

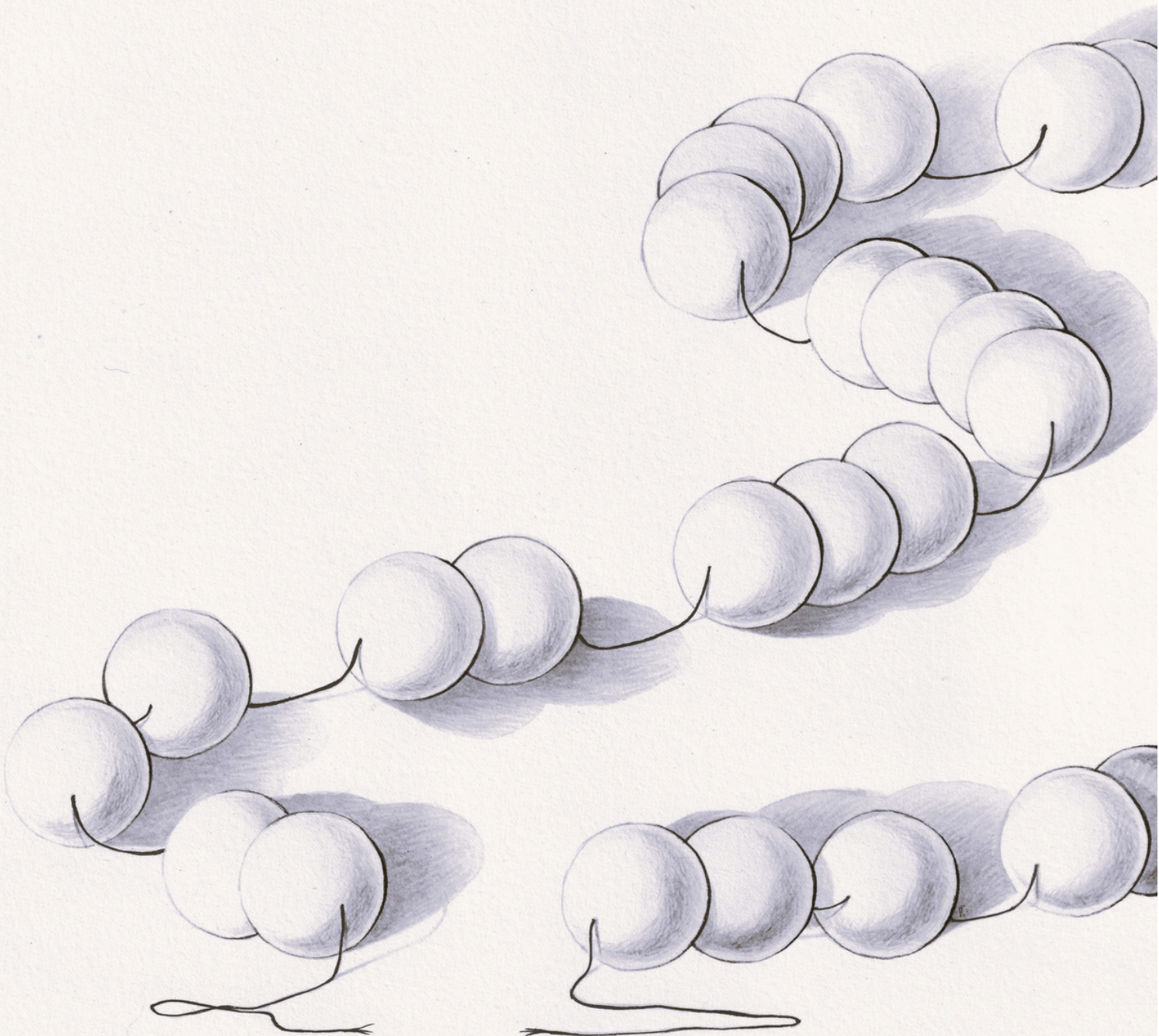
# GIRLHOOD X A HAUNTING

JESSICA RAE BERGAMINO

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## IN JESSICA RAE BERGAMINO'S GIRLHOOD X A HAUNTING

the reader, in a slipping Nancy Drew mask, follows clues with a magnifying glass through an explosive, visual, lyric, and devastatingly unique landscape to find the truth about girlhood, trauma, and Nancy Drew as a cultural icon.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jessica Rae Bergamino** is the author of *UNMANNED* (Noemi Press, 2018) as well as chapbooks from *dancing girl press* and *Sundress Publications*. She lives in Seattle, Washington.



