The V Formation

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Recommended Citation
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THE V FORMATION

by

DEVAN BRETTKELLY

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR WARREN LIU
PROFESSOR KIMBERLY DRAKE

APRIL 22, 2016
Acknowledgements

For my roots, particularly my mom.

Special thanks to my readers, Warren Liu and Kimberly Drake, as well as my Senior Seminar and ENGL 183A class. Thank you for giving this story your thoughtful readings and attention.
The V Formation

By Devan Brettkelly

Mom called at an inhumane hour, before the birds were even chirping. You grasped around, flattened out the comforter in the dark before finding your phone underneath the pillow. Slits of moonlight illuminated your roommate, middle finger in the air. Nodding, you walked out into the corridor. “Hi Mom.” She skipped the pleasantries and you knew something was wrong because your mother is normally a very pleasant woman. “It’s Phoebe,” she said. “You need to come home.” And that was all she could form into coherent words amidst guttural sounds.

“I can’t understand you, what happened?” you said.

There was a beat of dead air, some fumbling with the receiver as she handed the phone off to your sister Margot. At first you didn’t recognize her voice, which was usually light and airy. It sounded thick. She told you the whole story, how Nana found Phoebe closed up in her room with the generator still running. You sat numb with this information for a while, picking furballs off the carpet and trying to cry. As you rose from your sunken position on the carpet, a drunk boy from down the hall was trying to get his key into the door. He thrusted it forward like a shitty fencer, missing the lock by inches. His roommate heard the racket and finally let him into the room, and then you went into yours and booked the next flight out to Boston.

You laid on your bed in the dark, on top of all the covers, waiting until it was time to go to the airport, thinking about the last time you saw Aunt Phoebe. It was the end of summer, just a week and a half before your first semester of college, when you went to the Rite Aid in Somersworth to pick her up from work. She was hired to stock and clean, and though she did that most of the day, according to management occasionally she was caught daydreaming. When
Nana said she was reprimanded for this during her employee review, you wrote it off as bullshit. Most people spend much of their time staring off into space during a dull nine-to-five.

Phoebe had this unshakable misconception that work was disposable. She had a habit of up and leaving during lunch breaks, sandwich in hand, and refusing to re-enter the building. Consequently, her closet was filled with assorted uniforms; the red polo with khakis, the blue work vest, and various inscribed visors and button downs.

Phoebe had held this Rite Aid position for a record-breaking six months, probably due to the store’s consistent emptiness. A Walgreens had opened up across the street, stealing virtually all of their business. The wild dancing noodle they had inflated in front of the shop, and the man they employed to twirl their sign around roadside, were both a great success.

The woman at the cash register had a different hair color each time you saw her. That particular day it was a dark brown with yellow blonde streaks and the effect was reminiscent of a ripe banana peel. She glanced up at you from her magazine, snapped her wad of gum. “Should be plunging a clog,” she said, pointing a pink acrylic nail to the back of the store.

The bathroom was empty apart from a stashed mop bucket and a toilet that had yet to be unclogged. You scanned the store’s aisles and finally found Phoebe in the back corner with the scented candles. “Hey Aunt P!” you said. Her eyes darted around the edges of your body until she was certain it was you and she could safely look at your face.

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store, as well as the three other heads bobbing up and down the aisles. Phoebe checked her watch, realized that her shift was over, and bee-lined out of the building.

“Tell her tomorrow she’s on mop duty,” Banana Peel said. “And whoever packs her lunch needs to start cutting the crusts off her sandwiches. I get that they freak her out, but that is not my job. I don’t have kids, I don’t have time for that motherly shit.” You thanked her as she turned her attention back to flipping through her magazine.

Phoebe yanked the door handle, itching to get into the car. You unlocked it, buckled in and asked her about the crust situation.

“I just woke up one morning and couldn’t deal with it any more. I don’t want to touch it, I don’t want to look at it. Web MD says it’s called Sitophobia,” she said.

You inadvertently threw her a skeptical look that you knew she wouldn’t read.

“You’ve gotta stop going on that website, P. We’ve talked about this, it just makes you more nervous. Tell Nana to start cutting off your crusts.”

You drove to the cinema and watched an animated Disney movie. Aunt Phoebe was happy because there were talking dogs, and it was a matinee that had already been out for weeks so you had the whole theater to yourselves.

On the way home, Phoebe said, “My calendar says you and your mom are driving out to school in two days. Who will take me to the movies this Wednesday?”

“I’ll get Margot to take you,” you said.

She considered it for a moment, and said, “Please tell Margot to take the nose ring out of her nostril before she picks me up. It makes her face look very asymmetrical, and that makes me uncomfortable.”
“Will do,” you said. Aunt Phoebe rushed out of your car and into your grandmother’s house and you didn’t force her to hug you goodbye.

***

The flights shifted down the monitor to make room for yours at the top. SFO- BOS: Gate C17. You did nervous origami with your plane ticket, folding it up into a tiny fan, and flapped the air around your face and neck. The other passengers were lined up and looked though they were ready to clothesline anybody who tried to cut them.

You remembered something you had heard on the radio in the car the other night, on the way back to the dorm after a bad blind-date. You had shown up to the mini golf course wearing eerily similar clothing (khaki pants, white knit sweater, leather jacket), and instead of being a charming coincidence, the whole evening descended into an awkward spiral. After the game, you sat at a T.G.I.Friday’s table looking like a set of fraternal twins, severely uninterested in each other. You split the bill, no dessert necessary, and parted ways with a handshake.

You hopped into the Jetta and tuned the radio into This American Life. They were talking about people who cry on airplane rides during the movies they make the passengers watch, the “feel-goods” like Freaky Friday or Sweet Home Alabama. One man that they interviewed even said he had cried during a Capital One commercial, the one where the guy had momentarily lost his credit card. You thought maybe it was because being inflight is a sort of limbo space. People who can’t cry here on earth manage to do it up in the air somehow.

You looked around Gate C17 and wondered who the criers would be.

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The flight attendant announced over the intercom that they would be boarding by rows, starting from the front of the plane. You saw a woman towards the front of the line shake her
head. She placed a fist on her hip and yelled across the gate, “Lou. Lou. Louis!” Since it was an early morning flight, apart from her calls there was radio silence at the gate. You followed the woman’s gaze over to a man who must have been Louis. He sat by the window, watching the planes take off and eating a breakfast sandwich. The woman reached into her fanny pack for her cellphone to text him, and glared as saw Louis check his messages and ignore said text. She turned to her son. The boy’s lack of authority over his gangly limbs, and the mix of razor burn and acne that flecked his jawline lead you to peg him for about thirteen years old.

“Junior,” she said, “go get your father.” Junior’s lips were suctioned to a Pepsi bottle. He detached his mouth from the soda, groaned at his mother, and trudged off to tap Lou on the shoulder. Louis looked up at his wife and mouthed, “What?”

The woman pointed to the spot next to her in line and mimed, “Get over here.”

Lou was tight-lipped. He took his wire-rimmed glasses off the bridge of his nose and let them hang from his crokey. He stored his phone inside his briefcase, and heaved himself out of the seat. Approaching his wife, he said, “Jesus, Jan. What is it?”

“Didn’t you hear me hollering for you? Help me move our bags to the back of the line, they’re boarding the front first and we’re one of the last rows.”

“What? I told you to choose the first row. I need the extra space or else I get calf cramps Janet, you know that!”

“If you’re so concerned about your legs, next time you book the flights. Here, Tiny, take this.” Janet held out a shopping bag filled with magazines and slim jims to her daughter who was whipping her backpack around on the crook of her elbows. Tiny was small. Her black nail polish, and thick bangs that fell into her heavily-lined eyes, said that she wanted to appear older
than she actually was. And moodier too. She was a tween, about eleven or twelve, chomping at the bit to reach her years of teenage angst.

The flock moved towards you, and Lou said, “We are never going back to that hell-hole of a themepark again. Next year, we’re going to Palm Springs.”

“Oh quit it, Louis,” Janet said. “You say that every year. Only you could complain about Disney, it’s the happiest place on earth for christ’s sake. Besides, I already bought our park hopper tickets for next year on Groupon and those are nonrefundable.”

“You are unbelievable,” Lou said.

“If you don’t like it, you can spend the entire week in San Francisco with your mother. Although, the fact that you prefer her company to Micky Mouse is for the birds.”

“Don’t start on my mother, Janet.”

When they passed, you dodged out of Tiny’s wingspan as she swung the plastic bag around. She whined, “I hate lines.”

Louis plopped their stuff on the floor behind you. As he turned to leave, he asked, “Which rows are we in?”

“23 and 24. Why won’t you just wait with us in line?”

Louis narrowed his eyes and said, “Maybe I need a little break before I’m strapped in next to you for seven hours.”

Janet took the empty Pepsi bottle Junior held out to her and crushed it with her hands before she threw it in the trash. “Your father is a child, Junior, an absolute child.”

You wondered how they managed at Disneyland with all those lines, and how they would fare the following year when their tempers grew even shorter, and the year after that when they reach their wits end, and the year after that when it can’t get any worse, and the year after that
when it gets worse. But you knew they would keep making this annual migration from Boston to California. You were sure of it. For Junior and Tiny.

Your parents used much more discretion during their fights. According to your mother, all of that took place behind closed doors in hushed tones. Except once. Out of what must have been a thousand arguments, you only heard your parents fight once.

