



THESIS APPROVED BY

5/4/2021

Date

DocuSigned by:

*Trey Moody*

8FB888B0F3CD419...

Trey Moody, Ph.D., Thesis Director

DocuSigned by:

*Brent Spencer*

4F2BF495061B474...

Brent Spencer, Ph.D., Committee Member

DocuSigned by:

*Rob Dornsife*

5BA5804AE2FB422...

Robert S. Dornsife, Ph.D., Committee Member

*Gail M. Jensen*

Gail M. Jensen, Ph.D., Dean

UNDERMEANING WHERE I STAND

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By  
NATALIE V. TORREZ

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A THESIS

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# Table of Contents

Hallway.....	5
White Mouse.....	6
A Sky-Blue Silence.....	7
Home Diets .....	8
Udole the Tree .....	9
The first time I was bullied.....	10
Strawberry Cake .....	11
Baseball.....	12
Brown-Eyed Girl .....	13
Laundry Room Key .....	14
Purple.....	15
Middle School.....	16
Sister, at First.....	17
Old Wood Bench .....	18
Front Yard.....	19
Arachnophobia.....	20
London Fog.....	21

Warnings .....	22
Sister, at Last.....	23
White Picket Fence .....	24
Window Seat .....	25
Fairy in the Bottle.....	26
Back Door Doorbell.....	27
Front Porch.....	28
The Japanese-Spanish Cold War.....	29
Tornado Shelter.....	30
House Blessing.....	31
Bunkbed .....	32
Dicken’s Village.....	33
Virginia Hummed.....	34
A Sunflower .....	35
Beautiful Things.....	36

## Hallway

Carpeted in beige with creaks avoided only by stepping in four specific spots, this hallway housed a skeleton. In the dark it danced towards my six-year-old self as I snuck to mom and dad's room. Summoned from the scrapbook of my mind, it lingered on the stairs and moved only when it saw me. A game: who could reach their goal first? Me: stepping on those four spots to silence my movements. It: racing to get me, no matter how quiet I was, the *clack clack* of its joints echoing in my ears, inevitable, until I reached the threshold of my parents' doorway, their bed, their warm bodies, and I was crawling in between them, away from the hallway and the skeleton who vanished the moment I entered. When I was seven, eight, nine, the skeleton was there in the dark, but it left when I turned ten. Then the hallway was just a beige carpet with creaks avoided only by stepping in four specific spots.

## White Mouse

In front of the Big Long Bush, a walkie talkie checkpoint on my way to first grade, I found a white mouse no bigger than my palm. The mouse didn't move when I walked up, nor when I bent down, my nose almost touching its own pink pinpoint. In my head, I picked her up and placed her in my backpack, feeding her crumbs from my lunch and pulling her out to show my friends during recess. She'd move into my bedroom and her name would be Sapphire. But the *chsuuuuh* of the walkie talkie and the sound of my mom's voice asking if I was at the next checkpoint reminded me to be on my way. I looked at the sky and, worrying about eagles, grabbed a large, veiny, leaf and carefully placed it over my new friend. I started walking and by the time I reached the next checkpoint, I had already forgotten about my white mouse.



## **A Sky-Blue Silence**

The last stop of my newspaper route took me up four flights of concrete stairs to the top level of an open-air apartment building. My snow boots gave off a satisfying crunch with every step I took in the freshly fallen snow. When I reached the top, I would always pause and take a moment, strange body leaning on the rail with awkward seventh grade arms crossed to look at the simple view. A parking lot, the pool, sometimes wildflowers in yellows and reds in summer. It was nice, but the quiet is what drew me there. Spring brought the sound of birds, but the downy snow muffled all sound, like nature was urging everything to whisper, and so I preferred the view in winter. In that freezing calm, I could hear my breath and watch my jagged thoughts become smooth, like new snow with no footprints. I revisit that moment often in my mind, the memory of that silence sky blue.

