



almost famous

trish hopkinson

Almost Famous



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“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

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Almost Famous

Third Day, Third Month, 1972

My mother lay motionless
in a windowless surgery room.
Bright bulbs overhead

illuminated the task, flashes
from steel implements shined
on sterile walls like flits

from a watch face. A doctor,
or a man rather, pressed
a tool inside her, like the back

of a soup spoon reaching in
to a bowl of cold grits,
fished around for my tender

skull, and excised me from comfort.
The sun was yet to rise, or
maybe had just risen. I'm sure

I cried—wailed into the dawn,
grasping at my first breath, gulping
air like a baby robin just cracked open

from its warm blue shell.
I'm sure I saw my mother lying there
—as if dead. Her eyes still to the day,

anesthetized. The doctor had
said her giving birth was taking too long.
The doctor had said she must be put

under in order to get it over
with. My father waited
dumb in the hallway.

Kansas Flat

There is more sky in Kansas—
a vast stretch suspended
over early summer fields
where storm clouds bloom.

I press my plump nose
against the window screen
of our mobile home to breathe
the blossom of rain,

the scent of new earth
being turned up
seasoned by dandelions.
I'm fascinated by the vibration

of thunder and thin lines
of lightning zipping to the ground.
I try to keep my eyes wide,
afraid I might miss a flash of light.

We drag this mobile home
from one town to another trying
to find a job my father can keep.
The metal siding that holds us in

is pecked with hailstone dents
and rust-laced edges. Inside, the hallway
is shoulder-to-shoulder narrow
and the doors thin enough

for a fist. The kitchen wears
its linoleum like a polyester suit
and the avocado shag mats smooth
where we walk. Bookshelves host rows

and rows of science fiction paperbacks,
double-parked to fit them all,
tops speckled with roach droppings,
common in most mid-west trailer parks

where timid homes lie down like a dog
being scolded at the foot of a tornado—
sometimes, broken down in its wake,
collapsed like an empty cardboard box.

Almost Famous (A Family Album)

My great grandfather hangs in Missouri's capitol building, or so my father says.
I imagine his portrait looks like the black & white Wikipedia photo. His daughter

was my grandmother, whom I only knew well enough to say I'm grateful I wasn't
her daughter. Great grandfather was a governor, a republican & Methodist in the 1920s

& that's all I know besides my grandmother's story of how as a child, at a press conference,
she stood beside him in palpable fear, sure her father was being shot at, before

she laughed saying, Then he leaned down & whispered, "It's only camera bulbs popping."
I've searched online for her articles—she was a journalist in St. Louis,

& once found her name in the *New York Times*—a 1974 police blotter about a woman strangled
in Brooklyn, followed by an FBI investigation—two men arrested trying to sell

stock certificates, 35 grand worth, stolen from my grandmother's Virgin Island home—
the strangling & the theft? Unrelated. I also found divorce documents

from 1969, & how she agreed to bear the ongoing burden
of supporting the children & would receive no alimony. It's true she found

my father a burden. He was eighteen then, kicked out of military school
& attending a midwestern Methodist college where he'd soon meet my mother, who wrote

about his moustache, how it spoke to her from across the room, & about a stray dog
on campus they called Wolfer. Also unrelated. I keep her essays from college

in a manila folder, letters on onion skin typing paper, not quite aligned, edits atop
thick white correction paint. My mother was once a writer & a music major. She played

trumpet in the marching band & went to music camp in the summers, brought home her own
recordings on transparent blue records in thin paper sleeves. To me, she was famous—

her LPs in the stack with Rick Springfield & The Who. Maybe she could've been,
but she married the moustache, went from Methodist to Mormon & agreed

to raise her four children, to bear the ongoing burden of supporting her
husband. I keep a photo of my mother, middle swollen & glowing on the beach,

visiting the in-laws in the Virgin Isles, her first time on an airplane. She used to say
I'd been there too—even if only in her womb. Whose genes we carry. Whose archives.

