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An Interview With Gail Hosking

Gail Hosking was born on an army base and continued her childhood as a military brat, living in southern Germany for a good part. She attended Alfred University, holds an MFA from Bennington College, and taught at Rochester Institute of Technology for fifteen years. Her books include the memoir *Snake's Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* (U of Iowa Press), *The Tug*, (poetry chapbook from Finishing Line Press) and a new book of poems *Retrieval* (Main Street Rag Press). Her essays and poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Post Road*, *River Teeth*, *Solstice*, *Reed Magazine*, *Upstreet*, *Lilith Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *Passages North*, *Consequence Magazine*, and *The Threepenny Review*.

GD: Retrieval does a fantastic job at expressing the unwanted inheritance of the Vietnam War. It illustrates the effects of war on family structures and society and provides emotional links and connections. In the collection, there are multiple mentions of two different parallel worlds lived simultaneously. Can you elaborate on these two worlds?

GH: One world, of course, is the actual war—what you read, what your father tells you, what people say. Letters arrived from a place you've never seen or heard of before. The other world is the one of high school and friends. Football games. Your Latin grades. America moves from day to day without any thought of war. No one talks about the war, so you divide your life into two parts in order to survive. You want more than anything to be a “normal” student. The poem “Split Frame” is an illustration of this. Two different

worlds exist at the same time, and one must carry those two worlds around in heart and mind.

The author Viet Thanh Nguyen says that the war is lived twice--once in the actual war and the other in memory. "Nothing ever dies," he says about war. This, I have witnessed, is the life of a soldier who has seen war.

Can you talk more about the collection's title? What are you hoping to retrieve with these poems? What does remembering allow us to do?

Retrieval refers to retrieving bodies after the battle is over. In literal terms, helicopters fly in and bodies are picked up, put into black bags and brought back to base. Retrieval also refers to our memory, which is returned after we want to forget. In essence, it's about going back to get what was lost, what must be brought back into full view, what's been hidden in a nation's psyche. Remembering lets us connect the past with the present. Hopefully, remembering helps us understand the present better.

Your position as an "army brat" is interesting and notably different from how many other children may remember their childhood. Would you say that as a child you were more aware of the realities of the world, and as a result, you "enjoyed the world of a child" less? In your poem "I've Got to Say," the speaker mentions their college students "in classes someone else pays for, grown children" playing at war. Can you elaborate?

Indeed, life of an army brat—at least in the 50s and 60s—was far different than the life of a civilian child. We lived separate from the civilian world on bases surrounded by barbed wire. I lived in Germany then and witnessed bombed out buildings left over from WWII. I heard stories, saw men without legs, and watched my father clean his weapons on the dining room table in preparation for the next war. I watched men drinking beer go over battles well into the night. I stood in front of the buildings at Dachau and saw the horrendous photographs of Jewish prisoners. When I returned to the United States and lived with my grandmother (going to a civilian school), I was surprised how little everyone knew about the Cold War. How much of their lives wrapped around school dances and family vacations. We had come from different worlds. I wanted more than anything to be a part of their world with swimming pool parties, etc. but I had already seen too much. I often felt lonely because of that.

I did not see that kind of understanding in the 18-year-olds I taught at RIT. The only people who came close to that kind of wisdom were the children of immigrants.

When crafting these poems, was there an instinct to have all the poems be in first-person point of view? How does the point of view aid in what you want your readers to take away from this collection?

The instinct for the “I” was there from the start. It demanded my possession of these stories, admitting to the emotions. In that way they read like a memoir, which also demands the “I.” I didn’t think of this as I was writing the poems, but I see now it was my way of forcing my generation to see what was going on as they tried to ignore the war. It was my way of being heard and seen after so many years of silence.

During the development of this book, what was the writing process like? Did you write with the intention of curating a collection, or did you realize they belonged together after the fact?

