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# Re-membering Family: Recollections of a Coming-of-Age

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Abstract: *This essay constitutes an untidy attempt to make sense of the mess left when addiction and death touch a (blending) family. Weaving personal recollections with accounts shared by a cousin, this paper re-*members *family members years after a falling out. Through both content and mode, performance grounds this exploration on the body as an emotive and epistemic site. Wrestling with the trustworthiness of memory, this essay engages the potential utility of suffering with others, and other affective interactions, as part of the quotidian experience of grief after loss.*

Key Words: *Performance, Family, Grief, Memory*

**Preamble**

With "the genius of retrospection," the following account shares a story of family, grief, and memory.[1] From the years of 2014-2019, my three cousins joined my childhood home, a house already bursting at the seams with my four brothers and me. These years, transgressing my high school and early college experience, pivotally shaped my coming-of-age.

As the only daughter surrounded by four brothers, my cousins and Aunt provided a respite from the constant teasing and wrestling endured in the company of my brothers. I admired my Aunt and Uncle's successful white-collared

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[1] André Aciman, *How Memoirists Mold the Truth*, New York Times (6 April 2013): 3.

careers, believing that such accomplishment meant perfection. Slowly, though, I realized my parents began discouraging sleepovers at my cousins' house. Then, one fall night, my three cousins – bags, bodies, and glistening faces struck with silence – arrived through our red front door. My parents hoped this intervention would be the "big push" to encourage my Aunt and Uncle to receive help for their addictions. However, three weeks later, my Aunt suddenly passed away on a Saturday morning. As I sat in the basement, holding my younger brothers, I heard my middle cousin scream, and I knew, my life irrevocably changed.

The subsequent years filled with counseling, custodial battles, and stints of rehab for my Uncle. A pattern of repetition emerged, my Uncle would sober up *enough* for visitations, then my cousins would move back in with him, he would relapse, and my cousins ended up back in our house with greater heartbreak. Eventually, this pattern wore on everyone. In 2019, after a large fight, my cousins left my parents' home for the last time. Since this fall out, most of my family members have not spoken to my cousins. Now, I am the only one to remain in any contact with my cousins. This paper represents years of reflection on affect, family, and loss, coupled with an interview with my eldest cousin – an interlocutor in remembering these pivotal years.

## Re-membering Family: Recollections of a Coming-of-Age

My arms branch over the shoulders of my younger brothers, as we sit together on an old chest. The sun peeks in through the basements' half-window, lighting the spectacle of our wooden stage. Waiting together, time refuses to be pinned down by children. The door at the top of the steps conceals a mystery. I squeeze my brothers, holding my breath. Out of the silence, a deafening scream erupts as the world collapses in a single home. My stomach drops with a nauseating awareness of what occurred before any words are uttered my way. Now, whenever I hear the scream of a child, the nausea returns with force. I have spent years trying to rid myself of this moment, and of the string of moments that follow. Life can be a game of dominos. A cause and an effect that never stops – a f a l l i n g – affectively in my own fleshy walls.

The body stands as the first site of knowing, theorizing. bell hooks writes on theory as the "critical thinking of our lived experience," an act often seen in the

curiosity of children.[2] Children sojourn in the world briefly; time ages each of us, and the moments of wonder become infrequent with passing years. Education serves a role in this sequestering, too. Creative play transforms into enrichment, flashcards, and homework. As a child, my mom would not let me go out and play (or, also in my case, read) until I completed my schoolwork. Now, I reflect on this standardization as an act of cruelty in the lives of children. We become split from ourselves, from our own ideas and our curiosities. With aging, we give in to practicality, adhering to the norms of adulthood. As a child, I declared adamantly my intentions to pursue a career as an author. An old craving for alternative worlds and a writing room of my own to be creative. I am working to re-arrive with my own voice, to work my "I" back into what "I" think and "my" ideas. It is odd how we divorce ideas, theories, and solutions, from ourselves in the academy. As if our passions do not have exigencies or existences outside of the paper, leave alone within ourselves. As if our writing can condense the humanness of global problems down into a publication. But, as careers progress and disciplines age, the repetitions of our practices become norms – we forget that the "naturality" of our writing standards are unstable and open to subversion, through the body, no doubt.[3]