You and your mother were playing Crazy Eights at the kitchen table. That was back when you all lived together in the yellow house with the three garden plots; fully cultivated by then. By then you had planted six rows of corn and your mother had almost gotten rid of the potato bugs. She had started the root cellar and you were helping her can dilly beans and salsa. The garlic was drying on the front porch. She had given the grape vines over to the Japanese beetles. By then your mother trusted you to go out to the tomato plants with a pair of clippers and trim off all of the dead bits so that the healthy parts could grow.

Aunt Phoebe and Margot had already gone to bed. You were in a t-shirt and your underwear because it was record high heat and nobody on your street had AC. Barely anybody in Maine had AC because it was never supposed to get that hot.

All of the windows were open, and the little breeze was making the cards on the table flutter and jump. You had a glass of lemonade and you were careful not to put your hand down in the pool of condensation. Your cards were still soggy from the last time you did that, and Mom said there is nothing worse than a soggy deck. Your father came downstairs in a clean white button down, ironed and starched so that it sat just right. His tie was hanging loose around his neck, but your mother didn’t get up to fix it for him. He went into the mudroom where there was mirror so he could tie it himself.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked him.
“There’s a deltiologist in Dover who thinks he’s found an 1856 red mercury stamp on a postcard he picked up from a pawn shop. He’s probably an idiot, but it would be quite a find. They’re valued at over forty grand.”

Dad was a collector of sorts, though he referred himself as a curator. It used to be his main source of income; he’d invest in collecting a half dozen different things, and then sell those collections as a unit for a profit as soon as he lost interest in them. In more recent years, these collector’s items no longer hold his interest long enough for him to acquire a substantial assemblage. Now he is more apt to buy an abundance of things that are unrelated to each other. What was once an organized storage locker has become a hoarding zone.

Back then, his main exploits were rare stamps and dolls too delicate for you and Margot to touch.

“You haven’t been home a single night this week,” Mom said.

You father didn’t turn away from his reflection. “Well, I don’t feel like sitting around here in my underwear.”

Your mother bit her lip, and in the process of looking away from him, her eyes landed on you.

“Honey, it’s time to brush your teeth,” she said.

They waited until they heard the click of the door shut before they started in on each other. But you could still hear them. You couldn’t hear words, but you could hear tones. You brushed your teeth harder, focused on the movement and pressure, on polishing each individual tooth, getting in every little cranny. You spat and it was red with blood. You looked up at the mirror as Phoebe entered the bathroom behind you.
She stood by the door in her purple Winnie the Pooh nightgown, which your mother had to order online because most stores don’t sell them to fit thirty year-old women. Her index fingers were pressed in each ear. Her hair was parted perfectly in the middle, and fixed in two thick blond braids that reached her collarbones. She screamed, “What is going on?”

You scanned her face and it was contorted into every emotion you felt internally. Her mouth was almost folded in half. Your parents must have heard her because their yelling stopped, the front door slammed, and you listened to your father’s car take off down the driveway. Then it was quiet. With this silence, Phoebe removed her fingers from her ears and retreated to her room like nothing had happened.

You went downstairs to find your mother with her head down on the kitchen table. She looked up at you and a soggy Ace of Spades was stuck to her cheek.

The flight attendant came on over the intercom and called for rows 25-16. You looked down at your ticket. 24 B, the middle seat.

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You tentatively perched in 24C, hoping that there was only one member of the Jan and Lou clan in your row. Seated in 24D across the aisle was a nine- or ten year-old girl. She was smacking on her grape Bubbalicious, with her eyes glued to a gameboy screen. As you settled in you noticed her Unaccompanied Minor badge, and it was like you belonged to the same underground society.

A couple years after the divorce, your father moved out to San Francisco. Once he was settled in and ready for Margot and you to visit, by then you were eleven years old and Margot was nine. For that first cross-country flight they pinned the badges on you like Scarlet Letters. It was the same simple red and white striped button, the airline hadn’t changed its design in at least
eight years. As soon as they were on your shirts, Margot and you became the plane-wide pity party. The parade of fellow passengers moving down the aisle winked at you, tousled your hair, offered you their second packet of peanuts. This pissed you off, you were not pathetic.

The most distinct memory from that first trip out to visit your father was the escalator ride down to the baggage claim. There was a point where the steps sank to a level where you could just see your father standing on the floor below, smiling. His face was lit with excitement, and you momentarily thought this excitement was directed towards you. But then the steps sank a little lower and you saw a woman come up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. He pointed at us. The woman waved. “Who’s that?” Margot asked. You didn’t answer so she tugged on your arm. “Who is that?” You told her that you didn’t know, but you did know.

But you did not know that your father and this woman had said I love you by then. You didn’t know that the two of them had moved in together or that she had a daughter, who was Margot’s age. You didn’t know that, at the time, your father was deeply invested in his newfound family. You didn’t know that this woman was not secure enough in your father’s love to not feel threatened by the appearance of his two children.

Your father introduced the woman as Claire and told you to give her a hug. There was a certain stiffness that emanated from Claire which matched Dad. It was in the perfection of her flat-ironed platinum hair and her starched collared shirt. You both wrapped one stiff arm around each other, and you heard her movements creek like a mannequin.

There was also a shared dorkiness in Claire that matched your father, and this made for a unique combination. Dad told you that he met Claire and her daughter, Brynn, at a Cirque Du Soleil memorabilia auction.
“I was just there to look at some old show costumes. Boy, I have a great assortment started. You kids know Pete Vallee, the world famous Elvis impersonator? Well I won his red scarf off of Ebay, what a find.” Claire cleared her throat to get him back on topic. “Anyway, then I see this little lady across the room looking at the batons. Her daughter, Brynn, is a world-renowned twirler, and has an impressive collection of show costumes herself.”

Claire smiled at your father, but her lips transitioned into a purse when she looked back at you and Margot. She said she was concerned that the two of you didn’t look dressed to go out to dinner. “It’s a nice restaurant,” she said.

You looked over at Margot and she was staring at the pennies in her loafers. That morning your mother had laid out her corduroys and a red turtleneck. She braided her hair and put in a butterfly clip because Margot said she wanted to look pretty for Dad.

“You look pretty for yourself,” Mom said.

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You heard them before you saw them.

After an intense period of squabbling and shuffling, it was decided that Lou and Jan would sit in row 23, leaving Junior and Tiny to sit on either side of you, as Jan was the only one willing to sit in the middle seat and Lou could feel free to fully recline with Tiny behind him.

“You’re gonna put your headphones in and I don’t want to hear another peep out of either of you until we land. Understand me? Don’t even look at each other. There you are, A and C.”

You looked up at Junior who was chewing on the collar of his t-shirt and told him that you could move over to the window so that he and his sister could sit next to each other.

“Dad,” Junior pointed at you and spat the shirt out of his mouth. His pubescent voice broke when he said, “Stranger,”
Lou looked down. His eyebrows said that he did not want to be participating in a conversation with you. “Would they like to sit together?” you asked, as if he was the translator for his children.

“Better they stay separated,” Lou said, as he turned his attention back to cramming their bags into the overhead container.

You were merely an obstacle for Junior. Since your knees touched the seat in front of you, there was no simple way for him to slip past. Before you could move to let him in, Junior was already attempting to climb over you. He flung his left leg across your lap, but couldn’t get enough momentum to swing over the right. This was understandable as he was wearing Heely’s, the sneakers with the retractable skating wheels, which are just about the heaviest shoes one can strap onto their feet. “I’ll stand up for you, bud,” you said.

Junior hopped out of his awkward stance and you stepped out into the aisle. As you waited for him to get sorted, you caught a glimpse of the game Unaccompanied Minor was playing on her Nintendo.

You figured she must have those parents who will only buy her the games with “educational value”. This one taught her how to become the next Mozart. A fly hovered above a piano and Unaccompanied Minor read the musical notes at the top of the screen and tapped the correct keys in order for a frog to come along and eat the fly. Apparently Unaccompanied Minor didn’t care about what kind of music she was generating because she had turned the volume off. She just wanted to feed the frog and kill the fly. She saw you peeping, and turned her entire body away from you.

You sat down in 24B and leaned on the armrest, chin in palm. You thought about Sunday mornings in the yellow house. Margot and you were tiny and the front porch hadn’t even been
built yet. Mom had just started the compost. The apple tree was only five feet high by then. Your mother and father still kissed each other on the lips.

You and Margot ran up and down the hall, slipping sock-footed on the hardwood floors while Aunt Phoebe sat at the piano and played ragtime. Mom scooped Margot up, put her down so that Margot’s feet were on top of hers. They danced around like that, like they were in a ballroom. Dad clanged on the pots and pans in the kitchen, because Sunday meant blueberry pancakes. Phoebe stopped playing, but Mom and Margot kept dancing. Phoebe walked over to you and picked you up, plopped you down on the piano bench next to her. She took your hands and rested them on the backs of hers, like Mom did with Margot’s feet. This was the only physical contact that didn’t make Phoebe recoil. You were her people; the steadiness that she could swallow, consistency she could hang on to. 9-5 jobs didn’t last, but every Sunday morning she was pounding on the keys like clockwork at ten. Your fingertips barely reached her knuckles, and Phoebe’s hands were benign spiders that ran up and down the ivory.

Five years later that piano was moved out of your house and into Nana’s house because your house wasn’t your house anymore. Your mother said she sold it because she couldn’t afford the mortgage, but you knew she sold it because living in it hurt. Phoebe still played, but only quiet songs because loud music gave Nana migraines and there was nobody around to dance.

