

Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction



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Echo: A Journal of Creative Nonfiction - March 2020

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Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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About Echo

According to the National Institution of Health, a heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart. This test sometimes involves the injection of saline or another dye into the patient's vein to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo for our journal of creative nonfiction because we expect the work we publish each month to come from the heart. In each of our issues, we aim to publish the best creative nonfiction pieces that we can find.

We accept submissions for Echo: A Journal of Creative Nonfiction year round, and we would love to read some of your work!



What's Inside | Table of Contents

What Kind of Mother Are You? | Laura Stanfill

Age 16 | Andy Betz

The Walking Stick | Pamela Holm

The Prison of Perfectionism | Annie B. Johnston

Arcade | Joe Manus

What Kind of Mother Are You? | Laura Stanfill

You put your baby in the carseat and her neck falls over. She looks like the stuffed yellow duck with the floppy gullet you had as a child—still have, because you are sentimental. You wonder if your baby can breathe with her head at such an angle. She wheezes as she naps back there. They are cute sounds until you realize they mean she can't breathe.

You stuff rolled-up swaddling blankets on either side of her neck, hoping she won't turn her head to the side and suffocate.

But what else can you do? She is suffocating just by sitting there.

*

You take your baby to the produce section and point out the colors. You feed language into her developing brain. Egg-plant. Cu-cum-ber.

That leafy oddity right there, baby? That's parsley. It ends in -ley, like your name.

You sing them together, her name with parsley, hoping to instill appreciation of these lightly bitter green frills.

Of course she will grow up spelling and rhyming. These skills are milk you offer.

She gulps the language down.

*

You decide, at seven or eight months of age, that your baby should be able to sit up in the shopping cart at the baby store. You talk to her in reassuring tones about this new adventure, this milestone she is about to meet, as you wipe down the cart and snap the belt around her middle. She falls forward a little, but she's okay. Not crying.

You tighten the belt more, and still a little more, as if this tightening can stand in for trunk support, and a little more, until she throws up from the pressure, and you abandon the shopping cart, and you rush your baby back to the car. Both of you crying.

You have had seven or eight months to understand this scrawl of a mouth, and the limp little body attached to it, and you don't. You didn't suspect that you—the overachiever! the perfectionist!—would turn out to be so terrible at mothering.

*

Four specialists.

Five specialists.

Six specialists.

You imagine an egg carton, half full of doctor brains.

She'll gain at her own pace. She'll outgrow this valve issue, that kidney thing. She can see. She can hear. Lungs work. The sweat chloride test comes back negative. Do we celebrate? Or do we keep hunting for what else, what else, what about her heart?

*

Your daughter cries every day after school.

She cannot spell.

She cannot memorize math facts.

When she reads words out loud, she twists the tenses around her tongue like cherry stems.

She tries to interact with her classmates but it's so hard. They don't want to talk to her or play with her. They really don't want to be her partner for group projects.

Her spoken language skills rival the teachers'. A little adult who doesn't understand this business of crushes and can't copy down notes from the board fast enough—but what a vocabulary! This duality, perhaps, frustrates the school. They place her in the middle of the pack—not behind, as if they added her talents to her lags and divided by two to find an average.

She's so smart. She's so frustrated.

You want her to try harder, so she does.

You are still the mother who wanted to prove her baby could sit in the cart because your expectations got in the way of seeing her.

*

More years pass, meltdowns are survived, and you and your husband and the doctors continue identifying challenges and lags. After you pull your daughter out of elementary school midyear because her peers bullied her with words and their bodies, you finally get a diagnosis.

Then two.

Three.

Four.

On her permanent record. She is a rare, striped thing, hard to identify in the wild unless someone hands over her medical chart.

You want to say *I told you so* to the teachers, but she doesn't go to that school anymore.

*

You drive your daughter between her new school and the offices at the hospital. Third floor, fifth floor, which one today? You choose the elevator or the stairs, this bathroom or that one, always a special snack. A team, that's what you are. The two of the four in the family who make this trek, ask for help, learn skills and how to advocate. You listen to each other. You hold your arms out to each other and collapse.

Seven specialists.

Eight.

Nine.

One day, you let her sit in the front seat. She's finally big enough to be there. And now always she chooses time with you over the quiet empty seats in back. She tunes the radio, sings along, and you haven't taught her to pinch one ear closed, because she doesn't need to know whether she's off-key.

*

A helpful and loving daughter, yours. She catches loose neighborhood dogs and calms them down until their owners can fetch them. She brings plates of food to elderly neighbors. The collector of hygiene supplies for the local food bank, the organizer of activities for kids on the block, this girl of yours. When you take her downtown, she passes out coupons for free meals to street people and affirmations that say things like, "I believe in you."

These are the stories she chooses to tell with her life.

Twelve years ago, she almost didn't survive birth. You lean against the doorjamb to watch her sleep. Not that you will admit this to her. That you still watch over her. But you do.

*

You still have hope, but you have learned not to measure her against it.

You are the appointment getter, the encourager, the one she calls for help. This is how you hold her up now. You are the driver, miles of back-and-forth, hours of waiting rooms. You are always ready with books and pens and questions you have saved to spend on her.

As a tween, she's fierce and flawed, still small but growing. She doesn't apologize for being herself, and perhaps this comes from your early months of vegetable identification.

A squash matters. A zucchini matters. Parsley, even.

You, baby, exactly as you are. You matter

Age 16 | Andy Betz

I wanted to, but I didn't want to this way.

My father told me age 16 garnered responsibilities and privileges. I was to get a job. I was expected to begin saving. No longer would he accept excuses for bad behavior or poor decisions. Age 16 meant driving. It meant insurance.

It also meant women.

Not girls. Not dating.

Age 16 meant the onset of carnal knowledge with a woman best chosen to ensure the quality of this education equaled anything I learned in math or science class.

My father made a few calls, gave me a few hints, and "loaned" to me a prerequisite sum equivalent to an initial lesson and follow-up in the skills he wanted me to acquire.

While I was on board with his presentation, I was somewhat skeptical about his choice of the workforce.

His last words to me were, "Trust me."

Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread.

The driver of the cab arrived just as I finished grooming. My shoes were spit shined. My jacket was newly dry-cleaned. My pants had the pressed creases my newly iron shirt did not. I was as ready as I was ever going to be.