Sometime after my Aunt passed, I read *The Book Of Laughter and Forgetting*. Milan Kundera envisions an island of childhood, a spectacle that confuses the reader who attempts only once to understand the novel. Kundera writes, "Children, Never look Back!" and this meant that we must never allow the future to be weighed down by memory. For children have no past, and that is the whole secret of the magical innocence of their smiles."[4] The past weighs us down, in ways that transform our present identities. The past provides us with the context and purpose of our lives; the past delivers the full range of emotion onto us. If, to be without the past is to have a magical innocence in our smiles, then the past burdens us. This is a fact we all share. Time acts as a seamstress, we the fabric through which the spin and spool of our connections weave. We are held in place, although the stitches that comprise our worlds move endlessly – the seamstress can do and undo, carry us with her, and leave us by bedside. But we will find ourselves out there. Reflecting on my coming-of-age, I confront a past and find myself in the company of children who transformed into adults – strangers – with shared

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[2] bell hooks, "Theory as a Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 59-75.
[3] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[4] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, (New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999): 257.

moments. The present paper is just a flirtation with such past, as two cousins come together to remember.

At least, I think the following account leads to a re-*membering*.

↔

Grief is a peculiar emotion. For years, I gave into my grief – I allowed myself to experience Grief as a companion to an otherwise solitary period of adolescence. During the time my cousins lived with my family, I turned to journaling as an avenue to express emotions. Still, I turn to words as I attempt to make sense of the past. On writing the past, memoirist André Aciman claims:

> Words radiate something that is more luminous, more credible and more durable than real facts, because under their stewardship, it is not truth we're after; what we want instead is something that was always there but that we weren't seeing and are only now, with the genius of retrospection, finally seeing as it should have occurred and might as well have occurred and, better yet, is still likely to occur. In writing, the difference between the no more and the not yet is totally negligible.[5]

Prompted to think about my own moments, I question. What is shared? Where does memory play with identities and bodies? What is done to the body in telling the stories of affect homed in ourselves? I remain curious about the past, a past that cannot pass because the moments became ingrained in my body. How the present grows out of such roots.

To experience the *genius of retrospection*, I move outside myself – colliding with my cousin in moments of memory where we were sisters, roommates, friends. The semicolon in our lives, the points and stories holding our independence together. We are the storytellers of our families, the oldest in the home between two families turned oneoneone two one two one t w o. These are separate moments of reflected stories, fictions, and affects. I relied on my own extensive documentation in journals and headnotes, as well as an oral history interview with my cousin to experience a past I cannot re/collect on my own.

[5] André Aciman, *How Memoirists Mold the Truth*, New York Times (6 April 2013): 3.

**Phase 1 ↔ Grief**

Grief roots herself into the corners or our lives, seeping into our relational world. Roots implies the past. But the past does not lie still, it is not even past.[6] I write about grief, as pages of prose and scribbles hold the workings-out of my grief, even if my body's selfishness cannot release its entitlement to trauma. With each version of this story, I censor and shift the details engaging "Trauma," in favor of the everyday experiences that precede, that follow. We seemingly glorify the worst moments of one another's lives as entertainment. This story is not one that will divulge the painful details of these difficult moments, but one that will focus on the quotidian after. As body-subjects, we move through life in vivid ways – actively feeling and sensing the world around us, as the exterior world is essential to our own constitution. This story is about Grief, which translates to a story on pain. In considering the sociality of emotions, as Sara Ahmed urges, we must look to the circulation of affects to understand where and how meaning emerges.[7] In fact, Ahmed claims: "Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries a made: the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others."[8] Though Grief wants us to feel alone, it is through interactions and impressions in the world that we come to understand grief and loss at all.

On one particular night, six months after my Aunt passed, my cousin comforted me amidst the loss of my boyfriend's mother to a long battle with cancer. Sitting on the edge of my bed, she leaned in but quietly stated: 'There is a Grief box you build, a place to put all the pieces of your life before, a place in your mind that you do not visit regularly." The idea of a box, a compartment to place the moments of hurt, remains integral to how I come to relate to others who experience grief. The depth of suffering always exceeds representations. During my interview with my cousin, we talk about grief, as we had many nights before, but in this moment, I realized: I now grieved my cousins. We talk about the day.

