

under the

# gum tree

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. SPRING 2026.





*this is no ordinary lit mag*

Each issue of Under the Gum Tree is a carefully curated showcase of art and literature. Its full-color, glossy pages honor the work of our contributors.

*masthead*

**editor & publisher**  
janna marlies maron

**art director & designer**  
evan white

**editorial assistants**  
cynthia brown  
debra coleman  
will freeney  
holly wiemken  
sara dovre wudali

**managing editor**  
dorothy rice

**senior editor**  
cat hubka

*contents*

**feature**  
seattle, washington 8      nicholas dighiera

**flash feature**  
the sam mcbride 18      lucy black  
all in 22      craig reinbold

**fork and spoon**  
communing with clementines 26      hadley duncan howard

**soundtrack**  
can't hardly wait 34      kase johnstun

**those who wander**  
motherless on mother's day 42      raven sc lee

**cover art**  
long night      kk kozik

*Under the Gum Tree* is an independent literary arts magazine. Because we strive for authentic connections through vulnerability, we exclusively publish creative nonfiction and visual art. We publish quarterly and accept submissions year-round. Digital and print back issues may be purchased at [underthegumtree.com](http://underthegumtree.com). Visit our website for complete submission guidelines.

We believe that publishing true stories told without shame alongside visual art brings beauty into the lives of our readers—that's you! And the magazine would not be what it is without your participation in what we like to call contemporary, grassroots patronage. By incorporating the beauty of these pages on your living room coffee table, or waiting room magazine rack, or in your hotel lobby, you can support talented, hard working artists and writers. Though producing gorgeous creative work is rewarding in itself, it can't buy the celebratory wine. With your help as a subscriber, we can begin to pay our contributors and staff. For some, writing is therapy and for others, reading is therapy—and therapy is expensive! Instead, for less than the cost of one visit with the psychiatrist, you can have a whole year's worth of beautiful art delivered straight to you.

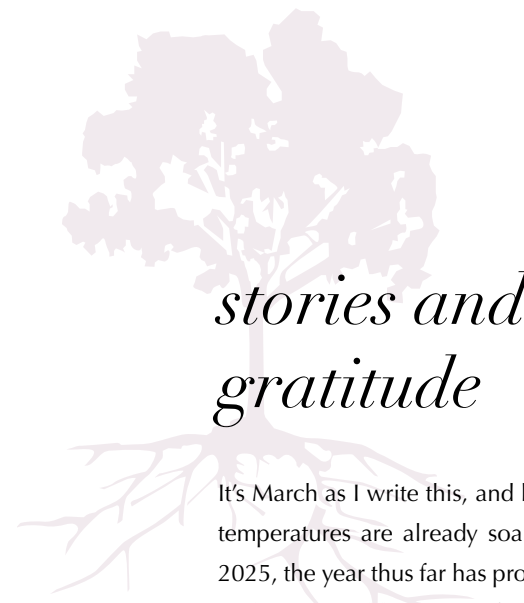
Copyright 2026 by *Under the Gum Tree*. No portion of *Under the Gum Tree* may be reprinted or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. Individual copyright of the creative work within belongs to each author, photographer, or artist upon publication. Digital subscriptions are \$20 per year. Print+digital subscriptions are \$80 per year.

subscriptions • renewals • back issues  
[underthegumtree.com/subscribe](http://underthegumtree.com/subscribe)

follow us  
[facebook](#) • [instagram](#) • [X](#)

All questions and comments may be directed to  
[info@underthegumtree.com](mailto:info@underthegumtree.com)

*Under the Gum Tree* [ISSN 2164-4853 (print); ISSN 2164-487X (digital)] is printed by Stationery HQ & MagCloud and published by More to the Story in Sacramento, California.



*stories and gratitude*

It's March as I write this, and here in the west temperatures are already soaring. Much like 2025, the year thus far has proven tumultuous and, on several levels, terrifying. Catastrophic weather and unspeakable violence to name two—in the United States and around the world. A sign in my son's front yard with the words "Let's Make 1984 Fiction Again" encapsulates the fear, disbelief, and resolve many are experiencing. Actions and events that once seemed exclusive to the realm of apocalyptic fiction have become all too real.

Art has always allowed humans to give voice and expression to our lived experiences. In times like these, the creative impulse becomes an imperative. Now entering its fifteenth year, *Under the Gum Tree* is proud to continue sharing your true stories and visual art. We hope to continue this publishing journey for years to come, and to evolve and grow along the way.

I have served as the magazine's managing editor for five years. Reading hundreds of true stories and collaborating with a small but mighty team to produce a beautiful and tangible artifact every three months is an honor and a pleasure. The issue you hold in your hands is the work of an all-volunteer

staff—guided by the vision, leadership, expertise, and commitment of editor and publisher Janna Marlies Maron.

Art director and designer Evan White has been selecting *Under the Gum Tree's* visual art and photography for ten years. He is also responsible for the magazine's distinctive and award-winning design and layout. In 2025 we were proud to make Sub Club's Best Lit Mags list for Beautiful Design! And, over the years, *Best American Essays* has recognized a number of our published essays as notable—this past year was no exception, with recognition for Cecilia Villarruel's "The Pianist" from the Fall 2024 issue.

I'm grateful for Janna, Evan, senior editor Cat Hubka, and our current fantastic cast of assistant editors—Sara, Debra, Holly, Will, and Cynthia!

Continuing our tradition, this issue contains six true stories. The perfect bliss of a clementine, parenthood's challenges and rewards, first love, and the abiding mystery of memory, plus the gorgeous art of KK Kozik. Here's to art in all its guises and to telling true stories without shame, now and always.

Dorothy Rowena Rice  
Managing Editor





{ feature }

# seattle, washington

nicholas dighiera

I close my eyes, take a breath, and roll out from under the van, having just swapped the radiator. “Alright, should be fixed,” I say to Dominic, my eight-year-old son. He’s squatting in the gravel, flicking pebbles with a stick. “Let’s fill it up with coolant. Can you jump in the driver’s seat?”

He climbs in. I walk over to him. He is already fiddling with all the switches and buttons, flipping the blinker and wiggling the gear lever. I place my hands over his to calm them.

“Dude, can you do this?”

“Yep.”

“No buttons, no switches, right?”

“Yessir.” He is bouncing in the seat.

“Okay, I need you to turn it over when I say, then turn it off when I say stop.” I show him how that works. He nods. I ask if he understands. He nods again. I ask him to repeat it. He does, in a way that makes me believe.

I go to the engine and start filling and he watches me. It’s over ninety degrees; he is in the shade, but I am standing in the sun and the sweat between my legs is visible on my pants. I upend a gallon of coolant into the opening, squeezing and flexing all the hoses. I have him turn the engine over and it fires right up. We cycle again and bleed out the air.

“Good work, dude,” I say. It’s moments like these where Dominic displays so much more than anyone gives him credit for. Even me.

He gets out of the vehicle, almost falling down, and goes back to playing dinosaur scientist with Finn, his five-year-old brother.