My father did not expect any show of emotion or a wave good-bye. I kept my eyes forward as I entered the cab so as not to disappoint him at the onset. I felt somewhere between a condemned prisoner and game show contestant. Tonight could make or break me. I would survive, maybe even for the better, but would I survive intact? This line of demarcation between that which was and that which would be was at hand.

I crossed my Rubicon when I closed the cab door and the driver pulled away.

Neither one of us spoke a word. I recognized my father's handi-work when I saw it. It seems everyone I would encounter tonight was bought and paid for. We all were to play our part. The ride took only twenty minutes to a side of town unknown to me. I had heard of legends and horrors from this side of the tracks as a child. I looked for any familiar outcropping to help navigate back. No such luck for my efforts. This too, was most-likely not by chance.

By the time we arrived, I exited the cab. The driver told me to take my time. He would be in the parking lot waiting. Not that I needed any addition anxiety, but now I was being timed. I began my adulthood, first and ten at the twenty with a full clock and no time outs. I could have turned, but I didn't. Sailors of yore sailed over the horizon passing the point at which they lost sight of where they began. It is at this point any direction they take gets them to where they need to be. Their course is set. They need only trust the navigation. I was at this point. My faith never wavered as I entered the building.

She was a former beauty, a few years past her prime, with a few to many layers of makeup covering (poorly) a few to many crow's feet and wrinkles. Her gown was a size too small and a decade too old. She asked my name. I asked hers. Perhaps the brevity of our conversation spoke the volumes neither one of us should. She offered me a beer. I reached for her drink instead. She found bourbon (two fingers, neat) to her liking. It tasted as uncomfortable as the situation. She chuckled as I took my first sip. Her hand soothed my face from the astringent nature of the spirit. I want to say our eyes locked, but they didn't. I want to claim she possessed an empathic nature that balmied the pain I kept hidden. Neither was true. Neither could be true. A quick survey of her room was all I required. She was neither a harlot nor courtesan. She was as much puppet as was I. I found the strength to stop trembling long enough to feel her hand begin trembling. I leaned in to her, past her lips, to her ear to whisper all I would say for the evening.

Years later, after her funeral, she willed me her earrings from that night. Her attorney (for she had found better days later in life) asked if I understood the term, "I left my strings at the door. Leave yours

there tonight.”

By morning, the cabbie remained, sipping thermos coffee, eating a packed sandwich. Maybe swag is collect on delivery. He knew I left my childhood at her doorstep. I passed on his offer of a sandwich. As promised, he drove me home.

The sunrise was a bit brighter that morning. I discovered hues and shades I never bothered to discover previously. Upon entering my father’s house, I found a plate of eggs and bacon, a cup of coffee, and my first bill monthly bill for room and board.

My father told me age 16 garnered responsibilities and privileges.

He never told me the costs.

After last night, I guess he never needed to.

The Walking Stick | Pamela Holm

The curtains are half-drawn and the dresser is crowded with wilting sympathy bouquets. I read Yelp reviews of funeral homes while my mom sleeps. At eighty, her dark hair is barely flecked with grey, but her skin looks translucent and pale like she's disappearing, which she is. My mom has been lying in bed for nearly a month now, fighting for death like most people fight for life. She stirs and her eyes flutter open, weakly, she nods to the can of orange soda on her nightstand. It's the only thing she will drink, and it maintains its fluorescent orange color all the way through her catheter bag. I pick up the can and position it so that the bendy straw reaches her chapped lips. "Mom," I say, "You drink orange soda like a Mexican toddler." She smiles a little and sucks on the straw. I pop two klonopin in her mouth and she takes another sip. When we were kids, my brothers and I were only allowed to have soda when we were sick. I suppose this qualifies.

My younger brother has been changing our mom's diapers, emptying her pee bag, and plying with her orange soda for the past two weeks. Now it's my turn. Meanwhile, my stepfather is paralyzed by shock and sadness. He's only just realized that his wife isn't going to pop out of bed recovered from her latest ailment and make him scrambled eggs.

She lifts a bony finger and points to a box on her roll-top desk. "Bring me that box, please," my mom says in a weak rasp. The carpet beneath my feet sticks to my shoes like bandaids as I walk the three steps to the desk, and I have no idea how this much orange soda found its way to the carpet in her bedroom. The mess is out of character; she has always been tidy to the point of violence. I pick up the slim box and set it on the side of her bed.

My mom is becoming weaker every day, which apparently is the point. Her's is either a very slow or very fast descent. Slow if you consider that her death was a choice and is being administered via starvation. Fast if you consider that less than four months ago, on her 80th birthday, she still had enough life in her to hiss demeaning insults at her husband while slamming the car door with the force of Thor. My two brothers, my sister-in-law, niece, nephew, and myself all watched from the driveway, embarrassed but not surprised. Afterward, we climbed into our own cars to caravan across two to a photo studio for a family portrait most of us didn't want to have taken. We were all dressed in black and joked that we looked like we were ready for a funeral procession, not a photo session. In a bid to beat each other to the punchline, my older brother and I both turned on our headlights when we started to drive, in broad daylight. My mom's car was in front of me, and I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach, the same as I always did when I laid eyes on her personalized license plate that says "Mrs. Mum."

I lift the top of the box, revealing a large color print from our family photo shoot. My niece looks gorgeous; she's standing next to my ageless sister-in-law, and I stand next to her. My brother are beside me. My mom sits below us, looking proud of the family that peacocks around her. My hair looks weird, but I always think my hair looks weird, and there is something strange about my left arm. I can't tell exactly what's wrong, but somehow it's off.

"Were these Photoshopped?" I ask. "My arm looks strange."

"I had Vince taken out of the pictures," she whispers.

"You did what?"

"I told the photographer to Photoshop Vince out of the pictures."

"Why?" I ask.

"He didn't want to have them taken, and I paid for them."

I leaf through the other photos, in different sizes, and in each one a body is missing. When my mom drifts off to sleep, I take the box of photos and quickly slip out to my car and hide them in my trunk and pray that my stepdad, Vince, hadn't already seen them.

