

Janet not Janet
Elida Schogt

Memoir – Draft 1 (2020)
Four Selected Excerpts

EXCERPT 1

LUKAS’S MOM IS IN town. She stopped by our place yesterday. Lukas put up a huge mirror in the living room for the occasion. The minute she walks in, she does a pirouette in front of it.

Smiling. Confident. *Blond.*

Not my mother.

hidden child

hiding

from us

from herself

Lukas and I ride our bikes to his brother’s place where his mother is staying. It’s early evening. The afternoon rain has left the streets wet and shiny. We stop at a red light. Lukas turns back to me. I follow his gaze to see a woman standing by a taxi. Her long blond hair glistens under the street lamps. Her tight clothes show her breasts and butt like a perfect comic book chick. Lukas raises his eyebrows. Parts his lips. Smacks them.

I throw my bike down. Lie on my back and scream, kicking my legs like a bug in distress. Lukas looks down at me. “Stop!” he shouts. I can’t. My face is hot. My voice hoarse. He turns forward to catch the green light. Looks back and practically spits at me, “Stay back. Don’t come with me tonight.”

EXCERPT 2

Toronto is vast, open, bleak
I miss the suffocating bricks of Amsterdam
the cozy over-populated bustle.

~

I AM FALLING

falling and falling
over and over

Resigned to my fate

I never feel the moment before the fall
—the jump
—the push
I am falling

Eyes fixed in a stare
wind whirs by my ears
deafening white noise

I wait for the pain of the concrete

I
keep
falling

EXCERPT 3

Michelle is a theatre artist. Like me, a mother. We've met in the schoolyard, finding a spot on a little wooden ledge, just before our daughters are about to come out from school.

Michelle doesn't know anything about my work, so I tell her about my background as an experimental documentary filmmaker. When I describe my work on Holocaust memory, she tells me her father's side is Dutch-Jewish. We nod together as she describes how not many survived. Around 75 percent of the Dutch-Jewish population perished, a remarkably high percentage compared with other occupied countries in western Europe. The high death rate for Dutch Jews comes from a combination of their assimilation — they did not perceive themselves as Jews — and, the pervasive collaboration of the Dutch with the Nazis.

My maternal grandfather, a non-religious Jewish lawyer living in an affluent neighbourhood among non-Jews, felt invincible well after the Netherlands became a Nazi-occupied territory. He even helped other Jews escape while he continued life as usual in the comfortable home he had built in 1929. It was not until the danger was truly imminent that he and his family found hiding places. My mother and her two sisters were given new identities (false papers made by the Resistance) and all three given separate addresses: my mother and one sister each placed with a family and the eldest given a job as nurse in a Catholic hospital.

My grandparents hid in a chicken coop on a farm. They were eventually caught by Dutch collaborators — sent first to the Dutch transit camp Westerbork, then to Theresienstadt and finally to Auschwitz where they were both killed on arrival in October 1944.

My mother and her two older sisters survived.

I don't tell Michelle this story. I do describe how dissociation feels like going into nothing. Nothingness. I also tell her how I made up the name Janet Anderson to avoid being me — the sexually abused girl. Michelle asks, "Who is Janet Anderson?" She envisions the piece as a mystery. What if each woman playing Janet would touch on her mystery? For example, she wonders, what if there were a story about swimming? We talk about water. Water as emotion. Tears. Flow. Interconnection.

Rio, 2011

My tears keep flowing
until I am drenched
in an ocean

Waves carry me off
I drift for decades
neither dead
nor alive

Awake for the first time
my eyes hurt
sun too bright

I want to hide but cannot
even with my clothes on
I am naked.

EXCERPT 4

Martin, a German photographer I've never met, is coming over to see about subletting our house for the month of December. As I get the house ready for his arrival, I wonder why I am meticulously cleaning the toilet, wiping finger prints off the kitchen cabinets, hiding a book on the Holocaust sitting on the kitchen table, and tucking away Sofia's toys. Do I think that a sterile, "home beautiful" home without a soul or a past is what he wants? What do I want? A clean, clean, house. Is clean, clean the opposite of sexually abused?

Rio, 2011

Sunday late afternoon
waves crash on the beach
voices in the distance
kids playing
a whistle
a car
a brief alarm
the ocean

a light breeze against my arm
I feel – not so much

birds chirping
relentless crashing waves

rhythmic pounding
an oil rig
the ocean again
and again.

I have felt this way before.

I don't belong here.

~

tired
head hurts
eyes burn
sad
mad
lonely

birds
breeze
hum
rattle
distant voice
dog barking

blue sky
car goes by
door creaks
car honks

the mountain is looming
in front of me

rock face

my face