

**FINALIST, ALEX ALBRIGHT
CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE**

My Grandmother's Love Letters

by Lockie Hunter

A collage hangs above the hearth in my mountain home. Three sepia photos capture a towering woman in Americana moments. Tugging the fur collar of her wool coat at the National Monument, posing with one stockinginged leg on the running board of a car in the Blue Ridge Mountains, sitting beside her young love in a garden, the serviceberry bushes forming a halo around the couple's head.

An overlaying love letter finishes the collage. It reads: *Shell Creek, TN, 1926*. My grandfather spilled his feelings onto the page. "Life would be most miserable if I could not live in hopes of teaching you to love me." And teach her, he did. They lived in harmony until his early death.

My self-appointed job is to chronicle family history. Set the record. I created this collage from a letter found in her bedside drawer a week after her death and photos found between pages of Bibles, in wig boxes, under balls of yarn. The collage has been hanging above my hearth for over twenty years, setting the record of our family.

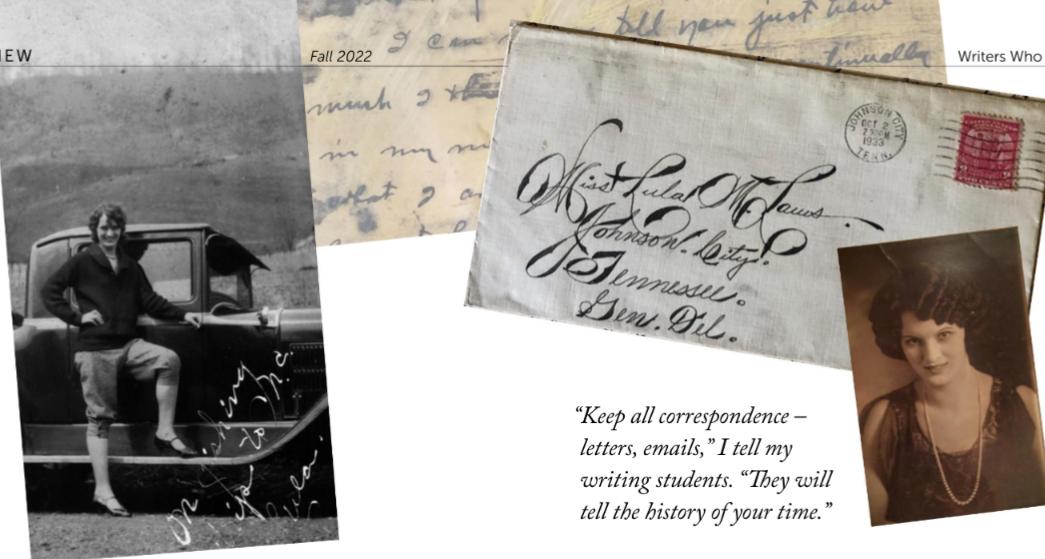
One weekend, my father examined the collage. "That's not your grandfather," he said.

"What? Of course it's him. That's his handwriting." I squinted at the letter affixed to the painting.

"He wrote the letters, but that's not him in the photo."

"Who the hell is it?"

LOCKIE HUNTER had three essays make it to the final round of consideration for the 2022 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize. Read the other two in the 2023 issues of *NCLR Online*. The author serves as associate producer of the poetry and prose radio program *Wordplay* on 103.3 FM in Asheville. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College in Boston and has taught creative writing at Warren Wilson College. Her work has appeared in several venues, including *Brevity*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and *Blue Mountain Review*. Lockie has received scholarships/grants from The North Carolina Arts Council and the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts.



"Keep all correspondence – letters, emails," I tell my writing students. "They will tell the history of your time."

"Honey," he pulled me close, "that could be any one of her many admirers."

In her glittering youth, she had been the first Miss Johnson City Tennessee – tall, likeable – and quirky.

She did not behave like other grandmothers. She favored red dresses, pink scarves, high heels and curly wigs. She spoke in a mix of Appalachian homespun phrases. *Pull your skirt down. We can see clear to the promised land!* Her nightstand boasted tiaras and long white gloves with pearl enclosures at the wrist. She stood in doorways, waiting to be escorted into rooms. Her high bosom laughed loud and often. In later years, she still drove, despite the revocation of her license. She did crochet, but even in that mundane task she brought an avant-garde beauty, the red yarn pooled on her lap, her long legs crossed, and her tongue sticking out as she concentrated. It wasn't until I saw the movie *Auntie Mame* that I had someone with whom to compare her. Unconventional. In high school, I wanted to be just like her.

I was especially impressed with the variety of ditties she used when judging my suitors.

