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Thesis Oral Defense

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Introduction

It's funny how we never realize we are making memories until after they happen, how we can be so unaware of the effects certain experiences, people, and places will have on us. I never expected that my experiences in the Midwest would influence me so heavily until one day, I looked back and realized they had. Although I have never officially lived in the Midwest, I will always consider it my second home. I first visited my family in Nebraska when I was around 12 years old. It was the first time I had ever experienced a place outside the West Coast. The vastness of the Midwestern landscape starkly contrasted the Southern Californian desert and the smoggy streets of Los Angeles, I was accustomed to. Endless fields stretch in every direction, with only the rocky buttes breaking the horizon line. The flat, open grassland has this eerie power and intimidating beauty that I have yet to experience anywhere else.

Nebraska is a place full of history, loss, war, genocide, and resilience. Although I have a lot of love for this region of the country, there is this undeniable sense of darkness that can be felt when you're there. I think it is particularly important to acknowledge the suffering indigenous people have faced in this area, let alone the entire country. Even as a child, I was hyper aware of this history being so close to Fort Robinson and the Crazy Horse monument. The setting in a Gothic story acts almost as a character in itself. The real-life horror that has happened throughout history is an integral piece of American Gothic literature. Even though my story doesn't directly focus on these elements of the Midwest, it is a history that I have kept at the forefront of my

mind while working on this project. Aside from the region's history, it is also a place significant to my family's personal history. My grandparents moved their family of six to Nebraska unexpectedly. They were one of the only Mexican families in town, living in a tiny two-bedroom ranch house that doubled as a ceramic shop. They definitely experienced a level of culture shock transitioning to a primarily white, conservative area after living in chaotic North Hollywood. Despite having so little and facing financial and social struggles, they built a home there. Although *Baby Teeth* is not an autobiographical story, it is intrinsically connected to Nebraska, my family's history, and my own childhood. I think of it like a scrapbook where all of these little pieces of myself have been taped together into a single narrative. This project has become more to me than just a story, but a therapeutic exploration of the many experiences that have shaped me.

Overview / Product Description: Creating the Book

When I proposed this project, I set out with the goal of creating a 64-page non-traditional picture-book dummy that incorporated graphic novel elements and explored themes of fear and change from a child's perspective. I largely achieved all of the things I set out to do with this project. That being said, it has gone through many alterations within the script, visual motifs, secondary narratives, techniques, and color palette, which I believe have ultimately strengthened my work and created a more nuanced story.

Baby Teeth was an idea that first sparked during my second semester of Sophomore year. I didn't have much then, aside from the concept of a girl finding mysterious teeth somewhere in the Midwest. The plot was pretty much non-existent, but I still decided to use it for Za's Visual

Development class, where I was able to dedicate a whole semester to visualizing this little spark of an idea. Although I ended up redesigning almost every aspect of the project for my thesis, I was glad I had that initial foundation to work from. I'm the type of person who likes to be a little overly prepared, so I made sure that I had my manuscript written, updated character designs established, and even some rough thumbnails completed during the summer before senior year.

Luisa is very much a reflection of myself as a child. Much of her world is internal. She is at home in her own mind, which can cause her to not always be very grounded. Instead, she overthinks every action and lives in a constant state of rumination. For Luisa, it is easier to find escape rather than deal with the discomfort of her reality. Because of her introverted tendencies, I wanted her silhouette to be very top-heavy with hair that flows with almost a mind of its own. This also makes her appear physically off balance, which reflects the imbalance she feels in her life. Mama's character is somewhat in opposition to Luisa's. She is grounded, practical, and hardworking. The weight of so much is on her shoulders, but she is sturdy enough to handle it. With this in mind, I incorporated square and rectangular shapes in her design. Where Luisa's proportions feel off balance, Mama's are fairly even throughout. I put her hair up in a messy bun with worn-down overalls to visually convey that she is isn't afraid to do the hard work necessary to raise a child. All of this preliminary development allowed me to begin my Senior year with a fairly solid understanding of what I wanted to do.

I researched intensively for this project. I never want to limit the scope of my inspirations, so I pulled from a variety of sources ranging from children's media, horror films, and fairytales. One of my most notable influences for this project was Dave McKean, who created the illustrations for *Coraline* and *The Wolves in the Walls*, which are both stories I first encountered as a child and have continued to find inspiration in as an adult. His work has this

innate eerie atmosphere that is strengthened by his use of collage and mixed media. I admire how his illustrations can feel scary while still being appropriate for children, which was something I wanted to make sure I balanced for *Baby Teeth*. I also recently discovered Jon Klassen through his picture book, *The Skull*. Similar to McKean's work, he is able to create a distinct atmosphere through texture, lighting, and mark-making. I love the way he uses shape design in such a simple but effective way.