It's been about three weeks since my mom told her doctor that she wanted to be put on hospice. She's

been suffering from congestive heart failure for the past few years, however her hospice request came immediately on the heels of being forced to let go of her dream of having her husband declared incompetent and placed in an assisted living facility - at which point she would sell his house and possessions, pocket the money, and relocate to a beach town somewhere. Though half-baked and morally void, my mother was flagrantly vocal about her plan, confiding in each of her children on separate occasions.

For years my mother had been talking about my stepfather's cognitive demise, insisting that he had Alzheimer's, with no medical diagnosis whatsoever, to whomever would listen. She complained that he was confused and fell asleep whenever he sat down. That he was constantly tripping over things, and that he couldn't remember what he was doing from one minute to the next. On several occasions, she called the police to try and have him committed, though to where and for what reason was never clear. If he was a dog, she would have sent him to the pound years ago.

Not long before my mom took to her bed, my step-sister, a nurse, drove eleven hours to check on her dad because her phone calls weren't going through. Once there, she sat down with him to go over his medications that were set up in a monthly pillbox, separated into AM and PM doses. Turned out, he'd been starting his day with Ambien, a sleeping pill known for its unpredictable effects, and twice his prescribed dose of Tramadol, an opioid, for hip pain from a spill he took a few months back. Before bed, he'd been taking his antidepressant and blood pressure medications.

Mom had been managing his medications for years. She may have been innocently confused while setting up his pillbox, but if she was, it would have been a first. She always knew exactly what she was doing. Confiding in me that she had blocked my step-sister's number on their home phone only underscores my point.

My stepdad comes into the room, and my mom reaches for his hand and says, "I love you, honey," in a whisper, over and over. When he leaves the room, she grabs my hand and says, "He's an idiot."

When I got the news that my mother had gone from ill to dying, I was skeptical. My life has been punctuated by my mother's near death experiences. There was the brain tumor that turned out to be an ear infection; her bout of fake tuberculosis, followed by a near-fatal case of fake lupus. A massive stroke that was really a sinus infection. And the time she needed a heart transplant - or would have needed one had it not turned out to be acid reflux. When she wasn't dying from a disease, she was recovering from a surgery or mishap and was always ready to yank up her top and show off the swollen galaxy of bruises on her ribs that she'd cracked falling off a ladder. Or to hike up her pant leg to show off the railroad track scars from her recent knee replacement, all while describing the processes of excruciating detail. Each time I'd meet the news of her impending death with strong skepticism. In a week or so, my skepticism would soften into apprehension. Then twinges of belief would pull at me, and I would start to feel like a heartless jerk for questioning my own mother's integrity while she was inching toward death's door. But as soon as I'd fully buy into the fact that whichever ailment was overtaking her and the end was nigh, she'd no doubt have a miraculous recovery, and once again I'd be punked.

Now, ironically, after all of her close calls, she is dying from a hunger strike, protesting her own existence.

When I finally realized that this wasn't just another idle death threat, a sudden rush of anger burned straight through me. It was like the time went out on the Thames and all I could see was half-buried artifacts embedded in the mud. A raincoat, a broken chair, the window I would climb out of, the bed I would hide under, a favorite dress that disappeared. The effortless humiliation. The insults that rolled off her tongue before I was old enough to know what insults were. The hurt feelings she told me I wasn't old enough to have. The hunger pangs, and sneaking into the kitchen when the house was asleep. Silently opening the cupboard and reaching for the crackers, and taking only a few because they had, no doubt, been counted. The light flickering on and my mother coming at me in her pink robe, her face red with rage. I remember her fingers digging into my arm while she dragged me back to my bedroom. The stinging flesh from the beating she gave me. My face, salty from dried tears. Laying in my bed in the morning, every morning, my bladder about to burst, calling out "Can I get up now, please?" and waiting to be granted permission to use the bathroom. Coming home in sixth grade to a mound of my belongings that had been dumped on my bedroom floor.

Clothing, shoes, jewelry, books, letters, stuffed animals, homework. Every drawer empty. Empty hanger bare. I remember when I was thirteen, sitting next to her in the car with my beloved cat, Conejo, on my lap while she drove me to the pound to have him put down. She said it was because he was stupid. I'm not sure if that was better or worse than the time she made my eight-year-old brother drown the stray puppy he brought home.

The anger was blinding and relentless. I remembered everything.

When the hospice nurse comes in the morning, my mom tells her that she feels like she's floating on a big, purple cloud, making it sound like she's being peacefully carried away by cherubic death angels instead of committing a slow semi-assisted suicide. When the nurse leaves, my mom tells me not to be afraid of death, that it feels really quite pleasant, though I suspect she is describing the effects of klonopin rather than the act of dying. Then she calls me a snowflake, and I can tell she means it as an insult, but it's one that she can easily deny.

When the nurse leaves, my mom asks me if I want her roll-top desk. I explain that it's too big for my office. She tells me that she paid nine-hundred dollars for it, and I tell her it's too expensive for my office, too. Her eyes droop into narrow slits. "After I die," she says quietly, "I want you to go to the See's Candy store and buy a box of candy. Then I want you to deliver it to my doctor's office as a thank you." Though for what I'm not sure, but I promise her that I will, and she falls asleep.

It's strange having her be so quiet. Normally my mother talks incessantly, holding entire rooms full of people captive and bored. One sentence runs into the next like a DJ crossfading songs, fearful of leaving even the slightest gap between sentences lest someone take over the floor. She doesn't talk about ideas, she doesn't have discussions, instead it's just a nonstop diatribe to anyone within earshot. It might be a long-winded but benign commentary about the carpet or the neighbor's new pantsuit, or squirt bottle she needs to return at Target, or the color of her new watering can. But it was usually a scathing monologue about someone, my stepsister, me, her friend that is no longer her friend, her brother who she only recently found out existed, but already is at war with.

I watch her sleep for a while. Her face is so familiar, I know every line and crease, but looking at it holds no comfort. I feel nothing except the stirring of a vague hatred that I turn on myself. What kind of monster watches her dying mother sleep and feels anything but sadness. I force myself to remember the good times, but I come up blank. I search my memory for motherly moments of warmth; giggling at a movie together, a joyful holiday dinner, a sunny afternoon at the beach, nothing. Instead the words from a Lucinda Williams song leap into my head, "The same hands that held you when you were two, are the same hands that beat you black and blue."

