

“The detective quality of this strong memoir is both maddening and fascinating. The reader is made to feel what it’s like to be denied answers in an essential search.”

—AMY HEMPEL, *Sing to It*

“Atlantis Black was—is?—an extraordinary woman whose descent into madness will leave you spellbound and heartbroken. Betsy Bonner writes with the precision of a poet and the courage of a survivor. I could not put this book down.”

—DOMENICA RUTA, *With or Without You*

“Scrappy and queer, charismatic and enigmatic, the young musician who reinvented herself as Atlantis Black left behind a haunting archive that complicates rather than resolves the narrative of her vibrant, troubled life. In this beautiful exploration of her sister’s life and disappearance, Betsy Bonner has crafted a terse, urgent page-turner that is equally ode, elegy, and mystery.”

—CHELSEY JOHNSON, *Stray City*

“Her manic, self-destructive sister wanted to be famous, but it took Betsy Bonner’s literary gifts to make her a rock star on the page. In mournful, meticulous—and sometimes wryly funny—prose, *The Book of Atlantis Black* gives us an unforgettable portrait of an impossible yet compelling young woman taken down by her own demons, and fighting every step of the way.”

—DAVID GATES, *A Hand Reached Down to Guide Me*

THE BOOK OF ATLANTIS BLACK

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THE SEARCH FOR A SISTER GONE MISSING

A MEMOIR BY
BETSY BONNER



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for Queen Leah, dearest of cats (1999-2019)

and for David, with love and gratitude

Let *me* go, if you want me to let you in!

—EMILY BRONTË, *Wuthering Heights*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The sections headed "San Diego, March 2008" were transcribed from a videotaped interview with my sister, Nancy, who had changed her name to Atlantis Black. This interview took place three months before she disappeared.

ONE

SAN DIEGO, MARCH 2008

Can we turn the camera off? It's so cold.

1.

On June 25, 2008, a young woman with my sister's IDs was found dead on the floor of a hotel room in Tijuana. Her body had needle marks in the left arm, a wound on the right middle finger, and a bruised cranium. She wore blue jeans and a brown T-shirt that read GOOD KARMA. Two syringes were in the room: one on the nightstand, one in her purse. The police report said that the IDs—including an American passport and a California driver's license issued to "Eunice Atlantis Black"—did not appear to match the body, which was cremated without anyone's taking fingerprints or checking dental records. The autopsy report said the woman had green eyes and weighed less than one hundred pounds. It estimated her age to be twenty to twenty-five years old. The cause of death was a pancreatic hemorrhage.

My sister had hazel eyes, like my mother's. She was thirty-one and running from felony charges in a prescription drug case in the state of California when she disappeared.

By the time I heard the news, the only thing that might have shocked me would have been if my sister had found a way to live.

Just in case of some miraculous mistake, I called Atlantis's phone—it seemed to be on—and left a voicemail message. Then I typed an email: "Call me as soon as you can if you receive this. I love you." I had no expectation of hearing back from her.

2.

In the summer of 2002, Atlantis took the stage, shook back the dark, straight hair that fell to her waist, and lifted the strap of an electric guitar over her shoulder. The instrument settled low on her hips. Strumming some quick minor chords, she tossed her head like a horse assailed by flies. Her silver-sequin tank top screamed Chinatown. A bony knee poked through her jeans as she leaned into the microphone and whispered, “Check.” She made a hand motion as if to say: *Come here*. “Check,” she said again, louder.

She said something inaudible to the pleasant-faced, leather-clad man climbing the stage, who nodded and took a seat behind the drum kit.

“Let’s have a little more vocals,” she said.

Bar chatter faded as Atlantis’s husky voice filled the room. The cash register opened and shut.

“Check, check, check,” she said. “That sounds great. Hey there, everyone! I’m Atlantis Black. Thank you all for coming out and

braving the subways on such a swelteringly hot and humid New York City night. Thank you to the SideWalk Café for welcoming me into your extremely prestigious Antifolk Festival. Honest to God, if I didn't feel so fucking proud, I'd be a nervous wreck. Thank you to Regina Spektor for that ridiculously fabulous set, and to Lach for believing in me and inviting me here. So tonight I've got a few new goth surf rock tunes for you, some from my first album, *In My Bed*, and a couple of covers. This first one goes out to my little sister, Betsy, who's here tonight."

Most people assumed that I was the older sister, though I was two years younger. I was clearly the more serious and responsible one. I went to graduate school for poetry and had never been caught breaking the law; Atlantis used her mug shot from 1996 for an album cover. (She'd taken hallucinogens with a friend in the Mojave Desert. I don't know what they did to get busted for "public intoxication.")

The drummer tapped off sticks, and Atlantis built a tower of minor chords. When it threatened to topple into noise, he knocked it down, and Atlantis picked up the shards. Her voice echoed as if from the innermost whorl of a shell:

*pour the hot wax on my skin
you always were my sweetest sin*

In the middle of a riff, the tank top strap slipped from Atlantis's shoulder, and her right breast popped out of her shirt like a pale, trembling Chihuahua. Some girls in crew cuts cheered. The Chihuahua twitched its dark nose. I sucked down the rest of my Maker's and ginger.

“You’re awesome!” yelled a kid with orange hair, raising his thin, muscular arms.

