Nathan asks if we can paint our room pink but I protest and it stays beige. Renter's beige.

Kate moves out. Nathan and I don't know why. One day she's gone and we are still there.

My dad rushes out the door. I ask where he's going but he doesn't respond. Nathan and I sit in the living room - waiting. Flashes of blue and red filter through the edges of the blinds. I move them aside and see an ambulance. A tenant across the street has been hit in the face. My dad's gone.

Walking into Safeway, then Sandpoint's one grocery store, my dad, Nathan and I head to the produce section. Nathan and I wait while my dad speaks with a worker, and then he gestures for us to follow him to the back of the store. We scramble up to him and head through the doors labeled EMPLOYEES ONLY. We continue into a bright and freezing room where the apples, and the empty apple boxes, are stored. My dad instructs us to start bringing the boxes to the car.

Repeated year after year - this was the precursor to moving.

As an adult, I was shocked to find out that people buy moving boxes. Apple boxes were the benchmark of my normal.

When we leave the apartments, my dad tells me that the man across the street was abusing

his daughters. He hit him, he wanted to scare him. He got fired and we had to leave the complex. "Don't worry," he assures me, "This wasn't a good house anyway. We're going somewhere *better*."



11. The Duplex Around the Corner from Mom

When we leave the apartments, we move into a duplex directly around the corner from the House on Spruce Street, where our mom lives. My mom doesn't know, until she does, and she's not happy about our relocation. Our dad's relocation. At least the commute for me and Nathan is short. But, like all of our houses, this too is impermanent.

As a kid, when I looked forward to something happening the next day I would spend the entire night with the covers pulled up to my chin staring at the ceiling, waiting for tomorrow to arrive. The anticipation painted beautiful stories of joy, of excitement, of wonder in my mind. Imagining tomorrow became almost as thrilling as experiencing it. One night, as I wait for tomorrow, I run through the next day. My dad, Nathan, and I will get into our ugly gold car and drive the hour and a half to Spokane International Airport. We will park and go inside, waiting for Erin to walk through the gate. I will run to hug her and we will all get in the car to drive home. Erin was coming for the entire summer and I couldn't be more excited.

Erin and I build fairy houses out of popsicle sticks and glitter. I meticulously construct and decorate each one. I leave berries and pine needles for the fairies to eat. I build tiny fairy furniture. Fairy house after fairy house I built an entire fairy city that summer.

Erin let me sit on the counter while we made chocolate chip cookies. She does most of the baking. I sit there, dusted in flour, taste testing the cookie dough, laughing.

Erin, Nathan, and I search the house, collecting all of our blankets and pillows to make a bed in the backyard. We pile on a thick layer of worn quilts and comforters and crawl underneath. The stars crystalize above us as we talk late into the night. Nathan and I ask Erin all about her life as a teenager, enthralled by the mundane details of high school, friends, and romance. I'm seven and convinced that these details are anything but mundane - they're glamorous.

It's my eighth birthday. Erin leaves. I don't see her again for almost five years. She needs to go but that doesn't make it any easier. Our sisters are gone but we are still here - in these houses - searching for wholeness in the fractures we don't yet understand.



12. The House on Main Street

Before we enter the house, we head to the backyard. The lot is large, overgrown with weeds rising well above my waist. The scent of rotting apples fills the air, but I can't locate anything under the thick, tall grass. All around me, piles of rusted metal and decaying wood have been abandoned.

The house itself shows signs of deep neglect. It's dirty. The walls are dirty. The floors are dirty. The windows are dirty. My dad tells me not to worry. "We'll paint," he says. We paint and it helps. They've since painted the outside too and it helps. But there's only so much paint can cover.

In the living room, we build a makeshift wall and put my brother's bed behind it. This is his room. My room is off the kitchen. It's damp and the walls always feel wet. Little more than my bed fits. My dad's room looks like a makeshift garage haphazardly added on to make it into a two-bedroom. There are so many spiders and bugs. I still hate spiders and bugs.

The floors are made of unfinished wood, perpetually dusty with occasional staples sticking out - remnants of the carpet ripped out before our arrival.

It's always freezing. I don't know if it lacked proper insulation or we couldn't afford heat. I bury myself in blankets, hiding from the cold, hiding from the spiders. But the spiders are cold too. Eventually, they start to find their way into my bed.

I'm eight and spend most of my time buried under mounds of blankets reading a series about cats living in the forest and the last few Harry Potter books.

Our landlord lives next door, to the left of us. She's an old friend of my parents - a kind and eccentric woman. When entering her house, I'm greeted with vibrant colors, an abundance of clutter, and the stale scent of incense. My friend Sharon lives to the right of us. Her lawn is pristinely manicured. Her house is clean and orderly, everything in its place. Her mom is strict and her dad is fun. A perfect nuclear family.

