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THE VERNAL POOL

ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016

My story begins with a small white two bedroom, one bath property with thick curtains that were never closed and a huge tree in the front yard, its branches twisting and hanging, untamed. It belonged to my grandparents. When I was four years old, my grandpa used to pick me up from school a few blocks away. He made me two boiled eggs and gave me an old man cookie that crumbled at the fingertips, tasted like butter, and came from a blue tin container. Then, he would sit on the couch protected with a plastic slip cover that squeaked whenever I tried to sit on it, across the dusty television set with crooked wires spewing out of the top, and hunch over an unfinished puzzle that was spread across his glass coffee table.

I would sit across him on rough red carpet with my legs in criss-cross apple sauce style and watch. When I would start telling him stories I made up, he would yell, "Cállate!" But, the only way I would stop was when he'd offer to let me help him with his puzzles.

Every so often I would start babbling again, but another, "Cállate!" and I would be quiet. It was on this same couch three years later that my grandpa passed away. At his funeral, in small heeled shoes, white floral socks that tickled my ankles and a braid that was wound so tight my head hurt, I refused to approach his shiny blue coffin that he was "sleeping" in. I was scared.

I moved into that house with my whole family-three brothers, one sister, and my parents-when I was in middle school. My dad put a green swing up with a rough yellow-brown rope that hurt my palms when I gripped it too tight. My brother got a pure bred Rottweiler for free-a gift from an acquaintance. The guy who gave it to him was sure he would be rewarded with acknowledgment when my brother got out of prison. What he didn't know was my brother was so deathly afraid of dogs that he kicked them out of spite with a grim face and bunched up eye

brows. So, it became my dog. I named him Monster. He had a MySpace page. He rarely updated his status.

In the front yard, my siblings got drunk and faded. They sat at a grimy white table that was so shaky, we were all prepared for it to collapse at any time in the pale brown dirt. It was always covered in cigarette butts, beer bottles, and bottle caps. It was even scratched up from keys and switchblades that belonged to my brothers and their friends.

In the back yard, my brother stood up all night with his friends. He lived in the back room that my father had built to connect to our house illegally. He sat on a scratched up white bucket with a flashlight and a half empty Corona with a lime slice shoved down the bottle at his side. In one hand, he had a disposable phone. In the other, he had a thick wad of cash that only ever grew until his wallet couldn't close. His friends leaned against the posts of that half constructed room, some lingered by my small curtain-less window. Not one dared to look in.

In the laundry room, a pathetic slab of concrete outside our creaky kitchen door, I helped my mom empty the clothes when she couldn't hold it all at once. She left the dryer door open one day, and it swung back and forth, banging and clanking against the spare pots and pans that were used to catch the streams of rain that escaped through the thin piece of wood that made up the ceiling. I reached in to check for calf high white socks and plaid boxers that she couldn't carry with the comforter. My fingers wrapped around something hard and long and cold. I put one hand on top of the gritty surface of the dryer and pulled with my bottom lip between two teeth. When I stood up, my arm was pulled down by a thick black gun. I put it back, and ducked into the hallway. My mom returned with the large white sheet from her bed, the edges stretching out from her arms, caressing her cheeks. When she came out of the laundry room, the sheet

was balled up in her hands. I took a step forward, but pulled back as I watched her rub the sides of the gun clean. I decided not to care because my fingerprints were gone.

In the kitchen, my mom made cakes while sobbing after a beating. She was barefoot, her small burgundy colored toe nails pressed against the grimy tiled floor that wasn't covered in thick shards of glass. Her legs had large red blotches and dirt filled scrapes. Her hair was curly and tangled, hanging in crumpled portions that my father had gripped and yanked. The dishes were overflowing from the sink, and the part of counter top she was leaning on had chips in the granite that wasn't covered in all his shit. Her arms shook as she took her fork and swirled the pink cake batter around in a deep yellow-green Tupperware bowl that had dents in it. Snot ran down her nose. She took shallow gasps of air. Her tears streamed down her face in large trails of sorrow. Low whimpers fell from her lips. She didn't look at me.

In the living room, I sat on a gray couch that sunk under my weight and smelled like my brother's hats-heavy cologne, sweat, and anger. I turned the page of the book in my lap and hummed without rhythm while my mother screamed at my father in their bedroom. He was supposed to go to prison today, which sucked. I hated when he left. He was lying down in calf high white socks, plaid shorts, and a blue muscle shirt I got him for his birthday. Something thudded, something else crashed. I hummed louder, turned another page. Their bedroom door swung in, and my father stomped out in his Nike's. He ran a dirty hand down his face, smoothing his mustache down. A tight lipped smile, a small wave at me, and a "Bye," echoed with care throughout the room. I waved. I said bye. That was the last time I ever wanted my father to come back home.

In the bathroom, I had to put my feet up against the wall when I went pee. My eyes darted back and forth on the rough

brown squares of tile that unevenly coated the floor. Large rats with long wiry tails poked their pointy noses out of small holes in the walls. Some squeaked in through the gaps of the large piece of wood that we dragged back and forth as a makeshift door to cover us from the view of the hallway. I started walking across the street to my Tía's every day at 6:30 in the morning to use her shower.

In my room, I slept under four blankets in a muscle shirt and sleeping shorts. I was woken up at 3:30 in the morning one night by my mother twisting my bent door knob and swinging the door open. I blinked at her. "Get up." I got up. She looked me up and down and shook her head. "Put some clothes on. There are four cop cars parked across the street. Fuckers are gonna raid us tonight." She left. I pulled pants and a sweater on. I could see my brothers running back and forth outside next to my window but I lay back on my bed, eyes on my bumpy ceiling, listening to a rat breathing heavily in my closet. I needed to be able to deny it. And if I didn't see anything, I could. The cops never raided. I never went back to sleep.

In the driveway, I sat in the backseat of my sister's car. My mom went in the house to go pee before we left. 10 minutes later, my sister ran in after her. 5 minutes later, my sister ran out and jumped over the rusty white steel fence. She turned to look back when she got across the street. My brother followed her with a gun kept low beside his jeans pocket. My legs got sweaty against the beige leather seats. He saw me. He came to my window and slammed the gun against the glass once. Twice. He stared at me. I stared back. He ran back in the house when a cop turned the corner, and my mom and sister ran to the car. We were gone before the cop could ask what had happened.

A week later, the S.W.A.T. team stormed my house. They took my dog. They took my brother. I never saw Monster again.

I have seen my brother exactly one time since then. I have seen the house multiple times. It is remodeled now, and the tree is gone, but when I look at it, I don't see what everyone else sees. I don't see the clean, freshly painted house with a white picket fence and a green front yard with pretty curtains hanging in the windows. I see a rusty old white gate that was permanently locked on one side, a tree that looked like it should have died with my grandfather, a front yard that was nothing but dirt. I see my bedroom door that was split in two, a large hole torn in the center, my books thrown on the floor, pages torn, my broken mirror, my mattress across the room, my clothes hanging from open drawers that the cops didn't bother to close. I see the boarded up windows, the crooked screens, the broken window panes. I see the wood door that smashed my finger and earned me two old man cookies when I was five left wide open from when the S.W.A.T. team threw a flashbang grenade to stun my brother for detainment. And sometimes, only sometimes, I see a younger version of myself standing in the window with tight clothes, thin eyebrows, large hoop earrings, and my hair cropped short, looking out, waiting, on 161st street.