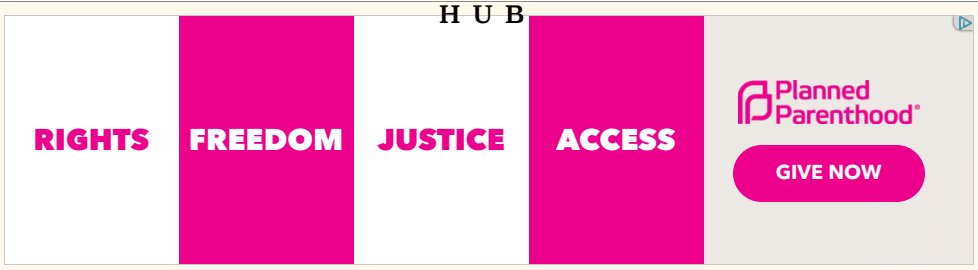

Betsy Bonner Tracks the Ghost of Her Sister's Life

Piecing Together the Life of the Late Atlantis Black

VIA TIN HOUSE

By Jeannie Vanasco — November 17, 2020

After reading an advance review copy of Betsy Bonner's debut memoir, *The Book of Atlantis Black*, in a single-sitting, I loaned it to my mom who also read it in a single-sitting and said, "That was one suspenseful book. Do you know her?" I did, sort of.

I had met Betsy once, in January of this year, at the American Booksellers Association's Winter Institute, when we thought nothing of leaning close to one another in a packed, loud Baltimore bar and shouting into one another's ears (mostly about how much we love the editor we share, Masie Cochran). That night, Betsy and I made plans to do an in-person event—though we didn't think to specify "in-person"—for her memoir's launch in August. The launch became a virtual event hosted by Chicago's Madison Street Books and opened with music by her older sister, Atlantis Black.

Atlantis went missing in 2008, and that June a dead body was found with Atlantis's IDs in a Tijuana hotel room; however, the police report said that the IDs didn't match the body, which would soon be cremated without any officials taking fingerprints or evaluating dental records.

At its core, *The Book of Atlantis Black* has a compelling story involving a DEA investigation, forged documents, and a cast of questionable acquaintances Atlantis met over the internet, but what maintained suspense for me was Betsy's formal experimentation—the way in which she fractures the narrative with dialogue transcribed from a videotaped interview that Atlantis gave three months before she disappeared.

Atlantis was someone who thrived off attention, who posted Facebook updates, such as, "Atlantis was finally able to masturbate today" and "Atlantis is filling out an application to the Peace Corps praying they'll do the background check before her trial is over," which is why I loved that the memoir began with Atlantis's words, "Can we turn the camera off? It's so cold." It establishes the tension of any memoir, regardless of how attention-seeking its subjects may be: what are the ethics of writing about someone else? And what happens when that someone self-mythologized a persona?

Betsy is also the author of a poetry collection, *Round Lake*, published in 2016. She is a former Director of the 92Y Unterberg Poetry Center, where she now teaches creative writing. We talked over Zoom, her in southwestern Vermont, and me in Baltimore, shortly before her book came out. What follows is a condensed version of that conversation.

–Jeannie Vanasco

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Jeannie Vanasco: What makes you the most nervous about being interviewed?

Betsy Bonner: I worry that there's some higher authority figure who actually knows something I don't about my own story. It's a combination of worrying about God—I was raised Roman Catholic—and my sense that I never had access to all of the information about my sister's disappearance and death. But my fear of being boring is greater than the risks of being wrong.

JV: The fear of being boring, though—that's a good fear for a writer to have. I was also raised Roman Catholic, and as a kid I distinctly remember telling myself before entering the confessional: keep it interesting.

Not that I'd lie to the priest. I'd think about how to frame the confession. A good exercise for a future memoirist—especially when the priest was hidden behind that latticed divider. I had to guess when his attention was waning.

BB: *How to Frame the Confession* would be a great title for a book about memoir-writing.

JV: That would be. One of the many things I love about your memoir is your focus on framing questions instead of prioritizing answers. While so many questions surround your sister's disappearance, the book isn't fundamentally about securing concrete answers as to whether or not she killed herself.

Through themes of art-making, mental illness, family, abuse, and grief, your memoir gets at the root of our genre, which is—and I realize how generic this sounds—what is identity and what is truth. Can you talk about the process of finding the right questions and figuring out how to frame them? To me, that's the hardest part of writing a memoir.

