

Aquitaine and Nevada, Canaan and Paris

ANDREA STRANE

The Great Basin is one of the least visited national parks in the system. It is best known for its bristlecone pines, trees withered and warped from four thousand years' exposure on their mountainside perch. As a child, I hiked a winding path to look at them up close. Fresh from Sunday school, I was stunned as I ran my hands along the trunk of something that had seen nearly two millennia before the birth of Jesus himself.

The only fact is the tree itself; the landscape shifts around it, dusty and golden. People's lives are drowned in the vista, their lives passing in seconds.

One night, after it had cooled off, we went to look at the homestead where my mother's father had been raised. The passage of time had had its way with that small building also, forcing the wood to buckle, the roof to collapse. I couldn't imagine it freshly painted, bustling with activity. My mother's father had died before I was born, leaving me without questions to ask. My mother, for her part, volunteered few stories. But there was much to discover, much to know.

I never saw my mother sorrowing during the days we spent on her uncle's nearby ranch, but then I was too young to recognize the signs. Nor did I ever think to ask about the story behind my grandfather's name, Darwin. Perhaps my great-grandparents, having forsaken the solidarity of a religious community, developed a newfound appreciation for the principles of evolutionary science. Or perhaps they named him out of respect and fear for the nature that was always encroaching there, the biological threat evidenced by my great-uncle's tall tales of shooting a mountain lion as it coiled around the frame of the house he had been building.

Its stuffed head hung over the mantle where in other homes would hang a family portrait.

The Bible tells its stories by virtue of inclusion. The writers included only the details essential to the stories they were intent on telling, the morals they felt obligated to share; all else fell to the wayside, slanting the perspective in one direction and then another. Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26) and we know nothing of what she sought to glimpse one more time. Lot himself offers his two virgin daughters for the pleasure of a lascivious mob that surrounds his house (Genesis 19:8). Nothing is made of this incident: were Lot's daughters trembling with fear, or did they lift their chins as their father spoke? Was Lot himself resigned to ceding his daughters, or did he do so out of desperation? Cain's wife—to say nothing of the entire people to whom she belongs—is conjured into existence when we are told, "Cain lay with his wife" (Genesis 4:17).

Truth echoes in the retellings, in the translations, in the authorings of their tales. They were written in a sentence or a book, and written out. They were conglomerations of facts, some important, some not; the writers reflected their ideas in the facts they chose.

These, then, are the facts: my parents met beside a baggage claim and shared a taxi to the hotel where they were both staying. My father called his mother that night and told her that he had just met the woman he would marry.

My great-grandparents were both raised in polygamous families in the beginning of the 20th century, each the first child of the first wife.

My grandfather Darwin flew reconnaissance missions out of a Thai base, spying on Soviet encroachments along the Pacific Rim.

It took me until the age of nineteen to realize how many of the surfaces in an art museum are reflective. Marble statues, glass cases, metallic vases. As I gaze at a bronze box-mirror in the antiquities wing, my own face is superimposed over the cover. If you peeled the layers away, how many faces have been reflected in the glass over it, the now-corroded cover, the mirror itself?

The ghost of Maxine Hong Kingston's aunt curls around the desk at which she sits to write, half-begging her to continue, and half to stop. Kingston never knew her aunt; her obsession stems from her refusal to believe that her aunt was merely a shadow of a person, sheathed in the brutally moralistic tale her mother tells. "She haunts me," Kingston writes in her essay "No-Name Woman," "her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her" (664).

Fifteen, in Paris on my first European sojourn.

History, in Paris, is not the past. It announces itself in unexpected places: the plaque on a wall announcing that a soldier was felled here, the famous expatriate café there, the buildings themselves, adherents to a dated six-story code.

The city is full of landmarks, each jostling for the most space in the guidebook, the highest visitor count. It embodies every cliché ever spoken about it, and yet makes them fresh again in my mouth. Now the Eiffel Tower, now Notre-Dame, now the Louvre.

