

1994

## Hunters and Gatherers

Tanya Eby  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Eby, Tanya (1994) "Hunters and Gatherers," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1994: Iss. 1, Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1994/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Amaranthus by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Tanya Eby *Hunters and Gatherers*

They had gathered in the stale rented cabin on the shore of Lake Michigan to divvy up her grandmother's possessions. They were inside, eating sandwiches, talking with the hushed voice people use when speaking of the dead.

"I had a dream on the night she died," her mother whispered to her aunt. "She told me to be strong and that she'd always be there for me." Her aunt nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "How comforting," she said.

They were liars, of course. They edited their memories and inserted created stories, perhaps thinking that by making an idol of her ashes, they deserved more of her things. No one said anything about the time when her grandmother took off without saying and returned a week later with pictures of the Mayan ruins. No one said anything about the year when she gave up talking to anyone except her granddaughter Elizabeth. Instead, they whispered about how wonderful her blueberry pancakes were and how much she would have liked this cabin by the lake.

Elizabeth walked out of the kitchen and onto the porch. She took deep breaths and watched the waves fall upon one another. For a moment she thought of walking up to them and telling them that they knew nothing. That by grieving her grandmother they were mocking her. She wanted to tell them that the objects they would be fighting for didn't mean anything, that her grandmother wouldn't give a shit who got the china or furniture. But Elizabeth knew she would never say anything. Silence, too, would be her rebellion.

She turned her eyes to a couple walking in the sand. She watched them throwing stones at the waves and oohing at the splash. Her grandmother had taught her how to skip stones across the water. They had walked on the beach together, like the couple did now, searching for the smooth black rocks so perfect for jumping.

"You arch you arm like this," her grandma had said. She had bent and fixed the crook of little Elizabeth's arm to match her own. "Look at how my fingers are curved around it," she had said. "You arch your arm like this, that's right, and you let the stone go. Like a Frisbee. You just let it slide." She had watched her grandma's silver bobbed hair fill with wind and parachute up. Little Elizabeth had slipped her fingers into the dry palm of her grandma's, and they had counted the skips together, softly: one, two, three, four, five, six. "Look at it go," her grandma had said.

Now my grandma is dead, she thought. My grandma is dead. And two people throw rocks instead of letting the stones slip from their fingers and glide.

"Elizabeth? Elizabeth!" her mother's voice pierced. "It's time to get started."

Elizabeth could see the anticipation in her mother's eyes, thinly covered with a film of grief. For a moment she imagined her mother's face as that of a lizard, with bile pupils and a red tongue flicking in and out of her stretched mouth. It was an image she had to push out of her mind before she could utter, "All right. I'll be right there."

Inside, her uncles were trying to force her grandpa to sit down. "Come on, Pop, you're too tired."

"Just relax."

"Take it easy."

But with a flick of the wrist like swatting bugs he said, "No!" and "No!" again. They watched him stand and wobble, knowing that once he had set his mind on something, that's the way it would be. He took off his glasses and rubbed the indentations on the side of his nose. No one spoke for a long time.

"Now, we're going to do it this way because that's the way Mother wanted it." He put his glasses on and dragged his hand through his thin white hair. "I've taken what I need off the list." He coughed and breathed. "So go on and choose. Take it all." He sank into his chair and blinked slowly. He watched his children tear into the boxes and thought how sad it was that this is what a life comes to.

It was decided that they would choose according to their age, beginning with Elizabeth's uncle. When an item was chosen it was crossed off the list and added to their separate lists of acquisitions. It was also decided that the three grandchildren, having no use for art or dishes, would choose from the costume jewelry and mildewed books, and could, when the others were done, search through the boxes.

Elizabeth watched them shed their mourning and pounce. Her uncle chose the antique credenza, saying that "Mother often told me I should have this when she...passed on."

"Well, John," her mother interrupted, "I never heard Mother say that. Besides, your living room is much too small. It won't fit. Why don't you choose the china?"

But Uncle John held strong, so Elizabeth's mother chose the piano, not because she wanted it (she couldn't play), but because John loved it.

Elizabeth watched them go through the list. Her mother was crying because her sister refused to give up the hope chest, her aunt and uncle were whispering angrily at one another, and her grandpa sat mumbling to himself.

It all seemed so sad. Sad that these people cared nothing for each other, and that no one seemed to notice her frail grandfather was edging closer to the end of his life, and that he had grown too old to be mean.

She remembered the time when her grandmother hadn't spoken to anyone but her. Then, after a year of silence, she had laced up her hiking boots and announced to the rest of the family that "Beth and I are going mushroom hunting. We'll be in the woods, in the dirt and there'll be lots of bugs. Want to join us?" Her grandmother had laughed, thinking it was an extremely funny way to end her silence.

So they had walked together into the woods, deftly stepping over twigs, careful not to crush the leeks or wild flowers. "Look closely," her grandma had said. "Do you see anything?"

"Where? There?"

"No. Look by that fallen tree. Be careful where you step." Elizabeth had walked painfully to the tree, squinting, thinking it would help her see better.

"I don't see anything, Grandma." Her grandmother had looked at her and smiled. Her cheeks were pink from the wind and she whispered (as if the mushroom could get away), "Don't move. Look by your feet."

Elizabeth had dropped her head and stared at her toes. She could see only browns and greens. Then, miraculously, it appeared--the spongy brown cap on an ivory stem, just waiting. "Oh! Gramma! I found it! I found it!" Her grandmother had laughed with Elizabeth's excitement and shown her how to pinch the mushroom at its stem so as not to pull it out by its roots.

They had picked seventeen mushrooms and put them in a small paper sack. They sat on the mossy tree to rest, listening to the woods and her grandma said, "I'm taking a vacation, you know." Elizabeth had guessed it and was glad. "I've given up too much for your grandfather over the years." her grandmother continued, "And now he just sits around and watches TV all the time, and I won't have any part of it." She slapped her jeans with her wrinkled hand. "I can't just wait around to die."

At home they had dipped the mushrooms in flour and fried them in butter, and eaten them silently while Elizabeth's relatives and grandfather screamed about her grandmother's insensitivity and cruelty.

Her grandmother's possessions were finally divided, and Uncle John suggested the three grandchildren go through the rest of the boxes so they could close the cabin and go home. Elizabeth's mother dumped the costume jewelry on the table. A marble rolled out of the box and bounced on the floor. Her cousins giggled at the tackiness of the fake jewels and plastic. She watched them clasp on necklaces and earrings asking "How's this one look?"

Elizabeth couldn't decide. It didn't feel right. These lists and piles of things weren't a part of her grandma, or even a reflection of her. They were props for a woman who had pretended most of her life, then gave it up to hike in Mexico, and take cruises to Alaska.

And then she saw it. It appeared, like the mushroom had years ago, suddenly, as if it had been waiting all along. She picked it up--a class ring, gold with black onyx imprinted with the year 1946. "It's from college," her grandfather grunted. "She never finished."

Elizabeth, more than anything, wanted to leave their pinched faces and false mourning behind. She left the table and walked down to the beach. The ring fit nicely on her left hand. She looked at it, the smooth black surface of the onyx, and thought it would make a pretty good skipping stone. She thought if she could, she would watch it skip across the water, counting softly out loud the times it jumped.