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Abby Higgs

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A Conversation With Brandon



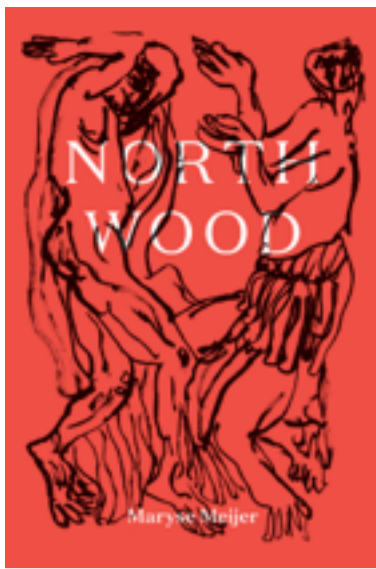
[\(/Abby%20Higgs\)](#) **Abby Higgs** ([/Abby%20Higgs](#))
Mar 22, 2016

I worried that my nephew considered it too late for reconnection.

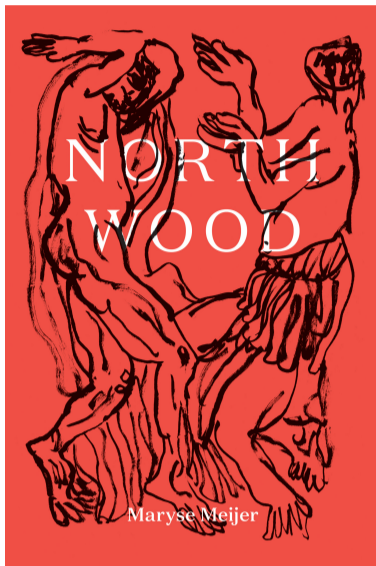
Brandon's pixelated face materialized on my laptop screen—frozen, then moving again, then frozen. My wifi connection was bad.

I was shocked by how much he now resembled my older brother—his uncle—who, like Brandon, has jagged cheekbones underneath which long shadows rest, stretched out, like earthworms under a rock.

They have the same eyes too, I thought. Deep-set, glistening, with a hint of paranoia. Brandon played with fronds of his brown hair that peeked out from beneath his beanie. *Handsome guy*, I thought. *My nephew is a handsome guy*.



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“Hello,” he said, uneasily, staring at the corner of his own monitor. “How are you?”

His deep voice stirred in me a nervous rush of guilt. It surged into my windpipe and stopped in my throat. Surely he’d sounded this grown up when we’d last spoken three years ago. In the years since, I’d seen a photo or two of him in my Facebook feed and noticed that his hair had changed, was steadily getting longer, and that his face had chiseled out. But for some reason I wasn’t prepared for what his twenty-year-old voice sounded like now.

I coughed. “I’m well,” I said. “Thanks.”

Brandon smiled and rested the back of his head against the white concrete wall behind him. His dorm room, I supposed, though it could just as easily have been a prison cell.

My thoughts briefly returned to my brother, who’d done hard time a few years back. I thought of him in his cell—three-quarters of his stout body, his squarish head atop which sat a shock of receding hair that blended his forehead into the horizon of his dirty-blond scalp—surrounded by white concrete walls as he sat hunched-over on his cot, writing the one letter I’d ever received from him: *Hey, Abby. Guess you know I’m in the clink...*

For about a year I’ve actually been trying to get into contact with my brother. He’s clean now and out of prison. I’m sober. We could probably have halfway memorable conversations these days. There’s still so much I want to learn about our family, our history, the pasts I was never a part of, but he won’t return my messages. Brandon will though.

And here he was, anxious to speak with me about music, which is what I’d promised the interview would be about. Nothing more. Just music.

*

I wasn’t sure where to start. Brandon and I had never grown close after I suddenly appeared in his life fifteen years ago. He’d been five at the time; I was twenty-one. We managed to bond for a little while over a shared love of *Spongebob Squarepants*. I’d pretend to be Patrick the Starfish, dropping my mouth open until a little spit spilled out from one corner. Brandon would imitate Spongebob’s rapid-fire laughter and point an index finger at me. But that was as far as we got to actually bonding.

Now I was a bit worried that Brandon considered my timing too late for reconnection. Especially after I'd disappeared completely from his life, moving across the country to eventually pursue an MFA in writing, exploiting my reunion story as fodder for that degree.

It's a story I've since told many, many times: Brandon's grandmother—my mom—gave me up at birth. She'd had heart trouble and two kids for whom she was already struggling to care, including my now long-lost brother. Before I was even close to arriving, she decided to relinquish me to the care of the welfare department.

She also had a feeling that I was going to be a sick baby. And she'd been right. I came into the world with a faulty heart too weak to properly pump blood and oxygen throughout my body: a dinky, blue, four-pound infant.

Twenty-some years later, when I came back into Mom's life—into my nephew, Brandon's, and my brother's, for the very first time thanks to an adoption reunion website I'd logged onto out of boredom—she told me all this.

“And I baked you a cake every year on your birthday,” she'd said, her deep-set hazel eyes glistening as she jutted out her sharp jaw to exhale cigarette smoke.

My brother used to eat that cake, unaware of who it was meant for. I imagined Brandon used to eat it too.

*

I'd had an easy life growing up compared to my brother's childhood and even Brandon's—both of whom had been raised by working-class parents. My biological mother had raised my brother and sister all on her own while holding a day job as a gas station attendant and, later, as a server at a pizza parlor. My older sister had raised Brandon and my niece alongside her husband who subcontracted as a carpet layer.