As I write this essay, after transcription, I realized I addressed some of the following memories to my cousin – an act of sharing.

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[6] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House): 1957.
[7] Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion, 2nd Edition* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014): 7.
[8] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

November 22nd, 2014.

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From the basement, I fly up the stairs, as the entire world shattered in a single home. Turning, I see you blur around the corner, and I follow. My hand reaches out, but you move just out of grasp. Traveling through the house in a matter of seconds, I find you nestled into the corner of your bed, tucked into a wall. The phrase 'backed into a corner' arrives in my mind. During the worst moment of y(our) life, you hide in the open – a place without escape. Diving beside you, I wrapped all I am to embrace your whole body, which now rocks against mine. My arms lock around your shoulders, as words dribble from my mouth in between tears. All I do is whisper into your blonde hair "it's okay," on repeat, a symphony. You claim your mother's death is your fault, you called my mom to stay with us. "I was the one who left her," you murmur, facing away from me, but your tears still splash on my arm. My mouth motors on, *it's okay, it's okay, it's okay*. Turning to look me in the face, your scream disrupts the crying. **Nothing about this is okay.** I never again would ask another to be together in moments of brokenness – Grief.

~

Now, on November 10th, 2022, we sit across from each other through a computer screen, but states apart. I ask my cousin what processing grief was like, especially as our two families experienced one another as self-proclaimed ~~siblings~~. Her voice travels through the computer speakers, acknowledging that we grieved the loss, too. But my younger brothers and I must have grieved "the way things used to be" for our family, my cousin claims. Her eyes dart up, and the direction of her thought drifts. I listen.

> But, yeah, you start to just forget some stuff and that makes it harder in a sense. And once 7 years have passed, it's kinda like everyone moved on. You're kinda, ya know, the only ones left to grieve her. Yeah. Grief is definitely the heaviest emotion I have ever felt. Trumps trauma…trumps the fear I felt growing up. It is heavy and it is complex, and it sticks around for a while.

I agree. In my own notes, I scribble: Grief makes you numb, carrying her friends like anger, guilt, and regret as she builds a home in yours. Emotions do, emotions

stick – affects acting and moving between bodies, the source of meaning in our reflections.[9] I try to imagine the weight of losing a mother when you also had to mother your siblings before the loss even occurred. A knot grows in my throat, and I am surprised at the ordinariness of this feeling. We live in a world filled with children carrying the weight of their parent's in/actions.

For five years, we lived as ~~siblings~~. I never once second guessed this semantic choice, I never thought about the biology and genetics that denotatively transformed us into liars. Eight siblings, ranging in age from the early twenties down to eight, with six under one roof. The Christmas of 2014, my cousins and brothers spent the day in an endless round of monopoly; but I did not participate, I watched. Christmas was the first day since my three cousins moved in that no one cried. Instead, we laughed. I smile, even now, as I write and reflect.

> My cousin acknowledges this closeness.
>
> Um, I mean it is sad talking about it now, but we were really close. And then, with you, I think, we were really trying to just… we all three wanted to be sisters, I think, really badly. We loved you and we knew you loved us and we were like 'we can just all three be sisters.' But saying this was a lot simpler than the complexities that go with it.

Maybe our attitudes represent an intimate version of cruel optimism. What we so desperately wanted – an erasure of the painful pasts that brought us all into one home – was the exact attachment causing us pain.[10] Maybe we just could not want it enough. I thought I did. Childhood ignorance, or optimism?