After much reluctance from her parents, Sharon comes to spend the night at my house. Late into the night, we play in the ditch in front of my house. We take turns laying in the ditch while the other leaps back and forth over us. We dream wild dreams. I realize her dad's watching us from behind the curtains. He peaks through every so often when he thinks we aren't looking. But I notice. My dad is nowhere to be seen. Sharon doesn't spend the night again.

In the spring, my dad starts seeing Chris who will become my very temporary stepmom. Not long after they start seeing each other, we leave the House on Main Street and move into her house for the summer.



13. Chris's House on 6th Street

Chris is spending the summer with her daughter Elizabeth at a lakeside cabin in Canada. She has money. She needs a housesitter and we need a house. We move into a house filled with her furniture, art, and memories that becomes our home for the next several months.

I don't fill the house with many memories of my own. It sits mostly blank in my mind. I can see its pale yellow paint and white trim. I can see the tall cherry tree in the backyard. I can see the rich hardwood floors, deep walk-in closet, plush couch, and the matching set of mixing bowls stacked neatly on top of the fridge. I see Elizabeth's bunk bed where I slept, her drawers of toys and dolls, and a large closet stuffed with pink clothes. I wasn't jealous of their nice, neat house filled with nice, neat things. But I couldn't locate myself in it. We were housesitters.

Maybe we were always housesitters in someone else's home. There as long as it was convenient for the owners. There as long as the memory could stretch.



14. The Big House in Hope

At the end of the summer, we move into a huge, white house in Hope with Chris and her daughter Elizabeth. The house sits tucked on the mountainside at the end of a winding road. When we move, my first order of business is to start acquainting myself with the forest. The landscape is steep. The trees aren't dense, they have open space between them that allows for bright, green light to filter down through their branches. It smells of damp earth and cedar. No smell reminds me more of home than damp earth and cedar. I hear the rushing water of a creek in the distance. I climb down the mountain ignoring the bright red no trespassing signs, following the sound of the water. I feel safer in the forest than I ever do in our house. The forest holds me, the mountains are present to my sorrow.

Chris and my dad have been seeing each other for less than six months but they both need each other. Chris has money. My dad has us. Chris wants her daughter to have friends and she wants me to become her daughter's 'caretaker'. I'm nine and only one year older. Chris pays for me to attend the private school her daughter attends - only for a year. She advocates for me to be held back, because of my summer birthday, so I can be in the same grade as her daughter. My mom says she won't let me attend if I'm held back. I transfer and they allow me to enter the fourth grade.

We all go to look at Christmas trees together. We take a hayride through the trees and drink steaming hot chocolate. "God, it's nice to have money," I think, even if just for six months. I don't know where her money came from, but we eat croissants and expensive, organic and out of season fruit. Our fridge and cabinets are full. We live in a big, beautiful house surrounded by a forest with a view of the lake. We have two deep, large bathtubs and separate showers. And right now, we're searching to buy a perfectly manicured tree. We walk through the beautiful snow-covered trees, each noting which one we liked best. Elizabeth relays her top choices and I relay mine. I don't care that much which one comes home with us, I'm entranced with the magic of it all. Entranced with the steaming hot chocolate keeping my fingers warm. We decide on one and bring it home. That night, Chris sits me down. This house is big enough that Nathan, rummaging in the kitchen, can't see us tucked in the armchairs in the corner of the living room. Her harsh, angular face contorts with bitterness. She starts in on me. In a hushed angry tone, she tells me that I'm cruel and selfish for disagreeing with Elizabeth. She tells me that I disagreed with her to hurt her. Chris threatens me, warning that if I hurt Elizabeth, she will hurt me.

Chris doesn't try to hide her hatred of me. She screams at me over any perceived slight and harshly criticizes me over any mistake. Nathan fiercely defends me while my dad watches as she rips me apart. Unrelenting and vicious. It isn't anything he hasn't done to me before.

When I cry, Chris and my dad say my tears are a form of emotional manipulation. I cry even more.

We go to visit huge pieces of property. One farm has hundreds of acres covering the entire front side of a mountain. I try to imagine what it might mean to own a mountain. How can you own the forest? My dad relays grand visions of us owning this farm. It's a sweet, empty dream. We will have sheep.

