

Spring 2020

This Life of (Y)ours

Laura Price Steele

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Steele, Laura Price (2020) "This Life of (Y)ours," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 91 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss91/7>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

LAURA PRICE STEELE

THIS LIFE OF (Y)OURS

I'VE NEVER SEEN anyone fight like my grandparents fought. They were relentless. Every time we went over to their house, we found them mid-battle. Something had already gone sour for the day. My grandmother had burned the coffee or thrown out the sports section of the newspaper. My grandfather had left the kitchen window open all night.

They lived in a brick house on the south side of Denver. The house itself was set too far back on the lot—it didn't line up with the other homes on the block, stuck out like a crooked tooth. The front yard had patchy grass that was never all the way alive, but never all the way dead either.

My parents dropped us off on Sundays and we stayed until dinnertime. My grandmother had a chest of worn-out toys that she'd picked up from a secondhand store. We didn't play with them, but we made a show of pulling them out because if we didn't she would do so herself, narrating the story behind each one, why she'd bought it and for how much. She wielded guilt like a weapon.

Sometimes we played outside, but only in the back yard because my grandmother had seen black men walking in the neighborhood before. She

said if we were out front they would ask us to hold something and we might be stupid enough to do it.

We called them Nana V and Pa Gene, and they weren't afraid to fight in front of us. In fact, they seemed to enjoy having an audience. Nana V screamed. She had a shrill voice, big lungs, and a talent for mapping out how each of Pa's failures linked to his past and future failures and spread out like a spider web around them both.

Pa's talent was his humor. He made fun of her voice, of her hair, of the uselessness of her criticisms. And we, all three of us, took his side. Pa Gene was charming. He had a big grin, gray eyes, and a head shaped like a basketball. While Nana V was private about her body—she wore a wig to cover her thinning hair, and stockings over her thick, veiny legs—Pa invited us to laugh along with him at the absurdity of his aging. He popped his dentures out in front of us, let us poke at his gnarled and numb feet, and sometimes when Nana V got going on one of her rants, Pa took out his hearing aids and laid them on the table.

• • •

MY OLDEST BROTHER Pete didn't like going to our grandparents' house. I think he preferred the tepid love our parents had for each other over the verbal brawling of Nana and Pa. Every Sunday began with Pete crying because he didn't want to go. He cried quietly over breakfast and we kept a washcloth in the freezer so that he could lay it over his face during the car

ride. For Pete, the only thing worse than spending the day at their house was to have Nana and Pa know that he'd been crying over it again. When we pulled into their driveway, Pete had us check his face to make sure it was back to normal and we always lied to him and told him that it was.

The fighting didn't get to me like it got to Pete. There was something romantic about the way my grandparents fought, as if only two people who loved each other could stand to hate each other that much. I preferred the furious love of Nana and Pa to the transactional conversations of my own parents. It was often a relief to be in their household, though sometimes Nana V screamed so loud we couldn't hear the TV.

Once when we were over, she broke all ten of the dinner plates. We'd never seen anything like it. Until then they'd only ever yelled at each other. I'd had the thought before that maybe after we left, the space closed between them. Though I could never imagine either one of them throwing a punch exactly, I could picture Nana smacking Pa with a serving spoon or Pa shouldering Nan out of his way.

I remember it was raining. That house smelled rotten when it rained, like the water had bled into somewhere soft and dry. Nana V was doing dishes; she never seemed to be finished with the domestic tasks that kept her from sitting down to watch TV with us. Already, she had yelled twice for Pa to turn it down. "You're going to blow out their eardrums," she said. She liked to put us in the middle of things.

"I'm not going to blow out their eardrums," Pa said, laughing. He said the word *eardrums* as if it wasn't a real word, as if she'd made it up.

The fight might have stopped there, but Pa grinned and turned the volume even higher. Pete put his hands over his ears. I could feel the little hairs inside my ear canals. The flesh in my head turned brittle.

