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Narratio

Retrograda

KATARINA THORSEN

September 2026



There is only one
of you in all time.
– Martha Graham

It would have been around 1999 or 2000. "You should get sick more often," he said, admiring my disappearing frame as I got out of the tub, shivering with fever and a bad stomach. I'd been sick for days and had lost a lot of weight.

Less of me is more.

Around the summer of 1984, she pulled me to the front of the studio. "This is what a dancer's body should look like," she said, pointing to me. My body was so slim because I was recovering from three weeks of radiation therapy.

Less of me is more.

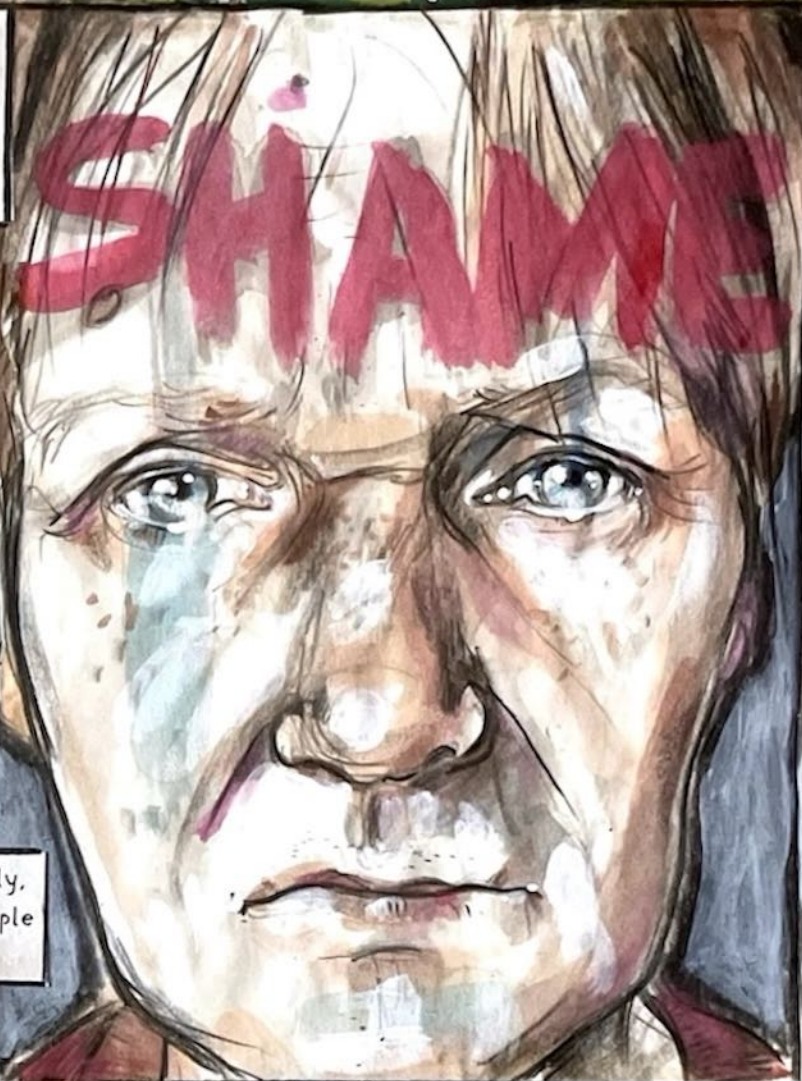
Now I understand that I came to believe this was the theme of my life. Less of me is the right way to be. Take up less space. Meet the expectations I believed other people had of me. Be more ashamed. Be sick.

Being sick also brought forgiveness — or, more rightly, what I interpreted as forgiveness. It also made people sick with worry. I couldn't win.

JEEEEEEZUS.
THIS MAY ALL BE TOO MUCH
NAVEL GAZING...
EVEN FOR ME.
APOLOGIES IN ADVANCE.

My body is my diary too.

Every scar. Every swelling. Every wrinkle. Every ache. Every change is an entry.



As I began thinking about this comic, I realized there were markers scattered through my life. Not pain points so much as plot points. Medical appointments. Treatments. Moments when I had to take care of my body.

I've gathered those bare-bones plot points because they offer a way back to 1977, when I struggled with body autonomy, personal autonomy, and what would become a recurring health condition that required intervention.

Christmas 1976. I received a new diary. It became my life raft through 1977, first in Sweden and then after we moved to Canada. Since that Christmas, diaries, journaling, and art have been my sacred space.

Now I'm 64. My body is my own. There's beauty in witnessing its changes. I don't want to deny aging or pretend it isn't happening. I have the privilege of witnessing its biology. Of witnessing history.

Perhaps *Potato Nose: Narratio Retrógrada* isn't only a story told backwards. Perhaps it's a story that reverses the story I have always believed.

