New Nonfiction from Sari Fordham: “Mending”

Our pre-WWII house has two small bedrooms, a tiny closet in each. I feel virtuous when I fit my clothing into one, leaving my husband Bryan’s clothes to migrate between our daughter Kai’s closet and the hall’s. Once upon a time, an American family fit easily into this house. Perhaps they even kept a car in the garage.

I buy *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo with the intention of paring down my belongings to their essential. I donate and donate. I learn to fold my clothes into origami shapes, but the deeper lesson, to accumulate less, is a harder one to master. Never before in human history have so many beautiful things cost so little. We can’t seem to resist. When the poppies bloom, Kai runs out to pick the prettiest ones. She’s indifferent to their fates—a swift wilting in jam jars of water—because it is the acquisition that fills her heart with joy. I feel the same thrill when the dress I ordered arrives in the mail.

The actual cost is in Bangladesh, where the dress is sewn by women earning too little. Count also the water used to grow the cotton, the pesticides sprayed onto the plants, the insects killed by the pesticides, the dyes thrown into a river, the coal or gas powering the factory, the energy spent on transportation, the plastic the dress is wrapped in, the box used to mail it to me, the tree the box came from. The clothing industry accounts for eight percent of greenhouse gases.

When my favorite pair of jeans gets a hole, I fold them into an origami rectangle and perch them in the back of the drawer. Jeans are the staple of my teaching wardrobe, but I draw the line at worn out knees. One must have standards. I would toss

them, but they have been kind to my post-baby body.

Enter mending and Sashiko stitching. Without the stunning picture—white circles stitched onto navy fabric—I wouldn't have clicked on the how-to article. In the *Little House* books, Mary mended, while Laura explored the prairie. I never wanted to be Mary. Yet here I am, intrigued by the artistry and simplicity of fixing your own clothes.

I borrow a book on visible mending from the library, and Bryan volunteers a pair of his old jeans for the patch. When I invite friends to a mending party, they're enthusiastic. Mending! How quaint! They do not, however, bring clothes to fix—because who mends anymore?—but they bring other tasks and we talk and laugh and when everyone leaves, I'm still mending. I'm enchanted with my progress, which is slow. When the patch is finally finished, the jeans look better than they did when they were new. The stitches travel boldly across one leg and are visually interesting. The reward circuit of my brain, the one activated by pretty things, is pleased with this outcome. More pleased, even, than when buying something new.

Mended socks, by Sari Fordham

I become the house mender, a position I hadn’t realized our family needed. I fix the hole in Kai’s sweater and then embroider a heart on it. When the dog chews our couch cushion, I announce that I can mend it. The couch is brown, and I first sew as much of the tear together as I can with matching thread. Then I use red fabric for the patch, and red thread to sew it into place. I am satisfied with my choices, which is fortunate since the dog chews another hole in the couch. He does this five times before we wise up and buy bitter tasting spray. Then, I mend the hole the dog chews in Kai’s bedspread. I mend Kai’s stuffed snail. I mend Bryan’s shirt. I mend a second pair of my jeans. I mend my sweatpants. And then, I get serious: I start darning socks.

I have purchased a vintage Speedwever on eBay and wonder aloud

if mending is just another excuse to buy things. “If you use it, it’s not,” Bryan says. The 1950s Speedwever is a tiny loom that makes darning faster and more aesthetically appealing. Though measuring quickness is relative. “I don’t know why it’s called speedy,” Kai says. “If it were really speedy, it would work like this,” and she makes gestures that remind me of an electronic typewriter.

“It’s okay to be slow,” I tell her.

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I’m darning at a time when humanity has both slowed down and gotten busier. The pandemic has arrived in the United States. Everyone I know is baking bread. I repair socks. I have a pile with holes. In the evening, hands busy with darning, I call my friend Youngshil in South Korea and we first gossip about old friends and then we sit with our fears. What do you say? Well, we say a lot. We compare our worries and the responses of our respective countries. “After this is over,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “You’ve got to come visit.”

