



**VERBALIST'S  
JOURNAL**

Volume 1 - Issue 1  
Edited by Wesley K. Andrews

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# PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Verbalist's Journal* is the published record of storytelling works presented orally at *Verbalists*. This issue features storytellers from the October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011 *Verbalists* showcase.

Modern storytelling, as a genre, falls between the usual definitions of theatre, fiction, and the personal essay. The pieces in this issue of *Verbalist's Journal* weave autobiography with imagination and offer reflections on identity and self. This journal is best understood as an imperfect archival of a live event; although we may enjoy these works silently, reading from printed paper or electronic monitors, we must remember that they were meant to be shared aloud.

The storytellers of *Verbalists* in October 2011 were Mallery Avidon, Ann Hedreen, Wesley K. Andrews, Jenny Forrester, and Elizabeth Lord. Ms. Lord works without a written text and is therefore not included in this journal; please know that she is truly hilarious and that her piece Egg Story was a smash hit at the showcase. You can read more about her at [www.professionaltalker.com](http://www.professionaltalker.com).

Thank you to 826 Seattle, the famous writing center in Greenwood, for hosting the event and for all their excellent work in the community. Thank you to Theatre Puget Sound and Amazon.com for their funding support of the event and for making *Verbalists* part of the *ArtsCrush* festival. Thank you to John Vreeke, theatre director, who worked with the storytellers to enhance their presentation and wring the magic out of their words. And finally, thanks to you, the reader, for taking the time.

[www.verbalists.net](http://www.verbalists.net)

# STORYTELLER BIOS

## ANN HEDREEN

**Ann Hedreen's** *Restless Nest* commentaries can be heard on KBCS radio. She recently completed a memoir called *Her Beautiful Brain*. Ann and her husband Rustin Thompson own White Noise Productions and together have made more than 100 documentary films. They have two almost-grown-up children and live in south Seattle. Ann has an MFA from Goddard College and is an alumna of the Hedgebrook center for women writers.

## JENNY FORRESTER

**Jenny Forrester** loves telling stories. Some of them are truer than others. She was the 2011 winner of the New Works Competition at the Richard Hugo House and the 2011 runner up in Indiana Review's 1/2K prize. Visit her at [www.facebook.com/#!/trailertrashwriting](http://www.facebook.com/#!/trailertrashwriting).

## WESLEY K. ANDREWS

**Wesley K. Andrews** is a writer and performer whose work has been seen at the Solo Performance Festival, iDiOM Theatre, the Frye Museum, and 14/48: The World's Quickest Theater Festival, among others. He was a company member of NewsWrights United for their productions of *The New New News* and *WikiLeaked: The Cables* and is collaborating with film director Nik Perleros on the short comedy *How To Get Laid* and feature-length drama *In the Interest of Security*. Andrews is the producer of *Verbalists*.

## MALLERY AVIDON

**Mallery Avidon** is primarily a playwright. Her plays have been developed or produced in Seattle, Chicago, New York, Boston, Providence & San Francisco. She was born and raised in Seattle & still lives here sometimes. Her play *Breaks & Bikes* will premiere in Chicago in 2012. BFA/Cornish College of the Arts, MFA/Brown University.

## ELIZABETH LORD

**Elizabeth Lord** was reared in Las Vegas, NV. When she was 18 she decided she wanted to be a professional storyteller after seeing a visiting troupe of professional storytellers at her local library. She has called herself a professional storyteller since 1995, and has performed for the City of Olympia, Pierce County Library, Olympia School District, and TESC, among others. She writes and performs original solo storytelling shows, including *Vegas Childhood*, *Cheap Rent*, *Getting There*, *Smoking is Cool*, *Personal Ad*, and *Please Write*. Read more at [www.professionaltalker.com](http://www.professionaltalker.com).

## JOHN VREEKE

**John Vreeke** is a lifelong theatre director whose Seattle credits include Book It Repertory Theatre, Arts West Playhouse, and Seattle Public Theater, among others. National credits include Alley Theater in Houston, Arkansas Repertory Theater, Attic Theatre in LA, Salt Lake Acting Company, and First Stage in Milwaukee. John is a company member at Woolly Mammoth, where he has directed *A Bright New Boise* by Sam Hunter, *Gruesome Playground Injuries* by Rajiv Joseph, *boom* by Peter Sinn-Nachtrieb, *Homebody / Kabul* by Tony Kushner, *Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street* by Stephen Adley Guirgis, *Martha Jose and the Chinese Elvis* by Charlotte Jones, and *The K of D* by Laura Shellhardt.

# A LETTER TO MY BROTHER

Jenny Forrester

*I'd like to tell my brother a story that he doesn't know that will make him understand how I became a left-wing feminist much to his great dismay and disgust.*

I ask my brother, "Will you beat him up for me?" I want my brother to hurt a boy who hurt me.

"I can't," he tells me. "That guy's small, even smaller than me, but he's mean. Besides, he has friends. And this town is small. Their family has land. And their dad's mean. I saw him once. He drives a really big truck."

\*

We live in a small town. Eight-hundred people, in the southwest corner of Colorado, far from freeways and train tracks. Our father lives in California. We don't see him or hear from him except on our birthdays. He never calls on the right day for either of us. He knows the month we were born.

Our mother takes good care of us.

But in this town, you're supposed to have a father. It's the western American Christian way.

So, my brother has many Mormon fathers. They teach him boy scout-related things and help with his pine wood derby car.

These men want us girls to learn different things. These Mormon men, these non-Mormon men. In a town, a faith somehow related to Jesus is all you need, but you do need Jesus.

These men – they want our uteruses to be pure, to be used only by our future husbands for their future children.

It's true.

I'll tell you how I know.

\*

I wake up to find Tammy, a girl from school – shaking my shoulder hard. She digs her fingernails in.

"Get up lazy!" She's not alone. I hear someone else laugh. It's Sharon. She's a senior. They've never been in our trailer before.

"What's..."

"You'll see."

I get out of bed and they both scream with laughter. I'm wearing a nightgown that's torn in many places. There's a hole in one of the seams so one of my boobs shows.

"You have to wear that nightgown," they say when I reach for a pair of jeans on the floor.

