

by brittany reid



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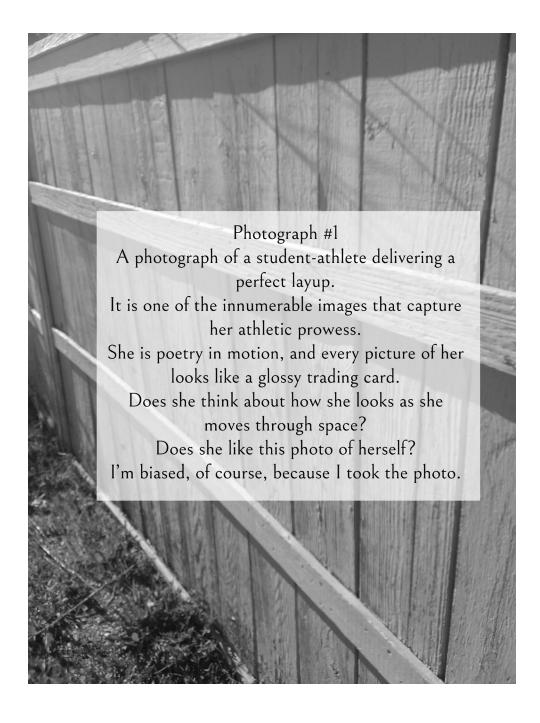
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Sidelines

I grew up on the sidelines

As the youngest, my siblings ushered in the world of sport and I tried to keep up Every early memory for me takes place between games, practices, or shifts And my story starts on the sidelines.

It was empowering when I finally left the sidelines
I felt nervous elation when I realized I was now being watched
As a young player, I began my complex flirtation with performance
And it meant I was no longer an anonymous girl on the sidelines.

In time, I came to quietly resent the sidelines
I was too proud, and I wanted to answer back when they yelled
I hated the ugly danse macabre between athlete and audience
I could not be contained by the sidelines.

After I stopped playing, I tried to return to the sidelines
But I anxiously squirmed, like a butterfly pinned into place
My pride couldn't handle being one of the spectators
Soon enough, I was no longer on the sidelines.

It took years for me to return to the sidelines

To learn the more subtle art of supporting others at play

I have come to understand that participation takes many forms

And that I will never again be sidelined.

Physical Education

If anyone asks, tell them I gave up on sports to focus on drama.

Tell them I found my true passion in the theatre.

And be sure to include that I quit soccer and never looked back.

Nobody would ever doubt that.

Why would I miss the icy March wind aching my ears?

The feeling of not knowing anyone, and having no partner for warm-ups?

The feeling of dread as the evaluators determined to which field you would be assigned?

The feeling of anxiety knowing your parents were watching and comparing?

No.

Tell everyone you can about all of those feelings, and they will agree it makes perfect sense.

That I was made for the stage instead.

Soul mates.

Besides, sports didn't really understand me.

They never properly mirrored my imperfect rhythms.

But please,

end the story there.

Don't let them know any more, because I don't want them to learn what happened in the theatre.

It might be too upsetting to hear how I lost control over my own body.

Please, don't tell them about how I would fantasize about the freezing rain,

and crowding under an umbrella,

and wet orange slices,

and hearing other coaches say "cover the girl with red shoes,"

and peeling off my worn-down shin guards.

It's embarrassing that an imperfect sport came to feel like a perfect dream.

I don't think I could bear it if they knew.

How I still kick myself for being too sensitive to handle the cold wind,

How I mistook stage lights as a beacon of hope.

Or how I wished I could return to the chilly, but uncomplicated, school fields.

I still wonder, sometimes, if I could have learned to follow the rhythms of sport.

But cut that part out too,

it won't make for a very good ending.

The Enforcer

Did someone tell you when it was time

to become the type of player you never intended to be? to learn an artless art in which you were never trained? to sacrifice bone or brain to fight a war without a cause?

Did they do you the courtesy of letting you know,

or did you have to guess when your PIMs surpassed your points, and your jersey was priced to clear,

and they praised you for intangible grit, but not your skill?

