

# **visceral brooklyn**

## **issue 2**

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**NADIA ALEXIS**



### **Daddy Ritual**

3AM & he paces  
the house, spit

collection in his  
mouth until he

releases it on  
the floor &

opens my door.  
I'm sure not

to lift a  
limb. He walks

to the bathroom,  
turns hot water

on, full blast,  
then cold water

all the same,  
pulls out hair

pick, pushes it  
through his coils

as if to change  
their shape or color.

Emergency  
room band on his wrist,

he sits on the living  
room couch, starts to

sing his favorite  
hymn. I'm still in

bed pretending as he  
sings & sings,

re-arranges papers &  
pillows, turns on

TV & volume as  
if to forget

all the shrieks  
of the running

water. He will  
make sure he's

heard. In the  
kitchen he calls

his father's name  
& turns on

the faucet. Walks  
into his bed-

room, goes back  
to sleep. Wash-

cloth covers drain—  
the house floods.

In morning, we  
all step into ruin.

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Nadia Alexis is a poet, photographer and community organizer. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *BLACKBERRY: a magazine*, *Duende Literary Journal*, *Kalyani Magazine*, *Kweli Journal* and *TORCH Literary Journal*. She is a 2014 Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop fellow and 2014 Pushcart Prize nominee. She currently resides in Harlem, loves traveling down South and will be an MFA candidate at the University of Mississippi beginning this fall.

**CHIALUN CHANG**

## To Jie

Why does the sky fall

Today, a few students played cards in the back of her classroom. She told them not to, but they crossed their legs and laughed.

She went to the bathroom, squatted and stared at the drops sliding down from the mottled ceiling.

The taxi driver would come at 4 pm. I called and asked if he would come at 3:30 pm. He cursed. It sounded like the screeching of a bike brake

I watched Cyclo while she was sleeping next to me. Mid-May was wet. Mosquito net covered us. I asked her about her brother. She turned over and said, "Nothing has a full freedom."

We talked in

young days eating ice cream, one scoop is freshening, the second is static, the third is the ice age.

I walked into a riverside cemetery, skinny bones scattered. Vietnamese and Americans dead in the wilderness, I picked their fragmented souls

As there is a day  
She wakes up in the dawn  
turns her body and the blanket over  
shuffles from the bed  
combs her hair

Memory is on the side of the yard  
In the mirror, I send  
joy to her tears  
become part of her braid

both of us sit on a sunset twice  
The bench is as long as the road  
We've not made it through

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Chialun Chang was born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan. She is the author of *One Day We Become Whites* (No, Dear/Small Anchor Press, 2016). Recent poems can be found in *The Home School*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Bone Bouquet*, *iO poetry* and *No, Dear Magazine*. She was a recipient of New York Foundation for the Arts IAP program, The Center for Book Arts, and Poets House.

**CYNTHIA CRUZ**

## GHOST

The world is a Russian  
Wood of wolves and white

Night foxes.  
Danger,

And other,  
Smaller figures.

My secret, my sweet  
Fever,

Where among the shattered  
Voices are you?

Glimmering white  
Like a god, and living

Inside the jeweled  
Prison of your mind.

Lies and the bell  
Of death.

Miraculous, your face,  
Forever changed

By the sickening poverty  
Of sorrow.

## BLAU VOGEL

In the game of death,  
You take the mystical

Medicine, and pray  
It hustles you

Away from the silvering  
Edge.

THE BRIEF ENACTMENT OF DARKNESS, WARPED WITH MEANING

Keys and wooden birds.

Red toys and snow-

White plush,

Animals, stuffed: a doe, a foal,

And small blue and yellow birds.

My trophies, my proof.

## SELF PORTRAIT IN PORCELAIN TUB

In bright red and orange  
V-neck lycra  
Swimsuit with glass beads.

I am myself,  
Again.

Transfixed  
Inside an invisible  
Skein of music.

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Cynthia Cruz is the author of four collections of poetry: *Ruin*, *The Glimmering Room*, and *Wunderkammer*. Her fourth collection, *How the End Begins*, was published in March of 2016. Her essays, interviews and art writing have been published in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Guernica*, and *Hyperallergic*. Cruz has received fellowships from Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony as well as a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in writing and an MFA in Art Criticism & Writing from the School of Visual Arts.

**HILARY VAUGHN DOBEL**

## Name Day

In time of tornadoes  
one does not hesitate.  
One enters a cellar,  
tries to hide in quiet.

In time of high water,  
one tiptoes and cringes,  
holds imaginary  
meetings with all one's things.

One raised in time  
of spacecraft explosions,  
of reactor meltdown,  
she too has few choices.

She digs out the topknot  
of the Sunday brioche  
and sets it on a white plate.  
She is the knife who learns

by cutting. She will take  
a lover, another, a house  
that thinks only of itself  
as she walks quietly inside.

## The Nautical Terms

And at the turning of the banner year  
he stood whole, to all appearances,  
like a melon neatly cleaved  
and propped upright. There, in the hulk  
of his grey winter coat  
like an animal on the chair,  
above the ocean's yellow foam  
knotted thick as yeast, as wool,  
as birds. I saw him lean out  
with his wind-lifted hair,  
for the rush of water-sound, for air,  
displaced by the body of the moving sea  
to take some recollections with it.  
But for some thoughts,  
there is no perishing.  
I've tried to signal my distress in other ways:  
the kettle, hot,  
left empty on the flame;  
a kiss that's halved and halved again  
until it is mistaken  
for nothing at all. I remember,  
on the ocean, we were ships then,  
faces mottled with cold  
to match the sea below,  
so I lift my lantern high  
in the night:  
Red, right,  
return to me.

