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# Life Writing Prize

LORELEI GOULDING



LIFE WRITING PRIZE WINNER 2020

# **Birdie**

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In the summer of 1979 we move to a bigger home on a leafy street on the North Shore of Long Island. Audubon Woods – the name of our development – is quiet, submerged in a canopy of green, the houses set far back from the road. When we pull into the driveway on a sweltering July morning, our stained mattresses tied to the roof of our beat-up station wagon with the illegal license plates, it doesn't feel as if we are in the right place.

On the North Shore I learn that the families have boats in the harbour and wall-to-wall carpeting in basement playrooms. The kids wear designer jeans and brand name sneakers, which are new to me. The fathers commute to New York City on the fast train in their suits and ties while the mothers – tanned, unworking – hover in kitchens making lunches or stand poolside, presiding over the running and jumping and splashing. It is not the first time I am reminded of how different my own parents are; my father, diseased with emphysema and malice, works sporadically and sits in his underpants for long periods during the day, barking orders at us for coffee or a clean ashtray. My mother works two jobs – the swing shift at the paper factory and overnights at Dunkin Donuts on the weekends – and is only seen briefly at odd times, if at all. She sleeps a lot.

The days are long that summer. My favourite sister Melissa, who calls me Birdie, is in college in California and can't drive me to the beach, or pull me close to kiss the top of my head when no one is looking. So instead I check the mailbox every day, waiting for her letters, and spend time reading in my room. There aren't many kids around – they don't play stickball in the street, or catch fireflies in jars in the evenings when it is light until well after dinner. There aren't neighbourhood-wide games of

Capture the Flag or Hide and Go Seek, like there used to be at our old house. Here, the yards are too vast and the houses are too spread out, and it could be a long time before anyone might find you.

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September takes its time to arrive. I am starting a new school and am anxious on the first morning, when it comes. I wear my best outfit, a light blue skirt with a ruffled hem around the bottom, and a matching striped shirt that comes with a clip-on bow tie. I also have long white knee socks and patent leather Mary Janes. The entire outfit was a birthday present from Melissa; brand new clothes, crisp with potential, that weren't hand me downs for once.

But my birthday was six months ago, and this morning as I get dressed I struggle to zip the skirt. The top is tight across my chest, fabric pulling in opposite directions between the buttons so the shirt won't lie flat, exposing skin. When I pull the socks on, they refuse to go all the way up to my knees. I cram my meaty feet into my shoes and fasten the loosest buckle, ignoring my toes, bulging visibly against the fake, shiny leather.

I enter the kitchen, grab the lunch I made for myself the night before. My mother is awake, in the den, entombed in a plume of smoke in her usual spot on the couch. The embers from her cigarette glow brighter as she inhales, and then dim again. Her eyes flicker from the television in my general direction as she waves me off with a hand, distracted: *have a good day*.

The bus stop is at the end of our lane, and as I follow the road around to the left, I can see the yellow school bus parked on a slight verge next to the woods. There is no one else around. When I approach the door and see my reflection in the window, my bow tie is already crooked.

An older man sits, leaning forward, in the driver's seat. His face is saggy, a Basset Hound's face, several chins drape down in folds from his jaw. A newspaper is spread open in front of him, and his belly presses into the bottom of the steering wheel. A cup of coffee, still steaming, rests in

his right hand. He wears a blue jacket, and a cap with CAT emblazoned across the front, in yellow letters. I tap the glass.

“Oh,” he turns and looks, places his cup on the dashboard gingerly. He wraps his fingers around the door release and pulls toward him, the two glass panelled doors swivel open, the mouth of a cavern, *open sesame*.

“Come in, come in. Didn’t see you there,” he says, his eyebrows raised. “Come on in.”

I climb the stairs, and sit in the third row from the front, on the opposite side to him. I watch his thick fingers fold up the newspaper. He turns to speak.

“You’re the new girl. What’s your name?”

I say it quietly.

“Well hi. I’m Al,” and he smiles as I nod and look downward.

“Well, you’re the only one at this stop,” he says, and I nod again, slightly swinging my feet beneath me. “It’s the first stop, so I’ll be sitting here when you get here every morning.”

