

SISTER ZERO

Other Books By Nance Van Winckel

VISUAL POETRY

Book of No Ledge (Pleiades Press, 2016)

POETRY

The Many Beds of Martha Washington (The Pacific Northwest Poetry Series, Lynx House Press, 2021)

Our Foreigner (Beyond Baroque Books, 2017)

Pacific Walkers (University of Washington Press, 2013)

No Starling (University of Washington Press, 2007)

Beside Ourselves (Miami University Press, 2003)

After a Spell (Miami University Press, 1998)

A Measure of Heaven (Floating Bridge Press, 1996)

The Dirt (Miami University Press, 1996)

Bad Girl, With Hawk (University of Illinois Press, 1987)

The 24 Doors: Advent Calendar Poems (Bieler Press, 1985)

FICTION

Ever Yrs (Twisted Road Publications, 2014)

Boneland (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013)

Curtain Creek Farm (Persea Books, 2001)

Limited Lifetime Warranty (University of Missouri Press, 1997)

NANCE VAN WINCKEL

SISTER

ZERO

A MEMOIR

S L / . N T
B O O K S

SISTER ZERO

A Memoir

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For my nephew Cameron,
my mother Mary Lee,
and my sister Sarah.

And he said unto them, *Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.*

—**Jonah 1:12**

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Close Your Eyes

I.



AWAITING DEVELOPMENTS, AT THE 1964 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

My family waits for the Polaroid to dry. It takes its time. Finger by finger, my sister pulls off her gloves. The next Just War puts on its boots. Illness circling, and nobody materializing here before our eyes sees well enough to recognize a seeping sore.

Slowly we eventuate, then hand ourselves around. We've admired the backdrop of our planet as a silver fountain. But this planet's drenched! Sparkling! Beautifully contained!

Then "*whoops!*" shouts a worker whose auger has suddenly disappeared down a pipe and into a hole. "All she wrote," he says as my family stares down, then bends down, ears tipped to the tool's grinding on: its tightening, its turning.

I STEP OFF, LATE

Years later my sister was a nurse. Dying, the last thing she'd done was check her own pulse. Two fingers on her neck. The gumption to do that, or write this: *Just. Press. Harder.*

Which was how her hand stayed, hours later, even in the black bag zipped up on the gurney going out.

I catch the last train of the week. It slips into a tunnel and comes out on a lake ringed by birches. I step off, late, carrying black shoes. The animals are all racing to get behind me—deer, dogs, ponies—ears pressed back against their skulls.

No matter how fast I run, I doubt I can hurdle that fence, though a scrap from a girl's dress flaps there on a post. *So*, I keep thinking, so it is possible.

NECK OF THE WOODS

Driving through my sister's old neighborhood, I turn right, left, right, never quite sure which had been her house, or even her street.

Somewhere around here.

Here, where I live now and she lived then.

A gone-too-longness presses down with the weight of a squat grey house fringed by bishop's weed. Was *that* the one? Although filled with strangers, many houses seem familiar.

Then, when she was last alive, I had gone only once to her house. I'd brought a woven basket for her new baby, lined it, and sewn blue ribbons into it, adding at the last a few glittery glass beads to its rim. These my sister immediately cut loose, saying nothing, just shaking her head and rolling her eyes in my general direction.

I turn back. The weeds wink. And now, like then—how loudly her scissors snip the knots.

FROM WHATEVER HOUSE HAD BEEN MY SISTER'S

I took her baby home with me. In the silly basket I'd given her.

Because he was too much. Because her leg was in a cast and she couldn't very well carry him and herself up the steep stairway, now could she? Because he was crying right then, and so was she, and because she asked me to, and because it was one thing, one thing, one thing I could do for her.

What does he eat? What
does he drink? How
much and how often?

She handed me a bottle and a box of formula. I was told to *read* the directions. "Read the back." (Pointing.) "Read all of this right here."

I was told the baby would tell me when and how much. "And Christ, you better believe he'll tell you."

LANDERLUNDEN

Anywhere I go in America, my mother's been there too, or so she says. Lived there. Vacationed there. Even a city I make up: Landerlunden. "Oh yes, it was full of lilacs. You girls rode your bikes around a park there." And on she goes until slowly it slides into my view too. Was there a forest encircling it? "Yes, and those foxes and their tracks we followed out from town, us carrying those awful pistols, and what a racket in the trees when the hounds flushed the pretty red one. Honey, I want you to have the stole we made from him. Remember it? His mouth is a little clip that opens and closes like this: {here her hand becomes a snout, biting}."

HER LIFE

My sister didn't have a boyfriend but she'd picked someone out. A married man. A jerk, she'd said, but who cares.

The jerk had no idea what was coming. He'd demanded a paternity test, but the baby was indeed his, and the court made him pay.

And the baby. Soon he's crawling. He spits yellow goo on the green shag carpet, and my sister says, "I quit, I give up, uncle."

I watch her inhale then blow a perfect smoke ring the baby slips his fist through.

Her plan in her mind. I'd been told to just listen. She'd said she wanted to leave something of herself behind since how long did she really have anyway and a baby would bring joy to her pathetic life. Said she had it all figured out. Said I should shut up and support her and not argue with every friggin' thing she said. So what if it was a huge mistake? It was hers to make. Her life. And she could screw it up any way she wanted. Said she was tired and depressed and mentioned again that bit about the baby and the joy.

THE BABY

The baby got big and banged holes in the walls. Fist-sized. The baby got a heavy coat for Xmas and stormed out into a snowy night, telling us all to Get Real, to Go to Hell, to Eat Shit.

The baby pocketed my friends' children's ninjas. The baby got shipped around to A) a father, B) an aunt, C) a grandmother, & back to A, then to C, & B again, & so on.

The baby hated school and loved Jimi Hendrix. Loathed any vegetable, loved all drugs. The baby's teeth went bad; his eyes went bad & then went yellow. He robbed and lied and went to jail.

The baby was a dead man at 24. The large weight of his small urn surprised me. I couldn't look at it. The baby was in there. I'd been the one to name him. ("Ask *her*," my sister'd said to a nurse. "She's got a bazillion words.")

I stare at the baby's name in the stone and kick snow off the letters. It blows right back. My mother says she sort of remembers the baby. "Wasn't he quite fussy?" She squints into the wind, trying . . . trying. Says she's sure she'll remember the later him later.

FAULT VS. VAULT

My sister's eleven when she gets the first diagnosis: juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. My mother's lip quivers when she tells me. I'm 16. I'm her other problem. Since I'm often up to no good with boys and gin fizz and motorcycles, I have a probation officer. Plus, lately I'm failing P.E. because I cannot, will not, no way in hell, leap over the goddamn horse.

Listening to my mother's news, my first thought is, my fault. I drift back.

Back. Seeing in my mind's eye my seven-year-old self pushing my two-year-old sister on her trike. Faster, peddle fast! I push harder. Then she's crying. What a baby, I taunt her—so sure she's crying because I'm pushing too fast.

But no, she's crying because I've broken her leg. It's stuck in the trike's spokes.

Two dark months later, I step over the toddler who's on her butt, loudly dragging her bright white cast across the kitchen floor.

I'm sorry. Sorry, sorry. I'm crying. "It's not your fault, honey." My mother takes my hands. "Not yours."

Cry baby, why worry the sorry, worry the fault rising fast in the wondering loitering here, where who, anyway, will ever believe what the mother just said?