"No. I'm not doing this." Tammy grabs my arm, digs those fingernails in deeper than before. She's a junior.

"You have to. Your mom said."

Tammy pulls me past my brother's door – closed now. He can't help me. He wouldn't help me anyway. He'd think this was hilarious.

I will myself to have a sense of humor, but it's not working out.

"Mom!" I plead as they drag me past her.

She's got a pained look in her eyes. Her daughter is about to go out into a Christian town with a breast showing.

"I almost told you to wear a t-shirt or something last night, but I didn't want you to know about the surprise."

"The surprise!" I say.

I'm angry and dragged into a car. Mom has made an exception to a rule of my life - she doesn't let me get into cars. I'm barely a teenager and she doesn't want me to get into other teenager's cars.

It's a cold, icy morning. The snow is dry. Tammy takes a moment to throw some snow into my jacket before she sits down next to me and tells Sharon, "We got the best one!"

She tells me to take off my glasses. I cradle them. They'll help me survive whatever is coming next.

She blindfolds me.

I can't imagine why my mom said this could happen to me, but my anger keeps me from crying. Crying right now would be unwise.

We drive for only a few minutes (our town is so small) and then Tammy pulls me across icy pavement. I fall. My knee is scraped. Tammy's laughing her demon laugh harder than ever.

We walk through a doorway and Tammy takes the handkerchief blindfold off. And I put my glasses back on.

This is the basement of the Mormon temple that doubles as the basement of the Masonic Lodge – Joseph Smith would've liked the idea that Saturday night dances took place there from time to time.

The girls from my class are there except two. The new girls from the city. It's Peggy, Karla, Consuela, Kelly and Becky, Donna and Catherine. Wendy's here, too – we go to the same church. There are girls from the next class younger – Jane, Elizabeth and Dawn – the girl with a wall of belts and parenting weaponry that her parents use against her and her siblings to raise them up right.

Tammy makes me hang up my jacket. I try to keep my nightgown holes pinched together, but there are too many to handle.

The older girls there don't let us younger girls talk to each other.

Consuela groans and Tammy laughs at her, tells her to do push ups. Tammy's a star basketball player. She's wire strong and dog mean.

The older girls herd us up a narrow stair well and into a small room. A heavy dark door stops us.

They take Karla alone. We're silent and waiting. We don't hear Karla scream, but it doesn't make us feel better.

They take other girls. One at a time.

Tammy comes out and gives me a sweater to wear. I button every last button and breathe relief.

We walk through the door into a small room with two doors on one wall. She knocks on the one on the right, the door opens and Donna says, "Who requests entry?" as if she can't see it's me and as if we don't live in a small town and we even know the names of the stray cats.

There's a giant Bible on a dark wood table in the center of the room, a light shines on it from the ceiling.

We're told to keep everything we hear and see secret.

There are oaths to take and lines to memorize and we're given goals and will earn pins all colors of the rainbow should we accept the challenge of becoming a Rainbow Girl. We'll learn more secrets – to make us sweet and subtle, good mothers, lovely wives.

We're told the wonderful things about being girls – that we're kind and gentle and lovely.

And the best thing about us is our Virginity. We're to guard our Virginity with our lives if it should come to that.

\*

In school, we have hunter's safety and driver education, but we're spared sex education. Using birth control would require planning which would be like planning to sin.

\*

As it turns out, I am unwilling to die for my virginity.

I give it to my boyfriend Paul. We do it like good Christians – we don't plan - we sin spontaneously.

\*

My brother grows up, 9/11/01 happens and changes my city-hating brother into someone who loves skyscrapers and sees humanity in city people.

On the phone, his wife says, "We've got to take care of Islam once and for all."

She says this as my brother prepares to go to war. She would accuse me – now - of taking her words out of context. But even in context, I think the words sound the same.

In context, she said, "He's got to fight to defend America. They can't just attack us and get away with it. The Bible says that the greatest gift a man can give is his life. We've got to take care of Islam once and for all."

John, the lover of the 2nd amendment above all others, tells me after his long tour that he helped to disarm the households there making it safer for women in Iraq.

*I'd like to tell a story about my brother because he saved me when we were kids, because he's brave and a soldier (two-time Iraq veteran) and he's a fighter aside from that – it's a story that he knows but might not tell the same way that I tell it.*

\*

Our mom finds Hootie in the road on the way to work and brings him home to nurse him back to health. He is a Great-Horned Owl. He's been hit by a car and has a tear-drop shaped pupil in one eye. He perches on a bedroom door, his head tilted and when he flies down to the floor, he walks

as if looking for some light at the end of a tunnel. He runs into walls.

My mom said the cats were safe from him.

“He’s not a hunter anymore.”

\*

Later, when we’re teenagers and our mom has us go hunting so we’ll eat meat that winter, my brother stands beside me in a dry forest a few miles from our trailer.

I’m trying to pull the trigger. A deer is standing, eating a few small mouthfuls from small clumps of grass then looking up at me, waiting to feed me. He’s willing, he says. It’s a good time to die. I see the long winter he has to endure. Another winter will be painful. He’s alone.

I know I hear him say this. I’m a child who believes in the voices of animals - still. My brother is always laughing at me when I cry about all the animals we kill. “Fish don’t scream. You ever heard a fish scream?” I have, but I can’t prove it.

My brother stands beside me, talks me through the instructions on how to shoot a rifle like I don’t already know. It’s ok. I listen to him. Make sure your feet are steady. I balance, push my shoes into the forest floor. Steady your shoulder, relax. Breathe. He’s not putting me down. He’s being manly and brotherly. He wants this for me. It would make me amazing in his eyes, in so many eyes. It would elevate me - I’d be better than just a woman.

“Breathe. Pull the trigger. Breathe. Pull the trigger.” He repeats this like a prayer.

I don’t pull the trigger.

The deer walks away. He’s tired of waiting for me to grow my guts to eat his, all spiced perfect in my mother’s chili.

The weakness of my gender is confirmed.

And I embrace that weakness in my gender. My weakness means that I don’t have to kill.