As she sleeps, I quietly pull open the top drawer of her dresser, I slip my hand through a nest of pink nightgowns and knee length nylons rolled into balls, searching for my grandmother's necklace that my mom has always kept in her top drawer. Instead, my fingers land on something cold and hard and retrieve it carefully. It's a gun, a loaded gun. I tuck it back in the drawer and quickly slide it shut. I sprint out of the house, and take a long walk on the deer trails through the dry grass and oak trees on their property. I remember last month when I took my mom to a doctor's appointment, how she'd told the nurses and the doctor, at separate times, that she kept her cane with her at all times to keep her husband from hitting her. I wasn't alarmed at the time because I just assumed, as I always did, that she was lying. Now the lie seemed more sinister, like she was deliberately planting seeds. The same seeds she'd planted with a neighbor and the local sheriff, telling them she was afraid of her husband, who at 87 couldn't have thrown a cup against the wall, let alone an adult woman. Together these actions, in my mind, added up to a plan B, which thankfully she skipped in favor of plan C. Plan C: With her doctor's blessing, but without consulting her husband of thirty-five years, she was put on hospice, stopped taking her prescription medicines, twenty-four in all, and left the office with a prescription for klonopin.

When I was a small child, I didn't have any reference points to gauge my mom's behavior. She saw nothing wrong with tying a net over my crib so I wouldn't climb out, or clipping my harness to the clothesline like a dog, so neither did I. When I was locked out of the house in the snow, or made to go to bed without dinner, or felt the sudden sting of a slap land on my cheek or leg, I assumed I deserved it. I wasn't sure

what I'd done to make her pack my suitcase and boot me out of the house when I was four, but I do remember sitting on that suitcase on the corner for hours, and wishing desperately that I had somewhere to go but back home.

While growing up, my family moved every six months or so. Sometimes to a new state, or a new country, or just a different neighborhood. Each time, even if we only moved a short distance, my brothers and I would start at a new school. We were never in one place long enough for a teacher to realize I could barely read by fifth grade. While both my brothers had been tested and tutored for dyslexia in first or second grade, paragraphs still slid around the pages of my books, sentences repeated, letters flipped, d's and b's looked exactly the same. I gave up trying to learn, and instead focused on faking it. I carried on with this through junior high, where I started smoking weed, taking acid and going to school with a peanut butter jar of alcohol tucked in my purse.

Around this time my parents divorced and my brothers and I were dragged through a chaotic series of wrong turns made by each of them. At fourteen my mom suspected that I was gay, I wasn't, and threatened to send me to foster care, she didn't. Instead she sent me to live with my father, who could barely take care of himself. He allowed me to stay with him under the condition that I cook five nights a week, clean the house, do the grocery shopping and laundry for him and my older brother, and went to highschool. This Cinderella pact was still easier than living under the same roof as my mom, whose normal terrifying rages had turned into terrifying drunken rages. The day I turned sixteen I got a job, and soon after moved out of my dad's house into my own apartment. I was still attending school, but on an "as I felt like it" basis. This was in part because there was an ongoing turf war between the chicano kids, and the white kids. And since the white kids were outnumbered three to one, it was often just easier, and safer to go to the beach. At seventeen I managed to graduate highschool, though with a D average, and barely literate.

At eighteen, when I thought I'd lived through the worst of it and adult life would bring some relief, I began having massive panic attacks. At the time I had no idea what was happening to me. I was afraid to tell anyone and had no words to describe it anyway. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. I dropped fifteen pounds in the span of a month. I stopped seeing my friends. I went to my job everyday, but was only marginally effective. I was terrified that I was going insane. Eventually I showed up at my mom's house amatiated and in tears, and tried to tell her that there was something wrong with me, really wrong. Her response was to show me her new set of casserole dishes and to chide me for my bad complexion. In the end, it was ballet that would pull me out of it. A strict teacher and a bar to hold onto, it was my first foray into hard work and self-discipline, and an eating disorder put to good use.

It wasn't until my daughter was born in my early twenties that I even began to understand the gravity of my childhood abuse. Looking at my tiny infant sleeping in her cradle, my heart was bursting with love and adoration, and excitement for all the things ahead, and I found myself thinking: how could anyone hurt such a precious little thing? And then I thought: why am I even thinking this? I kept my daughter well away from my mother while she was growing up. Still, Grandma insinuated herself into our lives by inviting herself overnor simply showing up unannounced, once arriving with a kitten she'd named Lucifer, for my three-year-old.

My daughter's childhood was the ultimate gauge to measure the shortfalls of my own. I got a front row seat to what the life of a child could be like, and as she grew, I grew. She attended the same school with the same kids from kindergarten through twelfth grade. She kept the same friends throughout and learned to hash out problems. She grew up knowing that she was an important thread in the tapestry of her community, and that she had gifts to offer, and things she deserved. She was just living her childhood, but I was watching a victory unfold.

In the morning, I pull open the curtains and crack the window to let some fresh air into my mom's room. She is shrinking and growing more gaunt. I wake her up and give her two klonopin with an orange soda chaser, then empty her catheter bag and prepare a bowl of warm water to give her a sponge bath. I ask as I prop her up on some pillows, and I pull her pink nightgown off over her head and pretend I'm not startled. Her body is covered with scars from her various surgeries that run across her pale skin like railroad tracks through different territories. A twelve-inch line travels from hip to thigh, and another from ankle to

shin. Pink crescents frame both her knees and arc under one breast. Yet another slices from elbow to wrist.

I wash her face with a warm washcloth. She pushes her face into my hand like a kitten and makes a silly purring sound. She opens her eyes and says "You're pretty. Have I ever told you that before? You're very pretty."

"No," I want to scream. "Never once in fifty-six years have you ever told me I look pretty."

"Thanks," I say, and pull a fresh pink nightgown over her head. Almost all of my mom's clothes are either pink or white, or pink and white. Even when I was a young this struck me as false advertising. I rarely wear either color.

"Do you know what happens when you die?" my mom asks as I'm smoothing her blankets and tucking her in tightly like she used to do for me.

"I don't think anyone knows what happens when we die," I say.

"I do," she says with her signature certainty. "Nothing happens. Nothing at all. You die and you are gone. There is no god, there is no heaven. You are just gone."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Of course I'm sure. God was made up by people who were ignorant and scared."

