

Terese Svoboda

Headlands Work Sample

published in the *Literary Review*

## THE HAIGHT

It isn't as if we are close as sisters, only her sweater is. It still has her shape from so much of her in it before I took it. I left first, and I knew what cold could await me. That she might leave too was not my problem. She had a place with my mother, she painted my mother's nails, she stood behind her couch and pressed her fingers into the top of my mother's forehead for every headache. I made up so little of that life, I figured they wouldn't miss me, I figured her sweater was a souvenir of what I wouldn't miss.

Her underwear too. A baseball cap. I took enough of her things so I didn't look her up when I barefooted it through her town a year later, or so the town Mom said a boy with airbrush tattoos and teeth you could count would take her. I had had enough of those boys myself, let alone the sweater I had worn and worn, without looking her up and saying I'm sorry. It's the least you could do, said my mother, but I did less.

After another year passed and hunger wasn't as new as all the other new things, I happened again to visit her town, and Mom said Check, just check up on her, I haven't heard Boo from her for six months, but I didn't. I said I work now, I conference all day and at night I sleep hard. Which wasn't all true, I was stuffing computer specs into the trash instead of smiling cow-eyes at brochure-laden retailers wearing actual patent leather, then getting wasted at nights at concerts and at last, laid, by nobody business.

I was tired.

The next time I flew there I was up to my neck in green screens, a look-see so new most of them were cardboard. Mom didn't care to hear about my trials ordering these screens for all of my twenty-four clients. She said when she herself had flown there, the address was all wrong, it could

not be right, and she found out nothing.

She must have moved, I said. She knows where you live, I said.

You're the only one to find her, you look like her, she said.

I would recognize myself if I saw me? I said.

She went quiet.

I don't have her sweater with me, I laughed my best fake laugh. I need the sweater as a lure.

That Mom should still be bothering, after all my sister's silence and not mine, hurt me. Who says one sister and another makes two together?

When you consider I was searching for a livelihood and someone to keep it lively all those years after, I was busy. Mom kept busy knitting more stinking sweaters--not for me--and for Mom, time was just a stitch dropped, or another color yarn. Then music we heard before came back like we were always tuned in but turned down, but my sister didn't. No letters with postmarks stained from rain or backed-up sinks left any kind of trail, no phone calls rang, charges reversed, there were no phone calls at all, the silence continued like a skip at the end of an old 78, a silence even I had to notice.

Did anyone know where the tattoo king had come from, exactly where he might leave for? I asked. He ordered pizza to go and your sister went with it, said my mother. She ordered the pizza like it would bring her back, got old with that pizza and didn't eat it, made phone calls and aggravation and sweaters, and then died without a word from my sister.

I cut my hair short the way my sister wouldn't, I kept away from pools and mirrors of all kinds so I didn't think *Who else?* when I looked. But now crowds crowd around with glimpses of my sister I can't catch, or she's walking just a bit too far ahead. I decide I must go, I must find her, I must ask her what she thinks she is doing.

The Haight is the place where someone like her with a pizza eater of tattoos and few teeth would end up at then, that's what my mother always said about that town that all the buses led up to. Look at the map of then, and the cost of those buses, the kind of girl she surely turned into as soon

as she left us.

So I go right to that spot and I put up and look at what pictures there are. The man at Emergency pleads innocent, *nada*, no computers back then except for salary, and the police ask about tracks, did she have them? They didn't lead to us is all that I answer.

The sweater I stole still fits me.

I'm looking for myself, I tell people. We have the same features. People smile and shake their heads. A lot of you came here, they say, the street was full of you, in and on it, people slept on people, humped here under the dark lights someone was always making here, the bulbs out all over. You couldn't walk the street like you do now, from one end to the corner.

A dog that is hers or could be can't find the hydrant he is so old. I take a place over the street and I watch that dog every day walk past my window. If she still comes to sprawl, one jeaned-leg crossed over the other the way girls her age did then, then this is where to watch. Otherwise, it's just a block not too far from a park.

I sit at the window in her sweater and she has my life now, bangs, a girl/boy/girl, wearing an apron no woman still young should wear, with Mexican shoes in green leather, and a husband who worked so hard he died early and left money. Or maybe she's not me--she could be the woman next door who moved out before I could ask about her tattoo and the pizza she ordered, or she could sell cars at a 24-hour lot down the street during the hours I sleep.

What I find out, after all these years, is that anyone could be her--one of those with her head down, with no other reason than not to be seen, or with her head too far up, a big bird flying away with her brain.

Police and the places that follow her kind of problem still send me papers. See the papers? My mother had so many that the heat of their fire took the hair off my arms. They send me more papers whenever I ask about her so I'm sure there's someone with the same name doing something.

But not her.

Haight means hate, my sister getting even. It's just a sweater, I say. I didn't have it that long

before she left.

To find me?

To be me.

Surprise! They say memory is all you are after you die.

She's done me one better.