When I hang up, I feel hopeful, grounded by a web of connections. It’s the same web that makes things like viruses spread faster and the planet heat up. Connectivity is vice and salvation. Bryan and I have joined our local branch of 350.org. We’re learning the granular details of legislative bills, making phone calls, writing letters, meeting representatives, and amplifying the efforts of environmentalists in other places. If the Earth is to avert disaster, systems must transform. Climate change is a global problem and we can only fix it together.

I repair a hole in the heel of my sock and understand how trivial my efforts are. Okay, do this because it feeds your creativity. Do this to remember the nobility of small things. I thread the needle again, and pull the thread through the colorful fabric of my sock. I tell Bryan that I’m preparing

for the apocalypse, and without irony, he nods.

Book Review: Lauren Hough's 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing' and Sari Fordham's 'Wait for God to Notice'

"I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I'd read."

— Lauren Hough, 'Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing'

"In 1984, we would arrive in Texas, and we might as well have been aliens."

— Sari Fordham, 'Wait for God to Notice'

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In Lauren Hough and Sari Fordham's recent memoirs, human life reads like a series of parallel universes. Both authors' families moved, globally, for religious motivations, many times when they were young: Hough grew up in seven countries, while Fordham lived in Uganda as a child, then Texas, Georgia, and, later, South Korea. The religions here are not exactly the connection (though in each author's case, religion is arguably their first culture, their first universe). Hough grew up in an abusive cult called The Family (Children of God), while Fordham's Adventist family was close-knit, loving, and devout.

Rather, the connection is Hough and Fordham's attunement to

the many different worlds of their lives, which they navigate from very young ages: observing, skirting the edges, shifting their behavior when necessary. Hough and Fordham both describe the shock and dance of trying to match these as they are moved from place to place, culture to culture.

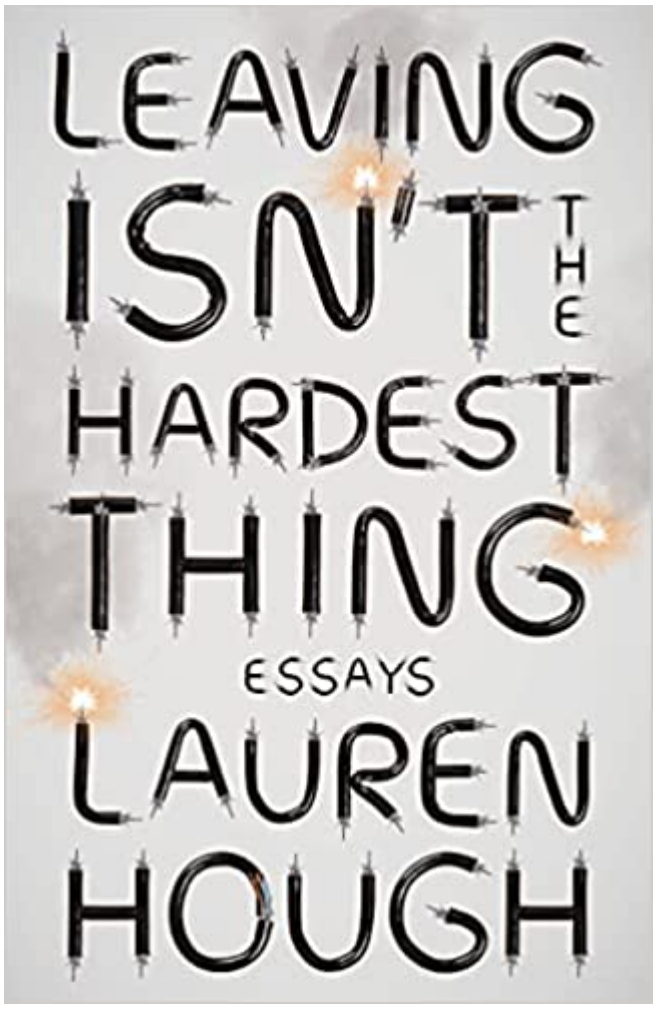
Their memoirs beg the question: Are we the same people we are now as when we were young? Are we the same people when we have changed lifestyles, allegiances, mannerisms, attitudes? How much choice do we have in how we become who we are?

