



# almost famous

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# Almost Famous



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## **Almost Famous**

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“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

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Almost Famous



## Third Day, Third Month, 1972

My mother lay motionless  
in a windowless surgery room.  
Bright bulbs overhead

illuminated the task, flashes  
from steel implements shined  
on sterile walls like flits

from a watch face. A doctor,  
or a man rather, pressed  
a tool inside her, like the back

of a soup spoon reaching in  
to a bowl of cold grits,  
fished around for my tender

skull, and excised me from comfort.  
The sun was yet to rise, or  
maybe had just risen. I'm sure

I cried—wailed into the dawn,  
grasping at my first breath, gulping  
air like a baby robin just cracked open

from its warm blue shell.  
I'm sure I saw my mother lying there  
—as if dead. Her eyes still to the day,

anesthetized. The doctor had  
said her giving birth was taking too long.  
The doctor had said she must be put

under in order to get it over  
with. My father waited  
dumb in the hallway.

## Kansas Flat

There is more sky in Kansas—  
a vast stretch suspended  
over early summer fields  
where storm clouds bloom.

I press my plump nose  
against the window screen  
of our mobile home to breathe  
the blossom of rain,

the scent of new earth  
being turned up  
seasoned by dandelions.  
I'm fascinated by the vibration

of thunder and thin lines  
of lightning zipping to the ground.  
I try to keep my eyes wide,  
afraid I might miss a flash of light.

We drag this mobile home  
from one town to another trying  
to find a job my father can keep.  
The metal siding that holds us in

is pecked with hailstone dents  
and rust-laced edges. Inside, the hallway  
is shoulder-to-shoulder narrow  
and the doors thin enough

for a fist. The kitchen wears  
its linoleum like a polyester suit  
and the avocado shag mats smooth  
where we walk. Bookshelves host rows

and rows of science fiction paperbacks,  
double-parked to fit them all,  
tops speckled with roach droppings,  
common in most mid-west trailer parks

where timid homes lie down like a dog  
being scolded at the foot of a tornado—  
sometimes, broken down in its wake,  
collapsed like an empty cardboard box.

## Almost Famous (A Family Album)

My great grandfather hangs in Missouri's capitol building, or so my father says.  
I imagine his portrait looks like the black & white Wikipedia photo. His daughter

was my grandmother, whom I only knew well enough to say I'm grateful I wasn't  
her daughter. Great grandfather was a governor, a republican & Methodist in the 1920s

& that's all I know besides my grandmother's story of how as a child, at a press conference,  
she stood beside him in palpable fear, sure her father was being shot at, before

she laughed saying, *Then he leaned down & whispered, "It's only camera bulbs popping."*  
I've searched online for her articles—she was a journalist in St. Louis,

& once found her name in the *New York Times*—a 1974 police blotter about a woman strangled  
in Brooklyn, followed by an FBI investigation—two men arrested trying to sell

stock certificates, 35 grand worth, stolen from my grandmother's Virgin Island home—  
the strangling & the theft? Unrelated. I also found divorce documents

from 1969, & how she agreed to bear the ongoing burden  
of supporting the children & would receive no alimony. It's true she found

my father a burden. He was eighteen then, kicked out of military school  
& attending a midwestern Methodist college where he'd soon meet my mother, who wrote

about his moustache, how it spoke to her from across the room, & about a stray dog  
on campus they called Wolfer. Also unrelated. I keep her essays from college

in a manila folder, letters on onion skin typing paper, not quite aligned, edits atop  
thick white correction paint. My mother was once a writer & a music major. She played

trumpet in the marching band & went to music camp in the summers, brought home her own  
recordings on transparent blue records in thin paper sleeves. To me, she was famous—

her LPs in the stack with Rick Springfield & The Who. Maybe she could've been,  
but she married the moustache, went from Methodist to Mormon & agreed

to raise her four children, to bear the ongoing burden of supporting her  
husband. I keep a photo of my mother, middle swollen & glowing on the beach,

visiting the in-laws in the Virgin Isles, her first time on an airplane. She used to say  
I'd been there too—even if only in her womb. Whose genes we carry. Whose archives.

