



belle

Cocoa Laney

July/August 2019

I spent the summer driving across Alabama, meeting and sleeping in the homes of young women and non-binary people in 15 different towns. Some of them I knew; most I did not. Each participant wrote a letter to the anonymous person I'd meet on my next stop, sharing pieces of their own experience and creating a network amongst strangers as the trip progressed.

Dear Next Participant,

My name is Adrian. I'm 26 years old and I've lived in Alabama my whole life. It has come with its own set of joys and struggles, because at the end of the day I am a queer and neurodivergent person living in a place that isn't always open to those parts of me.

That's what made being involved in this project really cool. I got to talk about those parts of my identity in conjunction with the extremely southern person that I am and will always be.

I got to talk about gender and queerness, and carving out space for those things in this world. I got to talk about femininity (and lack of femininity), and the shame often enforced from both of those stances.

I got to talk about the south as

what it is, what it isn't, and what it COULD be.

It's a lot to consider, in a very cool way. It gave me space to think about some pretty dense and nuanced topics in an open and frank way, and to figure out (sometimes mid sentence) how I felt about them. Which is always a great, challenging, sometimes terrifying, and always humbling experience.

I hope this project gives you your own insights about who and where you are now, and where we in the south are going.

Best of Luck,

Adrian



















HEY!
My Name is Madison-Leigh. I am 23
years old and I grew up in
Leeds AL. I currently live in
Birmingham AL and have a stones
throw away from where I grew
up. I am African American so
my story about living in the South
is just as tragic as you think it is.
In terms of shame I have
a life of shamelessness. I could
care less what others think
about my actions the only judge
in my life is me. I am my own

worst critic. Because of my childhood
trauma I can honestly say no one
else will ever love me, or hate,
me as much as I do.

I am writing this to tell you that
the thoughts and judgments of
others should never impact
how you feel about yourself.
You are beautiful and you are
worth it.

love yourself

Madison



Adrian
Lacey Springs
July 16

I've lived here my whole life. The knee-jerk reaction from my perspective is to criticize Alabama because it's a thing I feel personally very angry and hurt about, but I also recognize that [Alabama] isn't this one, unified thing. There's a lot more nuance than what people, sometimes me, are willing to give to it.

When I was a kid, I believed everything anybody told me. It wasn't until college that I started realizing why other people have the opinions that they have and I started questioning what I had been raised into, which was very rigid, conservative, fundamentalism. It started out as meeting a lot of people who were queer and going from "I don't know I feel about that" to "I think I'm gay".

Eventually I started experimenting with expression, with names for people to call me. At first I shortened my birth name but then I settled on something that's completely different but holds a lot of meaning for me. **Now I've just settled on a "gender is fake and everything is drag" perspective.** It's makeup, drag, and costume. It's worked pretty well... I resisted wearing men's clothes for a long time because I felt like I'd get seen as a lesbian, which I am, but I wanted people to perceive my gender as separate from that. With clothes and makeup, I at least had control over how people were seeing me. I was giving them permission to see me the wrong way, whereas if I was putting in an effort, I was just getting misgendered without permission.

I'm this close to Jekyll and Hydeing it. I'm almost two different people when I'm here [at parents' house] versus when I'm in private or out somewhere. I don't say anything when I'm at home because it turns to chaos and it's not worth it. You look at my online presences, who I am around other friends, and

I'm a different person and a much more outgoing person. Definitely a funnier person. I guess I'm a half-personality when I'm home. Even though from a moral outside perspective I don't think there's anything wrong with being gay, I still have a lot of shame associated with it.

I think you have to find the spaces where you fit. You have a minority here of people that will always understand you because they're living through similar things. There's never gonna be a space with no queer people, or no women, unless it is incredibly manufactured. It's about finding places where you fit and finding places that are willing to grow and learn. It's also understanding that, if you want things to change, sometimes you have to stick around and make them change. Also, things are largely rural in Alabama, so if there are people who are queer, women who are doing amazing things, a lot of times they are very isolated. Finding a way to magnify people's voices, especially if you have any kind of privilege, helps a lot.

Madison
Birmingham
July 26

I'm 23 years old and live in Birmingham but I'm from Leeds, Alabama, so I've always been in the area. Academia is my life. I've always enjoyed school but there's always been negative influences there, and by influences I mean those who make backhanded comments about my race and how it relates to my intelligence. And this is the smallest I've been since high school, honestly. The most I ever weighed was 400 pounds... I feel as though that hindered me socially and I've always kept with a certain friend group. Now I'm having the chance to blossom because people don't find me too crazy to approach. I think now is the first time I can honestly say I like myself.

I personally am someone who cannot be shamed. I don't let other people's influences directly impact my actions; I don't care what other people think of what I'm doing. That might be how I'm different. My external stress has always come from schooling. I hate to say this but growing up, I used to get beaten for getting Bs. Some people will have a stressor to look a certain way; I have a stressor to be as successful as possible and be the best in the room. That gets in the way because I am an egomaniac at times, especially if I know that I *am* the smartest one in the room.

For a black family, we're very conservative. My mother pushed religion and things of that nature but I'm very stubborn, and if I don't wanna go with something, I don't go with it. I can't talk to my mom about certain issues because I know for a fact that we don't have the same views and I don't want to like her less. I've had those situations with her before; my sister is bisexual, I'm pansexual. My mom doesn't know that. I probably will never tell her that because it might literally kill her. With my sister – who didn't come out of the closet, she was forced out of the closet – she literally told me, “the only reason I cannot agree with your sister's lifestyle is because I

believe in Jesus”. I said, it's crazy to me to think that you could let one book, edited by a caucasian man, dictate your love for your daughter. I left it at that and refused to talk about homosexuality with my mother ever again.