Al checks his watch and flashes a toothy lopsided smile. “Time to go,” and he turns in his seat and starts the ignition. The engine shudders and rumbles, and we trundle up the hill, just the two of us on board. I look at the back of his neck, which is sunburned red, and lined with deep white crevasses. There are several mirrors positioned around the perimeter of the windshield: to observe the kids that sit in the back, to help see around the long sides of the bus, and an additional rear-view mirror to see traffic behind him. I can see his face from several angles, and my eyes roam from mirror to mirror, taking him in. When I eventually meet his gaze as I glance around, I look away quickly. He can see me from several angles too.

At school, I enter room 201 and sit at a desk at the back, while the girls mill around in the centre of the class between the seats, in groups of twos and threes. The boys – noisy, fluid, always in motion – are restless around the edges of the classroom. When my teacher strides in, commanding and tall, a blanket of quiet descends. She sets her things on her desk as everyone takes a seat.

We are to call her Ms., which is pronounced Mizz. Not Miss, she explains, and never Mrs. as she is not married, but Ms., which seems to live somewhere between the two. She is unlike any teacher I have had before; she does not tolerate any nonsense, even on the very first day, and wastes no time in making short work of one of the mouthier boys, forcing him to stand in a corner at the front of the room, an example to us all. My teachers have been kind and full of affection up until now, but Ms. remains unsmiling, and I am a little afraid of her.

It turns out I am not the smartest kid in the class as I was in the last school. I'm still put in the top groups for reading and math, but when it is my turn to read aloud, I stumble over the words, mispronouncing many, even those I know. I have never seen long division and I don't finish the entire sheet. But I know what an antonym is when I'm called on and my penmanship is neat. We write a paragraph about what we did over the summer, and I am relieved I don't have to read mine aloud, after several kids mention pool parties on the Fourth of July or vacations with their parents. After we'd moved here, I had gone to the woods most days, by myself, to read and look at the leaves in the sun, dappled and suffused with light. There hadn't been so many trees in our last neighbourhood.

I peer around the room. The girls are freckled, blonde or brown haired, sun-kissed and clean. They wear overalls or jeans, and their shirts are emblazoned with appliqued rainbows or iron-on unicorns, or both. Their sneakers are Nikes, a single white swoosh – classic, they would be called now – fresh out of the box. A few wear shoes with a slightly stacked heel and they are widely envied. Many have French braids, neatly woven, or combed hair held in place with matching barrettes – the shiny metal kind, not plastic. Plastic is for much younger sisters, grades and classrooms further down the school. No one wears a party skirt, or patent leather white Mary Janes, or a bow tie. I am not spoken to.

At lunch, our class sits together at a single long table. I sit in the middle with the others who have brought their lunch from home, hoping

someone will be friendly, but the girls on either side of me face away, and I am left with their backs – square, impenetrable, forbidding. I open my crumpled brown paper bag furtively, but I can see the girls across from me are watching and signalling the others with their widened eyes or with their feet under the table. I take out my sandwich, wrapped in cling film, the only item ever in my lunch bag. The jam has bled through the white bread, darkening the centre, looking like the bloodied towels I see in my older sister's bathroom garbage every month. The girls across from me have the right kind of lunch; their shiny metal boxes are open, a thermos of milk or soup is plopped upright, a bag of grapes or peeled carrots, sandwiches prepared by mothers who cut the crusts off. They are smirking, each to another, along the table.

I manage half of my lunch before I shove it back in the brown paper bag underneath the table, out of sight. I stand up, ungainly, trying not to call attention to myself, but I feel everyone staring anyway. I make a mental note to sit at the end of the bench from now on so I can slip out more easily. A rookie mistake, but I am learning. I am usually good at sensing when there will be trouble. But not always.

I head for the bathroom, next to the cafeteria. I push the door, enter the end stall, turn the lock. There is no graffiti on these walls, it smells like new paint. The floors are clean. Even the locks on the doors are gleaming, hard and cold. I sit on the toilet, pull my knees up, hug them close to me. I have known for a while that crying isn't useful and can mark you as an easier target. Instead, I look at my white shoes – *baby shoes* someone had whispered behind a hand – and notice the black scuffs. My socks are now baggy around my ankles, not bright and clean as they seemed at home, but dingy grey under the unforgiving florescence of the bathroom light.

When I get on the bus later that day, Al smiles. "How was it?" he asks.

I answer with a nod, and say "Okay" as I fumble past, taking the seat directly behind him. Other kids push and jostle, it is noisy, raucous even, but I stare out the window, away from the school. When the bus moves I keep

my head rigid, staring, letting the woods and houses wash over me in a blur.