## Settling in

My mother hated that Naugahyde couch,  
the way her thighs peeled away, sweat  
affixing skin to the impermeable polyvinyl.  
This 1908 house was where she must settle

with her four sprawling children & even less  
of a husband. The tweed, layaway sofa  
with a hide-a-bed—maybe the only new thing  
she'd had—left behind when the move from Missouri

cost too much. This is when the settling began—  
settle on a smaller U-haul truck, on fewer things—  
left the sofa, my hobby horse, the rickety crib  
all four had slept in. *There's a couch already*

*at the house*, said her mother-in-law,  
*you can leave it*. And so they did. My mother  
tried to accept the gifted house, its tacky faux-crystal  
& golden chandeliers, downcast floors, pencil

scribbles on living room walls & only two  
bedrooms. The bulky kitchen table, allegedly antique,  
hardly fit the space at all; the chairs  
were meant for a patio, their wrought iron

legs & backs, the curled pattern poking holes  
in t-shirts & pulling long hair. It's not that  
what she had before was much, but at least she'd  
had some say. We shared a room, three kids

in bunkbeds made for two, & the baby  
slept in a box for shipping frozen chickens  
about the size of a bassinet,  
folded blankets for a mattress.

The house bared remnants of beauty—  
80-year-old stained glass transoms, spots of rose  
& prisms decorated the dingy raised-velvet  
wallpaper when the sunlight angled

in the late afternoon. The clanking radiators were warm,  
& outside, the lumbering Wasatch mountains  
blocked the horizon. There's no more seeing  
Missouri from here.

## Terminal

If only we had stayed on the farm where there were no threats  
of strangers or mailmen, only pesky coyotes and skunk stench,  
where there were no cars to chase, just cows in pastures,

and where there were no murderous tow trucks.  
My mother lifted the limp dog from the pavement,  
cradling the torso in her arms as she carried him

down the block and around the house to lay him to rest  
on redwood porch slats. It was winter, December or January.  
I held my hand against the cool glass of the sliding door—

waiting for the steam of his breath, pretending not to see  
the bit of blood pooling beneath his nose, pretending not to hear  
my little brother's howls of sorrow. My throat quivering.

## Crosshairs

My mother stands soft on the sidewalk, her absentminded fingers  
playful in my plain ten-year-old hair as she gossips  
with her friend from across the street.

I stand in front of her, facing outward, pretending to participate,  
smiling at all the right times, enjoying the closeness  
of the moment and trying not to remember

that I have an absent parent, that my own friend fears  
her mother and the telephone cord in the kitchen used to choke her,  
that prescription drug abuse caused two deaths—maybe intentional,

maybe not—and the homicide/suicide on the corner—the ex-cop  
from L.A. who stopped her meds and shot herself, but not before  
she took her son, too. All this, as we stand within the crosshairs  
of four city blocks.

## A Leveling

He brought us here, to this juniper desert,  
across Midwestern state borders into broken promise,

sloughing family fragments like tire treads along the way.  
I-80 rose up like Hell's Backbone, egoistic and narrow-

sighted with drops on either side of slight rails.  
We should have been safe in the valleys,

miles away from Boulder Mountain...  
And yet I learned to fear altitudes,

the uncertainty of my own feet,  
the distant perspective of abandonment.

Two years gone. Maybe it wasn't long enough.  
The knee-locking dread never subsides.

Instead, vertigo sets in on each downward step,  
handrails clinched each time I try high heels

and the teetering always sets me down bare.  
How can I be bowed into such spinelessness,

faint at the sight of red clay cliffs and sloping pines—  
a grand staircase. Father Escalante would pray for me

to forgive. He would level my landings. He would lead  
me to grace.

## South Side

Suburban, but where  
100 year-old homes creak  
poor kids from their seams,

flaky paint facades and weedy  
yards wait for stapled food stamps  
to drop into the mailbox.

There should be religion here—  
with a steeple on every corner  
alongside a dime bag or a beggar.

