

HEIGHT OF LAND
By Julia Tompkins '18
Casey Shearer Memorial Award for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction, First Place

This is the story of the women who came before me. The three that impressed the most upon me: my *Bisabuela*, my Susan, my Alison. One is my great-grandmother, the next my grandmother, the last my mother. All three demonstrated deep and visible love. Much mothering was done at a distance, across long rooms or silences. Sometimes across continent-sized divides.

One, now, is ashes in a river that leads to the Atlantic, four years gone, running perpetually downstream. The second is hard to trace – tonight she might be in her Massachusetts bed, tomorrow between Namibian sheets. For the third I rely on the strange magnetism that connects mother and infant, then mother and grown child. I imagine we are never too far off from each other. In this family there is a perpetual wandering nature.

There are many pieces of this story I will never know and a good number I must imagine. All the rest is fact. I was lucky enough to know my great-grandmother – our lives overlapped for nineteen years. Her letters and essays helped to color these pages. She believed in the importance of documentation. She wrote many things down. My grandmother passes down story after story. I've done my best to document them all in these pages. My mother has stories too, stories of herself and the two women before her. Those are also in these pages. Beyond their three voices I relied on photographs, books, and my own memories. This is an act of excavation.

Both my great-grandmother and my grandmother carry a history of intervention. My great-grandmother spent years as a diplomat's wife in Latin America and just as many years at the Central Intelligence Agency. Looking back, I am unsure of what side of history she fell on. I would hope it is the right one, the one that is fair, and just, and equal. What seemed right then carries much different weight now. I question not her motives, or her involvement. Instead I question her product. Family rumor which I believe is grounded in fact – the trail of fallen South American governments that my great-grandparents left in their wake. I cannot imagine they were uninvolved.

Years later and on the other side of the world my grandmother would attempt to reshape democracy with the National Democratic Institute, a nonprofit which supports democratic institutions abroad. Charged with spreading democracy like her mother before her. One, during the Cold War years; the second during the years after. For my great-grandmother the government motive was intervention. For my grandmother, I believe the concerns were more humanitarian. She hoped to leave free-standing governments in her wake.

My mother – perhaps as a reaction to the women before her – steered clear of diplomacy. Her work never took her far from home, far from me. She focused on local problems like affordable housing and development. Work she enjoyed, work that fed me. Work without a wake. I do not mean to get ahead of myself, but to establish these women as all the things they were and are – forces of government, of law, of business, and mothers too – always restless, always needing to do more.

In attempting to make sense of them, or at least sort out their chronologies, I might—I hope—understand their trails of orbit around each other, towards each other, away from each

other. I might see how each woman sprang forth from the one before her. How they each reckoned with their mothers. How they molded their daughters. How they themselves were molded.

I. SKANEATELES

We called my great-grandmother *Bisabuela* because she raised her children in La Habana and Panama City. Her name, though, was Dale. She was born Helendale but reviled the name. Her parents, it seems, were caught up in the times, or lacked guidance in the naming of their children. *Bisabuela's* brother was called Lad. Both children avoided these given names, so she was Dale and her brother was George.

Of *Bis* we know odd facts, her geography. She spent her early years in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. At some point her family moved to Buffalo, New York. Her grandparents resided in Skaneateles, a few towns over. She spent much of her childhood there. My mother remembers little of this history, though she recalls a playhouse *Bis* had as a girl, commissioned by her grandparents – large enough to walk in and out of, with electric lights, running water, a working stove. A home of her own.

My knowledge of her early years is informed only by the brief start to her obituary which she penned before her death: *A graduate of Mary Baldwin College, she became a Rockefeller Foundation intern with the National Institute of Public Affairs, then an analyst with the War Production Board and Office of War Information during WWII, as well as a Red Cross nurses' aide.* These years, as she wrote them, were something worth skimming over. Ten years in a single sentence. It was, it seems, a time of her life to age out of, to depart from.

II. CUBA

How badly unprepared we were for the demands of culture, mores, food, protocol, hurricanes, expenses, housing. But we did not do badly in learning to cope.

The year is 1947. Diplomacy is booming, there are plans for a new American Embassy in Havana, a rectangle of glass and travertine which will face out towards the green-blue sea. Fulgencio Batista will soon be *el dictador* with the support of the U.S. government. Power crowds the island, alongside it a fear of communism. A fear that America's brand of governance may soon no longer be welcome, but all that is still to come.

