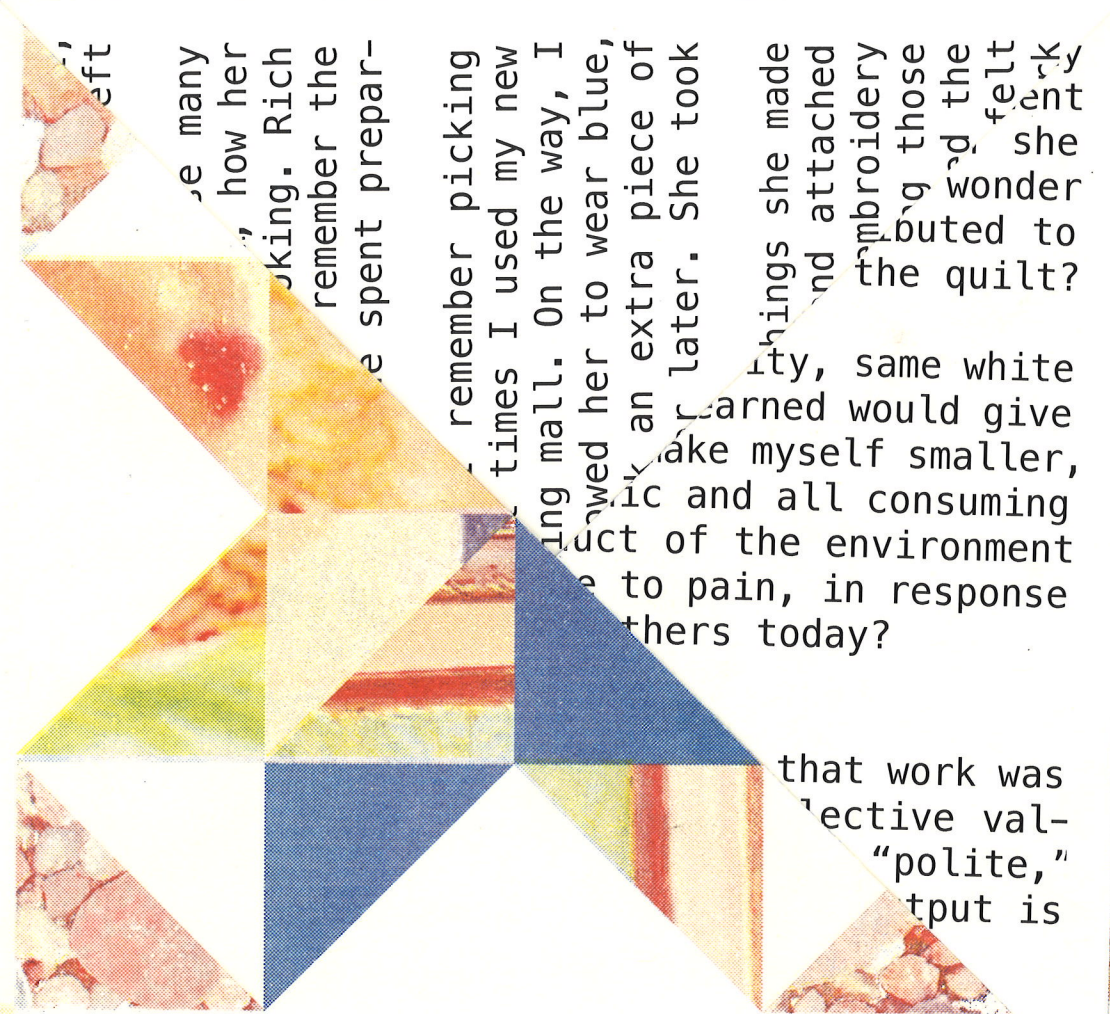
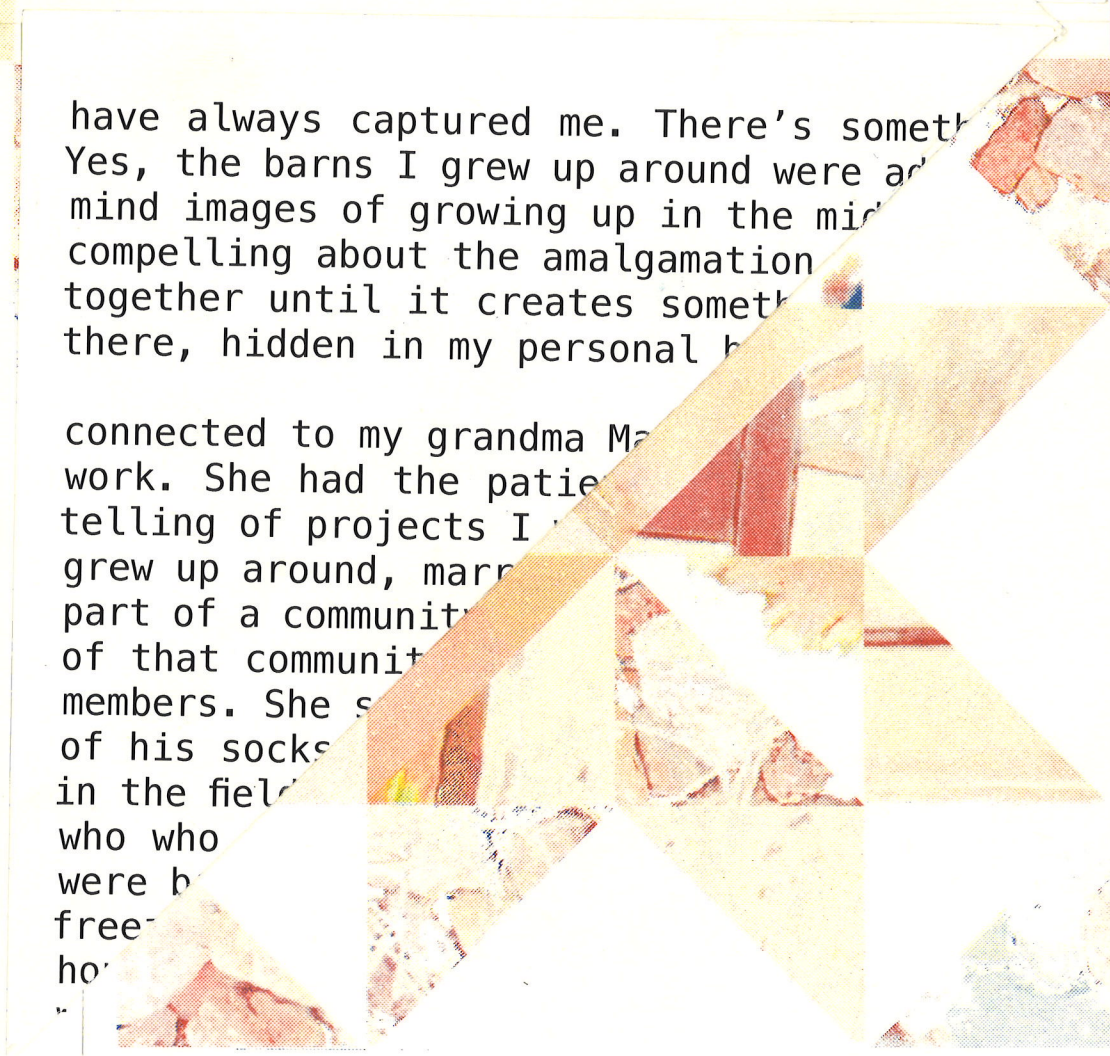