Did your heart sink in your chest

to know that you were now part of a dying breed?

to have your old career placed in the gloved hands of the newest kid?

to be bruised and bludgeoned while the crowd cried with bloodlust?

Did it feel like a dream come true

to hear your teammates banging their sticks in placid commendation? to be booed and devalued by the same fans who once cheered you? to daily fear becoming a ghastly statistic incarnate?

And did you wonder, in the end,

if you were enforcing the inane conventions of a sport that didn't think you were worth protecting, even when you gave your life to protect it?

Runner's High

I run so fast to the playground that I fall out of my sandals and don't even stop.

But let's run away from this.

After the outfield shouts "lady" and begin to move closer,

I manage to hit a slow pitch and sprint to first base.

But let's run away from this.

It's gym class, and there is a relay race

This is my time to show everyone that I am more than they think

I will run so fast that they wonder what else they don't know about me

But let's run away from this.

Soccer tryouts end with a race

I break out into an early lead and somehow hold it until the end

I finish first and draw a picture of myself winning

My brother will claim I exaggerated my victory

But let's run away from this.

I spend every dream running

In my head, I am always running

I prepare to run at a moment's notice

Running away from every perceived danger,

every threat,

every fear,

every doubt,

every regret,

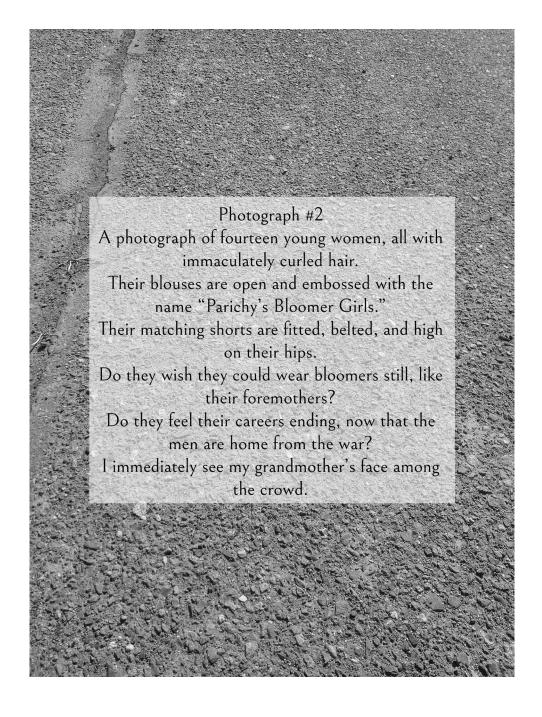
every certainty,

every anxiety,

every shame,

every

But I have run away from this.



Women's Sport

She is good enough to do whatever she wants, but she is too good to be here.

She is marvelous, and so obviously fluent in the physical language of her sport.

But seeing her play in this modest setting feels disjointed and wrong.

I feel embarrassed, like I should avert my eyes.

Like I should ask, on her behalf, why her ladder was not built with more rungs.

It is grotesque, watching someone so strong be so inadequately celebrated.

She is like a masterpiece in a broken frame.

I imagine she moves like a caged lion: her restrictive environment is beneath her regal mien.

Does she think of her medals when she skates among these children?

Does she keep track of her stats while playing with girls too young to remember her victories?

Does she know she is too good to be here?

She should be angry.

I hope she is angry.

I should have paid more money to watch her play.

She should be paid money for me to watch her play.

But then I watch her score, and pass, and cheer on her teammates.

She succeeds, and she celebrates, like she chooses not to see the bars of her cage.

Like she has never had a proper frame to display her.

Like she always knew the ladder would not be high enough to match her enormous potential.

She hugs a tiny teammate and lifts her off the ground.

I remember that she is good enough to do whatever she wants.

But she is angry.

And she knows she is too good to be here.

Winnifred Gallen

"Miss Winnifred Phyllis Gallen, who played with the world-famous Edmonton Grads from 1937-1940, was married Saturday in Norwood United Church to Mr. William John Reid"

As an Edmonton Grad, you never would have been permitted to marry.

As a woman, you were expected to be an athlete and Miss America all in one.