We come back from mom's house and Chris and Elizabeth are gone. I'm thrilled. My dad says we don't need Chris, we will get a dog to replace her. I'm thrilled. We go to the animal shelter and bring Gordi home with us. Later, I hear bits and pieces about why she left from friends of hers. Chris and her daughter vanished in the middle of the night, getting away as quickly as they could. Many people left my dad this way, slipping away under the cover of darkness. In a moment, they're gone.

Without Chris, we can't pay the enormous rent to stay in this big, beautiful house much longer.



15. The Snowgoose House

We're moving into a treehouse. Twenty miles from the Big House in Hope and a few miles outside of Sandpoint, the Snowgoose Apartments live tucked in the shadow of a mountain. These tall and narrow houses were built without foundations - perching precariously on stilts without the roots to keep them in place.

There are a dozen or so other treehouses, each clustered in groups of three to four. Our cluster includes our landlord and an anonymous neighbor.

It's our first night here. My dad leaves me and my friend Sheilah alone for the night. He and Nathan are spending their last night at The Big House. I am ten and thrilled at my newfound freedom. The house is sparsely furnished with the exact fixings that belong in a cheap vacation rental. There are scratchy couches and worn woolen blankets. But I don't mind. Sheilah and I sleep in twin beds in the attic covered by thick mounds of prickly blankets. When we wake up, we ready ourselves for a day of adventure. Climbing down the outside stairs we step into the gravel parking lot and take off sprinting down the road. We run all the way to the main road before turning around and walking back. We pass a building with gardening supplies, tools, and a pool table - our landlords. We walk back to the gravel parking lot in front of the treehouse. Sheilah and I make up a game of hurtling rocks at a target in the trees - with each toss we improve our aim. We laugh and play until the landlord living nextdoor comes outside to chastise us. "Where's your Dad? You can't throw rocks!" she scolds in a harsh voice verging on yelling. Her frustration at our lack of supervision mirrors our enthusiasm. Even if my dad was home, he surely wouldn't have noticed. We were always teetering between his proximity and his distance - each reality collapsing in on the other.

I tread lightly around my dad, never knowing what will awaken his explosive rage. There are traps everywhere. I don't squeeze the bottom of the toothpaste. The dishes aren't done. After washing, drying, and folding all our clothes, a sock falls into the crack of the couch. A word misplaced, a syllable dropped.

I'm afraid of the dark but equally wary of the light.

Passing the threshold between the gravel parking lot and the forest, the terrain became steep. This is the foot of a mountain. I hike up the soft dirt until I arrive at the moss-covered cliffs, then I start climbing. I spend my childhood climbing mountains. Each hand placed, each foothold, feels as comfortable as breathing. I return to myself - both a visit and a homecoming. I scale the rocks until I reach the paved road cut into the mountainside. The

road feels out of place here. No one uses it except me. I turn right and walk a few hundred yards. The rock juts out from the road and above the trees I can see the valley outstretched below. To the right, the lake reflects the deep blue sky. In front of me, I see golden fields dotted with roads and farms backing up to the tall, sapphire snow-capped mountains. I turn left and walk until I reach the bend in the road that brings it back to level ground. But I don't go back to level ground - maybe it doesn't exist. I go straight and scramble down a hill. When I reach the bottom, I'm in a field of huckleberries. The huckleberries are ripe and huge, their deep purple clings to my tongue. I keep going, following the path left for me by the other animals headed towards the large stream tucked away behind the trees. When I arrive at the stream, I sit down and take a deep breath. The sweet scent of damp earth fills my lungs. I listen as the birds recite beautiful, sweet nothings. Their songs cling to the air - soaking me in sound until I soar towards the sky as music itself.

On the first of the month, when our food stamps card refills, it's like Christmas. We climb into our ancient burgundy Buick and drive to the Safeway in town. We pull into a spot right across from the sliding glass doors. "Rockstar parking!" exclaims my dad. We walk in and he turns to me and Nathan with very specific instructions, "Go around the store and find all the food with a bright red sticker on it." The sticker marks food that's 50% off, usually nearing its sell-by or expiration date. Nathan and I have our mission. We take the shopping cart and start darting around the store. When we have filled the cart with all sorts of luxurious foods - little yogurts, croissants, and various off-brand cookies and snacks - we circle around to the bakery. The bakery gives away free cookie samples, it's our favorite part of grocery shopping. I hide behind a tall stack of bread and ask Nathan to go ask for a cookie for both of us. I'm shy. Nathan is charismatic enough to convince someone they don't know their own name. Getting an extra cookie would be no problem. He returns with two chocolate chip cookies, my favorite, and laughing he hands me the cookie. Nathan grins and jokingly tells me, "Gabriel, at some point you are going to have to start asking for your own cookies, I won't always be here to do it for you." "Maybe," I tell him, "But I don't have to start quite yet." We find our dad and collect a few more things then check out. We unload the groceries, filling our empty cabinets and fridge. Later in the month, they will be bare again. But today is Christmas.

