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COMPOSING A LITERARY ADOPTION MEMOIR AND SELF THROUGH
CREATIVE NONFICTION MEMOIR WRITING

BY

JAMIE K. NAGY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts

Major in English

South Dakota State University

2015

COMPOSING A LITERARY ADOPTION MEMOIR AND SELF THROUGH
CREATIVE NONFICTION MEMOIR WRITING

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Masters of Arts in English degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidates are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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Date

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Jim and Marilyn Stirrett. Thank you for your unconditional love during all of my years through this very day. You both have loved me well, and I thank you for the love and support you have given to my husband and I, and to our children—your grandchildren. We love you dearly.

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I dedicate this thesis to our five children—Nick, Tyler, T.J., Natalie, and Naika. Thank you for adjusting seamlessly to a mother turned graduate student three years ago. You all adapted to the changes in the flow of our home, and you each found ways to encourage me during the entire process.

I dedicate this thesis to my best friend Deb Schaefer.

Debbie, you absolutely held me together.

I dedicate this thesis to my search angel and friend, Lynne Banks. You walked me through all of these moments. You lent me your courage.

I dedicate this thesis to my birth half-brother Kris Gnagey, and to the other birth family members who have welcomed me and helped me: Martha Barnes, Paula Clarke and her family, Vicky Heinecke, Vic and Ellie Ostaszewki and their family, and James King. And, I dedicate this dissertation to my thesis advisor, Dr. Christine Stewart. Thank you for your instruction, your thoughtful feedback on my writing, your time, and mostly for your belief in me as a writer.

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ABSTRACT

COMPOSING A LITERARY ADOPTION MEMOIR AND SELF THROUGH
CREATIVE NONFICTION MEMOIR WRITING

JAMIE K. NAGY

2015

Adoption writings span across various forms, such as fiction, non-fiction, essays, poetry, theatre, and scholarly fields of study. While many of these adoption writings speak to the complexities of adoption, the general public still tends to see adoption “such a beautiful thing” to do—as the best plan for the child, a noble act, a selfless decision, and a solution to a long-standing social issue. This thesis explores the “literary adoption memoir”—artful writings about real life happenings; my contribution to this genre addresses the complexities of the closed adoption era, transnational/transracial adoption, and parenting an adoptee as an adult adoptee.

For this project, I share my process and the theories that validate and inform my felt experiences as an adoptee and as an adoptive mom. I use the literary tools in the creative nonfiction genre to write not a mere record of events of my adoption, of adopting our daughter, of searching for my birth family. I offer pieces of creative nonfiction that represent my desire for a final project: a literary adoption memoir—a memoir of real life that borrows from the literary world, and a memoir that speaks to the complications in adoption—to loss, abandonment, belonging, identity, and rejection.

Adopted

My first set of parents loved me, I know,
because they cared enough to let me go.

The parents I have now love me too.

We're stuck together like molasses, or glue.

I'm an adopted child you see.

That's why I have two sets of parents, and only one of me.

Sometimes I wonder who my parents really are.

If only they would have left me a little memoir.

I love the parents I have now.

I'll never leave them no way and no how.

~~Jamie Kay Stirrett Nagy circa 1982, age 12

Introduction: The Early Years

September 2007, one year after we adopted Naika from Haiti, I hide in my bedroom, down the hall, last room on the right, under covers, in pajamas, with white noise fan and ice to chomp. I scour the Internet for help, someone, anyone. Our Haitian daughter has only tiptoed in our home for one year, and it seems she might undo our prior fourteen. She hides too. She hides Barbies after she cuts jags in their hair; she hides candy bars she thinks she might need later; she hides toys she broke in two; she hides books she scribbled on. And she hides her feelings like a soldier. I need help.

The helpers suggest recreating her early years to retrieve those years we missed with each other. So, I cradle our two-and-a-half year old in my arms like a baby, and try to feed her a bottle—no a sippy cup—no, she likes the bottle but juice instead of milk—ok, I will try the sippy cup again. The goal of the therapy: to offer one-on-one time with me, to get her to gaze into my eyes, to replicate the attachment that occurs during feeding times. I play by the rules of the therapy for a while--removing the bottle/sippy cup when she stops making eye contact. But time after time, she avoids my eyes, avoids looking at my face—stares at the walls in the room or roams the room with her eyes. Eventually I give in and then give up.

During those early years, I “practiced” for graduate school: I researched answers to my questions, I sought more knowledge, and I studied adoption. I read details about the paperwork (the I-600A form for the United States Citizenry and Immigration Services, the proof of financial stability papers, the home study, the fingerprint papers, the recommendation letters, and more). I compared data other adoptive parents’ number

of months from when they started the process to when they brought their child home. And once Naika came home, I continued as a student of adoption. I researched parenting adoptees, transnational and transracial adoption, adoption and language acquisition, adoption and brain development. As a student of adoption, I also wrote--prayers, journal entries, online pleas for help from other adoptive parents, and blog posts. MMy experience as a new adoptive mom pushed me to discover what others have to say about adoption, and I soon discovered that the institution of adoption has given birth (and continues to do so) to innumerable amounts and forms of written expressions. Members of the adoption triad (adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents) write and publish memoirs,² essays and poetry,³ “self help” books,⁴ blogs and online adoption support group posts,⁵ dramatic performances,⁶ movies,⁷ documentaries,⁸ fictitious novels,⁹ and

² *Black Baby, White Hands: A View from the Crib* Jaiya John, *Found and The Truth Book* Jennifer Lauck, *Twice Born* Betty Jean Lifton, *The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse Among Jehovah's Witnesses* Joy Castro, *Beneath a Tall Tree* Jean Strauss, *Three Little Words* Ashley Rhodes-Courter, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* Jana Wolff

³ *Chosen: Living with Adoption* ed. Perlita Harris. *Parenting as Adoptees* ed. Adam Chau and Kevin Ost-Vollmers. *Beyond Good Intentions* Cheri Register

⁴ *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew* Sherrie Eldridge, *Attachment in Adoption* Deborah D. Gray, *The Connected Child: Bringing Hope and Healing to your Adoptive Family* Karen Purvis

⁵ thelostdaughters.com, attaattachtruthoutadoptioncollection.wordpress.com, adoptionbirthmothers.com, chinaadoptiontalk.blogspot.com, adoptiontriaddance.wordpress.com

⁶ *Blank* Brian Stanton. *Sometimes Hope is Enough* Michael Oatman. *Biohazard* Sarah Elizabeth Greer

⁷ *Juno*, *August Rush*, *Then She Found Me*, *October Baby*, *Philomena*

⁸ *A Girl Like Her* Ann Fessler, “DMC: My Adoption Journey” Darryl “DMC” McDaniels, “Closure” Angela Tucker

⁹ *orphan train* Christina Baker Kline, *Secret Daughter* Shilpi Somaya Gowda, *Salvage* Keren David

psychological explorations.¹⁰ Adoption writings also intersect with fields of study in anthropology, psychology, human development and family studies, cultural studies, neuroscience, social work and more.¹¹ Further, adoption stories exist in our popular culture. For example, in 2012, Oprah Winfrey revealed that a sister she never knew about found her; Oprah aired her sister's search, their reunion, and their mother's response (the birth mom) to being found—all on her show.¹² Troy Dunn created a show called *The Locator* inspired by his search for his mother's birth family, and ancestry.com airs celebrities' journeys to find their ancestral ties on *Who Do You Think You Are?* As stated in the Preface to Marianne Hirsch's and Nancy K. Miller's book *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, "The twenty-first century seems strangely attached to the past" (xi). The search for identity and for our past resonates in our current culture; and what I found resonated with me.

Introduction: Adoption Stories, Adoption Writings

I hide myself in the Brookings Public Library, in an old wood cubicle where I think no one will find me. I want to learn, I want to do better, I want to do right. Like a student, I annotate articles on adoption, on parenting children who come from an orphanage—children with attachment disorders. I paraphrase or sometimes directly quote knowledge into my bright pink spiral notebook. But the intellectual guise of the

¹⁰ *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience* Betty Jean Lifton, *The Psychology of Adoption* David Brodzinsky and Marshal Schechter, *Coming Home to Self* Nancy Verrier

¹¹ Search terms speak to the complexity of this issue. For example: attachment, attachment trauma, adoption trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, early relational trauma and neuroscience, neurosequential model of therapeutics, attachment behavioral system.

¹² <http://www.firstmotherforum.com/2011/01/oprahs-mother-didnt-die-when-her-secret.html?sref=fb>

library and the hot pink positive attitude spiral notebook only hold me up for about forty minutes. Then I write: “Heavenly Father, thank you for who you are. For how you love us and bless us. I’m so thankful for the family you have blessed us with, and I’m asking you to please cover our home in peace. Father, please help me to parent Naika. I feel overwhelmed. I need Your guidance, Your wisdom. I am hurting so much. I don’t know how to do this and I’m losing my grip.” Splotches of tears pool on the paper, warping the dark blue ink.

Reading adoption writings in the library, on the Internet, in books helped me, yes; but sometimes, the more I read, the more discouraged I felt. The stories of children with “attachment disorder” led me to see our daughter only through that lens; the stories affected how I functioned as her mother, and affected the “culture” of our home. The stories opened the door of “community” to me, to others’ shared experiences and recommendations; and I also sometimes felt doomed by the stories—that I could never live up to the required standard of parenting, that my daughter could never recover from this “disorder,” that our family would never be the same. For the stories in our culture that we tell, read, watch, and hear matter. As Adam Pertman said during my interview with him, “Language affects the culture affects the language” (Nagy). The language we use and the stories we tell influence our culture and can serve as education. In my readings, I found “adoption writings” that seek to educate through storytelling. For example, adoptee Jean Strauss shares stories from her own experience and others’ in her published columns, and opinion pieces, in *Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Adoptive Parents*, which explores the process of search

and reunion and also its potential effects on various parties involved. In *Instant Mom*, adoptive mom Nia Vardolas narrates her experience and exploration of parenting an adopted child. *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, by trauma therapist Dr. Bruce Perry, educates about children, trauma, brain development and healing through stories of children Perry worked with over decades of therapeutic practice. Similarly, Ann Fessler compiles various stories of birth moms from the closed records and pre-Roe v. Wade era in *The Girls Who Went Away* and educates readers about a part of our cultural adoption history.

These memoirs and stories give readers insight into the complications around the real lives and perspectives of real people involved in adoption, but other adoption writings can unfortunately mislead our culture.¹³ For example, news stories about celebrities who adopt transnationally seem to have grown in popularity recently, and the tabloid pictures surely oversimplify the reality. These celebrity adoptive parents cast a shimmer of glamour on adoption, and then others stories in our culture romanticize the orphan condition. *Anne of Greene Gables*, *Pippi Longstocking*, and *Annie* teach our culture about orphans who always have a smile on their face, orphans who can win anyone over, and orphans who actually do not need adults. Further, some adoption writings pull from tropes of mystery novels, treasure hunt stories, and “what was once

¹³A note about adoption in fiction: Some adoption writings pathologize members of the triad, and if what Pertman states holds truth, these stories do not teach adoption well: Jodi Thomas’s *Wild Texas Rose* tells a story of a seemingly young smart beautiful adult adoptee who seems “unable to commit” to romantic relationships and cannot handle much stress; Caroline B. Cooney’s *Three Black Swans* posits adoption as a prank to pull on someone else; Fern Michaels writes of a birth mother who returns to ask first for money, and then for her babies in *Deadly Deals*; and the film *Flirting with Disaster* places an adoptee searching for his birth family in contact with a “sexy adoption counselor” and the two end up having an affair.

lost is now found” sentiments. For example, Jean Strauss’s *Beneath a Tall Tree* tells the story of her search to find her birth family. Nicole J. Burton’s *Swimming Up the Sun* tells a similar story of the author’s journey to find her birth mom in the UK. She writes of the search and the reunion and the variations of fallout that occur with various family (both adoptive and birth) members. Burton’s adoption memoir titled *Swimming up the Sun* carries the reader through details of her search for her birth family:

I went straight to the big black marriage registers and pulled them off the shelf with a quiet fury, one by one, beginning with August 1956, the month following my birth . . . At *Jan Feb Mar 1957*, I waited impatiently until another patron finished his copying . . . I lifted it onto the worn oak reading table and ran my index finger down the chronological list of names. My heart was racing as if I knew she were nearby . . . Volume after volume, I traced the names down the avenue of one side, up the boulevard of the next . . . My finger stopped as my eyes took in the entry: EVE WRIGHT married DEREK GOODMAN in Nthmbld. W. [1b 704] . . . My mother’s middle initial was missing but the name was unusual enough I wasn’t concerned. (20-21)

As an adoptee, I read these memoirs and appreciate the familiarity of the emotions wrapped around each new “find.” And, the details of my journey as an adult adoptee sleuthing with the help of current technology for my birth family, traveling to the places surrounding my adoption (adoption agencies and social work offices in Chicago, public libraries to locate pictures in yearbooks, cemeteries, my birth mom’s and birth dad’s

childhood homes, etc.) offers suspense in an unfolding story with twists and turns that would hold a reader's attention.

For this project, however, I put down most of the details of the adopting, the searching, the finding, the contacting, etc. For this project, I focus my attention on the following: on **literary** writing, on **adoption**, and on **memoir**--written not as a mere record of events, shared in a linear timeline, but as a way to write toward the heart and complexity of adoption. I identify myself as an adult adoptee from the closed era of adoption, and as an adoptive mother of a transnational transracial daughter. I write the story of my awakening to the loss of my own birth culture through observing my Haitian-born adopted daughter's attempts to assimilate into our family. I seek to write a "literary adoption memoir"—a memoir of real life happenings that borrows from the literary world; and, I seek to do so in a manner that speaks to readers beyond the topic of "just" adoption toward loss, abandonment, belonging, identity, and rejection.

Adoption as Trauma: Naika's Experience

I imagine Naika's birth mom, Marie, in Port au Prince, Haiti, August 2003. A steamy 85 degree day, Mama Marie walks the crumbled dirt path toward the orphanage, with her older son shuffling behind her. Her six-month old baby girl Naika on her hip, Mama Marie's heart boarded up so she cannot feel this hurt, so she cannot change her mind. Once they arrive on the front step of the Three Angel's Children's Home in Port-au-Prince, I imagine Mama Marie tells her son, Steven, to knock on the door. They probably hear laughter and singing from children's voices through the teal-painted wooden door of the orphanage. Maxon (a Haitian orphanage worker) opens the door.

"I need to leave my baby here for adoption," Mama Marie says to him.

Maxon wrinkles his forehead.

"Why? She is beautiful. And she doesn't look hungry. She looks healthy."

"No. No. I cannot take care of her. I cannot feed her," replies Marie as she shakes her head back and forth. Mama Marie lifts Naika off her hip and places her in Maxon's strong Haitian muscular arms.