PLEOMORPHIC ADENOMA IS THE MOST COMMON BENIGN SALIVARY GLAND TUMOR, MOST OFTEN ARISING IN THE PAROTID GLAND. IT IS SLOW-GROWING, PAINLESS. ALTHOUGH BENIGN, IT CAN RECUR IF NOT COMPLETELY EXCISED AND HAS A SMALL RISK OF MALIGNANT TRANSFORMATION IF LEFT UNTREATED FOR MANY YEARS.

Doctor (ENT Surgeon): I reviewed your MRI. It shows multiple tumour beds that are most likely pleomorphic adenomas, the same kind you've had before. They're usually benign, but they can change over time. There are also some atypical cells

Me: That is what I expected. What are my options?

Doctor: *Option 1:* We can monitor them, but I'm not comfortable with that because of the atypical cells. *Option 2:* We can do surgery, but there's a significant risk of facial nerve damage.

Me: I don't care about the cosmetic side of things. What worries me is my eye. As an artist, I need full control of it, and facial nerve damage could affect my blinking and eyelid closure.

Doctor: Understood. Sounds like protecting your eye is key.

Me: What's the third option?

Doctor: I'd like to refer you back to RadOnc at VGH to discuss radiation therapy again. It's not the usual approach, but your situation isn't typical, and I'd like their opinion.

Me: What if we just wait and repeat the MRI down the road?

Doctor: I'd rather hear from the radiation team first, then we'll decide together. The good news is this **isn't urgent**. These tumours are slow-growing. The challenge is their location and all the scar tissue from your previous surgeries, which makes operating very difficult. Your case is also exactly the kind we're **researching**... people who have recurrences many years later.

Me: That's actually pretty cool.

Doctor: It is. We'll get the RadOnc team's opinion, then we'll decide on the best path forward.

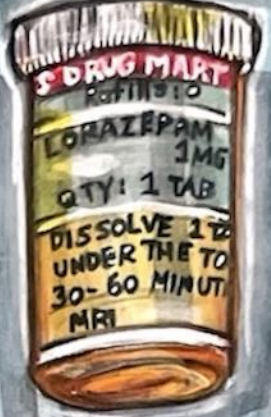
Me: Okay, thanks so—

[CLICK!]

I think I'll begin with the recent phone call from the ear, nose, and throat surgeon. What stayed with me wasn't the outcome.

It was the familiar, immediate **embarrassment** of taking up his time, taking up space, as though my body needed to apologize for requiring attention.

March 17, 2026



For extreme claustrophobia

But what also stayed with me this time was that I am the one who gets to decide what happens next.

St. Paul's Hospital, Burrard Street
MRI, Radiology Department



March 11, 2026

Dr. P (ENT Surgeon) called and confirmed the biopsy results: *benign pleomorphic adenomas with rare atypical cells. Low-grade carcinoma cannot be completely excluded.*

Because of my tumour history, scar tissue, and the tumours' location near the facial nerve, they will proceed cautiously. The next step is an MRI. It will take 1-2 months for an appointment.

The familiar embarrassment is rising... But it turns out there really were tumours in there. Ah... This journey isn't about my health. It's to push the aside the weak me and awaken the dancer again: extended spine, chin up, eyes to the back of the theatre.

Old and new
tumours

My left parotid
gland was
removed in the
late 1970's

Ugly mole.
One of
too many

Two small tumours
in the thyroid

February 24, 2026

The ultrasound itself turned into a surprisingly long process as Dr. B surveyed my cheek, jaw, neck. I was then called into the biopsy room for a *Peri Parotid Lymph Node, fine needle aspiration (FNA)*. Dr. S. was so gentle. I felt a tiny prick when the needle went in, but after that I couldn't feel it. I could, however, hear it. Inside my skull: *Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.*

I was overly relieved they didn't cover my eyes. My fucking **claustrophobia**. When I cranked my eyes way up and to the left, I could watch everything on the ultrasound screen. Fascinating! Meanwhile, another set of thoughts started swirling in my brain:

Are you doing this for attention? Are you making a bigger deal out of this than it is? Why take up these folks time?

February 3, 2026

Got a phone call from ENT. Requisition for ultrasound and needle biopsy has been made. I am on the waitlist.

January 9, 2026

First meeting with Dr. P, ENT surgeon

Journal entry 2:55 PM: Ubered to the Diamond Centre. I'm in the coffee shop downstairs as I am early. I'm not nervous at all. Just curious. My face's left side – sometimes quiet, often strange sensations ranging from pain to prickly soda bubbles. My familiar. Am I really dancing with "this gives me an out"?

I recall taking Mamma to this centre in 2008 to see the liver specialist but she was deemed too far advanced for Whipple surgery.

