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## Naturally: Memory in Verse

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**Naturally: Memory in Verse**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors Studies in  
English

By

Heather Drouse

Spring 2023

English

Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

**The University of Arkansas**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	1
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	2
introduction .....	3
<b>mother</b> .....	4
the love in our home .....	5
potion-making with the little girls of the world .....	7
yates .....	8
there is wildlife everywhere.....	9
Holding On.....	10
<b>father</b> .....	11
letting go .....	12
they'll learn your name .....	13
little .....	14
Pinconning Nature Trail.....	15
how i know he loves me.....	16
<b>love</b> .....	18
<b>bridges</b> .....	28
to one i know is watching .....	29
to the kids playing in the creek on the bike trail by my friend's house.....	30
to the school of fish in the tiny cave beneath the waterfall.....	31
to the residents on the outskirts of leipzig .....	32
to the waiter who gave us an extra daiquiri (because the first wasn't alcohol free).....	34
to the squirrel who gets closer to my window every day.....	35
<b>List of References</b> .....	37

## introduction

smell of tree bark

wet moss

lake (st. clair)

bream

shea butter

warm rain

cinnamon

(love) blueberry pancakes

sound of hockey

leaves (fall)

electrical hum

coffee bubbling

creaking floor

beer (cans) fizz

cat claws

stove top

sight of black hair

(safe) guns

stone fireplace

wood panels

corn + soybeans

rc cars (brother's)

wagging tail

step-up kitchen

feel of rubber swings

worms (huge)

tulip stems

(back) scratchy hands

short fur

banana muffins

plastic pool

wet dirt

taste of banana peppers

saltines

corn beef

chocolate (box) pudding

kielbasa

sauerkraut

asparagus (baked)

mashed potatoes

**mother**

## **the love in our home**

hummingbirds are not often in this part  
of the neighborhood.

with so many young children,  
most parents are too tired to keep up

a garden fit for these little speed demons  
that repels, at the same time,

much more destructive forces,  
such as the rabbits who wish for nothing but

to take back their birth-right  
of which we built our homes upon.

however,  
when the hummingbirds do come along,

it is to the climbing honeysuckle  
on our terraced-wood patio

at such an angle that one can watch them flit about  
from the sliding glass door of the master bedroom.

it is uncommon for them to stay long,  
but for those who find it fit to rest,

the grey swing-bench has a soft enough quilt  
for their liking;

one or two might sleep for a time,  
though only for small naps,

as they do to keep their hearts pumping  
and their wings spinning.

the hummingbirds are easy to spot  
when they hover at the base

of the honeysuckle,  
their teeny size giving them away

along with their bright red-scaled throats  
and bright green-scaled backs,

twinkling like little stars in the sunlight  
underneath the blur of their wings.

.  
. .  
.

when i get older,  
i'd much like to live somewhere

that the hummingbirds would suggest.



## **potion-making with the little girls of the world**

little me sits in the space  
between her grandpa's house  
and his neighbor's (frank's?)  
and pats the ground in front of her  
until it's soft  
then digs her tiny nails  
into the dirt, brown replacing white,  
shoving the soft soil to the side  
and forming a hole.  
she stands, teetering on her little legs,  
her little dress swaying  
and flinging the dirt off of its edges;  
in front of her, a bush  
full of dark blue berries  
with a white-ish bloom  
that rubs off on her fingers.  
she picks out exactly five  
and spins again, eyeing another bush  
full of little purple flowers  
and bright red, juicy-looking berries;  
of those, she chooses four,  
and at last, her final destination:  
a spiky shrub that she knows  
is packed full of those  
soft, squishy berries  
with the hole on the bottom  
and a seed tucked inside.  
with a few nicks on her hands  
she emerges with three,  
skipping, then, back to her post,  
picking up her hand-painted watering can  
as she plops down in front of her  
little hole.  
in the water goes, and  
some leaves, and  
five dark blue berries, and  
four bright red berries, and  
three soft berries, and  
*splash*  
as she sticks her grubby hands  
in the dirty water  
and mixes it around,  
her eyes full of stars.

**yates**

apple cider  
is the same color  
as the memories of the mill,  
of the shining green river,  
the tangled roots above ground,  
the cobblestone walkway,  
of the dragonflies on stemmed stilts.  
i would love to lie down  
in the soft grasses  
next to the water  
and rest my eyes for a time,  
just until the sun sets—  
but my sense tells me  
that i would sleep for far longer,  
until the trees reach  
into the heavens  
and my hair turns to moss.