BB: I think it's impossible to know what happened to Atlantis—and what happened isn't the point. It must have been something horrible, and I don't know what. She'd threatened not just to run away, but to fake her death. Atlantis did everything to great extremes. But that said, I do believe she's dead.

JV: This reminds me: your memoir opens with a question, and it's Atlantis's: "Can we turn the camera off? It's so cold." You're quoting a videotaped interview she gave three months before she disappeared. Her dialogue resonates—partly because those two sentences are the only sentences on that page, and partly because they're mysterious together.

Ghost tracks are also what people leave behind after they're gone—these days, the ephemera might be digital, an email account or social media posts.

This opening is so poetic—because it balances just enough ambiguity and clarity: *What does a video camera have to do with the temperature?* And it builds suspense: *Why is Atlantis being videotaped? Who's interviewing her?* How did you decide on this opening? And which came first: the title or the opening? I ask because beginning with Atlantis's words makes a lot of sense given the title. What other titles had you considered?

BB: That opening came first, the title last. Originally, my book was called *Ghost Tracks*, which are the unlisted pieces of music you hear at the end of, say, a Nirvana album. We probably last heard them in the 1990s, and my sister's music was very much of that era. Ghost tracks were a thing that I remember on cassette tapes especially: if you were listening before drifting off to sleep, they'd wake you up.

Ghost tracks are also what people leave behind after they're gone—these days, the ephemera might be digital, an email account or social media posts. But the phrase ghost tracks, in my mind, also refers to a specific violent memory of my sister when she was Nancy, and we're sledding in our yard. She makes a track in the snow down the best part of the hill—the steepest and the most fun—and warns me not to touch it.

Then she lets me use the good sled, and I go ahead and mess up her track by having some fun myself. We have a fight and I hit her with the sled—I see blood on her forehead. I put this memory in the present tense, which I don't use elsewhere in the book, unless I'm writing about a film—usually a video of Atlantis—which conventionally goes in the present tense.

My editor, Masie, said that the title had to be bigger than *Ghost Tracks*. Again, it was very 1990s, and most of the book is set in the 2000s. I remember being on the phone with her and my agent, brainstorming a new title, and Masie said: "Atlantis Black is singular." We couldn't call it "Atlantis" because it would get mixed up in the Steiner literature. My sister was desperate for someone to write a book about her, which she herself referred to as "The Book." So together we came up with *The Book of Atlantis Black*.

In the end, it *is* Atlantis's book, too. So much of it is her voice. When I say it's her book, it's really the sisters hand-in-hand. I wouldn't have had this material if not for her, and she wouldn't have this book if not for me. When she says: "it's so cold," it works subliminally. It sounds like her speaking as a dead person. And turning off the camera—no more scrutiny, please—that's what the book's about to do.

I decided on the opening after having transcribed her words from that interview. Her voice was essential to my project, which I knew by the time I transcribed the interview was a memoir and not an investigative report. Those are her last words in the copy of the interview I have.

JV: The plot is so suspenseful and you're dealing with a lot of emotionally heavy material. But what deepens the suspense and emotions for me are not the overtly dramatic moments, but the softer moments from childhood and adolescence.

Like, you and your sister buying V.C. Andrews paperbacks at the local grocery store or you getting ready—being teenagers and you're watching her get ready and apply eyeliner, curl her hair, you're copying her and she gets mad, or you sharing a waterbed with her and her listening to Sheryl Crow while you're reading *Jane Eyre*. Like these very quiet, wonderful moments. And I think those are so necessary to building this out.

A lot of times people think with memoir you need all of these dramatic moments, and that that sort of stuff is filler. But you handled the material so well and I'm curious about when in the writing process you wrote those scenes, those softer memories, and then just how you went about the process of remembering. Which is hard, and it can be also emotionally painful to go through and think back. What was that like for you?

BB: The very beginning of writing this, as I see it now, was that I had my notebook open and imagined going into the hotel room where she died (or was said to have died). I wanted to be writing poetry, but I had to find out, as best I could, what the hell happened in Tijuana; and more importantly, why. And I couldn't bear the idea that my sister was gone and I would never hear from her again.

In 2010, I interviewed writer friends of mine, acquaintances, and people who had lost loved ones to suicide or had written a powerful work about a sibling. I really wanted to see: can I make anything out of this that's not therapy? Marie Howe, my teacher, Christa Parravani and Nick Flynn, fellow memoirists—they all sat for me. And then, I took a little break from it.