I imagine Naika's dark brown eyes get larger, get darker. She looks to her mama's face, to her voice, to her eyes. Maxon's muscles try to cradle her, cuddle her, and then restrain her. She finds no soft bosom. He smells tanned and leathery, and spicy. He smiles at Naika and talks silly words in his unfamiliar voice. She stares at his eyebrows, his mouth, his teeth and tongue. That day, she will meet and try to play with twenty-nine other children and four "nannies." That night, she will try to feel safe enough to sleep without her Mama.

While birth moms often make decisions to place their children for adoption with the best intentions and out of fear that they cannot provide for their children, the children still experience abandonment and confusion. And while the orphanage workers and the foster and adoptive parents often strive to take the best care of these children, the orphans still experience fear and loss. Dr. Bryan Post (founder of the Post Institute for Family-Centered Therapy) defines trauma in his trainings and education as anything that happens to us that we deem *unexpected* and *negative*. Based on that definition, various life events could constitute trauma in varying degrees—hot coffee spilled in our lap, a fall out of a tree, a car crash, and life’s challenges such as miscarriages, infertility, and separation between mother and baby.¹⁴ Through my readings of adoption writings, I discovered theories that suggest adoption as trauma: Naika experienced *unexpected* changes in her living environment, and she could deem them as *negative* as they all involved loss—loss of birth mom, loss of familiarity. And because of the *unexpected* and *negative* in adoption, we cannot responsibly only refer to adoption as “the best thing for the baby” or simply claim only that “adoption is beautiful”:

What the general population considers to be a concept, a social solution for the care of children who cannot or will not be taken care of by their biological parents, is really a two-part, devastating, debilitating experience for the child. The first part of the experience is the abandonment itself. No matter how much the mother wanted to keep her baby and no matter what the altruistic or intellectual reasons she had for relinquishing him or her, *the*

¹⁴ Visit postinstitute.com to view more of Dr. Post’s work and resources. And, for a compelling and well-known discussion of adoption as trauma, see *Primal Wound* by Nancy Verrier.

child experiences the separation as abandonment. The second part of the experience is that of being handed over to strangers. (Verrier 14)

While I can only imagine Naika's abandonment experience as Mama Marie left her at the orphanage, I had a front row seat to her reaction to "being handed over to strangers." I witnessed her behaviors, and then in my readings, I learned about "Behavior as Communication" (Verrier *Coming Home* 95); "Sometimes, especially when trauma is involved, a person's behavior is an indication of early wounding. It is a cry for understanding—an acted out message" (95). In our home, Naika reacted to her trauma with bedtime and naptime screams in my ear, with a rigid and always alert body, with a frightened look on her face, and with attempts to control the adults who seemed to have caused all of this upheaval in her life. Eventually, these experiences would find their way into my creative nonfiction pieces and into my poetry during graduate school as I sought to make sense of what happened in our home, to make sense of my relationship with my daughter.

As a mother of five, this one addition of a little adoptee to our family challenged everything I thought I knew about parenting. For instance, at barely three years old, Naika hid her sister's over-sized Barbie coloring book. I sought advice from a counselor I had met with a few times (not an adoption-specialized counselor, though) about how to handle this: we could not find the book; I knew that Naika knew where we could find it; and Naika completely denied that she had done anything with the book. At this stage of parenting Naika, I agreed with the counselor—that I had to win the battles. And so, I told Naika that she would have to stay in her room until we found the book. Naika spent that entire day into the evening in her room; she opted to not eat, to not use the bathroom, and

to give only inaccurate hints of where I might find the coloring book—sending me on goose chases all over the house. I increasingly felt terribly about keeping her in her room all day, and I did eventually find the coloring book on my own.

After about a year of approaching Naika’s behaviors like that—as a matter of discipline and consequences, I found help for parenting children with a trauma history through reading and through finding social workers and a counselor specially trained in trauma and adoption. I learned that her behaviors required a therapeutic response—not disciplinary consequences. I learned that she would not respond to or benefit from discipline until the relationship between us becomes authentic. I learned that I must ignore the behavior, but never ignore the child. So, even if I knew that she had ripped something, hid something, stolen something, I had to ignore what she had done and actually pull her in closer to me—facilitate a “time in” for her rather than a “time out.”

Neither Naika nor I managed well. Neither one of us wanted “time in” together.

I cried.

I craved methods for the madness.

“I’m going put you on an anti-depressant and something for anxiety—something to treat you for post-traumatic stress disorder,” my doctor said.

“Isn’t PTSD something soldiers experience after they witness a bomb going off or something?” I asked my doctor.

“Well, you had a bomb go off in your home.”

I swallowed those pills.

Adoption as Trauma: Re-seeing my adoption as trauma

One night, I startle awake with a ping sensation in my head, and I feel the loss of my birth mom in that moment, as if it just happened. I grab my husband's sleeping arm and with my eyes open, I watch the umbilical cord float toward the right corner of our bedroom ceiling—illuminated in the darkness of the room, out of my reach. She lost me I lost her. The center of my stomach aches. A few other nights, I wake my husband from sleep with a fear that I have cancer or a brain tumor. I feel afraid that I am dying. I feel like I am evaporating out of my family. My husband drives me to the emergency room on these nights; they check me over and send me home. Because I am "fine."

As an adoptee myself, growing up, I lived in the “adoption is beautiful” box. But when we brought Naika from Haiti as our fifth child, I climbed out of that box. Naika’s fear, anger, and protests awakened similar feelings in me, and I began to recognize myself as the genetically unrelated daughter of my parents. Watching my daughter express her grief and loss through her behaviors (her quietness, her rigid body, her hoarding of food, her lack of trust in me as her mom) opened my eyes to my own grief over the loss of my birth family. In my fervent reading about all things adoption, I came across Betty Jean Lifton’s *Lost & Found: The Adoption Experience*. This book, predicts my awakening: “I like to think of Adoptees as being in the great tradition of sleepers. It is as if the act of adoption put us under a spell that numbed our consciousness. When we awaken it startles us to realize we might have slept our lives away, floating and uprooted” (71). Lifton also references P. L. Travers in her *About the Sleeping Beauty*: “Travers tells

us ‘things long unknowingly known have suddenly been remembered’” (72). At age thirty-seven, I felt myself suddenly remembering my loss.

As I witnessed Naika’s protests, I wondered about mine. I imagined after spending nine months in my birth mother’s womb, I *expected* to meet her, to smell her, to hear her, to feel her, and for her to care for me. Instead, she left me—an *unexpected* and *negative* event for me as a newborn. In Nancy Verrier’s *Coming Home to Self*, she writes: “The baby who cannot get his mother back, despite his cries (protesting her disappearance and beseeching her return), is helpless, overwhelmed, thrown into chaos, and eventually goes into shock . . . it takes about 45 minutes for an infant separated from his mother to go into shock” (8).¹⁵ So, how long did I cry after they removed me from my birth mom? How did I respond when strange smelling and sounding nurses fed me? changed my diaper? spoke silly words to me? Does it say anything in my medical records about them giving me Barbitrol—the drug they gave babies who could not calm down? And how did I cope with leaving the almost-familiar hospital setting (in what and with whom?) to arrive at a foster home—without the security of my birth mom’s voice? Had I already resigned myself to a life without her, so that after three days in the hospital and three days in the foster home, I had already become an excellent adapter? (My mother did share with me that I did not cry tears until after the age of two. But for years, our mutual interpretation of that phenomenon centered on my happy nature as a baby. Now, I wondered if my lack of tears speaks more to my survival strategy of adaptation, or to my too early reluctance to show emotion--did I cry for my birth mom to no avail, and thus, learn not to cry?)

¹⁵ Verrier leans on research found in Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Chilton Pearce’s *Magical Child* and *Evolution’s End*.

Awake now, I realized that before our adoptive parents “chose” us, our birth parents left us. We are leave-able. Viewing myself as leave-able, as abandon-able, changed my free writing in my spiral notebook, and forever changed the content of my writing. I wrote about my own experience as an adoptee and wrote to explore my experiences as a baby and as an adoptee; I wrote about parallels and points of difference between my daughter’s experience and mine. Naika made visible to me what a child goes through in abandonment, separation, disruption. I noticed that most people could grasp Naika’s experience as traumatic because “it” happened to her at an older age, and the orphanage living carried emotional weight. But when I shared about the trauma in a newborn baby’s experience of separation from its mother, most people furrowed their brows, and asked an incredulous, “Really? You don’t remember any of that, do you, though?” I sought more information, more scientific proof, about the possibility of my own adoptee experience as trauma. I sought validation for what I felt and what I began to write about—that my adoptee experience also, like Naika’s, included two parts—abandonment and being handed over to strangers.¹⁶

Adoption as Trauma: Complicating our adoption narratives

I stand in line on the playground pavement, waiting my turn in foursquare.

¹⁶ I cannot simply refer to my parents as “strangers” in this text and leave it without noting the following: I love my parents. My parents are my parents. They always have been and they always will be. I do not consider my parents “strangers” today, after having been their daughter for over forty-five years. I have parents who continue to support me completely and unconditionally through these years of making sense of adoption for myself.

“Yeah, she’s adopted,” Scott throws his words. Sandy brown hair, big round eyes, a couple of dimples. Scott lives two houses down from me. I would have a crush on him if he weren’t my neighbor. He knows too much and he teases me all the time.

“Really? How come your parents gave you up?” asks the kid.

“My birth parents loved me so much that they wanted to give me a better life—better than what they could give me. And so they placed me for adoption. And then my parents chose me,” I throw my words too. I know the story. No big deal.

I grew up with a healthy self-esteem that helped me to resist peer pressure, to lead, to achieve.¹⁷ But many years later, as Naika’s adoptive mom, I did not speak much to her about her adoption story. We looked at pictures from the orphanage together, we honored her birth mom “Mama Marie” in prayers and conversations, but I never quite settled on an “entrance narrative” for her that she refers to as her story in a definitive way. The language barrier kept me initially from conversing with her much about such emotionally weighted content. And my awakening to the abandonment that accompanies an adoption narrative stole my tongue, and complicated my own story. Also, several post-my-era “adoption writings” warn about the pressure of the “chosen” child syndrome.¹⁸ But interestingly, after she had lived with us for at least five years, I asked her if she would like for me to tell her the story about her adoption. She nodded yes. I told her as many details as I could remember—including the fact that a friend of ours brought over

¹⁷ H. Kranstuber’s & J. Koenig Kellas’s research on “entrance narratives” in adoptees states: “Those with the chosen child theme also had significantly higher self-esteem than other adoptees. They were taught that they were special and unique in the world, and it seems that this positive view of self is also reflective of an optimistic view of the world” (194).

¹⁸ See Lifton’s *Lost and Found* Chapter 4, “The Chosen Baby.”

several pictures of children who needed homes, but none of them moved my heart. Then, “they brought me a photo of you,” I told her, “and I knew we would adopt you. We chose you.” When I finished, I asked Naika if she liked any part of the story the best, and she (without hesitation) said, “the part about you choosing me.” My efforts to avoid referring to her as “chosen” seemed nonsensical now, if not harmful. She, like me as a young person, enjoyed hearing that we had chosen her.

But “to be chosen is to be acted upon—to be passive. It is not to choose” (Lifton 19). Adoptees do not do the choosing. And, even if that “chosen” part of the story made us both feel special, I now began to feel the first part of the story—the abandonment part. The part where we did not have a mom for a few days (and for Naika for a couple of years). The part where when we did get a mom, I imagine that she felt like a stranger to us. And now I, the stranger-mom, took Naika out of her familiar, out of her homeland, and forced (?) her to adapt to all new—smells, food, people, language, structure, country, weather, patterns of life, bodies. While others around me continued to compliment me on the “good” we had done in bringing Naika to our family, I witnessed her behaviors that demonstrated *our* pain.

Others (people who live in the “adoption is beautiful” box) tried to comfort me during those years with words like “Oh, what a blessing” for Naika –to have an adoptee for a mother, someone who understands her.” These well-intentioned people clung to a narrative about me as a mom who could parent her extra well because we share adoptee status. But the real story read differently; something kept me from acting with compassion toward her. Instead, my deep understanding created tension. I knew too much. I understood through my research why she lacked trust, wanted to self-parent,

hoarded food, missed social cues; yet, I struggled to respond to her as a compassionate fellow adoptee. Her presence served as a constant and living reminder of *our* displacement from the lives of our biological families. And while others in our family and close friends found humor in her “quirks,” I could not see past the sadness of them. Naika did not have a fellow adoptee mom who had faced the issues and healed; she had a mom facing her early wounds for the first time, and simultaneously trying to parent her. These experiences eventually found their place in my piece “Our Bodies Remember.” There, I explore the longing we both have for our birth families, and the complications that brings to our mother-daughter relationship. We share trauma and loss as mother-daughter adoptees—not the shape of our noses, personality quirks, and hands that look alike.

Adoption as Trauma: Complicating search and reunion

In our kitchen, I hover in front of the refrigerator, pouring over our family calendar. I circle the date the Confidential Intermediary said she mailed the letter to my birth mom. If she mailed the letter that day, what day might my birth mom receive it? I move my finger forward three days. And if she received the letter that day (or this day—the fourth day, maybe), what day might she most likely call the Confidential Intermediary? Would she call the day she opens the letter? Or would she call the next day, maybe after she has a chance to think? But that fourth day is a Friday. Would she call on a Friday? Perhaps she would call the following Monday—to start off the week. Or, maybe she might just send a letter. My entire body swarms around possibilities, dates, and responses. No, I don't wonder why she hasn't tried to find me.

My experience with Naika set me on my search. I felt compelled to find my birth family, to uncover the secrets of my heritage. Lifton's *Lost & Found* validated the impetus for my search. In her chapter titled "The Decision to Search," she references anthropologist Ernest Becker's words from his *The Denial of Death*, and his words echo my doctor's words about a bomb going off in our home: "'There is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions'" (78). My "shock" came in the form of adding an adoptee to our family. And in *Rites of Return*, I read Marianne Hirsch's and Nancy K. Miller's imaginings of "return": "For some, return is an act of undoing—a counterfactual effort to imagine a world before disaster and displacement. That act of imagination can also become an act of repair, however tenuous. For others, it is a claim to justice and restitution" (18). I did not want to undo through returning—to undo my adoption. But I wanted to at least fill in details about my life before "displacement," and yes—to claim the right to know my own life. And so, I pursued "repair" for myself—first through a search for my birth mom.

My appointed Confidential Intermediary (Linda) in the state of Illinois searched for, found, and contacted my birth mother for me. But my birth mom responded with a request for "no contact;" and then after Linda found my birth dad, he also requested "no contact." Still, through a series of "slips" and events and phone calls and travels, I eventually found the identity of both sides of my birth family: Ostaszewski and Bettis. Half-Polish and part Norwegian/part French. A maternal aunt and three siblings, a paternal aunt and three more siblings. With help, I found them all. I met most of them—

siblings, aunts, cousins.¹⁹ In a painful pattern, my initial contact with them went extremely well and included hugs, tears, conversations, questions, answers, laughs, food, drinks, invitations for more “getting to know you” opportunities ahead; and then, they performed abrupt and drastic measures to cut me out. Returned Christmas gifts, sent threatening letters, blocked Facebook pages, requested that I leave them alone.