My attachment to my cousins and Aunt exceeded the years shared in a collective home. Standing at the harbor, sometimes the waters of jealousy touch the bottom of my feet, a sudden gush of current beneath the dock. Always there, normally quiet. She was not *my mom*, but as I child I used to wish she was. My family loved to tell the story, *before*. Around the kitchen, we chat with dirty plates piled on every surface after a holiday. My family discusses the similarities between my brother and grandfather, when I chime in: "I think I got a lot of (my aunt's surname) in me." An eruption of laughter fills the room, but my 6-year-old body asserted herself confidently, seriously. See, my Aunt, my role model and confidant, married my mom's brother. No genetic connection could exist between us, but her presence in my life was formative. Some days, I am reminded of how my mother

[9] Ahmed, 4.
[10] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

and I can fail to understand one another, as our personalities never deviate. Somehow, the nuclear family still dominates family formation as "normal." I longed for the surrogate mother I had in my Aunt, and I come to realize again the excruciating loss my cousins endured at the cusp of adolescence.

As I listen back to the interview, I become stuck on my cousins' words. "At the time it was kind of like I was blinded by my own grief." Exhale. Grief positions the body as isolated, but the very formulation of emotion resists this conceptualizing of emotions as arising *in us*. We must be in interaction with others and objects to give meaning to emotions, to feel and recognize surges in our bodies as emotions. Maybe my cousin and her younger sister (whom I used to refer to as my sisters) felt alone in their grief. Did they not realize I wanted to mourn, too?

Grief calls us to make commonalities, I have concluded, to reach out to the connections out there, in here. *My hand reaches out, but you move just out of grasp*. I think about Judith Butler's commentary on grievability, how a life that is grieved is one that is recognized as human.[11] Butler's work on relationality displays that grief is felt in and between bodies, and that sharing this emotion results in powerful political ends. Simply, humans always have the capacity to both hurt and be hurt by one another, a corporeal experience that reveals our bodies as exposed to the other. Interdependence becomes the primary distinction that makes us human. Grief is central to that constitution, to our humanly constitution. I realized in our precarity after the loss of my Aunt, our exposed bodies and emotions compounded hurt on one another. Maybe my family tried to move on too quickly from our mourning.

I muse on grief. The grief I experienced and the grief I witnessed. Grief was a companion in my coming-of-age, and at times, I think Grief was the star. The grief of the five black dresses that hang in my closest. Retired. By the end of that year, the funeral home employees knew me by name. My Aunt's funeral the second in a series of intimate losses in less than two years. My cousin does not remember the funeral, despite the hundreds of people who arrived to give condolences. Manifesting in the body, sometimes grief resists sociality – or maybe we resist our own vulnerability that arises when experiencing grief. Oddly enough, I recollect moments of mourning in the outfits I wore. Objects. We carry grief in our bodies because books do not have the spine for such stories. We store grief in

[11] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso Books, 2004).

objects – artifacts with us daily and those tucked away.[12] Over the years, the idea of a grief 'box' continues to gain clarity; we tuck artifacts away precisely because of the affective weight stored in their meaning.

I say we, but grief plants herself everyw/here.

**Phase II ↔ Time**

2014-2019, one-fifth of my life was spent sharing a home with my cousins. As I am older than all three of my cousins, the period under my parents' home constitutes an even greater portion of their lives. During the five years, we celebrated weddings, birthdays, and graduations; we built traditions and enjoyed iterations of these events. Looking back, my family never understood the complex internal and emotional life of my cousins. When we fail to allow affects to circulate, the meaning cannot be shared. Can words carry affect before their circulation (to others)?[13] Even the language that structures my writing I learned through an-other. We always already belong to a web of humanity, entangled together. Butler, in writing *Precarious Life*, states "Discourse makes an ethical claim upon us precisely because, prior to speaking, something is spoken to us."[14] The same thing that composes us, should undo us. I continue to sit with precarity in both my personal and political life.

The decay of my cousin's family occurred prior to the official beginning – I think my silence facilitated this agonizing perpetuation of childhood trauma. I witnessed my Aunt and Uncle's fights, as alcohol slurred their speech and anger animated their shouting. After sleepovers, I never told my parents just how brutal the fighting was. How old does a child need to be before interceding on behalf of children even younger?

Interviewing my cousin in November cultivated additional turmoil in time. The anniversary of losing my Aunt approached, as well as the wedding of my older brother. My cousins were not invited to the wedding, a fact I suspected would hurt. Time passed and mountains of hurt built up, adding distance and a new complexity to a phenomenon we consider mundane: time. We finally spoke together. My cousin acknowledges **time.**

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[12] Devika Chawla, "Tracing Homes Habits," in *Stories of Home: Place, Identity, Exile*, eds. Devika Chawla and Stacy Holman Jones (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2015).
[13] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text*, 79 22:2 (2004).
[14] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 138.