The chattering tourists in front of the *Mona Lisa* jostle too, for the best photograph. The sharp exhalations of light from their flashbulbs, reflected in the Plexiglass bulwark surrounding the painting, are the only thing I can see as I stand on tiptoe at the back of the crowd. Even upon approach, I see too much of myself, myself being followed by those infamous eyes.

The sheer number of works in the Louvre is astonishing. Yet the tourists flock to this enigmatic smile. There are no fresh words for the *Mona Lisa*; hers is possibly the most famous, the most easily recognizable face in the world. Her gaze chases tourists around the room, toying with us: it is evident that she relishes her anonymity.

She hides behind the title of a painting, an anomaly: most of history has been reduced to names and dates, while for her we have none. For the *Mona Lisa* is but a coquettish smile paired with a searching regard. How much of history is left to chance? If it had not been DaVinci who painted her, she might have lingered in some obscure gallery, a forgotten muse.

These are also the facts: When my parents met, my mother's father was dying. Marriage was probably not the first thing on my mother's mind.

Polygamy was outlawed in 1862. The official doctrine of the Church of Latter-Day Saints forbade it by 1890.

In the 1970s, my grandfather did not fly reconnaissance missions for the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War. This is not documented.

Everything in the West is bigger, the mountains scraping the sky, the immense deserts reaching unblemished to either horizon. In comparison, my great-grandparents' homestead, its back broken from years in the harsh Nevada climate, seems as if it has crumpled and given in to the grandeur of the landscape. Here, I begin. I do not think this then, but I know it now. Once it was a structure, a hollow that gave birth to my grandfather, and my mother, and me. I also begin in Detroit, and in Nebraska. I begin in England, I

begin in Massachusetts, I begin in the Lakota territory, I begin in Aquitaine. Time spreads farther and farther the more I think about it, slowly wrapping itself around the globe. All of these things are true, all of these where-I-begins, yet each is separate. Time is too vast for there to be one truth.

Is it a coincidence that the Bible contains lists of “begats,” a word with so much similarity to beginning? Here he began, and here he ended, after a hundred years, after sons and daughters. And then they, in turn, begin. One name after another, and nothing more is said. Their truth is not simply to begin and end. They would argue that there was more to themselves than beginnings and endings, but such is the fate of those from whom nations are not made.

I too have family trees, spitting forth Xeroxed pages of names and places, dates of birth and dates of death. They are wide-margined, bare except for a handful of facts. Counties. Middle names. Certainly these are the facts, but they themselves tell no story. There were illicit love affairs, lives lost to war and plague, financial straits, famine, and everything else that can befall the inhabitants of a fledgling nation in the span of four centuries.

Can you immortalize yourself? It's impossible to know when you fall in love, when you give birth to a baby, when you try to make a name for yourself, whether you will be a centerpiece or a footnote in history, whether you will be lost to the centuries or captured on the pages of textbooks. If I were descended from George Washington or Henry VIII, every minute detail of my ancestors' lives would have been committed to paper long ago.

My ancestors are not those from whom nations were made. Yet I still exist. Who says they aren't immortal?

Even a fact is negligible. My boyfriend's grandmother does not know the date or place of her birth. Yet she still exists.

The fact, then, is that what people say may or may not be the case. And even if it is the case, it is only their truth, a small part of the whole truth.

One cannot visit the Louvre and ignore the other palace that looms over Paris, over French history. The opulence of Versailles is a monument to largesse, to blind ignorance, a monument to the reasons for revolution.

A river of tourists flows through its hallways and salons, myself among them. Their eyes widen at the gilded trim, the frescoes on the ceilings, the glitter that dusts every object in sight. Tour guides are lavish with explicit detail about the royalty who once dwelled here. “The royalty was accompanied everywhere,” they tell us. “Even to the bathroom. The whole court

watched when Marie Antoinette gave birth.” By now, their lives have been mined for the most interesting details, condensed into a paragraph in a history textbook, or a way of relating now-deceased people to the walls that once surrounded them.