Vancouver General Hospital, Ultrasound, Radiology
Gordon and Leslie Diamond Health Centre, Laurel Street

September 22, 2025

Downtown Radiology, Keefer Street

Journal entry:
Waiting at the Ultrasound in Chinatown. This is where I brought Mamma in November 2007 to do an ultrasound on her pancreas. It was not good news.

I am flooded
with feelings.

JAW/PAROTID AREA

NECK/THYROID



A diary is a negotiation with the ultimate truth that the goal of life is death.

Maybe every diary is an act of narcissism. Or maybe it is a refusal to let a life disappear without someone recording that it mattered.

Denman Medical Clinic,
West End

FOR
LEASE

September 9, 2025

I found another tiny lump. Maybe nothing.
Maybe a recurrent pleomorphic adenoma.

I decided to go to the doctor. I remind
myself: I am allowed to ask questions.

Who gets to keep the story of my body?

Doctors have written parts of it. Hospitals have stored parts of it. Other people have reacted to it—sometimes becoming so frightened and overwhelmed that their fear became another thing for me to carry. Believing that was my role. I think that is why I am a hermit now.

My medical records were lost in **2003** when my family doctor closed his practice. It feels strange to know that part of my own history has simply disappeared.

So my diaries, journals, and collection of old letters become another way of piecing together the medical history.

Maybe this comic is another kind of medical record. Not an official one. Just my own record. A way of saying: **I was here. This happened to me.**

Study of Puberty, 1894 by Edvard Munch

When I look back
at every stage of my life,
I think I've been
misinterpreting the assignment.

A dance teacher calling my body exemplary,
even after radiation. My (then) life partner
admiring what sickness had done to my body.
Doctors measuring, scanning it, opening it,
taking charge of it. Doing their job.

Meaning?

The most beautiful meaning
ever assigned to **my** body
was lending it to **my** children,
so they could grow inside it.



I now come to a point in **1984** when my written diaries began to melt into my sketchbooks.

Up until then, my sketchbooks had mostly been about drawing things I loved—trolls, dogs, and dance. My diaries were mostly words, with the occasional photo.

But that year came a moment—the **TURNING POINT** (also one of my fave movies ever, btw)—when **diary + sketchbook became journaling... became therapy**. A place where I could be raw and honest and ugly.

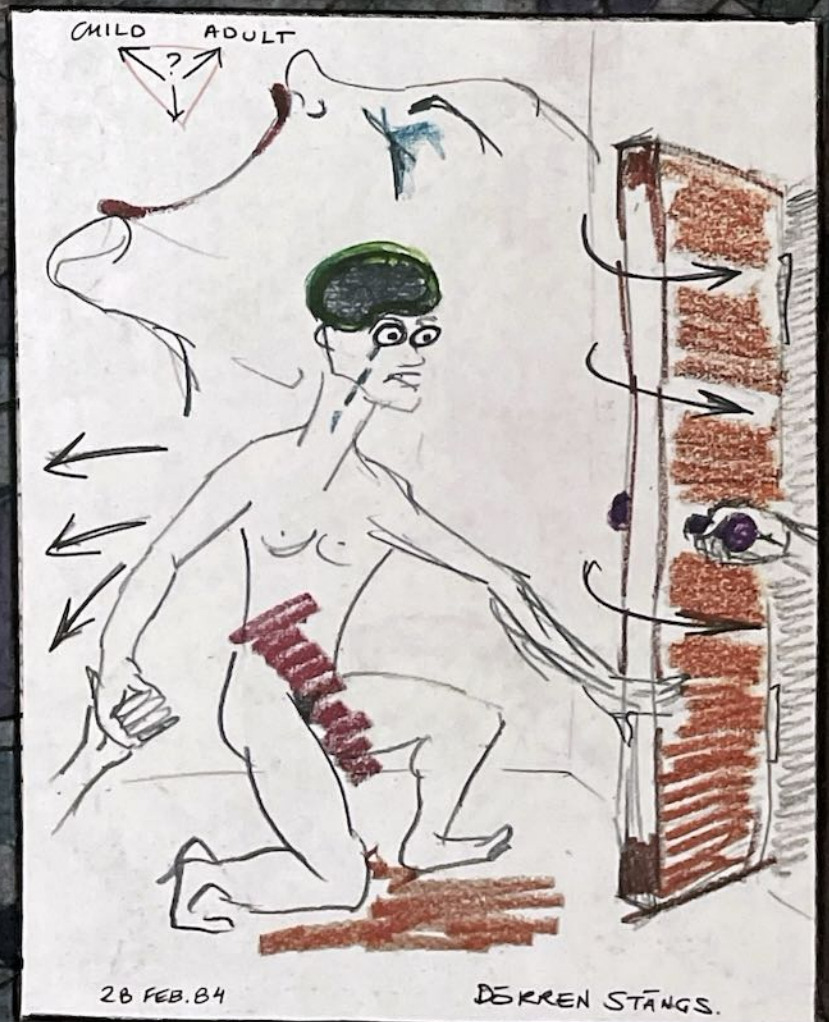
Oh God... **1984** ripped me wide open.

