

Excerpts from *SISTER ZERO*

Nance Van Winckel



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RECYCLING

Cleaning out mom's house, I thought at first I'd try to save us, the many framed and matted us. I could, or would, find spots in my own house for the under-glass mishmash of us and the dregs of our history. Someone getting a diploma, someone a black eye. A fish. A Jedi sword. A war bond.

I stare back at the stares and wonder if my sister's sidelong smirk or my nephew's cast-down glance convey clues I missed years ago but will suddenly sense as today's twilight falls upon the late-breaking now.

But no. My eyes are tired. Too much sepia has made them ache. The black and whites just seem covert and mean.

Then frames and all, I just gather us up and toss us. Having once loomed so large in one another's eyes, we barely fill half the recycling bin. A boy in a back row in first grade; boy on a sled, girl on Santa's lap. His mother/my sister; his granny/my mother; and then me. As I chuck in the next-to-nothing weight of our brief histories, somebody blinks a last time into a cold blue wall. Stacks of us. Clutter of us. We came. We went. In a flurry our gazes cross and weave and drop.

THIS SHIT CAME BEFORE THAT SHIT

Mom told me she'd paid your dealer with Great Granny's china. She said she'd peeked out a window and watched the dealer stare into the box she'd left on her porch stoop, his mouth forming the words Un-Be-LIEV-able over and over.

This was back in your heroin days, which were, thankfully, short-lived—since you'd been put on a plane and flown out to me. I had a place in Kansas. My first teaching job. In a college now defunct. This was before your baby. Before even the plan of a baby.

Standing in my Kansas kitchen, you told me I lived in a "godforsaken hellhole." And once, when I'd been away, you went out, coatless, on a cold rainy night to a neighbor's farm, knocked, and asked if they had any cough medicine. Mentioned you were my sister.

The next day they called and said you'd been shivering and coughing and "wearing only a nightgown and robe!" They gave you all they had, even your favorite: the cherry stuff with the codeine. All of it.

You took all of it. I sighed, thinking, Well, no wonder she's still asleep.

But when I hung up, I went to check to be sure. Sure that you were: Just. Asleep. Your chest rose and fell so quietly. The day before when I'd asked you about the needle scabs between your toes, you'd said you were all done with that. Said you wanted to live.

Standing in the doorway, I recalled more of Mom's china, he was laughing. Then she'd reminded me about those dishes. Purportedly they'd belonged to her grandmother who'd come over on a ship from England in the 1880's. This was a short part of a long story I'd heard for many years, a story which back then I still believed.

BROKEN RIBS

Two on the left, one on the right. Goners. For good. From here on. I show a friend: *Here, with your fingertips, press right here on the side.* Her eyes widen as she feels the jagged place where the bones went crunch in the middle of the night. *Even before the pain, I tell her, the loud crunch jerked me awake.*

Beyond Repair.

Drink more milk and lift some weights. Live with it. It will teach you how. You don't need to do a thing. No, there'll never again be a comfortable way to lean back on a chair. Don't stew on it.

Yeah, that's the way, that's right, that's how.

Share the space.

The live-with-it kicking in.

The *that* in the *that's nothing*.

A tiny nothing. A tiny nothing that slipped loose from the infinite one into which my sister and her boy walked, their arms out, feeling nothing, the boy zombie-like behind his mother.

Roll over. Cry out. Go back to sleep.

U R A Live with It

U Alive

It.

TINY TEARS

On the day my sister was born, my mother and stepdad presented me with a Tiny Tears doll. Here, they said, you should have a baby too.

Not quite five, I stared at the secret hole (in the throat!) where the water went. Oh. So there'd be tears. Oh, so *crying* was OKAY.

No matter how much everyone tried to stop the crying, clearly they also *wanted* the crying. Not to cry was NOT normal.

I squirted the eyedropper's water into the hole, watching the eyes blink twice and discharge two fat tears that took their sweet time drifting down cold unflinching cheeks.

