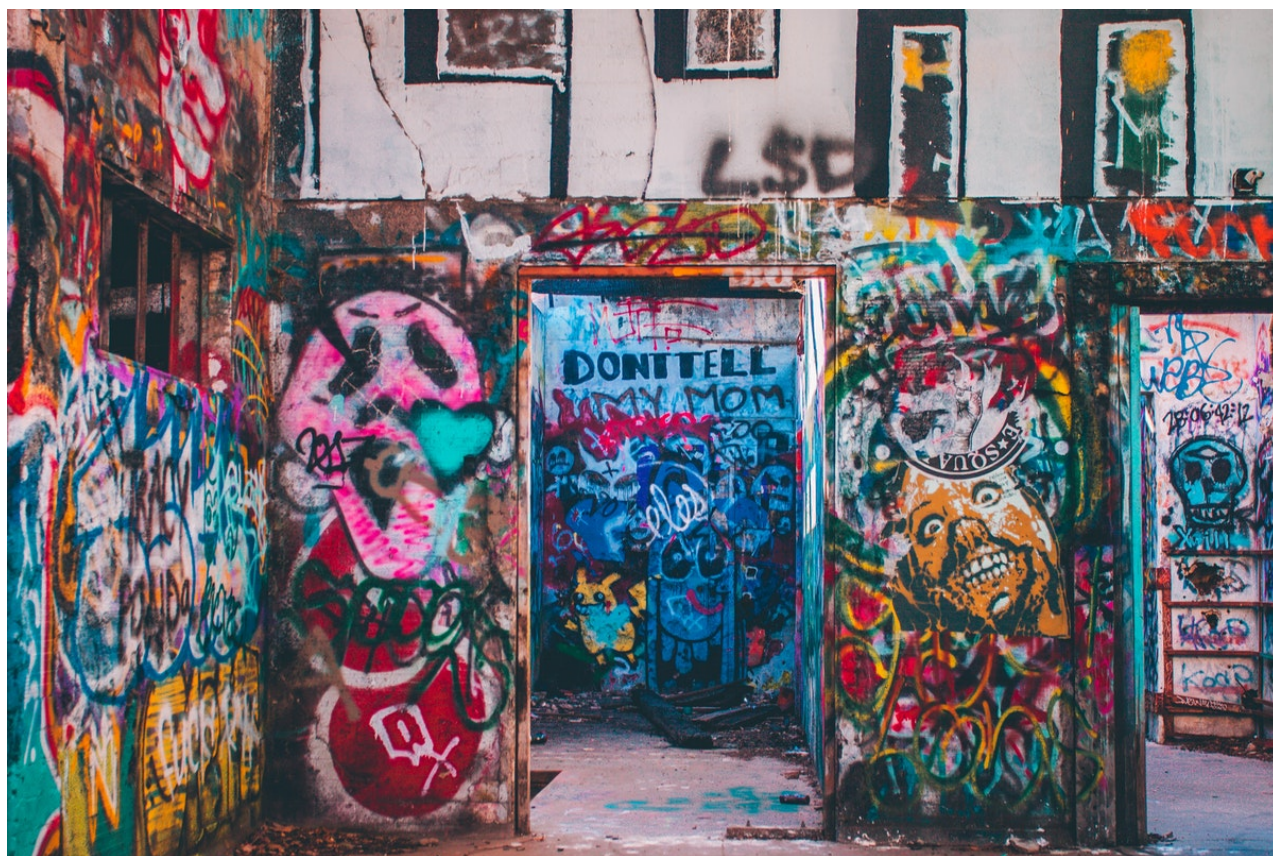


**HUNGER MOUNTAIN REVIEW <**  
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VCFA Journal of the Arts

**An Embarrassment of Riches**  
**Wendy Fontaine**

**Winner, Creative Nonfiction Prize**



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There is a moment when my car rounds the corner at our subdivision, when I glide past the cool blue community swimming pool and onto Mira Vista Street—a quiet cul de sac in southern California, with a name that means “look at the view” in Spanish—and think to myself this cannot be real. This cannot be my house, my address. It is not my front yard, not my three-car garage, not my plump and rounded hedges, pruned perfectly to look like clouds.

I think about the real occupants of this home, people who will be here any minute now, back from vacation or the supermarket, sacks of groceries in each arm. They'll wonder what I'm doing here, what my family is doing here. They'll call the cops and make us leave.