\*

My brother comes to my room at night because we’re friends, we listen to each other, sometimes it seems that all we have is each other. And we whisper in the dark, not waking our mama who works hard all day and cries when we ask her for money. We tell each other our stories, our ideas, our philosophies. Some day, we tell each other, we’re going to write

this stuff down.

He tells me not to worry about things. He tells me that I’m a good girl.

I tell him how much I love him and I tell him thank you for listening to me and for keeping my secrets.

\*

My brother graduates from high school.

He joins the military. Like a lot of small town boys with options like uranium mining and working in food service. Or both.

The owl that our mama saved once got stuck under my brother’s bed, hooting and wing flapping and shaking the bed. My brother screamed in the night, “Mom! Mom! The owl’s under my bed! Hurry!!”

He tells the story later how Hootie seemed like a ghost under his bed.

And then even later, my brother tells me about blanket parties in basic training in the army where everybody put a bar of soap in a pillow case and pounded on the guy who was deemed to have deserved it. The blanket party.

My brother had to participate.

“If you don’t join in, they’ll do it to you next.”

\*

*I’d like to tell these stories because he’ll never be able to hear them and I really want someone else to hear them.*

I am a teenager. I sleep with my door open. In case. In case I need to escape or my mama needs to save me. There are many ways for the devil to enter a room. My brother and I are religious children and we become religious teenagers. We fit into this town of the devout white Christians, a few Mexican-American families, and some Indian children borrowed and stolen by Mormons away from the reservations.

I don’t close my door no matter how much the cold comes into the window and down the hallway. I don’t fear cold the way I fear evil beasts. Sounds could enter, too. I’m more afraid of whispers that could cause me to stray than I am of hypothermia. The damage to the soul is irreparable. At least according to my understanding.

I have several plans to escape the beasts and voices, the pawns of Satan. The first is to cross myself and say the words, "I banish you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost!" at which point any beasts will vanish like the smoke from our trash barrel spiraling into this wide sky.

I'm praying to be good in thought, word and deed.

The devil could be a random thought of doubt or lust triggered by some sensation, a scent of musk or blood. It could be some impulse, some hormone, some trigger of biology lurking in my flesh and bones.

It isn't enough to be good in deed. God sees all so the contents of my heart and mind matter.

My brother and I have questions. We whisper them in the dark for years and years until we leave home.

"What if Mom isn't going to hell for divorcing dad? She's so good in other ways. What does it mean that we don't get hit by lightning while we whisper?"

We speak this blasphemy as quiet as the sage outside. We know our voices could carry long distances between mesas. We live in a quiet, wide place. We don't want Jesus to hear us. He seems like the type who would tell on us - mostly because he'd be forced to. I imagine him covering his ears while he sits on the trailer and pretends to watch the dark, starry night. His father spins the heavens, the wheel that is the Milky Way above our trailer.

I close my eyes when I pray. I'm on my back because I have a bunk bed and I just can't see to kneel and then climb up. I'm tired. And I'm short. So I put my hands flat on the bed, palms down. I don't want my hands wandering. It seems wrong - no, more than that really - to touch some other part of my body, any other part of my body with my hands while trying to get God's attention.

My brother is asleep in the room next to me. His door is always closed. He's more into barricades and strongholds for defense.

My brother could build a fort anywhere - with sheets and chairs, in snow - banked or not, behind tall, dry grass or just around the corner of the trailer or the barn. He's a master of forts. Our father used to say, "Atta boy," when John made a good fort. Our mama says, "That's really good." I don't always like his forts - I'm often the enemy and suffer the consequences.

My brother's offense is as good as his defense.

I believe in symbols and submission for both offense and de-

fense. I cross myself when I'm done praying for goodness and security. But my brother's also right about borders - a good barricade can be a good defense. I open my eyes and wrap the blankets closer to my neck - vampires can't chew through blankets. No one confirms this, but I reason this has to be true. In the movies, the vampires always go for bare necks.

I believe this for way too many years - I'm a teenager before I let down the barricade to my neck a bit. I have a boyfriend and he kisses me on the neck and I like it. He wants more. It seems to get out of hand not long after he kisses my neck. I don't want more mostly because I don't want to go to hell. "We won't go to hell if we get married later," he says.

I want to believe him. The tingling of my skin and my inwards inspires this belief, a new belief and a loss of belief, too. I know God will hate me for this. There is no game playing with Him. I know my value as a woman will be diminished without my virginity. I read the Bible. I know what it says about that. The church is just a gathering of people, the Bible states and this town, this eight hundred-person gathering of souls, is only barely merciful.

I love being a Christian. Here, in the town, it means I belong. I don't belong here without that - with our single mother, a father who's never been seen here and with some city-ideas that have been voiced without understanding the consequences, my faith holds my place - it's the space I can't be kicked out of.

I keep my boyfriend at bay as long as I can. I try to be the kind of girl who can inspire a man to be a good man, a virtuous and chivalrous man, an honorable man to make me an honorable woman, but things fall into bits and pieces. I'm just not that good girl. It's exhausting. And part of me is humiliated by this.

I'm confused.

I'm old enough now that I begin to think in rebellious ways. This is a land of Mormons also known as Latter Day Saints or LDS, polygamists and not polygamists, but willing to, should the commandment come down again. All blonde and blue-eyed except for the Indian foster children. And I'm not sure the Indians really want to be Mormon and far from their mamas, but it's not something that is spoken.

My teen-aged thoughts are like this:

If Joseph Smith was just a man who created a religion that found so many followers, even to this day, then why can't I remake a religion, too? What kind of a person would I have to be to do that? Why are the rules always different for women? Why can't I behave like a man behaves and still go to man's heaven?

The out-of-town Mormons are always asking me if I'm LDS because I look like one. I could be the next prophet to lead them back to matriarchy like the Indians around here were before white men arrived with their crosses and horses.

Even with my high-minded plans for a new religion, I don't feel secure. The wind is howling, the trailer is rocking but not in a good way. I hear things blowing around outside. There's a musk skunk-like scent of possum coming up through the register - they're hiding under the trailer because they were caught off guard by this wind.