I was in absolute shock.
Heartbroken.
Terrified.

But I followed my broken heart, and I made some of the craziest, boldest, weirdest, and best decisions of my life—even though they were also the hardest.

This is the page from that day...

This isn't the place to unpack the context.
That's for another time.





"I sing the body electric... To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough..." - Walt Whitman

"I sing [to my] body electric... To be surrounded by [my] beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough..." - my edit

Summer 1983: Radiation

In 1983, I was referred to the BC Cancer Agency at Vancouver General Hospital to discuss radiation treatment for the recurrent tumours growing in the area of my left parotid gland.

Dr. Stewart Jackson,
Head of Radiation Oncology, BC Cancer Agency, Vancouver

Dr. Albino D. Flores,
Radiation Oncology, specializing in head and neck cancers

I remember having about three weeks of radiation. After every radiation treatment, my mom and I would walk down Broadway, about a block or so from Vancouver General Hospital, and have our **\$2.95 breakfast** at Jukebox Johnny's at Heather and Broadway. At first, it was wonderful. Eventually, I couldn't stomach the food anymore. But we went anyway. It was my favourite part of the day.

Dr. Jackson wrote
Radiation as a Cure for Cancer: The History of Radiation Treatment in British Columbia, published by the BC Cancer Agency in 2002.

