

PAPER APARTMENT

Molly Jean Bennett





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MOLLY JEAN BENNETT

a winner of the 2015 Essay Press
Digital Chapbook Contest
selected by Jessica Smith



#71

ESSAY PRESS CONTEST SERIES

For Essay Press's 2015 Chapbook Contest, we asked 12 recent Essay authors each to select and introduce a manuscript extending and/or challenging the formal possibilities of prose.

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INTRODUCTION

— JESSICA SMITH

△

“We asked her what she did, and she said, ‘I’m sort of a spy.’”
—*Finding Vivian Maier*

“What does it mean to know who is in pain?”
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

△

John Maloof and Charlie Siskel’s documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* opens with shots of people Vivian Maier knew summing up Maier in one word (words like “eccentric”), and blossoms into descriptions of her life as a photographer. A queer social outcast, Maier worked as a nanny while taking thousands of photographs that she hoarded and never developed. By situating herself out of society—out of marriage, out of history (her personal history is a series of lies), with children who are not her own, wandering through the streets taking pictures of strangers—Maier lived as the ultimate detached people-watcher.

Bennett, too, is a people-watcher. She writes in cafes—eavesdropping and watching. Most of us do that: we write in cafes and people-watch. One of my professors once said that

cafes are productive because “They’re noisy but the noise is not addressed to you.” Cafes allow us to detach from our personal relationships and tap into the universals we want to record.

Bennett’s art returns to the particular, the family, her family, herself. She desires to record and understand Maier through the experience of her own aunt, who has a similar hoarding instinct. Through her own experience of being an embodied, and sexual, woman. The obsessive tracking of someone else, someone unknowable, through one’s own capacity for empathy.

PAPER



*For Great Aunt Mary Ann, Vivian Maier, and Frank Goode—
real, real once, abandoned, imagined, all of the above*



APART MENT

Carmichael, CA, 2011

M. A.

When they finally broke down the door, they found her apartment was full of paper. She had carved out tunnels to survive—front door to fridge, fridge to bathroom, bathroom to the cot in the hall where she slept. The paper tunnel walls were sedimentary not only in their layering. They were becoming earth. The newspaper and gas receipts near the bottom—1952, 1954—had turned to dust, then something like stone. Some tunnels collapsed into themselves. She must have crawled through them on her hands and knees.



Brooklyn, NY, 2014

I always try to find a seat by the window so I can look up from writing now and then to check if my bike is still locked to its rack or signpost or young tree trunk. Tonight I'm in a new cafe, one high ceilinged and low lit in the way that makes everyone's skin look soft. Small conversations and keystrokes fill the spaces between the espresso machine's whistle blasts. A bell rings every time the door opens. Behind me, a child tells an old woman a joke: *What did the grateful leg say to the foot?* Silence. *I don't know. What?* His answer explodes like a bottle rocket. *Thankle!* I look out the window and a woman like a shadow glides by on her bicycle. She turns her head briefly toward the cafe then blends back into the night. I wonder if she's seen me.

Brooklyn, NY, 2013 and 1950s

V. M.

When I spent my first summer in this city, my sister, who sends things, sent me an article about V. M., the street photographer only recently known. For decades she—nanny, spinster—shuttered and snapped through bus windows, on sidewalks, in film queues. Her body—100,000 negatives—was discovered in a locker at a thrift auction. From that first article, I remember one shot in particular, of a policeman holding a fat lady in a polyester housedress by the wrists. Maybe it was discipline. Maybe they were praying.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

September 20, 1988

Dear Brother Frank

Just want you to know that we are thinking of you & and haven't forgot you. Think of you several times a day. Hope that you are keeping warm these cold days & nights, And most of all, Hope that you are well. Heard that you have been getting around & over the hills, Doris & Leonard called us about a week ago & said that you have been over there, that's good. So go see him for you don't seem to care enough about me to come see us even when we are less than a hundred miles away, But I love you as my brother anyway, Sure hope that poor Fannie is improving or is that too much to hope for, Too bad, Butch is in pain most of the time with his Hip. The Hip-Joint is rotting away, & it even cracks when he walks most of the time, The Dr told him yesterday that he'd have to have it operated on very soon. No wonder my hair is turning gray faster than usual, Well, I must close for now & warm up the soup for Supper. Take care of yourself, Love you ~~always~~-Always

Butch + Penny

Carmichael, CA, 2011

M. A.

My mother had hoped to find letters in there. Maybe the brothers wrote her in the preventorium. Maybe the father apologized. M. A. herself wrote letters, my mother said. Once, 30 years ago, she asked the nieces and nephews for stationary at Christmas. It was my mother who bought it, thin blue sheets with violets spiraled in the margins. But in the tunnels my mother found no correspondence. Only seed catalogs, bank statements, newspapers—60 years.

