

Pape: He Did

# **HE DID**

**BY**

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**THE HARPUR PALATE AWARD FOR  
CREATIVE NONFICTION**

I have been waiting for my father to die for fifteen years. When he called to tell me for the first time that he was very sick and didn't know how much longer he would live, we hadn't talked for over a year. It was fear that led me to pick up the receiver, to interrupt the message he was leaving on our machine and say hello. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't picked up that call. If I had just allowed the silence to continue until it was infinite.

My writing studio overlooks the downtown park plaza, where homeless and shoppers pass each other, often intersecting at the recycling bins. My desk butts up against a wall of windows, so I often find myself noticing the same folks. There is a man who walks with a slight drag in his steps, his graying brown hair shaggy and unkempt, Levis slouching low on his ass. There is a moment, each time he passes, that I recognize him as my father. He isn't. I know this man's name. I've given him money before. I should know better, but on some level, I am always mistaking him.

I Google my father's name, then add "AND obituary." His relative with the same name who

died a hundred years ago comes up. This happens every time I break down and look for him in the ether. I get hits on registered sex offender sites. I find a random article and picture in his local paper that shows him volunteering at his local library. Some day there will be a different outcome. I will find an announcement of his death or get a call from one of the few people in his life. I can't help myself from seeking—a yearning rises up through the delicate, primitive cords woven through my body, my blood. My relentless heart.

The years we lived in our first yellow house, Dad kept homing pigeons in a roost that he built along the aluminum siding of the garage. A man could stand up in it and at eye-level there were nesting boxes where the birds slept and hatched their chicks. They circled our half-acre, sweeping and tumbling the sky, and I would watch them until my neck ached.

When the chicks hatched, my dad would hold me up to see into their nest. The chicks were ugly at first: downy fluff over pink flesh, oversized beaks with a protruding bump, wings and legs akimbo,

blue and bulbous eyes. Then, pinfeathers emerged like scales, making them ancient and reptilian. I loved them and named them.

Pigeons, according to a new study by geophysicist Jon Hagstrum, are now believed to find their way home through infrasound, a way of imaging landscapes through low-level noise. This is what they called the pigeon's "mapping system," which is different from an internal compass. In the same way you would recognize your home upon seeing it, pigeons *hear* their home. This theory comforts me. To think that there are inaudible echoes pulling us back to place, that those threads within us never break, but stretch over greater distances until we are wound back.

As the flock circled and then broke into a line away from our patch of sky, I would ask my father again and again how they find their way home. I couldn't imagine yet the way it would feel to be my grown self, returning to these same roads, to stand apart from the home that was once ours, but now has a huge American flag stretched across it. The world is so small compared to my memory of it. The

topography of the lion-hide hills of my hometown ignites a familiar ache for a time before the worst happened.

In the coop, my father's muscled arms held me up without tremor, both of us enamored with the secret life of our birds. Our strange babies the cats wanted so badly to eat. We stayed in the cage like that for a long time, the door locked behind us.

The stories I remember are not the only ones I know. I recall them because they substantiate the truth of two words I fought to not say, the pair of syllables that would indict, would explode the only world I'd been given. The letters that mirror the church we spent so many years inside—a pronoun weighted on the tongues of disciples, followers pleading for the strong arms of another to hold them, to suffer on behalf: He.

The words I was asked to say: *He did.*

When confronted, his words echoed the oldest of accusations. Breathing hard, he paced, then unwound the indictment he had been keeping: *She seduced me.* Then he left through the back

door's gasp and hush, saying he was going to kill himself. A few moments later, my mother and our pastor heard the familiar crunch of his wheels pulling out of the drive and saw his small, white pick-up disappearing around the corner.

I see different versions of my father on the street. The last time, I was making a left turn that I make every day and he was taking the last three steps up to the crosswalk. My head turned right as the car veered opposite to take in every feature on the man's face, the pallor of his skin, his height, his pressed khakis and checked shirt buttoned to the throat. He was too short to be my father.

My father lives six hundred and eight miles away.

There are so many men. Each embody characteristics of another decade, different proximity, in relationship to a different me. The ones with long, chestnut brown hair and tanned shoulders; the ones with tinted glasses and one tooth that raises their lip in an unintentional sneer; he who had aging indigo script at the edge of his hand; another with yellowed skin, sweating and swollen at the

joints.

Once, it actually was him.

I was on the 405, driving from Los Angeles to a conference in San Diego. At the on-ramp from Carlsbad, I looked over to see his white truck with the off-color camper shell speeding up to the rest of traffic. There was the neat tuck of his shirtsleeve, and his forearm like no other forearm in the world. I was stuck three lanes over and watched as he wove through the slow lane and then out of sight. I could almost hear the plastic cup with ice and juice clasped between his legs. I imagined what he was listening to and whether I would know the words to sing along.

