

## Cease, Cows

Life is short, and so is our fiction.

### Wedding Photo by Jan English Leary

My parents are standing on the steps of the church, squinting into the sun on the day of their wedding, nearly twenty-five years ago. My father's smile is confident; he's sure of his decision, eager about his new responsibilities. He holds her arm as he guides her, his new bride, from the church. My mother is looking off to her right and up a bit, away from him. At what? A well-wisher? A curious passerby? She doesn't smile. Some people might blame wedding jitters, but I know she is swallowing back the nausea of morning sickness, my six-week self nestled inside her, a surprise to be revealed later. She is only twenty-four but feels her choices narrowing, believes my father is her best chance and maybe her last. And of course, I am the real reason they're doing this. I look to see if I can discern any hint of her future unhappiness, of her dissatisfaction with the marriage she finally dared to leave after more than twenty years together. All I can see is two young people, shy and hopeful, strangers to each other.

The three-quarter profile shows off her straight nose and her brown hair, over-permed for the occasion. She is wearing her mother's satin dress with a high collar and covered buttons down the front — a full skirt under a Peplum jacket, not yet tight, but snug. Beneath her skirt the toe of a platform shoe peeks out. She told me her feet hurt that day, but she couldn't take off her shoes because her dress was too long. Besides, without her shoes, she'd throw off the stairstep alignment of the heads for the wedding party photos.



"Second thoughts" (image via Flickr user Carl Jones)

My father is wearing a cutaway coat and grey vest. He is rugged-looking, not tall, but solid. In the sun, his eyes are nearly closed. He is twisting his new ring with the thumb of his left hand. His right hand clutches her satin sleeve, wrinkling it, probably leaving an eager, sweaty palm print.

I see myself in the two of them – my mother's prominent front teeth, the crease between her eyebrows that makes us look worried even when we aren't. My father's hairline with the dip in the middle, the wide spacing of the eyes, eyes the color of doves. Eyes that chose not to see what was in front of him all those years. Eyes that still can't see that his wife has changed. What features might I pass on to a child? How will I be viewed in future photos? What will I see in them?

In the upper corner of the photo, I see for the first time what caught my mother's attention, drawing her gaze away from my father. A flash of white. A pigeon. Not a love bird or an eagle, or even a phoenix. A pigeon. The image is blurred as if the pigeon were attempting to escape the camera but got caught in mid-flight. From my perspective, it looks like the pigeon has been shot, halted on its way to freedom. Maybe my mother only saw the flight and all that it promised. In a way, we were both right.

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**Jan English Leary** holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and taught writing at the Francis W. Parker School, Harper College, and Northwestern University. She also served on the editorial board of *River Oak Review*. Her fiction and poetry have been published in numerous journals, and she has won and been a finalist for multiple awards.