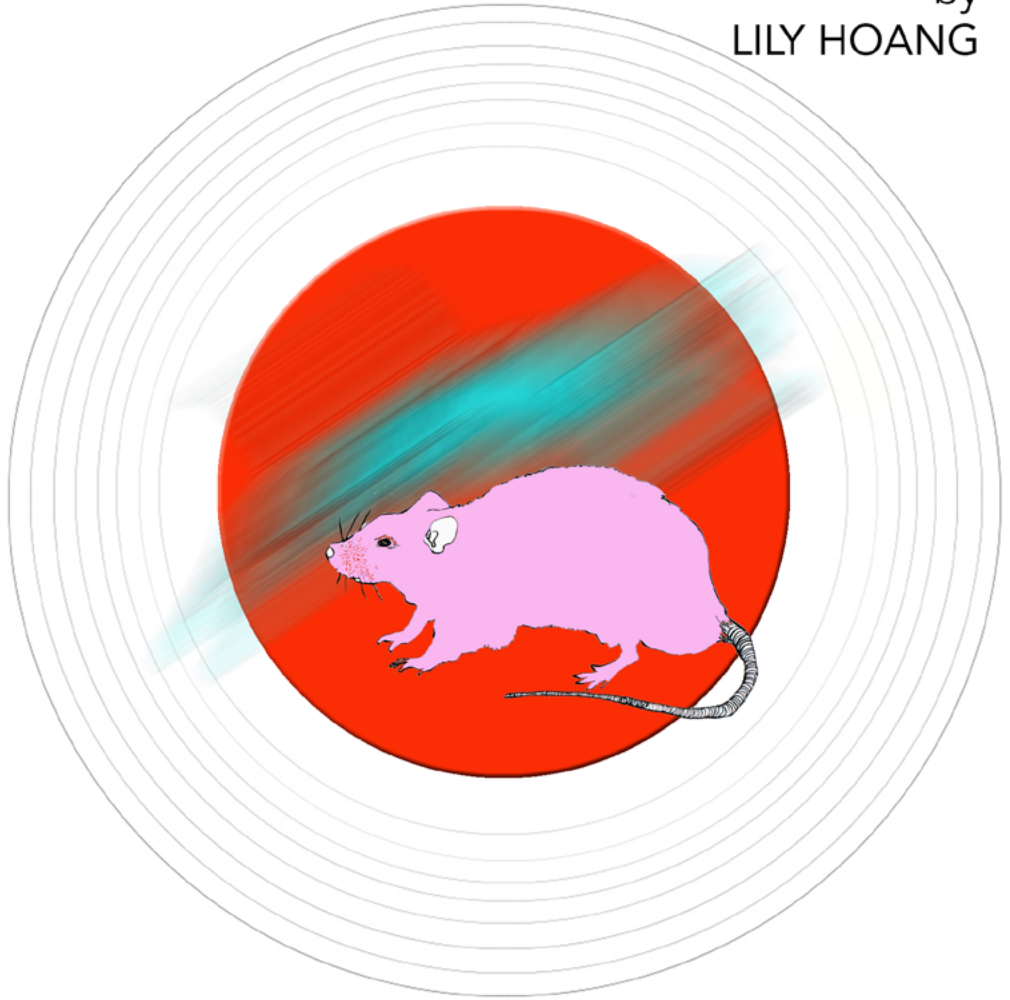


On Rats and Tigers

by
LILY HOANG



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AND TIGERS**

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#12

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

Contents

In the Essay Press EP series, we give extended space and time to some of our favorite authors currently developing new book-length projects.

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Introduction

—Lily Hoang

The cycle of essays, tentatively titled *Zodiac*, from which this excerpt comes, follows the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, while examining immigrant experience, family, mourning, addiction, and burgeoning love and its disintegration.

On Captivity and Rats

When I was young, my sister went to prison. I don't know why she went. No one will tell me, no matter how often I ask.

But I stopped asking more than a decade ago: lessons.

My sister died more than a year ago. Since then, one of her sons has become healthy again: the other, a heroin addict.

Although born in the year of the monkey, my sister was a real rat. I admire that about her. Sometimes, I want to emulate it.

I went to jail, which is temporary, unlike prison. My roommates narced on me when I was 19. Now I have a record, but I pass background checks enough to have a job.

When I am still married and living in Canada, I get offered a job and then the contract and then Karl yelling at me because now he has to leave Canada and then I find out about the background check—and what if I don't get offered this job because I've failed the background check? My panic as I call the chair. She assures me (shhh, shhh) it won't be a problem.

When I am still married and living in Canada and my sister is still alive and she's always been a liar and she's got a brain aneurysm that's leaking and she's always been a liar and I only believe this because I was there when it burst (another Christmas, not the one when she died but the one before, always her flair for drama sunbursting in time for Christmas) and she's always been a liar and the doctors prescribed her many pain pills in very high doses and she's always been a liar and before she was addicted to coke and then she's addicted to opiates and she's driving her bigass car and Mason's in there with her and she's always been a liar and she got her license taken away, that's how many accidents she got into, most notably (and she's always been a liar) the one where she ran over a man changing his tire and she hit and ran and the one where she flipped her car multiple times and Mason's afraid of cars, even still.

And yet, she was one of the true geniuses I've known.
And stunning, she was simply stunning.

Justin, from court-mandated boot camp, calls Child Protective Services against his mother. He calls her an unfit mother, not for himself but for Mason.

This could be called bravery.

This could be called revenge.

My own betrayal: bravery or revenge?

I called months after he did.

My dead sister told me, appalled, that he'd been so ungrateful as to call CPS, when (she said) he was the one with the drug problem.

I listen to my sister tell me all this, knowing we are all addicts by blood.

The one-drop rule: in relation to her.

The thought of Justin, in jail, detoxing from heroin, his dead mother, his no future, he doesn't even have a high-school diploma, I'm listening to Beach House's "Myth" on repeat, and suddenly I'm in a hospital, trying to enlist my services to their mental ward, and they decline me: I don't belong there, I belong at home; and the next day Jackie and I walk into a fairy tale together with her dynamite purple socks on my feet. We are both Alice, sojourning along an arroyo, which is really just a ditch, but doesn't arroyo sound magical? And I am something towards healed.