My stop is the last stop – since I am the first one on, I am also the last one off. “It’ll be better tomorrow, kiddo,” Al says, as he opens the door.

Kiddo. I know he can’t know that Melissa – so far away, and over a year since she left – signs off her letters to me “I love you, kiddo.” But he says it kindly, and it echoes in the deepest cave within me, as I walk home from the bus stop.

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I am not wrong about my teacher. Ms. rarely smiles, her face a tense network of lines, and she favours no one. I get used to her though, and as the days go by she scares me less, and I even like certain things about her; she has a deep and throaty voice, which she uses to great and frightening effect to get the class to sit still and pay attention. But it is when she reads to us for our fifteen minutes a day from the class book – currently *Island of the Blue Dolphins* – that I feel a strange kind of comfort. Her voice envelops me, provides a warm spot in a cold ocean I can swim in for a time. Even so, I catch her, in those first few weeks, after the book snaps shut for the day, looking at me down the steep angle of her nose. She sees the scratched eyeglasses, the dirty fingernails, the homemade bookbag with crooked stitching and sizes me up, dismisses me accordingly. Her assessment feels accurate, even I know I am lacking – a dull, runny watercolour painting on a cheap and dirty canvas. I am not cute or clean or even very bright, by these new standards. I am also aware that my parents aren’t reliable – or even very interested – as some parents are; they will not join the PTA, or make it to back to school night to sit at my small desk, or even return permission slips for class trips we won’t be able to afford. So at school I try to shrink into the background, which generally works at home, where I can go unnoticed for long stretches of time if I am quiet.

This tactic works with the girls at school, who mostly leave me alone. I am invited to one sleepover, early in the year, because all of the girls in

the class are invited. I stand in the basement playroom, by a snack table off to the side, busily eating by myself. When it is time for bed I lay in the corner nearest the stairs, listening to the others snigger and murmur and occasionally shriek with laughter. I don't sleep, I am wide-eyed, waiting for anything – I'm not sure what to expect. And after much whispering someone does wander over, on a secret mission, to check to see if I am awake. They don't get too close before they scurry back to the gaggle of sleeping bags, arranged seemingly on top of each other, close as puppies in a box. The realisation that I should have stayed home lands like an adult-sized fist in my stomach, which is not an unfamiliar feeling.

I'm still not the smartest kid in the class, and it is clear that maybe I never will be again. It's hard to keep up. But I have always been a reader and I like words and writing stories. I don't use all the new words I learn – instead I keep some for myself, roll them around in my head like a marble on wooden floorboards in an empty room, or curl my tongue around the syllables as I would a hard boiled sweet. I am saving them, stockpiling them like ammunition, lining them up as they bide their time, waiting for me to march them out when needed.

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I find Al parked in the same spot every morning, just as he said he would be, next to the woods between the last two houses on Bluebird Lane. He smiles when I arrive at the bus door each morning, his newspaper always spread out before him, and his coffee – a regular, he tells me, which means he has cream and sugar, like my father – sits on the dashboard, steaming up the windshield, obscuring the view of the empty road.

I now sit in the front seat across the aisle from Al, and he turns his whole body to face me, interested in what I say. He asks me questions, but not like a teacher or a parent; he asks about my family, my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, what I like to do after school, if I have made any friends. I tell him very little about my ill father or my absent mother, or my

many brothers and sisters. I tell him that I miss my sister who lives on the west coast though and he nods seriously, listens, takes it all in.

I tell him my mom will bring home donuts sometimes on a Saturday morning after her graveyard shift, and that my favourite is Boston Cream. "Hey! That's mine too," he says, and I smile.

Al does most of the talking, and he tells me about himself. He was in the Army when he was young. He has been a bus driver for almost twenty years and he has seen things, especially at the high school, he says. He was married but not anymore; he shrugs as he says this, as if he misplaced something and isn't upset about not finding it. He doesn't have children, he says the kids on the bus are enough and he still keeps in touch with those he considers to be special.

"Like me?" I ask.

"Like you," he says. "Wait. I'll show you," and I'm not sure what he means. He reaches behind his back and pulls out his wallet, which is on a chain, and removes a clear plastic insert. He hands it across the aisle to me.

"These are the special kids," he says, as I flip through several photographs. "The ones I still talk to."