Did my father exist anywhere in the world, I wondered, holding the steering wheel hard, willing it not to turn and follow.

He and I planned to meet on the campus of a doctoral program I was considering. I met with the advisor and walked up and down the halls of the department, reading the flyers and names on office doors, trying to imagine myself there. I found the circular walking path where my dad was sitting on the

other side, on a bench, waiting for me. I stood watching him from a distance for a little while—his legs crossed at the ankles, palms pressed together like an upside down prayer.

In my bag, I had prepared a picnic for us. These were the years I attempted to know him, to allow him to know me. We would meet somewhere in the middle of where he lived and where I was coming from. Those were the first years he was dying.

He could've been anyone's father, sitting there peacefully, scanning the paths for the one he was expecting.

My father, with his thinning brown hair and bright white tennis shoes.

He, who might've been a little hungry and couldn't wait to see his daughter, who he'd been away from for a very long time. I imagined he was proud of her and that he didn't mind waiting.

When I was six, my father broke his L4/L5 vertebrae when he fell off of a twenty-foot ladder at the lumber mill. Before his back was broken, he would dance around the living room. He would skip,

side-to-side, one hop, double hop, heel skittering in front of the other foot, head tipping up and down in sync. The Soupie Shuffle. Then he'd hold my two hands in his as I stepped onto his feet, the laces along my bare arches. We danced this way, monster-like, slow.

His happiness changed every molecule in the house.

Before his back broke, he would lie facedown on the moss-green shag carpet after a long day working outside. His back smooth and dark as red clay. I would walk up and down either side of his spine, the muscles and skin slipping and shifting under my small feet. When he had enough, I would lay on him, my cheek resting between his scapulae, the full day of sun rising up through his skin. Every therapist who's asked me to find a safe place in my mind has brought me here. My small, child body cradled in the curve and heat of his.

After his injury, the subsequent surgeries quarantined his body from me, no longer mine to touch or be comforted by, a receptacle for pills and longing for relief from pain. Before he could get out of bed in the morning, he needed a yellow pill, which I would

sometimes bring him.

Our pigeons disappeared. He could no longer care for them.

The first time his hands turned wrong was in that bed. I was nine. I thought, *He thinks I'm Mom.* I thought, *You can never crawl into this bed again.*

There is one memory that exists before my own consciousness.

A story told to me that I have integrated as if I recall it myself.

I was a baby, one year-old, possibly a little more. I wasn't walking yet. I walked so late, my parents joked they were going to have to get a little baby wheelchair. Everyone loved to hold me. They claim that's why I didn't walk. No one ever let me touch the ground long enough to try.

Dad wanted to go fishing and Mom was working a long shift at Montgomery Wards. He took me, with his friends, on a small aluminum fishing boat. We stayed out all day. When she came home, he was drunk and I was bright red and inconsolably sun burnt. Mom tore him apart.

I strain to remember the zip of reels casting out and their hands pulling against the willowy poles.

The gulp and click of the beer can. The cold metal bucket of minnows and my pale hands seeking their narrow, slick bodies. The laughter of men. The slap of waves against the thin vessel.

Maybe I was a little princess in the belly of the boat, directing them with my fat fingers across the choppy lake. Maybe they held up the thrashing fish to delight me.

I was not the first child to catch fire under her father's preoccupied gaze.

We sat down in a room with a circle of chairs. My mother, brother, father and me. A soft-spoken, older man who was a professor and therapist had asked us to take part in his research in family therapy and forgiveness rituals. We were told our session would be recorded for educational purposes. Four students sat behind mirrored glass, overstuffed backpacks at their feet. I saw them through a cracked door coming in.

I was twenty-three and in college. My brother was in crisis, which was why we were there. His high school counselor had referred us with the hope that an intervention of epic proportions

would interrupt the destructive track he'd been on—vandalism, drinking, anxiety, truancy. While I had been placed into a variety of groups, individual therapy, and had gone for a short time to a psychiatric facility, my brother had declined those same kinds of support. He found his own ways to cope with the loss of our father and the confusion around what our dad had done.

The therapist told us that his intention was to reassemble the pieces, to bring the story of the abuse to the table, so that we would all leave with the same understanding of what had occurred.

He contended that part of the breakage in a family is that each individual clings to their own version of the event that finally broke the already ailing system.

He insisted that each member witness my father on his knees in front of me.

He asked my father to describe, in detail, what he had done.

To his credit, my father knelt before me, crying, and said aloud what, for so many years, had remained secret. Even after

everyone knew his crime, the details were ours only.