Settling in

My mother hated that Naugahyde couch,
the way her thighs peeled away, sweat
affixing skin to the impermeable polyvinyl.
This 1908 house was where she must settle

with her four sprawling children & even less
of a husband. The tweed, layaway sofa
with a hide-a-bed—maybe the only new thing
she'd had—left behind when the move from Missouri

cost too much. This is when the settling began—
settle on a smaller U-haul truck, on fewer things—
left the sofa, my hobby horse, the rickety crib
all four had slept in. *There's a couch already*

at the house, said her mother-in-law,
you can leave it. And so they did. My mother
tried to accept the gifted house, its tacky faux-crystal
& golden chandeliers, downcast floors, pencil

scribbles on living room walls & only two
bedrooms. The bulky kitchen table, allegedly antique,
hardly fit the space at all; the chairs
were meant for a patio, their wrought iron

legs & backs, the curled pattern poking holes
in t-shirts & pulling long hair. It's not that
what she had before was much, but at least she'd
had some say. We shared a room, three kids

in bunkbeds made for two, & the baby
slept in a box for shipping frozen chickens
about the size of a bassinet,
folded blankets for a mattress.

The house bared remnants of beauty—
80-year-old stained glass transoms, spots of rose
& prisms decorated the dingy raised-velvet
wallpaper when the sunlight angled

in the late afternoon. The clanking radiators were warm,
& outside, the lumbering Wasatch mountains
blocked the horizon. There's no more seeing
Missouri from here.

Terminal

If only we had stayed on the farm where there were no threats
of strangers or mailmen, only pesky coyotes and skunk stench,
where there were no cars to chase, just cows in pastures,

and where there were no murderous tow trucks.
My mother lifted the limp dog from the pavement,
cradling the torso in her arms as she carried him

down the block and around the house to lay him to rest
on redwood porch slats. It was winter, December or January.
I held my hand against the cool glass of the sliding door—

waiting for the steam of his breath, pretending not to see
the bit of blood pooling beneath his nose, pretending not to hear
my little brother's howls of sorrow. My throat quivering.

Crosshairs

My mother stands soft on the sidewalk, her absentminded fingers
playful in my plain ten-year-old hair as she gossips
with her friend from across the street.

I stand in front of her, facing outward, pretending to participate,
smiling at all the right times, enjoying the closeness
of the moment and trying not to remember

that I have an absent parent, that my own friend fears
her mother and the telephone cord in the kitchen used to choke her,
that prescription drug abuse caused two deaths—maybe intentional,

maybe not—and the homicide/suicide on the corner—the ex-cop
from L.A. who stopped her meds and shot herself, but not before
she took her son, too. All this, as we stand within the crosshairs
of four city blocks.

A Leveling

He brought us here, to this juniper desert,
across Midwestern state borders into broken promise,

sloughing family fragments like tire treads along the way.
I-80 rose up like Hell's Backbone, egoistic and narrow-

sighted with drops on either side of slight rails.
We should have been safe in the valleys,

miles away from Boulder Mountain...
And yet I learned to fear altitudes,

the uncertainty of my own feet,
the distant perspective of abandonment.

Two years gone. Maybe it wasn't long enough.
The knee-locking dread never subsides.

Instead, vertigo sets in on each downward step,
handrails clinched each time I try high heels

and the teetering always sets me down bare.
How can I be bowed into such spinelessness,

faint at the sight of red clay cliffs and sloping pines—
a grand staircase. Father Escalante would pray for me

to forgive. He would level my landings. He would lead
me to grace.

South Side

Suburban, but where
100 year-old homes creak
poor kids from their seams,

flaky paint facades and weedy
yards wait for stapled food stamps
to drop into the mailbox.

There should be religion here—
with a steeple on every corner
alongside a dime bag or a beggar.