“I said turn down the goddamn TV,” Nan screamed. She came out of the kitchen. Pa made a show of adjusting his hearing aids. I looked at Dave, my younger brother and he was laughing, laughing just like Pa. I laughed too. Nana looked ridiculous—elbows-deep in rubber gloves, her hair like a misshapen helmet. She had a body like a troll and one lazy eye.

Nan held the plate over her head as if she meant to hurl it at Pa’s head, but of course this just made him laugh harder.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Throw it.” He knew how much she loved those dishes.

Nan stared at him. I could see her doing some kind of math in her head. It occurred to me then that I did not know Nan very well, that I had no idea what she was capable of.

Eventually we stopped going to Nana and Pa’s on Sundays. I remember it differently than Dave does. He thinks we stopped going because Nan broke the dishes in front of us. He thinks Mom wouldn’t stand for it after that. But I’m sure it wasn’t for another year or two. Not until Mom and Dad separated.

It would be an easy puzzle to solve with three of us. We could ask Pete. But in 1985 he rolled his car on the stretch of highway between Evergreen and Morrison. They got him out. Wrenched the door open. Cut the seatbelt. They said he was even sitting up and talking in the ambulance. But they lost

him on the way to the hospital. Internal bleeding.

My mother called me at work to tell me. I had a part-time job in the office of a furniture company down on Broadway. I wasn't the one to pick up the phone. I was in the showroom with someone from property management who'd come out to look at a discoloration of the ceiling—a bloom of caramel color that had started as the size of a fist and spread. Now it looked like an enormous mask.

“Looks like a face,” the man said to me.

“Huh,” I said as if it hadn't occurred to me. As if I hadn't been looking at the ceiling for weeks and seeing the petals of the eyes and the thick sneer of lips.

“There's the eyes,” he said, pointing.

That's when the office manager came out and got me. “Beth, you have a call,” she said. I felt a bed of needles under my stomach, not because I believed anything was wrong, I just knew it looked bad to be taking personal calls at work.

The office smelled like stale ink and cork. I went to the desk I usually used, which was a sort of half desk in the corner, and I picked up the receiver.

“Beth,” my mom said, and I knew how bad it was from the steadiness of her tone. Stress had a way of stripping the humanity out of her voice.

“Yes,” I said.

“It's your brother,” she said. And before she said his name, I knew it was Pete.

• • •

AT THE FUNERAL, Mom and Dad brokered some truce which allowed them to comfort each other. I hated seeing them like that—weakening to the nostalgia so much that they let their hands touch. Dave didn't mind, but I spent the afternoon seething.

We agreed to eat lunch together at Pete's favorite sandwich shop, where you could fish out your own pickle from a giant barrel. I was the only one who thought the idea of eating the sandwich Pete would have eaten was no way to honor him, and I said so.

"Don't be difficult," my dad said. It was one of the catchphrases he'd used my whole life and it had that strobing effect of dropping me completely into the experience of being a little kid.

I pushed away from the table to go get a pickle. The smell of the barrel was sharp and I expected the brine to be cold to the touch, but instead it was like bathwater that had sat too long. I could feel the pickles bobbing against my knuckles. I reached as deep as I could, wetting my arm up to the elbow. When I finally wrapped my hand around something, it felt like plucking a live thing from the ocean, like grabbing the sort of creature that was not quite a plant and not quite an animal, but something in between. When I returned to the table, no one would look at me.

• • •

NAN AND PA were already gone by the time Pete died. Pa went slowly—heart disease in '78. Nan didn't last a whole lot longer. Her kidneys failed and she was gone before the decade turned. Both of them had gotten old enough that their deaths seemed acutely inevitable. But once it finally happened there was that pang of disbelief from the way life shears off at the end.

After Nan died I thought it would be a long time before we buried any more family. I'd done the back-and-forth math of wondering whether Mom or Dad would go first. But that seemed decades away.