"He's not worth shooting."

"He's so little that if I landed on him he'd be nothing but a greasy spot."

And perhaps the kindest phrase she ever bestowed. "There's nothing wrong with that boy that a good haircut won't fix."

Though she never approved of my men, she valued male companionship, as my father teased her about her past, with a hint of disapproval.

I was in college when she died. She left an assortment of garishly colored afghans, a closet full of clothes four sizes too big for me, a large collection of estate jewelry, and seven cut-glass punch bowls ("We never even drank punch," my

father said). She also left a sizable oil painting of a handsome man with a light gray mustache, dark gray bowtie. It hung on her mantle. My grandfather? No, J.C. Penney. As in the actual James Cash Penney, the businessman who founded the chain of department stores.

My sister and I compromised over the bounty of the estate. I told her she could keep the sparkly necklaces and the punch bowls, the cobalt glass vases and the silver serving dishes. I wanted J.C. Penney.

My grandmother had worked in the major department stores as a floor model. Decades later, they built a mall and shuttered all the downtown stores in her hometown. Mr. J.C. Penney was found in the dumpster behind his once-flourishing store. My grandmother (then in her seventies and a widow of many decades) rescued him and hung him above her mantle.

"I miss having a man around the house," she had said. I agreed. I, too, loved having a man around the house. Or a few –

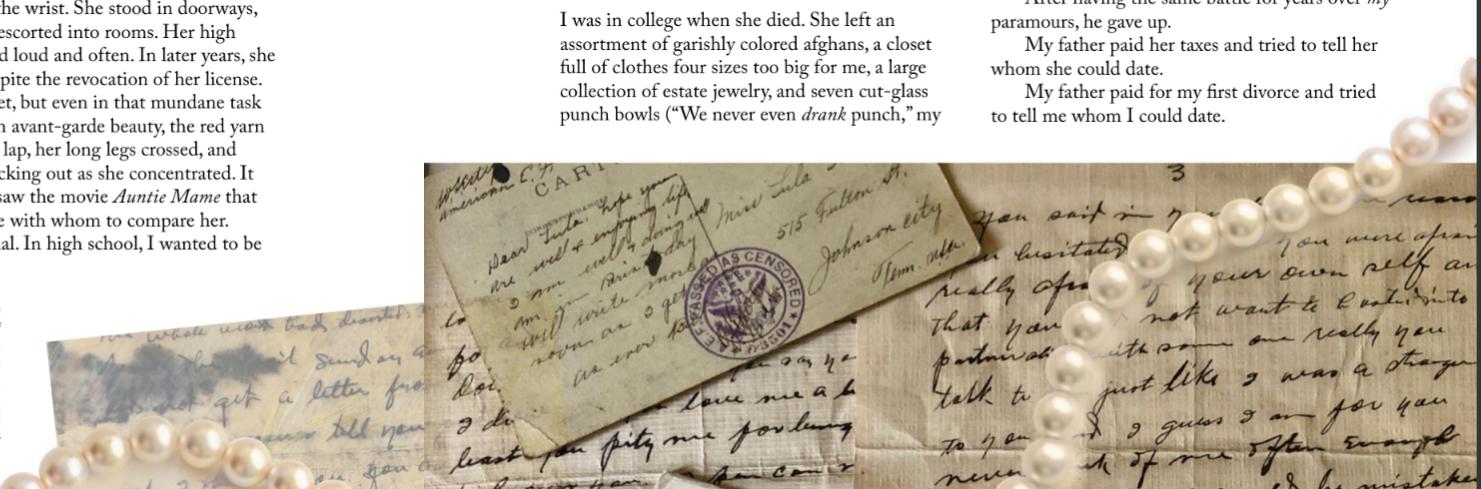
My father preferred to think of his mother as eccentric and dismissed many of the things she did, understanding the futility of changing her. Instead, he helped her behind the scenes. He pled her case at the DMV, paid all her citations, and restored her license. He threw out milk that was months past its prime.

After having the same battle for years over her paramours, he gave up.

After having the same battle for years over my paramours, he gave up.

My father paid her taxes and tried to tell her whom she could date.

My father paid for my first divorce and tried to tell me whom I could date.





"Look at you acting like I'm still living under your roof," I said to him.

A plastic shopping bag. Full of love letters. Letters written on graying paper, on stationery from the war office, on a modern typewriter. All addressed to my grandmother. From dozens of men. The contents were scribbled in different handwritings, many with photographs of her suitors.

A week after my father discovered the error in the collage above my mantle, my mother stood in her kitchen gripping a large blue plastic bag. "These are for you," she said. "Your father wanted to destroy them."