## Landscape with Cast Commentary

My favorite movies are the ones  
where the answer was right  
in front of them all along  
and somebody has to say so, awed  
and out loud and beautifully lit  
as they realize and raise their eyes  
skyward. Sometimes I shout  
upstairs to let me do it up right  
for once, to play the holy music  
while I flick on the waterfall  
and the clouds worry themselves  
into smaller clouds. If I have a sword  
I raise it now and a hush  
falls over the slow-motion crowd  
because how else would I know  
I am seconds from the ending?  
All those faces stare up at me  
in reconstituted moonlight. Beneath the roar  
of the assembly a voice complains  
*I thought it would be different* but  
she means *I thought I would stay  
the same*. In the name of my vanity  
we have been to the mountain  
and it gave us nothing. But I press on.  
Who on earth, I cry, can keep me  
from this beauty, and if he could,  
what good would come of trying?

Based on a True Story by Hans Christian Andersen

In this new adaptation of your life, you are cast as strong and ruddy, to better make a foil for the Snow Queen who is, as always, sylphlike and deadly with her blueberry lips. We made an alteration to the dream scene; when in the moonlit glade you are approached by the four men from its four corners, this time it will be you who remains clothed. We realize remaining clothed was not in the contract, but focus groups found the early cuts lacked tension: you, milky, shivering, them in their well-cut suits and power ties. Everybody knew what was going to happen.

This new version will feature a smart woolen pea coat, leaving more to the imagination, and it is truer this way for daily you trust yourself to imaginations not your own. When winter steals your other half and you embark upon your lengthy trek to Svalbard, you find the Snow Queen in her castle, refined and tasteful despite being made of ice and therefore powerless to stop its glittering. You barge in through the stained glass doors and tell her she won't like what happens if she doesn't give you what she's hiding: the piece of you in chains in cobalt dungeons where it's learning to love the cold and frost in its eyes makes it hard to comprehend what's happened.

The frame starts tight on you and then on her, and she's so beautiful you're glad you got your close-up first. You wrap a hand around her neck and lift her up against the wall to feel the solitary thrashing of her pulse beneath your thumb, and you shake her, shake her and she's lost her human face so you can see her, not how lovely but how cruel, afraid of daylight and of you and your hand threatening to melt right through her, and when she goes still and eyelids heavy fall, lashes long as daggers, you let her body drop, taste bile, fingers flexed at the pinprick of your life as it rushes back to them.

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Hilary Vaughn Dobel is a poet, Spanish-to-English translator, and an editor at Circumference. Her manuscripts, *Hot Cognition* and *He Imagined Himself Laughing*, have been finalists for the Brittingham Prize and the Colorado Prize for Poetry, respectively. She lives in Boston.

**LISA ROGAL**

## Labyrinth

IV.

The beginning of a labyrinth is disorienting. You would think you could go back, and for a while, you can. But then an invisible line is crossed and the option goes. At first it feels unjust, the entrance disappearing like that. A choice you had is gone. But you did it to yourself by moving forward. Of course, you could argue, is this really a choice? Anyway, you just keep walking because what else can you do but find the exit.

The labyrinth begins so beautifully it feels suspect. Flowers, of course. Large ones that I see and see and keep seeing. And then I *really* see them because they are brushing me in the face, overgrowing the path until I'm in a tunnel of them, filled like the tendrils of a jellyfish, so I can't see to the end.

They say labyrinths are built by Kings. Just wanted to get that out there.

The flowers are big and wet, sliding across my face. It feels fresh and a little disgusting.

Or, I should say, labyrinths are ordered to be built by Kings. The Kings don't do the actual building.

The flower tunnel spits me out, wet and blind. I wipe my eyes and see that the tunnel has opened into a desert. Now I have no idea where to go because there are no walls, no suggestions. Nothing is pushing me any direction.

I walk and walk in what I hope is a straight line. I lick my face to drink the water left from the flower tunnel. I realize I should have had more when it was possible. I make a note of it. And then I think, what is here that I'm ignoring? What's important now? But it's just a desert. What could I possibly need from it? It might be I don't understand. I have little experience with deserts. I almost lived in Arizona once and I walked into the desert to get to know it. It was very blue and very cold. A desert is a mystery. It is so open it feels like it just might be safe. But as I keep walking I know it's not. Time is the danger of a desert. Time and space, which are tricky and impossible to know.

V.

At a certain point in the desert, I can't tell if I'm still walking unless I look down and watch my feet making prints in the sand. I count my steps to one hundred then I start over again. This could go on forever, until I collapse from exhaustion.

In the desert, you forget your own name. In the desert, no one remembers your name. No. In the desert, no one knows their own name. In the desert, you can remember your name. In the desert – in the desert, you can't remember the names. Something about loss and what takes its place.