New York, NY and Chicago, IL, 1950s

V. M.

She had no children, as they say, *of her own*. The kind of children one owns, I suppose, are the children that come from one's body. That must be how the distinction is made. No body offspring, but for V. M. there were many children. In the big houses along the parks—Lincoln Park in Chicago, Central Park in New York—she rocked bassinets and tilted rubber-tipped bottles into tiny mouths. She sat with them for arithmetic, for piano lessons, for bedtime's single forehead kiss. A small boy threw his fistful of pilfered silver forks at her from across the parlor and she caught them in her skirt. One fork left a small hole above the knee. She walked home, saw other children, filthy ones, jumping rope in the street. She crouched, turned her focus ring, and caught them in flight.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

I call my mother and ask about the dates M. A. was in the preventorium. What year was she born? And when did she move into the apartment? When did you finally coax her into the care home? In what season did you call the men to help force your way in? Why wouldn't she give up the keys? I write a sentence, delete an adjective, write a paragraph, backspace backspace. I move from coffee shop to coffee shop, cafe to corner bar. This city has an endless supply. I could go to three new places a day, and by the time I got through them all, the neighborhoods would have changed enough for me to start again. A new seat by the window—write, sip, delete, write. Now I pause to look out on the rainy night. On the other side of the glass a woman unlocks a door that must lead to a staircase that must lead to her apartment. She has long, white hair and round glasses—a snowy owl on a warm winter day. I stare at her long enough for her to notice, so I give her my shy smile. She returns it and disappears through the door. I imagine the click of the lock as it closes behind her.

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M.

I look over the letters again and leaf through the big book I bought of V. M.'s photos. She took so many of lovers on the street. In one, a serious boy and his grinning girlfriend stand close in a bus shelter as summer rain pelts the roof. Another: a close-up of two hands tucked together. The big hand so big and muscular. The little hand so little, lily-white.

Carmichael, CA, 2011 and Carmichael, CA, Unknown Year

M. A.

There was always the question of her sexlessness. Her sexuality? Did we talk about it in terms of orientation? Her mother believed there would never be a husband. M. A. had rotted somehow and could never regrow. Then all those years in the tunnels she must have been drying up—every good vapor sucked and sucked into newsprint, cable bills, unused envelopes. My sister thinks there was a lover once, a man. Is lover the right word? Does *lover* refer to love between two persons or sex between two persons? I am not the kind of person who uses it. The lover, he would have been long ago, when she worked computers at the base. Maybe he worked there too, or perhaps they met at the archery range. He might have been quite tall and light-footed despite his big shoulders and long toes. He went away.

New York, NY, 2014

This morning, after my third sip of coffee, I decide not to see H. again. I will not go to his apartment late at night, press the buzzer and ask to be let in. A moth lands in my cup. I blow it toward the porcelain lip. I lift it out with my index finger and lay it on the table, hoping its wings will dry.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

March 20, 1989

Dear Brother Frank

I talked to Ida and she says she saw you outside the House yesterday, coiling up the hose & you had Fannie on the leash & you were with some Woman (!) Young Woman, Ida says, & someone she's never seen before. PReTTY Woman, Ida says, or something Like it. Well, big Brother, why the Mystery?! Of course you could just call every once & a while and tell what's on in your life. I told Ida maybe he's finally hired a Nurse, that's good. Maybe he's gone and done the smart thing. Anyhow, all the same here. Got to give Butch the new pills. Too Soon to say if they're any Help. Well, take care. Love you Always,

Butch + Penny

New York, NY, 2013 and Paris, France, 1922

A few months ago, I sent H. the postcard with the naked woman on the front. I'd spent the better part of an hour picking it out in a vintage paper-goods shop in Paris earlier this summer. The shop had a whole basket of them—women reclining on chaises, women pulling back curtains to reveal painted landscapes of pastoral bliss, women stretching their pale arms toward an imaginary sky. Most were totally naked. Some wore stockings. As I lifted each from the basket, I wondered if they were all dead by now. Probably. What happened to the big-bottomed brunette who dropped her robe in an unheated studio in the 9th Arrondissement, February 1922? I chose her because of that gaze—so fiery even in faded black and white, and at the same time so underscored by loneliness. I also chose her because her ass looked just like mine.