I thought I had prepared myself for whatever their response might have been; but instead, I fell apart. The reality of first my birth mom’s and then my birth dad’s “No” settled into my self-worth. During those next few years, I responded to their collective “No” with depression. For the entrance narrative I believed, “Your parents loved you so much,” now seemed false. If they loved me so much, why would they not want to know me? And now, my daughter had a mother who had not only experienced abandonment and rejection once at birth, but twice—and resoundingly so from almost the entire birth family, both sides, without an explanation I could understand other than “they thought it best.” In the same way that I sought healing from my wound at birth (loss of my birth mom) through the search and reunion process, I sought healing for this now—for this second rejection.

I studied search and reunion, and rejection. I found stories like mine. Burton’s search for her birth family (told in her memoir *Swimming Up the Sun*) resonated with me at this stage. She writes of unintentional slips, of half-truths told to her in efforts to conceal truth, of names found in births registers, of stories conjured from small bits of evidence on government certificates. I recognized her behavior as similar to my own—

¹⁹ Author and adult adoptee Sherrie Eldridge writes of a similar journey in her *Twenty Truths and Twenty Choices That Can Transform* in the chapter titled “Initial Rejections Shouldn’t Stop Us—The Rest of Our Family May Be Waiting With Open Arms!”

like a terrier dog, relentlessly digging a hole under a fence to get to the other side. My focus had narrowed to an obsession to find them, and as Burton writes—“Persistence paid off” (21). I read Lifton’s *Lost & Found* chapter titled “Stages of the Search,” and I found stories of other searchers hovered over calendars, slips of paper, telephones, mailboxes, and imagined conversations. Other searchers like me placed the rest of their lives on hold and became obsessed and then sometimes strangely ambivalent during the search process.

I read “MARTHA—Mother Refuses to See Her” in Lifton’s chapter titled “Varieties of Reunion Experience” (126). Reading that a second rejection had happened to some one else, and reading of its power over “Martha” helped me: “One of the most devastating experiences for the Adoptee is when the mother—because of shame, guilt, or pride—refuses to meet with the child she once gave up. She has so effectively sealed the wall around that original loss that she cannot respond when the child returns—as if all of her defenses would crumble in the process” (126). Lifton shares that in counseling sessions with “Martha,” they discussed the rejection, and she further validated what I felt: “the refusal of the birth mother to recognize you is a devastating blow. It is as if only she can confirm or deny your existence—her rejection consigns you to the realm of the dead” (129). I had feelings like “Martha”; my children, my husband, would come into my room to ask me a question, to say “hello,” to check on me, and I felt unsure if they could actually see me. If the two people who made me, who saw me first on this earth, who heard my first cry did not want me, then was I really there? Did I really exist? In 1970 (three years before *Roe v. Wade*), they did not choose to abort me, but now I felt as if they might.

In Search of Healing: Running

An excerpt from my piece “Scoop and Run”

They didn't want to know me. For me, that carried the message that they wished I would go away (actually stay away since they already sent me away). They prefer it that way. Me gone. They don't want to know about my life here.

Could they blot me out?

Could they erase me from my husband and five children?

Would I disappear, either by my own volition or theirs?

...

“Debbie, I don't know what's going on, but I feel really weird. Like I'm not really here, or something.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry.” She knows me well—inside out even. I need normal. Our normal routine. And so, we walk for our five minute warm-up on the street in her neighborhood and then begin to run. Relief. Running. Running helps me answer my own questions. No, they cannot erase me. I do have a physical presence. I feel my feet make contact with the ground every step when I run. I have impact. I am alive.

My desire to run where she lived came from the reading I had done about her—about birth moms. I attempted to understand my birth mom's decisions better and I wanted insight into birth moms of her era. I read Ann Fessler's *The Girls Who Went Away* in which women tell their stories of their “illegitimate” pregnancies and their perceived reality of having no choice but adoption. And I read Meredith Hall's *Without a Map: a memoir*. Hall became pregnant in 1965 (five years prior to my birth mom) as a

sixteen-year-old girl. Her family and school and community sent her “away;” and after she gave birth she had to never mention “it” again. Hall eventually removed herself through traveling in an attempt to escape, to heal, to survive. Also, I found pieces like Ronda Slater’s “Poem for an Unknown Daughter, 1973” and Carrie Etter’s “Letter to the Adoptive Parents from the Birthmother” in Susan Ito’s and Tina Cervin’s *A Ghost at Heart’s Edge*. Both of these pieces (and countless others) gave me insight into what my birth mother might have experienced while pregnant with me, after delivering me, and during the years to follow. I still did not know her, but through these other women’s writings, I imagined that I at least understood her better.

The story about my birth parents deciding on adoption because they did not feel financially ready to get married seemed less true in light of my reading; instead, it seemed more accurate that my birth parents fell under the pressure of society’s negative view of unwed mothers at that time and feared what their parents would do and say. I imagined the stress of what my birth mom must have gone through—hiding her pregnancy from her mom and dad, her sister; dropping out of college her senior year; taking a secretarial position at a local community college (I think). And even though she did not write poems or letters that I know of, or share anything about those days with me, I believed that some of what these birth mom writers shared surely echoed my birth mom’s sentiments—anger at the times for making them give up their baby, powerlessness, helplessness, sadness. Still, I felt angry as I tried to write about her, tried to write her thoughts for her, tried to learn about her through my reading and writing, because she would not let me know her. I felt powerless, too.

All the reading and studying I had done on adoption, on search and reunion, on birth mothers, on adult adoptees, etc. helped my understanding, but it did not lead me toward healing; and when my logical mind could make no sense of my emotional state, my body took over. I sought opportunities for movement—mostly running and dance. I began to run, to train for a ½ marathon starting with a “couch to 5K” plan. The rhythm of my feet hitting the ground soothed me and became a necessary part of my week. After five months of training, I ran my first half-marathon in Philadelphia, where my birth mother lived at the time.

Running where she lived seemed another way to imagine her life and a way to restore some agency to myself in my desire to know her better—to place my feet on her ground. I proceeded to run three more half marathons: Fargo, North Dakota, Omaha, Nebraska, (because of their proximity to me), and Champaign, Illinois (where my birth mom delivered me, where I graduated from college, and where I met my husband). After running all of these races, my Independent Study during my graduate studies led me to John R. Ratey’s book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Ratey shares stories of individuals who suffered with various issues—depression, ADD, PTSD, addiction, academic struggles; he shares how exercising to elevate their heart rate improved and in most cases eradicated their issues. I had done some running in high school and college—mostly to train my body, to get in shape. But Ratey’s book suggests that my brain benefitted from running, also. As I read the book, I marveled at how my mind and body had pushed me toward elevating my heart rate, toward running as a scientifically proven healing opportunity. But Ratey states that “we are born movers” and

that we have a biological mind-body relationship; in those days of seeking healing, my mind craved the visceral experience of movement, of running (3).

Ratey's book also helped me understand my months of just the opposite—my months of inactivity, of inward turning—my months of depression and hiding in my room. His chapter titled “Depression: Move Your Mood” validated my experience. Ratey references psychiatrist Alexander Niculescu, who “sees depression as a survival instinct to conserve resources in an environment void of hope—‘to keep still and stay out of harm’s way,’” (excerpt from Niculescu’s *Genome Biology*)” (129-130). And in the same paragraph, Ratey goes on: “When the emotional landscape turns wintry, our neurobiology tells us to stay inside . . . It’s as if our entire being has said, there’s nothing out there for me, so I may as well quit” (130). My brain, mind, and body naturally protected me from risking further emotional damage.

Also, in the chapter titled “Anxiety” I learned the science behind exercise and its ability to decrease anxious responses. Ratey narrates a story about “Amy” who combatted her anxiety disorder through aerobic exercise; while Amy’s traumatic circumstances differed from mine, I, like her, “rediscovered [my] motivation through the movement” and I transitioned from seeing my self as passively rejected to seeing myself “as being active” (90). After Ratey tells Amy’s recovery story, he details the science behind the remedy, and then summarizes “Outrunning the Fear”: “1) It provides distraction, 2) It reduces muscle tensions, 3) It builds brain resources, 4) It teaches a different outcome, 5) It reroutes your circuits, 6) It improves resilience, and 7) It sets you free” (106-108). Through running, my ailing brain, mind, and body had found an avenue toward healing. Through running, I found an active role to play—much different from the passive role I

played in my being abandoned, in my being “chosen,” in my not being allowed to know my birth parents. Through running, I could move myself; I could choose.

In Search of Healing: Dancing

From my slip of “non-identifying information” about my birth parents, I have always believed that my birth mother’s hobby is (was?) dancing. I too have enjoyed participating in dance class since maybe age 3. At this stage of my life, now a mother of five, pushing forty, I return to dance class in search of healing, in search of movement, in hopes to connect somehow through dance to the birth mother I cannot know.

I stand in the front corner, nearest the door, watching Melissa, our dance instructor as she teaches movement phrases that explore the mother-daughter experience: the egg implanting itself in the uterine wall, the early growth of the baby. Melissa rolls herself into a small shape, curls herself into a fetal position. On the ground, she stretches out a foot, an elbow, a hand as a baby pressing into its mother’s womb.

My turn to explore. I move further toward that corner space, near the door. I am slow to enter this dance exploration. I purse my lips in a frown no one notices or cares about, I gaze my eyes toward the corner. I feel invisible enough to remove myself. But I stay, to not be rude. I curl up too, like Melissa. I curl my head toward my tail, roll myself into a small shape. Once there, my mind imagines that I am inside her tummy. My lips soften, and my eyes feel hot.

In those exploratory movements, I re-experience and reframe those days of my life as a baby in the womb, my relationship with my birth mom. I dance the womb phrase loving her—her womb, her heartbeat. I dance the phrase reclaiming her, because I lost

*her too soon and I never wanted to lose her. I dance that phrase feeling her fear—
knowing my existence caused her stress. I dance feeling sorry, and angry.*

Much like running, the patterned rhythm, muscle movements, the somatic practice and the proprioception of dance contributed layers to the healing of my hurts.

Specifically, in modern dance class, Melissa (the instructor) asked us to take our bodies to places of imbalance, to create phrases based on abstract directions, to leap into a stranger's body expecting the stranger to catch, and more. Then, she asked questions: "How did that feel, when you felt like you were falling?" and "Did you like that feeling?" and "How did your body respond as you attempted to move in that direction with that speed toward that person?" Her questions caused me to take note--not of my body's technique necessarily, as much as its response; and, over time, Melissa led me (and others) to consider what my body could teach me, what I could learn about my self from listening to my body as I dance. I began to allow my body experiences to inform my perception of my relationships, my personal choices, my life.²⁰

Also, as an adult adoptee, I began to see and feel my body as my own; growing up, I did not reflect my mother's physical form. My mother's arms and legs differ in that hers seem longer, more "boney." And when we would go shopping for clothes, she would often say, "You're long-waisted"—different from her. Lifton coins the term "Genealogical Bewilderment" in her *Lost & Found*, and she references earlier writings about the subject: British psychiatrist, E. Wellisch, writes "persons outside ourselves are essential for the development of our complete body-image. The most important persons

²⁰ The following search terms speak to the validity of my experience: somatics, somatic-based dance pedagogy, therapeutic dance, somatics and therapy.

in this respect are our real parents and other members of our family. Knowledge of and definite relationship to his genealogy is therefore necessary for a child to build up his complete body image and world picture” (48). I never had access to these “essential” persons. But through finding scraps of photos and stories and people in my birth family, and through dancing and reflective practice, I experienced some healing in discovering what my body could do, could not do, would willingly do, and would only hesitantly do. I began to find and define me—body, mind and heart.

During my creative nonfiction coursework in graduate school, an ekphrasis writing exercise offered me a further opportunity to connect my visceral experiences in dance class, my slip of paper about my birth mom, my experience as a closed adoption era adoptee, and my efforts to know and understand my birth mom. For class, our instructor ushered us into the basement of our university’s art museum to view a wide variety of artistic prints. Our assignment: to notice our reactions to various prints, and to choose one or two prints to respond to with writing. In that collection of prints, I found another’s “slip” of a memory—a print of three actual checks written for dance attire and dance instruction paired with a pink silhouette of a young dancer superimposed on each of the checks. As part of my writing process, I researched about the life of the author of the checks, about the pink silhouetted dancer, about the society and the times surrounding the dates of the checks. As I wrote and revised my “Ekphrasis” piece, I recognized the parallel between what I had done all of my life—imagined my birth parents’ lives from (not a photograph) a slip of paper—and ekphrasis. In both experiences, I pushed myself to write toward discovery of what the slip, the checks, the images tell me about them, the

people I cannot know; the print in the art museum led me to a piece that best holds an artful representation of not knowing my birth mother.

While applying myself to my own healing process, I could not help but recognize (and probably sometimes project) that our Haitian daughter needs healing. And I felt like I tried everything I got my hands on: counseling, visits from a social worker specializing in attachment therapy, parenting classes for children with attachment issues, holding therapy, bottle-feeding therapy. I took her running with me. Eventually, I placed her in dance. But while I willingly learned about myself through movement, through my body, through counseling, I felt unsure that Melissa's somatic-based dance pedagogy would lead Naika to similar places of psychological and emotional healing. Curious, I conducted a semester of independent study in search of an answer to this question: can a dance student benefit from a somatic-based dance pedagogy therapeutically even if the student does not know the experience could/should deliver holistic therapeutic results? In other words, does research suggest that healing can occur in an attachment-disordered child's brain (through dance) without the child seeking it?²¹

Through this independent study, I found the following sources of trauma theories and therapies: Dr. Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dr. Peter Levine's *Waking the Tiger*, Dr. Dan Siegel's *The Whole Brain Child*, Dr. Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory, Alan Schore's work on attachment/relational trauma and the right brain, and Dr. Bruce Perry's Neuro-sequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT)). All speak to the efficacy of somatic therapy rather than cognitive therapy for trauma work. These

²¹ For an understanding of the effects of living in an orphanage on a child's developing brain, see <https://adoptiontriaddance.wordpress.com/2014/05/11/moonlighting-in-neuroscience/>. This blog post represents my research project in General Semantics as a graduate student.

trauma therapists assert that the condition of a person's traumatized brain (an over-developed amygdala, for example) keeps him/her in a persistent state of fear; and, overwhelmed by fear, they cannot improve just by increased positive relationships (as with a loving adoptive mother), or even therapeutic relationships (as with a well-trained counselor), until their brain stem is regulated by safe, predictable, repetitive, sensory input. These therapists recommend the following—a bottom-up (from the base of the brain and up) approach therapy: dance, music, massage, walking, running, swinging, trampoline work, singing, repetitive meditative breathing, yoga, and animal-assisted therapy. During my research, I also noticed that scholarship in somatic-based dance pedagogy and trauma therapy share commonly used words, such as: “restore the balance,” “heal,” “attain resilience,” “respect biological patterns,” “track internal changes,” “achieve self-regulation,” re-negotiate,” and “deactivate.” As a result of this independent study, then, I felt confident that I had found my answer: dance can prove therapeutic, whether the intent of therapy exists or not.