## **there is wildlife everywhere**

but the cicada hum doesn't feel real  
surrounded by concrete.  
i have only once observed a living cicada  
with my eyes:  
dissatisfied with its place on a leaf  
above my head while i waited  
in front of a boys & girls club for the bus,  
it hovered in the air  
touching twigs as it propelled  
until it landed on one  
that felt just right.  
i knew it was a cicada because of its fat body,  
the part most recognizable in the shell  
that it leaves behind, the ones that litter  
my backyard, stuck to everything and  
anything like a fishfly.  
i know that it is my fault that  
i see the world as two things:  
natural and synthetic:  
the wild and the unfortunately tamed.  
i'm sorry,  
ants. cicadas. grasshoppers. house spiders.  
but i just can't see you  
like i see dragonflies over open water.

## **Holding On**

### **I.**

As a child, I used to dig up bones with my hands  
in the front yard of Mimi's condo.  
I found the lower half of a deer's skull, once;  
I brought it inside, excitement brimming within me.  
Mimi would help me clean it and hold me tight after,  
her arms thin but her love thick.

### **II.**

When Mimi died, and I was nine, my mother gave me  
some of her ashes; I held the tiny jar close,  
opened the lid, and sprinkled some inside of  
the pillow that Mimi gave me, the same one that  
she used in her hospital bed,  
velvet red against stark white.

### **III.**

Every time I fill up another jar with some odd  
collection, I think of how Mimi would smile,  
how she loved everything that I did.  
I imagine her lifting the glass off of its shelf,  
naming the types of feathers bundled inside,  
what birds they came from.

**father**

## letting go

when my grandpa died,  
my grandma had to sell the farm  
that they had lived on  
for decades.  
it all went by so fast;  
one day, her sons and daughter  
and us cousins  
were sitting on the floor in the living room,  
talking with her as always,  
sharing memories of grandpa,  
hugging her in turns  
every time a tear escaped her eye.  
the next,  
a crowd of unfamiliar people,  
strangers,  
stood outside of the big three-car garage  
as a man rattled off the prices  
of all the furniture we grew up with.  
we helped carry out  
the heavy wood tables,  
the mattresses,  
old bed frames  
that we took apart hours earlier.  
when everything was sold  
and the crowd thinned,  
we left the house one by one—  
one of the last to leave,  
i walked circles around the perimeter,  
rubbing the leaves of the red bushes  
as i passed  
and snapping the bare tulip heads  
off of their stems,  
dropping them into the soil  
to grow again  
without us.

**they'll learn your name**

flying in,  
hovering, now, look,  
Sweet girl—

how the  
Seagulls  
come in  
two by two  
by two by two by  
One  
with their little  
plop  
plip plop  
feet  
pads  
on  
the blacktop  
for your  
Sweet bread—

crowds  
so large  
they  
Block  
The  
Street...

## little

12:32 PM

i love the smell of a dead fish  
mixed into the brine of the water,  
the sun beating down  
on its scales and one upturned eye  
as it lay sideways, gently swaying,  
twinkling in the current

12:55 PM

what gives back more: the body of the fish to the algae  
or the algae to the fish when it lived?

1:20 PM

this one is small, so small,  
barely unfit for a minnow--  
for certain, not big enough  
to catch the eye of the crows  
or to lure a bigger fish  
into the throes of the fall

1:22 PM

surely, if it were,  
the glinting silver of his body  
would have caught more than just me



## Pinconning Nature Trail

Shack of sticks + planks:  
pillar of un-exploration  
in the middle of the trees  
off the paved trail  
far past  
the Water plant  
visible only in winter  
when the trunks  
lose their dresses,  
looked at— Seen—  
but never understood,  
not close-up.  
“Hunting lodge,”  
my dad says  
passing it by  
on a bike.  
*hunting lodge,*  
i think  
eyeing it well  
at Sundown.

On the outside:  
light wood,  
just a little worn down,  
gaps between the Planks  
and a hole  
in the small door,  
the whole shape  
roughly rectangular,  
like an Oversized  
outhouse.  
On the inside:  
i see nothing, but  
i imagine  
a table, long and thin,  
enough to lay down  
a Shotgun or a Rifle  
and a lantern, unlit,  
with a handle  
large enough  
to fit my Dad’s hands.