## Home Diets

I started to hate my body when I was six. Mom didn't want me to be made fun of for my weight, so with the best intentions, any diet she started, I started. I remember it was summer, my brother and I were outside playing four-square with our best friends when mom called out a thunderous *Lunchtime!* The four of us stormed inside, a stampede of noise that shook the house. Plates were handed out and spaghetti was heaped into a pile, blood-red sauce dripping down the noodles. *Not for you, honey*, mom said as my brother and our friends sat at the table. Instead, I stood at the counter, our sink at my back, side-by-side with mom to eat our tuna on lettuce. The neon green filled my vision and my still-hungry stomach as I watched everyone else eat my favorite meal.

## Udole the Tree

When he was over fifty a girl who used to rest in his branches named him Udole. Using his body's perfect *one-two step climb* she would scale as high as she could—about ten feet—where she would nestle in his limbs obscured from the world, pull out her journal, and write until she was called in for supper. From the kitchen table she watched plenty of squirrel courtships, and smiled as the robins and blue jays frantically created their nurseries. From her perch in Udole, she observed everything else, like the couple that screamed at each other across the street in their driveway, the dog walkers bopping their heads to music, and the laughter echoing out of car windows. When her dad cut down her perch, *because it was obstructing the view, sweetie*, so did it feel he cut off her own limb. It took her years of walking with a phantom limp to heal, and like Udole, she began to grow again.

## **The first time I was bullied**

She took one look at my hairy legs in fifth grade gym class and laughed. I thought about her laugh for the rest of the day, but it followed me home when she walked a block behind me with her friends calling out *sasquatch*, *hairy bitch*, while I desperately sped up, looking for my white picket fence to appear, the words shouted until she turned up the circle before mine toward her own house and I walked one more block, through my front door, listening to my mom call out a *how was your day, sweetie?* and bursting into tears. When dad found out, he drove us to the bully's house to speak with her parent. Back then, I thanked God they weren't home. Now I wish they had been. That night, at my request, mom sat me down at the edge of our porcelain bath tub and taught me how to shave.

## Strawberry Cake

We had a rule: a timeout at school equaled no snack. I arrived home that sweet kindergarten day, surprised to see pale pink peaks adorning a two-layer cake. Small limbs dragged a small body into a wooden chair while a huge slice of cake waited on the table. Awkwardly fisting the too big fork, I shoveled the pretty taste into my mouth as a smiling mom asked about my day. Unthinkingly, I told her about forgetting to mark hot or cold lunch that morning before receiving my first timeout. Fork still in my mouth, the plate was snatched and the pink gone. Looking up at my sweet mother with her brows furrowed sympathetically, she said *You don't get snack if you get a timeout* as she scooped my slice into the trash.

## Baseball

My dad played baseball, my brother played baseball, so I played baseball. Not softball, softball was for girls. I grew up on the beige and green field with the sun beating down on my face, sunflower seeds littering the dugout, and the cheering screams that echoed the stadium. After dad was done coaching for the day, I'd sit on his lap while he drove the infield groomer out over the sand. I called it a land Zamboni, and sometimes, he'd let me steer. When I was ten, I was the only girl on an all-boy baseball team. The coach always had a scowl on his face when he looked at me and pointed to the right field: my position, the one they put the worst players, the only place for the girl. I'll never forget though, the moment I hit a double and scored a run. I'd been hit with the ball too many times already this season, but I squared my shoulders, centered my feet, and watched the pitcher wind up. Next thing I knew, I heard the *clink* of ball on bat, and I was off to second base. I can't remember if we won that game. All I remember is my dad telling me how he hummed *Another One Bites the Dust* every time he made it on base. I sang Queen all the way home.

## **Brown-Eyed Girl**

Even though mom told me she prayed for my brown eyes, I hated them the same way I hated my stomach and arm fat. Van Morrison aside, when most singers mentioned eyes, they are as blue as the sky or deep like a sea storm, raging tsunamis and hurricanes. Brown equaled dirt and mud, and I prayed they would become the hazel my siblings had. I hated my brown eyes until I heard them compared to earthquakes and volcanos, beautifully destructive in that they, too, could fall mountains. When I looked closer, my brown eyes had emeralds and gold buried in them. I just had to mine them first.