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The taste of metal brought you back to seat 24B. You’d been biting down on your bottom lip and had drawn blood. Sticking a finger in your mouth, you held the cut until the airplane ascended high enough that they turned the fasten seatbelt sign off. You climbed over Tiny, who refused to acknowledge your presence. In the bathroom, you took a wad of paper towel and applied a little pressure until the red stopped staining the white. You wanted to smoke so bad,
feeling like the carton of cigs weighed heavy in your jeans pocket. The fire alarm looked menacing… to tamper or not to tamper? Of course not, you returned to your seat. An inflight crime was the last thing your mother needed. She didn’t even know you smoked, and would have been devastated if she did. Every time you lit up, you thought about that. How could you damage something Mom grew so carefully?

On the TV screen above you, there was a map with a little red line tracing the flight path. It was barely a centimeter long so far. On your jeans was a streak of blood that you had wiped across the knee. You remembered how your mother felt about white denim.

The seventh time you visited your father in San Francisco, you were fourteen years old and Margot was twelve. By then, the airline considered you responsible for yourself and your sister, and no longer labeled you unaccompanied. Claire and your father had been married for two years, and you were starting to see the first signs of him ghosting her. Everything Claire said about their relationship told you that she was in denial.

It was the morning after you arrived. Your father was at a comic book convention, or hunting for snow globes at a pawn shop, or polishing something in his storage unit. Claire’s daughter, Brynn, was at Miss Tilly’s Sleepover Camp for Gymnasts and Twirlers. So that left you and Margot alone with Claire.

You helped Claire with the dishes from breakfast as she described the mama drama within Brynn’s baton troupe.

“...and Brynn can do the whole routine backwards. She learned it ages before any of those other girls in her class. Want to know how? I make her practice with her eyes closed. All the other mothers tell me she’ll cartwheel into a wall or impale herself on a rod someday. Guess what I say to them? I say, I’m not taking any advice from people who send their daughters to
rehearsal with runs in their tights and stains on their leotards.” Claire continued on this way, until all of the dishes were washed. You zoned out for a while until you wiped down the last plate, and tuned back in again to hear the tail end of Claire’s spiel; “...and that’s why those idiots banned me from the PTA meetings.” You nodded.

Claire turned to Margot, who was drawing a cherry tree in her sketchbook at the kitchen table. “Margot”, she said, “I have some pants that have been sitting in my closet for years that I think might fit you. Want to try them on?”

Margot jumped up and says yes because she loved clothes. She would change her outfit multiple times a day, just so she could wear more of them. Claire went into her closet and returned with a pair of white jeans, handed them to Margot who ran to the bathroom to try them on. She came back and they fit her great. You rethought. *Maybe you were wrong about Claire. Maybe she’s not so bad.* But then Claire opened her mouth and you rethought your rethinking.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m so happy they fit. Not like I’ll ever need to wear them again, I would have had to toss them out or something. Those were my favorite pants to wear when I was pregnant with Brynn.”

You winced quietly and looked over at your sister. At first her eyes lowered to the ground, and it reminded you of the time in the airport when you first met Claire, when Margot stared at her loafers. In that moment you felt that your father had landed the vilest woman in California.

But then something clicked in Margot’s mind. You could see it was merely a cringe, which she shrugged off. She smiled brightly at Claire, thanked her for the pants, and wore them for the rest of the day. For a while they were Margot’s favorite pants.
Looking back now, you are not so confused by this interaction. Claire was channeling the frustration she felt with Dad into hurting Margot. For a while this was her mode of operation, to lash out at anyone within arm’s reach. This is why she had no friends, nobody wanted to be within arms reach.

But Claire was confused. She stood with her hands on her hips and eyebrows perplexed, probably wondering why Margot was so unscathed. But she couldn’t have known why. She had never seen the way your mother looked at your sister. She wasn’t there during the countless golden hours on the porch swing, when your mother is holding Margot’s face in her hands, smoothing her thumb over the constellations of freckles that spread across her cheeks. When she said, “Oh, my Margot. You are mine.”

Claire’s words could have no effect.

When you and Margot returned home after that seventh trip to visit Dad, your sister was wearing her new white jeans. In the car, your mother asked where she got them. Margot said that they were from Claire, but left out the part where she called them maternity pants. Your mother fidgeted around for a little bit, and then said, “White pants are for people who sit on white couches, and never eat saucy foods. Is that how you want to live?”

But you knew that your mother was really asking if your sister wanted to be a woman like Claire.

“No,” Margot said. “But I’m still gonna wear these jeans.”

Your mother’s face relaxed a little. She said, “Then don’t come crying to me when you spill a glob of ketchup on the crotch.”

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Tiny was already snoozing next to you, neck craned and mouth wide open. She was sucking a lot of air for such a small person, and on each exhale you got a whiff of her sour breath. You tried not to wake her, shuffling through your bag by your feet. You had only packed the essentials; clothes and a textbook. While going through your drawers that morning, as quietly as possible so as not to wake your roommate, you’d realized that the only black article of clothing you owned was a grungy Grateful Dead t-shirt.

During those early hours you had also emailed your professors and were slightly alarmed by an immediate response from your history professor. What was keeping Hamilton up at three in the morning?

The email said to read from your Food and American Culture book. You turned to the assigned chapter about the US home front during World War II. Apparently, American victory gardens were vital in reducing the pressure on the public food supply during the war. Neighborhoods would pool their resources to cultivate plots of land into community gardens. People who could afford to would pay for seeds, rakes, and watering cans. Others would contribute their time and labor; planting, weeding, or harvesting. They would split the produce.

You felt your breath grow shallower as you remembered summers in the gardens at the yellow house. The earliest memory of your careless tiny bare feet pounding against the earth, crickets leaping out from underfoot with each step, and those same crickets, so forgiving, singing you to sleep each night. Aunt Phoebe was in a worn straw hat with about a pound of soil caked onto her hands and stuck underneath her fingernails.

Margot was just a newborn by then. Mom had started to spread fertilizer and seeds over the second plot. Her whole life revolved around raising those seeds and you. Phoebe didn’t have to hold a job either, so whenever things got bad, she could take an extended time off of work.
Your father had her covered financially. Back then, when her thoughts went dark she could spend every summer day outside. She didn’t mind the plants or the worms. Your mother would find her lying on her back in the grass, smiling with her eyes closed, letting a ladybug crawl across her eyelids.

Phoebe chased you around the first plot, which was in full bloom at the height of summer. She crushed the strawberries clutched in her fists, tossed them at you between the two rows of corn. You pushed your face between the stalks, stuck out your tongue, and leaped back just as a glob of berry came sailing through the air towards you.

Mom was yelling to her sister and you from the second plot. She had already planted the sweet pea seedlings that she had raised on the kitchen windowsill over the winter. She had Margot on her back in a Baby Bjorn carrier while she pushed the seed sower. Back then, she was still nervous about the sturdiness of her crops. How delicate are they? How much can they take?

“You two be careful where you step!” She called. “And quit throwing those berries around, you’ll stain your shirts!”

Your laughter drowned out Mom’s protests, and egged Aunt Phoebe on. The strawberries stuck to your shirt and stained like splotches of blood.

Seven years later, Mom gave up that house and the three fully cultivated garden plots on the land that surrounded it. The new apartment complex she moved to had two community planting beds, which your mother sweat and cried over on the weekends and whenever she took a day off of substitute teaching. Her new neighbors worshipped her for turning what were basically mud flats into two small gardens of Eden. Your mother tried to feel warmed by this, but in private she told you how it hurt because they had never seen what she had once grown.
During growing season, your mother would pick Aunt Phoebe up from Nana’s house on the weekends and bring her to the apartment so that she could help with the planting beds. For a couple summers after moving in with Nana, Phoebe tried to plant at her house. Your mother even brought over compost, but there was not enough direct sunlight, and Phoebe forgot to water the seedlings, so nothing seemed to want to grow. Phoebe tossed the terracotta pots out the window, and then had to get stitches when she cut herself while trying to pick up the shards.

***

Tiny startled awake to the sound of the flight attendant announcing over the intercom that they would come by with the snack cart shortly. They told you to look into the seatback pocket for price information, because only water is free now. The options included a cheese and cracker box, a glorified Lunchable, for twelve dollars and a Snickers bar for six. Junior reached his fingers through the crack between the middle and window seats in the row in front of you to poke his mother. He told her that he was hungry and she handed him two Slim Jims. You recognized the greasy sheen as he peeled back the yellow wrapper.

On your fifth visit to see your father, you were thirteen by then and Margot was eleven. Dad and Claire were engaged, and your father still came home every night in time for dinner. Claire had a diamond ring that was so big, you thought it must cause her to move more slowly. You wondered about the strength of her ring finger, the condition of her wrist even.

It was the evening of your father and Claire’s engagement party. The house was full of unrecognizable people, who suddenly became recognizable by their conversations with Dad. That was Rachel from Sotheby’s Antiques, whom your father had on speed dial due to her eye for rare carpentry. That was Allen from the pawn shop on Union, who had scammed Dad with
some fraudulent Dolly Parton autographs last summer. Apparently they had made up over some authentic handkerchiefs once used by Johnny Cash, and everything was copacetic.