My closest friends ratted me out. Now I trust almost no one: distance, distance.

What is healing though?

When Karl called me a liar (the repeat button pressed) it was because I never trusted him with my truths. Maybe that was the first failure of our marriage, among many.

My sister went to prison, this much is true. I tell people it was for five years, but I have no idea how long she was in there. My only memory: I am young. She is young too. She is not wearing makeup. Her hair is tied back in a simple ponytail. My mother and I are visiting. She is in an orange jump suit, just like television and film tell us. Her bangs are not hairsprayed; they are not curled. She does not look perfect—but she looks happy.

To account for prison, my sister says she went to LSU, got her degree in architecture. This is how smart she was: we are from Texas, LSU is far enough away no one would doubt her. LSU is big enough that even if someone went there (Texans stay in Texas) maybe they just missed each other; maybe they saw each other in the quad; do you remember me? I used to sunbathe in the quad; and yes! I was a Tri Delt, funny how we never met, etc.

From the ashes of prison, she was not a rat but a phoenix. She rebuilt herself: an architecture major, she

went to work for a construction company—answering phones, making photocopies, secretarial work. A year later, she cowboied up with a cowboy and they partnered to make Westar General Contracting, which would go on to make them millions. My sister had no experience in construction, except a year as a secretary.

My facts may be wrong. I'm not lying, I'm merely following her lead: I'm telling a story is all: hers.

Their first big job was my old elementary school. They built a computer lab. It stood proud at the front of the school, where parents drop off their kids, where my parents had dropped me off. I don't remember my parents dropping me off, but somehow I arrived.

Karl's mother was teaching at the school then. She said my elementary school teachers (the ones who were still left) remembered me, but I know that's an exaggeration.

Next, they renovated a library.

Next, they built the main fire station downtown. It was a marvel.

I remember going to job sites with my sister.

I remember once I was driving to high school and I saw my sister on a Caterpillar, just chugging along on the axis road.

I remember doing coke with her.

I remember how she kept her weed in a colander.

Mostly, I remember that she wasn't really there for me.

My essays all circle around certain characters: my dead sister; my heroin-addict motherless nephew Justin; Brandon, who I met the day my sister died, our love affair, our fun, the way he destroyed me; my parents, whom I destroy. I rarely include: my other nephew, Mason, the one who's doing well; my brother, who has bought me fashion; I hate Karl but he finds his way into these essays too.

My sister gave me a purple monkey. I can't remember if this was before or after prison. I treasured it—but I never named it.

Hate: a new emotion for me. I wish I hadn't learned it. I wish Karl hadn't made me.

My father says, *Once I stop loving you, I will never love you again.*

He says this about my sister, but it's a lesson for me most of all.

When I was young, my sister used to steal money from my parents, from their friends, from anyone. I always thought she went to prison for stealing, but five years is a long time.

Once, she broke into my dad's bathroom, where he kept his gun and all his money. She shattered a window from the inside, the gun thrown into the front yard. All our windows had burglar bars, that's how we knew no one came in from the outside.

This is an essay about some of the things I never write about: mainly:

The night before the night I found my sister seizing on her bedroom floor, before she went and died, I found her crawling on her bedroom floor. I heard her open my bags. I heard snaps and zippers. If I had any cash in my wallet: I didn't open my eyes.

Karl made me call Child Protective Services, and I didn't want to. It was an act of betrayal. I was wrong earlier: this was the first hint at hate: how he made me betray my own sister.

Karl bought us a book, *Walking on Eggshells*, about how to deal with Borderline Personality Disorder. He was always trying to fix things that aren't his, like me.

Karl bought the book and he read it and he got upset that I didn't read it, even though I said that I did and I was lying because I didn't because I didn't want to because I didn't need a book to tell me about my sister

because I saw her treachery for itself. I didn't need a fucking book to tell me what I already understood.

And then Karl left, and I don't know what ever happened to that book; maybe I threw it away. That's the way I'd like to tell the story.

My sister used to be married to a decent man. His name is Eric. He retired a full-bird colonel in the Air Force. That's one step away from one-star. Single star. He worked in intelligence, and he never had any insight into the monster my sister could be—until his whole life was a war zone and he was lost.

Mason the innocent: he is not Eric's son. He belongs to Raul, my sister's perpetual lover since before Eric was ever husband to her, my dead sister.

But for five years, Eric was his father, ostensibly genetic, until Mason wasn't his at all anymore.

I just talked to my dead sister's ex-family. I spoke with Eric's mother. She wouldn't give me Eric's number: that's how my sister fucked them: she wouldn't even give me his number.

She's dead, I implore. That's not too strong a word: I implored.

They were waiting for me in my dorm room. I had just bought books for the semester. It was MLK Day.

I remember that. The handcuffs. My roommates watching, strangers watching, they pushed my head into the backseat. It was humiliating, but I'd taken enough Xanax that I was calm between heaves of anxiety attacks.

The only call I made from jail was to my sister. She would help me, she would understand, and she did.

But she also betrayed me: she told my parents.

I don't know what I thought would happen to me, just that I didn't want my parents to know, just that I wanted to protect them from the monster I'd become.

I called the hospital.

I called the hospital because my sister ate a whole bottle of her husband's father's Vicodin and my sister stole all the money from under the Christmas tree and my sister threatened suicide—because she was caught.

I called the hospital because Eric put her in the psychiatric ward.

I called the hospital and I talked to my sister. She said, *Don't tell Eric*. But I betrayed her. This was before I betrayed her by calling CPS. This was my first betrayal.

To Eric, I explained almost everything. I didn't mention prison. I didn't think it was my place. I didn't mention Raul. I didn't mention that since they were

married, my sister would brag that if she makes it to 10 years with him, half of everything would be hers. That's the military's way.

The inevitable collision when lies and life are juxtaposed, that happened just after their ten-year anniversary.

