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Loser



MURIEL STEINKE



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# Artist Statement

Growing up, I avoided euchre with a ferocity and conviction so exhausting that I rarely deployed it in any other area of my existence. In my Midwestern family of loud talkers and proud goofballs, it was the social currency at every gathering, each tournament an inevitable feature of the evening.

*Loser* is a graphic memoir that playfully explores my memories and experiences through the context of the card games I've learned, played, and resisted throughout my life. Through essays, illustrations, and photographs I navigate the variety of ways I've used games as a tool for socializing (or not socializing) and how that has caused my perspective on my relationships to evolve.

# The Beginning

When I first started this project, I had so many thoughts spilling out of my brain that I couldn't keep anything straight. I covered the walls in my studio with frantic chicken scratch scrawlings of every idea, question, or snippet of logic that crossed my mind.

I wrote down things that made no sense. I made lists and then lists of those lists.

I knew that I wanted to tell stories, but I didn't know which or how.



One of my mom's stories about driving a random person to the hospital.

I don't remember how to talk to my friends.

What's the difference between a lie a secret And a memory?

I was looking for a hat in my basement when I found a picture of my mom with Bill Clinton

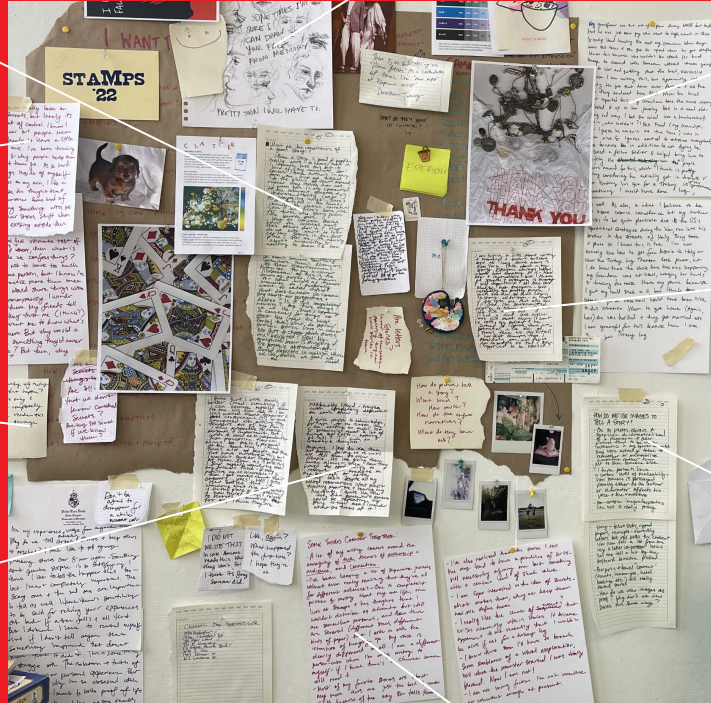
During the pandemic I thought about my friends so much I felt like I could draw their faces from memory.

My grandfather was shot out of a plane during WWII and declared MIA. He survived after trading his gun for a turkey leg. Thank God.

Why do we care more about certain people than others? How do our stories connect us?

Why even tell stories in the first place? What about them is so compelling to human nature?

All my writing was about connection and interaction.



# The Mom

Once I began writing in a way that resembled even the faintest hint of structure, I noticed that a lot of the stories I was telling weren't even my own. A bunch of them were anecdotes my mom had told me about her life that I'd been keeping in my pocket like party tricks.

I have always told her stories to anyone who will listen; they are truly nuts in both content and execution. This realization brought up a new problem: who do stories belong to? I've been telling my mom's tall tales all my life, claiming them as my own. She's *my* mom! Do they belong to me except when I'm talking to her? What about her stories that I'm in? I had always sort of positioned myself as the author of these fables in the library of my mind, but I was startled by the idea that I was maybe just a spine thief.

