

2017

## Casting Off

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### Recommended Citation

Guyton, Claire (2017) "Casting Off," *PoemMemoirStory*. Vol. 16, Article 35.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/pms/vol16/iss2017/35>

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## CASTING OFF

A few days before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday I felt in my fingers what I feared was an early sign of arthritis. No, I told my work friend Angela, who is only a few years short of retirement and knows the symptoms of arthritis too well, nothing felt stiff. Nothing ached. I flexed my fingers, then typed on an imaginary keyboard. “They feel... urgent?” Like they couldn’t stand to be still. By the next day both hands buzzed with vibration, though Angela swore she couldn’t hear the low hum, and neither of us could see the tremble I felt. The vibration was contained in my veins, then, or deep in my bones. I laced and unlaced my boots, rubbed my cuticles with lotion, and invented reasons to type. If I kept the hands moving, the buzzing was quieter, the urge to pound the nearest hard surface with my fists suppressed.

The night before my birthday, instead of crawling into bed after brushing my teeth, I sat at the dressing table in my mother’s old room to brush my hair with her gilt and rhinestone brush. It was an early gift from my father and the only thing I saved. The hands loved the cool metal and the heavy sweep through my thick, hip-length hair. The right hand would do ten strokes on its side of my centered part, then transfer the brush to the left hand for the other side. Ten, then another hand-off. The buzzing hushed to a sweet whisper. The glass gems flashed in the lamplight like fireflies.

When my scalp was so tender I winced with each descent of the brush, I stopped. The hundreds of strokes had brought so much oil, that from my part to my jaw my flattened hair clung to my skull and shone like glossy black paint. I smiled at my Mona Lisa face, ignored the answering roar in my ears and the frantic pulse from wrists to fingertips, and climbed into my mother’s bed.

The next morning I awoke early with my blanket twisted and bunched in a dense pile across my midriff, my legs shivering, and my hair in a hundred braids. My hands were running up and down my chest, buttoning and unbuttoning the long neckline of my nightgown. I could

hardly hear my thoughts but decided that wasn't necessarily such a bad thing, then headed for the shower, where I stayed much too long while the fingers lathered, rinsed, and repeated many times over. They loved the massaging and caressing almost as much as I enjoyed the relaxed strumming in my ears.

I had to focus to control them and to ignore the ever-rising pitch and clatter of their frustrated vibration whenever I forced them to provide the usual, mundane service of well-behaved hands. The kind of focus that just wears you down. On the way to work I let them go. I steered the car with my knees while my fingers flicked dust from the dashboard, refolded papers I'd left in the console, found a left-right rhythm opening and closing the driver's side window and then the glove box... the window and then the glove box... the window and then the glove box....

When I met with Ray in Marketing to discuss the right slant for the next brochure, I got so tired of the shrieking vibration that I closed my eyes for just a moment, while he was flipping through my proposal. When I opened my eyes again I discovered that my hands had reached across the table to pick nubs from Ray's sweater. He told me gently that he never dates co-workers. I thanked him for his candor. At lunch the hands spent twelve minutes rearranging Angela's carrot sticks. She presented me with a birthday cupcake, then trashed the carrots and advised me to find a distraction, to *occupy* myself. "Here's a thought—try dating." I shook my head, hoping to reduce the purring in my ears. "Well, I won't be dating Ray," I said, and told her about our misunderstanding. She responded by increasing her volume, her lips peeling away from her teeth. "I SAID TRY KNITTING." She leaned closer. "KNIT. TING."

Increasingly that afternoon my hands went to my hair, where they were most calm. The silky strands soothed the sting in the finger pads, slowed the pulse in the palms. The hum became a soft melody whenever I let them braid. Sometimes they would wrap themselves over and over in long handfuls, then hang from my scalp in tangled nests. I spent a lot of time in a bathroom stall, then decided to leave work early to investigate the yarn store Angela told me about. I walked the aisles of floor-to-ceiling yarn with my fingers twined in my hair, feeling uninspired. But then I saw a faint purple just the color of sweet peas and brushed it with an index finger. Both hands plunged into the skein of plush yarn and *would not let go*.