I pick up the end wrenches and sockets, the pliers and screwdrivers, and put them into a large red toolbox. The toolbox is heavy, but I slide it into place under the bench seat in the back. The boys are now playing a pirate game or a woodworker game or a ninja game or all three at the same time. I’m having trouble keeping track.

I tidy up the rest of the van and say, “Okay, pile in.”

They run over and sit on the bench seat.

Dominic looks down at a black cord sticking out from under his seat. He picks it up and says, “What’s this?”

“It’s plugged into the van’s brain. I’m gonna need your help with that. Can you help?”

He shrugs.

I’m standing in the large, empty floorspace in the middle of the van, having just swiveled the front passenger seat around. I take out my laptop and plug it into a handheld device that is subsequently plugged into the engine’s computer. This is the cord under his seat. I start the van and the computer takes readings of the engine’s vital signs. I check them on the screen then turn back to Dominic.

“Come here.”

He hops off the bench.

“Okay, there’re a lot of numbers here, but this is the one that I need you to read.” I point to the temperature. “I can’t read the temperature while I am driving because we are recording it on the laptop. That means the gauge up here,” and I point to the gauge in the dash, “won’t work. You’re my gauge guy, buddy. Do you think you can handle it?”

“I just have to read the number?”

“Yep. Just keep reading it so I know what the temperature is. That way we don’t overheat and blow up the engine.”

“Where do I sit?” He looks around at the floor, like a seat will appear.

“Just squat right here when I tell you. It’s fine.”

“Don’t I need a seatbelt, Dad?”

“Buddy, nothing’s gonna happen.”

“Okay.” He plops down on the floor and stares at the screen.

“Not right now,” I say. “You can sit in

your seat now. I’ll call you up when it’s time.”

He jumps up and gets back to his seat, flips the cord once, then buckles in.

• • •

As I sit in the driver’s seat, I feel the desperation. The new radiator needs to correct this overheating. We are a month into a fifty-three-day road trip from Colorado to Alaska and have been broken-down in a friend’s backyard in Seattle for almost a week. This van is our home and as I drive us out of that backyard and into the alley, the gravity of potential failure only adds to the heat of the day, soaking my shirt with sweat.

It’s early afternoon and southbound traffic is thick. The van only overheats at high speed, so we are heading to the interstate, but we don’t have AC and no air comes in as we grind along until we get there. Both boys mention how hot it is, more than once. A few times I ask Dominic to jump up and read the temps to distract him from the heat. He says, 198, 212, 195, etc. All acceptable. It takes forty-five minutes to get to the express lanes, though, and we’re all miserable. These lanes head north, toward the backyard, and there is less traffic than the main freeway. I pull into the express entrance and speed up.

“Dominic, hop up to the computer please. I need the numbers now.”

He kneels in front of the computer.

“198,” he says.

“Okay. Keep the numbers coming.”

“198. 202. 204. 204. 206. 208. 208. 208. 210. 210.”

Traffic is sparse in these lanes. It’s perfect.

“214. 214. 214. 214. 214.”

“Hey, just tell me when we get above 230, okay?”

“Just above 230?”

“Yeah. As soon as we go over 230 start reading them off.”

“Okay.”

We accelerate. Air pours in and cools us down. I look in the rearview and see Finn. His face is still red from the heat, and he is watching the back of his brother’s head. The bright orange hair around the edges of his forehead is sweaty. Dominic is hunched down and picking his nose. I have my right foot to the floor. We move through traffic, a silver brick, gliding in and out of lanes, picking up speed. Dominic hasn’t said anything for a couple of minutes, and I feel some of the weight of potential failure start to lift.

“Hey buddy, what’s the temp?”

“245.” His voice is clear and calm.

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST, kid,” I yell.

He is knocked over by my outburst but recovers. I let my foot off the gas and get the RPMs low to keep from overheating. “Now tell me exactly what I asked you to do.”

“Tell you when it goes over 230,” he says.

“Holy fuck, buddy. Is 245 past 230?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you say anything?”

He doesn’t say a word. We are approaching our exit. I ask him again. And again. Silence. I send him back to his seat and wonder what he was thinking. I take the exit and get us back to the house without

incident. Later, just before bed, I ask him again, and he shrugs. I give up asking.

While they sleep, I revisit my reasons for this trip. I quit everything for this. My job. My relationship. Packed all my things into storage. All for these fifty-three days of summer, for an opportunity to get out of my own way. To be present for my kids. To be a good parent. Obliterating my son with words is the opposite of that. I fall asleep with a sick churn inside me, knowing how close we are to not making it. How close I am to failure.

• • •

The next day we are back at it, the summer sun punching through the trees and heating everything. Dominic and Finn are playing an army game, marching around the yard with sticks for guns and talking about the Great War. I tell them not to play war.

It takes all day to swap the entire exhaust system. I have hope this will repair the issue, but that hope is flimsy. Still, I pack up the van for the test drive, but only loosely. I put all the tools in the red toolbox, close the box, but don't put it away. The eighty-pound toolbox is too much for me right now, so I leave it by the seat. I set up the computer while the boys shoot soldiers that are apparently hiding in the trees. By the time I'm done I know traffic will be as thick and terrible as it was for yesterday's test drive, but I decide to go anyway. I just want to be done.

"Drop the sticks, guys. Time to test our work."

They throw their sticks high and far and climb into the van.

"Okay," I say, eyeing Dominic hard, "you

know what to do, right? Read the numbers?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"Don't yeah, Dad, me. I asked you last time and you said you knew."

He eyes me right back. Finn scratches his head, but Dominic doesn't move.

"Repeat it to me, what're you supposed to do?"

He twists his voice up in this high-pitched baby squeal and says, "I need to read the numbers over and over again. 185. 185. 185." He is waving his hands around.

"Don't," I say, chopping at his words. "You fucked it up last time. I need to make sure you know what to do. You don't want the van to die, do you?"

"No."

"Okay," I say, smiling to change tactic, "You got it?"

"Yessir."

"Sweet. Let's get going."

We go through the motions again. The shit traffic. The ninety-plus degrees of stagnant air in the van. They both take their shirts off and at a red light I do the same. It's blistering and smells of exhaust because we don't have a catalytic converter anymore. The traffic is like a tumor blocking up every street. But, with each temp-check Dominic confirms that we are doing okay. He's nailing his duties.

We round the same corner as before, getting us lined up for the express lanes on the freeway.

"Alright, bud, you're up."

Dominic unbuckles and gets into his spot in front of the computer. His skin is tan and his arms are so thin I want to cry. He smiles,

half adult teeth/half baby, and I nod. The light turns green and I push us in.

Dominic says, "195. 195. 195. 203. 203. 205. 207." He keeps going as we crest a low hill and round a corner. Then we cross the I-5 bridge and approach the straight, flat stretch where we can test.

"Good job, bud," I say. "Killing it."

He reads faster. "210, 210, 214, 214, 222, 222, 224, 224, 226, 226, 226."