The caterers served tiny, fashionable foods that you could eat with toothpicks; like mini quiches, cocktail wieners, and shrimp puffs. You and Margot found none of this edible, so you raided their cabinets and were shocked to see one mysterious unopened box of Slim Jims on a top shelf. Claire had put Brynn on a very strict “performer’s diet”, which consisted of quinoa, greek yogurt, and an unspeakable amount of Fiber One cereal. The meat sticks must have been your father’s secret. You ate them until your tongues were raw from the salt, and hid the wrappers in the box which you stuck back on the top shelf.

Back in the living room, Claire had arranged the furniture so that the open floor space became a stage for Brynn to perform. Claire then went around interrupting the conversations of your father’s friends in order to herd them towards the couches. Once everyone was seated she pressed play and stood off to the side of the room, clapping in time to the music and glaring at everybody else in until they did the same.

Brynn came bounding down the hall in a sequinned purple jumpsuit, dropping immediately into a deep split once she reached her audience. Above her head she held a matching sparkly lavender baton. Margot cupped her hand over her mouth at the sight.

The fact that she could devote her life to a spectacle as ridiculous as baton twirling made you detest Brynn on a level you couldn’t explain. For some reason, watching her wave around a metal rod produced an irrational rage in you. Since this was what occupied much of Brynn’s time, you generally wrote her off as a person, and Margot did the same. You couldn’t have anything in common with her, you thought. As irksome as you found Brynn’s sport, Dad was doubly entranced. He wrapped his arm around Claire, and they leaned their heads together in
awe as Brynn caught the baton behind her back and maneuvered her shimmering body into a heart shape.

You never had to ask Mom why she married Dad. When your father was interested in something, he was a hundred percent. You remembered when Margot was four and she went through this phase where she would take a square of toilet paper from the bathroom and draw squiggles on it with crayons. While Mom thought it was strange that she didn’t just draw on regular paper, your father pinned them up on the wall in his office. He called them Margot’s Charmin series, and he swore she would be famous some day. Two years later, when your father left the yellow house, those squares of toilet paper were still tacked up. Your mother crammed them into the bottom of a trash bag so Margot wouldn’t see that he had left them behind.

The night before the engagement party, one of Dad’s collector friends had picked you up from the airport and dropped you off at the stoop of your father’s house, because they were heading that way, and therefore Dad did not have to be bothered with driving all the way out to SFO to collect you.

You and your sister lugged your bags up the stairs and tried the door. It was unlocked. The foyer light wasn’t on, but you could see the distant glow and hear the hum of the TV from the living room down the hallway. You left your bags, and walked soundless steps down the carpet.

You paused for a moment in the entryway of the living room to take in the scene, blocking Margot from it. They all had their eyes glued to the TV screen. They looked like a Pottery Barn catalogue. Your father’s arm was wrapped around Claire, and Brynn’s head was resting on her mother’s lap. They all fit together like puzzle pieces on the couch, the way you did
before when you had all lived in the yellow house. Back before your father was tired of sitting around the house in his underwear all night.

You recognized the expression on Dad’s face when he looked at Brynn and Claire, though it hadn’t been directed at you for many years.

Margot and you were chugging water, mouths still burning from the Slim Jims. You got tired of craning your neck, tired of the smell of their expensive vanilla scented candles. You saw a break in the congregation, and pull Margot out into Dad’s backyard.

In the yard there was a ten by ten square-foot patch of grass, and in the middle of the grass there was a tangerine tree. This was the only plant in the space. Surrounding the grass was a concrete patio, a hot tub, a swing set, and a bar for Brynn to stretch on. The patio was covered with your father’s most recent outdoor enterprises; a half-dozen fairy statues, five miniature windmills, and an absurd number of pink flamingo lawn ornaments.

Margot went directly to the swingset. The seats were too low for her because the chains were measured to fit Brynn’s height. Nevertheless, she sat on one of them, and began to pump until she was even with the top bar.

You went to the tangerine tree and saw that it hadn’t gotten any attention in a while. Some of the fruit was dead, some rotting with maggots. Many leaves were brown, others had beetles clinging to them. You started pruning it with your fingers, pulling off the little dead fruits and brown leaves and tossing them to the tree’s base, where they could decompose to replenish the soil. You picked off the infested tangerines and beetle-ridden leaves, threw them over the fence and into the dumpster where they could no longer damage the tree. You pruned until all that was left was the healthy fruit, and the green leaves.
You plucked two tangerines, sat down on the swing next to your sister and handed one to her.

***

In need of a stretch, you stepped over Tiny’s little legs and walked up and down the aisle of the plane a few times. A hundred faces were illuminated by the televisions above them. Nobody seemed to be taking advantage of the inflight cry time quite yet. You turned your attention to the screen that hovered above the seats two rows in front. At first, you watched without any sound, focusing on the movements of the silent figures, waiting for some relief after having slept only three hours the night before. But it didn’t come because you’d gotten to that point beyond tiredness, so you decided to fully invest yourself and put your headphones in.

The programming was on an advertisement break because apparently even charging for snacks was not reeling in enough cash. An ad for the airline’s new “Eco-friendly” airplanes was playing. There was footage of a flock of birds flying in a perfect V-formation, a half dozen birds on either side with one at the tip forming a perfect 45 degree angle.

A smooth female voice said, “Did you know that northern bald ibises migrate in a V formation in order to save energy? When one is tired, it drops to the back and flies in the current of birds in front of them. Our new wings were designed with that in mind, and are now more aerodynamic than ever.”

The ad faded out to the movie; a street shot of a woman and a man facing each other in the pouring rain, both crying and neither in possession of an umbrella, or even a hooded jacket. This was not your type of movie, it was Phoebe’s type of movie.

It was like one of those Lifetime originals that Phoebe used to put on when she went to bed. She used to keep her TV on all night long, playing these god-awful sob stories whose
dialogue would seep into her dreams. She called it her nightlight, and when Mom bought her an actual nightlight Phoebe refused to use it because she said she wouldn’t want to miss anything on the television. You once watched one of these movies with her during the daytime, and Phoebe said, “I’ve heard this one before.” She quoted along with the woman crying on the screen, and then said, “That’s not what I expected her to look like.”

On the monitor was a closeup of the woman’s face, her tears mixing with the rain. Her mouth was twisted into a grimace that suggested the man in front of her had offended her in some foul way. You predicted that she woke up one morning and his side of the bed was empty, and your predictions were confirmed when the man said, “I know, I should have called. But I just had to go.” He reached towards her cheeks to wipe away the rain-tear mixture, but the woman slapped his hand down. Then she said, “You couldn’t even leave a note?”

And those words struck a chord. No note, not a line. You remembered Margot’s voice on the phone and the same image that was then in your mind reappeared. Aunt Phoebe’s body was face down, and the generator was still running when Nana opened the door to her room. You were all left shrouded. The tears flowed, and you just kind of let them drip. Opening your eyes, you realized you had gotten the attention of not only Tiny and Junior, but Unaccompanied Minor was leaning forward to watch from across the aisle.

“It’s the movie,” you announced. “I cry during the stupid movies they play on airplanes. It’s a condition.”

None of the three probed you for any further explanation. The siblings put their headphones back in, Unaccompanied Minor shrugged and returned to her silent frog vs fly concerto. They left you to process alone.
You wondered if it is possible for people to find their V formation, thinking about Lou, Junior, Janet and Tiny, and how they stay together like the birds. You wished it was instinctual; you wished it was an innate part of your genetics to stay together and just be. Would people still choose to die if all you needed to keep going was the movement of others? If you could settle and survive as a unit? You thought about the yellow house. There had once been a time when you had been in perfect V formation, and Aunt was a part of it. This guilt started to gnaw away at your internal organs. It rose up the back of the throat, it filleted the lungs, carved the heart, and cut into the stomach. Why didn’t all of you stay for her?

The tears acted like eyelash glue and sleep was not far away.

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Tiny leaned over you, waving her hands around her brother. Junior, though obviously aware of his sister’s presence, closed his eyes and bobbed his head to the Blink182 that blared through his headphones. Tiny arranged her fingers into a mudra of pain, hung over your right side, and flicked him on the forehead.

Junior ripped out his headphones, leaned over your left side, and wound up like he was about to punch his sister. He was oblivious that your face was also in the flight path of his fist. You winced, but Tiny knew it was an empty threat. She didn’t even flinch.

He dropped his arm and said, “What do you want, buttmunch?”

“What, this?” Junior pulled out a copy of the *Half-Blood Prince* from his seat-back pocket, and using your headrest to gain more leverage, he waved it above his sister’s head. Tiny
reached up for the book, but Junior snatched it away and sat back down. “No chance! Like hell I’m gonna give it to you before I’m done with it.”

Tiny groaned, “But you’re the slowest reader on earth!”

You truly became an empty seat when the two propped themselves on your body in order to get more up in each other’s faces. Junior’s stomach smothered your arm and Tiny’s fists buried into your thigh. “You think I’m stupid?” Junior shouted. “I know that you just want to spoil it like you did with *The Goblet of Fire*!”

“You are an asshat, Junior, and I wish you were never born!” Their faces were a half foot away from yours, and you were free to observe them since they were neglected your existence. Tiny’s expression was all scrunched up in malice, but it looked natural on her. Like her eyes, nose, and cheeks automatically fell into the wrinkled squint. Junior’s face was oddly calm, as if to say anger is the default, this is how we communicate, this is how it’s always been. They started bouncing back and forth insults, rapid fire, that left you dumbfounded. It didn’t seem to touch either of them.

“Dad told me he hates you,” Tiny said.

“That’s funny, he said the same thing to me about you. And at least I wasn’t an accident.”