But always a woman first, and a woman that could be had.

You needed to be well practiced in the pageantry.

By that point, you were skilled at negotiating the conditions of women's athletics.

Track and field.

softball,

basketball,

hockey,

and curling were not enough to outweigh feminine expectations.

Sometimes I think of you, having to don lipstick to play basketball.

You wanted to scream

I can feel it in your photos.

But you well knew the conditions on living the life you wanted.

Yours was a rebel heart and you mastered every game you played.

When the Grads disbanded in 1940, you were free to date, free to marry.

In fact, now was the time to make good on the promise implied by your potential.

You married an artist and were toasted by your former coach, whose name is now on a school.

You finally earned your first headline in the Edmonton Journal:

"Former Edmonton Grad Star is Married at Norwood Church"

Did you want to scream then too?

To have your starlight only acknowledged through your marriage?

As if your career was just a courtship?

Before you were Winnifred Reid, you were Winnifred Gallen.

And you were exceptional

I can feel it in your photos.

Winnifred Reid

I did not know you well enough to say I loved you.

Because you died when I was still young, I have sensed you,

my spectre.

You are a mystery that has been left unsolved

a ghost that haunts my family.

In my search, I have found no reliable narrator.

It seems that you transformed everyone in your wake.

But I do know that you failed at meeting everyone's expectations:

As a mother,

As a mother-in-law,

As a grandmother.

Despite your perceived deviance, you have been required reading all my life.

I have seen all the archives, museums, books, and documentaries that feature you.

The Halls of Fame, the databases, all the resources that immortalize you.

You were finally inducted in the same year that I was born.

"Multi-sport athlete"

It feels perfectly like you to confound those who tried to memorialize you.

You didn't settle for success in one field

You needed to conquer every court, rink, or diamond you came across.

But yet, I feel terror in my loved ones when they see your image.

I have read the newspaper clippings, and seen the same photographs of you.

Those icy eyes are filled with such intensity and determination.

Age did not soften your eyes

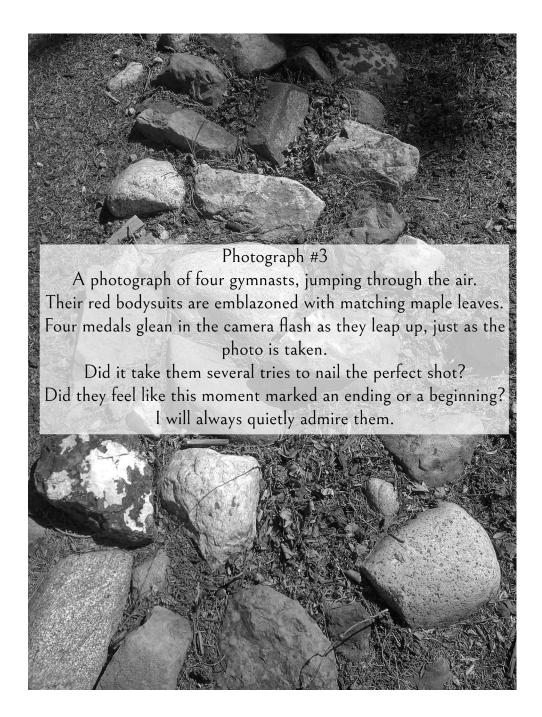
Did you know the price of being an athletic woman?

A strong woman?

A powerful woman?

Is it too much to ask that those traits are genetic?

Is it too much to hope that some of you is in me?



Hockey Cards

Many children collect hockey cards, but far fewer lovingly curate their collections.

Not as many organize them with a careful eye to posterity. But the cards in your collection were not intended to be sold by your future self.

That would be a betrayal of the players they feature.

Tiny stickers were added to each card that you deemed to be "special"

And page after page features rows of hand-torn stickers.

It is easy to imagine that you didn't want any players to feel left out

That would not have been your way.

There are sections set aside for your favourite players or teams,

Or perhaps a limited-edition series,

Or a card that took a loved one some extra time to find.

Even your most hated teams were permitted a privileged spot in the binders.

