

Iron Horse Literary Review
Interview with Nickole Brown and her wife Jessica Jacobs
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Questions for Nickole Brown

When did you start working on *Fanny Says*? What made you want to start writing about your grandmother?

NB: Technically speaking, I've been working on *Fanny Says* since about 2008, not too long after my first book came out. But there's a way in which I've been working on this book my whole life—Fanny was my grandmother, and she raised me up on her stories. Even though I lost her in 2004, I can still hear her fussing and cutting up most every day.

In your genesis statement, you describe the collection as “a biography of sorts.” Can you elaborate on that a little? Do you see your book as having some of the same aims as a traditional biography? What are some of the differences?

NB: It's not truth I'm after, but authenticity. What I mean by that is that, yes, I do try, as best I can, to tell the life of Frances Lee Cox, a woman born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, but I'm only able to tell the story that I know, through the muddled and biased lens of a daughter born to the youngest daughter of her seven children. I can't vouch for the facts, only my own perception of the facts. As I mention in my afterward to this book, if you knew Fanny and I told a story different than you know it, you know and I know Fanny told her stories over and again, each time changing the details just a bit. Maybe you weren't there on the same day; maybe she changed the truth, just for me.

How did you go about capturing your grandmother/grandfather's voices? Did you rely on memory? Imagination? Artifacts? Some combination..?

NB: Should my house ever burst into flames, here's what needs to be hauled out into the lawn right quick: one Prada bag, in bubblegum pink. It's was my grandmother's purse, and in it, you'll find, among other bits, a pair of terrycloth house slippers in baby pink, size five; a mess of hard hair rollers, perm rods, and metal hair clips; a plastic cigarette filter and a gold lamé cigarette case; an empty bottle of phenobarbital; an empty bottle of Fanci-full Professional Hair Rinse, 43 Platinum Plus; a light blue brochure from Jefferson County Family Court. This was my inheritance and about all I have left of my grandmother. There are photos too, of course, but these items I can hold in my hand, and sometimes, I swear they still have her smell. And there is her voice—almost 27 CDs' worth—that I recorded during that last year of her life when she was bedridden and had nothing left but talk. But to this day, I still can't bring myself to listen to the damn things.

What else do I have? My memory, I suppose, when it's not plain unreliable or moody or dumb. And notebooks, a whole drawer of them, as I always did write down just about everything she said. Matter of fact, every poem in the collection that begins with “Fanny Says” (there is one of those here) are nearly word-for-word. I didn't write those poems: I simply wrote them down, as she said them. She knew I was writing it all down, of course, and she never did seem to mind. Sometimes, I would listen to her all night, and about four in the morning, she would say, “Well, we might as well go to bed now, Koey. I think we've talked just about everybody. . . . Unless you think there's somebody we ain't covered?”

You write in your genesis statement: “Sometimes it’s impossible to say it, but it’s true: she did love him, and yes, he broke his own heart over her in turn.” Can you talk about writing from this position of trying to write that which seems “impossible to say”? For you, is ambivalence a productive place from which to write?

NB: For me, ambivalence is the only place from which to write. There are no villains and victims here, just life, every bit as confusing and devastating and chock-full of joy as we came into it. Negative capability talks about being able to live with mystery, but for me, it's also about honesty scrubbed free of false binaries and imposed sense. I like writing that doesn't force you to choose sides, that knows (and more importantly acknowledges) the whole truth.

“EPO” is written in first-person, and could perhaps be described as confessional. “For My Grandmother’s Teeth...” seems to be from the granddaughter’s perspective, addressing the grandmother directly. And “Fanny Says...” is written in first person, and seems to be from the grandmother’s point-of-view. Can you talk about a little bit about these point-of-view choices? Why different speakers/points-of-view for each poem?

NB: If you can think of a story as a house, I was trying to break in, any way I knew how, sliding in through the basement windows and knocking on the front door and slipping down the chimney. This manuscript uses everything I know of my grandmother and tries to make points of entry with various perspectives and narrative distances.