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have always captured me. There's something in them that feels inseparable from my life. Yes, the barns I grew up around were adorned with these quilting patterns, and they call to mind images of growing up in the middle of the rural Midwest. And yes, there is something compelling about the amalgamation of separate fabrics, disparate pieces and patterns sewn together until it creates something whole out of those parts. But there's something more there, hidden in my personal history with quilts.

They are so deeply connected to my grandma Marjorie. I spent many quiet hours with her, I loved to watch her work. She had the patience to entertain my questions, and play audience to my vivid retelling of projects I would someday make. My grandma was like so many of the other women I grew up around, married to a farmer who had rigid expectations about the role of his wife, part of a community that had one collective understanding of what a woman was for, and part of that community's church, who demanded a particular picture of service from its female members. She spent her time mending my grandpas overalls, and the bottomless wicker basket of his socks that set next to her chair. When she wasn't preparing meals for her husband in the fields, for dinner, for her 5 children, she was making meals for someone in our town who was sick, had lost a family member. After that she was baking the desserts that were brought weekly to the church for the elders and deacons, baking to replenish the deep freeze full of cookies she was expected to have ready in case someone came over to the house. When she wasn't doing that, she was cleaning, and when she wasn't doing that, she was making gifts. She had 5 kids, 19 grandkids, who knows how many great grandchildren. Each of them received a crocheted baby blanket and a decorative quilt at birth, another quilt upon graduating high school, and a set of embroidered dish towels when they got married - without deviation, and without fail. I remember receiving my graduation quilt, a year after she had passed, pulled from the stacks of quilts, towels, blankets she left behind to ensure no grandchild was forgotten.