> My sister and I say all the time, that, cause her 7-year anniversary is in 12 days. We say all the time to each other, "how has it been *7* years, there's no way it has been *7* years." Um, it feels like yesterday, then my sister will say, it feels like 20 years have passed. Some days it will be reverse. She will say, it feels like it happened a week ago and I might say, "what, it feels like it happened a lifetime ago."

As my hands key up the transcript, I listen and pause. Start and stop. Stories emerge, strung together with long pauses. We avoid the topic of weddings. An obvious decision, because of our dissolution.

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My phone lights up, a text from my mom reading "call me." I move from the living room to my bed, avoiding my summer roommates, strangers all working an internship for the same nonprofit in a city none of us call home. Even hours from my family, I still get roped into acting as the mediator between my parents and siblings. Yet, this text causes my stomach to drop. The last few years, my siblings and cousins held an unspoken rule: keep the secrets, secret. In May, I became a nark. My middle cousin, now 16, began to be more reclusive. At first, my parents assumed the similar repetition was occurring, sparked by an increased amount of time with her father. I held the secret in for weeks, doing my part alongside you to support our <sister> as she navigated through an experience shared by too many women. From my own experiences, I knew my parents could not respond with the necessary empathy; they were always better at parenting boys. We discussed this endlessly, as we navigated our relationships as young women with boys. How frequently we verbally declared needing your mom, my Aunt. I cannot imagine how you felt this need with passing time and circumstances. But eventually, my cousins' depressive behavior broke my silence, out of fear. I betrayed you both. *How old does a child need to be before interceding on behalf of children even younger?* My mom picks up on the first ring.

Her words spill through the phone rapidly. I only catch snippets of meaning – a letter, a trip, betrayal. My body goes rigid, as my mom slows and repeats herself. My parents received a letter from you and your siblings, as you visited your mom's sister, your other aunt, across the country. I would never read this letter, but the details are infamous amidst my parents and brothers. Supposedly, the letter declared we never made you three feel like family, that my parents' rules smothered you, and that you all would be moving out upon return.

And you did move out, mere days before we all were in my eldest brother's wedding. On their wedding day, you and your sister did not speak to my brother despite being bridesmaids, standing beside his wife-to-be. We drove together and chatted as usual, but the tension undergirded our interactions. I wanted to ask what happened, I wanted to plead with you where I went wrong. I never brought it up, though, and I moved through the day with the weight of our silence.

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Most of my family has not spoken since that day in August 2019. Now, two and a half years later, another brother is to marry in one week. My cousins are not invited. The topic is avoided during our interview. I wonder what this absence makes present.

Later, as my hands type the transcription, I repeat the process over and over. I listen and pause, start, and stop. Stories emerge from my cousin, strung together with long pauses. My cousin talks about the first night at our house, how an exciting sports banquet to honor her success turned into a tumultuous night. "So, I called my aunt, your mom, and asked if she would go with me and my dad. She said yes, and then, when she came back with me that night to the apartment where we were living. I think that was one of the first *times* she realized -- that anyone realized, now bad it was." Her voice softens, as she reflects on this time.

Time touched our memories, and my cousin and I pieced together spotty fragments after the interview officially ends. The most difficult moments lurk in the corners of memory, emerging when I least expect their presence. Talking with you, I counter, question, and provide more than detail than you realized I kept close in memory.

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Hands slide across the glossy cover, shifting toward the mug of steaming peppermint tea. The house is quiet, as I relish in the possibilities for the evening. My tongue scorned by my ambitious spirit, how I want to consume my pleasures in peace. My phone lights up, and I ignore the disruption. Twice, Thrice. I relinquish my stubbornness and reach to answer. Your voice slides out – unexpected. I do not know why I am surprised. Maybe your mother's the dry spell departs. Your voice whispers delicately, as you request my help. I jolt up, grab my car keys, and

leave a blissfully warm cup of tea undrunk. Each turn on my drive to the cinema adds to the worried sensation growing in the pit of my stomach.