"EPO" is written the way that it is because it's epistolary, a letter written to my grandmother as apology. It had to be written that way because I, in the big-headed idealism of my youth, was to blame. And even though the poem about her teeth also address her directly, it tells a story I did not experience; the facts here—if you can call them that—were given to me as story and were experienced only through my imagination. I mean, yes, I saw the dentures soaking on her nightstand every night, but I wasn't there when she lost her teeth. The other poem is a part of the "Fanny Says" series and is her voice, directly dictated to me. I suppose I curated that poem, or at least transcribed it, maybe even translated it a bit (Fanny had an undeniable accent I couldn't get on the page), but I certainly didn't write it.

Besides different voices/perspectives, the three poems here also have very different shapes. I think “Fanny Says...” could be described as a poem, a short story, or perhaps even an essay. Can you talk about writing that poem, specifically? How did you find that shape?

NB: Again, I didn't write that poem; I just wrote it down. And it's in a paragraph form because line breaks would be of my making, not hers. All of the poems in the "Fanny Says" series are my attempt to get out of her way and let her tell her own story, in her own words. It's my hope that in those pieces I disappear entirely, that it's just the reader and Fanny, sitting together in a room. It's my hope that the reader will meet her, and that, ultimately then, she (or at least a part of her) won't be forgotten.

Do you edit (these poems, specifically, but also in general) a lot?

NB: Lord, yes. Again and again. And sometimes, then again, so many times that the whole enterprise would fall flat on its face and I would have to go right back to an earlier draft. (As my

grandmother would say, *be careful not to tease your hair too far up to Jesus or it might fall flat.*) I mean, the first drafts would come bright and fast and just as shitty as you could imagine, and then, the rest of the time I spent has been a process of questioning each and every word, interrogating every line to make sure it deserved to be there. As I recently told my editor Peter Connors, I needed a hard and fast deadline from him on the final draft of my book, not because I particularly wanted one, but because I needed to be put out of my misery. I have until April first. Wish me luck.

Questions for Jessica Jacobs

In your genesis statement, you write of O’Keeffe: “I was six when she died, so these poems are my way of talking with her, of trying to understand how a woman can find the courage to live with such boldness and conviction.” When did you first discover Georgia O’Keeffe? What first compelled you to write about her?

JJ: Though I can’t remember a time I wasn’t aware of O’Keeffe, I’d filed her work as visual Muzak—eroticized flowers stamped on postcards and totebags. But during a visit to the Indianapolis Museum of Art in October 2011, I saw “Pelvis with Distance”—a blue sky and bluer mountain range, a section of pelvis surging past the frame—and that seventy-year-old painting knocked me out. I wrote the first draft of “Pelvis with Distance” standing in front of it, looking, I’d imagine, like some kind of possessed kook, trying to get it all down.

At home, I read everything I could find by and about her and saw that she lived as she painted, with singular sincerity and passion. How could I not be intrigued?

Pages and pages of letters between the two artists have been published. Did you draw on these for inspiration? What, if anything, about their letters intrigued you?

JJ: Their correspondence began in 1915, when O’Keeffe was 27, and ended in 1946 with Stieglitz’ death, reaching well over 1,000 pages. Though discussions of her paintings, his photographs, and the greater nature of art are woven throughout them, the early letters were also wonderfully silly and lovesick and far sexier than I’d imagined. And it was fascinating to watch her grow from a sometimes tentative young woman, flirting and trying to please the much older Stieglitz, into a confident artist—one who still loved him but also pushed back and asserted her view.

The poems are told from O’Keeffe’s (or Stieglitz’s) perspective. Was your goal to recreate each of their respective voices accurately, or to re-imagine something different?

JJ: While I read their letters, I took notes of passages that moved me, oft-used phrases, and period-specific vernacular, which then became the launching points for many poems. I also placed brief excerpts of letters throughout the collection to provide biographical context and allow their real voices to be heard.

But a danger with persona poems is that you can get so caught up in trying to accurately tell your subject’s story, you sink the poem with too much exposition. Though I tried to be factually accurate whenever possible, I was more concerned with finding some kind of emotional truth—imagining my way into the historic moment and then writing the poem as though that experience had actually happened to me.

Two of the poems here, “Plate 28—Clothed in only a Swim Cap” and “Pelvis with Distance,” are written as letters between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz. What drew you to this epistolary approach?