There is a section of one binder that might look incomplete, to the untrained eye.

A single card that has been lovingly placed in the center square of a page.

No other cards are permitted to go near it.

It is a rare treasure among your treasures.

I feel the warmth of your little heart radiating through that single card
The small note scrawled in your child's hand says, "do not touch."

Even then, you knew your favourite player needed protection.

It was like you sensed he was in trouble, and you wanted to hide him away Years later, you have removed most of your cards from their protective pages.

You now send them across the world, all to good homes.

But you will keep your favourite player tucked away and safely protected

just as you always knew he should have been.

Colouring Book

My brother's teammate passed away at a young age.

On a team trip, my brother had bought a colouring book, and the two of them lovingly filled the pages with crayons,

even though they were already young men.

After that, whenever I watched them play, I would think fondly of the pictures they coloured together.

There was no show of athletic prowess that would ever contradict

the image of a monkey

in a suit,

clutching his blue balloon

Or the signature his friend lovingly applied to the corner of one page.

When my brother's teammate passed away, at such a yong age, the funeral conflicted with practice.

My brother was penalized by his coach for missing it

My father yelled at my brother,

My brother replied, undaunted and assured.

My father and their coach never saw these shades

They knew nothing of their true colours

They didn't realize they were still boys,

many pages left uncoloured.

Wave Pool

Her tell was only obvious to me.

I knew she felt like herself again whenever I heard her laugh.

That full-throated, boisterous laugh that always felt incongruous with her cold, striking beauty.

Even then, I knew the best place to hear it was in the wave pool.

Every ghost awaiting her,

exorcized in holy water.

It was impossible to feel truly haunted when surrounded by bright toys and hollering children.

Perhaps she understood what a ridiculous sight it must have been.

Someone so tall and strong

Such an adept swimmer and gifted athlete

A regal mermaid

Tossed asunder by the waves, just like us mere mortals.

She had spent years perfecting her stroke and achieving swimming's highest levels.

But in that moment, her Bronze Medallion was no better than my four failures to achieve Maroon.

And we bobbed like joyful buoys, giggling in chlorinated seas.

It was ridiculous, and she laughed at the absurdity

She laughed at the knowledge that everything and everyone could be overtaken by waves.

And I laughed, my own matching, full-throated, and boisterous laugh when I saw the artificial tempest upend her.

When she was gone, I still returned to the wave pool, desperate to hear my twin laugh echoing against the pool tiles.

But my shivering body ached with the hollow realization that more

dangerous waves had crashed over her and I was powerless to save her.

Years later, I returned to the edge of the pool, with her by my side

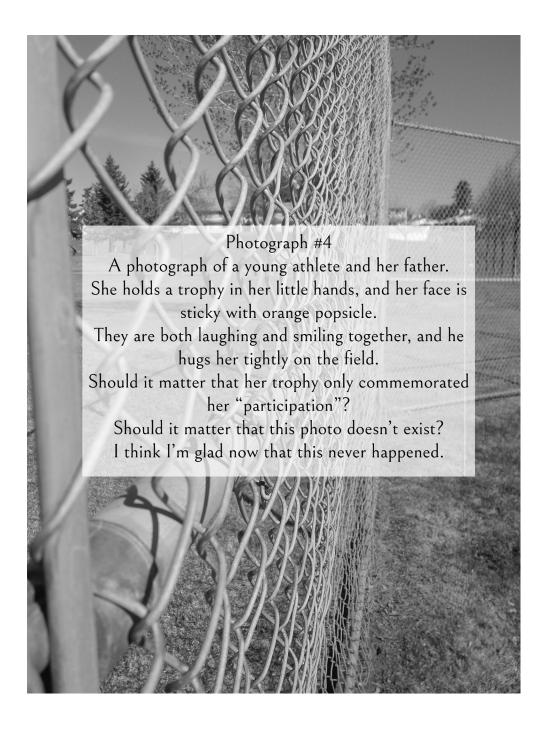
The artificial waves were toppling new children,

children who weren't even born yet when we last came together.

And as we watched them bob and squeal while the same waves rolled over and upended them,

I heard her laughter again

echoing against the pool tiles.