I would like this desert to be a metaphor, but it is not. I would like to not actually have to walk it, to be able to skip ahead, find a loophole. I look all around at the sky, the sand, the horizon, for signs of a labyrinth loophole. But this desert is real, as real as anything else as far as I can tell. I realize, I am going to have to walk all the way through it. My brain wants me to cry but my body just keeps stepping and stepping and stepping, my face with no expression I can feel.

When you actually have to do a thing that seems impossible, it's not your body that revolts. The body will do what it's told until it breaks down or dies. This is a wonderful thing about a body. It's like a dog. But my brain tells me to stop with each step. It doesn't know what to do once we stop, so we keep going. There is no thinking our way out of this. I have to step every step. I have to watch the endless landscape that never changes and let the boredom settle in my chest until it turns into sadness. Everything my brain is doing is a way to avoid emotion. There are no flowers or animals or trees or noises except the wind. I decide the wind is my friend. I cling to this friendship. This is pathetic but I can't help it. I want anything but to be truly alone with this brain that's run out of options. Each step on the hot sand sends a dull thud through my feet that rattles my skull. I am unbearably tender. When it comes down to it. I am raw as a tack. I long for something sharp. I think about a tack in my thumb, sticking that there. How that would feel. So good. It's strange. I think a tack in my thumb would make me feel less lonely. It doesn't make sense, but even the thought gives me comfort. I've lost count of my steps. It doesn't matter. I start again and this time I'm digging my fingernail into my thumb until I get a warm throb going.

## VI.

Maybe the desert ends at the ocean. Maybe it ends with a wall, the wall to the labyrinth, and I have to walk all the way back through it to get out. Maybe this labyrinth is a trap and ends with a creature that will kill me or turn me into a creature so it can be free. Maybe the desert is just a desert and nothing else. Maybe the desert ends at a beautiful hotel with a bath and room service and it's all free. Maybe the desert is really a plateau on top of a mountain and when I reach the edge I'll have to scale down the side to live. Maybe the desert ends just over those dunes up ahead. Maybe this time it really does. Maybe the desert ends when I collapse and give up and then I'm rescued. Maybe the desert slowly turns to grass and then a neighborhood and suddenly I'm in the suburbs somewhere out west. Maybe the desert is another planet and I need to find a wormhole to get out. Maybe the desert turns to ice and goes on forever and then I will really miss the heat. Maybe the desert maybe the desert maybe the desert. Maybe the desert is in my head and I'm not in a labyrinth or a house or anywhere. Maybe I'm in a dream where I walk through a desert until I die and then I wake up. Maybe the desert is a circle I keep going in. Maybe the desert ends when I can guess how it ends. Maybe the desert is a riddle I have to solve and then a mountain rises under me and carries me out. Maybe the desert has water underneath if I dig deep enough. Maybe I can dig my way out. Maybe if I try to imagine very hard that I am not in the desert it will dissolve and I'll be somewhere else. Maybe this is the Mojave Desert – or another name I'd recognize.

## VII.

I drink dew. I do the dew. My head wants a little dew drop to drink.

I once saw a Mountain Dew flavored cupcake, with Doritos on top. The world is coming to an end, I thought. But really the world was just beginning. The desert is like the end of the world. But no. It's not the end. The desert is the beginning of something – of the world. The desert is the end of the self. And the beginning of the world, which can finally stretch out in the space the self has left. A Mountain Dew flavored cupcake with Doritos on top is the self in all of its largeness. The desert has no room in the face of a cupcake like that. But the desert finds room. This desert was always here I just never knew it. Even while I stared at

the neon green and orange thing behind the bakery glass, the desert was here being empty and endless and hot and windy. It sat here the whole time whether I ate the thing or not, whether I was disgusted by the indulgence, the sick confusion of product with creation, the false originality of a Mountain Dew flavored cupcake with Doritos on top, whether I hated myself for being awed by a thing that was so aweless when a desert like this sat here for ages, changing and never changing and one day I found myself inside it and it didn't make any difference that a cupcake like that existed.

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Lisa Rogal is the author of *Morning Ritual* (United Artists Books, 2015) and *The New Realities* (Third Floor Apartment Press, 2014) and translator of Vladimir Druk's *The Days Are Getting Longer* (Third Floor Apartment Press, 2014). She holds an MFA from Long Island University, a BA from Northwestern University, and teaches writing for CUNY. Lisa is co-curator of the reading and performance series Heart-Star Salon in Brooklyn, NY.

**PAMELA SNEED**

## ILA

The last time I ever heard my true birth name was in Boston, while I was back in town visiting and partying at a gay club. I must have been 27 or 8 years old when this beautiful caramel-colored butch appeared, walked up to me and said cruisingly –

“What’s your name?”

“Pamela,” I answered, haughty and full of New York attitude.

“Oh,” she answered, disappointed. “I thought you might have been this girl I knew once named, Ila.”

Shocked that anyone outside my family could have known that name, I shouted at the top of my lungs, “It’s me! I am her!” ecstatic to hear the name of my birth, name I’d long since left, name of my childhood.

“I’m Marion,” she said. “Remember, you hung out with my brothers Troy and Tony?”

“Oh yeah,” I said laughingly, finally making connections between she and her two brothers. Silently, I marveled to myself at how Marion, once a tomboy, an insignificant little sister had grown into the handsome butch who stood before me. I also marveled at how she, based on the mannish appearance, had survived the small homophobic Massachusetts town we’d grown up in. “You don’t still live there?” I asked.