Then he stops. The engine roars and wind plows through the window into my ear. Other cars whoosh by in the outside lane. The world is spinning, clouds move overhead, and the leaves on trees at the park in the distance tremble in the wind. But Dominic is silent.

I say, "What the fuck, dude?"

He is quiet.

"Dominic?"

Quiet.

"Dude, what the fuck is the temp?"

Quiet.

And here, something like a bank vault opens inside of me. Cogs and steel shafts whirr to life, clicking and shifting, and they slide inward. Something darker emerges.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THE NUMBER," I scream, my throat tight.

No response.

"TELL ME THE FUCKING NUMBER. TELL ME THE FUCKING NUMBER. TELL ME." I know I'm wading into the deep-end of failure. But I keep at it like I don't have a choice.

Still, nothing. Dominic sits on his haunches with a face as innocent and blank as a mannequin.

"TELL MEWHATTHEMOTHERFUCKING

NUMBER IS GODDAMN IT."

He sucks in a deep breath and screams right back, "252."

"FUCK." I scream this like I am breathing fire.

All traffic in front of me comes to a sudden and complete stop. There is a wall of bumpers and license plates, and we are a silver torpedo with 1980's brakes. I slam my foot down.

Everything in the van flies to the front. Dominic collides with the swivel seat in front of him. Finn is caught around the waist by his seatbelt and his hands and feet shoot straight out. All the toys, the water bottles, my phone, a sleeping bag, and some tiny peanuts that I didn't know were on the floor blast forward, collecting around Dominic.

And there's the toolbox.

I see this happening in slow motion. The red toolbox with its angry corners launches from behind Dominic travelling seventy miles per hour. I watch the toolbox drawers open, the end wrenches flying out first. They have this metallic jingling sound that reminds me of working on my father's car when I was little. Then channel-lock pliers and vise grips fly out. Screwdrivers. Sockets blow out the top like confetti. All of these things are bent on hitting him, the frail tan child stopped against the seat with nowhere to go.

And they collide.

We stop half a car length behind a grey sedan. I turn to Dominic and ask, in the quietest whisper, "Are you okay?" I reach toward him and my hand is shaking and so much bigger than his.

The toolbox is dumped over, half on top of him. The lid covers his back. He pushes out from under it and says, "Yeah. I'm okay." His face is plain and sweet, and I cannot see a trace of anger or fear.

Once I understand he is not injured, everything converges. All the frustration. All the heat. The fury. All the disappointment. Bad parenting. All the pain, self-inflicted or otherwise. And the van. All of the anger I have ever had toward this benign beast that has carried us so far. Every goddamn thing that has ever happened to me, it all merges into something I have never seen before. Something feral.

• • •

I turn forward in the driver's seat, and I lose my goddamn mind.

I spew word vomit. Spitte gathers in the corners of my mouth. I say things I don't understand and things I wish I could take back. I pound the steering wheel, then grab it and pull myself back and forth as fast as I can. The window is open and I turn and scream into the face of an old woman in the car next to me. I yell at the sky. And I cry at the same time, throwing everything into the air because if I don't it will rip me apart.

The boys are motionless. So is the world. Leaves do not tremble in the slight breeze. Clouds have stopped ravaging the sky. Finn does not wipe the sweat on his forehead. Dominic does not get up from the sea of tools that he is kneeling in. And the faces of the people in the cars around us do not change. They just stare, slack-jawed, like the world is showing us all something new. Something

everyone has always known, however subconsciously. Even the leaves know.

Then traffic breaks and we drive. The wind moves objects in the world again. Clouds rage. Finn wipes his sweat. Dominic returns to his seat. We sit and quietly weep, looking out our respective windows. We navigate our way back without a word. I pull the van in and park. Turn it off. And just sit there. The air is still, thick, and hot.

I sob but try to hide it from them. My mind is a cacophony of negativity: You're a fucking worthless father; piece of shit; awful human being; just kill yourself; can't fix the van; ruining your kids; this trip is garbage; and on and on. That's when it hits me as plainly as anything ever has. I'm not at risk of failing. I'm already a failure.

"Guys," I say, "I'm not a good parent. I just don't have it in me. I love you more than anything, but I'm just not good at this. I wish you had a better dad."

They say nothing and I sit in the driver's seat, not knowing what to do.

Then I hear a noise, a metallic jingling.

I turn to see that Dominic has begun putting the tools away. He rights the toolbox. then with his slender hands he puts the end wrenches in. Then the channel-locks and the vise grips. The screwdrivers. The confetti sockets. He puts them all back in the box without saying a word. Because he knows. And Finn knows. Even the leaves know.

Then Dominic comes up and hugs my shoulder, not as father/son, but one human to another. And then, I know. My mind stops. The negativity dissipates. I realize maybe I

don't know what a good parent is. That it isn't up to me to define. It's these two little guys who make that call. Maybe the best parent I can be is one who shows them how to get back up after a failure, not to exist without it.

And then, for a bright moment, the weight

is gone. Because this isn't about the van or making it to Alaska. It isn't about failure at all. It's not about anything, really, other than sitting here in this right thing, holding onto it the best we can, for as long as we can, hoping it will last just a little bit longer. 🌸



**Nicholas Dighiera** strives to put love into the world with writing. He's had work published in *River Teeth*, *Hobart*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Fugue*, *the Forge*, and others. He'd like to grab a beer with you sometime and smash his heart together with yours so that, for a brief instant, you both will feel less alone in this terribly beautiful existence. Find more at [nicholasdighiera.com](http://nicholasdighiera.com)



{ flash }

# the sam mcbride

lucy e.m. black

On summer nights we would take the subway to Union Station and walk south under the Gardiner to the ferry terminal. Then we would ride the Sam McBride back and forth to the Island. We went alone. He said he wanted me all to himself. The crew knew us. They pretended not to notice that we stayed on board and took multiple crossings on one fare. Maybe they remembered what it was like to be seventeen. And we really weren't any trouble—just two kids in love. For one evening a week, we were world travellers on the deck of a large ship taking us to exotic

destinations. We'd lean over the railing, his arm heavy across my shoulder, and imagine we were cruising the Mediterranean or navigating the Nile. Every crossing took us to a different destination. We imagined exploring worlds we had only read about.

We watched the ducks glide softly by. Ripples multiplying as the ship nosed forward, lights from the city reflected in the dank water. His chin nuzzling my neck while my body tingled with the thrill of such proximity. The wonder of it all filled us with excitement. Everything seemed possible.

Sometimes, at dockside, the lake whiffed just a little, an unpleasant jarring in our fantasy excursion. The clanking of the metal ramp as it was lifted into place and chained fast, the horn blasting as we prepared to depart, the engine choking and spluttering as it started, then the jerking motion as we pulled away—sounds and routines so familiar, so much a part of our pairing. Cool air and water spray misted us. We pressed together tentatively, me cocooned in the shelter of him, as we swept from shore to shore, the lake winds whipping my hair.