It was difficult to find books that were perfectly comparable to *Baby Teeth*, but I was able to find some similar projects. *A Monster Calls* is a gothic story that also follows a child who is being haunted by a creature connected to his psyche. The inky illustrations are moody and evocative. This book was a perfect example of how ambiguity, texture, and mark-making can effectively create a sense of horror. As I touched on earlier, *The Skull* by Jon Klassen was a huge influence on me. This book is essentially a fully illustrated chapter book. It helped me realize that picture books don't need to fit into a traditional mold. It was an incredibly liberating realization for me that would go on to help fuel my passion for this project. Lastly, *Beautiful Darkness* is a graphic novel that has quickly become one of my all-time favorites. As the name suggests, it has this jarring juxtaposition of beauty and darkness. It is filled with whimsical, childlike characters who are placed in horrific and grotesque situations. This book helped me think more about the way polarizing concepts can be used to create an engaging story.

In the past, I felt I could only pursue children's books in one way, but I think that mindset is extremely limiting to the creative process. The art I find truly exciting is often breaking the rules or blurring the lines between barriers. All of these pieces of inspiration have encouraged me to prioritize telling a good story first and letting go of my perceived limitations.

Even after my midterm review, the writing in my story has gone through several drafts and revisions. I began officially writing the manuscript over last summer. I've always enjoyed writing, whether that be through stories, poetry, or journal entries. I write constantly, though I never felt I could consider myself a real writer. Even now, as I am literally presenting a book I have fully written and illustrated, there is this hesitancy I feel to confidently adorn myself with the label of writer. I know this is a regressive way of thinking about myself, and I never want to let my own self-doubt stop me from pursuing something I love.

In the early drafts of my story, I had a lot more elements floating around in my mind. Originally, I had a larger family unit and was considering focusing more on the discrimination and alienation that can be felt in small-town America. As I continued working, I felt it wasn't really the story I wanted to tell. There's nothing wrong with having stories focused on prejudice. In fact, I think those stories are incredibly valuable. I just didn't feel like that was the main focus of *Baby Teeth*. I learned through this project that writing a story is kind of like drawing a figure. You start with the big shapes and slowly refine the details into something more specific. By narrowing down my many ideas into a more focused and concise narrative, I was finally able to find the story I needed to tell.

Throughout every stage of this book, I was constantly ideating. I created a mixture of more refined studies of environments, animals, and plants, but also loose sketchbook spreads where I had the freedom to make whatever I wanted. This helped me immensely whenever I felt stagnant throughout the project. I would regularly need to take breaks to doodle and listen to my *Baby Teeth* playlist to help me feel inspired again. Ethel Cain got me through a lot of my art block. Although it can feel counterintuitive to take these breaks, this is how I was able to spark a

lot of new ideas and keep things fresh, which was a challenge for me when working on such a long-term project.

When you see a final piece of art, you're only really seeing the surface. There are layers of muscle, tissue, and bone built on each other to create a singular image. I think this is in part why the thumbnailing stage is so difficult yet vital. It is the skeleton, the very foundation that everything else must be built on. I was initially drawing my thumbnails digitally, but I found that I was being far too precious with my work. I knew I needed to get out of my head, so instead, I got a huge piece of cheap paper that I pinned to the wall and let myself be as messy as I needed. Once I did this, everything started to flow a lot more naturally, and I found myself getting excited about the project again.

For the rough and toned sketches, I returned to working digitally. I still struggled with waves of feeling unmotivated at this stage. I found many of the heavily paneled pages were particularly challenging for me. I didn't have a large amount of experience making comics before this project, so I was often learning while I was creating. I was constantly working to achieve a sense of flow between the panels, spots, and full-bleed illustrations.

Throughout this book, I am balancing both narrative and conceptual imagery. In certain spreads, such as the one where Lusía is helping Mama cook dinner, I played with a more surreal composition. Instead of paneling out every detail, I felt it would be a more impactful image to simply show a spoon with a single tooth sitting inside. I like how this allows the audience to put the pieces together on their own. This spread isn't colored yet, but I was planning to use red tones to evoke the look of blood splattered across the page. This is meant to heighten a sense of danger. There is also an additional connection to puberty and menstrual blood, which is one of many signifiers that change is happening within Luisa.

In other sections of the book, I took a more narrative approach. Such as in the spread where Lusia wakes up to all of these teeth surrounding her. I knew that these pages had to show time passing, the teeth multiplying, and the creature's presence intensifying. So, I chose to show snapshots of different moments, building up the momentum that eventually pushes her to run away from home. This spread also happens to have a reference to periods but in a more literal sense, with one of the drawers she opens having teeth placed next to a box of pads. Balancing these two styles of storytelling allows for a lot more flexibility by giving me the freedom to pick and choose what will work best for each spread. When it comes to the horror genre in particular, knowing when to use ambiguity to enhance the tension is a vital part of storytelling.

