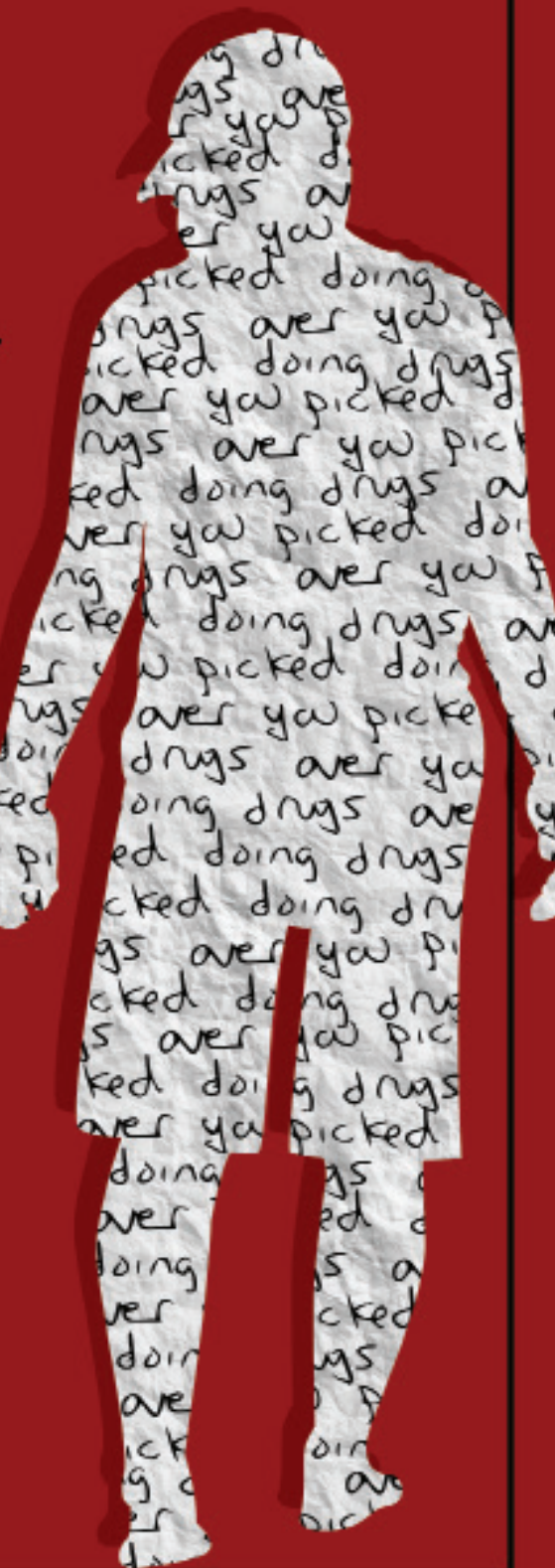


AFTER THE IMPACT

Sarena Pollock



“Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers
bailed, what does that tell you about God?”

— Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*

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snapshots of a father

*The chain of events began around 7:45am
when Pollock was involved in a dispute
with his ex-girlfriend with whom
he shares a daughter.¹*

I used to stay up looking
at a Polaroid of my parents,
one where she's laughing
and he's kissing her cheek,
the flash washing out the shadows,
and for a moment, I'd close my eyes
and pretend I was there with them.

*When the ex-girlfriend refused to let Pollock
take their daughter to school,
Pollock grabbed his ex-girlfriend
by the throat and threw her to the ground.*

"Does it hurt?" I'd ask
as I poked at his tattoos.
"Nah, not that bad. It feels like this!"
He jabbed me with his finger
making a zzzz sound, and I laughed
because it tickled and
kinda hurt at the same time.

¹Hessler Jr., Carl. "Man gets 8 years in jail for one-day crime spree." *The Mercury*, May 19, 2011.

*Pollock's mother heard the altercation
between Pollock and his ex-girlfriend
and saw him striking the woman.*

“Family comes before everything,”
he once told me, squeezing me tight.
“It’s you and me against the world.”

*Pollock's mother told police
she saw Pollock grab an object
from his pocket prior to threatening her,
and she believed this object was a knife.*

The sun rose high in the sky that morning,
birds chirping, wind rustling
and I smiled in bed, almost tasting
the aroma of autumn in my mouth.

*When the mother tried to intervene,
Pollock pushed her to the ground
and threatened to kill her
before fleeing the home.*

I ran towards the screams, turned
the corner of the kitchen entry and
there he was, back arched, arm raised
and with a final, “Fuck you, bitch!”
swung his fist across my mother’s face
as she dropped beneath him.

*Pollock allegedly approached
the neighbor who began to call 911
when he entered the house behind her.
Pollock was holding a pen and yelling
“I think I killed them! I killed them!”*

I have to help him. I can stop this.
I ran towards him, pulled his torso back
from my mother but she pulled me away,
my arms reaching for him—

*Pollock took the neighbor’s car keys, and
police say he was involved in a crash.
The car sustained disabling damage
and Pollock fled the scene on foot.*

“Dad,” I pleaded, locking eyes, but
they shone through me, wide and glassy.
“It’s me,” but before I could muster the words,
he turned and ran through the door
leaving my mother’s screams
echoing behind him.