There would be no “normal” if people talked about the things they're really going through. I never in a million years thought that I would have the same childhood as someone because of how shitty it was until I met my roommate, and if I have 150 stories that are exactly like hers, I have other stories that are exactly like other people's.

I think as children we're taught that what happens in your home stays in your home... I remember as a child there was a gospel song called “Sweep Around Your Own Front Door” that speaks on keeping your business in your home and your walk with God to yourself and things of that nature. That indoctrinates people to be so private, and **if things are happening in your home that are so bad that someone has to tell you “don't tell somebody”, you should probably tell somebody**. If someone says “that's not anyone's business”, it may or may not be someone's business.

Jacki

Montgomery

August 3

So, my name is Jacki. I've been in Alabama since I was 9, most of my life in Montgomery, and I want to be a teacher at LAMP high school until I retire. That has been my dream since I was 16 because of the impact it had on me; I owe my existence to the people at LAMP, my identity at LAMP. I left home at 16 and that school helped make me who I am. Helped me survive. But you have people saying, "you need to flee out of Montgomery, you're young and unmarried, go anywhere else!" And maybe it is that idea of heritage: I'm from *here*. I turned out alright, and I want to be for my students what my teachers were for me.

We have this stereotype that the South is backwards or stupid or behind the times but LAMP high school is the #1 high school in the state, #7 in the nation. My freshman year and sophomore year, I was still living with my biological family, but the rest of my time at LAMP I was adopted in a sense. I can trace a line of matriarchs who took care of me and mothered me and showed me how to be a strong human being.

I was a late bloomer; I didn't get my period until late middle school. **I had this complex when I was younger of thinking... maybe I'm a boy.** I'd pray to God, don't let me grow breasts. Don't let me have a period. Hoping I was some chromosomal abnormality, maybe later I would sprout a penis. I'm sure Freud would have a field day with that with the whole concept of penis envy, but it wasn't envy of the physical genitalia. It was envy of what it represented, the power of it.

I was the strong, funny one who did my work and I was my parents' favorite. I was told by them directly: you are my favorite. To the point I got called "the favorite son", to point out to my brother that he wasn't living up to the male stereotype.

My brother would cry; that was unacceptable in our family. Your feelings are inconvenient to the patriarch. So my brother characterized what was considered the stereotypical female emotional state, and I was the favorite son.

In my life, in that environment, being female was bad. It was shameful; it meant you had a lower status. Once I hit puberty, got my period, my role would be to get married and have children. Even though, prior to that, I was the favorite son. It's male stereotypes and female stereotypes: it's harmful across the board. Now, after having the people who have raised me since... I am comfortable with being female. I don't have any issues with body dysmorphia. My specific case was: I was told being female was bad so I wished I wasn't female. But now I'm me, and that involves me being female. And I will act however I feel fits those parameters, how I define it.

There's a certain self-reliance in being female. Maybe it's a Southern female thing, maybe it's universal to all women. But this idea of: you have to pick yourself up and keep going. We're told, "you have to be this AND this at the same time". Or, "not too much of this but still not too little". It's never just right; we know this, it's pushed on us. You will never be enough. So how do you fill that void of not being enough? Do you fill it with church, do you fill it with children, do you fill it with a husband? Do you fill it with a facade of yourself that you put up as "being strong" or this or that? Because none of us are ever going to be enough; there's always going to be something that you're "missing".















Hey girl! wow, it's so hard for me to even write that without cringing because I think there is so much subconscious shame in even acknowledging that we are women. But being a woman is a great and powerful thing. My name is Lindsey and I'm an openly gay pastor (and woman!) in Tuscaloosa. I am very privileged to have been raised by a feminist family but Cocoa has really helped me unpack all of the ways society and faith have still internalized shame around my womanhood and queerness. Being a woman with mental health battles has also been the source of a lot of shame. However, my journey and my faith has helped me realize that pride is not our sin; pride is our salvation. If God is important to you, know that

God loves you and that she is so proud of you! No matter your faith (or no faith), know that the greatest truth you can ever know and live is one of radical self-love. People might see this as aggressive or selfish or wrong but it is only because they are having to face the fact that they have to let go of the power and influence they want to have on you. Do what you want and be who you want to be, whether it's being a stay at home mom or a badass boss or both! Know that there is no shame in who you are, what you've been through, what you've done to survive, and the choices you've made. There is only pride in you having made it this far and the woman you have become. ^{keep thriving!}
♡, Lindsey



Jasmyne
Montgomery
August 4

I've lived in Alabama since the day I was born. The people in my age group, we're all fed up [with the state of politics]. I have so many friends who are volunteering for campaigns of politicians they believe in. They're going to rallies, they're educating themselves, and they're encouraging others to do the same.

My grandmother worked in a cotton mill up until I was in kindergarten and my mom... she's never said it outright, but I know my mom is indebted to her. Before then she cleaned houses and took care of white children while her own children were at home. Before she met my grandfather, [the white family] had offered to pay for her to go to school, but because my grandmother wanted to be with my grandfather and they didn't like him, she said no. She has a great relationship with that family and those children to this day, but she does still wonder what it would be like if she'd taken them up on the offer. My grandmother... I don't know if she ever had any aspirations like us, but looking at what me and my sister do, she sees that potential. I think she's amazed. "Oh, Jasmyne, you know how to do so many things!" But I understand it now; it's kind of a privilege thing.