Gospel is a thick fog, but it only  
spawns boredom in young people.  
No matter how loud the sermon,

or how low parents set  
the thermostat or how long they make  
the bread and milk last—

it won't be enough to keep  
a teen from looking elsewhere  
for something that feels

whiskey-in-your-belly-good,  
warm-hand-on-your-thigh-good.  
Something to squelch envy,

to take notice, to be different.  
It's easy to sneak out  
like lean gray mice

squeezing through a crevice,  
pressing against the night—  
go car-hopping, steal beer

and cigarettes from C-stores,  
find glue or paint thinner or  
gasoline to huff,

easy to coax a ride from  
a mullet on a bullet bike,  
easy to wrap legs around

a boy in the vacant lot,  
easy enough that no other body  
flinches when the kid



who lived in the mint-green  
house on the south side  
chokes on his tongue

and dies in his attic room  
from a brain tumor.  
Most of us knew him.

Some of us expect  
to go the same way.

## predator

sixteen-year-old-compulsive-liar-boy said the peanut butter scars smeared  
on his legs came from other boys who flicked a match as he stood in  
gasoline / he said the smooth section of his inside thigh was where  
doctors grafted healthy epidermis to his melted calves / no one ever knew  
the truth            not that it made a difference            sixteen-year-old-  
scared-aggressor-boy said no boys would want her with knuckle marks on  
her legs / said she wouldn't get pregnant if he pulled out in time / if he  
threw his closed fist into her abdomen daily / he said he would shoot out  
the back of his skull with a twenty-two if she left            he showed her the  
rifle            she believed him // sixteen-year-old-muddled-predator-boy  
didn't care that she was my best friend or how clear my skin was            or  
how my fat dimpled            or about any of us other than that we were girls /  
quick hands & eyes outside my window            slipped into the room & into  
my bed            no gloves            no mask            no alarm / are you awake? he said /  
fourteen flipped on its hip bearing womanhood

## promiscuity

just like young men

i knew what  
i wanted and how  
to get it—

trying to rise  
from beneath  
their mothers'  
hems

gorgeous young men my age  
“out of my league”  
older svelte men  
simple quiet men  
all the men

from nurture  
to their fathers'  
flat palms  
patted their backs

i sewed them  
under my skin  
whip stitched them  
gullible pinned them  
like campaign buttons

i too set out  
to sew wild  
added a stitch  
to my belt  
with each boy  
i charmed

wore them open and  
strong until  
my pulses

but my mother  
did not grin  
and slug my shoulder  
did not hand me my first

returned  
then i ripped them  
from the seams  
and plucked them  
from my chest

cold one

she sobbed

ironed patches over  
what was left

## rosebud

summertime 1988      adulthood swarming    a halo of hovering gnats  
dragonflies of knowhow    swooping recklessly in to feast    sixteen years  
floating    sixteen years evergreen    late night dew still fading behind  
helix & lobe // summer of the redwood porch outback    childhood  
daring    Bo Derek braids    and a tattoo    installed by a convict on the  
back of my neck    the rosebud & curling stem    the rosebud of a guitar  
string ink gun    rebellion reminder    youth hidden behind cornrow ends  
// cusp of summer    holding & glowing    the ting of moths against  
bulb    the electric typewriter    ticking for attention    sixteen    teen  
ambition sixteen    teen did you listen    hear the squelching    as it  
rumbled in // single rosebud    growing from columned bones    barbs  
extending—one then two    despite the unfurled leaf    despite the  
interlocked locks    the endangered dangling    rosebud blooming  
within    rosebud intrepid beneath the skin    blossom holding brain  
grasping ventricles & veins // summertime vines tangled    in between  
knotted around liver & kidney distended around    hip & knee  
sprouting and splitting    wrapping ankle & wrist    sixteen years  
evergreen    sixteen    teen did you listen    tick & tink    braid & ink  
coming undone

## Mixed Tape

I. Ripped from the womb with forceps while my unconscious mother slept—I imagine being hung from my feet and slapped, the sting causing an instinctive gasp, fueling my first cry.