Pete dying was like the jolt when a dream breaks open and bleeds into the morning—the way for a few minutes an impossible thing can fold itself in with the everyday. Pete was dead, and my brain kept twisting and twisting around the thought, as if it would eventually reveal itself to be as unreal as it sounded. Everywhere I went took on the eerie gloss of being both somewhere I'd been before and wholly unfamiliar to me. I'd never known a world without Pete in it and with him gone the world became unknown to me.

• • •

MORE THAN ONCE I've thought that if Pete hadn't died I never would have married Locke. Perhaps I am affording life too much symmetry. But it's hard to imagine I would have developed the habit of wandering the grocery store aisles late at night if not for the whip of insomnia I suffered all summer after the funeral.

Something about the crisp florescence brought me in. I felt like a moth, like something primal thrumming in my body propelled me through the automatic doors. I walked up and down the aisles, soothed by the clean, bright colors of the cereal boxes, the white bulbs of marshmallows, the milk sweating behind a thick window of glass. This unending supply of packaged food seemed to be the opposite of death.

Locke worked overnight stocking the shelves. I didn't notice him really; I was so focused on the food itself. Every time I went I bought something I hadn't eaten before. A puck can of potted meat, fish sauce, whole star anise. At home I filled the cabinet above the refrigerator. When I moved out of that apartment I double bagged the collection and told myself to take it to the food bank, but instead I just tossed it all into the dumpster.

Eventually Locke spoke to me. I'd seen him by then always curled over a box of canned food or pushing an empty cart back through the double doors near the deli. He had sturdy limbs and close-cropped hair. He told me much later that he spent weeks working up the nerve to talk to me. Our first conversation was in the baking section. I was considering the neat little boxes of gelatin and pectin. At the end of the aisle I saw Locke nearly hustle by. I felt his gaze rake over me and then I saw him turn so abruptly he gave his body a cartoonish whip.

He smiled as he approached, but there was something manic in his eyes. One hand he held up in a stiff wave, a sort of *wait for me* gesture. In the other hand he held a jar of something blood-red.

"How about these?" he said when he got close enough. He held out the

jar. It looked like it was filled with organs. The label said *Pickled Beets*.

“For what?” I said. I could see little ticks of sweat along his hairline.

“For your collection,” he said.

I felt the twin rush of flattery and overexposure. “Thanks,” I said, taking the jar from him; the glass was still warm from his hand.

“I’m Locke,” he said.

“Beth,” I said.

“Beth,” he repeated as if he was storing the word in some specific part of his brain. Then he gave me a grimacing smile, turned away, and trotted back the way he’d come. Years later he explained that he understood my coming in for odd items so late at night as my way of signaling to him that I was interested. “I knew you weren’t cooking that stuff, and I knew you came in so late because you wanted me to see you,” he said. I never bothered to correct him.

• • •

LOCKE AND I met during the coupling phase of life when everyone around us seemed to be pairing up. And so there was an ease to the way our relationship unfurled, as if we were paddling with the current. Though we were both charmed by the strange delights of having a partner, each of us understood the setup to have certain limitations. We were together, but we were still two distinct people. Never did we have the sort of emotional or intellectual melding that I think some people experience. But I didn’t want

for it. This separateness seemed better somehow, more stable for the long run.

We dated for a few months before we slept together. We waited until his parents were away; they'd gone back east for a wedding, somewhere like Vermont or Rhode Island. Locke had to work late, but I agreed to meet him at his place after his shift.

The house didn't smell bad, but the scent of it was always catching in my nose, reminding me that I was not at home. I'd been in Locke's room before, but now there was something different about the space, like the furniture had been cut apart and glued back together. We kissed on the bed. I liked his tongue, the sensation of something alive in my mouth.

"I love you," he said. I hated him for saying it now, when his voice was thick with hunger and I couldn't tell whether he meant it.

We pulled our shirts off, our pants, we pressed our bodies together. What I liked about sex was the surrender of it, not to him, but to some animal self. I could feel the whole of my body: the layers of muscle and bone, the stutter of my blood, and the electricity of my pumping heart. But as much as I lost myself in the process, Locke stayed firmly himself. Even as he pushed inside me, the worry in his brow did not go away.