She finished the song, then pulled up her tank top strap as if it were no big deal.

“Wow,” she said. “That was quite . . . cathartic. This next one’s called: ‘Another Fucked-Up Beauty Queen.’”

It was impossible for me to judge Atlantis’s music critically. Her riot grrrl songs were inspired by punk and goth bands that we both liked; she was allergic to pretty radio voices. Her themes were sex, drugs, and a love of pain, death, and transformation. She often sang from the perspective of a spurned lover, with lyrics addressed to an unattainable “you,” and ending on a tragic note. Her songs were easier to listen to when they were more playful and ironic, like “I Can’t Kill Myself Today.” A tribute to her vibrator, “My Machine,” had gotten a mention in *Time Out New York*.

Before Atlantis performed a song, she practiced it for months. If she played a wrong note, she went back to the place where it still sounded good and tried again. She was the most obsessive artist I’ve ever known.

Atlantis used to say that classical piano relaxed her more than any other music. She didn’t like violins (too screechy), symphonies (too boring and too much), or electronic music (no soul). Yet she never tried to pick up piano herself.

Our mother was a skilled pianist and as a teenager had performed weekly in church. Growing up, I asked Mom to teach me piano on the spinet her mother had taught her on, and I practiced a lot. Sometimes when I got a little loud, or maybe when she grew tired of hearing me, Mom would say, “Light touch.” I thought she laughed to herself after saying it; it was probably something she’d

been told when she was learning. Atlantis would never have tolerated musical criticism from Mom.

In my sophomore year of college, I studied piano with Edmund Niemann, who played with Steve Reich's ensemble and wrote music for Meredith Monk. He taught me to play some classical pieces that became Atlantis's favorites. Whenever we were both at home, she'd beg me to play Chopin, Brahms, and Beethoven, which she said had goth riffs.

After college, when I lived with Atlantis in New York, I bought a keyboard with headphones and recorded songs I made up late at night. I could play only when I was certain that no one but God himself was listening—not the neighbors, not Atlantis.

The first time I saw Atlantis onstage—she was still called Nancy then—she was a high school freshman playing Shakespeare's Juliet. In the dark auditorium, I watched her die. She was a great actress, especially convincing when it came to representing pain. After that, I became an actress, too, a Miranda marveling at a "brave new world, / That has such people in't."

I believed that the demons possessing Atlantis would kill her if she didn't perform. But I worried that she might actually become famous. I worried for both of us.

3.

Nancy and I grew up in Wyeth country: Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. The painter Andrew Wyeth's family lived three miles east across the highway, in the historic district. Where we lived, on Hillendale Road, there were beautiful woods and sweet old stone farmhouses, side by side with kitschy 1950s ranches and 1960s housing developments. Working-class country folks lived next door to wealthy horse people and nouveau riche commuters to Philadelphia; almost everyone was white. Our house was a split-level, painted and maintained by my father. The closest businesses were a mile and a half away: a gas station, a diner called Hank's Place, and the Wawa food market, where my father took us every Sunday after Mass and permitted Nancy and me one candy bar each. In the summer, before I learned to drive, I walked in the woods, read books, watched TV, and hung out with Nancy and a few friends who lived nearby. Sometimes we went swimming or tubing where the Brandywine River narrowed to a creek. There was a scary rope swing over the black rocks and waterfalls that we loved.

Chadds Ford was named for a businessman, John Chads—the town fathers didn't pay much attention to spelling—who opened a ferry service across the Brandywine River in the late 1730s. The Leni Lenape had presumably forded that river for thousands of years before he arrived. When I was growing up, a few Native Americans still lived in the area, some of whom sat for Andrew Wyeth, the only artist I was aware of; my parents displayed framed prints of his drawings and paintings around our house. On my way up the stairs to their room—where I sometimes found my mother during the day—I was both mesmerized and spooked by the figure in *The Berry Picker*: with two brimming baskets and boyish, short hair that frames a face turned away from the viewer, the berry picker appears to be napping in the afternoon. For a long time I thought the figure was a young man until I noticed the small breasts under the loose white shirt.

In October 1945, Wyeth's father, Newell Convers Wyeth, known for his illustrations of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*, died on the railroad tracks where the Octoraro line crossed Ring Road, a few miles from where our house would be built. When I was growing up, the story I heard was that his car stalled on the tracks and was hit by a train. In the 1940s, some trains still carried passengers on the line, but it was most likely a freight that killed N. C. and his four-year-old grandson. A Wilmington, Delaware, newspaper dated October 19, 1945, read: "Troopers Believe Famous Painter Was Blinded by Sun as He Drove Up Incline toward Tracks." David Michaelis's biography of N. C. Wyeth suggests that the accident might have been a suicide.

Less than a year after what the newspapers called a "double tragedy," Andrew Wyeth painted *Winter 1946*, a figure that he

described as “almost tumbling down a hill across a strong winter light, with his hand flung wide and a black shadow racing behind him, and bits of snow, and my feeling of being disconnected from everything. It was me, at a loss—that hand drifting in the air was my free soul, groping. Over on the other side of that hill was where my father was killed, and I was sick I’d never painted him.” But would he have been any less grief-stricken if he had?

I wonder the same thing about writing this book.