We planned our lives in detail. We would marry. Later we would travel. We would read books and write books and listen to music and recite poetry and go to museums and have four children, and our life would be filled with only good things.

Then one night, on the last sailing of the evening, a boisterous wedding party crowded on board. One man was pumping an accordion and the swarm of partiers advanced together, laughing and cheering. Leather straps held the instrument close to his body, one hand clicking the buttons while the other stretched and compressed the bellows,

all done with exaggerated dipping and swagger. He began a rousing folk tune. Someone nudged the bride and groom into the centre of a large circle. The group surrounded them, clapping and shouting Huzzah! Someone produced handkerchiefs, and suddenly I was pulled forward into a dance, holding onto a flimsy cotton square, spinning, smiling and whirling in a happy frenzy, momentarily included in the enchantment.

As we neared the city, I scanned the crowd for my partner, separated by the surging dancers. He stood apart, solitary, looking uncomfortable, hands

fisted in pockets. He looked annoyed, petulant or perhaps sulky. I saw him then as he really was, unwilling to share or enter in. Suddenly, I knew that I would travel and read books and write books and listen to music and recite poetry and visit museums and have children, but I would do those things without him.

The bride and groom blew us kisses before disembarking, laughing together while stepping onto the ramp, her lace train dragging across the pressed steel. I stood alone at the railing, aware that such moments might only happen once in a lifetime. ⚡



**Lucy E.M. Black** is the author of *The Marzipan Fruit Basket*, *Eleanor Courtown*, *Stella's Carpet*, *The Brickworks*, *Class Lessons: Stories of Vulnerable Youth* and *A Quilting of Scars*. *The Mural* is forthcoming in the Spring of 2027. Her short stories have been published in Britain, Ireland, USA and Canada. She lives with her partner in the small lakeside town of Port Perry, Ontario.



{ flash }

# all in

craig reinbold

I'm still a newbie, new to sport climbing, new to leading routes, and this one is at the outside edge of my ability. It's short—thirty feet—but kicks off with an overhang that snubs many. I pass the overhang and clip safely into the first bolt. A few moves later I wedge my toes into a crack and am now maybe fifteen feet off the ground. I curl my fingers around a half-inch hold, chest-height, and extend my left hand to snap a quickdraw onto the second bolt.

Unbelievably, it is just out of reach.

Seems the crack I followed to get here was a bit to the right of the prescribed route. Rookie mistake. And there's the bolt, just out of reach. Like,

half an inch—so stretch a little, right? Not so simple. My left arm is free, but the rest of me . . . I can't move an iota. My calves are already twitching, fingers weakening. Reach again. Gain a quarter of an inch. Still no dice.

"Down climb!" my partner suggests.

But that's not an option. I used too much muscle up front getting past that overhang. Not much left.

I could drop, but to fall from here, with the stretch of the rope, I'd probably hit the ground. Caliche and rocks. The shin-dagger fronds of a yucca. Looking up, I can see the anchor at the top. Options: Drop. Climb. Fall. Climb. Fingers giving out. I go for it.

One move, two, three, four,

and a solid hold. Arms straightened, I take a slow breath, then another. Five, six, seven, and I'm there. Snap on a quickdraw, and—breaking all etiquette, but who cares—I let go of the rock and hang onto that quickdraw with everything I have. Slip the rope through.

"Tension!" I shout, and the rope goes taut.

I sit, gasping.

• • •

Not my smartest decision. I could have died—falling thirty feet. But I went for it, and I made it. I'd never done anything like that before and haven't since.

Except when I moved across the world, to Japan. When I lit out across

South America with little money and no plan. When I turned down a steady job to spend three months writing, of all things, a novella, which has never seen the outside of this operating system. When I left a two-year relationship because I was in love with someone else, and when I told that someone else how I felt, and now we've been together almost twenty years. And when we decided not to wait for the perfect trifecta of jobs/house/security to have a baby, and now he's twelve, and we're still figuring out the rest. And when our

second came along, unexpectedly—and he is a jewel—it was never a question.

All in.

Hanging on for dear life.

Just recently we were back in Tucson and returned to that canyon, visiting old haunts. I stood beneath that stretch of rock with my youngest, now ten, a daydreamer, daydreaming about climbing. I told him what I'd done, the mistake I'd made when I led that route for the first time. I told him how I'd gone for it, climbed for the top with no safety, and it had been

fine, but it might have turned out otherwise.

We agreed I shouldn't do it again. But I also tell him that someday he'll find himself in a similarly tough spot and—in a moment, in a heartbeat—he'll need to decide, and what will he do?

Climbing rocks, it seems to me now, you should take the fall. Hands down, the smart move. But these decisions aren't always so simple. And in truth, in life, sometimes the foolish move is what gets you where you need to be. ⚡



**Craig Reinbold** is a writer whose work has appeared in *The Sun*, *AGNI*, *River Teeth*, and online at *The Missouri Review*, and his essay "What I Don't Tell My Wife" was recently awarded a Pushcart Prize. He works as a nurse in the Emergency Department of a hospital in southeastern Wisconsin.





{ *fork and spoon* }

# commun<sup>i</sup>ng with clementines

hadley duncan howard

i

I wasn't just pregnant—I was pregnant and really, really bad at it. Into each life a little rain must fall, sure. Much of my life's rain has had to do with making babies. At that point, I'd had three miscarriages—there'd be

a couple more later on—and this pregnancy that seemed to be holding had been a particularly disgusting sort of drama from the get-go. My husband had become my custodial crew, following me around with a

bucket and a damp rag. I was certain he was secretly wondering how he'd ever liked me well enough to get me pregnant in the first place. I'd never felt so profoundly mortal, so clearly made of dust.

We'd just arrived in Australia, my husband's homeland. Miraculously arrived, more like. The gate agent in Los Angeles had taken one look at my pallid face, lifeless eyes, the whiteness of my lips, the roundness of my belly and had—all blessings on his coiffed and highlighted head—put his finger to his lips in a gesture of silence and kindly upgraded us to first class. We'd crossed the Pacific on sacred beds of solace, shrouded in feather duvets of glory.

Which was cherished all the more because when we arrived at my in-laws' new home, another adventure began. Luke had grown up in Sydney, but his parents had retired to a charming country town in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. I'd been warned the new house, like all Australian houses built to shun heat, was chilly in the winter. I had interpreted that to mean I'd better pack an extra sweater. Sydney enjoys a mild climate. How frosty could it be, even in July?

The Southern Highlands were so named because of their very Scottish meteorological system. But the frost and fog out-of-doors were lovely—it was the temperature inside the unheated house that was sharp and raw. The fireplace in the lounge room was kept bright and roaring, the space separated from the rest of the house by a heavy velvet drape, like some sort of Elizabethan bed curtain in

shades of mauve, but even there, our breath puffed out like speech bubbles with every word uttered. Beyond the lounge room was the entire rest of the house, comfortable in its appointments if glacial in its temps.