In search of healing: Writing

Instead of cooking, instead of grocery shopping, instead of cleaning, instead of working, instead of running errands, instead of connecting with friends, instead of chatting with the neighbors, instead of jumping on our trampoline with my children, instead of . . .

I sit in my bed, jotting notes of reflection in the margins of my bible study workbook. I sit in my bed, annotating adoption memoirs. I sit in my bed, writing out

prayers for myself, for Naika, for our family. I sit in my bed, scribbling my thoughts in a notebook. I sit in my bed, writing a blog post, hoping. Can words make sense of chaos?

While my graduate studies led me to a place of researching movement as healing, I did not also formally research writing as healing. But during these years, I experienced writing as healing. I wrote. Out of pain. Out of need.²² In these writing exercises, my body and mind found their way toward healing even before I discovered theories behind them.²³ My coursework in General Semantics introduced me to S. I. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*, and Bruce and Susan Kodish's *Drive Yourself Sane: Using the Uncommon Sense of General Semantics*. In this class and in these texts, I found one of my most clear answers to my own question. In Hayakawa's chapter titled "Maps and Territories," Hayakawa shares Alfred Korzybski's metaphor in which our "verbal [intensional] world . . . [stands] in relation to the extensional world as a *map* does to the *territory* it is supposed to represent" (20). Korzybski's metaphor of maps and territories framed my need to write: I needed to map out these new territories in order to make some sense of it, in order to find my way. I used writing to map out what Naika and I felt and experienced, to map out attachment disorder and parenting, to map out a devastating second rejection from my birth parents, and to explore the territory of adoption not just as beautiful, but also as trauma.

For the popular "adoption is beautiful" map tells some truth, but it omits some roads signs, sudden curves, and valleys. Hayakawa states: "there are three ways of

²² See early posts of mine at www.adoptiontriaddance.wordpress.com.

²³ Search terms such as therapeutic writing, psychotherapy and writing, autoethnography and therapy, writing to discover, and expressive writing point toward scholarly research and discussion around this idea of "writing as therapy."

getting false maps of the world into our heads: first, by having them given to us; second, by making them up for ourselves by misreading true maps; third, by constructing them ourselves by misreading territories” (21). Over the years, I had received false maps. I had made false maps. Through writing, I set out to construct more true maps; more true maps could bring more sense and sanity. For example, the “adoption is only beautiful” map no longer represented the complexity of the adoption experience I witnessed Naika having. Through my reading of adoption writings, I found maps quite opposite—anti-adoption maps. As I experienced the freedom of writing for invention, writing in a journal, writing without restriction, I wrote toward anti-adoption at times; and, for a while, that felt good. However, I realized as I mapped toward that new opposite territory that I could not stay there, that I did not belong there. Instead, I live in and write toward a more complex and truthful territory that accounts for both “adoption is beautiful” and “adoption sucks.” That represents a map I can believe and I can follow.

In the Introduction to *Rites of Return*, Hirsch and Miller speak of a “desire to map a loss”—like “forced displacement,” like a “lost homeland,” like “expulsion, colonization, and migration” (7). Since I could not actually return to the space and time and people that I lost, writing became a way for me to map and to discover. By writing, I could overlap, intersect, cross and revise boundaries of territories as a way of “return.” I imagined conversations, circumstances, motives. And my exploration of my loss found its way into all three of this project’s creative nonfiction pieces. Hirsch and Miller also speak specifically to writing memoir and writing to discover: “Memoir, a literary genre reinvigorated and reinvented in the 1990s, has become an increasingly productive form for exploring the meaning of family, generational identity, and ethnicity” (10). And

William Zinsser writes, “Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us” (6). Writing my own experiences and reading others’ validated and repaved my maps about adoption and loss. Reading others’ stories gave me a sense of community—sent me to territory I had not visited until now. I read about people like me, people like Naika, people like my birth mom, people like my parents. I experienced the power of reading others’ stories, and I began to recognize myself as someone with a story to share—a story that could impact others.

Literary Theory and Adoption: Trauma

In the basement of Scobey Hall, I gather with fellow students for our Literary Theory class. I have fallen in love with the author Alice Munro's work, but I feel somewhat alone. No other student seems quite as enamored by her writing as me.

"I love everything I have read of hers so far! She's amazing!" I share.

"Ugh. I don't really like her stuff. All that divorce, and death, and relationship stuff. It's kind of depressing," says a much-younger-than-me fellow graduate student.

Once class starts, my obsession with adoption shows up again.

"That part where the narrator connects her troubled relationships to the loss of her mother to cancer at a young age . . . couldn't that apply to adoption stories, too?" I ask.

"Um, I'm not sure. I guess. I'm not exactly sure what you mean," our professor responds, asking for more; but "more" can only come from me. No one else will fill in the silence with further explanations. They can only think of the gain of a mother in adoption. They do not consider that before the adoptee can gain a new mom, he/she must lose a mom. Come On.

I go on to carefully measure just how much I can say or ask. My face feels warm and red, and my eyes have that hot feeling almost every time I bring this stuff up. Don't they get it? I am an adoptee. I am an adoptive mom. And thanks to this literary theory class, I understand I am a trauma survivor and a colonialist as far as I can tell. I am learning right in front of them what that really means, and I feel kind of embarrassed. Kind of like damaged goods mixed with white privilege.

Adoption situates itself comfortably in various scholarly theories; for example, I found *Imagining Adoption*, which includes several theoretical essays about the social constructs of motherhood, adoption, identity, and belonging.²⁴ And as I read specifically for my literary theory class, I found “adoption” everywhere. I scribbled exclamation marks, question marks, sad faces and pensive notes in the margins of my texts. My narrow focus on my field of interest—on adoption, writing, trauma and such sometimes led me to frustration in class discussions as (like the “general public”) my classmates often did not see adoption as a form of colonialism, or as trauma, but only as gain; therefore, at first they resisted seeing the parallels I would pose. For example, in Alice Munro’s “Five Points,” the main female character’s husband has suffered a physically limiting mining accident. And in “Meneseteung,” Almeda (also the main female characters) suffers the loss of her sister and brother, her mother dies (from a broken heart), and finally her father dies—all within a six-year period. Such life events constitute “trauma” in our culture --accidents, deaths in the family, diagnosis of illness, bankruptcy, loss of a job, divorce. The suggestion of adoption as trauma, however, raises the eyebrows of the general public, and of my classmates. But I clearly saw the parallels between adoption and the *unexpected* and the *negative* traumatic events in Munro’s characters’ lives. Further, the language Michael Ryan uses to discuss literary trauma theory in his book *Literary Theory: a Practical Introduction* aligns itself with the language I found in adoption writings: trauma carries themes of “loss and separation . . .

²⁴ The essays in the collection consider social practices in adoption critically (see “Should Whites Adopt African American Children?: One Family’s Phenomenological Response”), film and literature (see “Outlaws, Outcasts, and Orphans: The Historical Imagination and *Anne of Green Gables*” and “Adoption, Identity, and Voice: Jackie Kay’s Inventions of Self”).

the struggle to form a coherent self . . . and language . . . as a means of instantiating the unconscious processes” (100-101). The territories of literary trauma theory and adoption as trauma experience shared domains. And yet, the general public resists complicated stories of adoption as trauma; they prefer their “adoption is beautiful” map.

As we discussed several features of Munro’s work, I found myself drawn to the reactive behaviors that trauma elicits from her characters; specifically in these two stories, the woman with the physically wounded husband has an affair, and Almeda turns to writing. Characters in some of her other stories respond to trauma with denial, rebellion, obsessions and compulsions, vows of secrecy. These adult characters in literature react to trauma similarly to Naika, only with age-appropriate “behaviors”; Naika wrecked her dolls and books, while adults wrecked families and relationships. Naika scribbled with permanent marker on fabrics and papers, while adults “scribbled” thoughts in a journal or a blog. As a student, as a mom, as a person, I embraced this paradigm of “unsavory behavior” as most always a response to trauma. As a writer, I felt responsible to tell the stories of “unsavory behavior” related to adoption—to make room for adoption in the list of events widely accepted as trauma. And, in “Our Bodies Remember” and “Slips” I explore how Naika, myself, and my birth dad responded to the seeming trauma of an unplanned pregnancy, adoption, and search and reunion.

Literary Theory and Adoption: Colonialism

I sit in the basement of Scobey Hall in Literary Theory class with the professor at the helm, and a handful of fellow graduate students seated around then narrow conference table. Each week in this class, we read about, discuss, and set about

practicing applications of literary theory: feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism. This class period, we discuss colonialism, post-colonialism, and cultural theory. As a springboard for conversation, the professor puts a few pictures on the screen: I see native tribal dark-skinned men with colorful markings on their faces and a stiffly dressed and pressed white man. In the next photo, I see similar native tribal dark-skinned men minus the markings, dressed to match the white man. And more.

While the faces of the natives suggest happiness, health, and prosperity, their overall appearance suggests otherwise. I squint my eyes to try to see less; I retract my rib cage into the back of my chair, trying to get further away from what I see. I see their heavy thighs bulging in the restrictive long and tight trousers. I see their necks strangled by button-up white shirts, and their feet trapped in men's leather shoes. And now, I see Naika. I close my eyes, let out some of my air, and slump my shoulder. What have we done?

In general, our culture views adopting a child from a third world country as an altruistic and noble act. The people of Haiti suffer from debilitating poverty, an oppressive government, and frequent devastating storms. To remove a child from those dangers and perils, to bring that child to America—the land of plenty, gives the child an automatic plus in the columns of opportunity, brightness of future, and possession of material wealth. Similarly, during the era in which my parents adopted me, adoptive parents served as a solution to an unwed mother's problem—an illegitimate child. The institution worked well—parents who faced infertility could become parents, pregnant

women could escape the life of a scorned unwed mother after the adoption, and unwanted babies could have a stable home.

However, those babies grew into adults and began to speak of their experience as mestizos—as people with dual heritages, but often cut off from knowing one. In my case, the institution of adoption of the 1970s removed me from my original family culture, placed me with another, and then sealed all of the evidence. Today, adult adoptees from the closed era regularly spearhead legislation for open records, for equal access to original birth certificates. As a graduate student, when I applied a colonial and post-colonial lens to adoption, I saw that adoptive families (like mine) could actually exist in parallel with often-disdained colonialists. In his “Post-Colonial and Global English Studies” chapter of *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*, Michael Ryan states, “Colonialists sought to impose their own culture on a quite different culture so that it would mime or imitate that of the imperial center” (196). Did we impose our own culture onto Naika? Do we leave her no choice but to imitate our family’s ways, our American ways? I considered the possibility that we had not so much helped our daughter Naika, but instead had removed her from familiar people, smells, sights, and sounds, and dropped her into America—into a family of strangers.

I continued to wrestle with myself as a “colonialist,” but I knew that I did not bring her into our home with intentions of making her mimic or imitate us. While her behavior does match ours largely because she has now spent nine years in our home and nine years in America, I know and she knows she also has Haitian heritage. In an effort to raise Naika, a transnational and transracial child, responsibly and respectfully, I can listen to the “experts” ideas about what will serve her best: carry the adoptees’ homeland

culture into his/her life, learn to care for their different hair and skin, honor their heritage in your home. Still, consider this image below²⁵:



This image speaks with vitriol to the “culture camps” that some adoptive parents take their children to once a year; there, they learn about their culture’s dress, food, language, festivals, rituals, games, etc. Basically, they learn about their culture’s surface, its stereotypes. The image above sheds light on my wonderings about more than surface culture, like: why does Naika communicate with only concrete language, why does she rarely talk about her emotions, why does she have trouble walking along side me without bumping into me, why can she not tell time on an analog clock, why does she always have to win? These questions about the ways in which she differs from me, from our other children, hover around the bottom half of this diagram.

²⁵ Found at www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/influence.

How can I possibly pass her “culture” on to her? Educate her about her culture? From this visual image, it seems to me that we can only teach our transnationally and transracially adopted children the stereotypes of their heritage. As outsiders, even as “colonialists” with the best intentions, we have limits. Still, we could muse that this represents progress in adoption policy and practice—from sealed records to open sharing of heritage. And our culture today produces attempts to normalize adoption in children’s books, in movies with positive adoption stories, in online groups formed to help parents raise their children. We continue to strive toward “best practices.” But at the heart of the matter of adoption, no “practice” for raising a child apart from his/her mother and heritage seems “best.”

As I continued to study transnational and transracial adoption, return, diaspora, identity, I found disparity. The collection of literature swells with stories and studies about transnational and transracial adoption issues, but they do not include closed era adoptees like me in these conversations. We also grew up with no connection to our beginnings—no birth family, “homeland,” “roots,” no family weddings, funerals, Christmases, general family traditions (foods/favorite family recipe) from our birth family. We too dream about “return”—about going back to our roots to discover our first home. And we too often feel alienated and marginal once we do find them, and have trouble assimilating into a family of strangers. And we also grew up without a mirror for our bodies and our faces. But because my skin color “matches” the skin color of my adoptive parents, I am not a “transracial/transnational” adoptee; and writers and theorists overlook and exclude me in these discussions.

In my own writing and research though, I discovered parallels between Naika's and my experience as the "colonialized." My involvement in adoption conferences and reading of various adoption writings taught me these words: ambiguity, diaspora, mimicry, and creolization. While I read about them in the context of transnational and transracial adoption, I also understood them and wrote about them in the context of my own adoption. Another term, Dr. John Raible's "hypervisibility," helped me define (map) my experience as an overlooked, passed over adoptee in these conversations. Raible, a well-published writer and activist on adoption and social justice, speaks of the "hyper-visibility" of transnational transracial adoptees today. For example, as an adopted person in our family, Naika experiences "hyper-visibility" in everyday situations. When shopping for school clothes one afternoon—the sales attendant looked at me, my natural born daughter, and my adopted daughter, and asked, "Are you all together?" We experience occasional awkward moments of proving that we make a family even though our skin does not match. In a parallel domain though, I grew up with awkward moments of people telling me how much I looked like my adoptive mother. My mom and I would exchange a wink or a knowing glance with each other. Do we tell them I'm adopted? Or just smile? I grew up as a "hyper-invisible" adoptee.

Literary Theory an Adoption: Identity

I sit across the table from a sweet, empathic twenty-something blonde Barb, the post-adoption specialist in the Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois. She holds my adoption records in her hands. The file looks kind of thick to me. She pages through the

documents and tells me what she can--or what she thinks she can, or what she thinks seems interesting or important.

