

o n m e m o r y

s a m g o l i

Placement

Four feet to my left and six feet below the grass lies a cement box containing the pastel pink casket in which my grandmother's body rests—a color and style she selected and paid for years prior, which, upon reflection, I realize matched the sweatshirt and pant combination she often wore—and tucked into her right hand, a note I wrote by candle-light, face flushed both by the glow of the flame and an inner swell, the morning of her wake almost one year ago.

And from this plot, another may or may not arise.

Two feet in front of me, sitting on low beach chairs on the steep hill of the cemetery, my mother and her older brother converse en español about the sandwich shop down the street where he would like to take us for lunch. As they chatter on about the variety of carne they offer, my sister and I exchange glances in recognition that we will have to pick up food elsewhere since they don't have meatless options. As I return my gaze toward my mother, I notice she has in her hands an emerald quartz heart, half-wrapped in an off-white cotton handkerchief, that I identify as having belonged to her mother.

Regardless of whether or not I have seen these artifacts before, I release a deep sigh as I watch her fold and unfold the cloth, clench and release the stone, thinking about how those two objects, observed together, evoke the spirit of my grandmother and I feel a sense of her presence through these representations.

How long can one possibly live? They say one may live as long as the last person who remembers them.

I begin to wonder where she purchased the two, whether *en México* or somewhere in her adopted *Los Ángeles*. Did she pray over the heart like she did the two inch gold medallion with *El Señor Jesuchristo* on the front and *Nuestra Señora de San Juan de Los Lagos* on the back that she wore around her neck since as long as I can remember, which I now clutch and run my thumb over in my right pant pocket? I don't display this relic to anyone except, on occasion, my mother because of the commotion it causes amongst certain

relatives. Minerva Villarreal gave it to me herself at a time when she acknowledged the fragility of her age and wanted to gift her short list of possessions to her kin, at a time when she still contained the memories of her life, when she could remember whether she ate that day or not, when she still knew where she was, when she still knew my name.

In those years, when she remembered, the housing market in California had not yet crashed and my siblings and I all still lived at my parents' house on the westside. We would still go to mass every Saturday evening and go for dinner afterward as family, because even though we knew Sunday belonged to the Lord, not a single one of us—save for my mother and hers— would dare wake up before ten in the morning. But we did things that way, our way. These days the only place half of us find God is on the money we earn to pay the rent.

I often wonder how we made it this far—my family creating life in America. I don't mean that I doubted them or am surprised. I just can never ask my grandmothers about their stories again. I could hear it from their children, sure, but those firsthand accounts have come and gone, and here I am now putting together the pieces.

To know what they felt when they arrived, Minerva from *Monterrey* and Karimeh from *Bethlehem*, and not just that they arrived, would enrich the narrative I have of their migration, of their realities. I would have an account of their stories, and not a version twice-removed from their own truths—the re-telling as described by their children. Now we have too many gaps to fill. So to whom do these stories even belong, and who wrote them?

They also say that representations of the self, photos and possessions, will outlive us. I think about this as I continue watching my mother with the emerald quartz heart. After a moment, she folds it back up and returns it to her brother.

How can I let her go? I hear him ask but not really asking at all, more like insisting in its absurdity. He recounts to us the times his friends point out to him how often he comes to visit his mother's grave, as if once a week were too much for a grieving man who

happens to live only five minutes from the cemetery.

Three feet behind them, I observe my father pacing, not really listening to any of the conversation happening around him, and looking in all directions for the source of the smoke that has been wafting our way since we arrived thirty minutes ago. It smells of barbecue and I anticipate that within the next five minutes he will suggest that we leave and head to lunch.

Almost on cue, he finds a moment of silence and cuts through it like a knife asking if we would like to leave now. Despite predicting the arrival of that question, I can barely contain myself and shoot him an unapologetic glare, reprimanding him for only concerning himself with his stomach and can't he see we all came to spend time together to remember grandma.

Immediately after, I notice him bow his head either in discomfort or acquiescence and as I let my frustration dissipate, it occurs to me that I can't remember the last time any of us went to visit either of his parents' graves.

I look toward my brother and sister for solace, who have both made themselves comfortable on the *sarape* we laid on the grass, feeling somewhat guilty for having reacted with such agitation. They stare back in silence, thanking me with their eyes, and I kneel down with them, suddenly aware of this familiar scene. Out of the corner of my eye I try to assess my mother's spirit, and even though she says nothing, I can feel her relief.

After a heavy pause, my uncle returns to a discussion we had earlier, as if nothing had happened, about replacing the coolant fluid in my car, giving me clear instructions on how to do it myself. As he gets into the technicalities, I notice three coyotes appear over his shoulder in the distance. I pay them little attention, reasoning that they likely inhabit this land and therefore yield no danger, but I underestimate our dog's senses, and within moments he begins growling from under the embrace of my sister's arm where he has been nestled quietly throughout our visit.