The softer moments didn't come until after I'd laid out the dirty facts. Early in the book, we have Atlantis when she was known as Nancy: at age 13, she cut her wrists and lay down in her waterbed. A couple of pages later is the soft scene with her and me in her waterbed. I think that the softer scene is effective only because the reader has the harsher information; I discovered this by arranging and rearranging the material.

> It moved from being more of a eulogy—my memories of my sister, whom I loved and for whom I was grieving—into something more interesting: her story.

We've all talked probably too much about chronological order. But I went ahead and tried a draft like that: put the mother stuff with the mother, put the childhood stuff in childhood. To be able to read it that way was helpful in the sense that I knew then where I actually wanted the pieces to go.

JV: I want to talk about your presence in the book up against Atlantis's personality. There are moments—for example, when you're going through Atlantis's will—and you're breaking up the

items and you're giving context. It's so necessary because otherwise, Atlantis would've taken over the book.

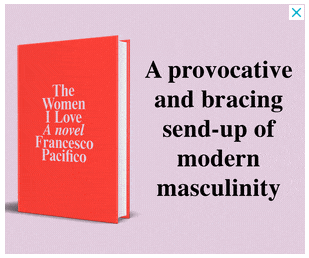
So, I just want to praise that, in terms of how you guide us through the material with your presence there.How did the book change as you were writing it?

BB: It moved from being more of a eulogy—my memories of my sister, whom I loved and for whom I was grieving—into something more interesting: her story. To write this, I tracked Atlantis. I focused on her and her life, particularly at its end, as I knew her. If I wandered into other autobiographical writing—which I often did—stray memories from childhood or of other people—I set them aside and returned to my sister.

JV: Your book embraces silence beautifully through form. Atlantis may be gone but she can still speak in a sense, thanks to her music and all of the archival footage and interviews she left behind.

At what point did you know that the interview excerpts with Gretchen, who becomes more of a presence in the narrative itself, would run throughout the book, contributing to its shape and texture? And how did you decide on their placement? The excerpts don't neatly or predictably divide each chapter from the next. Sometimes an excerpt will appear after one chapter. Sometimes it will appear after two or three. It works perfectly.

BB: I moved those interview pieces around until they appeared, like magic, to tell their own story alongside the longer text. It was important that they speak to what came before, or to what was about to appear in the book. Masie and my agent, Mary Krienke, were both helpful in thinking about the placement of Atlantis's words where they might have the strongest effect.



I discovered that her words—when she's thinking about the title of her next album—became alive when placed on either side of our mother's death. I needed to create some kind of silence—a "gasping for air," as Atlantis describes her formative musical experience while listening to PJ Harvey.

When my mother died, I thought my sister had sucked all the air out of the room. My mother's death was ineffable. I wanted to create on the page some kind of time travel, where Atlantis in her videotaped interview might have actually intuited what was to come. Of course this was impossible, but for the reader, two strands of time are intertwined. The story of my mother's death and my sister's interview are happening simultaneously, on two different tracks.

Tin House did a beautiful job highlighting this with the black pages, which evoke photography and cinema, art forms which have a lot to do with Atlantis, and which also have to do with my experience of her death—autopsy photos, and the films and video footage of her taken by people who came into her life near its end.

I encountered her moving image over and over, after I knew I'd never see *her* again. It was up to me to create an experience for the reader in which she is actually telling us something and revealing herself—my sister, who wanted to be seen and heard but never known.

JV: I'm reminded of the part of the book when Atlantis sent you the early pages of her untitled memoir. You replied with encouragement but also told her not to focus on making her sentences sound poetic: "In this case, the facts may be poetry enough." That seems to me your approach to this memoir. The prose is beautiful in its precision and spareness. You trust the material.

To me, the poetry is in all the layers of ambiguity. It's also in the artful arrangement of scenes and memories that resist chronology and instead follow this associative logic. You've published a book of poetry, and your MFA is in poetry. Can you talk about poetry's influence on your approach to this book? Is your creative process for writing poems very different from your creative process for writing memoir?

BB: Poetry influences me entirely. I discovered that I was writing memoir by looking at my own poetry notebooks and seeing that I was already doing it. I didn't set out to write a memoir. I have always kept a notebook for poetry-writing, and for recording dreams or making lists.

When I realized that I had some good material, I typed my handwritten notes and memories into a document. After that, I was able to compose on the computer. For some of the tougher stuff, I still went back to write prose by hand in a notebook—see how it looked the next day, if it was something I wanted to transcribe and pursue.