I NEVER HAD TO BUY A NEW CAR  
UNTIL I WAS IN MY FORTIES  
BECAUSE ALL MY VEHICLES WERE  
EITHER STOLEN OR TOTALED.

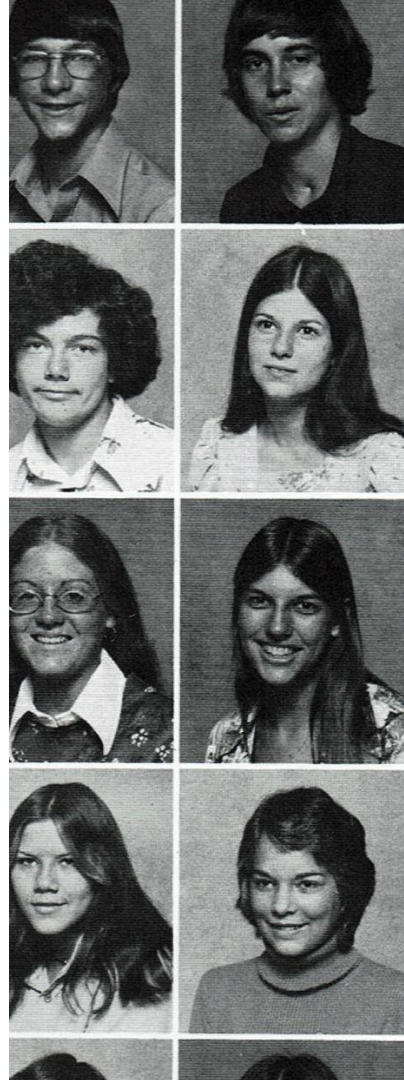


# The First Idea

When I presented at the midpoint review, my project had a very different face. Two faces actually. I thought I wanted it to be a book about my mom and I.

I was so relieved when I found the term graphic memoir. I thought, *this is what I'm doing! A dual graphic memoir! Hooray! I've figured it all out!*

I was wrong. This was only the first chunk of certainty in what became an ongoing search.



## MOST RESOURCEFUL:

*Susan Sherer*

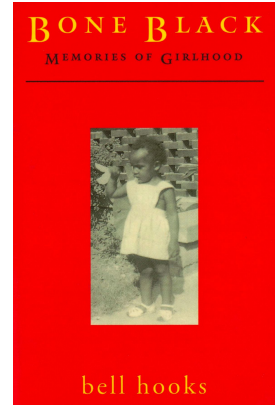
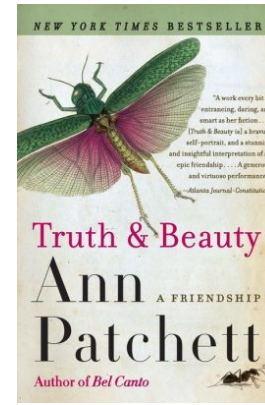
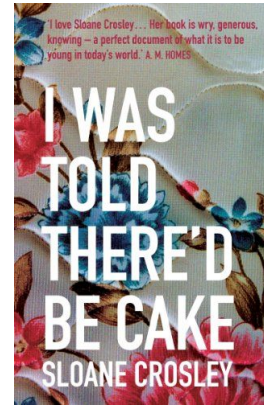
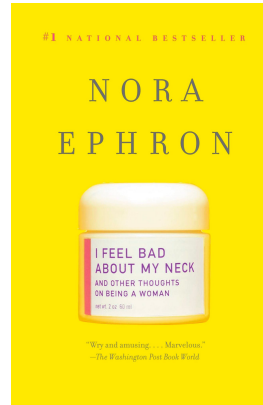
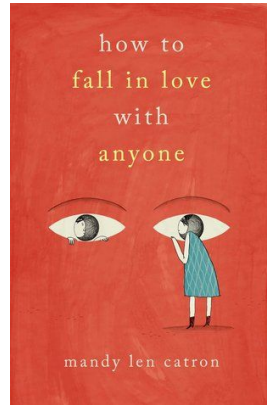
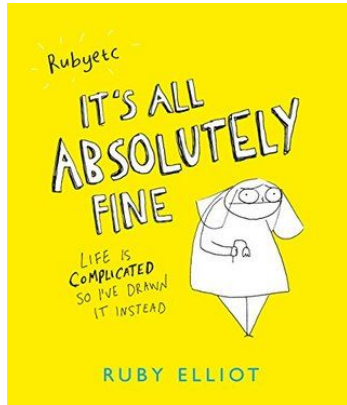
Bored out of her mind in the back of a hot classroom, my mom looked at the massive wall clock hanging assertively behind her and saw an opportunity.