My brother starts drinking and smoking marijuana during his sophomore year and in this town at that time, that is believed to be the far edge of the slope you can't climb back up. He still chews tobacco, but that's the way of men. Around here, you're not a man if you don't chew. The circle imprinted on the back of your jeans, the color of the faded denim makes you manly. Marks you as being from around here. But his chewing isn't enough for him. It doesn't keep him rooted the way it ought to.

Our mama tries to stop him from drinking - locks him out of the house some nights when it's been too long coming home. I stay awake, listening for a car to drive into the alley and drop him off. I let him back in. I don't want him out there begging mercy from Mormons or Baptists.

And I want to keep his drinking secret. I know that secrets can keep a person safer - around here.

As our mother says, "Reputation is everything."

He misses church more often. He never goes alone anymore. Sometimes, that's what we do. We don't make it to church as a family every time, but this proves our faith - we will go alone and face God and our small tribe of strangers we call friends. Parishioners. Fellow Christians.

I'm filling up with fear because I can't pray without God transforming into some demon. I try to see his face, but it's like stone and smoke, smudged. I can't envision God with his robes on still. He is male and therefore has male anatomy - that's what makes him King of All. I shouldn't think about his male anatomy, but the more I try not to imagine it, the more I imagine it.

I confess. But not to that. I confess to loss of faith, which is better than loss of propriety. Jesus is no help. Covered with cloth, bleeding in gold paint above my bed, hanging on his cross. His troubles are far greater than mine could ever be. I want to have made that death of his meaningful - the reason he died was for me, for my soul, for all of us and I fail him time and again.

I start to cry. I'm desperate.  
My hands begin to wander.  
My hands are comforting against my skin.  
I'm going to hell.

I let go. The wind howls, the trailer shakes. The cans and other truck smash into the trailer and roll down the alley, tossed along the stones and rock hard ruts. Metal and blankets and intentions won't protect me from the devil or from God.

Jesus and I are alone.

I don't know what will happen with my brother. I imagine he'll join the army. He's always been a soldier. He says they pay for college. He believes them.

My lack of faith causes me to disbelieve everything now.

I touch Jesus' feet before I sleep. In case. And I curl into a ball, becoming a smaller target for the lightning I know is headed my way to blast me into hell.

I sing Kenny Rogers' The Gambler because it always makes me feel better. I've been singing this song for a few years now. Mom and John sing it, too. It's like our anthem.

I have to know when to hold on and when to let go. I envision The Muppets and that old Gambler's ghost dancing and singing. This makes me smile and not smile. It seems more and more important to never show your hand.

Time goes on and John and I look for ways to face our futures, to feed ourselves without our mama taking care of us, to move up and out of this town where we don't belong. We want to belong, but there are people here we don't want to become.

I have a thought that John will fit in because he's a man who can pull the trigger and he won't have to show his faith all that much. He can just be a man and it'll be expected that his sins will be forgiven. He is, after all, just a man.

I don't have this thought for myself. I believe in God's judgment, that I've been ruined not to mention that I'm unrepentant, on the whole of it.

So, I spiral away from God.  
And I practice my poker face in the dark.

Brother - hope I've earned the right to say this now. Please don't beat anybody up on account of me.

I've changed my mind.

# BLUE NEST

**Ann Hedreen**

I crashed the artists' party because it was too icy-cold to stroll the streets while I waited for my husband in Columbia City. The gallery was flooded with light, warmth, people nibbling grapes and marveling over ingeniously hand-crafted books that folded like accordions, colored glass icicles, paintings of Mexican market scenes and surreal dreams. I marveled along with them, doing my best to blend, working my way towards the back, where I knew the jewelry and tchotchkes were crowded into a jumble of glass shelves.

And there it was, crowded among the mugs and bracelets: a blue nest. A shimmery-blue, wire and feather nest. My blue nest: It even had a little "A" for Ann dangling from it, along with a few keys and paperclips and a heart and a bottle cap spritzed with plink glitter. Beside it were a few sister nests, orange and red and purple. But the blue one, I knew, was mine.

Why would someone, an artist kind of someone, create such wonderfully odd little nests, I wondered?

Perhaps for the same reason I find myself writing about them. They embody all that we spend our lives doing and undoing: finding feathers and comforts and pretty decorations with which to line our nests; getting cozy inside them, sometimes with the wrong person but then, if we're lucky, with the right one, the one with whom we'll have the babies who we know in our heads—but never in our quick-beating, red-breasted hearts—will, someday, fly away.

And then we find ourselves restlessly rearranging, adding and changing the feathers and bric a brac; knowing that the nest will now be quiet much of the time and looking forward to the times when it's not.

I wonder what my elegant Grandma Nona would have thought of this blue nest. That deep iris blue was her favorite color. Orphaned before she was six, she became a nest-creator par excellence, though she would have found the scrapbookish look of this tabletop model a little down-market for her tastes, a little spunky and funky. She preferred the classic lines of a Dutch Colonial, a brick Tudor, a glassy condo tower.

Nona died November 21, 2010 at the age of 98, so she has been much on my mind lately, with her lapis eyes and mysterious origins. Nona so longed to be blue-blooded that she apparently—we may never know for sure—changed her name and told everyone that her parents, who died when she was so very young, were English, when in fact they were immigrants from Norway and Denmark. Like *Mad Men's* Don Draper, she believed in quiet reinvention.

And so she might concede that it is now time for me to do some reinvention: to view my own nest in a new way; to refurbish it, or maybe move on to an altogether new one. Or just fly away for a while.

When Nona was around my age, she got her first passport—which took some doing, since she had no birth certificate—and she and Grandpa went to Peru to visit my Great Uncle Carl. It must have been quite a trip, in those pre-Lonely Planet guidebook days. Quite the nest-ruffler.

Our daughter Claire was in Peru just a few months ago, traveling after a semester in Chile. She saw some of the same sites that Nona saw nearly fifty years ago. I wish they could get together for coffee and compare notes.

When Claire was a little girl, she loved to spend time at Nona's house. I know why, because when I was a little girl, I did too. Nona could pamper without smothering, listen without straining, feed without stuffing, soothe without fussing. Nona wore Shalimar, but never too much. She had a jewelry box with a dancing ballerina inside. There were furs in her closet. Cookies were served on Wedgewood plates. Claire spent the night with Nona when her baby brother was born. She didn't want to leave.