Soon a tote bag stuffed with yarn and needles was my constant com-

panion. I knitted through staff meetings, phone conferences, lunch. I created the “knit break,” an excuse to step outside, hugging my latest scarf-in-progress, every time our most addicted smoker rose from his desk, already reaching for his Camels. I could manage about twelve stitches at a red light.

Each stitch was a tap of the bow on the violin, or, depending on color and texture, wind over harp strings or even a jazzy run at the piano. As long as I knitted my life had a soundtrack, the light springy movie music that tells you to relax, settle in—a joke is coming or a reunion. She got the job, his cancer is in remission. As long as I worked the needles and slipped the yarn through my fingers a warm pool of energy filled my palms, radiating in liquid lines through my knuckles and into my fingertips, glazing long, strong fingernails. When I couldn’t knit I kept the hands as busy as possible, but just the promise that they would soon be raveling the soft yarn, tap-tapping the needles, weaving strands into fabric kept them in good form, the faint murmuring between music, the white noise of patience. As long as my current project was in sight, the hands were content.

My colleagues seemed delighted by the tote bag attached to my hip, the scarves sprouting from my fingers, my willingness to talk about my new passion. Angela said she could see the glow of creativity in my cheeks, and my boss told me twice that he was pleased to see me so engaged. I was used to my quiet, dim cubicle, and thankful for the space everyone had given me since Mother passed. So the new attention was a bit overwhelming for me, but the hands loved it. Whenever anyone admired my progress, the fingers would rev up the pace a bit and exaggerate their movements.

My hands made four pear-shaped scarves before they developed the right needle rhythm and played out the yarn at a consistent tension. That fifth scarf was a beauty, eight feet long and straight-edged as a sheet of paper. And it was a study in simplicity—the hands and I had decided to use only the most basic knitting for every scarf, the garter stitch. Even purling was a mystery to us. A mystery soon to be solved, for the smashing success of Scarf # 5—even strangers at the grocery store and the gas station couldn’t help stroking the end I tossed over my shoulder—made the hands ambitious.

We graduated to socks and then to hat-and-mitten sets, mastering the rib and then the seed stitch, the stockinette and the reverse stockinette.

When I had fortified every relative and co-worker with knitted accessories, the hands and I went on a cardigan tear. We twisted and plaited the stockinette, we went after the simple, chevron, and diamond variations on the seed stitch, and then we increased our repertoire with the basket, the quilted diamond, the waved welt.

In those days the soundtrack was more dramatic, resonant with promise but tipping sometimes into unexpected melodies that made me leap to my feet to pace the room while my fingers worked. Over time I found that I could influence the composition with color and texture, preferring to take up Easter pastels when I wanted an early night and a living room minuet, simple and delicate, my feet in slippers. Or I leaned into a chili pepper red with charred-black accents, my feet pounding on the mud room's stone floor, the heels of my boots applauding. We made our own symphonies, the hands and I.

As we became expert in every stitch and technique—casting on with confidence, casting off with laughs of triumph—I invested more in our labors, buying silk yarns in intense, hand-dyed jewel tones, rustic wools in the hues of a desert landscape. I chose for beauty or shock, for the pleasure of scent or the taste at the back of my tongue, throwing over any wish to control the music. I wrapped myself in the colors of a cashmere pashmina we made with special love for Angela, weaving strands of mellow Spanish sherry with peanut shells. We caressed, danced. Breathed in the scent of cooked raisins and toasted wheat, tasted the metallic salt of the needles, let the notes fling themselves at one another. The hands got nimbler, greedier, eating up the yarn so fast I was tossing off a sweater every couple of days. When Angela pointed out that I had far too many items to give away, that it was time to start selling, I went straight from the lunchroom to my boss's office to quit my job, then launched an Internet business.