It had this big knob at the bottom just like a wristwatch, and she figured she could twist it forward just a bit, raise her hand, and delicately suggest to the teacher that perhaps the dismissal bell was out of order.

With the teacher's back turned to them, mom stood up slowly and made her way to the broom in the corner. She crept back to her target and bravely pushed up on the dial in hopes it would turn.

The clock betrayed her instantly, flopping completely off the wall and shattering around her. The teacher and the other students whipped around to see mom standing there, broom in hand among the rubble. Time stood still.

# The Memoirs



To prepare for this project, I read all of these memoirs. All of them were written by women.

Consistently having at least one memoir as my companion throughout this project proved to be absolutely crucial.

Beyond providing me with demonstrations of profound eloquence, it was important to me to read authentic, unabashed depictions of a variety of experiences. While it can be a means of catharsis, it's important to remember that a memoir is not about writing a love letter to your past or airing your grievances. Personal writing is inherently biased, but at the end of the day your work must prioritize the **story**.

# The Essays about Memoirs

The rhetoric of this genre is riddled with perspectives, warnings, and approaches, but these are the two guidelines I lived by:

*"Memoir is the intersection of **narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing.** It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—**Show, Don't Tell**—is not part the memoirist's faith. Memoirists must **show and tell.**"*

— "Memory and Imagination," Patricia Hampl

Lightbulb moment. No matter how good I thought my story was, it needed a point, a reason to be told.

And this great reminder from *The Memoir Project*, by Marion Roach Smith:

## **3. Just Because Something Happens, Doesn't Make It Interesting**

This is especially relevant to my piece, as the visual elements function at the center of my story. The essays and graphics "show and tell", rather than either of them solely doing one or the other.



# The Subject

I started writing with both my mother and myself in mind, but quickly realized that despite having told her stories forever, I was itching to tell my own.

I was struggling to figure out what I wanted to say, but knew whatever it was, I had to be the one saying it.

I considered the parts of myself I wanted to address; what felt most crucial to me? What aspects of my world feel most relevant?

**I realized that a lot of my identity stems from my ability to interact with others, and this is the main way I create meaningful connections.** It's why I loved my mom's stories in the first place, and why I felt the need to tell my own.



# The Loser

When I considered the different ways I socialized with my friends and family, the theme of **playing cards** emerged.

I realized I'd fiercely avoided some games but been a champion of others, at once eager to play but afraid to lose. The mechanics of these games, my experiences playing them, and the way I viewed my relationships, were all linked. I was fascinated by the way my life was outlined by the way I'd been unconsciously using cards as a crutch for socializing; I was literally playing games, but I'd also been trying to strategize my way through my actual life.

I decided to write about my lifelong hatred of euchre and what my resistance and ultimate acquiescence revealed about my life. This overarching narrative is cut apart by smaller anecdotes about other games that each explore different facets of my relationships with others as well as my relationship with myself.



# The Look

Once I landed on a narrative, I had to figure out a way to illustrate my experiences in a way that was both authentic and feasible. My story proved to be more expansive than I'd anticipated, so I had a lot of opportunities to explore different compositions.

