



Reminisce



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## Introduction

How does memory reside in my body? What remains of their care? And what happens when I “sit with” these sensations?

For my research as action I displayed sound bites, photos, and movement to create a space/time to reminisce and invite others into how I experience my own memories of these women. The movement that I performed during the action was choreographed from gestures I saw and experienced with my grandmothers. There are stills of these gestures throughout my artist book that I put alongside images and memories that were a part of my research.





maneuvering around moments in my mind  
squeezing between thoughts, narrowly avoiding a collision  
holding my breath, hhhhhhshhhh  
the air jumps between my front teeth  
my chest expanding so that a waist could slip by  
all of this to avoid any thoughts that could send me sliding  
Where would you go?  
beyond, I mean, if you let yourself slide down the moments in your  
mind  
Are you already there?  
did you slip through  
like a car skating on black ice  
brakes locked up  
surrendered to the *slick, silent,*

*unseen*

We order ours from some guy my Aunt  
Bri knows.

One time she ordered too many tomatoes  
and so we made a lot more sauce and jars  
started going bad in our basement.

It was a race to use the sauce before it  
rotted.



1. Order many wooden crates of tomatoes.



My grandma's house on Eastview Drive was full of little pockets, places I could squeeze into. I would worm my way under the large red chair to close myself between the door and wall behind it, both covered floor to ceiling in mirrored glass. Pressing my shoulders against the glass, I would stare at myself, past myself, a million times over. Sometimes my cousins would try to come in too, or my brothers, we became enclosed in a world of repetition.

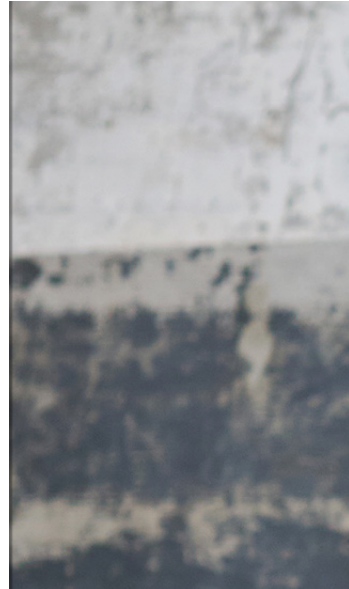


AUNT PHYLLIS:

That is so funny that you use that word. Both your grandmother's were

But then since then, I'll be laying in meditation and I'll feel like the

I don't even know how else to describe it,  
but when I started to notice,



stubborn.

When I meditate just lately. That started.  
Well, one time I looked in the mirror and I saw my mother.  
Literally saw my mother.

bottom of her mouth is my mouth.



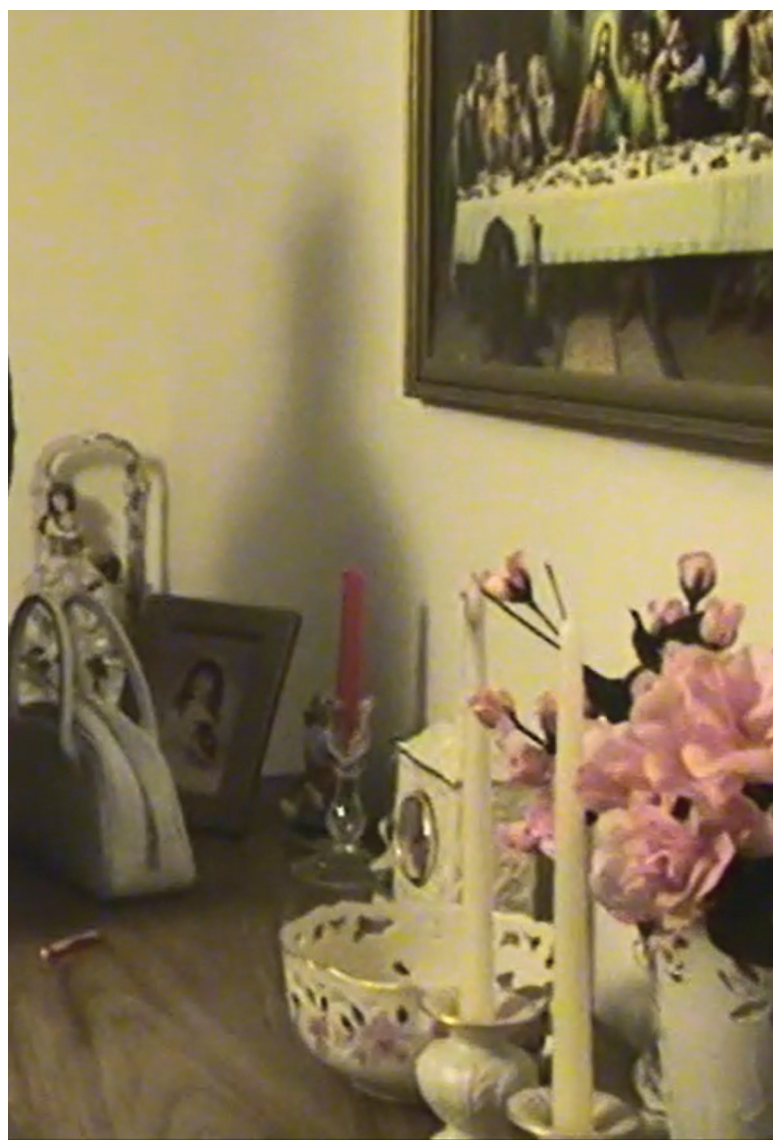
what is it about that?  
Like it was a stubbornness.<sup>1</sup>

