

EVERYONE LEAVES SOMETHING IN CHILDHOOD AND NEVER WANTS IT BACK

When I was a child, people were content to admire a dollhouse and never wondered how it felt to slide a finger into the stove. On a field trip, each class member received one tiny box of raisins, and if we did not like them, we dumped the totality onto our lap. I never needed to explain this to you. We were of the same generation. Skipping work, we deliberately crossed paths in line for the museum's History of Petroleum ride, old plastic phones replaced by touchscreens. We crammed into a shell-shaped seat for one, back of my arm so hot it activated an animated prompt regarding plastics recycling. We wanted to laugh but were already breaking so many rules. The seat began to creep along its rail. Headlines that day were about a violent murder in the building across from where I lived. At sunset you could see a hallway the killer paced with his blade. I told you about sweep-lights, call of the search dogs. Early June windows open, alley pocked with blossoms. The ride ended in pitch-dark, tinny recording of the national anthem, then blackout curtain swept away. Small children screamed at a hologram shield. In the lounge across from the gift shop, you emptied two mini vodka bottles into a glass of apple cider. Television behind the bar panned across my building, which looked like a woman with knees drawn up to her chest.

EVERYONE PRESUMES THE TRUTH IS SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE

I had freckles, spoke three languages, knew how to boil a pot of water but not where to drain. My feet a size six, or maybe eight. I tried not to feel confined. Educated in an uneducated kind of way, parents who worked sealing objects into boxes, paced faded linoleum when not working. I was from around here, but also from another town entirely, one where people stood in front of doors and never knocked. Loved being solitary but surrounded by a faithful crew: everyone smelled like nutmeg and competed for best joke. We lounged on department store couches we couldn't afford even if we pooled family savings, slipped under showcase sheets on mock beds. Bus drivers slowed when they saw me, then accelerated away. I was the typical girl next door, yet complete stranger to every neighbor when afternoon light shifted behind a row of oaks. I spent my entire birthday gift card on glass beads, dumped them all into one plastic bag.

EVERYONE KNOWS A MIDWESTERN GIRL WHO MET A MAN IN PARIS

It might happen exactly like the novel: drop a glove on the floor of the Métro, the rest is epic. You arrive knowing how to order one sandwich and one drink. Travel brochures caution over passport theft, so every tourist wears a stiff mesh bag inside their shirt, except for you. Perhaps years ago you traveled to Cancun, wore a tiered, fringed pink dress on the dance floor, charged a bouquet of glass roses to your hotel room. But in Paris you compact into a shared half-bathtub, begin to dream in French on the top floor of a charter bus. Back home, the corn lags on, and people listen to Led Zeppelin like it's new. In AP French you learned men would hand you their card as an overture. Sometimes even the most ordinary American woman gains an inexplicable sheen. The concierge at Hôtel Excelsior keeps all keys and a roster of names behind the desk. Security might test your hands for explosives, but not cologne from collarbones or cigarette smoke that twists around a body like fever. Your discothèque scene might be nothing like one shown by a substitute teacher who failed to read the film's rating, or it might be an exact replica: strobe light leaking out onto the street. Black polyester skirt sparkling like leather in the doorway.

EVERYONE HAS AN ANTIQUE WOUND THAT BURNS LIKE NEW

At my heartbreak garage sale, the ugliest jewelry sold first. Infamous quail brooch. Tarnished charm bracelet that sighed as it rubbed against a sleeve. Great-grandmother's cameo, yellowed like a butter pat over decades. Then a milk crate packed with videotapes: all my juvenile ice skating falls and crashes captured in chronological order. Mrs. Helmuth's fuzzy shadow queuing "Mony Mony" on the sound system, my ambitious third grade skip onto the ice. Another winter's blue sequins, nude tights pilled at the knee, knitted leg warmers I forgot to tease off before notes of "Living After Midnight" rattled across the arena. Nobody knew it would end in blood, or how fast. The entire crate of videotapes sold for fifty bucks. A pang of regret stung like hot sand, then vanished. Nobody wanted to purchase the novelty jumper cables, but a man offered ten dollars for the lot of vegan cookbooks once treasured by my ex. The shoes sold before I could even add a tag: morose office heels, suede ankle boots with barely a scuff.

EVERYONE HAS A TWIN ON CAMPUS, BUT SOMETIMES YOU NEVER MEET

Assigned to dorms on opposite sides of the quad. One of you looms behind the pizza counter at the union, the other purchases an overpriced box of Sudafed from the mini mart. One matches her underwear to her wallet. The other empties her backpack into the trash. You might cross in front of East Engineering at similar times, but only one of you enters, the other stubbing out her Camel Light on the steps. When you both end up in study carrels on the sixth floor of the stacks, a librarian reprimands you for leaning against the window with your tongue on the glass. The double makes out with a stranger. Not caring about her rust-colored sweater hitting linoleum that hasn't been mopped in a decade. Abandoning the scholarly monograph she located only moments earlier. Your perpetual worries like a bracelet that can't be removed without scissors. Like a frill of skin around a purple fingernail. Against the odds, you both graduate on time, two halves of a bagel springing from an extra-hot toaster. Maybe years later, in another state, your twin will be ahead of you in line for the bathroom at Stunners. Or perhaps you will wait on her at the coffeehouse, but won't bother to look up from the foam.

EVERYONE BELIEVES THE NIGHT BELONGS TO SOMEONE ELSE

I watched my suitcase journey around the baggage carousel a third time. Held the tepid coffee of another traveler with a similar name. Shoved my neck pillow at a stranger who shoved it back. The escalator paused, resumed. Someone demanded salmon from the sandwich counter. It wasn't on the menu. My suitcase halted in the armpit of the carousel, leather tag flashing. I felt like a leather tag. I was ready to go home. With anyone. To open a car door, any car door, and tumble in. Contort my hair into an unrecognizable twist. Luggage carts collided near the rental car booth. One of those suspicious courtesy phones like espionage tools from an experimental film—one of those began to ring. Nobody set down a clipboard or sandwich to answer it. Terminal doors heaved like a model guillotine. I wished I had worn a leather trench coat long enough to climb inside. A second dress beneath my dress.

EVERYONE HAS A CHURCH THAT'S NOT A CHURCH

When White Hen Pantry burned down, corporate raised a replacement within five working days. Men in moon suits sucked the smoke from nearby trees. Cashiers ignored any reference to fire. But when the bowling alley collapsed into a hideous bladder of melted resin, colorful balls sighing with flames, the town turned out to cry and drink from paper bags. Maybe it was the Kiss pinball machine crashing to its knees. Rancid jumbo erasers in the claw machine roasting like smelt. The bedazzled smiley faces above trash cans? Vaporized upon contact with flame. A man rode past the site on his son's junior BMX bike. A few sets of lovers stroked each other's hair, tucked dollar bills into a lace ribbon knotted around what was left of the old hitching post. Beat reporters from rival local newspapers shook hands in front of a hastily erected cross. As soon as everyone got comfortable, rubble would throw up a spark or heave. Alongside the ruins, a security guard hummed "Midnight Rambler" loud enough for others to mumble along.

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Mary Biddinger's latest poetry collections are *Department of Elegy* and *Partial Genius: Prose Poems*, both with Black Lawrence Press. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Couplet Poetry*, *The Laurel Review*, and *Pithead Chapel*, and have been featured on *Poetry Daily* and *The Slowdown*. Biddinger's flash fiction has been published in *Always Crashing*, *DIAGRAM*, *Gone Lawn*, and *Southern Indiana Review*. She teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Akron and in the NEOMFA program, and serves as poetry and poetics editor for the University of Akron Press.