The floor is dirt,  
no grass,  
stirred up and dry  
from lack of light  
and Bootprints.  
There are no animals  
around it, ever,  
none of the squirrels  
or rabbits or Deer  
that we’ve seen  
on other parts  
along the trail.  
No People,  
either.  
Maybe my dad  
was right.

## how i know he loves me

i am so scared  
of the dark  
and tonight i am  
maybe 11  
in the front room/kitchen  
of my dad's most  
remote house,  
the one off I-75  
that i affectionately call  
"the round house"  
because of the way the roof slopes  
down in the living room.  
night time is pitch black  
without any street lights,  
just one lamp light  
that shines in the backyard  
hanging from the porch,  
shedding just enough  
for my dad and i  
to watch as the first few deer  
duck their way  
into our property, where they know  
we scatter dry corn and seed  
every day.  
i am so scared of the dark  
because of the things it could hold,  
the people it could conceal and  
the black bugs i wouldn't see  
or my cat getting out  
of the window my dad keeps leaving open  
in the bedroom with no lights  
outside of the broken screen  
except for the very occasional  
headlight.  
i am scared,  
but we watch out of the big window  
in the kitchen as the deer  
multiply, 11 to 21 to 45 to 53 to 101  
and we lose count so fast  
when they're all bunched up like that,  
necks craned down to eat  
with the only space in between  
large enough to accommodate  
the huge antlers on some of them.

my dad sighs as he wins  
another muted game of spider solitaire  
on his big desktop turned away from  
the window and tells me  
for the millionth time how he would like  
“to shoot those big bucks  
and make a nice venison chili from them,  
but then all these deer  
would never come back”  
and i would never know  
what's really out there  
when it's pitch black.

**love**

1. *connection*

my mom and i  
plant tulip bulbs  
in the soft earth of september,  
her cracked hands concealed  
by cloth gardening gloves,  
silver  
as they travel up her arms.

she wears no digging claws  
but wields a trowel  
she painted  
years and years ago  
when she met my dad,  
all pastel yellows and pinks  
and little flowers  
with no names.

today my loose dress  
matches her painted yellows  
in both lovely color  
and purpose:  
if i had it my way,  
my skin would be stained  
in black just as much  
as the metal and the fabric.

my mom pats the soil next to her  
and, worm between my fingers,  
i shimmy to watch  
as she places the next bulb into  
the pit she dug  
with her trowel,  
right in the middle,  
like the only egg  
in the center of a robin's nest.

she nods at me, points at my hand  
with the worm.

i drop it into the hole  
and push in the dirt,  
taking turns with my left  
and her right  
packing it down.

## 2. *triumph*

fishing pole over my shoulder,  
oh-so-proudly  
i walk at my dad's side  
barely coming up to his hips  
down the dirt path,  
between the thick oaks  
that filter the sunlight  
far, far in the back  
of the park/golf course/playground  
behind the house  
he shares with his son,  
my half-brother.  
today is warm, but not too much,  
perfect  
for sitting by the water--  
when we get there,  
to the grassy edge of the pond  
(who am i kidding,  
we still call it a lake)  
i sit crisscross applesauce  
next to my dad  
and fling my pole at him,  
show him the hook  
between my fingers.  
*hold on, hold on,*  
he says,  
his patience tried already  
but his mind made up:  
he fishes the box of worms  
out of his huge kit  
and hands me one.  
i grab it carefully,  
though in my excitement  
the intent is lost;  
when i brush over the surface,  
his hands are warm, as always,  
a little dry from all the calluses  
and large enough that the lines of his palm  
feel like valleys to me.  
his confidence in me true as ever,  
he goes about fastening his own hook and worm,  
and in my own little world  
i pop the worm onto the silver hook,  
knot it once and pop it again

making sure to leave a trail,  
and with all the might in my tiny body  
i reel back  
and cast.

i don't remember if my dad caught anything;  
but i caught a piranha!

### 3. *safety*

in my mom's garden  
i would chase the baby robins  
whose nest was built out of  
sticks and petals  
in the middle of our lilies  
until my mom would  
tell me to stop,  
and later,  
i would scold our dog  
for doing the same thing—  
as the weather grew warmer,  
i would find  
their baby blue eggs  
in pieces in the grass,  
or below the pine tree  
or on the deck,  
and i'd pick them up  
to show my mom,  
crying that the babies  
had died,  
until she told me *no, bippy,*  
they had already  
hatched.