It's like a juicer but it keeps more of the tomato I think. The one that we use when we make a lot of tomato sauce is different from what I use when making a small amount, which I think is called a food mill. The smell of the tomatoes gets to be a little overwhelming for me during this part - the acid burns my nose.



2. Cut the tomatoes and gather in a large bin. Check to make sure there are no black spots, cut them out and discard the rotted part of the tomato.

If I wasn't at home I was at my grandparent's house, my mom's parents. Ma would watch me almost every day and when I got older and stayed home from school or had a day off I would go to her house instead. I explored many parts of that house: inside my grandpa's underwear drawer where he kept Wrigley's Double Mint chewing gum (on top of that dresser was my grandparents' wedding photo from Italy and other frames) - I would take an entire pack of gum and chew each piece (because the taste faded pretty quickly), underneath the dining room table (I played house underneath it, there was a section of wood that was the length of the table and I would climb around the legs and on top of the wood trying not to touch the floor), and the triangle shaped gap behind the TV full of dusty cords (I hit my head on the corner of the TV stand - Ma was hysterical because I think there was blood, and my Uncle Johnny crutched all the way from the back room and he started yelling too).





ME: “I was thinking about that cycle and kind of it seemed like...another thing that I associate with you and your research is that inter-generational exchange that you talk about and think about while you’re dancing. That’s happening.”

“And for me, the way that I connect the most [to an inter-generational exchange] is when I’m cooking. Especially with my grandma; she used to make sauce for my entire family, but she passed away recently and even before that, she couldn’t do it as much. So that act of making the sauce while she was there, but also while she wasn’t there, it was like this layering of different memories and time all at the same time connected in such a particular way. When you talk about your experiences with your family, it really makes me think of those moments. And that’s like a location for me, almost what I’m thinking about places where that happens.”



ME: “.... just like when you were saying, I feel like now by doing that, looking back, I’m also doing a nod forward. I want to be more intentional about how I do the same things that my grandmothers did. And for me right now, I’m in this time or the space where and of course, I always start crying whenever I talk about my family, but something like minor, like I’ll just mention my brother and for whatever reason, I start to cry.”<sup>2</sup>

DINITA: “Right. And that is not necessary. It’s essential. And you just think about when you have your children and your grandchildren, you’re passing on those traditions as well and those memories and then also the feeling. And then just bringing her, like you doing that in and of itself is bringing her into that space that you all created with each other.”

....

“..... But I said all that to say, too, when it came to, like, me talking about myself, it was really a hard thing to do because as you look at yourself and your process and your experiences, you’re like, oh, that’s just the way my life is. Or this is something that just happened or this thing is natural to me. And you don’t really understand the value of those experiences or just even going back and thinking about my family or the women in my family, the matriarchs creating space for me and how dance was always around me and in my life. And even in terms of going back to hip hop and street dance culture and social dance, those things were always around me. But I didn’t think about the codification of anything until I was introduced to European Western dance forms. And then going back and looking at that, I’m like, this was just the way of life for me. Not to mean that it’s less special, but it is more special because it was always there and it was an unspoken kind of thing. So when you’re saying, like, hey, this is just like the way we live, and that’s beautiful too. And that’s all, it encompasses exactly who you are. And I think that sometimes when we’re so caught up in our everyday lives and it just seems mundane to us, it’s kind of hard to really go back and express the value or the gravity of these experiences that we’ve had that really makes us who we are.”