There's this old toxic mindset that black women are indestructible, we're ballbusters, we give no fucks. But we give all the fucks; we give too many fucks, to be exact. I started showing signs of mental illness as early as elementary school but the concept of depression didn't come up for me until high school. We don't talk about mental illness the same way we do physical ones. I was in my guidance counselor's office my senior year and was like, I want to throw myself over this ledge. My guidance counselor handled it with an amazing level of empathy; she physically held my hand throughout the entire process.

Black women as counselors, psychiatrists, therapists: we need more of them. The black woman's experience is significantly different than that of a white woman's. You know that thought that girls mature faster than boys? There is this other idea within the black community that little black girls are basically forced to be mothers for other children while they're children themselves. Then you get the sexualization coming at them at the same age. *You're a mother, you're a sexual object... when do you get to be a kid?*

So you've got this girl getting ready to graduate, going to college, but she can barely get out of bed and function. My counselor basically picked me up by my backpack straps and was like: not yet. You're not done yet. She helped me and my mom find a psychiatrist that specialized in adolescents. I started seeing him and was put on the right track to getting better, finding a way to cope.

It took me a while to get comfortable with having a label [of bipolar II]. I didn't tell my grandmother that I had mental health issues until my junior year of college... it's not that she wouldn't understand because she's the most loving person in the world, but it was shame. It's the feeling of... I should be able to handle it.

Suraiya
Montgomery
August 1

I'm from Bangladesh, which is a very small country. I came from a lower middle class family; I moved here in 2009 in July. Ever since that I've been living in Montgomery. I was 9 years old and I didn't know any English – zero words! So I would communicate with very little, simple words. Sign language or something like that. But I went straight into school, I had very little preparation to the American culture.

We stayed with our aunt and uncle for a couple of months and then we moved out to a very poor apartment. It was a really bad neighborhood but we didn't have any choice. We started building our life there, getting to know people, and then the neighborhood didn't seem so bad. My uncles and family had a fight and we were left on our own. My parents didn't speak English, my older brother didn't speak English, I didn't speak English so... my parents and my brother, they hardly did anything to progress in America. I took matters into my own hands. When I was 10 years old I learned about what taxes were, how to find doctors, how to apply for insurance. That was important and I needed to help my family because we were not well-off.

Yes, I'm a strong Southerner now. I had a very strong Southern accent for a long time but then I had to correct myself! I love Southern food, I love country music, I love everything about the South. People are very hospitable, very nice. A lot of the older generation are very cultured so I like the gentle environment here. But to be a Southern woman, from what I've seen and what my parents try to make me... don't [stand out]. As a woman you can't voice too much. You can't show too much of yourself. So, keep it to yourself, whatever you have... be a little bit more of a shadow. There are a lot of old ideas that are still being taught in families, a lot of the children are following them. Depending on what culture you

are, you have a lot of restrictions. If you're brown you're weird. You smell bad. You own gas stations and you're ruining our country. If you're Muslim, your religion is bad.

This is the situation now with me: my family, they're strong Muslim believers. My boyfriend's side are strong Christian believers. And then me and my boyfriend, we believe in being a human. We don't really follow a certain religion and stick to it; we grab information from each, whatever makes us a good person.

Personally I haven't faced [negative stereotyping] because I've blended myself into American culture to where Americans around me don't feel threatened that I'm changing their ways. I wanted to feel like I'm in the crowd so I became Americanized but still try to keep in touch with my culture. I learned English very well; I didn't want a harsh accent. But I've seen friends feel the discrimination because of the way they are. I had a Bengali friend and she was... very Bengali. She wore a hijab and followed rules that were odd to a lot of people. They said a few things to her, treated her differently, but she didn't look normal. When you don't look normal, people talk about you. **It's a norm in society, but in Southern culture it's magnified.**

Cynthia & Suze

Irondale
July 24

My name is Cynthia Mwenja. I grew up in Huntsville and I went to BSU; I've stayed here in Birmingham since then. Went back to school when our youngest was 2, got a masters and PhD.

I'm Suze. I've lived here my whole life, and I'm finishing my degree in speech-language pathology.

We get a lot of opportunity to explain [life in Alabama to outsiders] because my husband is from Kenya. Kenya itself has its own issues so we don't get caught on the carpet the way folks from Alabama do, but we as progressives feel outnumbered. It's made a lot of progressive folks turn their attention to the national scene, activism on a national level, because it can feel really hopeless to change entrenched power structures within the machine and political interests here in Alabama.

Alabama is different than a lot of places but I've been really sheltered. I've never really been around any super far right-wing people. I was not really raised Southern having a Kenyan parent. The Southern belle stuff, I've never had that forced upon me. I grew up playing outside, not a lot of TV, around very like-minded people.

