**Readings and Prompts for Origin Stories: Identifying your Foundational Narratives**

**Eileen Garvin, Willamette Writers Conference, 7/31/20**

**Snapshot Reading**

“There is a picture of me. I am five. I have big eyes and a scrawny neck. I am staring at a plastic typewriter while I lie on a couch, on my stomach, ankles crossed, probably daydreaming. I always daydreamed. Even then, I was a writer. From an early age I would draw little villages on napkins and write stories about the people who lived in those villages…There is a picture of me. I am seven. I am happy, wearing overalls. I wore overalls a lot as a kid. I liked them for lots of reasons, but mostly I liked them because they had many pockets where I could hide things and because they were complicated and had lots of buttons and things requiring fastening. They made me feel safe, cozy.” — Roxane Gay, *Hunger* pages 33-34

**Prompt 1**

Picture your young self in a favorite outfit. Describe the outfit and explain why you loved it so much. Where did it come from? Who was your best friend at this time? What did you love doing? Could you wear this outfit to school? What was an average school day like?

**Old Wounds Reading**

“By the time I was four, when I cried, I wailed. Epically. And I cried all the time. I cried when I had to go to bed. I cried in the night. I cried when people I didn’t know looked at me. I cried when people I didn’t know talked to me. I cried when someone tried to take my picture. I cried being dropped off at school. I cried when new food was presented to me. I cried when sad music played. I cried when we put ornaments on our Christmas trees. When people would open the door to my trick or treat at Halloween. I cried every single time I had to go to a public restroom. Or in bathrooms at anyone’s house. Or bathrooms at school. Until I was in the seventh grade…I cried when my father yelled—but I also cried sometimes just when he entered the room.” —Lidia Yuknavitch, *Chronology of Water* page 35-36

**Prompt 2**

Complete each of these sentences.

I lost

I forgot

I remembered

I feared

I found

I cried

I was angry

I always wanted

I never understood

I always loved

I always hated

I never knew

I dreaded

I stole

I used to

I gathered

I was told

I always felt

I resisted

I changed

I kept

**Beloveds and Guides Reading**

“It’s an Indian condition to be proud of survival, but reluctant to call it resilience. Resilience seems ascribed to a human conditioning in white people.

The Indian condition is my grandmother. She was a nursery teacher. There are stories that she brought children to our kitchen, gave them laxatives and then put newspaper on the ground. She squatted before them and made faces to illustrate how hard they should push. She dewormed children this way, and she learned that in residential school—where parasites and nuns and priests contaminated generations of our people. Indians froze trying to run away, and many starved. Nuns and priests ran out of places to put bones, so they built us into the walls of new boarding schools.

I can see Grandmother’s face in front of those children. Her hands felt like rose petals. Her eyes were soft and round like buttons. She liked carnations and canned milk. She had a big heart for us kids. She transcended resilience and actualized what Indians weren’t taught to know: We are unmovable. Time seems measured by grief and anticipatory grief, but I don’t think she even measured time.” — Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries* page 7

**Prompt 3**

Visualize a person from whom you have felt unconditional love. Maybe it’s your grandmother, like Mailhot, or the person who raised you. Maybe it’s a creature —your first dog—or your first real friend. What is your first memory of being with them? What are some favorite things you did together? How did they make you feel loved? What do you admire about them? What did they say or do the last time you saw them? What qualities did they have that you would like to cultivate in yourself?

**Essential Landscapes Reading**

“DeLisle and Pass Christian, the two towns where all of my family hails from, are not New Orleans. Pass Christian squats beside the man-made beach of the Gulf of Mexico alongside Long Beach, the Bay of St. Louis at its back, while DeLisle hugs the back of the Bay of St. Louis before spreading away and thinning further upcountry. The streets of both towns are sleepy through much of the barely bearable summer, and through much of the winter, when temperatures hover near freezing. In DeLisle, during the summers, there are sometimes crowds on Sundays at the county park because younger people come out to play basketball and play music from their cars. In the spring, the older people gather at the local baseball field, where Negro leagues from throughout the South come to play. On Halloween, children still walk or ride on the backs of pickup trucks through the neighborhood from house to house to trick-or-treat. On All Saints Day, families gather around loved ones’ graves, bring nylon and canvas folding chairs to sit in after they’ve cleaned headstones and sandy plots, arranged potted mums, and shared food. They talk into the evening, burn fires, wave away the last of the fall gnats. This is not a murder capital.” —Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*, pages 5-6

**Prompt 4** Essential Landscapes

Describe a beloved place with as much detail as you can. When did you first go there? When did you last return? How does it make you feel? Why do you love it so and how does it love you back?