A plastic shopping bag. Full of love letters. Letters written on graying paper, on stationery from the war office, on a modern typewriter. All addressed to my grandmother. From dozens of men. The contents were

scribbled in different handwritings, many with photographs of her suitors – an older man in a fur jacket and matching hat. (*Something tells me that I am a fool.*) An angular man in a business suit. (*I thought and felt like the whole world was light.*) A young boy in an army uniform. (*Your letter filled me with hope.*) A teen in overalls with a fiddle. (*I think of you. Makes no difference what I'm doing.*)

I placed the bag of letters in my trunk, and drove away.

When I turned the corner I heard the bag move, heavy with history. It lent gravitas to the car. The letters moved with the car, spilling out into the trunk.

Nine months since I took possession of her letters and over twenty years since my grandmother's death, and her lovers' intentions still occupy my car. My children argue in the back seat, discussing the best flavor of ice cream. I fiddle with the GPS in the front seat. When I drive, the bag disgorges more of its contents, and my grandmother's amorous history intermingles with sweaty yoga mats, leftover school lunches and wet swimsuits. I have a similar bag of letters at home, love letters from boys whose last names I can't recall, photos of shared flats in San Francisco and trips to Yosemite. "Keep all correspondence – letters, emails," I tell my writing students. "They will tell the history of your time."

I place a bottle of seven-dollar red wine on top of one stack of letters. Tuesday wine. I hear it rolling in the trunk, a sassy gal's rolling pin, ironing out the words, marrying one letter with the other, flattening the history of the many men. Until I read my grandmother's letters, I had preferred the memories of my own men to be compartmentalized. *These* are the type of boys I date. *These* are the type of boys I marry. Marry the

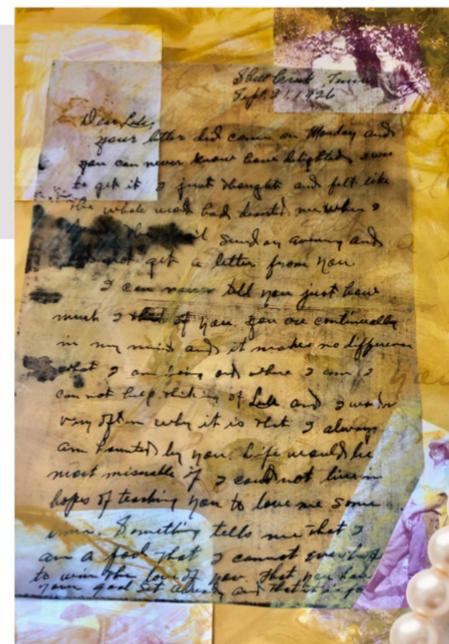
The spilled sweet tea saturates one letter, written in a fountain pen; the words smudge and assume new meaning. My grandfather's words soak into the words of other men. The words of the others do not diminish the love she had for him.

preppy, not the punker. But, in reality, I married both. If we love with abundance, does the man in the overalls vary so much from the man in the business suit? Did my punk rock wedding vary so much from my traditional wedding? The only thing that remains when I look at my photos is a profusion of love. My bag as full as hers. Love written with urgency.

I buy tomato plants and place them in the car trunk on a row of opened envelopes, postmarked from around the globe. The local plants take on exotic roots. One sits on Washington, DC, another on San Francisco. I spill a sweet tea inside the trunk and make no effort to clean it up. I've protected the few possessions I inherited from her (her flaking mother-of-pearl mirror is bubble wrapped, doomed to a life of sterility, preserved like a fly in amber), but I feel cavalier with her suitors' words.

The letters from my past lovers do not diminish my love for my husband. They amplify it. I wish to tell my twelve-year-old daughter, just now cusping into a life of love, that things are complicated. Memories smear together. I give her permission to be messy, explore layers of love, damn the reckoning! The spilled sweet tea saturates one letter, written in a fountain pen; the words smudge and assume new meaning. My grandfather's words soak into the words of other men. The words of the others do not diminish the love she had for him. Will my daughter one day rescue my love letters from the fire when my son unearths them and wants to burn them? Perhaps appreciation of multiple partners skips a generation?

I sort the letters, find the anxious loops of my grandfather's handwriting among the others,



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marry the correct photographs of my grandfather with his own words.

And now, I stare at my past error, a collage that holds his words and the photos of another man.

It is in this layering that the record is set.

I respect my grandmother's capacity to love in abundance and I wonder again if I, too, will be admired for loving in abundance, or will I be judged? I hold my eccentricities close, as she did, embrace my abundance or risk becoming a humorous postscript to my own history. ■