

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Lydia Martin

My Secret

By Lydia Martin

To most of existence there is an inner and outer world. Skin, bark, surface of the ocean open to reveal other realities. What is inside shapes and sustains what appears.

I walk off the subway. Cars, people, ambitions charge by. City thrashes without hesitation or apology. No stillness. No pause. People do not see where they are. Traffic stumbles by and feet carry forgotten objects. Eyes see only the next walk signal, the next cash register, the upward battle ahead. They tell me I am home.

Some salamander species are fully aquatic throughout life, some take to water intermittently, and some are entirely terrestrial as adults. Uniquely among vertebrates, they are capable of regenerating lost limbs, as well as other body parts.

The apartment. My parents sit still in their chairs, bodies frozen, emotions flooding towards me. Walls of memories line our apartment. *Classes, friends, thoughts?* They are excited to have me back, to remember what it was like with me here and them there. And while they deserve news, their questions ring chaotic in my ears. Reminders of the commotion outside, of people expecting more, pushing ahead. A non-stop pace. Existence outside oneself. I pause and tell them I need a minute. Just one second and the door closes. Eyes and ears shut. I am alone again. City melts, and questions quietly float away. I can remember the soft wind and red stones. With silence around, I can breathe again.

To a certain kind of mind, what is hidden ceases to exist.

My grandmother wanted me to tell her everything. About problems and boys. But I had nothing. No hidden needs, no burning desires. No secrets. *Nothing exciting to share?* Life is simple and I am happy. I do not know what else there can be. And it was not enough for her. She wanted a complex girl, a granddaughter worth picking apart. But I was whole. Complete. I was simply happy.

Age six. Dad reminds me I do not have to smile when I am sad. I do not understand what he means.

Age ten. He mentions that he misses my childhood. My first cue that it has ended. *You're just not the kid you used to be.* And what has changed? My happiness is still there. I feel peaceful inside. He tells me I've stopped smiling as much.

At a certain age we begin to define ourselves, to choose an image of who we are. I am this and not that, we say, attempting to thus erase whatever is within us that does not fit our idea of who we should be

Susan Griffin tells the story of Heinrich Himmler. Nazi. Torturer. Homosexual. Gatherer of secrets. And Griffin gathers them too, divulging what she hears, what she fears. *Ours*. She divides them over and over, multiplying our shared knowledge. Generations of stories, spun from fiction and fact. Imagination is more real than evidence. She can give you everything. Unknown history. Lost figures. But then I have nothing to share in return. I flip the pages of her essay. She may pretend it is not linear, but there are still lines to be read.

Respiration differs among the different species. Salamanders that lack lungs respire through gills. In most cases, these are external, visible as bright red tufts on either side of the head. Some terrestrial salamanders have lungs used in respiration, although these are sac-like and simpler.

It is fall, 2004. High School. I see money. Confidence. I wear mismatched socks, curls brushed out. I live only in me, and am surprised that others cannot see inside. Face wiped clean. Sweaters oversized. Everyone else tan and skin-tight. I begin to notice differences between us. Our barriers are more real to me than our connections. I ignore faces, and unspoken distances snap into focus. Denigration of unclosed alternatives. I do not value your gossip. I do not wear your clothes. I refuse to play the game, and so cannot mind that you pick me last.

I stayed inside for three days during fall break. Door closed. Barely left my bed. Scared to face the chaotic world outside. Why won't it pause? It does not breathe with me. Can I breathe into it? I stay inside and work. I will still smile for you, but know that it is just skin moving. Seamless bark holds everything back.

Saturday night. Try on twenty party outfits, do not choose shoes. No need for them. I watch TV and finish up homework.

Television mimics the ability to see in the mind's eye. And the rocket? Perhaps that night flight of the soul...

It is fall, 2008. A world of love. A fall brighter than any I have ever known. He is there and handsome and can lift me up and whisper to me that this is more than he could have ever hoped for. We sigh together and I beam from everywhere. The happiness is shared, created by two. Smiles can now be spoken. They burst out. Forget stillness. I want to dance.

Knowledge and work and people who think like me. We were not the most popular, the most beautiful, the most likely to win. We lived inside, working to create the people we wanted to be. Against the bidding of others. And we survived.

He is here. Holds my hand. Rests my head on his chest. He is something bigger than me. I can fit by his side.

Griffin, you change your secrets by exposing them. A story made of words lacks truth. Stories are what we form, how we learn, but they are not reality. Manufactured. Media. The media of my mouth. *Nothing exciting to share?* Scents in my nose, swinging emotions in my gut. Lost on your ears.

A story is told as much by silence as by speech. Can I ask for silence any more loudly?

Salamanders split off from the other amphibians during the Mid to Late Permian. Any resemblance to lizards is the result of convergence of the basic tetrapod body plan, as they are no more closely related to lizards than they are to mammals.

