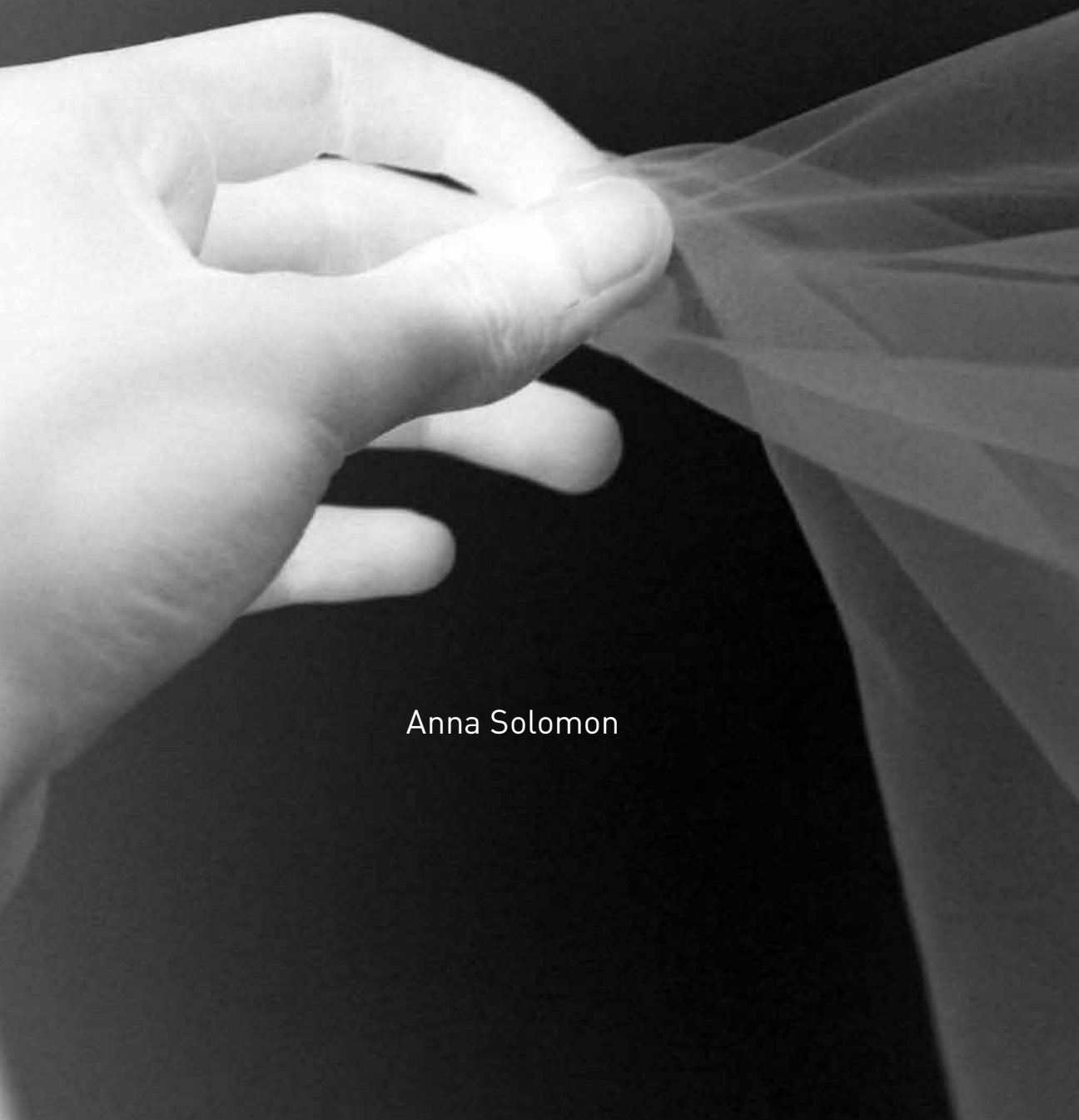


THE LONG NET



Anna Solomon

The summer I was ten, among other troubles, there was a heat wave unlike anyone could remember, including my mother, whose memory was as strong as most people's forgetting. Heat is shocking when you're close to the ocean but not in it. It feels like an injustice, a spectacle—even children do things they might not otherwise do.

This was in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Most of my friends were off at camp or occupied with sailing lessons or whatever other private school pursuits my parents deemed would interfere with a child's imagination and resourcefulness. (They could not have said they didn't have the money or that I was already on scholarship for school; they thought of themselves as having money and just choosing not to use it.) I was not allowed to go to the beach, for fear of sunburn.