I look at the photos, all a bit faded now. In each is an ordinary-looking girl, smiling at someone's camera. They are all blue eyed, with brown hair, similar to mine. *Oh*.

He is watching me. "Maybe you will give me one of your school photos when they come in?" he asks.

I brighten. "Maybe," I say.

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Not long after this on an ordinary seeming day, I get a package from Melissa. The package is brown, square and plain, unspecial except for my name on the front, in her handwritten loopy script, a tiny smiley face drawn to the left.

The package contains several things, which I spread out in front of

me on my bedroom carpet when no one is around. There is a deep red, clothbound book, with gold gilt edges, rectangular and dense. On the cover is a picture of a bird with iridescent feathers in various shades of blue and yellow and green, both beautiful and – to my mind – completely improbable. The bird is perched in a tree on a knobby branch, its long, purple beak rooting in a white blossom tinged with pink, against a swirling blue sky. There is some kind of gold writing I don't recognise, tiny strokes of lines and boxes that are wholly foreign and mysterious to me. I touch the cover gingerly, trace the flowering branch with my stubby finger. I turn the book this way and that, watching the gold of the edges catch and reflect the light. I am surprised that when I open the book, I discover it is completely blank, full of pristine white pages; a journal. There is also a red fountain pen, and two cartridges of blue ink. When I hold the pen in my hand, it is heavier than it looks, and I can feel its heft between my fingers.

If my father finds these things, he will hold them just over my head, a schoolyard bully taunting me, taunting all of us, as he has always done. So when I hear heavy footsteps and his emphysemic wheeze coming down the hall, I shove the pen and the journal and the cartridges under the bed hurriedly. It isn't until later that night – after my younger sister Ginny is asleep and I'm under my scratchy, thin bedspread with a dull flashlight – that I discover Melissa's simple inscription on the inside front cover, part instruction and part command: *Write, Birdie. Write!* I try to picture her – I haven't seen her in so long and I can't quite remember the shade of green of her eyes – somewhere sunny, smiling at me, urging me on.

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The leaves are starting to turn yellow one morning when I turn the corner and see Al standing next to the bus, facing away from me. As I get closer, I can hear a splattering on the pavement. I have brothers, I know the sound, which starts as a sizzle when it hits the asphalt and ends with a *tap tap tap*. I stand and wait for him to finish and when he does, he climbs back up the stairs.

“I really had to go,” he says. “I hope you don’t mind.”

I’ve seen and heard boys do this often enough, so I shake my head. From now on, when I arrive at the bus stop in the mornings, he is standing outside the door, holding himself as I approach. I don’t always hear the splatter, though.

After this we start to move away from talk of family and school and friends, and on some days Al tells me about what the boys and girls do in the cars in the high school parking lot before class, what he can see before the car windows get too fogged up. At first it isn’t anything I don’t know about – I have seen my older sisters kissing their boyfriends before and looked away. But as the mornings pass it is clear there is more to it, that Al sees more than just kissing from the height of his driver’s seat on the bus. When he talks about these things, I look down at my dangling feet, bouncing them gently – one foot then the other quickly after, like a heartbeat – against the metal heater located under my seat.

Al talks about the boys and girls in the cars most days, and I’m never sure what to say, so I remain quiet. Until one morning, after pumpkins start to appear on porches, he asks me if I have any questions. “I can show you what I mean,” he says. He seems to think I don’t know what he is talking about, that I am somehow confused. Which I am – we are not a boy and girl in high school, and I am not like my sisters with their boyfriends, giggling and kissing on the couch.

“Come here,” he says. I get up from my seat clumsily, stand next to his seat. “Closer,” he says, and I stand directly beside him. He is smiling when he reaches out with his thick arm and places his hand firmly on the back of my head, palming my skull like a basketball.

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I’m not sure when I notice the foliage has disappeared. The oaks and the maples had turned golden and pink and fiery red-orange, and on the other side of memory is the dull crunching of dried brown leaves beneath my feet. On a wet November weekend, a thunderstorm strips the remaining

leaves from the trees, revealing abandoned birds' nests and exposing branches, bony fingers pointing sharply upward. From where I am walking along our lane, the dense fretwork of bare, brittle limbs looks clinical and stark; frail capillaries against a white sky. They have been watching me, these trees, all along. Now, as I make my way past the woods, day after day, shivering, the air shrill and cold, they are poised to see what might happen.