I remember, on one of those many afternoons spent with her, telling her how much I loved the lunch she made for me, how her cooking was my favorite. She looked up in surprise, told me that she hated cooking. Rich had always told her he found her cooking lacking, nothing like his mothers. I remember the shock I felt, thinking about how many hours a day, over how many years, she spent preparing food.

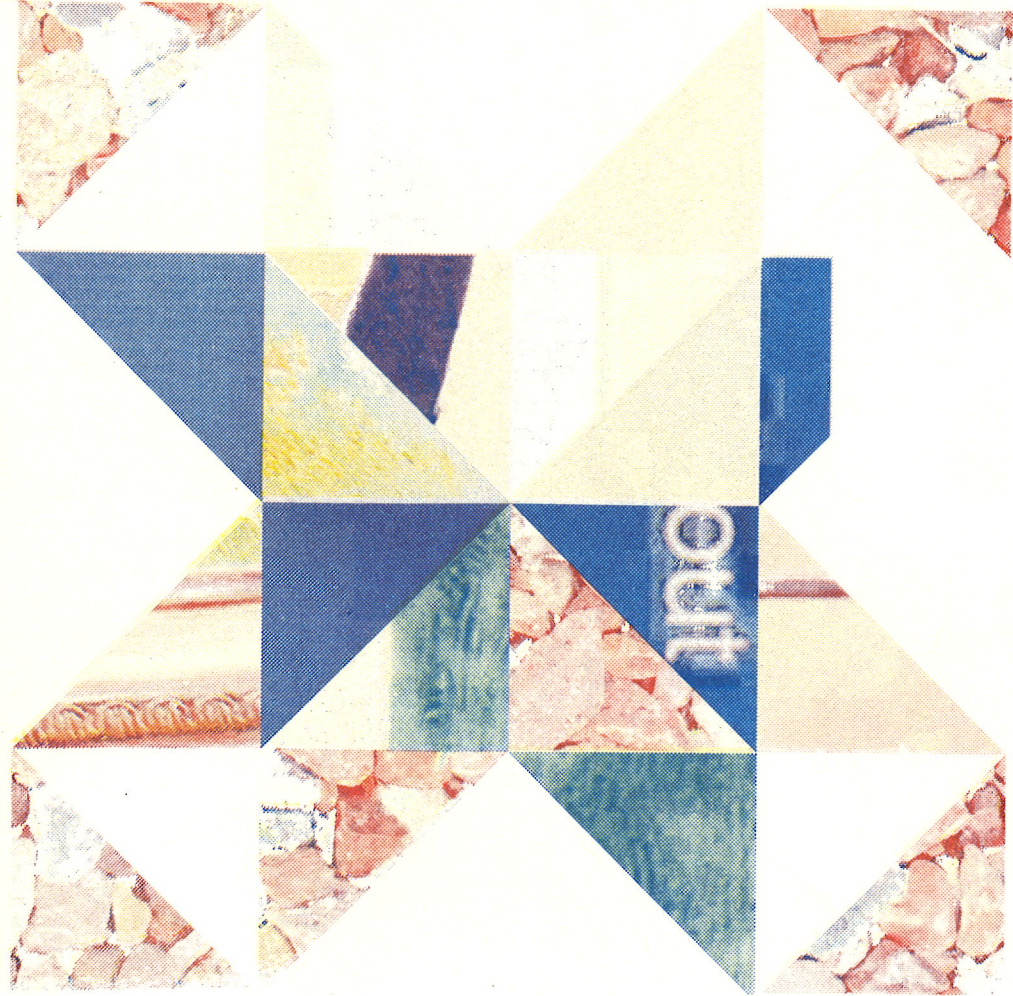
After my grandpa passed, I remember picking her up to bring her shopping for new clothes. It was one of the first times I used my new driver's license. We drove an hour to Des Moines, the nearest shopping mall. On the way, I asked her what she wanted to get. She told me how Rich had only allowed her to wear blue, maybe she would get something pink. I brought her to lunch. She took an extra piece of pizza from the buffet, wrapped it in a napkin, and slid it into my bag for later. She took my hand as we walked back to the car.