“No, no, I’m in college... Well,” she said, walking away, “Nice seeing you again, Ila.”

\*

For those who don’t know and people who just meet me, it’s difficult to explain my name change, to say I was born under another name and had a different identity. It’s difficult because the story involves not just me, but my family, primarily my father and his second wife who thought changing my name was a great idea.

\*

“Ill-ahhh,” my fifth grade homeroom teacher, the red haired and mustached Mr. Mastriani pronounced laughingly (Ill-ahhh sounding like killahhh minus the K) for the entertainment of my fifth grade class.

“Ila not Ill-aahh,” I said correcting him. I think he’d done that more than once, pronounced my name incorrectly for the benefit of the class. It was a technique, I suppose,

designed to keep me in line, because of all the 5th grade girls in his class, I was the most boisterous and outspoken. His mantra was: make a joke of the kids first, before they make one of you. “Ill-ahhh-Sneeze,” the fifth grade boys called me, embellished with a “ka-chew” for sneeze. “Ill-ahhh, the jolly green giant, and Hey Stretch,” they said, probably because at age 11, I was already 5’10” and towered above my classmates. As if imagining I existed at a different altitude, they yelled “How’s the air up there?”

In fifth grade I had wanted to fit in, belong, to somehow in size and shape and attitude look like the girls in my classroom. They were all white, with varying shades of blonde, brunette, and occasionally red hair. There was Laura, dark haired and Jewish, and Robin, a raven-haired beauty. There was Marlene, and her younger sister who was severely pigeon-toed, whose parents spoiled them. There was Terry, an Italian girl whom we kids visited after school and whose mother was famous for making something called “sauce.” There was Deborah with long strawberry blonde hair whom I taunted and put gum into her hair, resulting in her having to cut it. They were all monstrously good. I, on the other hand was dark skinned Black and unruly.

It was in fifth grade, the year that my name changed, I’d started acting out. I rebelled, talked back to authority, bonded with boys, and tried as best I could to make teachers like Mr. Mastriani, miserable. I also terrorized the French teacher, Mr. Blanch, who wore a blonde toupee and made us conjugate the French verbs in rhythm, who would say “Repete, si vous plait” and then bang his ruler on a desk for us to keep time like a drill sergeant. “Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf...” I led the disruption with fart noises, paper planes, passing notes, and frequently got tossed out.

Yes, it all floods back to me now, in fifth grade, my name change is the time I’d secretly begun to tear my hair out in patches and chew strands. Fifth grade is the time I began to have bald spots and needed to wear a wig. Perhaps I’m incorrect in my thinking, but, no, it all began in 5th grade and is related to my name change.

\*

There are two significant stories I must tell, both are important to my identity, and both involve waiting.

Before my father met my stepmother and remarried, he was a single parent, a young man who wanted to play the field. For these reasons and also while he worked, my grandmother—his

mother, Pearl—often babysat me. Once or twice a year, at school, there was a Parent-Teacher night where teachers gave interested parents in-person progress reports. I had been so good in kindergarten, so very good; I even had the capacity to write and spell long before the school taught me based on my father's at home lessons. He sat me down at a table and taught me the alphabet. He gave me lined paper and a pencil. I copied him as he wrote out Ila. I. L. A. I know now this is very important, as my father does not have a high school diploma and was educated only until the tenth grade. I could not wait for my father to go to the PTA night and for teachers to tell him how good I was. I think he and I had agreed upon this, but the evening of the meeting he was on a date.

In the living room of my grandmother's house was a huge rectangular picture window. From it I saw down to the end of the street, the Daniels School Park with the small hill we kids sled on during winter months. I could see the solitary tree on the hill. As we grew up, it was a tree we sat under and shared deep conversations or experienced a first kiss. Later, when the school became condominiums, the park was leveled and housed a tennis court. Also, from my grandmother's window, I saw the entire side of Daniels Elementary and Junior High schools. It was a red colonial building with a long lego modern wing attached. Beneath my grandmother's window was an old fashioned silver radiator. On the eve of the PTA meeting, I perched my five-year-old self on the silver radiator, like an owl on a branch, I sat and stared out and looked for my father. Hours passed, he never appeared, and finally the school lights started to go out. Every time a light went out in the elementary school and then the junior high, disappointment fell onto my shoulders like two-ton bricks, like debris that had broken free and fallen from a mountainous building.

It was the way I felt recently with a woman lover and the moment the disappointment occurred it felt like one of the valves, pipes, levees had burst in my heart, blood and water flowing everywhere uncontrollably. When my father finally arrived, he was drunk and my grandmother, whom I'd rarely seen angry towards him, said in a low voice, "She waited for you all night, why did you do this to her?"

I couldn't hear his response.

\*

The other significant event that shaped my identity involved Ruthie, my first mother. Unlike on a Parent-Teacher night, waiting wasn't contained to a few hours or an evening but extended decades, almost a lifetime.

Ruthie had dark brown skin and moles that covered her face like freckles. She worked at a beauty shop. She was a hairdresser. In the fashion of many African American women of her time, she wore silver bangles that went up her arm, almost to elbow, collected from different and exotic places like Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad. Once on a trip to Bermuda, after she and my father divorced, she bought me a silver bangle like hers, which she instructed should never be taken off. I was so impressed at that age by the thought of being like my mother and having a bangle like hers. Though, the bangle, which I did take on and off, bent and was lost.