Where do our memories meet?

While we are sitting and cutting, my aunt's cousin Rosaria (who usually comes to help) talks, my cousin will take pictures (always when my hair is a mess), my aunt will gossip (talking about how so and so did this or how my cousin did this).

I like it when we all sit around the bin on my aunt's patio together. Somehow my mom cuts the tomatoes with just one hand holding the knife with her thumb, sort of like a scooping action. I remember my grandma cutting her kiwi in half that way too.







The back of Ma's TV room was another kind of pocket, but I viewed it from a distance - behind one of the large couches was an area of about 5 feet wide where the Christmas tree would go sometimes. Mostly it was left bare, except for a small table in the corner. Covered in a small crocheted tablecloth, there were photos, frames, candles, rosary beads, prayer cards, a small Mother Mary statue, a crucifix, and different pendants of Saints. The small corner was packed with photos of loved ones that passed away and tokens of transport.

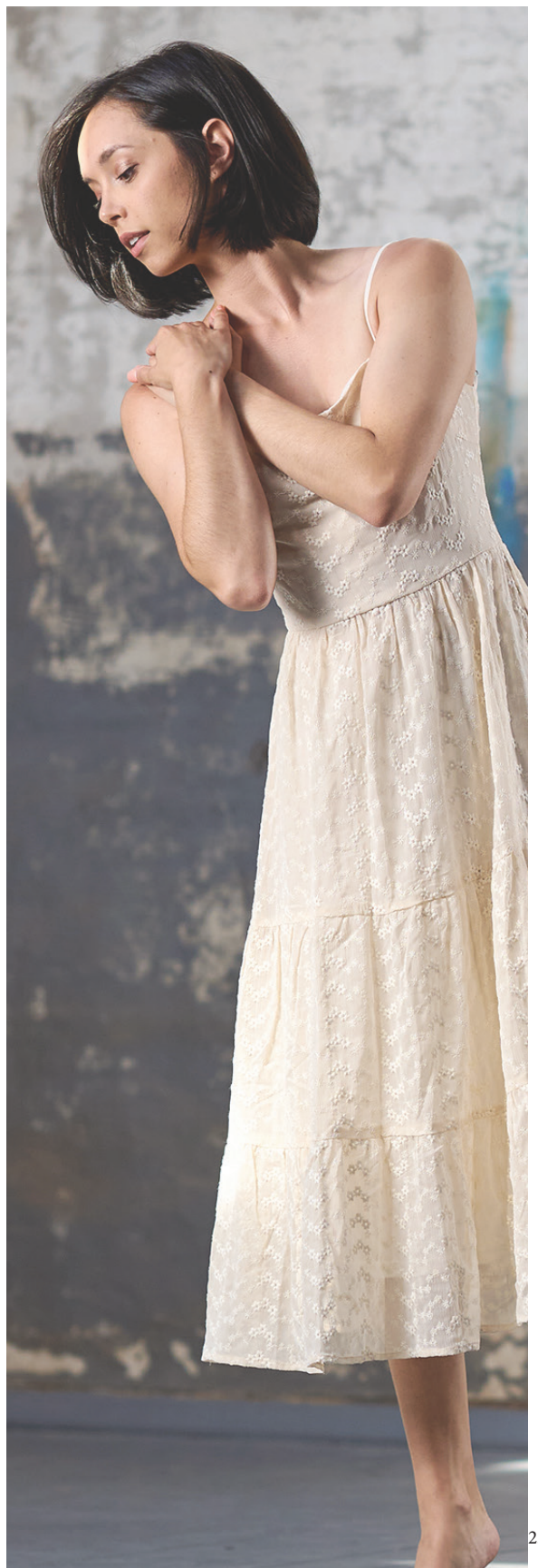
That corner would grow but it always felt like it was from another time. The rest of my grandma's house would change decor slightly - a new couch, or different curtains that would make it feel a little more, I'm not sure. But that corner could launch me back to 1930s Italy, fuzzy on the edges, and not something that I could touch.



Just pause and notice how you're feeling.