I arrive. In the back seat of my 2004 red Ford Taurus, the youngest enters first. Then, together, you and your sister shuffle your mom in the small middle seat and secure her with a click. You sit in the front next to me. On the drive back to your apartment, you chatter nervously with small talk. But my eyes are locked in the mirror, I glance at my Aunt as her eyes glaze over. Life brutally performed an injustice, and my vibrant role model became a shell of a woman. Do shells not always serve as protection for the value inside? Driving, I discover the borders of my admiration. I lose another piece of innocence, as a childhood idolization crumbles.

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In response to reading elements of my accounts, my cousin tells me how she forgot about the time I picked them up from the theater. Time wipes memories, distortions of past events and renditions of our identities. During the interview, I apologize to my cousin for not sharing my good memories about my Aunt. With time, memories fade and I can only imagine the desire to hear the good when that is fading. I rarely talked about how my Aunt was the first person who shared her love of coffee with me, carrying French vanilla lattes down the basement stairs after a sleepover. Never once did I share how my Aunt pulled me one evening in our final summer with her, talking to me about my new boyfriend. Hugging me, she urged me to communicate with her to be sure I was safe and cared for in the relationship. How desperately I would need her presence in the months after she was gone. How desperately my cousins and I needed her during those years. A coming-of-age.

In the interview, my cousin shared: "And then, slowly, it becomes easier and harder at the same time. As the months pass, time does heal I think, but as time went on, the outpouring of immediate support dwindles each month a little bit, and further and further each year. Um, so while more time has passed, it's like, you're surrounded by less and less support, so it's harder, too." I listen to this quote on repeat, considering how time means little to the body's memory. Even as we focus on the daily experience of life after loss, the presence of traumatic stress alters how the brain processes emotions. The body keeps score, and family trauma

can impact the development of healthy attachments in children.[15] I understand my cousins more as I research the attachment and hear my cousin's explanations, as she pursues her own advanced degree in psychology. How does the sociality of emotion, the need to circulate affects in and between bodies, offer an enrichment to human attachment? Lauren Berlant, on affect and attachment, argues that all forms of attachment are optimistic, and "whatever the experience of optimism is in particular, then, the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way."[16] My cousins' attachment to their father, as my cousin noted in the interview, is a biological drive. The repetition of their return – again and again – a display of optimistic attachment. Time can be paradoxical. Sometimes, time changes us and other times, despite passing time, we remain the same.

**Phase III ↔ Memory**

We all carry moments scored into our minds, destined to become memory. Time and memory interact by nature; time plays with memories, and memories morph with time. My cousin shared memories with me. "We have some really core traumatic memories…" her gaze moves around, avoiding eye contact. I listen.

> Like, in the past, when we [my siblings and I] sat down and talked about how we all saw that period of time. We all… …It was funny, we all brought up one specific memory in the apartment. My dad came home really drunk and really angry. And we, it was me, my brother, and my sister, we were all watching a movie in me and my sisters' room. Um, and we were just like, 'We don't want our peace freakin' disturbed anymore. Let's just lock him out. We just wanna watch a movie without dealing with his, his *shit*.' So, we put a vacuum under the door handle, so he couldn't get in. It really pissed him off but we kinda just tuned him out, and ya know, we were able to…watch our movie.

She smiles. A bad memory turned pleasant by resistance. Somehow, the memory turned into a re-collection of moments shared, sibling enjoyment, and autonomy. My cousin reflects on this memory, inviting me into a moment shared with her

[15] Bessel Van De Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Bod in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).
[16] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

siblings. Reflecting on this memory, I envision the room with my cousins lounging together. In the lull of silence, I realize my cousin and I both smile.