*“Numerous victims, numerous crimes...
this guy deserves to go away for a long time.
It was a one-man crime spree.”*

“I don’t know what I’d do
if anything happened to you,”
he told me one day.
“I’d kill someone if
they ever tried to hurt you.”



invocations

After you left, I stopped praying. There was no need for clasped hands over a bedside or wishful begging for a miracle because neither would penetrate steel bars. Letters in the mail became a new form of confession. Worship only lasted as long as your phone calls. I wonder if that sickly feeling of abandonment had always been there, if your promises of *I'll never leave you* or *it's you and me against the world* were just your attempts at slowing down the inevitable. God had never felt so cold, so empty, and sometimes I'd look to the heavens and wonder if fate was just a lie to make the pain more bearable. Am I really missing you, or am I just missing the sense of familiarity? This was a new kind of faith, the one where strength in conviction is an act of survival, but on those days when I felt your absence weigh on me like a broken promise, I'd wonder if you even existed at all.

our song: acrostic

I know you
miss your dad, when I'm gone, but...
over and over I listen to our song,
crying into the bedsheets, trying to
keep your memory intact, but
I tried to keep you sheltered from it the void is still
there,
Never planned it to be this way a
gaping hole where a father should be
But it's just something we have no control over
I could've done something, the memory
replays in my head over and over *and that's what*
destiny is thinking of ways I could've ~~saved~~ stopped
you.



the chaos in stagnacy

After you left, I snuck into your bedroom just to remind myself you lived here, you breathed and slept here, and if I closed my eyes and imagined hard enough, I could pretend you were still there, crouched over your desk or restlessly sleeping in your bed like you always were. I'd tear through your clothing just to catch a whiff of your scent, and when I found your favorite black t-shirt, I pressed my face into the fabric and inhaled in hopes of breathing your life back into it. When we cleaned out your bedroom, I cried as I stuffed your shirts in garbage bags and threw them in the attic. As I watched them collect dust and mice-ridden holes, I realized even the dust particles managed to find peace in the chaos after your absence. Sometimes I'd sneak up there at night while everyone was sleeping and rifle through the bags of clothing, pulling your favorite shirt out again and again, but it smelled like decay and less of you every time I did. I hoped I'd find some secret message you left for me up there, some sign of fate from the universe this was all going according to plan, but there was none. There was only me, digging through garbage bags covered in mouse shit and wiping away tears as I watched you fade right before my eyes.

the inheritance of violence

sometimes/ I feel my blood/ pulsing/ thick and heavy/ through
my veins// fists tightening/ jaw clenching/ and I wonder/ if
this rage/ has been home/ to both of us// is the hole you left/
in the drywall back home/ or in Mom's right cheek/ the same as
the scars/ I drew on my arms?// maybe we're both/ just look-
ing for/ what's on the other side// maybe drawing blood/ and
cracking bones/ is our version of art// maybe we never learned/
how to heal ourselves properly/ so we break others instead//
tell me/ did your knuckles hurt/ after the impact?// I used to
punch/ the door in the hallway/ just to see/ what it felt like/ to
break/ to imagine the pain/ as both your fist/ and her face/ the
culmination/ of the moment's collision// sometimes/ I look/ at
the scar/ on her cheek/ and wonder/ if impact is hereditary/ if
memory is voluntary/ if violence is compulsion/ and I can't help/
but fear/ that her scar/ was my doing/ that I am the one/ who
could've both caused/ and prevented it/ if I only had the chance/

self-reflection: acrostic

they tell me I
look like you. I don't see it, but
I get the feeling you're staring back at me in the
mirror, clustered in the
kaleidoscope of freckles on my forehead, trying to
escape through the glass when I
focus on my complexion. Maybe you never left
after all. Maybe you were always
there, buried in the gaps of my teeth,
hidden in the cracks of my smile—
except you did leave, and you still expect
reconciliation when you come back. I used to
look through old photos of us every night before
I went to sleep, and I still
keep your shoes hidden in my closet, an
exit wound refusing to heal. I always feared you'd
disappear if I didn't hold tight enough, so I grasped
any shard of your presence I could find to recreate
the illusion of
unity. I tried piecing you back together, but
glass draws blood when picked up with bare hands.
Now, all I
have left of you is crooked teeth and a bad
taste in my mouth, as if you made home on the tip
of my tongue after
exile, an apology waiting to drip from your lips to
mine. I spit in the sink and tell our
reflection I refuse to be your rebirth.



lord's prayer

the sky turns topsy-turvy
as the cement lines in the brick pavement

keep twisting and turning, burning
into the soles of my feet, and I laugh
as they squiggle into circles.

Don't fuck with pills but you can't wave
fruit in front of me and tell me
I can't eat it, can you?
Look at me, Father.