Like, notice if it's sadness or if it's regret or if it's missing or, like, try to notice the underlying emotion for the crying and then just notice it and then move forward, because that kind of allows you inside to kind of deal with whatever.

And then sometimes later on, things will come to mind and you never know where it'll take you, but it kind of frees you a little bit to move forward when you do that.<sup>3</sup>



Usually the younger boys,  
Gaetano and Francesco, will set up the jars  
on folding tables outside. We all help to pour  
sauce into jars and then seal them tight. I want  
to say by the end we have at least 300 jars of  
sauce that are divided between 3-4 families  
maybe.

We store all the jars of sauce in my parent's  
basement, the unfinished part because it's  
cooler, until we want to use it. Each time we  
take out a jar my mom adds extra  
ingredients, like spices...garlic?

I remember when my grandma was making the  
sauce for every  
family each week she would put in tiny pieces  
of broccoli, carrots and spinach too - as many  
vegetables as she could hide in the sauces the  
better.



4. Pour tomatoes  
into large pots  
to cook. Stir  
continuously.







The space that my grandma created in her home was a portal to an elsewhere. It wasn't addressed within my family, no one explained its purpose, if it had one. I didn't know that it was a part of her culture, that a lot of Italian-American women have these altars as well. I regret not asking her more about the people in that corner. But it wasn't for me then - now I am building my own pocket, a place to fold moments of time.<sup>4</sup>



I wish I could remember without displaying  
without the world knowing  
without thinking the world knows  
without knowing the world thinks  
Maybe I could obscure my experiential memory from view  
Close the curtain of my hair, falling forward over my eyes  
Hiding the visual response/ability of my memories

I wish I could remember without weeping  
constant and predictable, my view blurs  
a deep red pressure streams outward  
fracturing across my vision  
my nose starts to burn  
liquid travels to  
my mouth  
my nose  
my eyes  
my whole body is covered in sweat  
I am careful with remembering

my memories now are  
vestiges  
broken down bits, moments,  
of heirlooms waiting in the attic  
a sound  
the cadence of broken Sicilian superstitions  
infectious worry and care  
like the desperate grasp of her wrinkled hand

AUNT PHYLLIS: I've always thought hands are like the comfort, the doing, the taking care of the love. And to me, somebody's eyes, when you look into their eyes, you see their soul, it's their emotion, it's who they really are. And that to me is what's beautiful, not necessarily the shell on the outside. It's hands and eyes that bring you to the inside.



AUNT PHYLLIS: Yeah. Her hands were very soft. I always felt her hands.

AUNT PHYLLIS: I can feel her forehead on my lips because I always kiss her on her forehead.<sup>5</sup>



ME: And then I was thinking about Mammie and how she used to bless us that gesture with her thumb on my forehead. And that was like a very visceral memory. I can still feel it.

ME: Yeah. And I can see her thumb pad, if that makes sense, maybe because it's always, like, in between my eyes, but it's coming at me. And I think my dad has the same thumb pad.



The pots sit on burners on my aunt's patio.  
We stir them for an hour or so, maybe more  
- this is usually the part of the process  
where I go and eat pizza or pasta inside to  
be honest. One time we burnt the sauce a  
little, because I think the pot was too full  
so when we stirred the sauce the parts at  
the bottom didn't really move. My mom had  
to throw a lot of jars away that year.



5. Set out all the jars and  
prep tops. Place one basil leaf  
at the bottom of each jar.

Opening my senses out to receive.