Ode '72.

I returned the words "Summit Series" to my father, like an old photograph.

I was not in the photo, and he took it from my hands, convinced it could mean nothing to me.

He plaintively looked at it, seeing himself clearly through the cluttered images.

For him, Canada was not part of the story and the hockey itself was almost irrelevant.

He told me nothing about the games, the goals, or the gold.

For him, the story was about waiting in line for tickets at Maple Leaf Gardens.

One chance to be there and to say you were part of something people remembered.

He was the first person in line to not get a ticket to that game.

But it didn't matter, because that near encounter with greatness was enough.

Nobody can know the Summit Series like he does, as the first one it turned away

Its significance to anyone else is dwarfed and devoured by his own natal link.

In his heart, he is the Summit Series.

For him, the Summit Series was his brush with the sporting fame he had long coveted.

In his mind, he was suiting up and, with gleeful menace in his eyes, breaking Soviet bodies with teeth bared.

In his mind, he was ending the Cold War, with all the physical brutality he believed was needed.

In his mind, he was lauded conqueror and hero.

But never for Canada.

For him.

In his mind, it is a travesty that he is not included in the montages and the memories.

My father does not want to share his "Summit Series" with me.

He shoves the photograph back in his pocket.

Elegy

Maybe I wasn't there when it happened,

But I'll never forget you explaining between choked sobs.

After that, you realized you had never been free to play

Never granted permission to be a child.

Sports were conscripted service.

He grabbed your shoulder tightly, in the way we hated,

and refused to let go.

You survived by letting him think you were his sporting avatar

The athlete he lied about ever being

His to fawn over, or hurt, or live through, as the mood struck him.

And every win, every medal, every athletic scholarship of yours was confiscated and coopted.

But he didn't see your eyes that night, all those years ago.

That night, when we wordlessly agreed that childhood was over

And I felt the ache in your heart, like something was breaking

or something new was forming inside you.

And I saw your conviction that his victory would be impermanent

That you earned the trophies, and you would not be his to collect

And in your flashing green eyes, I saw the man you would one day become

And the games you would finally be free enough to play.

Red Card

We found you cleaning your own wound after you fell while running in the dark.

You didn't want help then, and you never have.

It was moments like this that led you to confidently state that you raised yourself.

Like me, you never forget, and you are always writing your tragic memoir in your mind.

You believe yourself to be a footnote of our family history.

But did you know that our mother used to watch you referee all your games?

Peering with binoculars, knowing you would never permit an audience.

We have all always been watching you and cowering to your bellicose spirit.

And do you remember when you touched my hair when I was born?

You saw yourself in my auburn locks.

You were a line of verse, and I completed your rhyme.

And although your strength and fight are alien to me,

And I have never been brave enough to tend to my own wounds,

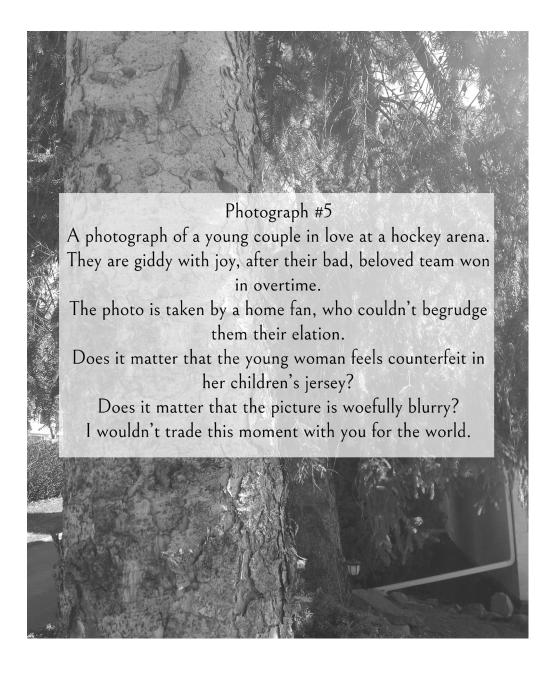
I will always see

something of me in you

something of you in me

You, with your righteous anger
Still a child
Standing in the middle of a field
Drawing a red card from your pocket like a gun in a duel

You, faintly smiling with menacing self-assurance More confident than anyone has a right to be And so oblivious that hidden fans were cheering you on.