I told Eric about her lies, some of them. I told Eric about her Borderline. I told Eric she was an addict. I didn't mention that I used to mail her cocaine. I didn't even mention cocaine. I told him enough that if he wanted, he could retain custody of Mason, only, Mason belonged to another man, his real father, but no one knew this then, that would come later and then later that was Eric's ultimate heartbreak, the one thing he could not forgive my sister for, even now, in death, how could he forgive the mirage his past life was? She destroyed him. He is demolished, still.

What is true fatherhood: and what is false?

My sister didn't know which man fathered Mason.

DNA, unlike my sister, does not lie—but is it always right? Does it ever make mistakes?

After coke, it was opiates. During coke, it was weed. My sister always shared. She told me she had a bottle of Oxy for me. She was hospitalized for the last time and

I was peeping around her house for the bottle—and her will, and her power of attorney. She told me it was all in a safe. It took a long time for me to find it; it was stashed inside a Vera Bradley tote. It required a key; it took a long time for me to find it. It was in her dresser drawer, the same dresser that held splats of her blood, that night she fell and I found her, seizing.

I opened the safe and it was full of trash. Nothing else, just trash: no will, no power of attorney, no bottle of Oxy; old receipts, candy wrappers, rubber bands.

I want to write about my brother, but he's too OK but he isn't at all but he's passing better than I do.

And he wasn't there, not for my sister, like theirs was a special hate. Neither of them has talked to me about it, when they talk to me about everything else—talked.

Once, so long ago it may as well be once upon a time, my sister came back to San Antonio and it had been 10 years since they'd seen each other, 10 years since she left, following Eric, becoming a housewife, forsaking her construction company, and the last time they'd seen each other was 10 years ago, and *Oh my God, Mari*, he said, *you're so fat*, and *Oh my God, Joe*, she said, *you're so gay*, and so the dinner began.

It was raining the day my sister died. I called my brother and told him to come—*before we turn off the machines*, I tell him. Her death, by then, was already inevitable. Her life, by then, was torture.

He sat there, arms crossed, eyes rolling.

I got the call from the hospital and I was on my first date with Brandon and I got the call telling me to come—now—and Brandon and I smoked a cigarette together and it was raining and together we agreed that we wished we could be religious people, to believe.

One thing my brother and sister shared, however, was a love for Louis and Prada. And they passed it on to me.

My dead sister being 13 years older and my brother 12, they were my American parents. They taught me how to be American.

Americanness being middle-class and white. And mostly masculine. Wearing brand names. Being snobs. Being anything other than what we were. Being better than anything we were only trying to pass as.

Another thing my brother and dead sister shared: an embarrassment of our Vietnameseness, our poorness, our otherness, our not-whiteness. We all just wanted to be white. And we were all aware of it too.

Another thing my brother and dead sister shared: a fear of not fitting in.

In *Holding*, I heard horror stories: how if they keep you, you'll be stripped in front of all the other girls and they'll put detergent on you and hose you down; how brutal Will Co. judges are, how they don't forgive; more stories I can't remember. I remember I was scared of being naked, of the roughness of detergent on my flesh, I remember being scared as shit, and then it happened, but I don't remember any of it. I just remember the fear of that fate.

My mother used to beg my sister to go back to Vietnam with her. My sister would laugh, say, *They'll probably kidnap me or something*.

It's been a day and Eric has not called me back. I'm thinking he's not going to call me ever. It's a shame that his hurt outweighs my mourning—the sons he used to call his own: their mourning: mostly.

My dead sister's sons are ashamed of the markers of their Asianness. They both wish they were just Mexican—Mexican being an Other better than Asian.

Or, at least, less embarrassing.

I was held captive for 10 days. It's not much, compared to my dead sister's five years of containment, her son's year plus. He didn't go to prison, though, he was locked up in a hybrid jail slash rehab.

Justin called me, grateful to hear my voice, and I unintentionally ignored his calls, the lack of caller ID a sure sign that it was a debt collector, the haunting of money. He called while I was visiting my parents for Thanksgiving. It wasn't yet Thanksgiving. We were all at dinner. He called and I picked up and he cried from the other side of my iPhone, because he'd be missing Thanksgiving, he'd be missing Christmas, he'd be missing the year anniversary of his mother's death.

Another thing my brother and dead sister shared: a desire for status; superficiality; a want to code nouveau-riche.

In Vietnamese culture, we celebrate the anniversary of death. We light incense and lay out the dead's favorite foods. We sink to the ground and bow our heads.

Raul was the one who paid for me to be bailed out. My parents and sister came to pick me up. My father wouldn't talk to me.

Walking alone with my mother, she asks me if she ever told me why my sister went to prison. She said, *Prostitution*. But five years is too long a time.

I can't find a worthy crime.

Maybe five years was my little-girl exaggeration.

Raul was her lover then and she was already married to Eric. She had already moved away. I had already mailed her cocaine. She was already miserable.

I haven't been in San Antonio on the anniversary of my sister's death. I haven't given her alms. I haven't bowed my head to the altar my parents have erected in their living room.

My parents always say, *If you let us down, we will die*.

I understood this literally.

Karl laughed at me for this, asked me if I knew how ridiculous I sounded, how egotistical, no worse: define: solipsism.

At my dead sister's funeral, she didn't have a single friend there. Not one person to account for camaraderie, her generosity, her everything.

Instead, the pews were filled with immigrants: my parents' friends and Raul's.

On my dead sister's birthday, a man called my office line, left a message because I was teaching, said he knew my sister, and I knew immediately he was a fool of

a man, one betrothed to my sister's lies, to the person she wanted to be but wasn't.

Going through my sister's things, I found arrest warrants—for fraud; for a hit and run; for etc.

My sister lived her life in lies. But I don't even know if she recognized them as lies.

Instead, she lived on various planes of lies. She kept them all straight: to some she was an architect; to others an electrical engineer; to others a beaten housewife; to others the perfect mother; to others a construction savant; to others the beautiful daughter; to others, still, a wonderful, flawed sister.

I want to believe I was exempt from her lies, but I'm not stupid.

When I called into the hospital to talk to her, I could hear happiness. I could hear other people saying her name: she was popular again. This is what she missed being an isolated military wife: friends.

She told me she would tell me about her life one day, but she died. My dead sister died and I never learn who she really was.