New York, NY, 1960s

V. M.

Sometimes she photographed herself. Reflected in mirrors and shop windows, she never quite smiles, never quite makes eye contact. There are portraits too of the second self light makes. Her shadow rises from the bottom of the frame like a misshapen Christmas angel. She looms over an empty street, then a field of daisies. The slick shell of a horseshoe crab on the sand, a fence made of sticks, the legs of two women wearing stockings. In one photo she must be just inches behind a sleeping beach bather. Her shade, hatted and coated, reaches across the woman's ample bust and shining belly. The bather will never see this image, never know it exists.

Norfolk, VA, 2013

H. liked the postcard. He told me so, not in a letter of course, but in a text message, and invited me to join him at his parents' house on the Virginia coast the next weekend. I went, sat on the porch with the whole family in my red summer dress. We drank beer and smacked whole steamed crabs with little mallets. H. introduced me as a friend, stayed a safe distance all day. After everyone went to bed, we walked out to the beach near the power plant. I blew him behind a brick hut marked High Voltage. The ground smelled faintly of urine and the stacks of the plant puffed pink-yellow clouds. I found them unbearably beautiful. After we finished, I laid my head on his chest and felt safe, felt almost home. He ran his hands through my hair, thanked me, kissed me again. On our way back to the house, we found a dead snake flattened in the road. *I'm sure the others are alive and well in that field*, he said, and I agreed.

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M.

I return to her photograph of an old man lying on a beach. It must be midday, the light falls crisp and even, and he's fully dressed in a plaid shirt and high-waisted trousers. Save for the lines of sand meeting sea meeting sky, he is the only thing in the frame. V. M. has approached from behind—he lies on his side with his face toward the ocean. Asleep, dead, asleep? She would have been able to perceive the faint rise and fall of breath, but, stilled permanently by her shutter, the man looks like he could be in either world.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

New York, NY, 2014

June 1, 1989

Brother,

Even though you won't say Hello, I thought I'd get in touch to say I found these Photographs from the old property & thought you might like to have a Look at them. The first one is of you & mother at the pond, you are so Tiny it must have been the summer of '15 or '16. Isn't mother a beauty in her bathing costume? Hard I Find to even remember her like that, & of Course you are quite the Handsome cherub. Well, it was a long time ago. The second is of Albie's goats, of course, you remember them, must have been springtime because look at those kids. The last one I can't Remember being taken at all, though Clearly we're all there. What dinner was that, some holiday, when Albie was still alive and Tina was already Born? And someone cooked a whole ham, and I'll say those cheeks all look Red and those glasses all look Full. Seems a nice Time. Memory, Brother. It goes. Well, keep Yourself well & Good. Love,

Penny

I watch through the cafe window as a man stops to admire a small tree covered entirely in icicles from the freeze melt freeze of the past day. The woman walking with him says something and he laughs in a full-bodied way, expelling a trail of steam from his chapped, easy mouth. A girl in a green coat passes. She pauses to break off the tip of an icicle. She holds it like a carrot, then a dagger, then a baby.

Bret Harte Preventorium, near Sonora, CA, 1936

M. A.

They sent her there so the tubercular gland in her neck might be monitored. With a quail egg of toxic possibility beneath the skin, she had to be kept from D. and Billy, her healthy brothers. Just once she described it to me, how the sound was like air horns and crickets and stage whispers competing for oxygen, how she could never sleep for the constant yowls of children who were not yet sick, but might be. They took morning lessons from an overrun nun. Sister Bianca had eight fingers, the left thumb and pointer martyrs to a grenade blast in a French field hospital where she changed bandages, 1916. *I count to eight, you count to ten*—teaching them numbers. *Apple, biscuit, cow, dandelion*—teaching them letters. M. A. looked up at her from her seat on the floor, lost track of *lion, mop, needle* for the bird-like movements of eight fingers teaching. Despite her age and hardship, Sister Bianca had kept her youthful skin. Her lips made such a soft *o* for *orange, pigeon, question*. M. A. watched and watched. Sister Bianca was the one good thing. After lessons, they all left the big brick house to play in the dusty yard. There were ropes for jumping and a single, coveted leather ball. M. A. never touched the ball. She was not good at making allies. Before supper, the children were all washed and checked—heart, lungs, temperature. She asked the doctors about her parents and brothers. They had no answers. At supper, the bread was hard. She believed she had been left to die. *Apple, biscuit, cow, disaster.*

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M.