Both Hough and Fordham have a complex understanding of what it means to be sometimes lonely or left out, peripheral, wondering; excluded or bound by place or newness or religion, by politics or sexuality or ethnicity, or by whatever power structure is currently in place; to be thrown at the world in various ways that are sometimes neither fair nor wholly deterministic. These two beautiful memoirs are deeply moving, funny and observant and sometimes very serious, but always attuned, and always stunningly, openly, thrown.

1. **“Where Are You From?”:** Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’

Lauren Hough opens her memoir with a lie. Or, rather, with the lies she tells other people when they ask where she is from. They can’t place her accent, her manners.

If you ask me where I’m from, I’ll lie to you. I’ll tell you my parents were missionaries. I’ll tell you I’m from Boston. I’ll tell you I’m from Texas. Those lies, people believe.



Where Hough is “from,” at least in one sense, is an Apocalyptic cult called The Family (formerly Children of God), where the Antichrist was a constant imagined presence and children were passed around for sexual “sharing nights” with adults. For Hough, who never fit in with the expectations of the cult (gender and otherwise), this was a source of shame, fear, and resentment. She was once badly beaten for not smiling. These are some of the milder details, and many are very sad.

This – the cult – is an important fact about her. But it is not the only fact.

She’s also empathetic and funny as hell. (“Sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.”) She is a champion of the underdog. Her attention to the ties that bind people – spiritual belief, escaped religion, the military, terrible jobs, homelessness, family, love – runs throughout the book. When Hough finds a

novel in Barnes & Noble which lists in the author bio, “raised in the Children of God”:

You’d have thought I was a closet case buying lesbian erotica the way I carried that book…I had to buy three other books just so it wouldn’t stand out.

Upon escaping the cult, Hough joins the Air Force. The thing is, she is a self-admitted “closet case” in more ways than one, and this is under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (which, in retrospect, sounds like it could have been a name for her cult). Eventually, after “Die Dyke” is written on her car and then her car is set on fire, *she* is the one expelled under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

It’s grossly unfair. It’s also not entirely surprising to anyone associated with military culture.

I thought I’d find something in the military. I’d wear the same uniform as everyone else. They’d have to accept me because I was one of them. I’d find what every book I read, every movie I watched, told me I’d find friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.

But all I’d done was join another cult. And they didn’t want me any more than the last one had.

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After leaving the Air Force, Hough is temporarily homeless, sleeping in her car. Her caring and fiery passages in defense of the working poor and the unhoused, replete with her trademark lush cursing, are refreshing to read.

She eventually finds an apartment with her friend, Jay [also military discharged for “homosexual admission”]. It has only one bed, which they must share, and the gallows humor is off the charts:

All I cared about was that we had a door and a roof, a

bathroom….I had a home. It was hard at first to focus on anything but that relief. But you can't share a twin bed past the age of ten unless you're related or fucking. Jay's an aggressive cuddler. I'm an unrepentant snorer. There wasn't even room to build a pillow wall between us. So after a few sleepless nights of his telling me to roll over and my trying to shove him just hard enough to get him away from me without throwing him onto the floor because I thought the hair on his legs was a mosquito, we headed to Walmart. The cheapest air mattress was $19.99. But in a stroke of genius, we found a five-dollar inflatable pool raft in the clearance section of sporting goods. It's probably a good thing we bought it. Anyone hoping to stay afloat in a pool would have drowned.

Jay, whose shift at the bar ends earlier, claims the bed. Hough gets the raft.