If I have one good quality, it's my ability to adapt. When Mother was diagnosed, I moved her into my new home so I could see to her needs myself. I didn't waste time thinking, planning, discussing. I just did it. A 16-month death sentence turned into seven years of salvaged life, limited mostly to our home, true, but rich nevertheless with shared memory and a quiet, warming peace. I approached my new business the same way and within a month I had a list of orders as long as that first scarf, but it wasn't enough. The hands streaked through the projects and scrambled for more. We knitted a cozy for my phone, the television, the computer.

We knitted a desk skirt and a shower curtain. Each remote control now lived in a ribbon-tied knitted baggie, and a knitted tube with a slit sheltered my paper towels. The instruments were all brass.

Still, I couldn't get ahead of the insatiable hands. In the garage I'd piled stacks of bedspreads and decorative pillows, six crates of puffy Christmas ornaments, scores of sweater dresses and shawls and a set of special orders to be posted the next day. Every movable object in my house had been draped, cozied, or bagged. I brooded on possibility, thankful for a rare, calming, fluttery flute that accompanied the hands on a dark and testy afternoon. They were making fast work of an intricate afghan in twelve shades of purple for a Finnish folk singer who had put his order in only yesterday.

Then my eureka. The windows had been rattling in the early spring gale, its grieving wail winding through the seams of my Cape Cod when the idea announced itself: "A *house cozy!*" My shout stilled the hands for an instant before they took on an even more frenzied pace in their dizzied expectation of such an enormous assignment.

The hands and I chose a thick, rust-colored chenille for the house cozy, a nod to the brick home of my childhood. We unraveled the skeins, stroking the fabric, and I buried my face in it, gulping the aroma of my mother's brownies. I worked up a simple pattern based on a tissue box cozy, and we began knitting panels I would edge with hard plastic rods before whipping them together with fishing line. For old-time's sake we used the original, the tried-and-true garter stitch. On dance nights I conjured mosh pits and slammed into arm chairs, my shocked hands temporarily stalled by the antics of my youth.

Angela and I still have lunch every week, so she was the first to learn about the new project. A day or two later I mentioned my giant cozy plan when chatting with my neighbor at the mailbox, and that Friday a newspaper reporter knocked on my door. I was loath to appear on camera, but the hands were ecstatic. There was no denying them, so I taped a spot for Channel 9 while the hands pranced and posed, completing only about half the stitches they could normally manage. I thought that would be the end of it, but no. The whole town went into carnival mode, and soon I was calling in regular progress reports to a local radio show, though I had to struggle with my fingers to get them to dial the number. The hands were only interested in being *seen*. I got used to the fuss and grew bold enough to use these opportunities to market my business, and

now I have enough orders to fund a comfortable retirement.

When Darla, the golden-haired, toothy TV reporter for public television, asked what made me go so crazy for knitting, I said, “Gosh, I’m not sure I can put my finger on it.” She didn’t react to that, just smiled, waiting. So I said, “It’s the seductive whisper of the loops as they slip over the needles, the caress of the yarn raveling through my fingers...” I could see she liked that, so I leaned in, my hands maintaining their usual furious pace. “It’s that spun sugar smell of soft, the lemony lush of silk and woodsy bite of wool, the lilting lyric of a perfectly executed stockinette—” The hands had dropped the work to cover my lips, but I didn’t fight them—Darla was wrapping up. “I love interviewing artists,” she said, teeth up to her hairline. “I always hear something fascinating!” Of course I didn’t tell her about my hands. “I just love to create,” I said, on her way out the door.

The yarn shop, hardware store, and a church that insisted my knitting was powered by Jesus put together the money to hire a helicopter. A local engineer volunteered his services, and between him and the pilot, the placing of the house cozy could not have been simpler, though the news teams did their best to create suspense with their tense voices and arched eyebrows. I gave four triumphal interviews, then knitted through my own rousing speech—“Knit, Purl, Dream”—at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, where our strutting, shiny-faced Mayor wielded the gigantic, fake scissors.