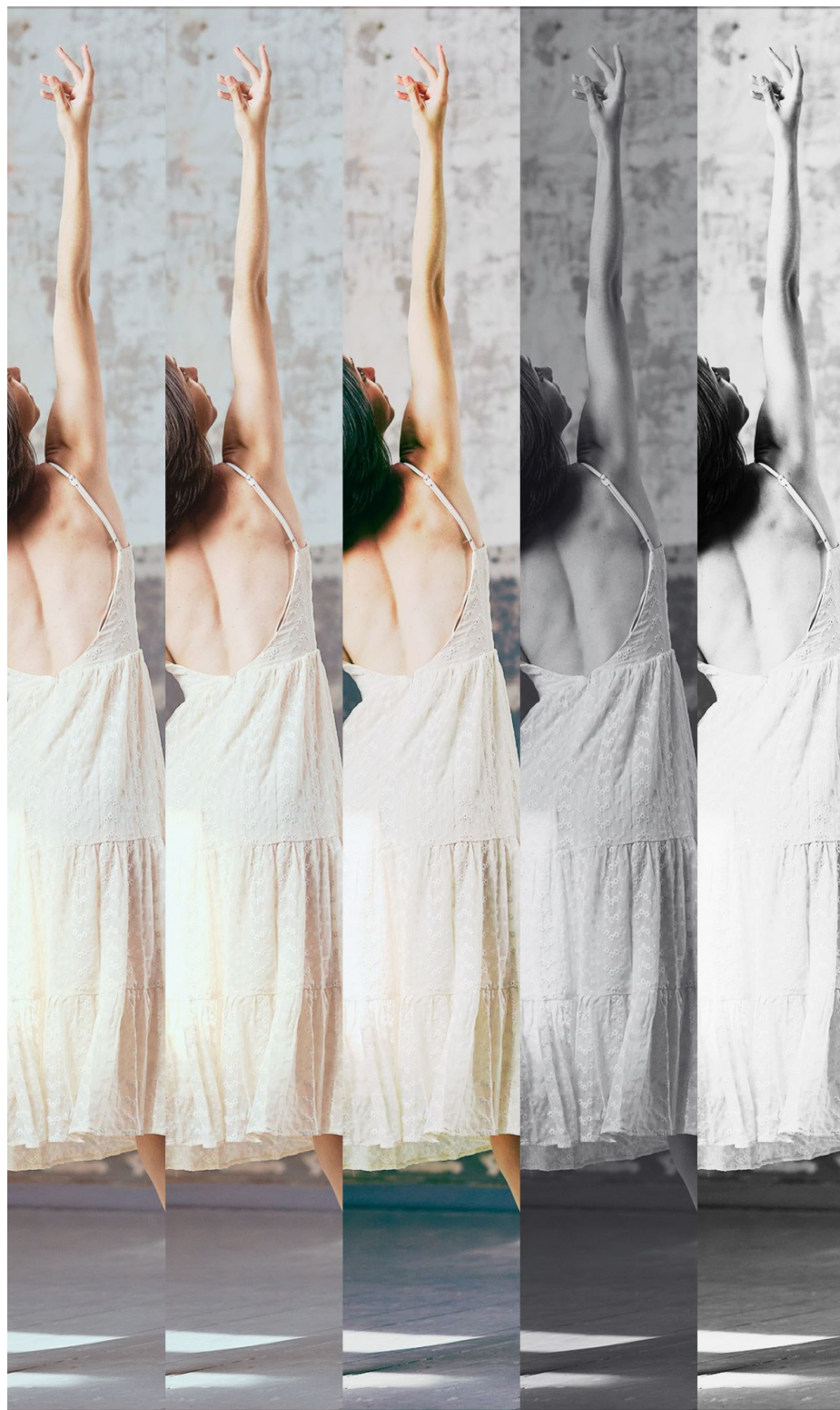
I feel thrown and caught into conversations, I'm sitting - covered in tomato guts - living the experiences of labor and camaraderie that I believe my grandmother felt. How many people have this memory written on them? All of the people that have done this before me that are now within this encounter.

There is a quote from Melissa Kwasny's "Ghost Dance: The Poetics Of Loss" (Debra Earling) that says, "For me, memory isn't situated in the past, but moves about freely," Poet (Joy) Harjo writes. "We can catch hold of it. And some of it is born within us, probably located somewhere in that DNA spiral."<sup>6</sup> I can see my grandmother's hands when I cut a tomato, in the shape of my knuckles. I can see how she is written in the make up of my body. I also have her words and actions pressed and held to me. I can hear her voice whenever I am walking alone in a parking lot, warning me that someone might be behind me. I hold her fear from experiences that I have no conscious knowledge of. But I also hold gestures of care when I dance and become aware of my ribs - I can feel the impression of their fingers between my rib bones giving warmth and space - expanding my capacity for breath and also giving me something to move with and toward.

Or is that my own hands?

In "My Meteorite" Harry Dodge says that "Memory works by classification and venue. There are trillions of minuscule bowers in our brains and each one stores data—our experiences."<sup>7</sup> Movement has been a way for me to categorize certain memories. I don't think it is something new - I've found myself doing certain gestures or holding certain parts of my body while telling specific stories. I carry all of it around with me, my emotions always just on the edge of spilling over.