My friend Claire from high school came by the other day. She lived less than an hour away and the last time I saw her was two years back in Brooklyn—the shame! Now she's in Guam, and before she left she came over and we drank wine and she gave me a bottle of Hydros and I never realized how lonely the military wife could be. I didn't know about my sister's terrible loneliness. She never let on. It was only talking to Claire that I learned the terror of alienation.

I've always considered myself alienated, too.

But that's not true: I have friends, true friends.

Claire tells me how she is trapped in the military housewife prison, that's the word she used: prison. None of the other wives like her. She has one friend. We smoked cigarettes in her garage together, swapped Adderall and Valium and Percocet.

I like pills too.

How Claire lived so close and I was so close and I was so selfish, absorbed in my own mini-crises, and I should have been a better friend and I should have known how lonely she was and my sister was, how very alone.

I would ask my parents about what my sister did, about all the holes in my story of her, but they've already romanticized her—perfect daughter.

Claire's sister went to prison too. Her sentence was 20 years: child abandonment; child neglect; child abuse. They found her drugged up, in a blanket, on the side of the highway. Her boyfriend had pushed her out of the car. She kept saying, *My baby, my baby, my baby is locked inside the closet*. Sure as sure, they find the baby locked inside the closet. It is malnourished. It is nearly dead. The brain damage is permanent. She was maybe 17 then.

Child Protective Services made an example of her. No early release, they demand. Max sentencing, they demand. Even with good time served, she's in there for more than decade.

Imagine: going in and coming out and technology.

Claire says her sister is scared, because she's a felon and unworthy of anyone: their time, their affection, their tolerance of such a monster.

Her sister, before prison, she was locked up with her baby too. Her boyfriend would starve them for days while he went on benders. He put pliers to her braces. Pulled out her Caesarian staples. He is, put simply, an asshole. And he is never punished.

Justice: what of it?

Justin the recovering heroin addict lives with my parents, and in clear English, my father says how he's

not welcome there, that he's a loser, that he doesn't want him there.

He doesn't even work. He's 22 and he's so depressed he can't get a job. Or: he's just fucking lazy. Or: he's still an addict. Or: I have no idea. We text, but mostly only when he needs money. Sometimes he's honest and says it's for weed; sometimes he lies and talks about his constantly empty gas tank, just 40 here, 60 there, Western Unioned.

My sister was not made for the estranged life. Always popular, but Eric really wronged her, asking her to give up her company to be his housewife. Or, maybe that's not how it went. Maybe she came up with the idea. Maybe she did it willingly. But knowing my dead sister, I can't imagine her sacrificing so much of herself, not for Eric at least.

And the construction people loved her.

Mason's father Raul, he does concrete.

My sister would talk to Raul from her military garage, smoking cigarettes in hiding. She told him she had divorced Eric and that Mason was his (which she didn't know as truth at the time) but she never let Raul see Mason. He asked. He surely asked. But she was lying about the whole thing, even the things that in the future would be true.

Raul is too generous a man. So is Eric.

They worshipped my sister: fools.

When my sister was happy in the hospital I could tell, because she had friends again, she was always made to be the leader.

The pied piper only took away the children because the town refused to pay him.

All these military wives, hiding cigarettes in their boxed garages.

On News, Destruction, and Catastrophe

I have never been a news person. I don't know why, but I've just never cared. For years, I tried to care: I steeped boredom into headlines, every word encouraging a yawn—or maybe it was distress. Fear. The function of news.

My ex-husband was (is) a news guy. He cares. Every morning, I remember, he would click on hyperlink after hyperlink, stuffing news into his eyes and brain, and I wish it would've just exploded him.

My father used to watch the news before work. *CNN Headline News* would run major news stories for the first 15 minutes every hour: is this how you remember it too? And my father would watch from 7 until 7:15, at which time he would drive away.

I am surprised by the apps my lover has on his iPhone, how he uses it. He reads HuffPo all the time; he goes so

far as to tweet especially vagrant stories. He is a young professional.

When did we become the target demographic?

My marriage did not self-destruct. It was a broken thing at its start and it just continued ripping at its own destroyed remains, picking, picking.

My ex-husband, in his last moments as my husband, walked into my office. It was 5:30 in the morning. I had not read the news and would not before the day's end. He said, *I think I should move back to Canada*, and he thought I would fight for him, but I bought him a one-way ticket and that was the end of something terrible.

But, of course, endings don't end so tidily.

Now my father no longer watches CNN. My parents have up-graded to a dish network that allows them to watch and hear Vietnamese programming. My father listens to his conservative news and calls it truth, he tells me this as if each of his words were facts, and I think politics and war and death and news are all the same in any language, aren't they?

My dead sister's news always came around Christmas: three times constitutes a pattern that always ends with her death.

Facing our marriage counselor, I removed my sunglasses; he looked at me straight in the face and asked, *Well did you deserve it?*

I find my dead sister not dead but convulsing, speechless, and she'd been that way for hours, a few days after Christmas. This is nearly two years ago. I was the one who delivered the last of her news.

I stayed in the ICU with her, her doctor told me after the third day that she would die. I could not tell my parents, even though I had to.

I didn't let my father come: too old and frail. I didn't let my youngest nephew Mason either: too young and frail. I question whether or not I should regret these decisions every single day. It is not that I regret, it's that I don't know if I should at all.

I was at my old boyfriend Aaron's house. This was more than 15 years ago. We had just gone to a steakhouse and I was veg and I ate potatoes cooked too many ways and the caller ID displayed my mother's cell phone, on repeat, my brother's. I called my brother first, even though I knew my mother was more in fret, and I sat down and smoked a cigarette before driving to the emergency room.

My father had been retired for maybe a year and then this: a stroke that debilitated half of his body. He was just beginning the vacation he'd earned, immigrant bootstrap by immigrant bootstrap: the American way.

A Bengal tiger was stolen from the zoo today. I read that on some news app. Probably BBC, but it seems so trite.

I don't even know how many strokes my father has had. My parents don't want me to worry, so they just don't tell. I know they're trying to protect me, but I wish someone in my family would just tell me the truth. We are a family of liars.