*Photo by Rushing*

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But I was allowed, for reasons that must have been grounded in progressive educational theory, to wander into the woods behind our house, which were large and dark and which led, eventually, if you went all the way up the hill and back down the other side, out onto the asphalt steppes of Shultz's Sunny Campground.

Shultz's was not the kind of campground my parents had taken me to up in Maine, with tent sites and fire pits spread out beneath pine trees. It was owned by Tammy Rinata's family, who'd notoriously fought to build an amusement park on the old drive-in land and lost, and whose clientele—older people who spent their winters down in Florida or inland people who'd come to town for summer work—stayed in RVs and camper-trailers. The Rinatas lived at the campground, too. Most people called them the Shultzes, which was Tammy's mother's maiden name and also the name of Tammy's grandmother, who ran the campground and who was called, by everyone, Bubbe. I knew Tammy from soccer league—the only part of my life where I met public school kids. I barely considered her a friend except in summer, when I was lonely. My father had told me never to feel lonely, but I did. He said loneliness was the result of boredom, and boredom meant you weren't taking responsibility for your gifts. So on top of my loneliness, there was a certain shame.

If I arrived early enough at the campground, I was invited down into Bubbe's cool "parlor" for a late breakfast of hot dogs. The Schultz women were fat, but Tammy and her sister, Gloria, were skinny, like their father, who did most of the work at Schultz's, and because Tammy's mother resented her girls for this—"Eye-talian stringbeans!"—she was always sending them to Bubbe's finished half-basement to be fattened up. I had never entertained the notion that hot dogs might qualify as food or that one might eat them indoors, free of bun and relish. On Bubbe's fine china, lolling naked in their glistening oil alongside potato chips and a pond of ketchup, they were terrifying. Two each we were served, like two fingers, or two penises, of which I knew nothing except that they might be a little like hot dogs. As I chewed, I tried not to touch them with my tongue and not to gag. That they'd been handled by a woman called Bubbe—without fork or tongs—repulsed me further. I was Unitarian-Universalist, raised to believe in my own capacity for compassion, tolerance, even love, if necessary, but Tammy's life seemed to me an undeniably crude thing. I was drawn to it as one is drawn to lives that appear poorer than one's own.

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Early that summer I had accosted my mother in her bedroom, where she'd been holed up making a quilt for someone's baby. I told her I wanted to learn to sew.

"I've never been any good at teaching," she said. "You know that."

She had half her hair up, half down, like two different people.

"You could try," I said. Truthfully, I just wanted to be close to her—even to be reprimanded by her for my clumsy fingers.

She lifted a hand to her hair, regarded herself sideways, then turned her head and regarded herself the other way. You might have thought she was vain, but I knew better. She was trying to hide her beauty, like always, making her hair tight, her clothes loose. Once she'd fastened all her hair up securely, she would think she had succeeded.

"You know that kind girl, from the campground, Tammy Schultz?" she asked.

"Tammy Rinata," I corrected.

"I saw her father the other day at the hardware store. He said she's home this summer."

"Uh-huh."

"You should play with her."

"I played with her last summer."

"This is this summer."

"Mom," I groaned. "Teach me how to sew."

She looked at me in the mirror, surprised. I was surprised, too. I couldn't remember the last time I had whined to her or even complained, about anything.

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“June,” she said, pushing herself up, her hair pinned now, the tendons in her neck showing. Her sewing machine sat in the corner; the quilt was draped over a chair. We both looked at it, not each other. “Go see Tammy. It would be the decent thing to do.”

So there I would find myself, well before lunchtime, while Bubbe trolled the perimeters of the table in her orthopedic sneakers and the rest of the room stretched out around us in a permanent, disorienting dusk. There was a couch that bled into a loveseat, a hutch that seemed to merge with the ceiling, animal figurines and candlesticks and crystal goblets and snow globes huddling in their own shadows. Tammy and I sat close together, though we were not close. She and Gloria ate quickly and without pleasure, finishing their pile of fat just as skinny as before. Then Gloria, who was older, went off in a golf cart to stock the canteen while Tammy watched me swallow the remainder of my hot dogs. I had the urge once or twice to stare back at her rudely and say, *That’s not very polite*. But there was something about Tammy’s look—it was the same quietly stunned expression she got on the soccer field just before you passed her the ball, as if she’d never seen one before. She had this dumbness about her. Even when she trapped the ball and took off down the field and scored—which she did more often than any other girl—you couldn’t quite reconcile any of that with what you saw when you looked at her face.