In the weeks before we moved, I kept photos of this place on my computer. I tabbed through pictures of the kitchen, of the living room, of the jacuzzi tub in the gleaming master bath. My husband and I paid the security deposit. We took the measurements and called a moving company, but I never really thought it would come to pass. Houses like this don't happen for people like me, people who grew up in mobile homes and trailer parks, on dead-end streets with no streetlights, in factory towns that smell like sulfur from the chemicals used to make paper.

And yet, my key always works. I open the front door and see my shoes, my chair, the one plant I have managed to keep alive. No cops come. No bewildered strangers arrive. On social media, friends write, “Congratulations on your new home! You deserve it!” They send cards and gifts, sometimes even checks. I am tempted to send it all back. To say it's just a rental. By that, I mean it's not really mine. I do not belong here.

\*

When I was a kid in rural Maine, I never invited friends to my home. Not for sleepovers. Not for dinner or to play video games. I didn't want them to see where I lived. Their houses were big, two stories, with dining rooms and staircases, grassy yards and basketball hoops in the driveway. Ours was a mobile home, long and narrow, made of aluminum and steel. We put it in a trailer park, then moved it to a dead-end street behind the grammar school.

Our place was small and simple, with wood-paneled walls and brown polyester carpeting. A dark, narrow hallway connected three bedrooms. Mine first, then my brother's, our parents' all the way at the end. The kitchen contained the basics—oven, refrigerator, cabinets for dishes and food. Mom set plants along the windowsills. Ivy, a spider plant, a cactus that bloomed bright pink every December. In the living room, bookcases held a set of encyclopedias and Dad's vinyl records—records he liked to listen to after having a few beers.

For years, I thought people who lived in regular houses were rich. I pictured them eating dinner every night at the kitchen table, then huddling around a glowing fireplace for family conversations. My parents worked in the local shoe factory. We ate spaghetti or Hamburger Helper from TV trays in the living room, in front of Wheel of Fortune or the evening news. In the winter, a portable kerosene heater kept us warm.

Maybe it's not that I didn't want my friends to see where I lived. Maybe it's that I didn't want them to see how I lived. My father didn't just drink when he listened to records. He drank all the time—workdays, weekends, birthdays, anniversaries. I once saw him crack a beer at 8:30 in the morning.

\*

Here, in the new house, my first thought upon waking is that this place is too big. The master bedroom sprawls like a hotel suite, with a stand-up shower and

jacuzzi tub, his-and-hers walk-in closets. I barely make it to the toilet in time when I have to pee.

In the hallway, I run my hand along the smooth wood bannister by the stairs. I curl my toes into the thick, blond carpets. Carpets that show everything. Carpets that stain. Rich people don't think about that, do they? They don't think about how much work it will be to keep it all clean?

My daughter's room feels like a separate wing of the house. I pass the staircase and cross the hall to check on her, relieved at the sight of her curled-up, sleeping body. Good, I think, she's still here. But where did I expect her to go? A person could get lost in a place like this.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I make coffee at a countertop dedicated solely to my brewer. Can you believe that? An entire countertop with only one purpose? I pad barefoot over tile flooring to the refrigerator and retrieve the milk. Then I reach into a drawer and fish around for a spoon. On our second day here, my husband, James, labeled all the cabinets and drawers with blue tape and black marker so we'd know where things went: drinking glasses over the sink, measuring cups in the bottom drawer, trash bags in the cabinet by the dishwasher. We kept the labels up for over a month, trying to learn how to live here.

\*

After the shoe factory closed and moved its operations overseas, my father started a new job at the upholstery plant thirty miles away. He got home late, skies already dark, his breath already yeasty and sour from the beers he drank on the carpool ride home. I didn't know then he was an alcoholic, that he was self-medicating his depression one six-pack at a time. I just felt nervous about what kind of mood he'd be in when he walked through the door. Would he be tipsy and loose, complaining about taxes and frost heaves and politicians not doing enough

to protect manufacturing jobs? Or would he be sullen and angry, his rage directed at us?

In our trailer, we had no place to hide. If I'd forgotten to fold the laundry, if I'd left the bathroom light on at the end of the hall, he grounded me. If I played his Simon & Garfunkel record when he wasn't home, just to hear "Bridge Over Troubled Water," he grounded me. I didn't try to explain or defend myself. That would only make things worse. I took my punishment, head down and mouth shut.