I try something different this morning. I walk along the road, close to the edge of where the wood meets the pavement, so I remain unseen. I stop at the bend, before the road curves left and the bus, marooned on the verge, comes into view. I stand still, trying not to exhale so Al won't see the cold cloud of my breath hanging in the air. I wiggle my gloveless fingers, and when I can hear him, finally, turn the ignition, I resume walking. As I round the corner, I am caught in the beam of the headlights.

He pulls on the door handle. "You're late," he notes, his eyebrows a dark line, as I climb the stairs. He is no longer sunburned, merely red-faced.

I turn away from him as I pass the driver's seat. I don't sit at the front like I used to, I sit in the middle of the bus now, further and further back. He doesn't wait for me to settle into a seat, so I am still standing in the aisle when he starts driving, putting his foot down so hard that bus jerks forward suddenly. I stumble, am caught off balance. But I don't fall over, not completely, and I somehow manage to right myself enough to sit down on the cold green bench and slide safely across to the window. The woods whirr by, blurring together as the bus picks up speed. I only look out my little square pane, to my right, unblinking. I don't allow myself to look in the direction of anything towards the front of the bus. Instead I breathe carefully – I always breathe carefully now – as I look to my right, up towards the sky and notice the faint, milky sunlight, glad there is no salty taste in my mouth this morning.

I do the same again the next day, idling for a little while at the bend in the road, waiting. Again, I hear the ignition. Again, I see the low, dim beam of the headlights as the bus comes into view. Again, there is no time for anything

other than driving, or the entire busload of children will be late for school.

The third day I stand at the bend, as still as the naked trees in the windless woods, and I hear the ignition, my signal. I start walking, there is the bus. I can see his mountainous outline through the windshield, and he waves at me awkwardly, something he has never done before. As I approach the door, I can see he is smiling, fleshy lips revealing his gappy, yellowed teeth. He pulls on the handle, the door opens.

“Good morning,” he says, as I enter. I raise my head, look up at him from the bottom step, directly into his jowly, rubbery face. He hasn’t shaved – his cheeks and chin and neck are encrusted with speckled stubble. His mouth is loose, not the thin slit it has been the last two days. “Did you see if the headlights were on?”

I hesitate; *why would he ask such a thing?* “Yes,” I say. “I think so.”

“Ah, good, good. Having some problems, just thought I would turn on the engine to make sure,” he says, his hand on the keys, casually switching the ignition off with a flick of his forefinger and thumb. He checks his watch as I stand on the top step. “We still have a few minutes before we need to leave.” I turn and as I shuffle along the aisle, I hear him grunt as he heaves himself out of his driver’s chair, lumbering after me. I turn my head left, towards the row of dirty little windows, looking out at the woods. The tangle of tree branches and limbs continue to be impervious to me. He follows me down the narrow aisle, a space only ever meant for children, and I blink hard as I slide across the seat.

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I begin to write. The words spill out of me silently across the pages, like a full glass of water that has been knocked over, running off in all directions.

I write ordinary things a nine year old would write; I write about Ginny who tattles on me for eating the last Oreo and is constantly touching my things; I write about how much I would like a pair of brand new white ice skates; I write about the dark-haired Greek boy, Spero, who is too handsome to look at directly. I write down words I come across in books I

am reading that I would like to look up, if I had a dictionary. I write about how pathetic I am at everything – spelling “pathetic” with a y, proving I am pathetic at spelling.

I do not write about my father’s left hand slapping my face without warning at dinner, like a frog’s tongue snapping at a fly, because my elbows are on the table. I do not write about my mother, who sits immobile at the end of the couch in a haze of Camel smoke which makes it always seem like dusk, watching television with the lights off. I certainly do not write these things at home where I run the risk of being discovered. I write in the corridor at school, sat alone outside my locked classroom on the cold marble floor, on the days that the early bus runs. I do not write about why I start taking the early bus to school. Instead, I re-read Melissa’s instruction – *Write, Birdie. Write!* – and silently repeat this to myself, as my fledgling pen scratches across the pages.

## BIOGRAPHY

**LORELEI GOULDING** is originally from Long Island, New York and lives in rural Somerset with her husband, three children, and a very unruly dog. She is currently completing an MSc in Public Health at UWE Bristol and is particularly interested in Adverse Childhood Experiences and how they impact health over the life-course. She has been keeping disorganised journals and writing stories since childhood. 'Birdie' is her first published work.