The spring is cold and snow covers the ground well into April. Nathan and I will be spending our two-week spring break at my dad's house. The first morning of break, Nathan and I walk down the road to the small building with the landlord's tools. The prospect of the pool table lures us out of the house. Nathan reaches out to test the knob. A distinctive click tells us it's unlocked, he pulls the door open. Inside it's musty and dark but there lies the pool table. I've never played pool but Nathan assures me, "Don't worry, I'll teach you." We spend the next two weeks in this little building, playing game after game. I mostly lose but I love it

anyway. Every day when we slip out, we turn off the lights and put everything back in its place. We know we aren't supposed to be here but we don't have anywhere else to go. Being home for two weeks with my dad won't end well for anyone. So we keep coming and going. One morning, the landlord calls our dad, she's furious. She claims that we left the thermostat on and she knows we've been coming in. We never touched the thermostat but the next day when we walk down the door's ordained with a large new padlock.

The last Harry Potter movie is released on my eleventh birthday. Nathan and I are spending the entire summer with our dad, mostly at his work, a local garden center. It's an especially hot summer. Nathan and I carry bag after bag of dirt to a plot where my dad's building a garden shaped like a sunflower. To make the beds, we layer on cardboard, straw, and then dirt. I pull wagons of small lettuce plants, flowers, and other starts to the sunflower shaped garden. My dad shows me how to remove the plants from their plastic pots and plant them in the soil. One after one, plant after plant, Nathan and I fill the garden we created. We rarely went to the lake or did other fun things that summer. But today is my birthday. We go to see *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* in theaters. We relish the space, completely packed but cool from the strong air conditioning. My dad buys us a bottomless tub of popcorn.

I don't know why we left this house. Maybe our lease wasn't renewed. More likely we weren't paying rent. Maybe we were formally evicted. Maybe we were told we had to leave.

Whenever we moved, Nathan and I were expected to help clean the house. To help reset it. To make it look like no one had lived there for the past year and a half.

I've cleaned so many houses.

We wash the house of our existence. Tenderly, my hands make swirling motions with the rag. Each circle lifts a little more of us from the beige walls. To find the marks we must wash away, we retrace the moments of our lives that left them there. One by one, I find each mark, erasing the remnants. Meticulous in leaving nothing of ourselves behind.

We don't have a vacuum. Nathan and I crawl around the thick, brown carpets of my bedroom picking up scraps of paper, springs from disassembled pens, pencil shavings - mementos from my days of writing and drawing. Our dad walks in and sees us, he doesn't ask what we're doing or give us a chance to explain. "You and Nathan are lazy! Go to the car! You're *worthless*. Go, GO NOW!" he screams. I don't know if he said we were worthless. Maybe he said useless, good-for-nothing, ungrateful. Some things don't need to be spoken for us to know they're true.

There are so many ways it was communicated to Nathan and me that our worth was conditional.

In our dad's violent outbursts sometimes he said we were worthless, other times he used dozens of other words to communicate it to us. He made it clear that our deficiencies were the reason he lost control of his emotions, that our deficiencies justified his behavior.

