

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

SPLIT AT THE ROOT: A MEMOIR

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in

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by

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Robert Steven Gryder, and entitled *Split at the Root: A Memoir*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read the thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Florida International University, 2021

## DEDICATION

For all the trees, falling and fallen, that are never heard.

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Max & Elvis

Mama, Daddy, Miss Libby, Russell, Rosa, Renee, Jessie, and Adam

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
SPLIT AT THE ROOT: A MEMOIR

By

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Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Wade, Major Professor

Influenced by— and sometimes in conversation with— diverse literary voices such as Dorothy Allision (*BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*), Harry Crews (*A CHILDHOOD*), and Mark Doty (*FIREBIRD*), *SPLIT AT THE ROOT: A MEMOIR* is a literary bildungsroman told primarily in the narrative mode. The memoir traces the narrator's volatile beginnings in the trailer parks of rural South Carolina in the 1980s to the day he accepted, sight unseen, an offer of admission to Yale University, boarding a plane in 1993 for the first time in his life. This memoir explores the narrator's quest for agency, deploying the essayist mode to interrogate along the way urgent themes such as class and cultural capital, addiction, domestic violence, marginalization, survivorship, victimhood, and always with careful attention to the reader's need for the engaging and well-told story.

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## Prologue

I am born from a storm.

At first only sparse drops of rain hit the hot asphalt, the steam wafting in ghost-like ribbons from the wakened earth, reaching toward the sun.

A prelude? A summoning?

No, a warning.

That petrichor hitting the nose— it is the tantalizing breath an omen gives as a storm gestates in the sky, thunderclaps scaring the dogs, who tremble and whine.

Lightning inks up the clouds.

Wind rummages through the trees.

And then it happens: the water breaks.

I am born from a storm.

Can you see me there, severed from my young mother's body and swaddled in her arms? I'm naked and wet with blood and a little pale too. Can you hear me? I'm loud with the first cries of life.

I've got all ten fingers, all ten toes. My eyes are blue, my skin pink, my hair golden, but it's only baby hair and will brown in time and then go gray and then fall out. There's the soft spot the texture of peach fuzz that I'll stroke and wonder at, the cradle of vulnerability always atop my head.

It's not special— it happens all the time. A child is delivered from the sky and is told to live.



Mama smiles and holds me close. But there's some fear in her eyes when she looks up at Daddy, the stolid man with a lumberjack's build looming over her like a gnarled tree.

*What will I do, Mama thinks, the boy's not even his?*

"He's precious," she says. "He's perfect."

I promise, Reader, to be as honest as I can if you promise to not look away.

**Book I**

## 1: She Said Please

I rue the day I knew I must write this book, which might have been as early as the day I first saw Mama bleed and heard her beg—for mercy first—and then for help.

*Please, Steve, she said.*

*She said: Stop, stop. Oh God, stop.*

And, after uttering my name—Robert— she said that word again: *please*.

*Go get help.*

*Son, please.*

*He's going to kill me.*

Witness, bystander, attendant, minor, a child—I was not more than five years old, and I believed her.

Steve, Daddy's name, my middle name.

What could I do?

When she said please, I was hovering outside our trailer home, in view of the open door where they held one another—he pushing forward, she pushing back. In his hands, she was a rag doll. In his hands, she was a kite jerking in the fast air, and with the mean string attached.

When she said please, I had been the first to run away as Daddy, pursuing her, bounded down the sliver of hallway, his heavy feet a mortar, his voice the sound a wrench makes when it falls. When she said please, I was standing outside watching, for I could not look away. The air was hot and dry on my cold gooseflesh. The summer sun

of South Carolina was high and blinding in the cloudless sky; so, their bodies, still indoors, became to me gray human forms, wrestling, before my eyes.

To see what I saw, it is now clear that, at first, I had not moved at all. I had not kept running and running. Seeing what I was seeing I must have turned to stone, and as white.

She said Robert. She called my name.

When I did break away, when I did blink and breathe again, I found my way to Miss Pressnell's trailer, one row over, two trailers up. It couldn't have taken long. I could have stood in my yard and thrown a rock that might have sounded on her kitchen window or off the tin siding of her home. I could have stood in my yard and seen her eyes as she might have pulled a curtain aside to check the weather, the flowers she had planted outdoors, the cars parked or away in the neighbors' yards.

Miss Pressnell, an old maid or perhaps a widow, lived alone. She kept a clean and quiet house. She saw the world through a pair of plastic eyeglasses, thick and round, that covered half her face. Miss Pressnell walked through her days in white, buckled shoes, the kind a nurse might wear. Miss Pressnell seemed always dressed for church. She wore hats in the style of Minnie Pearl, white stockings that covered her legs, long and long-sleeved cotton dresses with embroidered flowers and simple laces that covered her arms, and year-round.

The back door of her trailer was the closest one, the one I pounded on. But it did not have steps to it, or a porch. I was not yet four feet tall so when I knocked on the back door of her trailer, I knocked on the bottom and I had to reach up. I had to reach up and step back and wait, for back doors to trailers tend to open outwards.