In the beginning when my father remarried, Ruthie stayed in contact; there were gifts, occasional cards, but eventually, without warning or explanation, they stopped coming. I knew, too, there were not conditions for me to ask. So, I sat down by the window like the same little girl perched on a radiator on a Parent-Teacher night and waited for my mother.

In my tiny room, in my parents' apartment, there was a window and a single bed. Any time I imagine this window, I can also imagine the window and the tiny cell where Nelson Mandela spent 17 years on Robben Island before transferring to another prison. I imagine how that window, winter after winter, must have shaped his hopes and dreams where he looked out onto a yard and waited for release until his hair turned grey. The window in my room, however, did not look out onto a yard but a driveway, a huge parking lot filled with cars, the comings and goings of people living in an apartment complex. There was a woman whose face was scarred with acne and a daughter she sheltered. There were the people who lived below: the church-going Leona, who barely left the house, was my age; her brother, Junior, who had been in jail; their elderly religious mother; and an aunt.

For the 17 years I lived in that room, I sat often in front of the window on the corner of my bed and dreamt I saw Ruthie; my mother coming up the drive to rescue me. Pretty close to my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, I realized Ruthie would never appear. That dream, like the lights in Daniels Elementary School during Parent-Teacher night, eventually faded. I suppose the final nail in the coffin to Ruthie and our relationship came very early on, when my stepmother confessed, without guilt, to having burnt all of my baby pictures; pictures of Ruthie and I that attested to life before her.

\*

As far as I know, I was born into the world as Ila Levette Sneed. The surname came later. This is as far as I know because for child adoptees, birth certificates are fictitious. They never reveal the mother or father's name, nor the precise hour and exact location of the child's birth. These details, important facts, are intentionally left out, stored in sealed records in government offices for the purpose of protecting and insuring the anonymity of the birth parents' identity.

I can only assume my birth mother named me, having no other gift; she named me, "Ila," a special and unique name for a girl she'd have to give away. Yes, Ila is an uncommon name, and rarely, if ever in my adult travels, have I heard of anyone in the world called by the same name. I presume it was my birth mother who named me, but perhaps not. Perhaps the adoption agency where I'd stayed for two years until adoption, I had a special friend. Perhaps it was like in the movies or on television where a nurse or social worker befriended me and named me "Ila." Perhaps the name Ila was a gift bestowed upon me for what they sensed would be a particular and extraordinary, human journey. I have no idea, real memory, or factual information about that time. As far as I know, life began with my father, the man who adopted me, and his first wife Ruthie, both of who were and are to this day close-lipped and secretive about my origins.

It was reported to me, by my stepmother whom my father married after Ruthie, that upon meeting me at 2 years old, I'd run up to him in the adoption agency, said "Daddy," and flung my arms around him, though he was at that time a complete stranger. Something about me must have clicked for him also, because I was the one out of all the children in the world he picked. My father has never told me any of this history and if it were up to him, I wouldn't even know this much. He never wanted me to know of my adoption, nor of life and history before him.

It was my stepmother who told me, in a rather bad way, "I know you think he's your father, but he isn't and Ruthie isn't your real mother." I was standing in the mouth of a long hallway that connected the kitchen to the bathroom and bedrooms in our apartment. I was six years old, speechless, trying to piece the story like broken shards together, piece by piece. I was shattered actually, and had no way to understand it all. "If it weren't for your father and I, Ruthie would have sent you back to the adoption agency." Ruthie and my father had divorced two years previously. I understand now my stepmother was jealous of my relationship to Ruthie. I

understand now in a twisted battle for custody and ownership, she wanted to destroy any ties I had to Ruthie.

\*

I had lived with Ruthie for a short time after she'd divorced my father, and I'm hard-pressed to believe she'd have sent me back to the agency or away, but as a six-year-old hearing that terrible news delivered and undisputed by anyone, I believed what my stepmother told me, which she finalized by saying, "Don't tell your father I told you. He wouldn't want you to know." If I could physicalize how that news hit me (of my father not being my father and Ruthie not being my mother), I'd describe it as a crushing blow that sent me reeling into another stratosphere.

Suddenly, at six years old, the world I understood, thought was mine, my father and mother were no longer true. I no longer belonged, nor had the key fundamental figures that any child needs to survive. These facts were further verified by the fact that after my father remarried, Ruthie never came around, never visited, nor rescued me as I prayed she would.

\*

My stepmother and I used to play a game of sorts—she initiated—when my father went out. She would rifle through the paperwork in his top dresser drawer, looking for information about my identity. She came back one day and announced "Your mother was 5'10 and your father was 6'4. She was light brown and he was dark skinned. Their last name was Mills. He played basketball. They were from Virginia, but they came to Boston as students. They were young that's why they gave you up."

It was top secret information. I had no way of verifying if what she said was true, but I held onto those descriptions for the rest of my life. If the analogy is drowning or trying to survive, then their names are a raft tossed to me. I will never forget.

She said "Don't ever search for them; it will kill your father."