## **Laundry Room Key**

Maybe it was because my brother was so tall and my dad was so short (though even he could reach it) and I was turning out to be a short, plump, squash of a human, with tiny legs and a long torso, that I dreamed of being able to reach the key and open that door. That unassuming dirty piece of bronze hung on a crooked nail at the top of the door frame had always looked like it was twenty feet from the ground. I'd stare at that key, daydreaming of when I could finally grasp it, and wonder if it would lead to me Narnia. Years later, when I finally reached the key and opened the door, there was no Narnia, but I was older and taller, and my cheeks still dimpled when I smiled while hanging the key on the nail with ease.



## **Purple**

Purple is the color of my happiness and my curls. It's the color of the unrestrained thoughts flying from my mouth and the laughter bubbling from my stomach. It's my stretch marks and my dimples and my squinty eyes I share with my family. It's seeing my dog's mouth fall open in a grin, ink bleeding through paper, grandma's songbirds, the sound of a bell, the sway of a keepsake rosary, hands tearing open wrapping paper and playing roshambo. Purple is the softness of my mother's fingers tracing down my forehead, nose, cheeks, chin, as she hums me to sleep. It's knowing the distance between the tip of my nail and the skin underneath is infinite.

## **Middle School**

When I remember middle school, it's a burnt-orange haze. It's feeling the sound of the alarm for school jump-starting my heart. It's hiding out in the library, anxiety slithering through me when the old, unpleasant librarian smiled and said *you're exactly like me!* It's dreading the walk home with a backpack full of textbooks I won't take out, but dad told me to bring home anyway. It's replaying movies in my head during Crazy Kreecher's class. It's wishing my brother would say *hi* to me in the hallway before he reached high school. It's becoming friends with the new girl because she was new and I wanted a friend. It's inviting the 'cool' boys to my birthday party and none of them coming. In my color-coded memories, middle school is burnt-orange. I fucking hate orange.

## **Sister, at First**

It was just past dinner, mom scrubbing the dishes in the sink, while dad, my two brothers, my little sister and I still sat at the table talking about how we entertained ourselves that summer day (shooting hoops and hopscotch), when my older brother asked *dad, what does it mean to have four kids and one on the way?* The dishes in mom's hands fell, splashing soap water onto her shirt. After a brief explanation, I asked if there would be enough love. Change made me very nervous. Mom sat and pulled me into her lap, head thrown back in laughter. She held me tight, peppered my face with kisses, and said *of course there'll be enough love*. I was skeptical because mom and dad fought, and I already fought enough with my brothers and little sister. Would I even like this new person?

## **Old Wood Bench**

Dad said it was a housewarming gift almost thirty years ago. Growing up, we used the bench to sit three siblings for summer family dinners on the deck, or as a small pedestal for the snowmen made during winter. Otherwise, it was forgotten until the clock struck midnight, signaling the New Year. All five kids would attempt to fit on the creaking wooden top while the wooden legs wobbled, elbows flying to push each other off and into the snow. To the annoyance of the neighborhood, we armed ourselves with loud things, like pots and pans, and rang in the New Year with primal screams echoing quiet streets, obnoxious if only for a moment. Chill unbearable, bodies would hop off, swaying for a second on the unstable bench, before running inside. The bench once again forgotten, until the seasons changed.

## **Front Yard**

It was winter, we were young, and we had a vision of the biggest snow fort we could make. With the help of our dad, my big brother and I used our green, two-foot-long, recycle bin to stack brick after brick of packed snow into a seven-foot fortress. We then joined forces to start a snowball fight against our unsuspecting dad. Now it was summer and we had a fight in the middle of the yard where our fortress used to stand. My brother sucker punched me so hard in the solar plexus that I couldn't breathe, crying and clutching my stomach as I staggered into the house and gasped for breath. He faced justice in the form of a grounding. It was still summer, we lie in the sharp grass, and he cracked joke after joke that eventually brought tears down my cheeks. I clutched my aching stomach for a different reason as our laughter drifted through the thick, humid air like a song.