“Well at least I don’t pretend to smoke Mom’s oregano like it’s pot! You and your friends are idiots!”

“You fucking snoop!” Junior eyed his parents in front of him. “At least I have friends, Tiny. Everyone at school knows that the school nurse had to tell you to stop eating lunch in the bathroom stall because it’s dirty.”

“Don’t talk to me about dirty, Junior! You are a cloud of stinky B.O.!”

“Go lie in a ditch!” Junior said. And you saw that this fight’s end was not on the horizon.
“Hello?” you interjected. Both children snapped their heads back to look at you. Tiny removed her fists from your lap, and Junior leaned back into his own space, releasing your arm.

Genuinely curious, you asked, “Is this how you talk to each other?”

They looked down in their laps, shameful like they’d been caught in a lie. But you thought they were caught in their truth. Neither said anything, putting in their headphones to end the interaction.

You peered through the gap between the middle and aisle seats in front of you to see if Lou or Jan reacted to any of the fight. You found that they were a mess of flying elbows, oscillating between arguing about their in-laws and who was hogging too much room on their shared armrest.

“Janet, do you need me to mark which is my side and which is yours? Because I will.”

“Oh, please do. Do you see your elbow, there? It’s pointy and it’s hanging over into my personal space. You get your elbows and sense of entitlement from your mother,” Janet said.

“Don’t get started on my mother.”

“Now you listen to me, we are not going to her house for Christmas this year. I can’t deal with her during the holiday season. She’s been a ball of emotions lately and-”

Louis cut her off, “Because my dad just fucking died!”

The whole scene reminded you of when Phoebe was in that phase where she would sit at her desktop computer for hours on end, observing the NestWatch live stream. It was your junior year of high school, and a Friday afternoon. You’d gotten into the habit of skipping fourth period gym class on Fridays to visit Phoebe at Nana’s house.

You stomped off the snow that clung to your boots against the mud room door, and left your wet socks on top of the radiator. The air in the house was a mixture of battling scents. There
was the constant stale stench of Marlboro Lights, Nana’s main vice. There were the Lemon Fresh
car fresheners, hung like Christmas tree ornaments around all of the door knobs in an attempt to
mask the cigarettes. Then there was the salty smell of homemade playdough, which Phoebe
would roll out and mold into the shapes of things like seashells, hot dogs, goldfish, and shooting
stars. She baked them until they hardened into charms, and then she gave them to Nana’s church
friends on Sundays.

Nana was watching Jeopardy in the living room, which she called her smoking room
even though she would light up anywhere in the house. She exhaled a puff and said to the TV,
“What is Driving Miss Daisy.”

She was correct. Nana looked up at you and smiled, and for a second all of the wrinkles
that emanate like sun rays from her lips momentarily disappeared.

“Oh honey, I’m so glad you’re here,” she said. Her smile was a flash, quickly replaced by
a concerned purse. “P hasn’t been out of her room all day. She’s stuck on something she found
on the internet.”

“Is she googling how the honey bee colonies are collapsing again?”

“No,” Nana shook her head. “This is something new.”

You knocked on Phoebe’s door, repeating the rhythmic pattern you knew she liked. It’s a
knock knock pause, knock knock knock. It took her a little while to respond. She opened the door,
wearing purple long johns under the butterfly robe your mother bought her for Valentine’s Day
one year. She had a pair of fleece socks on her feet, and a pair on her hands.

“Are you cold, P?” you asked, pointing to the sock-gloves.

“No, I just like the texture,” she said. “I need to show you something.”
She sat at the foot of her bed, and pointed to the monitor on top of her desk. On the screen was an aerial view of a nest holding two sleeping baby birds.

“They’re cute,” you said.

“For now,” Phoebe said. “These are the black-headed grosbeaks that NestWatch has been observing. The parents left the nest about an hour ago. They could be back at any second.”

You watched the little birds puff up and deflate as they slept so silently. You wondered what Nana was so nervous about. Maybe that’s what Phoebe needs right now, you thought, to just watch the steadiness of their breathing. A slightly larger bird swooped in from the top left corner of the screen, and the shifting weight woke the chicks up.

“That’s the dad.” Phoebe said. The little birds started to squawk until their father fed them a Monarch from his beak.

“The mom will be back soon,” Phoebe said. She hugged her knees against her chest and rubbed her sock hands over her cheeks in a circular motion. “There she is,” she whispered at the screen as if to warn the birds themselves. As soon as the fourth bird’s talons touched down on the nest, all hell broke loose. Each bird raised its head to the sky, opened its beak and shrieked. The mother and father flapped their wings in each other’s faces, and jabbed at each other as if threatening to peck. All four birds transformed into screaming feathered balls, but none would leave the nest.

“What the hell?” you said.

“They’ve been acting like this for weeks. The ornithologists said the team won’t intervene because they are just there to observe. They said the chicks will have to wait until they learn how to fly in order to leave the nest.” She covered her ears with her sock hands.

“How do you know all this?”
“I’ve been emailing NestWatch to try to convince them to move the nest while the parents are out, but they keep saying that the chicks need their Mom and Dad,” Phoebe said.

“Well isn’t that true? Don’t they need them to bring them food and teach them how to fly?”

“The Audubon Field Guide says that knowledge is instinctual, and they’re strong enough to fly now. Moving the nest would just speed up the process.”

“But then they’ll be alone,” you said.

“Baby birds shouldn’t be forced to live in an angry nest,” she said. “It gets them off to a bad start.” The chicks were hunkered down, laying flat in the nest in order to dodge their parent’s wings.

“Nobody will listen to me,” she said. “I email them about this every day and they just won’t listen.” Phoebe started to gently knock her forehead against her knees. It was a knock knock pause, knock knock knock.

“Aunt P, maybe you should turn this off if it makes you so upset,” you said.

She shook her head. “I’m involved now.”

And you knew that there was no reasoning with her. A week later the team of black-headed grosbeak ornithologists took down the livestream because Phoebe had started a blog called *Free the Grosbeaks*. The stress of not knowing the fate of the birds caused her to rip out a chunk of her hair.

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Walking up and down the aisle, you realized the rows in front of you were mostly composed of a series of families. There was a mother helping her daughter color in a drawing of Snoopy dancing on top of his doghouse. With a yellow colored pencil, she filled in Woodstock
before moving on to the sun. There was a couple in their twenties asleep, their clasped hands
sitting on her pregnant belly. There were two middle-aged men reading together, one’s head
rested on his partner’s shoulder.

You realized you were in the process of judging basically every connection on the plane,
when you heard Thomas Fuller’s voice in your head, chiding you, “It is the property of fools to
always be judging”. But then you mentally told Fuller to fuck off. You were grieving, and staring
at people was helping you survive the trip.

You wondered if any of it was real. Had they actually found their V-formation, or did it
just seem that way in passing? As you reached your row, you looked down at Unaccompanied
Minor on the left and wondered if whoever awaited her at the gate for her would squeeze her
tight. Or maybe she was being carted around the country to uphold the delusion that her V-
formation was still fully intact. Although now you realize that you were projecting, at the time
you clenched your fists in frustration for her. Or maybe for yourself.

You were fifteen years old the last time you flew out to California to visit your father, the
trip when the white pants incident occurred. Dad drove back to the airport, bluetooth cemented in
his ear for the entire ride. You and Margot were audience to his one sided conversation, and
gathered that he was talking to a man named Thomas about a batch of rare cuckoo clocks going
up for auction in Marin that weekend. That moment was like a thousand others when you had
been trapped in the car with your father. Whenever he wasn’t on the phone, you would try to get
him to acknowledge you. You’d tell him about stories you were writing, but you knew he was in
another world. He wouldn’t even nod while you spoke.

“Dad,” you said. You just wanted him to look at you. You only wanted one conversation.
He mouthed I’m on the phone, and held a finger to his lips.
“I’m on the hunt for a Black Forest Schnieder,” Dad said to Thomas as you pulled up to the airport curbside. “Yes, the traditional one with the oval clock face and the movable goose.” He heaved your bags out of his trunk, kissed you and Margot on the forehead, and drove off.

For the first time, you acknowledged to yourself that his disinterest in you was fucking painful. You began to recognize that in Dad’s eyes, relationships were just another collector’s item. Something that he could invest in for a few years, and then drop once it no longer interested him. You remembered the Sunday pancakes when you loved him because he loved you, but now you are a matchbook or a silver coin, dusty in the attic.

On the plane ride home, you allowed hurt to fester into anger. You mulled over the parting kiss he imposed on you and Margot, like that was all that was required from him; one biannual kiss on the forehead as payment for two children. You began to rethink the notion that had been ingrained in you for your entire life, which is ingrained in everyone; that simply because you are his child, you must maintain the desire to be loved by your father and love him in return. You realized that you can be whole without this connection. It became a mantra. You can be whole without this connection, you can be whole without this connection.

You landed in Boston and on the car ride home, after the white jeans conversation, you told Margot and your mother that that was the last time you would visit your father. You explained that these migrations back and forth were unnecessary, and that they merely contributed to a delusion. You told her how you felt you were just following a hollow prescription for what to do when families separate. You no longer wanted to fly all the way out to California in order to spend a week listening to your father purchase things over the telephone. Margot cried a little and then agreed.