My mother was raised Jehovah's Witness, but in a house full of lies and contradictions. The official story was that a nice church elder took in my grandmother, a poor single mother, and her four children. The real story was that my grandmother and the nice church elder were lovers, an arrangement that would have gotten them disfellowshipped. And the nice church elder was also a peodiphile, who preyed on my aunt and my mother. This was during the depression in 1940s Canada, a time when Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted, in part because of their conscientious objection to military service, which included children not being allowed to sing the national anthem during the morning flag salute at school, which got her routinely expelled from school. Holidays were spent not celebrating holidays, and weekends were spent walking up and down the city streets wearing sandwich boards spreading the word of God. An act that would have made it hard to believe there was a God. Consequently, my brothers and I were raised in a spiritual void, knowing absolutely nothing about religion, the bible or god.

I've never thought about death much, but now that's all I can think about, and I realize I have no idea what to do. While my mom naps I scroll through a website selling coffins, the polished mahogany with brass handles and lined in billow satin, seems a bit extravagant, not to mention expensive, for something destined to be incinerated. I hop over to Ebay and resist entering a bidding war over a hand painted casket in the shape of a squash blossom from Ghana. It's late and I'm down the rabbit hole. I scroll through page after page, but the human adult caskets are mixed in with wicker cooling caskets from the 1800s, and miscarriage burial caskets, and halloween props. I stumble on a blog about the funeral industrial complex, and read about the ways funeral homes gouge the grieving, and learn that any funeral home will provide a cremation casket made of thick cardboard that costs under a hundred bucks and makes the deceased look like a giant flower delivery. Sold. I move on to shopping for urns. I'm tempted to order one with a flock of enamel birds taking flight across the engraved silver vessel. She hates birds. If she wasn't dying right now, she'd probably be sitting on her porch with a vodka tonic in one hand, and a pellet gun in the other shooting at the blue jays that flock around on her pyracantha tree.

My mother's toxic shenanigans, far too numerous to catalog, continued well into my adulthood. While she wasn't particularly kind to my brothers, her vitriolic actions toward me were practically a sport. And my desire for her approval was the fuel that pushed me to the top of my game. I minced around in dance studios, and slopped paint around canvas. I became a skilled graphic designer before computers made everyone a skilled graphic designer. I worked in high profile art studios helping build monumental sculptures. While I was competent at most things I tried, I was nearly thirty before I found something I was good at, but when I did, I hit the ground running. I wrote, day and night, in grocery store lines, on scraps of paper and matchbooks. I wrote essays that got published one after the other in newspapers and magazines around the country. On the rare occasion I'd visit my mom, I'd bring her copies of my published work. If she ever read any of them, she never told me. Soon I started writing short stories that turned into long stories, that turned into books. Books that got published by actual publishing houses. I sent her signed editions and got

no reply.

Unwisely, I sent my mother an advanced copy of my second book, a memoir ostensibly about getting married, but actually about being a mostly unemployable artist raising a child as a single mother in San Francisco. The book included the line, "Raising my daughter was as close as I'll ever get to a happy childhood, and it allowed me to be the mother I wish I'd had." While honest and true, still a sentiment that would understandably be difficult for any mother to read. Yet what launched her into a frenzied smear campaign against me was mentioning that she'd accidentally burned my forehead with a curling iron while helping me get dressed for my first wedding. To her it was an crippling insult, to me it was a comedic anecdote, and by far the nicest bad thing I could say about my mother.

For the next month she made phone calls to friends and family and raged about me to anyone who would listen. She sent me newspaper clippings about authors who'd been caught passing fiction off as truth. She retained a lawyer to draft a letter threatening to sue me and my publisher if we didn't remove the passage. We didn't remove the passage. The day before my official book launch I received a letter from her that may as well have been written in blood. As much as I told myself it didn't matter, I spent most of my lavish book launch event curled in a ball on the floor upstairs, eating xanax like pez.

I never cut her out of my life completely because I knew drawing that line would be setting myself for sabotage on a whole different scale. I didn't know what she'd do, or how she'd do it, but I knew that whatever it was it would be devastating, and that I would never see it coming. But I did stop seeking her approval.

The life is draining out of my mom faster now. Her skin is grey, her fingers are bones. When she sleeps she grimaces like she's in pain. When the hospice nurse comes to check on her, I ask if we can get something to make my mom more comfortable. The big medicine, as my mom has been calling it. In the evening my stepfather drives into town to pick up the prescription for dilaudid, while I paint my mom's fingernails with silver glitter nail polish.

"What do you miss most mom?" I ask.

"Vodka," she answers, without skipping a beat.

When I'm done with her nails I bring her a shot glass half filled with vodka and a short straw, and a vodka and orange juice for me. I hold the tiny glass and put the straw between her dry lips. She takes a long sip and smiles.

"I want to tell you something," she whispers. There's a long pause while she formulates her thoughts. I move closer and lean in, and against my better judgment, find myself hoping for the eleventh hour apology that I so desperately need. I stare into her dark eyes and wait. "I know we've had our issues," she begins, "but I forgive you."

I nearly spit a mouthful of vodka and orange juice all over her. "You forgive me?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry for all that stuff when you were a kid."

She could have stopped there, but that would have been out of character. She continues. "It's just that, it's just that you were such a bad kid." And there it is, always a caveat.

"I was a child." I remind her.

"You just always seemed to have it out for me."

"I was a child," I remind her again.

Even though I suspect that klonopin and the big purple cloud are responsible for her attempt at an apology, rather than a heartfelt August revelation, it's more than I expected, and I'm still happy to hear the words.

"I'm glad you're here," she says. I nod. I'm guessing she knows as well as I do, that I am the last person who should be here. I am here because I am not my mother.

My stepdad comes in with the medicine, a small bottle of orange liquid. I read the directions and fill the dropper to the halfway mark. "This'll make you feel better," I say. She opens her mouth and I slide the dropper in. She bites down on it, hard, and doesn't let go until every drop is gone. "What does it taste like?" I ask.

"It tastes like a walking stick." At first I think she's just being funny, but then it occurs to me that she means it. The medicine is going to take her on her journey.