## **Arachnophobia**

After a spider crawled across my chest in bed, illuminated by the pale light of my phone as I was drifting to sleep, I became an insomniac. I spasmed in terror, a full-body flinch as I fought my sheets, their smoothness gripping my legs before I escaped, landing on my feet, my body jiggling, hoping to dislodge anything foreign from my skin. My eyes will now skim the floor, the ceiling, my walls for movement and I'll unintentionally run my hands up and down my legs at every miniscule tickle, praying for nothing. Every small, dark spot draws my eye, even if I've looked at it a thousand times, especially when I lie in bed, phone on but fatigued eyes darting around my blankets. If it were to happen again, I would set myself on fire.

## **London Fog**

The caffeine in my black tea with almond milk always soothes my racing pulse. While the swinging teabag string brushes my fingers, the steaming cardboard cup stops my shaking hands. Soaking in the presence of others in this little coffee shop, their quiet chatter echoing the soft music, I don't feel the burden of speaking and that settles my mind the way the tea settles my body. I remain a background character in their lives as they extend the same courtesy. The barista's smile as she laughs. A cute boy's glasses as his neck curves down toward a book. A mother rocking a baby to her chest with tired eyes and coffee cup in her hand. I take a sip and imprint myself on this space for this moment, before I stand to leave, abandoning my now empty cup while the bells of the door chime a *see you next time*.

## Warnings

My little brother is made of fire and speed: an active volcano that sent soundwaves down the stairs, through every room, and out the front and back doors. He was running as soon as he got his feet under him, destructive, even at four. A natural disaster that necessitated a warning system until he became a teenager. When he caused trouble, he was a tsunami whose discovery always created chaos. It didn't matter if we were busy, or actively in a fight with a sibling, if it was too quiet, we'd send out the warning. We'd tear through the house, calling my brother's name until we found the casualty. Toothpaste spread all over the bathroom, mom's Halston perfume dumped on the carpet, and once, an impromptu haircut for our baby sister. Now at eighteen, he's a dormant volcano, but one with vast, peaceful forests growing on his land. He's slow to anger, but when he ignites, the strength of his eruption is strong enough to level nations.



## **Sister, at Last**

The answer is no. I didn't like her when she was born. I don't remember mom's pregnancy except when she picked up a too-heavy watermelon and almost dropped it on the hardwood floor. I don't remember my baby sister's birth. When my little brother cut her two-year-old hair, I told my family I thought she looked ugly, which got me sent away from the dinner table. It took many mediated get-to-know-you's before I decided she was okay. Now she's fifteen and she's grown on me, despite her sharp tongue and stubborn disposition. She shares my brown eyes and I love her fifteen-year-old self as much as I disliked her at first. The love I shared with my family felt tender when she came, like a bruise, but there's a reason time can eventually wear down even the strongest of rock; it's to create the most breathtaking canyons.

## White Picket Fence

Our white picket fence surrounds our white house in our white neighborhood. It stops at dad's rosebush, the fence a showpiece for our house. *Look, a white picket fence!* people say, excited when they spot it. *Yes, it's a fence* I'd reply. Only when I was stepping on the mulberries that littered the sidewalk, staining my white shoes as I walked, would I raise my head from my book and see the sharp, white tops of the white fence and know I had arrived home from school. My dad chopped down that mulberry tree. Now, the fence is off-white and the wood has gained many small fissures, just like a family. I love to watch my dog carve a path in the dirt right alongside the fence chasing cars and people, and when he jumps up and pushes on it to bark, shaking the pickets *back forth back forth*, I smile at the thought that he might one day tip it over.