One of my biggest concerns I had about this project was making my flashback scenes effective and distinct from the primary narrative. I decided that the best approach for this was to make the flashback panels visually distinct. I wanted them to mimic the shape and texture of torn paper that has been stitched together into these thought bubble shapes. Aside from making the past and present distinct from each other, these stylistic choices are also meant to reinforce the way memory can feel fragmented.

While creating this book, I realized I could not work chronologically. If a spread began to feel too overwhelming, I would step back, take a break, and work in another area until I was ready to try again. One of the biggest lessons I learned through this project is the importance of being kinder to myself. In the past, I tended to push myself to muscle through creative blockages, but that only led to stagnancy, burnout, and stiffness in the work I created. I realized through this process how shifting my focus and looking at the larger picture can sometimes be the best way to move forward and spark new ideas.

Creating the final pieces of art is always my favorite step of the process. Though this too came with its own set of challenges. One of my artistic goals last year was to blend my analog and digital work seamlessly. I find a lot of joy in the process of physically painting, but it can be very time-consuming. I wanted to find a way to retain all of the texture and fluidity of traditional art while still having the flexibility to make adjustments digitally. This project was the perfect opportunity for me to refine this process and find that balance between the two mediums.

For Baby Teeth, I went back and forth on the medium, process, and color palette that I ultimately chose to use. After some experimentation, I landed on watercolor because I felt the textures I could create visually expressed an eerie and unsettling atmosphere. I wanted my pieces to combine soft layers of paint with some more aggressive mark-making. There is an elegant softness to watercolor, but also a chaotic and unpredictable nature that felt perfectly aligned with the story I was making. I associate watercolor with a more traditional picture book style that feels non-threatening and nostalgic, so when it is placed with more aggressive marks, it creates an intriguing tension. I spent a lot of time perfecting my paint splattering abilities, though you're never really able to predict exactly where the paint may end up. This medium sort of became a metaphor within itself of how releasing control is a necessary part of the process. After using the lightbox to trace my sketch, I painted my spreads out in greyscale to ensure that I was paying close attention to my values. I then colored and refined my illustrations digitally in Procreate.

I felt a lot of indecision around my color palette from the beginning. I enjoyed the mood my grayscale illustrations were creating, but ultimately, I decided I wanted the color palette to reflect the Midwestern landscape. A mixture of cool and warm that feels somewhere in between both life and decay.

The process of making *Baby Teeth* was time-consuming, emotionally and physically draining, but also incredibly gratifying to see it all come together. Before I move on, I wanted to point out a few interesting details and creative decisions I made throughout my book. There are teeth hidden all throughout the story. I have them secretly placed on certain pages. I liked the idea of the reader noticing them later on a second or third pass through the book. Sometimes the teeth are simply placed discreetly in the scene. Other times, like in my cover design, they are a bit more surreal, being subtly formed within the clouds. I felt like it placed the audience in a similar state of disorientation that Luisa finds herself in. On this page, after the many flashback scenes, Luisa shakes herself out of her memories. I liked physically showing this through the paper-like panels being torn apart. I thought this was an interesting way to show the transition from the past to the present. In the spread where Luisa has finally confronted the creature, there is a moment where the two are hugging. I felt that this reinforced the idea that the creature was another part of herself she is learning to nurture, but I also just thought it was really sweet. Lastly, on these pages where Luisa is beginning to run away, I got the critique that I needed to more clearly establish Mama chasing after her. This is a spread I redesigned multiple times because I found it challenging to balance the many things happening at once. To solve this, I created a long skinny panel at the bottom of the page, broken up by tree branches. It alludes to the structure beginning to crack and that the story is soon reaching its climactic moment.

Project Description: Story and Symbols

I knew when proposing my story that I was deeply interested in metaphor and symbolism. Taking inspiration from the Gothic genre, which often juxtaposes the familiar with

the grotesque, I wanted there to be a level of nuance that was felt both within the text and the visuals. I am greatly opposed to the idea that children are not capable of enjoying or understanding nuanced stories, darker themes, or heavier topics. In fact, I think it does a disservice to children to assume they are incapable of understanding these things. I wanted to create a book that spoke to the very real fears and unsettling experiences found in childhood and adolescence. My hope is that *Baby Teeth* could be a story to fill a gap in the children's book market. There is so much rapid change in this time of our lives, whether that be through school, family dynamics, new friendships, first loves, or first losses. Even our bodies feel out of control, and I believe that those fears are worthy of being discussed.