In Vietnam my father was a principal of a middle school. He was a professor of mathematics. He drew political cartoons for the newspaper. He had wanted to be an artist but then he met my mother and chose comfortable stability. They came to America and he became a maintenance man at the state mental hospital. He repaired air conditioners and bowed his head to show respect and pray his otherness was unobtrusive. He spoke little English: even though he had studied the language extensively in Vietnam: he could never get intonation right: even if he understood every racist word.

My brother has never come out to me: is that a lie? I've met every boyfriend but he's never said the actual words.

My sister's husband called me the day after Christmas. This was the first instance of my sister's news. I can't remember how long ago this was, maybe a decade, give or take a couple of years. She had, he told me, stolen all of his father's Vicodin. She had, he told me, stolen all the money from under the Christmas tree. Then, when confronted, she had, he told me, threatened suicide. He was a military man and the military does not ignore suicide threats. My sister was, he told me, on suicide watch, in the psychiatric floor of some hospital. They were in Mount Olive, Illinois. I remember that.

I have always wanted to write an essay about Mason, the good son, the son who made it free from my sister's Borderline and sickness and addiction and death. I want to write about Mason, but maybe it's that I think he's too young to exploit: too pure. My writing would only erase all that, expose truths and ugliness and he's just too young. I don't want to ease apart his character just yet.

The son who didn't make it, Justin, he's the one who stars in every essay I write these days. He's in jail again.

Like his mother and Christmas, Justin's bad news always appears around the Fourth of July.

Unlike my sister, Justin's news is always the same: heroin, arrest, etc.

Once, when my sister was already dead (but before too, when my sister was still alive but her life had already fallen to worn threads and her treatment of Mason could only be called abusive, my father told me that he saw a look in Mason's eyes. *He will be another Columbine*, my father tells me in English. *He will shoot up a school. That's where he's headed.*

Because my dead sister died, I'm the one who pays for Justin's addiction now. Is this what responsibility looks like?

Now that look of sadness is gone from Mason's eyes, and it is replaced with the skin of a happy boy, one who has never experienced his mother's love and the fear that hugged him as tightly as she would and he loved those tight hugs, even as he squirmed against them, or maybe he never squirmed, maybe he leaned his body closer into hers, he still has every memory—all of them.

The look of sadness is gone from Mason's eyes. I know it's still there, but for him there is hope of something better, happiness, maybe.

My ex-husband only cared about the news because of his white guilt. He thought he could fix the world's problems too: the heroic delusion of white privilege. He cared so much about his whiteness, his maleness, his richness, and he would say, I can even remember his intonation, *I code heterosexual*. Code because he was married to me, a woman, but he had come out to his parents twice just before meeting me. Imagine their grateful sighs when he introduced me to them: at least I'm not a boy. My not-whiteness paled compared to my obvious sex. He had wanted to be oppressed so badly that he came out—twice.

Mason keeps a photograph of his mother in a protective case inside his pillow. I've seen it. He's never shown me but I've seen it and honestly, it breaks my heart.

When he left me, he said it was to explore his sexuality. I have never admitted this in print. I have told maybe a handful of people. I'm not ashamed, but I want people to think I had a more active role in the decision. I want people to think I'm actually empowered or something.

He has been gone for two years and we have been divorced for months and I pay him alimony and I just can't get over it. I pay him alimony. All because I said I would when he left, so that he would leave. I told him I

would give him money if he needed it, I was thinking he would never need it because he has a trust fund.

Also: I thought he would be too ethical to take money from a woman of color.

He calls that feminism.

In high school, I thought I would study infectious diseases when I became an adult.

I think about this other potential Lily all the time. I imagine what her friends might be like, what they would talk about, how she'd dress. I wonder where our interstices might extend and we might combine.

When Karl told me he had a trust fund, I didn't even understand what that meant.

Carmen recalls the first moment she started hating Karl. We were all in the car. We were driving her home. She was sitting in the back seat. He said I did something, ignore him maybe, flirt with someone maybe, it was always something. Every time we were social, I always blundered. He said, with derision, *Yes, that's right professor*, and it was the way he said *professor*, as if it was a title I had not earned, that's the moment Carmen began hating him.

Carmen began hating him long before I did. I didn't experience real hate until I began paying him alimony. The news of this new emotion (hate) hit me,

hard, this is what hate really feels like. But Carmen hated him because she loves me and she could recognize in that one word—*professor*—the abuse I hid because I am a feminist and I am a hypocrite and can you believe he calls his act of accepting alimony a feminist act?

The second news my dead sister delivered around Christmas: it was my mother's birthday, December 29, and we always celebrated my parents' birthdays together, with Christmas, because my father's birthday was Christmas Eve. I don't remember how I found out, just that one of my sister's brain aneurysms, an aneurysm I didn't even think was real (once a liar, always) had burst. I think I was still married to Karl at the time but I can't remember. I remember my whole family in the hospital as doctors inserted a metal coil into her brain. She was fine and I thought that two is not just coincidence this time: Christmas is a curse.

One Christmas, our boycat Ari ran away. I don't think anything bad happened to my sister that Christmas, but I'll be honest: I can't really remember. All eight years with Karl blur together as a waste of that tender time between youth and adult. Now I am an adult with bills and worries and a job and all I want is to stay young and feel carefree again. Our boycat ran away and we had to hurry back. I think we were living in South Bend at the time. He came back, Ari.

A year ago, Ari ran away. I was at Brandon's (six hundred miles away) and I had been there for too long, a month maybe, but it was love and it was magical and it was fun, we always had fun together, even now that he is only my part-time lover and no longer my boyfriend any more. Ari ran away and he didn't come back this time. I have not told Karl. I don't think he even has a right to know. If he reads this essay, this will be the first time he gets this news. Fuck you, asshole.

My father had been crying when we got back from the hospital and it was late. It was as if he was praying we would come home with different news of my sister, that she had somehow pulled through, but we came home with blustered faces, faces of the confused and the mourning, faces crushed by desperation.

That night, while I was still at the hospital but all the machines had already been turned off and the doctor had already proclaimed the time of death, Brandon texted me and asked how it all turned out. I told him my sister died, and he said he has a huge house and if I want a place to hide I could go there. I didn't go that night, but every night for the next month, I cuddled my body next to his after a night of pills and partying and playing. I would sleep next to him and to this day I can never achieve that same kind of sleep without him, like he opens his arm and I inch myself closer to his

chest and it's broad enough that I rest my head there and we stay that intimate until morning and I have the responsibility of my dead sister's estate and he has the obligation of law school.