I asked for the space to listen, and I do. Another story fills the computer screen, but my cousin's words transport me into a car. A basketball tournament on a day where my Aunt was "good," and "happy." With my Aunt driving, my cousin describes the scene from the passenger seat, with your dad and siblings in the back of the car. I imagine you all singing; I always sang in the car with my Aunt. My cousin continues, pausing when she mentions her dad. An unsurprising fight breaks out between my Uncle and Aunt. I overheard dozens of fights when I should have been asleep. My cousin's words disrupt my tangent thoughts, my stomach still churning with my own wave of emotion. My Uncle began hitting the back of my Aunt's car when driving, on the first day, my Aunt ignored him. That night, my cousin shares how my Uncle got kicked out of the bar, in front of my cousin's team, instead. The rosy color of her cheeks indicates the embarrassment that lingers, still. **But the next day.** The same seating, my cousin confesses: "this time my mom is not functioning very well," with widening eyes.

> They start another fight and my dad punches the back of her seat again. And she slammed on the breaks in the middle of the road. Got out of the car and started screaming. The cops were called, and we all had to give statements to the police. That was the first time, I think, that CPS was notified, too. Um, and my mom, I remember my mom was actually so happy that CPS was notified. She was like, 'when they call, I am gonna tell them everything. And maybe, like, we can finally get him out of our lives.' She, she had kinda given up hope that he gonna stop drinking. She was scared to divorce him because she didn't want us to have to split custody because she was scared of us being alone with him, getting driven by him. So she kinda stuck it out. But she was like, if CPS can hear my side of the story, maybe they will do something about it. I remember when they called and she was depressed and couldn't get out of bed. So my dad answered and my dad played everything off.

The things we remember can dis-member us. However, the more time spends around our bodies, the more at-odds we become with truth. Good thing truth isn't the goal. Right?

Memories, too, become objects. Sara Ahmed discusses the connection between emotion and memory, as memories can stir emotion in the body. Then, the memory is the object with which we interact, the object arousing affect. Ahmed elaborates, "the memory can be the object of my feeling in both senses: the feeling

is shaped by the contact with the memory, and also involves an orientation to what is remembered. So, I may feel pain when I remember this or that, and in remembering this or that, I might attribute what is remembered as being painful."[17] Here, Ahmed draws the connection between affect, time, and memory, delineating how we may come to assign meaning to memories after time has passed. Maybe the initial event is painful, but time also can make memories, through their recollection, painful. This framework extends to other emotions, but in this moment, I feel pain with my cousin, for my cousin, and for our joint familial dissolution. The objects filling our grief box may be material, or they may be memories of past events.

Throughout our time reflecting together, my cousin and I simultaneously experienced closeness and distance in nuanced ways. While the act of sharing fostered deeper understanding, the aperture of our lives and memories created pain in the re-discovery. As we re/collected our memories from the day my Aunt died, we could not piece together a timeline, despite the entire day being shared. Over time, the events became distorted, versions of the past, blurrier with every telling. Experiences stand for themselves, and the individual accounts of the day remain meaningful. As my cousin re-tells her memory of the day, I remind myself that pushing for a singular truth, an absolute version of the way things occurred, can rob us of the meaning that emerges through our individual recollections. I narrate a past that cannot be recovered, anyway.

The stories shared on paper become immutable, even when the oral account will morph, an almost intolerable permanence in life writing. I look again to Aciman's notes on memoir writing, acknowledging what my keystrokes do. My personal fiction.

> Writing the past is never a neutral act. Writing always asks the past to justify itself, to give its reasons… provided we can live with the reasons. What we want is a narrative, not a log; a tale, not a trial. This is why most people write memoirs using the conventions not of history, but of fiction. It's their revenge against facts that won't go away.[18]

As I share the "facts" that will not go away in my own life, I acknowledge that these details cease to be facts upon circulation. The five years my cousins moved in and out of my childhood home continues to impact my everyday interactions.

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[17] Ahmed, *7*.
[18] André Aciman, *How Memoirists Mold the Truth*, 1-2.

My movement in and out of this personal history reminds me to enact an ethic of compassion, unaware of the stories homed in the bodies of others. My cousin and I both divulged how we do not share this story often or readily. I acknowledge this fact as I write a version of these shared years, implicating the people I love most. In auto-reflexive work, all we can do is offer one account, knowing it never rests. So, "facts" can never be the goal.