What my forgiveness looked like was arms, legs and hands shaking, like eyes shut tight against the teetering man cringing in pain before me. It looked like my mother's face crushed into a thousand shards of grief. It sounded like the swoosh of the heavy institutional door, as my brother swung it open and ran.

Really, the only person the experiment worked for was my father. After the session had concluded, he seemed lighter. He shook the therapists hand as if they were old friends. The session was after we'd found out that his liver was failing, so this might be our last chance for closure. He took my gesture of kindness and turned it into a mantra.

"I've done my time," he would say after that, whenever I got close to talking about the abuse or the ways my brother and I continued to suffer.

Salmon, too, have a compass that guides them back to the place of their birth. They have a magnetic map that directs them from the ocean to their river of origin's

waters. The magnetic field where they entered the sea is the same one they seek when returning.

Recently, I visited the fish hatchery in my hometown. My father and I would go there together each year during the salmon run and watch the water, exclaiming as the enormous fish launched themselves against the spray where the river had been dammed. Their shining fins glimmering across the wide, shallow water. Deep crimson scales rose to the surface, then disappeared.

Thirty-six-years-old, standing at the edge of this same water and I miss my father.

I go down the stairs that lead to the observation windows. There is a family with two small children, a boy and a girl, who are running from one window the next, their voices echoing in the small concrete room. Four algae-green Plexiglas squares with metal frames and bolts separate us from the fish.

This is still a place I return to in dreams. The luminous squares. The hooked jaws of the fish, opening and closing as their bodies flex against the unyielding force.

I watch them cross over one

another, sweep backward into the momentary relief of the current, circle back against it newly. They never stop moving. A small breeze picks up and carries the scent of the dead ones that litter the river's banks. I yearn for my father, but no longer know why. Past the greatest harm, I still wish for and dread his physical presence.

I welcome this grief again, staring into the bubbling water, this rare sacred place we shared. A Chinook salmon rises to the observation window and holds close to my face. I put my hand to the dirty surface and can imagine the slick, freckled scales against my skin.

He says I am dead to him. I hold the corded receiver loosely against my face, letting it hang away from me. He says it again, *You're dead to me, hear that?*

My mother asked for me to call him and tell him not to drive up from Carlsbad to visit my brother and I. My brother is missing, strung out, and she can't bear for him to drive up into the middle of our chaos. She can't speak to him. She goes mad with rage when he begins to say almost anything.

It takes him a week to pack up his truck when he comes to visit us. Meticulous and obsessive, he brings everything he imagines he might need—tools, bedding, clothing, small collections of things he wants to give us, fishing gear, coolers of yogurt and juice, his medications. He is almost out the door when I call.

He is irate that she would ask him not to come. *I could help*, he says. *I know what it means to nip that shit in the bud*, referring to his sobriety, which we question, knowing that he can never truly be clean with the steady stream of pain pills he takes to get through his days. Often, he calls and his words are slurred, disintegrated, or repeated depending on the day, and my brother or I sit and listen for what meaning we can glean.

He is always asking to come visit. Between his wavering health and our hesitance, he comes once a year. When we visit family in southern California, we find ways to meet him halfway between where he is and where we are. We have never seen his apartment.

*But why*, he asks, again, when I tell him to come another time, to wait until we find my brother, when

things settle down, that he won't have a place to stay if he comes. *Why can't I stay with you*, he finally asks.

You know why. *But why?*

My daughter. I remind him. I have a daughter and he can't stay here. I realize that he is going to make me say it, tell him what it is that he did that makes this an impossibility. I wonder sometimes if he has forgotten. I say, *You sexually abused me, Dad.*

Unforgiving. A bitch just like your mother. And then, *Dead. You're dead to me.*

That was four years ago. I could say that I am free now from all the years of secrets. From the years that followed as I tried hard to leave some thread between us intact, but I do not feel free. I feel like one of our pigeons from all those years ago, circling and circling above the golden half-acre we once lived on, listening for home, searching in silence for some familiar geography to land.

In prison, he let his hair and his beard grow long. There, they called him "Pops." He created an alter ego—ancient and apart from the racial categories that rule the

hierarchy and power dynamics of incarceration. He hid. He grew a thick waist and the flowing gray tresses of a god. He wasn't harmed there, but for the constant fear of being found out and hurt.

When he was released, he shaved the shaggy beard from his face and cut his hair short. He left one piece long, which flowed from the base of his neck to the middle of his back. He kept it banded.

The last time we saw each other, before I was dead to him, that tail he kept was loose. He asked me to braid it for him. I sat behind him and gathered the thin hank of hair in my hands, almost like an animal, soft and slack over my fingers. I wove the three parts, bringing one over, then the other side, until I reached the frayed end. For one moment before rising, I held the rope of him in my palm, felt its weight. This dead living thing. Finally, I rested it upon his shoulder, got up, and walked away.