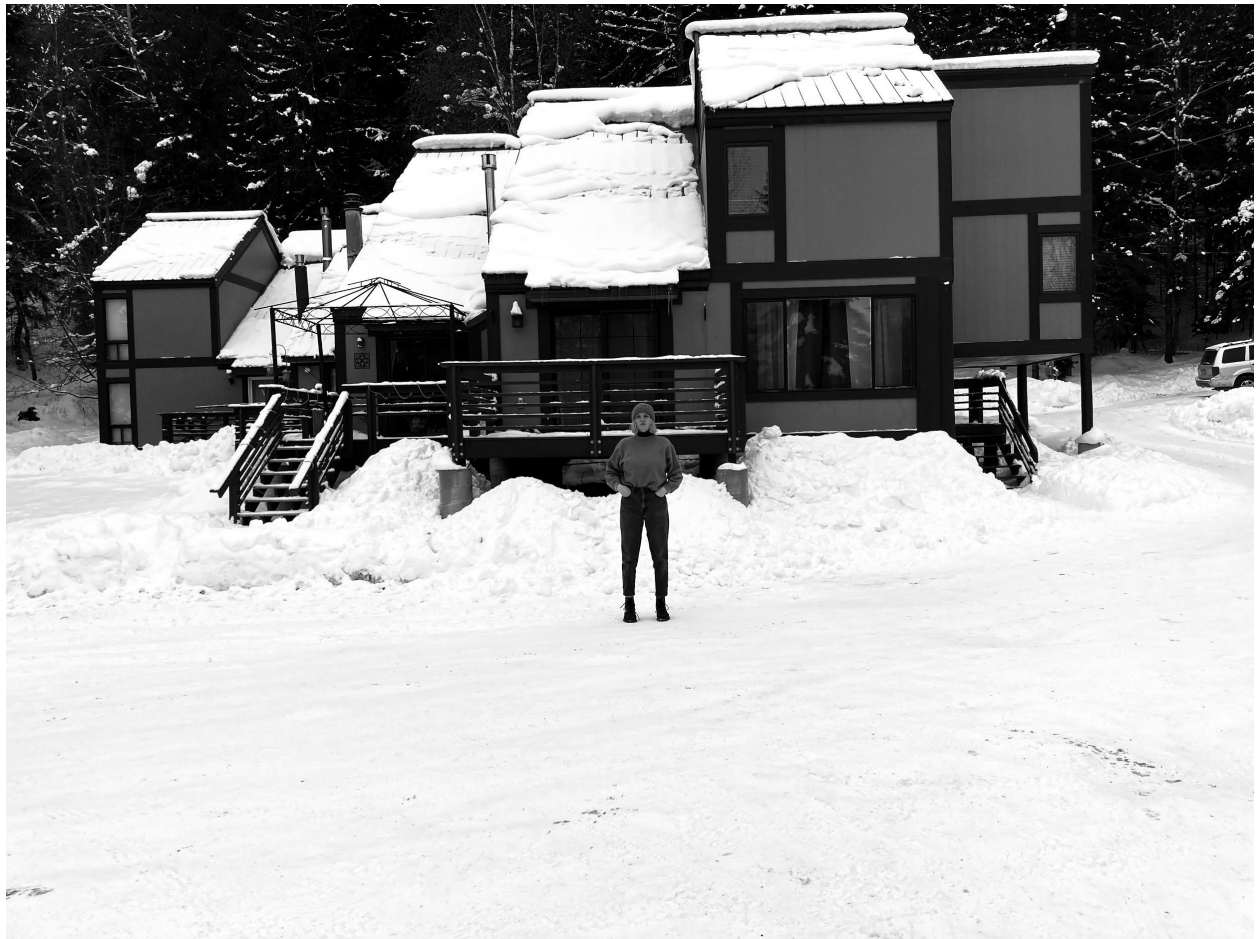
We were told we were worthless by our indifferent landlords, cold houses, and bare cupboards.

We were told we were worthless by our friends' parents, and then by our friends, as they ranted about how people on welfare are leeches, that if we couldn't afford to eat, we deserved to be hungry. Maybe they didn't know they were talking about us. Maybe they did.

We were told we were worthless by the government when they took away our welfare for minor infractions on endless rules.

From a young age, it was made clear to me that poor people were to be hated and as I got older, it became clear that we were those hated poor people. My dad, in particular, wasn't the good kind of poor person, the deserving kind. He was a con-man, a grifter, and an abuser. He was punished and we were punished. No one deserves to have the necessities of survival denied to them - to be stripped of their dignity.

"You and Nathan are lazy! Go to the car! You're *worthless*. Go, GO NOW!" he screams. We rush out of the house, tears saturating our faces. Nathan walks to the car and I turn towards the road. "Are you coming with me?" I ask Nathan. His face twists with guilt, "No." I start walking. As I round the corner I look back and see him climbing into the car. I look away, determined to keep going. My socks become wet and fingers numb from the thick layer of snow still covering the ground. I walk for three and a half miles down the icy county roads to Walmart. I walk quickly, vigilant, darting into the trees at the sound of each passing car. My dad isn't going to find me - not today. Close to Walmart, I cross a busy, narrow bridge. There's no shoulder, I wait for an opening and then sprint to the other side before cars zoom by again. I made it. I climb the last, large hill and find the bus stop, now I wait. The local grant-funded bus runs once an hour and is free. I'm eleven years old. I don't have a phone. I don't have anything with me. The bus comes and I climb on. When I get off at the stop closest to my moms, I see my dad driving down the road. He looks at me and I stare back - refusing to look away.



16. The First Duplex on Forsythia

When my mom, Nathan, and I move out of the House on Spruce we move a half-mile away to the First Duplex on Forsythia. The duplex is two stories, white and bland, a standard rental. We live on the left side. Next to our duplex are six identical duplexes and across the street are two more. All of the duplexes are rentals managed by Sandpoint Property Management, the largest property management company in my hometown.