You and I are disparate. Our thoughts disagree. Our secrets are worthless. Himmler will never be understood with pieces glued together. Even facts are false, filtered by the minds and mouths of informants. Life exists within me alone because that is all I can ever know. I can tell you about my parents, about my past, but it will not translate. Chaos outside. Reality lies within. Words destroy my truth.

I tell my grandma there is no one I like. Well, there was this boy from that summer program, but I do not really like him that much. She is confused. A child, she thinks. Does not know what it means. When I met your grandfather, I did not love him. But once we got married, I fell deeply, deeply in love with him. Could not leave his arms. Did not want to leave his bed. I squint my eyes. You know, one day that may not seem so weird to you. You'll understand.

Many of the highly aquatic species have no muscles in the tongue and do not use them for capturing prey, while others have a mobile tongue, but lack the adaptations to the hyoid bone. And salamanders have no external ear, only a vestigial middle one.

And then Griffin looks through my journal. She judges and explains and hypothesizes. *He and I discuss things I've never discussed with anyone else and I say things that I know he'll love to hear, even though they've been sitting, ignored in my mind for so long.* He will have a man flogged for the slightest infraction of the rules, and then stand to watch as the punishment is inflicted. *He makes me feel safe and happy and beautiful. But he is just so good. Everyone wants a piece of him, and I can't compete.* And increasingly he becomes obsessed with who he is not. *This cannot last forever, and though I am happy now, I know I don't want to be together for that much longer. I guess I'll end things soon.* Like the concentration camps he commands, in many ways he remains absent to himself.

The subject of cruel insults from other boys with harder bodies, and the torturous methods his father used to raise him, does he not feel rage toward his persecutors, a rage that, in the course of time, enters history?

The life history of salamanders is similar to that of other amphibians such as frogs and toads. The most primitive salamanders exhibit external fertilization.

Thanksgiving break. I tell my aunt that he and I broke up. I ended things. Too early to get so involved. I need to experience some things on my own. Better on my own. Crazy too soon. She looks at me. Good for you.

I see problems and justify them. I cannot be tied to others' happiness. I coil away to protect both of us. Before taught me to be on my own, and now is letting me enjoy it. If I am at danger of losing, better just to let go. And so I forced him away.

A week later. I am fine. Barely even remember how it used to feel.

Regenerative capacity is inversely related to complexity: in general, the more complex an organism is, the less regeneration it is capable of.

Maybe I am simple. Maybe I have returned to that simple happiness that I felt as a child. Since I know what will make me happy, shouldn't I pursue it? I feel my happiness resides within, in my own capabilities, mind, and body. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe I am a complex web of confusion, in need of a storyteller who can figure me out.

Our Secret. Himmler was a broken man. His childhood stolen. Sexuality repressed. Love destroyed by violence and secrets. Griffin completes the man by filling in his holes, tying together plotline gaps with some possible explanations. This is how a monster is born; this is how he can be understood. Abuse. Homosexuality. German childrearing. And when journals and documents are not enough, she borrows from the only life she actually knows: her own. *I knew a similar attachment to my sister. My grandfather was an anti-Semite.* The author's story reminds her of herself.

And should we be surprised? Himmler's story is told by Griffin, and so it becomes Griffin's. She expounds herself by revealing him. Turning actions, words, meticulous notes into a linear path of causes and effects, which will explain inexplicable action. Griffin, like all storytellers, is taking life and giving it sense. But this diminishes its reality. She is sewing together fragments, forgetting that the spaces between the pieces are more important than the rest.

In salamanders, the regeneration process begins immediately after amputation. Adults retain clusters of stem cells within their bodies, which migrate to body parts that need healing. They divide and differentiate to provide the required missing tissue.

It is winter 2008. I had been lost. I have been told how to behave, how to change the muscle inside me to match the appearance it gives to others. But I am now whole. My shards and forgotten, in between spaces make me a figure realer than any storyteller could form. Words cannot express what my body felt like when I was little. I exist in the aching of my forehead, the breathe that pauses at the top of my inhale, the way my feet get numb in the mornings. No storyteller can create me.

If I show you fragment pieces, then I want them to remain so. Griffin, do not sew me together to create a sensible figure, worthy of understanding. You cannot capture me and keep me whole. You cannot make me frown and then tell me to smile. You cannot demand my secrets and then fill in the holes with your own. I am neither linear nor explicable. Limbs broken, identity hesitant, I can regenerate myself. I am everything I need. My actions are just because they faithfully follow my irrational mind. I am without for a reason. On this island because it is quiet here. Remove the chaos, give me back my simplicity.

Like the white spaces in an etching, such silences render form. But unlike an etching in which the whole is grasped at once the silence of a story must be understood over time.

And now I have what I want. I am a woman on the desert island, deciding to stay in the sand. I am Himmler keeping my secrets inside. I am Griffin begging for them to be heard. I am

neither of them and none of you. If you were to tell my story, you would get it wrong. Don't classify my actions, nor interpret my notes. Life is known only from the inside.
No, I cannot share my secrets.

Sources:

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