\*

My name and how much I disliked it was the only thing my stepmother ever paid attention to. When I came home in 5th grade complaining about teachers and boys calling me "Ill-aahh," for some strange reason she listened. Truthfully, I did not dislike my name and she could have

explained to me then, the power and beauty of being different. She could have told me keeping and honoring my name would be the first step in a courageous and lifelong journey. She could have held me as social workers and parents did in those PBS after-school specials about troubled teens, and she could have said, *you're special my dear and your name is part of it. Someone, somewhere a long time ago loved you very much to give you a name like Ila.*

Instead my stepmother said of my complaints, "Let's change it. Let's change your name," and we took on the project of searching through baby books for a new name. It was something we did together. I suppose now, in retrospect, I was desperate to be my stepmother's daughter. Desperate to have her regard and pay attention to me, to be that daughter she dreamed of having with my father, to be that pretty girl who would surely have been light skinned and caramel colored with good hair and she would have been monstrously good, unlike me who could never seem to fit in, fly straight, or win her love and approval.

We were sitting in the familiar place, in the living room, her on the couch and me on the brown recliner I wasn't allowed to recline. It's a choice she'd said, after narrowing down hundreds of names in the baby books, between Pamela and Leslie. I wavered. "Leslie," I said, "Les-lee," I said sounding it out like some student in an ESL class. For some reason Pamela had the ring of a princess.

"Pamela," I said. "I want my name to be Pamela." Afterward, it became official and was changed in court.

\*

Every so often I think of my name and my mind drifts to a girl I met in college, a white girl named Ananda, whose family and she were forced into leaving South Africa during the apartheid era. They were exiles who lost everything in coming to America and I remember every time Ananda spoke of her homeland, her eyes welled up with tears, throat croaked with longing.

I disliked Ananda, in every class I challenged her, "How can you only speak of yourself, your maid named Beauty, and the land you left behind when every day Black people fight and die for basic rights?" The white teachers too coddled her, pulled me aside after class, said "Leave her alone, she's not on your level." But now with age & wisdom, I look back and every so often, like the guava of homeland, like Ananda, I, too, miss Ila, that little girl. I miss my father calling

me Ila on occasion up until my 18th birthday, almost as if he couldn't help it; he had never fully accepted the name Pamela.

It was the way he understood me, what made me his.

I miss my Aunt and grandmother calling me Ila, said with a Southern twang sounding like Allah, substituting the I sound for an A and drawing out the first A so it sounded like God. "Alllaah," I'd hear ringing out from the front door of my grandmother's house. "Allah come here."

Perhaps this is why I was so happy in the gay club when that girl called me Ila. It was the last time anyone who knew me then called me it, like someone from a different era and I received it like a gift, a special part of home and secret past only few can attest to.

\*

The last living proof I have of there ever having been an Ila is a bible dedicated to me by an Aunt, written to an Ila Sneed.

Recently I took a group of students on a class trip to NuYorican Poets Café in New York City.

A middle-aged brown skinned Black man approached, he asked, "Are you Pamela?"

"Yes," I said; I thought it was a fan.

Except it was a second cousin I grew up with, who I hadn't seen in more than 30 years.

"It's me, Reese," he said, ecstatic, "I knew it was you."

For a moment, the part of me I thought dead came back.

He said again, "I just knew it.

You're Ila."

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PAMELA SNEED is a New York based poet, writer and actress. She has been featured in the *New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Time Out*, *BOMB*, *VIBE*, and on the cover of *New York Magazine*. In 2015, she

appeared in Art Forum and The Huffington Post. She hosted Queer Art Film at the IFC in New York City. She is author of *Imagine Being More Afraid of Freedom Than Slavery*, published by Henry Holt in April 1998, *KONG & Other Works*, published by Vintage Entity Press (2009) and a chapbook *Lincoln* (2014). In 2015, she published the chaplet *Gift with Belladonna*. She appears in Nikki Giovanni's *The 100 Best African American Poems*. She has performed original works for sold out houses at Lincoln Center, P.S. 122, Ex-Teresa in Mexico City, The ICA London, The CCA in Glasgow Scotland, The Green Room in Manchester England, BAM Cafe, Central Park Summer Stage and recently Columbia University's Tribute to James Baldwin, The Whitney Museum, and BRIC. Currently, she teaches in the department of Journalism and Communication at LIU and is a Visiting Professor at Chicago's School of the Art Institute teaching Human Rights and Writing Art.

# SEMPRE SIGRID

2015 LIU Brooklyn MFA Alum Harry McEwan Chats with Author Sigrid Nunez

*In June 2015, I sat down for a coffee with LIU Brooklyn's Fall 2015 Distinguished Visiting Writer, Sigrid Nunez, to talk about her upcoming Life & Story course, and about the nature of memory, influences on her work, and advice for writers.*

**HM:** Sigrid, I was reading up on you, and something you said that stood out to me in your 1994 Kimiko Hahn *BOMB* interview was, “Part of the motivation for writing is to come to a clearer understanding of one’s memories, ideas, and feelings.” Could you elaborate on that a bit? For instance, do you think—writer or not—that one ever fully understands one’s memories, ideas, or feelings?

**SN:** Definitely not. I don’t think it’s ever possible to fully understand. But I remember something my former professor Elizabeth Hardwick once said, which was that only writers think. What she meant was that when you’re writing you have to do a certain kind of thinking that you wouldn’t do at any other time. So if you’re writing about your past, you have to look at it and reflect on it in a way that you wouldn’t have to do if you were just, say, idly reminiscing. It’s a special kind of concentration that you bring to your memories and inner life that helps to clarify certain things without necessarily solving all the mysteries. But I don’t think you want to solve all the mysteries, you just want to see things more clearly, or even just try to see things more clearly, and I think that process in itself can be very satisfying.