#### 4. *opportunity*

my grandparents lived  
on a farm near saginaw  
that, in the late spring,  
my dad and i would visit  
just to pick the asparagus  
at the edges of the property  
before they seeded.

we were armed with  
a plastic meijers bag,  
sometimes two,  
a pair of scissors,  
a pocket knife,  
and grey cloth gloves  
for my dad  
because i didn't mind  
the juice.

we'd pull off of the gravel  
road on my grandpa's  
quad, navy green,  
and move down the border  
in a perfect line--  
my dad cutting and snapping,  
me snipping and dropping.

every year that we could  
we gathered asparagus  
and tramped through the wet  
grasses and warm dirt,  
me in front, my dad behind,  
recovering the stems i'd miss  
because he wanted the meal  
my grandma would boil of them,  
and i didn't.

5. *innocence*

with cut logs  
and fallen branches  
we built forts,  
little havens,  
various meeting grounds  
in the woods  
behind my elementary school  
after hours.  
sometimes we worked  
within the week,  
dashing from the  
heavy glass doors  
of our classrooms  
through the playground  
and over the creek,  
hanging backpacks  
on the stubs of trees,  
brandishing pocket knives  
to trim the paths  
we made as shortcuts.  
other times,  
weekends,  
we'd meet at  
the creek fort or  
the one in the thick or  
the slim one by the fences,  
wherever our allegiances  
lay at the time,  
and eat saltines  
or the blackberries  
that grew on the  
main path  
while we talked  
or slept  
or fought  
with sticks--  
our pride  
and our joy,  
the unknown  
and the known  
immortalized in  
green and dirt brown  
and tongue rolling  
and laughter.

6. *play*

fishfly

fishfly

fishfly

fishfly

on my dad's back  
of his navy blue  
shirt he wears  
all the time i  
bombard him with

fishfly

fishfly

fishfly

## 7. *comfort*

there are blackberries  
in the visions of my past  
and now, finally,  
in my present;  
happily so,  
riding down the trail  
by my friend's house  
(the friend i never thought  
i'd live next to,  
after a decade  
of seeing them only twice  
before)  
on a bike too big for me  
and much too expensive,  
a mountain bike,  
i'd never ridden one of them before--  
getting used to the forward-lean  
of the bars while  
remembering how to bike  
in the first place  
could not stop me  
from calling out "wait!  
blackberries!"  
after the first one  
burst red tones  
underneath my giant wheel.  
the discovery wasn't like  
when i stumbled upon the bush  
in the corner of my backyard  
before the eviction,  
cut by the small thorns  
and too busy picking berries  
to care.  
i brought them back to my mom  
who saw, from the kitchen window,  
and helped me wash them  
then dust them with sugar  
so that i could understand  
what they were  
for the first time  
(they were too expensive  
at meijers, like strawberries)  
bathed in the light  
of memory's golden hour;

no, it was more like  
coming home  
after moving across the us  
and gliding to huron,  
walking down the trail  
to the deeper woods  
and cucci, rainbow plaza,  
but being stopped  
by the overgrowth of blackberries  
someone never bothered to cut down  
(where did the parents go  
with their children after school?).  
and even though i  
didn't have a basket with me  
i grabbed as many  
as my little hands could hold  
and brought them to my car,  
wrapped them in a napkin  
shoved back into the  
glovebox  
to take them back to my dad  
because even though  
he couldn't eat them  
with his diverticulitis  
i could tell him  
what they meant to me anyway  
while coating them  
with sugar.  
i ride the trail now  
on my own blue bike  
and stop often  
at the blackberries  
even though there are no  
benches there,  
just the running of the creek  
and shady trees  
from which they fall;  
*trees* from which they fall,  
not bushes  
like they are supposed to be,  
but even though  
these blackberries  
are most definitely *mulberries*,  
they are so small  
that i'll pretend  
anyway.

**bridges**

## **to one i know is watching**

i took up embroidery last year.  
i'm sure you've seen how often  
i take up the needle,  
how much time i spend  
during gatherings and in between games  
adding to each piece until it's finished.  
but i wanted to tell you  
that i began because of you.  
sure, i might have liked the few pieces  
i've seen in the past,  
but i knew nothing of this craft  
until you.  
you showed me jewelry making,  
sewing to mend what's broken;  
i still have the cross-stitch  
you made me of the cat  
in my closet, by all my books.  
when i embroider,  
i feel as though i am doing  
right by you.  
as though i am carrying on something  
to remember you, in my own way,  
like everyone who knew you  
and loves you  
does.  
thank you for showing me  
my favorite hobby.  
i love you.