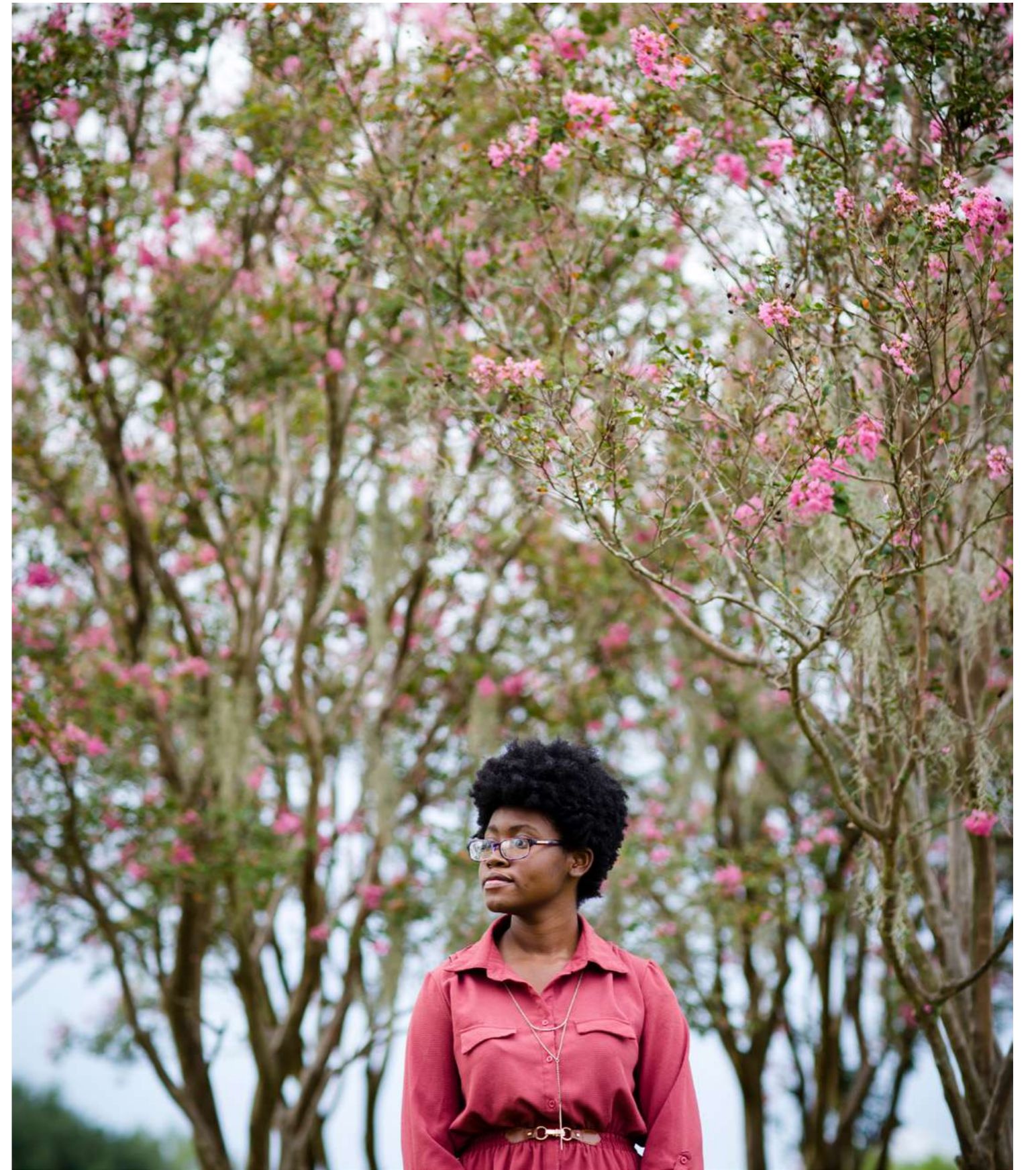
Southern women get everything that American women get: you're supposed to be a perfect homemaker, career person, perfect weight, fashionable, your kids are supposed to be perfect, and if you fall down in any one of those, you've failed. But Southern women get that to the n-th degree above American women. I feel like Southern women really need an opportunity to interrogate that, push back on it. Say, I didn't sign up for this. You can't make me buy into this whole picture. I can certainly think of friends of mine who feel it... I can't imagine what their stress level must be like.

I feel like there's a big generational change, particularly with fashion and self-expression... there's a lot more leeway. Certainly there were stronger taboos, much more social consequences if you spoke up about politics or gender roles as a woman in Alabama. But personally I feel like **within the past 10 years I've reached the point of saying: I don't care.** I'm clear and I'm up-front in a way I did not feel free to be [as a younger woman]... now, is that because I've changed or the larger culture has changed?

All through high school, even slightly into college, I've been privileged enough to keep myself out of politics. But now it's gotten to the point where these decisions, the way people view things... it's literally my life.

As a woman and a person of color, yeah.

In the class I was in, there were a disheartening number of people who identified as women and Republicans... they embodied more of that old Southern belle way of being. It's like, okay. We're not gonna talk about politics in here, I see.















Hello,

My name is Lexi and I ~~was~~ am born and raised in the South. I went to several different public and sat in several different classrooms. I would like to say that I was raised by strong women at home and at school. They made sure I stayed on top of my game as a woman and as a black woman.

They instilled hope, confidence, and ambition within me and I thank them for that. Now it is your turn to answer those complex questions about the South. Yes, they are very intimidating and very direct. Answer them with the first thing that comes to mind - DON'T HESITATE TO SPEAK YOUR TRUTH. Your voice matters. I say all of this because I have held my tongue in situations that I shouldn't have and I regret it. So let loose and speak what comes to you. With Southern love and care

~ Lexi ♡



Jemma
Huntsville
August 27

I was born and raised here in Huntsville. My parents moved here just before I was born; my dad is an engineer and my mom is a schoolteacher. They had me and my brother a little later on in life. I was born and raised here; I grew up in church. My dad has a history of emotional abuse so my parents legally separated when I was in sixth grade after my dad went through a traumatic car accident which led to a lot of brain damage. The result of that was terrible mood swings, emotional abuse. It ended in a threatening situation so my mom thought it was time to take my brother and I out.