I did not for one second think of a collection as I was writing these poems. In fact, I rarely took my poems seriously because my first loyalty was to essays and memoir. Even though many were published, I never thought of putting them together in one book. But as time went on, it became obvious to me that I rarely let go of the theme of war. Eventually I gave the collection to a friend/poet/editor who chose the strongest poems, put them in order, and gave me permission to send the manuscript out. I think had I been thinking all along about curating a collection, I might have been too self-conscious, which is not good for the writing process.

There is much pain, anger, and sadness within these poems. Poems like “For Richard Nixon on the 40th Anniversary of My Father’s KIA,” “White House,” or Ode to Captain Iacabelli: Company Commander” are hyper-specific and seem to contemplate blame and the consequences of choices. The value of blaming extends an opportunity for accountability. Who do you think is to blame?

Blame was indeed not my intent, but of course, it’s there. The president, the nation, all of us. Our country makes choices. If you look at our history, you can see that we are a nation of war. Accountability sometimes comes with time, as it has about Vietnam on a national level. People admit how wrong it was to blame the soldiers themselves. “The higher ups”—what my father called those in charge—are finally admitting, too, how wrong the war was. Vietnamese are writing their side of the story. The bigger picture keeps arriving, and now it’s far easier to see all those details our nation kept hidden for so long. Blame is a big word, and it does not cancel out what’s happened, nor is it a word to linger over. Blame gets us nowhere. Only the truth will help us.

In poems like “Lawdy Lawdy, Miss Clawdy” and “What’s going on?” you incorporate lyrics from songs that have had an enormous impact on American society. How did these songs and artists influence your writing? What is the significance behind borrowing these lyrics?

The music of those years was essential to my upbringing. We had no TV in Germany then and only one American radio station called “The Stars and Stripes.” That station played the top one hundred songs from America, had shows like “Gunsmoke” and “Dragnet,” and gave us the news of the world beyond our base. My mother was young and loved to dance and listen to American songs. She went to the Elvis movies on base. She collected records and played them constantly. When I came home from school, she would be dancing with her friends. So the music is embedded in my body. I cannot see images from that time without a background song list. Though not my intent at first, I see how the songs included in the poems are a way of witnessing those two worlds at the same time: the world of the Cold War and the Vietnam War at the same time as life for a child continues. These worlds live side by side. That’s one of the main points of my writing. There are families that are affected as political decisions are being made in the distance.

In your poem, “Sometimes,” I enjoy how you express the “both/and” aspect of love. You say, “sometimes love divides.” Do you still feel that “love” is the dividing factor of our country versus pride?

I’m not sure if love is a dividing factor in our country. Pride, of course, is there. But love is actually the link that keeps us together. In spite of awful things happening, when it comes down to it, love most often takes over. I knew my father loved me, for instance, even as he left me. My father’s love for the military/this country did indeed divide us at times. There was no other way around it. “We are military, Honey,” my mother used to say, which was meant to explain why we lived as we did.

What was the intention behind the form of the book? Why three distinct sections?

The section idea was my editor/poet/friend’s idea. I gave her a pile of poems and she was the one who helped me order the pile, get rid of the poems that didn’t work, and encouraged me to send it out. Now that I think about it, I see that memory itself is divided, comes to us in sections. Time is divided. You have the childhood part, the essence of the war part, and then the post part. More or less.

In your author’s note, you say, “writing is a good way to spend a life.” What brought you to writing as an outlet?

As a child I used to write letters to pen pals. I was a reader. But writing essays and memoir and poems came to me late in life. I started writing about my father (only for my sons) when I came close to the age he was at his death (42) and then I was encouraged to write a book using the photographs he left behind. It became *Snake’s Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* and was published by the University of Iowa Press. I went back to school to learn to

write better. I got an MFA from Bennington and then could not stop writing. Along the way I have had many essays and poems published. Now it's just a way of life. A way to make sense of the world. A way to connect with all that I witnessed growing up.