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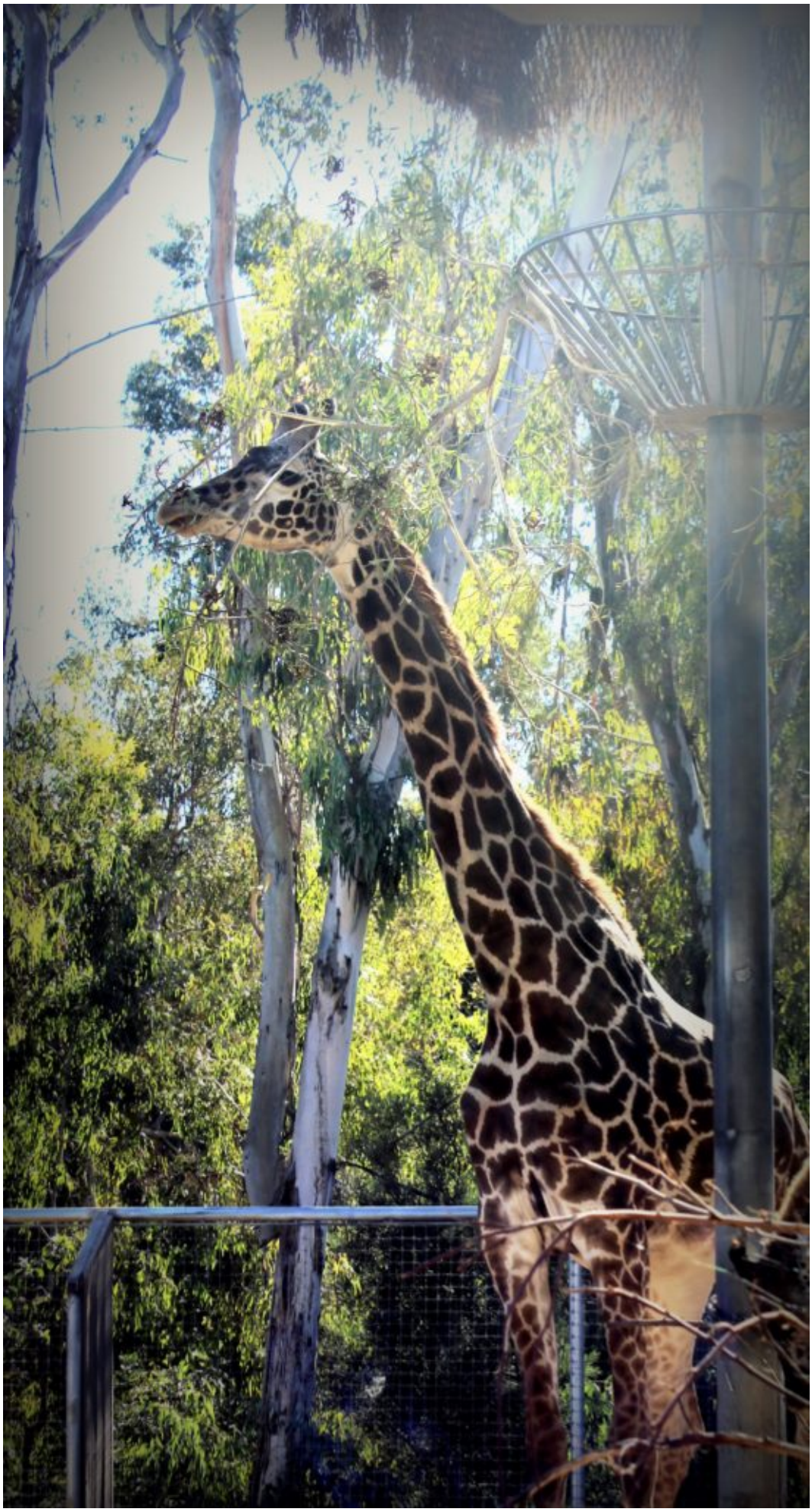
'Leaving' made me wonder, then: What does it mean to be "defiant?" Hough has experienced defiance in every form: early on, defiance of herself; defiance of authority; defiance on behalf of other people who need it. This may be one of the most cohesive threads running through her personality as presented in 'Leaving': a keen attention, almost an instinct, for the way people are forced to duck and hide, reveal themselves, band together, survive. She's had experiences with power structures most of us would not want.

"I was going to be normal," Hough vows, once she's on her feet, with a steady job as a bouncer and a home of her own. She is out of the cult. She has joined the world of what The Family had called the "Systemites."

But one day, traveling through Texas and suddenly curious, she decides to go back to the Texas site of the original cult. It's an incredibly lovely, lonely scene.

If anything remained of the old buildings, I couldn't tell

from the fence line….[But] the fence was all wrong. …[It was] black steel and eight feet tall. I was busy staring at it when a family of ibexes with their twisted antlers bolted out of a mesquite clutch. That’s not a sentence found in nature. Then I looked up. Towering above us all stood a single fucking giraffe, probably wondering why the trees wouldn’t grow tall enough to chew. You’re not supposed to identify with a fenced-in giraffe that doesn’t belong in Texas. I rolled to a stop and stared at the poor animal, awkward, lonely, and completely fucking lost.



