

Masthead Logo

**The Iowa Review**

---

Volume 34  
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 4

---

2004

## Suspension (April 20, 1984)

Rebecca Makkai

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Makkai, Rebecca. "Suspension (April 20, 1984)." *The Iowa Review* 34.1 (2004): 9-12. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.S781>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

REBECCA MAKKAI

*Suspension (April 20, 1984)*

The world's most astonishing photograph shows my sixth birthday party, with five children gathered at a picnic table, staring at a bomb. In the background, my grandfather's hands rest on his bald head, and my father stares at the sky. Far above them, unseen by anyone but the camera, my sister is flying.

Five minutes later, my mother would come out with chocolate cupcakes. She would take the bomb away and put it inside the family room, which convinced us all that the house would blow up in seconds.

About three minutes earlier, my father had handed his camera to my mother. The other photos on the roll are his.

Ten minutes later, the sky would crack open with dark thunder as we all ran screaming for the house. My sister, underwater in the pool, at first did not notice the slicing rain.

Fourteen years later, I would find, in the same roll as this picture, five photographs my father took of a woman with red hair, the sunlight shining through a hotel window on her face, a sheet wrapped around her chest. The photo envelope was marked in my mother's penciled writing: "Steven's roll: B's 6th B-day party, Easter, etc." I took the five etceteras and stuck them in a white envelope, storing them in my desk for the next five years, in case I ever needed to blackmail him.

Exactly six years before the picture was taken, I came out screaming, the umbilical cord wound three times around my neck as if I'd tried to hang myself rather than be born. Somehow, I was still breathing.

Seven years and eight months later, my grandfather, my father's father, living in Hawaii, would call to joke about the time difference.

“Happy new year!” he cried. “I’m calling from the old year! Tell me, what is the future like?”

Thirteen years after the picture was taken, when my sister was in her thirty-ninth hour of labor, I would light a votive for her in Ely Cathedral because, although I didn’t believe in anything like that, she did. I remembered the picture, how her twelve-year-old body flew through the air, her black hair straight out behind her.

Ten minutes before the picture, the air had started to get thick with humidity, so that my grandfather, his lungs old and weak, had to elevate his arms in order to get enough breath.

Twenty years later, looking at this picture and forgetting the thunderstorm looming overhead, I would wonder if it was the memory of a bomb that made my father turn his face to the sky, where the bombs of his childhood had been born. He stands there, hands on hips, squinting, as if waiting for a message.

Less than one year later, I would take my first photograph, a color Polaroid of my grandfather standing on his head in his Honolulu apartment. He wore a red and green Hawaiian shirt and his legs were lotus-folded in the air. He would stay like that for another hour, maybe.

Eighteen years later, sorting through the shoebox of photo envelopes, my mother would (oddly) not seem to notice anything missing from this roll.

Two minutes before the photo was taken, I had unwrapped David Schlosberg’s present, a black plastic ball with a thick white string sticking out, cartoon-style. “It’s a *real bomb*,” he said. “*Not* a toy. It’ll blow up in about, like, two minutes.” So we put it on the table and waited.

Less than a second before, my sister had bounced up and out, impossibly far, from the neighbor’s diving board, one backyard behind ours. Her black swimsuit and the water trapped in its thick weave gleamed in the one-o’clock sun, her arms out straight, her

feet pointed behind her. She would belly-flop, but as the picture is snapped, it looks for all the world like she's flying and won't ever come down.

Fifty years before this photograph, my grandfather had posed for another picture, one that is now on my father's bookshelf. It is 1934, and he is wearing the uniform of the parliament of Hungary. The sword at his side and the double row of gold buttons up his coat make him look like Napoleon. On his lapel are rows of medals and pins, gifts from foreign embassies and dignitaries in exchange for favors, courtesies. Although you cannot see its brilliant red color in the black and white photo, one small pin has at its center the twisted arms of a swastika, a gift from Germany's new chancellor.

Six years and three hours earlier, I started to push my way out. My mother could not get up to change the channel on the hospital-room TV away from the NBC retrospective on Hitler (the 89th anniversary of his birth that day), and the Jewish woman in the next bed, although she did not want to watch it either, could not get up because she was sitting Shiva for her brother. My father came in and slammed the power button with his palm.

Nineteen years later, I would shred and throw away the photos of the red-haired woman, realizing as I did so that she was quite beautiful.

Forty years earlier, held in a Budapest jail cell for public resistance to the Third Reich, my grandfather learned yoga from a shot-down RAF pilot named Nigel, who had grown up in India during the Raj. They closed their eyes and, as the bombs rained down and cast light through the small, unreachable windows, tried to levitate.

Six years, nine months, and sixteen days earlier, I settled, suspended, in the amniotic pool. I would spend more than two extra weeks there, breathing liquid and floating.

Ten years after the photograph, another call from Hawaii, my grandfather either joking or confused: "Which happened first for you?"

he almost shouted into the phone. "The sunrise or the sunset? It is very important that I know!" He sounded like he was choking.

In two seconds, my sister would hit the water. My father's head would turn at the sound of the splash.

An hour later, after my friends had gone home, I would put the bomb in my room, and spend the next few days half-waiting for it to explode.