A PLACE BY THE TAY
A STUDY ON ORIGIN
Christine Kannapel
Katharine Coles
Department of English

A PLACE BY THE TAY is a study on origin. It works through a lens that encircles decisions made by the pressures of society and that have produced one’s sense of origin across space and time. The question of legitimacy is particularly focused upon. What is and is not deemed legitimate by society through the government, religion, and life experience, and how it all affects one’s descendants, are the major points discussed. The case study begins in Utah and extends nearly half a millennium back into Scotland, on the shores of the River Tay.

The form of A PLACE BY THE TAY is creative. It experiments with creative non-fiction. The piece selected to represents the project, as a whole, is an essay that best shows the navigation of space and time in finding one’s origin.
Hairt is hunger, a longing for affection.

The father of my mother was dying. My mother knew he was fading before anyone else from 233.8 miles away. She picked me up from school and we drove into the middle of the southwestern desert.

I didn’t know what to expect. I was even younger than I was, the last time I saw him.

That drive was unforgettable, later, when I understood the region. The home she was raised in rises above the empty landscape around it. From an aerial view, it is shaped like a goose. The bird’s head extends slightly backward, as if waiting to be fed. If not for the dirt roads wrapping around it and the cars parked besides the rock’s walls, the place would look one with nature. It would appear uncorrupted by my grandfather’s people, just another desert formation jutting from the dry clay earth.

Before the rock was blasted through with dynamite and houses were built within its emptiness, there was only my mother and her parents. Before them, there was nothing. The area was empty, all but for a highway miles west and a forgotten history.

In a National Geographic video about the desert that I watched as a child, there was a shot of the desert sky. Clouds ran freely in thin series and then disappeared on the edges of the horizon. Sometimes they swelled with rain, would release themselves, and then reveal a cloudless sky. The sun was shining, beating and pounding on barren earth. My mother would leave the room when I watched the video. If I had questions, she would speak of Orion, the constellation she and her mother would trace on lonely, cloudless winter nights in that desert.

My mother’s home, in the gone days, was similar to Sebastião Salgado’s photographs of the deforestation of his family’s ranch in Brazil- cracked earth, plant scraps, an unseen animal carcass nearby, a corner of a leaning shed, the presence of hot and unforgiving wind.

That was how my mother’s home looked- rock hit by a tireless sun and emptiness. Yet, it was where my grandfather chose to bring his new family and his new, radical, beliefs. There, he thought his world was safe from ending and would only keep on growing.

On that drive, my mother talked of my grandfather’s cancer, how the sun and the pigment of his skin had caused it. Had he gone to a real doctor years ago, he could have been saved. By the end, he could only eat cantaloupe.

Stories of places here and there, she also told, many having to do with an underlying theme of starvation. Carrots were stored in the cold layers of the dirt floor for preservation. There were times of hunger and times of over eating the same thing for months. My grandfather worked to get enough food, leaving my mother to help raise her ten siblings. Her stomach was never full, though not until, maybe, when she had me.
I had these realizations several years after the trip when I read the diary entries my mother had written after my birth. There wasn’t emptiness on the pages; in fact, they were completely full, until she decided she could not write in the diary any longer.

My birth father was there and then he vanished. College had taken my mother away from her home, but knowledge could not fill everything. He brought her back. He filled my mother and replaced himself with me— a copy or a product, the result of a catalyst, the definition of a love child.

One of my first memories is reaching for a jar of marmalade. My grandfather must have been there, because the next thing I remember is his low, sing-song voice telling me I wouldn’t like it. He detested it and my mother loved it. Now I eat marmalade on my toast in the summer, when the sun is hottest.

We have never gone back— after my grandfather’s death. It’s a place no longer to us, no strings attached. But in my mother, somehow, it still exists, because it’s her origin.

Since, I’ve found a larger question, other than that of just my origin. Even on that trip, driving through the red rock on our way back home, I asked: “What factors create anyone’s, sense of origin?”.

I knew then that origin didn’t come from only one person, or two, but rather a long chain of people linked by their decisions and their longing, their hunger.