As we lay in the after, I felt the tunneling of returning to myself, of remembering my hair, my fat, the splotch of my birthmark. That's when I knew I loved Locke—when, as if he sensed my sudden discomfort, he curled around me and held me until I fell asleep.



WE MARRIED AT the courthouse. Me in a blue dress and Locke in a gray jacket. Neither of us wanted a traditional wedding; it seemed a simple way to skirt around the baggage of marriage. We did not articulate what exactly we were afraid of, but I could tell we both felt some ugly version of ourselves lurking. It was like we thought we could outsmart those selves by wearing blue, by exchanging vows in the small office of a judge, by calling the wedding anything but what it was.

After the courthouse, our parents took us out for lunch and I remember the tone of the day being one of hearty satisfaction. We'd checked off one of life's biggest to-do items and all four parents seemed happily relieved.

It carried us a long way, the satisfaction. After the wedding we rented an apartment near Capitol Hill, piecing together a collection of other people's cast-off furniture. I made spaghetti most nights and we ate barefoot on the sunken couch. We found that creating a shared life was like scooping up a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. Together we had to care for this wild, fragile thing. Our movements became careful—each one measured against the risk of accidentally snuffing out what we were meant to protect.

We found the spaces in each other to fill. I bought a jar to keep his favorite tea. He installed a hook in the bathtub for my loofa. I put a frame around the picture of his parents he kept loose in his dresser. He left an ice scraper in the back seat of my car. Together we picked out a set of dishes at the second-hand store.

I loved finding the evidence of how snugly Locke and I fit together. Our toothbrushes housed in the same mug, our shoes set side by side at the door, our laundry twisted into one heap. If ever I doubted what held us together, I just had to look around.

In those early years we talked sometimes about having a child; we were sure it would just happen for us. Back then there was a lightheartedness to the way we spoke—like we were two kids in on a secret plan together. We conjured up a baby who had my boxy feet and Locke’s strong chin, my dark eyes and his knobby ears. But soon there was a hollowness to those conversations. As time passed we began to feel like kids who’d grown too old to believe in the magic of our secret plan, like we had both realized that having a baby required certain logistical adult considerations and neither of us could bring ourselves to say so. It felt like a game of chicken; neither of us wanted to be the one to call out our mutual naivete. When I finally did, it was like pressing a needle into the skin of a balloon. Suddenly this thing Locke and I had been holding between us lost its shape.

Locke was not interested in a medical investigation. He refused to talk about doctors, about research of any kind. In fact, the more I pushed him to take it seriously, the less inclined he seemed to want a child at all. It was as though the whole idea had been spoiled for him. As we edged toward our mid-thirties, he began to cite things such as overpopulation and the possibility of genetic disease. Now whenever the subject of children came up, the conversation soured.

“When we have a baby, I’m going to want a dishwasher,” I said one

night as we washed the dishes. I scrubbed and rinsed, Locke dried.

I could feel a sudden tautness in the room. Behind me, Locke dropped silverware into its drawer.

“We could put it right here,” I said, tapping the cabinet next to the sink with my wet hand. I hoped this pivot might keep us out of a fight.

“You’re obsessed,” he said. Another piece of silverware dropped.

“I just hate doing the dishes,” I said. It was an offering, an escape hatch if he wanted it.

“I mean what is this desire to procreate?” he said. I’d never heard him use that phrase before.

“If you don’t want kids,” I said. “I just want to know.”

He let out a breath, and there was an answer in it, an admission. I didn’t say anything; I dropped one hand into the sink water and peeled the bits of food out of the drain. Already I could feel myself folding my desire for a child over and over in my mind, working it until it came apart. In some ways it didn’t feel much like a sacrifice—giving up a thing I was only half-sure I wanted for the sake of something I had in hand. But I can’t inhabit myself from those years with any authenticity. My new self edges into the memories and consumes every scene.