I'm back here in Huntsville now, probably not long term. I lived in Savannah, Georgia for a while but I'm back here to help out my family. We're putting my dad in an assisted living situation. He is very patriarchal and uses religion as a way to assert himself over women. With me less so but especially with my mom, he would bring up a lot of Bible verses... you know the ones that are say women are to be submissive and, especially if they're married, **she is supposed to abide by his will.**

When I moved away, it was a big change for me because I was moving out of this entirely Christian world. Even though Savannah is still in the South, it has such a large community of artists and people that have come down from the north. My friends didn't go to church every Sunday so it fell off, it wasn't a priority for me. But in the past year or so, I realized I need to think about it and realize what I went through as a child, what religion has meant to me. It's shaped me in a lot of ways, it gave me a moral compass, but in a lot of ways it has also hurt me. Stifled my education growing up. I wanted to explore that and because of that, I ended up starting to talk to a lot of people around my age who either grew up in religion or found religion later in life. What I've come to nowadays is the fact

that I'm not religious. At all. I think I'm more of a spiritual being... I find that nature is so beautiful and it's hard for me to not believe that there's an intelligent being out there creating the world.

It's interesting to me nowadays when I talk to my mom about some things. How she almost looks at women as being less. I obviously got this strong perception of women from her because she had to go through all she did, step up and be the head of the household, but there are some things that I've talked to her about regarding sex and reproductive health that are tough to bring up to her. She has these ideas of what it "should" be based on what religion has told her. When I was getting my period for the first time, she told me I could only wear pads until I had sex. That was weird to me... because of the way she was talking about my sex as a woman, it made me almost scared of my own body.

The South is almost like a family identity; if you don't stick with it, you're no longer part of the family. The way people view children that have left the church... it's like they're ousted. It's a familial thing; it's a community. I think a lot of people are scared of losing their foundation, people of our generation especially. They stick in church because it's something comfortable, it's something they know.

Lindsey
Tuscaloosa
July 27

My name is Lindsey Becker. I'm fascinated by how people believe, by culture, and I'm aware that every culture is deeply defined by how they approach faith. I went from college to seminary; that's a 3-year masters program. From there, part of the requirements for graduation was essentially chaplaincy in a resident setting. I went in kicking and screaming because I assumed what I'd be doing would be telling people who are dying that they need Jesus. That's not how I feel, and I actually think that's really detrimental to people. Exploitative, just like a lot of forms of evangelism are. I went in and realized it's the exact opposite and very much how I am as a person: you meet people where they are, explore the spirituality they have. Now I'm working full time as a chaplain here in Tuscaloosa.

I'm a pansexual cisgendered female. I grew up not ever feeling like God wouldn't love me for being gay but I didn't come out until seminary... that was because, at the seminary I went to, you were in the minority if you weren't gay or affirming. Our queer alliance was basically the student body. There were struggles from that, hearing a handful of people say "love you but I hate your sin"... toxic American Christian culture. But I came out surrounded by people in ministry who said it's not true.

When I came to this job I was leaving a relationship that was very visibly gay, but I never talked about that at work. I [started the job] essentially single and I met my husband there. He's trans and it wasn't until 3 years in that he started transitioning. They've known him from before he was Michael to now, and they love him and were so excited when we started dating. To be in Tuscaloosa, to marry a very open and vocal trans person, and have a lot of people who were supportive and validating people who voted for Trump... sure, I can say all day every day that people who voted for Trump are trash.

I can't forgive that, especially if they're still actively that way. But for them to be able to, for an individual moment, affirm and support that when they wouldn't have had the opportunity to encounter that struggle if we'd vacated and moved to San Francisco... I think that's necessary. I think I've forced a lot of questions on them.

When you look at the Southern woman, the baseline expectation is being able to take care of the home. They're expected to have a sass and a bite to them, but in a way that's still Godly. There's some agency in that... some families believe women are the holders of faith in the house, but they're also expected to do it in a way that upholds the norms of the dynamic. So it's raising a girl to know that God loves her, but raising her to know that godliness is cleanliness. Stand up for yourself and be strong but seek a man that will provide and protect you.

One of my theology teachers talked about how, in churches, so often we focus on the sin of pride. But she said: you know what? That's a male problem. **We're doing a disservice not talking about the sin of shame.** We can fight all day to legislate, give people choice, but until we can teach women radical self love... it's not going to matter as much. We can make abortion legal, but if all the men and even the women around us inhibit those choices, tangibly or intangibly, then what? Radical self love helps everyone and for people to take that as an act of aggression is proof that they don't care about rights. They want power.

Lore & Katherine

Opelika
July 31

I'm Katherine Wise and I'm 29 years old. I've been in Alabama since I was in 5th grade.

But you spent 2 years in Mississippi before that! From 3rd grade on, you've lived in the South. I'm Lore Wise, I'm 63 years old, and I've lived all over the country. I've spent the last 17 years in the South, 15 of them in Alabama.

I think a lot of the stereotypes that we apply to the South, you can take those same stereotypes and apply them to any state in the country; there are bigots everywhere. But I think churches used to be the great social network for everyone [in Alabama]. The younger generations don't need that because social media has done away with that and the information is out there if you want to find it. Before, you couldn't ask the questions because you didn't know who to go to.

Or you'd go to your pastor! Or your parents! They're absolutely going to tell you that you're wrong or you're sinful. Our sex ed class in high school was a joke.