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PAGE ONE

# ADVANCED PRAISE

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"Can Nancy, everyone's girl detective, finally solve the crime against generations of girls? Can she, after so many crimes solved through story, finally solve not the whodunnit (because we know who done it) but the mystery of the crime itself? That is what this somehow both gestural and capacious book dares to ask."

**—LUCY CORIN,  
AUTHOR OF THE SWANK HOTEL**

"Jessica Rae Bergamino's *Girlhood x A Haunting* summons the girl sleuth, Nancy Drew. Bergamino's gorgeous gurlisque poems take the reader on a tour of the horrors of high school ("Her ghosts push through her school's green halls, laughing their stuffy laugh"), child abuse ("When my father corners his daughter in detail he warns her, at least, tells her, Nancy, I'm going to talk to you like a grown-up now, treat you like one, break the glass of my anger and let it evergreen in you, all myrtle and clove"), and trauma ("where your memory splits from sight"). True crime is popular because viewing violation provides the illusion of control in a culture where so many are unsafe. Bergamino's book channels one of the OG feminist icons of the genre and empowers readers to navigate, perhaps even survive, the true crimes of childhood. I love this book."

**—CLAUDIA CORTESE,  
AUTHOR OF WASP QUEEN**

"If you like your true crime, noir, and haunted house to have a little tongue in their cheek, bite in their bark, and redemption in their existential dread Jessica Rae Bergamino's *Girlhood x A Haunting* is for you. It may also be about you. Were you, too, the queer dark-haired daughter—mouth stuffed with nails, body stuffed with brittle noise—of a conman and a bitter hiccup? Whose best friend, laughing like a silver bell, loved the worst men? Whose doctor flipped girl flesh inside out trying to disprove her mystery? Can you remember, yet? If it was anything like that, unbury yourself, Nancy. Look for me and [I] will look for you. And if it was nothing like that? Buckle-up buttercup. Golly and gasp, the poet rises from ash!"

**—DANIELLE PAFUNDA,  
AUTHOR OF ALONG THE ROAD EVERYONE MUST TRAVEL  
(WINNER OF THE SATURNALIA BOOKS 2023 POETRY PRIZE)**

"In girlhood, survival is not guaranteed. If you've had a girlhood you know this. It is a mystery to be solved. Because every brutal moment works to take that girl away, physically, psychologically. In Jessica Rae Bergamino's brilliant and harrowing, raw and intimate *Girlhood x A Haunting*, survival has a name. It's Nancy. And Nancy knows that survival is 'a grief she's tumbling towards' because 'surviving means seeing everything.' Nancy knows that to survive is to 'Steal the body back'."

**—EJ COLEN,  
AUTHOR OF WHAT WEAPONRY AND THE GREEN CONDITION**

"Forget clues—the poems in *Girlhood x A Haunting* confront a new kind of investigation. How do you solve the mystery of a body when the body is your own? Through Bergamino's signature and skilled voice, balanced formal tension, and adroit cross-examination of both history and memory, these poems build a new mythology for the queer detective work required of so many of us. Urgent, evocative, and, indeed, haunting, Bergamino has collected Nancy Drew and put her to work on the most vital of missions: self-reclamation. No other poet writing today could handle this case so deftly or with such clever care."

**—MEG DAY,  
AUTHOR OF LAST PSALM AT SEA LEVEL**

# LETTER TO THE READER

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## DEAR READER, DEAR, DEAREST –

Once upon a time, there was a place called New Jersey. For most people, New Jersey isn't real: it's parody, both the punch-line and the joke itself. For those of us who grew up there, it's the flame, the smoke, and the cigarette. You can leave it, but it doesn't leave you: your vowels are still fat and round as the moon in your mouth.