Alongside *Bis* and her husband Bob, my great-grandfather, are their children: a young American daughter – this is Susan, my grandmother – who plays in the street and Robert, her small brother. Two more boys will come, brothers to join her. *Bisabuela* will carry Peter in Cuba, Douglas in Panama. In 1947 Peter is on the way and Douglas is fiction still. I imagine *Bis* in the courtyard of their home, in a chair beneath palms. I imagine the BBC playing over the radio and the swish-swish of the maid's broom as she swept away the fallen palm fronds.

In Havana at the age of five Susan learned Spanish from Bautista's guards. *El dictador's* mistress lived on Susan's street. While he visited his *amante* my grandmother would play in the street under her mother's watchful eye. With Bautista's guards my grandmother would practice the nouns and verbs of her new tongue.

Bis wrote of her time in Cuba as one of education by immersion – thrown into the island's rhythms and the duties of foreign service. She wrote in depth of the people who

surrounded her. Of her descriptions, that of Jane, her maid, is most striking. She was a *Jamaican immigrant of sparse figure, independent spirit and intense admiration, other than her constant suspicion that some Santeria bruja would kidnap blond Rob [Robert] for a frightening voodoo ceremony, her refusal to cook most things except for Rob or to help me learn Spanish, she was invaluable.*

In Cuba *Bis* stood at the gate of her home, watching the maids buy tortillas from the women who sold them by the basketful up and down the street. There were visits from the wives of ambassadors, other *embassy people*, her first *black beans a la cubana*, her children's burgeoning Spanish, her own growing proficiency. In Cuba she realized the beyond.

III. PANAMA

After Cuba Bob was posted to Panama City. Let's call it 1950. The whole family moved – another large house, another courtyard. There were palms in Panama too. *Bisabuela* didn't like Panama as much as Havana. Perhaps it lacked the conversation of Havana's ex-patriot dinner parties. Perhaps motherhood sat heavy. Four children, three of them young, fighting in English, reading in Spanish, filling the house with noise and mess, blurring language. Douglas, born that year in Panama City would remain the baby, and the favorite, for years to come. The routine was the same. More diplomatic functions, maids, parties, tropical heat. Another home that was not quite home.

She wrote many letters, so many that after she died we wondered how she had the time. She wrote aunts, cousins, her parents, friends from school. She talked about the house, the children, about Bob. I often wonder if she was lonely.

In Panama, much like the other cities to which the family was sent *Bisabuela* demanded they live near the best schools. Though her children lived a life of privilege she decided they would learn as locals. In Panama she sent Susan to learn in a convent. The boys, too were sent to the best school close to home. At school they spoke Spanish.

Bisabuela's education lagged. Her Spanish consisted of words and phrases collected in their various postings. Cuba helped, but in Panama she realized the limits of her proficiency. *I had been too busy with four young children, she wrote of the Panama years – two born abroad – and the demands of a socially demanding new life to learn more than good conversational Spanish. I was comfortable in that ability and in my accent, but had not had the opportunity to study written Spanish in depth.*

IV. MEXICO

Almost all of our possessions that had been shipped from Panama to Mexico had been destroyed. Thanks to State Department ineptitude and against regulations, our entire household had been packed in flimsy plywood liftvans, shipped without notice, and left outside in limbo on the docks at Veracruz for four rainy season months... By mid-1953 we had been in Mexico nearly a year.

In Mexico *Bisabuela* settled in. Susan was older, she attended high school. Robert and Peter trailed behind her by only a few years. Douglas was a child still, he stayed nearby *Bisabuela*. Perhaps it was his age, but *Bisabuela* showered upon him a visible affection. The boys, it seemed to young Susan, were their mother's favorites.

Not one to dwell in idle time, *Bisabuela* filled her days with diplomatic functions, and games bridge and golf with the wives of other diplomats. Yet in these activities she still felt a distance from the city. She spoke the language, but felt far from the city's inhabitants, shielded within diplomatic cars and walls. She longed to engage.

"I hear that you are attending university classes!" The tone was unmistakably negative, the speaker the wife of our embassy's second in command, someone whose tone I had to attend to. We were guests at tea for the foreign minister's wife, not a venue for serious conversation. I smiled and said that I was finding my courses useful to better understand Mexico. It seemed a reasonable answer, since my husband and I understood that to be a responsibility of foreign service officers' families in countries where they were posted."