Watch me down this bottle of
Xanax like candy, watch me sink
as I tread in uncharted territory.
Just smoke weed, it's better for you

but I learned from the best, didn't I?
You, the great ghost of fatherly existence.
Maybe Percocet is my last attempt at

swallowing you out of me, at flushing you
out of my bloodstream with opiates instead. I
remember when you told me

my friend died from a pill overdose because
I wondered why it wasn't you instead.
But God can't die, can he?
Look at me Father, the living embodiment
of your testimony, your missed opportunities.

Maybe I just wanted to lose myself
in the cacophony of warmth,
to find something still untainted,
a sin you didn't commit yet.

Have I exceeded your expectations yet?
Aren't you proud of me yet?

I'm here fading into the brick's mortar,
and you aren't even here to
stop me.

riptide: acrostic

It came as a distant memory, or maybe a
dream, that you returned as a shadow
out of the darkness that swept you away. Standing
near your tides of torrential floods, my hands
tried grasping for your waves, but I
felt the darkness seep
over my skin, contaminating at the touch,
razor-blade roses as your redemption
gift. You had nothing else to offer.
I remember us driving toward
vacant mountains, up a cliff edge, the destination an
embodiment of your promised land to us, but
you took your hands off the wheel, gave
our fate to the sky as sacrifice, and let
us dive over the cliff into water. Submerged and
yearning for air, I pierced through the surface,
exhaling as you drowned beneath me.

I always knew
there could only be one of us to survive.



token to reclamation

I am the torn-up photograph taped to your concrete wall, the one plastered right above the bed frame. I am your reminder of a childhood you missed out on, a glimpse of the father you could've been. *She's beautiful* you beam, trying to close the distance with corporeal compliments, but your cellmate just says *Your daughter is hot. Think I can have her number?* I am your comfort in daydreams, the precursor to *Once I get out of here and If only I hadn't fucked up that day*. You don't ask if the concrete is comfortable. You don't realize if you leave me taped up all day, there's no room to grow. You never stopped to think your pocket-size companion would get too heavy to pin up on a wall, your crumpled-up photograph waiting for exposure. When I ask for air, you just flatten me down with the palm of your hand, trying to fit me back into *I'm so sorry* and *I'll be out in no time*. You told me *I'll never leave you*, but you never gave me the choice of leaving. Now, I'm the one who's fading right before your eyes. You either replace the photograph or throw me away. I can no longer watch you shrivel away when I've already outgrown the room.

learning by example

I'd like to imagine a life
where you wake me up for school,
where I come to the kitchen and smile
as you cook eggs on the stove.
You kiss me on the cheek
and hand me a bagged lunch
before I get on the bus, and maybe
you'd be waiting in the parking lot
to pick me up after school.

But wishful thinking is just disillusionment in disguise.

I'd like to think you'd finally learn
how to be a father,
but the truth is, you didn't even know how
when you were here.
The only difference is,
you took away that chance to find out
when you left.

You once told me
maybe getting arrested was a good thing
as if your absence was self-sacrificial,
but maybe this was an attempt at fatherhood
through the only way you knew how.

Maybe prison was your way
of making sure I never follow in your footsteps.



if i were my own savior

I would've brought you to the empty parking lot where he taught you how to ride a bicycle and sat you down on the pavement. I'd place my hands on your freckled cheeks and tell you to remember your feet on the pedals, his hands guiding the back tire, how he promised never to let you go, but he did anyway. Today is like that day. Remember looking back and seeing his fists in the air, not after impact but after watching you ride away from him. Remember how he praised gravity for having guided you through the pavement's cracks. Focus on his smile, so wide and proud, focus on his hands not clenched in fists but clasped around your shoulders as he smiled down at you. Know that sometimes we have to let go in order to grow. Remember that you are allowed to love someone who promises they won't let you go, and you are allowed to trust them. He let you go that day and he let you go today, but that doesn't mean anyone else did. Just remember there was a time when he was here, when his hands spoke not of violence but of love, and he was right there behind you smiling wide as you moved on without him. He was always doomed to let you go, but it says nothing on your ability to keep growing. You are allowed to move on without him. You were always meant to move on without him.

the letter i'll never send

There will come a day when you are here,
when home is no longer a jail cell
but a memory you yearn to relive,
and you will show up at my door
asking for your second chance,
a final attempt at redemption,
but I have already made my home
in the dust you've left behind.

I do not yet have the heart to tell you
fatherhood is no longer a void
needing to be filled but
a fragment I no longer desire.
I grew life from the ashes, built
a sanctuary out of your ruins
and now,
there is no more room left for you.

I'd like to think there will come a time
when I am ready to open my arms to you,
a time where I no longer beg you to stay,
but I give you the choice of leaving

and this time, you will change your mind.
Maybe I'll be ready to receive you,
but when a god returns after exile,
he is never who he once was

and neither am I.

For now, the absence of my forgiveness
is not from malevolence but
an act of self-preservation.
I have become my own god
and have rebuilt my temple as one
which will never forsake me.

There will come a day when you are here
but I am here now.

notes

The left-side stanzas in “snapshots of a father” are excerpts from “Man gets 8 years in jail for one-day crime spree” published in *The Mercury*, Pottstown, PA, on May 19, 2011, by Carl Hessler Jr.

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about the author



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