I wonder what it was like for Nona, to watch her two sons, then her grandchildren, then her great-grandchildren soar away from the nest, lofted high by the advantage she didn't have: of growing up loved.

Claire got her first passport before she was two, because my husband and I were going on a trip and we wanted her with us. Claire's Spanish is good. She's comfortable traveling alone in places that would have intimidated me at her age. Her eyes are brown like her father's, not blue like Nona's or mine. And as far as I know, she's never been tempted to change her name.

It's a different time in America: we want to see the world and we long to be authentic, to claim and plumb our identities rather than cloaking them. We want to express ourselves in words and blogs and nests. The notion of class, the way my grandmother would have defined it, is as quaint to us as the word "cotillion."

The mysteries of Nona's origins haunt me. She told us so very little. She claimed not to remember her parents' names. And so why, now, does it matter to me? Why am I prowling around old census sheets, looking for clues?

Because deep inside me is: her. Her story is part of my story. And I want to know my story, so that my children will know theirs. Because aren't our stories the very strongest, truest parts of our nests? Whether or not they are blue-blooded or blue-eyed or blue-feathered?

# THE PAST IS NOT A FOREIGN COUNTRY

Mallery Avidon

1.

*If you look closely you will see INFORMATION BOOTH GIRL sitting in the Information Booth in the center of the picture. She has brown hair and she's wearing a red hooded sweatshirt and a t-shirt that says I (umbrella) Seattle. You probably can't tell but she's sitting in profile looking down. Reading. Hoping as hard as she can that no one will come and talk to her. Eventually someone does. A tourist. The only people who ever talk to her are tourists. When the tourists talk to her she says some version of this:*

Welcome to Seattle.

Is this your first time?

Wedding?

Cruise to Alaska?

Conference?

Your sister's in College here?

Your brother works at Microsoft?

Anyway.

This is the Pike Place Market.

Not Pike's Place.

But Pike Place. Or The Market. NOT Pike's.

Straight back is where they throw the fish. You know. They throw fish. To each other. When people order it. They wear big orange fishing pant things. There's a word for them. Like galoshes. Only pants. And when someone orders a salmon they throw it to each other.

And that's where the pig is. The original pig. Not the ugly "pigs on parade" pigs. Like in other cities too where "artists" decorate pigs and then they're on display and you can get a map and take pictures with them and then they're auctioned off for charity. For a charity. In other cities they have other animals. Horses or maybe um bears. But here it's pigs because of the pig at the market. It's a um piggy bank. It collects change that goes to support the Market. Like a couple grand a year.

These are the things that you should take pictures of:

Your daughter sitting on the pig with her pigtails.

Getting a kiss on the cheek from one of the guys in the orange pants. Throwing the fish.

And the original Starbucks.

It's two blocks down on the right.

Yes it's really the first one. Yes it's still there. Yes you can get a Frappuccino.

And then you should take the Monorail to the Space Needle. Don't worry you won't get lost. The Monorail only goes to the Space Needle from Westlake Center. Between the two. You have to walk to Westlake to catch it. It's just up Pine a couple blocks. You won't miss it. It's a mall. There's a big courtyard out front. With a Starbucks in it. Between Nordstrom and The Bon. I mean Macy's. Between Nordstrom and Macy's. Across from Sephora. But before you get to Pacific Place. That's the other mall. That one has Barney's New York, and The Body Shop, and a Movie Theater and another Starbucks. Old Navy is across from that. Wait. No it's not. It moved. But The Monorail. It's at the top of Westlake Center outside of the food court. There's signs. Or you could just walk to the Space Needle.

It's just on the other side of Belltown.

Seattle is spread out. If you want to go anywhere other than Downtown or Pioneer Square or The Seattle Center (where the Space Needle is) you'll have to walk up hills or drive or take the bus. And the bus is. Confusing. And we have no train or Subway or. We have the light rail. But it will just take you back to the airport. And the Orange South Lake Union Trolley or Tram or...The places I would actually tell you to go to are far from here and difficult to explain how to get to. Even Capitol Hill is probably farther than you want to walk and there's nowhere to park up there. And it's not.

Did you know that The Denny Party. When they first settled here. They were the first um white people. And not even here really but in West Seattle. Across the water there. They called it New York Alki. New York by and by. And now it's just Alki. And so yeah. We aren't.

New York.

They dropped it anyway. Alki is just a beach now. Seattle. After Chief um.

But that was after. When they had moved across the water. To here or um to Pioneer Square. That's where the city was really founded. That's where the expression Skid Road comes from. Or Skid Row. Because they skidded logs down to the water. And that's where all the lowlives lived. Because everyone was a Low Life then. Everyone willing to pull up stakes and come all the way here in 1851. Was a. 1851. Which is.

Really Not That Long Ago.

I don't live here anymore. I'm just back. I'm here to. Something.

Anyway and I used to do this. When I lived here. The last year before I moved away. And Alan told me that if I was ever back and needed extra. Anyway so I'm just here for. And I needed extra money.

I live in New York now.

*People come and go at the market. Many people. They don't talk to Information Booth Girl. They go about their business.*

*The Information Booth Girl writes Haikus about Bands from Seattle on index cards and folds them into paper airplanes and throws them out the window of her Information Booth. She is a poet. But only because she is writing poems and she is only writing poems because if she is thinking about counting syllables and Pearl Jam then she is not thinking about other things. Other things that she does not want to think about.*

#### EDDIE VEDDER

Jeremy spoke in...  
that was before Columbine  
and you're still alive

#### JIMI HENDRIX

There's a rock at the  
Zoo dedicated to your  
memory, watchtower

#### JANE'S ADDICTION

In eighth grade English  
we had to bring in poems  
Ali brought Jane Says

#### SIR MIX-A-LOT

It was normal to  
say I listen to everything  
'cept rap and country

#### MODEST MOUSE

Is from Issaquah  
which is not actually  
Seattle. Oh Well.

#### DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE

Do we still get to  
bitch about bands selling out?  
I like emo boys.

#### KURT COBAIN

Dead on MTV  
voice of my generation  
still sad. Nevermind.