JJ: Epistolary poems are a neat trick in that they break you out of the confines of the “I” and allow the space that breathes in when addressing a “you” across great distances. I was also inspired to use this approach by the fact that so much of their work spoke to each other, as though their art was just another type of correspondence. She’d paint a series of wild, sensual abstractions and he’d take a series of clouds-in-motion photographs. He’d play with compressing distance and she’d do the same in a painting. It was a kind of call and response I tried to capture in my poems-as-letters

Not to imply that it’s essential, but since we’re in the southwest here, I’ll ask from curiosity: Have you ever been to the southwest/New Mexico?

JJ: As a writer, my strength lies far more in close observation than in creating unseen worlds whole-cloth. Fortunately, I’d lived in New York for a number of years, so I had the early part of her life covered. But to remedy my spotty knowledge of the southwest, I took two roadtrips. During the first trip in December 2011, I hiked and camped in Palo Duro Canyon (less than two hours north of *Iron Horse* HQ!), where O’Keeffe had lived and worked as a schoolteacher, and then spent a chilly few weeks hiking the sites of her paintings in Central and Northern New Mexico.

That summer, I lived for a month in Abiquiu, where she’d spent the final half of her life. I rented a primitive cabin with no electricity, no internet, no cell reception, far enough out in the desert that I was entirely alone with my books, notes, and many long hours. It was one of the more difficult things I’ve ever done; but I left with a finished draft of my manuscript, so it was definitely worthwhile.

Do you edit (these poems, specifically, but also in general) a lot?

JJ: My rough drafts tend to be baggy, prosaic monstrosities scrawled across several pages. Working between two journals, I redraft the poem multiple times, refining as I go. Then, I go for a run, holding the words sit just below the rhythm of conscious thought. Returning home, I’m able to see the poem more clearly—what should stay and what should go; and write out another full draft before typing it up, squashing it into a prose block, cutting out anything extraneous, and re-breaking it. As you can probably tell, my writing process, like my running, is far more tortoise than hare.

Questions for Jessica & Nickole

Where did you grow up?

JJ: Central Florida in the ‘80s was a strange, accentless place, populated by snowbirds, retirees, fundamentalists, Disney employees, and kids like me, who wore lizards as earrings, had teased-up mall bangs, hunted fresh-water mussels to use as bass-bait, and dreamed equally of escaping to cities and mountains.

NB: Well, I spent half my time in Louisville and the other half in Florida, further south from where Jessica was teasing her hair but not so far that I didn't have some rooster-crow Lita Ford bangs of

my own. And I can't speak of the accentless place she knew—Fanny brought all of the green acres of Kentucky with her to the swaying palms of Deerfield Beach—but I, too, liked to catch lizards and tease them with my earlobes until they latched on for dear life. (Yes, perhaps you can see why Jessica and I might be meant for one another.) And I, too, dreamed of other places. The night Fanny died, I spent the duration of the evening on a rooftop on the Lower East Side. I remember looking out over the city thinking how impossible it was I was there, considering where I had come from.

What did you read as a kid?

JJ: My paternal grandfather, a self-taught Polish immigrant, challenged me early, giving me books when I was eight like *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Atlas Shrugged* (Dagny Taggart was my earliest role model and first crush). I tempered Ayn Rand's mind-warping powers with healthy doses of *Sweet Valley High*, the *Wrinkle in Time* series, and every Stephen King book I could get my hands on (and keep hidden from my parents).

NB: When I was young, we had two things to read in the house: *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and the Bible. Now, I won't tell you the story of how I got in trouble cutting and pasting one of those sources of literature into the other, but I will tell you that I was the first in my family to care much at all for books. For my thirtieth birthday, a friend of mine bought me a copy of *Goodnight, Moon*, and I had never read it before. That "Goodnight, nobody" page is still a killer.

When did you start writing?

JJ: I first read Sylvia Plath as a high school freshman, discovering *Ariel* in my local library. At a small table tucked behind the farthest row of shelves, the room frigid with over-air conditioning and swimming with dust motes, I flipped to "Daddy:" "You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe..." Two lines in and the day disappeared—that emphatic, relentless end-rhyme of the long *u*. The simple, mostly monosyllabic diction that nonetheless expressed complex despair and rage. History and war twining around the intensely personal. Only after "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," did I return to myself, stunned and panting, as though I'd forgotten even to breathe while reading. I started writing then in earnest, believing if I could create even one work that made even a single person feel that way, it was the finest thing I could do with my life.