The most infamous, most celebrated room in Versailles is called the Hall of Mirrors. As the guides lead the tourists in, our voices swell as a whole in astonishment at the setting, laced with gold and gilt. Irony has a way of blossoming even in places where everything is laid out in front of us, factual: those who lived here were secure in their place in history. Yet even in a palace with a hall of mirrors, they saw only themselves, and not history coming up to greet them.

In the Great Basin, the dust is not gold, but red. My family has enough of a saga rooted in this land to fill volumes. My mother, my aunt, my grandmother: they tell and retell stories, each time giving birth to a new part of me, one that was already there yet I had never before known. This time, I am the only tourist. Each of them finds different facts to tell me, as if their version is a photograph taken from a different angle. So are they facts? Their stories bounce off one another, lookalikes but not mirror images.

We imprint our secrets, make them ours. Slowly we wash them in our own thoughts, let details erode with time or with shame. In secrecy, they are given weight they might not otherwise have had. They were once someone else’s facts, but now they are our own truth.

Her mother gave birth to her, and yet Maxine Hong Kingston finds that the truth about her aunt is stained by her mother’s tongue, her idea of morality. Instead of using that limited knowledge as the only truth, she lavishes detail on a ghost, filling in the spaces so it seems to her as if there were none, losing herself in a labyrinth of what-ifs and might-have-beens, breathing life into a woman so that she no longer ends in a lesson.

Even when secrets are revealed, they retain a fragment of their mystery: why were they kept secrets? We pour secrets into books and drink them up in the reading; we play can-you-top-this, giving voice to things that had none. Why does my mother choose to tell me what she tells me when she tells me? Perhaps she sees herself in me, at the age of seventeen, and wants to remind her younger self of what once happened. If she keeps her secrets to herself, if she does not tell me, then she erodes with time, lives on only in silent things.

In my childhood home, we are far from the harsh Nevada climate, safely cloistered. My mother rations out information about her family over the

years. When I am in elementary school, I make the mistake of revealing how little I know about my family. The other children look at me strangely, comforted in the fact that their grandparents live only twenty minutes away. She talks about these things in a low voice with other adults, conferring importance on them.

These things are precarious. Military men are forbidden to reveal their missions because wrongly given information could be damaging - as they used to say, "loose lips sink ships." We have learned instead to speculate endlessly over some things—about flights over Thailand, about La Joconde—and not at all about others.

My tongue would have tripped over polygamy, I would have fretted over mountain lions and landscapes more dramatic than the ones I was used to. I would have said too much and been accosted by sharp glances.

As a child, I once went to a carnival, paid to go to a fun house with a hall of mirrors. Once I had gotten myself lost, the only thing I could see was my own image surrounding me. Each movement I made taunted me; I could see only my attempts to grope my way out.

Had my parents stepped behind me, they would have seen me, lost in a fun house. But they would have also seen me, fumbling, as I would in later years. They would have seen my grandfather's wedding-day smile and my grandmother's curls, my mother's easy laugh and my father's luck. My grandparents would see flickers of my great-grandfather's red hair, my great-grandmother's anxiety. I am eight years old, but in me, they live to be a hundred. I belong to more time than I have yet managed to take up.

Time, in my mind, seems as if it should have taken up more time, because of the way its stories reflect off one another, as with the hall of mirrors, reflecting infinite but varied copies of itself. When the years a bristlecone has lived are halved, Christianity had barely begun to exist, yet it is improbable that a living thing can span this time because it stretches on so long. In the rings of the tree, you can watch the repetition of history: polygamy exists, polygamy is outlawed; polygamy is revived, polygamy is outlawed.

A fear of repetition is what makes Maxine Hong Kingston's mother tell the tale of her aunt, a fable. Along the same lines, silence can be preventative, especially when we lend ourselves to suggestibility. There will be chances for us to repeat history, chances which make our families' breath catch when they look at us.

Yet if we know these things, they echo in us, they cling to us. I think of my family's tendency toward polygamy, of the wars my ancestors fought, of our glamour and our tragedies, and a novel's worth of thoughts spring to my fingertips. I can't avoid them, and they can't avoid me.

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