When it comes to visual books, the sheer quantity of references can be a little tricky to overcome. There's just so much to read and see and so many incredible artists telling beautiful, important stories.

I was immediately drawn to more eclectic references that were surprising and inventive in their approach to storytelling. The books I've featured here demonstrate a variety of mediums and methods, from digital portraiture to comedic cartoons to classic dust-jacket designs. I took note of how each piece engaged with its audience and how the compositional decisions impacted the message.

Some opted for more space to breathe and allowed the viewers to arrive at their own conclusions, while others leaned into a more maximalist onslaught of imagery and demanded a specific reaction. I wanted my book to be a mix of each, smart but not obvious, thorough but not over-stimulating.



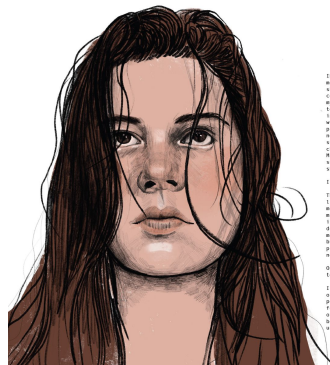
From upper left, clockwise: *The Illustrated Dust Jacket* by Martin Salisbury, *Second Grade* by Chan, and *It's All Absolutely Fine* by Ruby Elliot.

# The Drawings

Loser features many self-portraits, each with distinct expressions that offer insight into my perspective. These contrast the photographs, which only ever feature me as a child or in partial crops where the viewer cannot see my face. The illustrations are more specific, and were created with the sole intention of depicting emotion.

There are also several spreads that are more conventional, and operate as nods to more traditional graphic novel layouts.

I strategically paired drawings with text that matched the tone of each anecdote. The graphics provide the reader with a context the words alone can not provide and the imagery and text support one another, rather than competing with one another.



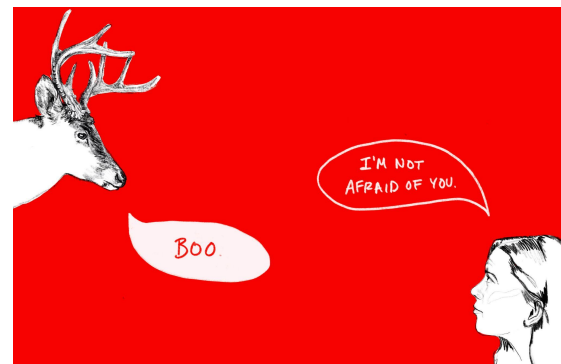
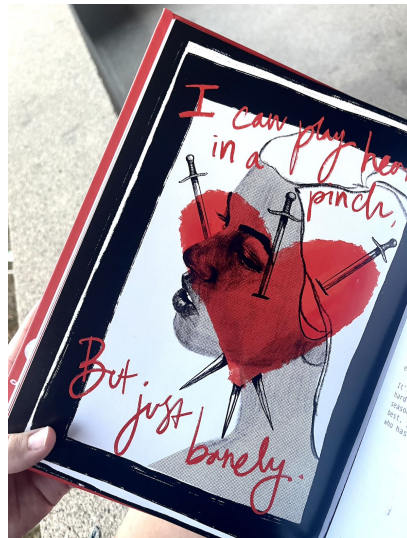
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IN THE SUMMER OF 2000 all I did was go on walks. I took long wandering strolls with no particular destination in mind, skipping over cracks and leaving ground and trees just because I could. I'd stroll the parks and nearby walking trails. Sometimes my loneliness I thought the trees were so lucky to exist on their own. They continued to stand upright my other way. In direct contrast to my own time which seemed to be getting weaker by the moment, I wandered around and watch I entered the patterns of the neighborhood arts. I'd cross the street to avoid to avoid the black line on the sidewalk and to his afternoon wandering, only to find the black line and the dark of the walk. The man who had made their choice, we all laugh, such taking a piece of the fractured pattern before writing an answer to some of us were quite prepared for.