“I guess you know what you need,” Mom said.
When they were quiet and in their own little worlds you watched Lou, Jan, Junior, and Tiny as individuals. It was like watching the sleeping baby grosbeaks. There was something endearing about the way Junior picked at his cuticles when tensions were high in his Nintendo game. You leaned your head to the side to peer through the gap at Janet, and a tear rolled down her cheek as she flipped through her Nicholas Sparks novel. Lou stood up slowly, grimacing in pain as he stretched his calves. Tiny watched you watching, and half smiled, despite her moody persona, when you caught her eye.

You were sixteen years old when Claire somehow got hold of your phone number, and slowly became real.

The first time she called, you and Margot were at the Acton County Fair. Margot had submitted a watercolor painting of ants tunneling around the roots of a white oak tree. She won a blue ribbon, and you bought two massive hunks of fried dough to celebrate, which you were gorging on when the phone rang. The powdered sugar was thick like paste on your lips, you wiped it off with the back of your hand before answering.

“It’s Claire!” she said. And you racked your brain for any other possible Claires that could have been in your life. An old babysitter? Your kindergarten teacher? A neighbor in Mom’s apartment complex? The plumber? But it was her.

“Just thought I’d call to check in!” she said. You were speechless, so she filled the silence. “It’s kind of quiet around the house today, Brynn’s at Twirl Planet learning how to light her batons on fire. Your dad’s at the San Diego Silverware Convention. Apparently he’s on a spoon kick at the moment. So I’m home by myself. And your father hasn’t thought to give me a call, even though I’ve left him five voicemails. Not much to do around here.”
You realized that she was waiting for a response. “Well, you could go out and work on that tangerine tree.”

“Oh, we get Maria out there every so often to keep it alive,” Claire said.

You recognized the name from the mornings when Claire would wake you up so that Maria could take your sheets in order to wash them. “Is that her job?” you asked.

Claire laughed. “Maria doesn’t mind. Plus I wouldn’t know what to do.”

You wanted to hang up the phone, but the lonely edge in her voice, verging on desperate, kept you on the line. You told her that attending to the tree could be her hobby, something she did just for her. You started to explain the basics of gardening over the phone, and somehow it grew on Claire. After that conversation, gardening became her thing. She fixed up the tangerine tree, and then she shuffled Dad’s outdoor junk around and put in two raised beds. She called from Home Depot to make sure she was getting the right boards, and she called back an hour later to make sure she was getting the right drill. She called from the greenhouse and handed the phone over to a guy working there to make sure he was selling her the best fertilizer. Once, she called at midnight, while she was in the process of installing a small drip irrigation system by flashlight that she just had to finish putting in before she would let herself go to bed. When you had assured her that watering the plots by can would be sufficient, she told you that she didn’t want to do anything half-assed. She started calling at least once a week, and piece by piece you relayed all of the knowledge about cultivation that your mother had taught you.

Initially you resented these conversations. If you were no longer connected to your father, why was necessary to maintain a relationship with his wife? But then the conversations became less about her new landscaping escapades and more about her marriage, and then you knew why you felt linked. The same cumbersome pain that once cut at you was now pounding on her.
Dad’s tendency to hoard was starting to emerge. What were once day trips to auction houses in search of specific items had turned into these week-long binges of accumulation. Dad would come home with carloads full of stuff. Claire said they had no more room. In the yard, Claire had to create a pathway through the junk in order to get to her plants. She said that when he was home, your father would spend most of his time sitting in his office, perusing the covers of unopened Superman comics.

“He won’t even look at me anymore,” she would say. And you could picture Claire with her head down on the kitchen table, crying to herself in the middle of the day. You wanted to yell at her to pull herself together, that your father was not meant to be family man and never will be and that she needed to leave. That she didn’t need the fancy house or Dad’s money in order to be happy. She could get a job, she could support herself. But you couldn’t bring yourself to say any of this over the phone, so instead you explained the nutritional benefits for plants of a worm-filled soil and left that conversation for another day.

***

You were seventeen years old the first time you flew out to San Francisco to visit Claire. Two weeks prior, she had called you from Myrtle Beach where Brynn was performing at the United States Twirling Association National Championships. Claire kept texting you with snarky remarks about the girls Brynn was up against, as well as her concerns that Maria wasn’t taking care of her garden correctly.

So when you answered the phone you were expecting more of the same. There was a long dead beat of silence before Claire managed, “We had to rush Brynn to the hospital a few hours ago.”

“What happened?” you asked.
“She collapsed on stage. She was doing her fire routine and doctors think she had a stroke. Part of her face was burned by the time anybody got to her.”

“Oh my god,” you said. “How is she?”

“She’s in a medically induced coma now, but she should be coming out of it soon.”

“Where is Dad?”

Claire’s shaking voice momentarily held firm. “I haven’t been able to get ahold of him. He’s been at the fucking garden gnome museum in Daytona!”

And you couldn’t even laugh at your father’s absurdity. “What can I do?” you asked.

“I need you to come out to California for a few days,” Claire said.

You bought a ticket out once Brynn was released from the hospital, and she, Claire, and Dad were back in San Francisco. Margot had a test she couldn’t miss, so this was also your first solo trip. Your father picked you up from the airport, and on the car ride to his house you noted how he was oblivious that you were done trying to relate to him. You and Dad sat in a silence that he didn’t attempt to fill until he switched on his bluetooth and called one of his numerous junk peddlers.

Claire looked through the curtains of the front windows as you pulled into the driveway. She greeted you at the door with a wordless hug. Her hair was tied up in a knot on top of her head, and she wore sweats that you didn’t know she owned. She led you into the kitchen, and your father went straight to the backyard. There was Brynn, shrunken in a wheelchair parked by the kitchen table. The stroke had caused hemiplegia in the right side of Brynn’s body, so only the left side of her mouth curled up when you enter the room. The other side was slack. You sat down across from her, and while Claire explained how well the recovery process had been going, you calculated all of the symmetry that was lost in Brynn’s face. You felt your stomach turn into
a wet paper bag filled with raw meat. The burns made the skin around the left side of her eye fresh like chewing gum.

You remembered looking at that face back when your father thought Brynn was better than sliced bread, and yearning for little imperfections. You remembered when Margot told you that she felt like a chicken nugget in comparison to her step-sister. You had wished that Brynn’s nose was slightly crooked or that one of her eyes was just a bit bigger than the other. Seeing her now, you realized that all of that disdain you felt towards her was not due to her obsession with baton twirling, but because your father had once loved her more than he loved you.

Claire blended an avocado into a green puree that Brynn could swallow without chewing. She ate it in teaspoons, tucking dollops into her left cheek. Halfway through she murmured something that Claire was able to decipher as salt.

“I’m starting to speak your language,” Claire said, setting down the shaker in front of her daughter.

Once she was finished, Claire wheeled Brynn into the family room and sat her down on the couch where you once found them fitted together like puzzle pieces. You watched which muscles in Claire’s arms showed as she moved Brynn from her chair onto the couch. They were the same ones that flexed when your mother moved box after box out of the yellow house and into her apartment.

Claire turned on MTV Cribs and set the remote by Brynn’s left hand.

“You call for me if you have to use the bathroom,” Claire said.

Brynn glanced at you and turned red. You dropped your eyes as she nodded. You followed Claire back into the kitchen.
Claire walked over to the kitchen sink, picked up the little bowl the avocado was in and scrubbed it furiously. You stood next to her with a cloth in hand, waiting to dry the dish, but mostly waiting for her to start talking. Claire dropped her sponge and put her hands on either side of the sink, bracing herself. She looked over her right shoulder, out through the glass doors to the backyard. You followed her gaze to your father on the patio amongst his gnomes, arranging them into a neat arrow, all facing the same direction like a merry, bearded army. He had a squirt bottle of Windex and was polishing their beards and red caps, making their shovels and pitchforks gleam. There was a calm, pleased expression on his face.

Claire was shaking her head back and forth slowly. “He has done nothing,” she said. She looked down at all of the crud that had accumulated in the sink drain. “He is completely absorbed by those fucking gnomes while I am in here making baby food for my fifteen year old daughter.”

And this was all the fuel you needed to start the conversation that she was not obliged to stay with your father. You tested the waters.

“You don’t have to stay here,” you said. Claire didn’t move, she just held your eyes.

“You can leave him, you know.”

No response. “Do you love him?”

She shook her head once, slowly. But she needed more. “You are not required to be with someone who makes you feel like shit,” you said.

Claire chewed these words into her bottom lip. After a while, she said, “But Brynn needs a father figure.”
You looked out through the sliding glass doors and it was like looking out at a pedestrian from a bus window, or watching whoever is in front of you in line at the grocery store. All you saw was a man.

Fuck that.

“No,” you said, “she doesn’t.” You were hesitant to say it, because you knew it would be binding. But you also knew you were involved now. “We can get through this.”

And that was when you officially became part of Claire’s “we”. That night you submitted the USF online application, that spring you accepted their offer, and that fall Mom helped you transplant yourself to the other side of the country.

***

Packing the car was a high stakes game of tetris, especially since your mother kept sneaking things into the trunk. The first three seasons of Friends on DVD, a cheap vanilla candle, and enough Pepto Bismol to paint your room pink were what Mom referred to as “necessities”. In between the boxes of your clothes and bedding, Mom squeezed in three potted succulents. “These will do well in California,” she said.

You had kept your mother in the loop about your phone calls with Claire, and your increasing closeness, and though it was strange for her at first, she grew to understand your connection. She even started to feel connected to Claire herself when she started the process of moving out of your father’s house. When you came home to tell her you planned on moving out to California for college, she was initially bitter, but then supportive when she thought of Brynn. Her only request was that she could be your co-pilot for the drive cross-country.