I would have chosen a yellow closer to butter for the ribbon, but otherwise the afternoon pleased me and the hands, who were slumming on a pair of knee socks. I waved, then lifted the narrow flap of the cozy, noting that I couldn’t have positioned it better—plenty of room to open the door—and stepped into my mud room, dropping the flap over the rainfall of applause and some goof-off golfer’s call, “In the hole!”

I stood in the thick, darkened hush. The chenille pushed into the windows and the gaps in the siding, so soft, sweet. The house settled, pressed. That familiar, now so gentle, between-knitting wave of buzzing closed over me, and I relaxed into my sanctuary, ready to knit more of the things I know how to make.

No. I was wrong. The house cozy is not my masterpiece. The house cozy is my shield. For once I am as eager as my hands, for once we have the same impulse. The story “Crazed Knitter Stitches House!” dies a quick and easy death, and the phone stops ringing. I put a hold on business orders.

The music now is the hum of attention and planning, and, as the knitting progresses, conversation. I pass along my mother's stories as the shapeless, bunched mass of yarn in my lap grows into my little one, who will spend most of her time there once I'm done with her. "Your Grandmother was born in a place called White Russia," I tell her, "a country far, far away. She spent her childhood in a city called Minsk, where the buildings look like they're topped with ball gowns." She was famous for her refrigerator pickles and beautifully worded thank you notes, but of course those accomplishments wouldn't impress a child. "She made her very own rose. Did you know a person can create a flower?" My little gal is made with top-dollar ivory silk yarn I kiss every ten or twelve stitches. Wasn't born with much hair, just a scattering of Arabica brown I curl into ringlets. She likes carrots and potatoes with gravy and begs me to play Johnny Cash, of all things, early Johnny Cash.

Her older sister has a darker complexion, light champagne. Her Arabica brown hangs to her slim shoulders. She's a sweetie, but of course the hormones will soon descend, and who knows what I'll have to contend with then. For now I disguise my advice in hapless stories about my own school days. How I tried to manage the diplomacy of unwanted Valentines. Or the day I mastered the multiplication table by copying it over and over, unreadably small, on a paper towel my mother saved for years until one day she said, "Do you remember this?" and it fell apart in her hands. I'm considering easing the transition to middle school with a puppy, as my mother did with me, but like the hormones, middle school is still a ways off. The girls like to say how glad they are I never had a boy, and the truth is, I'm glad, too—what do I know about raising a boy?

My mother-in-law's face requires a variety of rib stitches, of course. Her color is good, medium peach melba, creamy with that splash of raspberry pink. I put special care into her back and hips to protect against a fall. Nana tries my nerves with her statements about how *she* always cooked a stew, and how *she* was taught to set a table, but she means well, and I know I will be thankful when she's gone that I was willing to bring her into our home when she needed us most. I know my husband appreciates the allowances I make for his hunched, arthritic mother.

He is the tour de force. I select multiple wools to blend the exact color of his tan—dark champagne, toasted almond, desert sand. I use the hand-dyed amethyst for those movie star eyes my mother would have so admired, and a black and gray mix for that full head of salt and pepper. Sure his shoulders are on the narrow side, and yes, he has a paunch. To



me, these things only make him more lovable. I will say the same when his hair recedes, when he needs glasses all the time, when moles sprout along his ears. I set aside a mellow hazelnut silk for this last, a small skein it took me an hour to select.

When I have seamed the last arm to shoulder, I seat my family at the dining room table. Sheltered under our house cozy, we are free to keep each other company with no distractions. Johnny Cash plays low in the background, the girls are poised over a well-scarred Monopoly board. Coffee steams at my husband's place, his soft hand curled around the handle of the over-sized mug. I have nothing at my place, because I need nothing. I am silent, eager to watch and listen, too full to make space for conversation. I can say only this, after sighing and looking around my table for the better part of an hour: It is good.

The hands are silent, too. They rest in my lap, still as stone.