My mom keeps driving to the wrong house, she can't tell them apart.

The one distinct feature of the house is a tall Ponderosa Pine in the backyard. The pine tree has long, smooth, emerald green needles, and rough bark. Its sweet scent lingers on my hands as I brush the needles. I climb to the top and rest on the thin branches that bend underneath me. The branches at the top are new growth - young, soft and flexible. They hold me as I nestle into the tree, finding comfort in my precarity.

Someone buys our house and we get no-cause evicted. We didn't even know our house was for sale.

We move five houses down into an identical duplex. Identical in every way, except, our new duplex is on the right side. Everything inside is the mirror image of our former home, an identical inversion.

Someone bought our house, our home, where our family lived, and cooked, and laughed, and cried. There was an identical house down the street sitting empty. They could have lived in that house. My family could have stayed in our home. But, the house down the street had a different owner and they weren't selling, the owners of our house were. We, the tenants, could be arranged into whatever pattern was most profitable for our landlords.

Renters rarely get to choose how we're reconfigured.



17. The Apartment on Schweitzer

When we leave the Snowgoose Apartment, we move to a small apartment on Schweitzer Mountain. An off-season ski cabin, the apartment has an office where my dad sleeps, a small living room and kitchen where I sleep, and a single, windowless bedroom where Nathan sleeps.

When we move out of the Snowgoose House, something fractures. I start spending more time with our mom. Nathan starts spending more time with our dad. We both still go back and forth, but not as often. When I'm with my dad we fight. When he yells, I yell. I'm difficult and rude.

The quiet girl is gone - she's been replaced by someone unwilling to be silent so someone else can scream. There's only so much you can do as a child, but I resisted my dad in any way I could.

As I grew bolder against our dad, Nathan grew smaller.



18. The Last Apartment

We move to an apartment in town. It's brown, tall, and narrow. My dad has a room on the top floor and Nathan and I share a room downstairs. We have a bunk bed. Nathan sleeps on the top bunk and I sleep on the bottom, relegated, again, to my least favorite bunk.

Nathan is in his first year of high school and I'm starting seventh grade.

We have a TV and cable in this apartment. We haven't had cable in years. I lay on the couch watching a marathon of HGTV's House Hunters. The show follows people, usually couples, as they search for a perfect house to buy and start their lives in. They identify a budget and non-negotiables: a fireplace, ocean views, a stunning kitchen, expansive yards, *good* school districts. After viewing three houses, the housebuyer decides which place best suits their dreams. I watch each episode play out, one after another late into the night. As dreams are bought and sold, I watch, captivated, as home solidifies into an item for purchase. Everyone has gone to bed. I start making my way upstairs to go to sleep too. I quietly open the door and slip in. Nathan's asleep on the bottom bunk. He left the top bunk for me. I climb the cold metal ladder and wrap myself in the soft blankets. I drift off to sleep - safe above it all.

My mom is picking me up to attend a memorial this afternoon. It's Sunday, the day I go back to her house before the school week. I'm hiding in our room, my dad's been particularly on edge this past week. The air feels charged with tension. It just takes a spark. I cautiously navigate my time there. I see my mom's old gray Subaru pull up. I grab the backpack full of my stuff and head down to the living room. My dad and Nathan are watching TV, they lower the volume when I enter the room. "Mom's here to pick me up for the memorial, I'm just going to go back to her house after. I'll see you next week," I state calmly. It doesn't matter. My dad starts yelling, demanding that I come back to his house after the memorial. I tell him no, over and over again. He just keeps screaming, I don't know what he's saying. I can't hear anything, I've left my body. I run out of the house, shaking. "I won't go back," I tell my mom. We drive away.

I don't go back.

Things were never fractured, they were always broken.

In this last apartment, I leave the wreckage.

In this last apartment, I leave much of myself behind.



19. The Second Duplex on Forsythia

When my mom and I move in, the house is a blank slate. White walls, sparkling windows, old but clean carpets. The traces of the family before us are less real than imagined. Crayon marks painted over, holes patched, light bulbs replaced. Except, deep in the drain of our bathtub, a few legos have lodged themselves, withholding the shower water's exit strategy. These legos provide evidence of a life created here, artifacts of the home that existed here before the walls of their existence were painted over to create our blank slate.

A month after I stopped talking to my dad he and Nathan moved seventy miles to Spokane. I watch Nathan drive away. My chest is heavy, crushed by the weight of another goodbye. I was never ready for these separations but that never stopped them from happening.