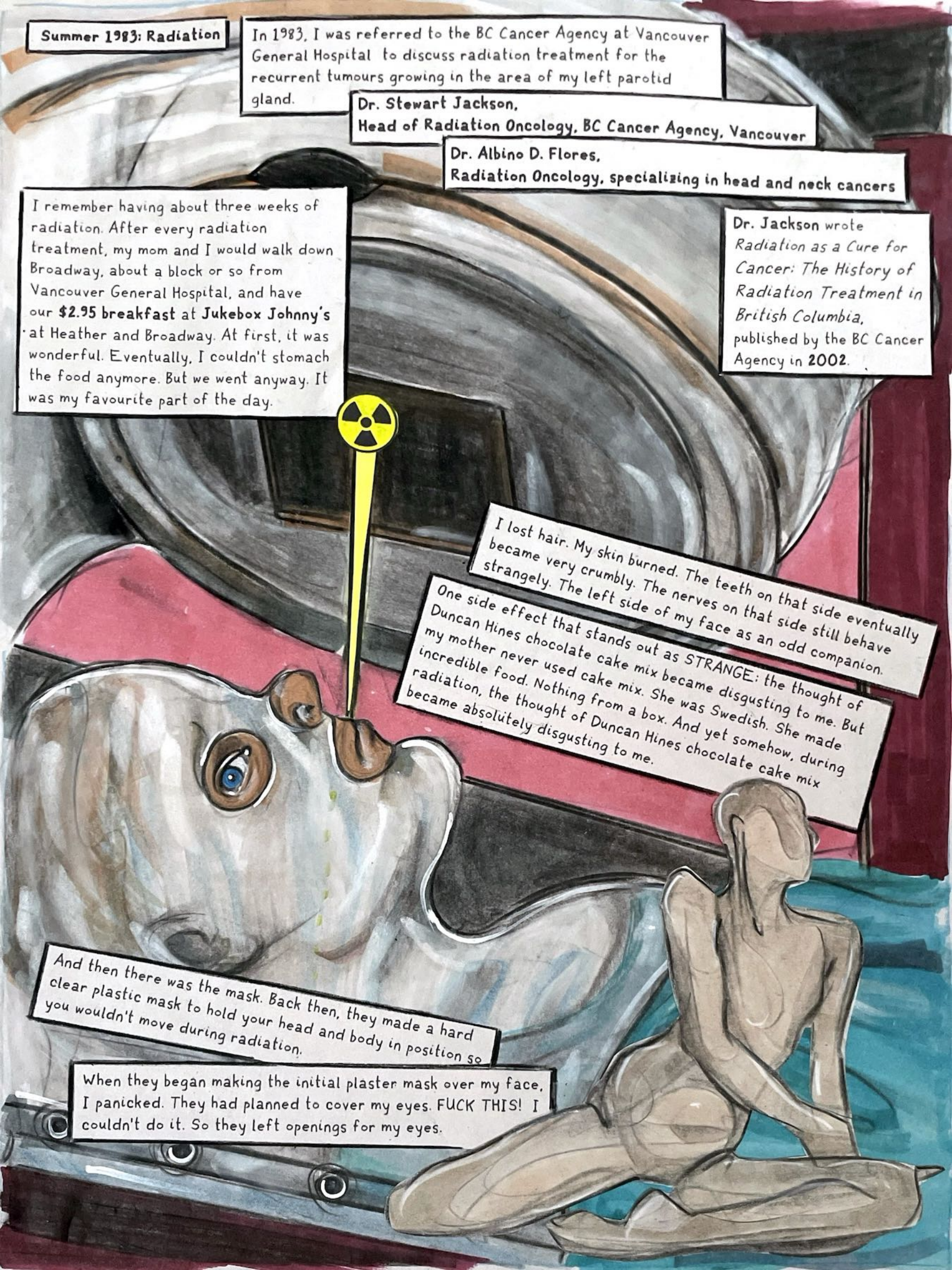


I lost hair. My skin burned. The teeth on that side eventually became very crumbly. The nerves on that side still behave strangely. The left side of my face as an odd companion.

One side effect that stands out as STRANGE: the thought of Duncan Hines chocolate cake mix became disgusting to me. But my mother never used cake mix. She was Swedish. She made incredible food. Nothing from a box. And yet somehow, during radiation, the thought of Duncan Hines chocolate cake mix became absolutely disgusting to me.

And then there was the mask. Back then, they made a hard clear plastic mask to hold your head and body in position so you wouldn't move during radiation.

When they began making the initial plaster mask over my face, I panicked. They had planned to cover my eyes. FUCK THIS! I couldn't do it. So they left openings for my eyes.



The Surgeries

Lions Gate Hospital
North Vancouver

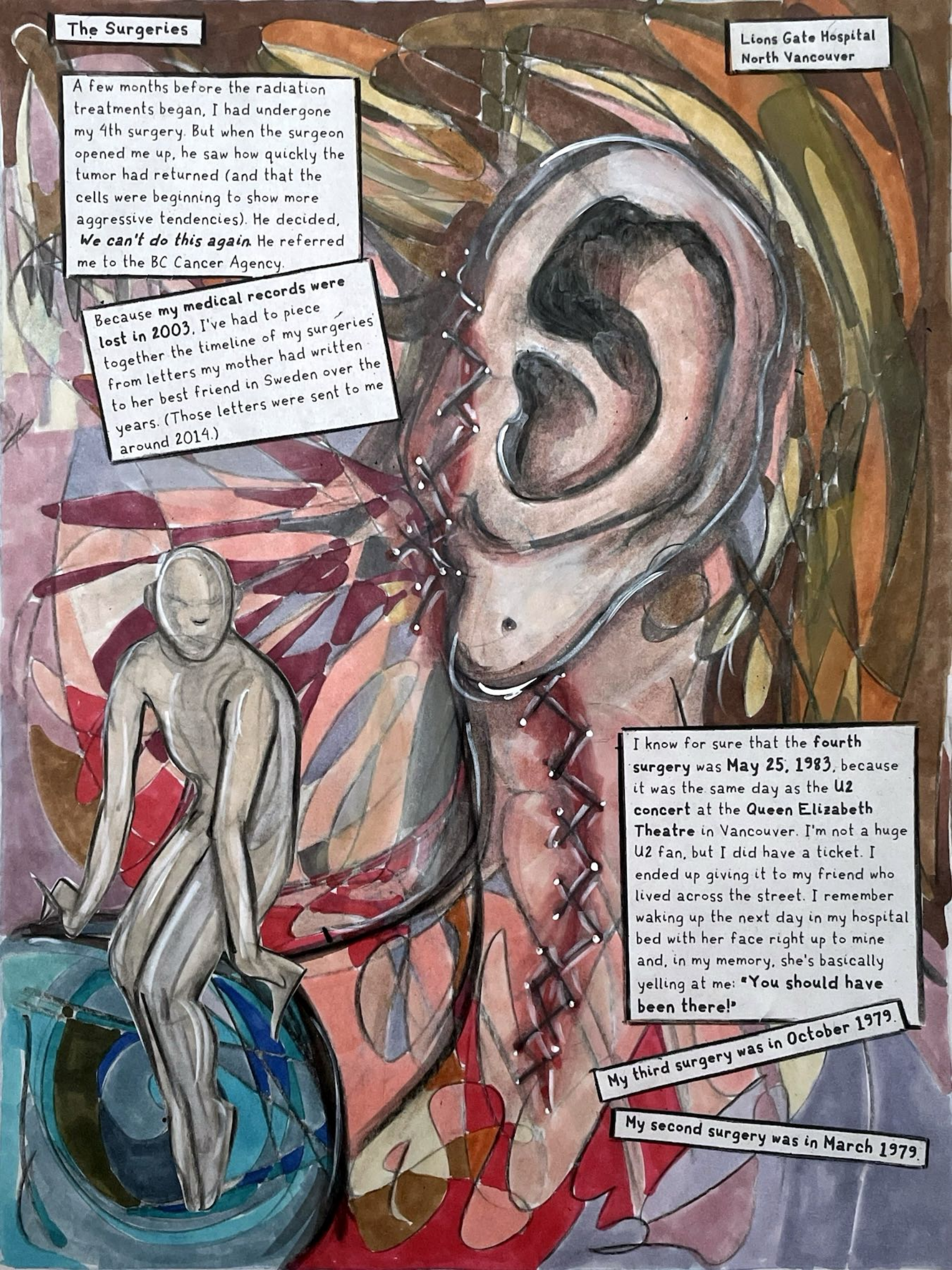
A few months before the radiation treatments began, I had undergone my 4th surgery. But when the surgeon opened me up, he saw how quickly the tumor had returned (and that the cells were beginning to show more aggressive tendencies). He decided, *We can't do this again*. He referred me to the BC Cancer Agency.