I have no idea how I'm going to feel when she is gone. As a mother she hasn't given me a lot to hold on to, unless you count anger. But even without her semi-apology that may or may not have been sincere, I'm done being angry. I know who she is, and I know enough about her own childhood, to have a pretty clear idea of why she is that way. I don't feel forgiveness exactly, but something like acceptance. I would have liked to have had a mother with even a few of the basic motherly attributes, but I didn't. What I have had is a life filled with magnificent people who have cherished me to the core, and a relationship with my own child that fills me with sunshine. I watch her sleep and she looks so peaceful and innocent, and I think as hard as it has been to be her daughter, it must have been even harder to be herself.

While she sleeps I read Yelp reviews of funeral homes, and request an appointment with the one with the least amount of complaints, for the next morning. When I get back from the appointment my stepfather is sitting next to her bed, holding her hand. "I gave her another dose of the medicine," he says sadly. He gets up and I sit down. I squeeze her hand and her eyes flicker open. I notice that the window is closed and leap up to crack it open. There's a superstition that you need to leave a window open for the spirit to get out at the time of death, and I've been keeping the window cracked a bit all week because, why not. And even though my mom doesn't think there is anything on the other side, I'd like for her to be able to find out. When I sit back down, no more than ten seconds later, I squeeze her hand and her eyes don't open.

I'd always known that my mom wasn't like other moms, but I didn't understand what was actually wrong with her until a few years ago. When Trump was elected, and despair settled over the county, the word narcissist was suddenly in the wind. Not knowing what the term meant exactly, I decided to look it up. Quickly I stumbled upon a personality disorder profile of a malignant narcissist. I read it over and over. I was stunned, not only was that our president, it was also my mother. I scoured the internet, I read articles and joined forums. I found out there were books on the subject of daughters raised by narcissistic mothers. I read those books and for the first time I understood what happened to me where the aching hole in the pit of my stomach came from. Very quickly, so many nails were hit on so many heads that I'd practically built a watchtower and I could finally see what happened. I was validated. I understood that the foggy feeling of disconnection and panic that stayed with for days before and days after seeing my mother, was PTSD. And that people grown under these circumstances either become over-achieving work horses, or defeated depressives. I am both.

How am I only finding this out now? Why didn't anyone tell me? Writing this, I remember twenty-five years earlier, on my first visit to the first of many therapists I've spent time with, trying to sort out my depression and anxiety, panic attacks, eating disorders, aching sadness, etc. I spoke about my mother in my usual casual, ha ha nothing matters, isn't child abuse funny, sort of way, and he pulled a thick book from his shelf, leafed through it for moment, then handed it to me and said "Read this." It was a concise description of a personality disorder peppered with words like; cruel, authoritative, sadistic, hostile, paranoid, grandiosity. When I finished reading and closed the book, the therapist asked me who that sounded like. "My mother," I said unequivocally. He nodded his head and said, "that's also Hitler."

BAM, welcome to therapy. Mic drop.

I would have been wise to have kept working with that therapist, but I backed away shortly after his attempt to help me access my memories through hypnosis. As he walked me back in time, I was being dragged down a hallway, a large hand clamped around my tiny wrist. I didn't want to go. When we got to the door at the end of the hall, she opened it and threw me across the room like a bowling ball. If I had been older or braver, I maybe could have hung around to explore those dark places, but as it was, I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I used to think that knowing the source of my damage would make it go away. It didn't. However things did start to make more sense. My anxiety and depression, my three marriages and three hundred boyfriends, my precarious relationship to various substances, are all the normal fallout of being raised by a malignant narcissist. As is the exhaustion I feel after being around most people. Narcissists don't produce rival narcissists, instead they produce empaths who can read the mood of a person, or a room, as effortlessly as breathing. When a child's physical and emotional safety rests on her ability to anticipate the actions of those around her, she learns to do just that. However, once that superpower is activated, it's difficult to shut

down, and it's exhausting. I've spent years learning how to tune out the white noise of hyper-awareness.

After my mom passed and the half healed scars had all been torn back open, it seemed like a good time to clean out those wounds. I sought out a therapist who works specifically with survivors of narcissistic abuse. She kept wanting me to isolate specific moments of trauma to work on but those moments were impossible to isolate, those moments were always. Terror was everyday. Fear was every day. My rebellion was every day. After making my therapist cry while talking about my childhood for a third time in four appointments, I felt like I was spending more time assuring her that I'm okay, than her helping me to actually become okay.

I was really hoping to find someone who would help me make a murder board of my life, with red string running from a cause, to an effect, to a triumph, in order to solve the mystery of my bridge phobia, and my fear of heights, my spring-loaded defensiveness, my inability to know if I'm hungry. But there is no mystery. Child abuse messes people up in a thousand ways. You aren't like other people. You might learn to pass, but you know you are different. Deep down you feel like you've been built out of broken pieces, and suspect that some parts are missing altogether. Sometimes these deficits are filled in with useful attributes like resilience and resourcefulness, charm, and humor. If you're smart, you learn to play to your strengths instead of your weaknesses. If you're lucky you grow up to be an artist, so that when the things you shove down just so you can function, begin to stir, and that molten mix of dark emotions threatens to erupt, you have a release valve.

I gave up trying to find someone to help me come to terms with my childhood, and decided instead to make friends the emotional void, and at times to fill it with projects and dogs, surfing and a kind husband whose scars rivals my own, and relishing the victory of raising a child who has no idea what it is like to be crushed by the people who should love her most. I still sink into depression on a fairly regular basis. Sometimes it lasts for only a day or two, and I am depressed about actual things, or events that have transpired. Other times I can see it coming from a mile off, like a dust cloud. The darkness looms in my periphery, then envelopes me. I know it's going to be bad, though I usually have no idea why. I sink. I try not to sink. I sink anyway. I plant flowers, and call friends, I eat chocolate, and swim, but nothing really helps. Sometimes the best I can do is remind myself that this is just a moment, and that it will pass, and my job is to hold on until it does. This will have to suffice until I find a therapist with a decoder ring for my brand of damage.

The Prison of Perfection | Annie B. Johnston

Hello out there,

I'm writing to you from prison. You may have heard of this place: It's called *Perfectionism*.

My name is Anne Bollin. Anne Bollin, like Henry VIII's wife Anne B-o-l-e-y-n who was imprisoned and beheaded by her royal husband when she failed to meet *his* standards of perfection. Unlike my ancient namesake, I am shackled by arbitrary standards of perfection that I think others have of me, or that I impose on myself. Can you relate? If so, perhaps we can break out of this place together!