Last year, on my mother's birthday, Brandon broke up with me. The only real indication of any wear on our relationship was that we were long distance, but this worked for us. It gave us room. It made our time together special and my departure always felt tragic. I was so upset, so desperate to salvage the relationship, that I told my parents I had to go home early—on my mother's fucking birthday, I'm so selfish, such a selfish daughter, and I went to Brandon's to beg him to take me back, make me his again, accept me. I stayed with him for the next nine nights, I didn't tell my parents I was still in town, I just hid in the playact that we were still in love.

Karl never liked me to sleep on his chest. Something about my hair.

I tell Carmen that this last time was the last time I'll ever see Brandon. She looks at me with a look that says this isn't new news to her and she won't be fooled this time, that's what her look says. I keep on crying wolf and everyone is sick of it, especially my friends.

I never wanted to marry Karl. This isn't some retrospective correction of the truth. No, even in the moment, I hadn't wanted to marry him. But he guilted me and I was forced to subdue, to become—*wife*. It was because he was moving to Canada to get his PhD and he had followed me to South Bend for my MFA and he lived in that shitty place for eight years because of me and fair was fair and so I married him. I left a visiting professor position midway through the year to be unemployed in Canada. No one would hire me: to teach, to make coffee, to make copies.

Six months of unemployment and I did the only thing I could do: I started a PhD in geography.

My mother once asked me, if I get my doctorate, if I could go to a better school. A school people in Vietnam might recognize, so that she could finally brag about me. I tell her that Notre Dame is a pretty good school. She says, *How about Harvard?*

I didn't go to Harvard. I went to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and I studied with the president of the American Geographical Society and she was icy but pumped full of Canadian funding. She had almost every possible oppression: Asian American female with disability. In me, she saw someone with work ethic, someone with ideas, someone who will bring her yet more accolades, and I would, or I did, or I won a major Canadian grant, which I declined, to take

this job at New Mexico State. I wasn't really going to teach geography. I was, more or less, getting a PhD for fun. Or for the pay of it, which was—surprisingly decent, especially when your husband has a trust fund for organic days.

I am making saffron rice, I tell Facebook. Because news of my everything is important to me. And it makes us all happy when our posts get liked. It feels like there's really a community out there in the vastness of the separation of our spaces, even if you live right next to me, even if you live with me, our spaces segregate us: we are just alone: nothing fancy about it.

Karl left after a year in Las Cruces. He tried, I know he tried. And I didn't. Not really. I wanted that relationship to be seven years less than it was. I would have given him a year of my life, but eight was excessive. He didn't deserve all those years. I'm glad he's back in Canada. I even hope he's happy. I hope he finds the love I couldn't let him have. Because let's be honest: he didn't fucking deserve it.

It's been two years since Karl left, and sometimes Karl emails me to reinitiate contact. He tells me he's gone through a lot of therapy and all of his issues are controlled now. He doesn't tell me he is flawless, but I'm sure part of him thinks he is: superhuman. It's his

white upbringing. I wish I had that kind of confidence. It's my immigrant upbringing; it tells me to be better than the white people or else they will never respect you. Can I tell you? I still believe it. Some part of me does at least. I am inadequate, that annoying echo, I am inadequate unless I am better than. And the rational part of me asks how we are quantifying better, but the echo just repeats, I am inadequate. Karl emails me and immediately he is in control again. I am powerless again. I am weak, I am broken already. It isn't love that makes me feel this way, it's fear. A country away, I am still afraid of him.

My sister, in addition to mental illness, was an addict. In college, I'd do lines with her. In college, after she moved, she would send me money and I would buy her cocaine and mail it to her. These were the risks I took for my sister. Every time I turned my head, her every wrong I ignored because it was also my own, and then there was the time I couldn't any more, because Mason was at stake, his life, his actual life.

Now Karl wants a long distance polyamorous relationship. I'm not even kidding you.

Karl made me do it, but it doesn't matter: I was the one who did it. I called Child Protective Services on my own sister, like I had any room to go pointing fingers.

I barely admit this to my closest friends: I called CPS on my own sister, to take her son away from her. I can't believe how great that betrayal was.

This was one of those moments when I came close to knowing what hate felt like for Karl, but I let those feelings retaliate as self-inflicted guilt. My parents raised me Catholic. I am built for guilt.

To my dead sister, I promise you: I'm so sorry.

The last email I sent to Karl: *So long as you are asking for alimony, do not contact me again.* It felt good. It felt empowered. I hit send.

CPS didn't take Mason away from her though. He was put into temporary custody with my parents, but that didn't have anything to do with my phone call. No, it was Justin who called, from jail, for the second or third time, and he called CPS on his own mother. I'm sure he did it out of anger. But what I know: he didn't do it out of love.

I know this sounds shitty, but I don't even know if Justin loves his brother. After their mother died they were separated—Mason to his biological father, Justin hopping from my parents' house in San Antonio to my house in New Mexico and when he couldn't score heroin here, he went back to my parents and he became their burden.

When my sister was married, her life was so cellophaned and glossy. Her military Ken. But her Christmas antics fucked it all up, and she was in her forties, living with her parents again.

Justin's sentence: nine months rehab for felons, three months in a half-way house. His other choice was two years in prison. Like real prison. Is this justice? At least when he is locked up, my parents feel safe again and I know he's not going to OD.

He calls me from Holding. He is crying. He says he's sorry he relapsed, like it was news, like it wasn't obvious. It's in the eyes, I've never seen a look that evil. So that's what heroin looks like, no wonder they call it the dragon. I am angry at him, I am forgiving. He's 23 with a GED and a revolving door at Bexas County jail and he's living with my parents who barely speak English and when my dad speaks in English, it's to say that he's a bad boy, that he needs to move out, that he isn't their problem. My dad said all this before Justin stole my dad's two-thousand-dollar camera. I imagine he got a hundred dollars for it at the pawn shop. And my dad, every time I was home at least, would bellow how he didn't want Justin in his house. *He is a boy who is not welcome here.* Like Justin didn't know it.