II. That sinking feeling, the one when you know someone you love has left you, I haven't had it once since we met. The lavender licks of ocean foam bubble around my ventricles and valves with the rocking rhythm of his current. It's safe here on shore.

III. My memories have taste buds—I can smell the morning we woke up together, run my tongue along the salty sweetness of the day he said *yes*, gulp the warmth of our first born like a miracle. Every moment has a different palate and lingers on my teeth.

IV. I remember the fertile mud smell of the lake in Missouri where I learned to swim. If sense of smell worked underwater, it would smell of catfish and silt and long afternoons of treading water in the sun with the bluegills.

V. Should I ever grow a tail, my sacrum will connect it to my spine and wiggle when I walk or wag. For now, it holds my pelvis in place, gives each side a wall to lean on, like beatniks against a lamppost.

VI. Paint your gods into tombs, into cathedral ceilings. Carve them into stone to marvel at humanity—anchored to cliff and the bottom of the sea. In modern times, they look like us but it hasn't always been that way.

VII. Waiting is a horrible preoccupation. When I've no choice, I write and memorize lists, make decisions, make solutions, make poetry. Poetry waits for me.

VIII. Androgynous like a sea snail, my language leaves gender neutral trails in mucus ink. Predators slurp it up and call it their own.

IX. I forgot about tomorrow and how it accused me of guessing wrong, of assuming my own identity, of collapsing in on itself before I look back at its selfish, eager skin.

X. Moss and glossy flecks of dirt surround my irises, earthy and lonely, like the way my mother stares at me with pride. Her eyes are like my eyes—they look green when bloodshot veins shoot in like roots.

XI. Some consequences shatter like a cold wine glass dropped in scalding water, while others drift and coat like dust on drapes or grime under a fingernail. The good ones lift character from within and resist gravity's pull.

XII. Anytime I ask for reassurance I only ask because I know the answer and don't like it. My mistakes dash away with a bow and a curtsy to leave me learning new steps.

XIII. My impetus swells behind my tonsils when I watch television all day on Sunday. It causes a rash under my tongue and makes my bones itch and my nerves jump. Only a tsunami of liquor squelches such nonsense.

XIV. Birthday after birthday after birthday after birthday after





**Trish Hopkinson** is a poet, blogger, and advocate for the literary arts. You can find her online at [SelfishPoet.com](http://SelfishPoet.com) and provisionally in Utah, where she runs the regional poetry group Rock Canyon Poets and folds poems to fill Poemball machines for Provo Poetry. Her poetry has been published in several lit mags and journals, including *Tinderbox*, *Glass Poetry Press*, and *The Penn Review*; her third chapbook *Footnote* was published by Lithic Press in 2017. Hopkinson will happily answer to labels such as atheist, feminist, and empty nester. She enjoys traveling, live music, wine-tasting, and craft beer.

“Trish Hopkinson’s fourth chapbook brims with evocative imagery. ‘My memories have taste buds...Every moment has a different palate and lingers on my teeth,’ Hopkinson writes. Her poignant and personal poems draw the reader into a vividly rendered childhood. Set in a sometimes nomadic home-life where doors are ‘thin enough for a fist’ and ‘the kitchen wears its linoleum like a polyester suit,’ uncertainty, danger, and death seem constantly close at hand. These emotionally rich poems reveal the life of a young woman coming into her own, from an unsettling birth to traumatic teen years. In *Almost Famous*, Hopkinson gifts us with poem after poem that boldly speaks its truth.”

— Nancy Chen Long, Author of *Light into Bodies*

“Trish Hopkinson is a consummate storyteller. Starting with her own precisely envisaged birth, and employing a brutal sort of honesty, *Almost Famous* brings family origin stories alive with vibrant and closely-observed imagery. Stepwise through years, with each poem immersed in its own moment, these narratives span the evolving viewpoint of a child, an adolescent, and finally, a grown woman, as she transports readers through ‘Birthday after birthday after birthday after birthday after.’ Hopkinson is a poet; with this book, she again proves to be a very fine one.”

— Risa Denenberg, Curator for The Poetry Cafe Online