*After a while a Hipster Boy comes to visit The Information Booth Girl at her Information Booth. The Hipster Boy is wearing a T-Shirt that says I (sub pop logo) Seattle. He looks young but that doesn't mean he is. He interrupts her writing by handing her a pound of Starbucks coffee.*

I brought you a present. *He says, smiling.*

Is this your free coffee for the week? *She says, not smiling.*

Um. *He says. Although. You don't really SAY um.*

And I don't. I don't drink coffee. *She says.*

How can you not drink coffee you live in Seattle? *He asks.*

How can you not have noticed that I don't drink coffee. *She says.*

Let's go to Paris. *He says, still smiling.*

I have to work. *She says, still not smiling.*

We have a show this weekend. My band- *He says*

*She cuts him off* I can't I.

*It is possible she's forgotten that there is such a thing as smiling. Or happiness. It is possible that she has forgotten there is such a thing as fun.*

*He looks at her. And he wishes he still knew how to make her smile. He says:*

Remember when I painted that painting of you and then later, after September 11<sup>th</sup> but before the war started, I painted the other side yellow and wrote a quote from Thich Nhat Hahn on it and took it downtown and wore it around my neck like a sandwich board and just stood there silently protesting a war that hadn't even started yet. And people were not pleased. I don't think you were that pleased. But that was after we had broken up and you had moved into the Kelo with Julia, and I was still in the room with the concrete floor, and you didn't come and get your stuff for ages. And then when you did I was meditating. I think that irritated you. Me meditating. And I had started Breakdancing and Skateboarding. And dating The Bellydancer. And we ran into each other that one night at Linda's and you were with Nicole and Connor and I asked if you wanted to meet the Bellydancer and she was standing right behind me so you did. And then she and I went to Italy and Paris. But she cheated on me and when I came back you and I drove down along Lake Washington out to Casey and Gina's house, except that Casey and Gina had broken up so Timmie was living there, because she had moved out from her place with Jon, before she went to Japan and before Gina moved to New Mexico and got sober and married that guy with the kids and before Casey met Debbie and got engaged and decided to move to Ohio, and I was staying in that weird sunroom porch thing. And there were Fireworks for some reason, but it wasn't the Fourth of July. And you put your hand out the window. Like people always do in movies when they're driving into the sunset. And I said I was sorry. For all those times. And then the next day I drove to LA and then I went to Denver and when I came

back it was with that girl who was Baha'i and I told you that. And you didn't know what it was. And after I had moved back, before I even saw you, I ran into Anna and William on the bus and Anna was wearing that shirt of mine that my Auntie Rose had bought me at that discount mall in Reno when we had gone down there to see my family that one year for New Year's, and you were in New York helping your grandma pack up her apartment to move here and after you got back we went and had a beer at Clever Dunne's and it was awkward. And you said you didn't want to meet Ami the Baha'i girl. And you didn't until later after you had moved to New York and you came back and it was St. Patrick's Day and we all went and saw Jon's band play at Nectar in Fremont and Jon and Timmie were back together by then. And Light was there and Casey and Debbie. When I still lived with them in the house on the hill that you never came to. And you were wearing my old jean jacket with my band's pin on it. The woman's face. And I said do you want to meet Ami? And she was standing right behind me so you did and then we all went out to Dad Watson's and everyone was there because it was your first night back. And it was like before. And Ami and I went outside and she was not happy. And we all drank a lot. And my birthday party was in two days and I invited you but then you didn't come. And you went back to New York. And after my birthday party I thought about how we used to lie in bed in the room with the concrete floor and talk about moving to New York together while I was in bed with Ami in the big house on the hill and then she read my journal, just like you had, and we broke up.

And I called you and we talked for hours and I said:

Remember what it was like before?

Because I was remembering a good time. Like when we would get Thai Food from Angel's before it was Jai Thai or when we saw the Matrix the day it came out and we didn't know anything about it and it was, for rest of the night, the best movie we had ever seen. And I said on the phone to you that night while you were in New York:

It's a good thing you don't live here anymore.

*And she's still not smiling. But she remembers what it was like.*

## 2.

*Another day at the Pike Place Market. Or the same day. Summer in Seattle, life in Seattle, everything in Seattle operates in a kind of fog. (Caffeine and Beer and Pot and Rock and Roll make today and five years ago fade together sometimes.) The Information Booth Girl listens to KEXP and writes Haikus about doing drugs. She has decided that she will write a book of Haikus called Sex, Drugs & Rock & Roll. She will write the book on index card paper airplanes and no one will ever know that it is a book.*

*The Hipster Boy comes to visit her again. He is wearing a t-shirt for a band you've never heard of but you will soon and as soon as you do he won't be caught dead in the shirt. He brings her Top Pot Donuts, because Starbucks sells them now. She doesn't like them any more than she likes coffee.*

*Still not smiling she says:*

Remember that night when I called you and you went to pick up a movie and it was when.

You went to the old Hollywood Video on Broadway and if you're in the Independent New Release section there's those big windows that look out onto the street and there were people pouring up the street and the cops in Riot Gear behind them and there was tear gas and a woman with her kid in a stroller who was just out walking because people were just out walking because everything was Downtown and we didn't know that they were going to push everyone up the hill to clear out for the um no Protest Zone.

And you were stuck in the store.

And this was way before we had cell phones and I was sitting in my apartment on the white Ikea couch watching the news and it was saying nothing and I could hear concussion grenades and it should have taken you half an hour at the most and it had been...

And then I went outside and you were there and my Dad and Diane were there and Connor and Nicole and David and Amelia and, I don't know, everyone? At the corner of Pine and Broadway and the cops were in Riot Gear in a line just below 12th by the police station.

And Riot Gear looks like fascism in four dimensions.

And it was raining a little and we weren't even protesting we just wanted to know why there were concussion grenades and we had been Downtown at the protests the days before but now it just felt exhausting and it was dark and you took a brick from that guy and put it in the mail box so he couldn't throw it through a window.

And eventually the cops pepper sprayed the crowd but we were near the back by that point debating whether or not to leave.

And it was when I already lived at the Boylston Court with Alison in the room with the concrete floor, before you moved in, after you went to Italy with Adam and Casey, so we just had to cut through Seattle Central and down the steps next to Broadway Performance Hall and we were back at my house.