We were assigned the largest guest room for our month-long stay. There were three quilts and an electric blanket atop the double bed. In subsequent visits, we'd keep warm by having lots of sex—a practical matter as much as a thermal one in a bed that small—but for the time being we rugged up more than unpacked. I may never forget the piercing shock of the toilet seat in the otherwise agreeable WC. Courage was required every single time we had to pee.

That first evening, Mum made a large pot of soup to warm and welcome us. As glad as I was to be with my in-laws again, I was ill, exhausted, and freezing, and went to bed early. The next morning, jetlagged and up before the birds, we discovered that the soup had spent the night, covered, on the benchtop. It was frozen solid.

Fine by me—I couldn't stomach it anyway. I was on the beige food survival diet. I'd been hooked to a PICC line at home in Utah for months and had still been sick an average of seven times every day. My salaried communications director role had been downgraded to an hourly pay scale so as not to waste budget on an employee who couldn't do much, and the office's disabled restroom was designated just for me so I wouldn't get caught out with a wastepaper basket in a hallway. I could barely remember my formerly capable, formerly cheerful self.

It felt like eons since I'd eaten anything at all for the pleasure of it. I was just glad that Australia's saltines were better than what I could get in the States, and that my darling in-laws seemed to subsist entirely on store-bought shortbread biscuits and warm beverages—"Fancy a tea, love?"—none of which had an off-putting odor.

We soon figured out that the cold, fresh air outdoors did me good, so we took to exploring the town. On this day, we'd stopped at the greengrocer to pick up a few things. Sickly and already slow, I'd taken my time, touching everything, wondering about all the foods that were new to me, or known by different names. The produce was beautiful to behold, all organic, each brightly colored item putting its best foot forward and calling to me. And star of it all was a golden heap of clementines, a flaming mountain of citrus, sunny as marigolds. Their scent baited and beguiled me. I bought dozens of them, these firm, ripe orbs of juice and mallow.

Once home, I placed them in a hand-painted serving bowl, stacking them on each other in a smaller mound just for me. The bowl stood with pride of place on the ledge of the pass-through window between the cold, enclosed kitchen and the (slightly warmer) lounge room. Citrus does well in cold environs, lasting longer, preserving and accentuating its vivid goodness.

Clementines are a friendly fruit. Wholesome, yes, but tempting, too. These clem's displayed a dazzling generosity, wafting their stinging scent of promise through the house.

Not all of earth's bounties offer such sensual experience. Bananas don't beckon from afar. Lettuce has no siren song to lure me in. Carrots simply don't care how they smell. There are no-frills foods, standard issue, jazz hand free. But clementines don't skimp. They're pocket-sized and personal, interactive, filled with juicy secrets that capture me first with their scent, assuring me the story only gets better. Their pleasures are portable and not at all shy—if you're eating a clementine, everyone around you knows it. Clem's are for all ages and abilities, a citrus for the people. They're substantive, silly, and sincere—maybe even a little bit sexy—the full package, packaged with style.

Standing before Mum's stainless steel sink on that brisk afternoon, with a view past the oldies watching telly in the lounge room out toward the back verandah, I sunk my thumb into the dimpled base of that first clementine, its give just enough to be satisfying, its zest caught under my nail. It lifted and peeled effortlessly, one long, curved strip, with a whispered swooping sound all its own, as if to be undressed in such a manner, to be consumed by me on that day at that sink in that cold kitchen fulfilled its entire purpose. It seemed to eagerly enjoy this, the measure of its creation.

But still, with parenthood pending I was seeking signs everywhere, and there were more gifts to receive. Plucking the leggy, venous branches between sections met my motherly need to create order, to prepare a place. Separating one section from the rest offered an organizational pleasure, as if the

Creator understood that fruit can contribute, can be smart as well as fun. The crescented wedges working together, each one built to support the others, each one equal to the rest: A metaphor for functional relationships. Each tiny segment specific and singular, wholly individual and contained, holding the infinity of itself and of its kind: a lesson in family dynamics.

I took my first bite, popping the first segment onto my tongue in its entirety. It

I stood in place at that sink in that wintry kitchen on that wintry day in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. For months, I'd smelled nothing that appealed, nibbled nothing for the pleasure of it, kept nothing down. I'd been eating with an eye toward what wouldn't hurt when moving the wrong direction up a single lane road. I'd been eating in grayscale.

But these clementines, their divinity lay in their immodesty, the outrageous delight

“ But these clementines, their divinity lay in their immodesty, the outrageous delight they took in sharing their celestial sweetness with me. They offered me cheer and celebration, like god rays breaking through a roiling leaden sky, and they knew it. ”

burst in my mouth, like first fireworks in the dead of night—color and movement and sound, liquid brightness of light and joy and wonder. It was extravagantly delicious. It held the universe within its flimsy membrane and offered it up with the liberality and largesse of the immortal. I had never in my life tasted something so vibrantly, so lavishly, so unselfconsciously alive.

One was nowhere near enough. I ate another, and then another, glutting myself on eight, nine, ten clementines, more, as

they took in sharing their celestial sweetness with me. They offered me cheer and celebration, like god rays breaking through a roiling leaden sky, and they knew it.

I laughed as I inhaled them with my nose and mouth, my fingers stained the color of their skins, the scent of their heady oils all around me. My husband laughed with me, amused by my greed, glad and grateful that I seemed more like his usually buoyant wife. His parents were gobsmacked at my ridiculous intake—me, the pleasant,

perplexing foreigner who loved their son— but happy with anything that did the trick.

Every day of that visit, all month long, I stood at the sink and communed with the clementines, consumed by and consuming their succulent self-assertion. Each day, each clementine, was gorgeous, each bite a sign and a wonder, as if noble Nature were giving a nod to my meager maternal efforts. The out-of-body beauty of that indelicate,

insatiable experience gave me the strength to endure the rest of that difficult pregnancy.

I've never again experienced such stunning succulence, so freely bestowed. But I have remembered the lessons those clementines taught me, their sunny, celestial character shared so shamelessly. On that cold and cloudless day, I was fully nourished— body and soul—by the juicy generosity of the humble clementine. ●



**Hadley Duncan Howard** is a writer, editor, and creative. Her work often focuses on themes of identity, family, and faith, with essays published or forthcoming in *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*, and elsewhere. She's a lover of life's little beauties and quiet comforts, starting with dogs and Diet Coke. Find her online: [@notingthebeauty](#).





{ *s o u n d t r a c k* }

# can't hardly wait

k a s e j o h n s t u n



We yelled out to Angela. To be more accurate, my lifelong friend, Heather, yelled “Angela!” to a group of runners who huddled near a car in the middle of a dusty, dirt-covered parking lot during a thirty-six-hour Ragnar running relay in early June.

Red earth caked our shoes and teeth, filling in the crevices of enamel and wicking fabric.

“Angela!” Heather yelled it again.

We hoped this blonde woman with long, thin, tan, athletic legs would turn around. We hoped that maybe the woman would yell back, “Heather,” or “Kase,” or “Heather and Kase!” We hoped that maybe this woman we hadn’t seen in twenty years would actually *be* Angela.