I'd deprecate incessantly about seeing my friends again. The day we'd all been forced to leave school I'd been telling my lines to connect me to a memory ledge or someone who we'd met at school to empty our hearts and expectations and in a real way. I took a year I'd dream in my own class and I'd dream despite myself as it shattered to bits against its hollow green metal shell. I didn't know the class and the class to read it. But then had made their choice, we all laugh, such taking a piece of the fractured pattern before writing an answer to some of us were quite prepared for.

Once my friends had left I took the best of many moments to myself.

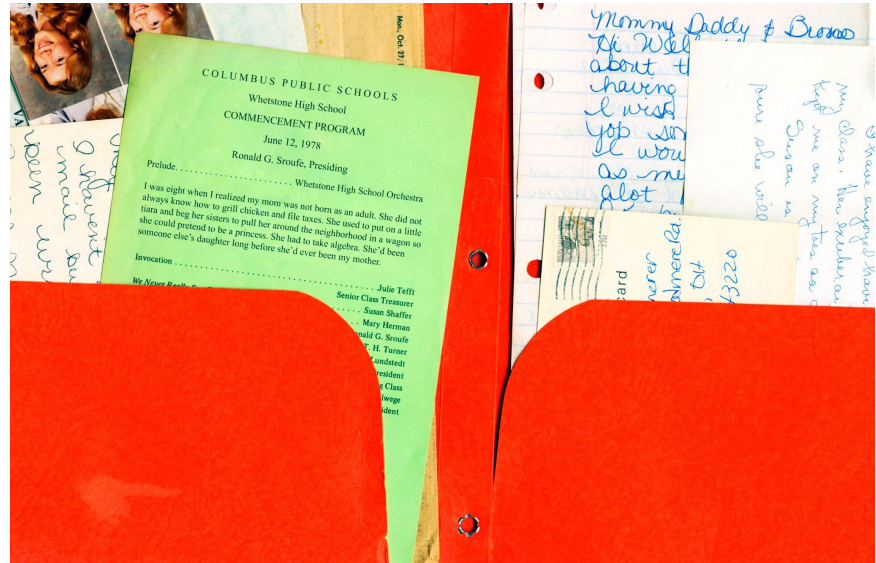
I stood on the edge of a seemingly endless pit, and with a view of disappointment always behind me. I carefully, hesitantly, pressed over. There I sat the bottom of the unrelenting area. Fear, the kind that can only come from the most hopeless strain of uncertainty. The man who had told before me, the man I'd be forced to write to myself. I was going to be imperfectly, unacceptably, and unacceptably alone.



# The Proof

One of the concepts I was enamored with throughout this process, was the idea of **images and objects functioning as evidence for our lives.**

With this in mind, I became a mini-historian and collected photographs, letters, and miscellaneous knick knacks as proof of my experiences and emotions. I took the original physical objects and added new elements to reflect my current perspective.



The above spread is composed of my mom's actual school photos and personal belongings, but features a doctored commencement program with my own thoughts on her upbringing.

The spread on the left is a collection of the actual letters my friends sent me during May of 2020, but the note popping out of the red envelope is a fictional representation of what I may have written back to them in return.