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I don’t want to spoil the very last scene of the book, which is so gorgeous I teared up typing it out to a friend. It’s set back in Hough’s cult days and involves a wonderful, visually beautiful act of youthful defiance among a group of children. You cannot help but cheer them on: *Defy* it!

Lauren Hough’s ‘Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing’ is a glorious, raucous, fuck-you to anyone who has abused their power, and a love letter to those who have endured it. That is where she is from.

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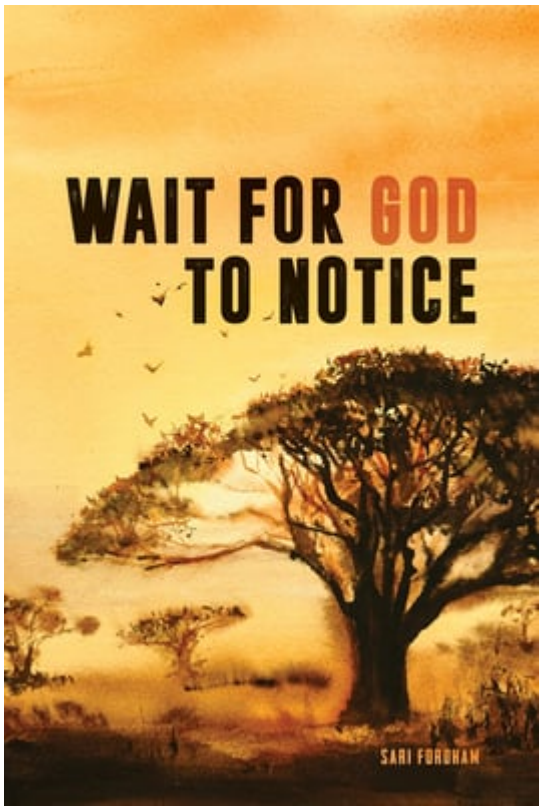
2. **“What are you doing here?”: Sari Fordham’s ‘Wait for God to Notice’**

In South Korea, where I had once lived and where Sonja [my sister] still lived and worked, we were known as ‘You Fordham sisters.’….Sonja’s husband added to the mantra. On long trips in the car, he would sigh, ‘You Fordham sisters and your stories,’ and we would realize we had spent long hours passing familiar narratives back and forth. The stories began like this:

1. *Wouldn’t Mom have liked this?*
2. *Remember that time in Africa?*
3. *We were such outcasts in the States, such nerds.*

The last was the most developed narrative. It was the one that started us laughing. It is not difficult to spot a missionary – there is something about the hair, the dress, the earnest eyes. We had all that and more. We were the kind of missionary children that other missionary children found uncool. When we stepped into our respective American classrooms, we never had a chance.



When she is very young, Sari Fordham's family moves to Uganda, where her father will serve as an Adventist minister. Her Finnish mother, Kaarina, packs up the two girls – Sari and her older sister, Sonja – and they fly halfway across the world to meet him.

As missionary kids it is, obviously, a religious childhood (Fordham's young friends, bored on the Sabbath because games aren't allowed, sneakily devise a game of Bible Freeze Tag, in which, unfreezing each other, they recite a Bible verse: "'Jesus wept,' we shouted. 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' we shouted"). But it is by all accounts a loving one, within a close-knit family, in which her parents are genuinely concerned for the people they serve.

First arriving in Uganda, however, the Fordham sisters feel their visual difference acutely:

The children darted forward in ones and twos, laughing. How could anyone be as drained of pigment as we were? They touched our skin and held tentative fingers toward our hair….The children stared at us, and Sonja and I stared back.

Soon, being children, they settle in. They play with the other kids. Fordham chronicles the lush, often fun, and occasionally terrifying moments of her Ugandan childhood, where snakes drop from the trees, fire ants climb over her sleeping infant body until her parents follow the trail and notice; and where in an airport, guided by her mother's careful calm masking enormous fear, they have to shake hands with Idi Amin.