Gospel is a thick fog, but it only
spawns boredom in young people.
No matter how loud the sermon,

or how low parents set
the thermostat or how long they make
the bread and milk last—

it won't be enough to keep
a teen from looking elsewhere
for something that feels

whiskey-in-your-belly-good,
warm-hand-on-your-thigh-good.
Something to squelch envy,

to take notice, to be different.
It's easy to sneak out
like lean gray mice

squeezing through a crevice,
pressing against the night—
go car-hopping, steal beer

and cigarettes from C-stores,
find glue or paint thinner or
gasoline to huff,

easy to coax a ride from
a mullet on a bullet bike,
easy to wrap legs around

a boy in the vacant lot,
easy enough that no other body
flinches when the kid

who lived in the mint-green
house on the south side
chokes on his tongue

and dies in his attic room
from a brain tumor.
Most of us knew him.

Some of us expect
to go the same way.

predator

sixteen-year-old-compulsive-liar-boy said the peanut butter scars smeared
on his legs came from other boys who flicked a match as he stood in
gasoline / he said the smooth section of his inside thigh was where
doctors grafted healthy epidermis to his melted calves / no one ever knew
the truth not that it made a difference sixteen-year-old-
scared-aggressor-boy said no boys would want her with knuckle marks on
her legs / said she wouldn't get pregnant if he pulled out in time / if he
threw his closed fist into her abdomen daily / he said he would shoot out
the back of his skull with a twenty-two if she left he showed her the
rifle she believed him // sixteen-year-old-muddled-predator-boy
didn't care that she was my best friend or how clear my skin was or
how my fat dimpled or about any of us other than that we were girls /
quick hands & eyes outside my window slipped into the room & into
my bed no gloves no mask no alarm / are you awake? he said /
fourteen flipped on its hip bearing womanhood

promiscuity

just like young men

i knew what
i wanted and how
to get it—

trying to rise
from beneath
their mothers'
hems

gorgeous young men my age
“out of my league”
older svelte men
simple quiet men
all the men

from nurture
to their fathers'
flat palms
patted their backs

i sewed them
under my skin
whip stitched them
gullible pinned them
like campaign buttons

i too set out
to sew wild
added a stitch
to my belt
with each boy
i charmed

wore them open and
strong until
my pulses

returned

but my mother
did not grin
and slug my shoulder
did not hand me my first

then i ripped them
from the seams
and plucked them
from my chest

cold one

ironed patches over
what was left

she sobbed

rosebud

summertime 1988 adulthood swarming a halo of hovering gnats
dragonflies of knowhow swooping recklessly in to feast sixteen years
floating sixteen years evergreen late night dew still fading behind
helix & lobe // summer of the redwood porch outback childhood
daring Bo Derek braids and a tattoo installed by a convict on the
back of my neck the rosebud & curling stem the rosebud of a guitar
string ink gun rebellion reminder youth hidden behind cornrow ends
// cusp of summer holding & glowing the ting of moths against
bulb the electric typewriter ticking for attention sixteen teen
ambition sixteen teen did you listen hear the squelching as it
rumbled in // single rosebud growing from columned bones barbs
extending—one then two despite the unfurled leaf despite the
interlocked locks the endangered dangling rosebud blooming
within rosebud intrepid beneath the skin blossom holding brain
grasping ventricles & veins // summertime vines tangled in between
knotted around liver & kidney distended around hip & knee
sprouting and splitting wrapping ankle & wrist sixteen years
evergreen sixteen teen did you listen tick & tink braid & ink
coming undone

Mixed Tape

I. Ripped from the womb with forceps while my unconscious mother slept—I imagine being hung from my feet and slapped, the sting causing an instinctive gasp, fueling my first cry.

II. That sinking feeling, the one when you know someone you love has left you, I haven't had it once since we met. The lavender licks of ocean foam bubble around my ventricles and valves with the rocking rhythm of his current. It's safe here on shore.