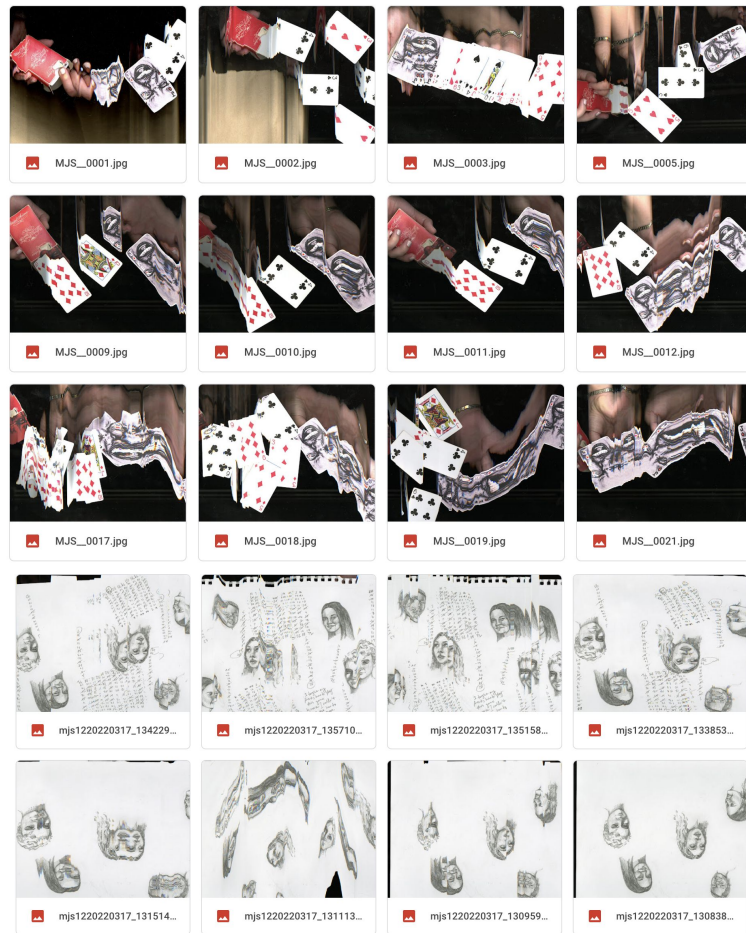
# The Scans

I wanted *Loser* to be intentional and playful, every square inch touched by my hands. Literally.

Beyond a means of documentation, I loved the way the scanner captured little glitches and imperfections. To get the choreography exactly right I parked myself at the scanner for hours and experimented with different techniques.

Due to the fickle nature of this technique, each composition required several attempts to get exactly right, but as I worked through each version, the ideas I wanted to highlight became increasingly apparent.

I found that by making careful movements, I could manipulate objects to convey a sense of time and create distortions that mirrored my own wobbly memory.



# The Space

For the exhibition, I built a little living room for patrons to sit and have a comfortable read.

I used furniture from my own home and added framed photos and objects featured in *Loser* to create a familiar, welcoming space. Additionally, I created a gallery wall out of selected spreads.

For particularly curious viewers, I also included a handful of easter eggs in the exhibition, such as handwritten notes and new photos that expand on the story told in *Loser*.

I also left out a couple of card decks, in case anyone was feeling a little playful.



# The End

*Loser* is the most complex, sprawling, and demanding piece I have ever created. It required an unbelievable amount of artistic, emotional, and physical energy to execute and it pushed me to the absolute corners of my brain in every way.

Even now it does not feel finished, because (in the corniest sense) as long as I am still breathing, moving, and playing, the story goes on. If not for the deadline of the semester, I may very well have gone on scrawling in perpetuity.

Finally having the ability to talk about my life on my terms was a wholly transformative experience, and one that I had no idea would be simultaneously cathartic and painful. I think honesty and vulnerability can be freeing, but they come at a price. For me, that price is slight embarrassment and a slew of explanatory conversations with both the readers and the (very real) characters in the book.

Prior to starting this piece, I hadn't done any serious formal writing since high school, and had never attempted anything of this scope. I'm thrilled that I was able to rediscover a passion for another art form just before my time at STAMPS comes to a close, and I'm looking forward to pursuing it more in the future.

It occurred to me at some point in this process that once I was done writing this book, people would read it. I know this seems obvious, but it did not process for me fully until I watched one of my friends crack open a hard copy. It is equal parts terrifying and lovely to be able to share something so personal with so many people.



*Losers*