The prison bars of perfectionism appear when I'm on the verge of taking a risk that involves vulnerability. Let's say I start a creative project: I'll get excited by a new idea, complete eighty percent, then stop... because there's something about the piece doesn't feel quite right. That last twenty percent involves completing and putting the piece out into the world. That's when I hesitate and start to erect prison bars in my mind: The first bar, *What if this is not what I really want to say?*; second bar, *What if I fail to see an important perspective and hurt/offend someone with what I put out there?*; the third bar, *What if this results in the loss of love?*

I can stay inside this prison for years, rationalizing that I must wait a bit longer, for one more insight to tie my project together, or apply one more polish to transform the umpteenth draft to perfect completion. If I am to keep my figurative head (aka my sanity), I need to find another way — some strategy or key — to break out of this prison of perfectionism.

How did I lose my freedom?

This loss of freedom is based on a longstanding semi-conscious belief that that Perfect = Safe. If my work is flawless — if I cover every base and achieve every goal — then I won't be vulnerable. This playbook is hard to shake as it has driven me to achievement educationally, professionally — to color-coded spreadsheets, calendars and closets, to precision and promptness. I have felt satisfaction and pride from such achievements, but over the years the stress has taken its toll.

In *How To Overcome Perfectionism: 4 Secrets From Research*, Eric Barker writes:

"A perfectionistic outlook is no fun. You live in the future, and the present is a high-stakes situation where every mistake has enormous ramifications later. You're under perpetual threat, constantly scanning for worst-case scenarios, always trying to dodge any potential for error or criticism... So why don't perfectionists just change? Because having high standards and working hard really does produce results. And that's what's so insidious about the problem. Being conscientious and thorough are praised, workaholicism is among the most acceptable of addictions and we often throw around maxims like 'you can never be too careful.' (Spoiler alert: actually, you can.)"

What's the cost?

Last year I was working at my standard clip, making sure that no balls were dropped, as I always have. I was checking my email every fifteen minutes. I was tired and irritable. I got that the relentless game of Whac-A-Mole was unsustainable, but how could I possibly learn to see the moles that pop up as not needing to be whacked?

One Friday night I wandered into a talk on mindfulness. The instructors were wearing white flowy outfits. They described the way I was feeling as "wired and tired" and suggested "surrender" and "trust" as remedies for my exhaustion. My arms crossed reflexively across my chest, "Must be nice...but I have work to do." And btw how do I know that if I "surrender" the moles won't ban together to storm the house?

So I kept my head down, as they say, and kept on working. The more exhausted I became the more argumentative I was when a bright-eyed instructor bounced along to suggest there was an alternative. They were naive, I figured, so I kept them at bay by big-timing them with a long list of my responsibilities. "Thank you for your suggestion, but people are counting on me to (insert laundry list of important things)..." At work I was becoming less creative and more forceful. At home I lamented to my partner about the stresses

of work and on the weekends I “recovered” with cocktails.

Finally, I hit a wall of exhaustion. I was still skeptical but too tired to argue. A friend saw this in my face and suggested a “wellness” retreat in Northern California. I started to analyze the cost benefits and she grabbed me by the shoulders: “Go. You need this.” Fair enough. Worst case, if the trek didn’t help I’d have definitive closure that relief was unattainable and I could return to business as usual. So I drove up to a forested land north of San Francisco. We kicked off with an exercise called “What’s the cost?” where another person asks you a bunch of times in succession the cost of holding onto something that you had identified as not serving you.

Q: What’s the cost?

A: The cost of perfectionism is that it keeps me from feeling free to share my creativity.

Q: What’s the cost?

A: The cost is that living in the future robs me of the present moment.

Q: What’s the cost?

A: The cost is that I will look back on my life with regret for the things I wanted to create but didn’t.

- Repeat fifty times -

What emerged for me here was that while I benefit from and enjoy some of the fruits of my perfectionistic tendencies (the color-coded calendar is beautiful and practical), they also hold me back in areas that are important to me. The mallet (my perfectionism) is a great tool to have — but at this point, am I using it or is it using me? What if I could wield the mallet in the times that it serves me, and choose another tool in the times it isn’t needed? What if, instead of a game of Whac-A-Mole, I saw life as a game of golf? Instead of a mallet, a nine-iron. In a golf game, I could use a nine-iron all eighteen holes, but I’d probably do better if I picked a club to match the distance I need to hit. An attorney friend told me recently, “It took me a while to get that I need to show up differently depending on the circumstance. Intensity can be helpful to cross-examine a witness but not so much with my five year old.”

My perfectionistic mind can wrap around the idea of picking the optimal tool to fit each goal. Perhaps thinking of myself as a golfer will help me put down the mallet and relax my standards in some departments. But, why do I still feel that pang of fear and avoidance when it comes to finishing a piece? What is at the root of this?

Perfection: Latin perfectiō “a completing,” from perficere “to finish.”

To finish. When is something truly finished? When it is no longer evolving, no longer living. Perfection = Death.

Maybe perfection isn’t for mere mortals — maybe it’s a state reserved for nature and her cycles over thousands of years and beyond. In Northern California I saw perfection in Redwood trees two-thousand years old. I’ve seen perfection on Flathead Lake, Montana in the blues of the lake, mountains and sky that blend together and connect the heavens with the earth. I’ve seen perfection in the orange melting into reds and yellows over the ocean as the sun sets. In the majesty of the Southern magnolia trees that grew outside my childhood home in Georgia. These were perfect to me — I couldn’t fathom any improvement. But if perfection is death and nature is alive, then nature is also imperfect, or in its perfection it contradicts, defies or shatters the idea of perfection itself...In fact, it seems absurd to attempt to define nature in these terms — nature just is.

The prison bars come back into my mind’s eye. The first bar, *What if this is not what I really want to say?* Seeing perfection as dead, stagnant helps me see that each project, each creation is a living reflection of where I am in my life at a particular moment in time. There is no light switch, no future final state in life’s continuous evolution. With this in mind I can consciously reject the arrival fallacy: that when I achieve a particular outcome in the future, I’ll finally become — and remain — happy. And, then, choose to appreciate the alive, flawed beauty of a project as it is, and the learning opportunity in each draft to develop, strengthen, and expand my creative powers. If perfection is death, I choose imperfection and life.