## **Window Seat**

A half-dead fern, a couple forgettable pictures in frames, a layer of dust—this cold wood seat was a remnant of an almost-cozy place, now obscured by the couch. So, when our golden-colored dog grew strong enough to jump, he lay claim to the spot and we acquiesced by cleaning the wood. In all his graceful majesty, our cat-like dog basked in the sun on his throne, head on paws, brown eyes scanning his dominion. From his perch, he kept a shrewd eye on the squirrels and warned us of any too-loud trucks that passed. Over time, a blanket was added to protect his body from the cold wood, a stool so he could ascend with ease, and a golden smile bid us farewell when we looked up to the window.

## **Fairy in the Bottle**

Creatures live in the bottles of my home, their silvery amber hair floating as they dance. Whoever opens a bottle, the fairies gracefully fly to sit on their shoulder, delicate wings glistening. Member after member of my family gain a fairy, never to leave their perch, whispering in their ears how they want another friend to play with. My family see them as beautiful. Often, I'm tempted to let one out for myself after counting how many fairies everyone else has, my eyes glazed in envy and want, but I'm the only one to see the fairies jagged, rotten teeth and pallid skin.

## **Back Door Doorbell**

*If you ring that bell one more time and wake those babies, your mouth will be so full of soap you'll be burping bubbles for a month* mom would threaten while waving the spanking spoon in the air. The useless thing gave off a single trite *ding* when rung, the bell hidden under a discarded piece of plywood in the left corner of our deck. We liked to push our luck, and usually at my brother's provocation, we'd play ding-dong-ditch on our own home, but the bell just gave one off-key sigh that echoed through the house. Sometimes, I felt a lot like that sigh, hidden under plywood, knowing exactly how the bubbles would taste. But I was hot-headed and my brother knew what buttons to push. That single *ding* is gone now, broken from disuse, still attached to that corner. I sigh.

## Front Porch

A picture on the porch means it's an important event. I'm four, it's the first day of school, and a pink and purple Barbie backpack hung from my shoulders, almost bigger than my body. I'm nine with my frizzy hair cut to my earlobes, my cheetah print dress balled in my fists to lessen my nerves, and my big brother and little sister stand at my sides as we smile for the camera. I'm sixteen, dateless, and my blush pink prom dress just brushes the cement as I teeter in my high heels. Every year, when our tree blooms, my siblings and I cluster together for the annual Easter photo. I'm twenty-two and across the Atlantic in London when the red-pink blossoms open, so that April, I photoshop my face to sit between both my sisters. I know one day the porch will change and so will we, cracks in the cement matching the wrinkles on our face, but these photos never will.

## **The Japanese-Spanish Cold War**

Dad always ended the argument with *Spanish is the language of the future and you're taking it*. Interestingly, though, he seemed to have forgotten I inherited his hard-headed stubbornness, how it boiled in both our stomachs and eventually erupted in heated tempers. We avoided each other, air turned sour as we escaped the room the other was in, each waited for the other to set off a spark to ignite another explosion. Our war continued silently as we walked into my soon-to-be high school, mom left as the only barrier to stand between me and dad, the registrar table right at the entrance. With the hubris only a teenager could have, I concocted a plan where I would change my classes after school had started and face the consequences when all was said and done. Looking back, it was a petty fight, but one I won with inevitable certainty.

## **Tornado Shelter**

The tornado shelter was an unkind space. To get through the two-by-two hole in the wall under the basement stairs, you had to arch your back, suck in your stomach, wish on a shooting star, and crawl. To illuminate the space, you pulled a string with a rusted silver washer tied to the bottom that turned on a bare, singular bulb. The only things visible besides the spiders crawling away from the sudden light were the cinderblock walls and dusty blankets covering the floor. Like clockwork, the tornado siren was tested the first Wednesday of the month. On the rare occurrence it wasn't a drill, my siblings and I would huddle in the shelter to watch movies on the portable DVD player while our parents listened to the news. They were all false alarms, but that didn't stop me from imagining the wind wiping so violently it tore our crab blossom tree from the front yard, ripping the roof off our house, and destroying it floor by floor until the only thing left was a cinderblock box filled with people in its wake.