**to the kids playing in the creek on the bike trail by my friend's house**

me too.

you parked your bikes (and one scooter)  
on the concrete cutting through the middle--  
they were the first signs of life i saw  
before i heard your voices, screaming,  
and the splash of your shoes in the water  
as you called to one another  
in a game i didn't stick around long enough  
to understand--  
and those bikes are what told me  
to move on, for this area has been claimed.



## **to the school of fish in the tiny cave beneath the waterfall**

why is it that you are so dark, so noticeable, when you are young?  
the smallest of you have black stripes and flashing spots—  
they don't blend in like you large fish,  
sandy-colored and slow-moving.  
you big fish scare all the little ones  
with how suddenly you appear from the dirt,  
so camouflaged that even your younger siblings and sons and daughters  
do not see you until you are close enough  
to touch them with a fin, to rub metaphorical shoulders.  
we get it; all children are vulnerable  
until they grow, gain knowledge, blend in,  
but is it really necessary, Evolution,  
for these kids to be so intensely exposed?

## to the residents on the outskirts of leipzig

on friday morning  
we took a walk  
through the trails of  
clara-zetkin-park,  
the recommendation  
of a friend in the flat  
above and across the hall  
who had lived nearby  
and walked there often.

it was beautiful.

the trees were not green  
other than the pines  
but i knew what they  
would have been like  
just from the look  
of them bare—  
towering,  
reaching towards the heavens  
and full of crows,  
even one large woodpecker,  
dedicated to their protection.

the city was beautiful, too.

i wonder if tourists  
often visit the park  
like we did.  
did we stand out?  
we spoke english,  
but no one was  
close enough to hear it.  
could they tell  
by the way we dressed?  
the way i took pictures of  
the twisting branches  
in the sky,  
or maybe how surprised  
we were by the resilient  
couples in freezing weather  
still heave-hoing in kayaks  
down the river?

maybe it's weird,

but i wanted to be

those kayakers.

me and him,  
on the water. at home.

**to the waiter who gave us an extra daiquiri (because the first wasn't alcohol free)**

i hope that my gratitude  
came through to you  
that night, though  
you surely don't remember it now.  
everyone told me  
in coming to germany  
i had to try the alcohol,  
and it's funny  
that it came true  
even though i told them no.  
i'm not mad– nor sarcastic–  
i mean it, sincerely,  
thank you!  
for your kindness  
in bringing our first drink  
and letting my fiancé drink it all  
because i couldn't stand  
the aftertaste.  
for proving me right  
in the tiny squabble  
over whether or not the first  
had alcohol, when i tasted  
the second and loved it.  
for not charging for the second  
even though we wouldn't  
have batted an eye  
at paying for both.

we stood waiting for the train  
in the whipping, chilling wind  
for 10 minutes after leaving,  
and all we could talk about  
was the receipt and the drink  
and the face you made when  
you asked "mit alkohol?" and  
we said "nei, alkoholfreie bitte."

**to the squirrel who gets closer to my window every day**

i wish there was some signal  
that i could give you  
to help you understand  
i mean no harm,  
no foul,  
i am no predator  
to your prey.

you enter my backyard  
every day by climbing up  
the grey wooden fence  
and sitting there for a moment,  
your tail shivering,  
eyes and ears alert as you wonder  
if this place of yours  
is still safe from the rest of the world.

i want to tell you  
it always will be,  
just as it was  
for the rabbit who ate  
the bunny flowers around the tree  
we had to cut down  
and the brown thrasher  
whose nest served her babies  
until it fell from its perch,  
barren but of no violence.

selfishly,  
little grey squirrel,  
i imagine holding you in  
both of my hands  
and realizing the softness of your fur,  
marveling too at the smallness  
of your ears and paws.

the last time i saw you  
you sat on the windowsill,  
mere inches away from my seat  
at my desk  
and i was too stunned to focus  
on anything else;  
i watched you rest there on the brick  
until your hunger took over

and you dug up the acorns you had hid  
underneath the tree there  
to take with you  
somewhere outside  
of my fence.

## List of References

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