I don't remember how my parents broke the news to me that my sister was going to prison. I must've been very young then. I wonder how my sister broke the news to Mason that Justin was going to court-mandated boot camp. It was the alternative to prison time. The judge was lenient because Justin was young. It wasn't his first offense, and it was a big one: domestic burglary. A felony. But the judge was lenient all the same.

I wonder how Mason accepted his brother's departure. If he was happy or sad. They were never close. Sometimes, they were close. But Justin was a broody addict too, just like me, just like my sister, and his last concern was playing with his little brother. Mason used to say Justin was a bad boy. He used the same language as my father: bad boy. To simplify, to granulate, to atomize a whole person into a bad boy. The universality of language.

I wonder how I accepted the news of my sister's departure. I remember worshipping her, but I don't know if this was before or after or because of her prison time. I remember being afraid of her. Of what she would do next to my parents. Do I remember this for real or do I impose this on memory now, now that all the facts are so impossible to prove, because she is dead? My sister is dead.

This time, when I go visit, my dad and I watch the World Cup on Telemundo and the commentary is in

Spanish and we are cheering hard for Team USA, all in Vietnamese. This is the American dream, I think.

Later that trip, I am in Houston with Brandon and we are uncomfortable with each other at first and then we pick up at the happiest times of our relationship and we pretend that we are not broken up any more. Except he wants to use a condom now. I think he thinks I'm a slut. That word is disgusting, and I kind of think I am a slut. That's disgusting too. I am so not a feminist. Not in the way I live. Philosophically, sure, I'm all in, but living it, I am ashamed.

Later that trip, Justin calls me and I ignore the call because I know he is just calling to beg for money, which I really don't have because he's begged any excess I have dry. Every month, there's a real threat that I will overdraw. I am an adult. I am a professor. I can't believe I am such a teenager with money. I can use Justin as an excuse (and I really do give him an obscene amount of money—because I feel guilt—because his life is so shitty—because there's nothing else I can do—because I can't make his mom come back to life) but I really am bad with money. That, and I have to keep my own drug habit thriving.

Every day and night with Brandon is a haze of pharmaceuticals. Look at us have fun, if only the Xanax hadn't wiped my memory, a transparent light-projector page, text floating against the white screen. Brandon

would write songs and play guitar and we would go on adventures together and it really was grand. With him, I experienced the emotion love for the first time, I think.

Even if I gave Brandon this essay to read, he wouldn't. So I can write whatever I want without fear of repercussion.

When he broke up with me, he said, *I'll probably regret this in a year and then I'll buy all your books and read them and swoon for you but by then, you'll have moved on.*

I haven't.

My mother had news too. I don't remember it surrounding any particular holiday, though it could have. I treat my mother carelessly, because she will always love me, but I handle my father with soft gloves. He is a grump, always has been. He holds grudges. This time, he's talking about Justin. Before, it's been my sister. It's been me. It's been my brother. My brother almost never makes it into my essays. One day, I want to write an essay about him. He never fits into the narrative. He removed himself from the family long ago, except to me. Except: to my parents he gives extravagant gifts: a way of apologizing for his unstated homosexuality. He's in his forties and he remains closeted to my parents. My mother, periodically, suggesting that he go back to Vietnam and marry a nice girl, bring her over here too. That would make my mother just so happy.

My mother's news was not happy. She had cancer. I don't even remember what stage. I just remember it was colon cancer and colon cancer worked its devil through her body in a nasty way. I remember how her skin turned gray with chemo, how the medicine made anything room-temperature feel like ice but she would wash dishes anyways. If I hadn't been such a selfish brat, I would've offered to wash those fucking dishes. She had cancer and I couldn't even wash the dishes after dinner.

What is catastrophic about this essay? My sister is fucking dead and people everywhere are dying all the time. Isn't that enough? I avoid the news, I avoid the news of reporting catastrophe and the regalia that accompanies it, its pomp and circumstance. I don't want to hear about people dying. I don't want to remember my sister is dead. I don't want to believe Brandon and I are broken up, but all of this is true and sooner or later, I will have to sober up and deal with all this shit.

But for today, I'll take another Vicodin, another Xanax, another puff, sure sure, that's what's up.

The truth of it is that even though I still love Brandon, what we're doing, still seeing each other, it's obviously destructive. I know this. He does too. We acknowledge it every time and then we agree we will continue with the status quo, this skeleton of our old relationship (or

maybe its shadow if that's not too clichéd) and I will see him again, he wanted me to say I'd see him again. I said yes, but I knew I wouldn't. I knew I wouldn't, but I knew I would and that made it OK. Still, when we parted ways, it felt like forever.

Like I would never see him again.

I'm so fine with never seeing Karl again. I would be totally fine with that. In fact, I would be happy with that. When it comes down to it, I pay alimony, yes, but it's worth it. I pay Karl not to be a part of my life and it's so worth it, even if it means ramen. A professor who eats ramen, but it's actually pretty good the way I make it.

Brandon tells total strangers that my main problem is my low self-esteem.

The third time, with my dead sister, I found her seizing on the ground. I called the ambulance. I told Mason to stay downstairs and call his father. Mason was calm, like he'd been through this before: an ambulance would come and take his mother away and he doesn't have to be scared anymore because it's happened so many times already, it's routine, frightening that this had become routine for him. Only this time was different. No one believed it would be, but it was. This time, she died. It took her days, it's not like she didn't rage, but it was over and no one wanted to admit it.

Who, I wonder, would steal a Bengal tiger, and where would you hide such a majestic animal, what could contain all that untamed frenzy?

This last time I was in Houston, Brandon agrees to take me to the circus. I'd never been to the circus. I put this on my FB, and sure enough, someone says something about animal cruelty and I want to tell everyone to just shut up for long enough for me to pretend I'm a kid again, like I ain't got a worry in the whole wide world. But no, that wasn't childhood for me either, just another apparition of possibility.

We go to a ball game after the circus. We beat the Red Sox and sit right behind the Houston bullpen. It's amazing.