NB: I, too, had my affair with Sylvia in high school—I carried *The Bell Jar* in a ratty satchel for two years, wearing nothing but oversized black dresses and combat boots. Writing became my lifeline during that time, but I'll give credit where credit is due, to a summer arts program in Kentucky called Governor's School for the Arts. I was fifteen; those two weeks saved my life.

Can you give an example of a text that's a guilty pleasure for you?

JJ: There's not really anything I feel guilty about reading, especially if it gives me pleasure. (Perhaps I should feel guilty about that?)

NB: Those children's books I didn't read as a kid. Those are my guilty pleasures, mostly. Last fall, I sunk into *The Wind in the Willows*, and Jessica let me read her passages from it in bed. This, I know, is love.

What are you reading now?

JJ: I always look forward to the newest issues of *Orion* and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, Traci Brimhall's collection *Rookery* is my favorite thing to read before writing, and Barry Lopez's *Desert Notes* is currently reminding me to slow down and pay better attention.

NB: There's little non-required reading during the semester, which is why I make to assign books in my classes that I want to read. This spring, it's Traci Brimhall's *Rookery*, Nikky Finney's *Head Off & Split*, Spencer Reece's *The Clerk's Tale* (as well as his new book, *The Road to Emmaus*), and the Li-Young Lee's heartache of a poem, "The City in Which I Love You." We're also reading *Beloit* and *The Georgia Review* for a publishing seminar I'm teaching.

This one doesn't have much to do with writing, but I'll ask it anyway (again, duets issue): How did the two of you meet?

JJ: We met in December of 2007, just after Nickole's first book, *Sister*, came out. We ended up at the same terrible party in the East Village staffed by bartenders-in-training. During the very long wait for drinks, amid the crowd of close-cropped NY women clad all in black, a beautiful blonde in a white tank top with Dietrich-red lipstick made room for me at the bar. She told me she was a poet and had a reading the next night (I groaned inwardly, imagining a potentially wonderful thing about to be ruined by sub-par poetry). But I went to the reading anyway, heard Nick's haunting, strikingly honest poems, and was lost.

NB: I would just add that she told me that evening at the bar that she worked in publishing, and being equally jaded, I remember feeling pretty skeptical about what that meant, exactly. Anyhow, she showed up on her little red bicycle—Geryon, she'd named it—at the A & B Bar the next night, and I, too, was lost. Perhaps too lost, I'm afraid, because like so many hokey romantic comedies, we messed things up pretty quickly. After an intense epistolary exchange (I was still living in Louisville) and a few visits to the city, we called it quits and decided we were better suited for friendship than romance.

JJ: But at the AWP Conference in Boston last spring—the convention-hall fount of all things windswept and starry-eyed (or something like that), we sat down to discuss the drafts of our manuscripts . . . and the rest is history. I finished my MFA that May, moved to Little Rock, and we were married this past October.

NB: I know, I know. You do the math: crazy, right? I wouldn't have believed it myself if it hadn't happened. But it was a perfect day, the kind of day you carry with you all your life. We were wed barefoot on the lawn of the Santa Barbara Courthouse with our dear friend Laure-Anne Bosselaar as our witness. I don't think we spent more than a hundred on the whole ceremony, and yet I couldn't imagine a more bright and shining moment.

Since this is the duet issue, can you talk about how having a partner who is also a poet has changed your writing process, if at all?

JJ: When we met, I hadn't seriously written in years. But her letters were so lyrical they demanded I respond in kind. Soon after, I quit my job to study and teach creative writing—a difficult choice but

one that brought me back to myself, a choice I wouldn't have made without seeing the devotion Nickole brings to her writing and wanting to match that, too, in kind.

NB: It was in our vows: to be each other's reader and witness. Jessica is my first and best reader, and not a day goes by when we don't talk about what poetry can do. She probably believes in me and my work more than I believe in myself, and it's no exaggeration to say that I'm changed—and continue to be changed—by that.