Because my medical records were lost in 2003, I've had to piece together the timeline of my surgeries from letters my mother had written to her best friend in Sweden over the years. (Those letters were sent to me around 2014.)

I know for sure that the fourth surgery was May 25, 1983, because it was the same day as the U2 concert at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver. I'm not a huge U2 fan, but I did have a ticket. I ended up giving it to my friend who lived across the street. I remember waking up the next day in my hospital bed with her face right up to mine and, in my memory, she's basically yelling at me: "You should have been there!"

My third surgery was in October 1979.

My second surgery was in March 1979.



516 East Braemar Road
North Vancouver

The past happened.
Fear happened.
But also tenderness.
And passion.
And love.



Peo was my childhood love. We were engaged at age 3! One of my first childhood memories is sitting on the kitchen counter with Peo on Råbäcksgatan in Grums, Värmland, (no adults around) eating (too many) sugar cubes.

Diary entry. December 16, 1977

Peo and I never dared to talk to each other when we saw each other in person in Sweden this past summer. Oh, I regret it so. I wrote him from the hospital after they shaved my hair before the operation and told him everything. I was crying and it felt good to write to him. To my surprise he has written back...

Autumn 1977

A repeated post-surgery scene comes to mind of sitting in the bathtub in the larger bathroom upstairs. I am leaning My head forward towards the faucet. Mamma is gently washing my hair for me so as to avoid the bandaged wound on my left side.



November 21, 1977

Letter from M. to me in North Vancouver:

I think your student photo is really cute. You don't have a big nose!!! Maybe it just looks like that in certain angles? Be happy for that. Nothing helps me, no matter what angle I sit. I am glad the operation went well! Lucky, lucky, lucky... Tumour. Yuck, yuck, yuck. Please don't... ah... please don't get another tumour because then I will lose my spirit. I have been so worried!

We met in dance class in Stockholm in 1975. Ours was a strange, passionate love that I can only liken to Juliet and Pauline in *Heavenly Creatures*.

M. lived
in

Huddinge (southwest of Stockholm)

My first surgery was in early November, 1977

I had the same surgeon for all 4 surgeries!

Dr. Norman Edgar Hamilton (30 October, 1934 - 30 August, 2023), Chief Surgeon at Lions Gate Hospital

He was so kind and so gentle.
And a master surgeon. I felt safe with him.

Temporal Branches

Zygomatic Branch

Masseter Muscle

Parotid Duct

Buccal Branch

Buccal Muscle

Buccal Branches

Triangularis Muscle

Anterior Facial Vein & Artery

Parotid Gland

External Auditory Canal Skin

Tip of Mastoid

Facial Nerve VII

Posterior Belly of Digastric Muscle

Great Auricular Nerve
Posterior Branch

External Jugular Vein

Sternocleidomastoid Muscle

Posterior Branch of Facial Vein

When someone asks me, *What is the most favourite meal you have ever had?* I immediately think of the $\frac{1}{2}$ banana and 1 arrowroot cookie in the Children's Ward after my first surgery. It was divine.

Lions Gate Hospital, Children's Ward
North Vancouver

BALETT AKADEMIEN

I first felt a lump Summer 1977 in Sweden. It was hard, beneath the skin, right by my left earlobe

I remember going to a specialist with Mamma, walking through the mysterious hallways of Huddinge Sjukhus: empty corridors, arrows on the floor, a lone patient lying on a bed. It was eerie. We had nervous laughing attacks.

Since we were already packing to move to Canada in August 1977, the doctor told us to see a doctor as soon as we arrived.