The blonde woman didn’t respond. She walked away. But Heather had hope. Heather always has hope.

“She turned her head,” Heather said. “I swear. She turned her head. I know it’s her.”

“I think she did too,” I said. I did think that, though I also thought I could have imagined it.

Twenty years earlier Angela disappeared from our lives after a one-year visit. Why did we care? Partly because it’s what Heather and I do—when we’re together, we chronicle our lives as friends.

• • •

“David Hasselhoff thinks I’m beautiful,” Angela had said.

Where I met her is blurry. It might have been at a bar or at that friend’s house, but I

do remember *when*. Not a specific day, but a time in my life, which, when I look back now, was one of the darkest. Within one short year after graduating high school, I had gone from a high school athlete and good student who had never done any drugs (except a lot of beer; this was the nineties, after all) to a young man who spent his days scrubbing cars and his tip money on booze, marijuana, and, on any random Tuesday, mushrooms and LSD.

I’d lost all confidence in me. I’d become everything my parents warned me I’d become if made I made the dumb decisions they’d warned me not to make. So, yeah, I remember when I met her—not the exact where or when, but I remember how I felt. Like I should get a haircut, take a shower, and step away from her in case I smelled like weed and day-old beer.

Angela dated *that* friend. He’d been my friend since middle school, a friend I considered my best friend from sixth to ninth grade, the one friend who always managed to get us into trouble. The friend that played college football now and had biceps the size of my head. The one who spent his entire existence trying to date the “hottest” girls, get them in bed, then brag about it. The friend I tried to distance myself from because of all that—and more.

“David Hasselhoff thinks I’m beautiful,” Angela said.

She recounted a story about how she sat in a bar in Los Angeles—this I remember—

and how he approached her, tapped her on the shoulder, and said, “You’re beautiful,” or “You’re stunning,” or something like that. I remember thinking, I bet David Hasselhoff just wanted to get laid. I bet everyone was thinking that, but none of us could deny she was beautiful or stunning or something like that, so no one told her he didn’t say that because, even if he was trying to get laid, deep down, we believed her. At least I know I did.

Back then, Angela lived in my friend’s world, not mine, if that makes any damn sense these days.

• • •

Earlier in the day, before Heather yelled her name, the blue sky hot and heaped above us with no clouds in one-hundred-degree weather, we thought we saw her. We’d been riding in a van, running our leg of the 130-mile Ragnar relay across northern Utah. At one of our exchanges, Heather pointed and said, “I saw her before, I swear.” She pointed again. “It’s Angela, I swear it is.” I didn’t actually see the woman. I *wanted* to. I wanted to know that Angela was okay, thriving in this world twenty years later. It would have made my heart happy.

In the van, Heather said, “If I see that woman again, I am just going to yell her name and see if she turns around. If she turns around, it’s her.”

Riding along, we talked about Angela and a million other memories that sparked from that time in our lives. Yes, we were in our late thirties, and, yes, this doesn’t sound like late thirty-year-old behavior. Two adults with children chatting for hours about a girl they

knew twenty years ago. Speculating whether it really was her. But we were trapped in a van, sweaty and shoved together and bored, for thirty-six hours with barely any sleep. We passed the time chronicling our lives together, and Angela had been part of our lives—memories that now dangled, incomplete.

“You know that I can’t listen to ‘Can’t Hardly Wait’ without thinking about that time you sang it to her all night at my house. Oh my gosh, Kase.” Heather had said the same thing to me back then and she’s repeated it hundreds of times over the years. “You’re such a dork.” She laughs when she says it.

Somehow, each time we talk about Angela, the conversation ends with, “That poor girl. I hope she’s okay.”

At each transition, we would pop out of the van and cheer on our incoming runner, but we both knew we were watching for her too. It was like a game, a mystery to be solved on a warm summer night along the Rockies and in the canyons between the Rockies and by the rivers that rolled through the canyons and kicked up cool air while runners kicked up the dry detritus of the desert.

• • •

On another summer night, on the other side of the Wasatch Front, during the younger side of our lives, the first half, Angela and I stood in Heather’s living room with cold beers in our hands.

I know how *I* ended up there. I lived there. Heather and her parents bought the house on 13th East after our first year of college at the University of Utah. I shacked up in the basement with my friend Neale

on two twin beds on concrete floors pushed against concrete walls. In the middle of the hot summer of 1995, the cold of the walls and floor beckoned other friends down into our dungeon-like room.

I think Heather, who became friends with Angela because everyone becomes friends with Heather, was supposed to meet her at the house to go out. But she got caught up at work, so I became the fill-in host when Angela knocked on the door. I offered her a beer. She didn’t leave, and after a few beers, I slid *Pleased to Meet Me*, The Replacements album, into the CD player in the living room and forwarded to one of my favorites songs, “Can’t Hardly Wait.” Trapping people in a room and making them listen to anything to the left on the radio dial was one of those things I did and still do today—I make them listen to the music I like, usually after a few beers.

This girl who showed up in an outfit to go out to the club did not belong in that living room with me. She belonged with that one friend. The one with muscles and a chiseled jaw. Not the one with an ugly goatee, a thinning hair line and the confidence of a turd. Not the one who lost his high school girlfriend earlier that year because he got high, called her from the bathroom on Valentines Day, and broke up with her because he was a complete idiot.

This was not a date. It was happenstance. Angela and I weren’t completely alone. In the room next to the living room, two young returned Mormon missionary girls hid behind their door. They hid behind their door every night, while we drank, smoked weed, did

mushrooms, and raged against the night until the dawn. They never came out of their room and likely regretted signing a lease to live in a place they didn’t belong. I still wish I could find them and apologize, but I don’t remember their names.

• • •

Heather and I got pushed out of the van that Ragnar night. We grabbed our sleeping bags and crawled underneath the front of a car, only our feet sticking out and gravel sticking into our backs through our bags. We had a couple hours to sleep before we moved on to run into the morning, then into the hot late summer afternoon.

I don’t know what all we talked about lying under the hood—life, family, friends, kids, running—but I know Angela came up again. We said we’d find her soon enough and call out to her and maybe she’d turn around. We talked about how Angela completely disappeared, about the maybes of why that happened after her and that friend from childhood split up. There were rumors. Not so good rumors. We laughed again about the night Angela and I stayed up until sunrise singing “Can’t Hardly Wait” over and over again. Heather gave me more grief about how I had forever tainted that song for her, how she came home, found us drunk and singing, then drove to stay at her parents’ house to be closer to work the next morning.

“You’re such a dork,” she said, again. “I heard she changed her name to get away from him,” Heather said. “I’ve tried to get a hold of her to make sure she’s alive, but I couldn’t find her.”

"Yeah," was all I could say. I knew who he was.

Our legs stuck out, vulnerable. Chronicling. We moved on, talked about other things. Life. Kids. Family. Work. Other memories. But we both hoped we'd find her along the hundreds of miles of road. We wanted to know she was okay and living a good life.

We fell asleep. The sun came up. We ran again. Looking.