Second bar, *What if I fail to see an important perspective and hurt/offend someone?* Behind this bar is the assumption that by keeping my thoughts to myself — not speaking up, not sharing my work, not raising my hand — that I will do no harm. What's really happening is that when I don't share something that could be helpful, I prioritize my own comfort over the greater good, failing to raise topics or questions that could move the conversation forward, encourage others to share their stories or strengthen collective ties between us. My intention for sharing is not to hurt or offend, but if I want to make a difference I must accept and expect that something I share will inadvertently offend or upset someone.

Brené Brown says:

“Do the best work you can and find the courage to put your work out there and know that, no matter what you do, some people are going to like it and some people aren't. All you can really control is how you feel about what you've contributed. The thing was to say out loud how hard that really is: ‘I want to be brave with my work and I want to be brave with my life.’”

Attempting to meet the expectations I think others have for me and my own high ones is truly exhausting. I know, I've tried. To continue is to guarantee the same fate as Anne Boleyn, that I lose my life and my freedom because the standard against which I'm being judged is an impossible, moving target.

This modern Anne Boleyn has learned that true freedom lies in defining my own standards. What is “good enough” for me? I **create to unleash my imagination**, clarify my thinking and paint emotions so I can see them. I do it for the joy of doing it. I share with the hope that something in my experience will make a positive impact in the life of someone somewhere out there, let them know they're not alone, offer a perspective that helps them to live with less fear and more freedom. For me, that's enough.

The final prison bar: *What if this results in the loss of love?* This taps into the primal fear of losing connection with others and getting kicked out of the tribe. To protect from this potential loss, one option is to show up as a strategically packaged version of myself, sharing only the parts that don't seem too vulnerable. This packaged approach not only costs energy, it actually blocks the authentic connection that I want. In having the courage to share more of myself, I open the doors to create and *grow* meaningful connections. I can reclaim the energy spent worrying about who I think I need to be in order to be loveable and have more to give to the people, projects and pursuits that I love.

Then there's the deep personal cost. When I live my life in relation to a standard of perfection, a future time and place when I have achieved this or learned that or banked this much or gotten myself into the shape I want, I reject myself in the present. The truly tragic part is that this perfectionistic future orientation has no end: no matter how well I perform at a given challenge, there's always the next one and then the next one, and in the meantime I am withholding full acceptance and love of myself like some sort of a torturous form of motivation.

If I am going to break myself out of prison I realize that it's a matter of making a choice. The choice to fully accept and love myself *now*, in this very moment, without conditions or prerequisites. This is so much easier to say than it is to do. For me it hasn't been a light switch thing either, it's a continual practice with ups and downs, teaching myself to notice when I start strategising or criticizing — stop — and speak the word “grace.”

Perfection is an impossible standard, yet it is understandable that we want to make something “perfect,” that will do away with all the sadness, suffering and imperfections of this world. The paradox is that we will try and, inevitably, we will fail, and out of our trial and error and limitations comes the reminder of our own and others' humanity. With this key in hand, this Anne Boleyn will stick her neck out in pursuit of living progress over dead perfection, of meaningful connection and choosing love now. I choose imperfection and life — and the doors of my prison swing open.

Arcade | Joe Manus

I had a sister.

She had diabetes.

When I was little, I wondered why the world and its God would make a sick little girl? Sick in a way that would deprive her of the coveted little girl things. Things like candy, dignity, recess, confidence, spend the night parties, or even a full night's sleep without the machine gun pulsation of a seizure.

Diabetes robbed her and all around her of the luxury of a peaceful tomorrow.

I hated that disease. I hated it with evil hate. I was three years younger, but would stand up for her when people made fun. Her convulsions and diet allowed her names like The Break Dancer, Sugar Free, and my least favorite The Fucked Up Sick Girl.

We grew up some together.

Over time though, I began to resent the attention it deprived me of. I was an afterthought to keeping her happy and alive. It was nobody's fault, but that fact didn't stop me from depositing blame on her.

Chronic sickness corrupts the bystander's sensibilities, twisting rights into wrongs, love into something else.

At fourteen her eyesight was at an almost full eclipse. She lived in the dark in the day and slept in the bright remembrances of her memory at night. She still shook to her nervous system percussion, washing down her pride with orange juice laced with glucose.

One night we were dropped off at the small-town arcade. She sported Gloria Vanderbilt jeans and a ruffled chest plaid button up. She stared blankly past me as she walked in. We had fought all day and it spilled into that night. When some time had passed, our pockets empty and the machines mouths full, we stepped back out. My Dad was going to grab us up any minute. A Lincoln Mark 3 pulled up in front of us. I told my newly blinded sibling it was our father. She opened their passenger door and got in.

Uproarious laughter at, not with.

She hated me for that. I hated myself for that. I also enjoyed the calm solace that accompanied the distant heart. We cared a little less about each other for a moment and it made her inevitably foreseeable death a little less painful.

She left when she was twenty three.

Sweeter than the candy deprived her.

The machine gun in her lay dormant.

Her eyes closed full of light.

The Authors | Biographies

Laura Stanfill is a novelist and the publisher of Forest Avenue Press. Her creative work is represented by Laurie Fox of the Linda Chester Literary Agency.

Andy Betz has tutored and taught in excess of 30 years. He lives in 1974, and has been married for 27 years. His works are found everywhere a search engine operates.

Pamela Holm is a San Francisco author and playwright. She is currently sheltering in place, working on a new musical as well as a memoir about trying to stay alive while living in India for a year and a half. Her work has been produced in small theaters in San Francisco, and published by MacAdamCage, and Villard/Random House, and newspapers and magazines around the country.

Annie B. Johnson is a writer and wealth advisor in Los Angeles. She has published two essays, “Real Affluence” and “No Regret Insurance” in Psychology Today online. Her short story “The Therapist” was published in the Penmen Review. She has participated in the Donald Freed Masters Creative Writing Seminar since 2010 and is the winner of the Debt of Honor International Writers Workshop: 2018 Award for Net Writing. She has a BA from the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication.

Joe Manus is a lifetime resident of the South. He was educated in the public schools of rural Georgia, receiving his high school diploma in 1992. Joe is an award winning furniture designer. He believes in living the best and the worst of the human experience and writing about it.