There must have been a little repair shop in her neighborhood, somewhere to see a man about a stuck shutter button, a lens with a hairline crack. Did he know what she was up to? Did he see her exposures, ask *What ASA for the shots on the train? Or How did you get that without the little boy seeing you?* I like to think she had an ally. Or at least someone to talk shop with.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

The cafe is closing soon. The barista, who looks a bit like H. but taller and with a fuller beard, taps his foot to the gypsy jazz on the stereo as he washes dishes. A couple fights quietly at a table by the bar. I can't hear them, but I see how anger etches itself on the crease of his brow, the sharp flights of her thin hands. I wonder how V. M. might capture the instant. With her Rolleiflex, she could not shoot discretely, nor from a distance. No, she would approach the table. *Continue, I do not exist*, her posture would suggest as she opened wide the aperture's eye and waited for the woman's finger to harden into an accusatory point, for the man's face to soften into something like guilt.

Bret Harte Preventorium, near Sonora, CA, 1937

M. A.

She began to take things. First, she slipped a pencil stub into her sock during lessons. Sister Bianca was flying her five-fingered hand across a map of North America—*This is where geese go in winter*—and never noticed M. A.'s tiny crime. That night, M. A. found a loose thread at the corner of her mattress. She worked it just far enough out to open a pocket for the pencil. She took rusty nails from a bucket in the yard, stole the laces from other children's shoes as they slept. How thrilling to take a sugar cube, a quarter stick of butter, then a whole orange from the kitchen. She never used, never ate, her stockpiled things. But she did protect them. She made sure she was the last to leave the bunkroom in the morning and the first back for bed. She ran her hand across the pocket, feeling the bulge of the decaying orange and the muffled points of the nails. She had become a person of means.

New York, NY, 1960s

V. M.

She filled her attic apartment with boxes, stacked them to the ceiling like a second layer of insulation until they blocked out the light from the west-facing window. Filed sometimes by month and year, she kept every scene and face, moments of gelatin emulsion exposed to light and then stored indefinitely in darkness. And manuals, magazines, private notebooks. She requested the landlord install a better lock. Best kept safe, best kept hidden.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

April 29, 1989

Dear Frank,

We hope that you'll soon be like New. Sorry that you didn't want to see us when you were in the Hospital. It sort of hurt both of us. If you want us to come and See you again let us know.

Love you as always

Butch + Penny

New York, NY, 2014

In the cafe, at the next table over, a woman in a long dress printed with golden peacocks and pears cuts a boy's cheese danish into four thin strips.

Bret Harte Preventorium, near Sonora, CA, 1937

M. A.

Twice she tried to escape. The second time she succeeded, waiting all day to slip through the fence into the open oak savannah. It felt blue and endless in the dusky light. She ran, pricking her shins on star thistle and scrub brush, scaring rabbits with every step. As a younger child she would have chased their light-trail tails, but at six she did not stray. She made straight for the horizon, the farthest place.

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M

Two girls with straight-cut bobs stand against a stone wall. The taller drapes her arm over the shorter's shoulder. Their faces turn toward one another; their noses almost touch. It is the pose of secrets.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

The first warm day of spring and someone has propped the cafe's back door open with a brick. A wilted ceiling fan mixes the air overhead, stirring the outside world with the in. It's recess at the school across the street and children, hyenas, and songbirds have conspired to release a continuous cry two parts joy, one part terror, one part pure unquestioning sound. Somewhere on the block, someone boils hotdogs. The smell of meat steaming cuts through espresso and exhaust and minor human sweat. I turn to the window just as a tiny girl, her hair braided with beads, swings the full weight of her body on the final monkey bar and lets go. Fear flashes over her face and then she lands, feet first, and runs.

Near Bret Harte Preventorium, near Sonora, CA, 1937

M. A.

Two nurses found her the next morning, asleep under a dead oak. With her body tucked up in the gray dress and hair spread across her face, she looked like a pile of detritus, like the husk of a person suddenly ascended. The nurses, young and bored at the rural preventorium, were thrilled to be out searching. The only men for miles were the handyman—arthritic, deaf, far too old—and the doctor, who was handsome but so cold as to be totally useless. It was summer, already hot and bright in the early morning.