Terese Svoboda

Headlands Work Sample

Published in *New World Writing*

<http://newworldwriting.net/back/spring-2014/terese-svoboda/>

## WE ARE LEARNING HOW TO TALK

We are learning how to talk. Half-circle, group, now lined up with No-you-before-me at break time. The chairs could and do talk, unfolded as they are for everyone who comes late, screeching, metal on metal, the way the stories are volunteered, no apologies, and then there's this break, and we leave those chairs, all of us middle-aged parents, broken and sad and surprised to be hungry except for a sibling who is young, strawberry-cheeked but still spent, the way the glop on the break food that's pink is, the way the torn-apart sweet rolls taste, milk slopped beside coffee drip, coffee weeping to the floor.

Rage is more like it, we gape while others talk through their story and then we rage through ours, we all need suture. We have two minutes to tell everything to each other. It turns out to be a lot of time, rattling rattling with heartbreak, years are involved.

The man beside me, his white hair fleeing his head in some smart way, his folding chair protesting his return from the break, is heavy with feeling. I lean into my chair, my chair squeaks, and he thrusts himself forward in his with Hello. His son is himself wrought wrong, he has said, his son he cuts into sentences so precise in his two minutes that he must be a surgeon: where's the scalpel for this? Where's the entry? Every tool points to the self, is what he says now. His wife crouches at his flank in a chair that agrees, she lies in the wind of his report, the weather of it brisk and affecting, the words nodding, hers too.

His two minutes were the longest.

Each of us tried to up the ante: a son in a house for a year chained, finger by finger, to a computer, a daughter who wants nothing except what leads to a noose, another with rehab in series for his son, and buddy-buddy bondsmen, a parent who drives punched-out car windows, who has offspring of offspring who use. No one has bad children, children left out of the fridge and turned bad. Our children rage like us at themselves, and forget and then hurt us so big we parents shrink to fit. Also no one is rich after all the shrinks, or even before, with truant officers and then bail, so there's no envy, no monetary advantage.

The white-haired man stopped his two minutes with comments about lack of medical services and his shock thereof. The hospitals aren't Obama's by any means, but.

Everyone nodded then. I nodded. His wife beside him started leaking flat tears. Now she tips forward on her folding chair, almost on her haunches to say--

No one can hear her but we listen.

Again.

What? Her husband turns to her.

I'm afraid, she says too loud back. I ran to the bathroom to collect myself the way you suggested, she says to us, she bows to the leader who has stepped back into the room, strawberried, coffeed and only too well aware of our problems, his own two children exemplars. He is the one to whom the cries of the chairs are directed, and he's often silent.

The boy's too big, she says, looking at her husband, not the leader. The boy scares me.

The husband narrows his eyes.

You have to use your Delay, says the leader.

He was kicking in the door, she says.

I see, being closer, the dark under the cantaloupe foundation that is spread across her skin.

The man with the seriously suicidal daughter, desolation incarnate but with surprisingly chipper clothes, says Visualize otherwise.

When she swallows and goes on without words, just shaking, the leader says, you have to

see these children with bolts through their heads--

That's not real, that's not real, she answers. Not a monster.

The white-haired husband dares lay his hand on her shoulder.

I want to touch him the gesture is so touching but she flings it off, saying the son tried to kill her that day and that was why she fled to the bathroom and what is she supposed to do about that? He – and she jerks an elbow at the husband – says it's nothing, not to worry, he'll – what? – grow out of it?

She doesn't say all of that, some of that we insert, knowing what every sob signifies, amplifies, except for the kill part. She says out loud what we all fear, that instinct to kill the parent that runs along like a rat under the skin of all children, that instinct with the stink inside it that parents fear big, that these anomalies of the mind – are they really? – make it easier to see, in fact, with our children's better muscles and short spans of reason and their dark thoughts tangled by internal globs of newly hatched hormones, it is even easier to see how hard it is for them to resist this.

She has fallen off her chair, she is sobbing that hard.

The husband sits there.

The leader clamps both hands to her shoulders, the leader rocks her quiet until the husband says *restraining order* and *protective services* then she uprights herself with a spring that the leader isn't balanced for, he sprawls, she's on her feet and yelling at the husband, against all his white streaming probably doctor hair.

I turn to my husband who doesn't hear the chairs or the coffee dripping at break or the leader when he does talk, although he does admire the leader for his job that he doesn't volunteer for. My husband is here in placation. It only rhymes with vacation. My husband said not a word about our son during our two minutes, other than positive. I admire this stance but words here and in this situation are for truth and not magic. This is the gist of the woman's lashing back, the black and blue marks on her arms she shows by peeling her shirt sleeves all the way to her armpits. Whatever she

says about her son I remember nothing, I'm watching my husband's hands clench and ball.

She's a woman not wifed, not mothered, but troubled. Troubled is not the word. She has fallen to her knees and the husband is saying No the way a person faced with a bad piece of themselves they grew on their back where even they couldn't see it, might on discovery. Not you-are-crazy-and-a-liar but a No-I-don't-want-to-know.

In fifteen minutes we spew from the room onto the dream of an institutional lawn: Adirondack chairs positioned in front of geese. Only the trees are weeping.

See? I say shaking, and he says, at last, Yes.