The morning of the move, you woke up at four in the morning and your mother sat you down at the kitchen table and forced you to eat half an english muffin with raspberry jam.
“Oh that reminds me,” she said. “I made a double batch last night so you can take some to school.” She got a box from the cupboard that was filled with a dozen jars.

“That’s a lot of jam, Mom. There’s no more room in the car.”

“Of course there is. We’ll make it fit. I thought you could give some to your roommate and the other kids in your dorm.”

You swallowed the urge to tell her that preserves wouldn’t win you any friendships in college.

“Thanks,” you said. Walking out to the car, you took the mug of coffee out of Mom’s hands and told her that you would drive first.

“Wake me up when we get to Boston and we can switch there,” she arranged her pillow against the passenger window and passed out as soon as you pulled out of the driveway.

You took a little detour in order to drive past Nana’s and the yellow house. You could see Phoebe’s bedroom window from the road. By the amount of light, you could tell that her lamp was on instead of just her TV. You wondered what was keeping her up, hoping that she wasn’t scrolling through WebMD.

The yellow house had seen better days. The front lawn that your mother had kept so crisp was now invaded by crabgrass, and the porch swing was gone. It wasn’t even a yellow house anymore, the couple that bought it had painted the siding grey. For some reason this comforted you. Like the times in the yellow house were yours only. The crushed strawberries, Mom’s root cellar, your father’s blueberry pancakes, Phoebe’s ragtime. Those were all yours.

***

The flight attendant announced that the plane would be landing soon. You started to gather your things and put up your tray table when it started to rattle and shake. The plane jerked
so hard that it lifted you off of your seat. Tiny shrieked and grabbed your arm. You realized that you were the adult in this equation. You put your hand on Junior’s shoulder, who was staring at you with his mouth wide open. The plane bumped hard for another few seconds until the shaking petered out.

“Sorry about that folks, we hit some surprise turbulence. We should be on the ground within the next ten minutes,” the flight attendant said.

You, Tiny, and Junior released each other, dispersing your momentary formation. It seemed strange how quickly people can form connections when you experience the same trouble, and then how quickly you can let go. Or sometimes how those bonds can hold when you choose not to cast them loose.

Claire and Brynn were already waiting when you and Mom pulled into the Gillson Residential Hall parking lot. You, Mom, and the car were all stale and covered in layer of Cheetos cheese dust after five days of driving.

You pulled into the spot next to Claire’s sedan, which she had recently swapped her Range Rover in for in order to save money on gas. Brynn waved from the passenger window, and you waited for her to climb out, taking note of how she was able to shift more weight onto her right leg since the last time you saw her, but her right arm still hung limp at her side.

The fact that she was up and walking with a cane was a triumph in itself. That first visit after the accident, Claire had showed you Brynn’s physical therapy routine, which at the time had been several repetitions of slight, isolated movements. These would leave Brynn frustrated and exhausted to the point of a breakdown. She would flick her wrist a hundred times, each one a mental marathon. Claire stood over her shoulder encouraging Brynn as if she was in labor, “Push, push! Just a little longer!”
You had visited Brynn and Claire three times since then, using the money from a mysterious check your father had sent you in the mail. Margot stayed behind because she was busy with school, Claire still rubbed her the wrong way, and she wanted to keep Mom company. With each visit, Brynn’s range of motion had grown. An ankle rotation became a leg lift. You recorded videos of Brynn’s movements on your cell phone, and played them for your mother and Margot, who reacted as if they were watching Evel Knievel perform a car-jump stunt. They were stunned.

Box by box, you, Mom, and Claire unloaded the car while Brynn sat on your new sheetless mattress. When you had first opened the door, the room had seemed so foreign and naked. The other empty bed across the dorm kept you on edge, a constant reminder that your roommate could walk through the door at any minute. You had sent each other simple messages on Facebook, determining who was going to bring the microfridge, agreeing that a pet fish might be nice, and pondering if you needed to bring quarters for the laundry machine. Although this communication seemed friendly enough, meeting new people wasn’t your forte.

Even though her taste in music irked you, it was soothing when Brynn took out her phone and said “I’ll DJ.” She twirled her cane above her head in time to Taylor Swift with her left arm, and briefly switched over to attempt tiny, crooked circles with her right.

The only thing you had ever allowed yourself to collect were vinyl records. As you alphabetized them, you listened to Claire and Mom talk about Claire’s new apartment, and the small space she reserved for gardening on her balcony.

“I’ve realized you can find a miniature version of a lot of plants,” Claire said. “I used to grow heirloom tomatoes at the old house, but now I’m starting to do cherry.”
“I saw in Horticulture magazine a hanging strawberry planter the other day,” Mom said. 
“I think the brand was called Topsy Turvey. That wouldn’t take up too much room.”

Brynn was understandably bored by this conversation. She called from the bed, “Mom, can we go to Ikea soon?”

“Oh right. Brynn’s got her eye on a bean bag chair,” Claire said. “We should clear out before the roommate arrives anyway. Wouldn’t this be a weird hodgepodge of people to explain to somebody you just met? What would you even call me? Your ex-stepmom?”

Mom fidgeted at the awkwardness Claire had called out, not used to her blunt way with words.

“I think I’ll just stick to calling you Claire,” you said. “I’ll see you on Tuesday. Will you be ready by 5:30, Brynn?” She nodded.

You had worked your schedule so that you could drive Brynn to her speech therapy on Tuesday evenings so Claire could go to her kundalini yoga class. This class was free for her because it was held at the Bay Club, which was the gym she got a job as a trainer at. This was the perfect position for Claire, as she channeled her aggressive impulse to micromanage into sculpting San Francisco’s wealthiest bodies. They were so happy with their results that her clients spread Claire’s name around, and she reached notoriety when she became the personal trainer for Tony Bennett’s daughter.

Kundalini mellowed her out, and taught her to look at bodies differently. She started to realize that health and beauty comes in many shapes. One day she called Margot crying because she had a sudden memory of the white pants incident. Margot laughed and told her that they were still her favorite pair of jeans, as if she was brushing it off. But you were sure it meant
something to her. Although they continued to clash personality-wise, Margot no longer harbored any resentments towards Claire.

Brynn and Claire started to head towards the door when Mom said, “Hold on a minute.” She went over to the windowsill where the three succulents were perched, and picked one up that you were sure had originally been reserved for you.

She handed it to Claire. “For your balcony,” Mom said.

***

When the wheels of the airplane touched the tarmac you felt this simultaneous sense of dread and relief. You were back on earth, limbo was over. That meant everything was tangibly real and in motion again. You wouldn’t be trapped in this encapsulated space of pause for much longer. You would have to interact; repair what you could, hug, hold, barry, reminisce, make Mom a hot tea, rub Nana’s back, repeatedly tell Margot there was nothing else she could have done as she wailed face-down into a pillow. But it also meant that you no longer had to mourn alone, and that landing did not mean the end of your space for tears.

Junior and Tiny were both staring out the window, watching the people in orange vests direct the plane to the gate. By then, part of you loved them and wanted to take them back with you to your own nest. You wanted to bring them home and play Crazy Eights from a soggy deck of cards. But they were knotted. As soon as the cabin started to clear out and you stood up, Junior slid right past you so he could be entangled with his family. They were such a physically close flock. They bumped and nudged their way off the plane and out to the gate, and you watched them move through the crowds of people. They traveled as a tight unit en route to the bathrooms, fighting with each other to get to the front of their own formation.
You switched your phone off of flight mode and the first text that came in was from Claire. *We can get through this*, it said.

***

One summer night when you were six years old, a knock on your bedroom door woke you to an otherwise silent yellow house. Even though it was a *knock, knock* pause *knock, knock, knock*, it was so late and you were so young that you didn’t recognize her pattern. Rubbing away the sleep, you were startled when your eyes focused to see Phoebe, in her yellow Big Bird nightgown, beaming down at you in the doorway.

She crouched to whisper in your ear, “I have to show you something,” she said. She held a finger to her lips and motioned for you to follow her.

The two of you went down the stairs, taking them one at a time as to not make a single creak. She lead you by the hand over to the kitchen cabinet where Mom kept the mason jars. She took out two large ones, usually reserved for the pickled eggs that nobody ate besides your father.

Handing you a jar, she said, “Don’t drop it. It’s glass so it will shatter and then your mom will wake up. Then you can’t watch the show.”

“What show?” You asked. She lead you out through the screen door and onto the front porch. You sat down on the swing. The front yard was the stage, covered in a black backdrop which was night. A million pin pricks flickered off and on, more condensed than the stars. They swayed in pairs, weaved towards and away from each other, encircling the space which seemed infinite.

“Do they ever bump into each other?” you asked Phoebe.

“Oh I’m sure they do,” she answered. “But they don’t seem to mind.”
“What are these for?” you asked, holding up your jar.

“These are so we can meet them,” she said, holding up hers.

You followed her out onto the front lawn, and all she had to do was pass her jar once through the air. She covered the opening with her hand and held it in front of your face so you could see the half-dozen fireflies glowing inside.

“Now you try,” Phoebe said. You waved your jar and then blocked it with your hand the same way Aunt P did. Four little lights blinked behind the glass.

You brought your bugs back to the porch swing to have a good look at them. You let them crawl around on your palms, getting to know them before giving them their names.

“Mine are called Glow, Glowy, Glower, and Frankie,” you said.