New York, NY, 1963

V. M.

Riding the bus, she would have had to turn entirely in her seat to get the shot. The elderly couple directly behind her sleeps, their heads leaned into one another. Two mouths fixed in slumbering frowns, two pairs of eyes obscured by his brim's shadow. Together, they wear one hat.

Near Bret Harte Preventorium, near Sonora, CA, 1937 and
Rouen, Assisi, Okinawa, Pasadena, 1939–1960

M. A.

The taller, plainer nurse carried two jars of water while her shorter, prettier friend held a medical kit and a picnic basket. The tall one would see France, Italy, Japan in the coming war. She would carry a disembodied human arm across the stage of a bombed-out concert hall in the dead of night. She would have sex—brief, desperate, white-hot but silent—with a Catholic priest in the basement of an orphanage. She would learn to attach a morphine drip to her own thirsty veins. The short one would marry an engineer, lose him in the war, then marry an oilman nearly twice her age. She would turn up the kitchen radio as he screamed on the phone in his study. She would learn to slip out of bed while he slept, walk down the stairs in silence and slide open the glass door without catching its squeaky wheel. She would stand in the garden, breathe the night breath of the star jasmine, and listen to the hesitant notes of the teenage neighbor on his guitar. The tall nurse shrieked and dropped one of her jars when she saw the shape beneath the oak. Kicking up clouds of dust, the nurses ran. M. A. remembered two faces, both sweat-beaded and sun-haloed, appearing over her. One angel opened a jar and tipped the rim toward her lips. The other clasped her hand and whispered that from now on, everything would be just fine.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

Waiting in line at the coffee shop today, I watch the young woman in front of me apply pale pink lipstick. She peers into the self-facing camera of her phone as she pulls the color across her lips. The image on the screen moves slower than she does; by the time her digitized lips pucker and pop open, I've already heard the *pip* and *pah* of her exhale.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

I have seen H. a few times since the beach by the power plant. Last week we cooked curry and drank wine in his tiny, impeccable kitchen. I noticed how he'd begun to say *That's* so *funny* rather than laughing in the loud, easy way he used to, rather than laughing at all. We finished dinner, danced to Billie Holiday in the kitchen, and then fucked on the torn armchair he kept next to the table. After, in his bedroom, he fell asleep with his face to the wall. I don't feel the need to tell him that was the last time. We have no arrangement.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

My Silent brother,

We went to see some fiddlers at the Church on Friday and that was nice, reminded me somehow of the farm & us riding our Bikes to town in the summers. Before the war, of course. All those old songs like Cornbread & Butter Beans & also Jesus Remember Me. Well, otherwise nothing here. Butch has been so quiet, can't get him to say much at all. The Man is deep in his head but that's who I married. Feels like it's just me all alone some days. Oh well. Ring me Up, brother. Not that you will.

Love as usual,

Penny

New York, NY, 1960s and New York, NY, 2010

V. M.

I am reading what I can about V. M. The man who discovered her has written many careful speculations. She had no close friends, no partners; she showed her work to no one. Few knew she took photos at all. He offers her deep need for privacy, her thorough insecurity as reasons. But I wonder how he can know she was afraid. What if she was singularly brave? She was so confident in the transcendent beauty of her images that she needed no external confirmation. No admirers, no sharp-eyed critics falling over themselves to praise her. They found recordings she made. *We have to make room for other people. It's a wheel—you get on, you go to the end, and someone else has the same opportunity to go to the end, and so on, and somebody else takes their place*—her words transcribed and printed on the jacket of a book. The recording themselves, her vocal-chord vibrations bound to strands of magnetic tape, have not yet been released. I crave the sound of her voice. I imagine it small, practiced—soft but not weak, a spring reed singing in a gale. But maybe it was bold and low. Her voice told children *No, shhhh, don't talk to your brother like that. We must be kind.* But it could have commanded armies.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014 and Buchanan, VA, 2013