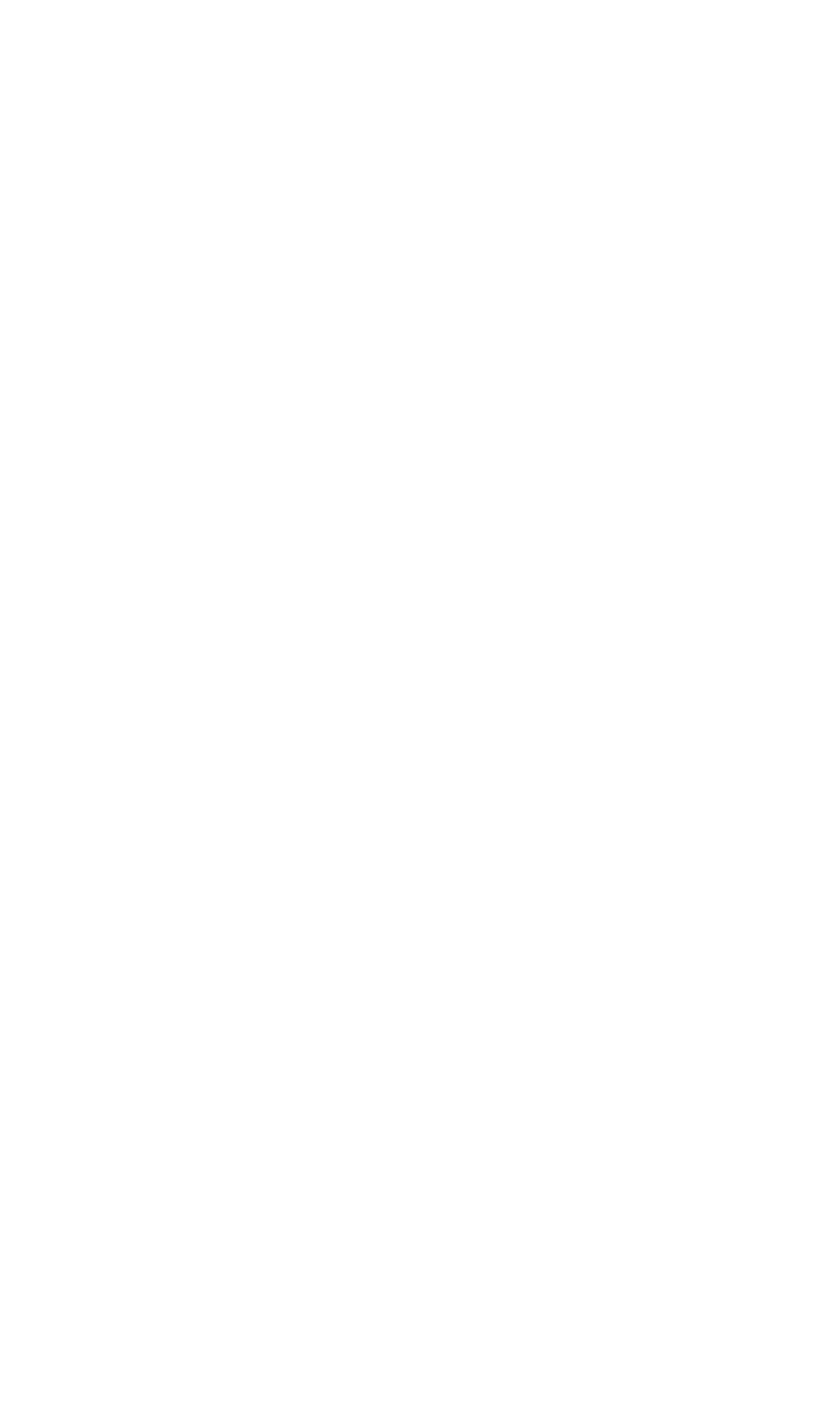
We've been shocked more than once at how often religion is involved in education in the South. It's not just the concept of religion; it's the concept of Christianity. Whatever the big church is in the area, those are the ones controlling it, and I find that appalling. It doesn't benefit anyone. As far as shame? The shame that's involved in growing up that way, the things young women have to face, are instilled in family through religion. **It's a parent's job to do away with that.**

In the South, because there is such a hard focus on respecting parents and elders, I wonder how much old ideals are died elsewhere are still shoved onto younger generations. You can look at some old white people – specifically white pe-

ople – and you can see it on their face when they disapprove of an outfit or the way someone's talking, or a gay couple. Hell, you can see it when they see a biracial couple, and you know there's a chance that that grandfather is then taking all of his ideals straight to the next generation.

[My husband] Bernie and I had a child before Katherine and he lived 17 days. He had all sorts of birth defects and internal problems. I gave birth to him in a Catholic hospital, not because I wanted to but because it's where my doctor happened to practice. Had he not been born there he wouldn't have made it past 4 hours. We had 17 days; first and only time in my life I actually prayed for him. I prayed for him to be better before we did an autopsy and realized what all was involved. There was no better, he never would have gotten better.

Bernie's mother and my mother pressured me into having him baptised so I did. I was worn down to nothing, this is what they wanted, it made no difference to me. I had it done. When he passed away, we had a service for him and the priest started talking about how this baby was born with this kind of sin that babies who aren't baptised are born with. He was talking about this and how, thank God we'd had him baptised, now he can go to heaven. We were in the first row, middle seat. I stood up and walked out and never went back in. There is no child born with original sin; this is a made-up thing and how dare you do this. Shame and religion to me... I would be more embarrassed to be religious than to be not religious. That's how strongly I feel about it.