JV: Can you discuss what it was like to construct a character who, in a sense, came preconstructed? Atlantis, like most artists, crafted a persona. Nancy Bonner mythologized herself as Atlantis Black.

BB: Atlantis loved, more than anyone I've ever known, having secrets. So, there were always alter egos, secret relationships, secret crushes, different names. Even I don't know exactly how she became "Atlantis." I think she just called herself that, and she very likely forged her first name-change document to get the fake name on her license and passport.

> There are people who remember Nancy, and others who knew Atlantis; there's actually very little overlap.

Someone certainly forged a name-change document that my aunt found in my mother's house; I assumed that Atlantis did it herself, but I suppose it's possible that someone else did. I thought of it as both self-creation and self-annihilation. To be someone who *really* didn't exist.

JV: She seems like she would've been one of the hardest people to write about. Not just for you because you were so close with her, but because you're a writer trying to construct her character. You spoke about this a little already, but how did you manage all of the research you did on her? And how did you determine what to use in order to make her come alive on the page?

BB: I had her email password. And anyone who's experienced this—finding someone's cellphone texts that you weren't supposed to see—knows we don't go there on purpose, right? We give partners or loved ones their space. But people are multifaceted, and sometimes you can't help coming upon another side of someone.

So, the dark material that I encountered in the email, that was hard to process. And then I couldn't take all of it at face value. She had already told me that email wasn't safe. And it was clear she was constructing a narrative about her legal situation—this very bizarre prescription drug case, which is a red herring in a way.

It's not even important, right? What's important is that she felt threatened, that her life was being threatened by felony charges for something she didn't do. But the part of her that loved melodrama—you know, drama with song—made me want to write it this way.

JV: The way in which you constructed a narrative around her construction of her narrative—the word "brilliant" gets thrown around a lot, but I mean it when I say your book is brilliant. You show Atlantis as incredibly strong but you also show she's suffering. She's fully realized as a character—so much so that I never find myself tempted to reduce her behavior to just symptoms for a diagnosis. Yet at the same time I recognize that she has an illness. But then it's complicated because some of her claims—both small and large—indeed check out.

BB: Atlantis was never properly diagnosed. Certainly she had anxiety disorder and depression. She was taking different kinds of drugs, as I found out from a DEA report, that were supposedly for some sort of a seizure disorder. And I thought, and my family also thinks, that she exhibited behavior like what we had seen with my mother's bipolar disorder.

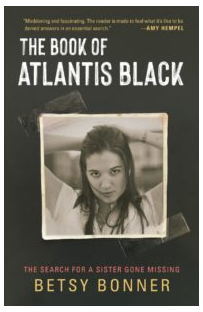
Anyway, the triggering event might have been when my sister was incarcerated for six days, and didn't have the anti-seizure medication, and supposedly she was given different meds at the detention center. You hear about this all the time. No matter what kinds of drugs people are taking, they're not going to get what they were taking when they're incarcerated. So, in her case, she had a grand mal seizure during her arraignment.

JV: Has Gretchen been in touch since the book came out?

BB: Since the book came out? No. No, though I've been amazed at the outpouring from people who loved Atlantis and who remembered my mother—who was reclusive—a lot of them in Pennsylvania and in New York, and some people in California. People from our childhood, someone who worked with Atlantis at Burger King when she was 15, a woman who gave my mother one of her cats: all have been connecting with me through messages on Facebook.

There are people who remember Nancy, and others who knew Atlantis; there's actually very little overlap. As for "Gretchen"—the one character in the book to whom I gave a pseudonym—I don't even know if she's still alive. Or if she is, I don't know that she has the attention span to read a book. Now that I think about it, there *was*someone on Atlantis's Facebook music page who was ranting and sending messages recently. Can you imagine? Someone ranting on Facebook!

My friend Tim Adams, who was Atlantis's guitarist and who's in charge of her archive, maintains that page, and he took the conversation elsewhere—to one of his own accounts. I don't have any interest in hearing that stuff. I mean, if anything interesting or important ever comes up, I'm sure I'll find out. But short of a credible confession by someone, we won't know what really happened to Atlantis. Maybe we will.



Betsy Bonner's book, The Book of Atlantis Black*, is available from Tin House.*

Jeannie Vanasco

Jeannie Vanasco is the author of the memoirs *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* (2019) and *The Glass Eye* (2017). Vanasco's writing has appeared in *The Believer, The New York Times,* the *Times Literary Supplement,* and elsewhere. Born and raised in Sandusky, Ohio, she now lives in Baltimore and is an assistant professor of English at Towson University.

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