Once I showed H. the letters I found in an abandoned house down in Buchanan, VA. I told him how I'd been driving down for the weekend to visit friends who had a neat gig tending a dairy farm. I was winding through a mountain highway south of Charlottesville when I saw the house—boarded up and half subsumed by grasses but bearing no instructions to *KEEP OUT*. I pulled off the road. I hoped H. would be impressed by the way I forced open the door and traversed the dark rooms. The air felt clammy and overripe; I took small breaths through my mouth. The house was still furnished, though someone had upturned the armchairs and knocked over an end table. There were boxes of paper everywhere—the sister writing endlessly to the brother as well as catalogs, bills, invitations to funerals and christenings. H. said the letters reminded him of him and his sister, only in his scenario he was the one sending messages to a silent sibling. *Sometimes she emails to say she's not dead, but that's it, he said. She won't say how she's doing, or if she's happy or anything.*

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

July 10, 1989

Brother,

I'm just very nearly at the End of my rope trying to get you up here to see us & again you don't seem to want to & only write a small note to say so. I do wonder how you can Stand it being down there all by yourself. What must you Do all day? Doesn't it just drive you mad not to have anyone to talk to? Butch Says to me, he says Penny you'd up & Die if you couldn't run your Mouth to someone all the damn time. Well & I laughed because I guess that's the truth. I suppose you must be content to be on your Lonesome. Maybe you talk to Fanny sometimes even if she can't talk back except bark & cry & all that. To each His own. Love you. Pleas Be in Touch.

Penny

*New York, NY, 1960s and Carmichael, CA 1960s
and Brooklyn, NY, 2014*

V. M.

In one self-portrait she is reflected in the chrome front of a cigarette machine. Camera at navel, she looks toward the sky. She wears a floral blouse. It's boxy around the shoulders with large, blotchy flowers, and she's tucked the whole thing neatly into her high skirt. I have such a blouse. It was M. A.'s. My mother found it in one of the less disastrous closets; the doors had been blocked off by paper stacks early enough to leave the coats and shirts unmolested by cigarette smoke and rat feces. On me, the shirt fits roomy—my frame lacks the solidness of her full health.

New York, 1960s

V. M.

Another self-portrait. Her reflection repeats through two round mirrors affixed to opposite walls of the same room. The room is empty, save for a stack of wrapped parcels and a square clock on the wall, its limp cord running crosswise to the floor. V. M. stands next to the tripod, hands on hips, her face fixed in a dark stare, something just on the edge of contemptuousness. It's as if an old lover has just walked through the door—he or she is not wholly unexpected, not dangerous, but certainly unwelcome.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

I know I'm not the first to try casual sex as a cure for loneliness and find it something like a Band-Aid pressed on the kind of broken arm where the bone pokes through. And *casual* seems like the wrong word. Casual is jeans at the office, a sandwich in the park at lunch. Casual is not touching the parts I would protect in an accident—the neck, the face, the base of the skull. H. likes to be touched in the hollows behind his ears, J.—who I saw only twice—seemed to need my fingertips on his clavicles, my tongue running down the valley of his sternum. L., from forever ago, wanted to feel the heat of my breath on her throat.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

September 2, 1989

Dear dear Brother,

I will Say that I have called you now a total of 16 times this week & nothing but your phone ringing & ringing on forever. We are Worried, Brother, & if you are angry for some reason this is a Cruel punishment, because by this point we think Maybe you are dead (!). Just call or write or come Up & see us so we know you are O.K. Love Always, Your Poor Sister who you are surely making Grayer and more Haggard by the Minute,

Penny

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M.

Another from the beach—shot low, just the wet skirt hems and atrophied calves of two women standing in the surf. The way their four legs tangle suggests they might cling to one another in the unseen space above the frame. Leaning, holding, they wrap old arm around old waist, lay cheek against shoulder. And V. M. crouches behind them. She must have taken off her shoes and socks, waded into the water. She would've felt sand, a thousand cold stars, between her toes as she shielded the lens from the bright sky. She would have considered the fragile scrim of film inside, feared overexposure. Was this the same day she captured the old man lying with his face toward the ocean? The same beach where she cast her shadow over a bikinied bather? Each photo is undated, its place unnamed.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

September 8, 1989

Frank,

I don't even know why I'm writing, seeing as I already called the Buchanan sheriff's office & had him send someone down to check on you only you weren't there, back door wide open & truck in the driveway but Nobody Home (not even Fanny) & a week's mail all stuffed up and falling out the mail box. I'm worried Sick. I just hope you get home from wherever you are & give me a call.

