

My Father in Water

*Also by Carol Guess*

*Poetry*

*Doll Studies: Forensics* Black Lawrence Press, forthcoming

*Love Is A Map I Must Not Set On Fire* VRZHU Press, 2009

*Tinderbox Lawn* Rose Metal Press, 2008

*Femme's Dictionary* Calyx Books, 2004

*Fiction*

*Darling Endangered* Brooklyn Arts Press, forthcoming

*Willful Machine* PS Publishing, forthcoming

*Homeschooling* PS Publishing, 2010

*Switch* Calyx Books, 1998

*Seeing Dell* Cleis Press, 1996

*Other*

*Gaslight* (memoir) Odd Girls Press, 2001

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*My Father in Water*

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2011 by  
Shearsman Books  
58 Velwell Road  
Exeter EX4 4LD

[www.shearsman.com](http://www.shearsman.com)

ISBN 978-1-84861-185-6

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To the memory of my father, Harry A. Guess





ONE



## Aperture

In a photograph taken when I was two, I'm sitting in the drawer of a filing cabinet playing with my toes. A dog-eared sticker on the front of the drawer reads *Radioactive* and I am, I glow. I glow blonde, white-blonde, sun-slashed, contented. I am a West Coast baby sitting in a filing cabinet marked *Radioactive*, waiting on a difficult father who scrawls numbers in chalk. He, in turn, is waiting on a difficult admiral to tell him whether some submarine will sink or swim.

Days, my father feeds cards into a computer the size of our home, cards he carries home for me to color. Nights, I do not have a sister and I do not dream of the sister I'll have. Oh, the years without her, the time when I am the center of two beautiful, terrible attention spans! My father vanishes, returns, vanishes again. He begins to make numbers mean important things.

I am two. I am almost a Christmas baby, almost a tax break. My sister is not yet born, not yet conceived. When she is born, she will take over, occupying space with miniature authority, a lazy ease passers-by will call *adorable*. I will be bald, still. Mistaken for a boy. I will bypass *adorable* and go straight to *clever*.

Later, when my mother feeds me fish, I will spit it out and stuff it in my sister's mouth.

But just then I am glowing, radioactive. My father is watching a sub fill with water. My mother is not ready for her father to die.

Most beautiful is my mother in photos with cats, her thick black eyeliner incautiously feline. I am the one with the Cheshire smile—at two, even.

My father frowns.

My sister is not yet born.

When they play Muzak at the naval base, the admiral sends out a call. A phone rings. Doors slam. A messenger appears out of nowhere, sprinting. Rips out the speaker above each door on the hall.

(Years later, during a fight over gays in the military: *Those submarines, my father says, are very small.*)

But I'm not yet gay. I love only my toes, and my difficult father, and my porcelain mother. At night my father vanishes, or goes stone, or plays Linda Ronstadt, The Beatles, and Elton John. *Rock me on the ramble, Rocket Man. Lucy in the wings with the walrus hammer.*

I love my parents and they love me. I wear pink flowery nightgowns, although my mother later erases this memory, finding it easier to remember her dyke daughter in PJs. I name our first cat after my favorite food: spaghetti with meatballs. And our second cat after my second favorite: spaghetti with meatballs. They become Meatballs One and Meatballs Two, then One and Two, then *was* and *were*.

By then I have a sister. And she is more beautiful than I, ahead of me already, and she thinks this of me, and so we learn to hate women.



But that's not the story I meant to tell. The story I meant to tell has no beginning and no end and runs underneath the story of my sister like a river. My father hovers in the aperture of a glistening window, suicide botched by his mother's ghost. Numbers from his slide rule pause on the sill, fallen by chance into a brilliant formula.

My mother walks to school in a flour sack printed with pansies, her German accent smeared with eggs. Her last name means *graveyard circled with trees*. Verbs dawdle between the gaps in her teeth.

My parents, speaking German in a German café, capitalizing every noun carefully, making new words from old, homesick at last. My parents in Heidelberg, only not yet my parents. Harold Adelbert, meet Geraldine Ann. She's shy, her hands covering uneven teeth. He's an engineer geek: highwaters, pocket protector. Both speak fluently but neither fools the other. American-born, they'll return to different

worlds. After Heidelberg their courtship is epistolary, a literary romance I'll never read. Geraldine's father Stanley burns their love letters. *Ravish*. Oh mother! *Your slender hands*.

And she becomes a navy wife.

And he thinks he's finally escaped the South.

And she hopes someday to become middle class.

And he becomes acquainted with great tenderness.

During Vietnam he works at Naval Reactors among a tight-knit, top-secret gaggle of math majors. He helps design nuclear submarines, the first of many dramatic careers. So much to discover, so many numbers to love! His brief forays away from theory end in dismay as he encounters humans.

But numbers and power, the great nuclear mystery. I am born to a genius no one can take anywhere, who scrawls formulas on tablecloths in fancy restaurants and doesn't look either way when crossing the street. Occasionally he forgets his address and thumbs through the phone book to call home and ask.

My mother manages him; this becomes her career. Over the years she learns piles of secrets. Discoveries yield to her as she tends to their maker. She arranges father, business, and us.

Carol Ann, meet Alison Pauline.

In pictures I hate her. They've obviously made me hold her; I'm posed like a doll. My sister's face lolls up at me, happy. She's always drooling; my eyes look crazed.

And I think she's more beautiful.

And she thinks I'm ahead.

And I long for the *friend* my mother promised.

And she's shamed by my difference: *freak, slut, queer*.

No one should have a sibling. What an impossible relation, an arranged marriage, maybe worse. This person, your blood, no one you've chosen.

And we want to love each other.

And we try until it turns to rage.

Little Trimesters, little sisters. Two girls, unlucky, stars burning too brightly. Strange family, with a hole at its center. I am trying to make sense of my distant father. *Very good, Carol*.

*Carol, be still.* At school I'm already becoming the sea.

Shy girl, to whom numbers mean nothing. Holding the clock to my forehead, my tongue. Unable to match minutes to hours. Dreaming already, little poems about ghosts.

My sister flits past me, grown-up already. Boys like a beacon in her version of night. I slide through the holes in my parents' stories, past the blue before speech to which I try to return.