My adoptive parents were also working class, but in a more privileged kind of way—they were always following a preset plan made accomplishable because *their* parents had somehow been able to save enough money for their futures. My parents not only owned their own house, they'd built it. They had two cars. They had savings accounts, credit accounts, and pension plans. They took me to swimming lessons and soccer camps. They took me on vacation at least once a year. They made sure I learned an instrument at an early age. The list goes on. I wanted for nothing.

*

Brandon said he wanted to play guitar more often, but he doesn't think he's good enough to be in a band.

“I can write songs with the guitar, though,” he added. “Sometimes I stay up all night to write.”

This intrigued me, that he could write with his guitar without actually knowing how to play it well. I imagined Brandon playing the slick black electric guitar I'd bought and sent him several years ago, plucking at its strings as he searched for words to go with the notes. That guitar had been his Christmas present, or maybe it had been his birthday present; I couldn't remember which, and I was afraid to ask.

There was shame in that gift. I'd been drunk when I bought it for him, spending money I didn't even have. The next day I remembered: Oh, right—Brandon had a little sister: my niece, Brooke. So I sent her a last-minute present too, almost as an afterthought. Brandon got a new guitar; Brooke got a paperback book.

“You stay up all night to write music?” I asked. “Why?”

Brandon laughed. “There's something about being in that delirious state,” he said. “I write better that way.”

This worried me a moment. Our family has a history of *living* in that delirious state. I searched Brandon's face for signs that he was high, had recently been high, was drunk, or perhaps hungover.

I couldn't tell.

*

My mom wasn't supposed to know my sex when I was born. But as I exited her womb, some ignorant RN shouted, “Congrats, it's a girl!”

Mom told me this years ago, before she'd had the strokes that left her unable to carry a conversation. She'd told me just after we'd first met. We were sitting on her porch swing, smoking cigarettes.

“I wonder if that dumb nurse ever felt embarrassed by what she did,” Mom wondered aloud. “If she’d said something like ‘oopsy-daisy’ as she scooped you up and out of the room cryin’.”

We sat in silence as five-year-old Brandon pounced around on the sidewalk in front of us, a purple Popsicle in his hand. He’d stop to jab the Popsicle into the center of flowers. Then he’d suck off the residue. I thought it was really cool he did that.

Mom asked if I wanted a Popsicle too. I nodded.

“Go get your Aunt Abby a Popsicle, Brandon!” Mom hollered.

Little Brandon begrudgingly obliged, stomping back up the steps toward the front door. We exchanged glances as he passed by. He frowned. I smirked.

*

Brandon told me he’s still into emo music. He doesn’t like the label “emo” because of all the negative connotations that come with it—that fans of the genre are suicidal maniacs who cut themselves. “I’m not a fan of subgenres anyway,” Brandon said.

I thought it was really cool he said that.

Then the conversation lulled.

*

Years ago, after the initial shock of the family reunion wore off, my brother and I got used to sitting around his apartment, getting high on Sunday afternoons. He’d tell me wild, disconnected stories from his childhood: how he taught his pet parakeets to cock-fight to death; how he misbehaved so badly in grade school that Mom had to start riding the bus with him; how, at the age of eight, Mom busted him for smoking pot with an older cousin next door after he’d nabbed an entire box of Nutty Bars from the pantry and walked around, blank-faced, eating them.

These conversations would crescendo into maniacal fits of laughter—“There I was, tokin’ like a big boy at the age of eight!”— before lulling again, leaving the two of us catching our breath.

*

Conversations were hard.

That’s what my brother told me over the phone after Mom had another stroke eight years ago. This was before he went to prison, before he walked out of the local Wal-Mart with an unpaid-for television, higher than he’d ever been with our cousin.

“Yeah, she’ll just start talkin’,” he said, “and then she’ll stop in the middle of the sentence. Then she’ll get real quiet before talkin’ about somethin’ else all over again.”

*

One awkward pause in the conversation between Brandon and I lasted so long that I thought that my connection had just gone out for good. There he was on the screen, staring back at me, waiting for me to say something. I scrambled for a question.

“What’s your favorite song?”

Brandon cocked his head and thought a moment, chewing on his bottom lip. “Well,” he said, “I’m pretty sure ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper’ is the greatest song ever written.”

I laughed.

“No, I’m serious,” Brandon said. “Anybody can write a love song. But not just anybody can write a song about love after death. I mean, it’s a unique perspective on the whole thing. People think it’s a song about a suicide pact. But it’s not. Not to me, at least.”

I felt horrible for laughing.

Brandon continued. “Blue Oyster Cult took all these themes and pulled them together. Love. The unavailability of death and change. Suicide and murder, to some people.” He stopped to think again, rubbing the side of his head. “And they just put them into a relatable package. It’s a unique perspective. And a catchy tune.”

I stared at Brandon after he said this. He stared back at me. *Who is this kid?* I wondered. What life events precipitated to his belief that “Don’t Fear the Reaper” was the greatest song ever written? Not that there was anything wrong with that. I just wanted to know.

But all I could think to say in response was, “More cowbell.”

Brandon laughed, but narrowed his eyes. Those deep-set eyes, glistening, with a hint of paranoia.

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Abby Higgs (/Abby%20Higgs)

Abby Higgs is a graduate of the University of Baltimore's MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts program. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Marie Claire South Africa*, *The Guardian*, *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, *Freerange Nonfiction*, *VICE*, and *The Barely South Review*. More of her words can be found at [slowclapabby.com](http://www.slowclapabby.com) (<http://www.slowclapabby.com>).

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(/andrearuggirello) Andrea Ruggirello (/andrearuggirello)
Oct 23, 2017



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Adoption is one of those forks in the road where many of us try to glimpse through the trees to the other path, the other world.



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