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We return for a third time to 11/22/14, our conversation lapsing back to that painful moment again, piecing our memories together. In your memory, the location and interaction differ significantly. Each memory is a re/collection, and this account is yet another form.

After rounding the stairs, you dart to my room. Sprawling on the floor crying, you wait for me to come – as you knew I would. Only moments pass until I am lying beside you on the carpet, my arm quickly wrapping around you. From the ground, positioned under my pink desk chair, you eye my missing graphic calculator. During our tears, we laugh at the retrieval of my lost tool, isolated from the rest of the house.

I question how these moments fill a lacuna in my memory. You barely finished the story before I pull the same graphing calculator out of my desk. Despite years since the last use, the calculator traveled with me through high school, undergrad, and now grad school. You do not remember being in your room, yelling at me, as I attempted to provide comfort. *You claim it is your fault, and I whisper into your hair "it's okay" on repeat, a symphony. Spitting back, your scream cut the house in pieces.* ***Nothing about this is okay.*** Instead, I add the calculator to my metaphorical grief box. Now, the calculator will travel with me, perpetually unused, with each new move, but tucked into the same spot in my desk. In a moment, an insignificant object gains new meaning, a new memory and object sparking pain, emotion. I tuck the calculator away, and you smile.

~

Repetitions, like the pattern over those years. My cousins move in, and moved out, repeat. The repetition became normalized. Reflecting, my cousin acknowledges the insanity: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and that is essentially what we were doing," we are talking about the years we spent

together as ~~siblings~~. The repetition wove a mess between our houses; the coming and going, the time reunited with my Uncle that fell apart, the shifting rooms in a house capable of expanding. Over and again, but now it is just over. When my cousins left the final time, me and my two younger siblings felt they were leaving *us*. By declaring they never felt like family, my cousins broke the ~~sibling~~ tie for us all. Repetitions also allow for norms to shift, and I really try to be happy for my cousins, reunited with their dad. Somehow, my cousin and I are the only remaining threads.

My fixation with these years hinges on memory, on the pieces left fragmented in the past. Speaking with my cousin, writing this paper is a new performance of memory, making present years I normally omit. Is this a liberation of sorts? Suffering pushing me toward something, someone, so what is done to the collective body in this telling? Affects create meaning through circulation between bodies. A circulation to my cousin, a circulation to the reader.

↔

This re-collection gave an excuse to re-*member* family members, cousins. (Re)*member*, bring together (again). Maybe I have created new meanings for my cousin, my memories, for the time that has lapsed, and for the tumultuous, pivotal emotions during those years and in the after. Maybe this is the point of re-membering, a coming-together that allows for relational peace, even if the wounds will always exist. Or maybe, this re-membering fosters understandings that can help build bridges over difficult divisions to shift, once again, how my cousin and I relate to one another as ~~siblings~~ cousins. Words are powerful, creating movement in our emotions, in us. Words do, and maybe the reconnection and recollection of this project does something, through our words and emotions, for one another. Emotions, suffering and grief, expose the vulnerability in our ordinary moments. Maybe, Grief calls us to make commonalities, to reach out to the connections out t/here. A crucial possibility, we collide with others and undo ourselves.

Writing about our personal, embodied, and affective movements through life requires the whole body, not just the mind or heart. To draw divides in our bodies, treating our bodies as mere pieces, minimizes our embodied experience as a form of knowing. On writing, Trinh notes "closure and openness, again, are one ongoing process: we do not have bodies, we are our bodies, as we are ourselves while

being in the world."[19] An underlying affect surges bodies, both in the ordinary and extraordinary days of our lives. An emotional charge exists and meaning arises when affect becomes circulated – in a touch, through words, objects, or gestures. For years, silent musings characterized my re/collections of this past. This project opened the collection of memories with my cousin about a shared time in our lives, *a home capable of expanding*. On ordinary affects, Kathleen Stewart writes "It's transpersonal or prepersonal – not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water."[20] Interactions with others implicates our bodies, an interdependence rooted in our human composition. In life writing, the reader now is witness, implicated in the story, connected by the memories and emotions shared. So, welcome.



[19] Trinh T. Min-ha, *Women, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 36.
[20] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 128.