Today, I treasure everything she touched. The things she made for me, the things she left behind with my name written on a piece of tape and attached to the bottom - her pushpin shaped like a tomato, her impressive collection of embroidery thread - there must be 50 different colors. Why didn't I ask if she enjoyed making those quilts, crocheting those blankets, embroidering those towels? I wonder if she enjoyed the work, perhaps it was one of the only creative activities she had. Or I wonder if she felt obligated to the work, felt these gifts were required of her nimble hands. Perhaps this work was some sacred activity, and her favorite hours were those spent over a project, picking out colors, patterns. Or maybe she felt the same way about it as she did about cooking.

When I sit with her quilt tucked around me, tracing the patterns with my fingers, I wonder about how she picked out each fabric, if it was a part of some garment she used to wear. How did she decide which colors to use in each quilt? I wonder if she felt skilled at it, or if she felt like there was always something else to learn. I wonder about those expectations, eyes of her family and community, and how they contributed to the piece of work that lays across my lap now. Do they diminish the beauty of the quilt? Do they diminish the value I've bestowed the object? Increase it?

I think about myself, how I was born in the same family, same community, same white steepled church as my grandma. I think about the traits and qualities I learned would give me value. Unending patience, self deprecating humility, the ability to make myself smaller, softer, purer, as a comfort to others, self sacrificial service, a manic and all consuming need to provide pleasure to others. What is me, and what is a product of the environment in which I was raised? So what if the traits were learned in response to pain, in response to communal ideas of identity, if they are what make me valuable to others today?

Does the output outweigh the work that brought that something into being? If that work was wrong, painful, or oppressive, does that change the perceived beauty or collective value of the result? "So agreeable and easy to teach", "a tremendous work ethic," "polite," "composed," "a born nurturer." Are the roots of these traits still bad if their output is what makes me desirable?