A thud jolts me awake at two in the morning, pulling me abruptly from a deep sleep. I hear clanging and footsteps below me. I go downstairs. The living room carpet has been ripped out, leaving dusty plywood floors with staples pointing out. Our couch and rugs are missing in action. Most of the living room furniture is gone. There's a lamp, our dining room table, and chairs, and a ladder with a paint bucket and roller resting neatly below it. My mom is standing on the ladder, splattered with paint, working on covering the ceiling with a soft yellow.

Our downstairs carpet was being replaced and my mom had gotten approval to paint - she was merely expediting the process. She worked meticulously over the next week to paint the downstairs, never using edge tools or painter's tape but perfectly executing her project with each stroke. On the last wall of our living room, she doesn't use the same soft yellow now covering the downstairs. For this wall, she uses a sponge to gently layer on orange paint, texturing the wall with darker and lighter hues until it leaves the impression of a brilliant sunset. With each stroke, the blank slate transforms into something that reflects not emptiness but warmth. In these things, we reclaim home, if only temporarily.

Nathan comes to visit for the weekend. I'm working at a daycare and tell him that I will take him out for Thai food. We enter the restaurant and the host seats us next to the window. Outside, the trees are covered with sparkling lights, warm against another cold winter. Nathan and I start to talk, but our conversation quickly devolves. He asks me why I won't see our dad, insisting that I need to rekindle the relationship. I knew this insistence wasn't his, he was the vessel for my dad's desires. I tell him it's not safe for me right now, that he's abusive. I can hear anger creeping into Nathan's voice at my accusation, see creases form as his face tenses. We start arguing. I am desperately trying to pull him out and he is desperately trying to pull me back in. Both tormented by the way things should be and by

the way they aren't.

In the years after Nathan left, we had this conversation many times. We couldn't talk about our childhood. Our relationship lived in the silence between unspoken truths. My mom and I would drive an hour and a half to Spokane whenever we could to see him, even if only for an hour over dinner. Everytime my mom and I left, we waded through the devastation of his life, wreckage so close it felt like our own.

Our house creaks, joints aching as it settles into another night watching over me while I sleep. Every creak sends a shiver through me, alone and on-edge, vigilant of both the ghosts and the people I conjure in my imagination. I hear footsteps falling softly, the floor cracks loudly. I tense, listening closely, trying to discern if the sound came from my house or the one attached to the other side of the wall.

My mom started caregiving while we lived in this house. At the beginning of my junior year of high school, she started working 48-hour shifts caring for an elderly woman, Polly, at her house on the Hope Peninsula. For a year and a half, every Thursday morning my mom would make the forty-five-minute drive to Polly's house and every Saturday morning she would make the forty-five-minute drive back. While she was gone, I spent my days and nights alone, trying to shake the lingering fear that each groan of the house presented.

Most of my time in this house was spent studying, most of my time out of this house was spent at school. This is the house where I started dreaming of leaving Sandpoint and moving as far as the limits of my imagination would allow. I didn't know what I didn't know. I had become deeply infatuated with my dreams. Dreams of escape, escaping this small town nestled in the evergreen-covered mountains of North Idaho. Escaping the pain that I located in this place. Escaping the hushed shame of poverty that I dissolved into. I grasped desperately for markers that rendered me deserving of worth.

My mom and I climb into her old Honda civic. It's three in the morning and we're starting the hour and a half drive to the airport in Spokane, WA. The late summer night feels thick with cool potential. We drive through the darkness, textured only by the faint outlines of mountains and the moon's reflection dancing on the lake. As we draw closer to Spokane, billboards and buildings populate my vision. The first tendrils of sun reach across the horizon as we arrive at the airport. My mom waits while I check my bag. Waiting for this moment of my leaving and this moment of her staying.

*"The youthful boy below who turned your way and saw
Something he was not looking for: both a beginning and an end
But now he lives inside someone he does not recognize
When he catches his reflection on accident."*¹⁶

When I board the plane, I am not scared. I know time as a straight line - things can only get better. I lived in denial because truth promised to tear me apart. To rip me wide open and demand I bear witness to the pain.

*"On the back of a motorbike
With your arms outstretched trying to take flight
Leaving everything behind
But even at our swiftest speed, we couldn't break from the concrete
In the city where we still reside."*¹⁷

When I left I was ripped apart by the past until all that remained was my trembling hands trying to pull the pieces back together.

Sometimes I'm certain that I am one of the dry sprigs of the lavender growing in my grandmother's garden. But if I was really so fragile there would be nothing left of me but the whispers of dust. I don't want to be a survivor but this is my inheritance, passed down by generations of women who had to be strong when they should have been soft.

But life is more than survival - it has to be.