Love & love always,

Penny

Carmichael, CA, 2011, Brooklyn, NY, 2012, and
Yolo County, CA, Date Unknown

M. A.

Behind a twenty-year stack of outdoorsman catalogs, banking files, unopened sewing patterns, my mother found M. A.'s hunting things. Boxes of arrows, their feathered ends decaying, and three bows along with trophies for deer, elk, sharks. There were five pairs of antlers, all but one unmounted, and the taxidermied foreleg of a doe. My mother threw the arrows out, donated the bows to the school district summer camp, and kept the antlers and trophies, the state champion plaque, in case my sisters and I wanted them. She told me she found a camera too, an old Minolta with film in it. I popped open the back, took the film to be developed at the drugstore on my block. I was hoping for M. A. and her hunting friends, the wind pulling locks of sweaty hair off their foreheads, the sun on their dusty cheeks. But the pictures came back light-heat rectangles of abstract browns and reds. *Sorry*, said the man at the photo counter, and *How old was that film?*

Brooklyn, NY, 2014

Iced coffee today, and a slice of coconut cake at the high-ceilinged cafe. In her last years, M. A. developed a fondness for sweet things, and for wine. I remember her lifting slow forkfuls of apple pie to her mouth at Sunday dinners. *Best damn pie I ever ate* was her appraisal of every pie. When she did venture into human company, she was a woman of well-worn scripts. After dinner chitchat: her dim views on vegetarianism, her disbelief in heaven. I take another bite of cake. Sweat shines my temples as I pull the letters out of my backpack—the sister writing forever to the brother. Which to transcribe today? The air conditioner cuts out. For a full minute, thick silence.

Brooklyn, NY, 2013

H. and I went to the beach at Coney Island once, last summer. It was the first time I'd felt solid enough in my body to purchase a bikini, and the beach day with H. was to be its maiden voyage. My heart beat a high thrum as the train carried us over and under Brooklyn toward the ocean. I wished we had taken our bikes. I would have preferred hot wind in my face to the car's cramped air. Once we had staked a spot in the sand for our blanket and ice chest—beers, dolmas, peaches—I pulled off my sundress. Though I had been fully naked with H. many times in the near dark of his room or mine, I felt for a moment an intense exposure. The bikini, with its printed parrots, its aggressive blues and teals, seemed an insufficient layer between the real live air and me. But the young family next to us did not look up from their cold-chicken lunch. The seagulls kept crying in nonchalant circles overhead. H. looked at me. *Swim?* Weaving between towels and tanners and crowds of sticky children, we ran toward the ocean. I saw an old woman lying fully clothed in the sand, her face turned toward the ocean. We passed so close she might have caught the droplets of our footsteps on her blouse as we crashed full-bodied into the cold water.

Harrisonburg, VA to Buchanan, VA

September 18, 1989

Brother,

Well thank the Lord you finally Rang to say no, not dead, just hiking. Next time you feel the need to go out on the trail for a few with just a pack & a walking stick & that blind dog of yours, you ought to tell me first, you old coot. Oh its nice to tell the barkeep at the Inn by the Trailhead that you're leaving Civilization for a spell should anyone come looking for you, but not your very own Sister. You say you're not too Old for adventures & living off jerky and creekwater & that's Nice, but I'm certainly getting too old for that kind of suspense. We only get one Heart in this Life, brother. We've got to try & keep it good

Simply love,

Penny

New York, NY, 1950s

V. M.

In my favorite self-portrait, she regards herself at a distance in a rectangular mirror. A hatted workman, his back to her, is lifting the mirror off a truck. Though the focus is pulled to the wrinkles on the workman's neck, the figure in the mirror is clear enough. I can see the swell of her cheeks and the shadows beneath them—her face pulled for once into a coy smile.

Brooklyn, NY, 2014 and Polish countryside, 2013

Clearing the photos off my phone, I find one I took of myself last summer. I'm on a train in Poland, riding from Częstochowa to Krakow in an empty compartment. I remember how the faux red-leather seats were all busted up, pocked with cigarette burns and bleeding stuffing from wide slashes. But the mirrors above the seats were clean and perfectly intact. In the photo, I reflect back and forth forever in them, phone in hand and a half-smile on my face. My hair, a messy near-bob like V. M.'s, is blown sideways by the wind coming in through the open window.



AUTHOR BIO



Molly Jean Bennett's essays, poems, and strongly worded letters have appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Atlas Obscura*, *Word Riot*, *Bustle*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hollins University and currently lives in New York City.



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