God forbid, (actually the state law forbids me), that I would get to look through the file myself and decide for myself what I find interesting or important about my self.

“I can’t show you what’s under my thumb. Your birth mom’s full name is written there,” Barb says to me. She opens the stuffed manila folder and tells me, “Your birth mom named you.”

Tightness clenches my throat and my stomach ripples. A mother who names her baby, loves her baby, wants her baby, feels sad that she cannot keep her baby.

“She did? I never knew that,” I measure my words out to Barb.

“She named you Lea Marie.”

Lea Marie. Lea. Marie. Is that my one of my birth grandma’s names? Did she just like that name? Did I look like a Lea Marie to her that day? That day that she gave birth to me? Did she hold me and name me? I like this name. I feel loved by this name. Later, I would order and wear a ring stamped “Lea Marie” around my thumb.

Barb pages through more of my file. “Oh, your birth dad’s sister’s birth day is the same as yours. She turned sixteen when you were born. She did well in school and she played a musical instrument.”

I was born on my aunt’s sweet sixteen birthday. I remember my sweet sixteen birthday very well. Does she remember hers? Did she wonder where her brother was that day? Why he was missing her special day? Wouldn’t it be sweet to her—to know that she has a niece, who shares her birth date? I have an aunt.

My definition of myself shifts underneath my chair, as if a whole new tile with a different color comes to hold the weight of me each time Barb tells me something new. In order to not fall while the tiles change, I sense myself floating at times, trying to integrate these new bits of information into my identity. Barb's thumb slips off the tab a few times. And I, still with an eagle's eye on her thumb, spy upside-down cursive writing: "Ostagazewski"--my birth mom's last name.

During the months that I searched for my birth family, I found new bits of information about myself, and about my immediate and extended birth family that shifted my identity. Each time I learned something new, it defined me in a new way. For example, I grew up as an only child, and now I have six half-siblings on this earth; now, I am a sister. One birth family member mistook me for my half-sister on the phone; now, I know my voice resembles hers. Just a few years ago, the state of Illinois changed its laws to allow adoptees to have access to a copy of their original birth certificate; now, I identify myself as someone who has her real birth certificate. I eventually find out that my birth great aunt used to quilt with my adoptive aunt, that my birth grandpa flew in the "Aluminum Trail" during WWII and worked at a newspaper office near my adoptive grandparents, and that my half-brother worked in air traffic control at the airport where I went to college, and my birth mom lived in the sorority house one block down from the sorority house that I lived in on campus. Finding all of these seemingly unimportant artifacts after three decades of my life had passed back-filled my identity. Sometimes, I sensed a literal shift in my angle to the earth; I write about the importance of these bits of information and people's slips in my creative nonfiction titled "Slips."

The slips and shifts I experience inform how I handle slips of information about Naika's adoption and her birth family. I handle them with care and with honor. Rather than experience a tidal wave of identity shifts like I did as an adult, Naika can (if she chooses) integrate her slips of information into her life as she continues growing. We have pictures, a few letters, a binder full of documents, conversations with her birth mom, and communication with one of her brothers adopted by a family in California. I aspire to give her as much access to everything we can know about her origins, her birth family, her country as she would like to have.

During graduate school, I discovered Alice Munro's short fictional adoption story titled "Trespasses" that explores shifts of identity for a young eleven-year old Lauren, who does not know about her adoptee status. Upon finding a curious box while packing for a move, Lauren asks her father about its contents, and her father gives Lauren pieces of her "file." Lauren begins to learn about her adoption. In a sense, Lauren, Naika, and I have "curious boxes"; someone else holds the boxes, and if we ask for them, we may or may not get to see them. The adoptee community commonly refers to the ones who hold the boxes as "gatekeepers." Access to our files, our "curious boxes," as adoptees, hinges on the gatekeepers' will. And when we do get to peer into our curious boxes, we go about constructing stories from the information, stories about our identity collaged together from the bits and pieces in the boxes. In "Trespasses," Munro artfully causes the reader to experience these attempts of pulling together one's identity through stalling the readers' ability to orient themselves to Lauren's "Chapter One"—to the beginning of her life" (Easterlin 90). The reader's journey of knowing Lauren's unfolding origins mirrors Lauren's slowly emerging knowledge of her own submerged history" (Easterlin 95).

I do not act as a gatekeeper of Naika's heritage, but still her development of her identity includes several layers of complication. For how can one develop an authentic personal identity from slips, files, pictures, artifacts in a box, and how does one develop an identity when he/she lives severed from their roots? As Naika matures, I wonder how will she identify herself? As Haitian? As a black woman? As bi-racial—born black and raised white? Will she claim America as her country and home? Or will she identify with her Haitian roots?²⁶ In "Adoption and Return: Transnational Genealogies, Maternal Legacies," Margaret Homans asks my same questions about Naika: "Is a transnational adoptee in the U.S. an exile, an immigrant, or just an American with a 'different' face?" and "Does her identity derive from her DNA, her 'blood,' her 'birth culture,' or her adoptive environment?" (185).

Aware of this tension, adoptive parents sometimes facilitate visits to adoptees' birth country; therapists in the adoption field often recommend such a "return" trip. We plan to take our daughter on a return trip. A trip to Haiti could help Naika gain clarity about her identity as she spends time around her birth mom, her siblings and extended family, around people whose bodies resemble hers. But then, Yngvesson's work and study reports that "return" sometimes produces quite the opposite of what we might expect from a "homecoming" or a "roots trip." Perhaps her homeland will now seem foreign to her after living with us in America for almost ten years. Homans writes my questions for Naika: "what does it mean for an . . . adoptee to return to the country from which she departed as a baby, of whose language and customs she has no memory? . . . will a 'roots trip' be a welcome return to the comfort of a once loved home, or will it only

²⁶ Land of Gazillion Adoptees Magazine offers insight into current cultural conversations surrounding adoption, diaspora, identity, and social justice.

activate a painful sense of loss?” (185) And while I sometimes imagine that she will return to Haiti to live as an adult woman, I recognize the complexity of that also. For in Yngvesson’s *Fugitive Vision*, she describes Korean adoptees now returned to their homeland and living in Seoul who “live fragile, marginal lives, cut off from their adoptive families yet [are] unable or unwilling to assimilate into Korean life” (Homans 189). Somehow, in embracing their homeland, they lost their adoptive families; and yet, through adoption, they lost their authentic Korean selves.

Literary Adoption Memoir

My creative writing process began from my place as a reader first. First, I reached for memoirs about transracial/transnational adoption. Then, I read memoirs from adult adoptees of the closed era—their experiences, their searches and reunions. I turned my attention toward memoirs from birth moms for a time. Eventually though, I began to read and re-read these memoirs from the place of a writer rather than as a reader of only content; through formal instruction, I read memoirs rhetorically—looking for strategies that other writers use to communicate their stories effectively and artfully. Through rhetorical reading of memoirs, class instruction, craft books, I participated in free writing, revision exercises, gathering words exercises, large group and small group peer feedback that led me to polished poetry and creative nonfiction—and to the four pieces of creative work at the end of this thesis discussion.

I realize now that the genre constructions of contemporary memoir met my needs at the time; and reading these memoirs rhetorically—as a writer—continues to meet my creative writing needs. Through reading countless memoirs surrounding the topic of adoption, I noticed the impact of some and the lack of impact of others. The memoirs that lean on the craft of imagery, scenes, segments, braiding, white space, and other literary moves communicate more than just another story—but stories that transcend the literal facts and also speak to a broad base of readers. I argue that the “literary adoption memoir” is a sub-genre of “adoption writings.” Lest the reader conjure associations of the

familiar “confessional memoirs” or “narcissistic recounting or triviality,” I will define the term.²⁸

Many writers distinguish autobiography from contemporary memoir by pointing to the importance of the individual’s inner experience within the memoir—writing that communicates one’s inner world in a way that speaks to a reader’s potential for personal inner transformation.²⁹ The contemporary memoir author does not stop at telling events that happened; instead, he/she writes of his/her own internal struggle to face circumstances and to make sense of the circumstances. Literary memoirs leave room for the reader to make meaning of the work for themselves; they do so by using white space within the texts, by showing more than telling, by speaking through metaphor rather than with direct words, by sharing episodes artfully ordered and leaving the “reader to do some of the heavy lifting of intellectual engagement” (Kirby 24). The various forms of creative nonfiction allow me to braid, layer, segment, etc. my journey and my daughter’s journey rather than simply tell one moment to the next. I can write scenes, flashbacks, memories, use white space, reflection, invoke poetic language, and write with other creative nonfiction artful techniques to create the heart of the work.

First, as a new parent of a transnational transracial daughter, I reached for memoirs to gain insight into what Naika’s inner world might involve. *Black Baby White Hands: A View from the Crib* by Jaiya John tells the story of a young African American

²⁸ In *Writing the Memoir: from Truth to Art*, Judith Barrington shares her early misunderstanding of the “memoir” as “famous-person memoirs [that] rarely stuck to one theme or selected out one aspect of a life to explore in depth” (19). Barrington shares that the contemporary literary memoir has its roots in writers like Virginia Woolf, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Montaigne (20).

²⁹See Michael Steinberg’s “Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays,” Sondra Perl’s and Mimi Schwartz’s *Writing True*, and Zinsser.

boy (the author) adopted in New Mexico in 1968 by white parents; the author writes of his childhood, adolescence, and eventually his reunion with his birth family. John's writing exposes a fresh layer of racism that his well-meaning white family and friends did not recognize. His story exemplifies John Raible's "hypervisibility." Early in John's memoir, he inserts hints of promise and hope in the first chapter; he writes of something terrible that happened to him as an adult—his family's home (the home of his childhood) goes up in flames. Yet, in a moment of reflection that foreshadows the maturity and resolution that John arrives at on the other side of the journey, he writes:

But what if what also went up in those flames was the space in which I suffered alone with my private circumstance? That awful, tendril-laden knot of discord that balled up in my chest and throat all those years was tied to a life I led in a particular place. That place is gone. What if that whole season has now evaporated, as if my Great Spirit has said to me, "You my go forward now, my son?" (3).

Here, John's reflective inquiry suggests that things will get better as he moves through his experiences of suffering. In my own writing, I found moments where adding foreshadowing signals to the reader a moment or discovery of importance that cannot yet be revealed. I used this technique in a revision of "Slips;" I added "My birth dad, though, would muscle me back in there where they put me. Where he thinks I belong" early in the piece—to hint to the reader what would happen in the end. Thus, I freed myself up to write my own happy findings through each of the "slips" that occurred, because I had already let my reader know what lies ahead. Similarly, John can write freely about the

sadness, the pain, and the suffering without needing to continually balance the promise of hope throughout; he has already let his reader know that he may “go forward” by the end.

Also, John uses italics for various purposes throughout his memoir. Similarly, readers will find several times in my creative work where I switch to italics. In each of my creative pieces for this project, I use italics to carry heavy emotional weight—to separate it away from a scene, or a dialogue. In the above quote from John’s memoir, he asks (in italics) questions that reveal his inner thoughts, his ponderings about unanswerable questions. I use this technique in my writing also, wondering about the “what ifs” surrounding my birth family. Further, John sometimes uses italics to give the reader insight into what he wants to say, but cannot say out loud: “Family members and other White people implied to me the same thing, over and again: ‘You’ve had so much, what do you mean it was painful for you?’ My silent answer: *Social and athletic success is worth very little when you feel like an ugly, trespassing freak of nature with nappy, Buckwheat-wild hair, a nose like an ape, lips twice that size, and the intelligence of something less than human*” (150). Like John, sometimes I use italics to “say” what I really wanted to say in the moment; readers will find a moment like that in “Scoop and Run” as I discuss my birth mother’s refusal of contact with the social worker over the phone. “*So that’s it? The baby asks to see her mom, and the mom replies, ‘no, thank you.’ . . . she is capable of saying ‘Goodbye’ to me again?*”

After months of reading memoirs about adoptees, I reached for Meredith Hall’s *Without a Map* that tells a story of a birth mom from the same era of my birth mom (late 60s and early 70s). After reading the book, I found myself recommending it to friends; the book speaks beyond a birth mom’s experience—it speaks of rejection, survival,

forgiveness, parenting, and more. Hall draws on creative nonfiction techniques throughout her memoir: poetic and abstract titles, italics, scenes, and white space. Also, Hall often writes sweeping sentences that produce a shock effect for the reader and reveal the larger emotion at hand:

Then I got pregnant. I was sixteen. Family, church, school—each of those memberships that had embraced me as a child—turned their backs . . . The price I paid seems still to be extreme. But I bet it was a while again before any girl in Hampton let herself be fucked in the gritty sand by a boy from anyone who said *love*. (xii)

At the end of “Slips, I employ this technique of fast-moving sentences and short phrases that drive the reader to read at a fast pace only to meet a road block: in my case, my birth dad and his perception of me, and of these slips.

And in this scene—book-ended by white space—Hall shows her delivery experience with a similar sweeping:

“You have go to let this baby go,” the doctor roared at me. He smelled of cigarettes. We had been there a very, very long time. “You cannot hold this baby inside you,” he said angrily. “Push!” My baby was born on Memorial Day 1966. (xxiii).

By writing sweeping sentences and scenes and employing white space around them, Hall shocks the reader into realizing the gravity of what happens and then gives the reader time to process, recover, reflect, to add a layer of understanding to their reading. I experimented the most with white space in “Saudade” and “Practicing Ekphrasis.” The content, that our bodies remember our loss and my love for a woman I cannot know,

carries heavy emotions and concepts; therefore, I used white space to slow the reader down, to encourage the reader to feel and to process deeply.

Joy Castro, in *The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses, A Memoir* tells of her past as an adopted young girl, abused young girl, who then ran away as a young teenager; her memoir speaks to the “trump card” of the American dream, her search for her birth family, and her deeply troubled adoptive parents. Castro tells her story in lyrical and poetic prose. Also, she breaks away from the prose at times to insert “slips” of paper from her baby book (Castro 31). I noticed in Castro’s memoir that I read those sections as if I were reading them through her eyes. Similarly, I insert my slip of non-identifying information and words lifted from paper checks in “Slips” and “Practicing Ekphrasis”; rather than paraphrase the information for the reader, I place the information in its most pure form for the reader. Making this choice allows the reader the opportunity to experience the information in the same “once removed” way as me, the narrator.

Castro also uses dialogue to communicate the weight of certain moments. She does not have to tell her readers, for example, that her mother makes fun of her. Instead, she writes her mother’s words and her affect: “‘She’s so sensitive.’ She laughs. ‘All I have to do is cross my eyes, and she bursts into tears.’” (21). And “‘Did you like it?’ I finally ask. ‘Did I do all right?’ She is silent. ‘Didn’t you like the ballet?’ ‘Ballet?’ she mutters. ‘You? More like the elephant walk’” (21). In order to privilege “showing” rather than “telling,” I lean on both dialogue and scene through each of my creative pieces.