I did invite someone over once—a girl from school. Her family lived in a trailer too. Then her father built them a regular home, large and made of wood. It sat back in a field away from the road. One Friday she came over to spend the night. I don't remember what we did, if we watched movies or played games. I don't recall how late we stayed up. What I do remember is her fear. Fear of my dad, of the long shadow he cast in our home. She refused to come out of my bedroom. I apologized and pacified and begged her not to go. But early the next morning, she called her mother and left.

I didn't blame her. I wanted to leave too.

\*

One day, when I was in junior high, I walked home down our dead-end street and saw pieces of gray carpeting stapled around the base of our trailer. Dad must have gotten it at work, at the upholstery plant, which made carpeting for automobiles. The stuff on our trailer looked like what you might find in the back of a minivan or a station wagon—dark, dense, scratchy. My friends, I hoped, would never see it.

I knew what he was trying to do. He wanted to protect us for winter. The carpeting would help keep cold air out of the space beneath our trailer. Mobile homes sit up

off the ground about two feet, high enough for wind and frost to get underneath. His undertaking was practical, sensible. I only wished it weren't so ugly.

Despite his efforts, our pipes froze every winter, sometimes in the middle of the night or Sunday morning before church. The freeze infuriated him. He yelled and cursed, shoved aside the furniture. Then he crawled under the trailer to look for the frozen spot. My job was to hold the hair dryer like a gun at the place where the pipes came into the house. If I held it straight, if I held it low, then maybe the ice would melt. Maybe he wouldn't be mad anymore. But after an hour or so, my arm ached with the weight of that dryer, with the burden of anger, poverty and shame. I had to set it down and take a break.

\*

Truth is, the house on Mira Vista is just a regular house. Big, yes. But not extravagant. It looks like every other home on our block, in our suburban neighborhood north of Los Angeles. The rent is about the same as any other apartment or bungalow in the city.

It feels indulgent, though, like a fancy dress that doesn't quite fit. Like the clothes my mother bought for me at yard sales held by other mothers with girls a year or two older than me. On Saturday mornings, we'd wake up early and drive to their houses. I'd climb out of the car, anxious to see what they had for sale but also a little embarrassed by my own need. Mom made me try on everything—the dresses, the sweaters, the pink polo shirts with tiny green embroidered crocodiles. My skin burned hot and red, but I tried every garment in my size—and some a few sizes up. I desperately wanted those things. Those soft, pretty things. I wanted them so much my body ached.

Another truth: My husband and I could buy this house if we wanted to. The down payment would deplete our savings, move us from living comfortably to living

paycheck-to-paycheck. But we could do it. In that regard, I guess we are being practical too.

\*

Over the years, I've lived in a handful of places, all but one of them rented. A loft with a small window overlooking the river in Rhode Island. A drafty farmhouse in coastal Maine. An outdated Cape with mint-green walls in New Jersey, and the bottom half of an old Victorian in the same town where I grew up.

When I met my husband, he lived on the second floor of an apartment building in Los Angeles, in a place that could only be described as a bachelor pad—utilitarian, functional and sparse. James worked in the movie business, with long hours and modest pay, and the best he could do then was a secondhand couch, a makeshift bar, and some framed movie posters on the wall. Over time, things became more homey. We bought nice plates and ate dinner at the kitchen table. We put fluffy towels in the bath and hung a painting in the living room. We invited people over a couple of times. For weeks beforehand I worried what they'd think of the place. Of what they'd think of me.

Then James started getting bigger production jobs with better pay. We began to look for someplace new, something with a back yard and a little more room. For years we searched, with a real estate agent and again without, but nothing measured up. Every house was too small, too old or too expensive. Some were too close to power lines or freeways. Others needed a lot of work we didn't have time to do.

Maybe that's how it is when you move up in the world. Nothing seems to fit. No place feels right. Or maybe it's me that doesn't fit.

\*

When my daughter makes the swim team in our new town, we go to the home of another swim mom for a party. Cheryl lives on a cul de sac too, in a gated community next to the golf course. At the gate, the security guard asks where we're going, what our last name is. He gives us a parking pass to put in the car window and waves us along.

Cheryl welcomes us at the front door. She hugs us, even though we've only just met. Turns out, her house is a fortress. Spanish-style with stone floors, steel appliances and ceilings so high my voice echoes. Outside, a patio with a firepit overlooks the valley. We arrive just in time to watch the sun set behind the mountains, watch it cast the yard in a dreamy orange glow. Mira la vista.