One of my favorite passages (indulge me) is an example of Fordham's riveting and lyrical writing – as well as a lovely insight into memory, and how we claim our own life events – when her mother, who has been reading *Animals of East Africa*, takes them to see the hippos:

The water stirred with hippos…Adult hippos can't swim. They walked along the river's floor, occasionally propelling themselves to the surface…Those on the bank seemed to hitch up their trousers and haul themselves up. In the distance, there was snorting and flashing of teeth. The river boiled around two or three angry hippos – it was hard to know – and then the water and the vegetation settles as they resolved their differences. The hippos moved up the bank, a hippopotamus migration, and they stood, majestic, on the shore.

This is how you would remember: you took a picture. You would later have something concrete to hold onto. That hippo would be yours. You could make as many copies as you liked, and you could show people. See, this really happened. You would have tangible proof. And you would own something magnificent.

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After Idi Amin's violent rise to power ("soothing" widows of the disappeared on the radio by telling them their husbands are not dead, they must have just run off with another woman), missionary families are forced to leave the country. And so the Fordhams head home.

But where is home?

At first, it is Texas. “Boys fidgeted in their jean jackets, their legs draped across the aisle. *We are Texas men*, their posture said. *Who are you? And what do you want*?”

Fordham’s account of her sister Sonja’s first day of seventh grade is so tender it is almost hard to read:

She was wearing an outfit our mother had bought in Finland, an outfit too sweet to wear without irony. Sonja looked as if she had just stepped off a Swiss Miss box.

…She stood in the doorframe for just a moment, but it was enough for her to have an epiphany: Everything about her and her Care Bear lunch pail was terribly, terribly wrong.

…She was so silent that as the day progressed, her classmates began to believe she was mute. They would ask her questions (Can you talk? Do you understand English? Are you retarded? Do you think Steve is cute?) *And she would look away. During Texas history, her teacher forced her to read aloud from the textbook, and when she rhymed* Waco *with* taco*, she could hear the whispers…She ate lunch in a bathroom stall.*

Siblings, sometimes, claim one another’s stories as their own. Or at least feel for them. Perhaps memory is permeable, and definitely shareable. You can make as many copies as you like. *Remember that time in Africa?*

“We were like a family of polar bears plodding across the savannah,” Fordham writes, in an interesting corollary to Hough’s giraffe story. “We didn’t belong. We didn’t belong in Texas.”

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The Fordham sisters persevere, first in Texas and then in Atlanta, where the family settles.

Much later, in college and strolling across the spring campus, Fordham is thrilled to be mistaken for a non-missionary kid:

A man known as ‘the preacher’ appeared. ‘Don’t be an Eve,’ he said as I declined a pamphlet. He walked beside me, ‘Jezebel, Jezebel.’ I quickened my stride, my mouth a scowl, but inside, I felt pleased. He hadn’t seen the earnestness that Adventism and my missionary childhood had drawn onto my features. I, Sari Fordham, was fitting into a public university. ‘You’re traveling to hell, missy,’ the preacher shouted at my back.

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Much of ‘Wait for God to Notice’ is devoted to Fordham’s mother, who died far too soon from cancer; a fascinating woman both resilient and fearful, who traversed continents but would not drive at night, could not keep a secret, was fascinated by the weather. The ultimate belonging is within our families, though we may resist it. “You’re just like me,” Fordham’s mother tells her, to her occasional teenage disgust, and it’s a double-edged comment, both a compliment and a rebuke, or maybe a caution. But it is also a powerful sharedness, and one can’t help respecting the fact that, through all of this, Fordham’s mother must have felt like an outsider, too. She had also lived many lives.

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Perhaps what Hough’s and Fordham’s memoirs make most meaningful is that there doesn’t need to be a strict divide between our past and present lives, or our relations to the people around us. These will never touch up completely anyway. There is only so close we can get to that, “you’re just like me.”

“We knew her best of all,” Fordham says after her mother’s passing. And maybe that is the important thing, impossible but not entirely sad: to try to know other people as well as ourselves, not in the false divisions of difference but in the joy of it. It might be that when it comes to who we are, the only choice lies in this trying.

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Hough, Lauren. Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing. Penguin Random House, April 2021.

Fordham, Sari. Wait for God to Notice. Etruscan Press, May 2021.