In addition to reading other published works rhetorically, I find two “how to” types of books especially salient to my work as they deal specifically with memoir:

William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* and Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: A practical guide to the craft, the personal challenges, and ethical dilemmas of writing your true stories*. In these two books, I find chapters and exercises that closely resemble those from the more broad creative nonfiction genre, and then also chapters like: "The Truth: What, Why, and How?" "Who Cares?" and "Other Thoughts on Getting Started" "Naming Names," "Writing about Living People." These chapters allowed me to accept varying truths based on who tells the story; my "Slips" explores the possibility of two different reactions to the same happenings. These chapters also led me to consider the complications involved in writing about interactions with other people, which I have yet to resolve as I write toward publishing.

Another "how-to" book, Priscilla Long's *The Writer's Portable Mentor: A Guide to Art, Craft, and the Writing Life*, lends insight to writers who wish to layer art and craft upon real events (nonfiction); my copy shows wear and tear from my interaction with during my coursework and beyond. She offers exercises that proved helpful to me in each of my creative pieces for this project in the chapter titled "Working with Language" such as "Where to Find Good Words," "Sound-Effects," "Repetition" and "Verb Work." Specifically, I employed the "Verb Work" exercise to my "Scoop and Run" piece toward a more polished revision. And I used the "Looping Exercise" and the "Paraphrase Exercise" in my revisions toward a more polished "Saudade." Also, Long offers exercises in writing into a structure: theme, collage, braided, and dramatic. The dramatic structure exploration led me to "Scoop and Run;" as I worked through the components of a "dramatic "where a squirrel plays the role of my antagonist—rather than an actual person. Long encourages writers to do sentence-level revision work—to work with fragments,

with list sentences, with transitions, with punctuation. The attention to language, structure, and scene, replicates what we might find in a “how to write fiction” or “how to write poetry” guide; instead, Long invites us to artfully approach our lived experiences with these literary devices.

Like other memoirs, each of my pieces (with the exception of “Practicing Ekphrasis”) follows a chronology of “lived experience”—of scenes, dialogues, and events that serve as a spine of sorts for me to write “what happened.” The stories though become complicated: Naika triggers my own desire to find my birth family; I struggle to parent an adoptee who is both the same as and different from me; together, we struggle to identify our outward appearance, our personalities, our persons; I search and dig for people who do not want to be found; and I recognize the transformation in myself and in our family that adopting Naika has brought to us. And so in my own writing, I seek to make sense out of events in my life as an adult adoptee parenting an adoptee, of our adoptive family’s life, of my search and reunion and rejection—to collage them together in a manner that creates art and creates meaning. This desire to make meaning out of a mess birthed my own “adoption writings” under formal instruction in graduate school. Highly-published author, Anne Lamott, offers writers her “ways in” in *bird by bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* that include discussions such as: character, plot, dialogue, set design, and finding your voice. I lean on all of these—the creative nonfiction anthologies, the creative nonfiction craft chapters, and the memoir how-to books for my own writing process toward my own literary adoption memoir. As I continue to write toward a publishable literary adoption memoir, Anne Lamott’s words

encourages me toward the heart of my writing: “who knows? Maybe what you’ve written will help others, will be a small part of the solution” (235).

Saudade

Google on Saudade:

*“a deeply melancholic longing for an absent something or someone that one loves . . .
a repressed knowledge that the object of longing will never return . . .”*

on Saudade:

*You stand at the window, strain your eyes to see your dog through the blizzard in the
night. You want him to come home, but you know he probably won't.
You go to school the Monday after her funeral, then Tuesday, Wednesday, then Thursday,
and then you face the first weekend
without your friend.
You try to act normal, and you try to get used to your arm being amputated.*

Around our kitchen table that seats our family of six, we pray for Naika; bringing Naika to us from her orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti will make us “seven.” We labor to send Three Angels Orphanage monthly support, gather paperwork to prove our financial stability, our mental stability, and the healthy tone of our home and family. We are pregnant with anticipation and after ten months, she arrives on U.S. pavement at the Miami airport. We wait, our eyes and cameras focused on double-doors with double-paned glass windows that limit our vision. In a slow moment, we see Naika delivered out of customs; she rides in a cart toting her “luggage”—a candy-apple red backpack with one change of clothes in it and the name “Rosaline” written across the top. We smile and

speak softly to her, and she (with no smile) lifts her arms up to me. She wants to be lifted out of the cart. I place the toddler on my hip, the hip accustomed to carrying our other four children.

Photos of our daughter this first night in the airport hotel prove expert theories on trauma. No matter my soothing tones and gentle rubbing of anti-fungal lotion on her skin. No matter the first warm bath. No matter the My Little Pony jammies and the Pooh Bear sticker book. No matter our concern that she must be hungry and the ice cream cone she hesitatingly accepts. Our expressions of joy in these early pictures clearly miss her expressions of fear in the moment. She falls asleep quickly not because we love her and she feels safe, but because her two-and-a-half year old brain shuts down as fear chemicals race through her bloodstream.

We awake the next morning and the three of us get on a plane. We put *Finding Nemo* in my husband's computer to entertain her, and a couple hours later we land in Minneapolis. Naika on my hip, we maneuver ourselves and our luggage to our big black Yukon XL with one car seat in it—for her. My ignorance haunts me still. I see our family vehicle with the safety seat we have used for years; she sees a strange tangle of belts and buckles and bright fabric in the back of a hollow black vehicle. I would like to think she trusts us enough to get in the car and allow me to buckle her in. But most likely, she senses she has no power and no choice but to follow our lead. Stripped of everything familiar, survival now requires compliance with us. Eight years later, Naika does not remember this trip; she only knows the story we tell her.

Well-meaning friends and acquaintances ask me, “How is Naika doing?” I walk down a narrow path to answer them honestly. How do I share the effects of Naika’s days in an orphanage, of abandonment, of neurons that never connected, of Naika’s pre-verbal experiences that will remain unknown?

hunger

A video teaches the memory of mealtime in the orphanage. Naika circles her arm around her plate; she eats with one hand and protects her food with the other.

abandonment

A picture teaches the memory of Naika’s birth mom visiting her in the orphanage; Naika on her lap, eyes darkened by longing, and each visit’s end pricks her wound.

competition

A video teaches the memory of relief workers who bring gifts (plastic sunglasses, fruit treats, gum). Naika and the other children shove toward the front, afraid they might not get any.

One day of travel does not erase who Naika became before she came to us. And even though she cannot verbalize her memories, they surface

like a beach ball pressed under water

Bedtime in our home her first night, and my new daughter screams in my ear while I press my body over hers and sing loud lullabies. I imagine Naika misses bedtime in the orphanage—her friends, her sleep spot, her nighttime nannies singing Creole lullabies, maybe her favorite pillow or blanket. She gains us—and loses everything else. I

try comforting Naika as I have my other children and get nowhere. She is two-and-a-half years old and doesn't speak English. And so, screams and hot terrified tears on my cheek pressed up against hers, my singing lips in her ear, until she exhausts herself and sleeps. Night after night we go through this process, until she copes better. Eventually, I sit on the floor in her line of sight; she feels secure enough to fall asleep.

I walk down the narrow hall of our home behind my new brown daughter. She bounces, jumps, and tiptoes oddly, pounding her feet into our carpet. I am losing it and I don't know why. Why does she bother me? Everyone says she is adorable. She bounces and moves with jerks and abruptness unfamiliar to me. I sense disorder, imbalance. I sense her anger. Subconsciously, my observations of Naika's terror in her new home awaken the adoptee in me, and I begin to unravel.

I know my adoption story well because my parents told it to me everyday since they brought me home. My birth mom and birth dad were both in the delivery room. My birth mom held me. I am chosen, special, adopted. When I was seven days old, my mom rushed in with an outfit she picked for the day they would take me home as their daughter. She dressed me. They held me, cuddled me, loved me.

By day seven, I have lost my birth mom, multiple strangers have fed me, a foster mom has cared for me for three days in her home; and all of my records have been sealed. Why does writing about this make me tired and make my head float? I want gum, ice to chomp, coffee, chocolate, ibuprofen, a drink, chips, something.

For the first few years, Naika hoards trash, wrappers, remainders of candy bars she discovers she doesn't like, a hard-boiled egg yolk because she only likes the whites, broken crayons, Barbies with jagged cut hair she must now hide, crumpled paper with scribbles, chewed gum, and more. Here, under her bed and tucked in corners of her bedroom, lies my daughter's pre-verbal memories. And evidence of how she feels about them. Angry. Ashamed. Frightened.

Hunger. In our home, Naika's eyes follow her favorites—sour cream and cheddar cheese chips, watermelon, gum, refried beans to make bean burritos. She trusts herself to find and get what she needs most. I fix her favorites, and she eats heartily—too full and uncomfortable, just in case.

Abandonment. Naika is a fourth grader now, part of our family for eight years. This day, I drive to pick her up. She sees both me and my car, but after-school traffic flow forces me to go around the block and come back to get her in that same spot. She watches my car leave. She panics. I see it in her face.

Competition. On a sun-filled Friday, Naika sprints at the sound of the track meet gun. She runs to win. She must win. It is scary to be slow and last in an orphanage. In our kitchen, Naika says things to me like, "I am almost taller than you," "I am the oldest in our family," and "Someday I'll be the tallest." It is scary to be small and weak in an orphanage.

Mostly, I don't like that the adoptee in me knows too well the panic of not being noticed, not being seen, and being left behind. On a Sunday morning, I rush around the house, offer breakfast to the children, tidy up, shower and try to meet the expectation of

all of us going to church together on time. My husband gets himself ready; he expresses frustration that we are late and then leaves our bathroom. I pull myself together, grab mascara to apply in the car, run down the stairs to the garage, and find my husband and children gone. He took them all. Deep in my gut, I ache.

I am her; she is my memory. Strange and inconvenient awakenings begin happening to me: a panic attack in Sam's Club while I push my cart, three trips to the emergency room for fear I have a brain tumor; anxiety drives me to sleeplessness and I experience an awakened desire to know whose genes I carry. One middle of the night, I startle out of sleep with a "ping" released deep in the middle of my brain. I grab my husband. I am frightened, I feel lost and abandoned, panicked, and I am being separated from my birth mother in that moment. This night, a memory buried deep under, now surfaces.

Naika and I carry pre-verbal memories in our behaviors. Naika carries some of my memory for me. Our bodies carry our memories. Our bodies carry *saudade*.

Scoop and Run

I board my connecting flight in Chicago, heading to Philadelphia, and I wonder if anyone on the plane knows her—or maybe her husband. I've never seen my birth mom in person, and I wonder if we would recognize each other. I play games with my eyes. I look at the travelers right in the face, right in the eyes, as if I am brave. In other moments, I shrink into someone who isn't supposed to be here, in her airport, in her city, in her space, and I don't make eye contact with anyone. But, never mind. I am going to run, I am going for me. I'm not going to run into her on the airplane, in the airport. That would be too weird. This trip is for me. I've been training with my best friend Debbie since late June for this Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon in Philadelphia—three months of four weekly runs.

We don't wear fancy running gear. No spandex, no special running socks, no specialty armbands for our devices, no timers or pacing watches. Mismatched shorts and tank tops--we don't really look like runners either. My wide hips—slimmed some by the training. Her pudgy middle-section—slimmed some by the training. We don't run like graceful gazelles, as do the more accomplished runners with practiced and perfected form. We just run. iPods in our hands with the cord snaking around to get in our way, black puffy headphones meant for sitting and listening to music, the two of us--all over the streets and sidewalks of Brookings, South Dakota. Sometimes we run where it's quiet—like on the bike paths. Sometimes we run where it's busy—in the face of oncoming cars who have to swerve a little to keep us safe. When we started, neither of us

could even run a 5K. But I needed to run away, to escape; I needed a safe place to pound out my sorrow, to feel my pain. I needed a healthy way to recover.

Once my birth parents refused contact with me, at times I questioned my existence. They didn't want to know me. For me, that carried the message that they wished I would go away (actually stay away since they already sent me away). They prefer it that way. Me gone. They don't want to know about my life here.

Could they blot me out?

Could they erase me from my husband and five children?

Would I disappear, either by my own volition or theirs?

One early morning, I slide my body out of our King-sized bed to silence my alarm. On the edge of our cream covered sheets and comforter, hunched over, my eyes try to focus on the short beige shag between my feet. My back, my neck, my head, my brain all feel separate, detached. I feel like I'm floating. I'm not sure in the haze of this dark morning that I am really here. I push through to get dressed in black stretchy cotton shorts, a t-shirt, mismatched socks and Nike running shoes; my best friend (already dressed like me) waits for me at her house. I arrive—still feeling fake somehow.

“Debbie, I don't know what's going on, but I feel really weird. Like I'm not really here, or something.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry.” She knows me well—inside out even. I need normal. Our normal routine. And so, we walk for our five minute warm-up on the street in her neighborhood and then begin to jog. As usual, I do not pay much attention to our surroundings. Instead, I look down, I see my knees, my running shoes on my feet, one

after the other, moving me on the damp blackened road. I smell the fresh sprinkles of rain, and I hear my quickening breaths.

Relief. Running. Running helps me answer my own questions. No, they cannot erase me. I do have a physical presence. I feel my feet make contact with the ground every step when I run. I have impact. I am alive. And now, I am addicted to running because it assures me of my aliveness. I'm running my first half-marathon for me, and for my birth mom, but she doesn't know it. She doesn't want to know me.

Two years ago, a Confidential Intermediary from the State of Illinois, Linda, reached out to my birth mom on my behalf. After two mailings (the last one sent by certified mail), my birth mom phoned in. Linda calls me shortly after. I am alone in the house when the phone rings. I've been trying to not think about checking the mail and trying not to wonder if the phone will ring today.

“Her voice sounded very fragile. She spoke carefully. She was very emotionally upset. She wanted to know how this happened—how she was found. I assured her everything was still confidential,” Linda tells me over the phone from her office in Des Plaines.

It's not sounding good—sounds like she is upset I found her. Tucked in a corner of my bedroom, limited by the cord on the phone, I stand on the beige shag while I listen, and I press my weight into the cream colored comforter on my bed as I write down every word.

“She wants you to know she's not mad at you. She says she can't put herself in your shoes, but she can imagine and thinks she can understand why you might want to

contact her. She doesn't want any contact at this time, and she doesn't want you to contact her children either. They don't know about you, and she doesn't think they would receive you well. They might be angry with her and then turn that on you."

So that's it? The baby asks to see her mom, and the mom replies, "no, thank you." Again. She said "Goodbye" to me in the hospital thirty-seven years ago, and she is capable of saying "Goodbye" to me again?

Instead, I thank Linda over and over for her work. I thank her and ask her every question I can think of. I ask her to repeat parts. But mostly, I hold myself together as we wrap up our conversation. Thanks again.

I thought I had prepared myself for this potential outcome, but I can't pick up the phone to call anyone with this news. It's too heavy and cement now fills my stomach. Eventually, I go downstairs to my computer room, and I email the people in my life who have been waiting for news, like me. Our phone rings within minutes of sending the email. It's my dad.