**GO TO
CHURCH**
or the *Devil* Will Get You!

To beautiful you,

I'm so happy to meet you. We're here, together, becoming part of something truly special! My name is Natalie. I'm 24 years old. I've lived in Alabama just as long. I'm a queer, mentally ill, agnostic woman. (That was a terrifying sentence to write.)

Today I talked about the southern identity and the masks so many of us wear to fit in. We're surrounded by community, yet incredibly lonely because our community has made it clear how they feel about our true identities. I'm trying to tear that mask ~~out~~ away, inch by inch. I know ~~I~~ I don't have to tell you how hard that is.

What I do want to tell you is that

every time I take a step towards exposing my true self, I feel happier. As we want to change our society we have to stop hiding. Stop being ashamed for simply existing. Please don't feel like there's something inherently wrong or unlovable about you. I promise that you aren't alone. You are my sister and I am so proud of you. But most importantly, be proud of yourself!

All of my love,
Natalie



Claire
Birmingham
July 20

So many people see [Alabama] as this poor, shoeless, post cotton picking, racially divided place where no one has money and no one is educated. We all support Trump and we all support him for the same reason. What they don't see is the wealth that exists here, that Mountain Brook [a suburb of Birmingham] is the second wealthiest city in the Southeast. Alabama is very rarely being oppressed by the nation or the world; it most often and I think most historically being oppressed by itself.

I've been very fortunate; I'd call my mom very liberal and my dad very reasonable. But my dad has some very traditional white male and Republican views, though he doesn't call himself a Republican. He tries to keep it unknown, unsaid, because he wants good connections in the state. Not just friendship but powerful men to be on his team. There have been advantages in life that I've gained because of the almost-facade that my dad has held up to fit into this society.

I was fortunate in a lot of ways in that my parents supported me in a lot of things. I'm not gay but I always knew that, if I was, my home was safe. I had boyfriends spend the night, even though I was – on my own accord – abstinent. I did not want to get pregnant or bogged down with something I was not ready for and they knew that and had given me so much freedom in my life around the issues of drugs, alcohol, and boys that I rarely pushed that boundary. Looking back now it's phenomenal that my parents had that much faith in me, but because there was this layer of trust and honesty, I know that if I had gotten pregnant I could have gone home and they would have been there for me.

But that's not to say there weren't other pressures in my house. We were very health-conscious. I think a lot of women

– and men – have a lot of overlapping experiences with food and eating and shame and exhaustion around the whole issue, but nobody wants to talk about it. It brands you as crazy, straight-up crazy. Unstable, unfrienable, undateable. But I think there are so many people walking around just... harboring this. People before us wouldn't discuss these issues; they have an even bigger shame than we do. The baby boomers can never mention their eating disorders! I have aunts who are currently anorexic and aunts who died of anorexia and they still don't talk about it.

I think there's a lot to be said for the racial divide issue in archetype and female expectations. I can't help but wrap it around to the food issue, because that as a woman in the South has been so tumultuous. **There's this ever-present duality of: you must feed, but you must not eat.** When you see a fat Southern white woman, what you see is a fat, lazy, uneducated, white trash woman. I can't speak for black women but with white women there is this ever-present "be thin, be perfect, have beautiful skin"- which is crazy in this climate!

We must maintain such a facade and starve ourselves, I suppose, while fattening up our husbands. There's whole phrase of "the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach". How do you find the will and passion to cook large meals and provide for a family when you're depriving your own body? We have beauty queens. We made pageants. We have to live up to those standards, the beauty queen standards, but we also have to live up to the other standard of being a Southern housewife.

Kirsten
Childersburg
July 28

I'm 27 years old and was raised in and around the Birmingham area: Blount County, Shelby, Jefferson, and now I'm in Talladega. My mom, stepdad, and little brother still live ten minutes away from this house right now. [As a kid] I didn't know there was any other way to grow up. Even watching movies, it felt like a fantasy world. It wasn't real life. My mom kept me very sheltered. I was raised very religiously; I didn't really hang out at other people's houses. I didn't really think about where I was living, but I did love going to my grandparents' house. When we'd go to their house it'd be this beautiful, green, rolling hills, swingsets, pine trees... I thought everybody's grandparents had a bunch of old cars in their yards.

My grandmother and mother both are incredibly strong Southern women and I've always wanted to grow up and be that. There's little pieces I've taken here and there, but **the thing that shattered this the most has been my husband dying**. My mother and grandmother did not ever make me feel like my worth belonged to a man. I want to make that very clear. My grandmother, she got married the day she turned 18 and she has said to me her whole life: do not get married young. Go to college, get an education. But you know, growing up with divorced parents... I still put a lot of my value in a man. I got very lucky with Zachary because he's not the kind of man to take advantage of that. He was the kind of man to encourage me.

Those Southern-isms have been really hard to hang onto because I just didn't care if my house was clean when people came over. I didn't care if my parents saw me drunk, passed out on the couch, wearing my husband's clothes around the house. But then there was the part of me that was like, oh, my mom's calling. She wants to come over and check on me. I gotta put my hair back or put a hat on or wash my face and

make it look like I'm not crying. When you're going through something big, it's impossible to be that "strong Southern fiery woman" that you're supposed to be. When you can't hold it together.