III. My memories have taste buds—I can smell the morning we woke up together, run my tongue along the salty sweetness of the day he said *yes*, gulp the warmth of our first born like a miracle. Every moment has a different palate and lingers on my teeth.

IV. I remember the fertile mud smell of the lake in Missouri where I learned to swim. If sense of smell worked underwater, it would smell of catfish and silt and long afternoons of treading water in the sun with the bluegills.

V. Should I ever grow a tail, my sacrum will connect it to my spine and wiggle when I walk or wag. For now, it holds my pelvis in place, gives each side a wall to lean on, like beatniks against a lamppost.

VI. Paint your gods into tombs, into cathedral ceilings. Carve them into stone to marvel at humanity—anchored to cliff and the bottom of the sea. In modern times, they look like us but it hasn't always been that way.

VII. Waiting is a horrible preoccupation. When I've no choice, I write and memorize lists, make decisions, make solutions, make poetry. Poetry waits for me.

VIII. Androgynous like a sea snail, my language leaves gender neutral trails in mucus ink. Predators slurp it up and call it their own.

IX. I forgot about tomorrow and how it accused me of guessing wrong, of assuming my own identity, of collapsing in on itself before I look back at its selfish, eager skin.

X. Moss and glossy flecks of dirt surround my irises, earthy and lonely, like the way my mother stares at me with pride. Her eyes are like my eyes—they look green when bloodshot veins shoot in like roots.

XI. Some consequences shatter like a cold wine glass dropped in scalding water, while others drift and coat like dust on drapes or grime under a fingernail. The good ones lift character from within and resist gravity's pull.

XII. Anytime I ask for reassurance I only ask because I know the answer and don't like it. My mistakes dash away with a bow and a curtsy to leave me learning new steps.

XIII. My impetus swells behind my tonsils when I watch television all day on Sunday. It causes a rash under my tongue and makes my bones itch and my nerves jump. Only a tsunami of liquor squelches such nonsense.

XIV. Birthday after birthday after birthday after birthday after



Trish Hopkinson is a poet, blogger, and advocate for the literary arts. You can find her online at SelfishPoet.com and provisionally in Utah, where she runs the regional poetry group Rock Canyon Poets and folds poems to fill Poemball machines for Provo Poetry. Her poetry has been published in several lit mags and journals, including *Tinderbox*, *Glass Poetry Press*, and *The Penn Review*; her third chapbook *Footnote* was published by Lithic Press in 2017. Hopkinson will happily answer to labels such as atheist, feminist, and empty nester. She enjoys traveling, live music, wine-tasting, and craft beer.

“Trish Hopkinson’s fourth chapbook brims with evocative imagery. ‘My memories have taste buds...Every moment has a different palate and lingers on my teeth,’ Hopkinson writes. Her poignant and personal poems draw the reader into a vividly rendered childhood. Set in a sometimes nomadic home-life where doors are ‘thin enough for a fist’ and ‘the kitchen wears its linoleum like a polyester suit,’ uncertainty, danger, and death seem constantly close at hand. These emotionally rich poems reveal the life of a young woman coming into her own, from an unsettling birth to traumatic teen years. In *Almost Famous*, Hopkinson gifts us with poem after poem that boldly speaks its truth.”

— Nancy Chen Long, Author of *Light into Bodies*

“Trish Hopkinson is a consummate storyteller. Starting with her own precisely envisaged birth, and employing a brutal sort of honesty, *Almost Famous* brings family origin stories alive with vibrant and closely-observed imagery. Stepwise through years, with each poem immersed in its own moment, these narratives span the evolving viewpoint of a child, an adolescent, and finally, a grown woman, as she transports readers through ‘Birthday after birthday after birthday after birthday after.’ Hopkinson is a poet; with this book, she again proves to be a very fine one.”

— Risa Denenberg, Curator for The Poetry Cafe Online