“Now watch this, but don’t do it yourself,” Phoebe said. “Your Mom wouldn’t be happy if you swallowed a bug.” She took one of the fireflies out of her jar, placed it on her tongue, and curled her lips up to show all of her teeth. Then it lit and each tooth was illuminated. She opened her mouth and it flew out.

You and Phoebe gathered all of the bugs into your palms, shook them until they were lucent and slightly agitated, and then you opened your fists to let them fly out. You followed their spots blinking across lawn until you lost them amongst the masses.

“The only real magic that I know of,” Phoebe said.

***

The escalator descended to a point where you could see a TSA agent escorting Unaccompanied Minor across the baggage claim floor. They met each other halfway, like magnets. She ran into the open arms of the Dad, and he scooped her up and swung her legs around like a human pin wheel.
The escalator dropped a little further, and there they were. Your magnets. Their arms were raveled around each other, twisted like wisteria. Mom was resting her head on Margot’s shoulder, both so out of it that they didn’t notice you waving. They met you at the foot of the escalator, and you all just collapsed in on each other; allowing yourself to fall, fully rooted in Mom and Margot, while bearing their weight in the crook of your arms. Finally you were able to grieve in company, and it felt excruciating and it felt like bliss at the same time.

You think about life and all of its unsteadiness, how it has evolved since your V dispersed and became more like a web. It’s splitting and regrowing, it’s spreading like a tree. You graft on limbs, and have to saw others off. You think about all the things that make you want to live, and you realize you never want to be a trunk without any branches. You long for your Aunt. But you don’t want to be a bird anymore either.
What is You: The Power of Second Person Narrative

*Sometimes “I” is supposed to hold what is not there until it is.*

*Then what is comes apart the closer you are to it.*

- Claudia Rankine

In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, second-person narration is defined as a “story in which the protagonist is referred to by the pronoun *you*. Second-person stories can be homodiegetic (protagonist and narrator being identical) or heterodiegetic (protagonist and narrator being different)” (Jahn, 522). Many narratologists scrutinize this as a surface level definition because it does not encapsulate the diverse connotations the “*you*” within second person narrative can have. The deficiencies in the definition of second-person narrative can be attributed the fact that these deeper meanings are still under exploration within the field of narratology, and are difficult to confine into one definition. Instead, I have found that theorists tend to break second person down into several different categories and attempt to define them piece by piece. Even so, theorists feel they fall short in identifying the full power and potential of “*you*”, to the extent that in several of the theoretical works about second person narrative I have read, writers feel the need to end their findings with a slew of unanswered questions.

Theoretical interest in second-person narrative as a technique came on the scene in 1965, with Bruce Morrissette’s essay, “Narrative ‘You’ in Contemporary Literature” (Bell and Ensslin, 313). Since then theorists have been investigating, debating, and categorizing the multiple functions of the word “*you*”. The culmination of this thinking has revealed even more complexities to untangle, and many thinkers in the field of narratology have differing opinions about how “*you*” can operate when it comes to an author’s intentions and a reader’s experience. For example, there is controversy over labeling second person an “unnatural narrative”.
Supporters of this label believe that second person narrative “you” does not mimic what we would consider “natural conversation”, that it is inherently counterintuitive that person A would relay to person B person B’s own story. Opponents believe that this label is doing a disservice to the narrative style because they argue that the general goal of fiction is not mimesis (Hyvärinen, 179). However, there are some characteristics of second person narrative that are universally accepted as true, even if these characteristics are given different names.

In a special issue of *Style* magazine released in 1994, James Phelan discusses the difference of the concept of the “narratee”, the persona of “you” addressed by the narrator, and the concept of “narrative audience” as the imaginary audience for whom the narrator is writing for (Bell and Ensslin, 314). There are also the categories of “referential you” and “address you”. “Referential you” corresponds with the narratee in that it defines the entity that the narrator is referring to. On one end of the spectrum, “referential you” can be general. In what is called a “the pseudo-deictic you”, which is impersonal and representative of a generalized audience, the “you” and the narrator are not the same, but they can be referred to simultaneously. This type of voice is not only used in literary work, but in texts such as instructional manuals, proverbs, and recipes. At the other end of the spectrum is intradiegetic narrator, where the narrator, the protagonist, refers to him or herself as “you”.

According to the Phelan article, “address you” also breaks down into two categories; “fictionalized address” versus “actualized address”. “Fictionalized address” communication takes place within the story, within the plot, between the characters. “Actualized address” surpasses the frame of the book, and therefore the realm of fiction, to directly communicate with the audience. Double-deixis is achieved when the narrator succeeds in communicating to both
addresses simultaneously. This happens when the reader “you” is superimposed onto the character “you”, which brings new depths to reader identification (Bell and Ensslin, 316).

The naming of these categories is also far from universal. Brian Richardson breaks second-person narration down into only three categories; standard, hypothetical and autoletic. In his understanding, which is much more focused on the tense of the writing than Phelan’s, standard second-person narration is “a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second person; the ‘you’ often designates the narrator and narratee as well” (Richardson, 20). Hypothetical second-person narration is the user’s manual or self-help guide type of literature. It is like “the pseudo-deictic you”, and employs the imperative and the future tense more than the standard category. Richardson calls this the hypothetical form because in said texts, the “you” is often the future version of the narratee, or what the narratee could become. Therefore, the reader will not feel fully addressed because the “you” that is referred to is not their current self. Richardson’s autoletic form is the most ontologically flexible, where the fictional “you” sometimes refers to the reader and merges with a character in the story (Richardson, 20). In Richardson’s standards, this seems the closest category that The V-Formation would belong to.

One of the most confusing and interesting parts of reading a text written in second person is trying to decipher who the author is referring to when they say “you”. Sometimes the author intends for the “you” to solely refer to a character, usually the protagonist, within the story itself. This is when the referential “you” is specific (the intradiegetic narrator). In stories like these, second person narrative could easily be replaced with first or third-person, but some authors choose the pronoun “you” over “he, she, or I” because it provides a mental distance while writing about personal subject material. The complexity of “you” comes into play when there is
ambiguity, or plurality, in the identity of “you”. Jamila Mildorf writes, “you makes it difficult for readers to decide whether the pronoun is to be interpreted as generalized or generic you, as the protagonist’s self-address, as the text's internal address to some narratee, or as an external address to the reader—or, in fact, as a combination of some or all of these possibilities at the same time,” (Mildorf, 77). When sharing The V-Formation with my classmates, some readers become agitated when they confronted this difficulty that Jamila refers to, while others appreciated the opportunity to ponder who is “you”.

The dynamic deixus of “you” is the power of the narrative because the constant repositioning, or multi-positioning, requires such active participation from the reader. In English, the word “you” can be masculine, feminine, or both, plural or singular, or a simultaneous mix. It can be human or non-human. Because of this, it offers a diverse range of uses. It is a unique experience when a reader must question, “By “you” do you mean me? Are you talking to me? Or society in general? Or a specific group within society? Or is it the character in this book? Or am I the character in this book?” When this distance between the reader’s personal self and the “you” is erased, it can feel intimate or interrogatory, and, when executed skillfully, the second person narrative has the potential to give the author direct proximity to their reader’s mind.

A primary source of inspiration for me while I was writing in second person was Claudia Rankine’s book Citizen: An American Lyric, because of how masterfully she uses the voice as a tool to further her message. The book is comprised of a series of anecdotes, written in prose and verse, which illustrate how microaggressions are both exhibited in everyday life, and internalized by the people they are directed towards. She manipulates the word “you” to serve several different functions within the prose. One anecdote that encompasses several of these denotations is:
“You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black tarred street being swallowed by speed: he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there. You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having. Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind” (Rankine, 10).

Throughout the text, the “narratee” (the referent character of “you” within the story) switches from the person who is committing these microaggressions, to the person experiencing them, to a bystander observing them. But Rankine also uses the word to point an accusatory finger at the “narrative audience”, the “you” that is flipping the pages. It is exemplified in the above paragraph with the line “Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?” With the “you” in this sentence, Rankine is referring to the man in the car, but also to the people in her “narrative audience” that say such things. This is particularly powerful because her target audience are the people who are committing these microaggressions; the white, privileged, and oblivious that must realize their role in perpetuating racism in an unjust society. Rankine’s prose is constantly hyper-aware of this second realm of “you”, and readers are becoming more woke because of it.

B.K Fisher’s review of Citizen, called “Chokehold”, for the Boston Review reads;

“I believe—I tell myself—I am writing this review to assist in some measure in getting this book into as many hands, syllabi, and newsfeeds as possible. I could also be writing it to jump on the bandwagon of endorsement because it gets me in touch with my white guilt, gives shape and outlet to my confusion in a zeitgeist of remorse and frustration” (Fisher).

This passage reveals how deeply Fisher was moved by Citizen, and how the book is successful in eliciting feelings of “white guilt”, that perhaps Rankin deems necessary to motivate change. It shows how deeply the self-recognition in “you” was internalized with Fisher’s reading of Citizen, through his admitted guilt and frustration.

In The V Formation, I attempt the specific referential “you”, or the intradiegetic narrator, where the “you” and the protagonist are one and the same. The deixus of “you” hopefully
becomes more dynamic in the parts of the story when I attempt to achieve double-deixis by directly communicating to the two different address yous- the pseudo-deictic readers of the text as well as the character within the narrative. These are the parts when “you” is analyzing the world around you. This is the most crucial time to use second person as a rhetorical tool, as I ask readers to personally question their ideas of family and the societal norms that surround these relationships.
Work Cited