The next day, I buy cowboy boots, like a real Texas girl. And right after that, Brandon drives us to the next bar, and he orders drinks and we play bocce. I don't drink but I drank because I felt like drinking and I was steadily drinking and I put a picture up on FB and I misspelled bocce and sure enough, an asshole pointed it out, and I am never bold enough to say asshole but asshole.

When Justin calls me from Holding to tell me about going in front of the judge, he tells me he's stressed out. *Lily*, he says, *I'm so stressed about this*. I tell him, *I*

know, and I do, because I've been in there too when I was 19 and stupid, but I don't really know. When I was in Holding, I knew I'd be OK, but Justin, he could've been sentenced to two years, of real prison. Like legit.

Yesterday Justin called, and even though I had guests and I was hosting a poetry reading, I picked up and he told me how he just won in a spades tournament and he sounds happy. His future is so dreary and at least he sounds happy.

Yesterday my horoscope said I will receive bad news within 24 hours, or, at least, news that will on its surface seem dour. I guess it's been 24 hours, but still, I wait. What doom will come my way? I wait for it, almost eager.

I make a concerted effort to keep somewhat current on news, but I really only know what appears on my BBC pop-up. I know war and genocide are happening. I know ice is melting and rain is monsooning and rain is droughting and people are dying everywhere. I know on the news there is destruction and hopelessness, fear.

I, too, have read Brian Massumi's *The Politics of Everyday Fear*. I've read a lot of other shit too.

I am so scared Brandon will fall in love with someone else, that someone else will be better than me. My father's words tattooed on my tenderest flesh reminding

me that I am inadequate, never good enough, a failure to his expectations, to him.

I tried contacting my sister's ex-husband to tell him news of her death. Nearly two years later, I find a thin potential thread to him. I find someone with his last name in Mount Olive, Illinois, where his parents live. I call the number. The woman who picks up is Eric's mother. For years, she was Mason's grandmother, and then he wasn't her blood anymore. She tells me that Eric already knows. I ask if I can get his contact information and she says no. She says he's been through enough and it feels like a familiar tableaux. She takes down my number and I know he'll never call me back.

I don't know what I'd say to Eric anyways. I mean, I want to apologize. I want to apologize for never telling him all the truths I knew. I want to apologize that my sister ruined his life. I knew what was happening and I let it happen. I am so passive. If I wanted to point to my most pressing character flaw, it wouldn't be low self-esteem as Brandon guessed (and he's right, it's a real problem), it would be my passivity.

A passivity: a week before Justin is arrested this last time, I call his probation officer. I know he's using again, I say to her voicemail. I don't mention the things he's stolen: my father's camera, my bicycle, a television, printer—all of them pawned for pennies on our dollar,

stolen, like he is exactly his mother's son. I do not confront him about it. I never let on that I know he's relapsed until he calls me from Bexar County Holding, crying—again.

This time, he was arrested on July 9. Last year, it was July 3. He was only free for a few months, and oh but the things he took from me and my parents during that brief stint of freedom: not just our things but our safety, our very safety.

To me when I visit, my father says: *One day we will go have dinner and we will come home and all our things will be gone.*

Either before or after, he says, *I have two guns.*

My father tells me: *Justin will either steal the guns or he will find them and use them.* My father never threatens to shoot Justin, but I know that he just might do it. Justin is an old weight that my sister has anchored to us now that she is dead: a reparation, but for whom?

A passivity: I waited for Karl to decide to leave. I didn't kick him out, and I didn't leave either, even though I packed up my books several times, dreamed up an escape route to New York, where I would fall in love with a writer and we would write books in the same room together, but with quiet resting calmly over us like morning dew.

A passivity: it's been too many times to count now, the occasions that I have left Brandon's in anger and then he would call and then I would turn my car around and drive back to him. Thirty miles. Five. A hundred twenty. I drive eight hundred miles each way to make a few new memories with him, easy.

In a few weeks, I will drive eight hundred miles to Houston to see Brandon. I don't think I should even pretend that this will be the last time. I make it out like it's a big decision but in the end, everyone knows it's all a sham. The news of my returning to him (every single time) it's no shocking news: it's a rut I want to ride until it's all smooth again and then, maybe, I will finally drive away.

I had news too, once. I told my sister. I was a freshman in college and she owned a construction company and I told my sister that our cousin raped me. I told her not to tell my parents, but of course she did. I don't know if she ever believed me, but I think she did. Everyone else in my family dismissed me, like that's the kind of lie anyone wants to make up.

Isn't it funny that I was getting a PhD in geography and I don't even know where Bengal is on the map? I am thinking of those Bengal tigers again.

Richard tells me over drinks last month that they found another ocean under the ocean. *What?! You don't know about this?* He is shocked. *I don't read the news,* I tell him. *You're missing out,* he says. *Like isn't it crazy about all of this Isis stuff?* I don't know about Isis. He is appalled and he explains, and that night I read the news. I do the next day too. After that, shrug: let me stay in the shadow of ignorance, the beds (I hear) are lush.

Foolish me, silly Lily: guffaw: Bangladesh, dummy.

When my physicist lover comes to town, we have dinner, fuck marvelously: we sleep close together but he is never as right as Brandon.

At the circus, we watch the Bengal tigers roll over, hop, they are submissive. We wonder if their teeth have been pulled out, their claws removed, how much tranquilizer has been used, and then we marvel at them all the same.

Afterwards, as we are walking to the train, Brandon tells me his favorite parts were the poodles, the trapeze guy, and the acrobats, most of which he missed buying beer. I missed most of the poodles buying another beer for him, but I agree, the poodles were the best. They, unlike the other animals, actually wanted to do their tricks: all they desire is to make their

humans happy. And the tigers (we agree) were majestic, even in their subdued state, they were just majestic.

Author Bio



LILY HOANG is the author of four books, including *Changing*, recipient of a PEN Open Book Award. With Joshua Marie Wilkinson, she edited the anthology *The Force of What's Possible: Writers on the Avant-Garde and Accessibility*. Currently Visiting Distinguished Writer at Cornell College, she teaches in the MFA program at New Mexico State University, where she is Associate Department Head and Prose Editor for *Puerto del Sol*.



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