I dip my feet into saltwater,
allowing the ocean to lap away my rough edges.
The sun showers me in freshness, scattering freckles across my face
until I can map the constellations I know so well.
I slip deeper into the water,
soaking my body in love until my fingers are wrinkled and my stomach is tender.
I am writing the houses of my familiar,
Waiting for myself to arrive.

¹⁶ Death Cab for a Cutie, *Brothers in a Hotel Bed*, Plans, 2005.

¹⁷ Ibid.



CODA

I pick up a glossy Sandpoint Magazine from a thick stack in the entrance to the local grocery store. I slowly turn through the pages, letting the story of my town wash over me. An advertisement for a luxury vacation rental promises that their home is “For those who seek an exceptional life.”¹⁸ Expensive real estate listings, luxury homebuilding companies, and mortgage lenders are tucked neatly within the magazine. I see photos of a posh new hotel being constructed at the nearby ski resort, wineries, spas, and a newly named ‘Granary Arts District’.

Once there’s an art district, you know you’re fucked.

Slipped 85 pages into the magazine is an article titled “Priced Out! Housing Crisis Sparks Community Action”. The article details what everyone in my hometown already knows: Sandpoint is in the midst of an extreme and escalating housing crisis. In the past year, houses sold at unprecedented highs with the median price of a home in Sandpoint at \$600,000, a sharp jump from the previous year's median home price of \$385,000, itself already a substantial increase from preceding decades. Simultaneously, rents rose dramatically and even for those able to afford these increased rents, almost no long-term rentals remain available.¹⁹ The article’s author acknowledges this problem as being widespread beyond Sandpoint, but foregrounds Sandpoint’s status as a rural, resort, and retirement community providing additional kindling to the crisis. She writes, “Local workers must compete not only with newcomers but with people who are shopping for second homes, with investors scouting out properties for a short-term rental business, and with speculators looking to turn a profit.”²⁰ This article, acknowledging the wreckage of gentrification, feels out of place in a magazine stoking its wings. Every page works to sell a dream of this place. And with each page I witness the place that I once knew so intimately slip through my fingers.

My mom moved out of the Second Duplex on Forsythia in May of 2021, after seven years in our home. The longest she has lived anywhere in my life. In April of that year, her neighbor Patrick and his family were no-cause evicted by their mutual landlord Steve. Patrick was a stay-at-home dad who would wake up at six in the morning after a night of heavy snow to shovel his driveway, then our driveway, and then the driveway next door. Steve gave him a thirty day no-cause eviction notice after many years as his tenant. My mom put in her notice shortly after, afraid she would be evicted too.

¹⁸ Daugherty Management, “Stay. Play. Getaway.” *Sandpoint Magazine*, n.d.

¹⁹ Cate Huisman, “Priced Out! Housing Crisis Sparks Community Action,” *Sandpoint Magazine*, n.d.

²⁰ Huisman, 86.

Steve informed my mom that the other landlords resented him for keeping his rents low, that her house was \$300 below market. The unspoken words were that she should feel *grateful*. When my mom's fridge completely broke, it took him nearly a month to fix it, he offered her no rent reduction. When my mom asked him to replace the carpet, already decades old when we moved in, he told her that he wouldn't bother to do it while she still lived there. He would only do it when she left and he could charge additional rent - when he had a tenant who could afford it. The month Patrick was no-cause evicted, my mom received a \$150 rent increase. She was on her way out already, but the choice to stay wasn't hers.

In February of 2022, my mom left the town where she lived for the past twenty five years. The town where she raised me and Nathan. The town where her life was torn apart and the town where she slowly, painfully stitched it back together.

But we reclaim agency in whatever ways we can - my mom joined her first tenant's union in Bellingham, Washington. I cried when she told me.

I returned to Sandpoint in the last few weeks of my mom's time there. My mom and I spent my few days in Idaho taking photos of the houses I grew up in. She was the photographer and I was the subject. A few pictures had been taken several years before, but most of the photos in this piece were taken over a three day period. Nineteen houses. At 18. The Last Apartment, my mom paused, looking at me. I could see tears welling in her eyes. She remarked at the weight of returning to all of these houses, the weight of realizing the instability we experienced.

Our normal was not an inevitable but a manufactured reality - a landscape we were painted into.

In leaving, we once again wash this place of our existence. Disappearing the traces of ourselves to make this place seem as if we were never there. When newcomers move in, it will seem as if this place was made for them, neatly curated but just blank enough to make it their own. They won't see us go and they will try to imagine that we were never here.

But a small silver heart hangs from a tree in the healing garden tucked behind the hospital.

Etched into the heart are the words *Nathan Burns 1997-2019*.

Things may seem invisible but they can't be erased.

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