Dr. Maldus Marits (1924-2000) was our family doctor in North Vancouver. Estonian-Swedish, he reminded me of Max von Sydow.

Walking backwards through my life now, the 64-year-old me steps aside, illuminating the earlier versions of myself.

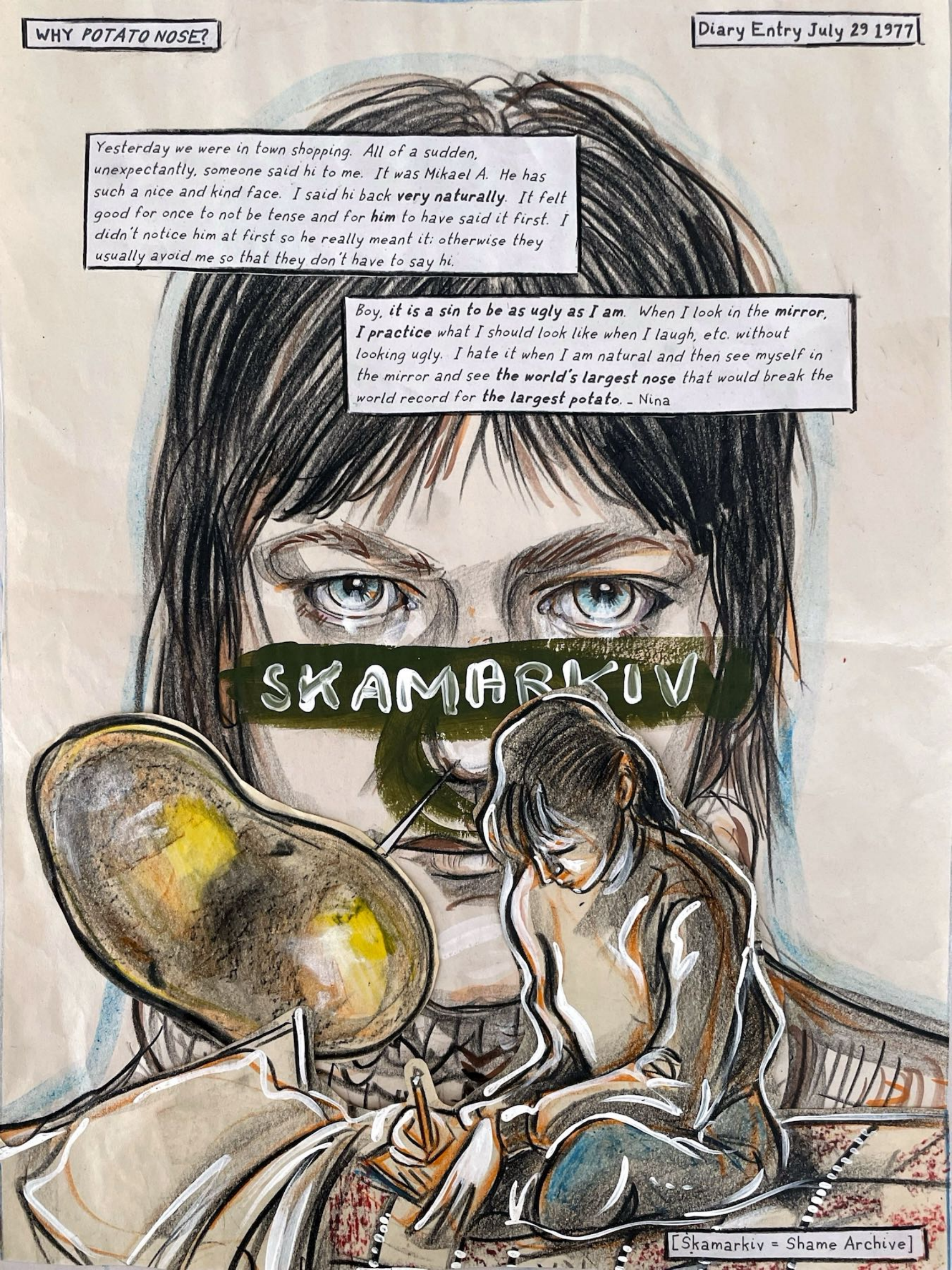
September 1977

516 East Braemar Road
North Vancouver



Yesterday we were in town shopping. All of a sudden, unexpectedly, someone said hi to me. It was Mikael A. He has such a nice and kind face. I said hi back **very naturally**. It felt good for once to not be tense and for **him** to have said it first. I didn't notice him at first so he really meant it; otherwise they usually avoid me so that they don't have to say hi.