Although I never want my work to be confined to a single demographic, *Baby Teeth's* target audience is middle-grade to early young adult readers. I realize that this is a hard sell in the publishing world. It's difficult to market work that teeters the line between two age groups, but I knew going into this project that my book would not fall into traditional publishing guidelines, nor do I want it to. I want to create work that is unique, innovative, and tells a compelling story. It would feel antithetical to my book, which is so heavily about the transition of one stage of life to the next, to be confined to a strict label.

As someone who has often felt like they live somewhere in between, whether that be through my ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, it feels only natural that I created a story that so heavily focuses on the liminal, a story about transitional periods and how impactful they are. In many ways, the Midwest feels like a liminal space, where people only tend to pass through on their way to the east or west. This felt like the perfect setting to reflect Luisa's emotional state and physical circumstances.

I played with a variety of symbols within my story, the most obvious being teeth. I was a child who never wanted to grow up. I've always struggled with accepting change, so I felt it was important to have my main character be at the age where you are constantly changing. Losing one's baby teeth is a stark visual reminder that childhood is ending. Although it is a very normalized part of growing up, there is something so visceral and grotesque about the experience. Luisa is on the precipice of teenagehood. She has already gone through huge shifts in her life, and the threat of more change looms over her.

As my project developed, I realized I wanted to deepen my story further by playing with a secondary narrative. I felt that having a small family unit, of a single mother and daughter, was important to heighten a sense of isolation. It was during one of my sketchbook ideation sessions that I began considering Mama's backstory. It is far too common for children's stories to gloss over real-world experiences. I wanted my book to allude to Luisa's parents' separation without outwardly stating it. As a child, your world view can be rather limited, you have the ability to feel something is wrong, but might not have the words or life experience to describe it. I purposefully wanted to leave room for ambiguity in my story to allow the audience an entry point and reflect the disorienting feeling of going through a traumatic event at a young age. It wasn't as important for me to literally explain the reasons for the father's absence, the move, or the tension between the characters. I more so wanted to focus on the feelings of loss and the struggle to put those feelings into words. Because no matter the circumstances, that is a feeling we all have and will experience at some point in our lives. So much of my story is about finding balance between light and dark, good and bad, what's above the surface and what's below. These concepts may seem polarizing, but in truth, everything is interconnected.

The same is true for the creature in my story. I drew inspiration from the Gothic concept of the sublime, which I define as the feeling of experiencing both awe and terror simultaneously. With this in mind, I wanted my creature to be both unsettling and beautiful to mirror the ways growing up can be both scary and exciting. Like a chimera, which is a creature built from an amalgamation of different parts, its design combines a variety of animals local to Nebraska. This includes deer, cattle, birds of prey, and even human hands. I intentionally wanted an amorphous quality to its design that creates tension between the familiar and the uncanny.

I think of the creature as an outward expression of Luisa herself. It is her shadow, and as much as she may wish to escape it, it will always follow close behind. There is an element of generational trauma within this story, and the creature design reflects that. I purposefully incorporated visual motifs of antlers and branches in association with Luisa's father and birds with Luisa's mother. The creature is a combination of her parents because so is Luisa. It is not meant to be an evil entity or a curse that she can't escape, but rather another part of life that she must learn to accept and grow from.

I knew from the thumbnail stage that the story needed to end with the symbol of a tree. Just as we do, trees are in a constant state of change. Seasons will come and go, but the trunk is sturdy and the roots are firmly planted in the ground. I intentionally wanted this story not to have a happy or sad ending, but a neutral one. Luisa will inevitably go on to experience more difficulties throughout her life because that is simply the nature of living.

Conclusion

I was fortunate enough to return to Nebraska over spring break. It had been about two years since I was there last, and I was confronted with an odd sensation. There is this unusual dichotomy of stagnancy and change that I've only ever experienced within small-town America. So much of what I grew up with as a child, and what my family grew up with, is still standing in this town, but not in the same ways. As we drove past the familiar fields I had seen through every stage of my life, we stopped by the pond where a fish was so strong it broke my line, where I nearly drove my uncle's pickup into the water, and where I had heard tales of little girls drowning from being caught up in the weeds below the surface. Now, the water is drained, the land is barren, and hardly recognizable. I felt this sense of loss at what had become of a place that held so many of my memories. But then I discovered the dock had been salvaged and was being used at another, new pond with sparkling blue spring water. When I walked on those creaky boards again, I couldn't help but notice how beautifully familiar it all felt.

So much of Baby Teeth became a way for me to work through my own fears and grief of the things I've loved and lost. The dock reminded me of where I am in life. How everything around me no longer looks the same, how things must end for new beginnings to emerge. My circumstances may have changed, but like that old creaky wood, I, too, hold memories of what once was and that can never be taken away from me.