In 1954 *Bisabuela* enrolled at the Universidad de Las Americas. In her second tongue she wrote her master's thesis. *I was the only woman and, at thirty-four, some ten years older than the other students in the program.* The role of diplomat's wife and scholar was an uncommon one. As a scholar she surrounded herself with sixteenth century records from the towns surrounding Mexico City. She was determined in her efforts. She did her best to ignore those who frowned on her work, those who asked *whether I was jeopardizing my husband's career by taking on a graduate degree.* She believed it was her time.

She saw herself as an outlier. The diplomat's wife with a life of her own. Her own interests, her own motivations. The degree, it seems, was a mark of not only her intelligence, but her independence too. For the rest of her life this would be her proudest achievement.

V. CHILE

The early 1960s brought the family to Chile. There *Bis* could be a socialite. The children were older; Susan was back in the U.S. attending university. Soon Susan would become pregnant, soon my mother would be born. This is a story with overlapping pieces.

In Santiago *Bis* played the role of diplomat's wife with ease. She had many friends. She befriended the wife of president Eduardo Frei, María Ruiz-Tagle. Together they established a market for rural women to sell their crafts in the city. Two women with time and money and an abundance of will. Soon the women of the market were more successful than their husbands. In Chile *Bis* could do something, something tangible, something lasting. She hated to leave it.

There is a photograph of my mother from those years. She is one, maybe two. I assume her grandparents had it commissioned. She and Susan look towards an invisible horizon. Susan half-smiles. She must have been about my age, twenty-one, though the way she carries herself exudes a wisdom only an adult woman could have, one which I have yet to find. She still wears a wedding ring. It will be a year or two before she and Bill divorce, before she and Alison settle in Massachusetts, before her own parents return home.

VI. WASHINGTON

After Chile, *Bis* returned home. She brought Douglas, the youngest, back to Washington D.C. My great-grandfather was posted to the Dominican Republic. This time they did not join

him. *Bis* took a job at the Central Intelligence Agency. By this time – the late 1960s – she must have been well connected in Washington. Not only that but her time abroad read as a resume of sorts. Her master's degree, her time spent in diplomatic circles, her two languages. This world was familiar to her.

She was appointed Deputy Branch Chief for South America, in the overt intelligence section. I imagine her at her desk. She is poised, glasses balanced on her nose, a hand knit sweater to block out the chill. She reads the Spanish language papers, pen in hand, scanning for anomaly. The ones she finds she enters of the typewriter that must have sat atop her desk. Each morning she prepares Kissinger's whitepapers for South America. She accumulates reports he will read and suggestions he will ignore. She would have missed the warm of La Habana.

In the living room *Bis* kept an ironing board. Each morning she'd slide the hot iron across her seersucker dresses: "everyone must have standards," she is known to have said. Dresses must be ironed, dinner finished, posture kept straight. *Everyone must have standards.*

VII. HEIGHT OF LAND

In 1972 when *Bisabuela* and my great grandfather retired they moved into an old inn. The house sat on a hill in Grafton, New Hampshire. In the Yankee tradition they named the house, or the land, or both after the road that ran along the property – Height of Land.

My mother would visit Height of Land for long swaths of summer, her own mother working back in Cambridge. She existed for those months under the eyes of her stern grandparents. In the attic her grandmother kept trunks of old clothes. These she would slip into and out of relentlessly. She would walk through the upper floor of the house, swinging in a hoop skirt and corset. She imagined herself at grand parties. Summer unfolded in the imaginary.

In the birch woods surrounding the house my mother hunted newts. She would crouch among the leaves and the pine needles, waiting for a rustle. She longed for the feel of orange velvet skin between her palms, the faint tap-tap-tap of a tiny nervous heartbeat. When the newts were illusive she tore bark from the birch trees. On her newfound parchment she created cities and legends. She disappeared into the woods for entire afternoons. She would return in the evening to my concerned *Bisabuela*, who would scold her for ripping the bark from the trees. Alison's imaginary did not extend to her grandmother.

In one trunk my mother found a collection of bandages – an echo of my *Bisabuela*'s time in the Red Cross, perhaps. These she wrapped around her body. Bandaged and with crutches pilfered from the attic she hobbled back and forth down the street for hours, until neighbors called her grandmother to inquire as to the nature of her young grand-daughter's injury.

VII. BLOW-ME-DOWN BROOK

We spread my great-grandmother's ashes in Blow-Me-Down Brook, in Cornish – two towns over from Height of Land. My grandmother goes first. She holds her silver ladle of ash—a gesture of beauty or poise—and throws it into the stream. "Goodbye Mom, from the one who was never your favorite."