I had to find myself all over again. I still am, in a lot of ways. As much as I hate to admit it, a lot of my identity was in Zach... really from about six months into our relationship. A lot of my identity was poured into that: being a perfect housewife, basically. It's something I'm a little embarrassed to admit... I really just want to be a mom.

I feel like I could have been a better wife. I know he was very happy, but sometimes I think of all the scenarios where I got mad at him for something really stupid. I have shame about embarrassing my mother during all of these things... when he died I went a little crazy. I got a lot of tattoos and got into some debt so that I could travel. I also slept around with people after he died. I was searching for human connection that made me feel something and it doesn't really exist in the way I was looking for it, which I should have known. I gave people little bits and pieces of me, even that was fake pieces of me, like "I'm a badass woman and I'm gonna be a player like boys are players! I don't have any feelings!" But since then I've tried to find joys that I lost along the way... I tried to get back to a little more of who I was originally. I don't remember who I was before Zach, but maybe who I was when I was with him. I take a lot of pride in being a Southern woman. I take a lot of pride in how I was raised even though I'll raise my children differently. I guess these two years have been a lot of reflection that probably wouldn't have happened had I not lost Zach.

Natalie

Mobile
August 16

I was born in Deer Park Alabama; when I was 3, I moved to the outskirts of Mobile and I've been here for 21 years. I just got my degree in international studies with a concentration in Asian studies and a minor in history. At first my childhood here was very pleasant. I was raised in a Christian household and my grandma was a famous Southern gospel singer. I was told that was what I was going to do; I got her voice, so from the age of 3 I was taught to sing. The first time I performed on-stage I was 3 years old. It was everything I knew: singing and Jesus. For a long time I was raised with the idea of knowing my entire future; it had already been told to me. I was okay with it for a while. I knew I wanted to sing, but it didn't take me long to realize I didn't want to sing gospel music.

In late high school, probably 11th or 12th grade, I really lost my faith. My grandma passed away in 2010 when I was in 10th grade and so many of the paradigms in my life shifted so drastically. Suddenly I was the mom to my mom. She had a mental breakdown and there was a lot less control over me than there was before because of that. I had more space to exist and to question and to wonder why things were the way they were.

I feel like the archetypal Southern woman is kind, strong, independent but still depends on the community and is very community-oriented. Has a strong morality. Goes to church. Wears sundresses and drinks sweet tea. Is straight. My mom is, to me, a very archetypal Southern woman down to her accent. My real accent is very similar to hers but I've always tried to speak with a more neutral TV sort of accent because there is a shame associated with being a Southern woman; at the same time as feeling the pressure to be a Southern woman, I feel pressure to not be Southern at all. You get pulled in multiple directions... being queer and a Southern woman, those things are embarrassing, in a sense, to mix.

I've felt a lot of pressure to be like my mom and especially my grandma, who my mom considered to be the ideal Southern woman. Each person is trying to live up to how her mother was in her eyes; it's this vicious cycle where none of us have felt good enough or had this impostor syndrome. I think that was passed onto me as a family heirloom. I don't want to disappoint these women in my life.

[Mental health] was something I'd always heard about in hushed whispers. Even my mom, she has really bad depression and anxiety and she never brought that up to me. My whole life she'd say **"I need to take my crying pills; if I don't take them, sometimes I cry for no reason."** But she never made it seem like there was any kind of feeling behind it. For my entire childhood, I had all these feelings that I knew... well, I don't want to say they weren't normal because it's not abnormal to have these feelings. But it was not the sign of a healthy mind. It reached this fever pitch in college. I had been trying for so long to keep this under control without even realizing it was significant, trying to function in this completely new environment feeling so lonely. I had a total breakdown and I was so anxious.

Eventually it reached a tipping point and I felt suicidal. I called my mom trying to figure out what was going on and she said, "I have depression. Those crying pills I take are my antidepressants." Why didn't you ever talk to me about this? It's something that's not talked about. It's shameful.

















i hope telling your story
brings you healing &
gives you the voice
you've needed to be heard;
we're all in this together.

even though we are
strangers, i'm honored
to share this experience
with you thinking of
you; you matter.

love from
deatur,

leslie long ♡



Cocoa
Huntsville
2019

In so many ways, the person I thought I'd become is not the person I am today. I was raised in Huntsville by a family that talked about very little, even as I watched the women closest to me self-destruct in the face of impossible ideals, and I was taught to be silent about the issues that most needed discussing. Being surrounded by the kind of religion that stifled questions meant I didn't know how to interrogate my own prejudices, my fears, my discomfort with my body. As a result, I judged others almost as harshly as I judged myself.

With a few years of distance, I'm at a point where I want to examine my conflicting feelings about the South. Part of the catalyst was the death of my older sister, who was estranged from the family until she passed away in 2018. **It suddenly became imperative for my family to confront the topics that had previously been taboo,** and so I began to have genuine conversations with my mother about the pressures she faced and the society in which we both grew up. Those conversations, coupled with an increasingly tense political situation in regards to women's rights, were the driving force behind this project.

As my worldview has shifted, my thoughts about Alabama have also become more nuanced. No, the South is not the backwards region it is so often portrayed to be, and there are a multitude of groups and individuals fighting to make it a better place for all people. It is also still profoundly unequal on a systemic level, and aspects of culture are resistant to change. My experience growing up in Alabama is unique to me; it is also defined by privileges that many others did not have. However, I also understand that being raised in an oppressively conservative environment means that womanhood can become closely linked to shame.

Even though Alabama isn't home anymore, I am beginning to see the ways in which being Southern has shaped me – for better and for worse.



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For my mother.