"Hey, there. How are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm ok." Tears. The truth is, I didn't expect her to say no, really. And, I didn't expect my dad to call. He almost never answers the phone when I call home, let alone calls me.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm really surprised. I thought she would at least be curious. Your mom and I wanted to thank her. We even talked about having her over." Words from my dad. He speaks a few now, when I can't.

So, I guess the era of closed adoption wins. In today's adoption world, 95% of adoptions are open to varying degrees. But that's not true of my era--the "Baby Scoop Era." From what my parents have told me, I don't think anyone maliciously scooped me out of my birth mom's arms, like some profit-seeking agency or anything strange like that. No, the story goes that my birth mom made a deliberate decision along with my birth dad to place me for adoption—a decision that seemed best to them at the time. My birth mom was probably told to go on with her life as if "this" never happened—that she would be fine and no one would ever know. The mentality of "closed records" prevails in my case and so many others from that era, and my birth mom remains convinced that anonymity serves everyone best. I become increasingly convinced that I cannot see myself in the mirror.

One morning, I get ready next to my husband in the bathroom mirror just like always. But this morning, all I see when I look at him—his mom and his dad. I watch myself put on makeup, do my hair. I don't recognize myself. I don't know who I look like. I see blonde hair with dark roots I keep fixing to blonde. I see blue eyes colored with brown-toned eye shadows to make them look more blue. I see teeth aligned by braces from 7th and 8th grade. (I take care to brush with baking soda to brighten them; I've always been told I have a great smile and great teeth.) I remember my torso is long, my mom told me once—noting that hers is not. I remember I have to exercise to keep from looking heavy; my dad cautioned me once in high school that I carry my weight in my hips. Who is my husband married to, and what will she look like as she ages? No,

anonymity no longer serves me well. I align myself with two adoption search angels, and I find my birth family. I run to find them all, and I do.

I find a half-sister and two brothers. I reach out to them, start communicating with them through Facebook, MySpace and email and such. I even spend a whole evening in Orlando on the Disney premises with my half-sister, Kelly. It's a Wednesday night, and the bar seems to be only open for us. We share conversation over chocolate martinis. She totes along a family photo album and shares memories, tells me a story about a ring that my birth dad gave to "our" mom when they were dating in college and that if she can find it, she will give it to me. She invites my husband and five children to her house the next evening for dinner. She makes lasagna and pizza and salad and bread.

We arrive at her home in our big Black Yukon XL and seven of us tumble out of the car and through her front door. A first. My son suggests we sing "Happy Birthday" or something for the happy reunion occasion. But once inside, I detect something has changed. She seems distant. I hear forced, tight, controlled laughter—different from the night before. And I sense worry, her pulling away. She tells me that she let her parents know that we met, and they are upset. With her? With me? I don't know. But this is the beginning of the end. A few months later, all three siblings will—in one way or another—refuse to have any further contact with me. I have no idea why. Nothing had changed on our end. I don't know. I've never been in their shoes. I'm just sad. They liked me, and I liked them. We are siblings. Found and now lost again.

I begin the run. I am one of 20,000 runners at this start “line.” I feel like I’m hiding a little, like I’m kind of somewhere I shouldn’t be. I feel a little like a stalker and that everyone else around me is in Philadelphia because they belong here. I kind of snuck my way in here. I don’t know why I feel this way; it’s a free country and I can go wherever I want. *But can I go where I’m not wanted?*

I think of her as I run 13.1 miles in Philadelphia. Has she walked on this trail? Did she visit that historic building up on that grassy hill on a site-seeing tour? Has she taken a picture by this famous symbol of “Brotherly Love” downtown? Surely she has. When they first moved out here (away from my birth place and where they raised their three children in Illinois), they must have participated in tourist activities and sights. I don’t obsess about her during the half-marathon. I obsess more about my own body, my own running, how I’m feeling, whether to choose Gatorade or water at this sideline station. I run with sport gummies for hydration and a few anti-anxiety tabs in my sports bra, with my iPod and my over-sized headphones. As I’m running, closing in on mile twelve, Christina Aguilera’s “Thanks for Making Me a Fighter” shuffles into my ears. I press repeat several times. The lump in my throat begins to come out. The runners around me fade from my sight as tears fall down my sweaty salty cheeks. I don’t try to wipe them away with my hands; instead, I push the tears into the pores of my cheeks. Images of my birth mom, my brother, the ones who have told me “no,” and the words they have said and written to me play round and round in the front part of my head. I welcome this grief as I continue to run. I want to run through it. A lesson learned from mile twelve: I can keep going even when I’m hurting—both physically, and emotionally.

As I close in on mile thirteen and the last turn to the finish line, I let go of Christina Aguilera and allow my iPod to shuffle again. A light-hearted Stevie Wonder song tickles my ears, and I giggle aloud, almost dance a little, and I welcome a smile of freedom on my face. On the black-topped ground below me, a cream-colored bar with electronic technology records my shoe crossing the finish line. I do not notice my surroundings much, but I glance up long enough to see strangers cheering my accomplishment. I bend over, one hand on my knee, and one hand holding my gut, I cry tears--for her, for me, for the rejection, for the pain of thirty-eight years of separation from her. And on Sunday, I drive to her address.

I don't want anything from my birth mom while I'm here except to see her face. I want to give her a potted plant (Kelly told me she doesn't like flowers), an angel figurine (Kelly told me she likes angels), and to see her face just once. That's all. As I'm driving, I'm mindful of the possibility of her presence again. Will I accidentally run into her on the road, at a gas station, in her local grocery store? I approach her townhome complex and notice a community park nearby. Playground equipment, yellow plastic winding slides, cedar chips to soften falls, swings, monkey bars, wooden benches for moms to sit. I wonder if Kelly, my birth mom, and Kelly's son (my nephew) have played at that park before. I take pictures of the park just in case. I take pictures of the parking areas in the complex. I take pictures of what my birth mom sees every day, trees that look like a mini-forest butted right up to the back yardline of their townhome. I take pictures of the front of their home—a large picture window upstairs with curtains pulled shut. I'm dressed in a

flowery blue, yellow, and black summer dress, and the seat next to me in the car holds the plant and the angel. I park my car, idle my car, sit in my car. Once I feel “ready,” I phone my search angel and practice what I’m going to say when I knock on my birth mom’s door and she answers. “Hi, Gerri. I’m Jamie. I don’t want anything from you, I just wanted to see your face and I wanted you to see mine.” The baby, armed with gifts, asking to meet her mother. Twice on Sunday, I journey up the stairs to her door. Each time I pretend I see signs of her. A backyard full of forest-like trees; does she like that? A neighbor’s empty cardboard beer box outside the door; does she like him? Stairs that need to be swept clean of tree drippings; does that bother her? I wonder if I look like her going up the stairs. Does she use the wooden railing? Does she go up the right side, like my mom taught me to do? Does she carry groceries up these stairs—each of her arms wrapped around a brown bag with bread coming out of the top?

Some doors have decoration outside of them; hers does not.

No one answers. For the next few hours, I see little-to-no traffic around their townhome complex area, and I certainly don’t see my birth mom. I leave after the dinner hour with plans to return tomorrow. It’s the last day I have in town before my flight returns me to South Dakota. So, I’ll try again.

It’s Monday. I return to my birth mom’s address and repeat. I watch, I wait, I drive away quickly only for a bathroom break and to get a bite to eat. I feel eerie driving and walking where I’m pretty sure she drives and walks. My eyes linger extra long on the checkout girl’s face in the grocery store, on the license plates around me. I notice the East Coast smell and pace and wonder how my midwest birth mom likes it out here. I’m kind

of extra friendly while I'm in the parking lot—smiling and speaking “hello.” I don't know. Maybe my birth mom goes to church with some of them. It's all so strange. I can't get connected enough. My birth mom refuses direct contact, so I try every other angle. I return to her parking lot—not wanting to miss any activity around her place. Nothing. The sun shifts towards the west. A squirrel scurries down the tree next to me. He freezes, and pierces me with beady black eyes. His tail swooshes back and forth slowly, confidently. He has my attention. Our eyes lock. He screeches at me, for what seems like at least four sustained minutes. He warns me. Go away.

“They are in Pittsburgh,” my search angel tells me through the phone. One conversation with an office assistant, and she knows where they are, why they are there, and what hotel reservations they have. Pittsburgh is only four hours away. I live in SD—which is an ungodly number of hours away from both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. And my birth mom.

“What are you doing?” my search angel asks me.

“I'm driving to Pittsburgh.”

She follows my lead, and we discuss all of the scenarios I might encounter.

Oh, how to appear as if this, as if I'm, normal?

~

But there's nothing normal about this. There's nothing natural about it. I was conceived inside her, and I've never seen her since I came out. And she hasn't seen me. She didn't nurse me. She didn't change my diaper (I don't think). She didn't feed me bottles, rub my clogged tear ducts, watch me carefully for jaundice, quicken to me when I cried—not as a

baby, and not now. She didn't take me home with her. She's not my mom but she is. There's nothing normal about that. And now I am old enough to drive myself around, make my own decisions as an adult. I'm not a baby. And I want to see her. That seems perfectly normal to me.

~

I will ring their room from my cell phone before 9 p.m. If she answers, I will talk to her in my calm sweet voice, tell her I am in town to see a friend from school, and that I have a gift for her, and would she meet me downstairs in the lobby? If she doesn't answer the phone before 9 p.m., I'll turn around and drive back to Philly.

I call at 8:56 p.m. "Hello?" she say. I go mute. I hang up. I call my search angel and tell her I chickened out. "Jamie," she reassures, "you can call her back and apologize. Tell her you are sorry, that you were very nervous." I call the hotel back, and they ring me through to her room. Someone picks up the phone, and drops it right back in its cradle.

I sensed then, and I sense now, while my goal was to see her face, I didn't; and while my heart wanted to give her a potted plant and a Willow Tree angel, I couldn't; and while she is still alive, I will try again.

Slips

They talked about getting married. They talked about waiting until they get married. But tonight, they slip. A slip of the tongue, a slip of the hand, c'mon sweetheart, let's slip in here, one slip leads to another. And a couple of months later, sure enough . . .

On a slip of paper in my baby book:

Birth mom: Height 5'3", Weight 124 lbs., Age 22, Eye color Blue, Hair Color Dark
Blonde, Hobby Dancing, Nationality Polish

Birth dad: Height 5"10, Weight 170 lbs., Age 21, Eye color Blue, Hair Color Dark
Blonde, Hobby Aviation, Nationality French and Norwegian

As an adopted child, I memorized the facts about my birth parents from this slip of paper. I tried to shade them in further with my imagination--a young man who likes to watch planes, a young woman who took dance lessons as a child or maybe even in college. My birth parents did not have faces, just hair; they existed more as floating vapors hovered in the front part of my brain—only when I thought of them. I pictured my birth dad as a young thin college-aged boy who wore a baseball cap for some reason, a jean jacket or a leather jacket, jeans and a belt, and a cigarette in his mouth. I created their personalities from the story my parents told me growing up: your birth parents loved you so much that they wanted you to have a better life than what they could give you at the time. They were planning to get married, but they didn't feel like they were financially ready for that yet. And so, they placed you for adoption.

I imagined two people who loved me very much and who would at least maybe want to know me as I would eventually want to know them. But in reality, they had locked me in their closets. And thirty-seven years later, I slipped out. My birth dad, though, would muscle me back in there where they put me. Where he thinks I belong.

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*Linda slips*

The phone rings throughout our home. I speed walk into our bedroom phone to best concentrate, just in case it's her. And the caller ID tells me it is. My hired-for-\$500 Confidential Intermediary named Linda has searched for, located, and today—talked to my birth mom. I scribble their conversation on a slip of paper: *she doesn't want contact. She doesn't want me to contact her family. Her children do not know about me. She feels afraid they would become angry with her and perhaps turn that anger on me. She says they have a very fragile family, and she doesn't want to hear about me—that would be too difficult.*

Like the polite, self-confident child my parents raised me to be, I thank Linda for her work and after a few more polite exchanges, we hang up. I cannot pick the phone back up to call my parents, my husband, my best friend, and tell them all those things. It's too sad. So instead, I go downstairs to my office, to my computer, and slip them all an email. I am a writer; I insert empathetic and sympathetic touches to the notes I scribbled on slips of paper. My life is already so full—great childhood, great parents, a wonderful marriage, five beautiful children, I feel sad for her--for my birth mom. I'll be ok, blah blah blah.

As I sit, staring at the email I just sent, the phone rings. I pick it up, and it's my dad--calling me from work. We muse about why she reacted the way she did. We throw around the possibilities, the explanations. Both of us try to swallow the lump.

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Shortly after, I opt for a second chance at a reunion--a search for my birth dad. Linda finds him, talks to him, and calls me with the results: "Unfortunately, he requested *no contact* . . . his family does not know about you, either." He did say that he would compose a letter to me, and Linda says she will send it to me. Early January of 2008, I receive his anonymous letter in the mail. He "thinks he understands what I might be curious about . . . two people, very much in love, not ready to get married, gave me to a loving adoptive couple." He includes some commentary, encourages me to "love the family that adopted me. To enjoy them, embrace my life with them." He acknowledges that "adoption laws are changing today, but that he still believes that anonymity is best, blah blah blah."

*Going into this search, I felt prepared for any response I might get, including these requests for "no contact." But I wasn't. I had believed all my life that "they loved me so much"; and now, that seemed like a lie. If they loved me so much, wouldn't they want to know me? to see me? their daughter? Have they not thought about me all these years the way that I have thought about them? I just couldn't understand. I grew up loved by my family. Their rejection of me shifted my foundation.*

Knowing my search has probably reached its dead end, I stall Linda on the phone as long as I can; she is the only person I have ever known who has spoken to my birth parents.

“Can you tell me anything else about my birth parents--besides their identity, I mean? like anything about their demeanor on the phone? like how about my birth mom’s voice? Sometimes, when I call a friend, I can’t tell the difference between the mother, the daughter, the sister . . . Do my birth mom and I sound alike at all?” Linda gives me more than I expected.

She slips: “Yes. Your birth mom and you speak with a similar pace of words, you measure your words similarly, your tones are similar. You know how when you call one person and they speak really loudly on the phone, and the next person you call speaks really softly? You two speak with the same volume, same kind of tone on the phone. And, *your names are actually similar.*”

What?

I stop sobbing.

“Our names are similar? Jamie Nagy? How can that be? I’m married now, my parents never knew her name, and my parents named me. I don’t get it. Jamie Nagy?”