You bathe and dress and feed a baby, and still it cries.

My infant sister cried.

My baby did too.

No matter how much we rocked and sang, or tickled, patted, and cooed, all the babies cried. *Hush, baby*. Ever shriller sobs. *Come on, baby*. Wet sobs. *Buck up, baby*. Breathless sobs.

Babies. Babies by the millions—they wake up and blink up and cry some more.

I DUCKED OUT THE BACK DOOR

Fight or flight. Something we probably learned early. Although flight usually proved easier, fight might be what we'd try first. "No, we're not moving to Connecticut." Our hands on our hips. "We're going to live with Nani."

"Nani!" Our parents collapsing with laughter in the kitchen.

Once, distraught about leaving my little friends, I ran away. I made myself pick one doll (which, oh which, did I most adore?) and put her in a squat brown suitcase. I passed my four-year-old sister napping in her room, slipped outside, and traipsed through the neighbors' backyards until I came to a busy street. I knew where the busses stopped. I had twelve dollars. I was sure Nani would welcome me back to our real home in Virginia, our real home before this new father had moved us to New York, where my southern drawl was the subject of much fourth grade ridicule.

"I can't believe you'd leave your little sister," my mother shouted as she pushed me in the car. (No doubt a neighbor had seen me and ratted me out.) "Just look how you've made her cry. She's hysterical."

But she wasn't. Staring at me, she went silent, as if I'd just returned from the dead.

Eight years later when she tried it herself, I scoffed. "They think they're God," I snapped. "And you can't fight God."

"Yes, you can," she snapped back. Then she schlepped her knapsack to her friend Patty's house, where, secretly the parents had agreed, she could stay for a few days

I don't recall how they pulled her back. But of course they did. Of course we pressed on. Dragging dad's boat behind us. Down the Crazy Woman Mountains, over the Rockies, and through the Selkirks.

For a while my sister fought her way through adulthood. She'd put on her nurse's uniform . . . long hours, long days. Then for a few years she only wanted to fly. Finally she stumbled upon a way to do both at the same time.

WHAT GOES AROUND

The dishes come back. In the same box. To the same spot on Mom's front porch. She calls me crying. She thinks the dealer's sending her a message. But what? The dishes are in pieces. Nani's dishes. What does it mean?

By this time my sister's started nursing school. Trying. Again. Another stab at a regular life.

"You'll make it." "God never gives us more than we can bear." To anyone uttering such idiocies, she'd laugh, turn on her heel, and walk away.

* * *

Thirty years later, for no reason I can say, I laugh when I open the box Mom's saved, saved for no reason she recalls. We've been cleaning out her garage since, at 75, she's moving, marrying for the third time. He's 85. They'll have 15 good years together.

I'm taking the box, I tell her.

"Fine. I don't ever want to see that stuff again." She pats the lid like a dog's head.

Okay. I nod. *Don't worry*.

* * *

But I break my word. My mother sets her glass of ice tea on a mosaic tabletop I've recently made from those dishes. We're sitting out back on my deck. It's been two years since my stepdad's death (at 100!). She tells me I've done a good job on the tabletop, and it's clear as she glances at the bits of plates and saucers—*pique-assiette*, the term for such tile work—she remembers nothing about them. The many pieces of pieces. My hand pressing chips into grout. I sanded and smoothed and sealed.

I worked on my back deck, where the marmots climbed up from the river to see what all the racket was. They leaped about, gleeful, happily nibbling a petunia and giving not the tiniest shit about the useless human and her useless human rubble.

No doubt next week the marmots will pee on my table.

Let them.

Days in the sun are good. For no reason. A harder hammering here. Less grout there. More smashing! More smashing! Nani was thirsty. Off this edge of a china-rose we ate. From this crack we hurt. Nani's hands in the suds, my hands in the sanding. In France an old man built a whole house this way, then went and lived inside it.