But you had never rented a movie.

And we were broken up then. Or on a break. And maybe this was the second day of the whole thing or maybe the third day.

It was the first day when you had been at work and they broke the windows and we had all gotten out of class because it was historic and our teacher was a hippie and we walked Dow town and there were people everywhere and buses stopped in intersections and Monica was sitting in the middle of the street right near the Paramount. It was hard to get through everyone and as we were walking, it was me and Nicole and maybe Megan and Serena and Colin and I started to... And then we got to the corner of Pacific Place, 'cause that was the Starbucks you worked at, and turned and you were all in your aprons standing in front of the broken windows trying to look tough.

And I read about it later in a book and they called it the "Battle in Seattle."

And the way it was... I remember it...Different. Both more and less violent then it is described in the book.

You in your green apron with your arms crossed over your chest and little bits of broken glass at your feet and.

*She finishes:* It was after that that you started reading the newspaper.

But I still worked at Starbucks. He says.

### 3.

*Another day. Or the same day. The Information Booth Girl is writing haikus about Sex. Her book is almost done. The Hipster Boy is talking to her. He says:*

When I still lived in the Summit Terrace, before I went to Italy the first time, before I ever said I loved you, when we were both still in college and you still lived with Cami and Rebecca, before Cami moved to New York to go to the Atelier and Rebecca started teaching grade school and got married and had a baby, when you and I were first sleeping together and we were sitting on my bed in the living room of the apartment that I shared with MJ, before he and I stopped being friends and before he went home to Irvine that summer and lost all that weight and came back and stayed with you and Anna, before he met Shariah and got married and then got divorced, before Anna moved back to New Zealand, that first time that we broke up. And you cried so hard.

We went outside to have a cigarette on the steps in the courtyard, because MJ was in his room and he couldn't leave without walking through the living room past my bed, and the way you cried was violent.

And that was before I ever yelled at you.

Before we couldn't. Coffee would turn into movies and movies would turn into making out and we just could never seem

to stop. It was before we broke up ten more times and each time the way you cried was more. Violent.

It was before the abortion and all the other girls I slept with. And all the other guys you slept with. To. Something. To. Something.

And when you were here this last time. Back from New York after your roommate died and we went to Six Arms and I brought The College Girl. And she was wearing a hoodie and was the same age as you were when we broke up the last time and she insulted your hair. And you were uncomfortable, and I was quiet but you both knew the same girl in New York so you found something to talk about, and we ate french fries and hamburgers and you drank your beers very quickly and said you had to go meet someone and you left and I went home with her.

And she said she liked you.

But I could tell she didn't mean it. And I thought about what she would do if we broke up and I knew that how she cried would never be like how you cried and I was...glad.

And I wondered where you were going and who you were seeing and what your apartment in New York looked like when it was empty after they took everything away and incinerated it.

And I wondered if I met you now who you would be.

And I thought about you crying in your grandfather's apartment on your birthday by yourself after you talked to Willow and she told you he was dead.

Crying and waiting for Jake to get there to tell you that it would be.

To tell you something.

Waiting for someone to tell you something.

And I thought about what you were like before I met you.

And I thought about bringing you mashed potatoes from KFC and laying in bed with my hand on your stomach and making you bacon and eggs while we watched the Sonics lose the morning after the first night you spent at my house and you were so young and you were already so sad.

I brought you a present. *He says. And he gives her the best present there ever was.*

*And she smiles. A real smile. Like maybe she remembers what being happy is.*

# CHAPTER III: THE FAIRBANKS HIGH SCHOOL CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Wesley K. Andrews

**PRESENT WES:** The story of the Fairbanks High School Constitutional Crisis begins with The Expulsion of Peter Greenleaf. Peter Greenleaf was the model student. Perfect grades, championship athlete, devastatingly handsome and a genuinely kind and caring young man, even to the nerdy kids he would never hang out with. He was the most popular kid in school, and not in a bad way. It's just that everybody liked him, and if you knew him, you would have liked him, too.

One year, Peter Greenleaf had a great idea for a Halloween costume. He would dress up like a madman with a bomb strapped to his body. He would make this bomb out of road flares and duct tape. Now, Peter Greenleaf was no fool, so before building his costume he checked with the school administration, and because he was the one and only Peter Greenleaf, they gave him the O.K. and said they would spread the word to all the teachers.

And sure enough, Peter Greenleaf came to school that Halloween dressed in fake explosives. All the kids told him how awesome his costume was, and how cool it was that they let him do that. He went to his first class of the day—gym. He changed into his gym clothes and left his costume in his gym locker, where one of the staff, who, for some reason, hadn't been briefed, saw it, mistook it for the bomb that it was painstakingly designed to resemble, and called the police, who evacuated the school.

Peter Greenleaf got expelled. And so the entire student body staged a sit-in protest in the commons until he was allowed to return to class, which took less than a day. Humor and solidarity had triumphed over fear.

As you know, any years later, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999, there was a massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado. The following Fall, Fairbanks High was scheduled to move into the newly built East Wing while the West Wing was remodeled, and with the new facility Principal Steiner planned to inaugurate a new era of discipline, efficiency, and order. There

would be no Columbines here.

On the first day of senior year, we entered the doors to our school, and found that the remodel did not suit our character.

My old friend Brendan Buckley remarked,

**BRENDAN:** I don't like the remodel. It looks like the inbred stepchild of a lunatic asylum and a train station. Ha-ha!

**PRESENT WES:** Brendan, the eldest son of Fairbanks High's American History teacher, was a half-Irish half-Jewish geography champion with three nipples, and his analogy was right on the money, per usual. Morning announcements began.

*(ding dong)*

**STEINER:** Good morning Fairbanks High, this is Principal Steiner, welcoming you to a brand new year. So good to have you back, safe and sound. For returning students, please be aware of the following changes in protocol: there is a new dress code—no sweatpants. Hall passes will now be required at all times other than scheduled breaks. And finally, we have a new addition to our team. You will see him in the hallway soon: our on-campus deputy, Officer Jennings. Let's have a great year.