As my daughter eats pizza with the rest of her team, I sit on the patio with the other moms, wondering if their houses look like this too. Wondering if any of them grew up like I did, getting food baskets from church at Thanksgiving or blocks of government cheese. Can they see it on my face or in my clothes? In the way I'm sitting here in my chair? We talk about our kids' practice schedules, about their coaches and teachers, about the ways we juggle meal planning and exercises classes, if we find time to exercise at all.

Between bites of taco salad and barbecued chicken, I can't help but look around, at the palm trees swaying in the breeze, at the blue-tiled water fountain burbling like a stream. I wonder what Cheryl and her husband did to deserve a place like this, and what I did to be here too.

\*

Later, as my parents neared retirement, they moved out of the trailer. They bought a regular house one street over, small but comfortable and inexpensive—though it has all the things I'd learned to associate with people who have money: an enclosed porch, a staircase, walls made of real wood.



They decorated their place with new shelves and cabinets, wooden tiles for the floor. A short time later, my father got sick. Congestive heart failure and Parkinson's disease. A series of ischemic strokes. He couldn't drink anymore. He couldn't eat. He lived the last year of his life in a tightening circle, which rarely extended beyond the front door.

Now my mother lives there alone. She plants flowers along the driveway, tends vegetables in the yard. When my daughter and I visit, she bakes muffins and cookies and pies. From almost every window, we can see that old trailer. See its rectangular form, its aluminum siding, thin and vulnerable to winter winds. Someone else owns it now, a man who works at the paper mill. But it lives inside each one of us, someplace deep and rigid, someplace fixed. Shame is a thing you take with you, no matter where else you go. It's always there, hiding, whispering, telling you you don't belong.

\*

On a Monday afternoon, my daughter and I return from running errands to find my husband at home on his lunch break. He's outside, under the pergola, eating from a Styrofoam takeout container. With him are two coworkers, eating from takeout containers of their own.

I freeze, my mind scrambling around the boxes we haven't unpacked yet, around the random items scattered in unfinished rooms. Kitchen gadgets and sporting equipment, winter coats and cleaning supplies. A stack of framed art and family photos sitting by the wall in my office, waiting for the moment when I can finally hang them, when I can say yes, this place is mine.

I don't want anyone to see our mess, our disorganization, all the ways we are flawed and unpolished. Then I remember. There is nothing to hide here. No secrets, no rage. Nothing to fear or try to explain. This house may be gorgeous, but one ugly thing remains: my own abiding sense of unease. My unworthiness. What did I do to deserve a place like this, when so many others struggle, when so

many others freeze? I can't think of a single thing. And yet here I am. Here we all are.

There may never come a day when I don't feel some amount of discomfort about the place where I live, whether that's a trailer park or a cul de sac. I might never be able to sit with other suburban moms and know that I am one of them, that I belong here. Right now, I feel a mix of joy and bewilderment when I show people the fireplace, the double ovens or the laundry room at the top of the stairs. And maybe that's all right. Maybe that's how you begin to neutralize the shame. You meet it with gratitude. You give it a name. You say, this house is beautiful and we are lucky to live here, even if it isn't technically ours.

As I walk through the kitchen, open the sliding glass door to the back yard and greet my husband and his friends, something warm fills my chest. I take a seat in the fourth patio chair, under the cool shade of the canopy, and share a bit of their lunch. They offer rice, teriyaki chicken, small dumplings filled with vegetables and pork. We talk and laugh about the stifling summer heat, about the projects they are doing at work and our kids home on school break. We look out across the neighborhood, at green lawns and wide sidewalks, at citrus trees and juniper hedges, at song sparrows balancing on telephone wires.

And then I offer them a tour.

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[av\_one\_half]**Wendy Fontaine** is a multi-genre writer whose work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Entropy*, *Full Grown People*, *Hippocampus*, *Mud Season Review*, & elsewhere. She's been nominated for a Pushcart, awarded the Tiferet Prize for Creative Nonfiction, & featured as a speaker at literary conferences around the country. A native New Englander, she currently lives in southern California, where she is at work on a novel & a memoir. Find more of her work at [wendyfontaine.com](http://wendyfontaine.com) < <http://wendyfontaine.com>> or follow along on Twitter [@wendymfontaine](https://twitter.com/wendymfontaine) < [https://twitter.com/wendymfontaine?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/wendymfontaine?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)> .

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