"MIXED TOXICITIES"

Cause of my nephew's demise. I read it on the death certificate. *Mixed. Toxicities.*

Months later I find his backpack—left, forgotten, having been pushed far under mom's guestroom bed, where he'd laid down for an afternoon nap.

Called for dinner, he slept on. And so an afternoon opens on eternity.

When my hands slip inside the backpack pockets, I feel the pill bottles. My hands touch one bottle, two, three, and then in another pocket, a fourth bottle and a fifth.

My hands. Suddenly resolute and on their own, they refuse to lift a single bottle from a single pocket. Instead, the fingers count the bottles again. The name of this or that—to the hands it's moot. The bottles were all empty. To the hands, this was the point.

TRADING VEHICLES

I got a new Subaru and gave my mother my old Camry and she in turn gave her grandson her ancient Mazda. So all worked out. All was good. All was spring and everyone was tooling the drag in a refreshed forward thrusting. Perfected forwarding! All went well. As if a flawless plan had finally been put in effect.

All fine! FOR TWELVE MINUTES! A perfect twelve minutes. The perfect span of time to make a person believe in perfect, in plans, in a smooth ride down quiet roads.

720 seconds, then WHAMMO. My nephew's new old Mazda hurtles through a red light—hard and bright, and the crazy crunch of cars.

We have to see the two totaled cars on the local news. At 4, 6, and 11. We have to hear three times "a miracle that everyone walked away."

My mother's mea culpa begins immediately and goes on for weeks. She's sure it's her fault, sure something had gone bad in the engine, a loose screw, sure she'd heard a pinging, a funny hum . . .

I wake up to more trades up and down—dishes and cars and money changing hands—and someone snipping about "a screw loose." And *Please*, I tell myself as the dream ends, *please pay attention. Those lights! Those lights right there in front of you.*

HOLE FOR A HATCHET

A pink flower had grazed the empty pot on my porch, blinked, and blown on by. Jar of baby food on a shelf one day, in the garbage the next. That child had made me open myself, close myself, and hate myself—sometimes all in a single minute.

Years after he dies, I go out and dig a hole for the hatchet but the hole just keeps shrinking, even as the hatchet enlarges. I'm trying, trying in my mind to bury it, so WHY has it suddenly attached itself to my ankle? OW—Criminy!—how does this thing stay so sharp?

Ow was the cry an owl made over our pathetic antics by that hole as the hatchet blade went on muttering to my freshly dug dirt, *Shut up! Take nothing—NO THING!—from this woman hacking away at the very ground beneath her.*

HATCH IT!

Hatch this! I shout up and hold toward the circling magpies a black onyx egg that belonged to my sister, a thing I'd given her. *You'll like it!* Oh, if only they'd shut up. It's not even light yet. *I know how you gruesome squawkers love the dead.*

Here, take this. Sit on it.

Forever and a day.

Egg with a royal, albeit inaudible, pulse within. It throbs in my hand.

Just a little something.

From our nest to yours.

Nance Van Winckel is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Our Foreigner*, winner of the Pacific Coast Poetry Series Prize (Beyond Baroque Press, 2017), *Book of No Ledge* (Pleiades Press Visual Poetry Series, 2016), and *Pacific Walkers* (U. of Washington Press, 2014). She's also published five books of fiction, including *Ever Yrs*, a novel in the form of a scrapbook (Twisted Road Publications, 2014), and *Boneland: Linked Stories* (U. of Oklahoma Press, 2013). She teaches in the MFA Programs at Eastern Washington University and Vermont College of Fine Arts. The recipient of two NEA poetry fellowships, the Paterson Fiction Prize, Poetry Society of America's Gordon Barber Poetry Award, a Christopher Isherwood Fiction Fellowship, and three Pushcart Prizes, Nance lives with her husband Rik Nelson in Spokane, Washington.

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