**PRESENT WES:** Officer Jennings was maybe thirty-five or forty years old, and probably five foot one. His job, as near as anyone could tell, was to station himself against the rear wall of the commons and stand there all the time. He had a demeanor that gave you the impression that he wasn't particularly well-trained. In fact, he seemed to be constantly terrified. Students male and female would tower over him, especially the ones who played sports, and when Brendan and I weren't ignoring him completely we would remark that if anything were to go wrong at school, he would be the last person to do anything about it. Now I don't mean to be cruel, he was doing the best he could, it's just that one uneasy police officer glancing around for something to do is basically meaningless in a sea of a thousand people. Which is probably why they gave him a gun.

Now, my school had always been a laid-back kind of place. We didn't understand this new atmosphere of restriction and we didn't understand why there was a gun in our school, a gun being operated by the loneliest and most nervous individual in the whole building.

There was no more wandering around during class. There was no more pushing the upright piano down the hallway,

running as fast as you could, playing the Mission Impossible theme song. It was a new, post-Columbine America, and everything was hard. The renovations continued.

This is the historical context for the Fairbanks High School Constitutional Crisis. The Crisis itself stretched over three Fridays and a Monday, and it began when the hallway by the office smelled like marijuana smoke at 1:30 on a Friday afternoon. Someone was getting high in school.

**BRENDAN:** I heard they're interrogating all the known pot smokers down in the office. Their first question is, "We know you smoke pot!" and the follow-up question is "Admit that you smoke pot!"

**WES:** That's not fair. We all smoke pot.

**BRENDAN:** Dexter has the combo for Moose Mountain. We're going sledding. You should come.

**PRESENT WES:** Moose Mountain was the best of the local ski hills. Instead of a lift, they had a road and a fleet of school buses. "Having the combo" meant undoing the padlock that held up the chain blocking the bus road so we could drive up in Dexter's pickup and go sledding by moonlight. We stood at the crest, looking over the unassuming hills of the Tanana Valley, and Brendan said,

**BRENDAN:** Nathan Hale's only regret was that he had just one life to give for his country. I wonder what I would die for. My family, probably.

**PRESENT WES:** And he took off down the mountain. And I took off. And I got separated from the group. And I went directly down Moose Mountain's only Black Diamond run all by myself, in a Paris-brand plastic sled that I got at the grocery store. On the second Friday of the Fairbanks High School Constitutional Crisis, the marijuana smell came back again.

**BRENDAN:** Did you hear that they interrogated Willow and Suzanne?

**WES:** No.

**BRENDAN:** Apparently, they were racially profiled, as hippies.

**WES:** Wow.

**BRENDAN:** Have you ever jumped onto a moving train?

**WES:** No.

**BRENDAN:** Do you want to?

**WES:** Sure.

**PRESENT WES:** And so we went down to the tracks by our school and jumped on a slow-moving train. Brendan and I stood on opposite ends of an oil tanker as the cottonwood trees breezed by.

**BRENDAN:** You know what's fascinating about the Civil War?

**WES:** What?

**BRENDAN:** On one level, it wasn't even about slavery. It was a conflict of economic systems and the entrenched elite who wanted to preserve them. Which they did, with great success, for several generations after Emancipation.

**WES:** Hey, we're speeding up.

**BRENDAN:** We should jump.

**PRESENT WES:** And Brendan leapt from the moving train. And I did too. I rolled on the ground, checked my hands for cuts and looked up to see Brendan walking calmly towards me.

**BRENDAN:** It's an interesting take on the conflict. Things never happen for the reasons we say they do.

**PRESENT WES:** On the third Friday, the smell came back again.

*(ding dong)*

**STEINER:** Attention Fairbanks High. It has come to our attention that certain individuals are consuming illegal drugs on the premises. Therefore, there will be no more off-campus lunch. Good day.

**PRESENT WES:** The student body stared at the P.A., aghast, with dropped jaws. Off-campus lunch? Taken away? No, no, we couldn't have heard that correctly. Saturday night there was a seniors' meeting at Carla's house, and the featured speaker was a boy named Cole, my friend since the second grade, whose funeral I would speak at the Summer after graduation.

**COLE:** Off-campus lunch is not a privilege, it is an unassailable right. It is the thing that makes high school better than middle school! This is an attack on our traditional values. Principal Steiner has taken us to the brink, and we need to rise to the occasion, as our predecessors did at The Expulsion of Peter Greenleaf. Monday morning, go to class, and when announcements start, walk out! We are Alaskans, by God! We are Alaskans!

**PRESENT WES:** We burst into applause, and then we all got high, and Carla threw up. Monday morning. I arrive in Chemistry. Brendan has a piece of paper pinned to his shirt that quotes the landmark Supreme Court decision *Tinker v. Des Moines*. It reads:

“In our system, state-operated schools may not be enclaves of totalitarianism. School officials do not possess absolute authority over their students. Justice Abe Fortas, 1969.” The P.A. crackled.

*(ding dong)*

Half the students stood up and started to walk out, but then:

**STEINER:** *(through the P.A.)* Attention all students and staff. This is Principal Steiner. Off-campus lunch has been restored. I repeat, off-campus lunch has been restored. The marijuana-like smell in question has been discovered to be the burning of sage, the burning of which was taking place in the Native Alaskan Art Class. However, our steadfast opposition to illegal drug use in school has not diminished, and we will continue to stand up for healthy lifestyles.

*(sigh)*

Congratulations to the Fairbanks High swim team for placing third overall in the state meet this weekend. After-school bus service on route 4 to Esther has been re-routed due to the rockslide on Old Nenana Highway please come to the office for more details have a nice day.

**PRESENT WES:** Brendan wore his Supreme Court decision all day anyway, just to show them he meant business.

That night, we drove to the bluff off of Gold Hill Road to smoke cigars and hit golf balls into the valley, which is what we liked to do when we were feeling philosophical.

**BRENDAN:** It’s interesting—Ben Franklin said that those who would trade freedom for security deserve neither.

**PRESENT WES:** He swung the driver, and we followed the golf ball with our eyes until we lost track of it against the backdrop of the snow.



[www.verbalists.net](http://www.verbalists.net)