My entire family turns in the direction in which our dog now snarls, suddenly more alert than they've been all morning, and while

the coyotes remain far off, they can't help but to grow more alarmed, particularly my brother who begins packing up our belongings at once. I suggest that the pack doesn't seem too interested in us, pointing out that they probably often encounter humans, and eventually we are able to subdue our Jack Russell, which grants us a bit more time to devote to our little patch of familial unity on the hill.

Although my mother's sisters and their families couldn't join us on the first anniversary of my *abuelita's* passing, I feel our cohesiveness more than I have in years. This isn't the first loss we've experienced, my immediate family and I, but something about watching and loving a person throughout their life cycle—through life, through aging, through palpable decline—seems to have made us all aware of our own mortality—the certainty of losing each other, one by one. And when I think back to when I was small and I would sneak into the back room of Grandma Karimeh's house with my cousin to find her box of cigarettes so that we could break them, and in our minds thus prevent her from smoking, all of our efforts seem so futile and I wish in that moment to pause time.

As we make our way down the hill toward our cars, finally heeding our grumbling stomachs, one of the coyotes wanders in my direction and we make eye contact. We stand there, about fifty feet between us, examining each other. After a moment I move closer, ignoring the warnings from my family, feeling a budding gratitude for this encounter. With eyes locked I crouch down, desperate to preserve this moment, and pull out my camera. As I wind the film, choose the aperture, and set the shutter speed, the coyote waits, never looking away. In a second, I snap the photograph and our moment ends, passing so quickly yet feeling more infinite than ever, and I file this memory alongside another: a portrait of my *abuelita* erupting in laughter watching *Sabado Gigante* on the rocking chair in the living room of my parents' house, as she did every Saturday.

Some memories fade over time, losing strength because of their triviality, or get replaced by others the longer we move through life. Others shuffle around like pebbles in a stream, present but take time

to uncover. And yet others still embed themselves like the roots of a tree, taking hold so deep that they become you.

As I turn back to return to my family, I notice that yards away at the top of the hill, in the shade of a tree, the other two coyotes lounge with their eyes squinted and panting in the heat, lending to the impression of a serene smile.

Displacement

I question why I'm sharing this vignette. Most days, and especially during significant moments, I feel the elusiveness of the minutes that I live, and then lose instantly over and over. Maybe I want to remember everything, feeling ever nostalgic for the now. I can say, at least, that's why I take photographs.

Or maybe, it's coping.

I try hard to preserve—to remember, to document, to hold space for—the stories of my family and my ancestors and my life, but at some point I lose certainty about whether I, in actuality, write non-fiction or fiction. Everything I narrated in the preceding section happened. But could I really assert that any of it is the truth?

The other day I found journals I kept as I entered early adulthood and as I read the pages, I noticed how differently I remember and understand the stories of my own life now versus then. Different details stand out, different events have shifted in their significance. But aren't these *my stories*? Shouldn't I be certain of my own narrative? I've been building my identity on them my whole life but suddenly I'm not sure if it's dependent on my ever-changing *memory* of them or of the events themselves.

If any of the stories turn out not to be true, does it even matter? At some point they were real enough to make me who I am. Is that enough?

What happens to identity once we've forgotten? I contemplate this often, especially when I think of my grandmother and how she understood herself and her life, or didn't, as her memory faded. Maybe she didn't pay it any attention. But with it went part of our history.

By writing down these events, these narratives, these vignettes, I've transformed them, reframed them, produced a copy of the truth. They've been composed from memory and filtered through a—my—consciousness, which are both fallible. So, does the truth only exist in the Now? And if so, why bother with any of it? What am I doing?

I don't know.

Either way, whether it matters or it doesn't, here I am anyway. Writing. Exploring.

Maybe I'll arrive at some conclusion by the end. Maybe I won't and I'll keep writing and re-writing the same stories, compounding them with future experiences, in future contexts.

It all starts to feel a bit narcissistic at some point. I look to Socrates for consolation in moments like this, when I feel self-conscious: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

I shrug, not knowing if that changes anything.

Replacement

I didn't mean to write this story, or any other subsequent one for that matter. I encountered it when I flipped through notebooks I'd kept with quotes that I'd scrawled down from books I'd read, when I reread journals I'd kept and notes I'd jotted to myself about observations and feelings I had, when I reflected on other stories I'd written and what compelled me to do so in the first place. I put this all together, essentially compiling my thoughts, noticing patterns, over the last two decades. Now I am left with a puzzle.

As I look forward, whatever I write, photograph, film, compose—from now until an arbitrary end—attempt to put it together, to reassemble, to see the whole picture. In other words: to reclaim our history, to reframe experience and trauma, and to let go.