*Girlhood x A Haunting* isn't a book about New Jersey, but it's not *not* a book about New Jersey, either. Can you ever separate crimes from the place that they occur? Likewise, this isn't a book about my father, but it's not *not* a book about him either.

This isn't exactly a book about me, either. When I shared the earliest drafts of this manuscript—an anecdote about my father's con-man aspirations or something about the therapist who stalked me throughout high school – the response was almost always recognition. *A yes, I understand, or, more often, a that happened to me, too.*

Reader, this used to infuriate me. This is *my* story! It happened to me! Of course that didn't happen to *you*, too.

But then again, I spent years telling myself that what happened didn't look like other narratives of trauma, so it must not have been that bad. It must not have been real.

If you had a girlhood, you know you had to survive it. This book is for all of us who did.

*Girlhood x A Haunting* is a genre-queer collection where I task Nancy Drew with solving the mystery of that survival. I insert her into my story in order to shine her flashlight on the spots that are too tender to touch myself. Her perpetual girlhood makes her a perfect cipher for challenging the mysteries, touching the queer temporality of making a life out of a landscape of trauma.

I am writing from the other side of the continent, 3,000 miles away from where I grew up. I go to karaoke and sing Bruce Springsteen, because I also *sprung from cages on Highway 9*. People comment on my accent—how strong it is, how it isn't strong enough. I carry it in my mouth like prey.

# LETTER TO THE READER

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I never go home because there isn't, really, a home to go to. Shortly after I graduated high school, my father and step-mother moved out of the house we had lived in my junior and senior year. I don't know where they went—I know there were a few shelters and, eventually, my father lost himself to the lights and promises of Atlantic City. But a few months ago, I found myself driving up the New Jersey Turnpike in the pouring rain and, without thinking, got off at my old exit. Reader, some cliches are true.

I wasn't allowed to learn how to drive when I was in high school, so this was the first time I drove myself, alone, to the scene of the crime. I was going around the jughandle—a Jersey type of roundtable—and hit something. A raccoon? Some garbage? A teenage girl? My pride? My own sense of self? I don't know, but whatever it was, I lost the hubcap to my best friend's car.

The farm next to the house had become a horse-themed housing complex and, for a minute, I couldn't find the house in the rain. I must have driven past it three or four times before my eyes could even see it. Even though so much else had changed, it was still there: the same color paint, the shutters still chipped, the mailbox the same. My family hadn't lived there for more than twenty years, but it was just as haunted as ever.

There was nothing to do but sit take deep breaths and struggle to find myself again. Name five things I could see, four things I could touch, three I could hear. Then, I drove to get soft serve at the seventy-five-year-old stand next to the racetrack, just like I had done a hundred times with my father, just like he had done a hundred times with his. I ordered an orange-vanilla swirl.

Next month, Reader, they're tearing the racetrack down.

**ALL MY LOVE,  
JESSICA RAE BERGAMINO**

**THREE POEMS**

Nancy, you think you're the heroine, plucky and lucky and bright, but you're just a bomb that's waiting to go off, a light waiting to fuse itself to shadow. He shows her his hands and folds them in his lap.

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For a long time, Jessica thought she couldn't write herself without a Nancy. That a Nancy could be better blooming without her. Is a Nancy the key or is a Nancy the lock? How is a Jessica supposed to know? Nancy, I'm afraid to find the words to replace you. I've lived inside you for so long I can't remember where your story ends and mine begins. You'll have to try to save the day another way. But wake up, Nancy! Wake up! You're drowning!

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Nancy tells people more than they need to know. Her name is past tense, Drew instead of Draw. She's transitive, always already happened and happening, always already the train in the station and the crayon untipped on thin pink paper. She's not very tall but she's outgrown the weeds. Her bones are blown, her knees are rough and scabbed. She waves herself goodbye from the platform, choking on the engine's steam. Her lips are chapped, her mouth is stuffed with nails. Her pretty blouses strain against their pearls.