Boy, it is a sin to be as ugly as I am. When I look in the mirror, I **practice** what I should look like when I laugh, etc. without looking ugly. I hate it when I am natural and then see myself in the mirror and see **the world's largest nose** that would break the world record for **the largest potato**. - Nina



SKAMARKIV

1977

Bläsvägen 8, Östertälje (southwest of Stockholm)

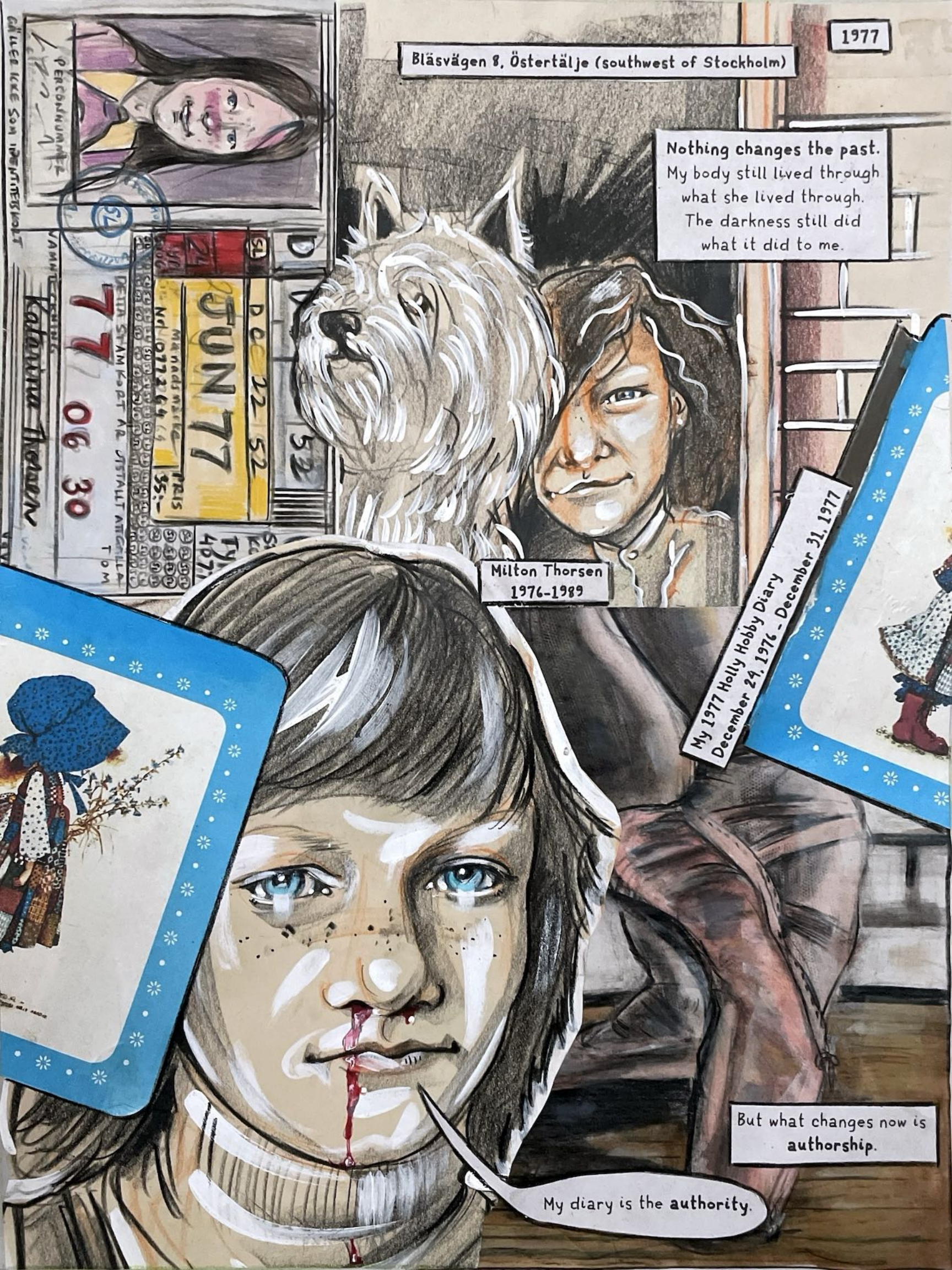
Nothing changes the past.
My body still lived through
what she lived through.
The darkness still did
what it did to me.

Milton Thorsen
1976-1989

My 1977 Holly Hobby Diary
December 24, 1976 - December 31, 1977

But what changes now is
authorship.

My diary is the authority.





Stay tuned for
Potato Nose: 1977 – the graphic novel!
Target release: 2028.

Special thank you's to Kickstarter backers



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Erin R.

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Miku G.

Mark A.

Dedicated to Tobey Thorsen
January 13, 2000 - December 23, 2015
You led me outside, and somehow helped me
find my way back to myself.

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