ME: “ I had written down a phrase from your proposal in January ‘dance as knowledge’ or ‘knowledge as dance’. What I understood was that you had these moments in performance probably multiple times. But you were practicing remembering, and that becoming...I don’t know. It seems like, it seems like a really interesting cycle, and it being that therapy that you were talking about, where you’re processing it through your movement and through that movement remembering over and over and over again.”

DINITA: “Right. And then also, while I’m doing that, being in the moment, because you never know, not to sound like a pessimist, when it’s going to be your last time dancing or even like, your last time on this Earth. I didn’t know how many more times I was going to experience this, so I wanted to live in it as lushly as I could so that I could gain the most that I could gain from it so that if there was ever a moment that I wouldn’t be able to do this again. I can walk away knowing that in this moment, in this show, in this moment, in this cipher, in this club, in this moment, in this classroom while I’m teaching, I’m giving my...Why am I getting emotional?...I’m giving my best.”<sup>8</sup>



Writing it all out makes it seem simple I think, but the whole process is about 12 hours long, maybe more. I remember my hands cramping a lot and having to stand almost the whole day.

My mom has a hard time doing it and she can't always take off of work to spend an entire day cooking. The logistics of gathering our large family to help make the sauce is always a source of stress - we used to come together every Sunday to eat and visit with each other, but the families are growing, children are becoming independent and time is being spent in other ways.

But each time I come to make sauce with my family I feel like we are recreating something necessary. It still feels like we are finding our way through it - each year we are trying to remember: how did it work last year? How did Ma do it again? The occasion is a pocket of time that I get to go back to and live in the memories with others.





my memories now are  
collective  
new sounds are added to my re-remembering  
catching laughs across the smooth surface of our wooden table  
the moment is now a part of the memory

I am the receiver  
standing ready, ready?  
ready to receive, but not yet ready to remember  
I am at the end of the phone line  
translating the memories  
peering through experiences not my own

navigating a world  
with my own distortions  
with my own moments  
with my own thoughts  
a world - it's my world, distorted

yet, I hope you feel welcome

## List of Illustrations

Cover. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 1. Photo Album at Grandma's. Image captured from video by Christopher Corrao.

Figure 2. Aunt Bri's back patio. By Author.

Figure 3. 98 Eastview Drive. By Author.

Figure 4. By Michael Pilla.

*This movement is from my Research as Action. Michael and I spent an afternoon talking about my grandmothers and his experience as an Italian-American, living both in the US and in Italy for a time.*

Figure 5. cutting tomatoes. By Author.

*My mom and grandma cut them with a stroke of their thumbs that I still can't get.*

Figure 6. Side Table in Dining Room. Image captured from video by Christopher Corrao.

Figure 7. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 8. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 9. Aunt Bri's food processor. By Author.

Figure 10. Christmas Eve at my grandmother's house. By Maria Corrao.

Figure 11. Halloween at Eastview Drive. By Maria Corrao.

Figure 12. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 13. Tomatoes in pot. By Author

Figure 14. Photo Album on counter. By Author.

*My grandmother, Josephine (my second cousin), Mariangela, and my Uncle Tommy at my mom's kitchen counter looking at old photo albums, which happens at most family gatherings.*

Figure 15. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 16. Boiling sauce. By Author.

Figure 17. By Michael Pilla.

Figure 18. By Michael Pilla. Format Edit by Author.

Figure 19. Sauce Day. By Author.

## Endnotes

- 1       Phyllis Chadwick (paternal aunt) in discussion with the author, March 2022.
- 2       Dinita Clark (professional performer and educator, UArts MFA Cohort 2021-2022) in discussion with the author, March 2022.
- 3       Chadwick, March 2022.
- 4       Dodge, Harry. *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing*. New York, NY: HARVILL SECKER, 2020.
- 5       Chadwick, March 2022.
- 6       Kwasny, Melissa. "Ghost Dance: The Poetics of Loss." *The American Poetry Review* 44, no. 2 (2015): 11–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24593885>.
- 7       Dodge. *My Meteorite*.
- 8       Clark, March 2022.



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### Collaborators

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Phyllis Corrao Chadwick (paternal aunt)  
The Corrao Family  
The Fiorenza Family  
Lindsey Woytowich

The Faculty and Staff at the University of the Arts  
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