• • •

Angela and I stood there in the living room with beers. I played "Can't Hardly Wait," over and over again, a song she had never heard before but fell in love with. I'd restart it. I'd sing it. Angela would join in. The poor young women in the room next to us couldn't have slept through our bellows. They didn't have the advantage of booze or weed to block out the noise, to black out life.

"Listen how he goes scratchy and high here. It's sounds like he doesn't mean to, but he *does*. It's on purpose. Try that." And she did, trying to scratch out the lyrics, then wait for a long beat and come in with perfect timing, "Can't hardly *waaaaiiiiitttt*. I can't wait."

I think I remember Heather popping in, then popping out again, but that might just be because Heather has told me that's what she did so many times. And she must have, because at some point that night, Angela changed into some of Heather's comfy clothes, sweatpants and a T-shirt. She dressed down from her clubbing dress, washed her face, and came back into the living room to sing some more.

By the time the night ended and the sun rose, she knew all the words, and I saw a girl I'd never seen before, smiling and relaxed and singing and comfortable. Around that old middle-school friend, she always seemed reserved, on edge. And I admit it, I fell for this girl in sweatpants and a T-shirt without any makeup.

Past the window, in the morning light, he walked by, her boyfriend. He peered in and saw us standing there singing, still singing, after a night of singing.

He rapped on the window. His face glowed red. I know he thought we were up to something. We weren't. We were just singing that song. Over and over.

She turned to him, grabbed her bundled-up dress, and ran to the door—maybe to keep him from coming inside first.

Had there been a connection between us? The girl David Hasselhoff thought was beautiful and some silly carwash kid? Maybe. But it disappeared the moment fear came into her eyes, and she dashed out the front door to meet him, her hands stretched out in front of her to brace his arms, to keep him from coming in, maybe to keep him from kicking my ass even though nothing had happened between us, at least not the way he might have thought.

I descended the stairs to my dungeon of a bedroom, high, lonesome, and, yeah, sad and worried for her.

• • •

We finally saw the woman we thought might be Angela again. In a Mormon church parking lot transition. Heather, brave and

hopeful then as she is in life, yelled, "Angela!"

Heather turned to me, "If it's not her, at least we tried. I still want to know why she disappeared."

I did too. I wanted to sing-shout, "can't hardly wait," a sliver of our only real memory together. But I didn't. Heather and I walked away that day, unsuccessful, without knowing if the girl who David Hasselhoff had called beautiful had actually been running alongside us all night.

• • •

"Can't Hardly Wait" had been a favorite song since seventh or eighth grade, a part of my life for a decade before that long-ago night. It still is. My wife of twenty years likes it too and it's become part of the soundtrack of my friendship with Heather.

I'd sung the lyrics a million times, but never actually *felt* the lines about having had

enough of "this stuff," of treating my body, my life, like an ashtray—not until that summer, at the end of a year of darkness, drugs, and nearly failing out of school.

I for sure felt the words that night with Angela. I sang that song hard, with passion, and she sang it with me, with the same gusto. A month later, after a horrible mushroom trip, I packed up my room and knocked on my parents' door with my tail between my legs.

Heather and I still talk about Angela every once in a while, over a beer or a run or a drive in the car. We talk about anything and everything we've been through together over the last thirty-five years, everyone who has come and stayed in our lives or who has come and gone. We still wonder what happened to Angela, where she went and why, and we hope she's okay. I hope she still sometimes sings with gusto, in sweatpants, with no worries. 📺



**Kase Johnstun** is the Director for the Utah Center for the Book at Utah Humanities. He is the author of two award-winning novels, *Cast Away* (Torrey House Press, 2024) and *Let the Wild Grasses Grow* (Torrey House Press, 2021), and he is the author of the award-winning medical memoir *Beyond the Grip of Craniosynostosis* (McFarland, 2015).





{ those who wander }

# motherless on mother's day

raven sc lee

*i* It's another parenting drop-off. This time, I am driving my daughter, Sage, to Bozeman from Portland for their summer job with the Montana Conservation Corps. We started that morning in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where Sage climbed barefoot over a fence to gather dogwood flowers in the courtyard of the Holiday Inn Express. Sage showed up at the breakfast table with a paper cup from the buffet full of dogwood blooms and a Happy Mother's Day card. Surrounded by other travelers, we shared breakfast in the sunny courtyard before getting back on the road.

Mother's Day generates complex feelings for me. My mother has chosen not to be in my life since I was five. When my kids were small (they are now both in their early twenties), Mother's Day unearthed feelings of grief and loss. But then, right in front of me, were these two beautiful souls. My husband would shepherd them through the day, trying to get them to behave in restaurants, keeping them busy making something or cleaning something. They were mildly reluctant, distracted and unconcerned with my feelings. I tried not to take their

indifference personally. Containing my feelings about my own motherlessness was emotional gymnastics.

Driving to Bozeman with my youngest is an antidote to the typical Mother's Day Blues and the internal struggle to protect others from my loss.

• • •

"So, what's happening with your friends?"

As we drive, I want to cover all the bases of Sage's life without becoming an inquisitor. I am reminded of the days when I dropped Sage at preschool. They demanded ten kisses or hair clips to hold the place of our connection until we were together again. Now I am the one holding on tight, trying to contain my grasping. I only have these two days between college and the summer job to cover it all—friends, romantic relationships, school, are they eating well, taking care of themselves.

Sage shares who is seeing whom in their friend group, the break ups and dramas—laying it all out for my entertainment. I listen and ask questions. It becomes clear that Sage feels close and connected to good people. I feel a tension in my body release that I didn't know was there.

"How do you think we are doing, Mama?" Sage asks.

We are about three hours from Bozeman. All the other bases have been covered when we get into the topic of our relationship. Sage and I have always been close. They spent most of their early life in my Maya Wrap, like a baby monkey clinging to my side, cataloguing the world from the safe perch of

my hip. Now almost twenty, Sage has been establishing their support systems outside of our relationship, which has meant there is sometimes a distance that didn't used to be there.

"I mean, I feel close to you and adore you . . . you know that, right?" I start here.

Sage nods and smiles slyly from behind the wheel.

Verdant hills and cannabis billboards pass my window.

"I am hearing you talk about your friendships and how you cry or let them see you, your vulnerabilities and feelings. I don't think I am seeing that part of you much these days . . ." I read their face to see if its alright to keep going. "That's okay, I mean, you have to do what feels right to you, but that is something I notice." I keep my voice even, aware that as the mom who is also a therapist, I hold so much power. I want to wield it carefully.

"Yeah, that's true," they say, "I am not ready to be *mommed* yet. I am still establishing myself outside of our relationship."

I turn my eyes to the window. This distance hurts. I don't want them to see. It grinds against the bigger, older hurt, the distance my own mother put between us.

• • •

When I was eight, I used my new writing and spelling skills to write a card to my mom. I had been living with my dad for three years. I didn't have her address, and I rarely saw her, but I knew where she worked. So I wrote to her.