**HM:** I think so, too, but I think a lot of writers can’t break away from those therapeutic aspects of reexamining the past and events that happened to them. Once not so long ago, when I finished my undergrad in NYU’s writing program, one of my professors said to me privately that I needed to “let go of the gay” in my work, that I was using it as a defense and that if I wrote less challenging material I would find a wider audience. Oddly, his comments spurred me to a real creative surge, where I was producing and producing material.

**SN:** Generally, I don't think it works to give that kind of advice. Whatever anyone writes about is up to the writer. Writers write about the things that obsess them. But you say it was somewhat helpful to you?

**HM:** It was. But I don't think that professor meant it exactly the way it sounds. He wasn't a homophobe at all.

**SN:** No, he was just trying to be helpful. But it reminds me of something Toni Morrison said, about how some people who read her early work said that what she'd done was all fine and good, but when was she going to write about something else, by which she knew they meant *When are you gonna write about white people?* As if when she was writing about black people she couldn't also have been writing about all people. There was an expectation, it seemed, that once she'd gotten writing about narrow African-American experience out of her system a writer of her talent and stature would want to take on "bigger," "more important" material.

**HM:** In your upcoming course *Life & Story*, one of the things you say you intend to do is explore the self as narrator and the self that lived an event. This is particularly interesting to me as a writer, because much of my early work was about dealing with my family. I wonder if you had a stage or phase where you tried to exorcise some kinds of demons or if you ever go back to your unpublished work to cull for something you're currently working on.

**SN:** I don't go back to old work in that way, but one of the reasons I like teaching the *Life & Story* course—there's an undergraduate version and a graduate version—is that I've discovered that most, if not all, of the writing students I've taught start out by writing autobiographical fiction. Many first published novels are autobiographical, and even when that's not the case it often turns out the writer has an autobiographical novel, or a draft of one, somewhere in a drawer.

**HM:** Yes, you're talking to one.

**SN:** It seems clear to me that a lot of writers need to deal with certain autobiographical material before they can move on to write other things. And that was certainly the case for me, I found that I had to write my first book—

**HM:** *A Feather on the Breath of God.*

**SN:** Yes—before I could move on to anything else. Not that the whole book was autobiographical, but the parts about my parents could have been published pretty much as nonfiction. But what I've found is that a lot of students and young writers don't realize that there are many different ways to write fiction that includes material from life. It doesn't have to read like memoir, or autobiography. *A Feather on the Breath of God* is just one way to do it, but the possibilities are endless. That's what I try to make clear from the range of works on the course reading list.

**HM:** I recently read your memoir *Sempre Susan* and your novel *The Last of Her Kind*, and one of the things that strikes me about your style that I find consistent in both books, is that each of these works has a graceful span between the narrator experiencing events in the past, and the narrator in the present, as the recorder or organizer of memories. What made you choose such non-linearity for these books?

**SN:** I don't feel that I chose it, exactly. Everything I write seems to come out nonlinear. And yet I love linear narrative. It's the traditional form of fairy tales and myths and many great novels and stories, though nowadays it's very rare. I once heard Colm Toibin talking about his writing students and how they were incapable of sticking to a linear narrative—even in short pieces they'd jump all over the place—and it made him wonder if he could write a linear story himself. And that's why he chose the linear structure for his novel *Brooklyn*, which turned out very well indeed. I myself have often been drawn to writing fiction that uses elements of memoir and that's written in the form of a memoir.

In most of my novels I've ended up including at least some material from my own life, for example the lives of my immigrant parents in *A Feather on the Breath of God*. In *For Rouenna*, I had to imagine what it was like to be an army nurse during the Vietnam War, something I'd never done, but I set part of the book on Staten Island, where I grew up. The main characters in *The Last of Her Kind* went to the same college I went to during the same years I was there, but I've never been married, I've never had children, I've never done time, I did not drop out of college, I was never a political radical—all experiences that my characters do have. That book has a first-person narrator, George, who's my age, but beyond that the only things we really have in common are having gone to Barnard at the same time,

and a certain sensibility. But basically what she wanted in life and what I wanted in life have nothing to do with each other. I like something that Richard Price once said, about how you might start out writing fiction that draws heavily from your own life, but at a certain point, as he put it, “You run out of life,” and then you have to find something else to write about.

**HM:** I think that’s what happened with me. But more so, when I reexamined my childhood, I just didn’t have those horrific experiences that some of my fellows had had, not that it was easy growing up gay in the 70s when there was no acceptance, but my real journey was coming to New York and discovering myself. But back to *Sempre Susan* and *The Last of Her Kind*. Both those books deal with the fluidity and unreliability of memory. What does that say about the trope of the unreliable narrator—which I don’t think you are, by the way.