• • •

LOCKE LEFT ME on a Wednesday. He packed his half of the matching luggage set his parents had bought us for our fifth anniversary. We’d been

together for sixteen years by then, but as soon as he said he was leaving I could feel all that time compress into one thin layer, like a coin I could roll between my fingers.

Outside the snow pushed up to the doorstep—neither one of us had bothered to sweep it away. I remember being surprised, watching him split apart the collection of things that held us together. I didn't cry, but I tried to grab his arm as he stood by the door. Already he'd told me there was someone else.

"Where are you going?" I asked. It was a stupid question, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Stop it," he said.

"This is our life," I said. My throat felt raw.

Locke looked around the room. Already his hand was on the doorknob. Then he looked into my face and he laughed. It was a snarling sort of laugh, and I understood instantly that in all the years we'd spent together he had never quite taken me seriously.

The fury came fast and hot. My whole body curled around the bead of anger. I stepped forward. I could feel that my face had rearranged itself—a new crease splitting my brow, a tightness at the edge of my lips. Already I knew the changes would be permanent. Locke pulled open the door. He looked as if for the first time he saw me as someone with bones and teeth.

I pushed toward him. I didn't have a plan, but I wanted to touch him. I wanted him to feel the heat of my skin.

"I'm sorry," he said. His breath smelled too sweet.

I reached toward him, not knowing exactly what I planned to do. But my hand grabbed onto his hair. The patch right above his left ear. I latched on. Between my fingers I could feel the tug of his scalp, the panicked wriggle of something caught.

“Beth,” he said, knocking my arm with his elbow. I tightened my grip, steeled myself for a fight. Already his body had become foreign. I’d never struggled against him like this, never felt his heft as something that might crush me.

“Beth,” Locke said again. “Let go.” He tried to duck away from me, but I held fast, squeezing my fist so tight my knuckles felt like they might un-notch. He knocked me into the doorframe and twisted. I felt the scalp give way, and I nearly fell back as the hair came loose at the roots.

“Jesus,” Locke said as we came apart.

I didn’t say anything. I stood on the porch with the clump of his hair in my fist. I could feel my feet planted firmly beneath me, but I could also feel myself sucked backwards in time, the anger arcing like a spark between two bare wires, between me and Nan. There she was with the plate in the air. Her hand had trembled as if she was split in half whether she could actually go through with it. The skin of her arm hung heavy off the bone. I remember being spooked by the bare evidence of her age.

At the time I’d been stunned watching the first plate tip out of Nana’s hands and drop to the floor, the burst of shards exploding, the sing of the ceramic splitting apart. After that first plate, Nana V pulled the whole stack from the cabinet. One by one she pitched them at the floor. We watched

her, her eyes wet, her lips raw. She looked devastated but determined—as if she couldn't help but recount each time she'd picked up one of those plates without dropping it. For so long she'd kept them unbroken. And yet there was an inevitability to her motions as if this was the exact thing she'd been saving them for.

She'd seemed like such a batty old woman then, but standing in front of Locke as he backed down the steps I could feel the depth of her bitterness as if it was my own. Men did not have to take us seriously—even the men who claimed to love us. It was like finding a rotten wound that had been on my body all along.

Locke stepped back into the snow. He touched the freshly bald spot with the tips of his fingers, winced. "I'm going," he said. He backed all the way across the snow, didn't turn away from me until he hit the edge of the driveway. Then he shoved the suitcase in his car and slammed the door. I looked down at the hair in my fist still dotted red at the ends with his blood.

I don't remember anything changing much after Nana V shattered all those dishes. She must have been the one to sweep them up. Pa Gene never would have bothered. If it were up to him, those broken pieces would have stayed there until they turned to dust. But whenever I walked in the pass-through between the kitchen and the living room, I looked down to see the scars in the hardwood, little nicks that I could feel in the bare soles of my feet. I think my brothers stepped over those marks. Pa Gene too. But even back then I liked to feel underfoot the evidence of a woman destroying the very things she was meant to cherish.