Opening Day

More than most sports, I had long ago closed my heart to the idea of baseball.

On television, the sport seemed slow and ponderous.

Without a clock, each game sprawled out like a languishing beast,

Always lingering too long when I wanted it to be over.

But I saw my first baseball game in person

with you.

You shared baseball with me like a perfect gift

you had been carefully wrapping for years.

I was torn between the impulse to feign knowledge or reveal my gnawing lack.

You knowingly smiled, but you did not make me feel bad about my predicament.

Baseball could not have designed a better experience to sell me on itself.

It was as if the sport's history, charm, and silly superstitions came together to conjure a kind of magic I had never felt

In person, baseball was like a mythical creature brought to life before my eyes.

It was comfortably familiar and surprisingly exhilarating, all at once.

I was enchanted by the dynamism of the Yankees all-star lineup.

Oakland had a mascot that captured our hearts, with his bright, wide smile

The smell of hot buttered popcorn lingered throughout the warm, June night

It was like breathing in rarified air, like a cave of fancy was opening before me

Like baseball was making good on the promise of being the idyllic summer pastime it is renowned to be.

But I know now what really changed that night

I saw baseball through you.

For the first time, I was saw this sport through the eyes of someone who loved it so well

And it made my own heart open.

Muscle Memory

"It's muscle memory," you tell me at the start of each season.

"Your body remembers how to move now."

I didn't think my body knew well enough to ever remember

But you taught me ten summers ago

At dusk in your mom's backyard.

You bought me a glove of my own, so I would know it was mine.

We passed the ball back and forth,

and you chased it over the fence

into the tall grass.

It rolled under the tree.

and you would eagerly crawl

underneath the brush

always volunteering to help.

Your strong arms and legs were lined with faint scratches

And we now know that you are allergic to the grass.

But you never stopped smiling

And you never stop smiling.

It is an incandescent smile, like you are always on the verge of laughing.

I was insecure about how little I knew then.

Sport was your world, and I felt like a cautious guest all too aware of my inadequacies.

"I'm sorry."

"I just don't like to be coached."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not good enough to play with you."

"I'm sorry."

But you never accepted my self-doubt.

(Even though I couldn't throw at all)

And you wanted to keep playing, you always want to keep playing.

Play is easy for you,

Like breathing.

Play was never as easy for me

But you have always been easy for me

And you have always made everything easier on me.

For years, you tried to teach me how to throw a curveball.

"It's like turning a doorknob," you would say.

You made it sound so simple, but I was sure it would never happen for me.

After years of practice, I threw a curveball one day.

(I still don't know if I really did, but you said it was true and I believed you)

You threw your glove in the air in celebration and picked me up, laughing.

You were right all along, of course.

You always are.

It was just like turning a doorknob,

And letting myself walk through into your open arms.

Sidelines is a collection of poetic memories about sport. Each narrative poem features a recollected moment, based on personal experiences, misremembered histories, or imaginative guessing games. In the process, Sidelines explores the complex contradictions of living and loving through sport by extending the concept of "participation" to include sporting culture's more marginal players. As a work of sport literature, this poetic biomythography considers how the sidelines are a liminal space that is peripheral, yet central to the world of sport. As a poetic memoir, it is a longing but hopeful account of how sports can inform your self-conception, even when you believe you are out of play.

Brittany Reid is a literary scholar, poet, and playwright, and she teaches English at Thompson Rivers University. Her Doctoral project explored the theatrical adaptation of Mary and Percy Shelley's lives and writing, for which she composed her own play, Justified Sinners. Her teaching and research cover a broad range of topics, including Sport Literature, Romanticism, Gothic Literature, Shakespeare, and Literary Monsters. Most recently, she co-edited Duelism: Confronting Sport Through Its Doubles with Taylor McKee: an interdisciplinary collection that examines sport through its many doubles and dualities.

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