## House Blessing

Violet-colored screams tore the walls down as tears cracked the foundation, young hands covered ears to stifle the sound. Tension consumed the air like heat waves pounding on black pavement, forcing anxious shoulders to live under ears. On the wall by the door hung parchment encased by a gnarled, dated wood frame and dusty glass. Faded blue tulips surrounded the black ink that held words of prayer even though most of this family stopped praying years ago.

*Dear Lord, swing the doors of our home wide so all people will feel welcome and loved,  
May the floor and walls be strong enough to carry the burdens of those who come,  
We pray no one leaves feeling less than when he entered,*

*May your love and peace cover and protect as each one departs. Amen.*

Beautiful the sentiment, God tore this family apart, so we rebuilt it without him.

## **Bunkbed**

My room became our room as I gained two sisters, and so we received a bunkbed. A queen on the bottom for them, a twin on top for me, the ladder useless when in a practiced movement, I bounced myself over the metal bar keeping my bed in place. From this repeated action, the bar eventually gave off an ungodly *SCREECH* any time it was moved. At bedtime, after singing our baby sister to sleep, I held it silent as my little sister heaved her small, six-year-old body over and into my bed. We took turns cracking each other's toes and giggle-sharing our secrets. When we heard the creaks in the hallway and the click of our mom's left ankle, I would hold the bar in place and she would slither down the familiar path to her bed. After pretending to sleep and the door was once again shut, we would do it all again, our laughter muffled by hands and our heads sharing a pillow.

## Dicken's Village

The ball hit the little ceramic house and like a hailstorm, glass pieces scattered across the worn hardwood floor of our kitchen. The seventy-pound dog was quickly shooed out before he could retrieve his ball among the shards and my solemn mother grabbed the broom to clean her mistake. Her long, quiet exhale was a gust of wind that swept her sorrow through the room and disturbed the long-untouched dust clumped on the broken house. As she settled back down onto the couch, mom looked up at the empty space, a singular dust indent where the house used to sit next to *Scrooge & Marley's Counting House*, but still picked up and threw the ball down the hall for the dog to chase anyway.

## Virginia Hummed

Grandma didn't have silence. Her hums followed her soft footsteps over softer carpet like her old, speckled hound used to. On Tuesday's I'd make her bread while she hummed and read the bible. When people asked my middle name, I'd smile and give them a hint: *it starts with a V and it's a state*. Grandma went by Gini and Gini loved scrapbooking, cross-stitching and crafts. Once when I was seven, grandma wanted to try out a new rubber stamp so we hid in a basement corner, covered the stamp in neon paint and stamped a flower on the wall. Grandma gave me a wink and placed a finger over her lips as I giggled. I imagined she hummed in the hospital when I was an ocean away, and when I got the call saying she was gone, a bird sang outside my window.

## **A Sunflower**

My little sister is the sunflower tattooed on my arm, a watercolor of yellows and golds. Her seeds are a mix of brown and black dotted across her cheeks and nose, different from her stormy blue eyes, but they both hold warmth just the same. She is the biggest flower in the bouquet on my arm, her stem thick, a pillar that keeps her spine straight and eyes on the line where the land meets the sky. Sunflowers are known to be tenacious; they have to be as they grow up and up toward our bright star. It's no wonder why I look up to her if she is the sun.

## **Beautiful Things**

My siblings' open-mouthed laughter. A field of dandelion seeds that look like snow. The warm taste of tea down my throat on a cold day. The tingle that rolls through my body after a good stretch. A compliment from a stranger. Sunday night family dinners. The smell of lavender. The golden curls on my dog. The curl of my own hair. Pale-blue eyes. A record player. A boy's smile. The quiet of big, open spaces. Thunderstorms. The peace and fear the sound of waves brings. My face with glasses. Soft music on a sleepy morning. Closeness. Coffee dates. Half-pictured dreams. Clouds painted on my nails. Feeling content with myself, finally.