

[Grout](#) [1]

January 26, 2015 [Flash Nonfiction](#) [2]

Flash Nonfiction by Mary Collins

So Few Pieces, So Many Gaps



At seventy, when you agreed to break your silence about my father, you began with a reminder about the muddiness of your memory, an allusion to the shock treatment I'm still not certain you ever had.

Your acquiescence was a needy one. You were lonely, and I was an ocean away. My father had been gone almost forty years. He left before I was old enough to remember anything. You'd never forgiven him and lived all those years as if he were only yours to hide.

But I had a child of my own now, and I watched with tender bemusement as he came to know his father. I am entitled

to know mine, I told you.

Once we set to turning the earth and sifting the ash, I sensed you selecting what to lift out and share and what to leave in the ground. I was prepared for you to incline toward the retentive. Every day of your adult life, you'd downed a double dose of laxative to ease the angst of letting go. You said your habit had its roots in boarding school, in the unkindness of nuns who made you wait, hold it in, and offer up your suffering for the redemption of souls in purgatory.

Ours was a hopeless journey. I was eager to arrive at *Who He Was*, but you were unwilling to leave *What He'd Done*. I almost put the phone down on you an hour into our second session. In the end, the digging did you in, and we had to stop.

I minded the gaps. All you claimed you'd lost and no longer had to give me. It was hard to let it go, thinking I could ever know. You were the only one left to ask.

With little to write about my father, I wrote instead about a mosaic I'd seen in ninth grade, one that was part of a traveling exhibit of artifacts unearthed from the ashes of Pompeii. Out of tiny tiles, a sturdy floor had been rendered, and I remembered noticing how crucial certain pieces were to the authentic whole—the single white tile in the black eye of a beautiful youth—how without that one piece, he'd never have been truly exhumed, the expression in that eye never brought to light.

Your tales of my father were dot-to-dot puzzles, random points that, when connected, were more suggestive of what was missing than of any meaningful shape. There was never an eye.

Forgetfulness was your ruse and refuge. Until, five years ago, you forgot to keep things hidden: your banking password, your laxatives left on the kitchen table, your life with my father rising up through the ashes. You were 78. One evening that summer, out of the blue—the darkening blue—you began the tale of his leaving by unearthing the woman he left with.

Her name was June Grout, you told me, tiny bats flitting above us on the border of your lawn, an empty wine bottle canting between us on a paving stone. *He brought her into the kitchen. He said, This is June, the woman I love.*

Fifty years you'd held it in. Night closed in beyond the yew hedge, and moths beat themselves against the outside light, and we took ourselves indoors. You went to bed forgetting your laxative, and I went forgetting nothing.

June Grout: her real name, however fantastically improbable. Made of the stuff that sits between the pieces, sets the pattern, holds the shape that given the right conditions will remain in place for years, no matter how deep the earth, the ash, the hiding place.

Art Information

- ["The Alexander Mosaic: Naples Museum 34"](#) [3] (originally from Pompeii) © Amphipolis; Creative Commons license.



Mary Collins won the *Solstice Literary Magazine* 2014 Award for Creative Nonfiction, the 2014 National League of American Pen Women's Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition for creative nonfiction, and a 2013 *Brevity* blog prize; she was a finalist for the 2014 [Writers@Work](#) [4] nonfiction prize. She's received two scholarships to attend the Norman Mailer Writers Colony in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Originally from England, she lives on Cape Cod with her husband and son and is working on a series of linked essays exploring how—for good or ill—the family-of-origin stories we hear as children shape the relationships we make as adults.

Why is this flash piece nonfiction?

In a recent interview, Charles Baxter writes of fiction, 'A story turns on a light; beauty and truth are its illuminated products.' This is, of course, true of nonfiction, too. Blessed (or cursed) as I am with rich real-life material, the scope for shaping nonfictional stories is bounded only by integrity. I can dig toward truth and aim for beauty.

What fiction might have afforded me in this piece is the luxury of filling in the gaps. Though I have for years minded the gaping holes in my mother's stories of my father, I have come to realize that they *are* the story. They give me the scope to write toward, and about, the not-knowing.

The story within my story may, for all I know, be pure fiction, given my mother's proclivity for fantastical tales. *June Grout*. The name might seem too implausible to carry its own weight were I to write her as fiction.

Charles Baxter quote is from "[Charles Baxter on Opening a Story the Right Way.](#)" [5] *Bibliophile's* "Write Start" series, January 19, 2015.

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[4] <mailto:Writers@Work>

[5] <http://www.biographile.com/write-start-charles-baxter-on-opening-a-story-the-right-way/38296/>