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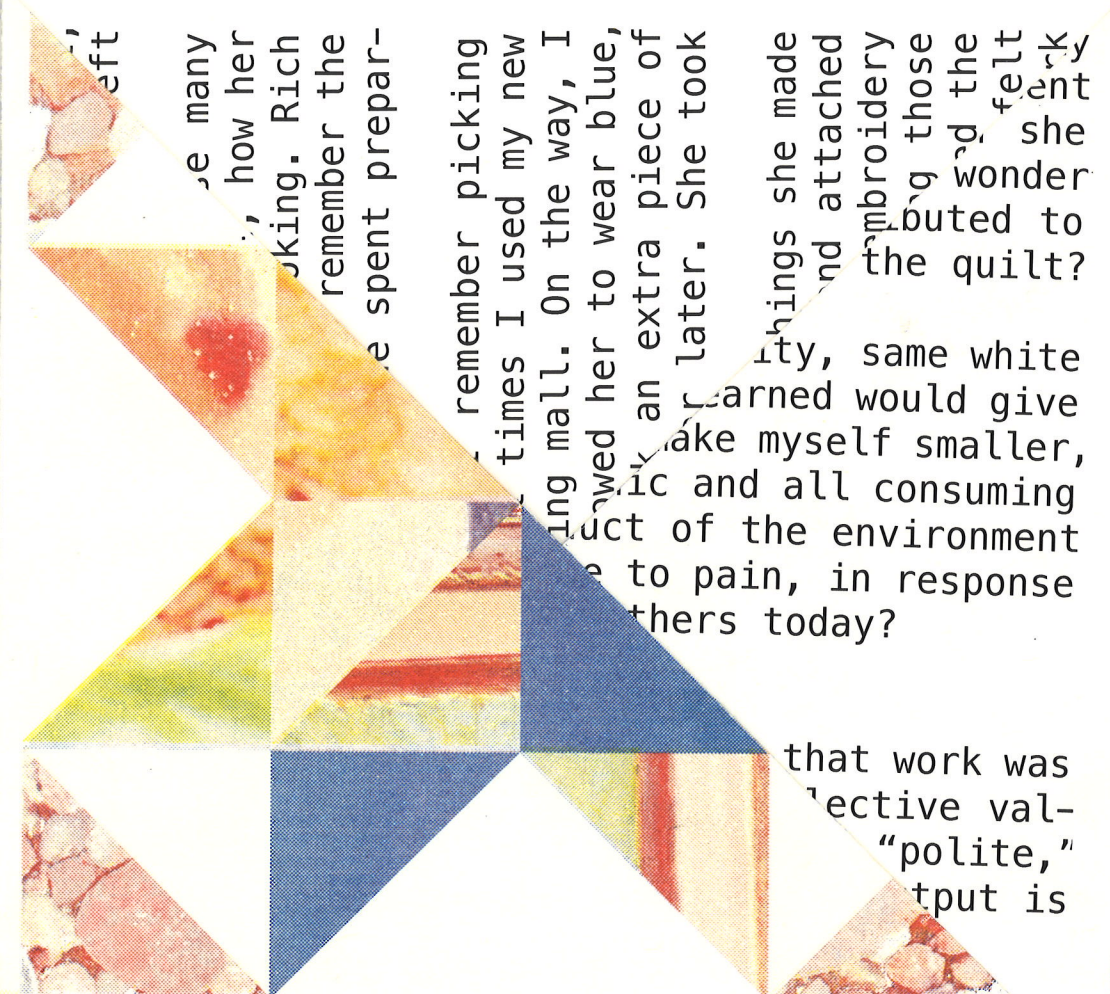
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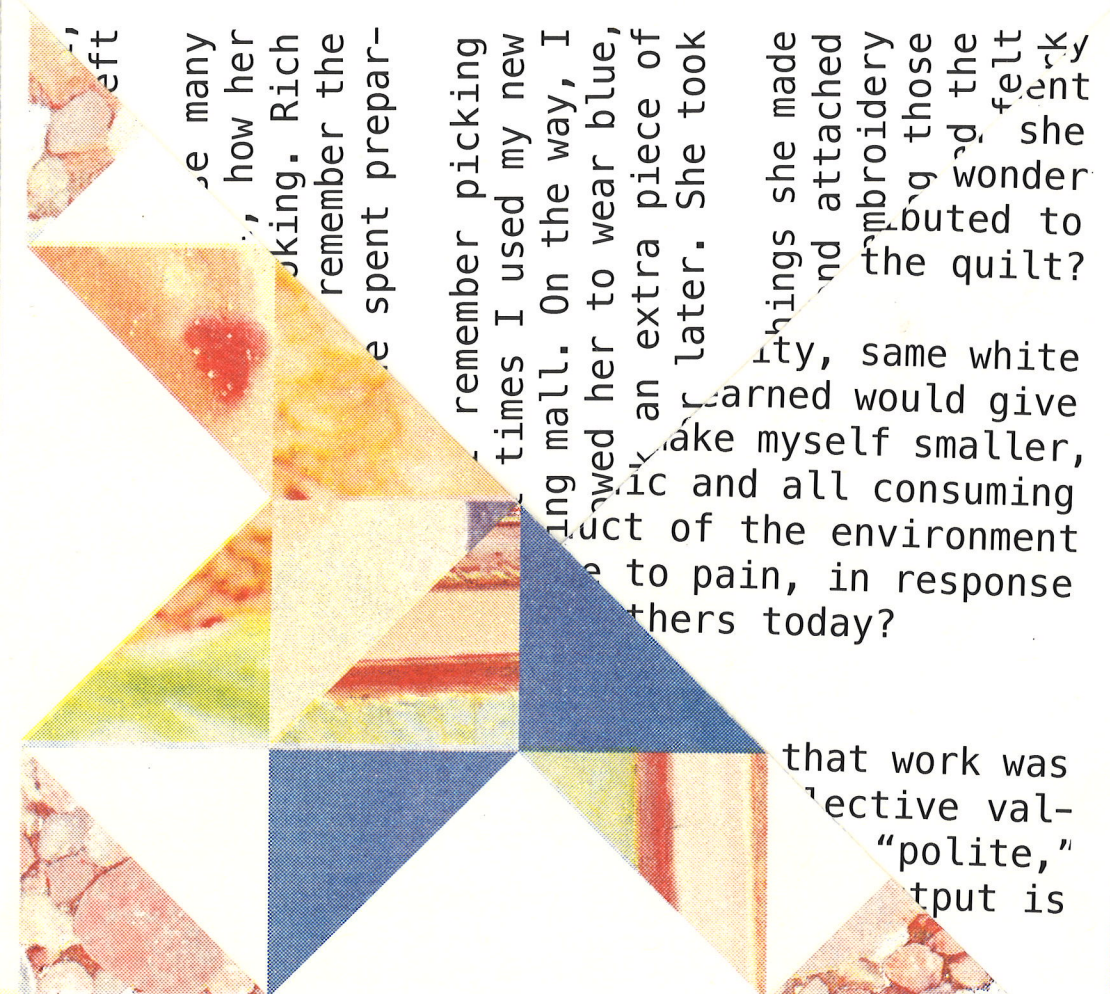
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