*Call me or write me.* I wrote those words

as many times as I could fit on the inside of the card. I closed with, *love, Raven.*

A couple of weeks after I mailed the card, she called. "Why did you write this? I am right here."

That is the only phone call I ever received from my mom, before or since.

It is something invisible that I live with, the ongoing rejection and the complete mystery of my motherlessness. It has always felt like a wall that separates me from others. I have met plenty of people with bad mothers, abusive mothers, dead mothers, mothers with mental health issues. But a mother who functions well in the world yet has chosen to build a life away from her children? That is not something I have run into often. And it has left me with a deep sense of separation from humanity. I have no simple story to tell. This is the mystery my life is founded on.

• • •

As the Montana landscape moves by, I tell myself my job is to tolerate this process. To be steady. To not leak the pain of my unwantedness. To let Sage find their way. As the Doug firs and hemlock of Oregon give way to the high desert of Idaho, then the lodgepole pine and watercolor hills of Montana, I try.

It is a big thing that Sage has asked me about our relationship. My kids have always been vigilant for any sign that I am using my therapist skills with them. It's a red card they throw in my face if my therapist self even sneaks a toe into our conversations. Once the red card has been issued, the conversation erodes. Sometimes I don't know how to have

deeper conversations with them. I was raised by the therapists I have seen over the years. It is the language I know best. The last time I tried to ask about our relationship, red card.

Most of the time, I try to protect Sage from the impact of my childhood. The self-centeredness of the teenage/young adult mind helps with that. I breathe and feel the sharpness in my chest—unwantedness throbbing.

"I will circle back, Mama." Sage says softly.

"Of course," I say, "I know that. You will find your way. And I will be here when you are ready."

I remind myself of the love I do have in my life. I remind myself that it is because Sage feels secure with me that they can put this distance between us. *Yeah, good job mama,* I tell myself. Remind, contain, remind, contain. I gaze out the window at the forever sky and try to find compassion for myself and all that I am holding inside.

We continue down the highway. Signs indicate that we are headed towards Helena. I have been careful in choosing a route that would *not* require going through Helena. Last time I heard, that was where my mother lived. I don't want to go there, to risk any possibility that I would see her or that I would be tempted to.

• • •

My mom sits across the booth from me and my brother. Her everything-is-fine smile firmly in place, like a closed door. She wears her uniform, a tux without a jacket. Her eyes shine behind her glasses. I am six and we

have ambushed her at her work, an upscale restaurant in Kansas City. I live about ten miles away, with my dad and stepmom. If my brother, seven years older, and I had told her we were coming, she would have called out sick. So we show up unannounced, my grandparents complicit in providing her schedule.

We sit in the soft leather booth of the Peppercorn Duck Club, make polite conversation and pretend that all of this is fine.

I haven't seen my mother since 1992.

• • •

Another road sign: Helena, thirty miles.

We talk about Sage's relationships. I am struck by their emotional intelligence, their sense of confidence and freedom. I am proud and thrilled that my kids got a start in life that has allowed them to travel, to follow their passions and love freely. At the same time, when I hear how they are living in the world my wounds and limitations feel exposed. Having learned early that relationships hurt, people aren't reliable, I am built differently than they are. I am still trying to understand and accept that I raised them to be more than I am.

I grab my phone to check the route. We are not going through Helena. Just near. Relief floods me. It feels like the universe has played a Mother's Day prank. *Ah, what if you had to go through Helena with Sage on Mother's Day?! Psyche!*

Sage catches me and says, "Mom, its okay, we aren't going to Helena!"

Sage knows the story, yet their tone

reminds me they have no idea what it would mean to not have a mom.

• • •

I left my mom when I was five. That's how I remember it. I left her.

When my parents were disassembling their marriage, we were living in a basement apartment in Kansas City, Missouri. Eventually, the court awarded custody of me and my siblings to my dad, something that didn't happen much in 1976. I don't remember who walked with me or drove me from one house to the other. I just remember walking down the sidewalk outside our apartment holding a bag of my belongings. My shoes, black Mary Janes, moving me away from my mom and into my new life with my dad and stepmom.

That was the end of whatever relationship we had. I just didn't know it yet. I wouldn't know it for many years.

• • •

Sage talks about their summer job with the Montana Conservation Corps doing park and trail maintenance.

I ask them if they have everything they need to take good care of themselves in the back country. Sage took a gap year last year and travelled solo in Europe and New Zealand. I know they know how to take care of themselves, but I want to be sure.

"You know, Mom, one thing I learned when I was travelling is that I can trust that my needs will be met."

I am struck by Sage's clarity.

They describe times they were travelling and felt alone. How a companion was

suddenly there or when they were lost and someone came along who could help.

As their words seep into me, I realize that I have never felt this kind of trust. My childhood fell through the cracks of a messy divorce. Growing up, my parents were burned out and disconnected. Living with my dad and stepmom, my basic needs were often met, but my aloneness was all encompassing. I watched a lot of *Beverly Hillbillies*, *MASH* and *The Tonight Show*. I relied on the TV to be my comfort.

"Oh Baby, that is so good," I say. "I am so glad you have that."

My heart is broken and mended at the same time.

• • •

The night before, we laughed about when they were little and transitioning into a new classroom—they were ruthless and mean to me for the first three weeks of the school year. Then suddenly they hit their stride and returned to the loving child I knew. Every

fall, I braced myself for the upheaval and being Sage's dumping ground. We laughed as I described how at four, they had already mastered sarcasm (clearly my fault) and used it to vent their feelings. Toddler biting grew into preschool biting commentary.

Later, I will hug my Sage, kiss their head tucked under my chin, and release them to their wilderness job for the summer.

Later, I will drop Sage at their training site. They will be anxious when we part ways, but I know they will settle.

Later, after I fly back to Portland, Tom will pick me up at the airport and I will cry all the way home, spilling the pain I contained in the car.

Later, I will tell friends, can you believe I almost had to drive with my kiddo through Helena on Mother's Day?

But for now, I reach out to the Montana fields and distant mountains for something to hold all of this bigness. This landscape can hold big things. 🌿



**Raven SC Lee** lives on unceded land of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and Siletz Indians on Wy-East (Mt Hood, Oregon) where she spends her time writing, hanging out in the forest and throwing funky pots. Raven writes memoir, essays and poetry. Her writing has appeared in *Eunoia Review*, *One Art*, *Amethyst Review*, *Honeyguide Literary* and *Hip Mama*. Raven is on a hiatus from her career as a psychologist and therapist trainer.



**KK Kozik** is an American painter whose work explores landscape, memory, and the quiet persistence of place. Influenced by early American writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, Kozik approaches landscape as both a physical environment and a space charged with atmosphere and meaning. Her large-scale paintings are created through movement and intuition, emphasizing direct mark-making and an immersive, physical relationship with paint. Kozik's pared-back compositions reflect the stark clarity of winter landscapes, using place and season as analogs for life's cycles of change and quiet endurance.

**@kk2kozik**  
**k2kozik.com**