**SN:** I think the unreliability of memory reflects actual experience. That’s exactly what happens: you have this incredibly vivid memory of some childhood experience and you bring it up at Thanksgiving dinner and your mother says, “Wait a minute. You weren’t even there. You’ve heard us talk about it a lot, but you weren’t actually there when it happened.” And you say, “No, I remember it.” This kind of thing happens all the time. It’s one of the central experiences of our lives. I think that as you go on in life you are constantly creating a narrative about it. That narrative can even resemble a kind of novel in your head as you try to make your life story a coherent one. But of course in real life there’s no such narrative structure, because life happens randomly, even chaotically. Real life is nothing like polished fiction. But even if your memories are completely unreliable, that doesn’t mean they don’t have any force or truth or meaning. This is a very different thing from the unreliable narrator in a story, of course, who is used by a writer for a particular reason based on what he or she is trying to do in a particular work. Sometimes an unreliable narrator is there to manipulate or trick the reader.

**HM:** Well, you can’t be an unreliable narrator if you acknowledge that kind of unreliability in the context of the narrative.

**SN:** Exactly. But I’ve never worked with a truly unreliable character.

**HM:** What do you think of the notion of Victim Lit?

**SN:** I’ve heard of it but I don’t read it. Whenever I think about people writing about their

experiences of having been victimized in some way, I always remember a conversation I had with Elizabeth Hardwick, about my first book and the difficulties I was having writing honestly about my parents. You have to find the right tone, she said. If you find the right tone you can write about anything. I think readers in general can have a bad response to a certain tone that writers of Victim Lit might be particularly vulnerable to, the tone of someone writing out of revenge. Also, I'm reminded of how Joan Didion says at the beginning of her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* that one of the first notes she made when she sat down to write was "the question of self-pity."

**HM:** I did read that Didion, and I felt she took you to the edge of self-pity without ever really giving in to that.

**SN:** Again, it's a matter of tone. No matter what you've been through, if your book is oozing with self-pity or clearly aiming to get back at someone who wronged you, that's just going to put the reader off. That's not the experience a reader wants to have when reading about someone else's pain.

**HM:** Do you feel your work has evolved since *A Feather on the Breath of God*? Can you trace an evolution there?

**SN:** It would depend on what you mean by evolve. I don't know that I would use that word. I think everything I've written has been quite different from what I'd written before.

**HM:** Was that a conscious choice?

**SN:** Not conscious in the sense that I sat down and said my next project has to be totally different from what I just did. Not at all. I just—at a certain point when I'm coming to the end of something I'm working on, I get an idea for what I want to write about next, and as it happens it's always been something that took me in a very different direction.

**HM:** Are you working on a new project now?

**SN:** I am, and it's not very far off the ground, but I know it's going to be a book that uses elements of both fiction and nonfiction.

**HM:** Have you ever worked on two or more projects at the same time?

**SN:** I was trying to work on a novel at the same time I was working on *Sempre Susan*, but I didn't get very far before I abandoned it. I think it's probably a bad idea for most writers, and except for that one time I've never tried working on two books at once, and I never would. I've often been asked to write an essay or a book review while I've been working on a novel and whenever I've done that I've found that it interrupted the flow and momentum of the novel. Most writers I know take breaks from their novels and write short stories or reviews or essays, but for me I think it's better to avoid it.

**HM:** How many projects would you say you've abandoned?

**SN:** Not many. I usually know what it is I'm going to write and once I begin I stick with it.

**HM:** Who were your biggest influences?

**SN:** Oh, like most writers, I read a lot, and I really do find that I'm influenced by whatever I'm reading, if I love it, if it's something good. But very early on, children's books and also fairy tales and myths. I thought that I would grow up to be a children's book writer. I thought that I would write fairy tales and other fantastic stories, and then when I got older I was very influenced by Dickens, who writes for everybody, children and grownups. And by the time I got to college, Virginia Woolf had become a major influence, and also Rilke—I'm thinking in particular of his autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the only novel he ever wrote, though it doesn't read anything like a traditional novel. And Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* was very important to me among many other reasons because it's a hybrid work that's both autobiography and novel. Though I would never have expected to count Philip Roth among influences, *American Pastoral* did indeed turn out to be an influence on *The Last of Her Kind*. And as I say, just about everything I read that I love has at least some effect on what I'm writing.

**HM:** What would you say is the best advice you ever got?

**SN:** I'd say Elizabeth Hardwick's comment about finding the right tone. But, of course, no one can tell you how to find the right tone, it's something you have to figure out yourself. And that's why it's so important to read other writers. Reading someone's else work, you find yourself thinking, There: that's the tone I want for my book. And then you try to learn from it. Another thing might be never to assume that the reader is not as intelligent as you are. That's very good advice.

**HM:** And that's where I'm going to end it, Sigrid. Thank you so much.

**SN:** Thank you. My pleasure.

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**Sigrid Nunez** is the author of the novels *A Feather on the Breath of God*, *Naked Sleeper*, *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury*, *For Rouenna*, *The Last of Her Kind*, and *Salvation City*, as well as the memoir *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*. She has contributed to *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The Believer*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Tin House*, and *O: The Oprah Magazine*. Her honors include a Whiting Writers' Award and two awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters: the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award and the Rome Prize in Literature.

**Harry McEwan** is the author of the Esther Hyneman Award-winning short fiction "Trashed," featured in Issue #9 of *Your Impossible Voice!* (September 2015). His stage plays have been produced in NYC, Chicago, and Minneapolis, among other places. He is a co-founder of *visceral brooklyn*.