

John Pearson
Professor of English
Stetson University
Unit 8300
DeLand, FL 32720
386-822-7725
jpearson@stetson.edu

I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl

Kelle Groom

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Kelle Groom's new memoir, *I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl*, is a poetic, often painful, and deeply honest account of Groom's loss of self after the birth, adoption, and death of her infant son, Tommy. Groom, a poet with three books in print (*Underwater City*, *Luckily*, and *Five Kingdoms*), writes this narrative with a commitment to self-revelation that is impressive and compelling. Tommy, Groom's son, rests at the center of the memoir. Having given birth to him in a dreamlike state and at a very young age, Groom gave him up for adoption to relatives, and lost herself in the process. "It's as though I disappeared when I gave Tommy away—I can't even see myself," she writes at the beginning of the book. *I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl* recounts the years that Groom spent first trying to remain invisible by drinking or trying not to drink, and

then the years she uncovered herself through the process of discovering knowledge of her son.

It's difficult to over-estimate the emotional intensity of this book. Unlike recent memoirs, like Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle*, which portrays childhood and adolescence in a dysfunctional family with breathtaking clarity, and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, chronicling a year of grief, Groom's memoir explores a fragile identity that is shattered repeatedly by events that are recounted as if the shattering, and not the events themselves, are imprinted on the writer's memory. She describes being raped in splintered images: "lungs like handkerchiefs flat inside my chest," "a current that pulls me, promising everything, except my body," "This girl, in this room, could be leaves in the woods." For Groom, every shard is an echo of the first fragmentation, the death of her son. And so the memoir returns to that moment over and over again. In *I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl*, there is no past, present, or future that matters even though Groom moves freely among these divisions of time. There is only "After Tommy died, when," only a perpetual moment *after*, and the events that occur in the first years after Tommy's death are "the dark the dark of underground."

Groom is a poet, and her memoir often moves from narrative to metaphor effortlessly. Writing of a lover whose name is Tom, Groom explains, "He holds me against his body as if he is inside me. And that holding on stays with me, like the painted works of mercy." The lyric structure and writing of this memoir adds to its intensity and deep, dark beauty. It is as if in writing of her life after Tommy, Groom is not only finding herself again, she is finding the rightful place of Tommy in her memory, in her life. This

echoes Groom's search for Tommy's grave, and ultimately for the cause of his death. Tommy died of leukemia, and Groom blamed herself as any parent might, partly for giving him up for adoption and partly for giving him her own biology, her own inner workings, which seemed to her to be maladapted to everyday life. She succumbed to alcohol before the age of twenty; he succumbed to leukemia before the age of two. Groom's quest for an explanation is one of the strongest signs of her healing.

If I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl is the story of self-loss, it is also a record of the writer's healing and great strength. Groom digs perilously deep in her psyche to show us not only the shattering, but her own piecing together of identity. Self-help groups, hospitalizations, half-hearted interventions, lovers, and anodynes all failed to realize in Groom what writing eventually achieved. Writing gave Groom a means of uncovering the past, recovering what seemed lost inside her. Most importantly, it offered Groom and her readers a hypnotic lineage of associations and images that tell the gorgeous and disturbing truth of a life's journey from chaotic self-erasure to the moment when Tommy and his mother finally see each other as they were, and as they perpetually are in this unforgettable, haunting book.