“Yes. You would be surprised,” she says “about the coincidences we find in these situations. Pet names, children’s names, blah blah blah . . .” *Our names are similar . . .*

~~~

Barb slips

As my search and reunion case closes, I get another nugget: Linda tells me that my adoption files are in the Children’s Home and Aid Society of Illinois in downtown Chicago on Milwaukee Avenue. I don’t tell Linda this, but I have made a couple of new friends—Lynne, who introduced me to Melisha; they volunteer as “search angels” who work to reunite adoptees and birth parents. And, in recent conversations, I have learned

that sometimes a social worker has been known to feel empathy toward the searcher. And sometimes, that social worker will meet an adoptee in a conference room or an office or something and tell the adoptee: “I have to use the bathroom. I’ll be back in about ten minutes” and slip out of the room—and leave the adoptee’s file on the table!

I do tell Linda (and it’s all true): “Could I maybe meet with you one time in person? You are the only person I know who has ever spoken to my birth parents, and I just want to meet you face-to-face, and ask you for any last details you might be able to remember. For closure.” She agrees to meet.

I am telling the truth. I do want closure. I do want to meet this young twenty-something girl who has spoken with my birth mom and birth dad. I do want to pick up on any insight that her face might give me as she retells the story of her interactions with my birth parents. Maybe something like that empathetic social worker thing will happen to me, but at my core, I don’t believe it will. At this point, I kind of don’t believe I deserve to know; I don’t have the right to know.

I drive 600+ miles at \$4.00 a gallon in our family’s black Yukon XL to see her face-to-face. I spend forty minutes with Linda in that office, and I write everything she says about my birth parents with a pen on slips of paper she gives me. I feel embarrassed, low-class, like someone begging for crumbs. She seems hunkered down, on guard, to not tell me anything else that she shouldn’t. I thank her, and I slip out.

I don’t know how I found the strength to even leave that building. I lived thirty-eight years of life not knowing who my birth mom/birth dad is. And there, in that building, in that office, are the names of both of them. Their addresses, their phone

numbers. Linda, twenty-six years old, has spoken to both of my birth parents. And I, their baby, leave the premises, without knowing their names?

But on the same day, I drive to Milwaukee Avenue for my second scheduled appointment for the day with a social worker named Barb—the Children’s Home and Aid Society of Illinois’ post-adoption specialist. I park in an open metered spot near the building’s address, and near a Baskin Robbins—my favorite ice cream place. I walk a short distance to the building and go up the elevator. People ride the elevator with me and get off at different floors—needing different types of help. I get off on the “Children’s Home and Aid Society” floor, and I speak to the attendant with a mix of timidity and the self-confidence my parents raised me to have.

“I’m here to see Barb for our one o’clock appointment.” I smile and thank her as I move my body to a waiting seat.

I fight off a panic attack. Did my birth mom ever come in this building? Did she feel needy? I feel needy . . . like I need the “Society’s” help. And there were people on the elevator who needed help too. But my help is different . . . I am coming to find my name. I am coming to find out what happened when my birth mom got pregnant, what decisions she made, where I came from, who I am.

Barb, the young twenty-something blonde post-adoption specialist with a kind smile, greets me in the waiting area and leads me to a large room with a conference-like table and chairs. As we navigate seating arrangements, she quickly tells me that she has her “thumb over this tab portion of the file folder here” because my birth mom’s last name is written under there, and she can’t tell me that, of course. And for an hour and a half while she finds pieces of non-identifying information she can share with me, my

eyes dance between her eyes. And her thumb. When she lifts her head to look at me, I shift my eyes to meet hers. When she bows her head to find another bit to share with me, I shift and narrow my eyes, to laser my vision under her thumb. A few times, her thumb slips. *Does she know her thumb slipped off the tab? Is she doing that on purpose?* Adrenaline jumps around my heart; I kind of think I see “Ostaszewski” in cursive and upside down writing, and I write every version I imagine that I see on a slip of paper among my notes of “non-identifying information” while I continue to match my eyes to hers.

After trying to see under her thumb while trying not to look like I was trying to see under her thumb for an hour and a half, I walk back to my car with wings. I drive “Ostaszewski” on a slip of paper to a parking spot just outside of a loft apartment in downtown Chicago, where the search angel Melisha lives; Melisha wants to help me.

“What did you get? Did you get her birth date?”

“No,” I tell her. “All I got was something like ‘Ostaszewski.’” As the adrenaline wears off, my head starts to float. She tells me she is a birth mom . . . goes to her computer . . . looks for “that strong Polish name.” I see a big screen, lots of dates, a black screen with green glowing letters and numbers she scrolls through. It looks super old and outdated to me. My eyes start to glaze, and I lumber over to this stranger’s large billowy sofa to fall into while she works away. Within five minutes she connects “Ostaszewski” to an obituary and she brings it over to me on the couch:

“Casimir Ostaszewski, loving father to Gerri (married to John Gnagey) and . . .”

Jamie Nagy. Gerri Gnagey . . . “your birth mom’s name and your name are similar . . .”

“That’s her! That’s your birth mom! Geraldine Gnagey!” We both soak in the moment, the realization that we have found my birth mom, her sister, her three children. My mind starts to replace my imaginations of her with this new reality, with these names.

“Wow. It’s never come together that easily before. It’s like it was just meant to be,” she tells me. And her computer sputters out pages and pages of information about all of them—my birth mom, her husband, her sister, her three children, her one grandson. Names, addresses, license plate numbers, email addresses. Leaning on her cushiony couch pillows, I contemplate Linda’s slip about our names and Barb’s thumb slipping. I shake my head. My knowing, my finding, hangs in the teeter-tottering of those moments, those two hints, those two gifts.

Kelly Slips

With this newly found information from Melisha, I begin to search for and contact my half-siblings. I find a way to meet my birth mom’s daughter, my half-sister Kelly, and words slip out of her mouth—probably from shock. She hugs me, she introduces me to her son as “Aunt Jamie,” she introduces me to the people around us as “her sister.” And, Kelly slips. “Well, your dad must be Greg,” she blurts out. She goes on to tell me stories her mom (my birth mom) has told her about this Greg from college . . . the boyfriend she had before she married Kelly’s dad, his fraternity, the ring that he gave Gerri. Kelly’s slip of my birth dad’s probable first name later helps me make enough connections to identify him out of the haystack of “young men interested in aviation in the Champaign, IL area in the such-and-such fraternity around 1970.” And, armed with his first and last name, I find three more half-siblings—his three other children.


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*My birth mom and birth dad had requested “no contact” and that I not contact any of their family. But I continued to initiate and request “contact”—an equally valid request—with any adult birth family members who wished to have contact with me; I had come to believe that their adult children (my six half-siblings) have the right to know about me and to make their own choice about what to do with me. I refused to stay in the closet.*

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I drive the big black Yukon XL across the country to meet more birth family members, (my siblings, aunts, cousins, great aunts and uncles, and finally my paternal grandparents), have dinner and drinks with them, and watch them cycle through a pattern of shock, enjoyment, and then usually efforts to put puzzle pieces together to make sense of the blending of our two lives, our two histories. I feel so thankful for these “slips” that led to the discovery of my birth family. But little by little, my birth dad makes it clear that he views them much differently. As I celebrate each new connection, he threatens me. In a letter on New Year’s Eve, 2008, he threatens me to not contact anyone else “even remotely” related to him; he tells me that the Christmas “gifts” I sent to his (adult) children would be sent back to my door step, and they were. I continue on—knowing that I can legally knock on anyone’s door that I want to. And two months later, I receive a letter from an attorney, threatening legal action based on “my actions.” I continue introducing myself to remaining birth family members on both sides, and my birth dad continues his actions by filing papers for an “Adult Protection Order” against me. He

makes it as clear as possible, without actually ever meeting me, that he doesn't want me slipping around anymore.

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*Slips of paper. Slips of sentences. Slips of non-identifying information.*

*Slips of hints. Slip of the wrist. Slip under my skirt.*

*Slip off the sidewalk. Slip on the ice. A slippery slope.*

*Their slips led me to a foothold--to my heritage; and their slips led my birth dad to fear the loss of his foothold--his secret.*

*And he wanted to put me back where I belong.*

*In their box. In the grave. In the place where they placed me.*

## Practicing Ekphrasis

**Reading My Birth Mom**

For thirty-seven years of my life, I could only read who my birth mom was from a piece of paper with “Non-Identifying Information” on it.

Birthmom

Hair: Light Brown

Eyes: Blue

Height: 5'3"

Weight: 120

Nationality: Polish

Hobby: Dancing

I've been trying to define her, describe her, to find her essence, her form, to bring her to life. My whole life. As an adoptee from the era of closed records, I practiced ekphrasis (way before I knew what “ekphrasis” was) from this 8 ½ x 11 yellowed sheet of paper. A representation of her. In print. Its edges and creases worn with years of wonder.

Memorized.

I hold on to her hobby. I carry it on, still. “My birthmom’s hobby was dancing,” I tell everyone. Ballet (my favorite), tap, jazz, modern. I earned toned and defined legs over my years of dance instruction. Tendues, pirouettes, and pliés. Pink ballet tights, pointe shoes. My daughter dances too. She carries it on. “Dancing is in your blood,” I tell her. Ballet, tap (her favorite) and modern. She too, at age eleven has toned shapely legs. She dances on stage, eyebrows lifted and engaged. Easy grace. Beautiful placement. A natural turn out.

Dear birth mom, did you take dance lessons? Did you walk to dance class or did your mom take you? I've always felt connected to you because as a young girl I believed that my love for dance came from you. I mean, that's what the sheet of paper told me.

That's pretty much all I had to go on until I found a yearbook picture of you when I was thirty-eight.

### **Reading This Print**

This woman. This print. This representation. She is not you. She is Joanne Seltzer—daughter of Leo M. Seltzer, M.D. She did take dance lessons and piano lessons in 1954.

I can follow the paper trail.

Check #1582 on 2/20/1954 for \$90 to Mr. John Hiersoux for piano lessons.

Check #1846 on 10/26/1954 for \$24 to the American Academy of Ballet for shoes.

Check #1914 on 12/14/1954 for \$32 to the American Academy of Ballet.

Joanne Seltzer. Pink parfait tutu—probably a poodle skirt. Loose long and feminine hair. But no sign of ballet in this print, no grande battements, arabesques, or pas de chats. Instead, Joanne's ghostly girly figure reaches see-through arms up, towards a partner's neck, as if to hold on. Did she learn ballroom instead of ballet? Did she practice with her dad, Dr. Leo Seltzer, M.D.?

*Dear birth mom, did you sometimes practice with your dad? Did you dance with my birth dad? I don't like ballroom much, do you?*

### **Reading the Backdrop**

Dance lessons in 1954. I imagine money for dance lessons was hard to come by in 1954. But Joanne's daddy was a doctor, and I (perhaps naively) assume the Seltzer family could

afford dance and piano for their sweet daughter. Still, in Joanne's print—I read the backdrop of sacrifice in the backdrop of the checks her daddy wrote.

*You sacrificed for me, didn't you, birth mom?*

In fact, that's kind of the standard definition of adoption, isn't it—the birth mom sacrifices raising her child to give the child a better opportunity in life. My adoption story tells me my birth parents didn't feel financially prepared to get married and raise a family. They were both seniors in college at the University of Illinois—my birth mom in accounting and my birth dad in geography (going on to be a pilot). They got pregnant in October 1969 of their senior year, and my birth mom dropped out of college. Her parents were befuddled and dismayed, I've learned; they never knew why and they took the mystery to their graves. My birth parents never told anyone—not their parents, their siblings, no one in their family that I know of. I can read the sacrifices. My birth mom sacrificed finishing her college degree. She sacrificed her body for nine months and then more. She sacrificed the joy of keeping and nurturing and nursing her first born child. She sacrificed living in freedom and truth.

*I know this print is about Joanne, but I can't stop thinking about you.*

*I would read every letter of every paper trail of yours 1000 times.*

### **Reading Natalie**

The Doner auditorium goes dark, and I light up the paper program with my iPhone. My daughter's ballet routine is next. Budding 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls, budding ballerinas in light pink leotards and tights under soft blue light, light blue sashes made of see-through taffeta float from the girls' wrists. On stage, her hair pulled up in a bun, held in

by bobby pins, my daughter wears a little blue eye shadow, a little blush, mascara, and a little red lipstick—just to keep her from getting washed out by the stage lights. I read Natalie as a leader on the stage. She tells me she is nervous, but she knows what she is doing. And without trying or forcing or faking, she expresses the message of the composition to the audience. I can tell and I know—she feels a fullness in her heart when she dances. Gentle grace in her eyes, her legs—curves of muscle that match mine and match the dancing training she has taken so far, her arms and fingers extended . . . soft billowy poise. She communicates with her eyes to the other dancers on stage, her friends, and she shares herself as she dances.

Natalie and I read each other well. She sometimes says exactly what I'm thinking, and vice versa. I wonder about my mom. When she saw me on stage at dance recitals, what did she see? My biological daughter gives me moments of self-recognition and self-awareness I never knew I was missing. I recognize my hands when I see Natalie's hands. I recognize the shape of my legs and arms when I see Natalie's figure. I recognize the hugs I give and like to receive when I hug Natalie. And I recognize the many personality traits of hers that are also mine. She writes. She talks. (My dad always called me "windy" growing up.) She likes to learn. She likes to read. She likes to dance. She likes music. I recognize what I see.

*Dear birth mom, do you give good long hugs? Do you like to learn? What else do my daughter and I have that is also yours?*

### **Reading my Birth Mom's Picture**

I found a picture of her in my thirty-eighth year of life. It wasn't easy. I chased a paper trail which began with my adoption file: her upside-down, written in cursive, complicated long Polish name on the folder of a file (which I am not supposed to see), to a computer that tracks births and deaths in the state of Illinois, to an Ostaszewski obituary that lists my birth mom as a survivor, to searching on the internet for recent addresses and such, to digs into the archives of libraries for yearbooks, to finally a friend's mom who still had her yearbook from the University of Illinois and found your picture in a sorority composite photo from 1968.

*Dear birth mom, you were beautiful. Simple stylish dark hair. Petite young woman. A beautiful smile.*

I tried to see myself in you. Everyone who knew me tried. We compared smiles and hair color and eyes and cheekbones and ears and eyebrows and noses and chins and expression. We poured over your photo. The joy of seeing you in print. The joy of imagining you as a sweet, full of aspiration sophomore at the University of Illinois recently pledged to a sorority. When I look at your picture, I see the hope of your future and the terror of an unplanned pregnancy around your corner. I feel like I want to say sorry, but I don't want to apologize for my life, really. I love my life. Could I say thank you?

*Dear birth mom, did shame make you a pink ghost? Were you vibrant and visible before you gave me up? Did your dancing attract my birth dad's attention in college? Your dancer's figure? And now, do you regret it? Because now, you hide. You hide from me.*

*I found you. I wanted to know you. But you say you don't want to know me. And so I research who you are, I find images of who you are, but I can really only imagine who you are. I found you, but I still can't make you surface.*

Stuck in ekphrasis.

Wiki on Ekphrasis:

“Socrates and Phaedrus:

The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive,  
but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence.”

*Your majestic silence breaks my heart.*



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